

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

Rated: R with smatterings of NC-17 here and there

Keywords: ANGST; UST; sex; more angst

Summary: Love is rarely perfect... sometimes it seems impossible. A young woman leaves her troubled past, determined to start a new life in a new city. When she becomes hopelessly entangled with a domineering, emotionally embattled individual, she doesn't know if it's a dream come true, or her worst nightmare.

Warnings and Disclaimers: This is a F/F SLASH PIECE that depicts sexual relationship(s) between consenting adult women. If depictions of this nature disturb you, stop reading and bail now. If you're under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal where you reside, get lost, dude. This story is character-driven. There is no in-depth plot. There is no action or adventure. However, many aspects and situations are based on real-life occurrences. The story and its characters are original and are copyrighted © by me. Please don't steal this; if you wish to post this to your own site, or whatever, be courteous and ask my permission first. Any similarities to persons/characters living, dead, or imagined is purely coincidental and not intended. All included song lyrics are probably copyrighted by their respective authors/bands and are borrowed without permission. Just ignore that part... I've tried to give proper credit.

Additional warnings: Sex, Violence & Rock 'n Roll: Yes; Yes, but nothing major; Yes, but just song lyrics. Angst and UST: Yes, there's LOTS of that. If you know my work, then you know my angst. Swearing/Cursing: Yes. If that bothers you, fuck off. Final Warnings: If UST annoys you, bail out now; if severe angst annoys you, BAIL; if you prefer a warm-fuzzy kind of story, BAIL. Please don't diss' me and send me whiney emails telling me that it was 'too angst-y' - You've been warned.

Additional author notes (aka, 'you can skip this part if you want'): Using song lyrics has sort-of become a 'trademark' for me. I've used them here again because, #1) I like the songs; #2) they felt pertinent; #3) I really dig it, man. Although this story may fall under the 'Xena Uber Alt. Fic.' category, I must confess to knowing very little about the show and its characters. I did my 'research' mostly by way of pictures and photos. I'm a visual person, and pictures, to me, tell so much more than words can; I like to look at a picture and just run with the feelings I get from it. So, why write a 'Xena Uber Alt. Fic.' if I know so little about the show, you ask? ...Good question. Someone clued me in to the Xena sub-culture awhile ago, and although I knew next to nothing about the show, I was intrigued by the pictures/video clips, and thought the two leads made an intriguing 'couple'. Or, maybe I just have a 'thing' for tall chicks and short chicks? Or maybe I was finally becoming bored with Scully & Reyes? ...Who knows.

I must give a huge *thank you* to my always-inspiring, ever-supportive beta reader and editor, Mahrta Conchita Consuelos. You have helped me SO much, and in SO many ways, my luf. Your thoughts, critiques and input are oh so valuable, despite all the times I've argued with you and answered your meticulous commentaries with a resounding 'fuck off!' Apologetic, appreciative

kissies for you, dah-ling (with tongue).

Begun in earnest October, 2002; completed December, 2003.

*"People have funny things
Swimming inside,
They swing like pendulums
They turn like the tides;
Darling, I don't need money
I could be happy with someone to love
Someone to trust... someone to love." - Garbage*

CHAPTER ONE

Allison sighed with relief as she finally steered her blue VW beetle onto the 200 block of West Market Street. After making three wrong turns and getting lost in the huge, bustling City of Jacksonville, the little blonde was ready to scream. The early July morning was already frightfully hot, and she feared she was sweating profusely beneath the brand-new designer suit that she'd paid way too much for.

Thankfully she had given herself an extra half-hour; she ended up needing it, and being late for her first day of work would make for a horrific first impression. Turning at the traffic light, the blonde easily spotted the humongous building that was to be her new home.

Fourteen stories of blue-tinted, glass-encased concrete and steel isn't too difficult to spot. She thought with a satisfied grin.

She was already beyond nervous due to her recent move to the city, but now that her 'first day' of the new job had finally arrived, she was actually feeling queasy. She thought back to last night's pep-talk phone call from her sister: *"You'll do just fine, Alli, you always do."* Kaitlyn always had a way of easing her mind and bolstering her confidence. She smiled, remembering her older sister's calming voice, and she was pretty sure that she felt better already.

Jacksonville was known as the 'First Coast', and although it was already one of the largest cities in the U.S., geographically, it was still undergoing growth spurts. New businesses and industries were constantly springing up all over, and established corporate giants were eager to get into the booming area that seemed to hold good promise of becoming a southern metropolitan powerhouse. The City was a good mixture of old and new; the downtown center was picturesquely bisected by the St. Johns River, with the eastern edge being situated along the warm, salty shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The downtown riverfront was dotted with tons of shops, stores, restaurants, cafes, and other cultural delights, while the beach was a casual scene that came to life at night when it beat with the pulse of a hundred different nightclubs, bars, and assorted eateries.

Even though she grew up only hours away, just outside Savannah, Georgia, Allison was sure that Jacksonville would be so different. It was a teeming melting pot with a myriad of people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. It was a 'promised land' of sorts, and the young woman hoped that it held great potential for her as well.

She had been considering getting away and striking out on her own for a long time; she needed a change, preferably for the better. Over the past few years, she had begun to feel that her life was becoming filled with nothing but failures and disappointments. All the hopes and dreams and aspirations she'd always had for herself seemed to slip further and further out of her grasp. She constantly felt like she was wasting her time and her life; there were still so many things that she wanted to do, and see, and experience. So when she heard about the opportunities that awaited young, professional people in the rapidly-expanding business sectors of Jacksonville, Allison decided to take a chance at changing her destiny.

Now that she was here, standing on the precipice of opportunity and possibility, she could barely contain her mixed feelings of excitement and trepidation.

She reached the parking garage of the building and showed the guard her brand-spanking-new security/i.d. card. With a polite, "Good morning and welcome, Ms. Phillips," she was ushered through the gate and into her new career.

The elevator reached the 13th floor and Allison exited hesitantly, her eyes darting around to read the directional signs. It looked different from when she had been here several weeks ago to interview again, and ultimately accept the job offer, and she idly wondered if the place had been remodeled or something. She finally found the receptionist's desk and approached a severe-looking, middle-aged woman.

"May I help you?" The woman asked, looking up at the petite, young blonde before her.

Allison put on her most professional voice, "Yes, I'm Allison Phillips, I have a 9:00 meeting with John Stevenson-"

"Oh yes, Ms. Phillips," the woman interrupted, "I'll let Mr. Stevenson know that you've arrived. Welcome to Whitton Incorporated," she said with some pride in her tone.

Allison thanked her and sat down in the waiting room, feeling a little anxious. Snagging a job as the Assistant Human Resources Director with one of the biggest construction/real estate/property investment companies in the area was a huge step up for her. Whitton, Inc. was widely known as a large, successful, family-owned and operated company that had its fingers in a little bit of everything, and it continued to grow in leaps and bounds. It was supposed to have an excellent work environment and had a high employee-retention rate. The pay was outstanding, and the benefits were top-shelf. More importantly, employees were supposedly rewarded for work well done, and there was a lot of room for career advancement. Alli had done her research before

even applying for the job; she knew this was a good place to be.

"Allison!" A tall, middle-aged man called out, startling Alli from her thoughts. John Stevenson was the Director of Human Resources and was a reasonably good-looking guy in his early 50's, with thinning, sandy-blond hair and hazel eyes. He was outgoing, friendly, and somewhat fatherly, and Allison felt positive they would have a good working relationship.

The two chatted politely for a moment while John steered them down several hallways until they ended up in the large area that was the Human Resources division. It reminded Alli of a doctor's office, but the area was spacious and the colors and atmosphere were light and airy. They walked over to a large, open office that was obviously unoccupied. Alli smiled as she took in the tasteful, spacious desk area, the large window, the perfectly ergonomic, high-back leather chair, the brand-new computer with a huge, flat-screen monitor, the ample file cabinets and drawers, and, to top it off, an enormous flower arrangement on the desk with a card that read 'Welcome to Whitton, Inc.'. Obviously, this place treated their employees very well indeed.

"This is yours," John smiled, waving her inside.

"Wow," was the only thing that Alli could get out of her mouth.

Stevenson grinned at her, "Yeah, it seems like a lot, but trust me - these young Whittons know what they're doing." Alli regarded John with questioning eyes for a moment, genuinely not knowing what he was referring to.

"Oh, it's just that old-man Whitton wasn't as 'up' on technology and aesthetics and ergonomics as the kids are, if you know what I mean?" He explained with a grin.

"Ahh, okay," Alli smiled. *So the 'kids' are in charge now, or what?*

"This place has undergone some serious transformation in the past few months and weeks, and it's all due to the new bosses," Stevenson added, plunging her mind into further question.

Alli just nodded like she understood, even though she really didn't remember much of the 'general' information John had given her in the earlier interviews. She thought that Mark Whitton was the patriarch, and that he ran the show by himself. She recalled John saying that some of the children worked here also, but she didn't remember what they did, specifically, and she hadn't met any of them at that time. John had said that there was some 'restructuring' going on, but from the way he worded his comments now, she wondered if something had changed significantly since she was here for her last interview.

No matter, really, Alli thought to herself, I'm just here to do my job - I'm not interested in the family politics.

After Stevenson had shown her around the building, introduced her to tons of people, and

brought her up to speed on what her duties would be exactly, he offered to treat her to lunch at the company's in-house cafeteria.

The 'cafeteria' was actually a full-fledged combination deli/grill/salad bar and coffee house, complete with a small ice cream kiosk in one corner.

"This place is amazing - does anyone *ever* leave here? And if so, *WHY*?" Allison joked as she and John sat down to their lunches.

"Yeah, I know, everyone gets treated pretty damn good here. I mean, the Whittons expect a lot from their staff, but they're one of the few employers who seem to understand that if you treat the employees well and give them a nice atmosphere and great amenities, you'll get more out of them."

"Hmm, well, it's a shame that that's such a novel idea." Allison agreed, munching her sandwich.

"Wait till you see the rest of this place... it's huge." John said, gesturing with his hand.

"Does the company occupy all 14 floors?" Allison asked.

"No, they rent out about half the building; the rest is filled by their staff, or is used for stuff like this - cafeteria, conference centers, whatever," John added with another wave of his hand. "Wait 'til you see the in-house gym," he said with a smirk.

"You're kidding?" Allison asked incredulously.

Stevenson shook his head, "Nope - it's totally state-of-the-art. Has an Olympic-size pool too." He said with a grin while Alli just looked at him with wide eyes as she chewed. John felt his propriety falter for a second as the jade-colored eyes looked at him innocently. Allison was undoubtedly a very attractive girl, but he didn't want to think about his new colleague like that. He would make himself behave around her, even if it killed him. "A lot of the... 'eligible' people like to hang out at the gym in the hopes of catching the eye of the other 'eligibles'... if you know what I mean?" He said with a small smirk, internally wondering what Alli's 'status' was.

"I guess," Allison answered with a shrug, "but I'm not really interested in that... at least not right now," she added with her own smirk as they laughed together. *Besides, I doubt I'd find the type of person I'm 'interested' in at a place like this,* the blonde thought privately. Just then, two figures cast their shadows on the table.

"Ms. Whitton, Mr. Calhoun, what a pleasure," Stevenson said as he stood up quickly to greet and shake hands with a dark-haired woman and man who stood at their table.

"Madison Whitton, Raiford Calhoun - meet Allison Phillips; Allison is the newest member of my Human Resources team." Stevenson offered. As soon as she heard 'Whitton', Allison snapped to attention and stood up quickly when introductions were made.

Madison Whitton was a very attractive woman, about 5'8" or 9" tall, with slightly wavy, dark blonde hair that fell just below her shoulders. She had a straight, slim nose that was situated between high cheekbones, and a precise, evenly-shaped mouth that was set in a strong, slightly-pronounced jaw. She was slender and built quite nicely, and her steady, steel-gray eyes regarded Alli somewhat skeptically from behind silver-rimmed glasses as she shook hands and twitched her mouth in a tight, proper smile. She was dressed exquisitely, wearing an obviously expensive, classic business 'power-suit' that included a tailored navy blue jacket and a matching skirt that was short enough to say 'sexy', but long enough to remain professional.

Raiford Calhoun was about 5'10" or 11", but he was obviously muscular and fairly well-built, with medium brown hair, deep brown eyes, and grinning - albeit crooked - white teeth that were highlighted by golden-tan skin. He was young and dressed in business-casual attire that consisted of tan cotton dress slacks with a short-sleeved, golf-type shirt. His aura fairly screamed 'Slick Willie'. Madison was obviously more refined and 'professional' than the Calhoun fellow, and Allison immediately found herself curious about the two.

"Very nice to meet you, Ms. Whitton, Mr. Calhoun," Alli said as professionally as she could. Raiford shook her hand easily, and Madison was polite, but Alli felt like she was totally scrutinizing her somehow. If Madison was now 'the boss', Alli wondered why she hadn't met her during one of her previous interviews.

"You're in good hands with Stevenson; even though I don't have the personal pleasure of interacting too frequently with that area, I hear he's one of the best managers we have." Madison said in a smooth, rich voice while directing a smirk at Stevenson, who blushed slightly.

"Why thank you," John answered rather playfully. "Madison is the Vice President for the Real Estate/Investment Division, so we, unfortunately, don't see too much of her." Stevenson added, smirking back at the dark blonde woman. "And Raiford is the Vice President for the Residential and Commercial Construction Division; we do tend to see a lot of him because it seems we're *always* hiring people for his construction crews," John offered in explanation as Raiford chuckled.

"Oh, I see," Allison murmured as she regarded Raiford but watched the interaction between Stevenson and Madison out of the corner of her eye. *Interesting that Stevenson likes to play the flirting game, thought Alli, and with a Vice President and Whitton too... ballsy!*

After the brief mutual smirking, Madison excused herself, "Well, it was nice meeting you, Ms. Phillips, and welcome again." She said perfunctorily, and she was on her way.

"I'm sorry we didn't have the opportunity to meet the last time you were here, Ms. Phillips," Raiford said in a voice heavy with a southern drawl as he engaged Alli and looked at her with a cock-sure grin, "John, I trust you'll allow me to meet with her sometime? Perhaps we can discuss possible ways of streamlining the hiring procedure for my construction crews? ...You know that's a pet peeve of mine." Raiford said somewhat condescendingly, not bothering to look up at Stevenson.

Alli smiled back at him, but something about the look on his face sent a shiver through her. *It's not totally unpleasant, just a little... predatory.* Raiford's persona was arrogant and pompous, and he made sure to keep direct eye-contact with the attractive little blonde in front of him.

"Yeah, actually that would probably be a good project for her; have Debbie call her next week to set up a time," Stevenson said with a nod and smile. Alli pushed away the small stab of anger that shot through her when the two men spoke as though she weren't even present. She supposed that, as hip and modern as the company seemed to be, there would still be times when 'old-school' mores and politics would be in effect.

God I hope this doesn't turn out to be a 'good-ole-boys' club or the kind of place where you have to sleep your way to the top, she thought dejectedly for a second, *I'll never get anywhere.* Despite her thoughts, she nodded her agreement to the two men. *Yeah, as if I could say 'no, I'd rather not, you give me the creeps' to the Vice President.*

"Great, I'll look forward to it. Allison, it certainly was a pleasure meeting you, and I'll be seeing you again soon," Raiford said as he shook Alli's hand a little too long, giving her a roguish smile.

As he walked away, Alli had about a hundred questions that she wanted to ask John, but something told her to just sit back and take it all in before she started with the inquiries. She was, by nature, an inquisitive person, and she was fascinated by people, but besides not knowing her new boss well enough to ask things that could be interpreted as 'nosey', she believed that it was sometimes best to just sit back and take it all in first. And she planned on doing just that.

The afternoon brought Alli to the company's Finance, Payroll & Budget Office to complete her tax forms and other new-hire paperwork, as well as meet the people she'd be working closely with.

As she entered the Finance area, she could hear loud voices through the closed door of one of the corner offices. It sounded like a pretty good argument was in full swing, and the receptionist and other people in the office displayed body language that said something about it was making everyone uneasy. Nevertheless, the receptionist greeted Alli and asked her to sit in the waiting area until the Director could see her.

After about 15 minutes, Alli began to fidget; the argument was still going on and she had the distinct feeling that the Director was the one inside that office. Whether she was on the receiving or the giving end of the argument, she didn't know. Just then a small, stocky woman with short brown hair came out of one of the other offices and approached her with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Carole Burnes - I'm the Administrative Assistant. Why don't I get you started on your paperwork and you can meet with the Director when she's... through." Carol said, tossing a wary glance toward the closed door.

"That'd be great," Alli said, glad to be doing something rather than sitting and fidgeting. As she

rose and began to follow Carole past the Director's office, the door suddenly opened and a tall woman burst through the doorway in a flurry of gray, running smack into Allison, causing her to drop all her papers.

"Shit!" The woman exclaimed as she caught Alli and held onto her arms. She looked apologetically at the small blonde in front of her. The girl looked young, like a college intern or something, and she was embarrassed for hitting her.

I probably hurt the poor thing... idiot. "I'm sorry; are you alright?" The woman asked as Allison finally looked up at her.

Alli was struck speechless by what she saw. The woman was tall - very tall ...had to be close to 6 feet - and she was, in a word, stunning. She had dark brown hair that was pulled back behind her head, and brilliant, pale blue eyes that seemed to pierce right through Alli. The woman faltered for a moment and quickly knelt down to pick up the papers that she'd knocked from the blonde's hands.

Alli could only stand there slack-jawed as she observed her, noting absently that she wore a pair of beautiful charcoal-gray slacks with a matching, tailored suit jacket and blue blouse underneath, and her hair was neatly twisted up and pinned into a bun at the back of her head. When she stood up to face her again, Allison couldn't help but marvel at the flawless skin, the angular, sculpted face, slender dark brows, and perfect, light-mauve lips. She was mesmerizing... an amazingly elegant creature; beautiful, but not overly-feminine - handsome, but not in a masculine way. Alli never believed in love at first sight before, but...

"Are you alright?" The brunette asked again, snapping Allison out of her stupor and pinning her with a penetrating light blue stare.

"Uhh, I'm - I'm fine," Alli finally managed to say. The woman quirked a small smile at her and not-so-subtly looked Alli up and down, immediately causing the hair on the back of her neck to bristle.

"Guess I should watch where the hell I'm going, huh?" The tall woman said in a smooth contralto voice as she handed the papers back to a still-stunned Allison. She then turned abruptly to look back at the Department Director, who was now standing in her doorway looking on. "I want you to call me with that answer before you leave today, Liz," she quipped sternly to the Director, pointing a finger at her. Then she turned back to Alli briefly, "I'm sorry again, miss," she said as she spun and briskly exited the office, leaving everyone staring mutely in her wake.

"Well *hell*, I think that's the first time I've ever heard *her* apologize for *ANYthing*!" the Director quipped sarcastically, breaking up the tense atmosphere and making everyone chuckle softly.

Allison smiled as well as she turned to acknowledge the Director. She too was fairly tall, with a smooth olive complexion, full, perfect lips, eyes that were a warm sienna color, and soft, light brown hair that fell in a gentle curl over her shoulders.

Is it a prerequisite that you be gorgeous and young to be a Manager or Director at this company? Alli quickly thought to herself. So far, everyone she'd met in these types of positions was extremely attractive.

"You must be Allison Phillips - I'm Elizabeth Jacobs - please come in." Elizabeth closed the door and motioned for Alli to sit as she took her own seat behind her large desk. "I'm sorry for that calamity, and I apologize if you heard any of the... 'discussion' that was taking place in here," Elizabeth said with a sigh as she ran a hand through her hair and scuffled with several papers that were strewn about her desk. She looked exasperated, and Alli felt for her.

"Not a problem. Who was that woman, if I may ask?" Alli couldn't help her curiosity.

"*That*, Ms. Phillips, was *God*... aka, M.J. Whitton," Elizabeth said with a trace of sarcasm.

Alli was confused, "That was M.J. Whitton?" Alli nearly squeaked in amazement. Her mind did a quick rewind of the tall woman's beautiful face, with the addition of Madison Whitton's visage as well. *Hmm... maybe the Whitton women are direct descendents of Greek goddesses*, Alli thought. Well, they may look similar, however, she was still confused.

"I don't think I understand - I thought 'M.J.' Whitton was Mark J. Whitton, the founder and head of the company?" Allison asked, looking at Elizabeth's questioning face.

"Not anymore. I mean, yes, Mark Whitton founded this company, but he no longer heads it nor runs it - his daughters do."

"Ah, and that would be Madison and the rather... *forceful* M.J.?" Alli asked with a touch of humor.

Elizabeth let out a laugh, "That's right, although to simply call M.J. 'rather forceful' is a little too reserved." She gave Alli a knowing look, and Alli frowned in confusion. "Let's just say that M.J. Whitton is veryyyy... *aggressive*," the Finance Director said, obviously trying to measure her words carefully. "She's very intelligent and driven... a force to be reckoned with, if you will, and she *always* gets what she wants."

Allison could only look at Elizabeth with furrowed brows, trying to decipher the implied meanings to the Director's words.

"...I mean all that in the most *positive* way, of course," Elizabeth quickly added with a smirk, to which Alli smiled. "Don't get me wrong - M.J. is a genius, and she's done wonders for this company, but she's, uhm... well, she's *interesting* to work with, let's just put it that way." Elizabeth added somewhat ruefully.

Alli looked at her with confusion and surprise etched into her fair features, and the Director gave a sheepish smile. "Well... I guess you must think me very unprofessional with that little outburst; it's been a rough day, Ms. Phillips, and-- "

"Please, call me Alli," Allison interrupted.

"Okay - and you call me Liz," the kindly woman said with a smile. "Anyway... I apologize for such a pathetic introduction. It's just that most 'meetings' with M.J. usually wind up with me being a little confused, and a lot frustrated." She forced a little laugh and pushed a pile of papers aside.

Alli smiled at her, but she still had a lot of questions. "Uhm, actually, if it isn't too... inappropriate, may I ask why Mark Whitton is no longer running the company?"

"He was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago. M.J. and Madison had been heading up their own divisions for some time, but when Mark became really sick a few months ago, he stepped down and M.J. took over," the Director offered.

"Why M.J.? I mean, why don't the two sisters run the company jointly?" Alli queried and the Director laughed, making Alli think that she probably sounded either naïve or nosey.

"That *is* a good question, actually. I've always supposed that M.J. just assumed primary control because she's the eldest, and because Madison wouldn't dare challenge her... but no one really knows. It could be that Mark just wanted her to do it... although that doesn't seem very likely either... he and M.J. butted heads at every intersection. If you think the outburst in here was bad, you should have witnessed a clash of those two titans - colossal!" Liz said, motioning with her hands and looking skyward.

"Sounds like they're very similar," Alli observed aloud.

"Yes, I think they are, although M.J. is more aggressive than her father, as well as...," the Director paused, obviously wanting to weigh her words carefully again, "uhm, let's just say that she's not quite as easy to approach as her father was." Liz said with a raised brow. "But I'm making her sound like some sort of monster - she really isn't that bad, once you get to know her and earn her trust," Liz said apologetically. "But that's, unfortunately, rather... difficult," she added, almost under her breath, making it obvious to Alli that she was speaking from experience.

"Well now, enough of that. Let's talk about you." Liz said with a smile, abruptly switching gears and sounding more upbeat.

The conversation about M.J. Whitton ended, but Alli was left with more questions than ever. She was surprised that Liz had spilled so much to her, especially since they didn't know each other from Adam. Obviously, M.J. Whitton had quite an effect on people. Alli definitely had the sense that M.J. was a fascinating woman with a complex story behind her. She wasn't sure if she should hope to meet her again and possibly get to know her, or if she should pray that their paths never crossed.

*"Save me the label
Of the perfume on that table,
So I can remember
What made a wreck of me;
...All women are bad." - The Cramps*

CHAPTER TWO

"Just sign that one and I think that should do it," the plump, 40-something attorney said to the attractive brunette seated at the large conference table. The woman nodded her understanding as she read over the papers quickly, a pen spinning impatiently in the long fingers of her right hand.

Charles Barninger licked his lips as he watched her. She was such an incredibly beautiful vision, he seriously had trouble controlling his libidinous thoughts whenever she showed up at his law office. Today seemed to be worse than ever, which surprised him, considering that he had some pretty decent sex with his new, young wife last night. But then again, Amber was nothing compared to this goddess... this heavenly body could spank his overweight ass all night long, and he'd still beg for more, more, more.

The attorney wiped a hand over his mouth casually, hoping to quell the nasty grin that threatened to spring upon his lips. He watched raptly as an elegant hand quickly scribbled another signature on the paper. Electric blue eyes looked up at him and a small sigh emanated from dark crimson lips.

"Okay... thanks Chuck," the woman said simply as she rose and shook the man's now-clammy hand.

"Uhm, it's only 12:30... can I interest you in grabbing a bite to eat?" *...or maybe grabbing a quick blowjob?* The attorney clumsily asked and internally fantasized.

"Thank you, but I have to get back to the office. Maybe some other time?" *Maybe in your dreams, fat boy,* the brunette thought as she gave a prim, forced smile then turned and headed out the door, glad to be getting away from the offensive, corpulent man.

She strode down the hallway and turned a corner, spotting the door that represented her blessed escape to the outside world. Just as she began to pick up speed, a slender arm darted out and snagged her, pulling her into a side hallway.

"Well, well... fancy meeting you here," the small red-headed attorney said with a touch of sarcasm. The brunette forcibly withheld a painful grimace; not only had her perfect escape been foiled, but now she was face-to-face with the one person she really didn't want to see today.

"Hello Kate," the brunette said through tightly pursed lips.

"Hmm, so curt. I guess this means you're still upset with me?" The redhead said, tilting her head to the side and regarding the taller woman through suspicious eyes.

The brunette sighed and looked around to make sure no one was close enough to hear them, "I'm not upset, I'm just in a hurry, okay?"

"In a hurry, in a hurry... you're always in a hurry," the redhead said accusingly. The brunette refused to answer and instead looked away, rolling her blue eyes and releasing an impatient sigh.

"You left without saying goodbye the other night." The redhead continued quietly, reaching out to caress the taller woman's arm discreetly, but the brunette casually moved so that the contact couldn't be made.

"Yeah... so?" The taller woman sounded sarcastic, and it was intentional.

"So...? We had quite an evening... and you just left without waking me or anything? Then you don't call me...?" The redhead sounded hurt, but the brunette only sighed impatiently again. "So... what's the problem, M.J.?" The redhead was beginning to get angry.

"No problem, Kate. I didn't know I had to *check-in* with you at all times... do I?" M.J. felt her own anger rising.

It was Kate's turn to sigh, "What are you pissed about now, huh?" M.J. didn't answer; she didn't want to get into this right now. "Alright then, let me guess," the redhead persisted, "I'd say you're pissed-off because I said we should 'cool it' a little bit. ...Right?"

Still no reply from the taller woman.

"Come onnn, M.J... don't be shitty... talk to me." Kate pleaded with a sigh.

"There's nothing to talk about, Kate. You said 'cool it', so we 'cooled it'," M.J. snapped, her icy blue eyes blazing.

"Yeah, 'cool it' meaning no more going down on each other in the goddamned office parking garage, not completely *ignoring* me! Jesus Christ, M.J.!" Kate said angrily.

"Lower your voice!" M.J. growled through gritted teeth as she flipped her eyes around warily. Kate's face was flushed and both women locked angry gazes for a moment. The redhead was clearly frustrated, which somehow gave the brunette a demented sense of satisfaction.

"You're so... abrupt... so damned *insensitive*!" Kate added, still glaring at the taller woman.

"Whatever. Look, I have to go." M.J. sniffed as she began to turn her body away from the

redhead.

"Fine. Go. I guess I'll see you the next time you *need* something from me?" Kate said sarcastically.

M.J. turned to look back at the small woman, a wicked sneer curling her lips and an elegant eyebrow arching high, "Don't flatter yourself, counselor." She said lowly, then turned on her heel, leaving the redhead leaning against the wall feeling plenty exasperated.

"...Bitch."

*"The world is a vampire, sent to drain
Secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames And what do I get for my pain? ...Betrayed desires,
and a piece of the game; Even though I know, I suppose I'll show All my cool and cold, like I'm
told; Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage." - Smashing Pumpkins*

CHAPTER THREE

"They're waiting for you, Ms. Whitton." The new, young assistant said, nervously poking her head inside her boss's office door.

"Let them wait... I'll be there in a minute," M.J. called back tersely as she gathered her papers together. There was a lot to cover at this month's Director's meeting, and she chastised herself for not being totally prepared. One of her V.P.'s was preparing to go on a long vacation, and that meant that a lot of his responsibilities would fall on her shoulders, as usual. She really wasn't up to the task right now; there were too many other things going on and she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep a proper handle on everything. Nevertheless, she would attend the meeting and put on her brave face, as she always did.

She stuffed the papers into her organizer and rushed out of her office toward the 14th floor conference room. As she entered, the muttering ceased and all eyes turned toward her. She wasn't in the mood for dallying today, and she hoped she wouldn't have any unforeseen surprises dropped on her.

"Ladies, Gentlemen... let's get started," M.J. said as she sat down at the head of the huge table. All the divisional Directors were there, as well as the two Vice Presidents, all with papers and pens in hand. Everyone knew that meetings with the President and two VP's were usually chocked-full of deadlines, assignments - and sometimes, fireworks - so everyone was always on the edge of their seats.

The meeting progressed rather smoothly with each Director giving a status report of his/her

current projects and workloads. Madison read off the current investment and financial outlook reports and gave her updates.

After she finished, M.J. took charge again, "That leaves us with the last agenda item - Ray's upcoming vacation. Ray, give us the current status of all construction projects and tell us who's taking care of what while you're gone," M.J. said in her usual commanding, no-nonsense tone.

"The usual people will be taking care of the usual things," Ray said, somewhat sarcastically to his step-sister as he leaned back in his chair.

Raiford Calhoun's mother had married Mark Whitton a few years ago, and as a favor to his new wife, Mark had given the young man a job at Whitton, Inc. Ray worked with dedication for many years, and although he wasn't overly bright, he somehow managed to earn Mark's trust and was loyal to his step-father. The elder Whitton took a shine to the eager young man and mentored him, promoting him quickly up through the ranks - much to the chagrin of his two older daughters. When he became ill and changes were made, Mark insisted that Ray be entrusted with a Vice Presidency.

None of this ever sat well with M.J. or Madison, and there was always a definite tension among the three siblings. The girls never liked nor trusted Ray the way their father did, and they saw a much different side to their slippery, fast-talking step-brother. He was too young, too dense, and too inexperienced to take his new position seriously, and, more importantly, he was a total snake-in-the-grass prick. It had taken the young man the full five years since he came to Whitton, Inc., to 'learn the ropes', and unlike Mark, M.J. and Madison knew that he would never fully gain the knowledge and know-how that it took to be a truly effective leader. Raiford was arrogant and brash enough before, but with his promotion to a vice presidency position, his head swelled to gargantuan proportions. He often threw Mark's favor of him in the girls' faces, just to agitate them - especially M.J. One time, he even had the gonads to say that Mark thought of him as the son he never had. That absolutely infuriated the girls, and M.J., especially, never forgot it. Maybe Ray **thought** he could step in and be Mark's pseudo-son, but M.J. would never, **ever** allow it.

Mark Whitton had a son once upon a time, and no one would **ever** replace him.

M.J. glanced up at the younger man and glared, "Could you give us some **details**, please, Raiford," she quipped back sharply.

Ray rolled his eyes, "It's no different than the last time I was gone, M.J. - Jimmy's got all the design stuff, Harper has engineering, Watkins has the vendors, --"

"I **know** all that," M.J. interrupted impatiently, "But who are **they** reporting to?" She queried, looking pointedly to Ray.

"They'll report to **you**, just like they **always** do, M.J.," he said snidely.

Madison rolled her eyes and M.J. shot Ray an angry look. "They can't all report to me again. If

you're going to be gone for four weeks, I can't take all of it... I don't have the time." M.J. snapped as everyone in the room shifted in their seats uncomfortably, sensing imminent danger.

"Actually... I'm gonna be gone a bit longer than that," Ray said, plunging the entire room into absolute stillness.

M.J.'s brows rose high on her forehead as she regarded him incredulously. This was so typical of Ray to use his position and try to pull some sort of idiotic trick on her.

"Oh really?" she said in a low voice, pinning him with a narrowed, icy blue stare that dropped the room's temperature by 10 degrees. Madison breathed an exasperated sigh and rubbed her temple as she sensed the battle that was about to erupt.

"Yeah, uhm... I wanted to talk to you about it," Ray said as he darted his eyes around the table. M.J. could feel her body temperature rising and her ears tingled with the building fury. Ray always staged this kind of stunt in front of everyone because he knew she wouldn't blow her stack in the presence of the Directors and Managers.

M.J. tapped her fingers on the table while shooting poison-filled daggers at Ray, barely containing her desire to reach across the table and strangle him.

"This meeting is adjourned. Mr. Calhoun, Ms. Whitton - in my office, **now**." M.J. said in a low, clipped tone as she rose abruptly and stormed out of the conference room. The Directors and Managers quickly scurried away, relieved to have escaped with their lives.

"I told you," Madison said to Ray as they rose from the table, "you should have asked her earlier. She's going to flip her lid now," she added, giving the younger man a scolding look.

"Yeah, so the **Scorpion's** tail is gonna zap me good... what the fuck is new?" Ray replied sardonically, invoking the President's hated nickname.

You're such an asshole, Madison thought as she rolled her slate eyes in disgust. Unlike her sister, Madison tried to make amends and not hold grudges against people. She often tried to bury the hatchet with Ray, but he tended to dig it right back up again.

As soon as Ray and Madison entered M.J.'s office and closed the door, she pounced on him, "What the hell is this about, Ray?"

"I'm taking more than four weeks," he said matter-of-factly.

"**How** much more? And why?!" M.J. spat.

"Not that it's any of your **business**, and not that you would **care**, but I'm going to spend some time with Mark, and then I'm taking my trip overseas with Stacey." He explained as he flopped down in one of the leather chairs. The fact that he was going to see Mark Whitton wasn't that much of a shock - although he was a jerk, he was genuinely fond of the older man and felt closer

to him than his real father.

"How **much** time, Ray?" M.J. demanded, refusing to be taken aback by Ray's revelation.

He paused, shooting a glance to Madison, "A week or two with Mark, then a month or two overseas - maybe more, if I feel like it," he said, lifting his chin with a challenging tone.

"WHAT?! You've gotta be fucking kidding! You **cannot** be gone for TWO MONTHS, Ray! You CANNOT!" M.J. shouted, motioning with her hands as she stood behind her desk.

"Why not!? There's nothing major going on right now, and I **want** to go see Mark! Not that YOU would understand that," he said snidely.

"This has nothing to do with **MY** father, and you know it," M.J. snapped back, emphasizing the point of Mark's flesh and blood. "You CAN'T disappear for two months and dump all your **shit** in my lap. You're a goddamn Vice President, Ray! It's time you start **acting** like one!" M.J. shouted.

Ray glared at M.J. across her desk for a moment before Madison spoke up, "Morgan, it really shouldn't be that big a problem," she offered calmly, wanting to smooth things over.

"Oh really? I suppose you knew about this already?" M.J. said accusingly.

"I **told** him to tell you about it weeks ago, and, as usual, he ignored me," Madison said, casting a disapproving glance at the younger man.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You can't be gone that long, period. You can have six weeks - that's it." M.J. said, glaring back at Ray as she sat back down at her desk.

"No way, M.J.!! I already bought tickets and the itineraries are planned! I can't change it now! I **WON'T**!" Ray yelled back.

"Tough **SHIT**, Ray! We have a business to run here, and that requires commitment, from all **three** of us! You can't just take off to go traipsing all over Europe with your little tramp-of-the-week girlfriend whenever you feel like it!" M.J. shouted.

"You fucking prima-donna **bitch**!" Ray snarled, gripping the arms of his chair fiercely and leaning forward.

"Yeah, that's right - I'm a bitch, but I'm also the **BOSS**!" M.J. growled back through gritted teeth.

With that, Ray shot out of his seat and lurched toward the taller woman's desk. M.J. quickly stood up, her chair clattering backwards as she squared her hips and gripped her hands into fists, fully prepared and daring her step-brother to take a swipe at her.

Coming close to blows was nothing new for the two hot-headed step-siblings. Mark Whitton's acceptance of Ray into the family circle so long ago had forced their working together closely, but they had never liked each other. They only tolerated each other; they were rivals who only barely managed to get along to please their parents and save face for the company's sake. The two stared at each other ferociously for a moment before Madison stood up to interrupt.

"Oh for *chrissake* you two! Stop it! If anyone knew that you behaved this way, it'd disgrace us all!" She scolded, giving Ray a slight shove back toward his chair. "Morgan, look... why don't you have some of his people report to me - that way you won't be saddled with all of it?" Madison offered, trying to settle things down, as she always did.

"What the hell are *you* going to do with construction, Maddy?" M.J. snapped. Madison knew nothing about construction, and all of them knew it - she was the numbers person and the legal whiz; M.J. was the one who had headed the construction division before Ray officially took over that VP role when she moved up to President.

"Give me the vendors and certifications, and... I dunno... closings, or something. You can take the rest." Madison offered, looking somewhat pleadingly at M.J. She was used to playing peace-maker between her older sister and her younger step-brother. It was a role that was quite necessary, lest the two of them rip each other's lungs out. She was tired of it; she'd been doing it for five years now.

M.J. pulled her chair back and plopped into it, releasing an exasperated sigh and looking at her desk silently for a moment. "Why are you going to spend so much time with Mark? What's going on?" She asked more calmly as she looked pointedly at Ray, who was now sitting back in his chair, sulking.

"*Nothing* is 'going on'. In case you've forgotten, he's dying," Ray said cynically, earning him immediate, harsh glares from both women.

"Don't you *dare* sit there and try to preach to me about *MY* father, you sorry son-of-a-bitch!" M.J. growled in a low, warning tone.

"Hey, maybe I just want to spend some time with him, okay? I know it doesn't matter to you two, but it matters to me!" he shot back quickly.

"Oh go wank yourself, Ray! You know damn well that I've gone to see him, and Maddy's gone to see him too, so don't even try to lay a guilt trip on us - it won't work!" M.J. retaliated furiously.

"Oh yeah, you two visited for his birthday, for a whole weekend - *wow*!" The angry young man chided. He knew he was pushing his luck, but he liked antagonizing the girls, and he always took every opportunity that presented itself.

"Oh shut UP Ray! Christ!" Madison finally spouted, smoothing a hand over her hair as she stood up, clearly irritated. "Look, I have to go. Are we finished here?" She was at the end of her patience.

"Yes, we're finished. Maddy, you and I can meet later to discuss the delegation of all this *shit*; Ray - goodbye, and good *riddance*!" M.J. said with much sarcasm as she dismissed the two.

"I'm not leaving *yet*!" He snapped as he rose to leave.

"Well why wait?!" M.J. called after him as he left the office, ignoring her and slamming the door with a bang.

Fury burned deep in M.J.'s chest and she finally lashed-out, sending a pile of papers scattering off the side of her desk with a swat of her hand and a frustrated growl. The sheets splattered on the floor and she immediately brought her hands up to her head, squeezing the temples, desperately fighting to bring her rage under control.

Fucking Ray, she thought to herself, *one of these days, I'm not going to hold back*, she thought darkly. She turned and moved to the window to watch the sun as it hung, burning low and orange in the sky above the St. Johns River. She wasn't really angry with Ray for wanting to go spend time with her dying father. Even though he was a complete asshole, she was pretty sure that he had genuine feelings for the old man. But still... his being so presumptuous about taking time off was too much, and the way he went about it was deceitful and unacceptable. He was such a conniving sack of shit sometimes; he infuriated M.J., and he damn well knew it. It was a repetitious conflict, always.

M.J. refused to let guilt about her own infrequent trips to see her father seep into her mind. Surely he understood that she couldn't take off much time - she was the President of the company - he had put her in the position himself. As much as she would love to escape to Pennsylvania and spend endless weeks lounging at the huge farm that had been her grandparent's home and her childhood playground, she just couldn't afford it. Besides that, spending any amount of time with her father was always difficult and stressful. His being sick and her muddled feelings about that would only complicate things further. It wasn't that she couldn't accept that he was dying - she did - she just didn't want to be around him because she didn't know what to say to him. And he never knew what to say to her either - it was the same old, same old. They hadn't been able to relate to each other for many, many years.

Their estrangement had been a long one. At one time, M.J. thought that perhaps her father's illness would somehow bring them closer together, or possibly heal old wounds. But as time elapsed, she realized that would not happen. Apparently the chasm between them would always remain as wide as it was right now. She supposed she should feel guilty about that, but she honestly didn't. In her mind, she wasn't the one who created the rift - he was; so she refused to feel guilty for not going and spending time with him right now. She would continue to squeeze in a long-weekend wherever possible, but other than that, she would not play the grieving-daughter-begging-for-forgiveness-and-absolution role that everyone expected her to play. Maybe it was harsh and cold-hearted for her to think that way, but she didn't care. No one else, save Madison, knew her family history. No one else knew how much of an effort it was for her to be here, doing what she was doing, at all. She owed no one an explanation; they could all go to hell, as far as she was concerned.

M.J. was frustrated, in so many ways; today's little ambush and blow-up with Raiford only served to deteriorate her mood further. She could feel the anger residing within her, as it had been for days. This afternoon's explosion just made the feelings swell dangerously larger. She needed to get out... get away from it all. She found her mind turning to thoughts of the usual way in which she quelled her anger. It wasn't something she was proud of... in fact, she felt it was more like a dirty little secret... but a necessary one, for her.

She turned and checked the clock, deciding to finish up a few things and then head home for the evening. Perhaps, she thought as she returned to her chair, she should work-off a little steam first before heading out for a 'fix'. After all, she wouldn't want to frighten anyone with a superfluous amount of 'energy'.

*"Novocaine for the soul,
You better give me somethin'
To fill the hole,
Before I sputter out." - Eels*

CHAPTER FOUR

The tall brunette stood in her bathroom, deliberately styling her long, dark tresses so that they looked messy and wild. When she went out on nights like this, she didn't want to look anything like her stiff, daytime business persona. Even though she had put herself through a vigorous one-hour workout with her punching bag at home, she still felt like there was an 'edge' to her anger and frustration, and it burned deep inside her. She hated feeling like this... desolate and totally keyed-up, ready to burst at the seams. She had tried almost every form of 'exercise' and 'work-out' that she could think of over the past few years to help her diffuse the bomb that seemed to constantly tick inside her body and soul. Unfortunately, she had found that the best way for her to extinguish the fire was to dominate and conquer another human being.

She couldn't explain the psychology behind it, and she really didn't want to know anyway. She only knew that sexual release always worked best for her, the more dominating and powerful, the better. The problem was that, even after a successful 'conquest' and 'purgings', it was only a matter of days before the vicious cycle would start all over again. It was a double-edged sword - wanting to be alone, but needing occasional human contact in order to 'relieve' herself. She honestly didn't like treating people like throwaways, but it was absolutely necessary for her; she was only interested in her release, and nothing more. Sometimes her anger spilled over into the sex, and then that was a problem. But the good thing was that she was always able to pick up a nameless, faceless someone on whom she could take-out her pent-up frustrations. It was always fairly quick and painless, and then she was back in the safety of her own home again. It was a ridiculous existence, she knew, but she felt as though she had dug herself into an inescapable

hole - a very deep one - and she didn't quite know how to climb back out.

Well maybe some day Princess Charming will come along and rescue me like a damsel in distress, she thought to herself with a sarcastic smile as she flipped the light off in the her bathroom and headed out at last.

M.J. snuck down the alley in her old Jeep, being careful to park it at a discreet distance, yet in a safe place. For nights like this, she always used this car because she didn't drive it that often, therefore no one would recognize it. The heels of her boots clicked loudly on the concrete sidewalk as she made her way to the club that served as her secret haven... her hideaway... her escape. She raked her fingers through her hair and adjusted the fit of her pants, secure in the fact that she looked different enough not to be readily recognized by anyone.

Not that I really give much of a shit if anyone sees, she thought to herself.

The truth was, she didn't care if anyone knew about her 'preferences' - she had never made it a secret - but she didn't talk about it openly either. Being the head of a major company forced her to have some modicum of restraint when it came to her public behavior, and she knew it was best if her business colleagues and associates knew nothing of her private life or her 'extra-curricular activities'. However... that didn't stop her from going out and doing what she wanted to do. She just had to be a little more discreet, and exercise a little more self-control. Becoming someone different helped too; on nights like this, she not only liked to look different, she liked to **feel** different too.

I doubt anyone from work would think that I'd be caught dead looking like this in torn jeans and a leather jacket, she mused, satisfied with her incognito feel.

As she neared the club entrance, she could hear the loud thumping of the music. A feral grin spread across her lips as she began to relax and slip into predatory mode. These places were her hunting grounds... this was where she came to stalk prey and satisfy the urges that sometimes overwhelmed her. It was a dirty little game to her, but one that she needed to play, and **needed** to win. She knew she should feel some shame about what she was doing, but she didn't; at least not right now. That would come later, and she'd deal with it then.

She entered the club, getting a drink from the bar and discreetly making her way to a small corner table where she could silently survey and single-out prospective victims. She smirked inwardly at the thought. She sometimes felt like a vampire, out on the town looking for a kill to help stave off her hunger. In a way, that was exactly what she was doing. She was only interested in satisfying herself for a few hours. Just play a few mind-games, lead them on a little, then a quick fuck that left them begging for more, and she'd be on her merry way. It was cold and impersonal, and that's exactly the way she wanted it.

It didn't take long until a few brave women began approaching the dark, forbidding-looking beauty. M.J. was selective, however; she was looking for a particular type tonight. She finally

found it in a small, but nicely-built platinum blonde with amber eyes and a charming smile. They chatted politely for a few moments, exchanging witty quips and sexual innuendos. It was long enough for M.J. to deem that this woman was smart enough to understand what was going on, and was therefore worthy of her time and energy. M.J. finally rose from the table and moved to stand behind the woman, pressing her intention intimately against the small body, and whispering into her ear that she wished to leave. The woman agreed to join her in a hurry.

They began walking down the sidewalk, away from the club, when M.J. suddenly decided that she didn't want to go anywhere with this stranger. She was here for one reason and one reason only - why waste her time driving to some cheap hotel or stinking up the backseat of her car? The tall brunette grabbed the platinum blonde by the arm fiercely and pulled her into a dark alley, backing her up against a brick wall. The blonde could only gasp breathlessly as the dark woman gave her a menacing look and yanked her jacket apart, leaning in to begin feasting on her slender neck while pressing her hips against her. Small hands grasped at broad shoulders as the tall stranger pulled the smaller woman's leather skirt up and grasped her buttocks firmly.

"Wait! W-What are you doing?" the blonde said breathlessly.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing?" M.J. snarled back, continuing to assault the woman's throat and clavicles.

"But-But... not here! Not like this! I wanna go to your place," the blonde said, somewhat confused by the already intimidating woman's sudden aggressiveness. M.J. stopped her ministrations and brought herself to stand at full-height in front of the blonde.

"Let's get one thing straight, honey - I'm only interested in doing what *I* want, not what *you* want. You got that?" She growled in a low, threatening voice as she grasped the woman by her shirt front. The blonde could only look up and stare, wide-eyed... she suddenly began to regret ever looking at this woman. Even though she was accustomed to this type of encounter, the cold, icy orbs that stared emotionlessly back at her gave her chills, and she feared that perhaps her choice this time was a bad one.

M.J. glared at her for a moment, then abruptly spun her around, pushing her face-first against the brick wall. She held one of the blonde's wrists tightly with a hand while she let her other hand slide up the smaller woman's chest, caressing her breasts along the way. The blonde could only rasp heavily against the cold, rough wall. She was taken off-guard, but the feeling of being dominated by this dark beauty was beginning to turn her on immensely.

M.J. let her hand slide up further until she was gripping the woman's slender neck, and she leaned down to whisper menacingly into her ear, "Now you're going to do exactly what I tell you, right?" M.J. said lowly, loving the fact that she was so easily in complete control of the little woman.

"B-But--," the blonde said in a breathless whisper, her fear and desire commingling.

"Shhhh... I won't hurt you," M.J. growled, her voice alternating between seductive and

demanding. The blonde wanted to relax, but she was still uncertain. "I want you to be very *quiet*... can you do that?" M.J. whispered against a trembling temple while squeezing the hand that was around the blonde's neck tighter. The small woman could only nod mutely - she wasn't about to defy the strong hand that suddenly had such a tenacious hold on her only source of oxygen. "...Good girl," M.J. teased as she licked the rim of the woman's ear while she quickly released her wrist and dropped both hands down to strip the blonde's panties down off her hips.

As soon as the panties disappeared, M.J. unbuttoned her jeans, withdrawing the strap-on phallus she had concealed within. Steadying herself, she grasped the smaller woman's hip with one hand and guided the shaft in-between quivering thighs, plunging it quickly into the awaiting tightness.

The small woman let out a loud gasp, and M.J. brought a hand up to again grip the blonde's softly-muscled throat, "Shhh!", She commanded as she held both of them still. "Tell me that you want this," she growled lowly into the small woman's ear.

"Yes! ...God, yesss!" The woman whimpered as she squirmed and pushed back against M.J.'s hips, desperate for movement.

"Tell me what you want me to do," M.J. insisted, holding the blonde's hips firmly so she couldn't move.

"Fuck me... Goddd! Fuck me!" The blonde groaned in a breathless whisper.

M.J. smiled at the woman's pleading, "Shhh! I want to *feel* you come, I don't want to hear you," M.J. demanded as she slowly began to move her hips. The blonde, who was now painfully aroused, writhed wildly beneath the larger body as she clung to the brick wall for dear life. M.J. held the woman tighter by pressing her body against her as she proceeded to unleash her own need.

The blonde gritted her teeth and tried valiantly to keep quiet, but the feel of the tall woman plundering her was quickly pushing her close to the edge, and she wasn't sure she could obey the brunette's commands. Her mind toggled between the fear of what might happen if she shouted out, and the pleasure that the dark stranger was inflicting upon her. The side of her face pressed harder against the cold brick wall as the tall body thrust against her backside repeatedly, and she pushed herself outward, craving deeper contact.

M.J. could feel the small body beginning to tremble beneath her, and she knew both their climaxes were imminent. She removed her hand from the woman's hip and slid her fingers down to tease the blonde's swollen button, causing her to emit a strangled gasp. M.J. squeezed the soft throat tighter as her fingers swirled and pressed harder until at last the blonde burst apart with a moan and a quiver that wracked her whole body. Her mind wavering on the brink of consciousness, the smaller woman smiled as she felt the brunette's body shudder slightly against her, a breathless gasp being the only audible evidence that some sort of relief was achieved.

M.J. relinquished her grip from the woman's throat and leaned against the brick wall, her arms resting on either side of the blonde's head, effectively boxing her in. As she struggled to regain

her composure, the blonde quickly twisted around so that she faced the taller woman at last. This certainly wasn't the oddest situation she ever found herself in, but the blonde couldn't help but wonder why such a beautiful woman would find it necessary to pick up a stranger at a club and fuck them so anonymously.

Probably some kind of head case, she figured. Wanting to taste the luscious mouth that taunted her so effectively, she reached out and brought her arms up to encircle the brunette's neck. But, as she reached up to kiss those tantalizing lips, the tall woman jerked, pulling away quickly and strenuously, disentangling herself from the smaller woman with a firm shove.

"What?!" The blonde asked in confusion.

The brunette glared at her with cold, heartless eyes and took a step back, adjusting herself and re-buttoning her jeans.

"Thanks." She said simply, then turned abruptly on her heel and began walking down the street, leaving a very puzzled blonde in her wake.

*"Why don't I just give up, and do myself a favor?
My life is slowly turning gray, and losing all its flavor;
Everything's the same, again and again and again." - Soft Cell*

CHAPTER FIVE

The shrill ringing of a phone pulled M.J. out of her sleepy stupor, interrupting her usual dream of a faceless woman making wild, passionate love to her. She decided, as usual, to ignore the phone and let the machine pick it up; however, when the machine went off, the caller hung up.

Fucking telemarketers, the brunette grumbled inwardly as she curled up and covered her head with a pillow, wanting to go back to sleep and to her dream. But alas, it was not meant to be... the phone rang again.

Rolling over toward the night-table, M.J. grabbed the phone, "What?!" She spat out in a raspy, sleep-deprived voice.

"Morgan!? Where the hell have you **been*!*" Madison squawked into the earpiece, causing M.J. to visibly cringe.

"What are you talking about? I've been here, at home!" M.J. growled back.

"No you weren't! I tried to call you all night, there and at your office - where the hell **were**

you?! ...Or do I not want to know?" The younger woman said accusingly.

"Maddy... what the hell do you want at-" she paused, checking the clock, "eight-o-fucking-clock on a Saturday morning?!" M.J. snapped impatiently.

"Daddy's in the hospital." Madison said seriously.

"What?" M.J. asked, sitting up to attention. "What happened?"

"Well, Virginia rang me - believe it or not - and said that he had been complaining of stomach pain and feeling nauseous, so she called the doctor and they admitted him. Turns out that he has some kind of bowel obstruction, so they're going to try putting a stent in tomorrow and- "

"A what?" M.J. asked, cutting her sister off.

"A *stent* - it's like a little metal tube-thing they implant in there to open the blockage - anyway, they're hoping that it'll work." Madison finished.

"And if it doesn't?"

"I don't know... how the hell would I know?!" Madison snapped in irritation. M.J. sighed long and loud into the phone as she reclined back on her bed and thought for a moment.

"So Miss Virginia rings you up, huh?" M.J. said with feigned indignance.

Virginia Calhoun had married Mark Whitton 6 years ago, much to the dismay and disappointment of his two daughters. They could barely tolerate the woman and saw her as nothing more than a gold-digging, southern-belle wanna-be. But Mark seemed to adore her, so they put up with the shrew for his sake. Now, however, with him being ill, she was even harder to stomach. More importantly, the two girls feared what might happen when Mark died - Virginia and her son could make a play for control of Whitton, Inc. If that happened, a battle of epic proportions would erupt and consume all of them.

"She *never* rings me, Morgan. I swear I almost fell off my chair when I realized who it was," Madison said.

"Yeah well, it's good she *did* - she wouldn't fucking ring me if her own life depended on it." M.J. said sarcastically. It was no secret that M.J. loathed Virginia - she had made that quite clear before the woman even married her father. Madison was civil to her, but M.J. absolutely refused.

"I didn't even recognize her voice - when it finally dawned on me, I thought... well... you know." Madison said quietly, and M.J. knew exactly what she meant. Having to hear from that woman that their father passed away was something both girls dreaded.

"Well, is she going to let you know how it goes, or what?" M.J. asked, interrupting both their thoughts.

"Yah, I asked her to let me know; if she doesn't - which wouldn't surprise me - I'll ring her tomorrow evening, I guess... unless *you'd* like the honor." Madison said, teasing her sister.

"Hah," M.J. snorted, "I'd fly up there to see for myself before I'd call that witch and ask her for a damn thing," she sniped.

"You know, Morgan, that actually isn't a bad idea." Madison said seriously.

"What? Me flying up there? Now? ...Forget it." M.J. retorted.

"Well, maybe not right now, but... sometime soon? Maybe we both could go?" The younger woman asked hopefully.

M.J. sighed again, "I can't go now, not with Ray getting ready to leave; besides, I wouldn't want to be there while *he's* visiting anyway. Speaking of Ray, does he know about this?"

"I don't know, but I'm quite sure Ginny told him before she told us." Madison said.

The phone was silent for a moment until M.J. spoke, "You know, Maddy, if you really want to go see him, you can; I can handle things for a little while by myself."

Madison sighed, "No, no... that's okay; I wouldn't do that to you while Ray is gone," she said, then hesitated for a moment, "Morgan?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you so good to me and so awful to Ray and everyone else?" She was kidding, but she still wanted to see what her older sister would say.

M.J. sighed heavily and closed her eyes as she considered her answer for just a moment. "Because... they're all assholes, and I don't trust Ray for shit... I only trust you."

The blunt honesty of her older sister's answer shocked Madison, and she found herself momentarily speechless. M.J. rarely granted such moments of frankness about her feelings, even to her.

"Oh Morgan, I think you're just becoming an 'ole softie!" Madison teased, recovering quickly.

"Shut up, Maddy. Look, I gotta go... since I'm now *awake*, I might as well get my shower and get some work done." M.J. said with feigned irritation.

"Morgan J., Morgan J. ...don't you ever take a weekend OFF?" Madison chided.

"No, not really," the older woman sighed loudly.

"Christ, girl... you need to get a real life."

"Tell me something I *don't* know, little sister." M.J. retorted, clapping a hand over her eyes and sighing loudly again.

"Okay, I'll let you go. Oh, Morgan? One last thing?"

"What?"

"...Where *were* you last night, really?" Madison teased.

"Good-BYE Maddy!" M.J. hung up the phone and flopped back down on the bed. She loved her sister dearly, but sometimes she was much too nosy for her own good.

She stared up at the white ceiling, suddenly feeling very miserable, very alone, and finally - ashamed.

Ahh yes, there it is... the 'morning-after' shame, M.J. thought sarcastically to herself. If her little sister only knew what she did last night... if she knew what a tragic, pathetic joke her life had become... if she knew that she only 'existed', rather than 'lived'... Madison would be horrified. Some days, M.J. was horrified of it herself.

She lay there on her bed, listening to nothing, save the soft whir of the ceiling fan as its blades lazily rotated around, stirring a slight breeze in the emptiness of the room.

Empty... that's how I feel, she thought to herself, *...that's always how I feel*. M.J. wasn't the kind of person who wasted her time wishing upon impossible dreams. When she did wish, however, it was always for the same thing: that her life was indeed much different.

"You turn my head when you turn around, You turn the whole world upside down; I'm smitten, I'm bitten, I'm hooked, I'm cooked, I'm stuck like glue; You make me, make me, make me, Make me hungry for you." - The Cure

CHAPTER SIX

M.J. walked briskly from the 13th floor elevator to John Stevenson's area. Even though he probably already knew, she wanted to make sure that he understood that all his hiring and firing would need to come through her while Ray was gone. Ray's construction crews tended to have a lot of turn-over, and he normally dealt directly with John on all matters, intentionally excluding M.J., even though she oversaw the Human Resources department and liked to be kept in-the-loop

about everything. Personnel and labor issues were something that she especially liked to keep a handle on, since problems, when they did crop up, tended to hit the flashpoint rather easily. She entered the HR area without looking at any of the employees and headed directly for John's office.

Allison both saw and felt the foreboding presence through her open office door as soon as it entered the room.

"Oooo... stop the presses... here comes the big bad boss-lady," she murmured quietly to herself. She remembered Liz's words about how aggressive and driven M.J. was.

Hmmm... she could 'drive' me anytime, Alli joked to herself with a lustful little smirk as she watched surreptitiously. The towering woman wore a serious expression on her strong-jawed face, complimented by a striking, pin-striped navy blue suit. Her appearance was simple, yet elegant, and her hair was again pinned tightly behind her head. She exuded confidence and determination. As Alli watched her disappear from her sight, she tried to recall what the tall brunette looked like close-up. She hadn't had the pleasure - or punishment - of having much interaction with the regal President of the company, and she'd only really gotten close to her that first day, when they ran into each other, quite literally. Alli remembered thinking that she had never seen a more beautiful, strong, handsome face before.

Handsome and beautiful... an interesting combination... so far, it seems to be very accurate, she thought.

Alli found herself idly wondering what the brunette looked like and acted like when she wasn't at work. So often coworkers and bosses are nothing like you'd imagine them to be when they're away from the office, and she wondered what M.J. Whitton looked like when she let her hair down, literally.

*She's probably the kind of person who always looks the same, because she never takes a break from her work... one of those 'I *am* the job' types of people*, Alli thought, returning her attention to her work.

M.J. strode purposely past everyone toward the Director's office. John had been talking to one of the secretaries when the tall figure darkened his doorway.

"M.J., what a pleasant surprise," he said with just a hint of sarcasm.

Alli had discovered that it was a well-known fact that John and M.J. clashed on numerous issues, and it was also well-known that John and Ray Calhoun were friends outside the office. John supposed he had a slight issue with a **woman** being his boss, but he forced himself to ignore it, especially in light of the fact that **two** women, who were also siblings, now essentially ran the entire company. He outwardly told everyone that it wasn't the fact that M.J. was a woman, it was her superior attitude and demanding ways.

"Just wanted to remind you that all of Ray's construction crew recruiting is going to have to

come through me while he's gone," M.J. quipped, refusing to be baited by John's tone.

"Yes, of course, M.J., but there isn't anything going on right now, so don't worry - we won't be bothering you." he added, reclining back in his chair.

"Well, since Ray is going to be gone for almost **two** months, I'm sure **something** will arise. When it does, be certain that all the paperwork comes across my desk. Got it?" M.J. said in a low, commanding tone. John's attitude pissed her off, but she knew that being condescending to him was the best way to get under his skin and keep him in line.

"Yes Ma'am," John said succinctly, daring to almost glare at her. M.J. gave him a stern look and turned to leave. As she turned, she looked in to the office that was directly across from John's. A young woman was sitting at the desk and looked up at her tentatively. She had short hair that was a light-blond color with smatterings of strawberry-gold reflected in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the office. Bright eyes of an indeterminate shade locked fully onto M.J. for a moment, then the blonde smiled politely and turned back to her computer screen. M.J. thought she looked familiar, but she couldn't remember where she'd seen her.

Wonder if that's John's new Assistant? She looks awfully young... cute too... so typical of John to hire some pretty young thing... he's such a dirty old man, M.J. thought as she exited the HR area.

*Jesus, she has *presence**, Alli thought to herself as she blew out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. Being a 'people-person' and naturally perceptive when it came to reading and analyzing personalities, Alli found herself highly intrigued by the commanding, enigmatic woman. She had met and conversed at length with almost all of the company's top Directors and Managers, as well as the two Vice Presidents, but somehow the mysterious President remained elusive. She'd been relegated to catching only fleeting glimpses of the statuesque brunette here and there - in the company cafe, in a hallway, going hurriedly in or out of someone's office - and she found herself wishing that she had the opportunity to speak with her or deal with her for whatever reason. According to what everyone had told her - in both subtle and very unsubtle ways - she should never **ever** wish for such a thing.

M.J. Whitton may be a savvy leader and astute business-woman, but Alli was discovering that she had very few allies in her own company. For some reason, this bothered the blonde. She couldn't imagine what the woman had done - or hadn't done, for that matter - to garner such criticism. Yes, she seemed abrupt and demanding, but a good business-leader normally isn't in the business of making friends. The most effective leaders are often callous and detached - it's often a necessity, and a casualty, of being in command. But M.J. Whitton was young - too young to be the harsh, experienced, world-weary veteran that her father supposedly had been; too young to have so many enemies; and too attractive to not have any admirers. Alli supposed that what bothered her the most was that the adjective most often used to describe M.J. was 'bitch'. She couldn't help but wonder, if M.J. were a man, would people still feel the same way?

Well, it doesn't matter anyway... it's not like we're even on the same working-plane, Alli thought to herself as she tried to re-focus on her work.

Alli had decided to catch a late lunch one day and wandered down to the cafe to find something to silence her complaining stomach. As she stood at the deli ordering a sandwich, her eyes took notice to the solitary, dark figure of M.J. Whitton sitting in a corner booth at the far end of the cafe, a small plate of food and a cup on the table in front of her, her eyes focused on a document she held in her hand.

Alli found herself nearly unable to take her gaze from the lone figure as she paid for her lunch and sat down at a table by herself. People came in and out of the cafe, some walking right past the President, but none of them spoke to her nor acknowledged her in any way. Did they not realize who it was? Or did they not care? Alli found it all very unusual; that the President of the company would be sitting alone in such a nondescript, public place in the middle of the workday, and that no one stopped to say one word to her. Alli studied the woman carefully; she wore a dark green suit today, with what appeared to be perfectly matched shoes, and she had a pair of glasses on. Her hair was again pulled back behind her head, and Alli wondered if that was the only way she knew how to wear it. She placidly took bites of her food and sipped her drink as she calmly read through the papers she held in one hand. Alli couldn't help but wonder what was behind the rigid facade of the tall woman; what other personality was lying in wait beneath the abrupt, commanding demeanor; what thoughts lurked behind that cool, unwavering gaze.

"See something interesting?"

The statement caught Alli totally off-guard, and she visibly jumped. Liz Jacobs laughed a little at how easily startled the blonde was.

"W-What?" Alli asked.

"See something interesting?" Liz repeated, this time motioning her head toward the lone figure of the company President.

Alli felt a blush overtake her features and she darted her eyes nervously toward M.J. and back again, scowling as she tried to cover her embarrassment.

"No, no, I was just... observing... y'know," she tried to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Liz smiled knowingly at her, her soft brown eyes winking. "Mind if I join you?" The tall, amber-haired woman asked as she sat down, not really giving Alli a chance to respond.

Alli said "Sure" anyway. She was actually getting to know Liz fairly well. The Finance Director had made it a point to befriend the new girl on the block, and Alli was grateful for her effort. Liz was down-to-earth and possessed a wicked sense of humor, which Alli found refreshing and delightful.

"She's a fascinating person, really," Liz said, obviously referring to M.J.

Alli decided to play dumb anyway, "Who?"

"M.J., of course. She's frustrating as all hell, but she's fascinating." Liz stated as she bit into her sandwich.

"You seem to know an awful lot about her," Alli said, propping her elbows on the table and leaning in toward her new friend.

"Well, I guess I know more than others, but unfortunately, it still isn't very much." Liz said cryptically.

"And how is it that you know more than others?" Alli inquired casually, quirking an eyebrow and smirking so that Liz thought she was only idly curious, and nothing more.

"Ahh... now *that* is complicated." Liz said, holding up a finger and smiling. "Remind me to tell you once I get to know you a little better, hmm?" She said coyly, winking as she took another bite of her sandwich.

Damn, Alli thought, *not getting anything out of her I guess*. She had the feeling that Liz was one of those company people who knew a little bit about everything, and everyone, and Alli was almost always dying to pick her brain to get a feel for things and educate herself. The Finance Director had already introduced Alli to numerous people at the company, and she appreciated the doors that were opened to her and the networking opportunities that were made available.

"So, you coming to the 'Executive Christmas Ball'?" Liz queried.

Alli frowned at her, having no idea what she was talking about, "What 'Executive Christmas Ball'?"

"Didn't you get an invite? All Managers get an invite. The email went out today...?" Liz asked, looking confused.

"I didn't get anything. Guess I'm not invited." Alli said with a grin and a shrug.

"Yes you are. That bimbo Helen probably just forgot to put you on the list for this year. She's a nice woman, but I don't think her elevator goes the whole way to the top floor some days, y'know?" Liz said, making wide eyes and pointing to her head. Alli chuckled at her antics as both women continued to eat their lunches.

"Well what is this 'Ball'? It sounds hopelessly old-fashioned." Alli said in-between bites.

"Oh it is, it *is*," Liz responded with an eye-roll. "It's this big, tacky, lavish party that the Whitton clan holds every year just for the managers and directors of the company. It's a totally gaudy, over-blown display - and waste - of the Whitton's money and social status." She said with slight bitterness. "It's some sort of tradition that was started way-back-when by old man Whitton

and his snobby, socialite wife. I thought that the girls would nix it for this year, but I guess the plans had already been made, so..." she let her words trail off as she shrugged and took a sip of her drink. "Wouldn't surprise me if this is the last year for it," she finished.

"Well, what, is it like a formal ball or something?" Alli asked,

"Close; it's just a very formal dinner party at a very swanky country club. They usually have a jazz band and dancing and stuff," Liz shrugged. "Actually someone told me that it used to be just a casual suit-and-tie affair, but when the old man remarried, his new *southern belle* wife took over and made it into the obnoxious money-parade that we have now." Liz said sarcastically, affecting a fake Southern accent for a moment.

"Oh, I didn't know he was remarried," Alli remarked casually, even though the revelation created tons of thoughts and questions in her mind.

"Yeah. He and his first wife divorced awhile ago. I think she lives in Paris, or London, or something. This wife he has now is a real piece of work," Liz said with an eye-roll. "Ray Calhoun is her son, you know," she added. "Very *convenient*, wouldn't you say?" She said with a conspiratorial wink as she sipped her drink.

"Yeah... interesting," Alli answered with a smirk. She could only imagine the familial tensions that must run beneath the outwardly stoic facade of Whitton, Inc. Her mind flashed back to her initial meeting with Madison Whitton and Raiford Calhoun.

I bet there are lots of interesting stories there, her mind mused inwardly. "I'm not really 'into' the swanky-party scene, y'know?" Alli said, wrinkling her nose slightly.

"It's not that bad, really. The whole dinner affair thing is actually sort-of comical... at least to me. Someone always gets totally trashed and makes a scene... I love that part!" Liz said evily as she laughed, causing Alli to chuckle out loud as well. Alli found herself liking Liz more and more; she was blunt and didn't pull any punches, yet she seemed to be a nice person. Alli considered herself a fairly good judge of character, and she felt good vibes with Liz. Alli hoped they would become good friends. She needed someone to trust.

"Everyone wears fancy cocktail dresses or formal attire, and you're supposed to be *proper* and bring a date, of course, but I never take a date - I always go solo," Liz said with another evil grin. "I'm sure that always pisses old-lady Whitton off, but what the hell do I care? I doubt she'll be there this year anyway," she shrugged, taking a sip from her straw.

"Sounds incredibly stuffy," Alli said, laughing at Liz's frankness.

"Oh it is, it *is*," Liz repeated. "Sometimes some of the fancy-pants investors attend too, and we even have some of Dougie Cohen's big-shot attorney and city official-friends join us too. It's *quite* impressive," Liz said mockingly.

"Who's Dougie Cohen?" Alli asked.

"Oh, that's Madison's hot-shot-attorney husband, Douglas Cohen. You've heard of the big law firm, Cohen, Reed & Barninger?" Alli nodded her head in vague recognition. "That's him." Liz explained.

"Hmm, well, it sounds like the Whittons have all the trappings that wealth and fortune can buy, and it sounds like they enjoy it too." Alli remarked.

"Most of them enjoy it and are happy to flaunt it," Liz said, turning cryptic again, "but not all of them do." Alli looked up at the brunette with questioning eyes. "If you ever have the opportunity - or maybe I should say 'misfortune' - to get to know M.J., Madison, or Ray, even a little bit, you'll see what I mean." She added, not giving away anything.

"I've spoken with Madison and Raiford a few times, but aside from the collision in your office the first day I arrived, I haven't said two words to M.J." Alli said, trying not to sound too obviously disappointed.

Liz made a 'hmpf' sound and grinned, "Well, that's not a bad thing, believe me," Liz said. "I'm sure you'll have the *pleasure* of dealing with her soon enough, seeing that she makes it a point to personally oversee your department, as well as mine."

"Yeah, what's the deal with that, anyway? Isn't it unusual to have the President overseeing areas like that?" Alli couldn't help her curiosity.

"I suppose it is, but M.J. does it because she doesn't trust Raiford, and Madison is too busy with her own division. She doesn't trust John, and she most likely doesn't trust *me* either. Basically, she doesn't trust *anyone*." Liz said a little sarcastically.

"Hmm... sounds like she's a micro-manager. Must be so counter-productive for her too... strange," Alli mused.

"Yeah, well, who knows what goes through that woman's head. Listen, just do yourself a favor and keep this in mind," Liz said as Alli regarded her with raised brows. "In M.J.'s mind, there are two ways of doing things: her way, or no way," Liz counted off on her fingers. "She doesn't like to 'discuss' things a whole lot; if she asks you to do something, just *do* it - don't question her, don't argue with her." Liz said, leaning toward Alli and lowering her voice conspiratorially, "She's been nicknamed 'The Scorpion', and there's good reason for it, believe me. She can deliver a deadly sting faster than you can bat an eyelash. I've seen it - hell, I've *lived* it!" Liz said, smiling and making wide eyes. "I guess what I'm saying is, don't be too hard-headed, but don't be completely spineless either - she has no respect for wimps with no backbone," Liz said, wrinkling her nose.

Alli was confused, "I don't really understand; don't be assertive, but don't be a wimp? She sounds impossible, not 'fascinating'." Alli said.

Liz made a face, indicating she understood Alli's confusion, "I know, and she's both, really. It's a

fine line you have to walk in order to work with her, but once you get to know her style a little bit, you'll understand what I mean. Just give her the facts, stand behind your work, and back-up your data - I mean **really** back-up your data. There's nothing she hates more than when she asks people questions and wants specifics, and they can't give her answers. She's an **answers** person." Liz concluded, taking a final chomp of her sandwich.

"Hmm... I think I understand what you're saying; thanks for the warning," Alli said with a pensive smile.

"No problem. Well listen, my friend, I gotta go," Liz said as she wiped her mouth and stood. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon - hey, let's go out for lunch sometime, huh?"

"Yeah, that'd be great," Alli answered with delight.

"Cool. I'll see ya later," Liz said, pointing and making a gun-clicking action with her hand. She started to walk away but turned back suddenly, "Oh, and if you don't have a date for the Christmas Gala, maybe you and I can go 'solo' together, okay?" She said with a smile and a laugh.

Alli laughed out loud, "Deal!"

Continued in [Chapter 7](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"I want a girl with a mind like a diamond,
I want a girl who knows what's best;
I want a girl with shoes that cut, and
Eyes that burn like cigarettes;
I want a girl with the right allocations,
Who is fast, and thorough, and sharp as a tack." - Cake*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alli's first month had gone rather smoothly, and she found herself easily falling into routines and procedures. She found that the HR office was surprisingly pretty loosely-run, as compared to her last job anyway, and she wondered if the rest of the company was like that as well. She found it hard to believe that anything could be 'casual' around the place, from what little she'd been told of M.J. and Madison Whitton, but she really had no idea.

Things had been quiet and fairly serene, but when John stopped in her office first thing in the morning to tell her that she'd be attending a departmental meeting with him, she had a feeling that the rest of the day wouldn't be so calm.

"You ready?" John asked as he stuck his head in her door.

"I guess - uhm, do I need to take anything?" Alli was at a complete loss; John had given her little to go on aside from 'we're having our monthly departmental meeting with M.J. today'. She was nervous and she didn't want to look like an idiot. This was her first 'real' meeting with the mysterious President, and, remembering the things Liz had told her, she wanted to appear competent and self-assured.

They arrived at the 14th floor and sat in the waiting area outside M.J.'s office. As soon as they sat, they could hear voices, obviously upset and stressed, and obviously arguing.

What is it with this woman that makes her inspire so many closed-door shouting matches? Alli wondered to herself. The voices continued, up and down, louder then softer, for several minutes. It was now 20 minutes past the meeting time, and Alli could see that John was getting impatient. One thing she'd noticed about John - he operated on a very firm time schedule. He ate his lunch from precisely 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. every day, and he left the office at 5:00 p.m. sharp every evening. Alli grinned inwardly at the thought that John was probably getting anxious about this meeting possibly infringing on his lunchtime.

An opening door roused Alli from her thoughts, and she watched as Raiford Calhoun fairly stomped out of M.J.'s office, his cheeks flushed bright red. He didn't even stop to say hello to them.

Hmm... the 'Scorpion' strikes again, Alli thought.

"You can go in now, Mr. Stevenson, Ms. Phillips," Helen said. Alli thought that it would probably be more prudent for the woman to allow a 'cooling-off' time before throwing fresh meat into the lion's den. She fancied that she heard John groan quietly as they rose and entered the office.

"Have a seat," M.J. said in way of greeting, barely looking up from her immense desk to acknowledge them. Alli scanned her eyes around the office quickly and discreetly.

M.J.'s office was dark and foreboding for the most part, except for the two huge glass windows that most likely gave her a gorgeous view of the city below. It looked like an attorney's office with its wood-paneled walls, deep bookshelves and cabinets, massive wood desk, huge leather wing-back chairs, and blue carpeting. Alli thought it rather dark and masculine but figured that M.J. just never had it remodeled after her father vacated it. Then again, maybe she liked it that way? The only thing that seemed out of place was the fact that it lacked 'personal' touches; there were no pictures or decorations... no snapshots or desk-top adornments like you'd normally find in someone's private office. It was rather sterile and barren-looking. Alli found that unusual, and disquieting, somehow. She had only been at the company a month, and her office was already chocked-full of pictures and snapshots and desk trinkets galore.

John didn't formally introduce Alli to the President, and the tall woman didn't ask who she was. It was as though the brunette already knew everything she needed to know, and she obviously felt no need to waste her time making small-talk with John's new Assistant. Alli thought this was rather rude, but decided not to overreact to it. After all, M.J. was the *President*, and she probably didn't have the luxury of chit-chatting with all new employees.

Then again, there really wasn't much time to make any small-talk; as soon as John and Alli sat down, M.J. began firing off questions in a concise, clipped tone, as though she had a mental laundry list that she was keeping track of inside her head.

They proceeded to go over whatever was happening in the HR department, with M.J. continually prodding and plucking John's brain for information, and John repeatedly hedging on his answers and not going into much detail. It was obvious that John didn't care for M.J., and vice versa, making Alli wonder what the deal was. Aside from the fact that she was a woman and relentlessly hammered the Director with one question after another, Alli had never seen nor heard of any reason for the obvious discord. But surely Mark Whitton had been just as demanding when he ran things... surely John was used to that?

There's probably some kind of 'history' between the two of them, Alli thought to herself. She could tell that M.J. was perturbed at John's uncooperative manner, but surprisingly, the brunette didn't bite his head off; she merely flashed her icy eyes at him in annoyance.

Maybe she's not so bad after all? Alli thought, *...or maybe she's just behaving herself because I'm here?* She wondered.

Alli sat silently through most of the meeting, adding only minor comments when John included her, usually by asking her a question about something she couldn't answer anyway, which made her feel quite stupid. The blonde was getting the feeling that M.J. assumed John was delegating a lot more to her than he actually was. She didn't know if this was just the President's over-expectant way, or if John really *was* supposed to be giving her more control than he had so far. Her boss obviously didn't handle delegation very well, but Alli had figured he would give her more responsibility over time. It was a bit too early for her to push any of her ideas or suggest any radical changes - she didn't want to rock the boat. She knew that the best thing was to just sit back and watch and wait, as usual. In this instance, that wasn't such a bad thing, because it gave

her time to observe the tall, austere woman as she interacted with her boss.

M.J. was cool and poised, and she wore an expression on her face that bordered on overly severe. She had small, dark-rimmed glasses on today, and with her hair pulled back in a tight bun behind her head, Alli thought she looked quite a bit like an old schoolmarm. She sat regally in her chair with her long legs crossed, calmly keeping everything under control, even when John would give her a sharp retort in response to one of her pressing inquiries. The woman somehow seemed to know that John hated to be questioned and pinned down about anything, and she handled his annoying reticence with serene superiority and a casually dismissive attitude. Alli found it interesting to watch how she handled everything.

M.J. hadn't addressed Alli and barely even looked at her throughout the whole meeting, making Alli wonder if the dark-haired woman even realized she was in the room.

I'm just the 'Assistant', so I guess that means I'm not important enough to contribute anything, Alli thought, feeling slightly annoyed at the non-inclusion. *Maybe her reputation *is* accurate after all?* The blonde mused inwardly.

"Well, I just met with Ray and we had a *discussion* about his excessive and frankly, questionable, hiring tactics. I think you should be aware that we're going to start being a little more *prudent* about who we hire for him." M.J. said as she pinned John with a serious look.

"What do you mean?" He said, his voice laced with annoyance.

"I *mean*, no more hiring friends of friends who aren't qualified; I mean no more 'hiring' illegal aliens and paying them under the table - I mean no more *bullshit*, John." M.J. spat out, momentarily losing some of her cool control. Her voice was low and her eyes were suddenly blazing blue fire.

"Oh come on, M.J.! We hire his people the way we always hire them. We just do what Ray asks us to do!" John replied, getting defensive.

"Yes, I *know*, and because of it, I have Labor & Industry breathing down my neck, and our attorneys are getting tired of dodging lawsuit threats from the City's Civil Rights and Ethics committees!" She growled, her eyes flashing at the HR Director as she leaned forward in her chair. "From now on, all hiring comes through me, whether Ray is here or not." She added with finality as she pounded her finger on the desk and pinned John with a deadly glare, as if to defy him to argue with her.

Alli felt herself shrinking downward in her chair, and she quickly changed her mind and thanked the heavens that the brunette hadn't been including her; she didn't want any of that anger thrown her way.

So the rumors are probably accurate then... oookay.

"Fine. Whatever you say, M.J. Is there anything else? I have another appointment to get to." John

said with clipped impatience, his agitation clear as he scooted forward on his chair, preparing to stand and leave.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is one more thing; I need some data from you people," M.J. began as she searched for something on her desk. John made a snorting noise and pushed back in his chair again, resigned to the fact that he wouldn't be leaving so soon.

"I need to know... over the past five years... everyone we've hired, fired, transferred, or promoted, and I need to know... race, gender, and age." M.J. rattled off the demand like a drill sergeant as she perused a paper in her hand.

"What? What for?" John dared to ask.

"Never*mind* what for - I need the information, and I want it by Friday." She said, her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched tight. She was now definitely fed-up with John's insubordination, and Alli was, quite frankly, embarrassed by her boss's behavior - she'd never seen him act in such a way. Surely the Scorpion's tail was poised and ready to strike his belligerent, sandy-blond head.

"Friday?! We can't get all that together in two days!" John complained, "Besides, we don't even *have* that kind of data!" He spat out in exasperation.

Another thing Alli had learned in her short tenure was that John was not very computer-literate. He knew how to fetch and send his own emails, but that was about it; anything beyond that was out of the question, and he avoided it like the plague. But Alli had become familiar enough with the inner-workings of the office to know that all kinds of electronic data and information was available - you just had to know how to get it. She felt that it was her duty to inform her boss, and his boss, that they mostly likely could get the information, but she didn't want to embarrass John. On the other hand, it would probably make the temperamental President happy...

"Uhm, actually, we might be able to get that data without too much difficulty," Alli said, hating the fact that she sounded so meek and unsure. She felt John give her a look, but she *saw* M.J.'s.

In an instant, she knew what it was like to come face-to-face with 100% of pure, heart-stopping intensity. They say a flame is at its hottest when it burns blue... if that is true, then Alli was being instantly incinerated. She found herself trying to swallow the lump that immediately formed in her throat, and her blouse suddenly felt very constricting. M.J.'s flickering blue orbs never left Alli's face as the blonde began to try to explain what she meant without sounding totally idiotic.

"Uh, we have the HR/Payroll system, which has hire dates and change dates and current information in it, and we also have the data backup tapes that are run after each payroll processing. I know Payroll and Budget use the data for their reports, so I would think we could extract information for our use as well."

There, that sounded pretty good, like I know what I'm talking about. God, I hope I'm right, Alli

prayed to herself.

John began to hee-haw around, saying things like "oh well, I don't know if that'd work or not," and "you should probably talk to Liz instead of us." Alli felt uncomfortable and again was embarrassed by John's obvious attempt to dodge the assignment, and she even feared that once they were back in the elevator, John might reprimand her for speaking up and over-stepping her bounds. Any doubt she had about speaking out was erased, however, when she saw the corner of M.J.'s mouth quirk upwards as she looked at Alli and then back to John, cutting him off abruptly,

"Fine, John. Don't trouble yourself with it... I know it's close to lunchtime for you, and I wouldn't want to keep you from something so important." M.J. spoke sarcastically, her eyebrow arching high into her forehead as she threw the dagger at the blonde man, making his face flush bright red. Alli felt her eyes bulge at the audacious, but comical remark from the tall woman, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

"Ms. Phillips and I can work on this without your assistance... if that's alright with you?" M.J. asked, turning her blue intensity to Alli again. The blonde felt her stomach lurch.

"Uhm," Alli hesitated for only a second as she glanced over to see John's reaction. He had a mixed look of shock and humility on his face. Well what was she to do? Tell the President and CEO of the company, 'sorry, but I don't want to upstage my stupid boss'?

"...Sure." Alli said simply, shrugging her shoulders slightly.

"Excellent." M.J. said, giving a small, satisfied nod. "See what you can come up with by tomorrow and we'll meet again to discuss it. I'll have Helen call you with a time."

*"I can't stand up, I can't cool down,
I can't get my head up off the ground;
Soon as I get my head 'round you,
I'll come around catchin' sparks off you." - The Jesus and Mary Chain*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Amazingly, John didn't say one word to Alli after the tense meeting. She didn't know if this was good or bad. The intimidating President had just picked the new, inexperienced *Assistant* Director to help her with some secret project, overlooking, and - dare she think it? - *ignoring* the more experienced HR *Director*. Maybe he was too embarrassed to say anything... maybe he was too angry.

He should be embarrassed, Alli thought. I don't know why he acts so disrespectful to her. She's

**the* boss.* She didn't have John completely figured out, but again, she knew all that would come in time.

Alli worked diligently the rest of the day, questioning Liz about getting access to the data and how it could be extracted and manipulated. Luckily, she was pretty good with most computer technology and always had the ability to pick up and learn new programs and systems fairly quickly and easily.

The next day she gathered all the information she thought she might need and started throwing it into a big spreadsheet. Her 4:00 p.m. meeting with M.J. was fast-approaching and she wished she had a little more time to make the spreadsheet look more presentable and organized. She was beyond nervous at the thought of actually stepping into the Scorpion's lair and working **with** the demanding woman, but she was betting that the President would be pleased to see that the insignificant little assistant director had managed to get all the information that she requested.

As she prepared to go upstairs, Alli discovered that she was actually looking forward to the meeting with M.J. So far the woman wasn't quite as bad as the rumors she'd heard - well, she hadn't been rude, demanding, over-bearing, and horrible to Alli **personally**. If that ever changed, then perhaps Alli would alter her opinion. For now, however, the President was in the Assistant Director's good graces.

"Okay, Maddy, I don't need an explanation of **all** the figures, just the important ones..." M.J. murmured aloud to herself as she returned yet another lengthy email to her sister. Madison knew that M.J. liked to be kept informed of all the business and investment dealings, but sometimes she went a little overboard with the boring details. Conversely, Madison always accused her older sister of being **too** concise, but M.J. merely saw it as efficiently truncating to get to the critical points. M.J. glanced at the clock, which read 3:55 p.m.

"Shit... gotta hurry this up," she mumbled. She had been looking forward to the meeting with the fair-haired Assistant HR Director all afternoon. After getting a good look at Allison Phillips at yesterday's meeting, M.J. remembered how she first met her by nearly running her over in Liz Jacob's office. At the time, she thought the blonde was just a kid, wet behind the ears, and of little significance and/or use to her. However, after watching her quietly assert herself while unwittingly putting her idiotic boss in his place, M.J. was eager to see what Allison would come up with for her. She had a feeling that this one was going to be full of surprises, and she hoped that they would be pleasant ones.

I could use a friendly ally in HR, M.J. thought to herself. *Hell, who am I kidding? I could use a friendly ally *anywhere*.* M.J. thought with an internal eye-roll. Her gut told her that this young woman was no dummy, and, even though it appeared that the wolves had already warned her and bent her ear about M.J.'s infamous reputation, she had a feeling that Allison Phillips would be different somehow and make up her own mind. Call it ESP, call it wishful thinking, call it whatever you want - M.J. sensed that something about Allison was different; she could see it in those clear, green-blue eyes. Allison seemed to have a determined, inner-fire that belied her

innocent, youthful-looking exterior.

Can't wait to see if I'm right, M.J. thought to herself with an inward grin.

At 3:58 p.m., Alli found herself walking up to the President's office waiting area, a hard-copy and a disk containing her valuable assignment held tightly in her hands. Helen wasn't at her appointed desk, but Alli could see that M.J.'s door was ajar. Did this mean she should knock, or should she sit and wait for Helen? She didn't want to appear too forward, but then again, she didn't want to sit out here and let M.J. think she was late. Telling herself not to be such a nervous dork, she walked up to M.J.'s open door and let her white knuckles fall on the dark wood.

The President was sitting at her pc, typing, and she looked up immediately when she heard the soft knock. "Ah, Ms. Phillips," she said in her smooth, rich voice.

"Uh, your secretary wasn't at her desk, so..." Alli trailed off, not wanting M.J. to think she was being presumptuous.

"That's fine, come in and sit down." M.J. said as she rose from her desk and walked to the door, closing it behind Alli. As her tall form breezed close by Alli, the smaller woman got a whiff of her perfume. It was a gentle, delicate scent, not overly feminine or flowery, not spicy or brazen, just... mild and pleasant. It didn't seem to match her personality.

*Or her *supposed* personality*, Alli thought.

M.J. sat down at her desk again and turned back to her pc, "Just let me finish this email quickly and... I'll be... right with you..." she said as she typed and spoke at the same time.

"No problem," Alli said, sitting back in her chair and taking the opportunity to look around the office and sneak a few peeks at her boss's boss. M.J. had her hair pulled back and pinned behind her head, as usual, but this time some of her bangs hung down loosely, sweeping across her forehead. A few tendrils had escaped from her temples also and were hanging down, curling slightly at her jaw. Alli thought it made her seem younger and softer somehow; and it suddenly occurred to the blonde that perhaps the reason the President always wore her hair so severely was because it made her look 'old and wise'. Did she think that she needed to look older and severe in order to gain respect, or was it just her true nature? How old was she, anyway?

"Okay... sorry about that. Now, what do you have for me?" M.J. said as she finished her typing and turned the full attention of her stunning eyes to Alli.

Alli tentatively presented her information to M.J., wishing that she sounded more confident. The president seemed to be pleased with what the blonde gave her, even though she didn't outwardly say anything. She fairly devoured the information, popping the disk into her machine and bringing the spreadsheet up to start moving things around and adjust some of the data. Alli was just getting ready to feel disappointed by the lack of gratitude from the silent woman when M.J.

began mumbling things aloud as she worked. Alli leaned across the desk a little, trying to learn what the president was doing and straining to see if she was ripping all her hard work to shreds.

M.J. noticed the smaller woman's curiosity and felt like she owed her some explanation, seeing as how she was the one to provide her with the data in the first place.

"Uhm, here... come over here and I'll show you what I'm looking for," M.J. said hesitantly. She normally didn't show anyone anything, and she honestly didn't know why she gave a shit about this young woman's obvious interest. But something told her that it was safe to include the inquisitive blonde, and perhaps even beneficial. She pulled a chair over close to her own and the petite woman sat down eagerly as the brunette began enlightening her, explaining some of her rationale for doing whatever she was doing.

Alli could only sit and watch in fascination as M.J. murmured and pointed out things like, "see, this one doesn't need to be in here... he was just an intern from the community college... this guy died - that wasn't our fault... this one... hmmm... this one might be a problem," and providing little tidbits of information that she just somehow seemed to *know*.

Alli was impressed that this woman - the President of the company - knew all these employee/personnel facts and apparently had them stored in her vast memory. She would bet that even John, the HR Director, didn't know or remember all the things that M.J. obviously did. Alli got the distinct picture that M.J. was trying to provide proof that the company hired, fired and promoted ethically and with proper justification. She couldn't help but wonder if it had something to do with what M.J. had said to John the other day, about the city's Civil Rights Commission coming down on them. Alli had no idea what was involved in all of it from a legal standpoint, but apparently the President was concerned about something. She was dying to ask questions, but figured she should keep her mouth shut... at least for the time being.

"Okay, I think that should do it. Now, do you think you can tidy all this up and make the spreadsheet look... presentable?" M.J. asked, snapping Alli back to attention.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Alli mumbled, wishing she could say something more intelligent.

"Good. I'll just email this back to you... what's your address?" The brunette asked as she began to compose an email at her pc.

"It's 'aphillips@whitton.net'," Alli said, looking at the screen with the dark-haired woman.

"'aphillips'? Why not the full 'allison-dot-phillips', like everyone else?" she queried, looking questioningly at Alli.

Alli felt her neck flush for a moment, "Oh, uh, you can use that too, but 'aphillips' is just... less typing, I guess," Alli said with a nervous grin as M.J. continued to regard her with confusion.

"I didn't know you could shorten it; can everyone do that?" M.J. asked curiously.

So Wonder Woman doesn't know everything after all? Alli mused to herself. "Oh yeah, you have several different options, actually. Here, I can show you...?" Alli offered, pointing to the keyboard.

"Please," M.J. said as she pushed her chair out of the way slightly and motioned to her desk, allowing the blonde to scoot her chair closer and take control. M.J. glanced furtively at the small woman as she helped herself to the mouse and began clicking away. The President took the opportunity to take in the soft, gentle lines of the youthful face, the flaxen-colored hair that was cut and worn in the popular shag-type style with long, fringy bangs, and the intelligent sea-green eyes that stared intently at the computer screen. M.J. found herself wondering just how old this little imp of a woman was.

"Here... this screen tells you how your mail service is set up," the blonde said, looking briefly at the brunette then back to the screen again. "This says that your address can be 'mj-dot-whitton@whitton.net', or just 'mjwhitton@whitton.net', or 'morgan-dot-whitton'... you see? You have lots of different options," Alli said, turning to meet the steady light blue gaze again.

**Morgan*... 'Morgan Whitton', Alli thought, I like it... wonder why she doesn't use it?*

Alli could sense that M.J. had been watching her carefully, and although it unnerved her a great deal, she couldn't deny that she felt a slight thrill knowing that the beautiful, intense eyes were studying her.

