

Serena

Run Serena run. That refrain was going through my brain like a mantra as my tired, blistered feet pounded the pavement outside my beach house where I was staying, temporarily, with some surfer friends who I actually met through Craig's List. Donny and Michael were your typical Ocean Beach surfers, who lived for the chance to catch a 10 foot wave on the water and worked jobs that would work around this singular obsession. Donny was a sushi chef at one of the ubiquitous sushi restaurants in town, even though he was clearly not Japanese, and Michael worked at a tech start-up in the evenings. Michael had made it clear that he could only work after 4 PM every day when he interviewed for the job, and the partners of the company agreed to his terms. God forbid the job would interfere with what he and Donny truly lived for.

I didn't necessarily understand their lifestyle, nor did that matter. To me, I would have been freaked out the first time I spotted a Great White, which apparently was a common sighting for Donny, Michael and surfers everywhere. They insisted that if they didn't bother the sharks that the sharks didn't bother them, but I was unconvinced about this. Still, even I had to admit that a shark attack was an uncommon occurrence. The last shark attack was in Solana Beach in 2008, when a shark killed a tri-athlete who was minding his own business as part of a training group, and he was the first shark fatality in the San Diego area since 1994. As Donny said, I was more likely to die from the flu than to be killed by a Great White, and he was right, of course. Nonetheless, like every bogey man that haunts everyone's nightmares, the shark attack seems likely to happen even though it is really anything but.

Not that I didn't get in the water. I did, but the bravest I got was boogie boarding. I took to that like a duck to water, sorry for the bad pun. But it was a time when I could feel free. Catching a wave and riding it in on my boogie board made me feel like I was flying, and, for a brief moment, I forgot my pain.

Running helped with that, too, so I tried to run at least 5 miles a day. It kept me in shape, to be sure, but I craved the physical pain that accompanied it, just because it helped me forget the psychic pain for just a moment. I could concentrate on how my lungs were burning, how my muscles were screaming in protest, how the blisters on my feet were joining in the pain chorus. So, I ran every single morning before work, rain or shine. I would get up at 5 in the morning to run, then hurry home, into the tiny shower in the two bedroom bungalow that I called home, and then throw on some clothes and head to work.

It was during these times – when I was running, boogie boarding or working – that I was able to come to terms with all that had happened to me in my life. All that I had lost. I never thought that I could fill that space, and, indeed, I didn't even try. I had to continue on with my life, of course, because the alternative was something that I couldn't bear.

I ran my five miles, and then came in the door, where I was greeted by Donny. I was surprised that he was awake that early, because he and Michael usually didn't get started surfing at least until 9.

"Hey girl," he said to me over his bowl of Cheerios. "S'up."

"I'm surprised to see you awake this early. Weren't you and Michael up late last night?"

He nodded his head. "Yeah, but, for some odd reason, I couldn't sleep, so I decided just to stay awake. I know that I'm going to pay for that tonight when I go into work though."

I knew the feeling. Ever since I had been going through hypnosis and counseling, I found myself waking up really early, having had a vivid nightmare. The nightmares weren't exactly about the incident or what had happened to me as a baby, but, rather, were more coded. I would dream that I was going into an exam, even though I hadn't been to class all semester. Or I would

dream that I forgot to put on any clothes at all, and I was standing in the middle of a busy street, buck naked. I would try to hide in a storm drain or any place at all, but, of course, there was never any hiding. Sometimes I would dream that a giant spider was on my pillow, or that there was bleach in my mouth and I knew not to swallow. Then I did swallow, and I would wake up with a start.

I was surprised that my dreams weren't more detailed. As an empath since birth, I was constantly in touch with the pain of others. I never wanted to be, and I couldn't understand why I was. What I always knew was that I was affected more than most when people around me were suffering, and it was always something that I had tried to block out. My hypnotherapist was helping me to understand this ability and how it had always affected my life, and why I, ironically enough, acted in ways that showed the world that I just didn't care.

My life would have been more balanced, for sure, if I didn't also have the ability to tap into the spiritual world. That was something that really drove me crazy all my life, and it wasn't until recently that I was able to accept this aspect about my psyche.

I stared at Donny, and sensed that nothing was really wrong with him. He just probably ate something he shouldn't have, and it made him insomniac for the night. "You probably need to lay off the sugar late at night," I told him. "I have to always remember the same thing."

Donny smiled. "Yeah, guilty as charged. Some idiot coworker brought in these rad cupcakes from Babycakes. Like I can resist something like that. But you're right, I shouldn't overindulge in such things right before I go to bed."

Donny did tend to overindulge in cupcakes and other such delights, whether it was late at night or during the day, but you would never know it by looking at him. He was amazingly lean, as a surfer must be.

He put his hand in his long blonde hair, and pulled it on top of his head in a makeshift pony tail. "What about you, Miss Serena? How come I never see you eat cupcakes?"

I shrugged. "I do. I just have to make sure that there are no animal products involved, that's all. Most of those things are made with butter, you know."

He nodded his head, a lazy grin displayed on his handsome face. "Oh, right, right. I guess you have to make yours with oil or trans-fat. I keep forgetting that all animal products are off-limits to you."

That was true. As an empath, I knew the suffering of animals. I could feel their suffering in my bones. There was no way I would ever consume any kind of product that came from this suffering. The frustration I always had was that so few people felt the same.

That would include Dalilah, my sister-in-law to be. I could never understand how somebody as sensitive as she was, whose parents were vegan, could consume animal products. I was heartened recently, though, when she told me that she and Luke, my brother, were in the process of giving all that up. She finally saw the error in her ways, and she came to it on her own, which was always important.

I rapidly showered and changed into my suit, and came out to grab my keys, which were on the table. "I'm going to be late coming home tonight," I told him. "I need to see another house." I was looking for a new home in the Solana Beach area, near where the tri-athlete had met his unfortunate end. I craved living near the water, which was why I had moved from New York to San Diego in the first place. I missed my family, of course, who were scattered among the East Coast cities of Boston, New York and Portland, Maine. I especially missed Luke and Dalilah, two people who I had grown extremely close to in the past few months, but it couldn't

be helped. My therapist told me that I needed to live by water because it was so calming for me, and, I had to admit that he was right about that.

“We’re going to miss you when you go,” Donny said. “I don’t know anybody who can cook a better vegan meal than you.”

I smiled. “It’s California, trust me, there are lots of people who can cook a better vegan meal than me.”

He shrugged. “Can you make sure that your replacement is one of those people?” he asked.

I gave him a look, but knew that he wasn’t serious. “Yeah, Donny, I’ll get right on that.” Then I picked up my keys and got into my new BMW SUV and drove off to my law firm.

I had recently discovered that I really wanted to get into criminal law, having worked previously on corporate mergers in New York City before quitting, because the entire thing bored me to death. When I had reconnected with Luke, I had been out of the legal business for a few years, which was why he was surprised that I still knew the legalities of the undercover sting operation that he and I did at that underground club. I was a bit surprised that he had asked me how I knew as much as I did, because I thought that he was aware that I was a partner in my old law firm, but I guess that he forgot and I didn’t necessarily want to remind him. I was trying to forget my old life myself.

I wanted to leave that work behind, because my firm wanted me to transfer into the environmental defense division, and that, quite frankly, was the last thing that I had wanted to do. I could think of nothing worse than defending corporate polluters, so I bailed with a nice buyout of my partnership. A buyout that had enabled me to buy that brownstone in New York and live for a few years without trying to think of my next move.

I guess I should have been happy to have had the luxury of those few years when I didn’t have to think about what to do with my life. After all, I was currently only 28, having made partner at the age of 24, because I had graduated from law school at the tender age of 22. That was another thing that I had in common with Dalilah – we both were prodigies, although I knew that Luke and the rest of my family were unaware of this fact. I had left home at the age of 18, and I didn’t have contact with them for years because they hated me. Their hatred of me was for good reason, of course, because I was a total bitch for so many years. I breezed through college, having gained two years of college credits while I was in high school, and then crammed the three years of law school into two by going to school, a full load, around the clock, never taking summers off at all. I have no idea why I wanted so desperately to get out of school, except that I really wanted a position to take my mind off of everything.

I took a deep breath as I walked into the gleaming high rise where my new law firm was located. I was only a junior associate at the firm, of course, and even that was pending my passing the California bar exam that June. I knew that I would pass, of course, but, at the moment, I wasn’t able to appear in court.

“Hi Serena,” Anna called to me. She was my paralegal, and was an extremely efficient one at that. “There’s been an emergency meeting with the partners. They asked that you be there,” she said as she took my briefcase and purse from me. “I’ll put these in your office. They’re waiting on you.”

I nodded my head. *Great, just great. Couldn’t anybody have called me about this?*

I went into the conference room, where the 20 senior partners were sitting around a table. I didn’t really belong there, as I was only a junior associate, and not even really that until I

passed the bar, so I was more than surprised that I was to be included in this meeting. Not just included, but apparently I was important to the meeting, as they were waiting for me to show up.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I didn't know that there was a meeting, otherwise I would have tried harder to be on time." I felt annoyed again that nobody had told me about the meeting. Ordinarily, my being a bit late wouldn't have been a big deal. Today, however, it clearly was a big deal, judging by the temperature in the room.

