Private Dancer
Nevea Lane

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ISBN: 978-0-557-71957-0

Published by LuLu.Com

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Dedicated to my friends, family and fans… you truly keep a woman going and keep her writing.

Chapter One – The Dancer

Concentrate Marise, she thought, as she slithered up the pole staring at the cracked ceiling. *If I count the water spots on the wall, I can forget about the numerous eyes staring at my body. I can pretend the thick smoke from cigars and cigarettes is fog. If only could tune out the thundering bass of this song, I will get through this. If only I could tune out everything.* She slid down the pole with her eyes closed. Marise James tried to ignore the leering patrons of Harem Adult Bar and Club, the seediest, most despicable strip club in the city. She tried to audition at the higher end clubs, where bikini tops were required. Tucked away in the warehouse district of downtown, Marise prayed that no one would ever see her opening the bright red door to the strip club. Every day, as she walked the blocks from her normal, respectable day job as a secretary, she prayed no one would find out about her second 'job'

As the tempo of the song increased, Marise rotated her hips in time to the music.

"It's just you and the music, keep it together." She muttered to herself, sashaying down the long rectangular stage. The red, blue, and white lights lining the edges of the stage blinded her. She would never complain about the lights in her eyes. She knew what those lights kept her from seeing. They protected her from seeing one of the strippers giving a customer a blowjob in the dark corner by the bar. The lights shielded her from seeing the details of the faces of all those men that were staring at her half-naked body.

Even as the music blared from the speakers tucked in the four corners of compact club, she could still hear the drunken blabbering of the regulars, screaming at her to 'show some tits'. It had taken months to learn to ignore the catcalls and whistles of the pimps, old men, young college boys, and lesbians. Her skin still crawled at the shouts to "take it all off".

Marise snorted to herself. She knew better now. At her audition eight months ago, she paid too close attention to the howls and whistles. Listening to the lecherous requests of the regulars, Marise had nervously pulled off the top to the red bikini and exposed her breast. The house-mother and retired stripper stomped on the black lacquer stage, and yanked Marise off by her

elbow. Marise's brown eyes glazed over as the women berated her for being so ignorant. The state would shut them down if they knew they served alcohol and naked women were parading around. Marise didn't know that serving alcohol meant absolutely no full nudity. Even as she wiped away the tears from being rebuked, Marise knew needed this job. She begged for a chance and apologized for her ignorance, even though she was internally grateful that there was no full nudity. Marise would take whatever grace she could get.

She reminded herself every night of this self-imposed sentence was her choice. The nagging notion that it was her only option always made her pause. Song after song, night after night for eight long months, she endured this humiliation to save her husband. If she didn't come up with the rest of the money soon, Lenny would cut off Darryl's hands. She didn't want an amputee for a husband if she could prevent it.

Marise shook the self-pitying thoughts from her head. Darryl had been good to her in their five years of marriage, and now, she was just trying to be good to him. His gambling problem may have gotten them into this, she thought as she twirled and slid into a split, she knew this was the way to get them out of it. *I only need a little more money to pay back all the money that Darryl had borrowed from Lenny.*

The song stopped, the last notes lost in the banging of glasses and high-pitched whistles. Marise bent to pick up the bills tossed on the stage. A few five-dollar bills and a lot of singles didn't amount to much for a song.

Just as Marise was doing a mental tally of the amount of cash she just made, a twenty dollar bill, folded neatly down the center, stared at her the end of the stage. *What? Who tips a twenty for a stage dance?* Marise thought. Even as Marise pushed a lock of the red wig from her eyes, she hoped she was not mistaken that a twenty lay on the stage. *A high tipper, great*! She would be able to pay her cab fare and still have enough left over for the jar at home. Marise crawled on her hands and knees to the end of the stage, carefully dodging the roaming hands trying to touch her legs and breasts. The cool smooth stage felt like ice on her heated skin. Although Marise's mind was not there, she could not control her traitorous nipples from peaking at the touch of the

cold lacquer. Stifling an inward groan at her body's misleading reaction, she picked up the twenty. As she was tucking the crisp bill into her cleavage, she heard a low, primal growl. She knew it wasn't her; her growls were only saved for those getting too close without paying.

Slowly, she looked up, afraid that some type of dog was on the loose. As her pupils adjusted to staring beyond the red bulb in front of her, saw two tan hands in front of her, pressed so hard on the stage the knuckles were white. Her gaze traveled upward, past the sleeves of a suit jacket, and Marise tried to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach. She knew something was wrong before she saw the thing she feared. She was staring into the cold blue eyes of her other boss.

Chapter Two- From Kasen Eyes

As Kasen Montgomery stared into the wide eyes of his assistant, he thought, *without her glasses, I can see the flecks of hazel in her maple colored eyes.* Sucking in his breath, Kasen shook his head and reminded himself where he was and why he was there. His administrative assistant, Marise was here and he didn't know why. His hair in a bun, glasses perched on her nose, proper and shy assistant was shaking her stuff up and down on a stage. His Marise could not possibly be stripping. He could not stand by and let his secretary moonlight like this, could he? Kasen couldn't stop the thoughts as they crashed into his mind. The moment their eyes met, despite her disguise, he knew it was Marise. His Marise could not possibly be stripping. Kasen had to shake himself. She was not 'his'. Yet, he could not stand the thought of his secretary moonlighting like this. What if his clients find out? Of course, he didn't think any of the marketing executives and the advertising agents he worked with would come to this dump. So why was he here?

If it were a laughing matter, Kasen would've chuckled as he watched Marise's eyes transition from wide shock to thin angry slits. He watched as she backed up, doggy style, off the stage. *Why would she back up off the stage? Probably not to give you a full view of her curvy backside you pervert.* His inner conscience was warring with his baser self. A small part of him wanted to look, to remember every curve of her lush body to warm him when he was alone in his bed at night. The other part of him wanted to punch any guy that looked at her square in the nose.

A garbled voice battled through the clanking glasses and the bass music.

"Give it up for Destiny everyone. That was Destiny, the newbie; y'all go ahead and clap now."

Kasen growled deep in his throat when the last of her flaming red wig disappeared behind the heavy black curtain on the side of the stage and stormed to the bar like a man possessed. Slamming down several Franklins from his billfold, he stared down the bartender until the cocoa

colored man turned to him. The blonde hair of the bartender stood out against his black leather vest. His skinny fingers slid over Kasen's as he fingered the money.

"What can I do for you, handsome?"

"I want the VIP emptied out in five minutes. I want Destiny to come and give me a private dance."

The bartender whistled low and fingered the hundreds again, his eyes never lever Kasen's.

"It will cost you more than three hundred bucks, high roller." Kasen swore that the bartender licked his lips at him. Kasen quickly flicked open his wallet, and pulled out the rest of the bills he'd. He plopped the crisp bills on the table and stared the bartender.

"You know, Destiny is new here, but we have some more, er, experienced dancers that can give you way more," the flirty bartender said, sweeping his arm in an ark to draw Kasen's attention. Kasen had already seen what the bartender had in mind. In the short time that he'd been there, he'd seen two women lead three men into the alley. He'd also seen numerous hand jobs and a few blowjobs.

"No, I want Destiny, now." Kasen turned his back and walked to the entrance of the VIP lounge. As he waited for the half-dressed women to scamper out of the room, he looked at the floor. *Didn't I just vow this morning to stop thinking about her? She was married and off-limits.*

Unfortunately, Kasen knew in his heart he could not stop thinking about Marise. It was easier to forget about breathing. Kasen didn't realize he was pacing until he ran into a petite dancer. She looked like a porcelain doll with her dark eyes and jet black hair. She gave him an inviting smile and looked him up and down as if he was the main course at dinner. *Nothing like my Marise. Marise is at least 5'10". Damn, I'm doing it again.* He knew she wasn't his; every woman he was around could not measure up to Marise.

His current girlfriend called him just that morning to cancel their lunch and to tell him that he'd an unhealthy attachment to work and to his secretary. As Claire ranted and raved on how it was silly and inappropriate to call his secretary before and after lunch to let them know he was running late, Kasen remembered why he started calling Marise before and after lunch.

One of his meetings had run over, and when Kasen finally waltzed into the office three hours after he should've been back, Marise looked up in him with a look of relief. She stood up and wiped her tears from her eyes.

"I'm so glad you made it back!"

"Why? Did something happen?" He couldn't help but to smirk at her emotional state.

"Yes, a bridge collapsed, I didn't know if you were on it or not. It was close to the place where your meeting was scheduled." Kasen had dropped his briefcase at her concern for him. Since then, he'd been hooked on making sure she knew he was careful.

Kasen shook himself out of the pleasant memory. *Good riddance to Claire, I was getting tired of her. I'm not an unhealthy sexual deviant and I'm not infatuated with my secretary. So what if I like a little spanking or being in control?* He groaned and kept pacing, ignoring the obvious invite from the woman he'd collided with. If he kept thinking about Marise and spanking, his docile manhood would awaken. The hovering women would close in like vultures. He knew he'd acted stupid and waved a stack of crisp bills at the bartender. He knew he was already the prey from walking into to cloudy club in a tailored suit. He would've to burn the suit; he would never be able to get the smell of cigarettes out of it. Kasen paced in front of the heavy red curtain, waiting for the last person to leave. Frustrated, he ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair again. He knew he looked like a wreck. His short hair was probably tousled and out of place, and he'd unhitched his turquoise tie after he saw Marise's first provocative dance on the stage. *Get a grip. You know she is too docile for your quirks man. And, she is married!* Screaming at himself mentally, Kasen wondered again, *why am I here? I'm no masochist.* Again, his sane self answered, *you are just concerned for her.* Why did he feel there was a *yeah*

right, hidden in that somewhere? He knew that she was not the one for him. Something within her was sad and he didn't like it. It was the only reason he followed her to this place. For the past year, her face would be bright and happy while she worked. Her almond-shaped eyes would light up with laughter, although she never laughed aloud. But, when the clock struck five, that spark was gone and she looked depressed. Kasen felt her eyes were a window into her heart. While Kasen wanted to comfort her, and be merely a concerned employer, he didn't want to put himself in an already difficult position. Kasen could not help his curiosity. Curiosity always killed the cat.

He'd felt a surge of adrenaline and the need to protect her overwhelmed him. Today he'd decided he would know why her bright aura would blackout at the appointed hour. After she shut down and gave him a brief nod goodnight, he watched her intently as she got in the elevator. He counted to ten and then raced down the stairs of the building and was at the ground floor before she was off the elevator. He followed her, not to the garage as he thought, but down the side of the building to a small coffee shop. He waited outside in the alley until she emerged again. He waited for fifteen minutes and what came out of the coffee shop was not his efficient, ebony haired secretary, but a red-haired, scantily clad woman wearing red sneakers, and an onyx skirt that barely came to her knees. He would not think it was Marise and would've continued to wait if he'd not noticed her calves. They were well defined and he would know them from anywhere. He'd spent many debriefing meetings trying to avoid them as if they were diseased. He failed, he became mesmerized by them when she would walk away. Lucky for him, she never turned around to find him fixated on her legs. He knew she sported a pin sized mole on the back of her knee. That mole told her the woman in the red wig was indeed Marise. He followed her at a distance and watched her walk six blocks from his office space to some dive with a red neon light. The word Harem flashed in front of him like a red flag. Rushing back to the office to close up, he wondered if he didn't pay her as well enough. As he lurked in the shadows, waiting for Marise to come on the stage, he pondered why he should even interfere.

Now, as he waited for his moment with her, he knew he'd just interfered in a big way. As the last person came out of the VIP lounge, a burly man in a flannel jacket, Kasen stiffened his spine. The brute snarled at Kasen and through clinched gold teeth, Kasen heard him grunt "Rich bastards think they own the place." Kasen shrugged and smirked. One side of him wanted to explain to offended man why he was buying out the room; his possessive side wanted to know if Marise had sat on his lap before. Kasen didn't anything but shove his hands in his pocket. The itch was too bad to punch the drunk bastard's lights out. No, he would not let Marise suffer like this, he vowed. He'd to get Marise and leave.

Chapter Three – Into the Lion's Den

Marise sat in the bright dressing room, staring at her reflection, wondering the man knew it was her. Marise scoffed at her naïve thinking. *Of course he knows! When will I stop being so innocent? How did this happen to me? How will I ever face that man again?* She shook her head as if she could shake her thoughts away. This wasn't the time to pity herself. She needed to make a plan. There was no way she was going to go back to Montgomery Advertising. Eyeing her reflection up and down, Marise resolved that after Mr. Montgomery saw her like this, he would fire her anyway. Still, a small part of her sent up a small prayer.

"PLEASE God, if you hear me, please don't let him recognize me."

For eight long months she'd been at this and all was about to be lost because of him. *Think*, *Marise*, *FUCK*! Taking deep breaths to calm herself, Marise tried to be rational. She knew she didn't look like her normal dopey, dowdy self. *It would be impossible for him recognize me! He couldn't have. I don't not look like this at work.* At her day job, she ensured her black and brown tresses were pulled back into a tight bun. She hid behind her tortoise shell glasses, and maybe a little lip gloss.