M.J. tore herself away from the jade gaze and looked back to the screen. "Well... they say you learn something new every day - no one from I.T. ever bothers to tell you this kind of stuff. How did you figure it out?" she asked, eyeing the blonde carefully.

Alli grinned, finding it refreshing that the President of a major company was curious about something as minor as the way an email system was setup.

"Oh, y'know... I guess I'm just inquisitive by nature... If I stumble upon some little... oddity, like this, then I have no rest in my pants until I figure the whole thing out." Alli finished with a nervous little laugh.

M.J.'s eyebrow shot up high into her forehead as the blonde confirmed some of her earlier thoughts, and she regarded the small woman with a half-smirk.

"Really? Well... I'll keep that in mind." The President said lowly as she let her gaze drift downward over the petite body for just a second, then shot it back up to catch the widened, oceanic eyes. She knew what her open appraisal was probably doing to Alli, and she also knew full well that she should **not** be doing it... but the cute pixie was such easy prey.

Alli found herself blushing furiously and instantly felt very out-of-control. The riveting, sky-blue eyes were nearly undressing her and, god help her, she was enjoying it.

*Ohmygod... what is *wrong* with me!* She thought in a panic, smelling the faint aroma of M.J.'s

perfume again and suddenly becoming keenly aware of how close they were sitting. Alli swallowed, her throat feeling tight and dry, and she licked her lips nervously. This certainly was *not* what she had expected to get out of this meeting, and *Morgan* J. Whitton certainly was not what she had expected her to be.

M.J. decided that she should ease up on the rookie, even though it was very tempting to keep her here to amuse herself.

"So... if you could clean this up a little bit, and then email it back to me tomorrow morning sometime, I'd appreciate it," the brunette said, her voice remaining low and even, her sly gaze still fixed on the blonde.

"Sure... no problem," Alli replied somewhat timidly as she cleared her throat and pushed her chair away to stand up, grateful to be escaping the disquieting situation.

M.J. stood up as well, towering over the smaller woman as they turned and began walking to the door. "Thank you for your assistance, Ms. Phillips--"

"Please, call me Allison," Alli interrupted as she turned to face the brunette, "or Alli... my friends and family call me Alli," she added, feeling suddenly bashful and shy.

M.J. gave a slight smirk back at her, again letting her gaze wander just a tad, "Okay... Allison-or-Alli... thanks," M.J. said lowly. Alli could only nod and quirk a nervous smile, then she turned and walked away.

Thankfully, by the time she got back to her office, it was nearly time to leave. Alli couldn't believe that in a matter of just two days, she had gone from knowing absolutely nothing about the tall, mysterious President, to having the gorgeous woman openly flirt with her.

Godddd, Alli thought, nearly groaning out loud, *was she *really* flirting with me, or was I just overreacting? Maybe she's just playing head-games?* Images of the brunette's face flashed through Alli's mind like a slide show. The high, arching brow that silently taunted her, the piercing, crystalline eyes that raked over her, and the sly, knowing smirk on the perfect lips that spoke her name so fluently...

*She was doing *both*, you dork, and you totally fell for it!*

Nevertheless, those penetrating cerulean depths gave proof of the dichotomy that lay within the individual that was M.J. Whitton: fierce, unyielding strength and intelligence, versus a seething, smoldering sensuality that nearly leapt out at you. A woman like that couldn't be so stern and severe at all times, and through this little confrontation of theirs today, Alli suddenly had a very distinct feeling of what M.J. Whitton was like when the sultry 'Scorpion' side of her personality came out to play.

*Oh goddd... don't even *go* there, Allison, she chastised, shaking her head as she flipped off her office lights and headed out the door.*

Another troubling thing for Alli was the fact that even though she had offered to cut through the formalities by using her first name, M.J. had not returned the gesture.

*Well, she *is* the President; I guess I can understand why she wouldn't want to offer such casualty to me, she told herself. One must stay within those 'presidential' standards, I suppose, Alli thought. Yeah, right... since when is flirting with an underling considered 'presidential'? Hell, maybe she attended the 'Bill Clinton School of Presidential Propriety', the blonde thought with a grin as she mentally tried to recall if there were any cigars lying around M.J.'s office.*

*"Sleeping with ghosts,
It's such a lonely experience;
The stars are out tonight,
Only they can hear you breathing;
You're so like a rose." - Garbage*

CHAPTER NINE

Alli flipped on the light switch as she finally reached the new apartment that she now called 'home'. It was a very small, one-bedroom bungalow with seriously outdated 1960's decorative undertones, but it was neat, clean, cheap, and only two blocks from the beach.

The blonde felt very glad to be home after such a strange day. She deposited her things on a small foyer table and moved into the kitchen to get a drink and contemplate what she could make herself for dinner. Deciding she didn't have the energy to cook for herself, again, she selected one of her many frozen dinner entrees and tossed it onto the counter without care.

Her little episode with M.J. had left her feeling very unsettled, and she knew that it was going to require a lot of soul-searching and reflecting to figure out what she was really feeling and thinking inside, and why. Well, she knew something of what she was feeling - it wasn't the first time another woman had pushed her buttons and turned her on - but she really didn't want to get into it right now. Right now, she just wanted to relax and enjoy some peace and tranquility. She headed over to her stereo and popped her favorite *Garbage* cd in before going to change out of her work attire.

Oh yeah, let's hear Shirley-baby belt out a nice, gloom-and-doom song... great idea, Alli, she thought with a roll of her eyes as she started to trudge back toward her bedroom.

As she passed her answering machine, she saw that the light was flashing. Depressing the button, she was rewarded with the sweet, southern sound of her older sister's voice, *"Hey Alli, it's Kait... just wanted to see how you're making out with the job and everything... haven't heard from ya in awhile... gimme a call so we can talk, okay? ...bye hon."* Alli smiled at her sister's loving send-off, and she immediately felt herself relax.

She was closer to her sister Kaitlyn than she was to her even older sister, Erin. Being the eldest, Erin had always been more maternal and instructional with Alli, whereas Kaitlyn was very easy-going and good-natured, and played the part of best friend and confidante. They knew each other well and remained close, even after Kait had gotten married a few years ago. Josh was a great guy, and his relationship with Kait was an enviable one. If ever there was a guy to marry, Josh was it, Alli had always thought.

Erin, on the other hand, was more like their mother, and it was well known that she was the woman's 'favorite' as well. Alli always thought Erin and her husband Jeffrey were much too different to be compatible, and she worried when they married so quickly, years ago. Erin was always very sure of her decisions, however, so Alli figured she must have known what she was getting into. Still, the couple seemed to argue constantly, and Erin's mood was often sour. She was also strict and manipulative with her two children, which really bothered Alli. They were basically good kids, and Alli hated to see them used as pawns in any kind of a battle between their parents - Alli had learned first-hand what that did to children.

Her parents had divorced when she was just eight years old, and the memories surrounding that whole dark period of her life were sometimes still so vivid. Her father had never remarried, and although she'd never been very close to him to begin with, she saw even less of the man after the divorce, since she went to live with her mother and two sisters. However, Alli found that as she grew and matured, she began to long for her father. She wanted to know him, and discover who he really was. So, several years after the divorce - while her mother serially dated one creep and loser after another - a teenage Alli had begun visiting and spending weekends at her father's simple home in the country. They reestablished ties and grew close, and the young woman was constantly amazed at what a wise, knowledgeable man her father had turned out to be. She often wanted to kick herself for not spending time with him earlier in her life. Robert Riley was not the dim-witted, indifferent man that her bitter mother had always claimed him to be. He was a gentle, quiet man who didn't want for much, but cared deeply about his children and grandchildren, even though he saw them rarely.

Her mother - now that was a different story. Alli often wondered what it was that Susannah Watson seemed to be constantly searching for in her life. She was currently on her third husband, Albert Watson, and Alli didn't give this relationship any better odds than the prior two. Both her step-fathers were supreme idiots and polar-opposites of her real father. But they were white-collar men as opposed to her father's blue-collar, and she supposed her mother figured she could be happy so long as she had money to buy materialistic things to fill the empty spaces inside herself. She drove a fancy car and wore fancy jewelry, but deep down inside, Alli knew that her mother was still miserable.

Her current step-father gave her the creeps. He had a habit of leering at her and often made snide

comments about what she wore or how she looked, or said other things that Alli considered inappropriate for a man to say to his step-daughter. She had no idea if her mother even noticed that the guy was a chauvinistic pig; if she did, she ignored it completely and played along like everything was peachy-keen.

Alli admitted that she might feel some pity for her mother if the woman wasn't so unforgiving and judgmental of her and her life. Ever since Alli had made the life-altering 'mistake' of unexpectedly getting pregnant, then marrying and divorcing, her mother seemed to criticize every move she made, and constantly harped on her about every little thing. She continually compared her life to that of her sisters' and absolutely drove Alli to the brink of her sanity. It was one of the main reasons she moved away from her native Georgia to start a new life in the 'First Coast' area.

Momma doesn't understand me, Alli thought as she erased Kait's message and trudged back to her bedroom. *Kait is the only one who understands... Momma will never understand*, the blonde thought pensively as she changed into shorts and a t-shirt.

The only one who took the time to listen to her and comfort her was Kaitlyn. She was the only person Alli trusted with her secrets and confessions. Yes, Alli had made some bad choices and stupid mistakes in the past, but she had worked hard to rebound from all that and had straightened her life out considerably. She now had a promising career ahead of her, and she was doing well for herself. But her mother didn't seem to notice that; all she noticed was that Alli wasn't married and didn't even date. The weekend that Alli moved to Jacksonville, her mother had launched into her yet again about the miseries of being single and alone in a big city. Kait had been there to jump to Alli's defense, but Alli told her not to bother. *"Momma will never change, Kait. No matter what I say or do, she'll never support me or my decisions."* Alli had said to her sister. *"Maybe not, honey, but remember that *I* understand, and *I* support you."* Kait had responded. Alli sadly remembered how she cried the entire drive to Jacksonville.

Returning to the kitchen to fix her dinner, Alli regrettably began to think back to her ill-fated marriage. She wished she could just block it out for good, but knew that would never happen. Perhaps it was because there were too many valuable lessons to remember from it, or perhaps it was because it marked such an important turning point in her life. She had been so young and so confused... if only she knew then what she knew now about herself. *"Hindsight is always 20-20, baby."* ...Her father had told her that.

She was in her senior year at the University of Georgia and she'd been dating Eric Phillips for about 6 months when she became pregnant, quite by surprise. It was right before graduation, and when Eric suggested they get married, she supposed that it was the best thing to do... but she was so scared and uncertain. Her mother, of course, told her that it was indeed the 'proper' thing to do, but that was only after she berated and screamed at Alli repeatedly, *"how could you be so STUPID!?"*. The woman never laid any of the blame or responsibility on Eric - she considered him incredibly chivalrous to propose marriage to Alli and pretty much told the overwhelmed young woman that she was insane if she didn't take him up on his 'generous' offer.

Alli thought it was just as much Eric's 'fault' as it was hers, especially since he had been the one

to goad and push her into having sex in the first place. She had wanted to wait until she was *sure* - until she felt certain that he was the 'right' one, but he was relentless and finally persuaded her, almost forcefully, to give in to what he wanted. It sounded ridiculous to say that she just 'went along' with it, but the truth was, Alli didn't want to disappoint or upset him. At the time, she was a shy, naïve girl who lacked self-confidence and was easily manipulated by the athletic, handsome - and sometimes intimidating - Eric. Even though she was uncertain about the depth of her feelings for him, she stupidly thought he might be the best thing she ever got. So she gave in to him. And it ended up getting her knocked-up with no money, no future, and no one to support her. Except Kaitlyn... Kait was the only one she could count on. Her mother seemed to be concerned only with Eric's feelings.

Figuring, and hoping, that things would work out and she would eventually come to love Eric and live a 'normal' life, Alli agreed to his proposal, and they got married immediately after graduation. Eric got a job working at a local paper mill making slightly above the minimum wage, and Alli worked as a clerk in the Personnel office of a rinky-dink manufacturing plant. They lived sparsely in a shitty apartment, biding their time and hoping that something better would eventually come along for the both of them.

Nothing better ever did come along. In fact, things went from bad to worse.

Alli slumped on her kitchen table, suddenly feeling not very hungry. *Why must I be plagued by all this, still? When will the memories leave me?* She wondered it every time they resurfaced.

She recalled all the things that had happened, and how the relationship deteriorated so quickly. Eric began to care more about partying with his buddies than he did about her, and his excessive drinking spawned a nasty streak in him. The smooth, sweet-talking young man who had wooed her back in college was gone, and a bitter, hateful drunkard took his place. He became verbally abusive, telling her often that he was miserable and that she had ruined his life.

As if it was my fucking fault, she thought now as she forced herself to eat her bland dinner in the darkness of her kitchen.

At first, she did blame herself, and she knew that Eric resented her for being stuck in the marriage. But that feeling didn't last long. Things changed, and she finally decided that she would not take sole blame and responsibility for the situation any more. Every time she looked in the mirror, she told herself to stay strong. Somehow, through it all, she found the strength to endure, and she began to realize that staying in the marriage was not what she wanted, even though her mother pressured her to stay and 'try to make things work'. Alli thought it was incredibly hypocritical for her twice-divorced mother to even suggest such a thing, and it was even more repulsive to watch the woman continually fawn over Eric and treat him better than she treated her own daughter.

They remained married for little more than two years; Alli finally decided she'd had enough when Eric's verbal abuse began to escalate into something more physical, and it all became too much for her to bear. She never pictured herself playing the part of an abused wife. Somewhere, somehow, some way, she found the intestinal fortitude to make herself get out of the situation

before things got really ugly. For some reason, or maybe just because he loathed giving up his control, Eric fought the divorce and refused to sign the papers, saying that he would never let Alli go. When Alli's mother again sided with Eric and defended him, ignoring his behavior and continually trying to talk Alli into a reconciliation, she turned to the only person she had left - her father.

Only when Robert Riley stepped in and threatened Eric did he finally back down and sign the papers. It was so out-of-character for Robert to do such a thing, but he couldn't bear to watch his youngest daughter suffer anymore. Alli never forgot that. *And I never will*, she thought, closing her eyes. She remembered her father's gentle words of wisdom and his quiet, unwavering support, "*The tide will turn in your favor eventually, honey... just be patient*," he used to tell her. She smiled, feeling the melancholy wash over her as a tear escaped down her cheek.

*Why am I thinking about all this *again*, right *now*?!* Alli chided herself. *After all these years, you'd think I could just let it GO.*

The only reason for the re-hashing of her past, she figured, was because today's little altercation with M.J. made her feel things she hadn't felt in a very long time. The alluring President stirred something deep inside her that she had nearly forgotten about. ...But the woman was also aggressive and intimidating, and that fact created feelings of foreboding in the back of Alli's mind. She tried to convince herself that her fears were unfounded, and that they were just left-over memories stemming from her past experiences.

Not everyone is going to be like Eric, she told herself repeatedly.

Even after they divorced and Alli moved out, Eric would call her - usually drunk - and beg her to come back to him. He even went so far as to follow her to and from work on occasion, and he always seemed to appear whenever she went out anywhere. It drove Alli completely insane, and she swore off men, and dating in general. Her self-imposed celibacy only lasted about a year, however. After Eric's harassment finally ceased, Alli soon found herself being lured out to clubs and bars with her friends, where she learned to take chances and experiment with her feelings... and her evolving sexuality.

It was during this time that she acknowledged her 'awakening', eventually coming to terms with and accepting the fact that she was attracted to women rather than men. It was something that had lurked in the back of her mind and plagued her for as long as she could remember; she was truly relieved to be able to release the pent-up feelings and frustrations that had tormented her for so many years. Still, no matter how much she allowed herself to 'experiment', she steadfastly refused to let herself be dominated or painted into any corners by anyone - her experience with Eric had taught her that lesson. Through all of it, she discovered that a very strong-willed woman lived beneath the small, innocent exterior of her persona.

She began to truly enjoy the freedom of being single and allowed herself to play the field, test-driving and honing her newfound self-assuredness. She never had another serious 'relationship' with anyone however, and although she did 'fool around', she never engaged in all-out sexual intimacies. She vowed that she wouldn't do that until she met the person who truly rocked her

world and treated her the way she wanted to be treated - with proper respect, unconditional devotion, and, well... a little tenderness mixed in with some red-hot passion would be nice too. They were things she'd never had, and they were things she'd decided she was willing to wait for.

So a situation like the strange one that seemed to be developing with M.J. Whitton was particularly distressing. Yes, she got the feeling that M.J. liked and respected her, but she seriously doubted that she meant anything to the captivating woman other than 'employee'. It wasn't the first time Alli had felt the stirrings of a 'crush', but she had always made it a point not to get involved with a co-worker - let alone the President of the company - and she really didn't want to start now. But she couldn't help herself... something about M.J. absolutely fascinated her, and she couldn't remove the thoughts from her mind, even though she knew she should.

M.J. was, in many ways, the complete opposite of what she thought she wanted in someone... and yet she appealed to Alli in a most urgent way. Alli knew it was utterly pointless to pine over the woman; she was the BOSS, for chrissake. Besides, she had no idea if M.J. was gay, straight, bi, or what. She thought she got some 'vibes' from the mysterious beauty, but that didn't mean much - her gaydar had a tendency to be way off sometimes, so she didn't depend on it a whole lot.

Tossing the remains of her meal in the trash, she decided that she'd just have to continue playing it by ear with the dark-haired enigma.

She's probably just one of those people who loves to flirt with everyone... it probably doesn't mean a thing... it's just a power-trip for her... I bet she gets off on it, Alli figured dejectedly. Rich, beautiful, powerful people... they're all the same.

She flopped down on her sofa and picked up her phone, dialing Kaitlyn's number. She missed her sister... especially at vexing times like this.

*"You've got a vicious streak,
For someone so young;
You're like a solar flare,
In the rising sun." - New Order*

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning, Alli was still thinking about yesterday's meeting with the intriguing, sophisticated President. She remembered the revelation of M.J.'s real name, and found herself wondering what else the beguiling woman hid behind her austere mask.

I wonder if her personnel file has any-- No, I can't! I shouldn't! Alli scolded herself, *but what*

*would it hurt?... just a *peek*... just a little glimpse... it's not like I'm going to do anything with the information... I'm just curious... that's all.*

The blonde soon found herself sitting in her office opening a surprisingly thin brown personnel file labeled 'M.J. Whitton'. She perused the information quickly, skimming through the documents looking for... she didn't know what. M.J. had a varied educational background from schools and universities located far and wide. Her medical forms revealed nothing, nor did her payroll and tax information.

Alli was just starting to feel extremely invasive and shameful when she caught a glimpse of an insurance beneficiary form. The name of the insured read 'Morgan Juliette Grayson Whitton', and it listed one 'Elizabeth Katarina Whitton Cohen' as the sole beneficiary.

Cohen, Cohen... isn't that Madison's married name? Alli thought immediately. Sure enough, the beneficiary's birth date of 09/29/98 and the signature of her legal parent/guardian, Madison Elizabeth Whitton Cohen, appeared right below. The document was dated 12/29/98.

So she's giving it all to her niece? Alli thought, *...and it only took her three months to decide that the kid was worth it? ...interesting. She and Madison must be really close.*

Alli's eyes immediately scanned the other papers in search of another date. She found it on a medical insurance form: 11/10/69.

Hmmm... a genuine Scorpio... well that explains a lot... not a surprise, really, Alli thought to herself, *Morgan *Juliette*, the powerful, mysterious Scorpio... how absolutely appropriate.*

The rest of the paperwork in M.J.'s file was surprisingly scant, and Alli felt like she had only garnered a few tantalizing tidbits about the obscure woman, which just made her all the more curious.

Serves me right... I shouldn't be snooping anyway, Alli thought as she slapped the folder shut and walked out of her office to return it to its rightful place.

Lunchtime brought a phone call from Helen asking Alli if she could stop up to see M.J. 'before she left for the day'. Alli thought it was an odd sort of request - not a formal meeting, so... what then? Alli had emailed the completed 'tidied' spreadsheet back to M.J. right before lunch, so she suspected that it had something to do with that. She hoped nothing was wrong, but it really was hard to say. A small lump of worry immediately formed and firmly parked itself right in the center of her stomach.

After much indecision about what time 'before you leave' meant, Alli decided to head upstairs at 4:45 p.m. She reached M.J.'s waiting area and found Helen dutifully cleaning up at her desk. M.J.'s door was closed, and the office looked dark.

Helen greeted Alli and tried to buzz through to her boss. "Hmm, she's still on her line. Hold on for a moment," the older woman said as she walked to M.J.'s door and tapped lightly, cracking it open to peer in.

Alli could make out the older woman silently mouthing 'Ms. Phillips' to whomever was in the office, and she nodded and turned her head back to Alli, "You can go in," she said simply. Alli walked into the darkened room and saw M.J. on the phone, her back to the door, facing the windows, the lamp on her desk providing the only light in the large office.

"Look, I **gave** you enough information - you should be able to take care of it, no problem," the brunette demanded to whomever was on the other line. Alli sat down and tried not to stare at the lean, well-toned arms that were exposed by the short-sleeved, cream-colored silk shirt that the President wore. Seeming to sense eyes upon her, M.J. turned slightly, giving a tight smile and acknowledging nod to the petite woman. Alli thought she looked frustrated and tired. Dark circles lurked beneath her normally bright eyes, and she rubbed her forehead with her fingers.

"Chuck... Chuck! You're not **listening** to me!" the brunette said, suddenly raising her voice and standing up to walk closer to the windows. Alli suddenly wished she were out in the waiting area... but then again, if she weren't in here, she wouldn't be afforded the lovely view that stood in front of her. M.J. had her back to Alli so that she could openly admire the body that wore a short-sleeved blouse tucked into a pair of very well-fitting navy blue pants. For the first time, Alli could clearly make out the President's figure.

*A very *nice* figure*, Alli thought, quirking an eyebrow as she ate up the vision before her. M.J. was not only tall, but she was built perfectly; long limbs, a trim waist, slender hips, moderately wide shoulders, and a graceful neck that supported that gorgeous face. *Why is this woman not a supermodel?* Alli wondered inwardly. The brunette's arms were shapely and her skin was lightly tanned... Alli could only dream what those long legs looked like in the flesh.

*Ohmygod! STOP it! What is *wrong* with you?!* She screamed to herself suddenly and squeezed her eyes closed.

"No! that's not good enough!" M.J. suddenly exclaimed as she turned back to her desk, jarring Alli from her perverse thoughts. "No! That's bullshit! **Make** a deal! That's your JOB, Chuck! **MAKE** a goddamn DEAL*!" Her voice rose even higher and she slammed her fist down on her desk. "Well you can tell **Doug** that I'll wring his damn bloody neck if you guys screw this one up! Now I want you to **finish** it - you got that? I want it **OFF** my back*! ...Good. ...Fine. Look, I have to go. Call me later and let me know that this is **over with**. ...Goodbye."

M.J. turned and slammed the phone down a little too hard, sighing impatiently, "Sorry about that... **lawyers**," she said, looking exasperatedly at Alli and making an irritated face.

It made Alli smile a little in relief to see that the imposing woman wasn't going to toss a chair out the window or anything. She felt like she always had to be on-guard around the tempestuous brunette.

"Uhm, well, let's see... I just wanted to call you up here to tell you 'thank you'," M.J. began as she pulled her seat out and eased her trim frame into it.

"Thank you?" Alli questioned, not understanding.

"Yes; the final report you sent back to me was great - very neat and clean, and exactly what I wanted, so - I just wanted to say 'thank you' for your help." M.J. explained matter-of-factly.

Alli couldn't help but feel incredibly shocked, and she tried very hard to conceal it on her face. "Well... you're welcome... I mean, thank you, I mean... well, that's my job, right?" she said, cursing herself for fumbling and sounding so lame. M.J. gave a throaty laugh and smiled at her - a genuine, wide, white-tooth grin. Alli had the distinct feeling that she was witnessing an unusual thing, and she thought it was the most gorgeous smile she'd ever seen. M.J. was gracing her with a rare glimpse of herself, and Alli felt truly privileged. She smiled back, feeling a definite blush overtake her cheeks.

"I, uhh... I often need information like that from your department, and... well... I usually have a hell of a time getting it," M.J. began to explain. "In fact, I usually have to **persuade** other people to get it, or else I end up doing everything myself," she said with a touch of bitterness. Alli suddenly understood many things with that one statement.

Apparently, no one helped the President willingly; no one offered her assistance or information. She kept the HR office under her thumb because she often needed the vital information it held, and she knew all that information by heart because she had to do the research work herself. She forced her authority on people because they ignored her otherwise; she had to be demanding and overpowering because she got nowhere without it.

Isn't it a sad state of affairs when a woman has to resort to being a 'bitch' just to get her job done, Alli thought.

"Well, I'm glad I could help. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask me," Alli said with absolute sincerity. She wanted to be different and offer her assistance to the President. Until the brunette gave her a reason, she didn't see why she shouldn't help this obviously hard-working woman.

M.J. was looking at her again, the slight smile on her face helping to offset the tired undertones. "Thank you, I appreciate that. You don't know what a relief it is to have someone down there I can depend on, even a little bit," M.J. said, looking directly at Alli to convey her sincere sentiment. The look and the sincerity in M.J.'s suddenly gentle voice unnerved Alli immensely, and she felt those damned butterflies taking flight in the pit of her stomach again. She could only twitch her lips and grin nervously, wondering if M.J. Whitton had any idea what she did to her insides with a mere look.

Before Alli could speak again, a tiny whirlwind burst through M.J.'s open office door.

"Aun' M.J.! Aun' M.J.!" A little blonde-haired toddler was running toward M.J. with her arms

wide open.

M.J. spun her chair, smiling wide and extending her arms to the child. "Heyyy, my little buddyyy!" the tall woman exclaimed, lifting the toddler up into the air and over her head. She laughed and smiled as she jostled the youngster, and Alli couldn't believe this was the same woman who, just five minutes ago, was threatening a prominent attorney with bodily harm.

"I haven't seen you in awhile, how are you sweetie?" M.J. asked in a warm, melodic voice as she brought the toddler into her arms for an enormous hug.

Madison walked into the office, noticing Alli immediately, "Oh, I'm sorry, Morgan - I didn't realize you were meeting with anyone," the V.P. stammered.

"It's okay, we were just about finished," the taller woman said, still grinning and giving a quick glance and nod to Alli, dismissing her, she supposed.

"Allison, how are you doing?" Madison said, turning to acknowledge her with a polite smile.

"I'm fine, thank you. Is this your daughter?" Alli asked with a tilt of her head and a grin.

"Yes, this is Lizzy. Lizzy? Could you say 'hello' to Ms. Phillips?" Madison chided, calling out to the little girl, who was now being mercilessly tickled by her aunt.

Lizzy... 'Elizabeth Katarina Whitton Cohen', Alli thought, remembering the information she'd secretly gleaned from M.J.'s personnel file earlier.

"Hello Ms. Phill-ahhh!" she squawked as M.J. continued to tickle her. Alli watched in rapt fascination as the normally intense, severe President tickled and teased the little bundle sitting in her lap, all the while her face exuding absolute love and adoration.

After a few moments of observation and chuckles, Alli decided that she should get going so that Madison and M.J. could be alone, since Madison had taken a seat and obviously wanted to talk to her sister. She excused herself, and M.J. again thanked her for her work.

As she walked down the hallway with a crooked smile on her face, Alli thought back to the warm, familial scene in the President's office. Nothing she'd heard about this woman seemed to be true, at least not in her eyes. She didn't see an emotionless tyrant who lashed out with a poisonous tail and snapped off people's heads without provocation. The woman who unguardedly hugged and kissed that little child was nothing but a loving, doting aunt who had plenty of emotion and a luxurious, captivating smile that was blinding. Perhaps she was being naïve; perhaps she had just been lucky enough to catch M.J. on 'good' days... she didn't know.

So she's a complete conundrum... everyone has different sides to their personality, Alli thought, *isn't M.J. allowed that too?* She didn't know, and she really didn't want to care, but again, she found herself feeling hopelessly bewitched by the irresistible President of the company.

She sighed out loud as she got into the elevator and pushed the #13 button, bringing a hand up to rub her temple. It was time to stop thinking... it was time to go home.

*"Copasetic, calm my frenetic, she's the shit, y'all;
Highly-rated, well-educated, she's an angel;
She's ambitious, beautiful, delicious, like a restaurant;
I can take it, truth stripped me naked, and I'm fucked up." - J. Cantrell*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Three months had now flown by, and Allison was finding that she enjoyed her new job immensely. Although she had been primarily focusing on recruitment and employee retention, which did need to be streamlined badly, as Ray Calhoun had said, she was enjoying the work. This was the first job where she had the freedom to put her ideas into motion without someone looking over her shoulder constantly. John finally seemed content to allow her to develop some independence and autonomy, and she found that she thrived in this kind of environment.

Things were going very well, but the office was dealt a blow at the beginning of this particular week: John announced that his wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and he was taking time off immediately to be with her. That suddenly left Allison in charge of the HR office. She was beyond nervous, to say the least, and yet she felt like it was a huge opportunity to prove herself. The biggest nervous hurdle to overcome was the fact that she knew that M.J. Whitton would be carefully watching her every move.

Today found Allison furiously preparing for a meeting with the oddly ambiguous President over a messy worker's compensation claim that had been filed by one of Ray's construction crewmen. She hadn't met with M.J. again since the 'email incident' meetings, as she had come to refer to them, and although she was nervous at the prospect of coming under the scrutiny of the intimidating woman's intensity again, she was also excited. M.J. seemed to bring something out in her - maybe it was a desire to help the information-starved President, or perhaps it was just some silly need to prove herself worthy in the powerful woman's eyes. If it was something entirely different, Alli couldn't name it; she only knew that her tummy tickled and she couldn't get her hands to stop trembling.

Alli had some worker's comp. experience from her prior job, but she hadn't dealt with it at Whitton, Inc., and she certainly didn't expect to be dealing directly with M.J... at least not so soon. It was times like this that she most missed having John there to serve as the official 'Director'. She wasn't sure how the issue even came to M.J.'s attention or why she was getting involved - all she knew was that when she received M.J.'s personal phone call requesting her to

meet about the matter, she nearly peed in her pants. She assumed that M.J. was merely looking into the situation since Ray had left on his extensive vacation a few weeks ago, but the thought of dealing with something that John normally handled had her feeling very unsure of herself.

Nothing like baptism by fire, she thought as she took the elevator up to the 14th floor. She arrived at M.J.'s office, jittery and on-edge. *Just relax... stay focused... don't let her get to you... just the facts, ma'am...*, she mocked inside her head. M.J.'s assistant knocked and announced that Allison had arrived, and she stepped inside to be greeted by M.J. and Madison.

Oh thank the fates it won't be just me and Ms. Mesmerizing, Alli thought with some relief. The idea of being alone, again, in an office with M.J. Whitton had been eating at her ever since the meeting had been scheduled. The woman, frankly, scared the shit out of her. She unnerved her because she was so dominating and intense - both physically and mentally - and she was, well... alluring. Alli was certain she was the most attractive woman she'd ever met, and she feared that she would have a hard time concentrating on the task at hand if they were alone. She quickly scolded herself to remain objective and not stare like a love-struck teenager.

"Have a seat, Allison," M.J. purred smoothly, her mood serious and all-business. Nevertheless, Alli felt the hair on the back of her neck stand at full attention. "I've asked Madison to sit in on this so that we have a legal point of view," M.J. continued, nodding toward her sister.

Legal? This is going to get that nasty? ...oh shit. Alli nearly panicked at the thought, but remained stoic as she sat down. M.J. looked stunning and cool, as usual, and she flashed a proper, but tight smile as she regarded Alli and began speaking about the case.

Alli felt the nervous butterflies being released in the pit of her stomach, like they always did whenever she heard the smooth voice of the captivating President.

...I do not have a crush on the President of the fucking company! I do not, I do NOT! She yelled to herself, *Stop it!*

The three women discussed the case in depth for over an hour. Alli was fascinated with the way the two sisters' minds worked. They played question-and-answer off of each other beautifully, and it occurred to Alli that she was witnessing something rare - two siblings who were ideally matched as business partners. Even though the two sisters looked fairly similar physically, their personalities couldn't be more different. M.J. was impatient and abrupt, seeing things as black and white, yes or no, and she paced back and forth in front of her office windows while she talked and thought aloud. Madison was urbane and placating, gently arguing with her older sibling and explaining why there were gray areas and what they meant. Alli loved having the opportunity to observe both of them carefully.

M.J.'s face almost always held a serious-looking scowl, and her brows were constantly knitted together in fierce concentration. If she wore any makeup at all, it wasn't easy to detect. The intense, penetrating eyes, the strong angles of her cheeks, and the slight jut of her strong jaw gave her face a fierce, intimidating look, and Alli decided that it was these features, in combination with her height, that gave her the 'handsome', even slightly androgynous,

appearance. Her lips held only a hint of color, and today she wore simple gray pearl earrings and a slender gold watch. On the fourth finger of her right hand, she wore a gold ring with a beautiful emerald-cut sapphire surrounded by diamond baguettes. Other than that, she was completely unencumbered by adornments.

Madison, on the other hand, was decidedly more feminine-looking. Even though she also possessed perfect cheekbones and a pronounced jaw like her sister, overall she appeared more delicate and demure. Her expression was open and placid, and her eyes, although beautiful, were more of a dusty, slate-gray and not nearly as bewitching as M.J.'s. Her use of makeup was obvious, but it didn't detract from her beauty. She wore large gold and diamond-encrusted earrings, which she occasionally played with when she was thinking. Her fingernails were perfectly manicured with a tasteful cranberry-colored polish that matched her lipstick precisely. Alli couldn't help but wonder what the parents of these two women must look like in order to produce such beautiful daughters; and again, she couldn't help but wonder why the two of them weren't appearing on magazine covers somewhere. They were absolute knock-outs.

Alli also noticed, for the first time, that Madison wore a bizarre gold ruby-and-diamond creation on her right hand, and a humongous diamond wedding ring on her left hand. M.J., in contrast, wore absolutely nothing on her left hand.

Not like that means anything for sure, she thought to herself. Stay focused on the meeting... idiot!

"I don't see why we just can't sack the guy! He's just screwing with us and he's going to drag this out forever," M.J. growled with obvious frustration as she slumped back down in her chair. M.J.'s moody temperament was a bit of a worry to Alli - she was like some sort of yin and yang... sometimes cool, sometimes hot - occasionally water, but more often fire.

"You can't just terminate him, Morgan, you have to offer him light duty or other viable alternatives. If he refuses those alternatives, *then* we have grounds to terminate." Madison reminded her gently. She sounded exactly like an attorney and always spoke in a crisp, precise, enunciated voice. Alli didn't recall anyone saying that Madison had a legal background, but she now thought that she must. She also noticed that Madison always called her sister 'Morgan' rather than 'M.J.'.

Bet she's the only one who gets away with that, Alli thought.

"I'm just concerned that we're going to set a bad precedent here, Maddy. If we don't nip this in the bud and make an example, all the other wankers out there will see that this guy got away with it, and then we'll have a dozen copy-cat situations!" M.J. grumbled impatiently, "I don't *like* having worker's comp. claims - it makes us look sloppy and unsafe." M.J. snapped as she leaned back in her chair and let out an agitated sigh.

"Well I don't either, but we still have to handle them judiciously and legally. Besides, we really don't get that many claims anyway," Madison added nonchalantly.

"Uhm, actually, we *do* have quite a few," Allison cleared her throat and spoke up hesitantly.

Both Whittons turned to look at her in surprise, and she immediately felt beads of sweat pop out at her temples. "Uhm, I pulled some files and looked over things, and, well, there are a lot of claims that, I think, could probably be avoided if the workers had some safety training... or something."

Allison looked at the two women, expecting them to say something negative, especially M.J. Instead, they just stared at her expectantly with raised brows, so she continued, treading carefully. "It might not be a bad idea to consider hiring our own Health and Safety Specialist... someone who could do training and inspect the work sites and conditions on our behalf... it might help alleviate a lot of the problems and ultimately, prevent claims...?" Allison trailed off with uncertainty, nervously twirling her pen in her fingers.

M.J. stared at her intently, as though she had sprouted two heads and was speaking an alien language. Alli felt herself blush under the scrutiny and she darted her eyes over to Madison to see if she was about to have her head lopped off, or what. Madison, however, had a faint smile on her face, and Alli felt a tiny bit of relief.

"I believe I made that very recommendation to Raiford and Liz Jacobs ages ago. Obviously Ray ignored me... as usual," Madison said. M.J. finally managed to tear her gaze from Alli for a moment,

"Why did you mention it to Liz?" M.J. asked, confused.

"Her office handled the worker's comp. claims before... uh... before Alex Whats-her-name left the department, remember?" Madison said, throwing a knowing glance at her sister, who in turn flashed a loud warning glare back at her. Luckily, the blonde didn't seem to pick up on the sisters' silent signals. "Anyway, after she left, you moved Worker's Comp. to Human Resources," Madison finished.

"Oh... right," M.J. said, wanting to immediately move past Madison's little trip down memory lane. "I'm surprised no one's noticed this before. And why wouldn't Ray or Liz have thought of the 'Safety Specialist' thing before? That's an *excellent* suggestion, Allison," M.J. said as she stood up and walked to the window, looking back briefly and pointing to Alli with approval. Alli felt her chest swell with pride - she had actually gotten *more* kudos from M.J. Whitton.

I wonder if I could get this quoted and printed on a certificate so I could hang it in my office as proof? She thought as she fought to quell the grin that tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes, it is a good idea. We should look into hiring someone immediately. When will Stevenson be back? Do we know?" Madison asked, looking at Alli and M.J., who turned and looked expectantly at Alli.

"I haven't heard from him since last week - have you?" M.J. asked, boring her bright blue eyes into Alli's.

Alli felt herself tremble slightly as M.J.'s gaze seemed to suddenly plow into her, "Uh, yes, I

spoke with him on Monday. He said that Donna wasn't responding well to her first chemo treatment, so... I suspect he'll be out for awhile yet." She answered, feeling bad that John obviously hadn't kept M.J. informed about his leave.

"Oh... that's too bad," Madison mumbled aloud.

"Well then, I guess you and I will start working on finding a Health and Safety Specialist, Allison," M.J. said as she approached the blonde's chair and rested back against her desk. M.J.'s features had changed, and Alli thought she was looking at her in a rather flirtatious, almost predeaceous manner. She wore a tiny Mona Lisa smile and her azure eyes seemed to glimmer while sizing Alli up, as though she were a potential foe... or a dinner entree.

A sense of deja vu echoed in the back of Alli's head, and her mouth felt oddly dry. She hoped to hell that she wasn't sitting there with her tongue hanging out as she stood up on slightly shaky legs, "I look forward to it, Ms. Whitton." Alli answered, somehow finding it within herself to sound self-assured and even quirk an eyebrow at the imposing brunette.

"You don't have to be so formal - call me M.J.," the tall woman said, reaching out to touch Alli's forearm gently, her smirk still firmly in place.

"Okay, M.J... let me know when you want to get started." Alli said with confidence. She was flattered that the all-powerful President had finally decided to be on a first-name basis with her, *and* she had *touched* her in a friendly manner. ...She was on cloud nine.

*Oh get a *grip*, moron!*

"I'll have Helen set something up for next week?" M.J. responded immediately, watching the blonde nod and smile back at her. Neither woman noticed that Madison was watching their interaction with great interest.

"Sure. Pleasure to see you again, Ms. Whitton," Alli said, remembering to remain polite as she reached out to shake Madison's hand before exiting the office and closing the door.

"Morgannnn," Madison drawled out, pausing for just a moment after Allison left.

"What?" M.J. answered indifferently as she walked around and sat in her chair again.

"You know *what*," Madison said admonishingly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," M.J. said evenly as she pretended to look at some papers on her desk. Madison stood up and walked over to her desk, intentionally placing her hands on the papers that M.J. was looking at. M.J. raised her eyes slowly and leveled a fierce look at her sister.

"Morgan... just...," Madison said in a soft tone, her gray eyes pleading.

"What, Maddy? 'Just' what?" M.J. snapped with some impatience as she regarded her sister seriously.

"Just... don't do anything stupid, okay? Don't be careless again; I don't wanna see another Alex Wicszleski situation, alright?" Madison gently reminded her older sister. M.J. glared at her younger sibling for a moment, her normally bright eyes misting over slightly. The mere mention of that name earlier evoked a landslide of bad memories for her. She was surprised that Madison actually remembered Alex's real name - they had always sarcastically referred to the former employee as 'Alex Whats-her-name'.

The whole mess took place a few years ago... M.J. had made the horrid mistake of having a 'fling' with Alex Wicszleski, an Administrative Manager working at the time in the Finance area under Liz Jacobs. It started out as a casual affair, but the whole thing ended up turning terribly sour, to say the least. M.J. quickly realized that cavorting with Alex was a big mistake. The woman was clingy, emotionally unstable, and - in Madison's opinion - obviously digging for gold in the pockets of the Whitton family. When M.J. tried to break things off, Alex went ballistic and retaliated by threatening to go public and sue M.J. and Whitton, Inc. for sexual harassment. The whole fiasco nearly cost M.J. her job and her family's business. Only after a great deal of savvy legal maneuvering and a hefty pay-off did M.J. get rid of the psychotic monkey on her back. She hadn't thought about the whole thing in such a long time; she much preferred keeping it in the past, where it belonged.

M.J. sighed with annoyance, pulling herself out of her reverie, "There will **never** be another 'Alex Wicszleski situation, so don't even go there," M.J. said dismissively, pulling the papers out from underneath her sister's intruding hands.

"I'm just saying... you **know** what I'm saying, Morgan," Madison said in a slightly scolding, but gentle tone. M.J. looked up at her again, the glare diminished greatly, and she sighed in acknowledgement. As usual, her sister was right, and M.J. knew that she was just looking out for her.

"Yes, I know what you're saying, Maddy... I promise I'll behave, alright?" She said impatiently, tossing her younger sister an irritated look.

Madison sighed and opened the door, "Yeah, **sure** you will," she mumbled as she shook her head and left her sister's office. M.J. smiled after her and went back to her work.

The short, one-floor ride down to the Human Resources department was fraught with vivid images, both real and imagined, for Alli. She had no doubt that the president of Whitton, Inc. had, once again, flirted openly with her - and in front of her sister and Vice President, no less. It might have been subtle and mild, but it was real. Alli prided herself on reading body language and silent signals, and she was certain that the non-verbal language that emanated from the tall

brunette didn't fall within proper business protocol.

**God*, the way she rakes her eyes over me... uhhhh!* Alli nearly moaned out loud.

Somehow she managed to keep herself from dissolving into a pile of mush; somehow she had retained her senses; and **somehow**, she even managed to speak back to the overpowering woman in a seemingly confident manner.

*Don't know *how* in the hell I managed *that**, Alli thought as she remembered quirking a brow while addressing the smug President.

She had also seen the silent looks passing between M.J. and Madison; the knowing glances and bodily communications between the two sisters was strong. Alli knew all about sisters and their connections - she had sisters herself, and she remembered a time when they were able to speak to each other in silence also.

Too bad I don't see Kaitlyn and Erin that often... I miss that closeness, Alli thought, feeling melancholy at the thought.

Pulling herself out of her contemplation, Alli went into her office, determined to get started on recruiting a safety specialist, and determined to make a good impression on the big boss - flirting be damned.

It's not like she'd ever do anything more than flirt a little bit anyway, Alli thought as she moved about her office, *she's the BOSS, for godssake... I'm nothing but a little peon to her.*

As the blonde tried to throw herself back into her work, she found her thoughts continually drifting away. It was as though she could feel a pair of enigmatic blue eyes constantly watching her, dissecting her. It was worrisome and yet thrilling at the same time. Her memories kept focusing on the image of M.J.'s tall, sleek form, pacing back and forth in her office... the dark, brooding figure never seemed to be at rest, and her mind never seemed to be at peace. She was like a panther, trapped in a gilded cage, waiting to lash out and break free. She was beauty and beast, she was goddess and temptress, all wrapped up in one magnificent creature.

Alli sighed to herself, wishing her mind would knock off the stupid, poetic waxing and give her a freaking break. She had to work with this imposing, alluring figure on an important project, and she couldn't afford to be distracted - not one little bit. She took a deep breath and blew it out loudly, determined to ignore her silly thoughts and feelings and concentrate on the task at hand. As she turned to her computer, she could swear that the reflection staring back from the monitor was a gentle cerulean.

*Oh, this is *not* going to be easy*, Alli thought with some defeat.

*"Why do you come here,
When you know it makes things hard for me?
When you know... oh why do you come?
I'm so very sickened, oh I am so sickened now...
But it was a good lay, a good lay,
It was a good lay, a good lay..." - Morrissey*

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was nearly 7:00 pm when M.J. finally glanced at the clock on her desk. She sighed loudly and leaned back in her chair, raising her arms up high and twisting them back behind her head.

Time to get out of here... I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm frustrated... so what else is new? She thought to herself, looking out the window at the darkened city skyline. She knew that tonight would be her usual quick dinner, followed by an excessive and unmerciful boxing workout, followed by a nice dip in the pool, then a long hot shower, and then off to bed.

I lead such a dreadfully exciting life, she thought to herself as she rolled her eyes and began cleaning up her desk.

The shrill ring of her cell phone interrupted her task. "Yeah," she said in her customary curt greeting.

"Hey, handsome," the voice at the other end of the line purred seductively. M.J.'s senses immediately went on alert. "No answer? ...okayyyy....," the voice added sarcastically.

"I'm just heading home for the night, Kate; what do you want?" M.J. said impatiently.

"You're always **so** goddamn polite, M.J., you know that?" The redhead teased in her trademark velvet voice. M.J. merely sighed into the phone. "Look, I need to talk to you about something - a **business** something," Kate added emphatically.

"So talk while I walk out the door," M.J. said as she began tucking papers into her briefcase, determined not to stay one more minute.

"Actually, I'm in my car, just around the corner from you... I was hoping I could just stop by...?" The attorney demurred coyly.

"I'm on my way **out**, Kate; give me a call tomorrow and we can discuss whatever it is," M.J. said insistently. Kate had a way of sweet-talking her into doing things, and she couldn't stand that.

"Oh come onnnn, M.J. It'll just take a minute... I promise," Kate enticed, "I'm coming up on your

building right now." The attorney knew exactly how to cajole M.J. and gently push her buttons, and she used that knowledge to her advantage whenever possible... like now.

M.J. paused a moment, releasing yet another loud sigh. "Fine, but make it quick. I wanna get out of here early for a change." She abruptly snapped the phone shut and stuffed it into her briefcase. M.J. knew she was being a bitch, but she really didn't care; there was no way in hell she'd ever let Kate Reed have the upper hand completely - not that that was even possible - they were terrible together when they were outside the bedroom; they clashed horribly.

She's great in bed, but letting her have any other kind of 'control' over me is out of the question, M.J. told herself. Kate was all about control and manipulation, and in many ways, so was M.J., hence the clashing.

Actually, it was ironic for Kate to call her today, of all days, after she had taken the little trip down memory lane about Alex Whats-her-name. It was during the legal battle over the Alex situation that M.J. and Kate met.

Yeah, I went from one bad situation to another, M.J. thought to herself. She sighed aloud, knowing that she'd probably kick herself later for giving in to the crafty little redhead tonight. God only knew what the woman had up her sleeve.

An hour later, M.J. gathered her briefcase preparing, at last, to go home for the night. Kate's 'business' discussion had lasted all of 15 minutes before she turned her wiles on M.J. and proceeded to seduce her with abandon. M.J. wasn't pleased with the turn of events, but in her state of frustration and fatigue, she found herself giving in, once again, to the attorney's advances.

Damn woman, M.J. thought to herself. She decided she should stop off at the bathroom adjacent to her office suite to make a quick check of her appearance, lest she run into someone on the way out. She flipped the lights on and gave herself a cursory appraisal.

Not too bad, considering how savage we were with each other, she thought to herself. Quickly washing her hands in a subliminal desire to clean her entire self, she refastened a few buttons and tucked her blouse neatly into her pants, tidied her dark hair, and shrugged her suit jacket back on. Noticing that her shoulder felt a little sore, she grabbed her things and headed out the door toward the elevators.

While quietly plummeting downward in the stuffy capsule, M.J. couldn't help but ponder the meaning of her life, or lack thereof. She hated it when she got introspective like this, but it was bound to happen from time to time. She had no one and virtually nothing in her life that was significant, except her career.

My 'career', she thought with sarcasm, *what the fuck good is it? It's all I have, and I barely give a shit about it anymore,* she contemplated, feeling somewhat angry. *I never wanted to be here... I*

was happier where I was... I only took this position because Mark made me feel guilty, like I 'owed' him... like it was my familial obligation, even though he tried to make it sound like I was just doing him a favor... I should have just told him 'no'... I should have stuck to my guns and done what I always planned to do... just work here a few years and then get the hell outta Dodge.

The brunette reminisced about her long-lost dreams for just a moment before the elevator chimed, reminding her that she had reached the parking garage level. She trudged to her black Jaguar and climbed in, tossing her briefcase on the passenger seat. Sighing in relief, she fired up her beloved sports car, punched up an appropriately gloomy song on the cd player, and zoomed toward home just as *Morrissey* began to croon about being so sorry.

Fall was a strange time in the deep South; it could be chilly and breezy, or it could be boiling hot, like the middle of summer. Tonight it was balmy and the air was moist. It seemed ridiculous to have to run the air-conditioner in the middle of the fall season, and M.J. was tempted to drop the car's convertible top, but decided against it. The only time she liked to do that was when the sun was shining brightly and her hair was down so that it could fly all over the place like a dark, wild flag of freedom and happiness. She hadn't done that in a long time... she hadn't felt free nor happy in a very long time.

She soon reached her home and pulled her car through the gates and into the spacious garage. Seeing her old battered Jeep Cherokee and her Harley-Davidson motorcycle made her smile for the first time that day.

Gotta take the 'ole Hog out soon... haven't ridden her for ages, she thought idly as she strode past it. Walking up to her Jeep, she looked wistfully at the well-worn vehicle and saw the rust bubbles that had begun to riddle its body like a metallic cancer. The 4x4 was like a cherished old friend to her; it had been with her, faithfully, for 15 years, and it looked it. She smiled again, feeling unusually sentimental, and patted the hood as she walked out of the garage and made her way into the main house.

She plopped her briefcase on the kitchen counter and immediately went to the fridge to see what was available to eat. Deciding on the usual frozen fare, she tossed the item into the microwave and grabbed a bottle of cold water. Leaning back against her counter, she looked around her home. Ruth had obviously been there today to do the cleaning, and the place looked spotless. M.J. employed the woman just to clean house for her - she did her own laundry and cooking, unlike her sister, who employed numerous staff at her home.

Ruth is good... don't know how she keeps this place looking so nice.

The house was an historic and architectural masterpiece. Fighting against her father's insistence that she should build a brand new 'Whitton home' to use as a showplace, M.J. had instead opted to buy an old house and renovate it. And that she did. It was a gorgeous, sturdy, old brick Georgian plantation-style mansion with beautiful hardwood floors, wide, thick baseboards, one-inch-thick plaster walls, a heavy slate roof, a gorgeous 2-story entrance foyer with a huge winding staircase, king-sized beds and fireplaces in every bedroom, and a long wooden dock that lead out to a large boathouse. All of it was perched very privately and serenely along the St.

John's River. The only areas M.J. had completely remodeled and modernized were the kitchen and the bathrooms - the rest of it was all original. She had also added a huge in-ground swimming pool, but that was the only real indulgent item she'd splurged on. She loved to swim, and found the addition a necessary one, rather than merely for show. She had always been fascinated with old homes, and this was exactly what she wanted. She'd personally overseen all the renovations, even designing and drawing up the kitchen and bath plans herself.

Even though she made it a point to avoid too much exhibitionism and opulence, M.J. knew that she probably wouldn't have all the things she had if she didn't hold the position she did.

Well, not necessarily, she thought to herself in self-defense. She was fairly frugal with her money and invested it wisely, rather than spending it on excessive things like absurdly expensive jewelry, priceless antiques, huge yachts, and private planes, like Madison, her father, and Ray did. Although she knew that her house, her Jaguar, and even her Harley could be considered 'flashy' items, she knew that she bought them for herself because she truly loved them, not because they could be used to proclaim to the world how wealthy she was. She had taken a good bit of ribbing from Madison about her sporty Jag XKR convertible -- Maddy accused her of being a posh snob, like their British mother, and the comment nearly caused her to forego buying the vehicle. But, ever the stubborn one, she refused to give in to her younger sister's chiding and bought it anyway; she reasoned that if she really wanted to show off, she'd buy an Aston Martin. Besides, Madison had a lot of room to talk, considering that she drove a Bentley.

She remembered when she was purchasing the house... even though it needed some work, she was very happy with the old five-bedroom home and loved the fact that it had some history attached to it, as did many of the aged homes along the St. Johns. Her father and Madison, and even Ray, tried to talk her into building something brand new that would be much bigger and more extravagant. *'Remember that your home will be a representation of you, *and* the company'*, they had said, as though she needed to be reminded that they built things for a living. They knew she didn't like extravagance and lavishness - it wasn't her thing, it never had been. To further prove her point, she purposely never purchased a boat to moor at her dock... she bought herself the Harley instead. She preferred small and manageable as opposed to grand and out-of-control. Being the only person living there, the house was certainly spacious enough for her. It was a big enough place to get lost in, and, she admitted begrudgingly, it was a big place to be lonely in.

It was hard to admit that she felt lonely sometimes, even to herself. She only made such confessions on days when she was especially melancholy, or after she'd had one of her ridiculous, emotionless, quick-fix sex encounters with someone someplace.

Kind-of like... tonight? M.J. thought. *Damn... damn that woman!* She cursed inwardly.

The truth was, she didn't mind being alone, she just hated feeling lonely... there was a big difference, but it was hard to explain. M.J. was pretty sure no one understood. She could never have a real relationship with anyone - it had only taken one bad experience for her to decide that. She wasn't interested in anything long-term or 'genuine'; it was just something she knew, in her heart, would never happen. Besides, she wasn't a 'relationship' kind of person; she got bored

easily, and she wouldn't be a good 'partner'. She would never fall head over heels *in love* with anyone.

Hell, the longest 'relationship' she'd ever had was probably whatever the hell she had going with Kate, and *that* hardly qualified as a 'relationship'. That was only an occasional good fuck, interspersed with a lot of sarcasm and power-struggles. She didn't understand what it was that kept Kate coming back to her, nor what made her give-in to the redhead's ploys so easily. Kate meant nothing to her; she was just a body on, and in, which M.J. released her pent-up frustrations. They used each other. It was nothing but rough, harsh, emotionless sex. It was totally dispassionate, and completely unfeeling.

She often wondered if she intentionally, albeit subconsciously, selected 'partners' that she knew would be a poor match for her. Maybe she dabbled with people like Alex Whats-her-name and Kate because her subconscious mind knew there was no chance in hell that it would last beyond a few one-night-stands or a casual fuck here and there. Maybe her conscious decision to have no attachments controlled her subliminal sex-partner selections. Was that possible? ...She didn't know. She only knew that she didn't like what she had become. And the current situation with Kate only served as a constant reminder of it. Their sexual encounters now seemed to leave her feeling dirty and pathetic. She hated it. Moreover, she hated that she *needed* it.

M.J. finished her drink and walked out of the kitchen, forgetting her dinner and deciding to forego a work-out for the night; she was too tired.

I just wanna go to bed, she thought to herself as she walked back to her bedroom, undoing her strict hairdo and stripping her clothes off. Walking back into her bathroom, she began to run warm water for a shower, then turned to examine herself in the large mirror that adorned the wall in front of her sink.

M.J. knew she was an attractive woman, but still, there were things about herself that she wouldn't mind changing. Sometimes she thought her lips were a little too thin and her jaw stuck out a bit too much. Even though enough people had told her that most women would kill for a face like hers, she didn't think it was absolutely perfect... nothing was, after all. She was always glad that she was tall, however. Standing at nearly 5'11", she automatically had the advantage of being intimidating without trying very hard. Coupled with her dark hair and blazing blue eyes, she knew she commanded attention... she knew she could make men - and women - weak in the knees, and she used that upper-hand to her advantage quite often.

She turned her shoulder to look at it in the mirror. Angry, crimson scratch marks stood out starkly against her lightly-tanned skin.

Fuck... no wonder my shoulder hurts! She thought angrily as she touched the tender area. *Next time the idea of 'giving head' comes up, I'm gonna make sure her fucking hands are tied behind her back!* She vowed as she turned around and climbed into the steaming shower.

*"I'll tell you something, I am a wolf, but,
I like to wear sheep's clothing;
I am a bonfire, I am a vampire,
I'm waiting for my moment;
You come on like a drug, I just can't get enough,
I'm like an addict, coming at you for a little more." - Garbage*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next few weeks Alli found herself reporting to and working with M.J. quite a bit. They had begun to put together requirements and a recruiting scheme for hiring a Safety Specialist, and M.J. had also been making numerous requests for information. It was now a common occurrence for the President and the Assistant HR Director to be working together. M.J. liked the idea of having someone like Alli to depend on and run reports and gather important statistical information for her. It was something she'd always looked for in her own personal assistants, but none of them ever seemed to be able to understand what it was she wanted and needed. Somehow, the intelligent little blonde HR assistant fell into the role perfectly. M.J. only had to give her minimal instructions and guidelines, and Alli always understood and delivered the goods to the demanding woman. M.J. found herself liking and depending on her quite a bit and, she admitted, it was a bit unsettling.

M.J. had always been very cautious in her business relationships; one could never be sure when a supposed ally and friend would turn on you, and she couldn't afford that... she had enough experience in that arena already. But her gut told her that Allison Phillips was trustworthy, and that she was different from all the other vultures who sat around waiting their turn to jump on her presidential carcass. M.J. supposed that what impressed her most about Alli was that she didn't act as though she were intimidated or in awe of her. She clearly respected M.J.'s position and authority, but she never kissed her ass overtly like everyone else did. Whenever they worked together, Alli treated her just like any other colleague; she gave her honest opinion whenever M.J. asked for it, even if it differed from the President's.

M.J. realized that, for a change, she respected someone else probably as much as they respected her. Their meetings had begun to take on a very relaxed, casual feel, and M.J. found herself treating Alli in almost the same way she treated Madison - like a trusted friend and confidante. She didn't know when this change took place, or what caused it; perhaps it had just been a gradual, natural evolution. M.J. had to admit that, although it was confusing, it was also rather pleasant.

Of course, there was one slight problem with the new 'comfort zone', and that was the *attraction* thing. M.J. admitted it to herself only in private, because that was the only safe place for it. Alli was cute, and smart, and strong-willed; she seemed - so far - to possess all the qualities that M.J. thought she'd like in a woman. But... M.J. knew it was something that could

never be. First of all, Alli was her employee and she knew better than to venture into that mine-field again; secondly, M.J. would never even attempt anything with someone like Alli. Someone who was so obviously naïve and pure in heart and soul would be devastated by a heartless predator like M.J. She knew very well what her ravenous, emotionless hunger did to unsuspecting women. She would never subject someone like Allison to her cravings. Madison had already picked-up on the way she looked at Alli, and M.J. knew she had to keep herself in check. But it was difficult sometimes; she enjoyed flirting with Alli, just as she did so many people. M.J. knew damn well that she shouldn't do it, but she honestly couldn't help herself. And, if her perception was still as accurate as it always had been, she could tell that Alli seemed to enjoy it too. So, if a little flirting and teasing was the most harmful thing she did, then that wasn't so bad... was it?

"Okay... this is good, but I think I need the current salaries for all the clerical staff in here too," The President said as she perused the spreadsheet that Alli had given her.

"Okay... clerical... too," Alli mumbled as she scribbled some notes on her pad of paper. "Administrative assistants too, or just secretaries and clerks?"

"Mmm... let's just look at the secretarial and clerk group for now; maybe I'll add the AA's later. There aren't that many, are there?" M.J. queried.

"Ahmm... there are five, but Jane Leeds is retiring at the end of the year, and Helen will be going soon after, so...," Alli let her voice trail off as she continued to write. M.J. smiled to herself; she loved the fact that the Assistant HR Director had already familiarized herself so well with the company, and that she could spit out facts without hesitation. The woman was good.

"Okay," M.J. answered as she clicked her mouse around the spreadsheet. The two women were seated in their usual positions as they worked on yet another project; M.J. was seated in front of her pc and Alli was pulled up beside her on a chair, watching whatever she did. M.J. had come to enjoy the close interaction, and she felt like Alli gave her valuable input whenever they worked together. She'd discovered that the blonde was a whiz with spreadsheets - and pc's in general - and she truly enjoyed watching the way her quick-witted mind worked. A loud gurgling noise suddenly disrupted the silence, and Alli made an embarrassed face,

"Ooo, sorry... I guess I'm paying the price for skipping breakfast this morning," she said with a grimace, pushing a hand into her protesting stomach as her face blushed in embarrassment. M.J. smiled and gave a small laugh. Looking at her watch, the President dropped her pen and pushed back away from her desk,

"Let's go." She said as she stood. Alli looked at her in confusion. "Lunch - let's go grab some lunch. I could use a break, and *that* obviously needs to be fed," she said, grinning and pointing to the blonde's stomach.

"Uhm... okay. Just let me go grab my stuff from my office," Alli said quickly as she felt a

nervous blush overtake her features.

She's just asking you to go to lunch, dork - calm down! She chastised herself inwardly.

"Okay; I'll meet you down there." M.J. said as Alli turned and skittered off.

Shit shit shit shit, Alli muttered to herself on the brief ride down to her floor. She knew that going to lunch shouldn't be such a big deal, but she couldn't help it - *M.J. Whitton* was taking her to lunch!

Okay, okay... just relax! For godssake, don't act like a complete spazz! she scolded herself again as she reached her office.

When she headed back out toward the elevators, she saw M.J. standing, talking to a middle-aged man who was all smiles as he obviously fawned over her and kissed her ass about something. Alli couldn't help but watch in amazement as the President spoke to the man, appearing to be patient and gracious, but with body language that screamed 'you're an idiot'. It was fascinating to watch her in action; she was totally dominating the man and apparently turning him down about something, and he unwittingly allowed every minute of it - Alli could tell just from his reactions and body language. She couldn't help but wonder if his 'suggestion' had been of a personal or business nature. M.J. saw Alli approaching and excused herself, relieved to have a reason to get away from the slobbering fool with the idiotic ideas. They got into the elevator and started the descent down.

"So, what do you feel like? Casual, or classy?" M.J. asked.

"Uhhh... I don't think I'm really dressed for 'classy'," Alli stammered, looking at her nice, but plain, blouse and slacks ensemble.

"Nonsense, you look great," M.J. said offhandedly as she took the opportunity to toss an appraising sideways stare at the blonde's petite form, a smirk gently tugging at the corner of her mouth.

*There she goes again with that *look**, Alli thought as she swallowed hard and fought away a blush, *Damn!* "Well, casual is fine... if that's okay with you," Alli stammered again.

"Casual it is." M.J. said with finality as the smirk spread into a genuine grin.

Five minutes later they were zipping along in M.J.'s sleek black Jaguar. Alli loved the car and couldn't help but comment on it when they got in. M.J. didn't mind her enthusiasm, and in fact found it enjoyable, for a change. They chatted about little superficial things while they drove, and Alli discovered, surprisingly, that it was quite easy to talk to the normally intimidating woman. She was obviously much more relaxed when away from the confines of her office, and Alli found herself wondering, again, just what kind of person M.J. Whitton really was beneath it

all.

"So... you're a true Southerner, huh?" M.J. asked out of the blue, startling Alli out of her thoughts.

"Uh, yeah... a genuine Georgia peach," Alli answered, letting her full southern twang emerge from her mouth. "How'd you know?" she asked, amazed at the tall woman's perceptiveness.

M.J. smiled smugly, "You have the accent; you fight it, but I can detect it once in awhile," she explained.

Alli was surprised that the woman was able to make such an astute observation about her; she thought she hid her accent rather well. "Yeah, well... I try my best to keep it under wraps; people have a tendency to treat you differently if they think you're a southern cracker," Alli said, moving her speech back to non-twang.

M.J. chuckled at the admission, "I know what you mean. I'm a full-blooded Yankee, and believe me, that doesn't bode too well with a lot of these Southern-folk either," she said, giving the blonde a dashing grin. Alli smiled back at her, feeling herself falling further into the abyss.

Oh goddd...

The sports car soon pulled off the road and into an authentic, old-fashioned drive-in restaurant, complete with car-hops whizzing around on roller skates. Alli looked around in amazement, a silly grin plastered on her face.

"I know this is **extremely** casual, but they have awesome burgers here," M.J. said as she turned the car's engine off.

"No, this is fine... this is great," Alli said, nearly giggling at the thought of eating lunch with the mysterious, beautiful President of Whitton, Inc. - in a car that cost more than her mother's house - at a freaking burger-joint. M.J. Whitton was just full of surprises.

The two women sat and chatted about various and sundry things while they ate their burgers which, true to M.J.'s word, were delicious. Alli talked about her two sisters and her parents a little bit, explaining to M.J. that she moved away from her native Georgia because she wanted to make a fresh start. She didn't go into detail, and M.J., thankfully, didn't ask her to. She seemed to know not to push Alli for the details, and the blonde decided she was grateful for M.J.'s gift of perceptiveness. Alli felt like she'd been doing all the talking, and she tried to gently turn the conversation to M.J. to see if she would talk about herself. True to form, however, M.J. craftily avoided divulging any information about herself repeatedly.

*I wonder if *she* has an attorney-background too... she's certainly slippery enough,* Alli thought.

"Okay... time for dessert - they have great ice cream here too," M.J. said, giving Alli a devilish

grin that reminded her of a naughty child.

"Oh no! I can't... I'm stuffed!" Alli lied politely, even though she loved ice cream.

"Oh come onnn... you want some!" M.J. teased in a low voice, making the hair on the back of Alli's neck stand up. "Let's see, I'd peg you forrrrr... a chocolate milkshake," M.J. said, narrowing her eyes at the blonde and giving her a beguiling grin.

Damn, she's good, Alli thought as she helplessly broke out in a wide, embarrassed smile.

"Am I that easy?" Alli teased back, not realizing how it sounded until she saw M.J.'s eyebrow arch high into her forehead.

"Well, I don't know... **are** you?" M.J. teased back as a scathingly flirtatious look overtook her features. Alli's face flushed bright red and M.J. just laughed lightly, turning and ordering one chocolate and one vanilla shake.

Alli suddenly felt brave and decided to push the flirting envelope a little further, just for curiosity, "Vanilla... I wouldn't have pegged you for being **vanilla**," the blonde said, lowering her voice just a tad. She was smirking back at the tall woman, but her head was screaming 'danger danger, high voltage' inside.

The dark, hungry look that overtook M.J.'s features at that remark sent Alli's pulse racing and her blood pressure skyrocketing. M.J. saw the reaction and decided she was going to play the double entendre for all it was worth.

"Well, I can assure you, Miss Allison... milkshakes and ice cream are about the **only** thing that I prefer to be 'vanilla'." She said in a low, near-whisper as she leaned toward the wide-eyed blonde and arched her brow even higher. The statement was so fraught with sexual innuendo, Alli thought she would choke on her tongue. The pale blue eyes had her completely pinned as brazen sensuality dripped from M.J.'s lips, and Alli found herself completely bereft of oxygen as she gripped the armrest of the car ferociously.

Neither woman realized it at that moment, but the little drive-in engagement marked the end of one phase and the beginning of another. The days of light, harmless flirtation had abruptly, and unconsciously, come to an end.

Continued in [Chapter 14](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"How does it feel, to treat me like you do?
When you've laid your hands upon me,
And told me who you are;
I thought I was mistaken,
I thought I heard your words,
Tell me how, how should I feel?
Tell me now, how do I feel?" - New Order*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After the 'drive-in incident', things changed between the two women. The once-innocent and mild flirtations became more open and pointed when they were together, and neither woman felt inclined to put a stop to it. There were always coy glances and smarmy smirks, and at least one not-so-subtle innuendo was tossed about carelessly whenever they were being playful with each other. On most occasions, M.J. was the instigator, making an off-hand comment that usually made Alli blush profusely; however, she was always able to counter with something equally saucy. M.J. was slick, usually concealing her little jabs by prefacing them with an innocent remark of some sort, but Alli was quickly catching on to her sly ways.

The new 'relationship' was actually quite enjoyable and harmless in Alli's eyes, and they had as much fun with the flirtatious exchanges and witty bantering as they could without crossing any obvious 'lines'. Even though it could be confusing at times, Alli was flattered by M.J.'s attentions. She couldn't help but wonder what M.J. really thought of her. Did she see something in Alli that the young Assistant had yet to discover? Did she somehow see a kindred spirit? Did she feel the same strange, tenuous connection that Alli did? Liz Jacobs had called M.J. 'fascinating', but Alli was thinking something else entirely.

On one hand, M.J. was funny and flirtatious; but on the other hand, she could be completely all-business and totally serious, especially whenever anyone was around the two of them. It troubled Alli, because she didn't think that the working relationship they'd developed was improper, and she didn't see why M.J. would need to hide anything from anyone. But, it seemed like that was exactly what the President did. She sometimes acted as if she barely knew Alli and would cast her aside without saying a word. She could do that so easily - dismiss someone and throw them away with no more than a mere glance. It hurt Alli's feelings, and she detested the fact that M.J. had that kind of effect on her. Granted, M.J.'s general disposition was serious and austere, but she was usually different around Alli - the blonde had thought that the gruff President was

beginning to loosen-up around her, just a little. Apparently that wasn't the case, and it frustrated Alli quite a bit.

She had never worked, nor been so friendly, with anyone who had the mood swings that M.J. apparently had. If it wasn't moodiness, Alli didn't know what the hell it was; she never quite knew what to expect, and she didn't know how to interpret the frustratingly complex woman when she was in one of her 'off' moods. It made her feel very uneasy and filled her with trepidation every time a meeting with the mercurial brunette was scheduled. When M.J. was in a 'good' mood, she was playful and flirtatious; when she was in a 'bad' mood, she brooked no arguments and broomed everyone out of her way as quickly and brusquely.

Alli also started to seriously question whether or not M.J. was indeed gay. When the flirtations first began, she automatically assumed that she was; all the 'signs' seemed to point to it, but sometimes, she wasn't so sure. Yes, M.J. flirted openly with Alli, but sometimes the blonde saw the attractive President toying openly with men too - it was usually light and casual, but still, it was there. Alli felt very uncertain where M.J. stood. Did all the flirting and bantering really *mean* anything? Especially since M.J. made it abundantly clear that she could turn it off just as quickly as she turned it on. Maybe she was just a big tease? Maybe it was yet another side to her personality? Maybe she just liked to fuck with people's heads? Alli really had no idea.

The realization that she should *not* be cavorting with a woman who pretty much mortified her, and who concealed her own self so well occurred to Alli more than once. So how could she find out if M.J. played for the pink team? Who would know such a thing? Alli had a feeling Liz Jacobs would know, but she wouldn't dare ask her such a thing... would she?

Alli tried to convince herself that she should just continue to play it by ear and be patient. She'd find out eventually what made the captivating, enigmatic brunette tick. After all, the constant flirtation and bantering couldn't continue forever. Sooner or later, one of them would either end it, or change it.

...And Alli didn't like either possibility.

Another day and another meeting had come and gone for Alli and M.J. They had been diligently wading through a project all week long, and today's meeting was the same as the others - lots of work with a little minor flirting thrown in here and there. M.J. seemed to be in a flat mood today - neither good nor bad - and she seemed unfocused and tired. As they wrapped things up and M.J. suggested they meet again tomorrow, Alli couldn't help but notice the gray shadows under the President's eyes. The pale blue blouse she wore made her eyes look eerily glacial and translucent, and her face seemed a bit ashen and weary.

"So, why don't we meet around...," M.J. checked her schedule quickly, "...10:30 or so; we'll see if we can finish this, and then... I dunno... maybe we can go grab some lunch or something... get out of the office for awhile? ...I need to get out of the office," she said quietly, almost to herself, as she rubbed her temple.

Alli was taken aback by the off-handed invite, but she quickly agreed. She stood to leave, but before she turned away, she reached out and touched M.J.'s forearm very lightly.

"Hey... you okay? You seem... tired?"

M.J. was surprised by the touch but warmed by Alli's gentle concern. She looked at the small hand touching her and smiled inwardly.

"I'm fine... just too damn much going on lately I guess." She said with a wry smile.

"Yeah." Alli answered with a smile. "Well, go home and get plenty of rest tonight, okay?" Alli added, patting the President's forearm slightly before heading toward the door.

"Do I need to be well-rested for you tomorrow morning?" M.J. called out playfully, not wanting to appear completely defeated in her friend's eyes.

Alli turned back with a grin, "You never know," she retorted before slipping out the doorway. M.J. let out a small chuckle after Alli left. She would have been so disappointed if Alli had turned out to be like everyone else. She was really enjoying their work relationship.

*Yes, *work* relationship, M.J. - *work*work*work**, she chided to herself as she returned her attention to a stack of never-ending papers. She knew she was constantly waffling between hot and cold with the pretty blonde, but she couldn't help it. Just when she would let herself relax and ease-up around the Assistant Director, her brain would clang loudly with reminders of her past experiences and her promise to Madison that she would 'behave', and then she'd find herself clamming-up tight like an oyster. She also forced herself to be keenly aware of her body language whenever anyone else was around her and Alli; she couldn't afford for any rumors to be sparked - that would certainly create disaster all over again. M.J. leaned her elbows on her desk and rubbed her forehead.

Why does everything always have to be so damned complicated? She asked herself rhetorically as she expelled a loud sigh.

Ten-thirty arrived and Alli tried very hard to not bound off to M.J.'s office with bells on her toes. She could honestly say that out of everyone at the company, she enjoyed working with M.J. the most. Liz Jacobs probably came next, but M.J. was, by far, the most enjoyable and challenging for her.

*Yes, *challenging* for sure, but highly intoxicating too,* Alli mused inwardly, *God I'm so hopeless!*

As she reached the reception area, Alli could immediately hear voices in the President's office. M.J. was barking out orders to someone, and within seconds, Rachel, M.J.'s young

Administrative Assistant, came scurrying out, looking red-faced and flustered. She dashed right past Alli, going to her desk to grab something, then dashed back in to the large office. M.J. continued to rant, and Alli could hear her handing out deadlines and orders.

Uh oooh... looks like a red-letter day, Alli thought, rolling her eyes.

"No, I need you to take care of this NOW!" Chills fairly crept up Alli's spine as she heard the raised voice of the President. Both Rachel and Helen suddenly exited the office, each of them splitting off in separate directions, their faces carrying looks of either fear or anger, and their legs whisking them away from the office as quickly as possible. Seeing that she was now completely alone in the reception area, Alli wondered if she should perhaps just leave, rather than risk intruding on an obviously pissed-off President. She glanced at her watch, noticing that it was now 10:35. She certainly didn't want M.J. to think she was late, but then again, she wasn't sure if she dared to venture into the lion's den.

She took a deep breath and walked to the open door, peering hesitantly inside. M.J. was standing at her desk, sorting papers hastily, her briefcase lay open and jumbled on her desk, her overcoat was tossed across her chair, and the phone was pinched between her jaw and her shoulder.

"I can't be ready in an hour - give me until noon... No! ...Look, just pick me up at the house around 12:30... well then we'll just DRIVE really FAST, okay?! Jesus! ...Okay... bye." M.J. slammed the phone back into the cradle and continued slapping papers into separate piles. She looked, for the first time, Alli thought, flustered. Some pieces of dark hair had come out of the tight bun at the back of her head, and her fingers frantically worked the pencil that she held in her hand, scribbling things down and placing notes on top of piles.

Alli exhaled a deep breath and let her knuckles rap gently on the open door. Darkened, stormy blue eyes flew up to the noise immediately.

"What are you doing here?" M.J. snapped in irritation, surprising Alli.

"Uhh, we had a 10:30 meeting scheduled, but-" Alli stammered wide-eyed, but M.J. cut her off.

"No - I canceled our meeting - I have to go out of town - didn't Helen call you?" She spat out tersely.

"Uhm, no, I didn't get-"

"Dammit! HELEN!" M.J. bellowed toward the door, making Alli cringe.

The elderly woman immediately appeared at the President's door, meekly giving a "Yes ma'am?"

"I asked you to cancel *ALL* my meetings, through next week!" M.J. snapped curtly.

"Yes ma'am, I did that ma'am." The secretary stammered meekly in her soft southern accent.

"Well then *WHY* is Ms. Phillips here for her 10:30 meeting?! 'All meetings' includes THIS MORNING's too, Helen!" M.J. reprimanded the older woman harshly.

"Yes ma'am; I'll make certain again that everyone's been notified. My apologies, Ms. Phillips." Helen stammered as she regarded Alli, then turned to escape to her desk again.

"Christ!" M.J. growled, more to herself than to Allison. Alli was somewhat shocked at the foul temper spewing out of M.J., and she was suddenly very glad that their meeting was cancelled - whatever was going on, this M.J. was not the one Alli wished to 'meet' with. She wanted to ask what was wrong, and where M.J. was going, but she was too afraid of incurring the angry woman's wrath and having her head bitten off.

Better just leave with my head intact, she thought as she started to back up and slink out the door.

"What were we supposed to be meeting about anyway? Was it anything urgent?" M.J. called out before Alli could completely escape.

Alli dared to venture back into the office a little further, "Uhm, we were going to make the final cut of the applicants for Ray's new construction crew... that's all." Alli knew she sounded timid, but she couldn't help it. M.J.'s current disposition threw all light-heartedness out the window.

"Right... well, it'll just have to wait until I get back, that's all... they'll just have to *wait*!" She said with irritation, tossing more piles of paper about.

"Uhm, well, I could go ahead and make the cuts... I mean, if you trust my judgment...?" Alli said, wondering where she got the nerve to suggest such a thing at a time like this. M.J. had never given her authority or free-reign to take over any of their 'projects', especially something as volatile as Ray's construction crew hirings.

"Of course I trust your judgment! What kind of question is that?!" M.J. retorted sharply, her eyes narrowing.

Alli felt her neck flush with the sudden prospect of being severed, and she hesitated, momentarily unable to respond to M.J.'s harsh impatience.

"Just do whatever you see fit and we'll discuss it when I return. Think you can handle that?" She quipped curtly, flashing a cold, wintry glare at the wilting blonde.

"Yes... of course... I'll take care of it. Anything else you need me to do?" Alli offered, even though she knew she should just put her tail between her legs and run like hell.

"No, nothing... just... go." M.J. said, dismissing her with a hand wave and not even looking up at her.

*Okay, I know you're obviously *stressed* about something, but you don't need to be *rude**, Alli thought, feeling suddenly indignant. The words danced on the tip of her tongue, but she knew

she wouldn't dare utter them to the agitated woman before her. She only hung there for a second, biting her tongue, before she turned and began to walk toward the door.

M.J. gave a sideways glance over to the retreating form of her colleague and cursed herself for being such a horse's ass. Alli didn't deserve her wrath; she was only trying to help. M.J. closed her eyes for a moment and released a frustrated sigh.

"Allison," she called out sharply, just before Alli slipped through the doorway. Alli turned back and looked at M.J., trying hard to conceal the annoyance on her face.

"Look, I'm... I'm sorry." M.J. began as she walked toward Alli. Feeling the stirrings of a tremendous headache, she squeezed her eyes shut momentarily and pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers as she continued, "I have a... family emergency... I have to leave immediately." She offered in explanation, her voice lower and softer as she finally came to stand right in front of Alli. "I didn't mean to snap at you." M.J. said quietly, looking at Alli briefly, then dropping her eyes, "I just..."

"It's okay," Alli offered gently, reaching her hand up to squeeze M.J.'s arm in a gesture of understanding and reassurance.

M.J. immediately felt like a real cad for lashing-out at Alli, as well as everyone else. How Alli could even be civil to her right now was beyond her comprehension. She was so accustomed to screaming at everyone and not giving a damn what they thought or felt; she was not prepared to feel guilty about her actions... she was not prepared to **care**. Her relationship with Allison was beginning to complicate things.

...Dammit.

Alli gave her a sympathetic smile, wanting to show her that there were no hard feelings, "I'll take care of this for you," Alli said, indicating the documents in her hand. "Don't worry about it," she added.

M.J. smiled in appreciation and relief, and she brought her hand up to clasp Alli gently on the shoulder, leaning in a little closer.

"Thank you, I appreciate it... and I owe you." She said quietly, looking Alli right in the eyes and giving her shoulder a squeeze before dropping her hand.

Alli could only give her a nervous smile in return; her mind was too busy reeling from that fact that not only had M.J. apologized to her, but she touched her and was standing **really** close too. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, the soft, sexy scent of M.J.'s perfume was wafting upwards, assaulting her senses. Her stomach did a complete somersault.

M.J. moved back away from her then, but before they parted, she added, "When I get back, we'll go to dinner - my treat... okay?"

"Deal." Alli managed, her voice nearly squeaking. She turned and quickly walked back out the door, forgetting M.J.'s prior anger and vowing to do a most excellent job with the construction crew applications.

*"Every day is like Sunday,
Every day is silent and gray;
Trudging back over pebbles and sand,
And a strange dust lands on your hands,
And on your face." - Morrissey*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The dull, dying colors of early November were so much more dreary in the northeastern part of the country. Everything was gray-brown, damp, and musty-smelling as the autumnal harvest season abruptly turned colder and began to give way to the frigid desolation of the approaching wintry months. Soon everything would be covered in snow and ice, and the gray-browns would all disintegrate into rotten, slushy nothingness. M.J. hated wintertime in the North.

"I'm almost afraid to see him... y'know?" Madison's voice broke the silence that had settled over the car, interrupting M.J.'s thoughts as she navigated along the familiar country roads that lead to their father's home.

"Yeah, I guess," M.J. muttered, her own mind already having raced about what to expect when they walked through the doors of the old farmstead that was her grandparents former residence. Early that morning, Madison had received a tearful call from their stepmother saying that Mark had fallen at home the night before and was now officially bed-ridden. In addition, he had been given bad news by their doctor several days earlier: test results showed that his cancer had spread throughout his body, and they now gave him 6 months or less to live. He was weak, he had difficulty breathing, and he often couldn't keep food down. There was nothing anyone could do for him anymore. The news shocked and angered the girls. Why hadn't Virginia called them immediately to tell them all this? They both agreed that it warranted an immediate visit to see their father, and to discover what other vital information they might be missing out on.

They reached the home and promptly went inside, preparing to clash with their wicked stepmother over her lack of disclosure. M.J. opened the front door without knocking and the girls entered.

"Hello-o?" Madison called out as they took their jackets off and walked further into the spacious, old-fashioned kitchen. The house was dark and quiet, save a noise coming from somewhere. M.J. took notice of the large array of medicine bottles and prescription papers and notepads with

various information scribbled in their stepmother's handwriting which lay strewn across the countertop.

The two women walked further into the kitchen and Madison called out again, "Hello-o? Virginia?"

Just then a short woman came padding out of the hallway and into the kitchen, "Oh, girls... I didn't expect y'all so soon." Virginia Calhoun Whitton looked old... older than her 52 years, anyway. She no longer looked like the haughty southern-belle-prima-donna that she normally pretended to be. Obviously, Mark's illness had taken its toll on her as well.

"Hello Virginia, how are you?" Madison asked gently as she bent to give the petite figure a slight hug. Madison always tried to make nice with the woman who was their father's second wife, but M.J. never pretended; there would be no hug from her.

"Oh I'm alright, hon, I'm alright. You girls look well," the woman said in her thick southern drawl as she eyed each stepdaughter carefully. Madison always looked so well-groomed and tastefully attired; the perfect attorney's wife and successful business-woman in her own right - her father's pride and joy.

Now Morgan... she was a different story. Although Virginia thought M.J. was attractive enough, something lurking in the girl's eyes always bothered her. In her opinion, she was a wild hyena who just barely kept poor Mark's company going. That company was his whole life, and he had handed it over to this loose cannon. She had heard the tales of M.J.'s former wild ways and exceedingly inappropriate lifestyle. Virginia knew M.J. didn't like her nor trust her, and the feelings were mutual; there was no love lost between the two.

M.J. scowled at her stepmother as she stood behind Madison. She could almost hear the snide thoughts echoing underneath the fake red hair of the woman before her. How her father could go from the beautiful, proper, elegant Elizabeth Grayson to this southern-fried red-neck was beyond M.J.'s comprehension.

Maybe she's a wild-cat in bed? M.J. thought crudely, arching her brow sharply and looking at her stepmother's short, frumpy figure and sour face ...*Orrrrr, maybe *not**.

"How is Mark?" M.J. asked, wanting to get right to the heart of the matter. They weren't here to talk to this twit, after all.

Virginia cringed at M.J.'s use of her father's name. She never understood why her husband's own child wouldn't refer to him as 'Dad' or 'Daddy', like she did with her own father. She knew there was a history of animosity between the two, but still, why did she seem to take such measures to stay distant? It was just another thing that annoyed her about the tall girl.

"Oh well, you know... he's doin' as well as can be expected, considerin'," Virginia drawled, pushing an imaginary strand of hair off her brow. M.J. intimidated her, and she hated it. The girl had no respect for her, and it drove her crazy that she had no control over the situation. She liked

to have control... and this strong-willed young woman definitely needed to be controlled.

"I finally convinced him to let me call Hospice... he didn't want me to - y'all know how stubborn he can be - but I think they'll be helpful." She moved to the stove and poured some warmed water into a teacup. "My good friend, Anna Mae, had them come in and take care of her husband when he was ill... she said they were just wonnn-derful," she sing-songed in forced casualty while steeping a tea bag.

"Yes, I hear Hospice is extraordinary. When are they coming?" Madison asked.

"Tomorrow, 'round noon they said," Virginia said as she sipped from her cup slowly. M.J. had no interest in chatting with her stepmother about Hospice. She turned away from Madison and Virginia and headed back the hallway to the room she knew housed her dying father.

She reached her father's room, quietly entering and looking upon him. He had changed quite a bit from the last time she'd seen him, and it definitely wasn't for the better. He was lying in his bed, the television on and the window shades drawn. It looked like he was sleeping, his chest moved in a shallow, steady rhythm and he breathed with a raspy wheeze. His normally tall, robust frame was thin and bony, and his hair seemed to be completely white now, instead of his usual salt-and-pepper coloration. His handsome face had a sunken appearance, and he was sallow and gray in color. It was painfully evident, M.J. thought, that he didn't have much time left.

Once her initial shock wore off, M.J. approached his bed, leaning down toward him.

"Mark?" She said, probably too softly. "Mark? You awake?" She called again, eliciting a slight movement from him. Feeling her usual detachment and resentment dissipate a little, she leaned closer to him and reached out to touch his arm.

"Dad? ...it's M.J., Dad."

Weary, cloudy-gray eyes fluttered open as Mark took in the apparition of his eldest daughter.

"Morgan J., is that you?" his deep voice rumbled.

"Yeah... Hi." M.J. answered, the corner of her mouth twitching in a near-smile.

"When did you get here?" He asked, blinking his eyes and adjusting them.

"Just now; Maddy's here too, she's talking to Ginny."

"Oh, well... let me sit up here so I can have a proper conversation with you." He said, struggling to prop himself up on the bed.

"No, you don't have to do that - just lie back... relax." M.J. said, placing a gentle hand on his chest. She didn't want him to strain himself and overdo it.

He looked up at his daughter, surprised at the softness in her normally curt, cold voice. She could be a sweet girl when she let herself be; it was a shame that it took something like this to bring it out in her. Father and daughter just stared at each other for a moment, feeling awkward and unsure what to say to one another. They had been close when M.J. was younger, but after the family suffered the loss of Mark Jr., everything changed, and the two drifted far apart.

"You look good... how are things going back in Jax? Everything alright?" Mark asked, not really knowing what to say to his eldest child.

"Oh yeah, everything's fine... same old, same old." M.J. said with a shrug. She really didn't want to talk about work; it seemed like that was the only thing she ever discussed with her father when they spoke. Then again... they didn't have too much in common any more. She always felt like she was 20 years old again whenever they were alone; Mark just had a way of doing that to her.

"Mmm-hmm. Raiford was here a few weeks ago. He said things are pretty slow and nothing important was happening."

"Yeah well, to Ray, nothing 'important' is **ever** happening." M.J. said in a disgusted tone.

Mark gave a small snort, "You two are still getting along splendidly, I see."

"Like I said, same old, same old." M.J. retorted, turning from the bed and walking over to the window to peer outside.

Mark watched his daughter as she stood pensively at the window. She was always such a solitary person, determined to not need anything, and never allowing anyone inside.

So much like her mother, he thought. Aloof, unemotional, seemingly destined to go through life unhappy, angry, and alone. It was such a waste. She was such a pretty girl... he couldn't imagine why she wouldn't want to find someone and settle down. Surely some nice young attorney or doctor would find her and want to make an honest woman out of her? He wondered if she still thought that she fancied women. He knew all about her wild college days and her former dalliances, but he'd always thought that she was just going through the normal experimental stages that most young people go through, and that she'd grow out of it eventually. He knew she was angry and mixed-up after her brother's death, and he figured then that she just needed time to sort things out.

He remembered when it appeared she was **not** sorting things out, how he flat-out told her that he didn't approve of her ways. She fought him, but eventually she came 'round. Looking again at the expressionless face staring outside, Mark wondered if he'd been too hard on his eldest daughter. He knew that he demanded a lot from his children, but that was how he'd been raised; it was the only way he knew how to be. He just wanted what was best for them; he just wanted them to grow up to be decent, hard-working human beings. And they were. M.J. excelled at anything she did, and Madison was bright and sharp as a tack. He was proud of them both... he was proud of them, but he never told them. Suddenly he felt very remorseful.

Yes, he had been hard on M.J.; he remembered it too well. When he offered her a job working as an architect at his company, he demanded she clean up her act and straighten herself out first. She of course balked, and it took all of his patience to keep after her. But he did, swaying her and tempting her with offer after offer, explaining to her that it was her family duty to help out and put in her time. He knew she needed the job, almost as much as he needed her. She finally did come work for him, straightening herself out admirably in the process... or at least she appeared to. From time to time, Mark was told about rumors circulating in the company which involved M.J., but he never believed them. He was certain that she'd put her reckless ways behind her - she was a little head-strong and had a temper, but he knew she was a good girl deep down inside.

And she still is, he thought to himself now.

It all seemed so long ago; M.J. was, what? 32? 33 now? ...Surely she had to be thinking about settling down, getting married and having children, like Madison, before it was too late. Didn't she want to find someone special to share herself with? She couldn't continue to be a 'free spirit' all her life... could she? Mark really didn't know, because he didn't know his daughter, he admitted.

No, I don't know her at all, he thought sadly to himself. ...*Just like her mother*.

After the girls visited with their father for several hours, they decided to let him rest for the evening while they went out to get some dinner and then retire to their hotel rooms. Despite their father's insistence that they stay there at the house, the girls politely declined. Madison would have stayed, but M.J. insisted they find their own place, telling her sister there was no way she'd stay under the same roof with 'that woman'.

The girls found a restaurant that was fairly close to the hotel, and they tried to have a nice relaxing meal while discussing their father and anything else that came up. It was nice to have some time alone with each other; they'd always been pretty close, but with the demands of their busy jobs and Madison's family life, they rarely got to kick back and talk to each other casually any more.

"Ugh, this steak is **not** rare!" Madison sniffed, poking at the meat on her plate. Of the two women, Madison was definitely the more fussy eater, and she preferred exotic, expensive cuisine. M.J. wasn't so particular; she was content with almost anything, so long as it wasn't too spicy or bizarre.

"You should have known better to order a steak at a place like this; we're lucky to get something even half-decent at this hour." M.J. shot back as she ate her club sandwich without complaint.

"Tch! ...I don't know that this even qualifies as **half**-decent!" Madison grouched. "We should have just gotten room service." She grumbled.

M.J. just looked at her and shook her head, smiling, "You'd never make it here, y'know. One

week without lobster or filet mignon, and you'd lapse into catatonic schizophrenia." M.J. said derisively. Madison shot her an evil glare, knowing that her older sister was right, but not liking the fact that she was so transparent.

"Well, just because I'm not as *comfortable* as you are with being a *hick*." She shot back, motioning to M.J.'s laid-back appearance. Her snide remark was met only with a smarmy smile from her sister. M.J.'s hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, and she wore her most comfortable pair of boots, in addition to a pair of well-worn blue jeans, an old college-logo sweatshirt, and her old, battered leather jacket. M.J. had always loved the peaceful, calm, farm country much more than Madison. She was more like her father than Maddy in that regard; Madison preferred the fast-paced glitz and hub-bub of city life, like their mother.

"So did you call anyone back at the office?" Madison asked, knowing that M.J. couldn't be gone for even a day without 'checking in'.

"Just Helen and Rachel." M.J. answered absently.

"Did you talk to Allison?" Madison said, seeing her opening to broach the subject about the blonde Assistant HR Director.

"Allison? Why would I talk to Allison?" M.J. asked, genuinely confused.

"Well, I dunno... you two seem to be working rather... *closely* lately; I just thought maybe you'd call her too." Madison said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

M.J. pointedly put her fork down and folded her arms on the table, fixing Madison with an icy stare, "What are you trying to get at, Maddy?"