I tried to shake off the tension I was feeling from the men and the three women who were staring at me, but it was difficult. I, once again, cursed my "gift." Stress hormones flooded through my body, and I took an enormous breath.

"Have a seat," Malcolm, the managing partner, said to me, pulling out my chair. "Now that you're here, we can call our meeting to order."

"Thanks," I said, and then closed my eyes. I tried to block out the voice that was coming from one of the women. I couldn't read thoughts all the time, but I definitely could read feelings, and these feelings were often presented to me in words. *Stupid woman*, she was thinking. *I have no idea who died to make you so important to this firm.*

I glared at her, and she gave me an innocent look like she had no idea why I would be giving her the stink-eye. I bit my lower lip and shook my head, and was glad that she didn't have the same ability to read *my* feelings about *her*.

"Serena," Malcolm said to me politely. I got a read on him and he wasn't covering up annoyance, so I was happy about that. "This firm has just been retained on the Slade Bridgewell case. That is the reason for this meeting."

I nodded my head and thought about what a coup that was. Slade Bridgewell was a billionaire who had been accused of offing his business partner. The media was obsessing over the case and had been for days, ever since his business partner was found bludgeoned to death at the corporate headquarters of Bridgewell Industries, which was an international pharmaceutical company that had just been taken public with an IPO of over \$10 billion.

I was ashamed to admit that I hadn't been following the case all that closely, unlike the rest of the free world. The details of the case had been breathlessly reported on every major news station pretty much 24/7 since the incident had occurred. Every time I turned on the television, they were talking about the handsome mogul, but I usually just changed the channel. He looked guilty as sin in my estimation, simply because he had that look; the look that exuded arrogance and privilege. For one thing, he was extremely handsome and charismatic, more handsome and charismatic than anybody had a right to be. With his dark wavy hair and piercing green eyes, he looked like an unusually good-looking male model. For another, he seemed entirely too laid-back, considering what he was charged with. I hated the way he was always smiling, even after the arrest, with his gleaming, perfect teeth and full lips. Hippy surfers like Donny and Michael had a right to smile like that, not wealthy men who were possibly facing the death penalty.

Of course, I hadn't actually been around the guy, so I wasn't actually able to pick up on his vibrations. Therefore, I didn't necessarily know that he was guilty as hell; I just had the feeling from looking at his visage on television. His looks certainly didn't help his cause, either, as that was part of the reason for the obsessive media coverage of his case. A guy who looked like that and was as self-made wealthy as he was at the age of 28 was a target for media attention anyhow. God knew that most billionaires didn't look like this guy, so he, and his playboy lifestyle, were fodder for the tabloids since day one. It seemed like every actress and supermodel in town had been on his arm at least once. From that, I surmised that he was probably gay and utilized a multitude of beautiful beards.

“That’s a coup,” I finally said to Malcolm, who appeared to be waiting on my response. I still had zero idea why I was brought in on this case, so I hoped that it would all be explained to me in short order.

“Yes,” he said, and then looked around the room. “So this meeting is the initial strategy session for his case. He has a PR firm on top of his image issues, of course, but, nonetheless, we need to be a front line on that as well. We need to prepare a statement for the media, which is camped out in front of the courthouse even as we speak. Mr. Bridgewell is going to be arraigned this morning, and Jonathan is attending that hearing.”

Jonathan nodded his head, and everyone got to work preparing what was going to be said to the media. It was the typical statement that every lawyer ever said to a shitload of cameras who were thrust into their face since time began. *My client is innocent until proven guilty, and we ask that his privacy be respected during this difficult time.* There really couldn’t be much more said in this statement, because to tell the media what the evidence was going to show would be tipping the hand to the prosecution on what the defense was going to be. That, of course, was verboten.

Cindy, the girl whose thoughts I had read earlier, raised her hand. “I think that it’s time that we go over his preliminary defense,” she said.

“We need to get his whole story,” Malcolm said, “Which is where Serena comes in.”

Cindy gave me the stink-eye to end all stink-eyes. “Serena?” she protested. “I was hoping that I could do the initial interview with the client.”

I tried to shake off the dark vibrations that she was shooting into me, but it was very difficult. This bitch was throwing me signals, left and right, and I took a deep breath and tried to clear out her negative energy. I was getting better at doing so than I was before, which was why I was, generally, in a calmer head space than when I was growing up and was tormented by the dark energy of others, not to mention the energy, both light and dark, of spirits who were constantly trying to use me as a medium against my will.

Malcolm raised his eyebrows. “Serena will conduct the interview,” he said. “And Serena, I know that this is going to be an odd request, but please go into that interview blind. I don’t want you to know too much about this guy before you talk to him, so do not do any independent research on him. I need your intuition for this, only your intuition, and if you go into the interview with any preconceived notions, it might interfere.”

I nodded my head. It had all become clear. Malcolm was one of the few people in the firm who believed in my gifts. He evidently thought that I would be able to get at the truth of this matter, which was going to be crucial. This Slade looked like he would be a glib liar, because he just had that type of demeanor and charm. It was naturally important to know the truth, and I could read Malcolm’s energy, which told me that he thought that I would be able to get at this important truth.

I took a deep breath, hoping against hope that Slade was able to be read. I sometimes had problems with people who were blocked off from their own feelings, as I had been for so many years. If this Slade had any kind of a defense mechanism surrounding his aura, I didn’t think that I would be able to achieve what Malcolm was obviously wanting me to.

Of course, if he were a sociopath, I also wouldn’t be able to get a read on the guy. A sociopath, a true sociopath, would be one who was not at all in touch with his or her feelings, namely because they didn’t have true ones. No feelings, no emotions...just void. I had met more than one person like that in my life, and they creeped me out way more than the ones who were

exuding negativity. At least with the really negative people I knew where I stood, and I had learned to deflect their energy. With a sociopath...I shivered just thinking about it.

I stood up, prepared to protest my selection in this matter. “Malcolm, I thank you highly for your vote of confidence. I really do. But I’m the most junior member of this firm. I think that there are much more qualified people than me to handle a case of this magnitude. But I’m very, uh, flattered that you would think of me first.”

Truth be told, I didn’t want to be the one who would interview this guy, because I didn’t want to be the one who would find that he was guilty. I knew that my law firm needed to know that, because it would direct how the defense would proceed. But I wanted to be far, far away from this case. If I went to meet with this guy, and every hair on my body would tell me that he was guilty, then how could I possibly feel safe? I knew that I was going to have to meet with him alone, too, because if there was anybody else in the room, I might not be able to get a good read on him. I got a good read on Cindy with others in the room, but that was only because she was terrible at covering up her feelings. I had the insight that Slade would not be the same, so I was going to have to really concentrate.

Cindy smiled. “Okay, Serena has declined. I would like to be the one who will conduct the interview.”

I shook my head. I knew why Cindy was so chomping at the bit – she was anxious to meet with a man as handsome as Slade. I knew that she was shallow, but I had no idea...But I could see it in her eyes. She looked like she wanted to bed our client right there in the conference room and she probably would if she got the chance.

“Serena will conduct the interview,” Malcolm said, obviously not brooking dissent. “And then, once she gathers the information, we will begin preparing our defense in this case.” At that, he signaled that the discussion of Slade Bridgewell’s defense had come to an end. “Until Serena has conducted the interview, it is pointless to belabor this case,” he said. “So, I would like to discuss other matters on our agenda.” Then he looked at me. “Serena, you may wait for me in your office. We’ll go over the specifics of where you are going to meet with Mr. Bridgewell and when.”

I nodded my head and headed to my office and sat down behind my desk. I had piles and piles of research projects as well as files for other clients who I was going to have to interview, none of which were nearly as important as Slade’s case. Our firm did a mix of white collar and lower-level crime, as well as quite a few mob cases. I didn’t relish meeting with the mob clients, but, at the same time, I usually got along with the wise guys, so it wasn’t such a bad thing. We also took on quite a few high profile cases, sometimes *pro bono* if the defendant was particularly notorious and broke. Malcolm was nothing if not an opportunist, so, any time he could get his firm into the news, he took it, even if the case brought in no money at all. He figured that such cases pay off in spades in terms of the firm’s visibility, and he was right, of course. His machinations had put his firm on the map.

I could just imagine how giddy Malcolm was when Slade decided to retain our firm. That was the get to end all gets. This case was shaping up to be one of the biggest murder cases since Casey Anthony, as far as media attention was going. There was even talk that it might blow up into OJ levels, although that speculation was far-fetched. The media circus over OJ was something that couldn’t be duplicated, but this case might give it a run for its money.

After about an hour of looking over files, trying to prioritize them, and doing online research on case law regarding various legal points, Malcolm poked his head in my office. “Do you have a minute? I need to talk to you about the Slade Bridgewell case.”