At Harem, her whorish alter ego took over. She looked at herself in the large wall mirror. Here she was Destiny, exotic dancer. The bright white bulbs surrounding the mirror mocked every line, wrinkle, freckle and mole on her face. Her makeup was so heavily applied she looked like a mannequin. Her jade green eye shadow contrasted with black kohl eyeliner surrounding her eyes. She added a dot of eyeliner to her upper lip for a misleading beauty mark. She changed her normal subdued burgundy lip-gloss to a garish deep red outlined with a black lip liner.

Oh yes, she looked the part of a stripper. She fit in with the rest of the dancers as far as her looks, but only she knew the real reason she was here. After looking in the mirror, she could always pretend that it was not her up there on that stage. It was her alter ego, Destiny, on the stage. She curled her lips in disgust, almost forgetting about the man out there, her other boss, and her destined downfall. She didn't want to lose the money that she made working for

Montgomery enterprises; it took both jobs if she was ever going to pay that loan shark back. But she knew she'd to quit. She could find a second job. She was a bright, college educated woman. She'd the whole future ahead of her. She always felt like every day was a gift, until she met Darryl. Now it seemed like every day was a fight to survive. She needed both jobs to save her and Darryl. She wished Darryl was home enough so she could talk about this with him. She wished she could tell him that she was stripping to pay back his debt. *Our debt*, she chided herself. *Remember that girl. He is your husband. Yeah. A husband I wish I could get to come home at a decent hour.*

Marise knew her Darryl didn't used to be the out all night type. Darryl, the smart, handsome sophomore was interested in her at their in college. He charmed his way into her heart with his sense of humor and ambition. Their final year of college, Marise discovered she was pregnant. When Darryl proposed, she should've been skeptical then. Marise winced at the thought.

She should've known something was off when he produced a ring from his pocket; sans the box she thought all rings came in. The smooth talker that he was, Darryl told her not to have any worries. Marise tried to help him with his plans to be the best entertainment agent around and his promises have them set for life, and she believed in him. They married in a quiet ceremony at the county courthouse and everything seemed to be on its way to that dream life. Sighing and rubbing the almond oil from body, Marise tried to shake off the haunting memories that always made her faint.

Too late, Marise bit the inside of her cheek as she remembered miscarrying seven months into the pregnancy. Every time she remembered seeing the small form taken from her body, she felt fresh pain. She could never stop the one tear that escaped her eye when she remembered. And she could never stave off the anger she felt at Darryl for not being there. But that is another reason that she was doing this stripping thing. *Perhaps I'm atoning for this marriage*. *If I do this right*, *maybe just maybe this marriage will be more of a marriage*. After the miscarriage, Marise wanted to throw herself into getting her graduate degree, but Darryl disagreed. He told her she must wait until he signed the next big star, because they would need two incomes. Marise

reluctantly agreed and after bouncing from job to job for two years, she found an opening at Montgomery Enterprises.

She was the assistant to the CEO and partner, Kasen Montgomery. Now, that same CEO had just seen her mostly naked. A small shred of hope started in her stomach, as she muttered to herself "Maybe he didn't recognize me," so the room full of changing women didn't hear her. Several women that had the same mocha colored skin as hers, and a few had on blue wigs and green wigs done in the same bob hairstyle. There were at least fifteen girls working tonight. It is possible that he didn't even know. That hope started to die when she heard Fatima, the infamous house mother and lady pimp clicking down the stairs in her light-up platform shoes. She snapped her fruit flavored gum in a motion that always reminded Marise of a cow chewing cud. Fatima scanned the dressing room with her artificially blue eyes. Marise found herself praying, hoping that she would not hear her name. Fatima flicked back her golden weave and put her hands on her hips. Marise could hear her two inch nails tapping against her metal belt.

"Destiny, you got business in the VIP." Marise swallowed and sighed. So much for him not recognizing her.

"Can't one of the others do it? I just finished a set." Marise urged. Her eyes drifted to Fatima's face. He golden lips were scrunched into a scowl and her ebony toned skin shined almost blue in the bright lights of the dressing room.

Please God, show mercy, Marise thought.

"Hell no. You better get your stuck up ass out there and make that money. He specifically asked for you, Miss high-n-mighty. You betta shake your ass." Fatima said with a sneer.

Marise shuddered and mentally shook herself off. She wiped her arms and legs free of sweat and slowly reapplied her lipstick. She felt like she was preparing for her own execution. She'd been nibbling on her bottom lip as she contemplated her dilemma. She needed time to think about what to do, but she heard a grunt coming from Fatima. Glancing at the woman, Marise muttered "I'm going." Marise stood up and stretched. She adjusted the skimpy sheer skirt and

made sure her breasts stood firm in her red bikini top. Each step up the stairs and to the lounge Marise felt like a death row inmate. Dead woman walking.

Every click of her heels sounded like a gun shot in her ears. The lounge might as well have been an executioner's block. Marise shook as the red velvet curtain to the lounge came into view. *It is just another dance. It is no more humiliating than the other dances. You won't go into work tomorrow*…She tried reassuring herself as she inserted her hands into the folds of the curtain to unveil her executioner. She parted the sea of red curtain slowly and stuck her head in. She scanned the room expecting to see a room full of gyrating dancers and drunken grabby men, but it was empty. Except for him. Sitting on the velour couch, like a king on his throne, was Kasen Montgomery. For the first time, Marise was glad the room was only dimly lit with a solitary faux burning candle. He won't be able to see my body shake, Marise thought as she struggled not to tremble. Fear, she told herself, gave people an advantage over you. She walked towards the reclining lion and tried to appear nonchalant. She knew there was another bouncer watching from the double-sided mirror across from the couch. Kasen could be pegged as a cop if she wasn't careful.

"What can I do for you Daddy?" Marise said in a pouty voice. *Oh God, I'm never going to be able to look at or be around this man again. No need, I'll quit tomorrow, and at least bow out before he fires me.*

Chapter Four – Leaving the Den

Kasen stood since Marise only came half way into the room before she halted.

"Come here." Kasen's brusque tone made Marise jump. Kasen flinched; he didn't mean to make her freak out. In fact, he'd the very opposite in mind, he wanted to be comforting, but how could comfort Marise she there, dressed in almost nothing, the reality of his fantasies had manifested and Kasen was pissed about it all. How many times had he imagined her like this, damn near naked, her coffee toned skin shining, and only mere inches away from him? But this is not where he thought it would be. It was supposed to be in his lavish condo, not this dump. It took all of his strength not to drag her out of here. He didn't want to cause a scene, but the desire to throw her over his shoulder and run like hell was so strong, he inadvertently took a step toward her. When Marise began to back away from him, he stopped. Kasen balled his hands into a fist and jammed them into his pockets. He slumped back on the loveseat and waited. The booming music matched the thundering beat of his heart. He kept his arms at his side and watched as she sashayed her hips and walked towards him. Kasen could not tell if she was trying to be seductive or trying not to fall in those damn shoes.

She turned around and her thighs were a mere inch away from his lap when he finally spoke again.

"Stop."

Marise froze.

"What was that hun?" Marise licked her dry lips as she looked over her bare shoulder. Kasen followed the motion with his eyes and he felt his cock stir. Dammit, he wanted to help her, not fuck her silly on the floor. Kasen swallowed hard to get past the lump in his throat.
"Stop, and turn around." His baritone voice gave no room for argument. She obeyed. She slowly turned and kept her eyes fixed to the floor.

Fuck, she is somewhat of a submissive too? Damn it all.

"Look at me." Kasen commanded, his voice low but authoritative. He could tell Marise was trembling inside by watching her long fingers jerk involuntarily. He knew one wrong move and she would bolt.

Looking her in the eyes, he could see she wasn't really seeing him, just another paying customer. He kept his hands at his sides as he stared at her slowly spreading her thighs and straddling his lap. Rubbing her hands on his chest, Marise tried avoiding his gaze. What did she think would she see there? Kasen wondered. Disappointment in her choice of a second job or maybe lust? She looked at the ceiling, gazing at the disco ball as if she could see her future in it. Her gaze fell on his fingers that were clawing the couch. Gyrating her hips on his hips in a back and forth motion, she looked everywhere but at him.

"Marise, quit," he barked. The heat from her body was feeling like it was burning through his pants. Marise still refused to meet his eyes. It took every ounce of self-control that he possessed to keep his cock from rising. It was painful, but he learned self-control a long time ago.

"I said enough!" Kasen growled, sounding like a wolf ready to kill.
His tone made Marise gasp. His breathing was ragged and her hands ceased rubbing his chest. She could feel his heart pounding. Finally, her chocolate eyes flew to meet his cerulean gaze. The feral gleam in Kasen's eyes was not lust, nor desire, not even a greedy smile of sickening, lecherous thoughts. It was unadulterated anger. Kasen's eyes glowed icy blue.
"Please," Marise's weak voice surprise him and Kasen felt the air rush into his lungs. "Please, don't say anything." Marise stopped moving, yet she leaned down low and whispered in his ear.

"I can't sit still; the bouncers behind the mirrors will get suspicious. Please don't say anything." Her husky voice and breath tickled Kasen's ear.
"How can I not?" Kasen hissed, trying to clamp down on his arousal and his anger. Marise's eyes darted to the mirror and looked at him, hoping that he comprehended what she was telling him.

Kasen's eyes shot to the mirror and returned. He focused top of her forehead. He knew he couldn't stare at her, and he didn't want to look anywhere else. Not if he wanted to walk out of Harem with his respect for her intact. Kasen expelled a breath.

"What are you doing here, Marise, this just doesn't seem like you."
"I have to do this and you don't know me." Marise hissed back, rolling her eyes. She turned and put her back to him again. Kasen clenched and unclenched his fists several times. Why am I so angry? Isn't this every man's fantasy? His prim and proper secretary was doing the nasty grind in his lap? No not him and not Marise not like this.
"I think I do know you, and you don't have to do this. Don't I pay you enough?" he whispered against her ear.
"Yes, Mr. Montgomery. You pay me quite well, but not enough to pay off my debt." She whispered. Kasen could almost feel her shame and tried to check his anger.
"Then why didn't you come to me? We could've done something." His voice low and endearing, he felt like he finally had some control over his sex drive and could get her out of this place.
"No offense, but it is not your problem. I'm almost done with this shit. I just need a little more." She hissed.
The music quieted. Marise got up off Kasen's lap, turned, and refused to look into his eyes again. Out of options of where to stare, she chose to focus on his necktie. Her hands on her hips, she looked as though she couldn't bear to look at him. She tried to smirk, to seem confident Kasen was sure, but he could tell it was a false show, as false as that awful wig and her smeared beauty mark.

Kasen handed her a fifty-dollar bill. Marise was surprised; he knew a private dance was only twenty bucks thanks to the many women who had approached him earlier. When she reached out to grab it, his fingers curled around hers and he pulled her close.

"Come to work tomorrow, please." There was a hint of desperation in his voice. "Trust me on this. Just don't run from me, and don't come back here tomorrow."

Marise nodded her head in agreement, took the fifty and ran from the lounge.

She'd a choice to make. Would she take Mr. Montgomery at his word or continue to do this? She looked around the dressing room. She was due for another set on the stage in a few minutes. What is she going to do? Sitting down on the metal folding chair in front of the long mirror, she weighed her options. It isn't like Mr. Montgomery came unto her. He could've and she couldn't have done anything about. It was a strip club and after hours. Damn he really could've made her beg back there. Marise looked at the crumpled fifty in her hand. He didn't but that didn't that he wouldn't, or won't tomorrow, if there was a tomorrow. Fatima came clicking into the dressing room again.

"What did I tell your stuck up ass last month? You can't come down here hiding all the time; you aren't making any money that way. Get your arrogant flat ass up there and mingle!"

Marise sighed as she realized the decision had been made for her. She couldn't take any more of Fatima calling her stuck up or telling her that she didn't have an ass.

"You know what Fati, I may be stuck up, but at least I have some damn manners." Marise took off the high heels and slammed them into the one of the lockers. She pulled the wig off her head and rubbed the lipstick and beauty mark from her face. Marise threw on her sweatpants and a t-shirt and walked up to the prideful pimp and shoved a twenty down the front of her bra.

"There is the house money for tonight. I got a headache, I'm out." Marise hissed and walked out of the smoky club. She could hear Fatima scream one last thing before the door closed behind her.

"Whatever you aren't that good or that pretty, that man is going to use you!"

As Marise hailed a cab, she prayed that Fatima wasn't right and that Mr. Montgomery wouldn't force her to quit. In the back seat, she closed her eyes and tried not to think. Tomorrow is tomorrow, she thought.

Chapter Five – Decisions, Decisions

Kasen was in his office the next morning, pacing the floor. He could not believe what he saw last night. What could he do to help Marise? She needed his help, obviously, but he knew she would be too proud to take it outright. He'd thought of a myriad of possibilities, most he dismissed because they seemed more demeaning than stripping. An idea had finally smacked him at two a.m. what he would do.