Madison sighed, knowing that, as usual, M.J. would cut right to the chase. "You know what I'm getting at. It's very obvious that you have a *thing* for her, and--"

M.J. cut her off, "A 'thing'?! I do not have a *thing* for her!" She said incredulously.

"Oh come *on* Morgan, Jesus! I *know* you! I *see* you! Do you think I haven't noticed the way you two flirt and make eyes at each other!" Madison insisted.

"What?! We do NOT--" M.J. started again, but Maddy held a hand up,

"Morgan, please. Don't insult me... I'm not stupid, and I'm not blind, okay?" Madison said calmly as she looked her sister squarely in the eyes. M.J. wanted to argue, but she refrained. She didn't want to get into this now, and she didn't want to discuss it with the one person who'd see right through her denials.

Madison continued, "I'm not condemning your attraction - I'm not. In fact, I can't really blame you - Allison is quite lovely and smart; she's probably just your type--"

M.J. cut her off again, "Maddy, please... don't." She mumbled as she brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose between her eyes. The headache that had pursued her doggedly all day was now pounding insistently.

Madison sighed aloud, "Okay... I'll just say this, Morgan... I don't think it's *wise* to get involved with someone at the company, or even someone who has *ties* to the company... y'know?" She said as gently as possible. "I mean look at the bullshit you went through with Kate Reed - she jerked you around and you guys fought constantly. It affected your work... it affected our relationship with the entire law firm!"

M.J. flipped her eyes up to give her sister a slight glare.

Madison continued, not wanting to upset M.J., but feeling the need to say these things out loud before it was too late.

"You were smart to break it off with her when you did. That woman is baaad news." She added, taking a sip of her drink and staring at her older sister, who suddenly gave her a sheepish look and darted her eyes down to her plate. Madison instantly froze and her face dropped, "Oh Morgan... tell me that you *did* break things off with that woman, *please*!"

M.J. sighed and closed her eyes, "We aren't 'officially' together anymore." She said, holding a hand up in defense.

"What?! What does *that* mean? You just meet up with each other for a quick wank once in awhile?!" Madison said, a little too loudly.

"Shhh! For godssake!" M.J. scolded, glancing furtively around the restaurant.

"Well?!" Madison demanded, unaffected by M.J.'s reprimand.

M.J. sighed again, feeling defeated, "We... *get together*, sometimes, but-"

"Oh *GOD*, Morgannnn!" Madison interrupted with a groan as she brought a hand up to hold her head.

"Oh shut *UP* Maddy! Christ! You have a lot of nerve, you know - you're married to *Doug Cohen*, don't forget!" M.J. said angrily, "Talk about a 'conflict of interest'!"

"That's different! You started your *thing* with Kate well after we'd hired them - I married Doug before his firm ever began representing us!" Madison fought back, her gray eyes cold and steely.

M.J. stared back at her in challenge, "Yes, how *convenient* for Doug and his firm." She said sarcastically. Madison opened her mouth in shock at the low blow from her sister. M.J. slid her wintry eyes away for a moment. This was disintegrating into a battle of hash-slinging, and she didn't want to deal with it.

"Look, I don't need your 'advice', Maddy - I know what I'm doing." M.J. said calmly, wanting to end the battle.

"Do you? Do you really, Morgan? Because I don't think you do!" Maddy snapped back.

"Well I don't really *care* what you think, okay?" M.J. retorted. She didn't need a lecture from anyone, least of all her prudish, heterosexual younger sister. "We serve each other's 'needs', and that's all. It suits me quite well, actually." M.J. quipped in defiance as she leaned back away from the table.

"Oh that's nice... very romantic... you must be sooo happy." Madison said with as much acidic sarcasm as she could muster. She hated the fact that M.J. would be so reckless and, in her opinion, stupid. Kate Reed was, by far, the most treacherous person M.J. had ever been 'involved' with - and she had been 'involved' with many such people. If things went awry or turned sour, Kate had the means - and the temperament - to make life very miserable for M.J., as well as the entire company.

M.J. glared at Madison long and hard, trying to burn her sister's retinas with the harsh blue lasers that emanated from the pits of her eyes. The sisters' silent little stand-off lasted only for a few seconds, until M.J. finally spoke.

"Look... I'm not going to do this. Not here... not now. You want to be angry with me - fine - be angry. But don't waste my time with your sanctimonious bullshit." She spat the words in a venomous tone then stood abruptly, tossing some bills on the table and leaving Madison to sit in the restaurant and contemplate their argument alone.

*"To my mother, to my father
It's your son, or it's your daughter
Are my screams loud enough for you to hear me?
Should I turn this up for you?
The silence is what kills me
I need someone here to help me
But you don't know how to listen
And let me make my decisions...
I sit here locked inside my head
Remembering everything you said
The silence gets us nowhere
Gets us nowhere way too fast." - Staind*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

M.J. sat on one of the plastic deck chairs of the covered-up, abandoned hotel pool. It had been easy to jump over the iron fence and get in. She was pissed off at Maddy's life-lecture, even though it wasn't unusual for the younger woman to launch into one from time to time. She meant well, but M.J. knew that Madison would never understand where she was coming from or headed to.

*Hell, even *I* don't know, how could she possibly have any clue?* She thought to herself. She didn't know what had bothered her most about Madison's attack - the fact that she knew something was brewing between her and Allison, the scolding on mixing work life with love life, or the disgust at her continued 'relationship' with Kate.

'Love Life'... what fucking 'love life'? M.J. thought, *I've never had a *love life*, and I never will. Why can't she just let me do what I want with whomever I want and stay the fuck out of it? ...She doesn't understand.* She already felt melancholy and depressed; seeing her father and arguing with Madison was only making her feel worse.

The only one who ever understood me was Jake, M.J. thought sadly. Unable to stop it, she closed her eyes and allowed all the memories flood her mind... it had been a long time since she'd thought about the cruel twist of fate inflicted on her family so long ago...

'Jake' was Mark Jacob Whitton, Jr., and, more importantly, he was M.J.'s twin brother. They had the kind of relationship most twins had; they were extremely close and could pretty much read each other's minds. They looked alike, thought alike, and acted alike. Jake was his father's golden-boy and had been groomed to take over Whitton, Inc. from the time he was a teenager. They were a happy, loving family, and M.J. and Jake were the apples of their father's eye. He doted on them and spent lots of time with them, and they, in turn, did everything in their power to please him and make him happy. And they were happy.

In the late 70's, Mark had moved the family from the rural farmlands of Pennsylvania to the burgeoning city of Jacksonville, Florida. His new construction company had an inauspicious start, but within a few years, and after a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, Mark had become very successful and extremely wealthy, making quite a name for himself in the business-world of northern Florida. He envisioned Jake taking over the company eventually and hoped that M.J., and even the then-little Madison, might work there as well. It would be a family dynasty that would endure for many years to come. It was his ultimate dream.

Things almost went as planned.

By the time Jake and M.J. reached their teenage years, they had begun to realize that they were a little different. Jake seemed to notice before M.J. did. He was the first one to begin dating, and he was the first to acknowledge that he didn't like girls the way his other friends liked girls. M.J. remembered well the first time Jake told her that he thought he was gay. She wasn't very shocked - she knew him almost as well as he knew himself, after all. They talked to each other about their feelings, and although M.J. didn't date at all, she knew that she was different too. She didn't use the word 'gay' until much later, however.

They never breathed a word to anyone about how they felt - only each other. They especially hid it from their parents, because they knew how upset they'd be. The family had become very accepted and well-known in social circles, and Mark Whitton - who had once been a laid-back country boy, content with the simple things in life - was now a self-made millionaire who relished in the status and power that his success afforded him. Although Mark came from a family of middle-class Yankee farmers, his wife's family history was wonderfully British, proper, and wealthy, and Mark intended to keep his hard-won aristocratic bloodlines flowing. He made it very clear what he expected from children. They would be highly educated; they would marry well; and they would breed well and carry on the family business and the good Whitton name. And so, being the dutiful children they were, they all strived to please their demanding father. They didn't want to disappoint him, and they constantly sought his approval.

There wasn't too much pressure put on Jake until he turned 18 and decided on college and his educational path. Their parents sent both Jake and M.J. to the best ivy-league schools, and they made it clear that they expected them to find ivy-league mates as well. That's where the trouble began.

Being away at college afforded both Jake and M.J. the freedom to experiment with their uncertain feelings and sexuality. And experiment they did. M.J. wasn't as reckless as Jake - she kept to herself most of the time and only dated a few people - men and women - lightly. Jake, on the other hand, seemed to take out all his frustrations through sex. M.J. sympathized with him; he had a lot riding on his shoulders, and their father expected the most from him. But he wasn't able to balance the demands of his family with his own needs. He couldn't handle the fact that he was gay and had to hide it. He simply couldn't take all the demands and high expectations that were placed on him.

With each visit home, more inquiries and more pressure was put on him to find a girl and think about 'settling down'. It drove him insane. He turned self-destructive and began to depend more and more heavily on drugs and random sexual encounters to ease his suffering. M.J. saw what he was doing and tried repeatedly to intervene and stop the vicious cycle, but she couldn't reach him... he was too far gone. She hated seeing what he was doing to himself, but she knew she couldn't turn to her parents - they would only make things ten times worse. She feared the whole thing would end badly... she just had no idea how bad.

It was Christmas Eve, 1988. The whole family was home for the holiday, and everyone had gathered for the traditional Christmas Eve dinner at the Whitton home. As the family sat and ate their meal, Jake calmly told them that he had contracted AIDS. He was dead less than six months later.

M.J. was devastated by the loss of her twin brother, but even worse than his death was the way her family handled it. They totally denied everything, and in doing so, M.J. felt that they denied Jake as well. The cause of Jake's death was 'cancer', according to them, and he most definitely was **not** gay. M.J. remembered quite well the night that her father sat stone-faced in his study and told M.J. and Madison that they would never speak of their brother's death or his 'unnatural ways' to anyone. He told them that no one outside their family could ever know what happened,

or else their name and reputation would be tarnished, and he would be ruined. M.J. couldn't believe that the man who had spent so much time doting on her and Jake as children was the same man who now instructed her to never speak about her brother.

She hated her father from that point on.

Their mother, Elizabeth, wasn't much better. She had always been quiet, reserved and aloof, and although she was very intelligent and highly capable, she was never very involved with her children. The one she seemed closest to was, ironically, Jake. After his death, she withdrew even more, turning to alcohol and prescription drugs to soothe her suffering. Mark stayed away from home more and more, openly having affairs and ignoring his family. M.J. and Madison were virtually on their own. Madison was only 14 years old.

M.J. returned to school but grew increasingly angry and wild. She skipped class after class, partied all night, dabbled in drugs, alcohol and sex, and her grades plummeted. Whenever a school break came up, she didn't go home; she stayed with friends someplace or got a hotel. She wanted nothing to do with her family. Her father intervened several times, forcing her to move and enroll in different colleges, but M.J. just continued to rebel. Whatever her father said, she disagreed; whatever he offered, she refused; whenever he tried to enforce something, she retaliated with anger and malice. She had changed from a bright, happy, promising young woman, into an unemotional, bitter, solitary person who seemed bent on self-destruction. She had locked away her heart and soul, intentionally alienating herself from the outside world and retreating into darkness. Mark eventually gave up on her and told her that she was, and would always be, nothing but a disgrace to her family and a failure to him. *"You disappoint me even more than Jake,"* he had said to her.

She thought she hated him even more.

Eventually, she dropped out of college and drifted from town to town, and situation to situation, in search of god-knew-what. She finally disappeared completely, making no contact with anyone for two years, not even Madison, who had tried to stay in touch with her older sister as much as she could. M.J. knew that Madison was at home, essentially all alone, but she couldn't bear to talk to her too much - anything that reminded M.J. of home was too painful to deal with.

M.J.'s life didn't change again until Madison tracked her down in a small town out West, where she was living with a woman in a shit-hole apartment above a rowdy, run-down bar, and working in a crap-job as a laborer for a construction company. Madison had come home one day to find her mother in her bedroom, unconscious. Elizabeth Whitton had tried to commit suicide by overdosing on pills, and she was rushed to the hospital. She survived, but did even more damage to her family, and her daughters.

M.J. decided then that it was time to come home. The madness that had become her family's daily life had to end. She returned home and somehow, some way, in a relatively short amount of time, she began to take control of things. She begrudgingly helped her mother recover as she took control of the household, handling the home finances and keeping tabs on her father, who had moved out of the house just a few months before. She took care of Madison too, helping her

to learn to drive and get her license. M.J. quickly became a very strong, very capable adult, setting the stage for the rest of her life to come.

Mark and Elizabeth divorced about a year later, and Elizabeth seemed to retreat further inside herself, despite Madison and M.J.'s attempts to get close to her. M.J. had hoped that after her father left and things were brought under control again, the girls could salvage their relationship with their mother and return the family to some sort of normalcy. It wasn't meant to be, however. Their mother was damaged beyond repair, and when Madison moved out of the house to attend college, Elizabeth left too, returning to her family's ancestral home in southeastern England.

The girls rarely saw her after that, although in recent years, after the birth of Madison's daughter, Elizabeth had started making an effort to stay in contact with Maddy and her only grandchild. M.J. still didn't want anything to do with her, however, which was a shame; they really were very similar to one another in many ways. Sometimes, on the rare occasion when she would allow herself to reminisce, M.J. would recall her mother's gently lilting accent; her old-fashioned insistence of having daily afternoon teas; the long, dark brown hair that she rarely wore down and almost always wore neatly pinned up behind her head; and the haunting, pale blue eyes that could look right into your heart and soul if they wanted to. Unfortunately, Elizabeth rarely wanted to.

M.J. eventually made a sort of tenuous peace with her father - mostly through Madison's insistence - but she never forgot what he had done and the things he said, and she knew she would always feel some anger toward him. Even though he had continually discounted her and her abilities, she somehow, still, always felt the urge to prove him wrong. She still felt the need to prove to him that she was not a failure; that she could do all the things he thought she couldn't; that she was bright enough, and strong enough, and good enough. She hated the fact that she still sought his approval and acceptance, even after everything that had happened, but she couldn't help herself. He had always been a very prominent figure in her life, and she had been very close to him once upon a time. And... he was her father.

When he first offered her a position at Whitton, Inc., M.J. laughed in his face. There was no way in hell she would ever work for the man, she thought. But Mark was crafty. He laid a subtle guilt-trip on his daughter and changed his 'proposal' from a simple job offer into a challenge of her abilities. M.J. fell for it, helplessly becoming hooked and wanting to prove her worth to her father. The job would mean good money - very good money - and plenty of hard work, but that didn't bother M.J. A chance to prove her father wrong and make some big bucks for a few years was very tempting to her. She made a deal with her father that she only had to stay and give him 5 years at the company, then she could leave and do as she pleased. Mark agreed, but on two conditions: 1) She had to finish college and get her AIA designation; and 2) she had to 'clean up her act'. M.J. didn't give two shits about finishing school and getting her certification - that would be easy; it was the second item that would be harder. She knew what her father **really** meant by it: no partying, and - more importantly - no women. Mark would grant her some leniency and help her learn the ropes at work, but he would never, ever, allow her to be openly gay. It would be a difficult challenge for her, but it was one she decided she was willing to take.

That all seems like ages and ages ago, M.J. thought as a chilly night breeze danced across her

face, blowing her loose bangs to the side. Her legs were cramping from sitting cross-legged in the plastic chair, so she unfolded them and decided it was time to head up to her hotel room. Hopefully Madison would be asleep and she wouldn't see her until tomorrow morning. This whole trip had been stressful, and her harsh words with Madison were making things worse. She hated to fight with Madison - her baby sister was the only thing she had left; the only person who knew her, and the only one she could turn to.

Madison knew that M.J. was unhappy, but in her mind, her big sister just needed to find someone and settle down. Madison didn't care that M.J. was gay, she just hated to see her miserable and alone. M.J. appreciated her sentiment, but it really was so much more complicated than that. She avoided discussing her life, in general, with Madison, because she knew that the younger woman could never fully understand any of it.

As she hopped back over the fence and headed toward her room, M.J. decided that she'd swallow her pride for a change and apologize to Maddy first thing in the morning. After all, Madison was the only real friend she had in this world.

*"I should be sayin' goodnight,
I really shouldn't stay anymore;
Been so long since I held it,
I've forgotten what love is for;
I should run from you,
On the double;
...I think I'm in trouble." - L. Buckingham*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The girls stayed in Pennsylvania until the week's end. They met with the Hospice representative and watched as the nurses came to visit and care for their father every day. Virginia stood around and acted pathetic and helpless, and M.J. was reminded to hold her tongue numerous times with either an elbow jab or a harsh glare from Madison. Mark didn't have much time left, it was easy to see. The Hospice people talked to both girls frankly, and they explained, step by step, what to expect over the next few weeks and months. It was a sobering picture. They fully expected to be making more trips over the next few months.

M.J. felt very strange over the realization that her father could, very possibly, be dead by the end of the year. As much as she hated him in the past, and as much as he had complicated her life, he was still her father. And she would always be his daughter. She had put him high upon a pedestal, once upon a time, and she realized now that the good memories should be as strong as

the bad ones. She pushed her jumbled feelings aside as much as possible, but she knew that there would be a time that she would have to come to some sort of reconciliation with her inner turmoil.

Although they wished that they could stay longer, both women knew they had to return to their lives in Florida. They left on a Friday, wanting to get back home and get reorganized before Monday morning at Whitton, Inc. rolled around bright and early.

M.J. was glad to be back in the safety and serenity of her own home. She hated hotels. When she arrived late Friday afternoon, Ruth was just finishing her cleaning. The older southern woman was a god-send when it came to keeping her house clean and orderly, and M.J. continually rewarded her with generous pay raises and bonuses. They had a good relationship, and although Ruth knew full well of M.J.'s moodiness and scathing temper, she had come to treat the brunette as though she were one of her children, which M.J. found amusing and endearing, rather than insulting. Ruth could see that M.J. was tired and stressed when she arrived home, and she knew that the illness of Mark Sr. was wreaking inner havoc on the usually stoic woman.

"It's good for you to be home, Miss Morgan," Ruth said in her thick southern accent as she entered the kitchen where M.J. stood sorting through piles of mail. M.J. smiled at the name Ruth had christened her with so long ago - it was a 'southern way' thing to be called 'Miss' plus your first name. It annoyed M.J. at first, but to make up for it, she started calling the older woman 'Ruthie', just to agitate her and even up the odds.

"Yeah, that it is, Ruthie... that it is." M.J. murmured absently as she continued to flip through the piles.

"How is your daddy doin', honey?" Ruthie asked gently while sitting her cleaning supplies on the counter.

"Not so good, Ruthie... not so good." The older woman gave the tall brunette a small annoyed look, noticing that she was repeating herself and not really paying attention to anything she was saying. Dark circles underscored the brilliant eyes, and the normally severe face was lenient, with lines clearly etched in her forehead.

"You're tired, Miss Morgan. Why don't you go sit and let me fix y'all somethin' to eat, okay?" Ruthie offered, touching M.J.'s arm to get her attention.

M.J. heard the offer, and thought it very sweet, "Oh no - thanks, Ruthie, but you don't have to do that." She said, putting her mail down and looking at the housekeeper. "I have to run into the office, and then I'll get something to eat later."

The older woman gave her a disapproving look.

"I promise." M.J. added, giving a half-hearted smile before turning and walking out of the

kitchen.

Ruth shook her head and sighed, "Girl spends too much time in that damn office." She muttered, shaking her head as she watched the taller woman disappear.

It was around 7:00 p.m. when M.J. finally decided to go into her office and see what awaited her there. When she pulled into the empty parking garage and drove around to her normal spot, she couldn't help but notice a blue VW beetle parked nearby. Alli's car. What was she doing here so late on a Friday night?

Well, I suppose it's a small comfort to know that I'm not the only one with no social life, M.J. thought to herself with a wry smile.

M.J. sorted through her email and other annoyances for about an hour before she decided to just give it up and go home. She was exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to go home, take a nice hot shower, and collapse in her own bed. As she flipped her lights out and strode out toward the elevator, she thought about Alli again. She hated to admit it, but the blonde had been on her mind a lot during the week, and now that she knew she was here, in the building, she found herself wanting to go downstairs and talk to her.

She's probably gone by now anyway, M.J. thought, trying to convince herself not to go and see. Giving in with a loud sigh, she climbed into the elevator and pressed button #13.

M.J. could hear the murmuring of a soft, melodious voice as she entered the Human Resources work area. A single light was on, and she walked quietly toward it.

"I know, I just don't really feel like putting up with her shit for a whole weekend, y'know? I mean, she makes me suicidal!" Alli said as she talked to her sister. She was reclining back in her chair - eyes closed, one arm thrown up, casually resting on top of her head, the other holding the phone to her ear - totally unaware that she was being watched.

"It'll be bad enough having to deal with all the questions when everyone's there, y'know? ...Yeah, I know, but I'd just rather stay with you and Josh, okay?" Kaitlyn was trying to convince her to have pity on their mother and stay with her over the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, when Alli was planning to visit.

M.J. enjoyed watching the younger woman from her hidden vantage point. Alli looked tired, but wonderful, as she rubbed her closed eyes with her fingers. Papers were strewn about her desk, the sleeves of her blouse were pushed up past her elbows, and M.J. could see a pair of shoes sitting beside her desk. M.J. smiled just as Alli opened her eyes and saw the dark shadow approaching her door. The blonde nearly jumped out of her skin as her eyes flew completely open and she jerked forward in her chair.

"SHIT!" She exclaimed, the phone falling from her hand. "You **scared** me!" She scolded,

placing a hand on her chest and staring wide-eyed at the tall, dark woman now visible in her doorway.

"Sorry," M.J. said with a grin, feeling only slightly bad for shocking the poor woman. She was cute when she was flustered.

Oh don't start, M.J. thought to herself.

A squawking noise coming from the forgotten phone brought Alli back to her senses as she picked it up and apologized to her sister.

"Uh, sorry... no, someone's here to... see me... I was just, uh, startled." She explained while motioning for M.J. to come in and sit down.

M.J. smiled wider and walked into Alli's office; she'd never seen the inside before, so she casually helped herself and looked around, taking everything in.

Alli only half paid attention to what her sister was saying on the other end of the phone; she was too transfixed by the lovely vision that was wandering around her office.

M.J. looked fabulous - more than fabulous - she was her same attractive self, but what really got Alli was the fact that her normally tight-bun hairdo was missing; in its place was a long mass of glossy, dark hair that was pulled into a loose ponytail and hung down her back, stopping midway. It was positively gorgeous... **she** was gorgeous. In addition to the freed hair, M.J. was also dressed very casually, wearing a deep-cut dark-gray v-neck sweater, faded blue jeans, a well-worn three-quarter-length black leather jacket, and a pair of black boots. Alli knew she was staring at M.J., but she truly couldn't help herself... she was stunned. Who would have ever thought that this incredibly sexy creature lived behind the severe business suits, the stern face, and that tightly-coiffed hairdo. Alli unconsciously licked her lips as Kaitlyn babbled on.

M.J. liked Alli's office. It was decorated with a combination of styles but mostly focused on an ocean theme. There were pictures of women that M.J. assumed to be Alli's sisters, because they all looked very much alike, but there were no pictures of parents or anyone else. After perusing and mentally cataloging everything in the room, M.J.'s eyes came to rest on two college diplomas that hung on the wall. The name on the B.S. in Psychology read 'Allison Riley'; the one on the Masters in Human Resources Management read 'Allison Phillips'. M.J. frowned at the disparity between the names.

What the hell? She thought. It suddenly occurred to her that she never considered the fact that Alli might be married - or at least may have been married at one time. The way the blonde always looked at her and willingly flirted with her made M.J. assume that she was single and a member of the pink triangle club.

Well shit, wouldn't that just be my typical fucking luck? M.J. thought dejectedly. She turned back to Alli, who was watching her with a strange look on her face.

"Uhm, listen, Kait, I'll have to call you back later... yeah, I know... I *know*." She said with some annoyance, looking at M.J. and rolling her eyes, "I have to go... okay... I'll call you later... bye." She hung up the phone and released a sigh, "She means well," Alli said with a grin.

"Your sister?" M.J. asked as she looked at Alli with a smirk on her lips.

"Yeah; she wants me to come visit for the holidays, but... I dunno." Alli said, shrugging her shoulders and wrinkling her nose. "So what brings you here at this hour? Just get back?" She queried; she was dying to know why M.J. had stopped by her office.

"Mmm, we got back this afternoon. I just thought I'd come in and get a feel for what I might be faced with Monday morning." M.J. said as she finally sat down in one of the chairs, "and I saw your car in the garage." She added, fixing Alli with another smirk.

Alli felt the beginnings of a blush, "Yeah, well... I just wanted to finish-up some stuff... nothing major." She mumbled, finding it difficult to express herself while trapped beneath M.J.'s consuming blue gaze. The two were silent for a second until M.J. mustered the nerve to ask something she'd been thinking about for the past few days,

"Have you eaten dinner?" the question came out calmly, despite the fact that the President was somewhat nervous about it. She didn't know why; it shouldn't be a big deal.

"Uhhh... no, actually." Alli said, a little surprised.

"Wanna go grab a bite? I did promise you, after all." M.J. explained with a grin.

"Ahh yes, you did, didn't you?" Alli said, feeling the flirtatious mood fill the room, "However, you did it assuming that I would successfully complete the task that we had discussed," she added, giving M.J. a coy look.

M.J.'s grin widened into a full-blown smile, "Are you saying that you *didn't* complete the task?" The flirting and bantering was picking up right where it had left off.

"No-o, I'm just saying that you're making *assumptions* about what I'm able to accomplish." Alli said, blinking her eyes long and smiling playfully.

"I do make assumptions, that's true," M.J. replied, quirking her eyebrows high, "but when it comes to your abilities and what you can accomplish... I have complete faith in you." She finished, regarding Alli seriously.

Alli was totally taken aback by the blunt statement of trust. It was probably the biggest compliment anyone had ever paid her, and she was shocked to hear it fall from M.J. Whitton's lips.

M.J. read the look of amazement on the blonde's open face, and she suddenly felt embarrassed for saying it; it was so unlike her to do such a thing. She stood abruptly, hoping to break the

awkward moment.

"Well come on then... let's go."

*"My world was on fire,
No one could save me but you;
Strange what desire can make foolish people do;
I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you,
I never dreamed that I'd love somebody like you." - C. Isaak*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

M.J. drove them to an elegant little restaurant that was quietly hidden amongst the more extroverted bars and hang-outs that made up most of the busy ports and pier areas along the St. Johns River. They chatted lightly and superficially in the car; M.J. was trying to keep things light and not-so-serious, and Alli was still trying to recover from the devastating compliment that M.J. had given her.

It seemed to Alli that M.J. was acting differently, somehow. She seemed to be more subdued... more laid-back, or something. Although the President had never told Alli where she and Madison had gone, Alli assumed it was to see their father. Obviously things were not well, and that was probably why M.J.'s mood was different. She wanted to ask M.J. about her father, but she didn't know if she dared; even though their friendship had come a long way, they still weren't at the point where they spoke about personal things. M.J. had definite boundaries, and Alli sensed that her family was off-limits.

Too bad, Alli thought, I'd like to know so much more about her.

They sat at a private table at the back of the restaurant, which afforded them a quiet place to talk. Dinner progressed much the same way as the car ride had - light and superficial. Alli did most of the talking, and most of the conversation centered around work issues. They were finished with their meal when Alli decided to take the plunge,

"So, uhm... I assumed you left to go see your father... is everything alright?" She said as gently as possible.

M.J. looked up at Alli, her blue eyes suddenly turning deep and dark with unspoken, carefully-guarded emotions. "He's, uh... he's hanging in there," she said, shrugging her shoulders and returning her gaze to her plate.

Alli wanted to comfort her friend and colleague, but she didn't quite know how or where to start.

She bit her lip nervously and reached her hand out to touch M.J.'s hand on the table.

"I'm so sorry, M.J.," she said quietly, "if there's anything I can do, or... any way I can help...," Alli said, trailing off as M.J. brought her pale eyes up to her again.

M.J. was keenly aware of the delicate hand touching her own. Her eyes burned and her mind raced with sudden thoughts of the numerous carnal ways in which the little blonde could indeed *help* her.

Stop it! She scolded herself inwardly and a nervous grin twitched her lips unchecked.

"Thank you... I appreciate that," M.J. managed to say as she fought the urge to chuckle at her ridiculous, insidious thoughts. She thought she must look maniacal to Alli. She flipped her hand over and squeezed Alli's palm into her own, smiling at her as she tried to convey her thanks a little better.

Alli tried to suppress the shudder that raced up her spine as she looked at the woman before her. The exquisite face was full of sadness, and yet M.J. tried to smile it away. The blue eyes were dark and they sparkled, perhaps with unshed tears, as they regarded Alli carefully. The intense feelings that swept through Alli's body as M.J. held her hand and looked at her were beyond anything that had ever transpired before. Was the sudden uneasiness because of what Alli had asked her, or was it due to something else entirely? Alli wanted to reach out further and touch M.J. more; she wanted to touch that face and graze her fingers across those lips; she wanted to--

Oh god, stop it! The blonde screamed to herself. Suddenly fearful that her feelings were being blatantly displayed in her eyes, Alli pulled her hand away and slid her eyes from M.J.'s.

When M.J. spoke, her voice was thick and low, "Uhm... why don't we go outside... it's nice tonight, we could walk a little?"

Alli could only lick her lips nervously and nod. *What was happening here?*

M.J. rose and pulled Alli's chair out for her. As they began to move through the restaurant, towards the doors, Alli felt M.J. place her hand against the small of her back. She involuntarily shivered and a deep, scorching heat raced through her entire body. M.J. continued her chivalrous manner as she opened the door and motioned Alli through, her hand again coming to rest lightly on Alli's lower back as she followed after.

Alli was grateful to be outside in the cool air; her flushed face and racing pulse would be safe under the protection of the darkness. M.J. withdrew her hand and stuffed both of them into her pants pockets as they began to walk along the riverfront, and Alli missed the contact instantly. M.J. knew she was dancing treacherously close to a line she dare not cross, but her hands seemed to have a mind of their own whenever the blonde was near. Alli was sweet, and kind, and attractive... it was so hard not to touch her or be close to her. M.J. knew better than to let her basal desires guide her; besides, there were things she still needed to know about Allison Phillips before she could decide whether or not she wanted to press further. Things like... what was with

that diploma that read 'Riley'?

They came to stand at a particularly scenic spot; several of Jacksonville's huge bridges spanned the St. John's River majestically, the full moon casting a luminous glow on them and the dark water flowing beneath them. Alli leaned against the metal railing and peered out at the water, releasing a sigh aloud.

M.J. looked at her companion for a moment; the blonde hair ruffled softly in the light breeze... the unusual greenish eyes stared dreamily out at the black water... the rosebud lips wore a gentle grin. Allison was a beautiful woman... but was she gay, or what?

"So...," M.J. began as she also leaned against the railing, studying Alli's face carefully, "why does the diploma in your office say 'Allison Riley'?"

Alli let out a laugh, genuinely amused at M.J.'s forthrightness. She knew that M.J. had noticed it, but she didn't think that the woman would come right out and ask her about it. She should have known better. She turned and regarded M.J. with a grin and an arched brow, "You sure don't like to beat around the bush, do you?"

M.J. just smirked and shrugged, making no apologies. Alli bit her lower lip and looked back out at the water, "Riley is my maiden name," she said simply.

M.J. smiled, realizing that she would have to pull the information out of the blonde, "So... you were married? Or... you're married now?"

"I was married," Alli said, still not looking at M.J., "a few years ago. It didn't work out." She finished abruptly.

"Why not?" M.J. prodded. *Why am I pushing this?* She thought quickly. ...*Because you want to know how she feels about *IT**, she answered herself begrudgingly.

Alli laughed again, only mildly shocked at M.J.'s bold questions. "Lots of reasons," she answered cryptically, "None of which I really feel like discussing right now... if you don't mind," she added, finally turning to look somewhat pleadingly into M.J.'s eyes. She wasn't angry, she just wasn't about to go into detail about something as intensely personal as her failed marriage.

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to pry and be rude--"

M.J. began, but Alli cut her off and reached out to grasp M.J.'s arm, "It's okay; I just don't feel like getting into all that... not right now." Alli smiled gently at the taller woman, and M.J. felt some relief.

She turned to face the river, leaning her forearms against the railing and standing close enough to Alli so that their upper arms touched. Alli felt a jolt of electricity pass through her as M.J. stood close and the gentle night breeze lifted the scent of the dark beauty's soft perfume across her face again and again.

"So what do you think of Jax, now that you've been here a few months? You like it here?" M.J. asked, wanting to change the subject to something lighter.

"Yeah, I like it. I think the beach is my favorite... I've always loved the ocean."

"Mmm, I know what you mean," M.J. agreed. "What do you do with yourself when you're not at work?" She added, her curiosity stubbornly - or foolishly - refusing to let sleeping dogs lie.

Alli turned to look at her quizzically; M.J.'s persistence was amusing, and flattering in an odd sort of way, but she wondered what M.J. was really trying to get at.

"Have you made any friends or anything?" M.J. added since Alli hadn't answered her.

Alli shrugged nonchalantly and turned away, "Not really. I really haven't been here long enough yet." She tried to sound indifferent.

"Don't you get lonely?" M.J. asked, "Or... do you not live alone?" She added craftily.

Alli grinned again and turned to her companion. She wondered why M.J. was suddenly being so personal; they had never delved into such territory before, and Alli wondered why the sudden change.

"M.J., what are you trying to get at?" Her amusement was clear on her face.

M.J. had to smile too; of course Alli would know what she was up to.

...Bugger! Stee-riike one, she mused inwardly. "I was just wondering if you lived with anyone... or anything," M.J. said with a shrug, trying to appear casual.

"Why do you want to know?" Alli said, refusing to let M.J. slip away.

"Just curious," M.J. smirked. "Just making conversation." She tried to sound extremely nonchalant... it was absolutely necessary to keep control of the situation.

"Really?" Alli smirked back.

"Yeah, really." M.J. lazily slid her eyes away from the inquisitive green ones, forcing the appearance of casual indifference.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know." Alli quirked a light brown eyebrow at the taller woman, pleased that the serene plumage of the normally intimidating woman was ruffled, even if just slightly.

"Well the cat should have been more prudent." M.J. retorted, smirking and delivering a sharply arched brow of her own as she returned her gaze to regard Alli steadily.

"Are you always *prudent*, M.J.?" Alli persisted, enjoying the turn the conversation had taken and still refusing to let M.J. weasel her way out of the corner that Alli had somehow begun to back her into.

"I try to be." M.J. answered with a sly grin.

"Are *you* involved with anyone?" Alli fired back immediately, knocking M.J. off-guard and taking the lead.

Shit! Steee-rike two! M.J. hoped that Alli didn't notice her slight hesitation, "N-No."

"Hmm - you don't look too certain... are you sure?" Alli said playfully. She hadn't missed the slight flinch before M.J. answered her. *So she isn't made of concrete after all*, Alli mused with pride.

M.J. grinned again, silently acknowledging her own demise.

Steeee-rike three - you're out! She reloaded quickly, regarding her foe with as much confidence as she could muster under the circumstances.

"I'm quite sure."

Oh thank god, Alli thought selfishly. "Well this is a shame... two single women, alone in a big, beautiful city." Alli sighed with feigned drama as she turned to look out at the dark water again. She decided to let M.J. off the hook - she didn't think she had the courage to seriously tangle with her at the moment.

"I'm not alone." M.J. said, her smoky blue eyes coming to rest on the jade ones that slowly turned to regard her with a dark look that was a mixture of amusement and ...something else she didn't care to ponder right then.

They stood and watched the water for a few more minutes, each of them deep in thought as to what was happening between them. The prospect of their relationship escalating frightened Alli beyond belief, but there was a niggling feeling of excitement as well. She yearned to learn more about M.J. almost as much as she yearned to jump her bones outright.

Goddd... stop it! Alli didn't deny that she was indeed attracted to M.J. - very attracted - but what, if anything, would she do about it?

She's my BOSS, Alli's mind screamed to her, *I can't carry-on with my BOSS! God, if I were to come-on to her and she didn't welcome it, she could fire my ass!* Alli hated the thought, but she knew that if anyone made a move, it was going to have to be M.J. - Alli would never make the overture. It sounded pathetic, and it made her feel hideously passive and subservient, but of the two of them, M.J. was clearly the dominant one. And Alli didn't like that. She didn't see herself as someone who would be 'dominated' - not again. She remembered her vow to never be put in a

corner by anyone ever again. But M.J.'s position and personality would not be changing anytime soon, so she knew that she either accepted those facts, or she walked away now.

She didn't want to walk away.

The thing was, Alli got the feeling that even though M.J. came off as harsh and dominating, she wasn't really like that underneath it all. She remembered back to all the intense looks and the occasional unspoken emotion that flashed across those brilliant, crystalline eyes. The woman was really quite masterful at hiding her feelings and staying detached from everyone and everything, but Alli knew that there was so much more to the tall beauty than that.

Like tonight, when Alli inquired about her father - the sadness was evident in her eyes, but M.J. covered it up skillfully and somehow managed not to go into detail about anything. She was a pro at skirting issues, and she had a definite knack for manipulating conversations and turning tables to her advantage. Her intellect was keen and her wit sharp - and all of it was designed to keep the outside world at bay. And she did it successfully. But all that was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to M.J. Whitton. Alli didn't know how she knew all this; she just knew that she **knew**. The fact that M.J. hid herself so well didn't really bother Alli, because she was beginning to suspect that it was merely a survival tactic for M.J.

M.J. was a diverse combination of so many things. She was aggressive and bold, and she was introverted and quiet; she was witty and intelligent, and she was sad and vulnerable. All these traits manifested themselves into a complex, complicated person that hid from everyone beneath a nearly impenetrable armor of the thickest steel. M.J. hid herself because she had to in order to survive - not because she wanted to toy with Alli. This, Alli surmised, was why she wasn't **really** afraid of M.J.'s 'dominance' - she knew it wasn't what was at the core of M.J. Whitton. She knew there was something tender and gentle lying beneath the course exterior. Again, she didn't know how she knew this, but she would bet her life on it.

"Ready to head back?" M.J. finally said, breaking the silence and pulling Alli from her deep thoughts. Alli simply nodded and they began walking back toward the car.

They strolled casually and close together, their arms brushing and touching often. The contact was maddening to both of them, yet they seemed to unconsciously insist on staying close to one another.

M.J.'s mind raced in a myriad of thoughts and questions. She'd gotten some of her questions answered, but the answers she received only served to deepen her curiosity more. She wanted to know everything about Allison, inside and out. Why she suddenly felt this way, she didn't know. Well... she might know, but she wasn't about to delve into that minefield. As they continued to walk, M.J. acknowledged that the petite little thing beside her had undeniably begun to worm her way into her heart.

She never, in her wildest dreams, thought that someone would really 'get' to her, and she never thought that she would actually allow it to happen. Now she found herself not only allowing it, but welcoming it. The realization that Alli was indeed breaking down the outer walls of her

barriers caused a slight swell of panic to arise in the back of M.J.'s mind. The only thing that kept her calm was the fact that they had not done anything that couldn't be undone. They hadn't acted improperly, and they hadn't crossed any forbidden boundaries; they were still treading on 'safe' territory.

...But for how long? M.J.'s mind queried.

The urge to touch Alli and be more demonstrative was strong, and M.J. knew that she had unconsciously faltered a few times already. It was disquieting to M.J., to say the least, to know that her subconscious was making decisions without first consulting her brain. She resolutely vowed to keep herself more in check in the future... but it would be difficult. The boundary lines still existed, but they were beginning to blur more and more.

[Continued in Chapter 19](#)

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~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"Livin' on daydreams,
Walking in my sleep;
Nothing is as it seems,
When you're in so deep." - 'Til Tuesday*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When the following Sunday rolled around, Alli realized in horror that it was November 10th, and it was M.J.'s birthday. Had she remembered this earlier, she would have mentioned it when they went to dinner on Friday and made it a point to... to...

To what, Alli? Her subconscious asked. She honestly didn't know. What exactly could she, and should she, do in a situation like this? Get M.J. a gift? Offer to take her out to dinner? Just give

her a card and play it casual? Or ignore it completely and pretend she had no idea? Alli had to make up her mind, and quickly.

M.J. entered her office Monday morning with her hands full - her briefcase and a wad of mail in one hand, and her keys and a hot chai latte in the other. She flopped everything onto her desk unceremoniously, immediately taking notice of a small yellow envelope with 'M.J.' written neatly across the front of it.

She opened it, revealing a humorous birthday card inside. As she read, a smirk slowly crept across her lips until she was grinning in a full-blown, toothy smile.

The Assistant HR Director was typing at her pc, deep in concentration, when she suddenly had the sensation that someone was watching her. She turned around and gasped aloud when she saw the President standing in her doorway, the now-familiar Mona Lisa smile on her lips.

"You gotta stop sneaking up on me like that," Alli said with a slight laugh and grin.

M.J. returned the grin evilly, a hundred sly come-backs dancing on the tip of her tongue... but she relented. Softening a little, she held the card up and waved it at Alli.

"Thanks for the birthday card," she said with genuine sincerity. She couldn't remember the last time someone surprised her with anything on her birthday, even something as simple as a funny little card. These days, the only acknowledgements she got regarding her birthday was a card and either dinner or a small gift from Madison and Lizzy, and the usual bland, no-nonsense card from her mother, sent across the seas from merry old England. She never got anything from her father and his wife.

Alli grinned in satisfaction at the happy look on M.J.'s face; her decision to just give her a little card was obviously a good one.

"You're welcome," she answered, her face flushing pink.

Why am I embarrassed? She wondered internally. She was happy that M.J. was pleased with the card, but the look that the dark woman was giving her, standing tall and gorgeous in her doorway, was doing something else to her insides.

"I don't even wanna ask how you knew it was my birthday," M.J. said in a playful, scolding tone as she continued to smirk.

Alli simply made a face, darting her eyes skyward and shrugging her shoulders. M.J. laughed quietly, liking the way Alli's cheeks were tinged a soft pink. The fact that she could elicit such a reaction from the lovely blonde gave her a warm feeling of satisfaction. They stood there,

mutually smirking for mere seconds, but it felt like an eternity to both of them.

Finally M.J. cleared her throat, "Well... I don't want to hold you up; I just wanted to say 'thank you'," she said, waving the card again and smiling as she backed out the doorway and turned to leave.

"Ahm, M.J.?" Alli blurted out suddenly, causing the President to turn around and look at her in question, "Ah... I was wondering... are you busy for lunch today?" It came out before Alli really had time to think about it. Well, that wasn't entirely true - she'd been mulling the idea over since last night, but still, she hadn't really decided to *definitely* ask her.

M.J. immediately put her mind at ease, however, by grinning again, "No, not really," she lied. She actually had two back-to-back conference calls scheduled over the lunch hour, but she quickly decided that they would be rescheduled.

"Good... then you'll let me take you out and treat you?" Alli asked hopefully.

M.J. graced her again with another tooth-filled smile, "Sure... that'd be nice." Today seemed to be the day for surprises.

Lunch was wonderful, and Alli was quite pleased with her bravery over the whole thing. She had fretted over whether or not she should even ask M.J. to lunch, but now that they were here, enjoying themselves and having wonderful conversations, she was so glad that she took the plunge.

M.J. was relaxed and funny and flirtatious, and Alli was jovial, happy and talkative. They traded little stories and tales and talked throughout the entire lunch. Perhaps it was just her overactive imagination, or perhaps she was just being overly hopeful, but Alli thought that M.J. was acting differently toward her in general. She noticed that M.J. seemed to stand closer to her and looked at her with a changed expression in her eyes. She also noticed, again, that M.J.'s hand always insinuated itself very gently, very lightly, at the small of her back whenever they were ushered anywhere. Alli supposed she did it just to be polite, but it was oddly comforting, and maybe even possessive, in some tiny way. Secretly, it thrilled her to no end.

Alli knew that she was drawn to M.J., and she now had to admit that she was becoming hopelessly enchanted with the tall brunette beauty. As much as she knew it shouldn't be happening, she was powerless to prevent it. Her judgment was definitely clouded on the issue. She worked in Human Resources - she knew all about dalliances and affairs in the work place. Situations like this usually had a tendency to turn volatile and go downhill very quickly.

She realized, all too well, that the two of them were fast-approaching the very precarious edge of an 'are we just going to be friends and co-workers, or are we going to be more than that' precipice. She just wished that she had some idea of what M.J. thought and felt. The intimidating, austere woman was so hard to read. Aside from the flirting and the disconcerting

way in which her neon blue eyes would rake over Alli's body, M.J. never revealed any other obvious signs of attraction. ...That is, until lately. The little inquisition that M.J. had launched after they had dinner on Friday made Alli wonder exactly what was on the tall woman's agenda. And then there was the hand-placing on Alli's back... what was that all about? Even though neither of them ever mentioned anything about the subtle increase in the light touches and gestures between them, not even in a joking way, it seemed to Alli that they both did it because they both craved the contact. Alli always enjoyed the interactions, and she was pretty sure that M.J. did too, but she couldn't help but continually wonder - would it, could it - and more importantly, SHOULD it - escalate into anything more?

Deep down inside, Alli secretly wished that something would happen. She yearned for someone to touch her, and hold her, and be with her in **that** way. She longed for real passion... to be deeply desired and worshipped and cherished... to be truly loved, both emotionally and physically. She never had those things before, and she wanted them so badly. Moreover... she was starting to think that she might want them from **M.J.**. Her feelings were getting totally out of control, she was certain of that.

It was ridiculous, but if a span of days went by and she didn't get to see M.J., Alli felt empty inside. If she didn't get to meet with her or spend any time with her, her week felt unfulfilled. She found herself craving the presence of the tall woman almost like a junkie craved her next fix. It seemed so absurd, but it was true; she couldn't deny it anymore. She tried to understand what was happening, and why. She had some psychology training in her background, why couldn't she figure it out? Was she just projecting her own sexual hopes and fantasies onto the first person she found attractive? Did she have a subconscious thing for dominating personality types? Was it just raging hormones and misguided animal lust? Or was there really something between them? Were they really meant for greater things? ...She didn't know. She didn't know what to make of her feelings, and she didn't know what to make of the strangely quiet, but definitely deepening intensity between the two of them. It was most perplexing, to say the least.

And of course, the fact that she was uncertain whether or not M.J. was involved with anyone didn't help matters. M.J. was a huge flirt, and most likely a major 'player', and although she'd said she wasn't currently involved, that didn't clarify if there were any recent involvements, or even if there was a 'casual someone' on the side. Alli would bet lots of money that M.J. had a vast resume of lovers, and a wide variety of sexual experiences - she could tell that just from being around her. It was in the way the brunette beauty behaved and interacted with others; the confidence she exuded wasn't false bravado - M.J. was sure of herself because she had the experience and know-how... in many ways. And it was in the way she expressed herself - her flirtations and overtures, her body language and little nuances, and that exotic gleam in her bewitching eyes - all of it told Alli many things; mostly, that M.J. was a woman who would try almost anything once, and probably had... several times.

Sometimes Alli wished that she could just tell M.J. how she felt... just lay it all out on the line and see what the reaction would be. But no... that would be disastrous, not to mention the fact that it would most likely mean career suicide. Besides, she really had no idea how much she should tell or ask M.J. about **anything**. M.J. had asked her some personal questions, but could she turn the tables and ask the same? Just how **personal** was 'too personal'? When did you hit

the 'too much information' danger zone? How far was 'too far' for the enigmatic brunette? Again, she was totally clueless... it all seemed so impossible sometimes. There were so damn many unknowns, it drove her crazy.

Alli realized, rather frustratingly, that she'd just have to control herself and keep her mouth shut, allowing things to continue as they were. She would have to learn to live with her lustful thoughts... she would have to learn to be happy with the flirting and the subtle touches... she would have to learn to deal with the non-clarity... and she would have to push aside the secret dream that perhaps some day, some way, it might turn into something more.

*"Don't you ever call me, I don't wanna see your face
Don't you dare to call me, don't darken up this place
What the hell did you expect from me?
Emptiness and misery, took it all away, you see?
Yeah... bitter;
Oh it means nothing to me
Oh you mean nothing to me
Oh it means nothing to me;
I paid the price... sacrificed." - A. Lennox*

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Thanksgiving holiday finally arrived, giving everyone a nice 5-day weekend. Alli reluctantly decided - with the help of Kaitlyn's prodding - to go home to Savannah for the break. She arrived home Wednesday evening and spent an agonizing Thanksgiving Thursday with her entire family.

By Thursday afternoon, she was ready to return to Jacksonville - even if it meant driving in the middle of the night. Not only had her mother grilled her constantly about what she was up to, she also did her usual harping about Alli's unmarried, uncertain status. The icing on the cake, though, came when Susannah Watson announced to Alli, and everyone, that she 'runs into' Eric Phillips on numerous occasions. It was bad enough that the woman would torture Alli with something like this, but the fact that she made the announcement at the dinner table, in front of everyone, wounded the sensitive blonde very deeply. Why she would feel the need to bring it up now, at this particular moment, made no sense to Alli. She, therefore, had to assume that her mother was just doing it to humiliate her and further ruin her homecoming.

"I saw him at the mall recently, and I've seen him at the supermarket several times," Susannah said merrily in her heavy southern twang. "We talk just like we're old friends!" she chirped, "I told him that I still think of him as my son-in-law, you know," she said with feigned good-heartedness, acting as though it was a good thing, and she was Martha Fucking Stewart. Alli

merely sat motionless, slowly chewing her now-dry mouthful of food. Susannah eyed her youngest daughter carefully, then continued, "He married and divorced again, you know... poor boy... 'just can't seem to find the right one,' he said!" Susannah added with a forced chuckle.

Jesusfuckingchrist... Alli thought to herself as she sat with her eyes closed, feeling very sick to her stomach. "He says to tell you 'hello', by the way, Allison... I told him you were coming home for the holiday to visit," her mother added casually, but with an underlying tone that inferred she and Eric had several 'discussions', and that she'd obviously told him all about Alli's move to Jacksonville.

Everyone sat at the table in silence... it was as if they all knew that a single utterance could spark a huge explosion. The tension was so thick it would have taken an axe to hack through it, and Alli wished like hell that she had one handy. She had about a hundred things she wanted to say to her mother - the predominant one being '*you're such an unbelievable fucking bitch,*' but she knew better than to fall into the trap that her mother had set for her. For a brief second, Alli just felt like blurting out that she was gay. The satisfaction of shocking her mother into absolute silence would be well worth the pain and suffering that would eventually follow. How much such a revelation would floor anyone else, Alli didn't know. She had always thought that Erin was suspicious of her - the older sibling often made comments and remarks that seemed to indicate she might have an inkling of Alli's 'preferences', but the only people who knew for certain were Kaitlyn and her husband.

But, instead of saying anything, Alli opted for her usual strategy of saying nothing. She continued to keep her eyes fixed on her plate and prayed that someone else would start a much different discussion. Her 'savior' ended up being her creepy stepfather, Albert, who leaned over from his chair at the head of the table and began to rub Alli's back a little *too* warmly.

"Oh now Susannah, leave the poor girl be!" he slurred in a half-inebriated drawl.

Alli stiffened at his unwelcome touch and her eyes flashed a warning that he didn't catch. He always pretended to be on Alli's 'side' whenever she had a disagreement with her mother, but Alli knew it was just a convenient excuse that he used in an effort to make himself look like the 'good guy'. He was nothing but a pervert, in her opinion, and she just wanted him to take his slimy paws off her.

Being able to read her younger sister's mind, as always, Kaitlyn quickly jumped-in and started talking about something that was happening at the school where she taught 3rd grade. Alli was deeply grateful for the interjection, but she continued to just sit quietly at the table, making no effort to join in any of the conversations that ensued after that.

After the big noontime meal, the men had toddled off to the living room to partake in the long-standing custom of watching football games in-between bouts of belching and napping all afternoon. That left Alli, her mother, and her two sisters to clean everything up. Alli dreaded the chit-chat that she knew would ensue once the women reached the privacy of the kitchen;

although, to Alli, it was more like The Inquisition than innocent chit-chat. She had calmed-down a little after the bombshell that her mother had dropped earlier. She supposed she had every right to get up from the table, pack her bags, and walk out the door, but she didn't want to ruin everyone else's holiday. Alli was always concerned about everyone else. Perhaps that could be considered a character flaw to some extent, but she figured she could be a lot worse things than foolishly selfless. She resolved to make the best of the day, despite her mother's attempts to goad her into an arguing match. She told herself that she was here mostly to see Kate and Josh, so she would simply try to steer clear of her mother and Erin. However... that was much easier said than done.

She managed to avoid being trapped in the kitchen until it became absolutely necessary for her to dump her handfuls of dirty dishes. Her eldest sister wasted little time and began the grilling as Alli entered with her load.

"So, Alli... tell us allll about how life in the fast lane is going," Erin started in as soon as she reached the kitchen. Erin hadn't called once to ask Alli how she was doing since she left Savannah. She was pretty sure that her eldest sister was a little jealous, as usual, and she wanted to avoid getting into a show-down with her on Thanksgiving Day.

"It's going fine, Erin," Alli answered blandly.

"Fine'? Just 'fine'? That doesn't sound very enthusiastic!" Susannah piped-in, her voice loud and grating to Alli's ears as it filled the kitchen. Erin and Susannah had already pummeled her relentlessly with questions, and it appeared that they would be continuing throughout the evening.

"Well tell me what the city's like... what's your apartment like? Have you made any friends? Have you met anyone *interesting*?" Erin spouted in a barrage of questions.

"Alright, alright!" Alli held her hand up in surrender as she moved to the other side of the kitchen, feeling the need to be as far away from her tormentors as possible. "The city is nice - lots of traffic and lots of people, but it's not so bad if you're closer to the beach, like I am," Alli couldn't resist teasing a little; she knew that Erin loved the beach.

"My apartment is nice - it's small and a little out-dated, but it's neat and clean, and... it's close to the beach." She gave Erin a smarmy smile; she just couldn't resist giving her sister a dig - she deserved it anyway. Erin acknowledged her sarcasm with a dirty scowl and a knowing grin, aware of what her smart-aleck little sister was doing.

"The only 'friends' I've made are at work - I've only been there a few months, so I don't have much of a social life yet," Alli said. "Besides, I don't really care about that. I'm concentrating on my job right now," Alli added as she absently picked up a stray carrot stick and took a bite.

"Well you'll never meet a nice man if all you do is work, work, work, Allison Marie," her mother quickly chided. "Unless, of course, you meet a nice executive... are there a lot of nice young men at this company of yours?" Her mother prodded, turning to eyeball her suspiciously.

Alli rolled her eyes; all her mother thought about was finding a man and getting married.

God... if she only knew, Alli groaned internally. "I'm sure there are plenty of *men*, Momma," Alli grumbled back at her mother. "But I'm not interested in that... it's not the focal point of my life," she added with a sarcastic snap.

Erin's eyebrow shot up at that remark, "Yes, that's right - your 'focal point' is runnin' and hidin' and drownin' yourself in your new *career*," she sniped, emphasizing her words. She, like their mother, hadn't been supportive of Alli's move to Jacksonville, and she didn't understand why Alli didn't make it a point to keep in touch with everyone back home. Just then, Kaitlyn came walking into the kitchen, her arms full of still more dirty dishes. She could tell from the tight look on her baby sister's face that her mother and older sister were up to their tricks again.

"I'm not *runnin'* and *hidin'* from anything, Erin. Just because I don't want to date doesn't mean that I'm running from anyone or anything!" Alli shot back in defense.

"Well if you don't *date*, how do you expect to meet someone and get *married*?" Susannah chimed-in again. Alli glanced over at Kait, but her sister only rolled her eyes and shook her head slightly. Alli was getting extremely fed-up with the constant harassment from her mother and Erin; she was ready to blow a gasket, and Kait could tell.

"I don't *want* to get *married*, Momma. I've been there and done that, as you well know," Alli said, biting off her words with obvious irritation.

"Yes, yes, I know, I *know*," Susannah said with a dismissive wave, intentionally downplaying her youngest daughter's flaring emotions. "You'll always blame that poor boy for your miseries, won't you?" She said, tossing a scolding glance in Alli's direction.

Alli's anger hit its breaking point. Her face flushed a violent red, threatening to erupt. How dare her mother defend her asshole ex-husband - still?! Kait saw the look on Alli's face and she knew that a meltdown was imminent.

"That *boy*?!" Alli growled, "That *boy* was the CAUSE of all my *misery*," Alli spoke lowly through clenched teeth as she regarded her mother with a burning rage in her eyes. Susannah turned to look fully at her seething daughter, surprised by the intensity of the anger coming from her.

"That *boy* hurt me, both emotionally and physically," Alli continued, her fury barely in-check. "That *boy* devastated me... and yet, for some strange reason, you continue to defend him, Momma...? Can you please explain that to me?!" Alli ended, her voice filled with fury and hurt.

Susannah stared at her daughter for a moment, "It takes two people to make a marriage work, Allison... and it takes two people to make a marriage fail as well." She said it condescendingly, as though Alli were still a naive little girl.

"Well, you would know allllll about failed marriages, wouldn't you Momma?" Alli snapped as she glared at her mother; she didn't care how catty she sounded or how much her words stung the older woman. Like a good and proper Southern-bred girl, she never spoke up or challenged her domineering mother... before now.

Erin and Kaitlyn's mouths dropped open in shock, and their mother's face flushed red in anger.

"*That* was uncalled for, Allison Marie!" Susannah spat angrily as she took a step toward her defiant daughter.

Alli stared her down, refusing to be intimidated and bullied by the woman any longer, "Was it? Funny how you don't have any problems tearing my life apart, but when I comment on yours, it's a much different story," Alli shot back. She'd argued politely and half-heartedly with her mother before, but this was much different. She suddenly found a strength within herself that she'd never felt before. She wanted to get in the older woman's face and show her that she was not only happier and better off with the life she now had, but she was different and stronger because of it.

Apparently Susannah did notice, because, for a change, she didn't reprimand, and she didn't argue back. She simply stood and stared at a daughter who had, apparently, metamorphasized into someone she didn't know anymore.

"I don't understand you, girl. I don't understand who you are, and I don't understand why you live your life the way you do." Susannah said sharply, looking at her daughter in total confusion with not one ounce of sadness in her eyes.

Alli gave a derisive half-laugh, "Oh I know you don't Momma... I know you don't," she said quietly, raking her hands through her hair and shaking her head as she walked out of the kitchen.

Kaitlyn found her little sister out in the back yard, swinging on an old, decrepit glider that had seen better days. Alli had a faraway look in her cloudy green-blue eyes, and Kait knew that she was miserable being here with the family. Who could blame her? Kait had hoped so much that they all could get together and have a half-decent time, but her mother and Erin had ruined Alli's homecoming with their constant needling, endless questions, and snide remarks. She would bet her bottom dollar that Alli would be leaving tomorrow.

"Hey Peanut," Kait said as she approached the lone figure quietly.

Alli twisted her mouth and gave Kait a subtle warning look - 'Peanut' had been her childhood nickname, and Kaitlyn always used it as a way of gently teasing her.

"I guess you're pretty pissed at me for begging you to come here and put up with all this, huh?" Kait asked as she sat down beside Alli and patted her thigh in a friendly gesture.

"Nuh," Alli answered quietly, "I had hoped that it'd be better than this... I really did."

Kait released a long sigh, "Some things just never change, huh?"

"Nope... seems they don't," Alli said, shaking her head. They sat, swinging silently for a few moments.

"So... I guess you'll be leaving tomorrow?" Kait asked with trepidation. She didn't want Alli to leave, but she really couldn't blame her if she did.

Alli gave a scornful laugh, "I'm leaving *tonight*. Fuck putting up with three more days of this bullshit," she said crossly. "Actually, I was thinking of going to see Daddy... maybe I'll just spend the rest of the weekend with him?" she said, looking at Kait for her reaction.

Kait smiled warmly, "That'd be nice... I'm sure he'd love to see you."

"Yeah... I miss him," Alli said wistfully as she smiled and looked back at Kait. The older woman grinned and reached up to run her fingers through her younger sister's yellow-gold hair.

She seemed to have changed since moving away; whether or not it was a good change, she couldn't say. Something was incubating and brewing inside Allison; something that made her speak up and challenge their overbearing mother like she never had in the past. She seemed stronger... less naïve... more confident and sure of herself. If this is what striking out on her own did for her, then it was good. But, Kait sensed that Allison was unhappy too. Maybe not unhappy, maybe just frustrated, or tired... maybe she was tired of being alone. Whatever it was, Kait hoped that her new life would provide some relief for her in that department as well. She'd always thought that Alli had so much to offer someone; she hated to see her wasting it by being all alone.

"So, tell me more about your job," Kait began, wanting to brighten the mood a little, "Last time I talked to you, you said you were doing a lot of work for the President of the company?"

"Uhhh, yeah... I do a lot with her, she's--,"

"*She*? I didn't realize it was a woman! Wow - a woman President! That's so cool!" Kait interrupted.

Alli made a face at her sister, "It's no big deal; she's very capable, and very... well, she's very good," Alli said succinctly, wary of revealing too much about her unique relationship with M.J. Whitton.

"So you work with the President of the company? That's impressive, Alli - how'd you manage that?" Kait asked, genuinely interested.

Alli blushed slightly and shrugged, "Uhm... well, she oversees the Human Resources area, and she needed some information for some reports and stuff, and... I dunno, I seemed to be the only one who had any clue about how to gather all the data, so... we just sort-of started working

together," Alli explained as honestly as she could without going into detail.

"Well that's great, hon! It's quite a big pat on the back to get kudos from the President of the company!" Kait exclaimed with a proud smile.

"I don't get *kudos*, Kait - we work well together, and... and I like her," Alli averted her eyes and shrugged again, trying to sound matter-of-fact rather than defensive.

Kate responded with a knowing smile, "Oh yeah?" she said, tilting her voice. Kait was well aware of Alli's inclinations toward women, and although they had never discussed anything in great detail, she knew, just from the way Alli was acting - and the sudden red flush of her cheeks - that something was up with her baby sister. She grinned at Alli, "Is she preettyyy?" she said, drawling the word out teasingly.

Alli rolled her eyes, "God Kait, *please*! Not you too! I can't TAKE it!" she exclaimed, clutching the sides of her head.

"Allison, relax! I'm *teasing*!" Kaitlyn said, giving her sister's shoulder a playful shove. "Why are you being so sensitive about this? What's wrong?" she asked in a gentle tone.

"Nothing's wrong!" Alli snapped, "I just... I get tired of everyone giving me *shit* all the time, y'know? It gets old," she said, slouching down in the glider dejectedly.

"Oh honey," Kait said, throwing her arm around Alli's shoulders, "I'm not giving you shit; I'm just teasing you, honest," she assured the smaller woman, "I just don't like to see you unhappy, that's all."

"I'm not unhappy," Alli quipped quickly, shaking her head, "I mean... well, I'm unhappy *today*, but... I'm not unhappy in general... not really," Alli rambled, trying to make it sound like everything was fine, but Kaitlyn didn't believe her. She knew her younger sister; she knew that something was troubling her, but she also knew not to push her about it right now. Alli would totally clam-up if she pushed her, so she told herself to be patient; she'd find out what was going on inside that head sooner or later.

"Okay, baby... okay," Kaitlyn whispered lovingly as she leaned down and kissed the top of Alli's head. "C'mon, let's go back inside; you can call Daddy and see if he's up for having some visitors."

"You gonna go with me?" Alli asked, turning to look at Kaitlyn with hopeful eyes. Sometimes the wide-eyed expressions on Alli's face made her look like a child again. A child who had always adored her sister and looked up to her for guidance and affection with bright eyes full of innocence and devotion. It almost broke Kaitlyn's heart to know that this loving young woman was unhappy. In so many ways, Alli would always be a precious little girl inside.

"For a little while, sure," Kait nodded.

"You'll have to deal with the *Wrath of Momma*....," Alli said emphatically, in a teasing warning tone.

"Oh I don't give a goddamn!" Kate said, making a face and smiling. Alli answered her with a grateful smile as they got up and walked back toward their mother's house, their arms encircling each other warmly.

*"And I don't want the world to see me,
Cause I don't think that they'd understand;
When everything's made to be broken,
I just want you to know who I am." - Goo Goo Dolls*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

M.J.'s Thanksgiving holiday passed in painful, turkey-filled boredom, as usual. She went to Madison's house for dinner on Thursday, but she left soon after, declining the invite to stay into the evening and 'chat' with Doug's parents. The elderly Cohen and his wife were always obnoxious and rude, and either one or both of them always managed to make a huge deal about the fact that M.J. wasn't married. They were either the most clueless, dense people on the planet, or they intentionally played stupid in a pathetic attempt to bait the surly brunette to see if she'd tell them the 'official' score. M.J. vowed and declared that if she didn't have to worry about her niece, Lizzy, and the repercussions that would certainly reach out and affect her, as well as Madison, she would get right in the Cohen's faces and announce with great satisfaction that she was a big, fucking dyke, and damn happy about it.

Instead, she made excuses and left Madison's house early enough for her to get home and enjoy a quick work-out, a jog around the block, and maybe a nice swim in the pool.

M.J.'s arms ached after the bruising work-out she gave her punching bag. It felt so good to burn off steam like that... it was so much better than that monotonous stationary bike she got rid of last year. Hot and sweaty and deciding to forego a run, she instead trudged her weary body out to the pool cabana where she unceremoniously stripped her damp clothes off. The huge pool beckoned her with its peacefully tranquil, crystal-clear depths, and she waltzed out and dove straight in, naked as the day she was born.

As she surfaced, the cool air nipped at her shoulders, reminding her that the nighttime temperature wasn't as warm as the daytime had falsely promised. She didn't care though; she just expelled her breath and sunk back down into the heated water, propelling her long body through the pool with graceful underwater strokes.

While she was swimming about, M.J.'s thoughts began to drift to Allison. She found herself thinking about the petite blonde more and more lately; whether or not that was a dangerous thing or a positive thing, she wasn't sure. She only knew that it meant something, and that 'something' worried her.

She performed self-therapy on herself, preferring this method of treatment as compared to spilling her guts to someone, which was out of the question anyway, really. Besides the fact that it calmed and grounded her to think things through as logically as possible, it also served as a source of amusement for her... usually.

Tonight she was a little more on-edge than usual, and she decided to blame it on the Cohens and their incessant, asinine game of twenty-questions. All the other times the elderly couple had tried to pin her down about her romantic life, she'd playfully banter with them and easily thwart their clumsy digging attempts. It was amusing to her, and she sometimes enjoyed teasing and leading them on, dropping false clues and making innocuously ambiguous statements about her supposed love life. But tonight she hadn't been in the mood to play. For some reason, every time they brought up the 'love life' topic, all M.J. could think about was Allison and whatever it was that was evolving between the two of them. M.J. couldn't explain it, but she almost felt like she would somehow be forsaking Alli if she bullshitted with the Cohens like she usually did.

It's fucking ridiculous, she told herself, because there IS nothing going on between us!

Yes, she could float here, weightless and warm, in the secluded privacy of her pool, and outwardly declare such things... but in the privacy of her mind, M.J. began to suspect that the only person she was kidding was herself.

M.J.'s swim and self-analysis only lasted about 30 minutes, but it was enough to calm and relax her sufficiently. Mindful of the lurking cool air, she climbed out of the pool quickly, dashing into the cabana and wrapping a terry robe around her body before hustling back into the safety of the house.

Once back inside, she flipped her television on and went on a scouting mission in her rarely-used kitchen. She had left Madison's house before dessert was served, so, she reasoned that she deserved to treat herself.

A half hour later, sitting on her sofa eating Starbucks coffee ice cream straight out of the container while mildly entertaining herself with a bad cable movie, M.J. reminded herself, again, how much she hated the holidays... all of them.

The Monday after Thanksgiving is always oppressive, it's heralding of the return to the grind reminding everyone that not only has the nice, extended weekend come to an end, but there was still almost an entire month before the working world was afforded another 'break'... if you can call the madness that is known as 'Christmas' a 'break'. Anymore, it was so chocked-full of

excessive, tacky festivities, grotesque over-indulgences, and falsely-wished 'good cheer' that it seemed more of a painful punishment than a 'break'. And, even after all that, the dullness of winter still remained for two or three more months.

Winter sucks, even in the sunny South, M.J. thought bleakly to herself while rifling through her daytimer. She was in a foul mood today; her usual erotic dream of the faceless woman had disrupted her sleep throughout the night, and she felt tired and irritable.

She took another sip of her chai latte and picked up the phone, determined to get through the day as quickly as possible. "Helen... see if you can schedule an impromptu meeting with Ray this morning, preferably before noon - I'd rather take my lunch break **after** meeting with him, as I'm sure I'll be needing it... okay... well if he insists he can't do it, then tell him I'm going to come down there to his office personally, dammit!" She snapped, dropping the phone back into its cradle.

Christ, even Helen knows his tricks... asshole, M.J. thought as she returned to her paperwork.

Raiford had always been belligerent toward M.J., but his attitude had taken a nosedive since he returned from his vacation. She planned to nip his poor behavior in the bud as soon as possible. His division was showing signs of high absenteeism, and his crews weren't meeting crucial deadlines. M.J. never permitted any of the construction crews to slack-off and fall behind schedule - Ray's area was certainly no different.

She knew that Ray often put himself on the same level as his workers, socializing with them outside the workplace and playing - in his mind - the 'Mr. Nice-Guy' routine in order to gain their acceptance. He never understood M.J.'s insistence that such behavior was acceptable to a very minimal degree, and that he needed to remember his place in the company. He was a Vice President, and carrying-on in a too-casual fashion with his employees undermined his credibility and respect, in M.J.'s opinion. Of course, Ray argued with M.J. about this constantly, especially when Madison sided with her, and the President felt like she never made any headway with the imbecile. Still, she had to keep trying... someone had to keep him in line.

The noon hour finally arrived, and M.J. sat in the cafe in her customary spot - corner table in the rear - eating her salad and, today, a milkshake.

I need some comfort-food after dealing with fucking Ray all morning, she reasoned with herself. As suspected, her meeting with Raiford turned into one of their usual shout-fests, and it ended with him stomping out of her office like a petulant teenager. Her morning was ruined, but she still had the rest of the afternoon to improve things. ...*Yeah, right*, she thought with a self-deprecating roll of her eyes.

She was flipping aimlessly through the morning paper when a shadow suddenly darkened her table. Looking up, her lips curled into a subtle smile as she took in the flaxen-haired, ocean-eyed face of her favorite Assistant Director.

Hmm... the day is looking up, she mused inwardly.

"Mind if I join you?" Allison asked, trying to sound casual but feeling ridiculously hopeful inside. She'd seen the scowling figure of her boss, sitting in her private little refuge, as she went through the deli line, and she tossed the idea of approaching the moody woman around inside her mind several times before deciding that she missed her company enough to risk being publicly shot down.

"Not at all," M.J. replied with a slight grin as she folded up her paper and tossed it aside.

Alli sat, putting her things on the table in front of her and trying not to appear nervous.

Why am I so jumpy? she wondered, *it's just M.J.* The truth was that M.J. always made her nervous; she hated to admit it, but being close to the overpowering woman was a double-edged sword for Alli. She wanted - no, she craved M.J.'s presence, but it twisted her up inside and threw her completely off-balance at the same time. It was like a necessary evil.

"So... how was your Thanksgiving?" Alli blurted, feeling the need to talk immediately. Aside from the fact that she really did want to know what M.J. did over the holiday, talking always helped to calm her nerves.

M.J. curled her upper lip slightly and shrugged, "Alright, I guess," she mumbled carelessly as she stabbed at her salad.

"That good, huh?" Alli retorted with a knowing smile. "What'd you do? Stay home? Go out?"

M.J. looked up, pinning the blonde with a direct stare, "What, are you writing a book?" She quipped back. As soon as the smile fell from Alli's face, M.J. grinned at her, letting her know that she was just kidding. Relief swept across Alli's face instantly, and M.J. smiled harder at the ease with which she could rattle the blonde.

"I went to Madison's house, as usual. And it was boring and stuffy, also as usual," M.J. finally offered, waving her fork dismissively.

"Mmm, well... that's too bad," Alli said around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Was yours so much better?" M.J. responded sardonically, her brow arched high and her curiosity piqued.

"Ha! That's a laugh!" Alli said, laughing nervously before taking a sip of her drink. She was silent for a moment and looked over at her companion, who was obviously awaiting further explanation with raised brows. Alli pushed her drink away and shrugged slightly, "Mine was pretty much... disastrous, I'm afraid," she said dismally, taking a bite of her sandwich again. Hopefully M.J. would just let it drop.

"Why?"

Oookay... guess not. "Uhm... well, for starters, my family isn't very happy that I moved away," Alli began, "so they made sure to give me plenty of grief for that - again," she said as M.J. looked at her blankly, save a slight crinkle in her dark brows. "Add to that my mother's constant hounding about me still being single, and the announcement that she apparently socializes with my ex-husband on a semi-regular basis and still considers him 'family', and you have one *hell* of a good time," Alli finished, her voice laced with obvious sarcasm in an attempt to hide the underlying pain.

Pausing, she suddenly regretted letting all that tumble so carelessly out of her mouth. Why was she saying all this to M.J., of all people? She could talk to almost anyone about this, but not M.J.!

God... she'll think I'm a total basket-case for sure... shit! I take it back I take it back! Alli thought in a panic. She ventured a glance up at her boss and was shocked to see a look of quiet concern on the normally impassive face.

"Why would your Mother stay in contact with your ex?" M.J. questioned carefully. She wasn't sure why Alli was offering this information about herself, but it was obvious that she needed to talk to someone, so M.J. told herself to play the good friend and listen.

Alli shrugged her shoulders, "I dunno... well, that's not entirely true - I do know - I just don't understand it," she said cryptically. Again M.J. looked at her with expectant eyes. The silent, sky-blue gaze automatically gave Alli goose bumps, and she looked away as she struggled with a suitable explanation.

"Uhm, you see... my mother never had a son - just me and my two sisters - so she always made a huge deal over the boyfriends, and the husbands - even if they were complete assholes," Alli began, and M.J.'s brows furrowed further. "In my mother's mind, the most important thing in a woman's life is to find a man, convince him to marry you, and then dutifully play the part of the devoted little wife." Alli explained, "Not being married is like having the plague - or god-forbid, divorcing and swearing off of men is even worse." Alli spouted off with more sarcasm.

It was obvious to M.J. that the blonde was reliving painful memories, and even though she knew she should probably just keep quiet and let her vent, she couldn't help asking questions. "Your mother blames you for your divorce?" She asked knowingly, tentatively.

"Oh yes," Alli answered immediately, "I never did anything right, in her mind... getting married was just another mistake, even though she pushed for it," she added.

M.J. had tried to put together some of the pieces of Alli's past after she'd found out that the blonde had been married. Recalling the name-discrepancies on her college diplomas, M.J. figured that Alli got married sometime after receiving her B.S., but before earning her M.S. two years later. This placed her marrying age somewhere between 21 and 24, by M.J.'s estimations. That was still rather young, she thought; especially if you aren't entirely 'sure', which Alli

obviously hadn't been since she had to be 'pushed' into the marriage.

"So... why did you get married if the guy was an asshole and everyone thought it was a mistake?" M.J. asked, hoping she wasn't making too many assumptions and pushing the issue too far, but feeling extremely curious about the answer.

Alli paused, her sandwich hanging limply in her hands, as her eyes locked with M.J.'s. She wondered how well the brunette could read her mind... she hoped not well at all. The hesitation was obvious, and Alli nearly panicked as she thought about what to do and say.

"Uhhh...", was the only thing that came out.

"Hey, it's okay - you don't have to answer... I shouldn't be prying," M.J. relented quickly, holding up her hand. Even though she really did want this particular mystery solved, she didn't want it at the expense of her adorable friend's pride.

God, what does that say? She mused somewhere in the back of her mind.

"N-No, it's okay, it's just...", Alli paused again, "uh... I just haven't really... discussed it with very many people." She said quietly, darting her eyes away, seemingly embarrassed.

"I understand... forget I asked." M.J. added quickly, waving her hand as a feeling of strained awkwardness settled over the suddenly-silent table. Both women dropped their heads down, diving into the remains of their lunch and avoiding eye contact.

Well, this sucks, M.J. thought, inwardly rolling her eyes and scolding herself for pushing.

This is stupid, Alli thought, closing her eyes and chewing more forcefully than needed. The silence seemed to stretch on forever, until Alli could stand it no longer.

"I got pregnant," she blurted out impulsively.

M.J.'s long draw of milkshake ended mid-suck as her eyes widened and stuck open in shock. She pulled the straw out of her mouth slowly and sat the styrofoam cup onto the table, her pale cerulean gaze locked on Alli's uncertain jade one. How the hell was she supposed to respond to something like that? Silence reigned for a few moments while M.J.'s mind raced and she swallowed her mouthful of melted vanilla. Knowing she had to say something, she finally managed a reply.

"...Oh...", was her stupendous exclamation.

Alli laughed nervously, breaking the gaze and looking down at her nervously-twisting hands, "Yeah...", she mumbled in an equally brilliant response.

God... why did I just tell her that! Shit! She thought in near-panic. She was morbidly embarrassed now, and her mind began to frantically think of ways in which she could quickly

and easily escape. The best idea she had was turn into a puddle of water and evaporate, but without her Wonder-Twin-Powers, that idea was moot. Alli nearly choked on more nervous laughter and she shook her head, wiping quickly at the moisture that had inexplicably begun to pool in her eyes. When she looked up again, she knew her face was flushed pink and her eyes glistened with insistent tears.

M.J. felt for her, truly, but she had no idea what to say... this was *so* not her forte. "Uhm, how did you... I mean, well, I know *how*... I mean, was it, ah...," she stumbled and fumbled for words uncharacteristically.

Alli took pity on the struggling woman; she was glad she wasn't the only one feeling awkward, "It was unplanned, believe me... very much 'accidental'." She said, taking a huge hit of her drink to quench her suddenly parched throat. "I didn't know what to do," she continued nervously, her voice quavering, "...he said he wanted to marry me... my mother thought that was *extremely* generous of him... so... I said 'okay'," Alli finished with a slight shrug, her voice flat and devoid of any emotion.

M.J. frowned, "Just 'okay'? That was it?" She asked bluntly, knowing full well that she shouldn't dig anymore, but blundering ahead anyway. Alli was opening up to her - she wasn't about to pass up the opportunity.

Alli had a sad look on her face as she shrugged her shoulders slightly, "Yeah, that was it." She said humorlessly, aware of how ridiculous it must sound. "I was confused... scared... I figured getting married was the 'right thing to do'... you know, all that bullshit," she said ruefully. M.J. just looked at her solemnly. "But then Eric started to... change," she added, "and I guess I changed too... it didn't take long for things to fall apart." Alli said with a deep sigh and a faraway look in her glistening eyes.

M.J. studied her companion for a moment while she took another bite of her sandwich. She knew something about 'shotgun' marriages - she became the product of one herself when Mark Whitton had quickly married Elizabeth Grayson because he'd gotten her pregnant. But, her parents were from a generation that believed that you stayed together, no matter what - no matter how miserable and unloving the marriage may be. Granted, her father wasn't the most loving man, and things eventually did get very very bad, but M.J. always felt that he truly did care for and support her mother, despite it all. So what kind of hell must Alli have endured being young, scared, uncertain, and surrounded by people who, apparently, didn't give a damn about her well-being or what she wanted? What must it have been like to find herself a young newlywed with an unwanted pregnancy, a mother who obviously treated her like the daily trash, and a husband who was an ass?

M.J. gazed upon the somber but still angelic face seated in front of her, suddenly noticing an underlying hurt and diminished spirit that she'd never seen before. M.J. had always thought of Allison as an equal match for her, in numerous ways, but for the first time, Alli looked small and fragile to her. There was a painful vulnerability in her features, and the taller woman suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to protect the little blonde and take care of her. To think that the intelligent, kindly soul before her had been mistreated and hurt filled M.J. with anger, and to

think that some ignorant, undeserving man might have been responsible for it made her see pure red. What kind of person would be stupid enough to treat someone like Allison poorly? What kind of fool would let her get away? And... whatever happened with the pregnancy and/or the baby?

"Uhm... forgive me for asking, but...", M.J. ventured in a gentle tone, uncertain if her persistence was wise or not, "...what happened with the pregnancy?"

Alli's eyes widened a little before they dropped down to her lap, and M.J. could sense her discomfort and apprehension as the tip of her tongue flitted nervously across her lower lip. She immediately regretted her question and quickly flipped a hand up in surrender.

"Look, I'm sorry... again. Damn, I can't seem to refrain from shoving my foot in my mouth." She muttered in a quick, atypical apology.

"No, no... it's alright," Alli started. "Like I said, I'm just not used to talking about this, that's all."

"Well, still, I shouldn't have asked, and I apologize." M.J. said, touching a hand to her chest in a sincere gesture and shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

"It's okay." Alli insisted, reaching across the table to gently grasp M.J.'s arm. They smiled lightly at each other in tentative understanding. "I miscarried." Alli said quietly, quirking her lips nervously as she answered M.J.'s question and shocked the brunette yet again.

M.J. bit her tongue, forcing herself to hold off on saying anything before thinking about it carefully. This was obviously something that was difficult for Alli to discuss, and she chided herself to be as delicate as possible.

"Wow." She finally spluttered. *Oh yeah, that was really *delicate*, idiot!* "I mean... I'm... I'm sorry, Allison." She said sincerely, looking deeply into green-blue pools.

"Thank you, but don't be... it was a long time ago, and it's all in the past now." Alli said calmly, shaking her head and sitting back in her chair again.

Despite Alli's apparent finality on the subject, M.J. still felt the urge to ask just one more thing, "Were things ever good with him? Your husband, I mean?" She cocked her head slightly and asked softly, hoping that she sounded casual and not jealous.

*Jealous? I'm not *jealous*!* Her subconscious interjected quickly.

Alli paused for a moment as she pondered the question. "...Honestly? ...No." She said, looking at M.J. squarely as she leaned on the table and propped her chin on her hand. "We were both so young and naïve, and we didn't know what we were doing, or what we felt. I guess I thought - and hoped - that things would just magically work out between us." Alli gave a small, regretful grin and her eyes took on the faraway look again, "We were only married for three weeks when I lost the baby." The words were spoken quietly, with such apparent sorrow, and as Alli gently

rubbed her fingers along her lower lip in a self-conscious gesture, M.J. felt a tremendous amount of pity and sympathy for the blonde.

Allison paused thoughtfully and looked down at her hands, "I was so upset... I got depressed... I couldn't talk to anyone about any of it. Eric didn't understand, of course. He thought I would just 'get over' the whole thing... like I could just take some pills, and it would all just *go away*. But I didn't just 'get over' it, and it didn't go away." Alli's face was softly sad and contemplative, and M.J.'s eyes were glued to her in rapt fascination and amazement. "After that, Eric... changed... so much. I was never sure if he was angry because I lost the baby, or if he just resented me for being stuck in a marriage that neither of us really wanted."

M.J. didn't miss the usage of the words 'angry' and 'resented', and she felt a swell of dread and fury rise up deep within her chest. She feared and wondered if Alli's ex-husband had assaulted or abused her. It sickened her to think that something like that might have happened, but short of asking the blonde straight-out, she had no way of knowing.

And it's better you don't anyway... you're already in enough trouble with this one, she cautioned herself, refocusing her attention as Alli continued.

Alli's brows knitted together pensively, "Maybe we just didn't care about each other enough? ...I dunno." She added with a slight shrug. "I don't think I've ever cared about anyone enough to truly consider devoting my whole life to them, or anything like that." Furrowed brows relaxed and aqua eyes suddenly looked up and locked with intense blue. "Have you?"

The innocent question took M.J. totally off-guard. *Shit... how did this conversation get to this point? I thought we were talking about her!?* "Uhm, no... not really," M.J. said with minor hesitation as she shook her head and twiddled her fork in the remains of her salad.

" 'Not really'... hmm... interesting answer," Alli said with a grin, quirked an umber brow upward as she made an attempt to lighten the mood just a little.

M.J. smiled sheepishly and shook her head, "No... the answer is just 'no'." She said, trying to do some damage-control and save face. They smiled knowingly at each other and amicably returned their attention to their lunches.

Somehow, they had inadvertently managed to simultaneously answer unspoken questions while spawning new ones in each of their minds. As usual, their simple shared meal had turned into a veritable wealth of information and insight for both of them. And, once again, the bond between the two had deepened and changed irrevocably.

*"She floats like a swan, grace on the water,
Lips like sugar... lips like sugar;
Just when you think you've caught her,*

*She glides across the water,
She calls for you tonight,
To share this moonlight;
You'll flow down her river,
She'll ask and you'll give her,
Lips like sugar... sugar kisses." - Echo and the Bunnymen*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After the Thanksgiving holiday, the weeks seemed to pass quickly. The intensely personal conversation the two women shared at lunch those few weeks ago definitely changed things between them... at least Alli thought that things were different.

At first she found herself embarrassed to be around M.J., for fear the brunette would think her foolish or pathetic, or something. But M.J. didn't act as though she felt that way at all; if anything, she seemed to treat Alli with more respect and maybe even admiration... although Alli admitted to herself that she might be stretching her hopefulness a bit.

It took Alli a little while to get her own confidence back, but once she did, she could tell that M.J.'s demeanor had indeed changed. The tall woman still flirted and joked, but her body language had somehow lost the defensive 'edge' that it had always carried before. It was as though, by having Alli confess one of her deepest, darkest secrets, M.J. now felt safe enough to ease-up on her own strict personal-space barriers... but just a little. Even so, the little 'breach' in the brunette's security allowed Alli some glimpses of what lay beneath the thick, hard surface that was M.J.'s public facade. Alli knew all along that M.J.'s gruff persona was just a self-protective layer for what was underneath... and M.J. was unwittingly proving her right.

The two of them continued to work closely with one another, their unique bond steadily growing stronger... and their feelings, quietly deeper.

Remembering Alli's confessions over the revealing lunch that they'd shared, M.J. often felt the urge to touch her lips to Alli's ear and whisper to her that she wasn't stupid, that everyone makes mistakes, that she should never doubt herself, and that she would always be there to listen to her. But she couldn't do that; she had a hard enough time controlling her libidinous thoughts when within the blonde beauty's range. It was a constant battle for M.J. to not reach out and touch Alli the way she sometimes longed to... to not brush her knuckles across a soft cheek; to not let her fingers caress a small, dainty hand; to not run her fingers through the inviting flaxen hair... it was maddening at times. She constantly fought to keep her behavior 'proper' when in the blonde's company; one look into those deep-set, unusual sea-green eyes sent her mind careening off into forbidden territory. She seemed to be forever berating herself for thinking devious thoughts when in Alli's presence.

For her part, Alli was having the same difficulties. She often wondered if M.J. could sense what she was thinking. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off the tall beauty whenever she was

around, and it didn't go unnoticed either - M.J. often caught her staring. At first, Alli had been embarrassed; now, she no longer cared, and she no longer looked away when it happened. A pattern was beginning to emerge... in the midst of a conversation, or across a crowded room, crystal-clear aqua would lock onto bright, light azure... a tiny flicker of some unspoken emotion would spark and pass between them... they'd share a secret look and a private smirk... and their minds would wander freely before one of them broke the spell and brought them back to reality. It was as though they'd developed their own silent, secret communication system that no one else was privy to. For both of them, the little side-trips to fantasy-land were exhilarating, but the implications were growing more and more disconcerting.

The week of December 10th heralded the arrival of the annual company Christmas party. Alli had learned that M.J., for some reason, despised the event and did not want to attend. She told Alli that she had successfully escaped attendance for the past two years, but would have to be there this year, as the company's new President. Not much more was said about the event, just grumblings and sarcastic comments from M.J. about how she thought it was a pointless waste of money that would be better appreciated if it were put in the employee's paychecks instead. The Assistant Director was a little surprised by M.J.'s opinion, but she had to agree with her.

Alli remembered back, months ago, when she and Liz Jacobs had discussed the Whittons, their money, and their high-society ways. Liz had cryptically said, "*most of them enjoy it and are happy to flaunt it... but not all of them do.*" From M.J.'s statements, Alli was beginning to realize that she was not your typical rich-bitch. For some reason, however, this only surprised her slightly. Her gut feeling that M.J. was a very different person on the inside was proving to be accurate, so to her it made perfect sense for the complex brunette to have an aversion to glitz and glamour deep within.

The Saturday party-night arrived unseasonably warm and breezy. Remembering their pact from months ago, Alli agreed to meet Liz in the lobby of the plush country club where the gala was being held, so they wouldn't have to walk in "obviously alone and painfully single", as Liz joked. The Finance Director showed up wearing a surprisingly modest, royal blue cocktail dress, and she had her hair pulled up in an interesting 'updo' with a few stray tendrils dangling in gentle wisps around her face. She looked quite elegant and very lovely, and Alli couldn't help but wonder why she was alone and single. After much shopping and consternation, Alli had decided to go with a basic black, strapless dress, and heels as high as she could stand them. The clerk at the dress shop promised her that the guys would be salivating over her, but that, of course, didn't matter to her in the least. She was only interested in catching the eye of one particular person.

"Wow, Alli! You look fantastic!" Liz exclaimed upon seeing Alli's entrance into the lobby.

"Really? I was afraid it was a little... 'too much' maybe, y'know?" Alli replied with uncertainty as she fidgeted and ruffled the hair at the back of her neck in an attempt to quell her nerves. She wasn't used to attending anything as glitzy and glamorous as this, let alone dressing the part. This

was all brand new and she felt very self-conscious.

"Hell no! You look *great*! C'mon," Liz said, looping her arm through Alli's as they set off to enjoy the remainder of the cocktail hour.

When they reached the large room, Alli couldn't help but feel her stomach twist into more knots of nervousness. She felt like every eye was on her, staring, critiquing, judging. She was so glad that Liz suggested they come together - she probably wouldn't have done this on her own. They found the bar and secured a glass of wine for themselves, then proceeded to mingle and make small-talk with their co-workers.

Most people brought spouses, significant others, or at least a date of some kind, and Alli felt out-of-place by just being with Liz. Having attended the function many times in the past, the Finance Director was much more comfortable, and she openly joked with everyone about being single and having to bring her female co-worker and friend as her date. Alli wished she shared her casual confidence - Liz could tell that Alli was uneasy, and she stayed by the blonde's side faithfully. Alli was thankful that Liz was turning out to be a good friend; she needed to find some friends in this big city, or else she'd go nuts.

As the two women stood and chatted politely with some over-friendly men Alli didn't really know, she surreptitiously began scouring the room in search of a particular brunette. Her eyes stopped at every dark head with hair piled up high, but she didn't find the face that she was looking for.

She said she had to be here... dinner is about to be served... where could she be? Alli wondered as she continued to scan.

The announcement was soon made that everyone should take their seats for dinner, and Alli and Liz found their place-cards and went in search of their table. Continuing to glance around as she walked behind Liz, Alli's eyes were drawn to two statuesque women with dark hair who were laughing and speaking with three gentlemen and a petite, attractive, auburn-haired female. The two tall women had their backs to Alli, but she knew, without a doubt, who the beauties were. One wore a shimmering, strapless green dress, and the other wore a red dress that plunged breathtakingly deep at the back.

Green and red... how Christmassy, Alli thought with a wry smirk. As she slowly took her seat, the two Whitton sisters finally turned to head toward their table, and Alli's jaw went slack.

Good god... how could I possibly have missed THAT? She asked herself as she drank in the vision that had been the object of her search.

M.J. wore a ruby red, full-length dress that was split tantalizingly up the side and sported a deep, scooping neckline in addition to a wonderfully wide-open back, and little skinny straps that wrapped around her neck. How the creation manifested itself into a 'dress', Alli didn't know; it looked like the front had to be hanging on with strategically-placed double-sided tape. M.J.'s hair hung long and loose, full of glossy body and spilling freely down over her bare back and

shoulders to end in gentle, wavy curls. Her crystal-blue eyes seemed to sparkle luminously, and her white teeth contrasted brightly against her matching red lipstick as she smiled and walked beside a blonde gentleman who put his arm snugly around her barely-clad waist and then held her seat for her as they sat down side by side. They looked a little too cozy for Alli, and she immediately felt the rumblings of something that was a cross between awe-struck dumbfoundedness and simmering jealousy. M.J. looked like an absolute goddess... and she apparently had a date.

The evening was dragging on painfully slow, in M.J.'s opinion. Dinner was just concluding and already she was sick and tired of being polite, making small-talk with people she didn't know, and kissing-ass with people she didn't like. Unlike Madison, who loved this kind of function and loved mingling and schmoozing with everyone, M.J. loathed it. The only reason she came was because she absolutely **had** to; she was the President, after all, so she couldn't escape it. One positive thing about the evening was that she didn't have to put up with her insufferable stepmother; however, she still had to put up with the woman's son, who was thoroughly enjoying parading around introducing himself to all the women as 'Mr. Vice-President'.

What a fucking jerk, M.J. thought with an internal eye-roll as she watched Raiford in action across the room.

She had come to the party with Madison and her husband Doug, as well as another attorney who worked with Doug - Steve Wilson. Steve was conveniently divorced, and for some reason, Doug and Madison thought it would be 'nice' for him to escort M.J., so that neither of them would have to be alone. Tossing a sideways glance at the boring blonde man as he talked shop with Doug, M.J. cringed inwardly at the memory of him touching her so eagerly. She wondered why in the hell she had let her sister talk her into this.