I nodded my head and gestured to my chair, and Malcolm sat down. "I'm not going to beat around the bush," he said to me. "I'm sure that you figured out why I have chosen you to do the initial interview with Mr. Bridgewell."

"Of course," I said. "You need my particular area of expertise."

"Yes," he said, and I suddenly got the feeling that there was something more to the story. I couldn't quite pinpoint it, though. There was something that felt just a tiny bit off about Malcolm as he sat across from me.

But, whatever it was, he wasn't going to divulge it just yet. "I believe in your intuition, of course, and I always have. I think that you're uniquely qualified to find out exactly what we're dealing with regarding Mr. Bridgewell, and then, after you deliver your report, we will know how we're going to proceed."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Listen, Malcolm, I hope that you know that my intuition isn't perfect by any means. True, I do have insight that others don't, but there are plenty of people who slip in under my radar. I just want to manage your expectations on how much good I'm going to be able to do."

"Nevertheless, I expect a full report on Monday morning. You have a week, Serena, to get to know this guy. Find out everything that you can. What makes him tick? How he thinks. How many negative vibes you get off of him, and why. I know that you can do this, better than anybody else in this firm."

"Okay," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "When is he coming to meet with us?"

"You're going to him," he said. "I need for you to meet him at his home in LA, and I need for you to stay there for a week."

I groaned inwardly. “A week. You want me to stay for a week with a man I don’t know? I have a life, you know. I’m trying to find a permanent place to live, so I need to close on a house soon.” I looked over my real estate listings, houses that I was going to visit that week, and felt enraged. “You can’t just upend me like this.”

Malcolm shook his head. “You don’t have any children,” he said. “I don’t see what the problem is.”

“I was also looking to get a dog,” I said, which was true. As soon as I closed on a house, I desperately wanted a French bulldog to keep me company. Actually, I wanted two French bulldogs, litter mates, because I firmly believed that dogs were only happy if they had company during the day.

“Do you currently have a dog?” Malcolm asked me pointedly.

“No,” I said. “But I have my eye on some dogs that I found out about through a rescue agency, just as I have my eye on a house in Solana Beach that probably won’t be on the market in a week. The owner is motivated to unload it for a song, and it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” The house that I was looking at was a fixer-upper, as much of a fixer-upper a home in Solana Beach could be which was why it was so undervalued. I had some experience with fixing up older homes, and I had hoped to take on this home as a project. I always had to have a project to keep my mind off of the obsessive thoughts about my past and about the incident I was trying desperately to forget, the incident that happened right before my mother’s murder.

Hell, I also needed to keep my mind off of my mother’s murder. I was still having a hard time forgiving myself for how foolish I acted when that happened. I was grieving as much as anybody else in my family, but I also was on the verge of a breakdown when it happened. A breakdown that was caused by my rape, and subsequent pregnancy, at the hands of a wealthy tool who was the most popular guy in my high school. That happened, and then my mother was murdered a few days later, and these two incidents spun me into a deep depression that almost took my life. Nobody knew that in my family, of course, because I had just split and totally abandoned them.

So, I had guilt, on top of everything else, to deal with. I was just learning how to channel my grief, rage, and guilty feelings into productive and positive things – things like running, learning to fix old homes, and...other things that I wasn’t necessarily proud of. Things I was trying to run away from, like an addiction. I had never been into drugs or gambling or any of that, but I did things that were destructive; destructive to my psyche and destructive physically. I could already see that my routine was going to be upended by this Slade guy.

I tamped down the rising panic that was forming in my throat. I could see on Malcolm’s face that he wasn’t going to let me out of this, but I had to try. “Listen, Malcolm, I really just can’t leave town on a dime.” I didn’t want to tell him why – that I was terrified that, if I got out of my perfectly designed routine, I would backslide into the way that I was. And going to stay at the Los Angeles house of a billionaire who was accused of murder would certainly qualify as my breaking my routine.

“I don’t understand, Serena,” he said. “Please help me to understand why you can’t do this.”

I looked down at my wrists, where the scars had finally faded. The scars on my arms weren’t quite as old as the ones on my wrists, nor were the scars on my legs. Fortunately, my pant suit effectively covered all that up. I shivered as I remembered how I got these marks on me. I hadn’t been brave enough to do all of that to myself, so I frequented an underground club

in New York City, where the people, men and women, were more than happy to do these things to me.

I had left all that behind when I came out west to San Diego. That's why my life was so structured - running at 5 AM, get to work by 8, home by 6. Hang out with either Michael or Donny - it depended on who was home in the evening - watch some television, go to bed. My life in New York City wasn't like that - it was crazy and chaotic, and the craziness and the chaos led to my never being able to fully heal myself.

I was finally finding my center, and now Malcolm was asking me to uproot this.

I took a deep breath, and found that there was no way that I could tell him the truth. He would freak out completely. He probably would never trust me with a major case, that was for sure. "I just think that you need to send a seasoned investigator to talk to Mr. Bridgewell," I finally said. "And, besides, I need to study for the bar exam. It's coming up in another month."

He shook his head. "You got this. You passed New York, which is just as hard as the one here. And you did quite well on it, too."

"Even so, I don't feel confident," I said, which was a lie. I felt more than confident that I could ace the exam. Malcolm was correct - I passed the New York bar with flying colors, and I barely had to study to accomplish this feat. I had no doubt that I would do the same with the California bar. But I didn't want Malcolm to know this. I needed him to believe that I had to stay around to study, not go gallivanting up to Los Angeles to stay with this Slade Bridgewell.

"I've heard nothing from you yet that will change my mind," he said. "You're going to Los Angeles, you're going to interview Mr. Bridgewell, and that's that." Then his face softened. "I understand your reluctance. I really do. But, Serena, you have a gift. You might or might not be able to get a good read on this guy. If you don't, you don't. But I need your insight. The last thing that I want is to defend this bastard, only to find out that he's guilty as hell."

I cocked my head. "What does that matter? We defend guilty as hell people all the time. That's what we do."

"Even so," he said, "I need to know. I usually don't, but, in this case, I do. I don't want to be a laughing stock like OJ's Dream Team was after they got him acquitted."

"They weren't laughing stocks," I said. "They were admired and revered. They did the impossible, getting off a guy who was guilty as the day is long."

Malcolm stared out the window. "It just wouldn't be good for the firm's reputation. Ordinarily, you're right. I couldn't care shit less if the client was guilty or innocent. But this case is too big, Serena. If we get him acquitted and then he goes and does it again..." He shook his head. "There would be hell to pay."

I suddenly understood. "Your fancy friends might not invite you to so many parties if that happened, would they?" I shook my head. I had no idea that Malcolm was so concerned about his image and his social standing, but he apparently was.

He looked embarrassed. "I don't care about all that, but my wife does. She's trying to be a doyenne."

I nodded my head. "Good reason," I said sarcastically. I was going to fall on my sword so that his wife could save face at the Country Club. I shook my head.

It looked like I was going to be going to Los Angeles to meet with this asshat Slade, no matter how much I protested. I could always quit, but this was a very prestigious firm and they handled a multitude of complex and interesting cases. The cases were interesting enough that I might, just might, be able to continue to try to forget about my inner wounds by concentrating on

them. Besides, I had to admit that I was intrigued by this Slade case, and I really did want to be a part of it.

I wanted to be a part of it, not be in the middle of it.

But it was beginning to look as if in the middle of the Slade case was where I was destined to be.

I hadn't met the guy, but I already despised him.

I packed up the Beemer and prepared to meet with Mr. Bridgewell, but I first had to do something for me. In a small act of rebellion, I called the French Bulldog rescue and arranged to meet the two Frenchie sisters who were rescued from a dilapidated home that was serving as a puppy mill. As I was telling Malcolm, I had my eye on these dogs, and I felt like I couldn't wait to get them. Donny and Michael were going to kill me, no doubt, when I brought them home, but I would burn that bridge when I came to it.

I had to admit that there was a large part of me that wanted to piss Mr. Bridgewell off. He was just sooooo special that he couldn't be bothered to come to the law firm like a normal person. No, I had to kiss the ring, and I resented it thoroughly. If he had been a normal guy, my life wouldn't have been uprooted. I would be talking to him at the firm, perhaps over dinner, and my comfortable, safe existence could continue on. But no...he was an entitled jackass, and I had to go to him.

If I had to go to him, then I was going to put him out just a little by springing these two doggies on him. So, I went to the house of the lady who was fostering the two little dogs, Sadie and Gigi. She lived in an elaborate beach house in La Jolla, which was an upscale beach community. I often went to the La Jolla Cove to watch the sea lions, which fascinated me to no end. The animals were not afraid of humans in the least, and they would sun on the rocks and let people take their picture all day long. I often got close to the sea lions, but, one time, one of the sea lions literally barked a warning at me, and I backed off.