Marise appeared in the adjoining office, right on time. Kasen let out a pent-up breath he didn't realize he was holding for the past eight hours. He'd been afraid that she would not come to work.

She looked nervous, and he would be too if he was in her shoes. At least she looked like his Marise again. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail with a few spiraling curls framing her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were weary behind her thin wire framed glasses. She was dressed in an all black skirt that touched the floor. Kasen got up from his desk and opened the door a crack.

"Marise, can I see you please," Kasen said softly. He didn't want to scare her. Although he saw her shoulders slump, he was not deterred. She probably thought she would face the firing squad.

She walked in with her head bowed and sat down heavily in one of his high-backed leather chairs. Marise sat straight, feet crossed at the ankles. She stared ahead even when he resumed his seat behind his desk. She looked like she was facing an executioner. He leaned back into a reclining position and tried to offer her his smile. Marise told him once when he was nervous about a meeting that he'd a great smile. Kasen's teeth were white, even and appeared strong. It was the only compliment she'd given him. He tried to use the information to his benefit.

"Marise, do you want to talk about it?" Kasen said, still speaking softly.

"Not really Mr. Montgomery. It is my problem. I can take care of it."

* * *

Marise had thought about it all last night, sitting in her bed alone, again. She would not take Kasen's money, no matter what. From the men she was exposed to during her life, they always wanted something in return. Nothing was ever done for charity.

"Does your husband know?" Her eyes flew to his face and she shook her head no. Darryl would kill her if he stumbled upon how she was paying off his debt. Would Mr. Montgomery tell?

"Please, Mr. Montgomery, this is none of your concern."

"How is it not my concern? I watch your face drop and your dimples disappear when the clock strikes five. I want to help." *Since when did he notice that she'd dimples?* Marise thought as she stared at him.

"I only have to do it for a little while longer. There is only three thousand left. I can be done in a few months."

Kasen shook his head and clinched his fist in his lap, almost breaking the skin of his palm with his nails. The hell she would go back to that place.

"No. You aren't going back."

Marise's eyes grew cold, who in the hell was he to tell her what to do? She stared at him.

"You can't make that decision for me, Mr. Montgomery."

Kasen sighed. He knew he sounded like a dictator, but he couldn't allow her to go back to the Harem. "You are right. I can't order you, but I can make you a better counteroffer." Marise looked at him and rolled her eyes. *Here it comes. He is going to ask you to sleep with him. He is going to blackmail you. Remain strong, Marise, you are no one's plaything.* Marise steeled herself and got ready to tell him to go to hell. Her jaw dropped at his actual proposal. "I want you to dance with me."

"What? Dance with you?"

"Yes, dance with me. I have a small dance studio at my loft. I'm learning to waltz and do classical dances for my family reunion this summer in France. I need a partner. I have not done these dances since boarding school, but my mother expects me to dance them perfectly."

"Mr. Montgomery, surely you can find someone else, I don't know how to do those dances." Marise shook her head. She'd not waltzed since her physical education class in seventh grade. Being the tallest girl in the class had made that moment even more awkward.

"I will teach you. I have about five months to learn for the reunion in August. I think me teaching you will refresh my memory. I will pay you for your time, five hundred dollars a week."

Chapter Six – Lesson One

Marise arrived promptly at six. One thing Kasen loved about her, she was always prompt. Kasen sighed when he caught sight of her dressed in sweatpants and white girl shoes. At least he would not be distracted by her calves tonight. This was purely about helping her, Kasen told himself for the hundredth time that hour.

"Hi, Mr. Montgomery." Marise said as she walked in to his condo. Marise gasped as her eyes caught glimpse of the view from his large windows. One could see the Mississippi river and the trees that dotted the banks. It being still early in the year, there were no leaves, and a few flecks of snow still clung to the rocks.

"Let me take you coat, and stop calling me Mr. Montgomery." Kasen took her coat and led her into his studio. Actually, he thought, it is more of a corner with a wall length mirror and wood flooring. There was a small stereo in the corner playing soft piano music. The recessed lights were dim and Kasen looked like he was glowing in the soft amber lighting.

She looked at him and put her hand on her hip, and said nothing. Damn she was a hard cookie to crack.

* * *

"So where do we begin?" Marise said, looking around her. This corner was bigger than her living room, and Marise liked the homey feeling in Kasen's condo. It felt lived in, not some model thrown up to attract the young jet-set crowd. His paintings were colorful with hues of rust and yellow. She smiled at the figurines that lined the large window sill, which stood kiddy corner from the mirrored wall. They were all couples, entwined in a state of dancing.

"Well, we will start with a basic waltz. Everything else is just as easy, just with a few more turns. So come and stand face to face to me."

Until that moment, when she was asked, Marise hadn't bothered to look at him fully; not at work, not in passing, not ever. A part of her knew it was because she couldn't afford herself to view Kasen Montgomery as a man, just someone who signs her checks. Right now, she saw him as just a man. His pectoral muscles showed definition beneath the gray cotton tank top. For the first time, Marise realized how devilishly handsome her boss was. It was his hair that made Marise gape at him. Usually it was styled out of his face, but tonight, it was unruly waves on his head. The shades of brown and blonde swirled together like his paintings. His body was more artistic than the paintings. Even though he wore baggy navy blue sweat pants, they dipped at his waist, a telltale sign the rest of him was as defined. Marise shook her head of her thoughts. She'd to focus. This was for her and Darryl, her husband. Sooner or later, Darryl would get enough of running the streets and it will just be them. With no threat of death and debts hanging over their heads, Marise believed that she and Darryl could make things work.

Marise stood in front of Kasen and put her arms in front of her, wondering if she could remember the dances from her 9th grade gym class. There was no need as Kasen grabbed her by her wrists and pulled her close. She could feel his muscled chest on her cheek and she almost stopped breathing. He scent was fresh and almost hypnotic. *Funny, I didn't have this much problem breathing around him last night and I had on close to nothing*. Marise reflected. Kasen took her left arm and settled it on his shoulder. He took her hand in his right and stood still.

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Kasen needed another moment to collect his thoughts. He was touching her, and all he could think of is touching her more. He knew she was doing this as a last resort, but he could not help but to think of it as a date.

Keep it together, Cassien, his father's words always came back to him when he gets ahead of himself. His father, George, would always use Kasen's full name when he was about to teach him something. .George "The Captain" Montgomery was a domineering man that owned a large fleet of boats. To teach Kasen to swim, George picked up the seven year old boy and threw him into the lake that he was named after. *Learn to swim or you will be a sacrifice to the lake that*

bears your name. Kasen remembered thinking that the beautiful Lake Saint Cassien would be his final resting place. Kasen shook his head to rid himself of the troubling thoughts. This was about Marise.

Kasen's arms tensed as he slid his arm in the curve between Marise's hips and her waist. His hand settled there and he remembered to breathe. He looked down at her skeptical face and smiled. He would keep it together.

Her skin was warm to his touch, and it felt as though her skin was as soft as her smile.

"The first thing is to step this way," Kasen led them to his right. "Good, now to the front, I will lead." Kasen took a step forward and Marise tentatively followed his movements. The movements were simple, and Kasen took the lead with ease.

"Very good, let's keep going." Kasen had Marise in his arms and they were sliding across the floor. Their bodies moved slowly at first, but the more comfortable they became in the steps, their bodies seem to connect on every turn. On instinct, Marise tensed up every time their bodies touched, but Kasen remained firm in his grasp. His grip didn't allow her to pull away. The second time the front of her thigh met his, Marise only hesitated a moment.

It was over too soon though. The small clock that Kasen had on the stereo began to chime. They had been twirling and dancing for two hours and didn't even notice. The alarm broke the moment and Marise came out of her trance of the music.

"This is going to be easier than I thought. You are a great partner to dance with." Marise said as she bent to rub her calves. Now that they had stopped, she'd felt a burning sensation rising up her legs. Yet, she was thankful that she was not standing in those high heel shoes for hours. Marise heard Kasen take a deep breath, but she didn't look up. They had just spent two hours dancing; anyone would be winded a little.

Kasen was not gasping for air because of his exertions. He was watching as Marise gave herself a calf rub. She'd given herself over to the music, and soon her movements were as fluid as his

were. Kasen became enraptured by her presence. The dull ache he felt when he was alone seemed to disappear when Marise was with him. Yet, she was not his. It was just for mere minutes of a song that he could say that she was his.

"I will take that as a compliment Marise, even though you didn't notice me mess up a step or two." Kasen chuckled.

"How was I supposed to know? You were teaching me, remember?" Marise's smile lit up her face and she was laughing in her way that shook her whole body. She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder.

"Same time tomorrow?" Kasen said as he walked her to the door. He didn't want her to go. He would've cooked dinner for her, anything to keep her longer. But he knew that would be pushing too far.

"Yeah, you bet. Thanks again, Mr. Montgomery."

"Stop, please don't be so formal with me." Kasen sighed heavily.

"How do you want me to be?" Marise retorted.

"I want you to be my friend, and I to be yours. My name is Kasen." Kasen eyes turned a dangerous hue of blue.

Marise straightened to her full height.

"Good night." Marise said, and slipped out of the door without a backward glance.

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Rushing down to her car parked on the street, Marise had to get a grip. She was made of steel, nothing could faze her, or so she kept telling herself. No, this was just another job; there was nothing personal about it. *It is just like being on the stage,* Marise thought as she climbed into

her small hatchback. When she looked up to the top of the ten story condo complex, and saw Kasen watching her from the window, deep in her gut she knew it was nothing like being on the stage. With this private dance, her emotions were on the line.

Somehow, for two weeks Marise had managed to keep her mind off of her private moments with Kasen. She learned the more difficult turns with the waltz, kept everything about the dancing, even avoiding using his first name.

Darryl hadn't noticed that she'd been home earlier than normal. He was never there. Marise worried that her wayward husband was getting into another debt with a different loan shark. She decided to stay up late to talk to her Daryl. She felt like she'd not talked to him in years. Somehow, they had managed drift apart.

"Darryl," Marise said walking into the bathroom where Darryl was washing his face. It was close to midnight and he smelled of cigarettes and whisky. She didn't turn up her nose at him. She'd always understood his socializing before, now was not the time to question him.

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Darryl turned to look at his wife. Damn, it was still weird thinking of her as that. Sure, she kept him fed, and she was cute. She just wasn't what he pictured his arm candy to look like. She was tall, and her coffee colored skin was not the exotic hues of some of the women he'd sampled the pleasures of recently. Her eyes were dull, not all done up with glitter, just almond shaped.

Darryl did give her one thing, she kept a home feeling like a home. It was clean and she didn't nag him. Granted, he came home late in the hopes that she would be fast asleep. *Just to avoid the drama,* Darryl always told himself. If he was being brutally honest with himself after a few shots of Wild Turkey, Darryl admitted he only married her so his baby wouldn't be a bastard.

Darryl looked at the woman standing in front of him with large expressive eyes. *When did she lose weight? She'd always had a sort of love handle thing going on, but it seems to have*

disappeared somehow. He couldn't help but to stare at the woman that was his wife but he barely knew.

***

Marise was confused by the look Darryl was giving her. He'd never looked at her with more than a faraway look on his face, but now he looked at her with an interest. She wrapped her silk rose colored robe tighter around her. She leaned against the doorway and became wary of the staring game going on.

"Darryl," his name came out in a sigh.

"Yeah?" Darryl still stared at her

"What is going on Darryl? How is the business?" Marise didn't mean to sound like she was frustrated with his hopes and dreams, she just honestly wanted to know what her husband was doing to fill his days.

"Why?" Darryl immediately took the defensive.

Marise did her best to keep her calm demeanor. She knew that nagging him would only make him clam up and leave again, so she kept her tone mellow and sincere. It was what she learned from her momma.

"No reason. Just thought to take an interest in what you do. If you don't want to talk, that's fine."

Marise pushed herself off the door and made to walk to their bedroom. She was not going to fuss. She wasn't going to question him about it. She just had to remember what her mom did, just breathe in and breathe out. Sooner or later, he will see that his home is the most comfortable place for him to be.

"Mar?" Marise stopped at hearing his pet name for her. He'd not said that in a while. She looked over her shoulder, trying to seem nonchalant, but so much hope welled inside of her she felt like she was about to burst. She was hoping that the stale fog that had settled on their marriage would lift, and that somehow the last year was all a dream.

"Thanks for asking, things are going ok. They could be better. I'm glad you have such an ok boss with you working all your overtime. It has helped." Darryl said with his toothbrush in his mouth. Marise smiled and gave him a small head nod, and before she could even think about having to tell him about the real overtime, the stripping and all, Darryl's cell phone buzzed loudly in his pocket.