*Practically everyone knows that I don't 'date', for chrissake, especially *men*! Why would anyone give a shit if I came alone? For that matter... why didn't I?!* She thought crossly, closing her eyes and shaking her head slightly.

She looked up briefly to catch Doug smirking at her, and she suddenly had the urge to reach across the table and slap him silly. Steve Wilson was new to the Cohen, Reed & Barninger law firm, and M.J. would bet money that her smart-ass brother-in-law thought it would be a good joke to 'fix him up' with his wife's attractive sister who would not only be completely disinterested in the young man, but, unfortunately, she would turn out to be **gay** as well.

Yeah, very funny Doug... you're a fucking jerk too, M.J. thought angrily. Looking at the blonde man again as she sipped her fourth glass of wine, M.J. mused sarcastically, *I hate to break it to you, Steve-o... we may have come here together, but we sure as shit won't be leaving together. You can catch a ride home with Dougie, and he can explain evvvvverything.* She really wasn't a big drinker, but she decided to make an exception this night.

Releasing a sigh of boredom, M.J. thought about the only other positive thing of the evening, and

that was the fact that she was getting a most enjoyable eyeful of one Allison Phillips. Sipping her wine and shifting her gaze furtively over to the side of the room where Alli sat, M.J. watched the blonde over the rim of her glass. Normally, Alli would be described as 'cute'; tonight, M.J. would describe her as simply gorgeous. She didn't know if it was just the little black dress, or the fact that it was strapless and rather form-fitting - whatever the reason, Alli looked terribly sexy and good enough to eat. At that thought, a small smirk danced fleetingly across M.J.'s lips as she licked them and took another sip of wine, carefully keeping her dark stare riveted on the object of her impure thoughts.

"See something interesting, Madame President?" a throaty voice suddenly purred in her ear.

M.J. had to restrain from rolling her eyes. "Gatherings like this usually tend to produce interesting things, counselor," she replied in a bored tone, not turning to acknowledge the petite redhead that had sidled up to her at the table. Kate Reed smirked at the brunette who was a vision of loveliness in her unique red dress and long, shiny, dark hair.

"You look quite ravishing tonight," Kate whispered seductively, leaning closer to M.J. "Can't remember the last time I saw you in a dress."

M.J. drained her drink and turned to look at Kate uncaringly, "Gee thanks - you look *swell* too," she said sarcastically.

Kate saw the annoyance on M.J.'s face, but she wasn't buying it. This was a game that the two played often.

"So... I haven't heard from you in awhile. What've you been doing? - besides distracting yourself with work, that is," the redhead purred.

M.J. turned away from her again, propping her elbows on the table and twirling her empty wine glass in her fingers, "Nothing... absolutely nothing," she said flatly.

"What a pity," Kate said. "You know... you should give me a call when you're bored... I'm sure we could come up with some way to... *entertain* each other." She added as she snuck her hand beneath the table and laid it on M.J.'s exposed thigh.

Not flinching a muscle, M.J. smirked, "I seriously doubt that, Katherine." She didn't even look at the redhead; her wintry eyes were fixated on a certain blonde bombshell.

Kate followed the direction of M.J.'s gaze, seeing only one person who could be responsible for the look on the face of her sometimes-lover. Knowing M.J. as she did, and knowing the brunette's penchant for blondes, Kate easily put two and two together.

"Listen, handsome... I can think of *much* more interesting things to do besides sit here and drool over your employees." The redhead said lowly as she non-too-discreetly ran her hand up and down the length of M.J.'s thigh.

Blue eyes finally rolled in disgust and the President turned to face Kate, "Oh really?" M.J. asked, quirking a brow.

"Oh yes." Kate nearly growled, arching her brow in return and giving the firm thigh a squeeze.

"Well Kate... if you're so bored, you can leave," M.J. quipped, reaching down and removing Kate's hand. "And don't let the door hit you on the ass on your way out." She added, her eyes flashing icily as she stood up and walked away. Kate could only smirk as she watched the tall beauty disappear into the crowd. Turning her attention back to the table across the way, she observed as the small blonde woman smiled and talked to a brunette in a blue dress.

"I don't know who you are, Blondie, but I'd bet a lot of money that lil' Ms. M.J. has plans for you," she murmured to herself, taking a sip of wine and watching the blonde through narrowed eyes.

Deciding that she hadn't had nearly enough to drink, M.J. was trying to make her way to the bar when she suddenly found herself face to face with Raiford.

"Well well... don't we look *scrumptious* tonight," Ray drawled as he openly looked M.J. up and down. M.J. merely fixed him with a dark warning glare; now was not the time nor place to get into it with her obnoxious stepbrother.

"I see that Ms. Kate thinks you look quite yummy as well," Ray added snidely, motioning his head toward M.J.'s table, where Kate still sat.

As much as she wanted to tell her step-sibling that Kate Reed was none of his damn business, M.J. knew better than to give or say anything that Ray could - and would - use against her. "Fuck off Ray," M.J. snapped through gritted teeth as she pushed past her smirking stepbrother.

Heading once again toward the bar, M.J. kept getting side-tracked by people who insisted on talking to her. She did her best to maintain a polite attitude, slipping on her fake smile and flirting with those who begged for it. It was artificial, but she tried her very best to grin and bear it.

The evening will soon be over and then I can forget about this bullshit for another year, she mused to herself as she craned her neck, trying to see how close she was to the bar. As she glanced around, she found her eyes gravitating to and locking with a pair of bright, jade-colored ones. Seeing the shy look on Alli's face, M.J. grinned and gave her a wink, causing a flush to visibly spread across the blonde's exposed chest. This made M.J. smile even more.

Before she got a chance to make her way over to Alli, however, Madison interrupted her, "Ah, there you are - Morgan, I want you to meet someone...", Maddy continued as she introduced M.J. to some older man dressed in a stuffy suit and mismatched tie. M.J. wasn't really paying close attention to what Maddy was saying as she began talking; her eyes kept glancing to the greenish

ones that continued to dart her way demurely. M.J. found it difficult to conceal her grin - both she and Alli were pretending to talk to other people, yet their eyes kept sidetracking and meeting up with one another. Realizing her sister's attentions were elsewhere, Madison touched M.J. on the arm to bring her back to the conversation at hand. One look in Alli's direction told the younger Whitton what M.J. had been preoccupied with.

M.J. tried her best to feign interest in Madison and the boring, overly-touchy gentleman with her, but it was difficult; she couldn't even remember what his name was... maybe she *had* had enough to drink after all. A few cautious looks from Maddy reminded M.J. to play nice, however, so she turned on her considerable charm for the man, who fairly salivated over her attentions and didn't bring his gaze up much past her breasts. Finally having had enough, M.J. fixed her sister with a knowing look and made up an excuse to break away from the conversation and the man, who had begun touching her arm way too much. She spotted her salvation just a few yards away and started to walk toward the bar quickly, only to find herself suddenly face to face with her favorite blonde.

"Well... we meet at last," M.J. said as she took-in the vision of Alli at close-range. Pale blonde locks were gelled and styled wildly, and cream-colored shoulders highlighted a wonderful display of pale flesh against stark black fabric. Accenting the slender ivory neck was a simple, but beautiful, string of iridescent pearls. M.J. almost laughed out loud as the term 'pearl necklace' registered and raced through her libidinous, slightly-intoxicated mind, and her lips stretched into a mischievous smirk.

"Yes... I thought I wasn't going to get a chance to talk to you," Alli said shakily, her heart-rate increasing as M.J. stepped closer to her and the familiar smell of her perfumed essence wafted through the air.

"Oh don't worry... I'd have come looking for you before the night was through," M.J. said, her brows arching sharply above wicked, translucent eyes as a lecherous grin spread across crimson lips. She turned to order another glass of wine, and Alli was at a loss for words.

The blonde just stood there, licking her dry lips while staring at M.J.'s very-exposed back. The smooth, lightly-tanned skin and the dark, silky-looking tresses that rested against it were just begging to be touched. Alli's fingers itched at the prospect of caressing those shoulder blades and trailing a finger down the long line of that supple spine, all the way to-

"Alli?" M.J.'s voice snapped her out of her reverie.

"Hmm?" Alli's head snapped up when she realized that M.J. was speaking to her. She couldn't stop the flush of pink that invaded her cheeks, and she knew that M.J. saw it when she looked up at the mischievousness in the twinkling eyes.

M.J. wanted to go in for the kill and totally disable the flustered blonde; she had about a hundred sly remarks and come-ons dancing on the tip of her tongue. But, she relented, deciding to take it easy on her gorgeous friend. Torturing her slowly was so much more fun anyway.

"I asked if you were having a good time?" M.J. said lowly, quirking the corner of her mouth as she sipped her wine and watched Alli's continued struggle.

"Oh, uh, yes... this is very nice... and dinner was delicious," Alli stammered, trying to regain some modicum of self-control.

M.J. grinned wide; she just couldn't resist any longer. She stepped closer to Alli, leaning down a little so she didn't have to talk loudly, "Speaking of delicious... you look **very** lovely this evening," she said lowly, her eyes dark and intense. A lump immediately formed in Alli's throat and she almost gasped aloud as M.J. reached out to lay a hand on her waist. "And this dress... it's **perfect** for you," the brunette demurred as she stroked lightly with her fingers, feeling warm skin beneath the fabric.

Alli thought her eyes were going to pop out of her skull. M.J. knew she was being awful, but she couldn't help it; alcohol always made her bold and a little reckless. Besides... she'd been dying to touch Alli ever since she saw her tonight. Sensing Alli's distress, she decided to step back, smiling hard and almost chuckling out loud as she removed her hand and brought it back to hold her wine glass while she pretended to look around the room nonchalantly.

Alli's heart beat in triple-time while she tried to reign in her shock. M.J. was in ultra-rare form tonight, and she struggled to get her head around what was happening. She and M.J. had flirted in the past, of course, and they'd touched casually, but this touch... this touch was completely different. She actually felt the need to look down to see if there was a gaping hole in the waist-line of her dress - M.J.'s hand had burned **that** much. By the time she looked back up at her boss, M.J. was looking strangely at a petite, flame-haired woman who had come to stand in front of her.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your **friend**, M.J.?" The redhead asked, quirking an eyebrow high.

M.J. fairly glared back at her, then she turned awkwardly to Alli, "Allison... this is Katherine Reed - she's one of the senior partners at Cohen, Reed & Barninger," M.J. said in a clipped tone, motioning to the redhead. "Kate... this is Allison Phillips - she's the Assistant Director for our Human Resources Department," M.J. added, motioning back to Alli.

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. Reed," Alli managed, sticking her hand out and smiling politely.

Kate returned the gesture with a small, prim smile and took the proffered hand, giving it a firm grip as she eyed her competition. "Likewise," she said succinctly.

She's quite attractive... M.J. still has good taste, I'll give her that, Kate thought to herself.

Alli was thinking the same thing as they released hands and continued to smile falsely at each other. Kate Reed was tiny, and very pretty. She had an aristocratic-looking face... fairly prominent cheekbones; a slim, slightly aquiline nose; a strong, tapered chin; perfect rosebud lips; and eyes that were an intense, penetrating, royal blue. All of this was framed by a cap of auburn

hair that just reached her shoulders. She wore a black dress that sported very sheer fabric in numerous places, and her fingernails were perfectly manicured and painted blood-red. She was petite, but she carried an air of intelligence and arrogance about her.

...Definitely an attorney, Alli thought. She was just beginning to feel oddly uncomfortable when she stiffened suddenly, feeling M.J.'s hand come to rest in her new favorite place - the small of her back.

"Alli has been absolutely invaluable to me these past few months. She's assisted me with numerous projects... she's a whiz with computers and spreadsheets and databases," M.J. said to Kate.

It seemed to Alli that M.J. had taken a somewhat possessive stance beside her, and it felt like she was bragging, or showing-off to Kate. For a moment, Alli wondered what the hell was going on, and she watched with interest as a strange look passed across Kate Reed's tight face. Feeling the pressure of M.J.'s hand again, her mind immediately tuned the redhead out and just focused on the thrill of having the tall woman touch her like this.

M.J. was saying something else to the redhead, but Alli wasn't paying attention; she was too busy memorizing the feel of M.J.'s hand as it moved lightly from the small of her back, up to the middle of her shoulder blades... then down again... then up again.

OhMyGodd... she's caressing me, in public, in front of this woman, Alli thought, *who is obviously jealous*.

She was willing to bet that there was some kind of 'history' between the two women, and she knew that she should probably be upset that M.J. was, apparently, using her to torment the redhead, but she just couldn't bring herself to care at the moment. As long as M.J. continued to touch her the way she was, Alli didn't give a shit if the President was offering to sell her body to the little redhead.

God, what is WRONG with me!? She chastised inwardly. She tuned back in to the real world just as M.J. and Kate were concluding whatever conversation they'd just had. M.J. was looking across the room, nodding to someone.

"Well, if you lovely ladies will excuse me... it seems I'm needed for something," M.J. said as she began to step away from Alli's side. Instead of just removing her hand, however, she let her palm slide all the way down Alli's back, ending in an ever-so-subtle but lingering brush across her ass. Alli nearly jumped out of her skin at the sensation.

Just as a blush was blazing its way up her neck, M.J. suddenly turned back to face her again, a mischievous smile once again on her lips, "Make sure you find me before you leave," she said lowly. "Wouldn't want you to disappear without saying 'goodnight'," she added, reaching up and quickly touching a fingertip to the underside of Alli's chin. She grinned evilly at both the blonde and the redhead, then turned and walked away.

*Jesus *CHRIST*!!* Alli thought, her eyes bulging and her mouth parted slightly. *What is she trying to DO to me?!* She had no idea what had gotten into the brunette. Maybe this was her way of stepping things up? Maybe she was just showing-off? Hell, maybe she just had too much to drink? Alli had no idea. Her head was spinning, her heart was pounding wildly, and she was suddenly more confused than ever. *God, maybe *I've* had too much to drink?!*

She had observed M.J. flirting with men - and women - all night. The tall beauty had apparently come to the party with the blonde guy who had been at her side and doting on her most of the night, and there was obviously something between her and Kate Reed.

*So where the hell do *I* fit into all of this?* Alli thought, suddenly feeling very much like a pawn in some kind of giant chess game that she was, obviously, completely clueless about. Without realizing it, Kate had stepped in closer to her, and when Alli brought her cloudy jade eyes back to meet the intense blue, she had the feeling that she was about to be educated.

*"I swore I would be true, but honey so did you;
So why were you holding her hand?
Is that the way we stand?
Were you lying all the time?
Was it just a game to you?
But I miss you...
You know I'm such a fool for you;
You got me wrapped around your finger,
Do you have to let it linger?" - Cranberries*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Alli was in a trance-like state as she walked back to her table. She wanted to find Liz and leave, right now. She was upset, and she was confused more than ever. After M.J. had left them, Kate Reed proceeded to try her best to fluster Alli and intimidate her.

No, 'outwardly threaten' is more like it, Alli thought angrily. Her mind played back the 'discussion'...

"I hope you're prepared for a wild ride, little girl." The redhead had started, her tone haughty and condescending.

"What? What are you talking about?" Alli replied indignantly.

*"M.J. likes to play, and she likes to play *rough*,"* Kate snarled, her eyes narrowed.

*"We're not *playing* at anything."* Alli insisted.

Kate leaned menacingly closer, *"Oh yes, you are - you just don't know it. And let me assure you... you will *lose* the game, my dear,"* she hissed, her eyes gleaming with dark blue intensity.

"I think I can keep things under control," Alli sniffed back in reply, refusing to be intimidated by a woman who was actually shorter than her.

Kate laughed derisively, *"You are *never* in control when it comes to M.J., darling! You might *think* you have control, but it's only a fantasy, and it's only temporary. She'll never allow you more than that - *trust* me."* The redhead responded darkly, her eyes still fixed and angry. *"She's a siren... she'll lead you off the path, lure you into the rocks, and laugh as your hull smashes and splinters into a thousand pieces. And while you flounder and struggle for life, she'll smile and let you drown in those pretty, deadly, water-colored eyes."* Kate finished dramatically.

Alli's mouth had unconsciously dropped open in shock at the poetic eloquence that emanated so viciously from the auburn-haired woman. Somehow though, she managed to keep her composure and glared firmly back at Kate.

"I'll try to keep that in mind, counselor." She said sharply, then turned and walked away.

Pulling herself back to the present, Alli shook her head.

What a bitch, she thought. *...Unbelievable!* She had wanted to reach out and slap the condescending smirk right off the attorney's smug face. There was no question in her mind that something **definitely** had taken place between Kate and M.J. The redhead came off as the typical jilted lover; whether the 'something' was in the past or the present, however, she didn't know. Alli suddenly felt both foolish and angry that she let M.J. intentionally use her to bait the attorney and make her jealous. She'd be damned if she was going to be threatened by some snooty little bitch, and she'd be damned if she was going to let M.J. toy with her.

*God, is that what she was doing? Just fucking with my head? Using me to fulfill her 'alpha male' role with a former lover? What is she trying to do, 'mark her territory'? Hell, why not just *piss* on me, M.J.!* Alli thought angrily as she looked around for Liz.

Finally reaching her 'date', Alli touched Liz on the shoulder lightly, "Hey, uhm, are you ready to go?" She asked anxiously.

Liz gave her a confused look, "It's only nine o'clock," she said, checking her watch and looking back at Alli.

"I know, I just... I'm just kind-of ready to leave," Alli said, trying to look and sound calm, but feeling her emotions welling painfully inside.

Liz studied her friend... something was obviously wrong. "Are you okay... what's the matter?" She asked, leaning in close and speaking softly.

Alli had to bite her lip and blink hard to keep the tears at bay, "Nothing - look, if you're not ready to go, that's okay; I can hang around for a little while longer. You've stuck by me all night, and I really appreciate that-"

"Alli, what's *wrong*?" Liz asked, interrupting the blonde and reaching out to touch her arm. Alli let out a nervous laugh, shaking her head and looking away for a moment.

"It's nothing... it's really stupid... just forget it, okay? Look, I gotta go to the ladies room... I'll be right back," Alli said quickly, turning to leave before Liz could say anything else. The Finance Director watched her friend disappear quickly, wondering what in the hell could have happened to upset her so.

Alli wished that she didn't have makeup on, because she could really use a nice, cool splash of water on her face to perk her up. Instead, she just looked in the mirror and smoothed under her eyes and fluffed her hair a bit. This evening had started out shaky, but just when things were looking up, they came crashing down again. She was pissed-off at M.J. for playing whatever head-fuck games she was playing, and she was very pissed-off at Kate Reed for being such a witch. She wanted to be pissed at M.J. enough to stay away from her and not speak to her for a long time - maybe it would teach her a lesson somehow... show her that Alli's emotions couldn't be trifled with.

The only problem was, Alli's mind kept playing back the earlier moments tonight when M.J. smiled and winked at her, and the way she'd looked at her and touched her when no one else was around. Did all that mean nothing whatsoever? And what about the daggers she'd seen M.J. throwing at Kate? Is there real animosity between them, or what? She just didn't know what to make of it. Was Kate just saying those things because she was jealous? Was it all just an insane *game*, or what? Alli's mind spun helplessly, flip-flopping between burning aggravation and residual attraction. She closed her eyes and let her head hang down.

*Hell, maybe we *all* just had too much to drink tonight, she thought ruefully. She supposed she had no right to expect any exclusivity with the bewitching President. She's a beautiful woman, Alli thought, of course other people lust after her as much as I do, she told herself. Maybe I'm just overreacting.*

Part of the problem was that there were no clear lines between them; there were no set boundaries, and there was no real consistency in behavior. With M.J., it somehow always ended up going through the same cycle - hot one minute, then cold the next... flirt shamelessly, then turn it off and act like a stranger. She had thought that their relationship was growing more solid, given the events of the last few weeks; but now, through all this confusion tonight, Alli had absolutely no idea where they stood nor where they were headed. She was so frustrated, she wanted to disappear into a corner and cry. Mostly, however, she wanted to smack herself for

being so naïve about the whole thing.

Vowing to keep her chin up and get a better grip on her escalating, out-of-control feelings toward M.J., Alli righted herself, smoothed her dress, and walked resolutely out of the restroom. She had just closed the door when she heard some voices murmuring softly and chuckling lowly in the darkened hallway adjacent to the restroom. Out of sheer natural reflex, she turned her head in that direction.

What she saw would stay with her for a very long time.

M.J. was leaning lazily against the wall with her back to Alli. One of her arms rested along the wall, the other hung down at her side, holding an empty wine glass. Someone else's arm was wrapped around her waist, a small hand stroking the bare skin of her tanned back. Based on the blood-red fingernails that decorated the fingers of that intruding hand, Alli knew exactly to whom it belonged. She could only stand there and stare unbelievably.

It was true... it was all just a game. A fucking game that she stupidly fell for. Allison could hardly believe it. She felt positively sick to her stomach and a sudden surge of bile burned in the back of her throat. A crushing weight had descended on her chest, and she suddenly couldn't breathe.

At that moment, Kate Reed's face appeared from behind M.J.'s shoulder, and she caught the stunned expression on the blonde beauty. Smirking triumphantly at her competitor, she decided to rub it in by reaching up and placing a seductive kiss on the neck of her sometimes-lover. Seeing the blonde's mouth drop open even further as she gasped and bolted out of the hallway, Kate let her head fall back as she laughed out loud.

Sometimes it felt so good to destroy people.

Alli was numb as she made her way back toward Liz. She knew her mouth was still open, and her eyes burned with tears that begged permission to fall. How she was holding it together, she didn't know. When she reached the table, she paused for a moment, not knowing exactly what to say. Before she could think of something, Liz felt her presence and turned to her,

"Hey, you wanna-- hey... Alli? What's wrong?" Liz said, noticing the odd expression and paleness of Alli's face.

"I... I'm... I'm gonna go... okay?" Alli stammered, "If you don't mind... I really have to go," Alli said rapidly, shaking her head and turning away abruptly before Liz could protest. She made it the whole way outside before Liz caught up to her.

"Alli! Alli! What is the *matter*!?" Liz said emphatically as she reached Alli and spun her around to face her.

The tears had begun streaming down her cheeks and her whole body was trembling, "I feel... so stupid... Liz... I'm *such* an idiot!" She choked-out between sobs.

"Shh... shh... it's okay," Liz soothed as she put an arm around her distraught friend. "Come sit down over here and tell me what's going on." She said as she guided Alli toward some benches that overlooked a large reflecting pool.

Alli spent the better part of an hour spilling her guts to her newfound confidante, telling her everything about her peculiar relationship with the ambiguous, frustrating President of Whitton, Inc. Liz listened very carefully, allowing Alli to cry and rant and rave, and even pound her fists here and there. The poor little blonde had fallen for M.J.'s charms, only to find out she was being used. It was a lousy introduction to a new city and the sometimes cut-throat world of big business politics, but unfortunately, things like this happened all the time. Liz just hated to see someone like Alli get caught up in it. The poor woman was understandably devastated.

The only saving grace for her petite friend was that she hadn't gone *too* far and done anything too inappropriate with the President. Liz had seen that before as well... this whole scenario was sickeningly familiar to her... and it made her mad as hell. She wasn't stupid - she was aware of the extraordinary amount of time Alli spent with M.J. She had noticed the little smiles and the expression that flashed across the blonde's face whenever M.J. was mentioned. Many times, Liz had wanted to warn her friend; she wanted to tell her that M.J. was a snake and couldn't be trusted for shit. She had tried, early on, to warn Alli a little about the President, but apparently, it wasn't enough.

Well... I have to be brutally honest with her now, Liz thought as she took a deep breath and released it wearily.

"Listen, Alli... there are some things you should know about M.J.," Liz began cautiously. Alli looked at her carefully, her umber brows knitted together as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I suppose I should have told you about this earlier, but....," Liz hesitated, looking away for a moment. "I dunno... I guess I didn't want to sound like I had a grudge against M.J. or something," she finished with a shrug.

"What do you mean?" Alli asked, her voice nearly hoarse from crying.

Liz released another sigh, "M.J. has somewhat of a... history," she began. "You see... this sort of thing has happened before," Liz said, looking at Alli seriously. "How many times it's happened, I don't know; but I do know that the last time it happened, it involved a friend of mine, and I do know that M.J. did the exact same thing to her." Alli looked at her anxiously. "The only difference is, M.J. managed to convince Alex to sleep with her a number of times before she unceremoniously dumped her ass." Liz added sarcastically.

Alli's eyes widened and her mouth parted slightly as she looked away for a moment. She knew she'd heard the name 'Alex' before. Her mind frantically processed until a light bulb came on,

"Alex Whats-her-name," she mumbled.

"What?" Liz asked.

"Alex Whats-her-name... Madison and M.J. mentioned her one time. She used to work here, right?" Alli asked, looking imploringly at her friend.

"Yeah - she worked here until M.J. fucked her over - literally - then they fired her," Liz snorted.

"You're kidding?" Alli asked incredulously.

"Afraid not. In a nutshell, Alex fell for M.J... they had an affair... then M.J. got tired of her and dumped her. When Alex tried to fight and win her back, M.J. cried 'foul', and Madison got her hubby's law firm to step in and pay Alex off so that she'd keep her mouth shut and leave quietly." Liz said, laying it all out brutally.

"What?! You've gotta be shitting me!?" Alli exclaimed.

"Nope. Alex was heart-broken, but she wasn't stupid. She took the money and ran. It wasn't pretty." Liz added. Alli just sat with her mouth open, staring at the ground.

"There's something else too...," Liz started cautiously, hating to hit the blonde with more bad news, "...that's when M.J. met up with Kate Reed. Kate handled her case against Alex." Alli looked up again, her eyes wide and unbelieving. "She and M.J. have been an 'item' ever since." Liz said with quiet finality.

Alli sat in stunned silence for several minutes. "Jesus... I can't believe I've been so *stupid*," she finally muttered, letting her face fall into her hands.

"Alli... listen to me," Liz began, reaching out to lift her friend's chin up, "it is *not* your fault. M.J. is the one who's wrong. She's a consummate pro at seducing and using people, and wrapping them around her little finger. Hell, when I first came to work here, she had *me* frothing after her!" Liz said. "She's devastatingly beautiful, yes, but she uses that to get what she wants, and honey... she's using *you*." Liz said bluntly, staring at Alli with hard eyes.

"Yeah... I can see that now," Alli said, clearly frustrated. Her shoulders slumped as she sat in silence for a moment, wiping at her eyes and nose with a tissue.

She wrinkled her brows thoughtfully, then looked up at her companion, "Liz... are you gay?" She asked with frank curiosity.

Liz smiled and laughed at her honesty, "Yes, Alli, I'm gay. Well, I guess I'm really bi... I've had relationships with both... but hey, you can call me whatever you want," Liz cracked, leaning back against the bench.

Alli laughed lightly, despite her emotional state. "You're not involved with anyone right now?"

She asked a bit more seriously.

"Nope. I've decided to be a little more selective from now on. But, as you can see, that's getting me *nowhere*! But I'm determined to be patient." Liz said with a grin as she mockingly shook her fist.

Alli grinned back at her. "I've been wondering about you, y'know... but I didn't want to just come right out and *ask* you," she added somewhat sheepishly.

"That's okay... I knew you were gay the first time I met you - it was your first day, when M.J. ran into you in my office," Liz said with a sly smile. "The look on your face said it all."

"Shit... am I that transparent?" Alli rolled her eyes and asked as Liz laughed her confirmation. "Terrific... I wonder who else 'knows'." The blonde grumbled as she too sat back and relaxed against the bench.

"Don't worry, most people aren't that observant. But... I'd put money on Madison 'knowing'. Aside from the fact that she's the one who keeps her big sister in line, not much gets past that woman." Liz commented with a shake of her head. Alli hummed her agreement and they sat in silent contemplation for a few moments.

"You know what the real problem is with all this?" Alli began again, "I really *am* attracted to her." She admitted quietly.

Liz made a disgusted noise, "Well you'd better get yourself UNattracted, and fast."

"I know, but... it's not like... I mean, it's not just a matter of me stupidly falling prey to her seductions, it's...," Alli hesitated, searching for the words. "It's like... I'm truly and inexplicably *drawn* to her. I dunno... I can't explain it. I just know that I've never felt this way before," Alli said, looking to her friend for understanding.

Liz opened her mouth to say something, but Alli cut her off, holding up a hand, "Before you say it - yes, I've been attracted to and involved with other women before, so it's not just because it's something 'new'. It's something... I dunno... it's something I've never experienced before, with anyone. It's a little frightening, to be honest." She said, giving Liz a worried look.

"Good... you should be frightened," Liz spat out quickly, looking at Alli intensely, "I would suggest that you listen to your fright instinct and stay the hell away from M.J. Whitton. You're a good, decent person, Alli. I don't want to see you get hurt. And believe me - you *will* be the one to get hurt." Liz said, pinning Alli with serious finality in her hazel-brown eyes.

Alli took a deep breath and blew it out, running her fingers through her hair roughly as she looked away. She knew she shouldn't expect Liz to understand what she felt, and realistically, she knew Liz was right. But how in the hell was she going to sever her ties with M.J.? No one could possibly understand what it was that drew her to the alluring woman, because she didn't understand it herself.

She had unwittingly fallen under M.J.'s spell, and she knew, however difficult it might be, that she had to push her lustful feelings aside and remember what she saw in that darkened hallway. She had to remember that M.J. was just fucking with her head, and she could not let herself fall victim to that any longer. Whatever she once thought they had was now a figment of her imagination; they were strictly co-workers, and nothing more. She told herself that she would try to avoid the woman, and if she had to meet with her, she'd keep it all-business.

*If M.J. can turn it on and turn it off, so can I, she thought defiantly, ...*So can I*.*

[Continued in Chapter 24](#)

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~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"I started out on the wrong foot,
Now I'm not myself;
I am Jekyll, I am Hyde,
Found this place to hide... come seek me;
Oh, so up and down,
So back and forth... so insecure;
Can't get this taste out of my mouth,
Swallow it down... pretend;
Then hold it, hold it all in,
Let it build up, oh build a bomb;
Then blow it, blow it away,
Clear it all out, just end it." - No Doubt*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The first week after the Christmas party was very difficult for Allison. She hated how she scurried from the elevator into her office, looking down at the floor and dodging eye contact with everyone, and she avoided M.J. and the entire 14th floor like the plague. She hated how her shoulders slumped and her head hung in shame, as though the entire building knew what had happened and how she'd been duped. She felt as if she were walking with a placard slung 'round her neck that read 'SUCKER'. Luckily, it seemed that M.J. was busy enough that she didn't need to call upon Alli for any reason, so the Assistant Director was content to stay in her office and keep herself occupied with HR issues.

Alli knew that she was being excessively anti-social with everyone, but she couldn't bring herself to give a shit. Her mind was a constant maelstrom of confusion, doubt, and anger, and she felt it best to just dwell within the confines of her office until she calmed down. She feared, however, that that might take awhile.

It had been nearly two weeks since the big Christmas bash, and M.J. was working frantically to meet numerous end-of-year deadlines. She had several Human Resources issues that she knew would require input from John or, preferably, Alli, but for some reason, every time she tried to get ahold of the Assistant HR Director, she either didn't answer her phone or didn't return the call. M.J. wasn't entirely sure why she felt an uneasiness every time she thought about Alli, but she had a niggling feeling in the back of her mind that told her something was amiss.

Not one to sit back and ponder things patiently, M.J. decided to take a little ride down to the 13th floor and see for herself where the Assistant Director was hiding.

The appearance of the tall, austere President in their office made the HR staff snap to attention. Although it wasn't unheard of for her to barge in through the doors unannounced, it always seemed to create a sense of doom and foreboding, and everyone walked on eggshells.

M.J. strode purposefully toward Alli's office, not pausing to acknowledge anyone else. When she reached the office, she saw that the lights were on, the computer was on, and papers were strewn around the desk, but there was no sign of the blonde occupant. Frowning and twisting her lips, M.J. turned and headed in the opposite direction.

Sensing someone's presence, John looked up from his computer screen to see his boss staring at him, a tight look of impatience etched in her stony face.

"M.J.? What can I do for you?" He asked with just a hint of dread.

"I'm looking for Allison," M.J. said matter-of-factly.

John craned his neck sideways to look over into Alli's office, seeing that she wasn't there. "I don't know where she went... I'm not her secretary," he answered rather snidely. He wondered why

M.J. was asking him where Alli was when she was the one who spent most of her time with the woman.

Why can't she just leave a note, like everyone else? He thought crossly.

M.J. made a small annoyed face, "Tell her that I need to see her when she has a moment," M.J. snapped, then turned on her heel and breezed briskly out of the office.

John sighed and shook his head, "Uh yeah, you're *welcome*, M.J.," he mumbled aloud.

Alli meandered slowly down the hallway as she made her way from the elevator back to her department. She sipped her cup of vanilla cappuccino languidly, reveling in the rich taste of the hot, sweet liquid. Taking leisurely little sojourns down to the cafeteria in search of comfort-food was becoming a bad habit for her this week, but it was a distraction she desperately needed. She was tired of sitting in her office all day, she was tired of feeling sorry for herself, she was tired of avoiding M.J.'s phone calls, and, she admitted, she was getting slightly bored.

As she entered the HR area and walked toward her office, John called out to her, "Alli... M.J. was here looking for you," he said as she approached his doorway. Unable to remain expressionless, she slid her eyes away and rolled them ever-so-slightly. John quirked his lips in an understanding smile, "She wants you to go see her when you have a minute," he added, fully enjoying the displeased look on his Assistant's face.

Alli sighed mildly, "Okay... thanks," she mumbled, then turned and walked back to her office, feeling a rush of anxiety wash over her. It seemed that her placid boredom was about to end.

Privately, John was glad to see that Alli wasn't as enamored of his boss as she once appeared to be. He had been getting concerned that his Assistant was spending more time with the company President than she did with him and her duties in HR, and - if Ray Calhoun was to be believed - there was more going on than just 'work'.

Yes, my little chats with Ray are always quite revealing, John mused inwardly. *But I knew it wouldn't take long before M.J. blew it,* he thought selfishly. *Now Alli knows what everyone else knows.*

M.J. was working diligently, trying to finish up her paperwork so that she could get out of the office and go home early, for a change. She glanced at her clock, noticing that it was well after four, and she had yet to hear from Allison. It was obvious now that Alli was indeed avoiding her, and she made a mental note to get to the bottom of it first thing tomorrow morning. Redoubling her efforts, she was feeling good about the headway she was making when a voice suddenly interrupted her train of thought.

"Working so hard, even at the end of the day?" Raiford said snidely as he waltzed into M.J.'s office unannounced.

M.J. looked up, fixing her obnoxious stepbrother with a glare, "Some of us take our work a bit more seriously than others," she snapped back.

"Oh yes... you're so noble and dedicated, M.J." Ray added with a mocking laugh.

M.J. dropped her eyes and returned to her work, "What do you want Ray?" She asked impatiently, refusing to look up at the pain-in-the-ass who had come to stand in front of her desk.

"Oh nothing... I just thought you might wanna know that there's some nasty gossip circulating around the company," he hinted coyly.

M.J. rested her hands on her desk and looked sternly up at him again, "I don't give a flying fuck about *gossip*, Ray." She spat tersely.

Ray smiled crookedly back at her, "Oh but you should give a fuck - the gossip involves you, sister dear."

M.J. felt an angry blush color her cheeks, and she pinned her step-sibling with a harsh, hateful stare. He was baiting her, of course, and she refused to give in.

Grinning wickedly, Ray picked up one of M.J.'s business cards, fingering it idly as he began pacing slowly in front of M.J.'s desk.

"It seems that everyone's talking about our normally reclusive company President and the *unusual* performance she gave at the Christmas party." He gloated at the silent, seething expression on M.J.'s face. "Personally, I think the sleazy red dress would have generated enough talk, but I think it was your drunken flirting with all the men - and women - that *really* got everyone's attention." Ray was positively giddy with the power he was wielding against his stepsister.

M.J. pushed her chair back and stood up, placing her hands on her desk and leaning menacingly toward her stepbrother.

"I don't have time for your stupid games, Ray. If you have nothing important to say to me, then get the fuck out of my office." She spat, her voice venomous, her eyes glacial.

Raiford smiled back at her and shrugged, "Have it your way, M.J." He said calmly, flipping the little card at her face as he turned and walked out her door, satisfied that he had ruffled the unflappable woman's feathers a little.

M.J. flopped back down in her chair, expelling the exasperated sigh that she'd been withholding the whole time Ray was in her office.

"Fucking asshole," M.J. cursed quietly to herself as she picked up the scorned business card and crumpled it in her hand.

Ray always had a way of getting under her skin, and he knew it. Of course he was just blowing smoke up her ass, but still, the fact that she let him get to her, even remotely, made her extremely angry - mostly with herself. She knew his underhanded techniques; she knew better than to give credence to anything he said. It had been so nice not having him around while he was on his excessive vacation; she hadn't had to put up with his bullshit for so long, maybe she was just out of practice. Since he'd returned from his hiatus, he seemed to be making more of a nuisance of himself than usual. It made M.J. wonder what he had been up to while he was gone, and she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Resolving not to let Ray ruin her agenda, M.J. returned to the task at hand, determined more than ever to finish early and go the hell home.

Alli put off making her visit to the 14th floor until the absolute end of the day. It was nearly five o'clock when she finally approached the desk of M.J.'s secretary. Her palms grew sweaty while she listened and watched Helen buzz M.J. and tell her that Alli had arrived, and when she heard M.J.'s smooth voice on the intercom saying, *'send her right in,'* her stomach constricted into a painful knot. ...This was going to be even harder than she feared.

Alli took a deep breath before she reached for the huge wooden door; when she pushed it open and stepped through the threshold, she expelled it quietly, facing her dread at last.

M.J. was seated at her desk, calmly typing away at her computer. Her hair was bound up tightly, as always, and she had her customary impeccable business suit attire on.

Hearing Alli's entrance, she glanced up, "Well, **finally**," M.J. said in a somewhat annoyed tone. "I was beginning to think you were intentionally avoiding me for some reason," she added, quirkling a brow and looking pointedly into Alli's darkened jade depths.

Of course she would be totally blunt about it... and she's obviously in a pissy mood... great, Alli thought as she felt herself blush, "I've been busy... it is year-end, you know," she managed to assert, jutting her chin out defiantly.

"Yes, I know. That's why I needed to see you," M.J. retorted perfunctorily. She paused, observing the tense disposition and decidedly unfriendly glare coming from the normally warm, placid woman in front of her. Raiford's words echoed in her head as she dropped her eyes to her desk and began rummaging through a stack of papers. Perhaps some of what he'd said held a smidgeon of truth? Could Alli be upset about her behavior at the Christmas Party? Had she perhaps heard the company gossip?

That's ridiculous, M.J. thought crossly, *if she believes any of the shit floating around the rumor-mill, then that's her problem.* Her initial notion of calmly finding out what was bothering her cute

friend went flying right out the window. Alli was obviously angry and uptight, and her body language bordered on outright hostility. This only served to spark the fight-cat tendencies within M.J.

If she wants to have a row with me about something, she'll have to initiate it... I refuse to give a damn, M.J. thought to herself before continuing aloud.

"I have several items that require your input before the holiday break," M.J. said sharply. She then proceeded to dish-out one assignment after another, not pausing to take a break, and not looking up at Alli once.

By the end of the brief meeting, the tips of Alli's ears burned red with anger and humiliation. M.J. was treating her like some sort of stupid lackey, and she wanted to strangle her. When the President finally ended things with a dismissive, *'that'll be all for now,'* Alli fairly bolted out of her chair and marched out the door, leaving M.J. staring blankly in her wake, feeling more disappointed than angry.

A million thoughts swirled inside M.J.'s head as she watched Alli streak out her door.

"Why am I always standing downhill when the shit decides to flow?" She mumbled quietly to herself, shaking her head.

It was just after five-thirty when Madison approached the open door of her sister's darkened office. She stopped short for a moment, seeing M.J. standing, staring out one of her big picture windows.

"Ooo... staring out the window... that's never a good sign," Madison said aloud as she walked toward her sister's stiff figure.

M.J. turned and gave her a warning look, "It's been a rough day," she snapped.

"Would that 'rough day' have anything to do with the huffy little blonde who just blew past me in the hallway without even saying 'hello'?" she queried knowingly.

M.J. shot her another look and plopped down into her chair with a sigh, "She's pissed off at me," the President admitted quietly.

"Why?" Madison asked as she came to perch on the edge of the desk.

"I don't know." M.J. said flatly.

"You don't **KNOW**?" Madison asked condescendingly, "I find it hard to believe that you have **no** idea what caused it."

"I don't! She was fine... up until a few weeks ago... until the Christmas Party... now she won't even talk to me." M.J. grumbled, pretending to sort through paper piles on her desk.

"Well, that should explain it, right there," Madison said matter-of-factly.

M.J. looked at her in confused anger, "What? What should explain *what*?!"

"Morgan... do you remember the party at all?" Madison asked incredulously.

"Of course I remember!" M.J. snapped.

"Well, do you remember how you *behaved*?!" Madison chided. M.J. just glared at her. "You were flirting and schmoozing shamelessly with *everyone*! I'm sure Alli saw you!" Madison said with a half-laugh.

"Hey! *You're* the one who told me that I had to schmooze!" M.J. yelled back, pointing a finger at her sister, "I didn't even wanna GO to the fucking party!"

"Yes, *schmooze*, Morgan, not get totally smashed and be completely over-the-top with everyone - *including* Alli!" Madison yelled back. "And I *certainly* didn't tell you to hang all over Kate Reed and make a spectacle of yourself!" The younger Whitton added for good measure.

"What?! I was *not* smashed, and I did *NOT* 'hang all over' Kate or anyone else!" M.J. growled through clenched teeth. "Have you been talking to fucking Ray?!" She said accusingly.

"Ray? What the hell does Ray have to do with this?" Madison asked, not understanding.

"Ray paid me a little visit earlier to gloat and inform me that everyone was *gossiping* about me and my 'performance' at the Christmas party," M.J. grumbled begrudgingly.

"Well, much as I hate to admit it, he could be right. That dress you wore caused enough of a commotion, let alone your *behavior*." Madison quipped in a disapproving tone.

M.J.'s mouth opened, then closed abruptly, and she clenched her jaw tight, grinding her teeth together. She wanted to punch her younger sister right in the face, right there in the middle of her office, in broad daylight. She also wanted to scream out and deny everything, but the truth was, she didn't have an extremely clear recollection of the exact events of that night. She knew that she had carried-on with Kate a little bit, and she vaguely remembered Kate making some very lewd suggestions and overtures, but the only heavy-duty flirting she had done - and enjoyed - was with Allison... at least that's what she recalled.

Madison could see the gears turning in her sister's mind, and she leaned forward to lock her steely eyes with M.J.'s.

"Did you ever stop to think that Alli probably saw you carrying-on with Kate, and everyone else,

and that she must wonder what in the hell kind of *game* you're playing with her? I mean, Jesus, Morgan, she must wonder which side of the proverbial fence you sit on because--,"

"Shut up, Maddy... just *SHUT-UP*!" M.J. interrupted with a shout, standing up abruptly, fists clenched tightly at her sides. She'd had just about enough of everyone climbing all over her today.

"No, Morgan! I won't stand here and watch you do this again!" Madison yelled back, slipping off the desk and standing firmly in front of her very angry, and in her opinion, stupid, sister. She'd be damned if she was going to sit idly by while M.J. destroyed herself - and someone else - again, just because she couldn't control her arrogance and curb her basal desires. M.J. said nothing, she just stuck her jaw out and glared menacingly.

"If Allison is pissed-off at you, then I say, make the break now... let her go," Madison added boldly. M.J.'s face dropped for a second and she just stared at her sister.

"Break off whatever it is you two have going before you make another mistake!" Madison said. "You can't un-cross lines and un-step boundaries, Morgan - once it's done, it's *done*!" She added emphatically, waving a hand. "You canNOT fuck up like this again." She said, taking a step toward her older sister and regarding her with serious, steely eyes.

An ebony eyebrow shot skyward and a smarmy grin quirked one corner of M.J.'s lips, "Interesting choice of words... or was that an intended pun?" She quipped sardonically as she sat back down in her chair again.

"Goddammit Morgan...," Madison hissed. "If you fuck up, do NOT expect me to be there to help you pick up the pieces this time! I *MEAN* IT!" Madison exclaimed loudly, pointing her finger in her sister's face. She turned on her heel briskly and stormed out of M.J.'s office, slamming the door so hard that the walls vibrated.

M.J. stared blankly at the door for about five minutes, then she let her head fall back as she exhaled a deep, wrenching sigh.

When did this all become so goddamn complicated? The tall woman asked herself. She hadn't intended for things to go awry, not really. She and Alli had been having fun, that was all... where was the harm in that? Her teasing and flirtatious manner was just a part of who she was... everyone knew it... it was never a real problem before. People flirted all the time, and no one got hurt... why was this time any different?

*Because it's obviously more than that to Alli, her subconscious annoyingly piped-in, and because you feel something for her... you know it... *she* knows it,* it persisted.

"Shut up!" M.J. mumbled aloud to herself.

*I don't *feel*... I can't *feel**, she thought as she closed her eyes. The only thing she could 'feel' right now was that she was losing her mind.

She propped her elbows on the armrests of her chair and let her head fall forward, pressing her fingers against her eyebrows in an attempt to massage away the massive headache that was forming there.

Why do women have to be so damn complex? M.J. asked rhetorically as she idly pondered the differences between the sexes. She'd been told numerous times that her mind worked more like a man's than a woman's, and she honestly didn't think that was such a bad thing. She didn't care much for relationships at all, but if one was necessary, then it should be minimal, and simple - cut and dry - avoiding all the emotional entanglements that most women seemed to thrive on.

Getting emotional was always a bad idea. When you get emotional, you get in too deep, and when you get in too deep, it makes it much harder to turn your back. And M.J. liked to turn her back. It was her modus operandi. She played with people, and when she grew weary of someone, she just dropped them, no questions asked. Most women would never do such a thing... most women let the person linger and haunt them. M.J. didn't do that... she refused. So if those things made her more like a guy than a chick, then so be it.

The thing was, she admitted disconcertingly, it seemed that Alli **was** haunting her. She didn't know when it started, or how long it'd been going on, but the attractive, intelligent little blonde had somehow seeped into her pores, silently invading the deepest, darkest recesses of her soul. M.J.'s mind didn't help things either; it tortured her often by stubbornly recalling the faint smell of dainty perfume... the ghostly whisper of a delicate touch... the soft expressiveness of the gentle features... the smirks that flitted across succulent lips... the honesty and openness that shone so brightly in the deep-set, uniquely-colored eyes.

M.J. absolutely hated to admit it, but as crazy as they made her, she was fond of all those things and missed the person they were attached to a great deal. Denying her feelings and thoughts was getting more and more difficult. On the surface, she could pretend that nothing had changed, but deep within, her internal monologue seemed to be complaining louder and louder with each passing day.

*"Well I do my best to understand dear,
But I'm still mystified, and I wanna know why,
I pick myself up off the ground,
To have you knock me back down, again and again;
And when I ask you to explain, you say,
'You gotta be cruel to be kind, in the right measure,
Cruel to be kind, it's a very good sign;
Cruel to be kind, means that I love you, baby,
You gotta be cruel, you gotta be cruel to be kind.' "* - N. Lowe

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The little tete-a-tete's with Raiford and her sister left M.J. feeling frustrated and restless for days, and Alli continued to dodge her, or, if they did meet up, she was curt and gave M.J. tons of attitude. As much as she missed their easy repartee and friendly - albeit risqué - flirtations, any warm, fuzzy feelings she thought she had for the blonde Assistant were quickly vanishing in the face of such obvious hostility and rancor.

M.J. continually wondered, if Alli was upset with her for her behavior at the Christmas party, which part upset her? The part where she flirted with **her**, or the part where she flirted with **others**? The brunette remembered feeling pretty secure in teasing and touching Alli the way she did, because all the things they had done and said leading up to that moment seemed to indicate that Alli would be okay with such contact. She tried very hard to remember what Alli's reaction had been, but all she could recall was Kate being there between them all evening, like a thorn.

M.J. wasn't one to apologize, especially for people and things she had no control over. So if Alli was upset by Kate and her antics, what could M.J. say about that? She certainly had no control over Kate.

God, did anyone? She wondered to herself. Surely Alli could see that Kate was just antagonizing M.J. intentionally... surely she could tell that the redhead meant nothing... couldn't she? If she couldn't, then what could M.J. do to convince her otherwise? And more importantly, should she even bother trying?

*This is why dating women *sucks**, M.J. grouched to herself more than once.

Part of her wanted to be brutal and just let the little blonde stew away in her downstairs office for as long as she wanted. But another part of her realized, reluctantly, that she sorely yearned for Alli's presence too. Other than Alli, M.J. couldn't think of anyone whom she actually liked and whose company she truly enjoyed. The question was... was their friendship now damaged beyond repair?

After much consternation, M.J. decided that she would simply treat Alli as she always treated her. She supposed she should be angry for the haughty attitude the blonde had been giving her lately, but she knew that it was probably just Alli's way of handling her feelings. She also knew that if she was cold and rude right back to her, Alli would only retreat further and they'd never have a good working relationship with one another again. And, if she tip-toed around her, Alli would think she was guilty of something, and M.J. vowed and declared that she did **not** feel guilty about anything. She didn't owe Alli any explanations... she was free to flirt and carry-on with whomever she wanted.

There was never any inferred exclusivity... if she misinterpreted our relationship and expected anything from me, that was her problem, not mine, M.J. insisted to herself, day after day... after

day.

The Christmas holiday passed in a quick, quiet blur, and the New Year was suddenly upon everyone. Alli had decided to spend Christmas Eve with her father, and Christmas Day with Kaitlyn and Josh.

M.J., on the other hand, spent her Christmas Eve alone in front of her television, and visited with Madison on Christmas Day only.

It rained heavily both days.

It was a dreary morning in early January when all the Department Directors met in the 14th floor conference room to go over budget planning and preparations for the new year. As usual, John drug Alli along because, she knew, he sucked at figures, and he had gotten her to draft up all the budget and expense report documentation. The man's knack for continually weaseling his way out of directorial assignments was truly amazing.

Alli was relieved to find that M.J. was not present at the meeting. It was just Madison and Raiford, and lots and lots of assorted pastries and coffees. Alli decided she could handle morning meetings like this.

Liz Jacobs had just finished her Finance presentation when John started in, albeit weakly, presenting the personnel and hiring forecasts to everyone. He reached a point in his speech where people started asking questions, and when Madison began inquiring about one new position in particular, John - like the spineless jellyfish he was - looked to Alli to back him up and fill in the blanks. Knowing the man like she did, Alli chimed-in flawlessly as soon as he looked at her.

"We do have one Commercial Engineer already, that is true, but since the Commercial Building Division seems to be growing and surpassing the Residential Building Division, those involved think that another Engineer position is very much warranted, and a search should begin as soon as possible." Sometimes she loved sounding so professional and polished.

The polish received a tarnishing blemish in no time flat, however, and it came in the form of an unseen, rich, contralto voice from the back of the room somewhere.

"A decision has already been made regarding the additional Commercial Engineer position."

All heads turned in the direction of the disembodied, but distinct voice. M.J. stood at the back of the room, a coffee cup in her hand. "The hiring for that position is being suspended indefinitely." She finished flatly, sipping casually from her styrofoam cup.

Alli had to catch herself before she let her jaw drop on the conference table. *She sneaks in here*

*and doesn't say one word until *I* say something, Alli thought crossly. Son-of-a-bitch!*

Her anger flared, and she was unable to keep her mouth shut, "I don't believe those involved in the hiring are **aware** of that," she snapped, eying the woman who was now a stranger to her with a disdainful, wide-eyed glare.

"Well they soon will be," M.J. shot back succinctly, her cerulean eyes not leaving the angry jade ones that pinned her. An awkward silence ensued for what seemed like an eternity until Madison made a comment and moved the meeting forward again.

After a few more minutes, Madison suggested everyone take a break, which was met with eager rumblings as everyone raced off to either the bathroom or the snack table. Alli watched warily as M.J. stayed in the back of the room, casually talking to people, a look of permanent arrogance parked on her elegant features. Alli could feel her blood boil as she continued to watch while M.J. grinned cheekily and flirted with men who smiled their smarmy little smiles while kissing her Presidential ass. It made the blonde ill to witness such forced coyness and bullshit bravado.

Alli forced her eyes away from the scenery and stood up to make her way over to the snack table ...another pastry should help to quell the uneasy feeling in her stomach. As she was helping herself to a cheese danish, she suddenly felt the pressure of another body as someone brushed a little too intimately against her backside. She flinched, dropping her danish onto the table. She didn't even have to turn and look; she knew of only one person who would have the audacity to do such a thing.

"Oops," M.J. said, glancing at the dropped treat. "Here... let me get that for you, hon," she whispered with sugary sweetness as she reached an arm around Alli's waist to pick up the item and re-deposit it on the plate. M.J.'s arm conveniently brushed along Alli's body, causing all kinds of alarms to go off inside the Assistant Director's head.

*Jesus *Christ* I can't believe her!* Alli thought as she closed her eyes briefly, willing away the feelings of arousal that surged through her at M.J.'s touch. Her mind was screaming with indignance and protest at the brunette's brashness, but her body was faltering and betraying her as it thoroughly enjoyed the contact and yearned pathetically for more.

Forcing her mind to remain steadfast in her conviction to be angry with the tall woman, Alli snapped her eyes open and turned abruptly to face M.J., who was standing with a self-satisfied smirk planted firmly on her ruby lips, and a dark gleam in her eyes that taunted dangerously.

Intent on making it known that she would not be intimidated and made to play the fool any longer, Alli took a bold step toward M.J., fixing her with a raised brow and a dark glare of her own.

"Thanks, **hon**," she said in a low, sultry tone. She then took a bite of her danish and licked her lips saucily, regarding M.J. with a look that was meant to throw down the gauntlet before turning away and walking back to her seat, her head held high.

*There! Take *that* Miss High-and-Mighty!* Alli thought with a smile. ...*Two can play this game,*

M.J. Whitton.

And so, yet another cat-and-mouse game began between the two women. This was one that Alli was very unfamiliar with, but she found herself jumping right in with determination, hoping to learn well enough as it went along. Judging from the numerous smirks and sly looks that M.J. threw her way, she assumed she was adapting quite well. Of course Alli knew that she was playing with some very dangerous fire. She had first-hand experience of just what M.J. was capable of, but instead of tucking her tail between her legs and running for cover, she found herself refusing to be defeated and sit on the sidelines.

The two women would meet or cross paths here and there, sniping at each other one time, then flirting another. It was odd, and usually frustrating, but it was also enjoyable, in a strange, demented sort of way. It certainly wasn't the way Alli expected things to pan out. Her relationship with M.J. just kept getting more and more bizarre, and she didn't know how to put the brakes on it.

Late one morning, right after a Director's meeting that was rife with the usual sharp remarks and exchanges, Liz stopped by Alli's office and asked her to go to lunch. Alli agreed, not thinking anything of it. Soon into the meal, however, she got the feeling that Liz had an ulterior motive...

"So... what's the deal with you and M.J.?" Liz asked nonchalantly.

Alli frowned, watching her friend's expression carefully, "No 'deal'... why?"

"I saw you two... 'talking' in the hallway after the meeting this morning," Liz said, trying to sound casual. "What was that little altercation about?"

Alli quickly recalled her little run-in with the President. They had discussed a worker who was being terminated, and they'd had a brief, but intense exchange about the unreasonable way M.J. wanted it handled. M.J. had intentionally stood very close to Alli, towering over her and trying to intimidate her, but Alli had refused to back off.

"Nothing. Just M.J. trying to employ her usual disarm-and-disable tactics," Alli said with a slight grin.

"Looked like you two were flirting with each other to me," Liz said in a warning tone.

"No, I was just defending myself and giving her a dose of her own medicine," All insisted.

"Same thing, isn't it?" Liz quipped.

"I dunno... is it?" Alli asked with feigned innocence.

"Oh come OFF it, Alli! I thought you learned your lesson with her?! You're playing with fire... and you're gonna get burned!" Liz exclaimed angrily, her normally warm eyes flaring uncharacteristically.

Alli looked at her in shock for a moment. She'd never seen Liz angry before, and the woman's outburst about something that didn't even concern her seemed a little odd.

"Liz, for chrissake! I'm not a kid - I can take care of this myself!" Alli asserted.

Liz continued to regard her seriously, "No, you aren't a kid, but you did admit to being naïve, didn't you?" she shot back.

"Naïve - maybe; completely unequipped to deal with the situation - no," Alli insisted, her brows furrowed as she regarded Liz with indignance.

Liz sighed and looked away for a moment, "I'm sorry, I just... I *know* how she is, Alli... I know what she's capable of, and--,"

Alli interrupted, "How do you know what she's like Liz?" she asked with a frown, "I mean, *really*?"

"I've worked here for four years, Alli - I KNOW her," Liz said with wide eyes.

"But have you worked with her as *much* as I have? Have you gotten as close to her as I have?" Alli said, trying not to sound condescending or arrogant.

Liz gave her an incredulous look, "What are you trying to say? That you know her sooo much better than everyone else? That she doesn't deserve the reputation she has?" Liz said sarcastically.

"Well... yeah... maybe that is what I'm saying," Alli replied somewhat sheepishly.

"Oh Jesus... oh Alli... please - tell me you're not caving! Tell me you're not falling for her fucking Academy-Award-winning ACT! *PLEASE*!?" Liz said loudly, motioning with her hands.

Alli dropped her fork and brought both her hands up to rub her eyes as tears began to threaten and burn behind them. How could she possibly make someone like Liz understand what she felt for M.J.? M.J. was so frustratingly complex; one minute she was funny and flirtatious, the next she was gnashing teeth and claws. She was so complex, such a challenge... so very alluring, and so incredibly maddening. ...And Alli just couldn't seem to stay away from her, no matter how hard she tried. She was inexplicably drawn in to her like the proverbial moth to the flame.

Both Alli and Liz sat in silence for a few moments, each uncertain what to say to the other. Finally Alli spoke quietly, "I just... I can't make myself stay away from her, Liz... I don't know

why... I don't know what it is that pulls me to her... but it's... it's something... something
powerful."

"Yeah, it's called a Black Hole, and it's going to suck you in and spit you out into the deepest, darkest recesses of outer space, never to be heard from again!" Liz said with much dramatic flair as she gave her friend a wide-eyed look.

Alli sniffed and looked up at Liz, "Y'know, I'm sure that you mean well, but you're really not helping me here," she said with a wry twist of her lips.

Liz relented and sighed, reaching out to touch Alli's hand, "I'm sorry... I just don't know what else I can do besides warn you... I guess you have to decide for yourself," she said solemnly.

"I know... I know," Alli said, releasing a huge sigh. Suddenly her salad didn't look appetizing at all.

Five o'clock had come and gone three hours ago for the President of Whitton, Inc. Sighing aloud and looking at the clock, M.J. told herself that it was time to go home and get out of this hell-hole that she called her 'career'. She gathered her things half-heartedly, not caring if she left her desk looking like a mess for a change. Trudging wearily out to the elevator, she climbed into the car and pushed the garage-floor button mindlessly.

The elevator rode down only a few floors before the chime sounded and the doors opened, revealing the tired face of the Finance & Payroll Director. Liz Jacobs' earthy eyes flashed with a brief look of anger as she regarded her boss. M.J. responded with a small, polite smile, but was slightly puzzled by the sudden and obvious pissed-off look on Liz's face.

More Christmas-party backlash, I suppose, she thought with an internal eye-roll. The Finance Director climbed aboard stiffly without a word, keeping her gaze fixed on the elevator's digital display panel.

"Working late?" M.J. asked with feigned innocence as the ride downward began. If Liz was pissed at her about something, she wanted to know what it was. She was tired of getting the cold shoulder from everyone, and if she needed to push the woman until she broke under a barrage of questions and innuendos, that's what she'd do.

"Yes," Liz said in a clipped tone, refusing to look at the President, "Carole and I have been working on those budget-projections you wanted this week."

M.J. paused for a moment, crinkling her brows, "Why isn't Carole here working late with you?"

Liz pursed her lips and gritted her teeth as she continued to stare at the decreasing numbers on the display panel, "Because Carole has a family, and I don't like asking her to stay late night after night."

"Why not? If it's necessary to get the assignment completed on time, then you have every right to ask." M.J. sniffed matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, well, *some* of us have more *scruples* than others when it comes to taking *advantage* of their office *assistants*," Liz said, stressing the words with heavy innuendo.

"...What?" M.J. asked, unable to conceal her confusion.

"Nothing." Liz closed her eyes and shook her head. This was the last thing she wanted to be faced with today - tangling with *this* woman.

"No - what are you trying to imply, Liz?" M.J. said, now irritated with the Finance Director and well aware that Liz was hinting at something that obviously had her provoked.

"Nothing, M.J. Forget it. You just... go ahead and live your carefree, ruthless life as you always do." Liz said with forced indifference, flicking her hand for emphasis.

"Well gee, Elizabeth, I'm sorry, but I didn't think any aspect of my *ruthless* life was any of *your* business... is it?" M.J. spat out tersely, turning to face Liz and pinning her with a harsh, steely-blue glare, her anger flaring dangerously.

"It is when it concerns a friend of mine." Liz said lowly, finally turning and locking stares with the taller woman.

"Really? And just what 'friend' might that be?"

"Allison."

"Ohhhh, I see," M.J. said flippantly, making an exaggerated face. The elevator had finally reached the parking-garage level, and it chimed brightly as the doors opened. M.J. ignored it, however, as she continued to hold Liz in a burning blue stare.

"So let me guess - you're going to turn this into another Alex Wiczleski situation, right?" M.J. asked, stepping in closer to Liz and intentionally towering over the slightly shorter woman.

Liz refused to budge, however, and she glared right back at the President, engaging them in a silent little five-second show-down.

"Jesus Christ, Liz... you need to get a fucking *life*!" M.J. finally growled as she broke the staring-contest and turned, walking out of the elevator. Before she got away, however, Liz ran after her, catching her by the arm. M.J. trailed bright, ominous-looking, aquamarine orbs from the hand that gripped her arm up to Liz's eyes, and the Finance Director immediately released her, keenly aware of the dangerous territory she was now treading in.

"Funny that you should mention Alex Wiczleski," Liz began with determination. "What you're

doing to Allison is eerily similar to the 'Alex situation', isn't it? You don't seem to learn your lessons very well, M.J." Liz sneered, not caring if the tall brunette decked her or what.

"This is **nothing** like the 'Alex situation,' Liz - don't even **try** to draw a comparison," M.J. replied lowly, her eyes darkening further as she took another step and leaned in toward Liz, bringing them very close. "You have **no** idea what really happened back then, so just do everyone a favor and keep your own goddamn nose on your own goddamn face!" She growled through clenched teeth.

"Oh yes I do know - Alex was my friend too, and I know **exactly** what happened!" Liz spat. She was already in deep; she figured she might as well go for broke. "You used her and then cast her aside, like she was nothing but a two-bit whore! You-

M.J. cut her off sharply, "**You** don't know SHIT, Elizabeth!" She cursed, her lips pulled back in a feral sneer. Her face was so close to Liz's that the Finance Director could feel the puffs of breath against her face. "You only know what Alex told you, and I can ASSURE you that her version was **VERY** skewed! Alexandra Wicszleski WAS a two-bit whore, and she was fucking PSYCHOTIC! You think you knew her, but believe me - you **didn't**! No one did! She got **EXACTLY** what she deserved!" M.J. poked a finger, hard, into Liz's chest as her shouts echoed loudly off the concrete surfaces of the parking garage.

"Fine, M.J., fine... say whatever you want and justify yourself however you need. All I know is that you **used** Alex, and you're doing the **same** damn thing to Allison!" Liz yelled, feeling a little nervous at the anger radiating off the taller woman.

"Is that what Allison thinks, or is that what **you** think?" M.J. asked, pinning the Finance Director with a dark, but suddenly calm, stare.

Liz said nothing, she just continued to give M.J. her best glare in return.

"...Yeah, that's what I thought," M.J. said disgustedly, bringing herself back up to full height and out of Liz's face. "Allison is a big girl; if she has a problem with me, then I fully expect her to discuss it with **me**, and no one else - **especially** not you." M.J. said with finality as she turned abruptly and stormed off toward her car.

Liz watched her go, throwing daggers at her the whole way.

"Christ... what in the hell could Alli **possibly** see in you?" Liz grumbled to herself, then turned and walked toward her own car.

*"Can't think of anything to do,
Yeah, my left brain knows that all love is fleeting,*

*She's just looking for something new,
Yeah, I said it once before,
But it bears repeating now;
Fell in love with a girl,
Fell in love once and almost completely,
She's in love with the world,
But sometimes these feelings can be so misleading." - The White Stripes*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When M.J. finally got home that evening, she was angry and frustrated. The little run-in with Liz Jacobs left her with a lingering feeling of guilt, and she detested that. She wanted to deny that the woman's harsh words didn't hold an ounce of truth, but deep down inside, she knew she couldn't. She was playing with Alli, that was true, but what Liz didn't know was that she had been thinking more and more that she might have feelings for Alli, and that's what made everything different.

As she sat in her living room, staring at the walls and trying to decide if she was going insane, she contemplated going out for a quick 'fix' to distract herself and preoccupy her troubled mind. She decided against it, however. Having mindless, anonymous sex with some bimbo wouldn't ease anything; it would only complicate things further. Instead she changed into work-out clothes and released her fury and frustration on an unsuspecting punching bag, occasionally picturing Liz Jacobs' face on the side of the canvas.

After working herself to the point of exhaustion, she shed her sweaty clothes and headed for the pool, needing to take a long, relaxing dip. Hanging her arms along the edge while letting her body float in the warm water, M.J. began to seriously ponder her relationship with Allison Phillips.

She wondered how long Alli would remain pissed at her, and she tried to back-track and figure out what started the two of them down the strange path they seemed to be on. Usually she didn't bother thinking deep thoughts like this - especially about someone else. Fretting over feelings - hers or anyone else's - was a waste of her time. She preferred to just focus on the day-to-day dealings of her life... she liked to lose herself in her work and shut off the outside world. It was so much easier that way. But things hadn't been easy since Allison had come along. Things were now hopelessly complicated.

She wanted to convince herself that it wasn't attraction she felt for Allison; she wanted to say that it was just friendship... co-workership... whatever you want to call it. Granted, it was an unusual relationship that currently seemed to be on the skids, but still, it was more than she'd had in a very long time. She momentarily thought that she could blame it all on feeling confused because she'd forgotten what having a friend was like.

I've just forgotten how to feel close to another human being, besides Madison, and sometimes I

don't even really feel that close to her, she thought. ...But that wouldn't work. If this 'thing' between the two of them was really just 'friendship', then why did she continually notice every little thing about Alli? Why did she find herself anticipating every emotion that danced across her soft features... why did she find herself always staring at the little cleft of her upper lip... why did she constantly marvel at the extraordinary color of her expressive, deeply-set eyes... why was she so hypnotized by the tantalizing scent of the smaller woman...? Why didn't she just dismiss her, like she did everyone else?

...You know why, her subconscious taunted. *Stop lying to yourself!*

Damn, why can't I just stop thinking about all this?! M.J. thought as she released her arms and sunk completely down into the pool, hoping to drown her melancholy before she drowned herself.

So what if I never admit the truth? So what if I'm lying to myself? ...It's a comfortable lie, she thought.

The truth was that it had nothing to do with the fact that they'd be crossing the 'just friends and co-workers' line... it had nothing to do with work at all. Their working together closely was just happenstance, albeit a fortuitous one. Alli never asked why M.J. called upon her so often; she never asked if there wasn't someone else M.J. should call instead of her; she just answered whenever the President beckoned. They clicked with each other right from the very start, and the flirting and bantering took off from there.

So M.J. was fairly certain, when she was honest with herself, that Alli was attracted to her just as much as she was attracted to Alli. The knowledge of the attraction isn't what scared her - she got off on that part, so that wasn't the problem. And the anxiety wasn't because she was trying to avoid an entanglement out of the worry that it could go sour and things could end badly - whenever M.J. had allowed herself to fantasize about the possibility of a deeper relationship with Alli, the fear of things not working out didn't scare her.

Alli would never hurt me... at least, not like I'd hurt her. She surfaced, wiping the water from her eyes and blinking rapidly.

So what is it then? What makes me float here, listless and miserable, agonizing about all this and torturing myself with these ridiculous thoughts? What am I scared of? She floated, treading water in the deep end of the pool, not wanting to answer herself, but feeling it push to the forefront of her mind anyway.

...Needing someone. I'm afraid of what it feels like to need and be needed. I'm afraid of what it means. I've never wanted anyone quite like this before, and I'm afraid that if I need her too much, I'll end up losing myself. I almost made that mistake before... I can't make it again.

It had been such a long time since she'd truly felt anything for anyone, let alone something this strong and this intense. And maybe she had never really felt it before at all? Maybe she wasn't sure that it was 'need' that she was feeling?

*...Or maybe I *am*, and that's why I'm so scared? ...Goddddd #\$\$%&*!!* She closed her eyes and sunk back down into the depths of the warm water again.

So what was the answer? What should she do about it, if anything at all? Realistically, she knew that she should just continue to play the denial card and keep playing her little games with the feisty blonde - they were damn good at it, after all. But, she also knew that a time was rapidly approaching when she was going to have to face the music. They couldn't keep up this pace forever, and when the moment of truth arrived, she truly didn't know what she'd say or do.

Even if I could admit... whatever, to myself, I could never admit anything to Alli. M.J. thought that the possibility of them being anything more than co-workers had to be non-existent, especially since she fucked the blonde over with the whole Christmas-party fiasco. Before that, she might have bet that Alli would have been willing to venture into uncharted territory... but now, she couldn't be sure. She surfaced again, catching her breath and blinking the water away.

*Okay, so I'm an idiot... so I'll just keep things copasetic between us... just treat her as I have been... maintain a safe, cool distance... yeah, yeah, that's the ticket. ...Not. Goddamn... I am in *serious* fucking trouble,* she thought, shaking her head as she closed her eyes and let her body slip beneath the surface of the water again.

When Alli finally walked through the door of her apartment that night, she was exhausted beyond words. The day had been too busy, and too full of emotional stress. Her angry run-in with M.J. was fraught with sexual tension, the lunch with Liz had turned into a major guilt-trip, and to top it all off, some idiot nearly ran her off the road on the way home from the Chinese take-out place, and her dinner had tipped-over on the seat of her car.

She was in her kitchen cleaning up the dripping mess that, fortunately, managed to contain most of itself to the inside of the paper bag, when her telephone rang.

"Hello-o?"

"Alli!" Kaitlyn's voice rang out, making Alli smile in relief. It was a nice ending to a stressful day.

The two sisters talked for nearly two hours, discussing everything from their mother to their menstrual cycles. When the conversation veered into 'work' territory, Kait noticed that Alli grew a bit quiet.

"So everything's going well then?"

"Yeah, everything's fine." Alli answered unconvincingly.

"How's it going working for the big boss... what's her name again? B.J.?" Kait asked,

intentionally trying to sound casual.

Alli laughed and shifted her position on the sofa, "M.J., and that's going okay too... most of the time," she mumbled under her breath.

"What? Whaddya mean?" Kait pressed, sensing she'd hit upon a sore spot.

"Nothing... everything's fine," Alli insisted with a sigh.

"C'mon Alli... I know that sound... what's wrong with your big boss-woman?"

"Nothing!" Alli said with a laugh, "She's okay, really," she tried to sound more convincing.

"Okay"? Just 'okay'? You don't like her?" Kait asked

"Yah, I like her... most of the time," Alli hedged again.

"Most of the time"? What does that mean?" Kait squeaked playfully.

Alli laughed again, "*Nothing*", Kait, alright? She's like most bosses - usually fine, but she has her... *moments* too," Alli said.

Kait made a 'hmm' noise and paused for a second, "Y'know, you never did tell me if she's pretty?" she asked playfully.

Alli made a groaning sound, "Don't even go there Kate - she's the *President*," she said.

"So," the older woman persisted.

"SO... how would it look for me - the Human Resources Assistant Director - to be messing around with the company President!?" Alli said incredulously, "Let alone the fact that we're both *women*!"

"Oooo, 'messing around'? Alli! You *do* like her!" Kait said with a smile.

"No, I *don't*! ...not like that," Alli tried to insist in her most convincing voice.

"Why not 'like that'?"

"I *told* you, she's the *President*!" Alli silently prayed that Kait didn't push her for details; she couldn't handle that right now.

"It shouldn't matter what your positions or titles are, Alli. If you like each other, you should be able to date!" It seemed so simple to Kait, but then again, she was happily married... and hetero.

Alli laughed out loud, "The business world isn't like elementary school, Kait... I mean, would

you date your principal, for godssake?" Alli asked, trying to draw a comparison for her sister.

"Ugh! No way! He's an old man!"

Alli sighed, "But if he WEREN'T... would you DATE your boss?"

Kait paused for a moment, thinking, "Yeah, sure... why not?"

Alli sighed in exasperation again, "Well, I can't. It would be viewed badly."

"You concern yourself too much with what other people might think, Peanut," Kait said warmly, invoking her little sister's detested pet-name.

"Don't call me that. And I *have* to be concerned with what people think... I'm in HR... it's my job." Alli insisted.

"No, that isn't it. You just can't let yourself go, Alli. You can't let yourself hope that *maybe* you and this chick might be interested in each other."

"Oh please... god," Alli sighed, clapping her hand over her eyes.

"I'm serious! Have you even flirted with her or anything? She flirted with you?"

"Oh yessss... we've flirted quite a bit, actually," Alli said, making her eyes wide.

Kait smiled wide, "Well, okay! Then she likes you?"

"Nooooo... you don't understand, Kait - M.J. flirts with EVERYONE. We had a Christmas party, and she flirted shamelessly with evvveryyyone - including me. It's just the way she is." Kait paused, momentarily at a loss for words.

"She's one of those people who likes to fuck with people's heads. She does it all the time. In fact, that's why I'm not really on ... 'good terms' with her right now. I'm kinda tired of the head games." Alli admitted quietly, a little embarrassed.

"Hmmm... well, that's too bad," Kait answered, unsure of what to say. She could tell that Alli was feeling a little deflated and wondered if all of it was due to this M.J. person.

"Yes... yes, it is." Alli answered with a deep, breathy sigh as she raked her hand through her hair.

Kait knew that noise, and she knew what it meant. "It sounds like you're disappointed... are you?"

"Not disappointed, just... I dunno... I dunno what I am anymore, Kait," Alli mumbled as she let herself stretch out completely on her sofa, feeling suddenly dejected.

"Look, Peanut, I'm no head-shrinker - that's your bag. But my suggestion is this... if you think you might like this woman, you gotta show her. Give her some reason to pay attention to you more than anyone else. Show her that she's wasting her time flirting with those other people. If you want it bad enough, Alli, you gotta stick your neck out and take a chance. You'll never hook-up with anyone if you don't." Kait finished sincerely.

She loved her little sister dearly, but Alli's reticence to date and take chances on romance was driving her nuts. She could tell that Alli was lonely, and it was a damn shame because she had so much to offer someone; she just needed a little kick in the pants to get the ball rolling. Maybe this M.J. woman wouldn't be the one for her, but regardless, Alli needed to get out there and start testing the waters again.

"So... whaddya think, baby sis?" Kait inquired after a few seconds of silence.

Alli sighed deeply, "I dunno Kait. I'll think about it, okay? That's all I can say right now." She said, her eyes closed and her mind abuzz with a multitude of thoughts and fears.

"Okay... I'll settle for that... for now," Kait answered with a smile in her voice, and it made Alli smile as well.

*"But I don't care if you don't,
And I don't feel it if you don't,
And I don't want it if you don't,
And I won't say it,
If you won't say it first;
Oh oh oh... let's go to bed." - The Cure*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The New Year progressed with quiet banality, and the cool, gray bleakness of the January skies permeated everything and everyone. A few weeks passed with tensions remaining the same between Alli and M.J. One time they would meet and M.J. would act friendly, like nothing had ever transpired between them, and at other times, her cold, lifeless blue eyes would pass right through the blonde as though she were a total stranger. Alli seriously began to wonder if the woman had a split personality.

For her part, Alli tried to just go with the flow, but M.J. always made it difficult somehow. The aggravating brunette seemed to be able to read the Assistant Director like a book. If Alli was in a good mood, M.J. cut her down by being harsh; if she was in a bad mood, M.J. teased and flirted and threw her off-balance. Despite the insanity of the situation, Alli knew she was still very

much attracted to the perplexing woman, no matter how schizophrenic she seemed or how dreadfully she treated her. Even with all the warnings and threats from Liz, and her own vow to keep her distance, it only took one sultry, side-long glance from those baby blues, and Alli was a goner. She spent many nights, alone in her bed, fantasizing about long legs and long fingers, and drowning herself with memories of deep, bewitching, azure pools. Of course she knew that she was a pathetic, hopeless love-fool, but she figured if she had to rely on a fantasy-figure for her jollies, why not employ the best?

There were times, however, when Alli's senses would reign supreme, and she realized that the ridiculous love-hate cycle that the two of them were engaged in had to stop sometime. M.J.'s hot and cold behavior and constant chain-jerking was starting to affect her work as well as her personal life, and Alli was, quite frankly, tired of the torment. She vowed and declared to herself that some time, some day, when M.J. pushed her too far, she was going to call the aggravating woman's bluff.

The day of reckoning came a little sooner than Alli bargained for. It was a Friday, and she had endured a long week of getting her chain yanked by her nemesis. M.J. burdened her with all sorts of assignments and hounded her with constant nit-picking and relentless questions about whatever she was working on. Alli was seriously ready to blow her stack.

It was the end of the day, and M.J. had asked her to drop off some paperwork before she left that evening. Dreading facing the tall pain-in-the-ass, Alli waited until the very last minute, as usual.

When she reached M.J.'s office, the President was parked at her desk in her standard position, tapping away at her computer. She didn't look up as Alli walked in. She *did* look up, however, when Alli threw the requested paperwork carelessly onto her desk.

"That's everything you need," Alli remarked flatly, not caring if the President reamed her out for being rude.

The corner of M.J.'s mouth curled upwards and she regarded the blonde saucily, "I doubt that *very* much." She said in a low, teasing voice as she picked up the pile of papers and flipped through them quickly.

Alli wasn't surprised by M.J.'s inferred meaning, but since she wasn't in the mood for jokes, she merely pursed her lips and rolled her oceanic eyes as she waited impatiently.

M.J. saw the body language in front of her desk and decided to torment just a little, "Have a seat while I look at this." She offered lightly as she rose from her chair and began to walk to the front of her desk.

"No thanks," Alli snapped back, "I have to get going."

M.J. glanced up, giving her a mildly curious look, "Hot date tonight?" She taunted.

Tch, I wish, Alli groaned internally. "None of your business," she instead asserted calmly.

M.J. merely smirked and continued to peruse the papers. Alli felt her impatience grow as M.J. took her good 'ole time, enjoying making the blonde wait, obviously. Alli could only glance around the disturbingly stark office, wondering again why M.J. refused to add personal touches to the place.

Nothing personal... no attachment... no emotion... actually, it suits her quite perfectly; I don't know why I'm surprised, Alli thought sarcastically.

The silence lasted for several minutes until M.J. suddenly turned and thrust the papers back toward Alli.

"Well this won't do." She said with a disappointed sigh.

"What?! What do you mean?" Alli spouted angrily, snatching the papers from M.J. and staring at them incredulously. How dare this woman just throw all her hard work out the window?! She had poured over the figures for hours and hours; it was **exactly** what she had asked for!

"It's not right," M.J. said indifferently. "The time frames and corresponding figures are all off," she shrugged carelessly.

Alli's face was suddenly burning with red-hot anger. She knew damn well that the figures and time frames were perfectly fine. M.J. was just jerking her around - as usual - and pushing her buttons - as usual - and she'd had enough of it.

"Y'know what, M.J., - fine... you want me to do the whole damn thing over again - **FINE**... I'll do it. But it's gonna have to wait. I'm going **home**." Alli asserted, biting her words off harshly. Her face was red and pinched tight with impatience, and her temper threatened to spike right out her ears, but she refused to let M.J. do this to her yet again.

M.J. couldn't help but smirk triumphantly at the fuming blonde standing rigidly in front of her. Of course she was being wretched, tormenting the poor girl like she was, but it seemed to her that Alli was asking for it with her insolent, combative behavior. She leaned back against her desk, crossing her arms and staring deeply at Alli's flushed face.

"Yes, by all means, go home, Allison... take a nice, hot bath... **relieve** yourself, or **something**," M.J. said, lacing her feigned concern with sarcasm as she spoke in a low voice. She very blatantly let her gaze wander hotly up and down the petite figure in front of her. "It's really not good for you to be so... **tense** all the time." She finished with a sly, predatory grin.

Alli was nearly livid. The woman just didn't know when to stop. She just kept pushing and pushing. Would the torment never end? Alli couldn't take it anymore... she literally felt something inside her chest burst, red and hot, and her ears were ringing.

"Why do you always do that?" Alli abruptly snapped, locking stormy, dark green eyes onto M.J.

"Do what?" M.J. asked calmly, a very subtle smile playing on her lips.

"Rake your eyes over me." Alli said with a continued glare.

M.J. had to fight to keep the smirk on her face from widening into a full-blown grin, "I *rake* my eyes over you?" She asked, feigning incredulousness.

"Yes, you *RAKE* your eyes over me... over my body. It's rude and unprofessional." Alli said with haughty indignity, propping a hand on her hip and jutting her jaw out defiantly.

M.J. wanted to laugh out loud at the little woman's forced act of disdain, but she refrained. Whatever Alli had stuck up her ass was obviously reaching the exploding point, and M.J. was glad to finally be getting to the source of the problem. If goading the blonde into an argument would help clear the air, then that's what she'd do. Besides, she always enjoyed a good sparring match with a worthy opponent... and Alli was definitely worthy.

"Maybe I'm just admiring your choice of clothing." M.J. responded flippantly as she intentionally kept her eyes locked and her voice even and calm, the cruel smile firmly in place. She loved little heated exchanges like this, and she was impressed with Alli's frank initiation of it. The bold, angry body language coming from the Assistant Director was beginning to turn her on, and she had to fight to keep her attention focused.

"Letting your gaze wander up and down my body is a funny way of admiring my *clothes*." Alli shot back, her own voice dropping a level as she quirked a scornful brow at the taller woman.

"Well what would you rather I do? Say 'nice pants' and walk away?" M.J. quipped as she stood up and placed her hands on her hips, taking a step toward Alli in an attempt to intimidate her.

The superior little smile that was perched upon the tall woman's lips was taunting her intimately, and it meant that M.J. was, once again, trifling with Alli's emotions. More than that, though... M.J. was daring her to make a move.

Alli refused to back away from it this time... she refused to let it continue. It was time for the audacious President to either put-up or shut-up.

"Maybe...," Alli said, her voice defiant but soft as she stood tall and refused to be bullied. "Or maybe I'd rather you just put your money where your mouth is and stop playing with me." She added, lowering her voice even more as she dared to step even closer to the brunette.

They were now separated by mere inches... cool, calculating, sky-blue eyes burned into Alli's skin, and she could feel her heart-rate pick up rapidly. She couldn't believe that she was actually doing this - confronting the woman who had been turning her on, pissing her off, and scaring the living shit out of her for months now.

M.J. looked down into bottomless eyes of light jade and felt her precious control falter for a second. She should walk away from this, she knew, but she was hopelessly spell-bound and immensely aroused by the petite woman in front of her.

"Maybe I like to play with you," M.J. finally managed to whisper roughly, watching Alli's face carefully and enjoying the mixed display of escalating attraction and determined anger.

"Well maybe I don't **like** to be played with." Alli responded emphatically, trying to make it sound like she was offended. She was... wasn't she? Much to her chagrin, Allison found herself incredibly turned-on, and she was suddenly very aware that she was in a position to do something about it. She thought of a thousand reasons why she should turn and walk away from this, but she could only think of one reason to stay.

Alli stared deeply into cerulean eyes that had turned murky and dangerous. The dark smoldering look that had overtaken M.J.'s features and the provocative aura that emanated from her suddenly unnerved Alli entirely too much.

*God... what the hell am I *doing*?!* She thought in a sudden panic.

Perhaps she was too frightened and overwhelmed by the bristling intensity that was barely being concealed in the tall, imposing body in front of her, or perhaps she was just too much of a chicken to continue her barrage and actually take the plunge. Whatever the reason, Alli found herself panicking and turning away abruptly from the overpowering brunette, making a hasty exit out of the office and scurrying into the bathroom that adjoined it in the hallway.

Once safely inside the small bathroom, Alli slumped against the sink, cursing herself for being so forward and bold - openly baiting and then rejecting the goddamn President of the goddamn company.

*Fuck, what is *wrong* with me?! What was I thinking, daring her like that?! Jesus *Christ* Allison! This is *NOT* what you should be doing!!* She chided herself inwardly. *You're asking for it... you want her to do it,* her subconscious piped in, *and you're jealous,* she thought, shaking her head. *You're jealous because you know she does it with other women, and you're stupid because you know she doesn't want you the way you want her!* She released a groan. *Oh Jesus... JesusJesus,* she thought, clutching her head in her hands. *Is that really what I want?! Do I really want this 'thing' between us to turn physical?* She had no answer for that question.

...Stupidstupidstupid. Her head pounded mercilessly as her mind warred with itself.

Whatever we have - or had - between us is nothing more than stupid flirting and competitive bantering, she thought, trying desperately to back-peddle. If she could convince herself and regain her composure, hopefully she could save face.

*M.J. would never consider carrying-on with you like that... Christ, Alli, think about it! She can have any high-class attorney or rich business entrepreneur she wants! You are *way* out of your league here! You have to stop acting like a jealous teenager and let it GO! You'll be damn*

lucky if she doesn't fire your stupid ass!

Meanwhile, in her office next door, M.J. collapsed on the side of her desk with a plop.

*Good God! Where did all that come from? Is she really *so* upset with me?* As she thought about the possible reasons for the little blonde's anger, she suddenly remembered what Madison had said to her about the way she carried-on at the Christmas party.

Is Alli just angry because of the way I fool around with everyone, or is it something else?

M.J. thought back to the brief Christmas-party-meeting between Allison and Kate, recalling the burning look in the redheaded attorney's eyes. At the time, M.J. had found it funny that Kate was so obviously jealous.

Yeah, and to piss her off even more, I played it up by totally going overboard with Alli, M.J. remembered. So... Alli must have been pissed at me for using her like that, because the next week, she totally avoided me... it was suddenly all making sense to M.J. And instead of realizing what I'd done, I ended up treating her like shit. Fuck... good going, dumbass... no wonder she hates me.

She recalled the numerous angry interactions and the underlying hurt expressions that had flashed across Alli's face during the last few weeks. She had refused to acknowledge them at the time, but M.J. knew they were there, and now she knew why. She had been too arrogant to realize and admit what she'd been doing to Alli, and she suddenly felt like a real ass for it. Add to that the run-in with Liz in the parking garage, and all the guilt came crashing down on her.

"FFFuck." M.J. whispered aloud as she walked over to her window, staring out at the city as darkness began to engulf everything.

I am such a bitch... I let my own stupid arrogance and need for control fuck up the one good thing that I going... the one thing that I really wanted, she snarled internally.

*What am I saying - 'really wanted'? Jesus Christ, M.J. ...what is *WRONG* with you?! She thought in a panic. I can't 'want' her, for fuckssake! This isn't supposed to happen! I don't *want* this to happen!* She recalled Maddy's warning words to her - "...you can't un-step lines and un-cross boundaries."

All the proper and improper things she'd done in the last several months and years instantly flashed through her mind as she forced herself to confront her real feelings for the blonde HR Assistant. All the stupid things she'd done, all the lies, all the mistakes, all the poor calls in judgment. Nothing had ever been 'good' or 'fun' or 'nice'... it was all wrong, and all the people she'd ever gotten involved with had been wrong too. Her whole life just felt 'wrong' sometimes.

But Alli didn't feel wrong. Alli felt right. She needed to talk to her... they needed to work this

out. They needed resolution before they both went mad and destroyed all of the good things they had built between them. M.J. was admitting openly to herself, for the first time, that she had been wrong. To know that she was the one who had caused Alli's hurt made her stomach twist into knots. And, to realize that she had feelings for someone that ran so deep that she actually, physically, ached inside, rocked her to her very core.

"God... I am so screwed," she mumbled aloud, clutching her head in her hands.

*"This wasn't supposed to happen
I've been hit with your charm;
How could you do this to me?
I'm in love, again...
You've put a seed inside me
And while you're away
It's growing silently
Starts in my stomach
Embraces my insides
And about to reach my heart;
This wasn't supposed to happen..." - Sugarcubes*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

M.J. hadn't heard Alli leave the bathroom, so she gathered her nerve and stood outside the bathroom, rehearsing again what she'd say to the angry blonde once she faced her. One: She'd apologize for the teasing and torturing; Two: If Alli accepted that and didn't say anything, she'd apologize for her behavior at the Christmas party; Three: ...she didn't have a three. She was hoping that Alli would just tell her 'apology accepted,' and she was **really** hoping that Alli would tell her that she secretly enjoyed the bad behavior, and would she like to come home with her and take things even further?

Oh for chrissake, knock it OFF! You'll be lucky if she doesn't spit in your face! M.J. screamed to herself as she took a deep breath and decided to just go for broke.

When she opened the bathroom door, Alli nearly jumped away from the sink counter. She honestly didn't think M.J. would actually come after her.

Oh shit... now what? She thought in a panic. M.J. opened her mouth slightly to start her recital, but nothing came out. She could only stand in silence and stare at Alli's beautiful flushed cheeks and wide, sea-green eyes. How dare her body be aroused at such an inopportune time?

Alli, in contrast, found herself frustratingly tongue-tied as well. She willed herself to say

something - anything - but nothing came out.

You've already said enough, she scolded herself. Still... the look on M.J.'s face was like nothing she'd ever seen before. She couldn't define it, and she honestly didn't know if she wanted to. It was at first regretful, sad, and uncertain, then it suddenly became intense, dark, consuming, and a little bit frightening. Wicked thoughts quickly flashed unbidden through Alli's mind, and her face flushed uncontrollably... she was going to go crazy if this continued.

The situation seemed to get more uncomfortable with each silent second, until finally Alli gulped down her embarrassment and fear.

"Excuse me, I have to go," she mumbled, brushing past M.J. in a desperate attempt to escape.

"Allison, wait," M.J. called out, spinning and striding after Alli quickly. She reached her just as Alli was fumbling clumsily with the door, pulling it open. M.J. came to stand right behind her and quickly reached a hand up above her head to push the door closed completely. Pausing for a moment, the taller woman then reached down with the other hand and slowly turned the lock on the door. The 'snick' of the deadbolt echoed loudly in the empty room, and Alli's heart did a complete backwards flip.

Alli didn't turn around... she didn't move... she was absolutely petrified and glued to the floor. M.J.'s body barely touched hers, but she could feel the scathing heat emanating from the figure that completely surrounded her. Was this really going to happen? Right here, right now?! Did she **really** want it to happen? If so, she wanted to renege, **very** badly.

OhmygodOhmygodOhmygod, she thought in a mindless frenzy. The silence in the room was deafening and her heart thudded painfully in her chest, straining to burst apart.

M.J. just stood there for a moment, her eyes closed and her jaw clenched tightly as a battle raged inside her head.

*I shouldn't be here... I *shouldn't* be doing this...walk away walk away... Goddammit!* Their chemistry was already so overpowering; but now, here so close like this, it was like nitro-glycerin... incredibly volatile and ready to explode at the slightest jarring. M.J. knew she was treading in extremely dangerous territory... she could not let this little slip of a woman melt her resolve completely away... she had to maintain control. But dear god... she wanted her so badly.

M.J. stepped even closer, her body now pressing lightly against Alli's backside, drawn to it like a magnet... her mouth barely touched the soft, flaxen strands of hair. Alli could feel the heat and the sexual tension rolling off the tall woman in waves. She was still gripping the door handle fiercely and standing stiffly, but she wouldn't turn around to face her captor. Her emotions waffled between paralyzing fear and burning desire... she had no idea what to do and wondered how long this little stand-off would last or which one of them would cave first. M.J. moved to place both her hands on the door so that her body totally imprisoned the smaller woman. Alli could feel wisps of M.J.'s breath in her hair and near her ear, and she closed her eyes and licked her lips nervously, her hand now trembling white-knuckled on the door handle. She almost

thought she was going to be sick.

M.J. nudged her mouth in to touch Alli's dainty ear slightly as her eyes drifted shut.

"What do you want, Allison?" She murmured deeply in her rich, sultry voice.

Alli's eyes flew open and she felt the blood drain from her face and travel due south. She hesitated for a moment.

"I - I don't know," she finally stammered quietly.

"Oh I think you do know," M.J. whispered seductively as she brought one hand up to lightly finger the buttons at the front of Alli's blouse, "And I think I can give it to you." She whispered breathlessly into Alli's ear as she slowly trailed her fingers down the fabric between the blonde's breasts.

"*Oh God,*" Alli replied, equally breathless, her eyes fluttering shut and her mind barely able to comprehend what was happening.