If I would have thought that I was bothering the animals, of course, I would never get close to them. I always felt animal suffering in my bones, even more than the suffering of humans, so I never would distress an animal in any way. But these guys more than held their own against the onslaught of fascinated people, and they genuinely didn't seem to mind the attention. So I often found myself going to see them and hang out with them. That's when I knew how desperate I was for a pet of my own, which led me to the Frenchie rescue and Sadie and Gigi.

My plan was to get the two dogs, head down to the shores to see my sea lion buddies, and then head up Highway 5 towards LA. I would get to this Slade jackass' house around 10 PM that night, and I hoped that I would be inconveniencing him in some way. I would be mightily disappointed if I showed up there and he was just waiting for me. I wanted to catch him in some compromising position or with a guest or, better yet, trying to sleep. Then I would ring the doorbell and piss him off, which would delight me to no end.

Yeah, it was immature of me to think that way, but, dammit, if I was going to be put out, so should he.

I arrived at the house, which was a modern glass and stone home that was built like a series of cubes. The woman, Evina, answered the door, the two little dogs in her arms. "You must be Serena," she said. "Come in, come in." She stepped aside, and I entered the foyer of the house. She handed me the two dogs, which were puppies, to my surprise. I thought that they were fully grown, but they clearly were less than two months old.

I stood there with the two dogs in my arms, reveling in their puppy smell and puppy breath. Nothing smelled better to me than those two scents, and these two little girls emitted these smells in spades. I put my fingers in Gigi's mouth, and her tiny body wriggled with delight while her sharp puppy teeth found my fingers and chomped down excitedly. While Gigi delightedly made mincemeat out of my fingers, Sadie excitedly licked my face. No doubt about it, these two little baby girls were pure love and joy.

“Here,” Evina said, giving me a box filled to the brim with toys and blankets. “These are their things. Feel free to change their names if you wish. They’re only around 7 weeks old, so they don’t really know their names yet.”

I nodded my head. “You have their shot records, right?”

“Yes.”

“Awesome,” I said, giving her the \$500 rehoming fee that she had asked for. These animals were a steal for that money, plus I got the satisfaction of saving them. Not that I really was saving them, of course, because if I didn’t come along, somebody would have snatched them up quickly. Frenchies ordinarily cost around \$2,000 apiece. But perhaps they would have been separated if somebody else had adopted them, so there was that. I was keeping them together, and that meant a lot to me, and probably to them.

Evina handed me a folder that had all their shot records, and showed that they were also de-wormed. She had tears in her eyes as she petted the two dogs, putting her face close to their beautiful scrunched up snouts. “Now you be good with your new momma,” she said, as the two dogs licked her face and tried to bite her hands. They wriggled so much that I had a hard time trying to control them, but I managed to keep a hold of them anyhow. “I’m going to miss you two so much, but I know that you’re going to be in great hands.” She looked at me. “I go through this with every adoption, but it’s a necessary thing. As much as I always end up wanting to keep my little babies, I know that I have to give them up so that I can foster others. There are so many who need it.”

I smiled and thought that I would love to do what Evina was doing; fostering animals and giving them a temporary home away from a shelter while a forever home was being located. If I didn’t have such a demanding job, I probably would do just that when I finally got my new home.

“Thanks,” I said, and Evina took the box of toys and goodies out to my car. I had picked up a large carrier to put them in for the trip up the coast. I put Gigi into the carrier, and as I prepared to put Sadie in there, she peed on me. Evina looked at me with horror on her face, but I just laughed. “Guess she’s excited. And that’s my fault. I really need to let these two little girls go to the bathroom before putting them in there. I can’t believe I didn’t think about that.” At that, I brought Gigi back out, and put a harness on her and Sadie. The dogs sniffed around the front yard and finally they both did their business. I brought out a poop bag and picked up the mess, and Evina helpfully took the two bags and offered to dispose of them.

“Do you need a change of clothes?” she asked me with a worried look on her face. “We look about the same size.”

I shook my head. “Actually, I have an overnight bag in the car filled with clothes, but I’m fine.”

“Well, then, you need to come into the house and change,” she said.

I raised my eyebrows as an idea formed in my head. I could just leave the pee soaked clothes on, which would gross out Mr. Bridgewell, which would be one more way that I could get my revenge on him for putting me out this way.

Then I thought better of it. Really, the only person who would truly be hurt in that scenario would be me, because I would be the one in pee clothes for the two hour drive to Mr. Bridgewell’s home. “Thanks,” I said, “I would like to change in your bathroom if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” she said. “Here, let me help you put the two girls into the carrier, and then you can change and be on your merry way.”

I went and changed into some new clothes, putting the old ones into a laundry bag that I had packed in my overnight bag. Then I emerged with fresh clothes and gave Evina a quick hug. “Thanks so much,” I said. “You can rest assured that these two little girls will have a wonderful home.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “But I’m going to miss them so much all the same. I really need to get a puppy of my own, but my hands are so full with my foster babies, I just don’t know what to do.”

I smiled and gave her another hug. “You take care of you,” I said. “You’re a saint.”

Then I got in my Beemer and left, thinking that people like her in the world gave me a little bit of hope for humanity, however slight of a glimmer that was.

I arrived at the home of Mr. Bridgewell after midnight, even later than I had anticipated. I had found myself delaying getting to his home. I stopped several times to let the dogs out, and then I stopped for dinner at a Temecula restaurant, lingering over dessert and a few glasses of wine. Ordinarily I didn’t drink at all when I was driving, but I found myself curiously nervous. Then I felt slightly buzzed, so decided to wait a few hours until my mind was totally clear. In the meantime, I got Gigi and Sadie out of the car and brought them onto the patio of the restaurant, after having asked the waitress if this would be okay.

“That would be fine,” she said. “We welcome dogs here on the patio.”

So, I brought them out with their harnesses on, and, for the next few hours, I drank water while one person after another came up to them and cooed, oohed, and ahhhhd over them. Everyone commented on how adorable they were, and, for their parts, their little bodies wriggled every time somebody came up to talk to them, and they excitedly licked many faces and nibbled on many arms and hands during the course of those few hours.

Finally, around 11, I left the Temecula restaurant and headed to the address in Los Angeles. It actually wasn’t Los Angeles so much as it was Malibu, for this privileged sonofabitch lived in one of those gleaming houses made of windows that were situated high on a cliff. I had to follow a winding path to get to his house, and then, when I finally got to where he lived, I had to follow yet another winding path to his home. His house apparently sat on several acres of prime real estate, and I had to admit, he did have an impressive view. Before I actually rang the doorbell of the enormous three-story home, I took the girls to the edge of the cliff and looked down. Far below, the ocean was crashing against the rocks, and the sound of it made me feel absolutely, positively calm.

Man, I gotta get me one of these homes. I couldn’t afford a home like this, of course, or anything like it, but I had hoped to get a little fixer-upper bungalow that was close to shore somewhere in the Del Mar, La Jolla or Solana Beach areas. I cursed myself yet again, knowing that I was going to be passing up the steal of a home that was situated in Solana Beach, and the asking price was just under \$600,000. Anyplace else, except in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, that kind of money would buy a mansion. But in the Solana Beach area, that was the going rate for tiny little shacks that needed a ton of work. So, the fact that I was able to find a three-bedroom bungalow that was fairly roomy, close to the ocean, and only needed cosmetic work done, was a miracle.

It was a miracle that some other lucky schlub was going to take advantage of, I thought ruefully, and I cursed the name of Mr. Bridgewell once more.

So, yeah, it was really late, but who cared? I was going to get his candy-ass out of bed.

I went up to the door and rang the bell. The chime sounded sonorously throughout the home, and I waited there impatiently for him to answer; or someone to answer. He probably would get a maid out of bed to answer while he slept, I thought. That would be just my luck. Mr. Fancy pants probably couldn't be bothered to answer the door.

To my surprise, he did answer the door -- in a towel. He opened the door, looking sexier than anybody had a right to be, his dark hair wet and dripping in his face. To my dismay, his features were even sexier in person than they were on the television. His eyes were a piercing green; his lips were puffier than any runway male model. His body was tight and sinewy, like he worked out every day of his life, yet he wasn't overly muscular. He was just extremely lean and taut. My eyes inadvertently went to the small patch of hair that was just above his towel, and I immediately felt embarrassed, so I forced myself to look him right in the eye.

That was a mistake. I felt myself melting right there on the porch when I looked him in those piercing green eyes. He cleared his hair off his face with one perfect hand, and still stared at me.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I had totally forgotten how annoyed I was to be coming up to his house, and then felt immediately annoyed that I had forgotten that I was supposed to be annoyed. Who was this jackass, looking like he just stepped off the cover of a men's magazine, or out of a Calvin Klein ad? Did he think that just because he had more money than god and had the looks that Greek deity would envy that I was just supposed to melt in a puddle at his feet?

And, just like that, I was angry again.

Then he opened his mouth, and I was lost again. "You must be Serena. Well, don't just stand there," he said in a gorgeous, sonorous voice. His words were smooth, like melted chocolate. "Come on in. Make yourself at home. What's mine is yours."

Holy fuck! He looked like the personification of sin, and he had the voice to match.

What was I getting myself into?