"Yo, this is D." Marise watched as her husband held a conversation all the while brushing his teeth. She straightened and turned to face him when she heard "I'm getting clean now. I will be there in thirty." Where is he going at this time of night? Marise stood there, regarding him with a sense of dread. She knew that he would not ask her to come along, and she knew that he wasn't going to be alone. Marise felt the walls of self-preservation surround her. She was safe as long as she stayed in her box. Darryl was reapplying his deodorant and was going to walk past her without saying anything.

"Um, Darryl?" He turned to her and for one moment, he'd a frustrated look on his face. *Why was he mad, he was the one leaving the house again*? Marise's thoughts slammed into her, making her breathless. No, she would not question him this time, but once she saw him for more than five minutes, she would sit him down and ask him what is going on. "Drive safe Darryl." Marise said and walked into her bedroom.

She heard Darryl's keys jingle and the door close behind him. Then Marise fell on her face in the bed and cried. Then she tried to count the times her and Darryl had made love in the past two years. *It was twice*. She cried harder.

Chapter Seven – It All Falls Down

Something had changed. Kasen looked at Marise with some interest after she'd ignored him for the second time in their session. They were taking a break from the tango for a breather. The steps were complicated, as much as he loved to hold on to Marise, it would take her quite some time before she learned all the intricate steps. She was supposed to slide one of her legs in between his, and slide her calf along the back of his thigh and leg when he dipped her. They would get to that part and she would freeze.

Freeze was too polite of a word, Marise had panicked. He could see it in her eyes, her pupils dilated and she looked like a deer in headlights. It was early, and he would hate to have her leave so soon, but there was no point of him continuing the lesson if she was not going to dance.

"Let's call it quits," Kasen said after her third stumble. Marise grimaced and didn't argue. Damn, he hated seeing her like this. Her agitation struck him hard in his gut as if he was the nervous one.

He put his fingers underneath her chin and tilted her head to look at her. "What's wrong, Marise?"

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"Nothing, nothing at all. My mind is just preoccupied. I'm sorry I'm not on par today." Marise said breathlessly. She could not believe that today was her anniversary and not once did Darryl mention it. *May I should just surprise him with something. He's appeared to be under a lot of stress lately.*

"Marise, I know when you are bullshitting me. What is it?" From the tone of his voice, the soft dulcet way he said her name, Marise knew that Kasen cared. Maybe he cared too much.

"Today is my anniversary." Marise said, not meeting his gaze. She heard Kasen suck in a deep breath and exhale slowly. She dared to sneak a look at him and she saw what resembled pain in his eyes. *What did I do?*

"Then you shouldn't be here. Leave, we will pick it up again sometime." Kasen turned abruptly and walked out. For the several weeks that they had been spending so much time together, he'd managed to forget that she'd a husband. Her admittance of her anniversary sent reality crashing down around Kasen, hard and unrelenting.

Marise didn't know what came over him, but she needed to get out of his home. His home felt like a home and not the cold and lifeless apartment she lived in with her husband. She walked out of the living room without a second thought. She drove the way home with her radio turned all the way up, singing old songs on the radio. She'd not done that since she was a teenager and it made her feel good.

Marise actually had a smile on her face as she fumbled with her key. It was still early, she decided that she would cook her and Darryl a wonderful meal and they could sit down and talk like they used to. She missed the way that they used to talk about everything, when their lives seemed like it was just starting. She sighed with the memories and opened the door. The lights were down low and it smelled like cologne and incense throughout the living room. Maybe Darryl had something special for her after all. Marise smiled at the thought that maybe they were on their way to some new ground. After all, if he was home early, then for sure he'd something special planned for their anniversary. She would even forgive him for forgetting her birthday last month. Kasen hadn't, she thought, but she immediately pushed the thought away. She kicked off her sneakers and walked to her bedroom without turning on the lights. She didn't want to ruin the surprise.

Marise walked into her bedroom and heard noises. When her eyes adjusted to the red light, Marise saw figures moving around in her bed. Where was Darryl?

"Damn Darryl dude, get off my knee," came a deep and gruff voice.

"Sorry Ray, but this girl keeps on moving," There was some heavy panting and then a squeal.

"Fuck you muther fuckers, I'm coming…"

"Yeah that's it, come for us baby," Then Marise heard Darryl's rough voice as he came. She knew that sound better than her social security number, and at the end, the world became silent.

Marise could hear the whirling of the ceiling fan, the heavy panting of the party under the cover. But she couldn't move, she couldn't breathe. She couldn't even think. She flicked on the light switch and when three surprised faces emerged from under her expensive Egyptian cotton sheets, Marise stopped thinking. There they were; Darryl, Ray, his best friend, and some chick with an orange mane and blue eye shadow.

Marise blew out a breath, and before Darryl could even analyze what was going on, Marise turned around and threw one last comment over her shoulder.

"Happy fucking anniversary Darryl." And she walked out. She left without packing her bags; she just took her purse and drove to her mother's house.

Her mother was no more receptive than she ever had been.

"What are you doing here?"

"Thanks Mom, nice to see you too." Marise said, sliding past her mother into the doorway.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, but you could've called." Marise's mother looked fidgety. Marise stopped half way to the stairs and looked at her mom. Her mom was too busy looking into the living room.

"You are right Mom, I could've called. What is going on in there? Do you have company?" Marise tried to peek around her mother, but the living room was dark.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. Why aren't you with Darryl, isn't it your anniversary?" Mother looked agitated.

"Yes it is, and why I'm not with Darryl, well, long story."

"Cheryl! get your ass in here now, this is hard to keep up without you."

"Cheryl baby, come in here." That was a woman's voice, and she sounded in a state of lust. Marise watched the color drain from her mother's face and Marise almost fainted. Was everyone she knew embroiled in a threesome? Frustrated Marise pushed past her mother and went back to her car.

She didn't have any place she could go. She would honestly feel bad if she showed up to work wearing the same thing that she'd on today. Marise decided to go shopping. There had to be a mall open somewhere.

As she shopped, Marise became more and more helpless. She sunk all of her extra money into paying off this debt, so she could not get a hotel room. Her mother was an undercover freak and there was no way she was going to stay there. Her best friend lived in New York and there was no way she would go there. She was a Midwest girl at heart.

As Marise sat in the parking lot of the strip mall after buying the few amenities that she could afford. Her phone was buzzing like crazy. Darryl had called several times, but each time he refused to leave a message. If he was really concerned, Darryl would've left a message. The funny thing was, Marise could not feel her heart breaking. It was the stuff that songs were made of right? You should feel your heart breaking when you just find out you husband is cheating on you with a man and a woman.

No, Marise was just numb. She didn't feel anything but the gentle sputtering of her car. She'd to go somewhere. Marise thought of the only place she could go. Before she could analyze the rationale of her thinking, her fingers were dialing.

"Hello?" said the soothing voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hello, Kasen?"

Marise found herself again parking at Kasen's loft. He stood waiting for her as soon as she ended the call. He wasn't going to let her be by herself, even though it was against his better judgment. Without saying a word, he grabbed her bags and followed her inside.

"Thanks again Kasen, I know I do not possibly deserve…" Kasen held up a free hand and silenced her. He'd known something was wrong when he picked up the phone and heard her broken voice on the phone.

For the first time in two years, he heard his name roll off her tongue and it was ambrosia to his ego. He'd been a little short with her earlier, and when she called, he was already in the process of ordering flowers to make it up to her. Now that she was here, Kasen wanted to apologize in person.

"Marise, I'm sorry for being so short with you earlier. I just know this was our last two weeks to practice, and I think overdid it." Marise smiled a small smile and shook her head no.

"Kasen, don't worry about it, I know that I was not being all that attentive when we were dancing anyway."

An awkward silence fell in between them. There was no more to say.

"Here, I will show you to my room where you can sleep. I will take the couch." Kasen walked briskly to his room and Marise followed. Although he didn't ask the question, he wondered how long she would stay. *Forever, if I had my way.*

Kasen knew his thoughts were nothing but trouble so he merely backed out of the room to the safety of the living room couch. There was no way he could've her that close, so near his bed, and be able to contain himself.

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There was nothing more to say, and Marise had seen enough television in her life to know that if she asked him to linger, even for the slightest moment; she would be in his arms. No, just because her life was up in shambles, it didn't mean that she would go running into the first available arms around.

This time, Marise would make her own choices, and follow her head and not her heart. She'd to. She was beginning to see that she was the only one she'd in this world.

Unfortunately, Marise spent most of the night lying awake trying to count sheep and not feel sorry for herself. *So, I lost my baby and my husband. My mom is a freak, which was ok, as long as mom's kept her escapades to herself.* She couldn't sleep. *What would be the chances that Kasen would drink tea?* She needed something to calm her, and staring at the walls didn't help. And she sure as hell didn't want to start snooping through Kasen's drawers.

Tiptoeing out of the room and into the kitchen, Marise was stumped. Every cabinet was clean and tidy, stainless steel and way too neat. Everything was put away. Marise honestly wondered if anyone was this tidy. She didn't realize that she was drumming her nails against the granite counter top until light flooded the kitchen.

Marise gasped, reacting to a shirtless Kasen, rubbing his eyes and looking quite delectable. She was caught going through his cabinets and all she was wearing was a t-shirt and nothing else. Could the night possibly get any worse?

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Yes, it could. Kasen mumbled something about the lights and snapped his fingers. The recessed lights flickered on to a soft yellow hue and the large white fluorescent light shut off. The granite counter tops looked like liquid in the intimate lighting.

"Marise, what are you doing up at this hour?" Kasen said when he finally stopped rubbing his eyes. Kasen always had been a light sleeper and he'd known as soon as he heard the bedroom door open that Marise was prowling. His baser nature wanted her to come to him on the couch where he could comfort her in his own intimate way, but he knew that was not what she needed.

"Sorry if I woke you. I just needed something to put me to bed, but I couldn't find anything." Marise stammered.

"It is ok, I'm a light sleeper. I just wanted to make sure that you are ok."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Just then, her stomach growled and its low gurgle seemed to echo in both of their ears. Kasen's lip tucked up in the corner into a knowing smirk. He winked at her and started to move towards the refrigerator.

"Your stomach doesn't sound fine. Let me make you something that always helped me when I was little." Kasen moved quickly around the kitchen, pulling out a cutting board a knife and various things.

Marise was stuck staring at his back as he cut up some slices of cheese and an apple. *Good,* Kasen thought, *she won't be able to see how turned on I'm with her walking around in my t-shirt.* On the stove, Kasen had begun to warm milk with honey. In a few moments, Kasen had made her a small plate of apple wedges and brie, with honey drizzled on them. Next to the plate, he put a mug of the warmed milk in front of her. It smelled sweet. She smiled at him and Kasen felt his cock stir. He backed away from Marise and stayed at the far end of the center island.

As she reached for a slice of apple, Marise looked at Kasen up and down. He felt like she was studying him.

"So tell me about you. Where did you grow up?" Marise said around a mouthful of apple.

"There is not much to know. I grew up in France. I lived only a few kilometers from Cannes."

Marise quirked her eyebrow at him.

"Sorry, miles, I still tend to think European sometimes."

Marise laughed and Kasen's breath caught in his throat. It was a melodious sound, rich and full of personality. He wished that he could get her to open up more. Maybe he could at least get her to tell him what made her call him.

"When did you move state-side?" Marise reached for another slice, and she watched his eyes as he watched her hand.

"About ten years ago. I just finished my studies and this city reminded me of the city I grew up in. Tell me about you Marise, where did you grow up?" Kasen said, quickly changing the subject. He knew about himself, he was aching to know more about her.

"Here, this is my home. Although I did go to Paris for a few weeks before I started college." Marise said with a shrug of a shoulder. That seemed as though all she was going to share.

"Why then and why Paris?" Kasen was curious about everything about her.

"I needed an adventure before college I think. I wanted to see something new. Since I took French for years, it seemed like the most reasonable solutions."

"I see. Any brothers or sisters?" Kasen loved his large family. They were loud, rambunctious but still full of hugs and kisses and smiles. Everyone except his father. His father was the exception to the rule, but Kasen realized in his twenties that is what probably brought his brothers and sisters the closest together. Their mutual disdain for the Captain.

"No," sighing Marise picked up her mug. "I was an only child and sometimes it felt more like an orphan child. My father was hardly ever around and my mother treated me like a nuisance."

"Only child blues?" Kasen wanted more than anything to hear her laugh again. She was beautiful when the light reached her eyes.

"I have the only child blues, as you call it, but only sometimes. After all, I had a husband to keep me occupied." Marise smiled a little and stared at him.

Kasen didn't miss the past tense way she referred to her husband. She'd never even mentioned her husband's name. There was trouble brewing and he could feel it surrounding her like a cloak.

"Had?" Kasen needed to keep on pressing her, if he didn't; she'd keep it all in like she did when she was stripping. He didn't want that. Correction, he couldn't *live* with that.

"Today was my anniversary. But now it is my divorce date. I caught Darryl with someone else. Well two other people. In my bed, in my room, on my anniversary."

Kasen waited for the tears to start, the uncontrollable crying and the hysterics that usually follow an announcement like that. Nothing. Marise grabbed another apple slice and bit into it.