*What are we doing?! This is wrong This is wrong This is *wrong*!* Her mind screamed as she felt M.J.'s hands begin to roam gently up and down her body, setting it aflame instantly. *How can something so wrong feel so fucking good?* Alli idly wondered, her heart racing as she succumbed to the surprisingly delicate touches of the overpowering woman behind her.

M.J. closed her eyes and let her fingers explore the soft, supple body beneath her, finally sliding a hand upwards to caress and linger hesitantly on a silky, slender neck. It was a well-rehearsed, age-old scenario of conquest for her, yet somehow, here with Alli, she didn't want it to progress in the same cold, rough, emotionless manner as usual. She wanted to take her time and be gentle with this precious package.

She's not just some pick-up... this is Alli... and I want this to be different, M.J. thought with determination. *...It *has* to be different.*

The brunette pushed her nose further into the fragrant, blonde tresses as she let both hands drift down to the waistband of Alli's slacks. Long, nimble fingers unbuttoned and unzipped the garment deftly, pushing it down off the slender hips with ease.

Alli shuddered and her chest sucked deep lungfuls of air as she stood there and very willingly submitted to M.J.'s domination. She placed her palms on the door, feeling the need for stability as her head spun and her legs became dangerously unstable. She felt completely powerless and allowed M.J. to command every fiber of her being. Yes, she knew this was horribly wrong; yes, she knew she was giving in to her own lust; yes, she knew she'd probably hate herself in the morning; but... she was unable to stop, and, she realized, she just couldn't make herself give a damn.

Alli leaned her forehead against the cool wood of the door and she gasped aloud when M.J.'s

cool fingers suddenly slipped inside her silken panties and invaded her juicy recesses with swift, smooth ease. The small woman's body collapsed against the door and she let out a deep-throated groan as M.J. immediately began a gentle stroking motion between her thighs.

"Shhhh," M.J. shushed gently against her temple. She was so incredibly aroused; she could feel Alli's unabashed response as she quickly began to veer out of control, and her own body rushed forward as she plundered the luscious ripeness beneath her, over and over.

"Yesss... let me feel you," M.J. growled in a low whisper, automatically positioning herself as she always did. Holding on to Alli tightly with her other hand, she molded her body fully against the petite form and pressed her hips against the small, firm ass. M.J.'s breathing hitched as she felt Alli push back against her and move her hips more insistently against the hand nestled at the juncture of her thighs. It suddenly occurred to M.J., however, that it didn't matter if she got off or not - she just wanted to do this with Alli. Whether it was as a 'favor' to the blonde or simply another stupid 'conquering' moment for herself, she didn't know... she'd have to think about all that later.

M.J. continued to urge Alli on, grinding her hips a little more insistently... they were both very close. As soon as M.J.'s thumb applied pressure to Alli's overly-sensitized button, the frantic blonde gasped several times and trembled violently, her buttocks clenching, her knees buckling, and her hands clawing at the door for support. Feeling the small body quake beneath her, M.J. released a breath that she didn't know she'd been holding, and she slid her arms up underneath Alli's to support her weakened, faltering form.

Alli emitted a breathless sigh and collapsed further against the door, resting her forehead on the wood surface again. M.J. let her body lean forward slightly, allowing her face to relax into the soft, flowery-smelling hair while she caught her breath and calmed her racing heart.

After a few seconds of labored breathing, M.J. pushed away slightly but continued to let her tall frame encase the smaller woman with her palms resting on the door on either side of the blonde head. She knew this was her critical point - this was normally the time when she brushed off her anonymous sex partner and walked away without care. But this time was different... this wasn't some nameless, faceless woman... this was Allison... this was someone whose feelings she truly gave a shit about.

God... how could I have let this happen? She thought in shock.

She was roused from her thoughts by movement. She felt warm skin brush against her forearms... soft lips barely grazed the fine hairs that covered her hands. Alli was doing something unmentionable - she was touching her lips to her.

M.J. had to fight to keep herself from jumping back and running away. Her fingertips turned white as she pressed her hands against the door, resisting the urge to push away from the petite form beneath her. She had no idea what to do... she was genuinely confused by her conflicting feelings and a flush of panic spread through her body. She squeezed her eyes closed and tried to concentrate, but instead, she felt Alli disentangle her arms and turn around to face her.

Oh no, oh no oh nooo, she thought with dread. When she felt no arms nor hands touch her, M.J. opened her eyes. Alli's bright green-blue orbs stared straight at M.J.'s chest, and her lips were slightly parted while her chest continued to rise and fall rapidly. Her face was flushed and her delicate features portrayed a combination of lustful after-glow, amazement, and sheer panic. ...M.J. thought she was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

They were so close together, it would only take a slight downward movement for her to capture the deep cleft at the top of those sweet lips.

God no! No kissing, no kissing! M.J. thought as she watched Alli's face carefully for an indication of what else she was feeling. Seemingly sensing M.J.'s dilemma, Alli slowly brought her eyes up to meet the taller woman's. The unspoken thoughts and intense looks that passed between the two women were composed of shared fear, stupefied shock, worrisome uncertainty, and residual desire.

Staring at each other for a long moment, M.J. found herself drifting in closer to Alli. She absolutely refused to let her lips touch the blonde's, but she could not stop herself from letting them graze the small woman's forehead fleetingly. Alli's eyes fluttered shut at the sensation, and she returned it by allowing the corner of her mouth to brush along M.J.'s jaw.

Alli somehow seemed to understand that sharing a passionate kiss would, in some strange way, signal the crossing of an important, but unspoken, boundary for the tall brunette.

So they didn't kiss; they silently and haltingly explored each other for a few moments with fleeting, gossamer caresses using only their facial features. Parted lips grazed a throat and faintly touched a temple; cheeks brushed along cheeks and jaw lines; noses plundered soft hair and inhaled fragrances. Alli thought it was the strangest, most sensual thing she'd ever experienced.

After a tension-packed minute, Alli finally pulled back a little and looked up into M.J.'s dark, hooded eyes. They stared at each other deeply for what felt like a lifetime, trying to convey emotions and perhaps thoughts, and Alli wondered if either one of them would, or could, say anything. It didn't take her long, however, to see that M.J. was not going to open up; the tall, austere woman protected herself well. Surely she'd had more than enough practice at cutting all ties and covering up after little 'incidents' like this.

Alli watched in amazement and horror as the brunette's face transformed from sensuous passion to cold indifference in a matter of seconds. M.J.'s countenance was suddenly stony, closed, and impassive, and Alli sadly realized that the little 'encounter' was not only an enormously foolish mistake, it was also quite over.

Acutely feeling the invisible slap to her face, Alli straightened herself up and reached down to fix her panties and re-zipper her slacks, fighting very hard to keep her emotions under control. Her eyes burned painfully with the sudden build-up of tears, and she struggled to keep her composure.

M.J. hated that she was too overwhelmed to bring herself to say anything, but at the same time, she realized that this experience was, in a very strange way, a momentous occasion for her. Even though she just had some very inappropriate sex with one of her employees, she didn't feel compelled to run away like she usually did; moreover, she didn't really want the encounter to end. She wouldn't deny that she felt something very strong for the petite blonde who was hastily adjusting herself in front of her - she did - she just didn't know what to do about it. Should she say something? Should she do something? Should she just give it up and kiss her?

NO!!

A conflicting battle was warring noisily inside her head, but - ever the stoic one - her hardened, aloof persona unconsciously took over, and she continued to stand there and say nothing, like a damned fool.

Sensing defeat, M.J. finally dropped her arms, freeing Alli from their enclosure as she stood herself up fully and stepped back. They exchanged silent, anguished looks one last time before Alli finally turned back to the door, unlocked it, and slipped out, posthaste.

*"In a trap, trip, I can't grip,
Never thought I'd be the one who'd slip,
Then I started to realize,
I was living one big lie;
She fuckin' hates me... trust,
She fuckin' hates me... la-la-la-love,
I tried too hard, and she tore my feelings,
Like I had none...and ripped them away." - Puddle of Mudd*

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

M.J. spent the next five minutes standing in the bathroom in silence, her mind warring with itself over what was happening to her. She was exceedingly attracted to Allison - that was a no-brainer - and she knew that Alli was attracted to her as well. But... to throw everything away and give in to her want... to falter and allow herself to express the desire and act on it, knowing that she'd end up causing hurt in the end - that was the part she was having trouble with.

*...I'm *such* a fucking *idiot*!* she chastised internally, over and over.

How many times had she fantasized about the blonde and stopped it abruptly, telling herself, 'don't go there'. How many times had she told herself that she would not act on her lustful thoughts, that it just could not be? ...She'd lost count long ago. She knew she had promised

Madison that she would behave; she knew the 'rules' were set, and she had forced herself to live by them... until now. Not only had she broken the 'rules', she had probably broken Alli's heart along with them.

M.J. thought back to all the times she and Alli had talked and worked side by side. All the lunches and enjoyable moments they'd shared. How their eyes interlocked and neither one could turn away... how Alli's simple presence in a room brightened it, even when they were sniping and torturing each other... how whenever Alli spoke and flashed a simple smile, M.J. nearly melted. To say, at this point in the game, that she was merely 'attracted' to Alli was a huge understatement. She had wanted the blonde in a way that she'd never wanted anyone before. She just couldn't believe that she let herself give in to it so damned easily. She claimed that she wanted it to be different, but it ended up being no different after all.

All the affairs and dalliances she'd had in the past had been with people whom she didn't **really** like nor respect. She saw the casual sex as 'favors' or 'niceties' for people who fawned over her and willingly submitted to her, no matter what she asked. She liked to be in control, and she knew she held the power; she wielded it freely, and sometimes cruelly. She saw the anonymous, rough sex as mere conquests, diversions, and head-games, meant only to purge her demons whenever they arose and demanded satiating. None of those people really mattered to her. They were people she didn't care for... people she had no feelings for... people she hadn't **fallen** for.

Fallen for? ...my God... *it can't be*, M.J. thought to herself. *I cannot be *falling* for her... I cannot *need* her!* She screamed inside her head and covered her eyes with trembling hands.

"God... what the fuck am I **doing*?!"* She whispered angrily to herself, her eyes burning - for the first time in many years - with the threat of tears.

Was she really falling for Allison? The thought of it filled her heart with absolute mind-numbing fear. Fear... and pain. Falling for someone meant pain - they went hand-in-hand, always. She thought of the look on Alli's face right before she bolted out of the bathroom... her sea-green eyes were red-rimmed and so full of hurt. She was hurting already and they hadn't even gotten started yet. How could anything possibly work out between them?

Nothing ever works out, no matter how much you want it to, M.J. thought dejectedly. *She'll hate my guts now, who am I fucking kidding?!*

But did she want it to 'work out' with Alli? Did she really want her? **Need** her?

...Goddddd! She squinted her eyes and squeezed her hands into fists,

"I can't do this... I **won't** do this! Not again!" she mumbled aloud, shaking her head.

Her thoughts began to invade relentlessly, ruthlessly, filling her head to the breaking point with things she didn't want to think about and visions she didn't want to see. A panic began to well inside her, and she visibly shivered. She felt like the room was closing-in on her, caging her inside a deadly trap. Her fear was suddenly so acute she could feel beads of sweat gathering at

her forehead.

Everything had suddenly become so real... so significant; it felt like her heart was being squeezed in a vise. M.J. realized, for the first time in her life, her feelings were completely out of her control.

And she was truly and thoroughly scared.

Alli managed to make it back down to her office before she totally lost it and burst into tears. Thankfully, everyone had gone home, but she slammed her door anyway as she openly let the anguish come. The sobs wracked her small body and she collapsed into her chair, wrapping her arms around herself tightly.

*This is insanity... how could I let this happen? I know that she's just playing with me! How could I be so *stupid*!?* She thought as her mother's harsh words from years ago rang in her ears. *Is this all my fault? Is M.J. to blame for any of it?* At this point, she really wasn't sure. *I didn't say 'no'... I didn't try to stop it... would she have stopped? Did she know that I wasn't about to stop her? ...Jesus Christ.* Her head began to throb from crying and thinking, but the questions continued to pile up relentlessly.

Does M.J. feel anything at all for me? Does she have any idea how I feel about her? How can we face each other now? Could we even continue to work together? Panic was now added to the mix of crying and thinking. *I should leave... find a new job... but I can't leave now, I've only been here a few months... how would that look to a prospective new employer? 'Why are you leaving Whitton, Inc. already, Miss?' 'oh, I fucked the boss' - yeah, that'd be nooo problem, Allison... Jesus... I feel sick to my stomach.*

It took a long time for the feeling of nausea to pass. Once she regained control of her faculties, Alli gathered her things and stopped in the bathroom to splash some cool water on her face, hoping to reduce the red puffiness around her eyes.

Knowing she looked like hell, she snuck out to the elevator and successfully made it to her car without running into anyone. Her self-loathing and self-blame was now giving way to anger. She knew she was at fault for what happened, but so was M.J.

It takes two to tango, as they say, and M.J. is the lead dancer. She recalled all their flirting and teasing, all the power-plays and the head-games.

It may be my fault for being weak and giving in, but it's her fault for abusing her power. She knew I wouldn't stop her... she knows she's the one in control. She manipulated me, just like Liz said... she used me. She shook her head and closed her eyes. *So much for saving myself for 'the right one'... shit.* She berated herself inwardly.

She had casually screwed around with a few women before, years ago, and she had achieved

orgasms with some of them, but none of them had ever brought her completely to her knees the way that M.J. just did. And they had been mild acquaintances only - women that she knew and sort-of liked, but didn't feel anything for. Her being semi-friends with them had always made her feel somewhat guilty about what was expected, post-sex. She usually wasn't interested in any kind of serious relationship with them, and she didn't like the messy emotional entanglements that such liaisons created. She was always too nice to simply 'fuck and run', so she decided to just stop it altogether, causing her to be celibate for several years now.

She sometimes considered picking up an anonymous woman at a bar so that she could just purge herself and get it over with, with no strings attached, but she never went through with it. She told herself that it was because she 'wasn't that kind of girl'. Her more recent experiences had been limited to lots of kissing and some light touching and fondling, but that was all she ever allowed.

*And now, here I am with a woman who won't even kiss me, but who just gave me the biggest orgasm I've probably ever had... *JESUS*!* She cringed, shaking her head in an attempt to clear it.

I've always been so good at staying in control... how could I just give myself away like this? She asked herself. *Easy, stupid - the two of you have been engaged in intense foreplay for six months!*

It was more than that, though. M.J. was simply a force that her body and soul could not reckon with. The tall woman overwhelmed her... she overpowered her... she caused Alli's rational mind to completely shut down so that her libido could come out to play. She had never felt the pull and attraction that she felt with the gorgeous brunette. Something about M.J. called out to Alli... the chemistry between them was very real and very powerful. Alli felt it, and she was sure that M.J. felt it too.

Yes, and she used it... she used it against me! Her angry inner voice reminded her. *Well no more... never again... I'd rather be lonely and miserable than go through this,* she swore up and down to herself.

Alli was angry with M.J., but she was angry with herself too, and disappointed with her total lack of willpower. She knew that M.J. was a player; she had vowed not to give in to her game... but that's exactly what she did - in a very big way.

She's probably on the phone, laughing it up with Kate Reed right this very minute... carving another notch in her desktop... stupid... stupidstupidstupid! Alli banged her fists on the steering wheel of her car.

'Hating herself in the morning' came several hours early.

[Continued in Chapter 30](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"You disturb my natural emotions
You make me feel like dirt, and I'm hurt;
And if I start a commotion
I'll only end up losing you, and that's worse;
Ever fallen in love with someone,
Ever fallen in love, in love with someone
Ever fallen in love, in love with someone
You shouldn't have fallen in love with?" - The Buzzcocks*

CHAPTER THIRTY

Four days had elapsed since the 'bathroom incident', as Alli liked to call it. She had been tempted to call in sick the day immediately following, but she didn't - she refused to give M.J. any more power. Instead, she just tried her best to keep a low profile, and she most definitely avoided the 14th floor. But she couldn't concentrate for shit.

Every time she gazed out her office window, she saw M.J.'s penetrating eyes staring back at her; every time she looked down at her body, she felt the burning caress of long fingers; every time she caught a reflection of her own face, she envisioned perfect lips grazing her cheek. She was a listless, unfocused mess, and she knew she was in big trouble.

Two weeks finally passed, and Alli was finding that even though she was relieved that she still hadn't run into M.J., part of her also felt a sense of disappointment. After working together and being in contact with each other so often, and for so long, it was painfully obvious that they were avoiding one another. She wanted to be angry with the brunette for being too chicken-shit to come talk to her about what had happened, but she knew damn well that it went both ways - she would never go and confront M.J. either. Alli also knew that if M.J. felt anything like she did, it was probably good that they were doing the avoidance thing. The only problem with that was, eventually, they were bound to meet up someplace. And when that happened, Alli had no idea what she'd say, think, or feel.

The moment of confrontation caught Alli by surprise, as she feared. Stevenson popped his head into Alli's office bright and early one morning.

"Hey, Alli - can you gather your stuff on that proposed Commercial Engineer position and come with me to the boss's office in about an hour? They've now decided that they wanna move ahead and start interviewing, so we gotta present the list of candidates." He said quickly.

"W-What? Why? I mean...", Alli faltered as she felt a small flush of panic. "We only had three or four possibilities, and after the search was halted the second time, I thought it was being shelved completely?" She asked, trying to give a good reason for her hesitation and panicked expression.

Stevenson shrugged, "I guess the 'ole Scorpion wants to see what we've got before we advertise again," he said, sarcastically referring to M.J.

Alli let out an obvious sigh of frustration while closing her eyes and shaking her head slightly. "I know, I know, she's a pain in the ass - what else is new, right?" Stevenson said with a knowing grin, then disappeared.

*Pain in the ass isn't *exactly* what I was thinking, John,* Alli thought morosely to herself. *Why the hell does he need ME to go along anyway? God, he's such a spineless pussy!* Alli thought angrily.

She had to figure out a way to avoid a meeting with M.J., especially since John would be there. She knew the man had no clue what had happened between them, but it would be extremely awkward, not to mention painfully tense. Had M.J. requested her attendance, or was John just dragging her along? Regardless of the reason, she *had* to get out of it. She gathered the paperwork out of her file cabinet and headed to John's office.

"John - here are all the resumes and the list of possible interviewees that we discussed last time," she said, thrusting the paperwork out toward Stevenson. "Uhm, listen... if it isn't *absolutely* necessary for me to go, I'd rather not. I have this big worker's comp. grievance thing to finish-up, and I'm a little behind on it." It was a flimsy excuse, but Alli hoped that John would buy it.

"Oh I don't think it'll take long," he said, then paused, "actually, I kind of wanted you to be there in case M.J. decides to go off on a tangent and start asking in-depth questions - you know how she can be - and since you were the one who handled all the advertising the first time around, I just think it'd be better if we both went... y'know?" Stevenson added with a shrug, fully intending on guilting his Assistant into going.

Shit... of course he's going to dump all this on me again! Dammit! "Okay... fine... whatever," Alli answered with an irritated sigh.

For an hour, Alli tried to keep herself preoccupied with work, not wanting to think about the impending face-to-face with M.J. She even played a game of Solitaire on her pc - anything to keep her mind off the lingering, phantom memories of her little dalliance with the alluring, unsettling brunette.

She sat at her desk, pensive and melancholy, her hand resting motionless on her mouse, her eyes staring at an imaginary spot on the wall of her office. Despite all the wretched, despicable, hateful thoughts she had about M.J. ...despite her resolution to never fall under the dark, sexy woman's spell again... despite it all... Alli still burned for her. It was never-ending.

She could still feel the warmth that the tall body generated as it pressed against her... she could still feel the imprint of M.J.'s hands on her flesh as they slid down her belly and plundered her secret treasure. Whenever she thought about the way M.J. had whispered her desire to her, murmuring so seductively in her ear as she stroked her and touched her so intimately, she shivered visibly. Just thinking about it now, she felt herself begin to break out in a sweat, and her body started to surge with want.

"Alli?"

"Huh?" She jumped at John's sudden intrusion and knew that her face was flushed.

"Are you coming?" John asked.

Alli looked at him, momentarily stunned, a nervous giggle bubbling up in her throat as she thought, *Oh John, I'm close, believe me!* She darted her eyes away, bringing a hand up to literally wipe the smirk off her lips.

"It's time to go to the meeting," John added, stepping further into her office, looking at her quizzically.

"Right... sorry... almost forgot," Alli mumbled, hastily grabbing a pen and notebook. She prayed that she didn't have a wet spot on her pants.

When the elevator announced with a pleasant 'ding' that they'd arrived at floor 14, Alli's stomach lurched. It flipped twice when they arrived at M.J.'s outer office and sat down in the waiting room. It flipped three more times when Helen buzzed the President to let her know that they were there, and it came dangerously close to leaping from her throat and out of her mouth when she heard the door opening. She glanced up out of the corner of her eye and saw M.J. standing at her door... tall, dark and tempting... wearing one of her customary tailored suits... her expression typically blank and unreadable. But somehow, none of that frightened Alli... she knew the warmth of M.J.'s secret touch... she knew the smoothness of her skin and the softness of her caress... she knew something of who M.J. Whitton was underneath it all.

Stop it! She screamed inside her head... this was **not** the time to wax romantic.

Alli refused to look at M.J. when the President invited them inside and directed them to take a seat. The nervous blonde walked as briskly as her shaky legs could carry her to a chair, where she sat down and kept her eyes focused on nothing but the notepad in her hands. M.J. began to

talk in her customary low, even tone, and John answered here and there. Whatever it was they were discussing, Alli couldn't say. Her ears were burning and her mind was buzzing so loudly that it seemed to block everything out.

She didn't even realize that John was asking her something until he reached over and touched her arm.

"Alli?" She snapped her eyes up to him and caught the confused look on his face. "The deadline for advertising in the next Chronicle? ...Do you know when that is?"

"Uhm...", Alli stammered, wracking her brain frantically. "For the weekend publications, it's always the Wednesday before, so I think the next one would be... the 25th." She answered, forcing her mind to work so that she didn't look like a complete idiot. Her ears burned and she swallowed hard, returning her gaze to her lap as John and M.J. continued to talk.

The meeting seemed to drag on forever. Alli barely paid attention to what was going on, refusing to make eye contact with M.J. in the hope that the woman would forget about her presence in the room. It would have worked too, had M.J. not dropped a paper off the side of her desk. The offending document landed right beside Alli's chair, and she stared at it for a few seconds, realizing with dread that she would have to pick it up and hand it back to M.J. She was certain that the brunette did it intentionally, just to torment her. Determined to stick with her no-visual-contact plan, Alli leaned over and snatched the paper off the floor, tossing it hastily onto M.J.'s desk and sitting stiffly back in her chair, her jade eyes successfully never meeting with the blue ones of her nemesis.

When the meeting finally concluded a maddening hour later, Alli was the first one out the door. She marched straight to the elevator and sent it down to her floor immediately, not even waiting for John. She wanted to get as far away from M.J. as she could. Luckily, it was almost lunchtime, so she dropped her things on her desk and grabbed her purse out of her desk drawer, wishing to escape outside for a blissful, stress-free hour. Unfortunately, John met her at her door before she was able to fly the coop.

He stepped further inside and closed her door quietly. Alli's heart dropped to her stomach, a sense of foreboding filling her.

"You want to tell me what the hell is going on?" John asked, his voice tinged with impatient anger.

"What are you talking about?" Alli frowned, feigning innocence.

"You and M.J. - what's going on?"

ShitShitShit... "John, I-I really don't know what you mean--"

"For months you're thick as thieves, and now you won't even look at her. You acted completely unprofessional up there, so don't stand here and try to tell me that nothing's going on!"

Alli's face flushed bright red and she opened her mouth to deny everything, but nothing came out. She averted her gaze and blinked her eyes long and hard.

"Look, I'm sure you think it's none of my damn business, but I can't have people's personal issues and problems interfering with the functions of this office. You are the *Assistant Director* of *Human Resources*, Allison... THINK about it!"

John was upset, but he didn't want to come down on the blonde too hard. She really was an asset to his office, and besides that, he liked her. His voice softened and he inclined his head to regard her carefully. "I don't know what's going on between the two of you, and I don't really WANT to know - all I'm saying is, get it and yourself under control. ...Okay?"

Alli could only stare at the floor and nod slowly, feeling like a reckless child who just got scolded by her father. She was beyond embarrassed; she wanted to dissolve into a pile of dust and blow away. John turned and opened the door again, but before he left, Alli somehow managed to speak up.

"John," she called out quietly. He turned and looked back at her, standing there nervously rubbing her temple. "I'm really sorry," she admitted quietly, motioning and dropping her hand. He nodded at her, giving her a small half-smile, then he turned and disappeared.

*"I may be mad, I may be blind,
I may be viciously unkind,
But I can still read what you're thinking;
And I've heard it said too many times,
That you'd be better off, besides,
Why can't you see?
...This boat is sinking." - A. Lennox*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

John Stevenson rode up to the 14th floor with much trepidation. Not only did he NOT want to face his boss, he certainly didn't want to confront her about a personal problem that concerned *her*, as well as his Assistant Director, and he knew that he had to nip it in the bud before things got out of hand. He was quite familiar with similar situations that had turned ugly, and he couldn't just sit back and hope that this one would go away... no matter how tempting that was. Besides, he told himself, Allison was his employee, and she was a good worker and a sweet girl.

He hated to see her manipulated and jerked around by his arrogant, self-indulgent boss. He and Raiford had discussed the 'situation' numerous times, and Ray totally supported the idea of him speaking to M.J.

Well, at least I know that I have Ray on my side, if things go horribly wrong, John told himself as he approached M.J.'s office.

"Hi Helen - is she in?" John asked the older woman, who answered with a mere nod. John approached the massive wood door and knocked firmly.

"Come in," a gruff voice called out.

John opened the door and walked in, making sure to close the door tightly behind him. His boss waited a beat, then looked up from her desk, regarding him with questioning, raised brows. He took a deep breath and blessed himself silently. "I, uh... I wanted to speak with you for a moment," he began unsteadily.

"So... speak," M.J. said flatly, returning her attention to the paperwork in front of her.

John sighed, knowing already that M.J. wouldn't make this easy, and thinking that maybe it had been a bad idea after all. He walked toward her desk and sat down in one of the large chairs, but she still didn't look up at him.

Determined not to let the woman smash his resolve, he cleared his throat and started carefully. "I uh... I just had a little chat with Allison."

M.J. froze, abruptly halting her writing and finally lifting her eyes from her desk to lock them with John's. She suddenly had a very bad feeling about this man's little visit. John shifted a little uncomfortably in his chair and cleared his throat again.

"I'll tell you what I told her - I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but it needs to be resolved."

M.J.'s eyes immediately ignited, her dark brows arching sharply in genuine surprise. "...What?"

John took a deep breath, steeling his resolve, "You heard me. I don't know what the problem is, but it's beginning to interfere with Alli's work, and it's making both of you look *very* unprofessional."

M.J. stared at him before speaking, "Just what is it, exactly, that you think is 'going on', John?" She asked, cocking her head to the side and fixing him with a burning blue stare.

"I wouldn't want to hazard a guess, M.J. I'm just telling you, as a friend, that people have noticed, and it's affecting Alli's work." He reiterated with some impatience.

" 'As a friend'? You're kidding, right?" M.J. scoffed with a sarcastic smirk.

John's nostrils flared in anger, "Y'know, maybe this is all fun and games for you, M.J., but think about Allison... think about what this is doing to her reputation... she doesn't deserve to have it *tarnished* because of you and your *carelessness*!" M.J.'s face hardened and she clenched her fists together as she glared at the HR Director.

"You are *way* off-base, and *way* out of line, John." She said in a deceptively calm, low tone.

"Am I? What about you, M.J.? Don't you think *you're* out of line? Or will you *always* feel that you can do whatever the hell you want, to whomever the hell you want, just because *YOU'RE the boss*?!" John hissed venomously. He knew he was dangerously close to getting his ass kicked, but he couldn't stop himself; the angry words seemed to spew forth of their own volition.

M.J. shot up out of her chair, wanting to deck the older man, but knowing she could do no such thing. "Get the *hell* out of my office, John." She growled through clenched teeth, her eyes dark and murderous.

John stood up as well and they locked angry eyes for several seconds before he turned and silently stalked toward the door. As he opened it, he turned back one last time, finding his boss's blue fury still pinned on him. "Think about what I said, M.J." Then he turned and walked out.

M.J. stood rigidly behind her desk, her jaw literally aching from clenching her teeth together so hard, and her fingernails biting painfully into the palms of her tightly fistled hands. She nearly shook with rage as she re-processed what just happened. She turned toward her window slightly and closed her eyes, fighting desperately to reel in her fury. Losing the fight, she quickly spun back around, lashing out viciously and sweeping her arms across her desk, sending everything crashing to the floor with a loud roar.

Outside the office, Helen and Rachel turned and looked at each other with raised brows when they heard the noise. They knew their boss's temper all too well, and neither one dared to go and investigate. Unless M.J. appeared in her doorway, bleeding profusely and asking them to call 911, they would do nothing except hope and pray that the mercurial woman didn't come flying out of her office to take her anger out on them.

Madison made her way toward M.J.'s office, a slight spring in her step. She had just received some encouraging financial news about the company, and she wanted to share it with her big sister. Nearing the desks of M.J.'s office staff, she met them with a friendly smile.

"Good afternoon ladies - is she available?" She sing-songed.

Helen and Rachel exchanged careful looks before Rachel answered the Vice President. "Uhh, yes... I *guess* so," the young woman answered slowly.

Madison frowned and shook her head a little as she headed toward the door... she had always thought Rachel was a bit odd. Knocking briefly and not waiting for an answer, Madison was greeted by her sister's back.

"You're staring out the window *again*?! ...Morgan, you gotta do something about these 'rough days', honey." She teased. M.J. didn't budge.

"Hmph... you're telling me." She grumbled humorlessly.

Madison approached her sister's desk, noticing and picking up an obviously shattered glass desk clock. "Is this broken?" She asked, tilting her head and frowning quizzically. Eyeing it curiously, she shifted her gaze to the rest of M.J.'s desk. Just as she observed that things seemed a bit ruffled and askew, M.J. interrupted her by snatching the clock out of her hands and slamming it back down on the desk, a few shards of glass loosening and skittering away to drop onto the floor. Madison jumped slightly from her sister's abrupt movements. Obviously something was *very* wrong.

She waited a beat, then ventured bravely forth. "So... what is it this time?"

M.J. simply ignored her, returning to her silent stance in front of her window, her arms crossed tightly.

Madison drew a deep breath and decided to press on. "I haven't seen you for two weeks, Morgan. You cancel our meetings, you don't return my calls... you haven't been by my house since Christmas." Still faced with her sister's back, she walked over to stand beside M.J. "What's going on with you?" She asked softly, with genuine concern.

M.J. said nothing for several moments. Finally, knowing she had to say something to her sister, she sighed. "It's nothing that I can really... talk about right now, Maddy. Just... suffice it to say that you were right, and I was wrong... okay?" She said quietly, finally turning to look at her younger sister. A brief look of anguish passed over the strong face before quickly disappearing.

The troubled, washed-out look on M.J.'s normally sharp, determined face told Madison quite a lot, in addition to the fact that M.J. had just admitted she was wrong about something. Maddy had a sinking feeling that she knew exactly what was going on... but did she dare broach the subject?

"Morgan... what happened between you and Allison?" The younger woman asked the dreaded question very quietly while reaching out to touch her sister's arm.

M.J. closed her eyes. This was the last thing she wanted to deal with right now. Would this hellish day never end? She didn't say anything for at least a full minute, secretly hoping that Madison would just *go away*. No such luck, however. She took a deep breath, "You obviously have a pretty good idea already, Maddy, otherwise you wouldn't be asking me."

Madison's eyes fluttered shut and she let out a soft, disappointed groan. M.J.'s non-refute was all

the answer she needed to confirm the rumors that she'd been hearing for weeks now. She of course hadn't believed the stories about the President doing the horizontal-mambo with the new HR Assistant. It made her angry that people would make such assumptions about M.J. and Alli, just because M.J. was a flirt and the two worked closely with one another.

But Madison wasn't stupid... she was well aware of the chemistry between the two women, and she knew that M.J. was very attracted to the pretty blonde - blondes were her weakness, after all. However... M.J. had promised her that she'd behave with Allison. She *knew* not to let things get out of control - she *knew* what could happen - she *knew BETTER*. ...Or at least Madison had *thought* she did.

Madison closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she turned away from her sister; if she looked at her any longer, her head would explode. She immediately started thinking about the best way to wrest control of the situation... what kind of cover-up would be needed?... what kind of hush-money would be required?... who would she get to defend M.J. legally? She hoped it wouldn't be as nasty as it had been with Alex Whats-her-name, but she wouldn't hold her breath.

"Okay, so... what kind of damage are we talking about here?" Madison said aloud, her thoughts springing forth from her mind. M.J. turned to give her a confused look.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What's the damage?" She spat impatiently, flinging her hands out. "What's Alli's asking price for her to shut up and split?" M.J. paused, regarding her sister with pained disbelief.

"Alli isn't *asking* for anything, Maddy... there's no 'damage' for you to control, for *fuckssake*!" She cursed, her anger kicking-in.

"Morgan, Jesus *CHRIST*! Don't be stupid! It's only a matter of time before the slanders and the threats begin! Let's squelch it early this time, *please*!" Madison pleaded, motioning frantically with her hands.

M.J.'s temper was ready to fully erupt now, and she turned to face her sister with a glacial glare. "Look - Allison isn't *like* that... she and I had a little... *misunderstanding*... that's all... that's *ALL* it is. Don't make a federal fucking case out of this! Just keep your mouth shut and let me *handle* it, alright!? Do you think you can DO that!?" She shouted back, watching Maddy's face flush bright red.

Madison tapped her foot rapidly, clenching and unclenching her fists as she contemplated what to do. Punching her sister in the face probably wasn't a good idea, so she opted for a more controlled response.

"Fine Morgan... you 'handle' it... just like you've 'handled' this entire ordeal, AND all the ones before it! I'll leave things in your *capable* hands!" She snapped sarcastically, then spun on her heel and marched quickly out of the office, slamming the door loudly.

The jarring vibrated all the way down to M.J.'s bones, and she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, releasing it wearily. Not only had Maddy assumed she was having a full-blown affair with Alli, but she also assumed Alli was a back-stabbing, gold-digging bitch like Alex Whats-her-name was.

*Imagine her thinking Alli was like *that*, M.J. thought indignantly. She knows nothing about Alli... she has no idea how beautiful she is... how amazing. M.J.'s horrific mood lightened just a smidge as she envisioned Alli's soft face in her mind and remembered the exquisite feeling of her delicate, silky skin. As quickly as the positive images appeared, however, negative ones followed in their place. Alli's flushed, angry face as M.J. teased and taunted her... her red-rimmed, teary, green-blue eyes as M.J. watched her turn and scurry away from her.*

The brunette lifted a hand to her face, covering her eyes and shaking her head. When did all the beauty between them become so hideous?

*"Still a whisper on my lips,
Feel it at my fingertips... it's pullin' at my skin;
Feel me when I'm at my worst,
Feelin' as if I've been cursed... bitter cold within;
Days go by, and still I think of you." - Dirty Vegas*

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The next few weeks drug on painfully for Allison. She still avoided everyone at work as much as possible and dodged any group activities and functions. She even turned down invitations for lunch and after-hours social gatherings at the local pubs, which was something she had just recently starting doing, and enjoying, with Liz and other people from work. She no longer arrived at the office early in the morning, and she made sure to leave precisely at quitting time. She had begun bringing her lunch from home so that she could avoid going to the in-house cafe. She had turned herself into a hermit, but she felt it was necessary in order for her to sever her association with M.J. and regain her dignity and the respect of her peers.

She still berated herself for her lapse in judgment and lack of control, but she was more angry with M.J. and her apparent ability to brush her and the entire incident off like it was nothing more than dust on her bookshelf. Alli wasn't sure what she expected M.J. to do - it wasn't as if she wanted her to come crawling on her knees, begging forgiveness, or whatever - but some sort of 'Gee I'm sorry for seducing and fucking you in the bathroom' apology would be nice. At least it would prove to Alli that M.J. acknowledged what had happened, and could possibly shed some light on what the enigmatic brunette was thinking. Right now, Alli had nothing to feed on but her

own humiliation and self-loathing.

Alli was busily occupying herself with a project one morning when she heard a soft tap at her door. Calling out hesitantly, she was relieved to look up and see the warm, smiling face of Liz Jacobs.

"Hey," Alli greeted.

"Hey woman - long time, no see." Liz gently chided. The attractive, brown-eyed woman had been a good friend to her, and Alli truly felt bad for shutting her out the way she had been.

"Yeah, I know... I've been kinda busy," Alli answered with a nonchalant shrug, averting her eyes.

Liz noticed the pale, drawn features of the small blonde. The past few weeks had obviously been very draining on her romantically-challenged friend, and she felt for her.

"Whatcha doin' for lunch today?" Liz asked, trying to sound casual and upbeat.

"Uhm, nothing. I brought a sandwich from home... I was just gonna eat it here." Alli mumbled and scratched her head, knowing full well where Liz was headed and dreading it.

The Finance Director perched herself on the corner of Alli's desk, "Let's go out today - my treat." she offered, hoping to tempt her friend into crawling out from beneath the rock she'd hidden herself under.

"Ah... I really can't, Liz. I have to get this report done, and--," Alli began in weak protest, but was cut-off.

"Uh-uh - no excuses... I won't take 'no' for an answer." Liz grinned, wagging her finger and shaking her head. Alli leaned back in her chair, rolling her eyes and sighing. "Come on, Alli... you've been hiding in here for weeks and weeks. It's not *good* for you." Liz insisted gently.

Alli pursed her lips and looked away. She knew it would be pointless to try and get out of this. Liz could be very insistent when she wanted something.

"I really don't feel like going out any place." Alli replied in a futile last attempt at resistance.

"Okay. How 'bout I get a sandwich from the cafe, and then we can go sit outside somewhere? It's really gorgeous today, and there's a nice little park just down the street... we can sit there and talk?" Liz pitched in her most charming manner.

Alli sighed again... maybe it would be nice to get outside for a spell. "Okay, but I don't really feel like *talking*." She acquiesced carefully as she looked at Liz with a mild warning in her eyes; she knew what Liz wanted to 'talk' about.

The Finance Director merely smiled and nodded, her mission thus far accomplished. "I'll meet ya down in the lobby around 12."

Liz had been correct - it was a gorgeous day for the middle of February. The sun shone brightly and warm breezes floated by, gently ruffling Alli's hair and caressing her cheek like a lover's fleeting kiss. Unfortunately, that made her think of M.J., and she abruptly felt disheartened, despite the lovely weather.

She and Liz made their way to the small, quaint city park where they found a bench and parked themselves. They chatted pleasantly about many things, but Liz made it a point to avoid too many work topics. Eventually the conversation wound down, and Alli seemed to grow pensive and quiet. Liz could no longer stand it... she had to broach the dreaded subject with her friend and get to the bottom of things.

"So... you gonna tell me what's been going on with you? Or do I just keep listening to the rumors and wondering?" Liz asked.

"What rumors!?" Alli asked indignantly, sitting up straight.

Liz fixed her with a knowing look, "You mean you haven't heard the rumblings going 'round? ...I find that hard to believe."

Alli's shoulders slumped and she looked away, "John told me that people were 'talking'." She snapped in irritation.

Liz turned to face her friend, reaching out to touch her arm, "Look, Alli... I don't give a shit what stories people are concocting and spreading about you, honestly. I only give a shit about your well-being... okay?"

Alli fixed her with a serious, thoughtful stare, "I'm finding it hard to believe that *anyone* gives a shit about me these days, Liz." Her eyes glistened suddenly with the threat of tears.

Liz squeezed her arm gently, "*I* do Alli." She returned her friend's look of desperation with understanding; she felt for her friend, and she truly wanted to help. "Talk to me, hon... tell me what's going on." Alli merely looked away, releasing a frustrated sigh, still saying nothing. Liz squeezed her arm again, "You gotta get it off your chest, Alli, or you're gonna self-destruct! Have you talked to anyone about it?" She asked gently.

"Tch... who can I talk to? Who can I trust?" Alli snorted.

"You can trust *me*... I swear it," Liz said, looking at Alli with sincerity. "I promise I won't freak out, or jump to conclusions, or judge you." She waved a hand and shook her head, grinning slightly.

Alli managed a small smile and looked down at the hands twisting nervously in her lap. She did trust Liz. The older woman had become a good friend in the last few months, and although she was embarrassed, she really did need to unload all the feelings inside. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"I... I messed up, Liz... I messed up big-time," Alli began. She tearfully looked up at her friend, who sat silently. "I was weak, and I did something, and now everyone thinks I'm M.J.'s little *bitch*." A single tear dribbled down her cheek as she made the confession.

Liz considered her fragile friend for a moment before continuing. She felt a stab of dread, because the rumors were apparently true, and she felt a small stab of anger toward Alli for not staying the hell away from M.J., like she had told her. She had so many comments and questions, but she knew she had to proceed with caution.

"So... you're confirming, then, that something *did* happen between you and M.J.?" Liz asked quietly. Alli started to give her a warning glare, but Liz put her hands up in defense, "I'm only asking because I don't want to jump to conclusions, remember?" She explained quickly. Alli's gaze slid away, and she closed her eyes and nodded slowly and silently, her shoulders drooping. "And now, you regret what happened, or...?" Liz fished carefully.

"Of course I regret it!" Alli snapped, her eyes opening and flashing. Liz looked at her with both apology and understanding, then they both turned away from one another, sitting silently, neither sure of what to say next.

Alli closed her eyes, breathing deeply and tilting her face toward the heavens as she felt hot tears gather beneath her eyelids. She wondered how in the hell her life could go from bad to worse in the space of only six months. Liz contemplated what she could, and should, say to her friend now that she had made such a wretched mistake. Of all the company people for Alli to have an affair with, M.J. Whitton was the *worst* of the worst. The arrogant, conceited brunette wasn't worthy of having the adoration of someone as sweet as Allison.

"So... are all of your problems so monumental, or do you deal with minor little disturbances too, like the rest of us mere mortals?" Liz broke the silence with a small smile, giving her friend a sidelong glance.

Alli grinned crookedly back at her, wiping at her eyes, "Yeah, sure... my checkbook is off by \$52.00... my car makes a weird noise when it idles... and last weekend I lost my favorite pair of earrings." She lamented, managing a weak smile.

Liz grinned and patted her on the back, "Well it's good to know that you do have some 'normal' complications, then." They laughed a little, easing the tense atmosphere a bit, and they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Y'know what the ironic thing is?" Alli said, interrupting the brief moment of levity.

"No, what?" Liz asked

"At my prior job, *I* was the one responsible for writing the company policy on sexual harassment... *ME*!" She pointed at her chest, giving a small, rueful laugh. "I mean, I can literally say that 'I wrote the book on it,' and look at me now! ...Jesus!" She said, her head shaking and falling into her hands.

Liz frowned, wondering exactly what Alli meant by that comment, "Wait a minute, Alli... did M.J... I mean, did she force--," Her words were interrupted.

"No - she didn't force me into anything... I... I let it happen." Alli admitted sheepishly.

"Yes, but, did you... y'know... did you 'do' anything, or did she 'do' it all?" Liz asked a little more emphatically.

Alli looked at her quizzically for a moment, then shook her head when the inference sunk in, "No, Liz, it wasn't like that... it wasn't *all* her doing." Alli tried to explain without going into the gory details; this conversation was embarrassing enough.

"Yes, but Alli, she's your *boss* - she's the *President*! I mean, would you have even considered saying 'no' to her?"

"Yes! I mean no... I mean... ah, shit!" Alli held a hand up to her forehead, pausing to regain her composure for a moment. "I could have said 'no' - I know that I *should* have said 'no', okay? ...But I didn't. I didn't want to. I... I *wanted* her to do it... okay?" She admitted quietly, suddenly feeling highly ashamed and very slutty.

"But *would* she have stopped? If you had said 'no'?" Liz prodded gently.

"Yes. I mean... yes, I'm sure she would have." Alli hesitated for a moment, then looked up at Liz worriedly, "It didn't happen the way you're thinking, Liz... I know you don't like her, but she's not like that... she wouldn't do that. She didn't force me into anything... and I can't blame her completely. I wish I could, believe me, but I can't." She paused, looking off distantly, "I let her do it... because deep down... I wanted it to happen." She said very quietly, twisting her fingers nervously and hanging her head in shame.

Liz was quiet for a few moments as she stared at Alli's bowed head. "You, my friend, are in *very* deep." Liz said, blowing out an exasperated breath.

Alli gave a half-laugh, "I know it Liz... I know it." She said as a stinging in her eyes announced a fresh arrival of tears.

Weeks turned into months as Alli very carefully began to come out of her self-inflicted hibernation. She began to leave her office and go to lunch, but only with Liz. Still, it was a small

victory. Sometimes they went out, sometimes they went to the park, and lately, they even ventured to the company cafe.

A rainy morning had squelched Alli and Liz's plans for a nice park lunch, so they decided to eat at the cafe instead. They were standing at the deli counter ordering their sandwiches while chatting with each other, paying little attention to anyone else around. They paid the cashier for their food and turned to walk away, Alli's head turned downward as she put her change back into her wallet. She didn't see the tall body until she bumped right into it.

"Oh, excus-" the words died on her lips when she looked up.

M.J. had been talking to Madison when they entered the cafe and rounded the corner, and she didn't see the individual who clipped her side until she turned and looked at the person. ...At *her*. Bright green-blue eyes looked up at her, and the apologetic smile that was on the bow-shaped lips vanished immediately. They stared unflinchingly, locked onto one another, the air around them immediately saturated with tension. M.J.'s blue lasers cut deeply into Alli's jade, and they stood there for what seemed to be an eternity. Madison and Liz shot nervous glances between their companions and each other.

After several agonizing seconds, M.J. opened her mouth, as though she were going to say something, but Alli quickly squared her shoulders, assuming an air of indignance, "Excuse me," she muttered in a low, strained voice, then turned abruptly and walked away. Liz tossed M.J. a dirty look, for good measure, and followed closely on the heels of her lunch-mate.

M.J.'s eyes followed Alli's stiff form as it disappeared around the corner, and she felt a stab of regret at the loss of contact. The aqua-eyed beauty who had been haunting her dreams still looked as lovely and tempting as ever. When she turned back, Madison was watching her expectantly, her eyebrows arched and her face questioning. M.J. merely pursed her lips together tightly and gave Maddy a warning glare - a clear message that the younger woman shouldn't say one word.

Alli and Liz sat in silence at their cafe table for a few minutes. Liz unwrapped her sandwich and went about her business, carefully glancing up now and then to gauge her friend. Alli was moving, but her face said that the little run-in had badly shaken her reemerging confidence.

"You okay?" Liz asked very softly. Alli said nothing, she just nodded her head slowly. Liz could see the tears quickly forming, and she carefully reached a hand across the small table to grasp Alli's fingers.

The friendly gesture broke Alli's resolve, and a tear broke free, dribbling down her cheek, "I could smell her perfume." She whispered in tearful anguish as she propped an elbow on the table and brought a trembling hand up to cover her mouth. Liz's heart ached in sympathy for her friend. She had never been in a situation like Alli's; she had never been so maddeningly enamored of someone that she felt agony simply from being in the same room with them.

As if things weren't bad enough, Liz almost gasped aloud when M.J. and Madison came walking into the cafe dining area and took their seats at a table that, although on the other side of the room, was within easy seeing distance of her and Alli.

"I hate to tell you this, hon, but your lunch just seems to keep getting more rotten," Liz spoke lowly to her companion. Alli lifted her eyes up and looked at Liz, who motioned her head toward M.J. and Madison.

"Fuck." Alli whispered. She shifted her jaw side to side and turned back to Liz, "How much of a scene would it make if we were to get up and walk out of here right now?" She asked sincerely.

Liz twisted her lips and considered the question. She had noticed that nearly all eyes in the cafe were on them when they entered, and now that M.J. had made her entrance, the four of them were surely the topic of conversation at 99% of the tables.

"Well... it's just my opinion, but I think you'd make a better statement if you stayed and refused to be frightened off." Liz said, looking squarely at Alli with a small quirk dancing at the corner of her mouth.

Alli pursed her lips and considered her friend's suggestion. She ventured a sideways glance at the woman who still plagued her every waking moment.

"So... are we going to talk about what you want to do for Helen's retirement party, or are you going to sit here and keep pretending to listen to me while you stare at her?" Madison said tersely, annoyed that her sister wasn't paying one iota of attention to what she was saying.

M.J. snapped her eyes back to Madison, shooting her an angry look, "I'm not staring at her!" Of course she was sneaking little peaks at the blonde head across the way, but she thought she was being discreet. She should know better than to think she could pull a fast one her razor-sharp sibling.

"Morgan... if you had lasers mounted in your eyes, her head would be melted by now." Madison said reproachfully. M.J. just gave her sister a scowl... she couldn't deny it. She averted her eyes downward, stabbing forcefully at her salad, not wishing to discuss any of it anymore.

Madison watched her older sister carefully... she didn't understand what was going on inside that dark, stubborn head, but she knew it was serious enough to consume a large portion of M.J.'s thoughts. Through all the years she'd known about M.J.'s personal 'preferences' and 'appetites' - through all the affairs and flings that she'd known her to have - she'd never seen her sister so distracted by one single person. Granted, she was sure she didn't know everything about *all* her sister's dalliances - M.J. was, after all, extremely protective of her personal life, even with her only true-blood sibling - but Maddy knew enough to realize that this time, for some reason, things were different. Since M.J. never discussed the private matters of her love life with

Madison, the younger woman didn't really know how to broach the subject. She had always known better than to try to pry for information outright, but something told her that she might want to give it another try. M.J. was deeply affected by Allison Phillips, and Madison wanted to know why.

"Morgan... can I ask you something?" Maddy started cautiously, interrupting the momentary silence.

"No. Finish your food so we can get out of here." M.J. spat back tersely as she shoved another forkful of salad into her mouth, chewing harshly and staring at the tabletop, possibly trying to melt it as well.

Madison rolled her eyes, undaunted by her sister's bark. Sometimes M.J. treated her the way she did when she was a teenager.

"If you really are so... *taken* with her... why don't you try to pursue something serious... something meaningful?" Maddy persisted in a tentative but genuine voice, "It wouldn't be unheard of, you know."

M.J. looked up, regarding her sister with an incredulous look, "You're kidding, right?"

"No... no, I'm not." Madison answered with a small shake of her head, her face displaying the conviction and sincerity of her words.

M.J. gave a derisive half-laugh, half-snort, then gathered up her food tray and stood abruptly, "I'm finished, let's go." She snapped, not giving her sister an opportunity to disagree with her.

Madison breathed a sigh of frustration as she slowly stood and watched M.J. stride purposefully toward the exit doors.

"God she's impossible," Maddy murmured to herself.

"Oh damn, they're leaving... what a shame," Liz remarked sarcastically as she watched M.J. get up from her table. "Told you we could wait it out." She said, smirking back at Allison.

Alli snuck a peek, furtively watching as M.J. walked over to the trash receptacles by the doors and dumped her tray. Before she turned to walk out, the tall brunette ventured one last glance over in Alli's direction, catching the emerald-blue gaze dead-on with her light sapphire fire.

Allison's stomach plummeted as their eyes locked for mere seconds, and she watched in amazement as M.J.'s face seemed to soften ever so slightly. For a precious moment in time, Alli wished that she could just get up and run over to the towering beauty and throw herself into her strong arms. She fantasized, just for a second, that M.J. would not only welcome her, but would scoop her up, sweep her off her feet, and carry her away like a knight in shining armor... or a

gladiatrix in shining leather and chain-mail... or something. For those few moments, she forgot her anger and wished that things were much, much different.

After what seemed like an eternity, M.J. tore her gaze away and turned, exiting the cafe and not looking back. Allison spent the rest of the day feeling slightly sick to her stomach.

*"I hear a voice say 'don't be so blind',
It's telling me all of these things that you would probably hide;
Am I your one and only desire?
Am I the reason you breathe, or am I the reason you cry?
...Always, always, always...
I love you, I hate you, I can't live without you;
I breathe you, I taste you, I can't live without you;
I just can't take any more, this life of solitude;
I guess that I'm out the door, and now I'm done with you." - Saliva*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Spring had finally made its presence known in the First Coast area. Sunshine warmed the earth for longer periods of time, flowers precariously pushed forth, and the brown grasses began to rejuvenate and turn green again. The weather was turning considerably warmer, forcing the winter doldrums to loosen their evil grip and vanish at last.

Allison and M.J. had started running into each other more frequently; it seemed both of them were slowly coming out of seclusion, and they were finally reaching a point where they could look at each other without quickly averting their eyes. Privately, they had both decided to try their best to move past the little 'bump in the road' and carry on with their duties. They had jobs to do, and they refused to let their foolish indiscretion bring everything to a grinding halt.

Still, whenever they did meet, it was still tense and uncomfortable, and they were rather curt and abrupt with each other. Luckily, all their interactions had occurred when other people were present, so they were never alone with one another. But they both knew that it was just a matter of time until the odds would no longer fall in their favor.

It was just after the lunch hour one week when Allison made her way upstairs for a meeting with John, Raiford... and M.J. Although they'd had several meetings since 'the bathroom incident', the two women still struggled to speak normally, and civilly, to one another, and only did so when absolutely necessary. As far as anyone else was concerned, however, the two seemed to have put their troubles behind them and were moving on. ...But things are rarely as they 'seem'.

Alli reached the 14th floor and walked as casually as possible toward the conference room. When she reached the door, she opened it to find only one person seated at the large, oblong table... M.J.

Hearing the click-clack of the door, M.J. looked up from her note-writing to be greeted with wide, oceanic eyes. Both women froze momentarily, the realization that they were alone rendering both of them speechless.

"Come in," M.J. finally said, motioning to the table, "Ray and John should be here soon." She tried to sound casual and indifferent, but she had no idea how it was coming off.

Alli quickly looked away from her and took a seat at the opposite end of the table. She opened her attache' and began sifting through papers, pretending to read over them studiously while ignoring the looming presence on the other side of the room. She could feel M.J.'s burning gaze on her, but she absolutely refused to look up. If she did, she'd be done for. The deep cerulean depths of the beguiling woman still had the ability to do mysterious and wondrous things to her insides, and she had no desire to stir the pot. She was finally reaching a point where she could accept that she had made a mistake and move on; she wasn't about to throw all that progress away now.

After waiting in painful, awkward silence for what seemed like an eternity, Alli decided she couldn't take being in the room any longer. Even though they hadn't spoken a word to each other, she was certain that, by now, M.J. had burned a hole in her head with her piercing gaze, and she felt like she was suffocating. She looked at her watch in irritation and stood abruptly, murmuring, "I'm going next door, excuse me." Then she scurried out of the room and disappeared from sight.

M.J. breathed a deep sigh of mixed relief and frustration. Being in Alli's presence was turning out to be harder than she had thought. She thought she could play it casual and loose around the pretty blonde, dismissing what had happened between them as she always did. But instead, she was finding the opposite. Alli's cool, aloof manner and refusal to speak to her or meet her eyes consistently was disturbing her more than she'd bargained for. She could handle someone screaming and yelling and being a complete bitch to her - she could even handle pathetic begging and pleading - but she didn't know how to handle someone ignoring her as well as she ignored them. The fact that Allison seemed to be able to brush her off easily was disconcerting, to say the least.

The entrance of John and Ray broke M.J.'s thoughts, "Sorry we're late... hope we didn't keep you ladies waiting too terribly long...," Ray started with a venomous grin. "Oh... where's your little friend?" He asked, looking around the room and noticing that Alli wasn't there.

"She stepped out for a moment," M.J. said evenly, refusing to reveal anything or let Ray's comments entice her into a battle.

The two men sat down and made small talk while they waited for Allison to return. When it

became obvious that Alli had been gone for an inordinate amount of time, M.J. offered to go fetch her so that the meeting could get underway.

Alli was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, dabbing her forehead with a damp paper towel. She knew she had to get back to the meeting, but she was overcome with a feeling of sudden, irrational anxiety. Being alone with M.J. was distressing... more than distressing, actually. Even though she had told herself time and time again that she would have to get it together and get over her dread, she just could not handle being trapped beneath the vexing beauty's consuming stare. How the woman could still be her fantasy while also being her nightmare made absolutely no sense in her mind, and she had worried and distressed herself to the point where she was breaking out in a sweat.

She was just convincing herself to stop being so irrational when she heard the sound of the bathroom door opening. Entering the dimly-lit bathroom and closing the door, M.J. pinned her with darkened eyes. Alli immediately felt panic wash over her, and she stared fearfully at the ominous presence. She wanted to bolt out of the room, but her feet suddenly felt grounded to the floor like lead weights. She was certain she was either going to swoon or wet her pants. ...She silently prayed for swooning.

M.J. walked slowly toward the skittish blonde, certain that if she said so much as 'boo', the smaller woman would faint dead away. At first the thought amused M.J., but as she came to stand in front of the blushing little body, she felt ashamed more than anything. Ashamed that Allison was so afraid of her that she would hide away in a bathroom rather than face her... ashamed that they couldn't even talk civilly to one another any more... ashamed that Alli was so obviously distraught just from M.J.'s presence in front of her that her body trembled visibly and her chest heaved deep lungfuls of air.

Letting her gaze wander over Alli's flushed face for just a moment, M.J.'s hand suddenly sprang a mind of its own and began slowly reaching outward and upward. Alli's breathing hitched, and her wide eyes carefully tracked the movement of the hand as it came closer to her face. When the back of M.J.'s knuckles just barely touched the fair cheek, blue-green eyes fluttered shut and all breathing ceased.

But the touch of the delicate caress disappeared just as quickly as it happened, and when Alli reopened her eyes, she looked again onto pale, sky blue. For a brief moment, she saw something akin to sorrow and remorse flash across M.J.'s face, but she couldn't be certain. For just as soon as the emotion displayed itself on the handsome features, it was gone... replaced by blank neutrality.

M.J. withdrew her hand abruptly and took a step backward, "John and Ray have arrived." She said in a low, quiet tone, then she turned and walked to the bathroom door. Just as she pulled the door open, she turned back to look darkly at Alli again, "...I'll be waiting for you." She added, nearly whispering.

A shiver ran through Alli's body as her mind spun and tried to process the possible implied meaning in that simple statement.

It had been almost two weeks since Alli had nearly lost it in front of M.J. in the bathroom. Thankfully they hadn't had the misfortune of being alone together since then, but Alli still had to work hard to get her panic attacks under control. She had been doing so well; the brief but unsettling 'meeting' in the bathroom brought back so much emotion and intensity, she was badly shaken by the whole thing.

More than that, Alli struggled to understand what M.J. meant by her statement of *'I'll be waiting for you'*. Did that mean that M.J. was waiting for her to make the next 'move', or did it mean something deeper? Or, was it just a simple statement that had nothing to do with the two of them at all? Was Alli just reading too much into things? ...Once again, she just didn't know.

M.J., on the other hand, had a difficult time pushing away the memory of Alli's beautiful face and the anguish that had been so painfully displayed on it. She wanted to know what it was that caused the blonde to cry and be so upset, still. Was it shame and regret over what had happened? Or was it anger? Did Alli hate her? Or did she possibly miss M.J. and their friendship, like M.J. missed hers? The idea of Alli being distressed ate away at her constantly, but she didn't know how to go about 'fixing' it without approaching Alli and talking to her. The thought of that scared her more than the thought that she actually cared enough about the blonde to even consider such a thing. So, adhering to her usual modus operandi, M.J. did what she normally did in such situations... she did nothing.

*"Don't touch me please,
I cannot stand the way you tease;
I love you, though you hurt me so,
Now I'm gonna pack my things and go;
Tainted love... tainted love,
Touch me baby, tainted love." - Soft Cell*

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

June marked the end of one fiscal year and the beginning of another, and it also heralded the retirement of M.J.'s long-time secretary, Helen Lewis. Helen had been with the company for 20 years, working tirelessly as executive secretary first to Mark Whitton, and then to his daughter. The small, gray-haired woman was 65 years old, and although she never fully learned how to use a computer and was no longer the sharpest tool in the shed, M.J. liked her. The President admitted that she would miss the calm demeanor and quiet, unassuming ways of the woman who

had taught her the finer points of proper business etiquette for typing up correspondence, as well as the three different ways to fold a letter and stuff it into an equally properly prepared envelope. The little woman was conservative and old-fashioned, but she was a gem.

Dozens and dozens of people came to the lavish party that M.J. threw in Helen's honor in the company's conference center. There was a live jazz band, tons of food and drink, and M.J. had even secretly tracked down and invited Helen's immediate family so that they could attend. The event was a big hit, and Helen was floored by the massive display of gratitude and appreciation from the intense young woman who frequently seemed to not even realize that anyone else existed outside the four walls of her own office.

The older woman watched M.J. as she spoke to Madison and a few other people. She smiled, thinking back and remembering fondly how the two young girls used to come and visit their father when the company had first started. Madison had always been precocious, engaging Helen in intelligent conversations that reached beyond her years. M.J. was the tempestuous one, frequently challenging and arguing with her father, even though it was obvious the youngster worshipped the ground he walked on. M.J. had always been the apple of her Daddy's eye, and it had bothered Helen to watch the two of them grow apart over the years. Despite M.J.'s exasperating nature and Madison's occasional haughtiness, Helen always liked the young women and respected them immensely. Not many women could succeed in this business the way the Whitton girls had; both were young and their ideas were so unlike their father's, yet here they were - productive and successful in their leadership of the company. Mark Whitton was like Helen herself - old, out-dated, and past her prime. Perhaps new blood was indeed good for a company that would need strength and youth to take it into the 21st century. Still... she would miss this place, and the people who had become like her second family.

The party had started over an hour ago, and Alli still had not ventured upstairs. She knew she had to, and she really did want to - she liked Helen. The older woman had always been patient and kind to her, but... she knew that M.J. would be there, and she loathed the idea of having any kind of a face-to-face with the unsettling brunette. Liz had been bugging her about attending the function all week, telling her that she needed to go and face M.J. and stand up to her, if necessary. Alli knew that Liz was right, she just detested the thought of a confrontation. Their latest little clash in the bathroom still hung painfully in the back of her mind, and she feared that any meeting with M.J. would lead her down the path to emotional disaster again. It was the end of the day, so she finally convinced herself to go and just put in a brief appearance.

Just pop in, wish Helen well, maybe grab a quick drink, and then beat it outta there, she told herself as she reached the elevator.

Alli was surprised when she arrived at the big conference room and saw the festivities that were underway. There was a band, flowers, balloons, and food - oh the food! Her stomach growled lightly, reminding her that she'd had a skimpy lunch.

*Well, maybe I'll have a few things to eat and drink, and *then* I'll go,* Alli mused to herself.

Liz spotted her friend and went over to her immediately. "Hey! I was wondering when you were gonna get here!" She teased, bumping Alli's shoulder as she forked some food onto her plate.

Alli grinned sheepishly, "Yeah, I was, uh... I had to finish some things up first." She muttered, popping a little bite-sized quiche-like creation into her mouth.

Liz smirked at her, "Yeah, sure you did... chicken." Alli grinned and blushed and Liz nudged her again as they both chuckled. They chatted for a few minutes until someone approached them from behind.

"Glad to see you could make it," M.J. said lowly as she came to stand behind the two women.

Alli whipped her head around, startled. Her eyes took in the small, artificial-looking smile painted on the President's mauve-colored lips. "Thanks." Alli said simply as she popped another bite of food into her mouth. *Play it cool, play it cool... don't let her rattle you*, she chanted to herself as determined blue-green stared at smoky sky-blue.

Liz watched the interaction intently; she had been coaching Alli for weeks, trying to convince her friend that she could, and should, stand up to M.J. and not be bullied by her. It was the only way for Alli to escape the corner M.J. was obviously trying to keep her in. She had to admit that part of her was jealous that the President was obviously so infatuated by Alli; but another part of her was also angry that M.J. would tease - and in her opinion, harass - her friend so mercilessly. What must it be like to have someone pursue you like that? She thought that it would be enjoyable, if it were the right person... but M.J. Whitton was NOT the right person. She wondered when Alli would realize that. Liz knew that she walked a fine line; she didn't want to push her opinions onto Alli too much. But on the other hand, she just couldn't sit idly by and let Alli continually fall prey to M.J.'s treachery. Liz always had the feeling, despite Alli's protests, that she was naive and inexperienced in too many ways, especially when it came to people like M.J. It was always difficult to sit back and watch a train wreck take place.

"So... do you always throw such lavish parties for your exiting employees?" Alli asked, forcing herself to be strong and break the awkward moment of silence first. The three of them stood in a triangle, watching Helen talk and laugh with people.

"No... Helen is special." M.J. remarked with a casual smirk.

"Yeah, special in that she lasted an astounding 20 years at this place. That must be some kind of record?" Liz interjected sarcastically, not caring if she pissed her boss off; they were already on rocky terms with each other. Alli watched M.J.'s face carefully, gauging her reaction to Liz's caustic words.

"She's one of the company's most senior employees, yes." M.J. offered with a slight smile, her face remaining otherwise impassive.

"Yeah, interesting that she only lasted with *you* for about a year though." Liz said snidely, her

sienna eyes meeting M.J.'s in unabashed challenge.

"Well you know what they say," M.J. quipped, shifting her gaze to Alli, "...All good things must come to an end'." She pinned the blonde with a long, meaningful look before she turned from both of them and walked away.

Alli let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and Liz snorted as she watched the tall brunette blend into the crowd.

"Huh! What was **that** all about? God, she's a piece of work, man!" Liz sniped. Turning back to look at her blonde companion, she easily read the troubled look on the soft features. Dejected, oceanic eyes turned away from M.J.'s disappearing form to look at her worriedly, and small white teeth nervously chewed on a lower lip. Liz felt a mixture of understanding and pity for her friend.

Allison was still in very deep.

The party drug on until 7 p.m. Liz had convinced Alli to stick around; *'At least take advantage of getting a free meal!'* she had said in jest. Alli decided she was right, and the two of them had made themselves comfortable at one of the tables while they ate, laughed, and chatted amicably.

When nearly everyone had gone, they decided it was time to leave as well. Alli decided to use the restroom before she left and bade Liz farewell as the brunette walked toward the elevators. She was just reaching for the bathroom door when it opened suddenly and she was faced with the visage of one M.J. Whitton.

Alli jumped back visibly and gasped, "God! What is it with the two of us and BATHROOMS!?" She spat out exasperatedly.

"I dunno... you tell me," M.J. said lowly as she smiled and looked Alli up and down while blocking the doorway.

Alli made an indignant sighing noise and rolled her eyes. She felt her hackles rising, but she didn't want to tangle with M.J. She was **tired** of tangling with M.J.

M.J. pinned Alli with a long, hard look, then finally turned like she was going to move out of the way. Before she did, however, she stopped and looked at Alli again, "I hope you enjoyed the party... I know you enjoyed the **food**." She grinned at Alli, wanting to harass her just a little. It had been so long since they bantered with each other, and she wondered if Allison was willing to reconnect in that way.

"Yes, well, why not take advantage of a free and tasty meal? You understand that, don't you M.J.?" Alli said teasingly, but with a distinct underlying tone of sarcasm. She really didn't want to start anything, but she wanted the aggravating woman to get the gist of her hidden meaning,

since the brunette seemed to be fond of them.

M.J. leaned in toward Alli suddenly so that their faces were barely separated, "I might... but you should understand that *nothing* is free. There's *always* some kind of price to pay." Her eyes flashed and she spoke seriously, in a low, menacing tone designed to get her point across as well.

They stared at each for several moments, the standoff uncomfortably silent and fraught with intensity. Finally Alli decided she couldn't take it any more and she caved, tearing her gaze away from the glacial blue and escaping the frustrating brunette by disappearing into the women's bathroom at last.

Once inside, she contemplated locking the door - she didn't want to risk any additional 'bathroom' scenarios whatsoever. She was angry that M.J. had gotten to her, yet again, and she was confused by the mixed feelings of anger and arousal that burned inside her. She played back M.J.'s words, trying to dissect them and ascertain what the brunette beauty was implying.

I know I've paid a price, but what kind of fucking 'price' has she paid?! Her mind screamed and boggled in wonder. Refusing to let herself get wound-up for the zillionth time with thoughts of M.J. Whitton, she shook her head and inhaled a deep breath, then expelled it in a loud sigh. It was late, and she just wanted to get out of here and go the hell home.

*"You let me violate you; you let me desecrate you
You let me penetrate you; you let me complicate you
Help me... I broke apart my insides
Help me... I've got no soul to sell
Help me... the only thing that works for me
Help me... to get away from myself;
I want to fuck you like an animal
I want to feel you from the inside
I want to fuck you like an animal
My whole existence is flawed... you get me closer to God;
You can have my isolation; you can have the hate that it brings
You can have my absence of faith; you can have my everything
Help me... you tear down my reason
Help me... it's your sex I can smell
Help me... you make me perfect
Help me... become somebody else." - Nine Inch Nails*

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Alli punched the garage-level button of the elevator, anxious to get home and relax after the little post-party run-in with M.J. She had forgotten her briefcase and made a pit-stop at her office to fetch it, but now she was finally headed home. It was late, and no one was around, and she was glad to ride in peace and solitude.

The happy 'ding' of the elevator's bell interrupted her serenity. Wondering who else was stupid enough to be there so late, she glanced up, and her heart nearly stopped. M.J. stood at the open doors looking, momentarily, as surprised as Alli was. The shock was quickly covered-up, however, replaced with her usual sly smirk and sharply arched brow.

"Going down?" M.J. asked in a low, teasing voice as she reached her arm out to stop the doors from closing.

*Oh *shit**. Alli thought in a panic, but outwardly she only glared at the tall woman as she walked fully into the elevator car. They said nothing to each other as the doors closed and the car lurched to begin its descent. Alli clenched her jaw tightly... she couldn't believe that of all the people she could run into at this moment, M.J. would have to be the one to appear.

The fates must fucking hate me, she cringed inwardly, what the hell is she doing getting on at the 10th floor?!

Her throat constricted from an overwhelming urge to let loose a primal scream, but she absolutely refused to utter one word. She would not let M.J. taunt her and lure her into another battle of twisted words and sharp retorts. She wished she could jump off at the next floor... she wished *M.J.* would jump off at the next floor... she wished she could PUSH her off.

She wanted to plead with the tall beauty to just leave her ALONE. But no... she would *not* plead with her, she insisted to herself. She would not ask or beg M.J. for *anything*. She'd had it with the aggravating woman's condescending attitude and arrogant dominance over her. She would *NOT* give in anymore. If M.J. wanted to battle wills, Alli would stand her ground and battle her, right here, right now. The floors began to roll by in cheery 'dings' as the two remained silent. Alli silently seethed inside, biting the inside of her cheek to the point where it was becoming painful.

"So...," M.J. finally spoke out, interrupting Alli's determined thoughts, "are we going to just keep avoiding each other, or are we going to be mature and try to resolve things?" M.J. asked, breaking the painfully tense atmosphere as she turned to regard Alli carefully. She didn't want to be angry with Alli, and she didn't want Alli to be angry with her. She was tired of playing parry and dodge with the blonde; she wanted to get past this hostility and awkwardness and go back to the way things were before... before all the mess.

Alli's eyes flashed stormy blue-green as she turned her head slightly, shooting the brunette a perturbed, sideways look, "There's *nothing* to resolve." She snapped, her ire evident.

M.J. turned and took a step toward her, placing a hand on the wall near Alli's head in a move meant to subtly intimidate. "If we're going to work together, we need to sort things out." She

said, her face strangely serene, her voice deceptively low and soft.

Alli gave an incredulous laugh, feeling her patience finally go up in smoke. She suddenly wanted and needed to unload and get everything off her chest. She turned to face M.J. fully, " 'Sort things out'?! " Alli said, her voice rising along with her temper, "You *fucked* me in your office bathroom... *WHAT*, pray tell, should I 'sort out' from *that*?! "

M.J.'s eyes widened in surprise just a smidge; she really didn't think Alli had the gonads to give it back to her like that. She quickly decided to fight back and see what else the little blonde had inside.

"Oh, *I* did it? So it's all *MY* fault then?" M.J. retorted in a much louder voice as she pointed to her own chest. "*I* forced you to stand there? *I* held you down and threatened you? *I* wouldn't let you go, even when you kicked and screamed and BEGGED me to stop?" She spit the words out as she stepped closer still, cornering her captive.

Alli stood there, eyes wide and blazing... blood pressure rising... chest heaving great breaths.

"Y'know, as I seem to recall, *YOU* told me that you wanted me to 'put my money where my mouth is'." M.J.'s eyebrows rose sharply as she dared Alli to refute her words.

Alli could only stand there and glare hatefully, her face reddened, her heart thundering in her chest. M.J. knew she had her.

"What I do *NOT* recall, Ms. Phillips, is you asking me to *stop*... not once." She stepped even closer, leaning down so that they were separated by mere centimeters. "All I recall you doing is moaning and groaning a whole lot." M.J. taunted, drawing the words out and letting them roll viciously and seductively off her tongue.

"You self-righteous *bitch*!" Alli growled lowly through gritted teeth, her body nearly shaking with anger that threatened to send her into self-destruct mode. She couldn't very well punch her boss in the face, so she decided to get the hell out of the elevator and away from the infuriating woman as quickly as possible. She jerked her body forward, making to quickly move past the tall body that was blocking her way.

M.J. had different ideas, however. She darted an arm out and snagged Alli around the waist, forcing her back into the corner with ease. Then, just as deftly, M.J. turned around and flipped off the elevator's 'run' switch, bringing the car to a stuttering halt and plunging it into semi-darkness.

Alli was shocked, and her mouth opened in a gasp as her body gently bumped against the paneled walls, "What in the HELL do you think you're doing!?"

M.J. turned around again to face Alli, "I want you to tell me." She said simply, her voice calm and even, her eyes alight with hungry blue intensity as she stepped in to corner her captive once again.

"Tell you **what*?!"* Alli said in exasperation. She was a little frightened by M.J.'s sudden aggressive maneuvering and the fact that she was now trapped in an elevator with her, but... she also felt the start of a hot, fiery sensation burning low in the pit of her gut. *Oh Jesus H. CHRIST, I cannot get turned-on NOW!!* She screamed inside her head.

"Tell me what you want me to do," M.J. said lowly through clenched teeth as she leaned her body in even closer to the small, angry blonde one beneath her. It was so incredibly difficult not to reach out and touch Alli... so hard not to lean her face down and smell her aroma... lick her skin... taste her desire. She was going to go crazy in about two minutes.

"Jesus Christ, you're **crazy*!*" Alli said with unwitting accuracy as she willed herself not to completely freak out. She brought her hands up to shove M.J.'s shoulders away from her, but before her hands even touched M.J.'s blouse, the brunette grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the elevator wall. Alli's eyes widened in surprise.

"TELL me!" M.J. yelled, her nose almost touching Alli's, her eyes nefarious, dark and wild.

"Let go of me!" Alli demanded, trying to twist her wrists free.

"No!" M.J. shot back, "Not until you tell me what you want!"

"Stop it!" Alli cried out, gritting her teeth and fighting in vain.

"NO!" M.J. reiterated, "I want you to tell me!" She demanded even louder, her larger hands refusing to release Alli's slender wrists.

Alli could only cringe and grit her teeth harder. Her panic-stricken mind warred with her body over what to do and say and feel. The sheer strength that the taller woman seemed to possess shocked and frightened her, and numerous bad memories flew through her mind at break-neck speed. She had been in this very position so many times before with her former husband; she shuddered when she thought about what would come next. She didn't want to believe that M.J. would hurt her... but people do strange things in the heat of anger and passion.

And yet... despite her fright and her fury, a distinct thrill coursed through Alli's small body. She was both livid and scared, yet she could feel the electrical charges that passed from M.J.'s gripping hands into her clasped wrists. Being overpowered by M.J. - by this woman who frustrated her and aroused her and drove her to the brink of insanity - was doing something to her insides that she did not and could not comprehend. Every nerve seemed to be standing on end; every sense seemed to be heightened. She could almost see the energy and heat radiating from M.J.'s taut body; she could feel the undeniable pull of their subliminal, soulful connection; she could smell the unbearable, lustful intent within both of them.

Alli stood with her eyes squeezed shut, praying not to cry, screaming inside her head that this was insanity, and absolutely **refusing** to let her body arch outward so that it could feel M.J.'s tall form press against her intimately.

OhMyGodd..., she thought helplessly as her eyes began to burn and fill with hot wetness.

M.J. could see the battle being waged inside the little blonde's body, and she leaned in even closer, her lips barely grazing a flaxen-haired temple, "Tell me Allison... do you want me to 'put my money where my mouth is', or do you want me to leave you alone?" M.J. spoke low and husky in a voice that rasped like raw silk.

The throaty tenor of the words vibrated along the side of Alli's skull, scrambling her brains further, reverberating inside her body, and sending mixed signals to a spot between her legs that could only respond by releasing a damp need.

Alli couldn't answer; she was too overwhelmed by her senses. The engulfing heat and sexuality that emanated from the tall body... the rich, sultry seduction that came from the teasing mouth... the smell of light perfume mixed with the subtle odor of arousal... all of it was reaching out and grabbing hold of her while doing unmentionable things to her insides. The enormity of the situation was hitting her full-force, and she felt the rushing tide of her jumbled emotions surge forth inside her chest, pulling her rational mind into a dense fog of confusion and desperation. She was falling... she was faltering, again... her head was screaming '*no no*', but her body was screaming '*ohhh yes*'. Tears flooded Alli's eyes in an instant, and she could only squeeze them harder as the wetness began to dribble down her flushed cheeks.

M.J. saw the tears and the quivering chin right away and almost felt sorry for the small woman she had trapped beneath her. If only Alli knew how much she wanted her... if only she knew how much she hated herself for being such a coward and going about it like this... if only she knew how maddening it all was and how positively crazy it made her. M.J. was as close to losing her precious control as she'd ever been in her life. She forced herself to take a deep breath and closed her eyes, gently leaning her body forward until it pressed ever-so-lightly against the smaller one, while letting her face nestle against a soft, damp temple. Alli smelled wonderful... she felt incredible... M.J. was satisfied to just stay like that. They both stilled for a precious moment... bodies trembling... eyes closed... inhaling each other's essence... trying to reign in their emotions... trying to regain their sanity.

After a few minutes, M.J. slowly released Alli's wrists and brought her hands in to rest on the slender hips beneath her. She supposed she was not quite satisfied after all. She let her hands and fingers gently stroke the waist of the smaller, quivering body.

"I know that you want this," M.J. whispered softly against Alli's ear.

Alli squeezed her eyes together even harder; she was in absolute agony. She had been trying so hard to resist M.J., for the sake of her morals - for the sake of her sanity - but the temptation was so powerful. The urge to wrap her arms and legs around the taller body was overwhelming... she didn't know how long she could fight it. Her breathing hitched when she felt the soft caress of M.J.'s hands on her body.

...Oh dear God help me.

M.J. leaned her face downward, grazing her lips along Alli's jaw and neck while her hands continued to wander over the petite, lithe form.

She lifted her lips to Alli's temple again and whispered, "Tell me if you want me to stop." Alli did not answer. "Come on, Alli... *tell* me!" M.J. rasped more emphatically.

Alli couldn't speak around the huge lump that had become lodged in her throat; she only whimpered in response and lamely shook her head 'no' as more tears fell in anguished silence.

M.J. closed her eyes and pressed her face against the side of Alli's head, "I know you want me as much as I want you!" She whispered forcefully, breathlessly... her need now so great that her voice betrayed her by quavering, and her body betrayed her by insinuating a leg between Alli's thighs. She continued to taunt, "Deny it Alli... deny how much you want this!" She growled into Alli's ear and then leaned down to gently bite and suckle her silken neck.

Another whimper escaped from Alli's mouth and her hands flew up to grip the brunette's shoulders as she sucked a breath in through her teeth and clenched her jaw tightly. Her body finally surrendered, announcing its mutiny by pushing her hips outward to grind lewdly against M.J.'s invading thigh while her nails dug into the broad shoulders even harder, nearly tearing the taller woman's silk blouse off as she clung to it. She stood there and let M.J. take control of her, powerless, once again, to say anything or make herself move; unwilling to even slow it down... not wanting it to stop... only wanting M.J. and whatever she offered... only wanting the erotic indulgence of pure carnal pleasure. Her mind thrilled at the blood-lust that rushed through her veins... her heart soared at the reckless abandonment of propriety once again.

She couldn't tell M.J. to stop, because she didn't want her to stop; she couldn't deny her want, because it would be a lie. She wanted M.J.; she wanted her like she'd never wanted anyone before in her entire life. She wanted her with a vicious, all-consuming passion, and she would gladly take whatever M.J. gave to her. Wherever she wanted to take her, Alli knew she would follow... again.

"Tell me to stop, Allison!" M.J. insisted urgently, but Alli still said nothing. She couldn't. She wouldn't. Her only answer was to release her frustration in the form of choked gasps and tears. M.J. quickly unbuttoned Alli's blouse, parting it and reaching a hand in to caress the soft, silk-clad breasts. She bent her head down further to place open-mouthed kisses on the tender, newly-exposed flesh, driving her captive insane with arousal. Alli could only groan softly as her hips moved instinctively against M.J.'s firm thigh. There was no turning back now.

Burning desire coursed wildly through Alli's veins, and she brought her hands up to grasp M.J.'s dark head, gripping hard, but not pushing away. M.J. inhaled a sharp breath against Alli's skin and reached down to unzip the linen pants that covered the rest of the petite body beneath her. She quickly slipped a hand inside satiny panties, immediately delving into the warm, overflowing wetness that greeted her questing fingers. Alli released a deep groan and threw her head backwards, bumping it against the wall while jerking her hips forward. Her hands moved back to M.J.'s shoulders and she dug her nails in harshly again.

"Uhhh yeahhh," M.J. groaned and hummed against a blonde temple, relishing in the contrasting tenderness and brutality of the moment. As M.J. stroked and plundered her, Alli was unable to stay quiet, erupting with quiet noises that were a mixture of broken gasps and whimpers.

Then suddenly, without warning, M.J. withdrew her hand and dropped to her knees, kneeling in-between Alli's legs and pulling her pants completely down and out of the way, including her undies. Alli's foggy mind struggled to realize what was happening, and she had trouble believing it until she felt strong, warm hands touching her legs and urging them apart. When she felt the soft wetness of M.J.'s lips press against her inner thigh, she jerked and gasped aloud, her hands flying down to grasp at the head of the kneeling woman.

Unfazed, and even pleased by Alli's surprise, M.J. persisted with her oral attack, trying hard to touch the small body delicately, but finding it difficult. Her tongue snaked out to insistently probe and taste and ingest every sweet ounce of Alli that it could. Her ravenous hunger was so great; it urged her to devour the feast in front of her and she feared that it was insatiable. Her perplexed mind sent mixed signals everywhere, and she nearly wept her need aloud. She slid her hands up along soft skin to grasp the backs of Alli's thighs and buttocks, bringing her intimately deeper and closer to her goal.

Alli's hips thrashed and undulated against M.J.'s fiercely questing tongue and she gripped the dark head tighter and harder. She could only gasp, groan and breathe erratically while her mind teleported back and forth between this world and the next. With every swirl and stab of M.J.'s relentless tongue, Alli's body tensed and her thighs squeezed, threatening to crush the body that was firmly wedged between her legs.

M.J.'s lips curled into a half-snarl, half-smile, pleased at Alli's nonsensical utterances. Before the smaller woman could reach her climax, however, M.J. abruptly stood back up, pressing her body against Alli's and sliding her hand back down to finish the task her tongue had begun. Confusion and surprise further muddled Alli's hazy mind, but the sensation of M.J.'s penetrating fingers quickly banished any displeasure she had about the sudden change of pace.

"Now, tell me how much you hate this, Allison!" M.J. taunted in a menacing whisper as she pressed her face against Alli's temple and moved her hand in a quick, rough rhythm, bringing Alli closer and closer to the precipice. "Tell me how much you *hate* me!" M.J. demanded breathlessly as she ground herself against Alli's thigh and plunged her fingers deeper, faster, harder.

Alli's mouth opened and she panted out in staccato breaths, "I... hate... you!" She hissed, giving in to M.J.'s taunts. Her hips continued to thrust against the invading hand, and she wrapped her arms underneath and around M.J.'s shoulders, bringing their bodies tightly together and fusing their need. She tried to keep her climax at bay as long as possible, but alas, she could not. The ripples began to reverberate throughout her body, foretelling the imminent explosion.

"I... hate... you! ...I ...HATE... YOU!" Alli choked out in a broken, guttural growl, clutching M.J. desperately as her orgasm stole upon her swiftly, destroying her last vestiges of control.

M.J. felt the trembling within Alli's body and it triggered the beginning of her own release. She breathed out a deep groan, her pelvis pushed firmly against Alli's hip, and her face bent downward and pressed tightly against the side of the dampened blonde head.

Alli's climax reached its pinnacle and she surrendered completely, coming with a ferocity that shattered her. She cried out and clamped her teeth down on the exposed trapezius muscle between M.J.'s neck and shoulder, needing to release her agony and pass it on to her tormentor at the same time. Her small teeth carved an angry red gouge into M.J.'s flesh while her body shuddered and she came, one crushing wave after another.

The bite and the staggering climax that she felt made M.J. cry out, and she was pushed completely over the edge as well. Panting, spent, and slumped together, both women gasped for air and clung to each other for several minutes, struggling to stay upright in the corner of the stuffy, sex-infused elevator car.

Beads of perspiration lightly dotted Alli's forehead, and she let her face fall down to rest against the shoulder that she'd just maimed. The intensity of her shattering orgasm and the magnitude of the moment suddenly gripped her, and she was filled with an overwhelming urge to cry.

M.J. breathed raggedly as she rested her cheek against Alli's head, her heart thudding fiercely as she tried to regulate her breathing. She kept her eyes closed, reveling in and enjoying the warm strumming of Allison's body.

"So beautiful." M.J. whispered into the flaxen hair so breathlessly and so quietly that Alli almost didn't hear it.

...Almost.

Floodgates opened, and the already-welling tears immediately sprung from the jade pools. Alli closed her eyes, overcome with conflicting feelings and emotions that spun perilously out-of-control. Despite her refusal to give in to her emotional turmoil, the hot tears streaked unchecked down her cheeks.

A few silent moments passed as both women continued to stand in the corner, fighting to bring themselves and their bodies back under control. M.J. could feel warm wetness saturating the shoulder of her shirt, but she didn't care; if it meant holding the small, beautiful woman close like this, Alli could ruin her entire outfit.

The tears finally stopped and Alli continued to rest her face in the crook of M.J.'s neck. She could feel the rapid pounding of M.J.'s jugular vein as it throbbed rapidly against the side of her face. Turning her head slightly and opening her eyes, she watched in rapt fascination as the artery jumped and pulsed beneath the dampened tan skin. Without much thought, Alli tilted her head so that she could press her mouth against the vein, tasting and sucking it gently between her lips. Her eyes fluttered and slid shut as she licked and ingested and memorized the essence of the person who had her completely and utterly enthralled.

M.J.'s eyes flew open when she felt the soft moistness touch her neck, and she sucked in a tremulous breath. Alli was tasting her in one of her most sensitive spots, and her knees threatened to wobble and give out at any moment. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to stay calm and in control, but the delicate little laps of Alli's tongue were slowly undoing her.

Oh god oh god...

Alli felt the slight shudder race through M.J.'s body, and she realized that the tall temptress was not quite as in control as she thought she was. Going against everything she vowed she wouldn't do, Alli tilted her head up toward M.J.'s ear and whispered in a raspy, throaty voice, "Come home with me." M.J.'s eyes flew open even wider. "Stay with me, just for tonight?" Alli implored quietly while she resumed her suckling of M.J.'s pulse-point.

M.J.'s mind raced with a million thoughts and her heart surged with a million feelings. She was amazed that Alli would even want such a thing from her, and she was shocked to hear her actually voice it. While her libido tried to fantasize about the numerous carnal delights they could partake in all night, her mind overrode everything by zeroing in on the primary thought and feeling inside her: Fear.

Fear about the implications of what they had just done... fear of what direction this strange relationship could take... fear of what it would mean if she were to go home with Alli and spend a night with her... fear of what Alli would expect and want from her. Too much fear... too much commitment... too much of everything.

M.J. cringed and closed her eyes, steeling herself for what she knew she had to say and do.

"I can't." She said very quietly as her hands tensed on Alli's back and waist, preparing for the inevitable eruption.

Alli pulled back, her dark aqua orbs wide and round, a crushed expression plainly etched on her face. "Why not?" Her brows crinkled and she looked at M.J.'s downcast face with sad longing. She really didn't think that she'd be turned down, not after M.J. admitted how much she wanted her.

M.J. raised her head slowly, looking into tearful eyes of the deepest, most exquisite green-blue. Two pairs of intensity-wracked orbs locked on one another, swirling with a mixture of emotions and colors that looked like they were plucked directly from the raging depths of the sea and the crystal-clear blue sky.

M.J. suddenly couldn't look at Alli. She closed her eyes and shook her head slightly, "I just... can't." It wasn't enough, she knew, but it was all she could say; it was all the explanation she had at the moment.

Alli recognized the look on M.J.'s face. It was the same one she'd had after the 'bathroom incident'. Darkened blue eyes reopened and burned with overflowing desire, but the expression

on the impenetrable face told her she still would not be getting inside the heavily-guarded fortress. The lingering euphoria of the sexual rush quickly gave way to first, hurt and then anger, and Alli felt it well up, painful and red inside her.

She could feel her throat begin to close up, and she swallowed convulsively. She wanted to cry... she wanted to throw-up... she wanted to scream and kick and punch and hurt someone. She knew better... she knew she should not be here, doing this... again. Still, somewhere in the back of her mind, she had stupidly held out for a small miracle that maybe M.J. would come 'round... that she would strip off her suit of armor and allow Alli inside.

But, of course, she wasn't doing that. Instead, she was telling her, flat out, that she could not, and would not, commit to anything - not even one night together. All she would ever do was continually push Alli off the cliff with not even so much as a 'sorry' as a tether. M.J. didn't want a relationship with her; she would only continue to use her.

She didn't trust her. She would never give her anything.

She's such a liar, Alli thought suddenly, remembering back to their first 'encounter' in the bathroom. *She fucking *LIED*!*

"You're a liar, and a coward!" Alli suddenly spluttered, pushing back away from the tall figure. M.J. just looked at her in confusion. "You told me that you knew what I needed! That you could give it to me!" Alli spat accusingly, her voice catching as she tried to blink back the tears that flooded her eyes.

M.J.'s eyes widened and she looked away quickly, afraid for Alli to see the shock and genuine regret on her face. She struggled with herself for a few seconds, the temptation to blurt out how she really felt leaping to the forefront of her mind... but only for a fleeting second. She would never do that... she couldn't... it was impossible. But she had to say something; Alli was waiting for her comment. M.J. quickly decided to do what she'd always done... push her feelings deep down inside herself and lock them up in the dark dungeons of her heart once again. She would revert to the plan of action she was most familiar with... the one she knew best and could always rely on... her best friend... Denial. M.J. looked back into watery, anguished green-blue, hating herself for what she was about to do.

"Well I guess I was wrong." She said it with such finality, her voice flat and devoid of emotion, as though she was merely negating a bad business transaction. The 'slam' of the metal doors on her heart was almost audible.

Alli's mouth opened and then closed. What else was there to say? M.J. had said it all, and all of it had devastated her. She looked into the veiled, crystal-blue depths of the woman who could have had her heart, and realized that this was it. It was truly over. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she could feel her heart shattering into a million pieces.

Alli only stared at M.J.'s closed-off countenance for a few seconds; it was too agonizing to look upon her any longer. Refusing to completely lose it in front of the tall woman, she finally

wrenched herself free of M.J.'s dominance and maneuvered out of the corner to quickly snap the elevator's 'run' button back on. The car lurched and began its downward descent again as Alli stood with her back to M.J., swiping her hands across her eyes and furiously working to re-button her pants and shirt.

I will not lose it in front of her I will not lose it in front of her, she chanted inside her head. Her eyes burned and the painful lump reemerged, wedging itself firmly in the middle of her throat.

M.J. stood there, defeated, watching Alli dumbfoundedly, unable to do or say anything. She knew Allison was hurting, and she knew that it was her doing, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. How do you tell someone that it's just too frightening to be with them? That you don't know **how** to be with them? How do you explain that you can't handle the feelings? That you fear your own need, as well as hers? That because the emotions are so intense and so deep, you don't know what to do with them? And you don't know what to do with **her**? M.J. grimaced as she felt a confusing rush of fright, regret, anger, and agony wash over her.

The elevator gave an ironically cheerful 'ding', heralding their arrival at the garage level. Alli was still tucking her blouse into her pants as she bent down to grab her nearly-forgotten purse and briefcase. The doors opened and she forced her way out abruptly. The tears began to fall immediately.

"Alli," M.J. muttered, her voice and her resolve cracking. Allison ignored her and began to walk away as quickly as her legs would carry her. Cursing herself, M.J. pushed away from the elevator wall, yelling out pathetically, "Allison wait! You don't understand!"

Alli stopped and turned slowly, her tear-stained face looking back at M.J. with such pain and confusion, it tore the brunette's heart to shreds.