I tentatively stepped through the door, with Gigi and Sadie trailing behind, wearing their harnesses and leashes. Mr. Sex-on-a-stick took one look at the two little dogs and his face broke into a huge grin. "Oh, Frenchies, my absolute favorite," he said. And then he knelt down and put his face right up to Sadie's snout. She licked him furiously, and he laughed and to my surprise, lay down on the floor. The two dogs attacked him gleefully, their little bodies wiggling madly with joy. Sadie barked, the first time I heard her do that, and she commenced attacking his face, biting and licking madly. Gigi did the same, and tried to push Sadie out of the way. She apparently was jealous that Sadie was getting all the attention, and Sadie, for her part, obliged Gigi, who did the same as Sadie -- nipping, licking and generally attacking Slade's gorgeous face.

So much for my plan on annoying the fuck out of Slade. That little plan certainly did backfire, as it seemed that my having these two dogs delighted Slade to no end.

Finally, he got up off the floor. "Oh, I can't tell you how happy these two little dogs have made me. I just lost my Great Dane, Sophie. I was going to get a new dog right away, but these two little girls will do for now." He picked them up, and they commenced to licking his face again. And Sadie, of course, right on cue, peed all over him. She seemed to have a habit of that when she got excited, and I covered my mouth so that Slade wouldn't see that I was trying very hard to stifle my laughter.

Of course, Slade didn't mind. In fact, he laughed, too. "Looks like someone is excited," he said. Then he took the leashes out of my hand and put them on the two dogs. "I'll walk them."

“No,” I said. “I’ll walk them. They’re my responsibility.”

He grinned. “It’s not a problem,” he said. And then he let the towel drop. I caught my breath and looked away modestly, but he didn’t seem to even notice that he was buck naked in front of a perfect stranger.

He shrugged. “I’d bother to put my clothes on, but why? It’s not like there’s anybody around to see me walk these dogs naked, and besides, they really need to go out, judging from the amount of pee Sadie just poured on me.”

“I know, which is why I’d like to walk them,” I said. “You need to get some clothes on.”

He just grinned and found a pair of shoes. “I’ll be right back,” he said, the two dog leashes in his hands. “Or you can come with.”

I took a deep breath, feeling that I had no choice. I couldn’t just pawn my responsibilities onto him. That wouldn’t be right. So I followed him out the door and took Gigi while Slade took Sadie.

I tried not to look at his nakedness, but it was very, very difficult. He was sheer perfection, from head to toe. I caught a fleeting glance at his cock, which was dangling in the wind, and I was more than impressed. It was thick and hung down about eight inches. I immediately felt embarrassed and averted my eyes.

He caught me looking, of course, and he grinned boyishly, but he didn’t address my peeking openly. “So, what inspired you to bring these two beautiful girls here?” he asked me as Sadie sniffed around some bushes and palm trees before finally squatting. Gigi was sniffing around flowers and shrubs and then she, too, squatted.

“I had my eye on these two before I came here, and I wanted to make sure I snagged them before anyone else had a chance to,” I said. “I’m sorry that nobody warned you about them.”

“By nobody, you mean you, right?” he said with a smile.

“Yes, I mean me, Mr. Bridgewell. Malcolm had no clue that I was going to bring them up here, of course.”

“Well, I’m glad that you did. You do know that they’ve done studies that show that dogs tend to lower stress levels of the people around them, right? That’s why they take dogs to nursing homes, to cheer everyone up and bring their stress levels down. And god knows I need some stress relief after the week I’ve had.”

I cocked my head at him. “I notice the absence of news people. I’m surprised. I thought I would have to get through a phalanx of photographers and reporters sticking microphones in my face.”

“Oh, you’ll see them tomorrow, believe me. I call the police on them all the time, because they can’t come on my property, so they hang out on the street outside the gate. They wait to ambush me, and I always say ‘no comment,’ of course. But I’m always catching them in the bushes and hiding behind trees, so the cops have to come out and chase them away.”

I looked around, thinking that there was probably a photographer around. If that was the case, it certainly wouldn’t be so great for Slade, being buck naked and all. That’s the kind of picture that would go viral for sure.

He seemed to read my mind. “There’s nobody around,” he said. “Not on my property anyhow.”

“How do you know?” I asked him. “After all, if they’re able to sneak onto the property during the day, they certainly can at night.”

He shrugged. “Eh, you’re right, I guess. If they get a shot of me naked, then they get a shot of me naked. That’s the least of my problems.”

I nodded my head and said nothing. That was certainly an understatement, that him being naked on the Internet would be the least of his problems.

Then he smiled. “Maybe it would even help my case. You guys can argue that I can’t possibly get a fair trial if the jury would be busy imagining me naked. Or maybe the prosecutor could argue that.”

“I don’t think that it works that way,” I said. “But nice try.”

“How does it work, then?” he said. “I mean, let’s face it. The chances of my getting a fair trial with this kind of obsessive coverage is slim and none. At this point, they could hold the trial in Anchorage, Alaska, and the jury pool would still be completely tainted.”

I nodded my head and tried to focus on him. I didn’t come up here to drool over his body, no matter how gorgeous it was. I was sent up here for a very specific venture, and I felt completely unprofessional for forgetting about it.

Slade had a way of making me forget about why I was there, that was for sure. He had a way of making me forget my own name.

Concentrate Serena, concentrate. I felt distracted walking next to him, to say the very least. My heart was pounding out of my chest and was almost audible in my ears. My hands were shaking as they held tightly onto Gigi’s leash.

Slade paused and let Sadie go number two.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, “I’ll get the poop bag out.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll get Henry to get that tomorrow,” he said. Then he glanced at Gigi, who followed suit. “And that, too.”

“Henry,” I said. “Who is that?”

“My groundskeeper,” he said. “Do you think that I can get this topiary done on my own?”

I couldn’t see very well, but I focused on the bushes and saw they were, indeed, done in topiary fashion. They were very carefully trimmed to resemble geometric shapes, circles and there were a few that were trimmed to resemble animals. One of the bushes was in the shape of the California bear on the California state flag. Two others appeared to be shaped like two elephants walking on the African Savannah. “Henry is very talented,” I said. “I’m surprised that he doesn’t mind picking up dog poop, in addition to sculpting these amazing animals out of the bushes.”

“You’d be surprised at what people are willing to do when you pay them enough.”

“Actually, very little surprises me anymore,” I said, and I meant that. There was one thing that I had learned in my life, and that was that people, in general, will shock the hell out you if you let them. So I tried not to let them. I had to remind myself of this, however, as I stood next to the naked Slade.

The dogs, having done their business, went inside with us. I brought in their carrier, put a soft blanket in it, and put them inside. “Night night little ones,” I said, peeking at them. Within a few minutes, I could hear both of them snoring. It was an adorable sound.

“Okay,” he said. “Let me show you to your bedroom, and, tomorrow, we’ll get started on the interview.”

“Thanks,” I said tentatively. He picked up my bags and led me through the house – past an enormous living area with 30’ ceilings and a wall of windows with a fireplace in the middle and a skylight on top. The fireplace was surrounded by a rock wall and the floors were cherry wood. It looked like an interior decorator had designed this room. We also walked past an

enclosed pool area that had an Olympic-sized pool, complete with lanes and a diving board. There was also, apparently, a bowling alley, movie theater, and game room with arcade games and a billiard table.

I had been in plenty of homes in my life, but nothing quite like this one.

Finally, he showed me to my room. Like every other room in this house, the room had 30' ceilings and a fireplace and was enormous. The bathroom had a 10-person Jacuzzi tub that was sunken, and a shower that was large enough to fit a group of people. I put my bags down on the floor and sat on the bed. "Thanks," I said to him. I felt embarrassed about thinking such evil thoughts about him earlier.

"Night," he said, and then simply left.

I sighed and undressed and got into bed. On my computer was a list of questions that I was supposed to ask him, but I always preferred to wing it. Asking questions according to my intuition let me guide it to where I wanted to go. That always served me well when I had trials in the past, and I thought that it would serve me well here.

And I was going to have to keep it together with this guy. I couldn't let him intimidate me with his looks or his obvious charm. I was never one to let things like that block me, and, usually, things like that didn't block me.

There was one thing that really bothered me about this guy, too. It was the fact that he was so unruffled, so charming. His sense of humor obviously was intact, and, indeed, his demeanor with me told me that he didn't seem bothered by any of this. Not by the media attention, not by the fact that he was facing the possible death penalty. None of it seemed to faze him. Unless he was covering up extremely well, it seemed as if he was just living his life and not caring a damn about what he was up against.

Could he be a sociopath? The classic sociopath was somebody just like this Slade character. Charming and glib, with the ability to lie about anything and everything. All sociopaths weren't violent, although some were – the ones who combined other kinds of mental illnesses with anti-social personality disorder. Really, the person who should be here with this guy should be a shrink, not me. Because one thing was for sure – if he was a sociopath, I was going to be taken in by him. As an empath, I had to be working with somebody who had actual feelings. If he was feeling guilt and remorse over the killing of his partner, if, indeed, he killed the guy, I should be able to pick up on that and follow that feeling where it goes. But if he killed the guy and felt nothing? Then I, too, would feel nothing.