As she looked at the honey dribbling down her Kasen wondered where the emotion was. She just stared at her fingers.

"Marise?" Marise looked up at him and cocked her head to the side. She regarded him with sleepy lids and a slight smile. *Is she about to go hysterical*, Kasen thought, as he watched a lazy grin form on her face.

"Kasen, have you ever had your heart broken?" Marise said, calmly, as if she was trying to figure out the speed of light. *Maybe she was in hysterics, but she didn't know what to compare the feeling to.*

"Only once. A broken engagement, years ago. Why?" Kasen didn't like where this was going.

"What does it feel like? I've never had to experience anything like this, but I don't think that my heart is breaking. I'm waiting for the bottom to fall out, for something to crack, and nothing. Is that normal?"

"I think you are in shock. That is all it could be. Do you want to talk about it?" Kasen didn't want to be dragged into the middle of this, but at the same time, if Darryl had laid a hand on her then Kasen would personally lay him out.

"There is nothing to talk about really, it is over. He was in my bed with another man and a woman. How can you possibly cheat twice in the same moment?" Marise laughed as she picked up the empty mug and took it to the sink.

She was washing the mug with a vigor that Kasen could tell she was welling up with something. Yet, he couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Kasen could feel tell Marise was on the edge of anger. Anger, he was well acquainted with.

"Marise, it is normal to be angry." Kasen had walked to the side of the center island where she'd stood. Now he was a mere foot away from her. Now he could see her eyes clearly. There was a fire in them and she put her arms to her side and clinched her fists.

"Kasen, I'm more than angry. I'm furious. I spent eight months sliding up and down that damn pole trying to pay of his gambling debts. I have gone without seeing him for years… I even had the miscarriage by myself. No, this goes beyond angry." Marise said with more passion than he'd ever seen from her.

Kasen was shocked motionless. All he could do was stare at Marise. Never before had he witness her temper, or any other emotion. She was like a robot, but he'd still cared for those soft smiles and dimples. Now, seeing her alive with emotion, even anger, made him want her more. Yet, he knew he couldn't touch her. He would be the rebound guy, the one she went to for a shoulder to cry on, and he could not do that to her. No matter how much he wanted to.

"Do you love him?" Kasen regretted having to ask the question, but he couldn't help himself. He'd to know. Sure, she was angry with her husband, but anger eventually goes away, love shouldn't.

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Marise stood at stared into the depths of Kasen's eyes. In them, she found no hidden agenda, nothing that said she repulsed him. It was concern, compassion and caring she grabbed as she looked into his swimming pools of blue. Never once did Darryl look at her like that. That is when Marise knew the answer to Kasen's question.

Marise had anger at her mother and father, anger at Darryl, anger at all the tips and eyes staring at her while she was up on the stage. It had been almost four months since the last time she was on the stage, and yet she felt it still haunt her. Was it once you are a stripper you are always a stripper? Could she not take enough hot baths to wipe that part of her life from her body? Of all the emotions that she felt for the people who surrounded her, love wasn't one of them.

"No, I don't love him, and I don't know if I ever did." Marise sighed and turned to face the sink again. She'd never felt this raw on the inside. She'd never admitted it to herself, but she knew that she didn't love Darryl; he'd been a way to escape the loneliness.

Kasen walked up behind her and just stood there with her. He wrapped his arms around her body and pressed her back into his chest. Dipping his head so his chin rested on her head, Kasen expelled a loud sigh. A shudder of breath entered her body and she finally let go and pressed her back toward him. She welcomed his embrace and warmed to his touch. She realized that she just needed him to hold her.

Marise knew it was not good to lean on him like this. Yet, it was an emotional need that she could not deter. She needed it, and now that she'd it, she didn't know what to do with the rest of it. She felt the pad of his thumb resting comfortably beneath the swell of her breast. It was sending tingles of fear and desire sprawling through her veins.

It was a bad idea for her to be in his house. It was a terrible idea for her to call him. It was a horrific idea that she'd come out of the bedroom. And now, the only ideas she could seem to muster was about letting Kasen make love to her. She could use it, and she know that she would feel release, but what happens after? What would the aftermath be?

Marise expelled a pent up breath and shoved off the counter. She'd to be smarter to make it through the next phase of her life. Kasen held her still, and although she didn't want to leave the comfort of his arms, there was danger lurking there.

Marise felt the air change. For the months that she'd worked in the club, she knew sexual tension as if it was a part of her nature. There were always girls that were wound up and often wound up together in the locker room fondling each other.

What Marise felt between her and Kasen was far more than sexual, and therefore, far more dangerous. Marise was vulnerable and she knew it. It didn't help that she could feel the rise and fall of Kasen's chest on her back.

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Kasen knew of the danger, but he didn't care, he was holding his Marise. For once, he was holding her without having to pretend that he was only doing so for the sake of dancing. He wanted to hold her just like this, and see if she could feel the waves of emotions that overcome him when he is around her.

A month ago, Kasen had finally admitted to himself that it was more than just infatuation with his assistant. He could even say that it was more than just concern for her welfare. Now, holding her, breathing in her scent, and being the strong shoulder for her to cry on, he could admit to himself that he was in love with her.

Kasen didn't make a move. He was scared that if he moved, she would walk away from him. He didn't think he could hold her like this and just let her walk away. Too many things in life he'd cherished, too many things in life he'd wanted, and all the things that he wanted, he saw in Marise.

Marise broke the silence first.

"Kasen, I'm sorry for leaning on you like this. I wouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be doing this, but I feel safe. What I'm trying to say is thanks." She bowed her head and settled enough to feel the air from his nostrils on her neck.

"No need to thank me. I'm sorry for grabbing you and I…" Marise whirled around and pressed her index finger to his lips.

"It's ok, I needed it." Marise cocked her head to the side and stared into Kasen's eyes. "Kasen, I need to ask a favor." She said with her head cocked to one side. His eyes grew cold, and he could feel his body tense. She grabbed him by his hand and pulled him, although he was extremely unwilling to follow her into his bedroom.

"Marise, you are distraught. I don't think…" Kasen stammered as she pulled back the gray comforter and eggplant sheets.

"Kasen, that's not what I want. I want you to hold me. Do you think that you could do that? It is just comforting and I…" Marise's voice trailed off. She didn't know how much more to say to it than that. He just stared at her for a long moment. Marise must have assumed that silence was a rejection and crawled into the king sized bed.

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She was under the covers when she felt a weight on the other side of the covers. She held her breath as she felt his hand snake around her abdomen and lay right underneath her breasts, again. It was if they belong there, Marise mused to herself. The warmth from his palm and his gentle breathing was almost a lullaby. Marise scooted closer to Kasen underneath the blankets and pressed her bottom against his crotch. It was unintentional, but it felt so right.

Marise let out a sigh and snuggled into the blankets. Kasen had just given her peace with just being there, and for now that made her content.

Absently, his thumb began to draw circles on her stomach. He must have heard her sigh and then a soft moan escaped her lips. He stopped rubbing and held still. She took his hand and guided it lower until it rested on the top of her cotton bikini. She led his hand until his palm was over her sex.

Kasen's breathing became ragged and he held very still. He didn't want to do something that she would regret. Kasen believed he'd everything under control until she spoke:

"Rub me, Kas…"

Kasen didn't know what to think. He wouldn't even dare to breathe. Of course, he couldn't have heard Marise correctly. It must be his flights of fantasy working again. He'd always wanted to hear Marise utter his name, and he would've never thought that the innocent way that she'd shortened it would've turned him on as much as it did. Now, he was stuck. Stuck between trying to be a good friend to Marise, realizing that she was just in need after having her world dumped upside down, or giving in to his baser nature and succumbing to the temptation that was before him.

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Marise knew that she was laying all her cards on the table, and had Kasen been Darryl, Darryl would've already been plundering her body with his cock and not even asked if she was sure. Kasen, however, held back and it made Marise nervous. Had she said too much? Was he going to think of her as a whore? After all, he did catch her shaking her ass for a buck. Mortified at what he must think of her, Marise snapped out of her trance.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. Damn, you must think…" Kasen held up his warm fingers to her lips. He could make out the outline of Marise's round face in the moonlight. She was beautiful, and Kasen would never see her as anything but virtue, despite her circumstances.

"I don't think anything but the truth Marise. I think that you are a beautiful, sexy yet innocent woman who has more strength than some men I know. I think that you are intelligent and have a

lot of mixed up emotions. I think that I made a mistake by leading you on to believe that what I feel for you is strictly platonic." His words were nothing but a whisper, but the truth behind them were loud and clear.

Shocked into silence, Marise just stared. Kasen had been nothing but nice to her since she started working there. Sure, sometimes he'd a temper, but that was understandable in his line of work. He has sent her flowers for her birthday; he gave her this job so she didn't have to dance on a pole. With that thought, the light came on for Marise. In all of his actions, the small gifts, the understanding, his smiles, Kasen had put himself in a position of a suitor who knew that he'd no chance in hell because of her marriage. Tears welled in Marise's eyes when the magnitude of Kasen's statement hit her. He wanted more, and always has.

"Kasen, I…" Marise would've gone into a beautiful speech if she'd not seen the tick in Kasen's jaw. She knew well that the ticking in his jaw meant that he was holding back, that he was using his insane sense control to keep him from making a mistake. And that is when Marise's heart took a plunge. She could not have described the moment to anyone, but the smell in the air changed, the atmosphere seemed to clear, and Marise knew exactly what to say. "Kasen, this, us, here now, is not a mistake. You are not some rebound thing, and I'm not all that distraught. I know, you might think that I'm making excuses for my body losing control, but my body knew a long time before my brain did. I want you Kasen. I'm not worried about tomorrow. I'm not worried about the next few hours; I just want to lose control with you. Please, let's lose control together." As soon as she said it, she knew that she'd hit a soft spot for Kasen. His eyes became wider and she could see the full circle of his irises.

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"Marise, I can't. You don't understand."

Kasen sat up in the bed and took a few deep breaths. Never had he let someone push his buttons as much as Marise did. She was always there, always soft, and even in the midst of a traumatic shift in her life, she was still looking out for him. What was he going to do with her? He knew

what he wanted to do. Kasen wanted to make love to Marise with the fierceness of his love for her. It was his desire to make her feel the very effect that she has on him. Could he let his guard down long enough to let her see the real Kasen Montgomery, uncontrolled?

Marise watched as Kasen clenched and unclenched his fists. He was taking in huge amounts of air again.

"Help me understand you Kas. I want to know you. Why must you have so much control all the time?"

"Control means that all successes as well as all mistakes lead back to you. It means that you don't have to worry about people blaming you because you already assumed that role when you take control."

"Yes, but has control brought you happiness?"

Marise raised her hand to the side of his face and caressed his jaw line. He was such a strong man, but when would he realize that strength sometimes came in the form of appearing weak?

Marise wanted his mind. She was thirsting for someone else's thoughts besides her own now. She knew there was so much to this man who sat across from her, but she wanted to know him for the man he was, not her savior, or not her boss. Just as a man.

"Control and happiness do not always go hand and hand Marise. Control has made me lose more things than gained, but I will not lose control with you."

Marise's heart dropped, but she was determined more than ever to get Kasen to drop his guard. Gone was the euphoric feeling of being touched by him; it was now replaced with the need to touch him emotionally. Marise had never allowed herself to become emotionally engaged with anyone, but for him, she was willing to try.

"Do you know what it is like to lose control Kas?" Marise scooted across the bed to him. She laid her hand on his thigh and her thumb swirled absent-mindedly on his warm skin. His blond

hair was very fine on his legs, feeling like silk in her fingers. Marise knew she'd never even bothered to notice if Darryl had hair on his thighs or not.

"No." Kasen said through gritted teeth.

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Marise could not possibly know what she was doing. She was driving him insane, but he would not forget all of those lessons that his father had taught him. *Giving up control means losing your balls, son. Never give up control.* Claire had walked out on him for not giving up control. He would never allow his ex to ride him during sex. He even introduced hand cuffs as a part of their 'normal' routine. Now that Kasen thought about it, perhaps it did seem real strange that he would never allow Claire to seduce him. It was always in his terms on his time.

Now, Marise sat and rubbed his leg, after telling him to rub her. Marise had taken control of the night. Marise was dangerous to Kasen. She made Kasen give up his precious control.

Kasen pushed from the bed and looked at the startled expression on Marise's face. He would not and could not give up his control. Not for anyone and especially not for Marise who didn't know what she wanted.

"Kasen?" Marise looked at him and wondered if she'd gone too far. She grabbed the crumpled sheets and pulled them around her body. It was insanity. Kasen had seen her in more states of undress in the past four months than her husband and she felt indecent now?

"Marise I don't think that you know what it is that you want. You would be under duress."

"Under duress? Kasen, what do you think I'm doing?"

"You don't want me, you couldn't. You are still married and you are just distraught." Kasen was backing out of the room.

"What does me being married have to do with you opening up?"

"You just want to be comforted." Kasen was barking at her. Marise, for the first time in years felt her temper raise its head.