"You're right, I DON'T understand!" Alli choked out in tear-filled rage. "I don't understand YOU! ...I don't understand ME! ...I don't understand **ANY** of this!" Her chin trembled and the tears ran freely down her face. When M.J. started to take a step toward her, she held up a hand, "Just... forget it, M.J.! Just fucking **FORGET IT**!" She yelled loudly.

Turning sharply on her heel, Alli bolted toward her car, tossing her bags inside and slamming the door violently when she reached it. Hot tears blurred her vision and she could barely see the ignition as she fumbled with her keys. Finally the bug's engine turned over and she slammed it into reverse, squealing the tires and flying out of the garage in a mad rush.

M.J. watched and listened silently as the sound of Alli's car retreated further and further into the distance. She let her body collapse against a wall, wincing and gingerly touching the sore, nearly-bleeding spot on her trapezius. Pulling her hand away from her shoulder, she looked at her fingers, remembering where they had just been... the beauty they had just caressed... the perfection they had just lavished in. She closed her eyes and brought the fingertips to her lips, sticking her tongue out to taste the residue of nectar that still clung to them.

She couldn't believe what they had just done - again. She couldn't believe she had been so bold

and aggressive, and she couldn't believe how responsive and lustful Alli had been in return. She still was shocked that Alli had actually asked her to come home with her. M.J. wasn't surprised by too much, but she had a feeling that, given the chance, Alli would surprise her in many ways.

And are you going to give her the chance, M.J.? Her subconscious asked, snapping at the opportunity to jump in. M.J. closed her eyes as the same old argument flew 'round and 'round inside her head once again. *It's not about *giving* chances... it's about *taking* chances,* she thought in response. *...And I just don't think I can take the chance.*

**Coward*!*

Shaking her head and groaning aloud, M.J. gritted her teeth together and brought both hands up to the sides of her head, grabbing fistfuls of hair and telling herself, again, what a complete, fucking idiot she was.

The drone of Alli's car and the spectre of her presence had finally disappeared completely, leaving M.J. and the garage in confused and anguished silence.

[Continued in Chapter 36](#)

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~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"We don't like you, we just want to try you
I'm tired of runnin', the feeling ain't comin'
It all could be different, it all could be different
But all this is sickness, the feeling ain't in this;
'Cos we don't know where to stop
We don't know where to stop
I try and I try, but I can't get enough
I won't fail you, but you won't bleed for me." - Black Rebel Motorcycle Club*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Alli cried and cursed M.J. as she drove home to her apartment. At one point, she had to pull over and sit for several minutes, needing to gather herself and stop the onslaught of blinding tears. Her body continued to quake and tremble beneath the fury of overwhelming emotions and sensations. She had come so violently that her ovaries ached. She felt so many conflicting emotions - shameful regret, incredible anger, agonizing guilt - her mind ran the gamut of twisted, painful feelings. She wanted to scream and cry out loud; she was so tired of feeling pathetic, foolish, dirty, and angry. She cried the rest of the way home, and when she reached her apartment, she collapsed on her bed and cried some more.

She kept reliving the scene in her mind. The dangerous, all-consuming look that M.J. had pinned her with... the desire plainly written on the beautiful face... the smell of her body, of her passion... her lust. It turned Alli inside-out and made her lose control completely, hopelessly. She had nothing to combat that type of erotic seduction... that type of magnetic, lustful need. She was helpless against its overpowering force. She could not make herself stop.

She recalled the words of devotion and praise that had spun wildly inside her head as M.J. knelt in front of her. She wanted so badly to speak the words, but she was afraid to. She was afraid of what M.J.'s reaction would be to them... afraid that all M.J. wanted was this - just sex; just casual, lust-driven, no-strings-attached, sex. Granted, it was fabulous, but it seemed it was all the dominating brunette would ever allow them to share. M.J. remained, still, in complete control.

So again, Alli had allowed it to happen... again, she had let herself succumb. And again, she hated herself for it. For losing control... for being weak and pathetic... for being the prey to the predator. She hated that she had no power, and she hated the fact that M.J. had it in spades. Power to seduce her... power to manipulate her... power to take what she wanted while giving nothing in return. Power to walk away.

Why does she walk away? Alli asked herself mournfully as still more tears leaked out of her puffy eyes. *But more importantly, why do I keep coming *back*?*

She wanted to understand M.J.'s distance and reluctance, she really did, but she couldn't. She wondered if she ever would. Part of her wanted to ignore M.J.'s claim of *'I can't'*; she wanted to push and shove and demand an answer from the frustrating beauty. But another part of her wanted to be gentle and tread lightly on M.J.'s apparently damaged soul. It had to be damage from some past romantic trauma - what else could it be? What else would keep her from opening the door and allowing Alli inside?

*She said 'beautiful'... she thinks it's beautiful... that I'm beautiful... or that *we* are. How can she say that and then just run away from it?!* Alli wondered, feeling her frustration multiply. No one had ever uttered words like that to her before, and she desperately wanted to think that M.J. was talking about her, rather than the sex act itself. But she would probably never know for certain.

She couldn't fathom what it might be that prevented M.J. from exposing her feelings... from just

talking. The brunette always held Alli - and everyone, really - at arm's length, keeping them at bay for some reason, but what? What could the reason be? Maybe it had something to do with their work/professional situation - maybe M.J. thought that she'd compromise herself somehow? Maybe she didn't want to get involved in anything serious or long-term? Maybe the tall temptress only wanted someone to fuck around with? Maybe this was all they were ever destined for - occasional, lustful sex in strange places...?

*No... no way! I will NOT do that! I will not let myself be weak and pathetic like that, goddammit! *Never*! *Never again*!* Alli shook her head, crying to herself in a mixture of confused rage and heart-wrenching sorrow.

She didn't know what to do... where should she go from here? As hard as she prayed, no answers dropped magically from the sky. All she knew, at that moment, was that she had to swear she would not allow herself to fall prey to M.J. again. No matter what. She could not, and *would* not, give in... ever again. If she were to wrest control of herself from M.J., she had to make the break, and make it now.

God... am I strong enough to do that? Again?!

Even though she knew that severing the tie was absolutely necessary to save her self-worth and resurrect her dignity, she also knew the pain and sadness that it would bring. Aside from all the twisted games and sexual manipulation, she had really liked M.J., deep down inside. They had a good working relationship once upon a time, and now that would be gone too. She already felt the pain of the impending loss.

After awhile, Alli finally drew enough strength to force her sorry ass up off her bed so she could get changed. She made her way into her bathroom, coming to stand in front of her mirror, where she stood and took a critical look at herself. The face she saw was the same one she saw every day, but now, somehow, it seemed different. It seemed like a stranger was looking back at her. This was a person who no longer felt that the promise of a better life lay ahead of her... who no longer had hopes and dreams... this was someone who was incredibly confused, and so unbelievably unhappy.

*How could this have happened? I was supposed to be making a change for the *better* when I moved here, not worse!* Alli thought dejectedly as still more tears slid down her fair cheeks.

Later, as she eased her overburdened body into her soothing bed, Alli's jumbled mind continued to whirl in a maelstrom of thoughts, refusing her body's plea for sleep, which it so desperately craved. She continued to think and play back the events of the evening... all the emotions... all the feelings and sensations... all the confusion.

Nothing about her 'relationship' with M.J. met her expectations. None of it had gone the way she thought it would; this latest encounter was just further proof of that. She had always hoped and wished and thought about many things when it came to her first big, serious, sexual and emotional relationship with a woman she truly cared about and wanted. Her mind had conjured plenty of ideals, and she'd dreamt-up many fantastical scenarios, just like everyone does.

However... being seduced and taken so blatantly while fully clothed and pinned against a bathroom door, and then cornered in an elevator car...? No, none of these things had ever played into her chimeras. They would more likely qualify as nightmares.

Still, she shamefully felt a warm blush creep up her skin as she remembered the feel of M.J.'s warm, wet tongue on her and in her as it probed and penetrated and devoured her with hedonistic greed. Even though she had technically had sex with other women, she had never allowed one to pleasure her orally in her most intimate spot. M.J. had been the first. She wondered if that would mean anything to the arrogant beauty. It certainly meant something to Alli. Granted, the whole thing hadn't happened the way she had hoped it would, but it still marked a significant turning point for her. She had, in an old-fashioned sort of way, been 'saving' herself for the 'right' woman. But now her precious gift had been opened... and she feared that it hadn't been unwrapped by the 'right' woman at all.

She wondered if perhaps she was just making a bigger issue of it than necessary. Thinking back to her sexual experiences with her ex-husband - the only man she'd ever slept with - she also recalled her experiences with other women. She'd always figured that those experiences were her representations and guidelines of 'good sex', and she'd convinced herself that they were as good as it would ever get. Tonight's experience, however, had blown all those theories right out of the water. She had been dreadfully, dreadfully wrong... about so many things.

Whatever it was that transpired between her and M.J. all those months ago in that office bathroom, and again this evening in the elevator, changed her in some way... a way that she didn't understand. It was as if something sleepy and dormant had been roused and was awakening deep inside her... like a long-buried creature had been unearthed and was clamoring to break free from the depths of its dank prison. Alli couldn't fully comprehend it, and she didn't know how she felt about it. Was all this rebirth and new discovery a positive thing, or a negative thing - especially now, in light of her crushed feelings and her vow to never give in to her lust for M.J. again?

The conflicting feelings just added to her already overwhelming frustration. Part of her was thrilled to find that her naive ideology of what constituted 'good sex' had been smashed to smithereens, and yet another part of her felt a sense of emptiness and desperation deep inside. It was as though she had been starving for so long, and then suddenly, someone dropped a cornucopia in front of her, spilling forth such luscious, succulent food. But the delight only lasted for a brief, fleeting moment; for as soon as she reached for the sustenance, it was snatched out of her grasp. She was given a glimpse and afforded a whiff, but she wasn't permitted to touch it... she couldn't hold it in her hands nor sink her teeth into any of it. She remained hungry and malnourished.

That's how she felt about M.J. The dominating brunette was just out of reach and always in control, and probably always would be. But truthfully - and perhaps pathetically - Alli thought that she could probably deal with that, as long as M.J. allowed her to have some say-so and catered to her needs and demands from time to time. But obviously, M.J. was unwilling to capitulate to her in any way, shape, or form. That was the part that frustrated Alli the most. She had thought that her frustration was borne out of the abruptness and impropriety of their

encounters, but now she realized it was much more than that.

The fact that the tall beauty never gave Alli the opportunity to touch her, or pleasure her in return, told her a lot. M.J. would never relinquish her control, and she would never open herself up.

If she really cared about me, she wouldn't need to be so in control... she would trust me. And that was really what it was all about: Trust. She doesn't trust me at all... she won't even kiss me, for chrissake!

Alli squeezed her eyes closed, trying to halt the tears that she knew would come again. She had cried so much tonight. She cried over her own feelings... she cried over M.J.'s... she cried because her heart ached so badly, it was just too much for her to bear.

"Oh M.J. ...if only you would let me in ...things could be so different." She whispered aloud to herself as the tears began to track down her cheeks and seep into her pillow. Her head throbbed painfully and her eyes were horribly swollen. She would look like utter hell in the morning.

She finally cried herself to sleep, her thoughts hopelessly wondering what trauma the next week would bring, and how she would ever get through it.

M.J. had driven home in somewhat of a trance, the events of the elevator incident replaying themselves over and over inside her head like a scratchy, broken record.

So many things stood out in her mind, but the predominant ones were the sensations that had assaulted her during the frantic encounter. The deepness and intensity of Alli's lustrous eyes... the smell of need that emanated from her pores... the feel of the hot, molten lava that gushed from the center of her lithe little body... the sweet, succulent taste of her arousal... the sound of her strangled cries and gasps for breath when she climaxed... M.J. remembered every little detail. Her body tingled and goosebumps erupted on her flesh when she thought about how it felt to have Alli's body clinging to hers while she came, trembling so severely in her arms.

And then, of course, there were the bad thoughts. The look of absolute devastation when she had turned down Alli's request to accompany her home... the feeling of Alli pulling away from her, both physically and emotionally... the rage that came from the blonde when she shouted at her with such vehemence.

M.J. had always fancied herself as a person who felt no pain, and feared very little. She knew now that this was no longer true. She felt the pain of what she had done to Allison, and she feared the reason why it hurt.

It would be so much easier if we just hated each other, M.J. reasoned to herself as she finally reached her house and trudged inside. She carelessly tossed her briefcase on the kitchen counter and immediately headed back to her bathroom to change for bed.

She stood at her sink, quickly rushing through her nightly routine and skimming on the details... she was too exhausted for details. As she brushed her teeth, she stared into the mirror, her mind still reeling and her tongue still aching for more of Allison's sweet ambrosia. In her mind's eye, she could see the two of them touching, their bodies pressing together so intimately... she felt the raging desire that so easily boiled her blood... she saw the dark stormy depths of Alli's sea-green eyes. Her own eyes fluttered shut, and she felt her nipples tingle their involuntary response.

Ohmygod, stop! Just STOP! ...I'm going completely insane, she thought to herself, shaking her head.

Rinsing out her mouthful of toothpaste, she raked her fingers haphazardly through her hair, trying to erase all thoughts from her head. Her body felt hot and agitated, like it was ready to explode all over again. She hurried out of the bathroom and into her bedroom, determined to forget about everything and shut herself down... at least for a little while.

She lay naked on her bed, staring up at the ceiling fan as its subtle breezes cooled her overheated skin. Barely able to make out the fan blades as they whirred around in the darkness, she thought - again - that they were a perfect representation of her life at the moment. Spinning around and around... turning in circles and getting nowhere... stuck in a mindless, meaningless rotation that only had two options: on or off.

But no... that was no longer true. Her life was suddenly **not** two-dimensional at all. There was now another very large, very complex, and very frightening other dimension... the dimension of deep feelings and emotions. She stared up at the fan again, realizing for the first time, in a very long time, that she had absolutely no idea what to do.

She had no idea what to do with the feelings and emotions that were now, undeniably, running rampant inside her, screaming and clamoring to be heard. And, she had no idea what to do about the person who had caused all these feelings to come bubbling to the surface... a person who, she knew, would haunt her every moment of every day.

M.J. eventually managed to fall asleep, and as she slumbered, she dreamt. She dreamt of the mystery woman who always made passionate love to her, only this time, the woman had a face... and the visage was one of a familiar fair-haired beauty, with perfect bow-shaped lips, and eyes as soothing and warm and beckoning as the gentle pull of the ocean tides.

*"I'm holding on,
Waiting for your call,
It's simple but I can't explain this;*

*I'm sinking down,
I feel like I could die,
I'm falling off,
I don't know why." - American Hi-Fi*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The next day passed, and Allison did very little. Since it was Saturday, she thankfully didn't need to leave her apartment for any reason, so she decided not to. She opted to stay in bed nearly the entire day, behaving like a total couch-potato, watching television and doing absolutely nothing. Her emotions alternated between small crying jags of feeling sorry for herself, and wishing she could drive over to M.J.'s house so she could strangle her... or at least bite her again, only harder.

She was just contemplating hauling her lazy butt out of bed to take a nice, relaxing stroll on the beach when the phone rang. Not really wanting to talk to anyone, she debated with herself for a moment before finally picking it up on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Alli! Hey hon! How are ya? I thought you were gonna call last night?" Kaitlyn's soft southern drawl immediately soothed Alli's troubled mind, but it made her feel a sudden resurgence of emotion also. She knew that she could talk to her sister and unload all her feelings, and the prospect of possibly releasing all the pent-up sadness and misery inside her made her chest constrict painfully.

"Yeah, uhm... I'm sorry... I guess I forgot." Alli mumbled sheepishly. Because of last night's drama, she forgot that Kait had called her at work yesterday, wanting to talk to her about 'something important'.

"Oh you big-wig business types are all the same! Too wrapped-up in work to remember us little people!" Kait chided and teased her younger sister with a chuckle, but Alli wasn't laughing. All Allison could think about was that she had indeed been 'wrapped-up' in something last night, but it hadn't been work - it had been 5'11" of untamed, hard-core, lust-driven carnality. She sighed audibly.

"Alli? You there?" Kait's voice interrupted Alli's melancholy trip down memory-lane.

"Yeah... sorry."

"You okay, hon?"

"Yeah... just... tired, I guess." Alli rubbed her eyes and tried to get ahold of herself before Kait figured out that something was amiss. As much as she wanted to spill her guts and tell her sister everything, she also wanted to just get the conversation overwith so that she could disappear back to the safety of her comfortable, non-confrontational bed. "So what's this big important thing you said you needed to discuss with me?"

Kait drew a deep breath, "Well... I wanted to tell you first, before anyone else in the family....," she drew another nervous breath as Alli waited in patient silence, "...I'm pregnant!"

Alli's mouth dropped open and she couldn't utter a sound. "Alli...? Are you there?" Kait's voice called out tentatively. She had been afraid to relay the exciting news to her baby sister, after what she had gone through years ago. She wasn't sure if Allison would be happy for her, or upset, or jealous, or what, but she just couldn't contain it any longer. She was pretty sure that Alli would be happy for her and Josh... but you never know.

Alli shook herself back to reality, "Yeah, yeah... I... I... oh my *god*, Kaitlyn!" She really didn't know what to say. She was surprised and taken off-guard, but she was happy for her sister.

Kait chuckled lightly in her ear, "I know, I know! I can't believe it either!"

"Congratulations! I mean... had you and Josh been trying?" Alli asked, wondering why Kait wouldn't have told her before.

"Well, I guess sort-of, but not really, y'know?" Kait rambled a little nonsensically.

"Well, but... you're happy about it though, right?" Alli asked, suddenly worried.

"Oh yeah! Yeah, Alli, we're ecstatic!"

"Well... that's wonderful, Kait, I mean it... *really* wonderful. Congratulations." Alli said the words with absolute sincerity, but deep inside, she couldn't help but feel a small twinge of jealousy at the joy her sister was experiencing. Joy that a couple *should* experience in moments such as this.

"Thanks hon! I couldn't wait to tell you... I wanted you to know first, before Momma or Erin, or anyone."

"Thanks Kait... I appreciate that." Alli was honored that Kait made a point of telling her first, but she also knew that it served another purpose - the purpose of protecting her from finding out second-hand from someone besides Kait; namely, her mother and her eldest sister. They both would have taken great pleasure in throwing such information in Alli's face. After all, Kait would be succeeding where Alli had failed.

"Alli, honey, are you alright? You seem sad. Are you upset? I didn't tell you this to upset you, hon-"

Alli interrupted Kait's nervous rambling, "No, no - I'm not upset. I'm happy for you, Kait, I really am." She almost let out a sob, but fought to restrain it. The last thing she wanted to do was to start crying and ruin her sister's good news. "It just... it... brings back memories... y'know? I'm sorry! I'm being stupid! God!" She covered her face with her hand as her voice cracked a little, and she felt really bad for being such a wet blanket.

"Oh Alli! Baby, don't be sad! Please? I don't want you to be sad!" Kait implored, feeling her own voice tremble as tears quickly made their way to her own eyes.

"I'm not! I'm not sad about it - I'm *happy* for you, honestly! I think it's *wonderful*... and I think you and Josh will make the *best* parents ever, and..." her voice broke and the tears began to fall, "...and I think you're the luckiest person in the world right now!" She sobbed, feeling so conflicted inside and hating that she was ruining a moment that should be filled with glee.

"Oh Alli!" Kait's voice cried in the phone. "I'm sorry, honey!"

"No! Don't say that! Don't you apologize because my life is fucked-up!" Alli asserted through angry tears. "You shouldn't give a damn about *me*! You should be thrilled! Overjoyed! This is something wonderful and miraculous, Kait... it's a precious gift... and you and Josh deserve it!" She insisted.

The two sisters cried and talked for a long time, finally coming to grips with their emotional outbursts and talking everything through. Alli felt better about her sister's news; it had thrown her for a loop at first, and because of her already-heightened emotional state, she had reacted badly. As always, Kait understood, and everything was fine now. They continued to talk, but when the conversation steered toward Alli's work, she suddenly clammed-up and became unresponsive to Kait's questions. The older woman was immediately suspicious.

"Allison? ...Baby, what's goin' on?" Kait drawled softly.

Of course Kait would see through me and confront me about this, Alli thought ruefully. Her initial instinct was to deny everything and push it all away. She didn't really want to get into it, not after she'd just gotten done crying and acting like a complete fool. Still, her heart pounded and her eyes immediately burned with the threat of more tears when she thought about getting it off her chest. She was so tired of feeling confused and desperate and pathetic and uncertain and, mostly, of having to go through all of it alone. She bit down on her lower lip to stop it from trembling.

"Alli?" Kait repeated.

Alli laughed with chagrin, "Oh Kait... there are so many things 'going on', I don't even know how to begin describing them to you." She said through a veil of sorrow.

"Try, honey," Kait persisted. She knew something was troubling her little sister as soon as she picked up the phone tonight. Even though Alli lived farther away these days, they were still close enough that Kait could read her little sister quite well. "Does it have something to do with work? Orrr... maybe some*one* at work?" Kait ventured delicately, already having an idea of what - and more importantly, who - might be the problem.

Alli snorted softly, "Both, I guess... I don't know," she answered cryptically.

"Alliii...", Kait drawled, "Come on... what's going on?"

"God, Kait... my life is **such** a mess!" Alli said, dropping her head into her hand and letting the tears come freely.

"Why? What happened?" Kait pleaded, wishing she were there to console her sister in person.

Alli was silent for a moment while she reigned-in her tearful outburst. Finally she stammered shakily, "It's... it's M.J."

Ah-ha, Kait thought. *I knew she had a crush on that woman.* "M.J.? What's going on with her? Things not going well, working with her, I mean? I know you said you really liked her, but that she could be a pain sometimes-," Kait began to prattle on, but Alli stopped her.

"No, it's not that... not really."

Kait's brows drew together in confusion. "Well then... what is it?"

Alli drew a deep sigh, closing her eyes and steeling her nerve, "Things have gotten a little more... uhmm... **complicated** between the two of us." She said tremulously. She was suddenly uncertain she was doing the right thing by blabbing all to her sister.

It only took a minute for Kaitlyn to interpret the feeling behind those nervous words and work out what her little sister meant with that simple statement. "Oh no... oh Alli," Kait breathed out softly, trying very hard not to sound disappointed or reproachful.

Alli immediately felt like she wanted to curl up and die again. Now, she not only felt like a pathetic slut, she felt like she had somehow let her sister down. The one person who still believed in her and loved her, no matter what, and now she'd screwed that up too. Her body deflated and she immediately started to cry.

Kait heard Alli's sobbing and wished so badly that she could be there for her. She whispered soft words of comfort to the younger blonde, trying to soothe and console her obviously fragile emotions. After a few moments, Kait ventured forth again, "Is it serious?" she asked carefully.

"What?" Alli rasped.

"This thing between you and M.J. - is it serious?" Kait rephrased.

Alli let out a rueful laugh, " 'Serious'?! God... 'serious' is definitely **not** how I'd describe it!" She said sarcastically. She knew she needed to explain, but she honestly wasn't sure how. "It's... confusing, and frustrating, and so complex, and... Jesus... I wish it were simple, really, but it isn't... it's **anything** but simple." She trailed off, shaking her head.

Kait frowned, not understanding one bit of what Alli was saying. "Okay - you're totally losing me here. Did you **sleep** with her, or what?" She asked in an impatient, straight-forward tone.

Alli cringed and rubbed her temple, "Sort-of... but not really," she answered, furrowing her own brows.

"Alli!" Kait said emphatically, "Would you stop being so damn vague! Did you screw your boss or not?!"

Alli pursed her lips nervously, "Well... I guess, technically, she screwed *me*... I just... I just let her... do it." She admitted, closing her eyes in anticipation of the chastising she knew was forthcoming.

"What?!" Kait spat, as expected. "Allison... are you telling me that your boss is *forcing* you into something?!"

Alli interrupted before Kait could go any further, "NO! Jesus! Why does everyone automatically assume the worst?!" Alli cried out angrily.

"What? What 'everyone'? Who else have you discussed this with?" Kait demanded.

"Nobody - just a friend at work... it's not important." Alli didn't want to explain how she had discussed some of this with Liz; she knew Kait would be miffed.

"How could you discuss this with someone from *work*? Why didn't you come straight to *me*!?" Kait said, sounding hurt.

"Kait, please... could we just focus on the more important issue right now? Please?!" Alli said, her voice laced with impatience.

"Yes, you're right... I think we should focus on why in the *hell* you would screw around with your boss." Kait quipped in a harsh tone. Alli released a choked sigh and slumped backwards on her sofa as silence fell over the phone line.

Kait could hear her sister's mournful sigh and defeated countenance, and she immediately felt bad for kicking her while she was down. "Alli...", she started quietly, "Shit... I'm sorry honey."

"It's okay." Alli said quickly. She understood her sister's disappointment; she was disappointed in herself. They both sighed loudly and regained control of their emotions.

"What are you gonna do? I mean, where do the two of you stand with this?" Kait delicately asked after a moment.

"That's just it... I have no idea." Alli said honestly.

"You mean you haven't talked about it or anything?" Kait asked, sounding incredulous.

Alli sighed loudly, "No, we haven't. We don't... I mean... I *can't* talk to her about it." She

stumbled.

"What?! Why the hell not?" Red flags were popping up all over the inside of Kaitlyn's head.

Alli only sighed loudly again. She didn't know how to explain the complexities that were uniquely M.J., and she didn't know to explain the 'hold' that the overwhelming woman had on her. She was also afraid to admit that she was somewhat scared of confronting M.J. because she was so domineering and in control. Kait would be supremely disappointed in her. She would automatically think that, once again, Alli was allowing someone to use and dominate her. She would never understand that Alli had simply fallen under M.J.'s mysterious spell.

"It's just... it's complicated Kait, okay? It's all so... so fucking complicated." Alli said, drifting off quietly.

Silence reigned again, neither sister knowing what to say. Finally, Kaitlyn spoke quietly, "Alli... do you have feelings for this woman at all? Does she have feelings for *you*?"

Alli laughed wryly, "Oh hell, Kait... I don't know. I don't know anything anymore." Her voice wavered and she fought again to contain her tears.

Kait could hear her anguish, and she wished so badly that she could gather her sister up in her arms and hold her tight. In lieu of that, all Kait could do was encourage Alli to be strong. "Baby... you need to figure out what you feel for her, if anything, and then you need to *tell* to her about it."

Kaitlyn made it all sound so simple and straightforward, but it wasn't. Not at all. Alli knew she didn't understand... how could she possibly understand?

"I told you, it isn't that simple."

"Yes it is, Alli - it is. Don't let her have control over you!" She didn't know how she knew, but in the pit of her stomach, Kait was sure that that's exactly what was going on. "You are not a weak person, Allison; you are *strong*! Use that strength to your benefit!"

"You don't underSTAND, Kait!" Alli cried emphatically.

"Yes I do, Alli!" Kait yelled back. "You want someone, and you want to feel needed and loved - and that's okay, and I *do* understand that - I do!" The older woman continued, "But you shouldn't have to sacrifice your dignity and your self-worth for that, hon! If M.J. really cared for you, she wouldn't feel the need to keep you under her thumb! And that's what's going on... isn't it Alli?"

Alli couldn't speak... she couldn't tell Kait that she had already told herself this exact same thing... she could only sit there with her hand covering her eyes as they filled with tears and spilled down her cheeks.

"Allison?" Kait called out quietly. A heart-wrenching sob was the only answer she received.
"...Oh baby!"

Several minutes passed as Alli wept and Kait again whispered soft words of reassurance to her. Finally, after getting herself mildly under control, Alli spoke, "You know, the fact that we did what we did isn't even the worst part." She said in a soft, scratchy voice.

"What's the worst part, baby?" Kait asked gently.

"The worst part is that I'm so crazy about this woman," Alli said, tears unmercifully filling her eyes once again, "I'd probably do it again." She finished shakily, grimacing wryly, tears slipping out and rolling down her fair cheeks again.

"Oh honey," Kait sighed, her eyes closing and her heart breaking for her little sister. "Baby, I don't wanna tell you what to do, but this just does **not** sound like a good situation for you." She said, not wanting to injure her little sister, but feeling the need to force Alli's eyes open a little. It seemed to her that Alli was being blinded by lust, or some such monster, and seeing the younger woman hurt - again - was the last thing she wanted. "If she were the right person, you'd know it... you'd **feel** it. There would be no hesitation... there would be no doubt." Kait said.

"I know." Alli muttered quietly, her eyes still closed, her head still in her hands. She did feel something for M.J., but she couldn't ascertain what it was. There were too many clouded issues... too many unasked and unanswered questions... too many uncertainties.

"I think that you need to really think about this, and then make some decisions, honey." Kait added.

"I know that too." Indeed, Alli knew her sister was right, and she'd already gone over all this with herself a hundred times. The truth was, she **wanted** M.J. to be the right person for her, but the longer things dragged on, and the more bizarre twists and turns the relationship took, the less likely it seemed.

M.J. had somehow become toxic to her, and her presence weakened Alli, silently brain-washing her and impairing her judgment while sapping her strength and crippling her resolve. The stability and independence she had fought and worked so hard for was in serious jeopardy of being lost. As much as she wanted M.J., she knew, deep inside, that Kait was right. She would not, and should not, sacrifice herself just so she could continue being M.J.'s play-thing.

The only answer was to escape. And the only way to completely escape was to leave Whitton, Inc.

This was the decision she had reached. And the thought made her positively ill.

The two sisters finally ended their marathon phone call a short while later. Alli was relieved that she had gotten things off her chest, but she was troubled now by a whole new set of worries and problems. She now had to seriously contemplate leaving a company and a job that she truly enjoyed, despite the entanglements with its maddening Commander-in-Chief.

She suddenly dreaded Monday morning and what it might bring. She thought about how she needed to handle her emotions and behavior with the utmost care - if John caught wind of anything suspicious, her ass would be caught in a sling again. And as far as M.J. was concerned, she planned on NOT seeing her for a very long time.

But... she also knew full well that things sometimes didn't go as planned.

*"Come into these arms again, and lay your body down
The rhythm of this trembling heart is beating like a drum
It beats for you, it bleeds for you, it knows not how it sounds
For it is the drum of drums, it is the song of songs;
Once I had the rarest rose that ever deemed to bloom
Cruel winter chilled the bud and stole my flower too soon
Oh loneliness, Oh hopelessness
To search the ends of time
For there is in all the world,
No greater love than mine." - A. Lennox*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

On Monday morning, M.J. buried herself deeply in her work. She had come to her office early, determined to work like a madwoman and keep her mind completely occupied. She was successful, not leaving her office all day, not even for lunch. Tuesday arrived and she happily continued in the same fashion - that is, until she received a phone call that turned her world upside-down.

M.J. and Madison sped along the same Pennsylvania country roads that they had been on just a few months prior. Only this time, it was the middle of the night, the feeling was a bit more urgent, and the mood a lot more dire.

Their Stepmother, Virginia, had called Madison on Tuesday afternoon, distraught and tearful, telling her that Mark was failing rapidly. Apparently Hospice told her that she should gather the family around, because it was doubtful he'd last more than a few days, or a week at the most. The two sisters dropped everything they were doing and flew to be with their father immediately.

They arrived at the Whitton country home around midnight. Virginia met them at the door and tried to explain everything that had been happening. They made their way to Mark's room with much trepidation, not sure of what to expect and frightened about how they might feel or react.

The room was quiet, except for the sounds of the inflating and deflating air mattress their father was lying on. The Hospice nurse had brought it in to aid in preventing him from getting bed sores since he was no longer able to get out of bed. Madison and M.J. stood and watched him as he lay flat on his back, drifting in and out of fitful consciousness, his breathing heavy and raspy, his mouth hanging open in gaping silence. His once robust frame was now withered pitifully, and his hair was almost completely white. He was indeed failing fast - even more so than they imagined. He could no longer talk sensibly, and they wondered of how much he was aware. When he would awaken and they'd try to talk to him, he would look at them in confusion and try to talk back, but it was inarticulate. He moaned and groaned constantly and squirmed around on the portable hospital bed that had most likely become his deathbed.

Virginia looked completely washed-out. Raiford was there as well, having apparently arrived a few hours before the girls, which pissed M.J. off, despite her best efforts to not give a damn.

Virginia told them that she and Ray had been fussing unsuccessfully with Mark, trying to get him to stay propped on his side. The Hospice nurse had told them that Mark needed to stay turned on his side so that he didn't choke on his tongue. As Ginny explained all this, she just stood there, hesitant and uncertain, twisting her hands as if to say, 'I don't know what to do'. She seemed overly frightened and confused about this simple thing that needed to be done for her dying husband, and it made M.J. angry. Virginia was not a woman who was easily overwhelmed, and she just didn't picture her playing the poor, helpless soon-to-be-widow. Mark needed help - so why wasn't she just DOING it? M.J. didn't understand the hesitation.

Having no patience for the silly standing-around-and-waiting, M.J. looked at everyone and finally snapped, "Well let's just TURN him on his side, for chrissake!"

She quickly took charge, barking out instructions for the three of them - M.J., Madison, and Ray - to pull the hospital bed away from the wall and turn him. Even though he had lost a tremendous amount of weight and was not much more than skin and bones, Mark was still a very large man. They slipped their arms under his tall, thin frame, working and struggling to shift him again and again, earning them several noises of disapproval. Whenever he would let loose a moan, Madison and Ray would stop their movements, fearing they were hurting him, M.J. supposed, but she insisted they continue to lift and shift. After much complaining and sliding and wriggling, they got the sickly man satisfactorily situated on his side.

Somehow, through some strength and depth of caring that she did not even realize she possessed, M.J. calmly reassured and comforted her father - and everyone else - the whole time by simply taking control and talking to him. She would get down close to his face and speak calmly to him, explaining what they were doing, while gently touching his cheek to reassure him.

Madison couldn't help but watch in awe as her sister worked her magic. M.J. was the one who always seemed to be the most distant and least caring when it came to their father, and yet here

she was, stepping in and aiding him in his most desperate hour. Maddy knew that M.J. was a natural born, take-charge leader - she saw that every single day - but to see her aloof, bristly older sibling display the depth of caring and concern and - dare she think it? Love - that she was displaying right now... why that was nothing short of miraculous. Then again... Madison always had faith that M.J. was capable of great and wondrous things... and she wasn't talking about anything work-related.

Mark valiantly kept trying to twist himself so that he could lie on his back, but when he realized that wasn't possible, he then insisted on bending his legs and trying to prop them up. They shook and trembled so badly, however, that he couldn't control them.

"What are you trying to do with your legs, old man, hmm?" M.J. asked him in a gentle tease, taking some of the extra pillows that were lying around and positioning them between his knees so that he'd hopefully settle down. "Just relax and stop squirming, okay?" She patted his bare leg and Mark answered her with a noise that sounded very much like a whine. She quirked a small grin, leaning down close to him again, "I bet you wish I'd just go the hell home, don't you?" She was teasing, of course, but when Mark answered her by shaking his head slightly and looking directly at her with glazed, deep gray eyes, her countenance faltered, and she nearly lost it. She held it together, however, forcing a quick smile back at him and then turning her attention to arranging more pillows around his head to ensure he would stay in a sideways position.

When they checked back on Mark later, he was thrashing his legs again, kicking his bed sheet off and exposing his naked body repeatedly. M.J. thought it was quite appropriate that he would remain belligerent until the very end, but Virginia was thoroughly exasperated. Apparently, in the days just leading up to this, Mark kept taking all his clothes off, not wanting anything touching him, including an adult diaper. The room smelled vaguely of urine, but M.J. knew that Mark was probably delirious and didn't realize what he was doing. None of it bothered her, personally, and every time Ginny would squawk about his antics, Madison and M.J. would tell her to let him go. The poor man was half out of his mind and doped-up on morphine - couldn't everyone just deal with his odd behavior?

It was now stretching into the early hours of the morning, and everyone was exhausted, except for Virginia. The woman was high-strung, nervously hawking about and fretting over her husband's nakedness time and time again. As much as she tried to understand what her stepmother was going through, M.J. found herself growing more and more irritable with each passing minute. She sat in a recliner in the corner of the room as they all watched Ginny fuss with the sheet again, scolding Mark for kicking it off and insistently pulling it up over him.

Finally, M.J. couldn't take it anymore, and she snapped, bolting upright out of her chair, "He's DYING! Let him be fucking NAKED if that's what he wants, for chrissake!"

Everyone stilled, and Virginia turned to regard her with indignant shock. Impatience and fury burned blue and hot in M.J.'s eyes, and she glanced at Maddy, who was looking at her with a mixture of surprise, sorrow and understanding. Ignoring the stunned looks of the others, M.J.

walked up to her father's bedside one more time. Ginny stepped back, giving the angry young woman a wide berth.

M.J. reached out and rested her hand on Mark's bare chest, his scraggly salt-and-pepper hairs rough and scratchy against her soft palm. He had his eyes closed and seemed to be content, and she breathed a deep sigh of mixed relief and frustration. She touched his cheek reverently, then walked out of the room, leaving everyone behind without a care.

*"We're mere human beings,
We die;
Desperate;
It's destined." - Seal*

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Virginia insisted that the girls stay at the house, and they all decided it was best to be close by. But they didn't get much sleep. Mark kept making strange noises all through the night, and he was breathing in loud, heavy rasps. The next day he moved much less, and in fact he wasn't really awake or making noises at all. M.J. saw this as a bad sign, but didn't say anything to anyone. In the meantime, Madison had talked Virginia into letting her tidy-up the house and help with the laundry and other things - it would help Ginny and it gave Maddy something to keep her preoccupied. While this was going on, M.J. decided to venture out under the pretense of picking up some groceries, since they'd be staying there indefinitely.

She had rented a sporty, bright red BMW, and for a brief shining moment, she had a glorious time cruising around the winding back country roads of her childhood homeland. She sought out either the more twisting roadways, or the wide-open straight-aways, gleefully tramping the pedal to the metal and pushing the randy little car to its German-engineered limits. It was a tiny little highlight to her otherwise glum visit, but she was glad for it nonetheless.

Later in the afternoon, after M.J. had returned, the Hospice nurse came to bathe Mark and change his linens, and so on. Everyone stood around watching with baited breath as she worked, some asking pertinent questions, some saying stupid things in an attempt to alleviate the tension. The nurse didn't come right out and say that Mark didn't have much longer to live, but when she took off his socks while washing him down, she pointed out that his feet had turned blue. She explained that this was an indication that his circulation was failing, and M.J. knew then that it was just a matter of time.

Right after the Hospice nurse left, Virginia's only sister, Rose, showed up at the front door. This was yet another thing that pissed M.J. off, but it was only because she never liked the woman, even though they'd met only a few times before. Rose was a duplicate of Virginia, and that more than doubled the annoyance level, in her opinion. She and Maddy were now out-numbered by Ray and his flesh-and-blood, and that seemed, somehow, terribly insulting to her.

After a very brief and stilted visitation, the extended Calhoun clan went out to the living room to sit and chat. M.J. in the meantime, noticed that her father's respiration had become quite labored and loud again, and his bodily movements seemed few and far between. But he was still breathing and was in the safe sideways position, so she left him alone. Wanting to avoid the presence of **the intruders** as much as possible, M.J. wandered about the house for a little while, reminiscing and fondly recalling as many good memories as she could. Eventually, she made her way back toward her father's bedroom. As she approached the room, Madison peeked her head out into the hallway, and, seeing her older sister's approach, motioned frantically for M.J. to come.

With a dreadful feeling curling in the pit of her stomach, M.J. darted down the hall to the room. She walked in and saw Madison standing at the bedside, staring wide-eyed. The younger woman turned to M.J. with watery, frightened eyes, "I don't think he's breathing." She spat out nervously.

M.J. walked closer to her father to see for herself. Indeed he was not breathing. He was just laying there, partially on his back, his mouth agape, and his eyes glazed and stuck wide open. M.J. knew he was dead. She looked back at Maddy in shock, horror, disbelief, sadness - everything that goes hand in hand with realizing that the person lying in front of you, the person who took part in making your human life possible, was dead and gone.

Not having any idea what to do, M.J. reacted purely out of instinct, reaching a trembling hand out to feel for a pulse at his jugular. He was cold already, and the feeling jolted through her fingers and her arm, making her stomach lurch painfully.

Oh God... I think I'm gonna be sick, M.J. thought in a sudden panic. Feeling no pulse, as she knew she would, she then leaned her ear down to his chest to see if she could hear a heartbeat - a futile last-ditch effort, she knew, but she figured she should try. Of course, she didn't hear nor feel anything. She only felt the cold, clammy skin of her father's lifeless body. Straightening herself up, she turned to look at Madison, who was standing there, wide-eyed and aghast, ready to burst into tears.

"H-He's gone," M.J. whispered quietly, incredulously.

Madison brought a hand up to cover her mouth as the tears welled-up and spilled out. Both girls stood there motionless, staring at their now-deceased father for a long time. M.J.'s mind was overcome with shock and grief, and she felt strangely numb and blank. The feel of her father's chilled, lifeless corpse still had not left her, and wouldn't for a long time. The image of his gray face, gaping mouth, and glassy eyes open and staring, burned itself into her mind, and she knew it was something that would haunt her for an eternity.

She turned and looked at Madison again, who had now begun to sob quietly. M.J. reached an arm out and pulled her little sister into a tight hug, not saying anything, just holding her securely for as long as she needed. As shocked and saddened as M.J. was, however, she did not cry.

After they consoled each other for awhile, they panicked at the thought that they now had to go tell Virginia and Ray. The girls walked back to the living room, and as soon as Ginny saw the teary looks on their agonized faces, she knew. She ran past them, back the hallway to the bedroom, and they all followed. M.J. had to admit, as she stood and watched her stepmother weep while laying her head on her father's chest, she actually felt sorry for her.

The rest of the day was a blur. M.J. and Madison had to call Hospice, they had to call their father's doctor... the funeral director... the relatives that they barely knew and rarely saw... anyone and everyone they could think of. They were both in a daze and operating on nothing but adrenaline. M.J. felt like she wasn't really there, going through all of it... it was more like a dream... a surreal, other-worldly dream. She wondered what the long-term effects would be.

When the undertaker and his staff came to get Mark, Virginia hid in her bedroom with Rose; she didn't want to see the body taken away. M.J. understood Ginny's feeling, but for some reason, she decided to stay. She stood motionlessly and watched while the funeral director and his black-suited henchmen bagged and zipped-up her father's body, wheeling it away on a litter and placing it inside a green Ford Expedition-cum-hearse. This struck M.J. as a bit odd; she knew it was a new millennium, but there were some things that really should stick with tradition, weren't there?

That evening, the house was stilted in alternating moments of commotion and silence. Everyone stayed up into the late hours of the evening while arrangements for the funeral were discussed and made. Feeling the need to get out of the house at one point, Madison persuaded M.J. to take a walk with her outside. The two sisters walked and talked and reminisced while trying to come to grips with the fact that their father was truly gone. They remained outside for awhile, and by the time the late-night hours arrived, they were completely exhausted.

M.J. collapsed into bed that night, physically drained and emotionally spent. It was eerily quiet as she lay in the old-fashioned canopy bed that had once belonged to her paternal grandmother. The only noises were the scritch-scratching sounds of tree branches as the wind rustled them and made them scrape against the stone of the old house, and the loud bonging of an ancient clock as it struck off the hours in some room someplace. The noises were hollow and made the barren house echo with emptiness. It suited the way M.J. felt perfectly.

She had attended the funerals of her grandparents and brother, but she hadn't handled nor organized any of the details directly; she hadn't dealt with them up-close and personal like this. She didn't know if she was making the right decisions or what, and she hated the fact that she felt

like she was constantly pitting herself and Madison against Virginia and Raiford. She and Madison thought that the service should be small and family-oriented only... Virginia and Ray wanted it open to the whole wide world. She and Maddy liked the cherry wood casket... Virginia liked the blue steel. She didn't think Mark would have wanted a graveside military salute, even though he had been in the service... but Virginia and Ray argued that he would. The discrepancies were minor, but constant.

M.J. felt horrible for thinking it, but she just wanted it all to be over with so she could go home. She was tired of thinking and making decisions and acting as everyone else's support system. As she finally began to drift toward sleep, her thoughts took the form of wishes... wishes that she could just disappear to someplace quiet... where she could let go and be by herself. Better yet, she wished that she had someone who would support *her* for a change.

As the darkness pulled her under, her final thought was of a certain blonde-haired, jade-eyed angel. An angel whom she fantasized would support her and give her the peace and serenity she craved. And she so desperately craved it. She knew what she was admitting now, and she no longer cared.

She was tired of playing around; she was tired of the head-games and the mind-fucks. She was tired of being miserable. She wanted Allison. She wanted things to at least be the way they used to be. If there was any chance for anything between them, she knew that she needed to remedy the situation as soon as she returned home.

I just hope I'm not too late, she thought as her foggy mind at last succumbed to the peaceful darkness of sleep.

It was Thursday morning when Alli reached her office and immediately began preparing for an afternoon meeting with John, Ray... and M.J. She had been dreading it all week, fretting and trying to find any excuse not to be there; but alas, she couldn't weasel a way out.

God forbid, I'm becoming like John, she thought ruefully. It was much too soon to be face-to-face with her frustrating, alluring nemesis, especially in light of the difficult decision she'd recently made, but she had no way of getting around it.

She was also afraid that she would handle herself badly, like she had after the 'bathroom incident'. She always had trouble hiding her emotions, and she knew that, as always, John would be watching her interaction with M.J. closely. If he sensed anything, he would undoubtedly confront her again, which would be disastrous, because she wouldn't be able to lie to him.

Oh God... imagine if he found out what we've done... again!? ...*Christ!* Alli thought nervously. The ringing of her phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Allison Phillips," she answered in her customary, professional tone.

"Ms. Phillips, this is Rachel. I'm calling to cancel your meeting with Ms. Whitton this afternoon," the young woman said.

Oh thank God, Alli thought immediately, rolling her eyes skyward. She wasn't too surprised, really; surely M.J. didn't want to meet with her either. They'd avoided each other successfully for several days - *why mess with a good thing?* She thought sarcastically.

She sighed in relief but tried to sound annoyed, "Alright; when can we reschedule?" She asked as she retrieved her appointment book.

"Uhm, I'm not sure... Ms. Whitton was called out of town unexpectedly, and I'm not sure when she'll be returning." Rachel said rather ominously.

Alli stiffened in response, "Why? Is something wrong?" She asked quickly, her disdain and anger toward M.J. mysteriously evaporating.

"She didn't give me any other information, Ms. Phillips. I'm sure Ms. Whitton will be in touch when she's able." Rachel explained in a mechanical, pre-recorded manner.

Alli wanted to be annoyed that M.J. would disappear without somehow informing her, but she knew, realistically, that she was being absurd. They had crossed into forbidden territory - again... they had argued and painfully cast each other aside - again... she had been busy scanning the classified job ads in the newspaper while trying to decide whether or not she hated M.J.'s guts - again... and yet here she was, pissed-off because she wasn't on the brunette's 'call first' list?

Jesus... get a grip, Allison! She scolded herself.

It had been firmly established, in Alli's mind, that M.J. didn't want her and didn't trust her, so **why** would the tall woman let her in on any details of her life? More importantly, why should Alli give a damn where she'd gone?

Alli quickly pulled herself from her thoughts, "Uhm... okay... thank you, Rachel." She mumbled, hanging up the phone. Despite her determined effort not to give a shit, she couldn't help but sit there and wonder what could be going on. Actually, she had an idea of what might be happening. Debating with herself for little more than five minutes, she picked up her phone and quickly punched some numbers.

"Good morning Karen, this is Allison Phillips in Human Resources - is Ms. Whitton available this morning?" Alli asked, baiting Madison's assistant.

"No ma'am, Ms. Whitton was called out of town and I don't expect her back for several days." The young woman answered. *Well, that confirms my suspicions*, Alli thought.

"Alright, I'll just catch up with her later... thank you, Karen." Alli hung up the phone and sighed as she sat back in her chair, drumming her fingers against her desk in an impatient gesture. There could only be one reason for both women to be called out of town at the same time... their father.

[Continued in Chapter 40](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"This is the last time, that I'm ever gonna give in tonight;
Are there angels or devils crawling here?
I just wanna know what blurs and what is clear to see;
But I can see the pain in you,
And I can see the love in you,
And fighting all the demons will take time... it will take time.
The angels they burn inside for us,
And are we ever, are we ever gonna learn to fly?
The devils they burn inside of us,
And are we ever gonna come back down, come around?
I'm always gonna worry 'bout the things that could break us." - Dishwalla*

CHAPTER FORTY

Friday morning dawned cold, gray and rainy, Mother Nature appropriately keeping with the unspoken tradition of supplying dreary, miserable weather for a day filled with reflection and rumination about death, dying, and pondering one's own vulnerability and mortality.

M.J. awoke early, her mind filled with thoughts of her father's viewing, which would be held in the evening. Despite her best efforts to sleep late, her restless mind had her rising with the roosters. She seemed to have a constant headache, despite the fact that she still hadn't cried nor lost control. She idly wondered if there was something wrong with her, or was her mind just holding it all in until a later time, when she could be alone with her misery, like always? Shaking the thoughts out of her mind, M.J. slipped her robe on and ventured to the kitchen to make coffee, but when she reached the staircase, the smell of Colombian brew tickled her nose, and she realized that someone had beaten her to it. Apparently she wasn't the only restless soul in this

house.

She entered the kitchen to find Virginia sitting at the center table, a coffee cup in one hand and a large manila envelope in front of her. M.J. almost turned around and headed back upstairs, but before her feet could move, Ginny turned her head and saw her.

"Good mornin', dear," she said quietly in her southern lilt.

"Morning," M.J. managed to mumble in return as she headed toward the cupboard to retrieve a mug. She had the distinct feeling that Ginny was watching her like a hawk as she poured her coffee and added the milk and sugar. Not in the mood for being dissected behind her back, M.J. turned to face her stepmother, leaning back against the countertop while she sipped her brew and eyeballed the older woman carefully.

Ginny cleared her throat, "You know, Morgan...," she started hesitantly, her fingers working nervously as they spun her coffee cup around in circles.

Oh Christ, here we go, M.J. thought with an internal eye-roll.

"I know you and I haven't always... 'gotten along' very well...," She trailed off, shooting M.J. a small, contrite smile. M.J. said nothing and kept her face perfectly blank; wherever this was headed, she was certain she wasn't going to like it. She just kept her eyes trained on Ginny's haggard, drawn face.

"And now that Mar- ...now that your *father* is gone, I suppose we won't have to pretend to put up with each other any longer." She looked at M.J. and gave a slight smirk, hoping for some kind of friendly, or perhaps even truce-like, reaction from Mark's eldest daughter; but instead she found only cool, blue indifference. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised.

"Well, anyway," she reached for the manila envelope, "your father wanted you and Madison to have these." She held the envelope out to M.J., who stepped forward slowly and took the envelope out of her hand. "His attorney has other documents and papers that need your signatures, but he wanted me to give these to the two of you in private." Her words were ominous and cryptic. M.J. frowned at her and reached down into the envelope to pull out two smaller envelopes. They were labeled in her father's scratchy handwriting, one reading 'Morgan Juliette', and the other one 'Madison Elizabeth'.

"Y'all can read them whenever you like, I s'pose." Virginia said as she stood up. M.J.'s eyes met her stepmother's and they looked long and hard at one another for a moment.

Ginny pursed her lips and spoke quietly, "He loved you, you know... and he was proud of you. He wasn't good at showin' it... but he felt it." She gave M.J. a sad half-smile, then turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving M.J. alone holding, apparently, her father's final thoughts.

Weak sunlight streamed in the window of M.J.'s temporary bedroom as she stood dressing herself in the classic black, pin-striped suit she had decided to wear for her father's funeral. Today was the day they would bury his body and lay his soul to rest. Last night's viewing had gone surprisingly smooth with only a few relatives and friends getting hysterical and blubbering out of control. Virginia cried on and off throughout the evening, but M.J. and Maddy had somehow remained rather composed and in control.

The worst part, in M.J.'s opinion, was talking and 'visiting' with relatives and family friends whom she hadn't seen for years. If she had a dollar for every person who asked her where her husband was, or commented on how surprised they were that she'd grown up to be such a *loovvely* woman, she'd have a nice wad of bills in her pocket. Everyone knew she was a black-sheep - she always had been - and she liked it that way. She intentionally hadn't kept in touch with anyone from her childhood, unlike Madison, and seeing her relatives and enduring their vapid, redundant comments was torturous. The only spark of satisfaction she had all evening was when she got to tell people, with a subtle gleam in her eye, that she had never been married and intended to keep it that way. The puzzled, sometimes horrified looks on their faces was almost worth the price of putting up with their insipid inquiries. People could be so fucking stupid sometimes; she would have laughed if it wouldn't have been viewed as completely inappropriate.

She checked her look in the mirror as she fiddled with the collar of her shirt. They had to be at the funeral home in a few hours to have the final viewing and then start the procession to the church. Unable to sleep again, she arose early to prepare for the events of the day, even though she was absolutely dreading it. She knew she had to hold it together just a little while longer, but it would be a challenge. This entire drama was turning out to be more of a challenge that she ever dreamed. There were so many thoughts and emotions whirling inside her head, she felt like she was on a never-ending roller-coaster ride.

The primary reason for her restlessness last night was, she knew, due to the surprising letter from her father. Shifting her gaze from the mirror, she spied the rumpled papers lying open atop the dresser, where she'd left them late last night.

Never in her wildest dreams did M.J. think that Mark Whitton would write such a candid, heart-wrenching narrative to his daughters, especially her. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised at all to find that someone else wrote the eloquent, touching words for him. However, the entire document was hand-written in her father's distinct scrawl, and he referred to things that M.J. knew no one else was privy to, so she deemed that it had to be his genuine thoughts. She felt a tad guilty for doubting her father, but, she reasoned, something like this was just too astonishing to be taken at simple face value.

The letter didn't cover any one topic specifically; it was mostly just her father telling her all the things he could never say to her. She recalled his words, "*...I'm ashamed that I have to write these words down; I'm sorry that I was too cowardly to tell you, to your face, how I felt.*" Staring at the disturbing document, she reached out to pick it up again, skimming over some of the other words and sentences that she knew would haunt her for many years to come...

"...Once upon a time, you were my precious little girl... I don't know when things changed, only

that they did, and I blame myself..."

"...It is far too late for me to go back and try to correct the mistakes and the things that I did, or did not do... things that I said, or did not say... the 101 ways in which I probably hurt you, whether deliberately or through my own selfishness and stupidity..."

"...I believe that it is never too late to admit that you are wrong or say that you are sorry... and I need to say both these things to you, Morgan..."

"...I have always been a proud and cautious man who could not demonstrate my emotions easily... I suppose it is your misfortune, as well as mine, that you took after me in that regard..."

"...Over the years I have watched you grow into a beautiful, strong, intelligent woman... and even though I never told you, I cannot express to you, even through these words, how incredibly proud you have made me..."

"...I see a painful sadness and an emptiness inside you that breaks my heart... you have so much to offer... please don't waste your life caging your heart and withholding your feelings like I did. You will surely regret it one day, as I do now..."

"...I wish that I could take back all the wrong I've done and make it right. But I cannot. It is too late for me now. It is too late for me, but it is not too late for you, Morgan..."

"...You must let your heart be open. Do not be afraid to love and be loved in return. This is my dying wish for you... I do so love you, my precious daughter..."

M.J. placed the letter back on the dresser, her trembling hands unable to hold it any longer. She swiped at the moisture that had gathered in her eyes and rubbed her face, looking at her reflection in the mirror again.

Why now, Dad? Why torture me with this brutal honesty now? She thought to herself.

A knock on the door startled her, and she turned to see Madison peeping her head in, her face looking drawn and pale without her usual make-up.

"Hey," the younger Whitton greeted softly while entering the room. She was still dressed in her robe, obviously not feeling the urge to get ready yet.

"Hey." M.J. answered, taking-in the weary countenance of her younger sister. She briefly wondered if she looked as bad.

"Why are you getting dressed already?" Madison asked, observing M.J.'s state of partial-dress as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I dunno... nothing better to do." M.J. answered with an indifferent shrug as she picked up a hairbrush and began to run it through her long, freshly-washed locks.

Madison sat and silently watched M.J. for a moment. She was suddenly overcome with a distinct feeling of déjà vu, as though she were transported back in time 15 or 20 years... the scenario in the bedroom was suddenly so familiar and comfortable. She watched M.J. with melancholic fascination, wondering when and how she had lost touch with her beloved big sister. They had been so close to each other when they were young, but as they grew older, M.J. seemed to retreat emotionally, drifting further and further away. It always troubled Madison, and she still struggled to understand why her sibling was so distant.

"Did you read the letter?" She asked suddenly, breaking the silence with a referral to the mysterious documents Ginny had given them the day before. Madison had been deeply moved by the letter, and she wanted to know how it had affected her seemingly-stoic sister.

"Yeah... I read it." M.J. responded succinctly as she continued to brush her hair and gaze into the mirror. She knew that Maddy would want to talk about the letters, but she didn't feel like getting into it now. It had upset her greatly, as her fitful sleep proved, and she was still trying to digest all the information. She felt exposed and angry, and she wasn't sure she was up to discussing her feelings just yet... or ever.

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" Madison said, oblivious to her sister's quiet quandary as she turned to look wistfully out the window.

"Which part?" M.J. quipped, her voice tinged with some of the anger that she still harbored.

"I dunno... all of it, I suppose." Maddy shrugged. "I can't believe he even wrote us letters, let alone saying all the things he said about-"

M.J. cut her off, "You should get ready to go. We have to be there in a few hours."

Madison turned back to her sister sharply, "Why do you always do that?" She demanded with a huff.

"Do what?" M.J. answered defensively.

"As soon as something intense or personal is brought up, you cut me off and shut down." Madison said with stormy, accusing gray eyes.

Emotions had been in high-gear for several days, and M.J. knew they were both stressed and feeling extremely volatile. For this very reason, she did **not** want to discuss the letters.

She drew a deep breath, replacing the hairbrush on the dresser. "Look, Maddy...", M.J. began as she turned and walked over to sit next to her sister, "I just don't wanna get into this right now, okay?" M.J. implored, sounding uncharacteristically gentle.

"You **never** want to 'get into' it, Morgan. You never **talk** to me!" Madison insisted, looking deeply into her sister's cryptic light blue orbs. She wasn't fooled by the older woman's falsely

pacifying tone; M.J. was a master at manipulation... but she was tired of being held at arm's length.

M.J. sighed and rolled her eyes slightly, "Maddyyy...", she drawled.

"It's true, and you know it! You always use your temper and anger as an excuse to avoid talking about things!" She paused for a moment. "You don't trust me, Morgan. You say you do, but you don't... not really."

Her father's words echoing in her head, M.J. stood up quickly, stepping toward the door, "What do you want me to 'talk' about, Maddy? Huh?" She spun around to face her sister, exasperation clearly written on her tired face. Madison was obviously going to push her about this, so she quickly loaded her guns for battle.

"Anything! ...Everything!" Madison said, motioning with her hands. "I know you're upset! I know you're angry! Talk to me! Tell me how you *feel*, dammit!"

"Fine! You want me to tell you how pissed-off I am that our father had to *write* his feelings down because he was too much of a fucking *coward* to tell us to our faces? Fine - I'll tell you that!" M.J. shouted angrily at Madison, waving her arms. "You want me to tell you how flabbergasted and betrayed I felt to find out that he knew he was ill for almost *ten* years, but never bothered to tell us the truth? How he intentionally *lured* the two of us to come work for him, because he knew he wouldn't be around for long, and he wanted to stick us with his responsibilities?!"

Madison sat very still and let M.J. lash out, but as the older woman vented her fury, her face began to change. The look of intense, fiery anger began to give way to sadness and frustration. M.J.'s arms finally stilled by her sides and she brought a hand up to press at the insistent pounding that had begun to invade her forehead.

She continued in a quieter tone, "Do you want to hear how much it hurt me... to have my father tell me - no, *apologize* to me - for having to write down that he loved me... because he just couldn't bring himself to say it to my face...?" She looked at Madison with a distressed frown, her pale eyes at last revealing the disbelief, hurt and grief that the younger woman knew existed inside somewhere.

"There... are you happy now?" M.J. asked quietly, her eyes full of defeat and sorrow.

"Well... it's a good start, but it's not nearly enough." Madison said gently, giving her older sister a sincere look.

M.J. huffed aloud, "No, *of course* it's not enough for you, but it's all you're getting! Now we have to get ready to *go*." M.J. snapped, turning to fetch her shoes out of the closet while immediately slamming the door to her emotions shut. Madison could almost feel the jar of the inner steel and concrete.

"God you are **exactly** like him... you know that?!" Madison shot back. She was on the verge of something important here; she had tapped into her sister's elusive vault of feelings, and - although she knew she was treading on thin ice - she didn't want to back away just yet.

M.J. stiffened slightly at her sister's harsh words; she knew that Maddy had no idea of the impact they made on her at this particular moment. She clamped down on the sharp retort that danced on her tongue and kept her back to the younger woman while slipping her shoes on.

"You never tell anyone how you feel... what you think... you keep it all inside... always unspoken... always a secret... always caged in and locked up tight." Maddy ventured. "What I don't understand is how you can keep it all bottled up like that. I mean, don't you ever feel like you're going to explode?" She received no reaction from the taller figure. "You don't have a serious lover... you don't have a close friend... you only have me, and you never talk to me, so I can't help but wonder how you keep from wanting to scream and let everything out?" Maddy asked, trying her best to bait and hook her sibling.

M.J. finally turned and regarded her sister with a dark look and a small smirk, "Who says I never scream?" She retorted, then walked back to her dresser to calmly resume brushing her hair.

Madison sat and glared at M.J. for a moment, wanting to scream herself, but holding her tongue. If she was going to turn the tide and break through the tough, final barrier of ice that stubbornly surrounded M.J.'s innermost emotions, she was going to have to hit below the belt and fight dirty.

"Y'know... what I'd **really** like is for you to talk to me about Allison." She dropped her stealth bomb with quiet seriousness.

M.J. turned around slowly to face her sister, fixing her with a cold, glacial glare. "**No**... there is **no** fucking way we're getting into **that**... NO way!" She asserted, holding a hand out and waving a finger to stress her warning.

"Why NOT!?" Madison persisted, deciding to risk it all and go for broke. M.J. turned her back, completely ignoring her again. "I know something is still going on with you two... I can sense it."

M.J. stayed silent, brushing her hair rather harshly now.

"Why won't you **talk** to me about it, Morgan?" Madison implored softly as she got up off the bed and came to stand behind her sister's stiff, unyielding form.

The older woman still did not answer her, but instead of giving up, Maddy chose to push the envelope even further. "Are you just playing around with her, or is it more than that?"

M.J.'s countenance remained quiet and cold.

"Are you... in love with her?" Madison prodded softly with much trepidation.

M.J. completely froze, her body taut and rigid. "Madison... *DON'T*," she warned through clenched teeth, her voice low and threatening.

"Don't what?" Madison insisted.

"Don't *START*... I *DON'T* want to discuss this... not now!"

The anger was coming off M.J.'s body in waves, but still Maddy forged on, "You *have* to discuss it Morgan! You *have* to deal with it! ...Unless you just plan on having illicit little trysts with her forever and ever?!" The younger woman suggested sarcastically, but it got no verbal reaction from her sibling.

She wasn't sure how she knew that M.J. and Allison were screwing around still... again... whatever - she just knew. Between her sister's strange behavior and Alli's perpetual look of embarrassment every time they met, Madison's suspicions had been aroused for some time. And now, M.J.'s tightly clenched fists and lack of denial to the loaded statement she just made provided her with all the confirmation she needed.

"Morgan... do you *want* to be like our father? Unwilling to be honest and forthcoming, even with family and people you love? I mean, you said it yourself - he was a coward. Is that what you want for yourself?"

Still no answer; M.J. merely stood stock-still with her eyes closed, wishing a hole would open up in the floor and swallow her.

Madison, on the other hand, wished she had a hammer, or a sledgehammer; she wanted to wallop her big sister upside the head. "Aren't you tired of being alone all the time?" Madison daringly continued to prod, "Don't you get *tired* of having no one but yourself, day after day, night after *night*?"

M.J.'s back stiffened and she drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth. "You get used to it." She finally answered tersely. "You get used to a lot of things when you know you have to."

Maddy shook her head slowly, staring at her sister in sad amazement. "But that's just my point... you *don't* 'have to'." M.J. again said nothing, and Maddy took a step closer to her sister's tense figure. "What are you so afraid of, Morgan?" She asked softly.

"I'm not afraid!" M.J. shot back, turning to face Madison, her light blue eyes swirling with a mixture of anger and emotional turmoil. She was teetering on the brink.

"Bullshit. You're scared. You're scared shitless. Why?!" M.J. clenched her jaw tight; she refused to get into this, but Maddy continued, "Are you scared because you feel something *real* for Alli?"

M.J. closed her eyes, remaining silent. *Shut up Maddy, just shut the fuck UP!*

Again Madison persevered, "Do you think you might be in love with her?"

Eyelids squeezed together even tighter as M.J. gritted her teeth almost painfully. ...*Shut up shut up shut up shut UP!*

..."Morgan?" Maddy persisted.

"*WHAT*!?" M.J. finally exploded, her eyes flying open to pin her tenacious younger sister with blazing fury.

"Are you in LOVE with Allison!?" Maddy demanded, staunchly refusing to give in or be intimidated.

"YES! Okay?! *YES*!" M.J. shouted, throwing her arms out wide, the terror and strain of the conversation finally causing her to erupt with truthfulness. "Are you *SATISFIED* now?! Is THAT what you wanted to HEAR?!"

Maddy took a small step backwards, the force of her sister's words catching her off-balance, literally. She could only stand and stare in open-mouthed shock. Even though she already suspected what M.J.'s feelings were, to hear her actually give them voice was astonishing.

"What ELSE do you want to hear, Maddy? Huh?! How miserable I am?! That I'm in *agony*?! That I can't stop *thinking* about her... that I can't stop the memories of... what she sounds like, and feels like, and smells like...?!" M.J. was nearly shaking from the magnitude of emotions that coursed through her body. Tears threatened and welled painfully in her eyes, and she had to fight hard against their escape.

"Do you want to hear how... every time I close my eyes... all I can picture is her face...?" M.J. finished in a quiet, quavering voice filled with heart-felt agony. She lost the battle of the tears as the salty droplets leaked out from beneath dark lashes to trickle down her cheeks. She quickly brought a hand up to cover her face, ashamed at her outburst and embarrassed at her uncharacteristic loss of composure.

Maddy remained in stunned silence for a few moments, looking at M.J. as she stood with her shoulders slumped, holding her head in tremulous hands. She finally reached out to touch the older woman's shoulder gingerly, "Morgan... all those things should be wonderful things... why won't you let it be wonderful? Why are you so scared of being in love with her?"

"I'm not scared!" M.J. insisted stubbornly.

"Morgan...this is ME you're talking to here," Maddy reminded her, "do you think I don't know you at all? Do you think I can't *see* anything?" She added, bringing herself to stand right in front of M.J. "Why is it so frightening for you to be in love with someone?" Madison asked, her voice soft and placating. "...Why?"

"BECAUSE!" M.J. yelled out, pushing away and out of Maddy's grip. The younger woman stood

and waited patiently. "I feel so... out of control when I'm around her, and yet... I can't stay away from her! ...I can't *stop*!" M.J. spoke hesitantly, tears of frustration continuing to fill and burn her murky blue depths. "I think about her *constantly*! ...I feel like I'm losing my fucking mind!" She choked out, her face twisting as she swiped the heels of her hands across her rebellious eyes.

Watching the tears course down M.J.'s face was like watching a block of ice melt. Madison hesitantly stepped forward again and slipped her arms around her big sister's waist, hugging her tight and offering her support. This was the only time she'd ever seen M.J. lose it in such an explosive, emotional way, and it was one of the very few times the older woman had let herself be held close and comforted.

Perhaps a turning tide brings with it a great fear of being pulled under?

They were quiet for awhile until Maddy pulled back and spoke, "You're not losing your mind, Morgan... you're just in *love* with her."

"But I *can't* be in love with her, Maddy! I *CAN'T*! ...Don't you understand?!" Madison looked at her with furrowed brows, not understanding at all. M.J. shook her head, "I didn't want this to just be some stupid, casual fling - I didn't want that for her... not for her. She doesn't deserve that!"

Madison shrugged and turned her hands palm-up, "So, don't let it be *that*...?!" She said - it made perfect sense to her; what was the problem?

"I *can't*!"

"Why NOT?!"

"I don't want to *NEED* her, okay?!" M.J. yelled, motioning forcefully with her hands as Madison looked at her in utter confusion. "I don't want her to need *ME*!" More angry tears streamed from sky-blue pools and M.J. pressed a hand to her forehead. "I don't want to have to live up to anyone's expectations only to fall short - I've had *enough* of that in my lifetime!" Madison silently continued to furrow her brows as comprehension slowly began to dawn.

"I don't want to put all my feelings on the line... I don't want to think about what'll happen when she eventually realizes that what we have between us isn't *good* anymore... or that it isn't what she wants... or that *I'M* not what she wants!" M.J. emphasized, touching her hand to her chest.

Ah... now we're getting to the heart of the matter, Madison thought at last.

"I don't want to open myself up for that kind of devastation... not again. I couldn't take that again!" M.J. finished, her voice hitching and her eyes closing as more tears escaped down her cheeks.

Madison stayed silent for a few moments as she contemplated what to say. M.J. had only ever hinted at what had happened to her during those two years, so long ago, when she took off and dropped out of sight. When she finally did return home, she was a completely different person. Maddy knew that she had been involved with a woman, and that something had gone terribly wrong, but M.J. never divulged any details to her. It happened so many years ago, but could that be the problem with her cold, aloof, loveless sister? Could the pain from those two tragic years still resonate within her?

"Morgan...", Madison ventured ever so softly, "what happened between you and that Carly woman all those years ago?" She knew she might lose her head by asking, but she had a feeling that M.J.'s problems had everything to do with the mysterious stranger her sister had lived with.

M.J. looked up, confusion and shock on her face, "What?"

"You heard me." Madison ignored M.J.'s incredulous look, "I know she hurt you - that much is obvious - but what did she do to make you **so** cold-hearted and unwilling to give yourself to anyone ever again?"

M.J. gave a soft snort, wiping her hands across her traitorous eyes, "Yeah, she hurt me - isn't that enough?"

"There's more to it than that. Whatever she did, she did a fabulous job, because you're miserable. You have been ever since that time. I think I only **truly** realized that just now...", Madison added thoughtfully.

"God Maddy! Shut UP, **PLEASE*!*?" M.J. interrupted, bringing her hands to her face again, this time to rub her temples in a desperate attempt to escape the headache that was now in full bloom inside her skull.

"No! Tell me what happened! Tell me what she did that was **so** horrible, you can't have a **normal** fucking relationship with **anyone*!*" Madison yelled, determined to break through her sister's scar-toughened heart. Even if M.J. decked her, it'd be worth it to solve the mystery.

"She **BROKE** my fucking **HEART**, alright!?" M.J. exclaimed loudly, throwing her hands out. "I thought that I was in love with her, and I gave her **EVERYthing*!* Every bit of my money, every bit of myself! Even when she told me that she couldn't return any of it, I fucking kept on giving ANYway!" Her eyes spit blue venom and the veins in her neck stood out starkly as she yelled and took her anger out on her younger sister. "I gave and gave, and she took and took! And then one day, she decided that it wasn't good enough anymore. That **I** wasn't good enough! And she **DITCHED** me!" M.J.'s strength faded quickly, her waving arms stilling and her shoulders sagging in sudden, rapid defeat. "I trusted her, and she took my heart and my soul, and she tore them to fucking **shreds**." She finished weakly, plopping down on the side of the bed and holding her head in her hands again.

Madison was stunned, despite the fact that she already had an idea of what had happened. To hear M.J. tell the story and obviously be so hurt by it, still, cleared up many things in the younger

woman's mind. She wanted to reassure her big sister, but what could she say to soothe such pain? Just as M.J. wasn't very good at bearing her soul, Madison feared she wasn't very good at easing it.

She hesitated for a few moments before she spoke again, "Morgan... I don't think that Alli *expects* anything from you." She continued carefully, "I think she'd accept you just the way you are. Hell, she's proven that she'll take whatever you're willing to give, hasn't she?" She added, then paused when M.J. began to shake her head.

"No, she wants more... she needs more - I know she does." M.J. said, recalling how Alli begged her to come home with her.

"Well she needs more than just *sex*, yes! ...She probably wants to be *closer* to you... that's to be expected." Madison offered gently. She couldn't believe her sister could be so clueless when it came to matters of the heart; but then again, M.J. hadn't allowed herself to feel anything for anyone in such a long time, this was like new territory for her.

"Morgan... there's nothing wrong with someone wanting and needing to be close to you, and there's nothing wrong with you wanting and needing them back. That's part of what being in love is about... reciprocation." Maddy reasoned softly. "You have to open yourself up completely and take the chance again, or else you're never going to find ANYone, *ever*." She walked over and sat down beside her older sibling, resting a hand on her arm. "You have to tell Alli how you feel... You have to *talk* to her."

M.J. sat silently for a long moment as she contemplated her younger sister's gentle, and surprisingly rational words. "I don't know, Maddy." She finally said, sniffing and looking up at her sister with red-rimmed eyes, "I just don't know if I can do that."

Madison squeezed M.J.'s arm, "I think you can. And I think you *should*."

To that, M.J. said nothing; she just paused thoughtfully for a moment, then rose up off the bed, sighing deeply before she opened the bedroom door and walked out, leaving her sister behind in uncertain silence.

Madison understood now what M.J.'s fears really were, but she didn't know if she had comforted her at all. If M.J. harbored such doubt about her own feelings, what could she do to help that? She was amazed at the older woman's hesitation and lack of confidence in herself. It was quite shocking, to say the least, to see her usually arrogant, domineering, self-assured sibling cowering in the face of something as seemingly simple and harmless as mere love.

But then again... sometimes love can cause plenty of harm, even to the most iron-clad hearts.

*"Dying is easy,
It's living that scares me to death;
I could be so content,
Hearing the sound of your breath;
Cold is the color of crystal,
The snow-light that falls from the heavenly skies;
Catch me and let me dive under,
For I want to swim in the pools of your eyes." - A. Lennox*

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The extended Whitton and Calhoun clan stood in the somber, heavily-curtained viewing area of the funeral parlor. The classically tacky tones of eerie organ-muzak played quietly in the background while people talked in hushed voices and took turns crying and gazing upon the still form of Mark J. Whitton one last time. Oodles of various flower arrangements were crowded around the casket, many of which were from employees of and/or business associates related to Whitton, Inc. Mark was well-known and respected by many people, and it showed.

M.J. had been leaning against a wall near the back of the room, staring blankly in the direction of her father's casket, her arms crossed, her face stony but pensive. To the casual observer, she looked like a typical griever, lost in deep contemplation over the man everyone was here to mourn. It wasn't that she was lacking deep thoughts about her deceased father - she wasn't - it was just that most of her mind was preoccupied with vivid memories of her earlier argument with her sister. And she wasn't really angry with Maddy either; she was just upset that the 'discussion' had taken place here and now, of all times. Still, she had been avoiding Madison since then, making it obvious that she was unhappy about it.

Madison rarely forced issues with her older, head-strong sibling - especially ones of such epic proportions, as this one had turned out to be - but this morning she had dared to wage a battle, and she had won... in a way. She had gotten M.J. to admit, aloud, to things she had successfully concealed and denied for a very long time. M.J. couldn't help but be distressed by it. Perhaps the death of her father and his disturbing letter had made her especially vulnerable to attack and breakdown... she didn't know. All she knew was that the cat was out of the bag, so to speak, and now Madison knew everything. She felt strangely exposed and denuded, as though her protective armor had been stripped away, leaving her open and susceptible to further attacks. It was a most unsettling feeling for the former Queen of Denial and Master Manipulator.

"Hey." The sudden voice so close to her made M.J. flinch visibly. She turned to see Madison's soft gray eyes looking at her with concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah... fine." M.J. murmured dismissively with a slight nod.

"It's time to get going. They want us up front to close the casket."

"Right." M.J. drew a deep breath and released it uneasily as she and Madison walked to the front of the room, where they would say their final goodbyes to their father.

For some reason, the funeral procession and graveside service always seemed to be the blackest, most depressing moment of a burial. M.J. and Madison, along with Maddy's husband, Doug, were placed in a car behind Virginia and Raiford, who followed the long, old-fashioned hearse to the grave site. They rode in their big black Cadillac in silence, feeling like some kind of warped royal family traveling in a ghoulish, circus side-show parade.

Madison and Doug had decided to leave Lizzie at home with Doug's parents, and Doug had arrived late in the morning to be with Madison. Virginia's sister, Rose, was there of course, and even Ray's current girlfriend-slash-tramp had shown up. M.J. seemed to be the only one without an escort, and, surprisingly, it bothered her a little. Who would have ever thought she'd be wishing for a 'funeral date'?

The graveside service itself was monotone and morose, and the sniffles and sobs of numerous people could be heard above the reverend's prayers and attempted words of comfort. It was becoming a vicious cycle; bouts of turmoil and tears punctuated with periods of silence and remembrance.

M.J. sat between Madison and Virginia in one of the stiff folding chairs which flanked the casket, feeling very much like they were all on display. It was awkward and uncomfortable, and the elderly, austere reverend kept looking at her, as though he couldn't understand why she wasn't crying like everyone else.

Virginia had decided to have the Army Reserve servicemen perform their little military ceremony as well, and even though they all knew the gun salute was coming, the sharp crack of the rifle shots still made everyone jump. When the lone trumpeter began playing 'Taps', Madison finally lost it. She wasn't sure what set her off; it wasn't anything specific, really... just the culmination of everything hitting her at that particular moment, perhaps. Maybe 'Taps' was just symbolically sad.

M.J. ventured a glance over to her younger sister, hating the sound of her piteous sobs. She reached a hand over and it was immediately grasped and squeezed tight. She would have remained just fine and perfectly in control had Maddy not then brought the hand up to her mouth and pressed it to her trembling lips. For some reason, that did it for M.J. Something let loose inside her chest, and the tears burst forth like a ruptured dam. Madison dropped her hand and both sisters simultaneously moved together, sliding their arms around each other, holding one another in a comforting embrace of support and consolation.

After the service was over and everyone began to scatter, M.J. walked away from the burial, needing to be alone with her thoughts and regain her composure. Even though it was edging

toward the summer season, the temperature outdoors was surprisingly cold, and M.J. tugged her trench coat tightly around her tall frame to ward off the chill.

The blustery, insistent wind kept whipping her long hair to and fro as she walked down narrow stone pathways, observing how serene and tranquil the cemetery was. She wasn't afraid of graveyards, but she certainly didn't like them either. All the carefully-spaced rows of old, chunky stones protruding bluntly up out of the grass, announcing to visitors that someone's corpse was decaying in a ridiculously expensive box deep below... all the bizarre statues and rough-hewn monoliths with their dates and corny sentiments and sad messages of lament etched into the smooth surfaces. It all seemed so pointless and ironic. How could such a place be seen as 'peaceful' when it served as nothing but a painful, visible reminder that these people were truly dead and gone forever?

Madison's voice in the distance as it called to her shook M.J. from her morbid ruminations. She turned to see her younger sister waving to her, beckoning her back to the land of the living. It was time to go... and she was so very relieved.

The Whitton daughters stayed in Pennsylvania for another week after their father's funeral. They attended meetings with their father's lawyers to clear up and finalize numerous legal issues... there were meetings with investment and financial advisors and insurance paperwork that had to be dealt with... there were real estate transactions that needed to be taken care of... all of it boggled the girls' minds - even Madison, who figured she'd have a good handle on it. By the time they left to return to their normal homes and lives, they felt utterly brain-dead.

As they cruised high above the earth in the big silver bird that carried them homeward, Madison glanced over to sneak a peek at her older sibling. The strong, silent face was slightly pensive as it rested on a fisted hand, and the pale blue eyes were tired and glassy as they gazed out at the thin, cottony threads of passing clouds.

Since the day of the funeral, they'd spoken very little about the big 'discussion' they had regarding the revelation of M.J.'s feelings; however, Madison had the distinct impression that the big explosion had altered something inside her frozen sibling. M.J. wasn't hiding the fact that she was upset, like she used to. She was obviously melancholic and sad, and she openly told Madison how she felt when asked. She was also more forthright with her displays of affection and support. Perhaps it was just due to the emotional stresses and strains, but ever since the 'discussion', Madison was certain that M.J. was different. She talked to her more, she touched her more... she seemed more 'open'. M.J. was never an affectionate or demonstrative type, even with her, and Maddy couldn't help but think that, no matter what it was that caused the change, it was a good thing.

Looking down at their hands linked together and lying in her lap, Madison smiled, *Yes... a good thing indeed.*

*"Daylight licked me into shape, I must have been asleep for days,
And moving lips to breathe her name, I opened up my eyes;
And found myself alone, alone... alone above a raging sea,
That stole the only girl I loved, and drowned her deep inside of me;
You... soft and only,
You... lost and lonely,
You... just like Heaven." - The Cure*

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

It was around 5:00 p.m., and M.J. was going bonkers. She had arrived home two days ago, spending nearly all her time since then wading through telephone messages and flowers and letters and cards of condolence from people she didn't know and never even heard of. She appreciated the sentiments and thoughts, she really did, but right now all she wanted to do was get back to her usual routine and return things to the way they used to be. She didn't want to write back to anyone, she didn't want to return phone calls or talk to anybody. She didn't want pity, or sympathy, or people's stupid sentiments popping up all the time, constantly reminding her that her father was gone. It was painful enough as it was. She just wanted some semblance of normalcy... she just wanted her life back.

Dealing with the mess at home made her think of the mess that awaited her at the office. She wasn't really looking forward to work, and she'd put off her 'official' return until Monday morning. But now she was having second thoughts. She was bored, and, she reluctantly admitted, she was lonely too. Madison had mentioned that she would probably stop by her own office today, and M.J. suddenly felt a small pang in her heart.

It had only been two days, but she missed the comfort of her sister's presence. If she hurried, she might be able to catch Maddy at the office and see how she was coping. *Even though it's Friday, I could check out my office tonight and get a head start on things before people start hounding me first thing Monday morning.* She reasoned, trying to justify it as much as possible. But she knew she was just kidding herself.

Looo-ser. She thought with a shake of her head and a roll of her eyes.

Sighing and running a hand through her hair, she debated with herself for only a few seconds before giving up the fight and heading toward her garage.

Allison breathed out a deep sigh of relief when she reached the elevator and the doors whooshed

shut quietly behind her. She leaned back, tilting her head up and resting back against the wall as the car began its downward journey. It had been a long, tedious day, but she'd gotten a lot accomplished.

She officially had five days left at Whitton, Inc., and although she knew she could easily kick back and not expend any additional energy whatsoever, she wanted to leave graciously and on good terms, with all her assignments completed and everything in neat order. She was conscientious, perhaps to a fault, but it was just her way. Besides, her leaving was surrounded by some suspicion and whispered rumors; she figured she should avoid the risk of burning any bridges.

Alli shook her head, telling herself that she should be looking forward to her new position, rather than worrying about this one. After answering only one ad and interviewing only one time, she had successfully snagged a job as a full-fledged Director of Human Resources at another construction and property-development firm in the city. The company was smaller than Whitton, but she didn't mind; she was the Director, and she would have full command over the entire HR Department. It was exciting, but she had to acknowledge that she was going to miss Whitton, Inc. She had truly enjoyed her job and had made many friends, and she would miss them all.

The decision to leave Whitton was an agonizing one, but it was something she knew she **had** to do. The turmoil between her and M.J. would only get worse, and sooner or later, it was bound to consume and destroy her completely. It had interfered with her job and undermined her reputation and integrity, and she could not work under such circumstances any longer. Besides all that, she knew she was nothing more to M.J. than a play-toy. The frustrating beauty was using her, and Alli refused to let herself be a whore. If she was to resurrect her dignity and self-respect, a clean break was absolutely necessary. She had to distance herself from all of it and start anew. She had made a mistake, but now she was moving on. Once again, she had learned a painful, albeit valuable, life lesson.

And hindsight is always 20-20, right Daddy? Alli thought to herself with a small, wistful smile as the elevator came to a stop at the garage level and the doors opened with a merry chime.

As soon as she exited the elevator and started walking, she caught the unmistakable sight of M.J.'s black Jaguar convertible.

*Oh God... she's *back**, Alli thought in a sudden panic, her legs and feet ceasing their movement.

She had been wondering if M.J. would return before she left. Even though she tried to convince herself that it would be best to just disappear without a confrontation, she knew that she would probably feel guilty if she just vanished. It would be so cowardly, sneaking away under cover of darkness while M.J. was preoccupied with all her family issues... wouldn't it?

*But why should I feel guilty? Why should I care if she thinks I'm a coward? She doesn't care about me. If she 'cared' at all, she'd come to me. If she had one ounce of compassion or humanity in her cold heart, she'd come and *apologize* to me and say goodbye.* The resolute words sounded good to Alli's determined mind, but they couldn't quite be swallowed by her indecisive

heart. Blue-green eyes rolled at the never-ending discrepancies that raged inside her, and she forced her feet to move again.

I wonder what she's doing here at this hour? I wonder if she knows I'm leaving? I wonder if John told her yet? Alli pondered, her mind refusing to quit. *Goddd! Why do I give a shit!?* She shook her head and continued the short walk to her car, telling herself to stop being so ridiculous. She knew M.J. was going to find out sooner or later, and now that the President was home, there would be a risk of an uncomfortable face-to-face. Alli had already gone over the potential conversation and meeting a thousand times in her mind, but she still dreaded the thought.

Alli felt bad that she was dumping her resignation on M.J. so soon after her father's death. The company had issued a formal notice to everyone when Mark Whitton passed away, and Alli felt very badly for M.J. and Madison, unable to imagine what they must be going through. Wishing she could do something but knowing she couldn't, she ended up just sending flowers and cards to both their houses. Even though such formalities never seemed adequate enough when it came to losing a loved one, especially one's parent, she figured it was better than nothing. Alli also found herself constantly thinking what a shame it was that M.J. had to go through all of this alone. Well, she wasn't completely alone - she did have her sister. But Madison, in turn, had her husband, Doug, and M.J. had no one. It was stupid and completely pointless at this juncture, she knew, but Alli still wished that she could have done something for M.J., some way... somehow.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she finally reached her car, but before she could open the door, she stopped and turned back, casting a sad, longing glance in the direction of the black Jaguar parked near the elevator.

If only you had let me in, M.J. ...I could have been the one to be there for you now, Alli thought with remorse.

Aside from all the bullshit, the two of them had been friends once... highly compatible co-workers and teammates. Alli had truly enjoyed M.J.'s wicked wit and sharp intellect, and she was constantly awed by the way the woman's talented mind worked. She now understood why Liz Jacobs called M.J. 'fascinating', and she was in absolute agreement.

Alli wondered, again, what M.J. was feeling right now... right at this moment. Was she sad? Angry? Indifferent? Was she sitting in her office, diligently working away, like nothing had changed at all? Or was she standing in the dark and staring mournfully out her window, contemplating life and all its mysteries? It was so hard to say with M.J. Whitton.

As Alli looked at the Jaguar again, she realized that it was parked very close to her Beetle. Surely M.J. took notice to this... surely she knew that Alli was here.

I wonder if she knows I'm leaving? Alli thought again. *I wonder if she'll be furious or relieved?* She pondered, feeling her insides twist and waffle yet again.

She was still angry and upset with M.J., even though she didn't want to be. She always tried to part company on good terms, whenever possible, but the tensions between her and M.J. seemed

to drastically lessen the chances for an amicable parting. Even though she felt she had every right to just disappear without a word to M.J., Alli knew she would regret doing anything in angry haste. She repeatedly wondered what would happen when and if she and M.J. met up before she left. The suspense was nearly driving her insane. She had to find a compromise somewhere.

Maybe I should go see her right now... get it over with? She considered, twisting her lips in thought as she continued to linger at her car. *Or maybe not... maybe I should just wait and see what happens Monday morning? But no... then I'll go nuts thinking about it all weekend.* She sighed and rolled her eyes again, hating her nervous indecisiveness.

*Her father just *died*, for chrissake... I doubt she gives as much of a shit about my leaving as I do.* Alli considered. *I should at least have the decency to give her my condolences in person... a confrontation about my leaving can wait for another time.*

Closing her eyes and shaking her head, Alli drew a deep breath before turning to head back toward the elevators. "I must be stupid, or crazy... or both," she mumbled to herself as she pressed the elevator button and waited with her heart in her throat.

Alli stood outside M.J.'s office for a full minute, her mind waffling back and forth, her hands fidgety and sweating, and her heart pounding. The President was in there; even though the office appeared dark, Alli could see a tiny sliver of light through the partially-open door, and she could hear the slight noise of paper shuffling.

Why am I here? Why am I doing this?! She asked herself, wondering what in the hell had possessed her to come up here. *I'll just give my condolences, and then scam... just a quick, 'sorry', and then I'm outta here,* she thought, nodding to herself in silent agreement.

She stepped forward, peeking through the open door with much trepidation. M.J. stood at her desk, casually flipping through a huge pile of mail and papers. Her posture was slumped, suggesting weariness; her hair was loose, tumbling carelessly down and around her shoulders; and the casual jeans-and-shirt ensemble that she wore looked atypically rumped. She looked completely washed-out.

Sensing a presence, M.J. looked up, catching light jade eyes in an immediate, intense gaze. Time seemed to slow for a few moments as the two women locked onto one another.

M.J. was genuinely shocked to see Allison. Shocked, but... relieved too. She didn't want to see anyone, except for Madison, and she especially didn't want to see Alli. She didn't want to see her, because she knew now how she *felt* about her. Since she had admitted her feelings, the damned things consumed her every waking moment.

When she went to bed at night and stared up at the ceiling, it was Alli's face that she saw lingering in the shadows... when she awoke in the morning and turned her cheek to look at the window, it was Alli's light shining through... when she dressed herself and checked her look in

the mirror, it was Alli's approval she was seeking. Thoughts of the beautiful little blonde occupied every free moment and filled every nook and cranny inside her head. Not a day went by that she didn't remember how soft Alli's skin was, how warm her body felt, how delicious her essence tasted. M.J. was, to her absolute chagrin, bordering on mad obsession.

Now, seeing this vision before her, she was overwhelmed with a desire to reach out and touch Alli, to grab hold of her and not let go. She needed so badly to feel her heartbeat... to feel her life force... to pull herself away from the stench of death and convince herself that she was alive and not alone in this world. She wouldn't be alone... not anymore. There would be no more denial... no more games; she didn't want that any longer. She wanted Allison, and now, she was here... right in front of her, full of beauty, and life, and... love. Maddy's words echoed in her head, '*...she probably wants to be closer to you.*' Dear God, she wanted to be closer to her too - so close that she could crawl inside her skin and find shelter for her injured heart.

She was absolutely in love with Allison.

Oh my God... M.J.'s throat suddenly closed up and she could barely breathe.

Oblivious to M.J.'s tumult, Alli stepped haltingly into the office, walking closer to look further into the eyes of the woman who had hurt her and scared her and infuriated her and drove her insane with lust. But the pale-blue orbs she looked into now were not arrogant, nor threatening, nor taunting; these eyes were completely different. They were unsure and unfocused, and they spoke of exhaustion and remorse... of terrible misery and deep pain. The tall goddess was no longer a siren... she was a tortured soul, and Alli wished that she could save her from the rack that she lay upon.

But it was too late for that. Allison had made her decision. The change was already in motion.

Alli was so busy thinking all these things, she didn't realize that she was now standing directly in front of M.J., looking upon the features of her perfectly-sculpted face and gazing into the unfathomable cerulean pools.

God, I've missed her, she thought, *how can that be?!* She felt the beginnings of a deep stirring within her heart, and a mixture of longing and incredulity washed over her.

They stood there saying nothing as Alli's gaze quickly wandered around M.J.'s face and down her neck. The taller woman wore a shirt with a wide open collar and Alli could just see the edge of a reddish-brown blemish that marred the texture of M.J.'s perfect skin, close to her neck and shoulder.

My mark... the one that I imprinted on her during our 'elevator encounter'... she still carries it. Alli thought in amazement. In some demented little way, that thrilled her, and she felt a hot shiver involuntarily race through her body.

*No No *NO!* I won't give in again! I *WON'T*!* Alli screamed to herself internally. Her heart hammered violently as she contemplated what to say to the enigmatic figure before her. They

were still staring at each other when she finally managed to speak up, the need to break the silence and say something becoming urgent.

"I'm so sorry about your father." Alli whispered, almost shyly.

M.J. blinked long and deliberate, and when she opened her eyes again, she regarded Alli very somberly, emptiness and anguish plainly evident in the normally well-guarded depths of wintry blue. "Thank you." She whispered back, her voice cracking slightly.

"If there's anything I can do--," Alli started, then stopped abruptly, realizing how that might sound. "I mean, if you need to talk... or...," she finished uncertainly, letting the words trail off.

M.J. stared at her again, her eyes searching the gentle, sympathetic, aqua pools that bored into her. Alli's voice washed over her so soft and warm, she felt a sudden urge to burst into tears and break down in the blonde's arms, right then and there.