I closed my eyes and tried to summon the spirit of the dead guy, Sam Harris. I had long since blocked out the voices in my head that came from restive spirits. I had to, for my sanity. I had to learn how to make them leave me alone. Now, I was actually trying to communicate with Sam, which was dangerous, really, because if I let him in, the floodgates could very well open, and I would be the way that I was before I learned to block out all the noise – going literally crazy, unable to function except if I drank to excess. Then my drinking would get me into all sorts of other problems. I couldn't afford to go there.

After a few minutes, I realized that I would hear nothing from the dead business partner. It was just as well, really, because I didn't necessarily want to risk going back to the way that I was.

I slept in the next day. I couldn't help it – I was greatly fatigued from the stress of having the responsibility of finding out the guilt or innocence of this guy. It was a lot of pressure, and if I was wrong, it could have disastrous consequences. Not only that, but his bed was so damned comfortable. It was a hand-crafted mattress made in Sweden, as Slade had explained, and the brand was Vividus. He didn't say as much, but I knew that such a mattress tended to retail at around \$70,000. After sleeping on it for the night, I would have had to say that the mattress was worth every single penny.

I tentatively went down the stairs and stopped when I heard the sounds of a piano playing. It was probably a recording, but it did sound live. I would imagine that this guy had the kind of sound system wired that would make anything sound live.

As I approached one of the dens, however, I saw Slade behind a grand piano. He was playing a complex classical piece that I recognized as being one of Gustav Mahler's early concertos. He didn't notice me until he was completely finished with the piece. Then he saw me and broke out into a huge smile. "Hey," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did." That was an understatement. That bed was so damned comfortable, I was surprised that I didn't just want to stay there the entire week.

"Where would you like to do this?" he asked me. And then he called on the intercom. "Marina, could you please bring breakfast out to the terrace?"

He then turned to me. "I'm sorry; you probably think that I'm completely ADHD. I can assure you that I'm not. It's just that it occurred to me that both of us need some breakfast before tackling what we need to tackle. I'm sure that you agree."

I was hungry, famished actually, so I simply said "sure." I then went over to the carrier to let out the dogs, but they weren't in there.

Slade came up behind me. "I put them out. Don't worry. I have a large fenced-in area on my land. I've always had dogs myself, so it's been a necessity to have it. I can either get Sven, my personal assistant, go get the dogs or..."

"I'll get them." I was feeling a major annoyance already with how he apparently couldn't do anything for himself. Then I reminded myself that getting the dogs out of the fenced-in yard wasn't his responsibility anyhow. It was mine.

He pointed to the area where the fenced-in yard was, and I went over to it. My two beautiful girls came up and eagerly greeted me. I had their leashes and harnesses in my hands, and I put them on them and walked them into the house. They went into the house and immediately started sniffing around and exploring. "I hate to ask you this, but is there an area where we could confine these two?"

He shrugged. "Dogs will be dogs, you know? They'll settle down after they've explored the house, and if they have an accident, I'll..."

"I'll pick it up," I finished for him. I wasn't going to let Henry or Sven or Marina or any of his other peons pick up after my dogs.

"Suit yourself. At any rate, let's go out to the terrace. Marina will meet us out there with breakfast. I hope you like croissants, eggs and strawberries. I forgot to ask you what you like."

I took a deep breath. Croissants were made with butter, and I couldn't eat eggs, either. "My fault, I'm a vegan. I should have warned you about that."

He simply called Marina on the intercom after I said this. "Marina, could you please include regular whole grain toast and veggie sausage links in the breakfast too?" Then he turned to me. "I actually have a wide variety of things in this house that are vegan friendly, and Marina

has been trained to cook anything at all. So, it's not a problem that your vegan." He studied me. "What brings you to veganism?"

"Well..." I thought that I would get the whole reason why I was there out of the way. "I'm an empath. I can pick up strong vibrations that are translated into feelings for me. These feelings are often put into words in my head. It's almost like mind-reading, except it's not. For instance, if you're feeling guilt or remorse, I should be able to pick up on that, and that feeling would be translated into you saying, in my head, that you killed your business partner. That's why I'm here, as opposed to somebody on your team who's a bit more experienced than me."

"I see. And you won't eat animals because you have an unusual bond with them because of your empathic abilities." He said that as a statement, and I was impressed that he picked up on that so quickly and easily. "That makes an awful lot of sense. I admire your convictions, really."

"Thank you."

At that, he got out of his chair. "Follow me out to the terrace," and I obeyed. We got to a table that was small and had a marble top and four chairs around it. Down below was a patio that had a large table with 10 chairs around it, another swimming pool and another sunken Jacuzzi that appeared to seat 20 or more. The area was surrounded by palm trees and bougainvilleas, a flower that is native to South America that was ubiquitous in California. They were beautiful flowers that grew into enormous bushes and came in various colors, including red, purple, white, yellow and pink. The bougainvilleas that surrounded the pool area were in every color and extremely mature, so that they really provided a natural privacy fence for that area.

A slight woman with blond hair soon appeared with a tray. Slade took baskets off the tray that were filled with strawberries, muffins, scones, and warm bread. Also on the tray was a plateful of eggs for him and veggie sausages for me, plus a pitcher of orange juice. "Thanks Marina," he said, taking everything off the tray.

I glared at him. "She's a small woman with a very large tray that she apparently has to haul all through that enormous house of yours. I think that you probably should have helped her with all of that."

He just shrugged his shoulders. "She's stronger than she looks. She's Russian for god's sake. She's gone through many more hardships than carrying a tray full of breakfast through a house." Then he paused. "But I like that you're sticking up for her all the same."

I calmed down just a little, but still felt out of sorts that this was a guy who apparently could do very little for himself. Then again, that's how the wealthy lived, so I probably needed to let it go.

"So, protector of the underdog," Slade began, "let's chat over breakfast. We can get these preliminaries out of the way, and then I have to get some work done while the workers set up for a party tonight."

I took a deep breath. "You were just arraigned for murder yesterday, and this evening you're having a party? Are you quite sure that's such a good idea?"

"No, I'm not quite sure that's a good idea, but who cares? Life has to go on even if you are suspected of murder. The grand jury hasn't returned an indictment, so, as of now, I haven't been formally charged with anything."

"Nonetheless, do you want the media to get a hold of this? They're going to crucify you."

"Like they already haven't. Listen, I know that you're thinking that I don't give a crap about the fact that I have a murder charge hanging over my head, but you're dead wrong about that. This party was scheduled a month ago, and I couldn't just cancel it. I am very aware that the people in this country and the media believe that I should be withering away alone behind closed

doors, secluding myself and clutching pearls because of what I allegedly did. And my answer to all those people is that they can all go to hell.”

I had to admit he had a twisted sort of logic. I dug into my veggie sausages and strawberries. “Are those muffins made with butter or oil?” I asked him. I had to admit that the blueberry ones looked scrumptious – they were enormous, with whole blueberries and a crumble topping. I knew that crumble toppings were usually made with butter and so were muffins, so I was hoping that somehow, somehow, they were vegan.

He was studying me carefully, his green eyes penetrating the armor that I had so carefully built around myself. I suddenly felt vulnerable, like he could see inside of me. Maybe he was the empath, not me, because, thus far, I hadn’t had any negative intuition at all about him. “They’re made with butter, of course. If you would have sent word about your dietary restrictions, I would have accommodated you better.”

“Of course, that was my mistake.”

He merely grunted at that, and then summoned Marina to come to the table. She was there in a flash, and, before I had the chance to protest, he was asking her to make special muffins for me. “Marina, could you please whip up a batch of blueberry muffins for Serena? She doesn’t consume animal products, so everything must be made with oil, even the topping.”

“I will do that,” she said, and she disappeared.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said. “I just scolded you for overusing your help, and then you go and make extra work for her on my account.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “You really are a piece of work. I pay my help good money, more money than any of them can make anyplace else. And they’re more than happy to pick up dog poop for me or make special muffins or what-have-you. Why you have to pass judgment on this is beyond me.”

Chastised, I turned my attention to my orange juice and took a sip. I glanced at the grove of orange trees that lay just beyond the pool area and surmised that the juice was freshly squeezed blood orange. “Very good juice,” I said. “And I’m sorry for giving you grief about having your help do everything. I’m sure that you have enough on your mind without having to worry about dog poop and special muffins and all of that.” I meant that sentence sincerely, although I realized it could be taken either way.

“Apology accepted. And, by the way, I picked the oranges for this juice myself. I didn’t squeeze them though.”

“It’s very tasty.”

“Of course it is. My horticulturist is one of the best in the world, so the fruits that grow on the trees around here are truly premium.”

I bristled at that, too, and wondered what was wrong with me. I had to admit that the trappings of wealth were something that didn’t come naturally to me. My family was solidly working class, and, even though I made good money as a law partner, my earnings never came close to this guy. So, everything about his lifestyle felt just a little bit wrong to me.