"Comforted? You think that me asking about you is going to comfort me? Then you are wrong, I don't need that type of comfort. If I wanted that type of comfort, then I would've tried to fuck you the first time I came here. After all, I haven't had sex for almost a year, and only had it twice in the past two. You don't know what I would be under. Lust, perhaps, but duress? Shit Kasen, do you think I want to be your on the side fling? Never mind, I was just trying to talk to you."

Marise got up and shoved him out the door and closed it behind it her. Sliding down the other side of the wall, she finally let go and cried. Not hard tears, not even a sob. They were the quiet tears of a woman caught in limbo.

Chapter Eight – If You Can't Beat It, Run

Kasen left for work at six am. He couldn't want to face Marise that morning. He'd spent the night staring at the blackness that surrounded him in his living area. Never before had he come so close to losing control. Never before had he come so close to committing the very thing that his father had warmed him about not doing. Kasen's mind was a muddled mess and he didn't know what to do about it.

In his office, Kasen prepared to be out of the office for the next few weeks. He knew now that he needed to get away for a moment. Being around Marise had given him a case of temporary insanity. There are so many times around her that he was on the verge of losing control. And that would be the last thing that he needed when he went to face the Captain in a few months.

Kasen quickly placed a call to his business partner and told him he was going to California to drum up more business. It was a lie, but a little white lie where his life was concerned didn't bother Kasen. As Kasen quickly arranged his ticket, booked his hotel and tied up all his loose ends, his mind began to move in the logical fashion he was accustomed to. He would vacate his place for a few months and allow Marise to get on her feet. He would stay in California and keep his distance and his control. By the time he came back, it would be time for him to leave again to Lake St. Cassien. It would be ample time for them both to get over what almost happened.

That would've been a perfect game plan, if Kasen could keep his thoughts from Marise's welfare. He'd never seen her as vulnerable as he'd last night, and the man in him wanted to take advantage of the situation. There was also the carnal desire that he'd for her for two years that he'd allowed to fester instead of dealing with it. Kasen had to force himself not to care, and he'd to force himself out of Marise's life, no matter what the cost to him.

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Marise stayed up that night trying to figure out what to do with her life. What had almost transpired between her and Kasen was enough for her to think that perhaps she needed a different job. Darryl proceeded to call her cell phone but never bothered to leave a message. Marise wanted to pack up, leave, and start over somewhere. Odds were against her though, and plus, she didn't know if she wanted to live without seeing Kasen's face every day.

Marise went into work the same time as always, as if nothing had transpired. She sat down at her desk and began the day as she always did, checking her emails for anything that Kasen needed done early. She was shocked to see that he'd arranged his own travel plans and saw that he would be out of town for several weeks. Marise didn't think that it had anything to do with her. She was not someone worth all the trouble. Kasen was stubborn and sometimes a cold man, Marise thought, there was no way that their 'encounter' could've possibly made him make all of these arrangements.

She was engrossed in her own thoughts and the day moved without a pause. Marise called her mother and they met for lunch. Marise had no choice but to tell her mother everything. It felt good to finally unburden all the things that she carried, even though she was positive that her mother would not care. Her mother invited her to stay in her own room until she sorted life out. That took care of the problem with having a roof over her head. But Marise was still reluctant to return Darryl's phone calls. What would she say to him?

Her biggest dilemma was sorting out her feelings for him. He was never there, and she can't remember the last time she told him that she loved him. Marise didn't feel as though she loved him, or didn't love him enough to go through this pain together. Did she want her relationship to work or did she just want to throw it all away? The variable was Kasen. If Kasen was not in the picture, would Marise even want a divorce. If she'd not had Kasen to lean on, or unwillingly seen the feelings that Kasen had for her, would she even consider the thought of leaving Darryl?

Marise didn't know the answers to those questions. Her world was in turmoil, but she did find a bright spot. No matter what the outcome, she will never have to strip for the rest of her life. She'd Kasen to thank for that. Now if she could just see him for a moment to thank him.

When Marise returned to the office after lunch with her mother, Kasen was already gone on his business trip. He left a few notes for her about what to do on a day-to-day basis, but he left without saying goodbye. He needed his own space Marise thought. Perhaps so did she.

Marise spent the first week of Kasen being gone reconciling her differences with her mother and father. There was a lot there that Marise didn't know, and although Marise doubted that her parents and her would ever be close, at least she would be able to call them every once in a while and not have to pretend like they didn't exist. She learned that her father's 'infidelity' was a mutual thing, and in essence, there was never any cheating.

When Marise told her mother that what she'd found on her anniversary, her mother was actually sympathetic. Marise told her that whatever decision she made, she would stand by her side. Unfortunately, Marise could not make any decisions because she'd avoided Darryl like the plague. Marise's thoughts left her wondering that maybe if Darryl actually made some effort, perhaps sent flowers to say that he was sorry, she would be more inclined to talk to him.

Nothing, a few phone calls the next day, and even fewer the next. After a while, Darryl stopped calling. When Marise had not heard from him in a few days, her fears that Lenny had gotten to him plagued her mind. She picked up the phone and dialed Darryl's cell phone.

"What?" came his rough voice from the other end.

"Hello Darryl." Marise held her breath. She didn't know what to expect from him.

"MarMar! Where the hell are you?"

"That isn't important, I was just checking to see if you were alive or if Lenny had gotten a hold of you."

"Lenny, how do you know about Lenny?"

"Darryl, please, I know a lot more than you think I do. And if you go racking up more loans, I can't help you. My days of overtime are done."

"What do you mean? I never asked anything of you…"

"No, you didn't. But I didn't want to see my husband dead either. At least I gave a damn."

"I do care Mar, but I don't see what Lenny has to do with us?"

"Then you really haven't been paying attention Darryl. I'm the one who paid Lenny off."

"How? You don't understand these dudes, they don't…" There was a hard pause and Marise held her breath, "Did you fuck him?"

"Would it have mattered if I did? Would you have even cared?" Marise asked with more calm than she felt.

"Of course I would care, I mean you are my wife dammit!"

"Darryl, please, when is the last time you looked at me as your wife?"

"That isn't important now."

"The hell it isn't! I worked my ass off paying of your debts, and that is how you repay me? On our anniversary?"

"MarMar…" Darryl's voice was that syrupy tone he used when he wanted things his way. It made Marise's stomach coil.

"Don't call me that. Don't. How many times Darryl?"

"How many times what?"

"How many other times have you cheated Darryl? How many?"

"I don't know…" the way that Darryl said he didn't know made the next thing that Marise had to get off her chest that much easier.

"You don't know, huh? That many? Wow, at least now I don't feel bad."

"Feel bad for what?"

"Feel bad that to pay off your debt, I was sliding my ass up and down a pole at the Harem. I've carried that burden for months, nine months to be exact. And all the time I was up there, all I could think is that I hope Darryl will understand. I didn't feel right doing it, but I did what I had to do. To save you and to save us. But I don't feel bad anymore. If you can't remember how many times you stuck your dick in a hole that wasn't mine, it's worse than I thought."

"You are a stripper? Damn Marise…"

"Correction, I was a stripper. I stripped everything I had for you. I worked my ass off, and for what? To come home to my husband fucking two people in our sheets on our anniversary?"

"I'm sorry Marise, it just happened."

"And how many times did it just happen? Did it jump on you, did it threaten your life? How did it just happen?"

"Marise, you don't talk to me like that." That pissed Marise off in the worse way.

"Darryl, you are way past the point of telling me how to talk to you.

"Marise, look, I know that I haven't been there, but that gives you no right to treat me like this! I'm your husband. "

"So you keep saying. But do you know what it means to be a husband? To have, to hold, to honor and cherish, those are how the vows go. Let's see, you have not had me in a year. Strike one. You have not held me for over three years. Strike too. You didn't come home at night, you stopped calling to check in, and you have had numerous affairs. So the honor and cherish things are out too. So no, I don't think you are qualified to say that you are my husband anymore."

"What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm telling you that it is over, we are getting a divorce."

"You don't want to do this…"

"Oh come on Darryl. You know you don't want to be tied down. And I know that I don't want to be tied down with you."

"Is there someone else?"

Marise scoffed. It was unladylike and almost disgusting the way she sneered into the phone. She could not believe that Darryl had the audacity to ask her that.

"Yeah Darryl, you, Ray and the redhead were the someone else." She hung up the phone. She'd enough. She'd to get the court papers filed before Darryl disappeared. She shook her head and wondered what she saw in him for so long.

Chapter Nine – Severing Ties and Forming New Bonds

Marise met Darryl for lunch a week after hanging up on him. She called him that morning wondering if he was available to talk. Her hopes were high, hoping that he would not contest a quick and simple divorce. She just couldn't imagine being married to him anymore. Life had taken an unexpected turn and she didn't know how it was going to end with Darryl, but she prayed for a peaceful separation.

They met at the sandwich shop right below Marise's office space. Marise had plenty of time to take lunches with Kasen being in California. As she waited for Darryl to show up, she fretted with the divorce papers sitting in the plain manila folder. She looked them over three times to make sure she signed where she should and marked up all the pages that Darryl should sign.

Darryl stood across the street and watched Marise in the window. He knew he didn't love her, but she'd been the only stable thing in his life for years. He was used to her comfortable presence and compassionate silence. He was not ready to give that up. He also saw her playing with the papers. Darryl's mouth kinked into an upward smile. He was pretty confident that he could make her not want a divorce. He knew that he could. But did he want to? He was torn with being footloose and free on one hand and having some form of stability in his life. He touched the black eye on his left side. He'd gotten into another scrape with a different loan shark this time. Maybe she would spare a little sympathy for her husband. Darryl decided to play the sympathy card. He quickly schooled his expression into the look of the lonely and brokenhearted and walked across the street to the bistro.

Marise, who had been watching the door like a hawk, gasped and put her hand to her mouth when she saw Darryl. He was disheveled, his jeans were wrinkled, his shirt was buttoned haphazardly and he was sporting one huge black eye. *When will he learn?* Marise asked herself as she watched him walk over. Was that a slight limp, she wondered? Then she gave herself a

mental shake. This is Darryl, Marise scolded herself. He would probably never get tired of running the streets. He didn't want to have the comfort of a home, and maybe a child.

"Hey MarMar. How have you been?" Darryl said, cocking his head to the side. Marise steeled herself against his sweet as pie act. That was close to the same line he used to get her attention in first place. Except, then he'd said *How are you? I haven't seen you around here before.* She refused to be sucked into it this time. She folded her arms underneath her breasts and looked at him squarely.

"Better. But you look like shit." Marise said, looking at him from head to toe.

"Thanks Mar, like I needed to know that." Darryl pulled out a chair and thumped down into it. "Seriously, how have you been? It is weird not having you at home. And I think I have lost some weight. I miss your delicious meals."

Marise rolled her eyes at him. Of course that is the only thing that he missed. He was never there any other times.

"So what happened?" She said, motioning her hand at his eye. Did he even put an ice pack on it?

"Just a misunderstanding in a club. It was kind of messed up too. I was not trying to hit on the bookie's girl, but she was flirting with me. If I had his damn thousand bucks, she would've hustled him out of it…" Darryl stopped short and realized that he'd just told on himself. He dared a look into Marise's brown eyes, and they didn't hold resentment, just disappointment. He might have been able to handle resentment; resentment can be handled with flowers, chocolate and good sex. Disappointment, well, he could never handle that from Marise. Maybe that was the reason that he stayed away from home so much. If she could just control her disappointment in him, he would've been a better husband.

"Mmmm, I see. Well, you know why I called you. Can you sign these please?" She said, pushing the folder toward him with a pen on the top.

"Why? Don't you think we should try counseling or something? I mean you are not even giving me a chance to make things right." Darryl said, leaning back in his chair. He started to tap his foot, the same foot that he'd been limping on earlier. So much for him being hurt, Marise thought.

Marise sighed and looked Darryl in his hazel eyes. She wished things could've worked out between them. But they were much better suited at being apart. She couldn't take the wondering if he was coming home anymore.

"Darryl, this isn't because of a onetime thing. There is more to it than that." Darryl just stared at her. "And no, it wasn't about our finances. I would've been happy living in a cardboard box if you were there with me. Well, at the time."

"Why not anymore?" Darryl said. Marise hadn't said this much to him in almost a year. He was curious what made his naïve doormat grow up.

"Darryl, what was our son's name?"

"It had a name? It was a boy? Why didn't you tell me?" Darryl was furious. The baby she was carrying had been a boy?

"I did tell you Darryl. It wasn't an 'it.' His name was Carter. When did he die?"

"I don't know MarMar, it was a long time ago. I don't remember. What does it have to do with us?"

"Everything! You don't know and you never cared. Why would I believe that you would want to stay married? It was December 24th. I lost my baby on Christmas Eve."

"Your baby? It was our baby." Darryl said, getting defensive. Why was she ragging on him? It wasn't his fault she became attached to the fetus and gave it a name.