Instead, she cleared her throat and nodded slightly, "Thanks... I'll be fine."

Alli only pursed her lips in return, and they stood there again, staring at each other so deeply in a silence that was both deafening and maddening. Both of them could feel the pull between them; their bodies and spirits yearning so much for one another, despite it all. M.J. had a magnetic seductiveness that relentlessly beckoned Alli still, despite her pledge of 'never again', and Alli possessed a tenderness and warmth that drew M.J. in and lulled her subconscious with the promise of acceptance and trust.

Alli finally broke the gaze, looking down slightly and squeezing her eyes shut, momentarily seeking solid ground inside her flustered head. She'd never experienced anything like these feelings before, ever; if the pull between the two of them was strong before, this was absolutely overpowering. She didn't know what to make of her thoughts and emotions; she only knew that by standing here like this, her body's desire was climbing higher and higher while her resolve melted further and further. She knew that she had to turn and leave - that it was necessary if she were to make a clean break.

Do it now, do it NOW! Her mind chanted.

When Alli ventured a glance up again, she fell into a murky chasm of azure that swirled in a strangely intense mixture of pain, desire, and something else she couldn't quite decipher. It was nothing she'd ever seen before in those light-colored depths, and it made the hair on the back of her neck rise up.

Godd... What are you doing to me, M.J. Whitton? Alli searched for the answer beneath the shrouded veil of blue, but failed. She knew that she still cared for M.J., very deeply... it was undeniable. She still wanted her with a desperateness that threatened to consume her, and her body could easily succumb to the powerful attraction. But the self-destructive cycle had to end. It had to be halted. The pull between them was strong, but she had to be stronger. She **had** to walk away... and she knew it was now or never.

Walk away, you fool... walk AWAY!

Suddenly, unable to keep any more distance between them, M.J. took a tentative step closer to Alli. Their eyes never left each other, and somehow, in some way, their bodies began to converge ever-so-slightly. Somehow, M.J.'s hand came to rest gently on Alli's waist... somehow Alli's hand wandered out to touch M.J.'s arm... somehow they began to lean in toward each other, drawing closer... closer. They were still staring, and when M.J.'s hand reached up to touch Alli's face, the blonde nearly passed out.

More of Madison's words echoed in M.J.'s head, '*...you have to tell Alli how you feel.*' She gazed into swirling oceanic depths and clenched her jaw tight, garnering her strength.

"Allison," M.J. whispered softly, her voice aching and strained with painful need, her soulful eyes bleeding blue passion. She so needed this connection... she needed to be with someone... she needed her body and soul to be grounded... she needed the comfort of intimacy... and she wanted it from Alli.

Alli swallowed dumbly, unable to speak and virtually paralyzed. She could feel herself faltering as she began to drown helplessly in the engulfing, desperate gaze of intense, burning cerulean. Her own eyes fluttered shut as her heart began to twist and succumb to the heat of the body that almost adjoined hers. She could feel M.J.'s hands touching her, burning her flesh and scorching her soul...

*OhmyGod... NO! *STOP*!* Jade orbs snapped open abruptly and Alli flinched and pushed away from the near-embrace of the taller body, forcibly jerking herself back into reality.

"M.J., I-I..." Alli stuttered, shaking her head in an attempt to clear the jumbled thoughts and feelings that muddled her brain.

"Morgan?" The sound of another voice interrupted the tense atmosphere, but it took a moment for the realization of the presence to sink in. Madison entered the office and both Alli and M.J. quickly stepped away from each other, looking wide-eyed and terribly guilty.

"Oh - I'm sorry... I didn't realize..." Madison muttered, looking from M.J. to Allison and back again, wondering what in the hell she'd just interrupted. "Hello Allison." The younger Whitton said, nodding somewhat stiffly to the blonde.

Alli flushed deeply, feeling like she'd been caught doing something dreadfully inappropriate. "Hello, Madison," Alli managed to eek out. "I was, uh, just giving M.J. my condolences for your father's passing... I'm very sorry." Alli stammered, feeling flustered.

Maddy quirked a small, tight smile and nodded, "Thank you." All three stood in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments, not quite knowing what to do or say, but for very different reasons. M.J. felt like something vital had been interrupted; Maddy was dying to ask M.J. if she'd heard the news yet; and Allison just wanted to get the hell out of there with the

contents of her bladder intact.

"Well, I didn't mean to interrupt..." Madison started hesitantly, shooting uncertain glances at both M.J. and Alli again, but, seeing her chance to escape, Alli interrupted with a wave of her hand.

"No, no... I was just leaving. I just... wanted to...uhm," she paused, casting an apologetic look at M.J., "...I just wanted to tell you that I'm... that I'm sorry." She spoke with quiet sincerity, wondering if M.J. would read anything into her implied meaning.

Not knowing anything yet, M.J. didn't read into it, but Madison certainly did. She shifted her eyes sideways to watch her older sister's face for signs of her freaking out, but none came. If M.J. had heard the news that Allison was leaving the company, she certainly wasn't acting like it. The tall brunette merely stared and nodded at Alli in silent gratitude and watched as Alli turned and began to walk out of the office.

Just before she slipped through the door, however, Alli looked back at M.J. one last time, their eyes again locking. Misery, regret, longing, apology... a dozen different thoughts and emotions poured out of both of them... a dozen things that should have been said... a dozen things that could have been explained. But it was too late now. The opportunity was gone. They would have to reconcile their miseries with themselves now.

Hot tears began to well and burn painfully in Alli's eyes, and she quickly turned and escaped out the door just before a tear spilled down her cheek.

M.J. could only stare after her mournfully as she disappeared.

Madison watched her older sister carefully, trying to read her thoughts. M.J. stared at the door for a few seconds before she closed her eyes and turned back to her desk.

"I'm sorry, Morgan... I hope I didn't interrupt anything important...?" Madison asked carefully, wondering if M.J. would tell her what, if anything, had been going on.

M.J. shrugged her shoulders and acted nonchalant as she shifted her attention back to the piles of paper that still littered her desk, "You didn't; she was just passing along her sympathies." She didn't want to get into anything with Maddy right now; she wasn't really in the mood for it.

Madison twisted her lips, "Is that all?" She queried carefully.

"What do you mean?" M.J. asked, bringing her gaze back to meet her sister's steely gray.

"Is that all you were talking about?" Maddy asked evenly.

"Yes! Geez, Maddy! Do you expect me to ask her out on a date right away!?" M.J. said

exasperatedly.

Madison knew what M.J. was referring to... on the way home she had managed to get M.J. to open up a little about what she planned to do about Allison. Maddy had convinced her to pursue the blonde, but in a somewhat more 'traditional' fashion, like asking her out and 'dating' her before hopping into the sack.

Based on M.J.'s reaction and comment, however, Madison realized that M.J. must not be aware of Alli's impending departure. *What to do, what to do*, she pondered.

"No... that's not what I meant." Madison said, shaking her head and touching her fingers to her temple as she gave her sister a worrisome look. She was bound to have a massive headache from this. "Have you read any of your emails yet?" She had received the news of Alli's resignation earlier today, via a smart-assed email from Ray, which she quickly verified by calling John Stevenson directly.

"No." M.J. answered her with a quizzical look.

"Have you spoken with John at all?"

"No... I've only been here for half an hour." M.J. said, confusion and irritation flashing across her features as she read the fretful look on her sister's face. Something was up. "What's going on?"

Madison could only stare at M.J. open-mouthed. How do you tell someone that the love of their life is about to walk away from them and disappear?

"Maddy... *what*?" M.J. frowned and pressed more insistently.

"Morgan...," Madison paused and closed her eyes, hating herself for what she was about to say. "Allison resigned... she gave John her two-week notice last Friday."

The world seemed to stop... time halted... the air ceased its movement. Her heart had been ripped from her chest and it was hanging outside, naked and flapping in the wind. The organ thudded loudly as her head began to spin and darkness suddenly enveloped everything.

The bottom of M.J.'s world had suddenly and inexplicably fallen away, and she had nothing to hold on to.

*"Did you know, when you go, it's the perfect ending,
To the bad day I'd gotten used to spending;
When you go, all I know is,
You're my favorite mistake... you're my favorite mistake;*

*Well maybe nothing lasts forever, even when you stay together,
I don't need forever after, but it's your laughter that won't let me go,
So I'm holding on this way;
Did you know, could you tell, you were the only one that I ever loved?
Now everything's so wrong;
Did you see me walking by? Did it ever make you cry?
Now you're my favorite mistake;
Yeah you're my favorite mistake." - S. Crow*

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

M.J. was devastated. There was no denying it, so she didn't even try. She was shocked, sad, angry, and - to her chagrin - she felt incredibly stupid. Even though she had acknowledged being in love with Alli, she never stopped to consider the fact that, perhaps, Alli wasn't in love with *her*. She could scarcely believe it. This wasn't what she wanted at all... this wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. But it did happen... it was done. And it was all her fault... she had no one to blame but herself.

Through her own stupid selfishness and arrogance, she had completely and totally blown it. She toyed with Alli's feelings... she bullied her and treated her like she was nothing... and now it had come back to slap her in the face. More than that - it stabbed her in the heart, and she was bleeding-out.

It was so bittersweet. She had finally come to realize that she was in love with Alli and wanted her more than anything, more than anyone... but the beautiful little blonde wouldn't have her now... she didn't want her. M.J. had foolishly insisted on playing the game, and she lost.

Alli was leaving. It was over.

Her emotions ranged from painful sorrow to furious rage. She went from bemoaning how much she'd miss the sweet, angelic face to cursing herself for falling in love with the blonde beauty. Madison tried to put a positive spin on the whole thing, insisting time and time again that it was actually a good thing for Alli to leave the company, because now M.J. could pursue her with no worries about work-related entanglements. M.J. understood what Madison was saying, but it didn't really matter to her. In her mind, Alli was leaving because of her, to get the hell *away* from her, and so she didn't see a point in trying to pursue anything.

After turning it over inside her head and dissecting it for an entire weekend, M.J. told herself that she would simply have to *deal* with Allison's departure. She was leaving, and there was nothing M.J. could do about it, aside from groveling, that is, and she sure as hell wouldn't be doing *that*. She saw only one way to get around the gaping hole that had been blasted in the landscape that lay ahead of her... she knew of only one method to dodge the hurt and bury the pain. She would call upon her old friend... her only true and trusted companion... her soul-mate... her second-skin... DENIAL.

She would deny it all. The feelings, the thoughts, the emotions, the admittances. None of it had actually happened. None of it was real. It was all pure imagination. If Alli cared so little for her that she could just up and leave, then M.J. would care even less. She would fight fire with fire. She would banish the thoughts and push the entire matter far, far away. The blonde would be gone by the end of the week, and M.J. could once again get on with her life. It would work.

She would **make** it work.

It only took three days for M.J. to realize that she no longer played the denial card like she used to. Frankly, she sucked at it.

As much as she wanted to deny everything and shove it all into a musty old closet someplace, she couldn't. She was constantly reminded of Allison. Every phone call she received, every letter she read, every email she transacted... every little thing seemed to remind her of something Alli did, or said, or handled, or talked about once upon a time. Hell, if she picked up a piece of paper with greenish-blue ink on it, she immediately studied it, thinking that it looked like the color of Alli's eyes. It was ridiculous.

It was Wednesday; in two more days, Alli would disappear. M.J. felt the urge to seek her out and talk to her, but she wasn't able to muster the courage to actually transport her carcass down to the 13th floor. She was actually somewhat perplexed that she hadn't run into the blonde anywhere... they **did** work in the same building, after all. She told herself that Alli was surely busy finalizing her work and cleaning out her office, and all that garbage. Surely the blonde didn't have the time, nor the inclination, to come and say goodbye to the President of the company. Surely M.J. was just an afterthought to her at this point.

And a nasty afterthought at that, M.J. grouched to herself as she sat in her chair and stared aimlessly out her window for the umpteenth time that day.

She thought back to this morning's conversation with Madison as her fingers played with a rubberband that had been wrapped around yet another bunch of condolence cards she received in the morning mail. Unable to stifle her curiosity, M.J. had called her sister and asked her if she knew where Alli was going. Of course, Maddy had the low-down, as always. ...Sometimes it was highly beneficial to have a sister with 'connections'.

Allison had landed a job at a local Mom-and-Pop construction and development firm. It was a fledgling company that specialized in mostly residential endeavors, but from what M.J. knew of them, they had a solid reputation and a promising future. It wasn't that she didn't wish Alli well - she did - it was just that she hoped she wasn't taking a step backward instead of forward. She might have landed the job of Director of HR at this company, but with it being so small, M.J. wondered how much of a 'step-up' it would be for the intelligent, talented blonde.

She twiddled the rubberband in her fingers, working the springy strand furiously back and forth

as she stared and considered, again, if she should go and confront Alli.

What would she say to me? What would I say to her? 'Oh gee Alli, I'm sorry I fucked with you - literally; would you consider staying if I promise to wear a straitjacket whenever I'm around you?' She mocked herself internally. *God I'm such a fucking idiot*, she thought again, pulling on the rubberband until it finally snapped, stinging her fingers intensely.

Friday finally arrived. D-Day. End game. Alli was anxious. M.J. was depressed.

They still had not seen nor spoken to each other all week, and Alli was both amazed and perplexed at that. It seemed obvious that M.J. was making a point **not** to see nor speak with her, and Alli supposed she shouldn't be surprised. After all, she wasn't going out of her way to see M.J. either, was she? But still she wondered, was M.J. saddened? Relieved? Angry? Apathetic? ...Who the hell knew?

Alli couldn't help but think that M.J. probably felt a little betrayed, as most employers do when someone leaves their employ. Even though the exasperating brunette was the primary reason for the departure, Alli knew that M.J. respected her work and had always praised her accomplishments. But none of that evoked any kind of pity from Alli. She was beyond pity. She was beyond feeling badly about jumping ship; she was looking out for number one now. She was taking the plunge, and she wasn't looking back.

Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead, baby, Alli thought as she stuffed the last of her personal belongings into the cardboard box that sat atop her desk.

"Almost ready, huh?" A deep voice rumbled as John Stevenson stuck his head inside her door.

She looked up, smiling at him, "Yeah, I think so. Just gathering up the last of my stuff, then I'm outta here." She grinned again, hoping to offset any negative feelings that might be lingering.

John smiled back at her and stepped into her office further, "Listen, I uhm..." he hesitated, "I just wanted to tell you, privately, that there are no hard feelings about anything... okay?" He addressed her softly, his eyes serious but gentle.

Alli knew what he was saying. He wasn't angry that she was leaving; on the contrary, he was surprisingly sympathetic. When she had first given him her resignation, they'd had a long discussion about the controversy surrounding Alli and the President, and John begrudgingly agreed that it was probably in Alli's best interest to leave. "Okay." Alli acknowledged with a nod and a small smile.

"I understand why you're going - I still wish you weren't, but I do understand." He said. Alli gave him an acknowledging look. "And I know you'll do just fine running your own show, but... if you ever need anything, you just give me a jingle... okay?" He added, grinning crookedly.

Alli smiled again and nodded, "Thank you, John... I appreciate it." The man might be a first-class putz, but he had always been good to her. She felt her eyes well with tears for the second time that day, and about the fiftieth time that week. Her office had thrown her a 'bon voyage' party a few days ago that left her teary-eyed and melancholy, and she'd cried outright earlier today when Liz Jacobs stopped by to say her final goodbyes. She didn't think she had any tears left.

Her box was now full and her office was empty. It was after five o'clock, and she was finally ready to go.

"Well, uh... I'm not really very good at farewells, so...", John stammered nervously.

Alli laughed slightly, "It's okay, I don't like farewells either." Alli conceded. "I enjoyed working with you, John. You taught me a lot, and despite everything else that happened, I did like it here." Alli said seriously, again holding back the urge to cry. "I'll miss you guys."

John touched his hand to her shoulder, "We'll miss you too, Alli."

After several lingering goodbyes and wishes of good cheer here and there, Alli finally managed to hop an elevator and arrive at the garage. It was now after six o'clock, and she desperately wanted to just go the hell home. Lugging the cardboard box that contained the last remnants of her work life, she tottered off unsteadily toward her car. She had just fished her car keys out of her purse when she heard the clicking of heels on the concrete and the chatter of a familiar voice. She turned her head to see who it was, and her heart stopped.

Madison's talking trailed off when she realized that M.J. was no longer walking beside her, and she stopped to see where her audience had disappeared to.

Oh shit, the younger sister thought to herself as she spied the distraction.

The President stood a good distance away, but Alli could still see the bright, laser-sharpness of her light blue eyes. She looked like an angel in her crisp white blouse and light tan slacks... and she looked like a devil with her dark hair and hard, chiseled facial features. She saw Madison shooting one of her famous sideways glances at the taller woman and Alli suddenly felt her stomach constrict into multiple, painful knots.

Jesus H. Christ... doesn't this just fucking figure, Alli cursed inwardly as she closed her eyes and briefly considered what to do. She hadn't seen M.J. all damn week, and now, at the very end, she runs into her just in time for a big, uncomfortable confrontation. *How typical*, Alli thought. Resolving to act like an adult and be professional, Alli straightened herself up and turned around fully.

"Hello, Alli." M.J.'s voice was so familiar, even though she hadn't heard it in over a week. It still sent chills down her spine and made her heart skip a beat, despite all that had occurred over the past year. "Or rather, I suppose I should say, 'goodbye'." The tall brunette added, but with no

sarcasm.

Alli wanted to spit something smart back at her, but she couldn't think of anything to say. Madison merely stood still, flicking her gray eyes back and forth to gauge reactions, and, Alli figured, trying to calculate explosion impacts.

M.J. disregarded her sister and walked a few steps closer to Alli, which made the blonde's heart jump. "I uh... I wanted to say goodbye earlier, but I didn't want to... embarrass you in front of anyone... or anything."

M.J. spoke hesitantly, which surprised Alli. Whether she was surprised that M.J. was hesitating, or whether it was because she cared enough not to embarrass her, she didn't know.

"That's alright." Alli said with a slight shake of her head, not knowing how else to react.

M.J. paused again, darting her tongue over her dry lips. "I guess I should apologize," she began, "you probably wouldn't be leaving if it weren't for me." She said, her voice rasping low and quiet, as though she didn't want Madison to hear her admission of guilt.

Alli said nothing. Even though she was thoroughly amazed that M.J. was actually offering an apology, and doing it so calmly, she managed to keep a slight scowl on her face and pinned M.J. with a determined look.

"...And thank you for *disagreeing* with that." M.J. added, her voice lilting slightly as she quirked one corner of her mouth in a tiny teasing grin.

Alli wished she could return the grin, but she could not. She didn't trust her voice, so she just stood there, still saying nothing.

Madison shifted her feet nervously, unable to determine what was developing without being afforded a view of her sister's face. She could only see Alli standing there, staring wide-eyed and looking very much like she was either ready to bolt or ready to deck M.J. at any given moment.

The two ill-fated, almost-lovers stared at each other for a few awkward, painful moments, neither one knowing quite what to say to the other. Alli bit the inside of her cheek; actually she had plenty to say, but she wouldn't. It was, she reminded herself, pointless and too late for that now.

M.J. knew that she was dangerously close to making a fool of herself, so she quickly ended the stare-down, "Well... I should let you go." She stared deeply into Alli's eyes, intent on delivering that message to the fullest extent.

And Alli received it. Her aquamarine eyes burned with the immediate arrival of more tears, and she blinked and blinked, working furiously to keep them at bay.

M.J. saw this, and she knew the message had indeed been heard and understood. She knew that, despite it all, Alli felt some kind of remorse, just like she did. She felt regret, and she felt sorrow.

Because it all could have been so different... it could have gone in a completely different direction. But it wasn't, and it didn't.

M.J. drew a breath and pursed her lips together tightly; she wished that Alli would say *some*thing. Hesitating one last time, M.J. at last spoke her final words to Alli, "Goodbye, Allison." She said calmly, evenly, "...Good luck with your life."

The sincere, softly-spoken words cut into Alli's trembling heart, and M.J. gave her one last long look before she turned away.

Long after Madison and M.J. left the parking garage, Allison sat in the darkness of the blue Beetle with her arms wrapped around her body, rocking herself back and forth as piteous sobs wracked her small frame, and her heart broke all over again.

*"She cuts my skin and bruise my lips
She's everything to me;
She tears my clothes and burns my eyes
She's all I wanna see;
She brings the cold and scars my soul
She's heaven sent to me;
Now she's gone, and love burns inside me...
Never thought I'd leave you like the way I do, well,
Kiss my love and I wish you're gone,
You can kiss my love and I wish you're gone...
Now she's gone, and love burns inside me." - Black Rebel Motorcycle Club*

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

She's gone.

Three full weeks had passed since Allison's departure, and M.J. still found herself repeating those words nearly every day.

At first she felt shock and disbelief. This eventually gave way to sadness and depression. Then came the anger and resentment. M.J. wished that all of it could have been directed toward Alli, but she knew damn well that she was to blame. Actually, she had to applaud the little blonde's bravery and strength; not many people would have the courage and intestinal fortitude to actually leave. It was just another reason why she was crazy about her... or rather, *used to be* crazy

about her.

M.J. berated herself constantly, telling her stubborn mind that it should have known better, that it should have kept a closer watch on her foolish heart.

If it's too good to be true, then it probably is... isn't that how the saying goes? She knew the perils of getting in too deep and getting attached... it never lasts, and you **always** get burned in the end. It was one of the cardinal rules in her own personal little book of life, and she'd stupidly broken it. Would she never learn?

Sometimes the anger would well up inside so painfully, the only way she could get it out was through physical release. At first, she tried to accomplish this by returning to her 'old ways'. She stalked the clubs and bars, looking for willing women to take to bed and violate, wanting to prove to herself, perhaps, that there was still some remnant of the 'old' M.J. left. But it was no good. It just wasn't the same, and she no longer got anything out of it. She even briefly considered hooking up with Kate Reed, but thankfully, the sane half of her mind kicked in and squashed that idea.

She usually ended up releasing her frustration and anger at home, on her unsuspecting punching bag. Over and over, she would beat and pummel the canvas sack, letting her rage and fury pour out while hot tears filled her eyes and stabbing pain needled her heart. On and on she would push herself, until her fists felt numb inside her gloves and her forearms ached from the force of her hammering. She would often collapse to the floor in a heap, her spent body lying prostrate on the floor, her clothes saturated in sweat, her throat dry and raw, her head throbbing, and her eyes burning. It was a strange and vicious cycle, but she didn't know how to break it.

It had been a month since Allison's departure, and M.J. was meeting with John and Madison to go over the list of interview candidates for her replacement. Raiford was also supposed to be involved, but his secretary had called earlier to say that he'd be late.

They were just finishing-up when Ray came waltzing into M.J.'s office unannounced, as usual.

"Sorry I'm late... you know how lunch meetings can sometimes... 'run over'." He said with a lecherous smile as he plopped himself down on a chair.

Madison and M.J. only glared at him. Everyone knew what a sleaze Ray was, and everyone knew that his 'lunch meetings' usually consisted of him meeting his flavor-of-the-week girlfriend someplace for a quick tryst. He bragged about it often. The man was a pig.

"Actually, we're finished, Ray; you shouldn't have even bothered." Madison snapped.

"Ah, you people are **so** efficient. Well then, who are we interviewing, and when?" He asked, turning his gaze to John.

John opened his mouth to answer, but was cut-off by M.J., "*We* aren't interviewing anyone. No one from this pool satisfies the criteria, so John's going to re-advertise." She said sharply, grabbing the stack of resumes and tossing them to the edge of her desk.

Ray let out a snort, "No one 'satisfies' the criteria? Or do you mean, no one 'satisfies' *your* criteria?" He asked, his tone smarmy and smug as he pinned M.J. with a challenging look.

M.J. immediately felt her hackles rise and her anger spark, but she forced herself to stay calm. "None of them possess the *required* qualifications in conjunction with the *preferred* ones." She spoke the words carefully, enunciating each word to get her point across.

"Yeah, right... whatever. So, is this meeting over? I got things to do." Ray said dismissively as he stood up."

"Yes, by all means, go Ray... wouldn't want to keep you from your *work*." M.J. sniped back as everyone else stood and she followed them to the door. "Madison, I'll catch up with you later; John, let me know when you get the new ad in the paper." M.J. said as they all reached the doorway.

Just before they exited, Ray turned to John, "Y'know... maybe you just need to re-word the ad, John... maybe you should just be more *honest*." Everyone stopped and John gave him a quizzical look. Ray then turned to look at M.J., a devious smile on his lips. "I bet you could snag what M.J. wants if you said, 'hot little blonde bimbo needed to serve as 'bottom' for 'top' construction company President.' "

Ray never saw it coming; he only heard the crunch and felt his head snap backwards as M.J.'s fist crashed squarely into his nose. The pain and the blood immediately followed.

"Morgan!!" Madison screeched.

"M.J.! For chrissake!" John yelled.

"*FUCK*!! You BITCH!! You BROKE my fucking NOSE!!" Ray howled and cursed, his hands flying up to cover his face as the blood began to stream out.

The tall President could only stand and stare, her heart hammering, her eyes clouded in red fire, her mind consumed with murderous intent. Madison actually had to reach out and shake her sister back into reality. Genuinely shocked by her violent reaction, M.J. could only look dumbly at her bleeding, wailing stepbrother. She gave Madison an apologetic look and opened her mouth to utter something, but realized she had nothing reasonable to say.

Snapping her mouth shut, she quickly pushed past the others and fled her office, speeding down the hallway toward the elevators as fast as she could, all the while rubbing her throbbing right hand.

More days turned into more weeks, and the weeks eventually turned into months. Stormy summertime skies gave way to cooler, clearer autumnal breeziness, and the dreary spectre of Winter lingered just around the corner.

The fiasco with Raiford died down relatively quickly. Madison managed to wrangle an apology out of her older sister in exchange for an apology from Ray, plus an additional promise that he wouldn't sue M.J. for bodily injury, like he threatened. The company's rumor mill had plenty of fodder for weeks.

M.J.'s moods continued to flip-flop, and she worked hard to purge herself of her ever-present demons. She continued with her brutal workouts, swimming, jogging, and pounding away at her punching bag until she was too exhausted to even think. But that didn't always work. Her final thoughts before she fell asleep and her first thoughts when morning broke continued to be about Allison.

She considered looking Alli up and trying to make contact. Maybe, she thought, if she waited long enough and then apologized to Alli, they could make a fresh start? But no... she couldn't do that. She couldn't risk the injury of a flat-out rejection. She really didn't have the courage, when it came right down to it.

Eventually, M.J. decided to just resign the whole thing to being 'fate', and she finally managed to let go of the anger and the frustration. She told herself that she had to accept her tragic destiny and just learn to live with it... but it wasn't easy. Even though she felt certain that she was over Alli, she still wasn't sure who she was, where she was going, or what she was doing with her life.

She seriously considered leaving the company herself. It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed her mind; in fact, she had considered it numerous times over the past several years. But she never did anything about it. Her father had always been there to give her the subtle familial obligation/plea for assistance thing, and then when he told her that he was ill, she didn't dare leave. But now that her father was gone, there would be no more *'I need you to carry on for me'* guilt-trip speeches and expectations.

She was really free to go then, wasn't she? Did she 'owe' anyone anything anymore? Did she have to worry about Madison anymore? No... of course not. Madison was a grown adult and successful executive, and she was probably smarter than M.J. ever hoped to be. So... why was she still here?

M.J. knew that her lack of desire to leave wasn't really about guilt or worry; it was really just because she didn't want to leave her sister. Now that their father was gone, Madison and Lizzy were the only ones M.J. had. They were her only 'connection' and the only things that gave her life meaning. And she didn't want to walk away from that. As frustrated and discontent as she'd get, she knew that she needed her family in her life.

So, ever determined, M.J. kept plodding along at the company, day in and day out... but her mind just wasn't in it one hundred percent. Her heart and soul weren't in it either, but then again, they

hadn't been in it for a long time. She seemed to be in a perpetually confused state, always distracted and unfocused. She couldn't help but wonder when things would change... *if* things would change.

Where would destiny lead her next?

Continued in [Chapter 45](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"Now, don't just walk away
Pretending everything's okay and you don't care about me;
And I know there's just no use when all your lies become your truths
And I don't care, yeah;
Could you look me in the eye and tell me that you're happy now?
Would you tell it to my face, or have I been erased?
Are you happy now? Are you happy now?
You took all there was to take, and left me with an empty plate,
And you don't care about it, yeah;
And I am giving up this game, and leaving you with all the blame,
'Cause I don't care, yeah;
Could you look me in the eye and tell me that you're happy now?
Would you tell it to my face, or have I been erased?
Are you happy now? Are you happy now?
Do you really have everything you want?
You could never give something you ain't got;
You can't run away from yourself, yeah...
Could you look me in the eye and tell me that you're happy now?" - M. Branch*

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Eighteen months. It's hard to believe that time can slip through your fingers so swiftly and with such ease... especially when there are things from the past that occasionally tug on your subconscious and threaten to pull you backward.

The past eighteen months had been a whirlwind for Allison. She had left a job that she hadn't even been in for a year, successfully extricating herself from the clutches of a painful affair in the process... she had started a new job and pointed her career down a new, and thankfully pain-free, path... she had become an Aunt for the third time... she decided to change her name back to 'Riley'... and her romantic life was actually looking up for a change. She had spent a lot of time and energy getting her life back on track, but she felt like she had succeeded.

Alli hated to admit it, but she still thought about Whitton, Inc. More than that, though, she hated to admit that she still thought about M.J. Whitton every once in awhile.

It had taken her a full year-and-a-half, but Alli had finally gotten over the heartache that the frustrating, devastating beauty had caused. Rather than rehashing what actually happened however, Alli found that most of her thoughts these days dealt with musings of what might have been. She couldn't help but wonder what might have developed between the two of them had M.J. been less controlling and more open. Would they have been lovers? Partners? Could M.J. have been 'the one'?

Alli repeatedly told herself no - M.J. most definitely was not 'the one'. Although they had an intense connection and an undeniable chemistry, M.J.'s barriers and her need to keep Alli at arms length made it impossible for Alli to get close to her. And that was what Alli had wanted; she wanted to get inside. It wasn't enough that M.J. made her heart flutter and her panties damp; Alli wanted the whole package. She didn't want a relationship of unbalanced, one-sidedness; she wanted equality. She wanted trust.

She realized that her affair with the alluring, perplexing woman was another calamity that, once over, left her with a profound lesson about life and love.

Some people are very good at love; some people suck at it; and some haven't the faintest idea what it is. Some people wear it proudly on their sleeve; some keep it locked up inside; and some just lose touch with it completely. Alli couldn't help but wonder... which kind of 'people' was she?

She still had misgivings about love and relationships in general, but at least she no longer sat around pining over the fascinating, enigmatic President. Right after she left Whitton, Inc., Alli thought about M.J. constantly. Month after month slid by, but memories of the bewitching brunette stayed with her. She tried, but didn't know how to shake the lingering feelings. She even went as far as deciding to pick up an anonymous woman and have a fling. She wanted so desperately to confirm that her feelings about M.J. were not unique, and that they could be easily replicated by any woman who was attractive, intelligent, and gave good head. She frequented a few bars and found a few desirable women here and there, but nothing ever materialized beyond some kissing and heavy petting. Although she tried very hard to convince herself that there was

nothing sleazy about it, she just couldn't bring herself to go through with it and do the deed.

And, she never did get her confirmation.

She could have let herself stray down a path of carelessness and destruction... it would have been so easy. But rather than slip into a depressive funk, Alli somehow reached inside and found the determination and the intestinal fortitude to pull herself together and get her life back in order. And get it in order, she did. She was happy with her new position and her new responsibilities, and everyone at the company valued and respected her. The little organization was growing steadily and continued to hire more and more people as it spread its wings further and further. Alli was an integral part of the expansion, and she was rewarded well for her contributions and hard work. She was certain that, at last, her determination and resilience had paid off.

As far as her personal life was concerned, Alli wasn't doing too badly in that arena either. She had met Kristine Mitchell about nine months ago at a regional board meeting of the Northern Florida Real Estate and Residential Developers Organization. Alli's company was part of the Organization and Kris was an executive for one of the area's top real estate firms. They hit it off immediately, and although Alli was very reluctant about getting seriously involved with anyone, Kris pursued her determinedly. After a slow, cautious start, they were now officially 'an item'.

Her family life was pretty much the same. Her Mother was condescending and disapproving, as usual, and she hounded Alli endlessly with questions about why she'd left her job at Whitton, Inc., so suddenly, and why she'd decided to go back to using her maiden name. Of course, Alli didn't bother trying to explain anything to her; what would be the point? She had, however, spilled her guts to Kaitlyn, telling her sister every sordid little detail about the entire, miserable entanglement with M.J. Kait lent her ears and her shoulders, comforting and supporting Alli, just as she always did. Kait agreed with Alli that she'd done the right thing by leaving Whitton, Inc., and she was thrilled that her little sister had found Kristine. Kait even stood by Alli's side when she finally decided to tell their father about her 'lifestyle'. Robert Riley was shocked, but he took the news amazingly well, telling Alli that he was happy as long as she was happy.

But, *was* she really happy? ...That was the million-dollar question.

And it was one Alli didn't have an answer for.

The Annual Holiday Charity Auction of the Northern Florida Real Estate and Residential Developers Organization was in full swing by the time Alli and Kris arrived. It wasn't an extremely lively event, but it was a good excuse to dress up and enjoy a nice evening out.

Alli was relaxed and comfortable tonight, looking smartly chic in the little blue cocktail dress that she wore. A low-cut neckline highlighted her slender neck and clavicles, and the slightly ruffled hemline billowed gently around her calves when she walked, making her look like a cool breeze.

She and Kris were chatting amiably with some mutual business acquaintances when an older gentleman turned a microphone on, making it squeal noisily for a split second.

"Uh ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention for a moment," the speaker said into the mic. "This year we have a new donor that I'd like to mention especially... Item #75 has been donated by the Mark J. Whitton Memorial Fund."

The smile on Alli's face immediately fell and the color drained from her cheeks. She nearly dropped her glass of wine as she turned to give the speaker her full attention.

The man rambled on, "As some of you may or may not know, Mark Whitton was a past Chairman of the Board for our Organization, and he was really one of the 'founding fathers' of this particular event. Unfortunately, he passed away last year after a lengthy illness, but his family wanted to contribute to the auction this year, in his memory, so... we thank them very much for their charity and continued support." A brief applause sounded as the mic switched off, and people soon returned to their conversations.

Back at the rear of the convention center, blue eyes rolled and a long, glossy mane of dark hair shook slightly in irritation. *It wasn't last year, you moron, M.J. scoffed to herself in disgust, he's been gone for a year-and-a-half.* She drew a deep breath and released it quietly.

The charity auction was a complete and utter bore to M.J. It was held every November, but she had always managed to weasel her way out of it and convince Madison to attend instead on behalf of their company. Madison loved these types of events anyway, and she and her husband viewed them as important networking and glad-handing opportunities. M.J. was certain that Doug Cohen was eyeing a run for some kind of political office in the near future.

She had only been there for an hour, and she was certain she couldn't bear it much longer. She sighed again and sipped her vodka tonic, scanning the crowd of people and avoiding eye contact as she searched for her MIA, social-butterfly sister.

Meanwhile, in another part of the room, sea-green eyes began to scan the grand hall frantically, looking for a familiar, imposing figure with dark brown hair and beguiling sky-blue eyes. If Lady Luck was with her at all tonight, Alli would only find a dark blonde with understanding steel-gray eyes. Hell, she'd even hope for that asshole Ray Calhoun at this point. Alli gulped her drink and made her way over to a section of the ballroom where there were less people and more breathing space. She continued to search, her nerves escalating and her heart suddenly increasing its rhythm.

"Hey... what's wrong hon? You look like you've seen a ghost?" Kristine asked as she approached and took in her lover's pale face.

"No... at least not yet." Alli mumbled, taking another gulp of her drink. Kris continued to regard her with questioning umber eyes. "You remember that I left Whitton, Inc., about a year and half ago, right?" Alli finally conceded.

"Yeah... so?"

"Well... I guess that little announcement just startled me, that's all."

"Oh." Kris answered, still not fully understanding, but that was no fault of hers. Allison had never gone into detail about her very brief, very confusing, and apparently, very fucked-up affair with a mysterious 'someone' at Whitton, Inc.

Kris didn't know who it was, nor what had happened exactly; she only knew that something had gone dreadfully wrong which caused Allison to leave the company after only a year of employment. Alli's deliberate vagueness had driven her crazy at first, but Kris learned not to push for answers, and Alli never offered any. Kris knew that she had a tendency to be a possessive lover, and she had been trying very hard to curb her instincts with Allison. She really didn't want to screw up this opportunity.

"I guess I'm just wondering if anyone from Whitton will be here, y'know...?" Alli shrugged, trying to play it down, but feeling her nerves shoot even higher.

Kris felt a small twinge of jealousy, despite her efforts to remain blasé. "I don't know if I'd recognize anyone from Whitton," she said, looking around. "Is it really that big a deal? Do you still feel *bad blood* after all this time?"

Alli scoffed, "I'm not sure that *I'm* the one with the 'bad blood'." She added, taking another gulp from her glass.

"You worry too much, babe." Kris said, slinging her arm around Alli's shoulders and giving her a quick peck on the temple. Allison smiled, wishing she could feel as at-ease about everything as Kris apparently did. She hated the fact that the possibility - just the mere thought of the possibility, really - that she might bump into M.J. Whitton was driving her into a state of panic. She downed the remainder of her wine, trying to push down the rising dread she felt inside.

Kris watched as Alli polished-off her drink, wondering what could make her normally calm, poised, confident girlfriend come unglued so thoroughly. "Allison... slow down, baby," Kris said, reaching out to remove the now-empty wine glass from Alli's hand.

Alli frowned, her jade eyes darkening and flashing for a second at Kris's overprotective gesture. She knew that the taller woman only meant well, but it angered her, just for a second, that Kris would try to control her life in any way. It wasn't that Kris was overly controlling - she wasn't really - she just had a way of subtly infusing her opinions by gently 'suggesting' or just 'handling' things, sometimes without Alli's full consent. Alli didn't want it to irk her, but it did. It was yet another discussion that they hadn't had... Alli's dislike of anyone trying to 'handle' her in any way. She had been manipulated and controlled enough for one lifetime.

Kris caught the quick, angry look and immediately tried to back-peddle, "I'm just saying... you drove tonight, don't forget." It was a valid point, after all.

"I haven't forgotten, and I'm fine." Alli said, a little too curtly.

"Okay, okay," Kris held her hands up in defeat and gave the glass back to her lover. They exchanged awkward looks for a moment before Alli shifted her gaze away, feeling a little bad for snapping.

"Listen, uhhh...", Kris started, glancing around to make sure no one was watching, "actually, if you wanna stay late and party-hardy, that's okay, becuzzzz," she drawled playfully, leaning down so that her nose brushed the side of Alli's face, "I happen to know someone who can give you a lift to her very nice - and very *empty* - condo." Kris teased, kissing a blonde temple.

Alli drew in a deep breath. She felt another red flag pop up inside her head... Kris was up to something. "Oh yeah?" she queried, trying to sound casual.

"Mm-hmm," Kris hummed against her cheek. "The kid is staying overnight at Grandma's, so we could have the whoooole place to ourselves." She enticed, hoping and praying that Allison would finally acquiesce and actually spend a whole night with her. They'd never done that yet, and Kris was getting tired of waiting. It seemed that Alli was always dodging her about one thing or another.

Allison usually referred to the presence of Kris's five-year-old daughter as the reason for it 'not being a good idea', so the tall blonde thought that removing that 'issue', just for the night, would help things. She wanted so badly to wake up next to this petite little beauty who drove her insane with desire. Kris was certain that if she could get Allison to cross that line and start spending nights with her, she could push things to the next level. She was ready for that... she was ready for something more... she was ready for commitment. It was fast, she knew, but when Kris knew what she wanted, she didn't like to dawdle; she went after it full-throttle.

"Hmmm," Alli hummed and closed her eyes, absorbing the feeling of her lover's body as it touched hers slightly while soft lips planted dainty kisses on her cheek and jaw. She did feel sort-of bad that she'd never spent an entire night with Kris. It seemed to be yet another 'issue' that she needed to work through. She and Kris had slept together, often, but Alli always hedged whenever Kris hinted at wanting more. The tall blonde could be very forward and aggressive sometimes, and Alli had a nagging feeling that Kris was one of those women who'd show up at your front door with her U-Haul in tow as soon as you had a few slumber parties with her. It sounded really harsh, she knew, but Alli didn't want to move that quickly. She wasn't ready to start spending nights with someone, and she most *definitely* wasn't ready to take any big step with Kris, or anyone else for that matter.

Maybe she was wrong; maybe Kris just wanted to spend more time with her. Maybe the brief, romantic evenings of make-out sessions on the couch and quick shags in the bed just weren't cutting it for the lanky blonde anymore. It was enough for Alli, but obviously Kris felt differently; she apparently wanted to move things up a notch.

*Godddd, Alli cringed inwardly. Two years ago I would have been *thrilled* to have someone wanting me like this, she mused, but that was before... just... *before*, she thought, refusing to*

delve into her black memories again. It was bad enough that thoughts of M.J. Whitton had invaded her mind tonight, possibly ruining the evening entirely; she would not let them ruin anything else.

But M.J. did ruin me, didn't she? Alli thought sadly to herself. *If it weren't for her, I'd be on my way to Kris's place right now, ready, willing, and able to move things along. Damn... damn you, M.J.!*

Alli wondered, for the hundredth time, why she couldn't completely open herself up to Kris. The tall, curly-haired real estate executive was a good person, really; she was kind and intelligent and funny. She could be a teensy bit presumptuous and overbearing sometimes, but it was usually tempered by genuine, good intent. Being concerned about and taking care of people was just Kris's way. She wasn't perfect, but she wasn't bad either. And she certainly wasn't as toxic as M.J. had been. The differences between Kris and M.J. were as wide as the Grand Canyon, and while Alli could easily say that Kris was so much better for her than M.J. was, there was still something missing that Alli couldn't quite put her finger on.

It wasn't that she and Kris weren't compatible in and out of the bedroom - they were - it was just that something was... lacking. They had decent chemistry - there were sparks, and there was ignition... but the fire just didn't burn as bright. The crackle wasn't as crisp; the heat wasn't as intense; the burn wasn't as severe.

Alli tried to reason with herself that she should just be happy that she had someone like Kris; someone who wanted her as much as Kris seemed to. She told herself that she should just learn to be satisfied and stop expecting perfection. No one is perfect, after all, so no relationship can be perfect. She should just be grateful for Kris and learn to be content... right?

Wrong. She couldn't do that. As before, she knew she wouldn't be satisfied with an incomplete package. She didn't want pieces missing; she wanted it all.

If she had met Kris before M.J., she probably would have been very satisfied with what she and Kris had. But now, tucked away in the back of her mind, was the knowledge that a greater high was possible. She had experienced it, even as brief and one-sided as it had been. So, M.J. had ruined her for anyone else.

Yeah... she ruined me good... damn her, Alli closed her eyes and thought, again, for the hundredth time.

"So... whaddy say babe?" Kris purred against Alli's temple, rousing her from her deep reverie. "Is it really that difficult to decide?" Oh yes, she had been in a **very** deep reverie.

...Oops, Alli chagrined. "Uhhh... I dunno Kris," Alli murmured, feeling like a real heel for backing out - again - but needing desperately to do so. "I have a lot of stuff I need to do tomorrow." It was true... kind-of... sort-of. *Oh God,* Alli lamented to herself. She could feel Kris draw a deep breath near her ear.

"Couldn't we do the 'stuff' together?" Kris asked quietly, hopefully.

Alli closed her eyes again, "Mmm... not really, no." ...*I'm sorry I'm sorry*. She felt Kris's body and mouth ease away from her.

"Well... if you change your mind, let me know." Kris said, her voice calm, but Alli could hear the underlying hurt in it. Alli ventured a glance up at her taller lover, knowing what she'd see. Kris's soft face wore a very slight expression of confusion and lack of understanding, but her dark eyes still held a glimmer of ever-present hope. Alli quirked a small apologetic smile at her and reached out to squeeze her hand before turning away.

Kris watched her petite lover disappear into the crowd, thinking that she might never get a straightforward answer out of Allison. She wondered, yet again, what was going through that beautiful, complex, blonde head. She felt like she would never truly know.

*"I know you don't know what I'm goin' through
Standing here looking at you;
Well let me tell ya that it hurts so bad
It makes me feel so sad
It makes me hurt so bad to see you again...
Why don't you stay and let me make it up to you?
I'll do anything you want me to
You loved me before, please love me again
I can't let you go back to her
Please don't go, please don't go
...Hurts so bad;
Come back it hurts so bad
Don't make it hurt so bad
I'm begging you, please." - L. Ronstadt*

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Ever since the speaker had made his unsettling announcement a half-hour ago, Alli had been hiding furtively in groups and gatherings of acquaintances, hoping and praying that she didn't run into any Whittons. After spending the time scouring the room as extensively as possible, she felt secure in the fact that no one from her former employer was present tonight.

Alli had just started to relax and enjoy a conversation with a group of colleagues when suddenly, a strange sensation took hold of her. It was similar to the feeling she got whenever she knew that Kris was watching her from afar, only it wasn't a warm, fuzzy feeling... it was different. It was a dark, almost ominous feeling... a strange, uneasy pull that tugged at her heart and soul. She

twisted her head slowly, feeling her eyes distinctly drawn to one side of the conference hall.

Everything around her seemed to melt away into silence when she spotted her. All movement seemed to cease and time slowed down nearly to a standstill, as though Fate wanted to give Alli an extra moment to observe and absorb the vision before her.

M.J. looked sophisticated and coolly regal in an impeccably tailored, pin-striped, charcoal-gray suit.

*A suit... of course she would wear a *suit*... and gray too - how very *M.J.* ... it's obvious that her taste in clothing hasn't changed,* Alli thought as she kept her gaze carefully locked.

Gray seemed to fit the towering enigma so very well. It was like her persona - a colorless, bitter, winter morning; it was like her emotions - cold steel and solid concrete; it was like her heart - a hard, impenetrable rock, devoid of color and life. And in this body of colorless, coarse, gray granite, it would make perfect sense for the eyes to be dead and impassive... to be dull, lifeless and gray as well. But they weren't. They were the most alive, most vivid part of the rigid, stone statue that stood leaning casually against a wall. This was just one of the many things that fascinated Alli about M.J. Whitton, even after all this time.

The tall woman's electric blue orbs were clearly visible to Alli as they flickered and surveyed the room, cutting through the air and performing a brief, cursory appraisal of everyone and everything. And when those light azure lasers finally turned and found Alli, everything came to a screeching halt.

The blonde's lungs were suddenly bereft of oxygen, her heart ceased beating, and her eyes refused to blink. She gripped her wine glass so hard, she feared it would burst in her hand. When the stone statue acknowledged the connection, it came to life and began to move toward her, making Alli's knees buckle unsteadily.

Oh Jesus..., she thought in an instant panic.

My God... she looks incredible, M.J. thought when she first spotted the woman who still frequented her dreams. She actually had to do a double-take to make certain her eyes weren't deceiving her.

Alli was standing with a small group of people when M.J. first saw her, and she was amazed that she actually was able to stand there and watch objectively without drooling. Alli wore a simple, elegant dress that was royal blue in color and complimented her complexion and her bright, aqua eyes perfectly. Her hair was much longer and, M.J. thought, a lighter shade, but the face was the same... the smile was the same... the eyes were the same. The same... yet somehow different too. Alli's posture was straight and sure, her face proud and her chin tilting upward slightly. She looked confident and secure as she smiled and laughed at something someone said.

M.J. diverted her gaze for a moment, scanning the clusters of people and making certain no one noticed her brazen observation. When she looked back, she found wide, oceanic orbs riveted to her, and a perfect mouth slightly agape in a silent gasp.

After a moment, it occurred to M.J. that they were staring openly at each other, but she didn't care. It took her a full minute to catch her breath, and when she did, she mustered the nerve to approach the little blonde at last.

The short walk seemed to take an eternity, and as M.J. drew closer to Allison, she could see that the smaller woman's chest was heaving unsteadily, and her eyes were still stuck open in shock. All the things she'd considered saying to Allison if ever they were to meet again rushed through M.J.'s head... all the snide, cutting remarks... all the excuses and justifications... all the admittances and apologies. But nothing sprang to her lips... none of that seemed to matter now. As she came to stand directly in front of Alli, M.J. could only gaze upon the petite beauty and feel the agony of her loss all over again.

"Hello Allison." M.J. said at last.

The low, raspy voice washed over Alli, and she felt goosebumps arise on her flesh. "M.J.," Alli managed to return with a slight nod.

She was surprised that her voice hadn't betrayed her by squeaking. Her nerves were completely jangled by this point, and she hated that. Alli didn't want to look small and pathetic; she wanted to look composed and self-assured. She would not let M.J. see her as little, vulnerable, or weak. She readjusted her shoulders and jutted her chin forward slightly, determined to convey the sense that she was in complete control.

"You look... wonderful," M.J. felt herself nearly falter, "...How have you been?" She tried to sound casual, but she really sucked at the innocent small-talk thing.

How have I been? God... it's a good thing you weren't around to ask me that question a year ago, Ms. Whitton, Alli thought to herself. The taller woman's nearness immediately caused great dissonance and turmoil inside Alli's head, and she scrambled to regain control.

"Fine... I'm fine," she replied quickly. M.J. nodded at her silently as she sipped at her clear drink. "And you? How are things at 'Whitton, Inc.'?" Alli asked, not intending for the question to come out as caustic as it sounded.

M.J. shrugged and swallowed, "Same old, same old." She answered in a bland tone, her icy blue orbs deceptively calm and steady as they slowly slid over Alli's face.

Remembering how M.J. always had a way of silently devouring her with those deadly eyes, Alli felt a warm blush erupt and threaten to consume her. But she fought it, feeling a surge of irritation blossom within her chest.

"Well, I guess it's true what they say - some things never change." The inferred meaning laced

with acridity was intentional this time.

"Maybe." The tall woman replied smoothly, never batting an eyelash.

M.J. stared intently into the bright eyes in front of her, looking for any evidence of the precious connection the two of them once shared. She thought she saw and felt something... but it could just be her ridiculously hopeful imagination, too. Even after all this time, M.J. still kept a candle burning for Allison in the dark recesses of her heart.

"So... did you come here alone tonight?" M.J. asked suddenly.

Alli was surprised at the question, and she hesitated for a moment, unsure of how much information she wanted to give away. "Not that it's any of your business, but no." She watched closely for a flash of any emotion on the handsome features, but saw nothing. *Like I should be surprised by that.*

"Oh... that's too bad." M.J. responded with a slight sigh. Inside, her mind was reeling with the horrific thought that Allison probably had a lover. *Of course she has a lover! Why wouldn't she? What, do you think she became a nun after leaving your sorry ass?!* M.J. shouted inside her head.

Alli's curiosity was piqued, but she remained cautious, still studying the veiled, sky-blue depths before her. "Why do you ask?"

M.J. shrugged again, trying to ward off ridiculous feelings of jealousy and replace them with cool indifference. "I dunno," she began, stepping closer to the small blonde and bending her head down a little, "I just thought maybe we could go someplace and... get a drink and... maybe talk...?"

The sultry rasp of the contralto voice hung in the air, close to the side of her face, and Alli could almost feel the warm breath. Her cheeks again flushed hotly and she felt an odd sensation pricking the hair on the back of her neck. It seemed that M.J. was still full of her usual tricks... but Alli refused to make the mistake of falling for it again.

"Talk?" Alli asked, raising her brows in suspicion.

"Yeah, talk."

Alli gave a scornful huff and shook her head slightly. "Well gee, M.J., I'm sorry, but I believe you had your chance to 'talk' a long time ago." The words were calm, but biting. Alli paused, staring at the familiar, beautifully sculpted face that loomed so near her own. "Besides, why would I be interested in anything you have to say?" She added for reinforcement.

M.J. again let her eyes wander over Alli's fair features, finally gazing deeply into light jade depths and dipping her head closer still, "Well... sometimes things **do** change... sometimes people change."

Jesus... she's unbelievable, Alli thought as another disdainful noise escaped from her lips. "In your case, M.J., I seriously doubt it." They locked eyes and stared at one another intensely for a moment before Alli broke the connection and resolutely walked away.

M.J. watched Alli's firm little figure disappear into the crowd. She shook her head, drawing a deep sigh and blowing it out before polishing off the rest of her drink and harshly sucking the wedge of lime between her teeth. Turning away at last, she muttered under her breath, cursing her sister again for dragging her to this stupid, blasted event.

Dark eyes followed the petite blonde as she got another glass of wine from the bar and walked briskly toward the back of the room.

It was obvious to Kris that Alli was upset by the conversation she'd just had with the tall brunette who dared to invade her girlfriend's personal space so intimately. Acutely feeling the green flames of jealousy flickering inside her head, Kris forced herself to calm down before she reached Allison.

"Who was that woman you were talking to?" A familiar voice asked from behind. Alli spun around, surprised by her lover's sudden appearance. She did not miss the hard look in the normally warm, amber eyes.

"Oh, no one... nobody important." Alli murmured, taking a sip of her wine while keeping her eyes glued to the area where her maddening, former flame had just been standing oh-so-closely to her.

"Really?" Kris asked, her disbelief obvious. "If it was 'nobody important', then why are you flushed and trembling?" She added, her voice growing louder and carrying a distinct accusatory tone.

Alli turned to look at her fully, feeling a stab of indignance at Kris's demeanor. She grabbed the tall blonde by the elbow and quickly led her to an area that was away from prying eyes. "What are you trying to infer, Kris?" Alli demanded.

Kris gave a small, sardonic laugh and shook her head slightly, "I just want you - for once - to tell me the **truth**, Allison." She asserted, her voice still loud. "Why can't you just **tell** me who the fuck that WAS, instead of making me drag it out of you?!" She added, motioning sharply with her hands. ...So much for being calm.

Alli was completely taken aback by Kris's sudden temper - but that didn't mean she was without her own. She darted her eyes around quickly, making sure no one was staring at them. "**Fine**," Alli snapped back, "you want to know who that was, I'll tell you! That was...", She meant to just spit it right out, but found herself hesitating. "That was someone that I... that I was **involved** with... once upon a time." She hadn't spit it right out, but she said the words tersely, refusing to

feel embarrassed or ashamed.

"*Who* is it?" Kris immediately asked.

"It's not important *who* it is." Alli quipped back.

"It is to ME!" Kris growled.

"Why!? Why do you need to know?" Alli asked, her tone now angry and impatient as well.

"I just DO, okay?!" Kris shouted even louder, "I want to know who you've lusted after, or kissed, or *fucked*! I think, as your *current* lover, I have a RIGHT to know those things!" She added, her anger and jealousy more than apparent.

"Shh! Keep your voice down!" Alli scolded quickly, feeling her temper flare even more. How dare Kris do this to her, here and now, of all places? How dare she make such demands? This was exactly what Alli did *not* want. This pressure, this demand, this 'ownership'.

Alli flashed an angry look at Kris, but spoke as calmly as possible, "You have no right to demand *anything* from me, Kris. And as my 'current lover', you should trust me enough - and *respect* me enough - to let me tell you about my past in my own good time."

Kris huffed scornfully, "So I get no 'rights' to you? I get no exclusivity? You can just go and fuck around with anyone you want? Is that what you're saying?!" She snapped.

"No! That's not what I'm saying! That's not what I want!" Alli retorted, her brows furrowed deeply.

"Well what *DO* you want, Allison, because I sure as hell would like to know! I've been fucking *waiting* for you to make up your mind, and I'm *tired* of it!" Kris spat through clenched teeth. She roughly raked her fingers through her curly locks, drawing a deep breath. Holding a hand up, she began again, more calmly. "I wanna know - right here, right now - what do you WANT?" Kris demanded, biting off each word slowly and deliberately.

Alli closed her eyes and lightly ran a hand across her face and through her long bangs. She just couldn't seem to catch a break tonight. Why did everything always have to be so fucking difficult? Why did it always have to turn into such utter shit? And where in the hell was Kris's possessive anger coming from? In the nine months that Alli had known Kris, she'd never seen her behave this way. Sure, Kris sometimes questioned her about her friends and co-workers, but she never displayed any kind of serious jealousy issues. Was the sweet, caring, concerned attitude just an act? Did the tall blonde really think that she was just stringing her along and using her as a casual fling? Were they both just lying to each other? ...Alli didn't know what to think.

Shit, am I playing games with Kris? Am I no different than M.J.? Alli asked herself worriedly. *No, I'm not playing games... I'm just not *sure*... just because I want to take things slow doesn't*

*mean I'm stringing her along... I am *not* using her... I just don't think she's the right one... *especially* now.*

She finally released a huge sigh and looked directly into Kris's dark, angry depths, "I'm not sure what I want, Kris, but I know what I *don't* want." Kris just glared at her, her ire still burning brightly in umber eyes. "I don't want someone making *demands* on me and playing 'alpha male' whenever I run into an acquaintance... I don't want to be anybody's 'possession'... and I don't want to be pushed into any kind of commitment." Alli finished calmly, but with absolute sincerity.

The words hit Kris like a ton of bricks, and she had to fight to keep from staggering backwards. All her fears seemed to be coming true. She knew that Alli was too good to be true... she had known from the very start, really. She just thought that maybe, if she played her cards right, she could make the little blonde love her. But of course, that never works, does it? She was just deluding herself.

Kris swallowed her pride and spoke as rationally as possible, "Well then... you and I have very different ideas about where this relationship is heading, because I'm *ready* for a commitment." She looked at Alli intensely, remnants of anger still simmering in her eyes. "I'm ready to move forward... I'm ready to upgrade from casual fucking around to a *real* relationship." Her voice was sharp and her words biting, "But... I guess you don't want that... do you?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

Alli almost couldn't formulate an answer. To know that Kris thought she was only fucking around and using her made her feel very much like an M.J.-clone. She knew how Kris felt; the knowledge that she was breaking the tall blonde's heart gnawed at her insides, just as it had for some time now. She felt like a complete jerk.

"Look, why don't we just... take a break for a little while." Alli said lowly, raking a hand through her hair again, her exasperation evident.

Kris gave a small snort of incredulity, "A break? ...a *break*?!" She said, her voice hitching with disbelief.

"Yes, a *break*." Alli reiterated tersely, "A break from each other... from this... from whatever the hell we're doing here." Alli said, motioning between them.

Kris half-laughed, "Why don't you just tell me to 'fuck off', Allison... it'd make things *so* much easier!" She delivered the caustic words harshly, her eyes full of anguish and hurt.

Alli couldn't say anything to that; she had run out of steam. She could only shift her jaw sideways and hold her breath as they pinned each other in a final stare-down. Kris waited for Alli to say something to ease her pain and change her mind; Alli waited for... she didn't know what. She just wanted to curl up and die.

It seemed as though her relationship with Kris was turning out to be just another painful mistake.

She was going to have to sit down and seriously contemplate the idea of permanent celibacy.

Somewhere on the other side of the room, watching surreptitiously from a safe, stealthy distance, a pair of wintry-blue eyes carefully observed the tense interaction between the two blonde lovers.

*"Everyone makes one mistake,
One more time for old times sake,
One more time before the feeling fades;
One that's born of memories,
One more bruise you gave to me,
One more test, just how much can I take?
'Cos you're not the one, but you're the only one,
Who can make me feel like this;
You're not the one, but you're the only one,
Who can make me feel like shit." - Foo Fighters*

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

It was a lovers quarrel... she could tell. M.J. watched in rapt fascination as Alli and the tall, curly blonde woman argued back and forth. But it wasn't the obvious arguing that gave them away; it was the way they looked at each other... it was their body language... it was the way Alli touched the taller woman's arm, obviously trying to placate her. M.J. felt a combination of curiosity, jealousy and selfish hopefulness.

What could they be arguing about? Was this woman just Alli's date? Was she a current lover, or a former, or maybe just a potential? What kind of relationship did they have, exactly? The curiosity could definitely drive M.J. insane. The woman must mean something to Alli for her to touch her arm repeatedly, and the way she looked at her... M.J. remembered when Alli used to look at her like that. It was an unusual mix of anguish and affection. Still, it threatened to make the green monster within M.J. rear its ugly head. But, if they were arguing, then things perhaps weren't so rosy between them. Judging by the tall blonde's body language and the way she stormed off, M.J. guessed that things were, in fact, pretty shitty. This gave her a little sliver of hope. It was weighted-down quite heavily with guilt, of course, but it still meant there could be a slight chance.

*Yeah, a slight chance for *what*, moron?* M.J. thought, rolling her eyes. She knew that she probably should just leave it alone... leave Alli alone... just let *go*. But... she couldn't... not yet. Alli hadn't completely dismissed her; she hadn't told her that she hated her guts and wished she'd drop dead. All she'd said was that she doubted M.J. had changed. *Well have I?* M.J. thought to

herself with a frown. *Yes... yes, I have. Even after all this time, I know what I want, M.J. thought, and I want another chance with her.*

M.J. knew that if she didn't give it one more shot, she'd kick herself forever for giving up and walking away. She was tired of walking away. After a year and a half of bemoaning the fact that she let her go without a fight, Alli was suddenly here, right in front of her, and she would not miss the opportunity Fate had so graciously afforded her. She couldn't let it be over just yet; she had to at least try to make things right.

M.J. furtively watched Alli for a few more minutes, debating how to approach her, and where. When the petite blonde deposited her wine glass on a table and disappeared through the double doors that led out to the foyer, M.J. decided that this was her cue. She hurried through the same doors, but when she reached the foyer, she didn't see Alli.

"Shit," M.J. cursed aloud. She walked into the room further, scanning the side-rooms and hallways until she saw a lone figure walking slowly down one of the narrow corridors. Keeping a discreet distance, M.J. followed the blue-clad woman down the hall until she saw her turn a corner. Taking a deep breath, M.J. turned the corner as well and came face-to-face with her destiny.

Alli was leaning against the wall, her arms crossed, her head hanging in despair. She dabbed a tissue at her eyes; she was obviously crying, and M.J. suddenly felt very uneasy about being here, doing what she was about to do.

The small blonde sensed the brunette's presence before she saw her. It surprised and disturbed Alli to realize that she had this ability. More than that, though, it made her angry. She didn't want to see M.J. right now... she didn't want to talk to her. Tonight was already going down in the history books as one of the worst ever, and M.J. would surely just make it more miserable.

Allison released a sigh and closed her eyes, tilting her head slightly upwards. She didn't want to look at the dark-haired intruder whom she knew was standing at the end of the hallway, staring at her.

"What do you **want** M.J.?" Alli said, her emotions a mixture of anger, sadness, defeat and dread.

"I just want to talk to you." M.J. said softly as she dared to walk closer; she didn't want the conversation to turn antagonistic.

Alli huffed in exasperation, "I told you... you had your chance to talk a long time ago." The words weren't angry, just tired and impatient. She finally turned to look at the bright sky-blue eyes that, surprisingly, seemed to pin her with understanding concern, rather than predatory smugness.

"I know... and I know I was wrong to stay silent, but I want to talk now... I want to explain things--," M.J. tried to say, but Allison cut her off.

"Explain WHAT, M.J.? Explain why you broke my heart? Why you pulled me in and strung me along, only to push me away, time and time again? Or maybe why you toyed with me and played with my emotions, not giving a damn how I felt!?" Impatience got the better of Alli, and the words quickly became angry as she spat them out in rapid succession. All the feelings of frustration and anger that she had forced herself to forget so long ago suddenly rushed forth, mixing explosively with her jumbled emotions from the earlier upheaval with Kris.

"No... no, that's not true!" M.J. interjected, shaking her head.

"Isn't it? Well then what IS the truth? What could you *possibly* 'explain' to me at this point in time, M.J.?! " Alli yelled, throwing her arms out in emphasis.

"I want to... to tell you how I felt then... how I feel now." M.J. hated that she sounded so unsure. She had always thought she'd be completely prepared for this confrontation, if and when it happened, but now that it was here, she found Alli's anger surprising, and her defenses were threatening to fail her.

Alli laughed sardonically, "How you FEEL? How *YOU* feel? You know what, M.J.? I don't give a *FUCK* how YOU feel, okay?!"

Ouch. "Okay. I deserve that... I know I deserve that, and probably a lot more." M.J. said calmly, trying to regain lost ground and keep things civil.

"You got that right!" The blonde sniffed contemptuously.

"I know, but please, Alli... *please*, let's just go someplace and talk. I wanna... I-I wanna..." M.J. fumbled again.

"What? You wanna what, M.J.? Tempt me again? Hurt me again? *Fuck* me again?!" Alli spat harshly, hoping she was inflicting injury. She wanted M.J. to hurt for a change. She was tired of being the one who always hurt.

"No! I just wanna *talk*!" M.J. retorted emphatically. Alli stared at her, trying to read the sincerity in those forever-murky-blue depths. M.J. consciously softened her look and dared to continue, "Please... I'd like to see you again... I've missed you, Alli, and I have so much to explain and make up for." She spoke the words quietly and her eyes were earnest and almost pleading. Wait... was she begging? *Damn! I didn't want to *beg*! Shit!* ...This was so much harder than she'd imagined.

Alli turned away and shook her head slightly, pausing to think for a long moment. It would be so easy to fall back into the bad habit that was M.J. Whitton. She knew both of them were still dangerously drawn to one another - the air fairly crackled around them and the intensity was painfully palpable both times they'd interacted with each other tonight. But she had learned a very painful lesson at the hands of the tall, dark-haired woman, and as compelling as the attraction was, she knew it was just impossible. She would not hop from one frying pan into

another.

When she returned her aquamarine gaze to M.J.'s pale-blue, her expression was hard and determined. She shook her head, "Look, I'm sorry M.J., but... I can't. I have a new life... and there's no place for you in it."

M.J. was stunned, but as Alli turned and started to walk out of the hallway, M.J. quickly caught her by the arm, spinning her around so that they faced each other again, and pulling her close. Alli stared at her in open-mouthed shock.

"Just tell me one thing," M.J. hissed through gritted teeth. Her face was so close to Alli's that the blonde could feel the warm breath against her cheeks and see the blue sparks that ignited in the gleaming eyes. "Tell me, in all honesty, that you never *ever* think about me!"

As much as she wanted to laugh out loud and tell the brunette to go to hell, Alli couldn't. She couldn't deny it, because it wasn't true. She did think about M.J. She thought about her often, if she was really honest with herself. But she wasn't about to admit that. No fucking way.

She shoved and pushed the tall body away, angrily shrugging out of M.J.'s grasp. "Let go of me! Who the fuck do you think you are!?" Alli growled through clenched teeth, her eyes flashing darkly. "You think you can just come waltzing back into my life - a life I had to fight damn long and hard to reestablish - and just expect me to fall back into your web!? Well THINK AGAIN!" She yelled, not giving a damn if anyone heard.

M.J. was beyond asking nicely by this point. She was out of ideas, and out of patience. She suddenly grabbed Alli by both arms and did something she'd never done before...

She kissed her with everything she had.

Alli was so completely shocked by the action that she didn't move... she couldn't. She just stood there, frozen, feeling nothing but the pressure of M.J.'s mouth upon hers. That is, until the taller woman opened her mouth and snaked her tongue out. Alli felt all reason and resolve drain from her head, and her body instantly melted as M.J. stabbed and requested entrance. Acquiescing immediately, Alli's mouth opened, and she willingly invited M.J. inside.

The brunette's kiss was soft yet firm, and she pressed and probed gently, hesitantly, almost as if she expected Alli to push her away again. But Alli didn't push her away, and she doubted that she could have even if she tried. Not caring if anyone could see them or not, she slid her hands up to M.J.'s neck and shoulders, pulling her body closer and hugging her solidly, crushing their breasts together as she deepened the kiss with sudden urgency, wanting to taste and consume the tall woman like no other before.

M.J. pushed a hand into Alli's long, silky hair and gripped her tighter as their lips devoured one another, the intensity of their union quickly escalating beyond their control. Kissing Allison was unbelievable... it almost couldn't be described. Her mouth was warm and luscious; her flavor sweet and mellow. M.J. wanted to swallow every ounce and hold the flavor on her tongue

forever.

Alli let her hands tangle in M.J.'s hair as she kissed and tasted and absorbed. She couldn't believe that they were actually doing this... that it was finally happening after all this time, after all the pain and suffering and bullshit. She could almost feel the passion and intensity surging out of M.J. and into her. It was as though the tall beauty had kept her feelings and emotions pent-up inside for so long, they were gushing forth uncontrollably, nothing and no one able to stop the onslaught. Everything was suddenly so powerful and so emotional, Alli found herself instantly on the verge of tears.

A warning bell suddenly and immediately clanged loudly inside her head, and oceanic eyes instantly flew open. Reality stepped in and abruptly slapped Alli on the face as she quickly remembered who they were, where they were, and what had transpired between them in the past. Pushing away from the entanglement of M.J.'s strong arms, Alli gathered her wits and took a huge step back.

Looking into the brightness of mortified, perplexed aqua depths, M.J. gave Alli a look filled with undisguised hunger and desperation. She had finally crossed the boundary-line and committed the one act that she had always held so sacred. She had let her mouth and her feelings fuse with Alli's, and now, by doing so, she had fused her soul to the petite blonde too. But did Alli understand that? ...She could only pray that she did.

Alli's heart beat ferociously in her chest, and for a long moment, all she could do was stand and stare wide-eyed, with one hand touching her swollen lips. The realization of what she'd just done fell onto her shoulders like a crushing weight.

You really did it now, she thought as she closed her eyes tightly. *You tasted her... you *want* her... you still WANT her!* Her subconscious taunted mercilessly. *Ohmygod... oh fuck... FuckFuckFuck!* She was completely blown away. The axis of her world had shifted irreversibly, and her precious resolve now lay scattered around her feet in a million pieces.

Sea-green eyes sprang to life again and locked onto uncertain, questioning azure depths. Alli dropped her hand and opened her mouth as though she were going to say something, but instead she gave M.J. a horrified, stricken look, then turned and bolted out of the narrow hallway. M.J. hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do, before hurrying out of the hallway just in time to see Alli's petite form exiting the building in a royal-blue rush.

M.J. glared at the exit doors, her jaw tight and her face tense. She would not let Allison run away from her... not now... not again.

And besides, she thought, *she never denied my accusation*. She steeled herself with a deep breath, then headed toward the exit doors, determination filling her mind.

*"It just ain't fair, this thing called 'loving',
We're one step there, and the other feels nothing;
I would've done anything for you,
I still love you, baby I adore you;
All day I keep from falling apart,
But at night, when the sky gets dark,
Tears from the moon, fall down like rain
I reach for you... I reach in vain;
Stop, stop haunting me, it should be easy,
As easy as when you stopped wanting me, babe;
Tears from the moon, fall down like rain,
But tears from the moon, can't wash away the pain." - Conjure One*

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Allison sat in her VW for several minutes, trying desperately to calm her racing heart. This evening was a nightmare that seemed to have no end. She sat back in her seat and closed her eyes, replaying all the events over and over again, but her mind kept coming back to one event in particular, or rather, one person... M.J. Whitton.

She could still see the look that burned in the tall brunette's eyes... she could still smell her perfume... her fingers still tingled with the sensation of the dark silky hair... and she could still taste the lime that clung to M.J.'s tongue when they'd kissed.

OhmyGod... that kiss, Alli thought, unconsciously licking her lips. ...*Oh I'm going completely insane*, she thought as she shook her head and slumped forward to lean on her steering wheel. She was just about to begin chastising herself for her reckless impetuosity when she felt a cold chill wash over her.

Once again, Alli could feel the presence before she saw it. Lifting her head from the steering wheel, she turned and looked at the side mirror. The tall, gray spectre emerged from the shadows several yards behind her car. It moved toward her slowly, cautiously, gracefully. The long, dark hair billowed gently around the strong shoulders as it crept closer, closing-in on Alli like a ghost from the past, bound and determined to haunt her forever, it seemed. The face was indiscernible, its expression and features shrouded in the darkness, but the eyes... the eyes seemed to glow, brighter and clearer as the figure continued to inch ever nearer.

Feeling a sudden surge of panic, Alli glanced at the windows of her car, remembering that they were down part-way and that all her doors were unlocked as well. Irrational fear gripped her, and she reached down and grabbed hold of the car key dangling in the ignition. She squeezed her eyes shut and flipped the key harshly, turning the engine over and bringing the vehicle to sputtering wakefulness. When she reopened her eyes, she was shocked to find electric blue orbs staring right at her beside the open driver's window. She jumped, letting out a squeak of surprise.

M.J. stared at the wide blue-green depths that regarded her so frightfully. She regretted that Alli was so anxious to escape her, but it wasn't the first time the blonde had run away. And she wouldn't let her escape again. Not without a fight.

"Don't go." M.J. said, her voice low and earnest.

"Let me **alone**, M.J.! PLEASE!?" Alli yelled, her voice cracking under the strain of the stress and emotion. She jerked the gear shift into reverse, but before she could move, M.J. reached in and grabbed the steering wheel with one hand.

"I wish I could, Allison... I **really** wish I could." M.J.'s voice whispered in despair, and Alli slowly brought her eyes up to regard the face that loomed so close and the eyes that burned so bright. "Don't run away from me again," M.J. said, her voice soft and sincere, "...Please."

The quietly desperate edge to M.J.'s final plea made Alli hesitate, and she stared at the taller woman intently, trying to figure out if M.J. was being serious, and more importantly, why.

"Why are you here, M.J.? Why are you doing this to me?" Alli said in an anguished whisper.

"I'm not trying to 'do' anything to you, Alli. I just want to talk to you. Please... turn the car off, and come take a walk with me." M.J. held her hand out in gesture as she spoke calmly, evenly, wishing to convey her wants and express herself as honestly and sanely as she could.

Alli could only stare hard as she thought and thought, and debated and debated. *Why should I trust anything she says? Why should I even give her one second of my time? Why should I give her ANYthing?!* She battled back and forth between what her sensible self warned, and what her libidinous self desired. *'Desired'?! I can't desire her! That's how this all started! With me and my stupid, reckless *desire*!* Alli warned her inner self. She closed her eyes and shook her head while the mini-war waged inside.

"I just want to talk." M.J.'s low, smooth voice interrupted Alli's rampaging thoughts, and the blonde looked up again to meet the steady, burning gaze of the woman, who - against all reason and rationale - still stirred something deep and passionate within her.

Closing her eyes again and taking a deep breath, Alli switched the ignition off, removed the keys, and got out of her car.

The convention center was situated a half-block from the beach, so the two women silently agreed to head in that direction. Neither one spoke as they reached the beach ramp and discarded their shoes, feeling the tingle of the cool sand against their feet as they walked out toward the crashing surf. They strolled for a short distance until Alli finally slowed and came to a stop, peering out at the vast ocean and the waxing gibbous moon that hung high and bright in the blackened night sky.

M.J. also ceased her footsteps and turned to look at Alli. The blonde stood with her arms wrapped tightly around herself; whether it was a protective or a defensive stance, M.J. wasn't sure. Long, flaxen hair ruffled in the breeze, partly obscuring Alli's face and those expressive eyes, and M.J. had the sudden urge to reach out and brush the pale locks away so that she had an unobstructed view.

Realizing she was being watched and not liking it, Alli spoke abruptly, "Look, I don't want to stand out here all night. Just say whatever it is you have to say, M.J., and then go." The words were clipped and rushed as she turned to face the taller woman at last. She wanted to get this over with so she could go home and think... her psyche had been bombarded with much too much tonight.

It was understandable that Alli would be mistrusting and upset, and M.J. knew she had her work cut out for her. "Alright," She said, taking a deep breath before she began. "I uh... I don't even know where to start, really," M.J. said as she raked a hand through her long hair, feeling nervous.

Alli kept her pinned with a steady, unyielding gaze.

"Before, when we were... when we first got... 'involved', I was...," M.J. hesitated... this was so hard. "I acted incredibly selfish. I was arrogant, disrespectful... thoughtless." She watched Alli's face as she continued. "But then that changed, Alli. My feelings toward you changed. I started to feel something real and genuine for you."

Alli still hadn't moved; she just watched and listened intently, her arms still hugged tightly around herself.

M.J. took the smaller woman's silence as a sign that she should continue. "I got scared. I knew something was happening between us, and I didn't know how to handle it. So I pushed you away."

"Not before you took what you wanted, though." Alli spoke at last, her voice low and terse.

"I didn't mean to **take** anything," M.J. stressed, "I didn't mean for it to turn out the way it did, honestly. I just... I... I just... **God**!" She exclaimed loudly, balling her hands into fists and bringing them up to her head.

Alli watched the taller woman turn away from her and struggle with her emotions. She felt a small twinge of satisfaction in knowing that M.J. was the one suffering, for a change. She didn't want to be a bitch and fight with the brunette, but if it was her only means of keeping a handle on things, then so be it.

M.J. turned back to face her, her shoulders slumped, her arms hanging limply by her sides, "I didn't mean for **any** of it to turn out the way it did, Allison. Everything just seemed to grow so out of my control. I didn't know what the hell to do. I know I handled it all badly... **very** badly. I know that you didn't deserve to be treated that way." Her voice was quiet and she struggled to

get the words out.

Alli still regarded her with unwavering silence, so M.J. stepped closer to her; close enough that she could see glistening uncertainty in the aquamarine eyes. "I know you have good reason not to accept anything I say, and I know you won't believe me, but...", she hesitated again, staring deeply into Alli's eyes. "I cared for you very much back then, Allison...", Time to drop the bomb. "...I cared for you then, and... I care for you still." M.J. watched the oceanic eyes carefully, and they watched her as well for a long moment.

Alli was the one to finally break the gaze by looking away and blinking long. She couldn't look upon M.J.'s face any longer. The taunting grin and the lustful azure gleam that she remembered and had been accustomed to was no longer present. In its place was a new, strangely disconcerting look; one that spoke of sincere apology and vulnerability. She wasn't prepared for that... she didn't know what to make of it. But she had to keep her emotions under control... she would not be swayed.

After another long moment, M.J. finally had to speak... she had to know what Alli was thinking. "Aren't you going to say anything?" She asked quietly.

Alli gave a slight shrug, "What do you want me to say, M.J.? That I understand? That it's okay? No big deal?" Her voice increased slightly in volume, "It **is** a big deal, M.J., it's a very big deal! You broke my heart! You devastated me with your callousness, and your control, and your stupid mind games!" M.J. cringed as the blistering words assaulted her ears. "You used me! You used me, and you threw me away as though I were **nothing** to you." The words were emphatic and harsh, and absolutely true.

"I... I know." M.J. hated to sound so whipped, but she didn't know what else to say. She wanted Alli to understand that she was truly repentant, but she was so clueless. Reparation and atonement were concepts that were painfully alien to her.

Alli made a small noise of disgust, "Y'know, you keep saying that, like I'm just going to forgive and forget because you claim to realize the error of your ways... but it's not that easy. You have to earn forgiveness... you have to earn trust, M.J." Alli stared hard at the dark, bowed head. M.J. didn't dare say 'I know' again, so she instead stayed quiet. "Do you realize that you haven't even said 'I'm sorry' to me?" Alli added. "I mean, it sounds like you're apologizing, but I'm not really sure because you haven't actually **said** it. Frankly, I don't think you **can**."

The accusation hung in the air between them, and M.J. frowned, realizing that Allison was right, and feeling very ashamed of it. She never apologized freely. She never did it because she never cared to. But now... now it was different; **she** was different... wasn't she?

They were quiet for just a moment before Alli interrupted, "You can't just make up excuses, M.J. ...you can't just hand me a line and expect me to fall for it again."

"I'm **not** handing you a line!" M.J. finally snapped, jerking her head up to pin Alli in a bright blue glare.

"No? It sounds like a line to me... and we both know how *good* you are at manipulating those lines." Alli couldn't stop the biting sarcasm that leaked into her words. It visibly affected the tall brunette, who blinked rapidly in response to the harsh comment.

"I'm not the same person I was back then, Allison." M.J. said, her voice laced with a mixture of hurt and anger.

"And neither am I, M.J." Alli answered with confidence. "I'm not the stupid little girl that I used to be."

"I never thought you were stupid." M.J. retorted.

"No, just easy, right?" Alli shot back immediately.

To that, M.J. had no reply. She opened her mouth in an attempt to say something, but nothing came forth; she had no comeback for Alli's angry, biting words. Shaking her head and turning away, she walked a few steps from the blonde, who merely stood and watched her carefully.

M.J. supposed she shouldn't be so surprised at Alli's reaction, but she was. This wasn't going the way she'd planned. Back at the convention center, she was certain that Alli was going to forgive and forget. They had kissed... she had felt Alli's hunger... she had tasted her desire... she knew the blonde had been close to caving in. But apparently, Alli had changed her mind after that. Apparently she'd had too much time to think things over. M.J. knew she was failing to make Alli understand how she felt about her. She was failing to win back the woman she knew she still loved. She was failing in every respect.

Can't give her any more time to think... gotta go for broke and bare your soul, Morgan J., she told herself. She took a deep breath and expelled it.

Turning back toward Alli again, M.J. began, "Some time before my father died, he wrote me a letter." She kept her gaze focused on the surf, knowing that she'd lose her nerve if she ventured a look at Alli. "You first have to understand that my father and I did *not* get along. In fact, it's safe to say that we rarely had a kind word for each other." She paused, taking another deep breath. "He didn't approve of my life... he didn't support me... he didn't understand me. At least, that's what I had always believed. But... after reading his letter... I realized that he did understand me." She turned and finally looked squarely at Alli, "He understood me, because I was exactly like him, and he knew it. He had known it all along."

Alli watched the tall figure intently; M.J. was obviously leading up to something important and revealing, and she wanted to pay close attention.

M.J. gave a wry grin, "My father was arrogant, self-centered, manipulative, heartless, uncaring... all the things I detested most about him, I ended up becoming." M.J. paused and looked away; this was the really hard part. "But the worst of all the traits I inherited was... cowardice. My father was a coward. He never revealed his feelings... he never told me..." she had to pause as

her throat threatened to close-up and her voice hitched. "He never told me that... that he was sorry for the things he did and said... and he never told me that he loved me. I had to wait and read it in that damned letter. And, of course, by that time, he was gone." M.J. shook her head and blinked back the tears that welled and burned painfully in her eyes. "He was gone, and it was too late... too late to make amends and repair the damage." Her voice was small and unsteady, and her shoulders slumped from the weight of the words she spoke. She almost didn't want to look at Alli, fearing what she'd see in her honest eyes.

And Alli was definitely looking. She was staring long and hard at the woman who stood before her now. If someone had told her that M.J. Whitton was a changed person, she wouldn't have believed it; but now, seeing and hearing all the pain and heartache that M.J. had obviously lived through and held inside for so long, she was beginning to believe. Against her better judgment, Alli was finding herself wanting to forgive the troubled brunette for her shortcomings and her past deeds, no matter how badly she'd behaved and how dastardly she'd been.

M.J. finally garnered her nerve and turned to look directly into Alli's eyes again. The bright aqua depths were clear and open and, to her surprise, understanding. There was no judgment; there was no reproach. There was only compassion and acceptance.

M.J. stepped closer to Alli, bringing them within a foot of one another, "You called me a coward once, and you were right... you were absolutely right." She pinned Alli with sad, serious look. "I don't want to be like my father, Allison. I don't want to be a coward anymore." She paused, taking a huge breath. "I want to apologize to you... for everything I did... for the hell I put you through. You didn't deserve it, and... I'm sorry. I am truly, deeply sorry, Allison."

Alli's jaw went slack and her mouth fell open slightly. She could hardly believe that M.J. actually said the words.

What was that saying about a leopard not being able to change its spots? Alli began to panic with the thought that she wasn't keeping a good handle on things at all.

M.J.'s heart was pounding, and she leaned in toward the blonde. "I don't want to be afraid anymore... I don't want to make any more mistakes." The words were soft but strong, and the voice spoke with calm surety.

"N-Neither do I." Alli struggled to speak. She was nearly lost in M.J.'s engulfing cerulean depths; the look on her face was one that Alli had never seen before. It was open and vulnerable, but at the same time, it was certain and clear. She continued to gaze into the searching light blue eyes, unable to say anything else.

M.J. leaned in closer, "Being with me isn't a mistake, Alli... it's right."

OhmyGod... is she suggesting what I think she's suggesting?! Alli thought incredulously for a moment.

"We belong together. I can feel it... I've always felt it... and I think you do too." M.J. finished, her

voice soft and honest.

Alli wanted to laugh at the cliched words coming from M.J., but something wouldn't let her. Something told her that, as corny and dramatic as it all sounded, M.J. meant what she was saying. She really was sorry... and she really did want to be with her. But... how could Alli be sure? How could she trust what the tall beauty said? Didn't she make that mistake before? Didn't M.J. play games with her head and her heart one too many times already?

Alli squeezed her eyes shut, "Don't play with me, M.J.," she finally said, her voice tremulous as she shook her head slightly.

"I'm not playing." M.J. whispered, her voice gentle and sincere. She continued to stare at the bowed golden head, unable to tear her eyes away. She brought a hand up, daring to reach out and graze Alli's jaw softly.

A tear broke free, dribbling down a fair cheek, and Alli flinched, "No," she said, pulling away, "I don't want you to touch me." Her voice was suddenly desperate and unsure, and she took a step back away from the taller body.

"Why not?" M.J. asked, stepping toward Alli, refusing to let her escape in any way.

"Because... because I can't think clearly when I'm around you... because I don't know if I can do this again... because it scares me to death!" The words came out of Alli's mouth in an unsteady rush and ended in a choking sob.

M.J. carefully reached out and placed both hands on Alli's shoulders, "It scares me too." She said, her voice soft and reassuring. "And I'm not sure I can do this either... but I think we should try." She touched two fingers to Alli's chin, forcing the tear-filled eyes to look up at her, "My life has so little meaning without you in it, Allison... I'm just... lost."

They looked deeply into each other's eyes until finally Alli felt her insides melting so thoroughly, her stronghold of resolve collapsed and her body helplessly deflated, leaning forward and coming to rest against M.J.'s chest. The long-forgotten feeling of the steady, solid body and strong arms surrounded her, enveloping her with warmth and surprising her with tenderness. Alli breathed-in the aroma of M.J.'s unique fragrance mixed with the smell of the damp sea breeze, and a rush of tangled emotions filled her mind. M.J.'s hands further complicated her uncertainties as they calmly stroked her back in gentle, swirling motions. To be held in such a way... to be supported and reassured physically... it was something Alli had been craving and yearning for such a long time. She only realized now, however, that M.J. seemed to be the only one who could properly feed that craving. Not Kris, not the nameless, faceless women she'd tried to pick up in the bars... only M.J.

When the hands suddenly stopped and raised back up to her shoulders, Alli lifted her head and looked upward, falling head-long into a deep, churning cauldron of blue. M.J. lowered her head, bringing their lips together in a slow, deliberate movement. Alli's eyes fluttered shut, her heart racing in a myriad of feelings, her mind swirling in a tempest of thoughts. She willingly yielded

to the tender touch as hands slid upwards and fingers threaded through hair and lips suckled softly and sensually. The kiss wasn't rough or forceful or sexual; it was tentative and gentle and reverent. It asked for forgiveness, reassurance, and restitution. It asked for a second chance and a new beginning.

Alli was moved to tears. Something stirred deep inside her from the intensity and the emotional magnitude of the moment. The tempo of the oral union increased slightly, M.J. seemingly intent on swallowing all the misery and tears and replacing them with passion. But as the kiss deepened and M.J.'s hands slid down her body, Alli felt herself balking.

Her mind furiously rehashed everything M.J. had said. She wanted to believe all of it so desperately... she wanted to believe it was possible... that they were possible. But could she do that? Did she dare? Was she being sucked-in, literally and figuratively? Was she caving too easily? Was she being stupidly naïve? A trusting fool? Was she setting herself up for another painful, crushing fall? Hadn't she learned her lesson? Hadn't she learned **anything** at all?

Alli suddenly broke from the embrace and stepped back. The look on her face and in her eyes said everything, and M.J. knew she had failed before Alli even spoke.

"I'm sorry, M.J. ...but I... I just **can't**." The words were spoken so softly, so mournfully, as more tears broke free.

The two women looked at each other with regret, anguish, longing, misery, uncertainty, sorrow... all the things associated with dashed hopes, broken dreams, and having your fingers burned one too many times.

Distrust is sometimes an impossible hurdle to overcome.

*"How can you see into my eyes like open doors?
Leading you down into my core,
Where I've become so numb without a soul,
My spirit sleeping somewhere cold,
Until you find it there and lead it back home;
Wake me up inside, wake me up inside
Call my name and save me from the dark;
Bid my blood to run, before I come undone,
Save me from the nothing I've become;
Now that I know what I'm without,
You can't just leave me;
Breathe into me and make me real,
Bring me to life." - Evanescence*

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Allison needed to calm down. The entire evening had been like a category five hurricane, and her heart and soul were ravaged from the storm. Unable to sleep due to her reeling thoughts and feelings, she changed into jeans and a t-shirt, turned on some soft jazz music, lit some candles, poured herself a glass of wine, and stretched out on her living room sofa, determined to get a grip on her unraveling life.

As soon as she sat down, she remembered seeing the message indicator blinking on her phone. Walking over to check it again, she saw that it flashed six messages. She had a good idea who the messages were from. Depressing the play button, she leaned against the wall and listened.

Noises and music could be heard in the background and the voice was somewhat tinny-sounding, obviously coming from a cell phone. *"Allison, are you there? ...it's Kris." A pause. "I've been looking all over this damn convention hall for you... where are you?" Another pause. "...Shit."* A loud click ended the call.

The next message began, again from a cell phone. *"Alli... it's Kris again."* The voice sounded nervous and impatient. Alli sipped her drink and stared blankly at a wall. *"I checked the parking lot... your car isn't here. Where the hell are you?"* The call ended with another loud click.

Jesus, she's probably out combing the entire neighborhood looking for me..., Alli thought with a shake of her head.

"It's Kris again," the third message started, *"Obviously you took off some place, so... well, I uhm... I just... I just wanted to... ah, hell!"* A disconnecting noise sounded, ending that call.

The next one began abruptly, *"Okay, you're not here, you're not at home... so, okay... well, I just wanted to... to, uhm, apologize. Y'know, for being... such a jerk, and... I dunno... can you just call me, honey? Please? I just wanna talk to you... okay baby? Okay... bye."*

Oh so now it's 'honey' and 'baby'... Christ, Alli thought, rolling her eyes slightly.

As the next message started, the voice was clearly more agitated, *"Alli... it's me again. Maybe you *are* at home and you just don't wanna talk to me... Look, I just wanna know where the hell you are, okay? I'm starting to get worried. Just *call* me when you get home, alright? No matter what time. I *need* to talk to you, Alli, I... I... I love you, dammit! ...Bye."* Alli's mouth fell open.

Jesus, she has nerve, emotionally blackmailing me with the 'I Love You' shit... fucking aye! She thought, shaking her head in disbelief. She and Kris had never said 'I Love You' to one another. Alli had simply never felt it, and she always assumed that Kris could tell.

Alli shifted her jaw as the final message played and she considered Kris's tone. *"Okay, fine. You*

obviously don't want to talk to me. That's fucking fine, Allison. I'll leave you alone. If you change your mind, you know where to reach me." A loud 'clack' signaled the end of the short tirade.

How do I always seem to attract the psychotic ones? I swear to God, Alli thought with another eye-roll as she drew a deep breath. Polishing off her wine, she headed out to the kitchen to pour herself another glass.

Nearly two hours and several glasses of wine later, Alli was feeling more relaxed and had a pleasant buzz going. Now that her guard was down and she was sufficiently chilled-out, she allowed her mind to wander back over the happenings of the night.

She thought back to the fateful encounter with M.J. and how she felt seeing the vision from her past standing and looking so regal and gorgeous in the present, and even worse - how it felt to kiss her, taste her, and feel her. Even after all this time, her attraction toward the tall brunette was still so strong; M.J. still made her heart flutter and caused her pulse to race.

Damn, Alli cursed to herself. *Why did she have to kiss me?* She thought. *How can she still get to me, after nearly two years?! Good God,* she thought, rolling her eyes. *And what about all that stuff she said on the beach? Is any of that true? Did she and does she really care about me?* Alli held her head, thinking back to the way M.J. looked, and acted, and spoke. *She did seem different. She wasn't arrogant, or cocky, or overtly sexual like she used to be. She seemed... contrite... sad... genuine. Goddd... but how do I know if it's *real*?! She thought. Should I have given her more of an opportunity down there on the beach? What if I never see her again? What if that was *it*? I may never know if she's really changed or not.* Alli groaned aloud and closed her eyes, letting her head fall back against the sofa in tired defeat.

She didn't know whether she wanted to scream in frustration or cry because of the pain. She just wished she could disappear for awhile, just until all the dust settled. A light rapping on her front door made her jump, abruptly ending her deep thoughts.

"Shit!" She hissed aloud to herself. "Shitshitshit!" She jumped up off her couch, hesitating for a moment as the knocking sounded again. She knew who it was. It was the same woman who had phoned her damn apartment six million times looking for her. Chewing nervously on her bottom lip, Alli decided to sneak to her door and take a look out the peephole. If indeed it was Kris on the other side of that door, there was no way in hell she was letting her in and dealing with all that bullshit. Not tonight.

She reached the door and stood on her tiptoes to peer out. Instead of seeing curly blonde hair, however, she only saw long dark hair.