Marina soon appeared with the special muffins, and I eagerly dug into one. It was delicious, moist and fruity. “Where do you get these blueberries?” I asked him.

“They grow wild on my property. Not this property, but a property that I own in Oregon where it’s a bit cooler. I have farmers up there harvesting the blueberries all summer long. There are other kinds of fruits up there too, as well as hazelnuts and marijuana.” Then he smiled. “When pot was legalized in Oregon, I made a killing, I’ll tell you that.”

“I’ll bet you did,” I said. “A lot of people are getting rich off the green.”

He shrugged. "It's a nice little side income. The farm is projected to bring in about \$10 million this year, and it should be growing every year thereafter."

\$10 million was a *side income*. Must be nice.

I ate the blueberry muffin and then helped myself to another. "Marina is an amazing baker," I said.

"Yes, she is. She's an amazing cook anyhow." He studied me. "So, Serena, I know that you didn't come up here to hear me rhapsodizing about blood oranges and pot, so why don't we get down to business?"

I nodded my head. "Yes. I need to know your story about what happened. And please don't lie to me. I'll be able to tell." That said, I was hesitant that I would be able to tell if he were lying. Ever since I met him, it was the weirdest thing. I wasn't getting anything negative from him at all. I couldn't feel even a hint of guilt, remorse or shame from him. No sadness, either, really, and this is what worried me. I hoped against hope that he wasn't a sociopath, because then my own life would be in danger.

The dogs came up to us, having thoroughly explored the house. Slade then summoned yet another person, whose name was Magdalena. She appeared, a beautiful 20ish Mexican woman. "Magdalena, could you please go through the house and make sure that these two dogs didn't create an accident? They probably did, so if you would be so kind as to clean up whatever is there, I would be much obliged." And then he said something in fluent Spanish, and she nodded her head and left.

"I should probably put them in their kennels while we do this, since I can't watch them," I said, picking them both up in my arms. I walked through the house and put them in their kennels. "You go night-night," I said to them. "I'll be right back." I never felt foolish for talking to dogs like some people did.

I went back out on the terrace, where Slade waited for me, sipping his orange juice. He poured me another glass when I sat down.

"Okay," I said. "Let's hear what happened the night Samuel Harris was murdered."

“Where do I begin,” he said. “I’ll just start by telling you about the relationship I had with Sam. He and I go way back to college. He was right there when I decided to start up my firm after I got my PhD from Stanford. I was 23, and had big dreams. He had the connections that I needed to get venture capital for the firm, so he was very valuable. I managed to get Ambrose to the market in record time, and we were on our way.”

Ambrose was a drug that was taking the country by storm. It was apparently the first antidepressant that worked for many people who were previously drug-resistant, and it did it with a minimum of side-effects. Once it hit the market, and people were finding relief from depression who were never helped previously, it became an enormous hit.

His eyes were downcast, and I felt sadness emanating from him. I almost gave out a sigh of sheer relief when I felt this vibration, because it showed that he was capable of human emotions. *He’s not a sociopath after all.*

Slade continued. “I loved him like a brother,” he said. “I couldn’t have done any of it without him. But he suffered, always. He was like so many others who are highly intelligent – he was pretty socially awkward and I suspected that he was bipolar. It was undiagnosed, but the signs were there. He could literally work seven days straight without a break. Seven days without a wink of sleep. He’d call me from the lab at all hours of the morning, excited about some breakthrough. I finally had to turn off my phone while I slept, because he would be calling me at 2 AM, 3 AM, 4 AM. You get the point.”

I nodded my head. “I’ve known people like that myself, so I’m right there with you.” I thought of my brother Christopher, who was suffering from a mood disorder and had been ever since he witnessed the murder of our mother. I never knew if he had a chemical imbalance or he was just devastated, but he could be a brilliant song-writer when he wanted to, but that burst of creativity always alternated with crippling depression. He could probably be helped by Ambrose, I thought wryly.

“After the success of Ambrose, we were able to get a team of researchers and developers to patent more and more drugs. Everyone wanted to be a part of our up and coming firm, but Sam couldn’t care less most days. He would definitely come off his high-highs and sink down into the abyss. Our firm was working on drugs that would help cure him of his bipolar, including Chares, which was going to be our newest drug. Now, I don’t know if it will make it to the market.”

I closed my eyes, trying to feel if there was any deception coming off of him. So far, though, I felt that he was telling the truth. Of course, the most pertinent part of the story hadn’t yet come out, so that was probably why he showed no hint of lying or guilt.

“On the night when I found him, he was coming off a 5 day binge where he did nothing but work, literally around the clock. And I do mean literally. Medical interns who work 100 hours a week had nothing on him during this period. I always was concerned about him, though, because I didn’t know how he could continue to invent safe drugs while he was in that state. He would start to hallucinate, I guess. Then again, maybe he wasn’t hallucinating at all.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “It’s difficult to say. He became very paranoid, but, you know what they say about paranoid people – just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that somebody isn’t actually out to get you.” He smiled. “But he was paranoid about corporate espionage. He was also terrified that there were shadowy governmental agencies who were trying to shut us down. I do admit that corporate espionage is something that always concerned me as well. There’s always

somebody who is looking to rip off a drug that you're inventing and try to get their 'ripoff' to market and to patent it before you get a chance to."

I listened carefully and took notes. The vibrations that were coming off of this guy were slight, nothing that would point to deception for me. "Go on," I said to him.

"Well, Sam was developing a drug that he was really excited about, but he wouldn't tell me what it was. He said that it was going to revolutionize the industry, though, and it was something that was unlike anything anybody had ever seen before. He was very secretive about this particular drug, however, and I have no idea why he was. I personally was wondering if that drug that he was developing was all in his feverish and paranoid head."

I hung back and just let him talk. This was more important than me interjecting or asking questions.

"Yeah, so he was very paranoid, but brilliant." And then he started to look sad again.

It was then that I felt it. The despair that was roiling beneath his sunny exterior. It pierced my heart to feel that from him. It flooded me all at once, and I felt tears streaming down my cheeks. It was a powerful sensation, one that almost shook me to my core. I put one hand on one of his, and the feelings became all the more potent.

"Uh," he said, and then shook his head. *I can't unsee what I saw.* I heard those words from him as plain as day. *You don't know how it affects you to see somebody that you care about bloody and broken on the floor.*

He put his thumb and forefinger on his face and pinched the top of his nose, as if he was trying to hold back tears. "I'm so sorry," he said, and I felt his grief. It was just as if I was the one who was grieving.

Then, just like that, I didn't feel anything anymore. It was as if he had flipped a switch and his wall was back up again. He leaned back in his chair and finished what he was trying to say. "Anyhow, I found him the night that I was arrested. His skull was crushed on one side, and he had been beaten up pretty badly. He was in the lab, which had been ransacked. I immediately called the police, and I was brought in for questioning that night. I called my lawyer who was there with me, of course. I thought everything was fine during the interrogation, and then they announced that they had probable cause to arrest me."

I had looked over the file, of course, before I came up to see him. I personally thought that the probable cause was flimsy at best. Apparently, he had motive to murder his business partner on the theory that Slade wanted total control of the company. There was evidence that was presented that Slade was working behind the scenes to oust Sam from the firm, and that was enough for the police to arrest him.

I took a deep breath. "You were trying to get Sam out of the company. Tell me about that."

His green eyes looked pained. "Serena, I just told you that Sam was having some kind of a psychotic breakdown. I just told you that I was worried that he was going to be a danger to the company because he might have been in the lab inventing something that wouldn't have been safe. And a man in that state is a loose cannon, anyhow. I never knew what he would be doing next."

I closed my eyes and tried to feel what he was feeling when he said those words to me, but I couldn't. It was a blank space. I had no idea why, except that he had his defenses up. Why did he have his defenses up? That concerned me, to say the very least.

Slade continued his story. "So, I found him in that state, and I was arrested for his murder. I loved him like a brother, Serena. I wouldn't have done something like this to him."

Once again, I felt grief pouring out of him. But that didn't convince me that he didn't do it. After all, you can grieve for somebody that you killed. I wasn't naïve enough to think that wasn't possible. And the way that poor Sam was killed was such that it was a crime of passion, in that the person who did that probably didn't go into that lab intending to kill Sam. Maybe it was all self-defense – Sam was in a psychotic state, and Slade went in there, armed with a baseball bat in case Sam tried to attack him. Then Sam did attack him, and he had to fight back? That would mean that Slade would be grieving for his friend, because Slade would have felt that he had no choice but to do what he did.

Maybe. But Slade wasn't singing that tune. He wasn't saying that it was self-defense, which would have been somewhat of a justification. Maybe not entirely a justification, simply because you cannot use more force than what is necessary to protect yourself, and Sam was badly beat up. One whack of the baseball bat to send him into the hospital would be all that it would take.