"No, not it, he, Carter was mine. I carried him, I cared for him, I grieved for him and I mourn for him every single Christmas Eve." Marise's eyes misted over as she stared Darryl down. She'd never told him any of this. It felt good to finally get these things off of her chest.

"Babe, I'm sorry you went through that, but that was years ago. Why can't we start over?"

"Because Darryl, that is where our marriage really ended. We're really doing ourselves a favor by getting out now." Marise truly believed that.

"What if I don't want to? I'm used to you, and…" Marise held up her hand in his face and shook her head.

"Darryl, being used to someone is not love. It takes love to sustain a marriage. Can you honestly say that you love me?" Marise wasn't in suspense. She already knew the answer. Darryl didn't believe in love.

"No, but what does that got to do with us? We made it work."

"It was work. It was not the blissful times I had imagined. Sooner or later Darryl you will wake up and see that you want more out of life. I just happened to discover that before you."

Darryl sat back and looked at his soon-to-be-ex. Where had this woman come from? She was not the meek little mouse he was used to. His Marise never looked him in the eyes. This woman sitting across from him had nerves of steel. No, she was right; he couldn't be married to her. She was too strong now. Sighing he picked up the pen and began to sign the papers.

Marise's heart almost burst when he finished signing them and slid them back to her. He actually had a contented smile on his face. It was contagious. She smiled back. For the first time, she felt like she'd a life of her own.

"So I guess this means I can't get a quickie?" Darryl said, trying to break some of the tension.

"No, but I know some girls at the Harem that would probably love to give you one. For a fifty." Marise laughed. At least now she could laugh at her being a stripper. She felt like a huge burden had been lifted off her shoulders.

Darryl titled his head back and let out a good bark. As his head leaned back, that is when Marise saw two cold blue eyes shooting daggers at her. Kasen was back and Marise's heart sank. *Oh shit.*

* * *

What can I do but be happy for her? Kasen thought as he rode the elevator up to his office. He'd not contacted her for two weeks, didn't answer her emails and always had his partner relay his messages to her. But, Kasen thought with a sigh, that is that, and Marise James was no longer his concern.

He felt as though he could finally be free of the nagging thoughts he has had of her in the past two weeks. He wished that he could've handled it better, but now it is out of his hands. And he felt partially relieved. Or, perhaps it was more anger than relief that had him storm away from the deli. He'd known that the man occupying the table was the infamous Darryl from the pictures on Marise's desk.

Marise was a burden that Kasen believed he was more than ready to be relieved from. He would be much more content living with his previous shallow existence. The women that he normally associated himself with were too self-absorbed to care if he honestly cared about them or not. *Who did Marise think she was? She'd laid her burdens on me and made me care about her*. Kasen gave pause and chuckled to himself. That was the biggest lie he'd ever told himself. He knew he was trying to make himself feel better about the mess as a whole, but lying to himself was going a bit too far. If there was one thing that Kasen had learned in his life, it was to always be honest, no matter the pain that it caused. The truth of the matter was, now, he knew he would want Marise more than he ever had. He'd tasted a bit of her vulnerability, he'd seen her at her worse, and it didn't make him run.

The knowledge of what could've been if he would've lost control that night would nag at him on top of his feelings for her. Kasen raked his fingers through his hair and sat down at his desk.

"DAMN!" he growled. He didn't know what else to say. He sat with his elbows on his desk and sighed. What more could he do but move on?

Just as Kasen had made up his resolve to get on with his life, he heard a soft knock at his door. Marise's head peeked in around the corner. And she looked at him wide eyed and with that questioning gaze. Marise didn't know she'd just stuck her head into back into the lion's den.

* * *

"I didn't say come in." Kasen growled at her. Taken aback, Marise snapped her head back out of the door and closed it with a soft click.

In any other circumstances, Marise would've put on a cold façade and pretended like she didn't care what that other person was going through. Life had taught her that caring about what other people are going through would drain her strength. Right now, she wasn't willing to be drained of the new strength she'd.

But, this wasn't any other circumstance. This was a man that had saved her from sure insanity in what was proving to be the most difficult year of her life. He was also a man that she'd come to care for in the most primal way. He needed her, and she would not back down out of his life. She knocked again, this time firmer than before.

"What!" Came the response from the other side of the door. Marise's lip hitched up a little in the corner. If he wanted to be the big mean and bad boss, she would give him what he wanted. Marise waited patiently, and knocked again. By the time Marise took a breath, the door whipped open and Marise stood staring at Kasen's loosened tie. She looked up at him and saw that his blue eyes were stormier that she'd ever seen them. She was scared, but at the same time, she knew she'd a mission in this man's life.

"I said what?" Kasen snarled between pursed lips and clenched teeth. Marise winced a little at his demeanor, but she would not back down. She looked up at him defiantly and met his gaze.

"I was waiting for you to say 'Come in', not what. So, I knocked twice. May I come in?" Kasen's jaw ticked and Marise knew he was holding back a lot of anger. He stepped to the side, and motioned with his arm for her to take a seat. Marise knew this was not going to be an easy conversation. Kasen looked pissed when he left the café so abruptly. She was trying to look at it from his perspective, but she could not bite back the news of her divorce for too much longer.

"What can I help you with Ms. James?"

Ms. James? What was wrong with him? He'd always called her Marise before.

"Well, Mr. Montgomery, as you will be leaving again in a few days I thought we could catch up on things." Marise said with her head cocked to one side. If that was the way that he wanted to play it, she could be cool and detached too. Perhaps she misunderstood his compassion when he left two weeks ago. Or perhaps he didn't want to have anything to do with damaged goods such as her. She watched him wearily as he rounded his desk and flopped into his chair. He ran his fingers through his hair and then fixed his gaze at her.

"Yes, we should. Set up a briefing for tomorrow morning. Anything else?" Kasen stated as he began flipping through papers. He wasn't looking at anything he'd not looked at before. He just couldn't let her know that he was a mess.

Marise was taken aback by his abrupt and short tone. But, Marise had also spent years running from these types of situations. For years, when Darryl got agitated, she would remain silent and not say anything. She would watch from her lowered lashes and pray that she could find something to say. She never did with Darryl. With Kasen, however, Marise found herself wanting to say a whole lot.

"Yes, one more thing."

"Yes, Ms. James?"

"What happened to you?" Marise said and folded her arms in front of her chest. That posture didn'thing but agitate Kasen because it gave him an ample view of her coffee toned cleavage. He groaned and rolled his eyes.

"What makes you think something happened?" Kasen said as he looked at the ceiling. This was a conversation he didn't need.

"Well, you are short and you seem frustrated. Was the trip bad?"

"No, the trip was actually good. I just have a lot on my mind, that's all." Kasen hoped that she would take the hint and not pry.

"Oh. So is the family reunion going to be a good thing?" Marise was curious about him, and talking about his life made her briefly forget about hers.

"Nothing I can't handle. Thanks for asking. How did you handle things while I was gone?" Kasen knew he should at least be nice to her. It was entirely his fault his heart was broken. She never knew what he felt for her.

"Pretty slow here when you are not here cranking out the work," Marise said, making the effort to smile. At least he wasn't being borderline rude, she thought. Now would be the perfect time to tell him about her divorce.

"I see. So did you play hooky at all? Long lunches?" Kasen tried to remain playful, but he knew if he got the real answers to those questions, he would be livid and probably worse yet, trying to find a reason to fire her. Kasen was not proud of his line of thinking, so he'd to take a few breaths to get himself under control.

"No, I only took lunch twice. I met my mother to get some things straightened out. That is where I'm living now. And the other lunch was with Darryl, whom you saw." Marise waited for his reaction. When none was forthcoming, she rushed out, "He was signing the divorce papers."

Marise waited. Kasen stared. What could he be thinking? Marise waited for a reaction of some kind, but again, Kasen's face was schooled stone.

"We decided, well I decided for the both of us it was what was best."

"Hmmm." Kasen just nodded. Now he was stuck. He didn't know what to do with that announcement. He could've jumped for joy, asked her out, told her congratulations if that was in order, but he didn'thing but stare at her.

"Just thought you would like to know." The light had gone out of Marise's eyes and her voice sounded hollow. She couldn't believe that was all he'd to say. She felt rejected, again. She brushed off some imaginary lint on her skirt, stood up and turned to the door. "Gotta get ready for the briefing tomorrow." She said over her shoulder. Still, she was met with silence. Well, she thought, I guess that was that. He was only comforting me that night apparently. She walked towards the door, and with one more backward glance at Kasen, she walked out of it, shutting it softly behind her.

Kasen stared at that closed-door for what seemed like hours. He couldn't believe it, Marise would be free. Free for what? What made him even think that she would want him? He was a self-admitted commitment-phobe and never knew how to give up control. She was bright, inquisitive and would ask him questions he spent most of the time trying to avoid.

Marise couldn't be the woman for him. Why should he pounce on someone who was so obviously in a vulnerable spot? Because he'd wanted to pounce on her from day one, is what he told himself. Before his brain could react, Kasen bolted out of his seat and was at his door.

Opening it softly, he stared at Marise who was staring at her computer screen. She appeared lost in thought, but there was that sad look in her eyes again. Only this time, he was the one who put it there. Kasen took a breath and let his heart do the talking.

"Um Marise?" Kasen said, it was barely above a whisper but Marise heard him anyway. She looked away from her screen and looked at him with guarded eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Montgomery?" Her voice sounded edged with steel as she said his name. Now, Kasen longed for that unforgotten moment when Marise called him Kas.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I'm just a little out of it. I was wondering, would you like to have a few more practice sessions before I go to France? Well, I guess I'm more asking you to do me a huge favor by practicing with me one last time."

Marise's almond shaped eyes squinted as she sized him up and down. Kasen knew he deserved it, but he would try his hardest to make amends.

"Ok, when?" Marise agreed, completely shocking him.

"Tonight, if that is ok?" Kasen's head dropped down and he looked at the carpet as he asked. What was it about her that made him feel like such a schoolboy whenever he opened his mouth?

"Ok, tonight is fine. Usual time?"

"Yes." He said, trying not to let the hope show too much in his voice.

"I will see you then Mr. Montgomery." Marise turned back to her computer and she began to type.

Kasen watched her for a few more moments, and then ducked back into his office. Now, he just had to figure out how to tell her how he truly felt.

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Chapter Ten – The Last Dance

Marise waited outside of Kasen's condo five minutes before she was supposed to dance with him for the last time.

She relished her new-found independence somewhat, but there was still a nagging presence in the back of her mind. Kasen was still in her thoughts, even as she dismissed what had almost happened between them as a moment of vulnerability on both of their parts.

So why was she not going up to his condo? She was plainly scared. Kasen was the most intimidating man that she'd ever met, and he was always in control of everything. It seemed to her that Kasen's life always went as planned, and if it didn't, he would make up another plan. He was a hard man to figure out, but Marise couldn't just walk way. No matter how much she wanted to, she could not get the thought of Kasen Montgomery out of her mind.

Marise, you are mad. You are getting a divorce from one man, yet only to be consumed by thoughts of another? Isn't this just too soon?

Marise shook her head and took a deep breath. She'd to get these thoughts out of her head. She was not trying to marry him, hell she wasn't even trying to date him, even though the thought of dating a man like Kasen was quite appealing.

"You have got to stop this girl." Marise said to herself as she walked into the complex. She rode the elevator humming the tango rhythm to herself. That was the last dance that her and Kasen danced before life blew up. Maybe she could get that final turn right this time, she thought as she pressed the buzzer. She didn't go home to change this time, as she thought that the light skirt that she was wearing would be just fine.

Kasen yanked open the door and grinned at her. He was still in his suit shirt and pants.

"Glad to see I wasn't the only one who didn't feel like changing. Come in." Marise came in and inhaled. It was just as she left it two weeks ago, but it seemed lighter inside somehow. Perhaps she was only deceiving herself, but it is the first time she'd stepped into his condo with the gray cloud of secrets hanging over her head.

"Yes, it was such a warm day out, I didn't want to go home and put on sweats." Marise said, dropping her purse by the door. Kasen stared stunned at her. It was the first time where she spoke without seeming like a deer in headlights. She seemed so easy going now. What had he missed in the past two weeks?

"Would you like something to drink? Perhaps unwind a bit after a long day?" Kasen knew that he'd thrown all sorts of work at her that afternoon, hoping that she would tire out and forget his stupid idea of asking her to dance with him one last time. He'd regretted it the moment he asked her. He wasn't sure how to lay out everything that he wanted to say, and Kasen thought that maybe it was best left unsaid. After all, she didn't seem to be suffering for it, or so he told himself.

Now, as she stood in front of him, Marise didn't seem like the same person. Where was the shy foal that he wanted to protect with all he'd? Where were the lonely looks in her eyes that he would've loved to take away? She seemed stronger and more confident and maybe she didn't need him in her life.

"No, I don't think… well you know what, it's Friday, why not we share some wine, if you have any?" Marise looked at him eagerly, hoping that he would've some wine to unravel her nerves.