Ohmygoddd, she thought, genuinely shocked that this woman would come after her... again. Alli stood perfectly still for a moment, having absolutely no idea what to do. She didn't want to answer the knock, even though M.J. had certainly seen her VW out front and knew she was home. She shouldn't invite her in. If she did, things could get out of hand... easily. In her

uncertain, emotional, and now intoxicated state, Alli was sure she'd do or say something stupid.

Probably not a good idea to let her in, she thought, but... maybe she's just come to apologize some more? Alli considered. Maybe she just wants to talk, like she said? I can do that, can't I? Just talk? Clear the air... clear our consciences...? Unbeknownst to her conscious mind, Alli's subconscious was taking control of her hand and unlocking her door.

Alli only opened the door a crack and peered out warily. The imposing, darkly-clad figure stood several feet back from the door, apparently having been ready to give up and walk away. The wind had kicked-up, whipping the long strands of dark brown hair around the tall woman's face, concealing everything but the piercing, crystal blue eyes that turned to regard Alli from the shadows.

"Hi." M.J. said, her voice simple and quiet. When Alli just stared at her and didn't respond, she tried again, "Can I, uh... come in?"

Alli hesitated, her rational mind waffling indecisively while M.J. looked at her, patiently waiting for an answer. Slowly opening the door a little wider, Alli silently invited M.J. inside at last.

The brunette entered cautiously, raking her fingers through her wild hair and glancing around somewhat nervously. Taking-in the smell of vanilla and the soft, muted colors of the furnishings that were absolutely Allison, M.J. considered the fact that this was really happening. She was really and truly standing inside the humble abode of the woman who drove her crazy enough to do what she was doing right at that moment.

If someone had told her yesterday that she'd be chasing after this little blonde so thoroughly today, she'd have told them they were insane. But instead, she was the one who was insane. Insane with want... consumed by need... driven by the urgency she felt to go to Allison and love her and give her anything and everything she desired. She was obsessed by the need to be with this woman and take care of her. It was no longer a fanciful dream - it wasn't even a preoccupation - it was now her life's goal.

"This is, uhm... nice." M.J. offered, wanting to break the ice and the silence.

Alli was nervous and felt incredibly awkward. She was also buzzed and her mind was seriously impaired. A slight twinge of embarrassment washed over her as she noticed M.J. looking around; M.J.'s house was surely a mansion compared to this dinky apartment. She felt the urge to make chit-chat to help quell her jangled nerves.

Still not looking at the taller woman, Alli shrugged and twisted her hands together in a nervous gesture. "Uhm, thanks, I know it's not much, but the rent is reasonable, and the appliances are pretty modern, and-" Her rapid-fire rambling was cut off by M.J.'s fingers on her lips.

"Allison... I didn't come here to talk about your appliances." The tall brunette said as she stepped closer, her voice a low hush and her eyes suddenly dark and unreadable in the dim lighting of the apartment. Alli closed her eyes and drew a shaky breath as M.J. let her fingers slide across the

lips for a moment, feeling their softness, relishing in their perfection, remembering the sweetness she had tasted there just a few hours before.

Alli fought to remain calm, refusing to let even a sigh slip from her mouth. She would not meet M.J.'s eyes; she knew that if she took one look at those fathomless pale blue depths, there would be no turning back. She would be enslaved, and there would be no escape. The blonde felt the taller woman lean in close to her, and she swallowed hard, her throat suddenly feeling parched and thick.

"What did you come here for then, M.J.?" Alli questioned in a shaky whisper, her eyes closed and her head cast slightly downward.

"...You."

It was only one tiny word, but it was a word that held the power to change everything.

Alli's eyes mutinied and opened, and when she at last looked up to meet the beautiful, burning blue gaze that had terrorized her heart and soul for so long, she knew she was completely, helplessly, irretrievably lost.

But it wasn't a superficial, spur-of-the-moment surrender; it went much deeper than that. Unfortunately, Alli's brain was too inebriated to consider all the deep, philosophical reasons at that moment. She only knew that she wasn't giving-in for the hell of it; she wasn't simply horny and upset and looking for a quick-fix fuck. She and M.J. had an undeniable connection and a near-perfect chemistry. She knew that M.J. wanted her, and, much as she fought it and tried so hard to deny it, she wanted M.J. too. She needed to feel the tall brunette, mouth on mouth, skin on skin, body on body.

Alli's entire world had been turned upside down tonight, and her current state of intoxication left her feeling vulnerable, naked, and emotional. She desperately needed to be comforted, grounded, and connected; it felt like her life was spinning completely out of control, like she was hopelessly floundering in an ocean of despair, and she needed someone to throw her a life line and anchor her.

At that moment, and for the time being, Alli wanted that 'someone' to be M.J. She looked to the strong, dark-haired woman to be her anchor; to reassure her that she was wanted, desired, and loved, and to convince her that everything was going to be okay. Alli was unwittingly turning her tormentor into her savior. Her muddled mind could not process what was happening as the taller body leaned in toward her; her body could only instinctually feel and react.

M.J. converged on the bow-shaped mouth slowly, touching their lips together softly, delicately, wanting to take things slowly, but not knowing how long that good intention would last. Time again seemed to stand still, and all awareness about the rest of the world seemed to vanish. At that moment, all the two women could think about was that things were about to change in an irreversible, life-altering way, and neither of them would ever be the same again.

The tide, it seemed, was about to turn again. And they would not fight it.

The initial daintiness lasted about a minute. As soon as Alli reached up and wrapped her arms around M.J.'s neck and deepened the kisses, the dams broke and everything burst apart in an immediate, overwhelming explosion of sexual lust and raging desire.

The kissing turned bruising and desperate with both of them trying to claim and conquer each other's mouths. They crashed together over and over in near-brutal urgency, wanting to exorcise the demons and quench their insatiable thirst for one another. They gasped for air as the oral battle continued, their hands wandering and working furiously at zippers and buttons and clasps as they tore at each other's clothing. They stumbled and made their way into the middle of the living room, tossing offending garments aside and freeing themselves of all obstacles.

Somewhere in the back of M.J.'s mind, she thought that perhaps they should move to the bedroom, but at the rate they were progressing, she didn't think they'd make it. Indeed, before she could say anything, they were stripped and lying on the living room floor in a tangle of arms, legs, and hands. They frantically touched and kissed all over each other's flesh, their mutual hunger continuing to escalate in intensity.

Alli raked her nails across the smooth, tanned skin of M.J.'s back, eliciting a groan from the taller woman. Her small body throbbed with want and need, and she wrapped her legs around M.J.'s hips, groaning and grinding her pelvis wantonly against the long, lean body. She was totally unrestrained, having tossed aside the propriety that had always kept her from losing control and falling into this primal place of lustful, reckless carnality. She suddenly could not get close enough to M.J., her need to feel and touch and taste overwhelming her to the point where she nearly begged the larger woman for anything and everything.

M.J. was breathless, shocked and amazed by Alli's frantic aggressiveness. The blonde moved and gyrated her hips urgently, whimpering her desire and clutching handfuls of dark hair and tan skin. M.J. gladly and enthusiastically met her thrust for thrust, their bodies quickly growing sweaty and slick as thighs intermingled and hands rubbed and fingers penetrated.

Their mutual climaxes were desperate, profound, fast, and ferocious. Bodies tensed and muscles contracted as they groaned and gasped in unison and clung to one another, the surge of erotic pleasure overpowering and draining them both completely.

When it was over, they lay slumped together on the floor, their ragged breath mixing with the soft sounds of the forgotten jazz music that still emanated from the stereo.

As she teetered on the brink of consciousness, M.J. opened her eyes slightly to gaze at the flushed face of the tiny beauty who had stolen her heart, and now, her soul as well. She had wanted to touch and pleasure Allison so badly, but she wanted Alli to touch and pleasure her as well. The mutual intimacy was something she hadn't allowed in a very, very long time... but everything was different now. She felt a profound connection with Allison, and she wanted her like never before. She wanted to possess her and consume her and drive the thoughts of all others from her mind. M.J. needed to give and be given to, and she needed to take and be taken in

return. So she let Alli give to her and take from her; and she gave and took from the beautiful blonde in return.

Well into the night, the giving and taking continued with passionate fervor.

They dozed off eventually. Or maybe they blacked-out, M.J. wasn't sure. It was still very dark both inside and out when she returned to wakefulness, so she surmised that only an hour or two had passed since their last go-round. She was lying on her back, and the hardness of the living room floor was absolutely killing her. Alli's small body lay partially on top of her, the blonde head resting on her chest and the long, flaxen tresses spilling down around her breasts.

M.J. smiled to herself thinking that at last, after so long, she had done it. She had allowed Alli to possess all of her, and in return, Alli had allowed the same. The feelings she had for the little blonde suddenly hit her in a thundering rush, and she felt her eyes well up with unexpected tears. If this was what true bliss was like, she was sorry she had missed out on it for so long.

M.J. shifted her body slightly, acutely feeling every place that Alli's lithe little form touched hers. She strained her neck to look down at the fair, angelic face as it rested in peaceful slumber. The long brown eyelashes anchored the closed eyelids, concealing the deep aqua depths that were so honest and full of emotion... the slim eyebrows twitched slightly, perhaps contemplating some subconscious thought... the bow-shaped lips were parted slightly, joining the button nose in its never-ending task of breathing life into the small body that was attached to them. M.J. relaxed her head again, sighing deeply and closing her eyes as she brought a hand up to gently run her fingers through Alli's hair, feeling the dampness that suffused the soft locks.

Trying to shift her position again, M.J. felt the delightful way their adjoining flesh was pasted together with the remnant wetness of sex and sweat. She could feel the moist heat radiating from between Alli's legs as the small body reacted and squirmed slightly, and the silky tuft of pubic hair tickled against M.J.'s hip as a softly-muscled thigh flexed slightly. A flush raced up and down M.J.'s body, and she felt a sharp jolt of desire spark inside her all over again.

Alli stirred further, and soon hands and fingers began to stray, reawakening the hunger and the need to consume one another. It seemed that the two of them suffered from a thirst that could not and would not be quenched this night.

[Continued in Chapter 50](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Turning Tides ~

by A. K. Naten

See [Part 1](#) for author notes and disclaimers.

*"Last night I dreamt that somebody loved me
No hope, no harm, just another false alarm...
Last night I felt real arms around me
No hope, no harm, just another false alarm...
So tell me how long before the last one
And tell me how long before the right one
The story is old, I know, but it goes on...
It goes on." - Morrissey*

CHAPTER FIFTY

Allison juggled her briefcase, her purse, and her coffee travel-mug in one hand as she fumbled with her house keys in the other. Unlocking the door at last, she walked in and pushed it shut with her foot. Hearing nothing but the slightly muffled sound of a television, she walked into the darkened house and plopped her things on the kitchen countertop.

"Hey Babe? ...I'm home!" She called out, flipping the lights on.

A moment passed until Alli heard soft footfalls, and she turned around to greet her lover. M.J.'s looming figure stood on the other side of the kitchen, one hand on her hip, the other holding a glass of wine. She didn't look very happy to see her partner.

"Where the hell have you been?" M.J. snapped.

Alli gave her a surprised look, "At my office, of course... I had a late meeting, remember?" M.J. knew where she was... what was with the third degree?

M.J. made a disgusted noise, "No... no I don't remember your late *meeting*." She said in a snide tone as she walked further into the kitchen, sitting her empty glass down and fetching the carafe out of the refrigerator to refill it.

Alli watched in confusion, not understanding why her lover was so upset, and wondering why she was drinking. "Hon, what's wrong?" She asked.

"What's wrong?!" M.J. spat, spinning to face Alli with blue fury. "What's *wrong* is that I told you to be home HOURS ago! I *told* you that we were going to stay home and have a nice

dinner tonight... but did you listen to me? Did you do what I asked? Nooo!"

Alli could only stare in astonishment at the anger radiating from M.J.'s tall form. The brunette turned away and took a long gulp of her drink. What the hell was going on?

Suddenly, M.J. turned back to look at Alli again, only she was no longer M.J. ...she was a completely different person. Alli gasped aloud and took a step backwards as dark, angry eyes glared back at her.

"I'm fucking sick and tired of you not being around when you're *supposed* to be! I'm sick of you not *LISTENING* to me!"

The reddened face and screaming voice belonged to a man... a familiar man... a man who was once her husband.

"You're supposed to be here, at home, taking care of ME, goddammit!" Eric grabbed Alli's arm roughly and pushed her backwards, slamming her back against the sharp edge of the counter.

Wincing in pain and grasping at the counter edge to steady herself, Alli's mouth dropped open even further as she watched in horror as her ex-husband morphed back into a woman again, only this time, the tall figure had curly blonde hair and a wild, desperate look in her amber eyes.

"Why couldn't you love me Alli... when all I ever did was love you?!" Kris's familiar face cried and tears streamed down her face. If Alli didn't think she was losing her mind before, she definitely did when the face changed again, morphing into an older version of herself.

Alli stared in wide-eyed horror as she looked upon her mother's countenance and listened to the woman's harsh, southern-tinged chastising, "You're nothin' but a slut! A foolish, stupid little *SLUT*!"

Allison jerked awake, her eyes popping open suddenly only to be met by the dark stillness of the night.

A dream... just a dream, she thought in relief. ...Jesus Christ.

Her foggy mind soon became aware that she was lying on her stomach with something rough and uncomfortable scratching her tummy and her hips, and something very warm and smooth blanketing her left side. A panic began to well up in her throat and she pulled herself up onto her elbows, blinking her eyes rapidly and forcing her vision to focus. Just as she realized she was lying on the carpeted floor of her own living room, a warm hand caressed her bare back.

"Hey... you okay?"

Alli heard the familiar, low murmur and turned her head toward the sound. M.J.'s pale eyes regarded her with gentle concern, the light blue irises soft and luminous in the near-darkness of early morning. Alli couldn't answer... she couldn't say anything. Scattered memories of the prior

night suddenly flashed through her head, and her eyes grew wide as she came to fully realize what she had done, and whom she had done it with.

"Oh my God." The words came out in a horrified, raspy whisper. Alli pushed herself up onto her knees as she started to back away from M.J.'s naked form, her eyes stuck open in shock the whole time. M.J. sat up and looked back at her, unsure of what to say or do.

"OhmyGod, ohmyGod," Alli mumbled again as she got to her feet and stared down at the spot on the floor that she'd just vacated.

M.J. stood as well, carefully keeping her eyes on Alli, preparing for her to flip out. Everything around them seemed to go absolutely still and silent for a moment and M.J. braced herself for the impact of the panicked, regret-filled explosion she could sense building inside the blonde.

After a silent, tension-filled minute, M.J. cautiously reached a hand out, wanting to comfort and reassure. "Allison-," she began, but Alli flinched and backed away from her, giving her another wild-eyed look before turning and dashing out of the room.

"...Shit." M.J. cursed quietly to herself.

Alli had been in the bathroom for a dreadfully long time, and M.J. supposed she should go and check on her to make sure she hadn't passed out or drowned herself in the toilet or something. She knew the blonde had been drinking at least a little bit before she arrived last night; she had noticed the open wine bottle, and she could see it in Alli's glassy eyes and taste it on her tongue.

*Great... well it's good to know I can still make them dizzy with desire - oh no, wait, strike that - it's dizzy with the desire to *hurl*!* She thought sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

Waiting just another minute, she decided to walk back the short hallway to see what was up. Arriving at a closed door, M.J. could hear water running, but nothing else.

She hesitated for a moment before knocking lightly, "Alli?" No answer. "Alli... are you okay?"

There was a long pause before a shaky voice answered simply, "Yes."

M.J. made a face to herself, not quite knowing what she should do. "Okay." She said with equal simplicity.

Returning to the living room, M.J. realized she was still naked. She wasn't quite sure what to do; this wasn't exactly how she'd hoped the morning would turn out, after all. Should she leave? Should she stay? Should she call 911? With the bathroom door remaining closed and Alli giving her no indication of what lay ahead, she felt like an idiot. A very naked idiot. Deciding she should probably just get dressed, she slipped her undergarments back on, figuring that it was best to be prepared for anything. Who knew what Alli would say or do or want when, and if, she

returned.

M.J. shrugged her blouse on and was just zipping her suit pants when the bathroom door finally opened and Alli emerged, dressed in a bathrobe. Her face was pale, and her eyes were pink-rimmed and nervous, unable to meet M.J.'s.

"Are you alright?" M.J. asked cautiously, watching Alli's expression.

Alli shook her head, keeping her gaze fixed on the floor, "No."

...*Uh oh.* "What's wrong?"

More head shaking. "I can't...", Alli hesitated and brought her hands up to hold her head, "I can't believe this... I can't believe we did this! I can't believe *I* did this! Oh God! Oh my *God*!" She wailed and collapsed onto the sofa, breaking down and crying distraughtly.

Even though she had sensed it coming, M.J. was still taken aback by Alli's woeful regret. Again, she didn't know what to think, or how to react. Should she be hurt? Angry? Offended? She just stood there, feeling only shock and confusion.

Suddenly Alli shot up off the sofa, bright blue-green eyes boring into M.J. as she stepped toward her, "You have to go." She spoke the words curtly, her expression desperate. "You have to get out of here!" Alli said louder, her eyes wide and wild.

M.J. could only look at her and frown in disbelief. What the hell was going on? She opened her mouth, "But-", was the only thing she got out before Alli interrupted her by picking up her suit jacket and her shoes and shoving them into her chest. M.J. stumbled backwards slightly, still unable to comprehend what was happening.

Alli started shaking her head, "This did not happen... this did *not* happen," she murmured over and over.

M.J. stared at her incredulously, "But Alli... it *did* happen-", Again she was cut-off harshly.

"NO, it DIDN'T! It did *NOT* happen!" Alli yelled this time.

"Yes it DID!" M.J. yelled back, "It *DID* happen!"

Alli shook her head forcefully, "No... no... no nonono!" She mumbled, bringing her hands up to clutch her head again.

"Allison-", M.J. began, only to be stopped again.

"No! You don't understand!" The voice was tremulous and tears began to make their way down fair cheeks again. "I can't do this... I can't *do* this, M.J.! ...I CANNOT let this happen!"

M.J. just looked at her, the shock and disbelief beginning to give way to crushing hurt.

"I want you to go," Alli said, turning back to M.J. and reaching out to give her a push.

M.J. staggered backwards, unable to move, her mouth hanging open in wordless astonishment.

"Please! Just *GO*!" Alli pleaded, pushing harder as the tears came faster and she cried openly now. She pushed and shoved M.J.'s tall frame repeatedly, begging and forcing the dazed brunette to take more backward steps.

When they at last got close to the front door, Alli looked up at M.J. The wintry blue eyes pinned her intensely, and they held a mixed look of anguish, agony and building fury. A long silence passed and Alli grew nervous, the hair on the back of her neck rising in a slight twinge of fear as the pale eyes suddenly went dark with an unreadable, unspoken emotion. Alli averted her eyes quickly, reaching for the door and jerking it open, silently insisting that her guest leave.

M.J. walked slowly toward the exit, still stunned over the unexpected turn of events. She looked at Alli one last time, wanting to see the truth in those oceanic depths; needing to see if this was really what she wanted. But the blonde head was cast downward, refusing to look at her.

Another silent moment passed until M.J. finally spoke, "This isn't over Allison... not by a long shot." The voice was low and solemn, and the message was clear. Then she turned and walked out.

Alli flinched when the door slammed loudly.

*"I don't wanna die, but I ain't keen on livin' either
Before I fall in love, I'm preparing to leave her,
I scare myself to death, that's why I keep on runnin'
Before I've arrived, I can see myself comin',
I just wanna feel real love
Feel the home that I live in
'Cause I got too much life runnin' through my veins,
Going to waste;
I need to feel real love, and a love ever after
I cannot get enough,
I just wanna feel real love, and the love ever after,
There's a hole in my soul, you can see it in my face
It's a real big place." - R. Williams*

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Alli walked around her apartment like a zombie for nearly an hour. She straightened up her living room, she rinsed the few glasses and utensils that sat in her sink and tossed them into the dishwasher, she even did a load of laundry. She did anything to keep her mind occupied; anything to detour her thoughts from what had taken place... what had happened... what she'd done. Eventually though, she ran out of distractions, and the memories began to surface.

She sat on her sofa, listening to the whir of the dishwasher and the muffled chugging of the washing machine. It all felt so surreal, like she was dreaming again, only this time everything made sense. Still, she sat on her sofa and stared into space for a long while, hoping that maybe she'd wake up to a different reality, preferably one that would weigh easier on her conscience. But a different reality never came, and she soon realized, like M.J. had said, it **did** happen.

She and M.J. had consummated their long-standing lust for one another, and this time, both of them were active participants.

Her first instinct was to curse herself for succumbing to M.J.'s charms again, but after she calmed down and thought about it, she realized that it wasn't just a matter of her falling for the tall beauty's wiles again. As much as she wanted to refute it, M.J. **was** different, and she had treated Alli differently this time. She hadn't taunted her, she hadn't manipulated her, and she hadn't controlled her. Alli did what she did because she wanted to, and M.J. had allowed her to do whatever she desired.

And oh my God... what I desired, Alli thought, feeling a flush race over her body as her eyes drifted shut. She drew her knees up against her chest and wrapped her arms around them as she closed her eyes and prepared to let her sketchy memory wander and roam free.

She remembered M.J. showing up at her door; she remembered the look on her face and the intent clearly displayed in her eyes. She remembered kissing and feeling completely, utterly swallowed by a tidal wave of want and need. Her hunger for M.J. was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She was certain that she had never been so aroused and so completely out of control.

She recalled the glorious sight and feel of M.J.'s long, toned frame as they merged into one another, touching, kissing, grasping, and devouring. She remembered raking her nails across the broad back; blue flames boring into her eyes as bodies tensed and voices moaned in ecstasy; muscles straining as they tightened and flexed repeatedly; hips rocking, pushing, thrusting. She recalled warm, smooth lips canvassing her flesh and long, soft strands of hair tickling and brushing against her skin as M.J. hovered above her, trailing her tongue down her body and pausing to suck and bite here and there. She remembered crying out and squeezing her thighs tightly around the dark head that plundered her so thoroughly, her hands roughly grabbing handfuls of hair, and her breath catching as her back arched up so high while she fell so far.

Alli felt her body flush with heat and she swallowed hard against the lump that had arisen in her throat, but she allowed the memories to continue.

She remembered the exquisite feel, smell, and taste of M.J.'s body. The luscious beauty had let Alli have complete control to do whatever she wanted, and Alli remembered nearly everything. The strong arms that held her tight as they kissed and ravaged one another again and again; the muscles of M.J.'s stomach as they convulsed and contracted; the thighs that opened and trembled under Alli's rough kisses and caresses; the hands that clenched and fisted in her hair; the burning heat and desire that spilled out of the brunette; the flavor and texture that saturated Alli's tongue; the overwhelming intensity of M.J.'s earth-shattering climax. Alli remembered falling over the edge herself, just from the sound and feel and taste of M.J.'s release.

It was so unbelievable... so intense... like nothing I've ever done or felt before, Alli thought. This was what I'd been waiting for, wasn't it? ...This is what I've always wanted... and so what did I do? ... I freaked and threw her out.Jesus. Slumping down further into the sofa, she shook her head and glanced down at the living room floor... the floor where they had made love... several times. She swore she could still see the indentations that their bodies had made in the carpet.

"Oh my Goddd." She groaned aloud, bringing her hands up to cradle her aching head.

But had they 'made love'? It didn't really feel like it... not quite. It had felt more like... just sex... just raw, carnal fucking. It had been harsh and intense and frenzied; there had been little, if any, gentleness, and there had been no softly-spoken words nor tender declarations of devotion. There had been lots of calls for divine intervention, but that didn't count.

If we've never declared our 'love' for one another, how could it be 'making love'? Alli thought. *Do I dare to even *think* that I might love her? ...Could she ever truly love me?* Her eyes went wide as she pondered the dreaded question.

Actually, she recalled feeling a burning urge to tell M.J. that she loved her; she had come close to blurting it out while in the throws of passion, but besides being horribly cliché, she was drunk... at least part of the time. Thankfully her intoxicated mind had managed to keep her foolish impetuosity under wraps somehow.

And that's all it was... just stupid drunken thoughts, she insisted silently to herself.

Still... she couldn't help but wonder what M.J. would have thought if she had blurted it out. Would she have found it absurd? Would she have been touched? Amused? Horrified, maybe? It was too hard to tell. All of this had happened very quickly, as ridiculous as it sounded. They had already been involved, long ago... how could it be 'too quick'? Yet it was. They went from not seeing each other for almost two years, to suddenly and fatefully meeting up again and madly fucking each other's brains out, all in the same night.

And let's not forget the fact that I was already involved with another woman, Alli thought. *Oh fuck, no... don't even go there,* she scolded herself, rolling her eyes. The mess with Kristine would have to wait until later. Right now, she had to concentrate on whatever it was she was going to do about M.J.

Shaking her head in frustration, Alli decided that she was too exhausted to concentrate on anything. Picking herself up off the couch, she trudged back to her bedroom where she flopped down on her bed and almost instantly fell asleep.

Across town, M.J.'s early morning wasn't progressing much better.

She had driven home from Alli's place in a trance-like state, unable to process everything that had happened. She had fantasized so many times about doing what they did that she struggled to come to grips with the fact that it actually and truly **did** take place. She and Allison had finally, at long last, taken that final step and crossed the line that had been drawn in the sand so long ago. And they had done it together... over and over and over. It had been unbelievably amazing.

Now showered and lying on her bed, M.J. pondered about how and why she had so willingly let her defenses down and opened herself up to Alli. She had never done that before. She had never given up her control so freely, and she had never let herself be completely vulnerable like that.

It was so different than what she'd become accustomed to for so long - what she'd **made** herself become accustomed to. It'd been years since she'd even held another woman close, let alone completely falling for them. She had mastered the art of staying detached and in complete control, and in her isolated perfection, she'd forgotten what being close to someone was like. But this was way beyond just being 'close'. This was maddening erotica... this was warm sensuality... this was gentle tenderness... this was real... and it was right.

M.J. wondered if the intensity of her feelings was due to the long and complex relationship she'd had with Alli... or maybe it was because their chemistry was so explosive... or maybe it was just simply **Allison**... she didn't know. Whatever it was, it had caused her to allow herself to open up and feel. After all this time of fighting it, after all the years of being so aloof and so isolated from everyone, she had finally taken the enormous step.

She had given something precious to Alli... and in return, Alli had thrown it back at her and pushed her away, quite literally.

Goddammit, she thought angrily, feeling tears well and burn in her eyes. She supposed that she deserved it, in some way; she knew that Alli was still upset by what had occurred between them two years ago, but it hurt to be scorned so vehemently.

I knew this would happen, didn't I? If you take a chance, you just end up getting crushed somehow, M.J. thought, shaking her head and blinking annoying tears away. Rolling over onto her back, she forced herself to push aside the pain of rejection, letting her mind drift back instead to the night of delirious desire she shared with Alli.

Her lips twitched in a slight smile as she remembered how they had kissed so lasciviously and pleased one another so thoroughly. Their numerous unions had been forceful and hungry, and they seemed absolutely possessed in their desperation to consume each other and drive away

whatever demons still lurked inside their hearts and souls.

She recalled pinning Alli to the floor, raking her mouth and teeth down her chin, her throat, her clavicles, her tummy, down to her deepest, most intimate places. M.J. had devoured her savagely, the passion spilling freely from Alli's body as knees drew up around her head and thighs squeezed her tight. She had clutched Alli's hips and held her securely as the petite body tensed and arched high up off the floor when the explosive release at last came. M.J. swore she could still feel the warmth and taste the lingering sweetness of Alli's essence. She groaned aloud and covered her face with her hands.

And then, when Allison had taken control and turned her desire loose on M.J., how exhilarating and erotic it had been. No words had been spoken, no gruff demands, no impassioned entreaties, no enticing taunts. The only sounds that could be heard were strangled moans and garbled groans, and the desperate gasps for breath mixed with the telltale sounds of hungry feasting and skin meeting skin.

A rush of warmth flowed through M.J. as she opened her eyes and looked up at the spinning ceiling fan above her bed. She recounted the raw carnality and aggressiveness of Alli's actions and realized that she would never have pegged the little blonde to be so forward and bold. M.J. couldn't help but wonder if it was the alcohol's influence, or if Alli had simply gained a hell of a lot of experience in the past eighteen months.

They had been brutal with each other, but it wasn't borne out of anger; it was instead borne out of a desperate, all-consuming need. A need they both shared. Feeling an unexpected surge of emotion, M.J. remembered having to fight for control of her feelings last night, too. They had threatened to betray her several times, and she could feel them yearning to break free, still.

M.J. wondered what Allison had really felt last night. She knew that Alli was still attracted to her; she had felt it the first time they'd kissed back at the convention center. And Alli hadn't denied it; she just said that she was unwilling to get involved again. So... why did she give in then? Was she really so intoxicated that she didn't have control of herself? Did she just give in to her lust because she was worn down and weak? Had it just turned out to be a classic case of 'morning-after regret'?

M.J. had wanted to show Alli how much she wanted her, but she also wanted to show her that she wasn't merely interested in a quick fuck for old time's sake. That was why she'd opened herself up to Alli so willingly. That was why she'd let her share the control last night. She wanted to prove to her that change was possible, and that she had accomplished it. However, now that she'd been essentially slapped in the face, she thought that it'd all been in vain.

She had allowed Alli past some very well-constructed, heavily-armored walls, and with that loss of security, M.J. knew that she now risked being seen for what she really was... vulnerable... needy... and foolish. She felt very stupid for doing what she did, but she couldn't help it. She had wanted Allison, plain and simple. Even as she lay on her bed now, feeling doubtful and pathetic, she still craved the blonde with a fierce urgency. The only problem was, M.J. was highly uncertain if Allison would ever want her again.

No matter... I learned my lesson... and I won't chase after her again, she asserted to herself. Despite her resolve, images of Alli's lovely nakedness danced persistently inside her head. Sighing deeply, M.J. tried to erase the tormenting thoughts by following the spin of the ceiling fan blades until she felt dizzy and had to close her eyes.

God help me... I'm so crazy about her, she admitted, feeling an amazing clarity despite the short-lived dizziness.

Alli awoke from her fitful sleep still feeling sluggish and hung-over. The muscles of her thighs and buttocks ached as soon as she moved, vividly jogging her memory about her overzealous activities from the previous night.

Deciding that she would not mope around her apartment all day, Alli finally made herself get a much-needed shower. Stripping and tossing her robe into her clothes hamper, Alli turned and caught her naked reflection in the full-length bedroom mirror. Her mouth dropped open as she took in the angry red marks streaked along her throat, clavicles, waist, and hips. The stark, visible reminders of her frenzied, impassioned coupling with M.J. made her stomach clench, and she quickly climbed into the shower, overwhelmed by a sudden urge to cleanse herself of her wrongdoing.

She wetted her body and hurriedly began lathering herself with soap as more memories infiltrated her mind. Images of M.J. and the look in her eyes as she moved above her, against her, and inside her... the sounds of ecstasy that filled the room... the feeling of slick, hot skin against skin. As she scrubbed herself, Alli felt equal parts relieved and saddened. She was cleansing herself, yes, but she was also erasing the evidence that she had shared something extraordinary with the dark-haired woman who would probably haunt her until her dying day.

She didn't want to admit it, but as the thoughts continued to crowd inside her head, Alli found herself thinking that M.J. could very well be her perfect lover. It was surprising, really, considering how domineering and heartless the brunette used to be. But she wasn't like that this time... not at all. M.J. had come to her, open, willing, indulgent, having changed - it seemed - into the person Alli had been wanting and waiting for all her life. And Alli simply had not been prepared for that.

But instead of taking a moment to stop and think about the impact of what they were doing, instead of staying in control and insisting that they just slow down and take it easy, she had given in. She had thrown all propriety out the window and let herself succumb to her own lustful desires. She wanted to say that she just couldn't help herself, and she supposed she could take the easy way out and blame the wine, but that wouldn't be entirely true.

I knew what I was doing... at least vaguely, Alli admitted shamefully.

And then, to make matters worse, instead of talking about it in the morning and explaining to

M.J. that she needed time to think things through, she completely flipped-out. She panicked and asked M.J. to go.

*No - I *forced* her to go. I screamed at her and pushed her out into the street, half-dressed!* She thought with deep regret and more shame. *Well congratulations Allison... you're officially a psychotic bitch,* she thought to herself as she slumped against the shower wall, suddenly feeling unable to get herself any more clean. She could still picture the look of anguished astonishment on M.J.'s face when she shoved her away the first time. She would bet that the tall beauty had never been rebuked like that before.

"Oh what have I done? ...I've made a complete mess of *everything*!" Alli murmured aloud, bringing her hands up to cradle her now-throbbing forehead.

More thoughts piled up and tumbled around her head in a whirlwind, her emotions again sucked into a vortex of turmoil and confusion. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the oncoming surge of fear and worry and dreadful unhappiness. She did not want to cry over this again... she refused to break down... she would *not* cry.

She cursed herself as a single tear escaped from beneath dark lashes and trickled down her cheek.

...Goddammit! Alli couldn't withhold the agony any longer, and she covered her face with her hands as her body began to shake with heart-wrenching sobs.

She stood there in the corner of the shower and cried for a long time, the sadness, confusion and pain she felt inside constricting her heart and strangling her soul more profoundly than ever before. She cried for herself... she cried for M.J. ...she even thought that she cried for Kris.

She had thought that her life was finally changing for the better; she thought the tide was finally turning in her favor. But it wasn't. And this wasn't a turning tide. It was a savage, brutal rip-current, and she was being viciously sucked in by the powerful undertow and dragged helplessly out to sea where she would most certainly flounder and drown.

"Backbeat, the word was on the street that the fire in your heart is out, I'm sure you've heard it all before but you never really had a doubt, I don't believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now; And all the roads we have to walk are winding, And all the lights that lead us there are blinding; There are many things that I would like to say to you, But I don't know how; Because maybe... you're gonna be the one that saves me, And after all, you're my wonderwall." - Oasis

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The agonizing weekend finally came to an end, and Alli was grateful to go back to work. She needed something to distract her, and burying herself in work was just the thing.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Hard as she tried, Alli was unfocused and lackadaisical all week long at the office. All she could think about was M.J. and what they'd done together, and all she could feel was a deep ache in her heart. She was seized with acute fear over the realization that she may very well be in love with M.J., and her brain waffled constantly with thoughts of what she should or should not do about the whole thing.

She thought about picking up the phone and calling the brunette to at least apologize for her rash actions, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Surely M.J. thought she was sleazy and psychotic for sleeping with her and then tossing her out on her ass... surely M.J. wouldn't want to talk to her after the way she'd behaved... would she? But they should talk... Alli knew they should talk. They should at least clear the air and discuss what had happened. Although her pride begged her to just forget about it and move on, Alli knew she couldn't leave things hanging like this between them. She hated 'unfinished business'. But every time Alli looked at the phone, her stomach twisted into knots and she lost her nerve.

By week's end, Kris had stopped calling her and leaving messages. Alli was grateful for that reprieve, but she was still severely troubled with the matter of M.J.

Alli had begun walking on the beach in an effort to quell the confusion that constantly raged inside her head. She would come home from work and just as the sun was setting, she'd head down toward the sound of the pounding surf, doffing her shoes when she reached the sand and walking for miles while her mind tossed and turned. The constant sound of the crashing waves somehow calmed her soul and helped to ease her restlessness as she strolled aimlessly. She would walk just at the surf's edge, letting the cool, salty water rush over her feet, wishing that it could wash away her troubles and drown her sorrows.

She knew that she had royally screwed things up between her and M.J. - perhaps irreparably. The question was... did it really matter? Moreover, did it matter to M.J.? M.J. hadn't called her, so either she was upset, or she'd decided that it didn't matter, and therefore Alli didn't matter. Or maybe she had finally just given up?

No, that couldn't be it. She wouldn't have gone to the trouble of tracking me down just to walk away again... would she? Alli questioned herself silently. The vision of M.J.'s intensely burning eyes and her final, departing words of 'this isn't over Allison' again filled Alli's mind. *She's just waiting for me... waiting for me to make the next move*, Alli thought. *But dear God... can I do that? Can I make the next move?* She considered for a moment. *What *move* could I make? What move *should* I make?* Alli wondered, feeling a small swell of panic. *Oh I'm going to go mad... completely, *utterly* mad!* She thought to herself with a shake of her head as she continued walking.

The same questions hounded her over and over... had she made a mistake by giving in and being

with M.J.? Was it right, or was it wrong? Was it a wretched misstep, or was it a beautiful culmination of longing and desire? Was she wise to push it away, or was she missing out on the chance of a lifetime? Was it foolishness, or was it destiny? Alli had no answers... only questions... only fears.

Fear of hoping... of taking the risk... of putting her heart and soul out there on the line. She had done it before, and she had gotten hurt. She feared wanting something too much... wanting some*one * too much. And she wanted M.J. She wanted her so badly that she physically ached inside. She wished that she could just let herself fall into the mesmerizing, hypnotic pool of M.J.'s blue eyes and disappear forever. She thought about it constantly. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't work. She was a wreck.

She knew she had to do something, but what? The ball was in her court... and she really sucked at sports.

Saturday morning arrived early for M.J. She arose just before dawn, unable to sleep or even rest. As usual, her never-ending thoughts and questions about Allison woke her up, so she got out of bed and showered, determined to find something to do that would get her mind off the blonde.

She ended up deciding to clean up her motorcycle and take it out for a nice long ride. The weather was perfect, and it had been ages since she'd spent any time riding her beloved Hog. Donning a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt, M.J. headed for her garage to fix the beast up and get it ready to rumble.

Putzing around with her bike was enjoyable and satisfying, but it unfortunately did not chase all thoughts of Allison away. As she sat on the concrete floor of the garage shining the bike's dirty chrome with a rag, M.J.'s thoughts began to roam.

She wondered what Alli was thinking... what she was feeling after a week. Had her days and nights been miserable, like M.J.'s? Did she think that their joining was a mistake? ...Or did she think it was perfection? Was she still horrified? ...Or had she forgotten it and moved on? As tempting as it was to chase after Alli and hunt her down again, M.J. knew that she could not.

She would not call Alli... she would not go to her. M.J. felt that she'd done the right thing by going to Alli and confessing her sorrow and her feelings, and showing her how she felt... as many times as possible. She had done all that she could. Alli probably had no idea how incredibly difficult it was for her to do what she had done. ...Or maybe she just didn't care? Maybe the hurt that M.J. had caused in the past was too great to forgive and forget? She didn't know. She only knew that despite Alli's rejection, she still longed to feel and touch and taste the luscious blonde, now more than ever.

M.J. knew that it was the most amazing sex she'd ever had, but whether or not it meant anything more to Alli remained to be seen. It had meant much more to M.J. than just fabulous sex. Their impassioned union had been more than just carnal lust; the two of them had shared something

incredibly intimate and extraordinarily rare. M.J. wanted to label it 'love', but she was afraid to. She was afraid to hope for such a thing... she was afraid to hope that Allison felt the same way. It was one thing for her to privately admit that she was in love, but to open herself up wide and wear her heart on her sleeve for another person, and all the world, to see... that was too dangerous.

M.J. was afraid that if she told Alli how she really felt, everything would come crashing down around her. And with each day that passed without word from Alli, it seemed that was indeed the way things were going to end up.

The worst part was, now that she'd had Alli - now that they'd consummated their long-standing desire for one another and she'd had a taste of what it was like to love Allison completely - she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to survive without it. ...Without her.

But she would not chase after Alli again; she had to let it go. She would not humiliate herself anymore. Alli wasn't the only one with feelings... she wasn't the only one with weaknesses and vulnerabilities. M.J. could feel hurt too... she wasn't immune to pain... she was just better at covering it up.

She had given it her best shot, and she had failed. Now she would just have to live with it. But it would not be easy. Not at all.

Alli's mind was heavy with uncertainty as she drove down the winding, never-ending road that ran along the river. Huge, old oak trees towered high above the asphalt, stretching their ancient, gnarled fingers out across the narrow roads and darkening the gated driveways that passed by Alli's searching eyes. This was an exclusive, upscale area of old and new homes, all of which sat far back from the road, safely tucked away and hidden by long private drives and scattered clusters of natural vegetation and scrub.

Alli snatched the wrinkled piece of paper out of her purse, checking the address again. She still couldn't believe she was doing this. As she read her own scribble again, she realized that she was getting close. Finally, she saw a pair of large stone pillars with the correct number on it. Alli slowed her car and turned into the concrete driveway until she met up with a large wrought iron gate and an intercom box.

She had caught a glimpse of M.J.'s home one time before. She had been nosy - or maybe obsessed - long ago, and she'd looked up the address and drove past it just to see where it was and what it looked like. She hadn't been able to see much from the road, and sitting in the driveway now, she still wasn't able to discern a whole lot. The driveway continued back from the gate through some trees, to a point where she could just barely make out a huge two-story structure. It looked stately and magnificent, and Alli was impressed in spite of her nerves.

As her mind danced with wonder about what the interior of the house looked like, Alli noticed that the door of an adjacent building - presumably a garage - was open and some type of truck or

SUV was parked out front.

Oh great! Someone else is here! She thought in a sudden panic. *Well of *course* someone else is here! Like I thought M.J. would be sitting around pining after me? After *ME*!?! Jesus CHRIST! I must be a fucking IDIOT!* Alli covered her face with one hand as old doubts and lingering fears began to raise their ugly heads once again. Drawing a deep breath, she shook her head, fighting for control over her insecurities and waffling emotions. *No... I can't stop now. I came here to have my say and correct my misstep, and goddammit, I'm going to do that!* She thought determinedly.

Alli eyed the security camera that was mounted beside the intercom box and nervously chewed the inside of her cheek. The little red call button seemed to taunt her, and her stomach twisted in anxiety. Did she really want to do this? Did she really dare? Was this **really** necessary?

*Yes! Yes it is! Just *do* it, you chicken!* She asserted internally. She took another deep breath and blew it out loudly before lowering her car window and reaching her arm out as far as it could go.

The loud beep that signaled someone calling from the gated entrance startled M.J. She had always disliked the intercom system, but now that the area was becoming more built-up and she was disturbed by nosey buyers and realtors more frequently, she was glad for it.

Still, M.J. glared up at the intercom and security system that was housed inside the garage and gave an annoyed sigh as she arose from her position on the floor. She didn't have the camera monitor turned on - she rarely did - and she didn't bother to poke her head out the door and look down toward the gate. The caller surely must have seen her Jeep parked out front and saw that the garage doors were open, so she couldn't pretend she wasn't here... although she considered it for a brief moment.

M.J. walked over to the flashing light on the intercom and depressed the 'talk' button. "Yes?" She barked impatiently at the intrusion.

The caller paused for a moment. "Yes, uhm... I'm - I'm looking for M.J. Whitton." The female voice asked the question meekly, but M.J. recognized it nonetheless. She would recognize the clear, slightly melodic tone of Allison's voice anywhere... it was something she'd been anxiously waiting to hear for a week.

Glancing over to the monitor, M.J. quickly depressed the power button and turned the screen on. Sure enough, the black and white display showed a VW beetle sitting at the gated entry. M.J. faltered, not knowing what to say. She couldn't believe that Alli had actually come looking for her and was right here, right now. Deciding it best not to say anything, M.J. just pushed the remote entry button, allowing the iron gates to swing open and admit this most welcome visitor.

The little blue beetle hesitantly crept up the driveway until it pulled into the circular drive at the

front of the house. Alli got out of her car and glanced around, wondering if the abrupt, tinny-sounding voice she heard through the intercom was M.J. or someone else. Turning her head to look at the garage, she got her answer.

M.J. was walking toward her, clad in beat-up blue jeans and a rumpled, white t-shirt with some kind of faded emblem on the front. Alli's breath caught in her throat as she watched M.J. come to a halt about ten feet away. The dark-haired siren said nothing; she just stood and stared at Alli with those mercilessly haunting, pale-blue eyes. She looked relaxed, but tired; her hair was held back in a loose ponytail, and she looked... younger... softer... much less threatening than she usually appeared. It suddenly occurred to Alli that she'd rarely seen M.J. wearing anything except a crisply tailored suit.

Well... either a suit or absolutely nothing at all, she said to herself. Alli blushed and her hands began to fidget with her car keys as the two of them stood there and absorbed one another for a brief moment.

"Hi," Alli finally said, unable to stand the silent scrutiny any longer.

"Hi," M.J. returned simply, letting her eyes wander up and down Alli's petite frame. The blonde was similarly dressed in jeans and blue t-shirt. She looked nervous and unsure of herself, but M.J. thought she was breathtaking all the same.

Alli felt M.J.'s invisible caress, and another warm blush raced over her entire body. *Oh God... maybe this was a mistake*, she thought in a sudden panic. *No! I have to get this over with... I have to say my peace, then I can leave*, she insisted to herself.

"I uhm... I wanted to, uh... talk to you," Alli began with a stammer, "I mean, if you have time... are you busy with something? 'Cos I can leave if you're busy." She spat the words out in an unsteady rush.

"I'm not busy." M.J. said with a simple headshake, her unreadable expression not changing.

Alli hated that she was still unable to decipher what lay behind those enigmatic, sky-colored eyes. She briefly thought about bolting, but finally mustered up the courage to speak. "I just wanted to apologize," she started, "for last weekend... for the way I acted. I... uhm...," Alli trailed off, rolling her eyes and looking away while she drew a deep breath. "It was... I was just... I don't know...," she faltered again, sighing heavily.

M.J. gave her no reaction; she simply stood still, watching and waiting.

Of course she wouldn't make this easy, Alli thought, steeling her nerves. "I wasn't thinking clearly, and... I was upset, and... I'm sorry for the way I treated you." Alli looked up at M.J.'s blank expression and wanted to say more, but she didn't know what else she could add... especially if M.J. was unwilling to join in. She felt tears sting her eyes, and she knew she had to leave before she completely lost it.

"Well... that's all I wanted really. I just wanted to say 'sorry', and 'I'm an idiot.' So... I'll be going now." Alli spoke quickly, wanting to get the hell out of there and save face, if possible. She turned and started to walk back to her car, but M.J.'s voice stopped her.

"Alli... wait." M.J. called out, wanting and needing to say something, but not quite knowing what. As reluctant as she was to stick her neck out on the chopping block again, she knew that she couldn't let Allison simply walk away. Not now. ...Maybe not ever.

Alli stopped and hesitated, blinking her eyes several times before turning around. When she did, M.J. was standing very close to her.

"You don't need to apologize for something I've had coming to me for more than two years." M.J. said, her voice low and solemn.

"Oh no... no, it wasn't that! I - I wasn't trying to get back at you or anything like that!" Alli insisted, realizing that M.J. had the wrong impression. M.J. just looked at her in confusion. "I just... I was taken off-guard by the whole thing... I - I gave in to something I shouldn't have, and then I was upset with myself, and I took it out on you, and I shouldn't have." She rambled haphazardly.

"So, you really do think it was a mistake then?" M.J. asked, her brows furrowed.

"Yes... I mean, well, no... I mean... uh, shit!" Alli held a hand up to her forehead and shook her head, pausing to catch her breath and calm her nerves. Things were suddenly threatening to veer out of control and become severely misconstrued, and she would not allow that this time.

"Look, M.J. ...we've both made mistakes. We've both done the wrong thing and said the wrong thing, and...", Alli continued slowly, "I just want to forget all that. Just... forget all the bullshit, and move past it. ...Y'know?" She looked up at M.J., hope and eagerness written on her face.

M.J. didn't say anything; she just averted her eyes for a moment and gave a small nod of agreement.

Alli drew a deep breath, gathering her nerve for the plunge she was about to take. "I can't deny that I'm incredibly attracted to you, M.J.," she began unsteadily. "I think it's pretty obvious that we have a real... *chemistry* between us." Alli nearly stumbled on the words and quickly darted her eyes away, at last causing a tiny smile to erupt at the corners of M.J.'s mouth. "But... as satisfying as that is - and it *is* satisfying... *amazingly* satisfying, actually," Alli added, blushing as she fought for control of her feelings. "I need...", she hesitated and looked up into M.J.'s eyes again, "I need more than that."

M.J. dropped her eyes for a second and shifted her jaw slightly. She was fairly certain that she knew what Alli was insinuating, and she wanted to blurt out that she would pledge to give Allison anything and everything she desired. But now was not the time for such overzealousness; besides, she could tell that the little blonde had much more to say.

"We need to talk about things, M.J." Alli said at last. "We need to resolve some issues and talk about what we're going to do with... this," she added, motioning between the two of them with her hands, "because just sharing a night of passion here and there isn't enough for me."

M.J.'s eyes roamed over the fair face, but she still said nothing. She didn't trust herself, really; she didn't want to talk... she wanted to lean forward and kiss the dainty, rose-tinted lips in front of her.

As usual for Alli, however, she couldn't tell what the aloof brunette was thinking. But, since she'd started this confessional, she figured she might as well go for broke and finish it. "I'm not saying I want to jump right in with both feet... I just don't want to go into it blindly. If we're going to get 'involved', I want us to be open and honest with each other."

Keeping her eyes trained on M.J.'s unwavering expression, Alli reached out and gently grasped M.J.'s arm, forcing the blue eyes to meet hers squarely. She wanted to make certain M.J. understood where she was coming from; she didn't want any unspoken thoughts or confusion this time around.

"I need to know what you're thinking and feeling." Alli said with soft sincerity.

M.J. stared at the bright aqua depths of this woman that she loved. She certainly wanted to tell Alli what she wanted and needed and desired... she wanted to tell her of her hopes and dreams and plans for the future. But not right now. Right now, all she wanted was to feel and taste and pleasure this gorgeous, incredible beauty who had touched her so deep inside.

M.J. stepped closer and reached up to softly cup Alli's face with her hand, "We can talk later. Right now, what I want to feel is your body against mine."

Alli's mouth opened, but no words emerged; this wasn't exactly the response she was expecting. Smoky blue eyes locked with brilliant jade, and before Alli could force any type of sound across her lips, M.J. converged on her, wrapping long arms around her shoulders and tucking the smaller body into her larger one. Alli brought her arms around M.J.'s back, returning the hug tightly and pressing her face into the warm softness of M.J.'s chest with much relief.

They held each other close for a long time, silently reassuring, comforting, confirming, promising. M.J. kept her nose buried in the softness of Alli's hair; the lightly flower-scented strands tickling her nose and filling her senses with a soothing sweetness that belonged only to her blonde lover. Alli inhaled the combined aroma of M.J.'s cotton shirt, the unique fragrance of her perfume, and the faint smell of humid air mixed with a dash of sweat. It was intoxicating and it melted her insides like butter.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two of them drew apart and gazed at each other. Longing, understanding, affection, arousal, hunger... a range of emotions played across their faces in an instant, and they realized at that moment that the ever-changing tides were again turning.

And their destiny was at hand.

"You make me feel so divine, Your soul and mine are entwined, Before you I was blind; But since I've opened my eyes, And with you there's no disguise, So I could open up my mind; I've always loved you from the start, But I could not figure out, That I had to do it every day; So I put away the fight, Now I'm gonna live my life, Giving you the most in every way; I belong to you, And you, you belong to me too." - L. Kravitz

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Alli awoke feeling uncomfortably warm in the large bedroom. *I should get up and turn that ceiling fan on*, she thought idly as she glanced up at the unmoving blades that hung in the center of the room. *But... I don't really think I can move from this spot*, she decided. Rolling over onto her side, her lips curled into a tiny smile at the sight that greeted her. *My God she's beautiful*, Alli thought... again.

M.J. was asleep. One arm was stretched up above her head, the other one was partially draped across her stomach, and one leg was stretched out and intertwined with Alli's legs. Alli watched the steady rise and fall of M.J.'s chest and listened to the rhythmic, even cadence of her gentle breathing. Inhaling deeply, Alli closed her eyes and absorbed the aroma of perspiration and sex that hung in the air. The little grin stayed on her lips as she recounted the glorious euphoria that had filled the room just a short time ago.

The absolute hunger they felt for one another was staggering, and it made their first joining greedy, needy and explosive. Their week-long hiatus caused them to come together in a lustful collision of pent-up want and desire. It had started with a series of deep, searching kisses while still standing outside, and it ended with both of them collapsing half-clothed and panting onto M.J.'s bed.

The next time was a little calmer and slower. They at least managed to take a moment to fully undress then explore one another's bodies thoroughly. Alli felt like this union was much closer to 'making love', and she was certain she'd never come anywhere close to experiencing such bliss and perfection. She was quite relieved that she was completely sober this time, and she made it a point to ingest and remember every wondrous detail. As she lay quietly on the bed, Alli closed her eyes and recalled the extraordinary feelings and sensations.

They had inspected every square inch of each other's bodies. Every mole, every scar, every downy little hair... all of it had been touched and tasted, then catalogued and memorized. It was so intensely erotic, and so gently loving. M.J.'s passion was at one time powerful and

overwhelming, and the next time, tender and sensual. The darkened blue of her eyes pierced Alli as she touched and kissed her all over, wordlessly promising pleasure, silently delivering ecstasy.

Alli sighed as she remembered the feeling of M.J.'s long, silky tresses as they tickled her while moist, warm lips fleetingly kissed and caressed her entire body... how their sweat-slickened skin melded together as their bodies tensed and strained and insistent hips pushed and thrust together. It was so good.

*Oh God... it was so *unbelievably* good, she thought dreamily to herself. The things she did to me and made me feel... uhh!*

All of it had far exceeded every hope-filled dream and fantasy she'd ever entertained. She was certain she'd never come with the ferocity and emotion that she had with M.J. It was so profound... so exquisite and deeply moving. She felt like they were truly joined now... as though their soulful, physical couplings had absolutely bound them together, and they would be forever linked by some kind of cosmic, karmic prophecy or something. It was a sort of epiphany for her.

But as Alli lay there contemplating the sudden clarity and depth of her feelings, she couldn't help but wonder what M.J. thought, and what she felt. They had not had their 'talk', and they had yet to voice any kind of love or devotion for one another.

Alli knew that M.J. had been with other women - more than likely a *lot* of other women - and she naturally felt a little envious and inferior. Had M.J. already experienced the kinds of feelings Alli was just now experiencing? Did she perform the same intimate, soul-touching acts with other women too? Did she reach inside those other women the way she reached inside Alli? Was it all nothing new for her? Could she have loved any of those other women?

Could she love me? Alli's subconscious spat the thought out before her conscious had time to censure it. *Dammit... why am I doing this to myself?* Alli cursed inwardly and squeezed her eyes shut.

They really needed to talk. Their hunger and desire had understandably side-lined the serious discussion they'd agreed to have, but Alli's mind was impatiently jumping the gun. She thought about the future, wondering where they would be tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. She questioned their devotion to each other and their intent. Would their time together be only an occasional occurrence? Would they just have a casual affair? Would they ever venture out and acknowledge themselves as a 'couple'? Would M.J. consider coming to her place for the weekend, or would she insist on hiding-out at her house?

The questions piled up relentlessly, and Alli felt her confidence waver. She knew she was thoroughly, hopelessly smitten with M.J. - she had been for two long years. But insecurity is a terrible thing, and it can undermine even the most steadfast certainties.

They *definitely* needed to have that talk, and Alli was determined to again broach the subject once they were both fully lucid and satiated.

A soft sighing noise and movement of the long leg tangled beneath her thighs stirred Alli from her worrisome ruminations, and she shifted her eyes to look at M.J. again. A small smile crept onto her lips as she let her gaze wander over the long, moonlit form that lay recumbent and sprawled out on the bed. M.J.'s face was relaxed and peaceful; the complete opposite of her usual intense, serious look. Her long, lean body was firm and toned just so... it was as close to perfection as you could get. Alli thought about how unfeminine M.J. appeared at times. Well, not 'unfeminine', exactly, just... severe. Too severe, and too stiff.

But that wasn't how she looked now. Right now she looked breathtaking, surprisingly vulnerable, and unbelievably sexy. She was all smooth planes and gentle curves, and was completely, unquestionably, feminine. Alli swallowed as her eyes strayed to the gentle expansion and contraction of M.J.'s chest and stomach. The lightly tanned skin had a thin sheen of sweat on it, and Alli bit her lower lip at the sudden urge she had to lick every ounce of dampness from the sumptuous body before her.

Smiling and propping herself up on an elbow, Alli bent her head down close to the valley between M.J.'s breasts and stuck her tongue out, delicately lapping at the beads of moisture that had pooled there.

Ohmygoddd..., Alli thought as she felt a gush of hot moisture between her legs, ...that 'satiated' part is going to take awhile.

The next time Alli awoke, she was lying on her stomach, and something warm and wet was peppering a trail of kisses from her shoulders all the way down to her calves. She smiled and turned her head to see what M.J. was up to.

Seeing that her lover was awake, M.J. grinned and teased a little more, running her hands over Alli's buttocks and thighs and gliding her fingers along curves and into crevices. Alli hummed a small moan of approval and M.J. smiled again, finally bringing her body to lie down on top of her lover. Releasing another groan of contented pleasure, Alli closed her eyes and absorbed the warm weight that enveloped her.

M.J. pushed long blonde hair aside and kissed the back of a tender neck, "How much do you trust me, Allison?" She whispered seductively into a dainty ear.

Alli's eyes flew open, "What?" She asked, her surprise obvious.

M.J. chuckled lowly, "Do you trust me?" She asked again.

Alli didn't answer right away... She couldn't. She was distracted by what M.J. had been doing, and she wasn't sure what the brunette was now asking of her. She thought for a moment, then whispered, "I want to."

M.J. chuckled again, "That's not exactly an answer, is it?"

Alli didn't respond, she could only breathe heavily and grip the sheets as M.J. resumed running her hands all over her naked flesh.

"Tell me this then," M.J. amended, "will you let me do something? Something I've been thinking about and wanting to do for so, so long...?" She rasped the enticing words into Alli's ear.

Alli swallowed hard, her heart beginning to hammer loudly in her chest at the thought of what her more-experienced lover could be planning.

M.J. leaned down closer to Alli's face and placed a gentle kiss on her shoulder, "I won't hurt you or anything... I just want you to give yourself up to me... completely... alright?"

"Oh Jesus...," Alli groaned in return, squeezing her eyes shut.

M.J. grinned and laughed softly, "Just a simple 'yes' or 'no' will suffice," she said, nipping at Alli's earlobe. "Don't worry... I think you'll like it."

Alli hesitated. M.J. wouldn't hurt her, she knew, but she couldn't be sure what kind of surprise the brunette might have up her sleeve.

"...Yes," Alli finally acquiesced in a soft hush, her fear and anxiety just barely overruled by her arousal.

M.J. smiled at Alli's sweet timidity and she placed another kiss on the back of her neck, "Good," she whispered, "you won't be sorry."

Alli felt the bed moving and heard rustling behind her, then the heat and weight of M.J.'s upper body pressed upon her again. Soft kisses were placed all over her back as M.J. slowly inched her body upward. Just as M.J. completely covered her back and nestled her face into the side of her neck, Alli felt M.J.'s hips touch against her backside, and something firm and rigid slipped in-between her thighs.

Holy *fuck, Alli thought as she sucked in a sharp breath. She was actually expecting something like handcuffs or a blindfold, not a strap-on.

M.J. smiled at the reaction and pressed her face into her lover's fragrant blonde hair. "Spread your legs a little farther," she instructed softly, reaching down to persuade Alli's thighs apart.

Alli shivered as M.J.'s breathy, sultry voice washed over her and warm hands touched her skin. The gentle touch comforted and aroused her at the same time, and she found herself cooperating and opening herself up to her lover. She was fully exposed and very vulnerable, and she idly wondered if M.J. had any idea how hard this was for her.

Sliding her knees up so that they touched Alli's thighs, M.J. grasped the blonde's waist and moved her hips so that the turgid toy slid along her lover's wetness. Alli's entire body surged

with heat as M.J. stimulated her by stroking the smooth phallus back and forth, and she groaned in anticipation while arching her back and gripping the bed sheets fiercely.

M.J. grinned again, admiring the writhing movements of the supple, softly muscular body in front of her. She placed her hands on Alli's buttocks, kneading them gently while she continued to move her hips and tease. Alli pushed back, desperate to be filled and fulfilled by the brunette and what she promised.

Alli felt M.J. lay down upon her again, "You are so beautiful," the contralto voice whispered into her ear just before warm lips placed a tender kiss on her shoulder.

Before she could fully absorb the soft words of praise, Alli felt M.J.'s familiar weight disappear from her back. A second later, she felt a firm hand on her waist and another brushing against her inner thighs as it helped the phallus gently ease into her. Guttural groans erupted from both of them, and M.J. quickly grabbed Alli's hips and pushed inside further. Alli squeezed her eyes shut and gasped aloud as incredulous sensations rocketed through her body from the tight, pleasurable fullness. Feeling M.J.'s hips and stomach pressing against her buttocks, she responded by thrusting her bottom back against her lover, evoking a soft growl from the brunette.

The harnessed end of the phallus stimulated M.J., and her already-raging need throbbed harder with every movement her petite lover made. She was unable to keep things at a moderate pace, and her pelvis began a rhythmic pumping against Alli's firm backside. Hips and thighs picked up the tempo, bringing their bodies together harder and faster, and Alli felt herself quickly climbing toward ecstasy. But she needed something more... she needed to see M.J.'s face and hold her close as they partook in this most intimate, coital act. Alli stopped her movements and twisted herself around, causing M.J. to cease her actions as well.

M.J. was somewhat confused and thought that perhaps Alli didn't like this after all. She felt a sense of loss as the warmth of Alli's body disappeared and she was forced to withdraw from her. She looked at her blonde lover with anxious questioning in her sex-hazed eyes. But Alli alleviated her fears quickly.

"Come here," the blonde urged, her voice hoarse with desire as she grasped M.J.'s hand and pulled her toward her now-reclined body. M.J. immediately positioned herself between the open, welcoming legs, and Alli maneuvered a hand to grasp the phallus and guide it back into her aching sex. Alli released a soft moan as M.J. pushed slowly and the shaft filled her again.

M.J. rested her hips on Alli's pelvis, holding herself above the smaller body while both of them heaved great breaths and wordlessly watched the emotions and expressions that played across one another's flushed faces.

M.J. could almost see the puffs of breath as they escaped from between Alli's parted, panting lips. She trailed her eyes all over the face before her... the cheeks were tinged pink, lips parted, eyes half-lidded. It was the look of pure ecstasy... it was total erotica... it was absolute beauty. She thought she had never seen anything or anyone more breathtaking. Words of love and devotion and desire swirled inside her head and danced behind her eyes, but she couldn't

persuade them to make the journey across her tongue and lips. She held her breath as she continued to helplessly drown in the glistening oceanic eyes that stared back at her and invaded her very soul.

Alli fought to contain the tears she could feel welling mercilessly in her eyes. The musky smell of sex and overheated flesh permeated the moist air between the two lovers, and Alli inhaled it freely, wanting to inhale and swallow every last morsel of the moment. She was overwhelmed by the intense feelings and raging emotions that filled her heart, and she felt it beating violently and threatening to burst free from the confines of her chest. M.J.'s face hung close to her, and she felt her eyes fill with still more tears as she considered how very deep her feelings for this beautiful brunette ran.

She had never given herself to anyone the way she gave to M.J., and she had never wanted anyone to fill her and consume her and take her the way she wanted M.J. to. She wanted to memorize every touch, every feeling, every taste, every smell... every second of every moment. She wanted to capture it all and bury it inside, keeping it safe and holding on to it forever. Her feelings were a jumbled mixture of amazement, worry, desire, adoration, trust, and most certainly... love. Alli's heart pounded loudly at the sudden, earth-shattering realization that swept over her.

My God... I love her... I really do love her.

The tears that had gathered finally escaped from the jade eyes, trickling down flushed cheeks as Alli looked up and fell deeply into pools of searching, penetrating blue. With a timid, nervous heart, Alli reached up and cupped M.J.'s face, finally whispering aloud the words that had taunted and terrorized her for so long.

"...I love you, M.J. ...God help me, but I do." Alli said in a hushed, quavering voice.

M.J. was stunned into absolute stillness. Her mouth fell open, but nothing ushered forth.

Oh God... ohGodohGodohGod, she thought, unable to grasp nor believe it. *She loves me... she loves me? ...She *loves* me!* She wanted to protest it, or deny it, or decline the honor, but she didn't. She knew she should answer back, but she couldn't do that either. All she could do was stare at Alli in complete, utter amazement.

Alli's heart pounded even louder in her chest as she watched a multitude of emotions race across the elegant features of M.J.'s face. She instantly feared that she might have made a mistake; the expression on her lover's face was one of shock and awe, then of affection and tenderness, and finally, of anxiety and panic.

But Alli would not let M.J. panic and pull away from her. If the brunette didn't return the feeling, she would have to find some way to deal with that later. Right now, what she needed was to hold her dark lover close, calm her profound emotions, and squelch the fire that raged between her thighs.

Alli silenced all thoughts by quickly winding her arms around M.J.'s neck and pulling her down to sear their lips with a ferocious kiss. Then, using what little energy she had left, she pushed M.J. to her side and flipped the larger woman onto her back so that she was now on top.

Continuing the deep, searching kisses, Alli poured every ounce of love and desire that she held inside into the oral union, and M.J. responded in kind. Tongues locked and battled as they kissed and sucked and swallowed each other's overflowing passion.

Finally breaking away, Alli pushed herself upward, bringing her knees up alongside M.J.'s waist and sliding them apart to adjust the fit of the rigid toy inside her. She slid her hands down to rest on M.J.'s taut stomach and began rocking back and forth gently, using her thighs to control and cushion the thrusts. M.J. groaned as shock waves jolted her every time Alli moved, and she reached down to clutch firm buttocks, squeezing, pulling and pushing them in an effort to speed up the action.

Soon hands began seeking out skin to grab 'hold of, fingers gripped tightly as hips thrust together, and bodies collided faster and harder against one another. Heated flesh sweated and tensed as arms and legs strained and thighs began to tremble in anticipation. Teeth clenched together and breathing hitched while fingernails dug painfully into skin and muscles began to convulse and contract in uncontrollable spasms of climactic release.

Alli threw her head back and cried out, squeezing M.J.'s body between her thighs and gasping loudly for breath. M.J. grabbed Alli's hips and held on tightly, acutely feeling her lover pulse against her with the paroxysmal energy of a shattering orgasm. The burning heat that had lain coiled up inside M.J.'s body ignited at last, blinding her as she also came with a violent surge of intense ecstasy. She made a choking noise as her lungs struggled for breath and her whole body shuddered. Her fingers gripped soft flesh and she pressed her pelvis upward, pulling Alli's hips down and holding them fast against her while the lingering shockwaves resonated throughout her body over and over again.

*"Desperate for changing, starving for truth
Closer to where I started, I'm chasing after you;
I'm falling even more in love with you
I'm letting go of all I've held onto
I'm standing here until you make me move
I'm hanging by a moment here with you;
I'm living for the only thing I know
I'm running and not quite sure where to go
And I don't know what I'm diving into
Just hanging by a moment here with you." - Lifehouse*

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

A whisper of freon-cooled air drifted across the bedroom, ruffling the window blinds and chilling the dampened flesh of the woman who lay wide awake on the king-sized bed.

M.J. had been awake for some time, watching her sleeping companion and basking in the quiet, peaceful serenity of the moment. Well... it had been **somewhat** peaceful and serene.

Ever since Alli made her heart-stopping admission, M.J. had felt nervous and a little high-strung, unable to do anything but replay Alli's words over and over inside her head. She distinctly remembered the look in the watery aqua eyes... she recalled the other-worldly feeling that had swept over her... and she rehashed her brilliant, spur-of-the-moment response of... silence.

*...Idiot. *Why* didn't I say it back? Why didn't I say *some*thing!?* M.J. chastised herself repeatedly. *What must she have thought? What must she think now?! ...I'm such a *fucking* jerk,* she lamented.

M.J. turned her head to look again upon the beautiful, fair face of her lover. She was so tranquil and delicate in sleep; the rose-colored lips were slightly parted, the dark lashes were closed... she looked like an angel. M.J. reached out and lightly fingered a strand of long, flaxen-colored hair, closing her eyes as she thought about the beauty and passion they'd shared this night.

Alli was an extraordinary lover... not too shy, not too bold. She had the perfect combination of demureness and aggressiveness; at one time soft and yielding, at the next, forward and in control. M.J. marveled again at how she'd never felt secure in giving up her control to anyone before, but with Alli, she didn't mind at all.

She reveled in the taste of Alli's lips as they lavished her mouth with kisses, speaking their devotion with every swirl and stab of the dainty tongue. She loved the feel of the petite body lying on top of her, guiding her movements and manipulating her release. With relish, she replayed the erotic experience of having Alli's petite, shapely legs straddling her head as the blonde knelt above her and allowed her eager tongue to delve into the secret recesses that drove the small woman wild with pleasure. She adored the warmth of Alli's body as it wrapped around and merged with hers, infusing her with affection and desire... and love.

She wished Alli was awake; she wanted to tell her that she was sorry for once again being such a coward. She wanted to kiss her and taste her and make love to her again. She wanted to show her that she trusted her... that she loved her. She did love Allison... she just froze up when it came to saying it out loud.

...Idiot, M.J. thought again, rolling her eyes at herself.

She edged toward the blonde head and kissed it very lightly, blue eyes fluttering shut as she inhaled the comfort and warmth of Alli's presence. Her tightly-wound libido threatened to make M.J. do more than just kiss her lover, but she knew that she should let the little blonde sleep. She

should be sleeping too, but that was pretty much out of the question by this point. One more kiss was delivered, then M.J. silently slipped out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

Quietly closing the door and flipping on the lights, M.J. began to run the shower. Hoping to quell the strange feeling that had arisen in the pit of her stomach, she stepped inside and immediately immersed herself in the hot water. As she began to wash herself, she examined her body. It was the same body she washed every day, but it seemed somehow different now. It was as though it had experienced something completely new, and it felt ... altered... alive... loved.

She had no idea that it could feel this way to love and be loved - truly loved - in return. She never would have believed it possible.

*So is this what it's like to really love someone? To make love? To be *in* love?* She mused in amazement. *But what did this newfound closeness mean? What was the next step? Where should things go from here? What does Alli want?* The relentless questions were coming hard and fast, and M.J. closed her eyes in exasperation, slumping into the corner of the shower and resting her head against the tile wall.

Her mind was a maelstrom of thoughts. There were many things she had questions about, and there were many answers she didn't know; but one thing she did know was, she was completely in love with Allison. Undeniably, unquestionably, without a doubt... she loved her.

Now all she had to do was overcome her crippling fears and tell Alli that.

When Alli awoke, she could feel that something wasn't right. She jerked her head up off the pillow and immediately turned to the other side of the bed.

It was empty.

Oh Jesus... I knew it... I knew it would freak her out, Alli thought, feeling an immediate panic. *You just *had* to go and blab the 'L' word, didn't you Allison? ...Just *could not* wait until we had our 'talk'... nooo... had to go and ruin it... *AGAIN*! Fuck!* Alli scolded herself internally as she sat up on the edge of the bed, wondering where M.J. might have snuck off to, and wondering what she should do now.

As she glanced around the neat but sparsely-appointed room, Alli saw a robe lying at the bottom of the bed. Obviously M.J. had laid the garment out for her, and it made her lips twitch in a small, hopeful smile.

Well... maybe all is not lost, Alli thought as she slipped the over-sized robe on.

She tied the sash and pulled the collar up around her neck, inhaling a scent that unmistakably belonged to M.J. The thought triggered a flash of memory, and Alli reveled in the recollection of the burning sensuality and tender affection that had poured from her dark lover during their night

of intense, deeply emotional lovemaking.

Many times during their couplings, M.J.'s face had worn an expression that Alli had never seen before. It was soft and beautiful and incredibly loving... it was gentle and adoring and awed... it was giving and devoted... it was trusting. Something had broken free somewhere inside her. M.J. truly had changed. That was part of the reason Alli had blurted out her feelings... she had thought that it was 'safe' to confess them. But M.J.'s surprised look and silent answer seemed to disagree.

Why didn't I just keep my mouth shut? Alli lamented again. *I wonder what she'll say this morning,* she mused worriedly, *I wonder what's going through her mind. Well... only one way to find out,* Alli concluded, drawing a deep breath as she headed for the door.

Finally arriving downstairs, Alli's nose led her toward the smell of coffee and the kitchen, where she found M.J. freshly showered and standing at the counter. Alli watched for a moment as the brunette buttered toast and poured coffee into two cups. Alli supposed she should feel slightly embarrassed that M.J. had obviously been up for some time while she still slept... but then again, they had given each other quite a workout last night.

Alli was admiring the damp glossiness of M.J.'s long, dark hair when the taller woman suddenly sensed her presence and turned around. They absorbed one another for just a second before breaking into mutual, nervous smiles. They both hesitated but said nothing; the tiny grins on their lips were the only expressions of feeling they gave away. They knew they needed to talk about everything, but neither one wanted to take the first step.

The only thing that filled Alli's mind was the fear that she'd scared M.J. by saying 'I love you' last night. Part of her wanted to turn back the clock and take it back, but another part of her wanted to just walk up to the tall beauty and kiss her and hold her and reassure her that everything was alright. But the pensive, uncertain look on M.J.'s face warned her away from that thought.

M.J.'s mind could only focus on the fact that she had not said 'I love you' back to Alli, and that the blonde was probably upset with her. She hated the awkward silence that hung in the air and she forced herself to say something to ease the disquiet.

"Uhm... I was going to bring you something to eat," M.J. finally muttered, motioning toward the toast and coffee. She'd never had an overnight guest, and she felt woefully inadequate when it came to playing hostess.

Alli smiled uneasily, "Thanks, but, uhm... mind if I grab a shower first?" She asked, motioning her thumb over her shoulder.

"No, no, go ahead." M.J. murmured, not moving from her spot. She watched with mixed feelings as Alli quirked a tiny smile then turned and disappeared from the kitchen.

Well what the hell am I supposed to do now? M.J. thought, releasing a sigh and rolling her eyes skyward.

Allison stood in the huge tile-and-glass shower, letting the jets pummel her head with hot water. Her mind was a jumbled mess of worry, confusion, and anxiety. She thought about last week, about last night, and about this morning; she wondered about what had happened, what's going to happen, and what she **wanted** to happen.

M.J.'s hesitation and apparent discomfort worried her. Was this just the brunette's typical, aloof 'morning after' persona, or was she just nervous because of what Alli had said?

Fuck if I know, Alli thought to herself, beginning to feel the familiar, crushing grip of frustration as it threatened to strangle her heart. **Why* did I have to go and ruin things?! I sort-of told her what I wanted yesterday, but she never told me anything! I have NO idea what she wants from this whole thing, and STILL I had to go and blab 'I love you'... Dammit!* Alli cursed herself inwardly.

*What was I thinking?! That she'd be perfectly *fine* with it? That she'd just act completely casual and at-ease? That she'd instantly invite me to stay with her the whole weekend? ...Christ, I must be a *complete* idiot!* She closed her eyes and raised her face to the pulsing water.

And I must be even crazier to think that she'd consider coming to stay with me or anything, she chastised inwardly. *Maybe it'll never be more than this one-night stand shit... maybe we're just *too* fucked up to 'make it' together... maybe I'm just fooling myself*, Alli lamented, feeling old doubts and fears surfacing again. *...How fucking stupid can I *be* in one lifetime?!* She thought, feeling her heart constrict with worry.

But... a part of her refused to give in to defeat so easily; it refused to surrender after finally melting away the iccap that had frozen them for so long.

*God... get a *grip*, Allison!* She chastised, shaking her head and forcibly pushing the wretched thoughts from her muddled mind.

Yes, they still had problems; all couples have problems. They had made great strides, but it would probably be a long, difficult journey before they reached any kind of 'normalcy' in their relationship. But they would reach it... Alli was determined. She really didn't know what she was doing, and she felt like they both were floundering about in a sea of confusion. She didn't know what M.J. wanted, and truthfully, she wasn't entirely sure what she wanted either; but she would not just give up and walk away.

You don't walk away from something like this, she told herself, *you don't walk away from something so incredible and so beautiful and so... right.*

Maybe she had just pushed too hard, too quickly. If M.J. needed time, Alli would give her time.

She would give her space and room to breathe... but she would not walk away. Not this time.

When Alli finally reappeared in the kitchen entryway, M.J. was startled to see that she was fully dressed. Alli gave her an uneasy look and stood there, not walking any closer. It seemed obvious that she'd been thinking about things too much, just like M.J. had been, and based on her attire, it also seemed obvious that she was not staying. M.J. felt a twinge of disappointment constrict her throat, and she suddenly had trouble breathing.

"Do you, uh, want something to eat?" M.J. asked, motioning to the toast and coffee that still waited on the table.

Alli hesitated for a second, her fingers nervously clutching her purse, "Uhm... thanks, but... I should probably get going." The words were quiet and heavy with uncertainty.

"Oh... okay," M.J. replied, averting her eyes and frowning slightly in disappointment and confusion.

A multitude of thoughts rushed forth. Was Alli just feeling awkward and uncomfortable? Was she upset because M.J. had not returned her declaration of love? Or was she having regrets and second thoughts again? M.J. felt like screaming, but she refrained. She couldn't say anything; her tongue felt thick and dry and tangled up inside. She felt like she was trapped in a bad dream, and she didn't know how to get out or wake up. She just continued to watch Allison in silence; her dark brows twisted in conflict and her pale blue eyes riveted to Alli's glistening blue-green.

Alli saw the mixed emotions flash across M.J.'s face, and she briefly thought that perhaps she had misread the body language coming from the complicated brunette. Still, as M.J. stood there saying nothing and looking like a puppy about to piddle on the floor, Alli knew that she should just go and leave M.J. alone. Both of them obviously needed a day to decompress and think things over.

She didn't want to push M.J. any further, but Alli couldn't help but feel a small bubble of worry well up inside her chest. She sensed history about to repeat itself as she watched M.J.'s internal struggle. She loved the tall, stoic beauty, but this muted, unspoken shit **really** had to cease. Alli felt the distinctive burn of frustrated tears as they began to accumulate behind her eyes.

I will not cry... not now... not again.

A few more seconds elapsed and they stood in the bright kitchen in uncomfortable silence, each tortured by their own perilous thoughts. It felt like an eternity had passed until Alli finally cleared her throat and spoke.

"Well, I guess I'll uhm... talk to you later...?" She spoke the words with quiet, questioning hesitation and a sad, tearful undertone.

"Okay." M.J. murmured in response, nodding slightly and feeling numb.

Their eyes met once more before Alli turned and walked away.

M.J. stood there, staring dumbly. Her brain felt like it was melting away like wax, her heart thumped dull and hollow in her chest, and her feet felt like they were stuck in rapidly-hardening concrete. The sound of the front door closing echoed through the empty house and jarred her all the way down to her bones.

What the hell just happened?

*"There used to be a graying tower alone on the sea
You became the light on the dark side of me;
Love remains, a drug that's the high and not the pill
But did you know that when it snows, my eyes become large
And the light that you shine can't be seen;
Baby, I compare you to a kiss from a rose on the gray
The more I get of you the stranger it feels, yeah
And now that your rose is in bloom
A light hits the gloom on the gray." - Seal*

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE - CONCLUSION

Alli lay on her bed staring up at the ceiling, the silence intermittently punctuated by a lingering snuffle. She meticulously counted and dissected every crack and brown water stain in the stucco... anything to avoid thinking about what had gone wrong back at M.J.'s house. But the distraction couldn't last forever.

She ended up crying most of the whole way home, and when she reached her apartment, she went straight to her bedroom and stripped off her clothes. They held a combination of her own scent plus the distinctive aroma of sex mixed with M.J., and her olfactory senses just couldn't handle it.

As determined as she was not to dwell on any depressing thoughts, she couldn't help but rehash the morning over and over. Hoping to discover any signals she may have misread or any signs she might have missed, she tried once again to decipher M.J.'s enigmatic hesitancy.

*I just don't understand WHY she won't talk to me?! She talked to me before... she told me about her father... why is this time different? Why can't she just *tell* me what she's thinking? I've spilled my guts to her, but all she does is stand there and give me that LOOK! If I scared her or*

*came on too strong, why doesn't she just *say* so instead of saying *nothing*! JESUS! Angry tears burned behind Alli's eyes as she turned the events over in her mind.*

*I probably shouldn't have walked out - I *swore* that I wouldn't walk away - and yet, here I am. A chicken-shit fugitive... on the lam from something and someone I want *so* badly. Goddammit... why does this have to be so fucking HARD?! She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, fighting the urge to scream.*

Maybe she just doesn't love me. Maybe it's just ME who wants the relationship and the commitment. Maybe she can only be 'committed' to a little roll in the hay every once in awhile? Just a little fuck-buddy to have a nice, orgasmic fling with now and then. Fear and doubt riddled her mind like a cancer, eating away any surety she'd thought she felt.

*No... that can't be it... she CAN'T just want that... can she?! Oh GOD! I just don't KNOW anymore! I don't know *ANYTHING*!*

Theirs was an unconventional relationship, for sure; it had been from the get-go. They'd never officially 'dated'... they'd never 'gone out'... they'd never even called each other on the phone, for chrissake. All they'd ever done was have wild monkey sex together, and then part ways without discussing a single thing. It was *completely* fucked up. So how could she expect any of it to go smoothly? How could either of them expect any sort of normalcy, now that they'd jumped the gun yet again by sleeping together before discussing anything?

"Augh! Why does this always happen to me?!" Alli yelled aloud, not receiving an answer. It all seemed so impossible and improbable, and it was frustrating as hell.

Alli began to doubt all possibility of them ever having any kind of 'normal' relationship. She had been holding out hope, telling herself that no matter what, they could somehow make it work. But now she wasn't so sure.

In the back of her mind, hidden away from everyone - even herself at times - Alli had begun to think about a future with M.J. She had begun to make plans and thought constantly about what she wanted for herself, for her partner, and for the two of them together.

She wanted to get inside M.J.'s head. It would be a challenge, for sure, but she wanted to break down all the barriers and tear down all the walls that surrounded a heart that, she knew, was aching to break free. She wanted to cross every pointless boundary that her dark, complicated lover had ever constructed for herself. She wanted to strip her naked, figuratively as well as literally.

She also wanted to be closer to M.J., so close that she could crawl inside her skin. She wanted to go to bed with her every night knowing that she'd be there when she woke up in the morning... she wanted them to move one another to tears and then soothe them away, together. She wanted to find out what M.J.'s favorite foods were... she wanted to go grocery shopping together and make dinner together and have breakfast in bed together. She wanted to go to the movies and walk hand in hand on the beach at sunrise and sunset... she wanted to curl up together on a lazy

Sunday afternoon and rub M.J.'s back and play with her hair until they both fell asleep. She wanted to lie in front of the fireplace and talk about the past and the future and all the possibilities that lay ahead of them. She even thought about wanting the ultimate - to try to have a baby together some day.

But these were all things that they needed to **talk** about... these were things that they **should** have talked about before sleeping together, **AGAIN**. It seemed that their relationship had started out ass-backwards, and they would have to work in reverse, extra hard, to achieve any type of 'normalcy'... **if** that was even possible anymore.

But, was Alli willing to do that, still? In light of all the repetitive agony and constant head-fuck, was she willing to do anything to make it work with M.J.?

She didn't know. She only knew that, despite the frustration and the constant set-backs, she loved M.J., plain and simple.

*Only problem is, we're not plain, and love is *never* simple.*

M.J. lay on her bed, staring once again at her whirling ceiling fan. She pretty much had every idiosyncratic movement of the damn thing memorized by now, right down to the tiny little squeak it made after running for exactly 22 minutes. Her body was unflinching, but her mind spun like beaters in a mixing bowl. So many thoughts crowded her mind, she felt her brain swell under the maddening pressure.

Sighing aloud, she finally turned on her side, reaching out to grab the pillow that Alli had lain upon just that morning. As she pulled it to her face, she inhaled the fragile scent of Alli's aroma, which clung to the fabric and surrounded her like the faint memory of a wonderful dream. She desperately missed the gentle warmth and supple silkiness of Alli's body lying beside her, beneath her, and on top of her. She longed for the delicate touches, the intimate kisses, and the passionate embraces.

In her mind's eye, she recalled the soft but intense emotion that overtook Alli's features when they locked eyes... the silent declaration of love that was always there... the adoration and devotion that shone so brightly in the clear oceanic depths. How could she have ever mistaken the meaning of the look that came from those aqua soul-doors?. They were always so open, so honest... they pierced her very soul with their overwhelming beauty and emotion. *How could I be so stupid?* M.J. asked herself as she stared dumbly at her bedroom wall.

She had said that we weren't going to jump right into anything, but then she said 'I love you' and threw me for a loop, and I just didn't know how to handle that... I wasn't prepared for it, and I panicked, M.J. thought, rolling her eyes at herself.

More than that, though, M.J. asked herself why she was so afraid, STILL? How long would she let fear and cowardice run her life into the ground? How much anguish would she subject herself

to because of her stupid, fucking insecurities? It had to end. It could not go on. She had let fear rule her for far too long. Fear of the past, fear of the future, fear of the unknown... all of it had to go before it ruined everything. And she knew that she was indeed in danger of ruining things with Allison for good.

She blamed herself for today's fuck-up. She should have said what she wanted or talked about how she felt, especially when she knew that was what Alli wanted and needed. But Alli's sudden declaration of love came out of left field, and she had been caught off-guard. They had agreed to talk about things, and M.J. **was** willing to talk, but Alli abruptly disappeared before she'd worked up the nerve to say anything.

*'Nerve'? What 'nerve'? You don't have any nerve whatsoever, you fucking pussy! No wonder she bailed on your pathetic ass! M.J. scolded herself and rolled her eyes. You had the perfect opportunity, dumbass, and you blew it - AGAIN... when are you gonna *LEARN*?!*

She thought she had learned; she thought she had gotten over her fears and dropped her cowardly habits. But old habits die hard, and the fear of being hurt is one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome.

M.J. knew now, for certain, that Alli loved her... so what was the problem? Why was she still scared? Why was it so difficult to just take the plunge and admit that she loved her back? She knew she was completely in love with Allison; she wanted to be with her, she wanted a **real** relationship with her, and she wanted a **real** commitment.

However... that acknowledgement, and the realization that her life was on the verge of changing permanently and irretrievably, was what scared her beyond belief.

She'd only ever had one other serious relationship in her life, and when that ended badly, she declared that she was finished with 'love' and swore she'd never fall for anyone again.

*Easier said than done though, isn't it? She thought. When you find the right one, you can't stop yourself from falling, she admitted. It's a natural phenomenon, falling in love... why can't I just let go and let it happen? She scolded internally. I love her... I want her... I want to build a *life* with her, for chrissake, she thought. I've never wanted that before... not with *anyone*, *ever*... surely that's a 'sign'.*

But not all the answers to life's dilemmas can be found in 'signs', and even then, the 'signs' are often unclear.

Alli loves me, M.J. assured herself, knowing that this was perhaps the only 'sign' she really needed. I love her, and she loves me... I love her, and she loves me... I love her, and she loves me...

The words became a looping mantra inside her head as her eyes slowly slid shut and she drew a deep, soul-cleansing breath.

M.J. Whitton lived her life feeling very confident and secure with herself and her abilities. But right now, she was more scared and uncertain than she'd ever been in her 34 years.

A restless afternoon and evening passed, and as night finally began to fall, Alli sat slouched on her sofa, mindlessly watching a bad cable movie. She had not eaten dinner, and her stomach growled loudly as she watched the two lead characters proclaim their undying love for one another before kissing and undressing and falling into bed together.

"Oh yeah, sure... on *TV* they can say 'I love you' to each other with noooo problems. But not in the real world! Noooo siree... the real world is too *fucked* for that!" Alli spoke the sarcastic words aloud. She shook her head at herself and ruffled her hands through her hair, thinking that she was just being ridiculous and pathetic. Her stomach growled again, seemingly endorsing her thoughts. She was just considering calling for a pizza delivery when her doorbell sounded, interrupting her food musings.

"Fuck off," she murmured aloud again. She most definitely did not want to see nor speak to anyone.

The ringer sounded again and she rolled her eyes in irritation. Sighing loudly, she pulled herself up off the sofa and shuffled to the doorway, not bothering to look out the peep-hole.

What she saw when she opened the door nearly took her breath away.

M.J. stood there, an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, and a hand clutched tightly at her side while she shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. She had an uncertain, almost frightened look in her pale blue eyes, and a nervous hand raked through her already-disheveled hair.

"I'm sorry," M.J. blurted out immediately.

Alli's eyes went wide and her mouth opened in silent surprise.

"I didn't want you to leave this morning... I should have told you that... I should have told you a lot of things," M.J. said, her voice tremulous and low. She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, they pierced Alli with a bright, profound clarity.

"I... I love you, Allison." M.J.'s voice cracked from the strain, but the words were most definitely clear, and most definitely real.

Tears immediately flooded Alli's eyes, and she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from crying out. A hesitant tongue darted across M.J.'s lips as she continued to pin Alli with an intense, earnest look.

"I'm sorry I didn't say it before... I *wanted* to say it, but I...", she paused, fighting to control her

rapid-fire blubbering, "...I was... scared. I was *so* scared."

M.J. spoke in a near-whisper and her voice quavered unsteadily. Her eyes darted all around Alli's face, trying to gauge the blonde's expression and prepare for the reaction. Before she could even take a breath, Alli reached up and grabbed her, pulling her down for a long, deep, emancipating kiss that lasted at least a full minute.

Finally breaking apart, they kept their foreheads pressed against each other as they paused and breathed and thanked the fates above for this turning tide.

"We can be scared together...okay?" Alli finally whispered, her lips brushing against M.J.'s.

M.J. smiled and nodded, "Okay." She answered, her arms wrapping around Alli's waist and hugging the petite body against her.

With those simple words, and in that brief but power-packed moment, all Alli's doubts melted away, and all M.J.'s walls of fear came tumbling down.

The first rays of dawn were just filtering through the white mini-blinds, illuminating the small bedroom in a soft sheen of golden, misty light.

Alli's eyes fluttered open, her internal clock waking her much too early for a weekend morning. She sighed and closed her eyes again, telling her brain to give her a break and go back to sleep. Shifting slightly, she immediately became aware that something, or someone, was touching her. A smile touched her lips and slowly spread across her face.

M.J., she thought, ...she's here... she's really and truly here with me.

She was lying on her back and M.J. lay on her stomach beside her with one hand splayed out across Alli's stomach. Alli reached down and gently placed her hand on top of M.J.'s, feeling the way it rose and fell with each breath she took and reveling in its warm strength and security.

It felt so familiar, lying there with M.J., as though they'd been together like this for years and years. And yet, it had taken them so long to reach this point. So much pain and anger; so much sadness and longing and frustration.

But it all worked out... the tides finally turned in our favor, Alli thought as another smile flitted across her lips. Her hand slid up M.J.'s arm and she let the pads of her fingers trace a delicate trail on her slumbering lover's velvety skin.

M.J. stirred, the warm hand on Alli's stomach twitching and squeezing gently. Alli smiled again and turned on her side toward the brunette. She slid a thigh over M.J.'s hip, bringing her leg to rest on her lover's firm ass as she reached her arm across the broad shoulders and gave a tender, reassuring hug.

M.J. released a soft sigh and turned so that they faced each other and Alli immediately wiggled in closer, sliding her leg up over M.J.'s thigh and slipping her arm around the trim waist, pulling their bodies closer together.

Alli felt the pressure of a kiss pressed lovingly against her temple, and she grinned into the neck that she snuggled into. M.J.'s arms encircled her body and soft, gentle hands stroked the skin of her back... around and around... up, then down... up, then down. Alli placed a kiss in the hollow of M.J.'s throat and let her hand trail across her lover's waist and down her stomach until it came in contact with the small patch of soft, wiry curls.

M.J. drew a deep breath and held it for a moment as Alli's fingers glided across her slickened sex. When the nimble, probing fingers eased into her, she released the breath as a lingering groan. Not wanting to enjoy the rush all alone, M.J. slid a hand down to Alli's legs, stroking the ultra-soft skin of the blonde's inner thighs before slipping her fingers into the waiting wetness.

Slowly they began their mutual, rhythmic motions, their hips moving against each other and their breath quickening as their desire mounted. Alli was the first to succumb to the sweet torture, the waves of pleasure crashing all around her as her body spasmed and she came, contracting and pulsing around M.J.'s thrusting fingers. Her climax triggered M.J.'s, and the brunette fell right behind her, hard and fast.

They held on to each other tightly as they slipped beneath the surface of the unseen water, tumbling head over heels in the surging, roiling ocean surf. A breathless eternity seemed to pass before the darkness receded and they opened their eyes. Gazing at each other in blissful wonder and adoration, they smiled and pressed their lips together, breathing life into one another and confirming their immeasurable love and devotion with each tender kiss and caress.

They finally broke apart, their faces still touching as their eyes closed and they breathed in gentle harmony together.

"I love you." M.J. whispered against Alli's lips.

"I love you." Alli returned before joining their mouths again.

No longer would either of them yearn for someone to love. No longer would they be afraid. No longer would they flounder in the deep, dark, uncertain waters.

The turning tides had at last washed their lonely, frightened souls ashore. They had been rescued.

*** THE END ***

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to send feedback and comments to a_k_naten@yahoo.com , or visit me at: http://www.geocities.com/a_k_naten .

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