Tried as she might, she tried to look at Kasen as just her boss, she could not help but to go back to that night in his bed. *I will not lose control with you,* he'd said. Does he still feel that way? Marise had to know what he wanted in his life.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I hope white wine is ok?"

"Of course. I'm your guest."

Kasen gave her a smirk, and left the room. He came back with two chilled glasses of wine and they sipped in silence for a while. They watched each other with hooded glances and sly stares, but neither one of them could move to what they really wanted to say. Marise, finally, took the matter into her own hands.

She turned on the CD player with the remote, and a waltz cd was already cued. She turned the volume up and sat her glass onto the window sill. Empty armed, Marise held out her hands before her and began the steps to the waltz, without Kasen.

Kasen stared at her long form move for a while. Her eyes were closed and she'd lost herself in the music. Kasen watched her and then let his body do his thinking and soon he was in her arms. At first she opened her eyes, and met his fierce gaze with a cool nonchalance that should've bugged him. But, in her arms, he was captivated by it. When Kasen stumbled the steps twice, all Marise did was smirk slightly, her subtle pink lips raised a little in the corner.

"I'm not being a very good instructor am I?" Kasen asked, a little sheepishly. Marise smiled a little and knew that he was embarrassed. Although she knew that she could drag out his embarrassment, she'd other ideas.

"No, but that is ok, because you are not the instructor at this moment, Mr. Montgomery." Marise said coolly.

"Marise, can't you go…wait, what do you mean?" Kasen was going to ask her to go back to calling him by his first name, but her announcement that he was not instructing through him through a huge loop.

Marise ignored his comment and kept dancing. She was placing a lot on this moment, and she could not afford to let the cat out of the bag to soon. Kasen, although his arms had grown rigid with tension, was still dancing, following her lead. And that was exactly what she wanted.

Marise was leading him and he didn't even realize it. She'd taken his role in the dance, and that left him to move backwards in the dance.

"It means you are not the instructor right now." Marise said as she caught her gaze in the mirror. Tread slowly, she told herself in the mirror.

"Marise, what does that mean?" Kasen growled in his low whisper. She'd not heard him use that tone of voice since that night in the Harem. Marise's head tilted a little to the side as she regarded Kasen with a lazy look.

"It means that you are not leading. I'm." Marise knew there was one minute left in the crescendo and that she'd led Kasen for fifteen minutes without him knowing. The piano notes hit their peak, the violins were winding down, and the song was at an end. Instead of Marise being buried in Kasen's muscular arms, he was instead in hers.

Kasen, trying to put some distance between them by pushing at her arms, but she locked them around his neck and held still.

"Marise," Kasen growled again. Marise released him and stared at him innocently.

"Yes, *Cassien?*" That is where Kasen stopped cold in his tracks. The sultry voice that Marise had used drove him to distraction, but there was a time and place for games. And now was not one of those times, and he didn't honestly think Marise was the type to play cat and mouse games.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" Kasen put his hands on his hips.

"I don't know. You joined me, remember? Am I a terrible lead?"

"No, you aren't a terrible lead. You just aren't supposed to be leading." Kasen pursed his lips together. He could feel his temper begin to rise. He could not believe that she'd totally taken control! He was angry at himself for not seeing it as soon as he was dancing with her.

"I don't think the headmistress is going to hit our hands with a ruler, do you?" Marise smirked and walked over to the large window that held her drink. She took a few sips and stared out into the evening. The sun was getting low in the sky, and the bright blue of the day was dwindling to

the seductive shade of azure blue that reminded Marise of Kasen's eyes when he was passionate about something. When she turned to look at him, she saw that his eyes were indeed that color now. Maybe she'd over done it?

"Marise, what are you doing?" Kasen said again.

"You have asked me that twice in less than a minute. And I tell you I'm not up to anything. Haven't you ever felt unburdened in your life? Have you ever felt like you just needed to go with the moment?" Marise's eyes were wide and she appeared eager for something.

"No," Kasen said and he walked away from her alluring form.

Marise wasn't going to let him off that easy. She flicked the remote again, this time to the fast paced tango. She hurried and caught Kasen on his shoulder.

"Come on, there is more practicing to do." She took his hand and led him back to the middle of the wooden floor. She smirked, and looked him in his eyes, which were weary and skeptical. "Don't worry, I will even let you lead this time."

Kasen squinted at her, and began to move to the song. Tentatively he led her through the steps. Marise could feel his inner war, and she wanted to help. She knew that she'd to get him in a spot where he didn't have a choice but to lose control. But how? As they worked through the dance almost flawlessly, Marise found the solution.

"Kasen?" Kasen's head jerked up at her voice. She seemed to be back to normal.

"Yes, are you tired?" Kasen was panting, but he didn't want it to show. Holding his composure and trying to dance to the upbeat tempo had caused him to exert himself more than he planned.

"No, no," Marise patted his chest for emphasis, "I just wanted to try that dip now. I think I can do it. If you would just lead me into it." Marise's eyes had got big and eager again, as if she was pleading with him to take her on her word.

Silently, Kasen led them into the dip, her legs sliding in between his. As she brought her calf up to his thigh, she hooked her ankle around his leg and held on. Just as she hoped, Kasen lost his balance and began to fall.

What she didn't expect was for Kasen to shift his body, almost cat like, and make her land on top of him. Kasen's bottom landed with a large thud and Marise landed with her face buried in his chest. Before she could control herself, Marise started to laugh. Her whole body shook as she laughed at the sight before her eyes. She was staring in the mirror at her and Kasen, a bundle of limbs on the floor.

* * *

"Oh my God, Marise are you ok?" Kasen was trying to sit up to look at her, but he couldn't from the way Marise's leg was wrapped around his body.

Between peals of laughter, Marise managed to say she was fine, but she was in the throes of a laughing attack. Kasen was on his back, and just listened to her laugh for a while. He didn't even try to hide the fact that he was growing hard in his pants. It was too much for him to keep control of at that moment. He even began to chuckle a little.

At the sound of Kasen's throaty chuckle, Marise stopped laughing. She met Kasen's eyes and she was lost. Before she could stop herself, she leaned into him for a soft kiss. The electricity shot through them both at the same time. Kasen gasped, sucking in Marise's exhaled air and deepening the kiss at the same time.

Marise reached up and put her fingers in Kasen's hair and held him still for her to explore his mouth.

Kasen's cock stirred to life. Kasen tore his lips from hers with a hiss. He looked down at Marise's flushed face and kissed the tip of her nose. He couldn't stop there. He captured her full bronzed lips in his and began to kiss her as if he wanted to steal the air she breathed.

Pulling her wrists behind her back, Kasen used their position to his advantage and rolled her over on her back. He lifted her skirt up her smooth chocolate legs, touching her skin as if she would disappear if he didn't cherish every inch of her skin. He watched Marise's eyes close and her lips form an "O".

Groaning deep in his throat, Kasen bent to unbutton Marise's white silk blouse. As his fingers worked the buttons, he could feel the heat rising from her skin. Pushing the fabric from blocking the view of his treasure, Kasen gasped when he saw Marise's full breasts heaving, calling to him. He bent slightly and began to suckle at her breast through her lace bra, her erect nipples looking like chocolate candies wrapped in white.

Marise groaned. She took the pleasure Kasen was giving and let it wash over her. She sunk her long fingers into his thick strands hair and pulled him closer to her breasts.

Marise's head fell back in a gasp as her Kasen sucked her nipples with vigor. His hands were working magic, touching and caressing every inch of her exposed skin. Marise opened her eyes and caught a glimpse of them in the wall mirror. She looked utterly satisfied and Kasen was licking her body like a man possessed. His large hand grabbed her wrists and he held them over her head, holding her still as his tongue lavished circles around her stomach and on her hips. Her hips bucked towards him when he blew his warm breath on the wet spots his tongue has caressed. As her hips bucked higher, Kasen grabbed the edge of Marise's cotton underwear and yanked, ripping them from her body. He'd waited for too long to keep himself from her pearl any longer.

Marise held still as soon as she felt the cool air hit the hot wet lips of her pussy. *When had my panties come off?* It didn't matter. Kasen held Marise down, keeping her helpless, and that was the way she wanted it. She looked down just as Kasen looked up. His eyes were hard, passion-filled. Marise slowly swallowed and closed her eyes.

"Look at me Marise." Kasen barked, making her eyes snap back open. She didn't know if she could watch as Kasen's head dipped between her thighs but Kasen's stare commanded her

attention. She kept her eyes open as she felt his tongue touch her swollen clit gently at first, and the he did it. His mouth clamped down around her clit and his tongue swirled and danced over her clit. Marise bucked harder, but she couldn't scream, all she could do was pant.

Kasen watched Marise go over the edge and thought it was beautiful. He kept feasting on her pussy, watching her orgasm blossom and take over. Kasen finally let go of her wrists only to shove his free digits into Marise's warm waiting wet cunt. He moved his fingers in and out, in rhythm to his questing tongue. His mouth and fingers sent Marise over the edge.

"Fuck, Kas, Kas, damn." Marise chanted as another orgasm ripped through her.

Kasen removed his fingers from her hole, knowing she was finally ready for him. After licking his fingers clean, and giving her a chance to catch her breath, Kasen left the room briefly.

When he returned he was shirtless and pants-less.

Pulling Marise off the floor, Kasen held the beautiful creature in front of him. He slid her skirt down to the floor.

"Step." His gruff voice brooked no argument from Marise. She watched in the mirror as Kasen's hands slid the blouse from shoulders. She was naked, and exposed. Her eyes met Kasen's in the mirror and she never felt so adored. He ran his warm hands over her thighs, over her small thatch of hair before prying open her pussy lips and holding them open. Kasen dipped his head, nipping at her shoulder.

"Watch what I'm doing Marise." Kasen breathed in her ear as he positioned himself behind her. With a slight bend of the knees, Kasen had lined his raging cock up to Marise's quivering opening.

Marise could hardly contain her anticipation, but Kasen took it slow. Little by little he fed her dripping hole with his thick cock, stretching her more and more.

When Marise thought she couldn't take the torture anymore, Kasen lifted her leg and plunged his cock home. Marise's back arched into Kasen, but he held them both up as he began to pump his hard length slowly in and out of her.

"Watch Marise," Kasen growled through clinched teeth. Marise tried to focus her hazy vision on the mirror. When she did, she gasped at the sight in front of her. Kasen, with his strong body, was holding her up, slowly pumping his cock in and out of her. It was a beautiful sight and Marise felt her pussy quiver again with another pending orgasm.

As if sensing her impending explosion. Kasen picked Marise up and carried her into the kitchen. Settling her on the center island, he only paused a moment before filling her to the hilt.

"Oh my!" Marise breathed as Kasen began to pound into her tight walls with a sense of purpose. It felt as though he was trying to brand her.

"Mine!" Kasen growled as he picked up the pace, filling her cream coated wall with all of himself. Kasen captured her lips in fierce kiss and increased the pace. "Come with me Marise, don't hold back."

Marise found it difficult to catch her breath, her orgasm bordering on the line of pain and pleasure.

Kasen would not be deterred. He placed his hand in between them and cut her swollen clit in a vise of his index and middle finger. Kasen's vigorous rubbing was all Marise needed to go over the edge.

"Kas! I'm, I'm…" Marise couldn't finish her sentence. The lights began to explode behind her eyes and Marise felt her body go tense.

"That's it baby, come with me," Kasen cried before his body went tense. He pulled Marise's body close to his as they both rode out their orgasms in each other's embrace.

Kasen didn't know how long he remained that way, but when he felt himself go limp and began to slide out of her, he pulled away only long enough to take the condom off and throw it in the trash.

He pulled Marise into his arms and they walked into his bathroom in silence.

Getting a warm towel, Kasen held it to Marise's throbbing pussy. He knew he'd been rough with her, but he'd lost it.

"I'm sorry." Kasen murmured, unable to look her in the eyes as he held the cloth.

Marise put her hands on his back, as if she was trying to soothe a little boy.

"For what? I wanted that as much as you did." Marise said, keeping her voice even, although her throat felt raw.

"I should've known better, I should've…" Kasen was getting agitated now. He felt like he took advantage of her. Marise put her index on his full kiss-swollen lips.

"Kas, you didn't do anything I didn't want you to do. We both wanted this. Perhaps we both needed this."

"Marise, this, is more than want. I need this, I need you. I haven't been the same since you walked in that door two years ago. You have been on my mind; you have been in my heart the whole time. I need more Marise, can you give that to me?" Kasen's hissed words shocked her. What was she to say to say to that? She stared at him wide eyed, and then a slow smile crept to her face.

"I can give you that, if you can give me something in return." Marise said, slowly, hoping she could gauge his answer.

"Anything, anything Marise, just stay with me." Kasen said as he held her close to him, smelling her hair.

"Your love. Do you think you can you love me?" Marise said, her words sounding garbled from the bend of his shoulder. Kasen chuckled and picked her up. Marise wrapped her legs around him and he carried her to the bed.

"Marise, I have loved you from the moment you walked into my life. There's no stopping me now."