Then I ruminated on Slade's words. That Sam was a danger and that he might have been developing a drug that would be hazardous. Maybe Sam was developing some kind of drug that would have given him superhuman strength? And perhaps he had taken that drug at the time when Slade went to confront him? In that case, it would have been difficult to fight him off, and maybe Slade was justified in beating him as badly as he did?

I decided to try to go into that line of questioning. "Okay, Slade, so you found him in that state. Do you happen to know anything about some of the drugs he was developing? Was there perhaps a drug that would increase testosterone to the point where, perhaps, Sam had increased strength?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, I don't know. He was developing a drug that he was excited about, but I don't think that this drug has anything to do with increasing testosterone." Then he thought more about what he was saying. "Why do you ask that question? You think that I did this in self-defense? That maybe I went in there, and Sam was as strong as a bear, and I had to beat him like that?"

I had to hand it to him, he was lightning-quick. "I'm just trying to cover all the angles."

Slade shook his head, and his hand was shaking as he put his glass of orange juice to his lips. "I told you that I had nothing to do with it, and that's that." Then he shook his head. "You're my lawyer. There's nobody else here at the moment. Therefore, anything I tell you will be in confidence. If I did it, even in self-defense, I would tell you. I know how the game works. If a client lies, that client doesn't get a good defense."

"You also know that if I know for sure that you're guilty, because you told me so, I couldn't put you on the stand. If I did, I would be suborning perjury."

"I know that." He narrowed his beautiful green eyes. "Why are you here? You obviously don't want to know the truth if you're telling me that if I did it, I should lie to you. I'm not lying to you at all, of course, but it seems that's not good enough for you. You want me to tell you that I did it because why? That would make your job that much easier? Listen, Serena, I don't know what your game is. But I'm not lying, and, besides, a self-defense justification would be impossible to win in this case. So, even if you get me to confess to something, it would not make the road any easier."

Flashes of intense anger flooded through me, and I closed my eyes. I didn't want to lash out at him, but it was difficult to do. His anger was permeating my pores, and I took a deep breath. I tried to find my center, and, after a few minutes, I did.

So, grief and anger were the two emotions that I was getting from him. So far, no sense of guilt, no sense of remorse. But was he angry because he didn't do it, and felt that I was attacking him? Or was he angry because he did do it, and I was getting too close?

He shook his head. "This interview is over. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to do a staff meeting so that we can all get ready for the party this evening." At that, he threw his napkin on the table and went into the French doors that led into the rest of the house. I was left at the table, alone, staring at the empty drinking glasses. So far, this wasn't going well at all. I couldn't get a proper read on this guy, and what I was feeling was very difficult to interpret.

One thing was for sure – this guy was closed-off. Aside from the flashes of grief I was feeling from him and the anger there at the end, I couldn't get anything off of him. It was almost as if he was so guarded that, the second he starts to feel something negative, he brings up a wall so that he doesn't have to access those uncomfortable feelings. Not that he was any different than most of us, because it was human nature to try to cover up and hide from what we really feel. But Slade's tendency to do that was going to make my job that much more complicated.

I went into the house and I found Marina in the kitchen making a pie crust. The kitchen was enormous, the size of a commercial kitchen, with several stoves and ovens, a multitude of pots and pans hanging overhead and as much counter-space as any industrial kitchen. However, the counters weren't metal, like with most commercial kitchens, but were marble. Like everywhere else in this home, the kitchen looked like it was designed by a top-notch interior designer. It was elegant, with a mosaic Italian stone floor and metal appliances that fit in with the décor.

"Mr. Bridgewell is around here somewhere," I said to Marina. "Could you please tell him that I'm going out for the afternoon?"

"Yes," she said in a thick, Russian accent. "I will. Will you be back for the party?"

I shook my head, but then thought better of it. *Get a read on this guy, find out what makes him tick.* I remembered, anew, why I was selected for this job, and observing Slade at a party had to be part of the job description. If he was going to be flitting around his guests like a social butterfly, without a care in the world, that would concern me, to say the very least. I did somewhat understand his reasoning for continuing to hold the party. Life did have to go on, and canceling a party where there were a lot of guests – apparently that would be the case with this party – wouldn't necessarily be fair to everyone involved. But hopefully he wasn't going to act like nothing was wrong.

I went to the dog carrier and got the two dogs out of their cages. They were fast asleep when I got there, and when I woke them up, they looked at me with bleary eyes. They both stretched and yawned, with Gigi making a little noise when she yawned. And then, just like that, they sprung to life, their little bodies wriggling excitedly around my feet. I picked up Sadie, and she gave me kisses all over my face. I reveled in her puppy breath and smell, and immediately relaxed. That was what I needed after my stressful interrogation of Slade.

Then I put the carrier in the back of my car and put the two dogs into it.

As I approached the gate of the house, the reporters, hundreds of them, swarmed my car. They beat on the window, asking me to roll down the window and give a comment. I just looked at them and drove right through the phalanx.

And I headed back to San Diego.

I had no idea why I was heading back to San Diego, except that I needed the drive to clear my head. I was more than confused by Slade. He obviously had many sides to him. He was charming, an animal lover, had discerning taste in décor and was an amazing classical pianist. He seemed to be very kind-hearted. Yet, beneath the surface, there was something there that roiled. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it was white-hot. He was a passionate guy, of course. You don't get to where he is without having drive and passion. You don't get your PhD from Stanford in molecular biology at the age of 23, and develop a revolutionary drug shortly thereafter, without passion.

I knew that I shouldn't try to investigate his background until I was done questioning him. I didn't want impassive news articles to color my perception of him. These news articles would probably be glowing, because he had accomplished so very much. I just needed to go with my intuition and not try to let the media color how I saw him, either good or bad. The media filter was not wanted in my world.

So, I didn't bother to do research on him. I had to clear my head some other way, so, when I got back into town, the first thing I did was go to La Jolla cove to watch the sea lions. I couldn't bring the dogs out, unfortunately, because the beaches generally didn't allow animals until after 6 PM in the summertime.

I called Michael on a whim. I hoped that he would be home, because it was his day off. Of course, he probably was surfing.

He answered the phone. "Hey," he said. "What's up?"

"I really need to talk to you. Can you come to the cove?"

"You got me at just the right time. I just got done surfing, and I was scrounging around the house for a bite to eat. You treat me to lunch, and I'll be there."

"Thanks. I'll be where the sea lions are. Not the seals, but the sea lions."

"See you in a few."

I got out of the car and jumped over the wall. The sea lions usually hung out in a certain area of the cove, as they sunned themselves and slept on the rocks. Sometimes they slept on their sides, like a human. Other times they would have a perfectly erect posture, their noses up in the air. I used to think that this pose meant that the animal was on the defensive, but I soon found out that the pose was just how they slept.

It always amazed me how much people got seals and sea lions mixed up. Most people thought that sea lions were seals. Hence the term "trained seal," because they envisioned the animal on a platform with a ball balancing on its nose, and called that animal a "seal." But seals and sea lions were very different. Seals were fat and had tiny little flippers and were small, relative to the sea lion. Sea lions were huge and brown and had big flippers that they could use to actually walk like a dog. Well, waddle would be the better word, but, at any rate, the flippers were large enough that they could walk on them. In fact, I had seen them do just that in different sea lion shows. I had never in my life seen a seal in a show – only sea lions. And sea lions were the animal that fascinated me, not the seals, who were just a bit down the beach, where they rested by the hundreds.

I gingerly went up close to one of the sea lions, who didn't seem to mind my presence. There were groups of other people around, too, just as fascinated by these creatures as I was. They were taking pictures and laughing, and the sea lions just hung out. They almost seemed like they enjoyed the attention. I closed my eyes, trying to feel if the animals actually were in distress, but I didn't feel anything, so I got just a bit closer. One of the large sea lions yawned loudly, and everyone laughed. Then another sea lion tried to get on the rock, and the yawning sea

lion started barking so loud the people in the restaurants, which were a good thousand feet away from the cove, could probably hear him. The sea lion got aggressive with the newcomer, who growled. The first sea lion nudged closer to the interloper, and bumped him back into the water.

Everyone laughed at the antics. The defeated newcomer was soon back in the water, swimming towards another rock where, presumably, he would get a warmer reception. I soon saw him approach a rock that had a large group of sea lions huddled together, and, indeed, he got on that rock without incident.

I sat there and watched them for a few minutes, then went up to check on the dogs in the back of the car. As soon as Michael got there, I would take him, and the dogs, to one of the restaurants around with a patio that allowed dogs. I had to have someone to talk to about Slade. Somebody neutral. Michael would be the perfect choice.

The two dogs were in the back, cozied up together. I opened the cage and pet them and gave them water, which they eagerly lapped up. "Don't worry, little ones, we'll soon be getting out of here. I just needed to see my sea lion friends for a little bit. They always cheer me up when I'm feeling out of sorts."

Sadie and Gigi both looked like they understood me, and I smiled.

I went back to where the sea lions were, after putting the dogs back in their cage, and I just sat, watching the water. It lapped, wave after wave, on the big rocks. I always craved being near the ocean. It made me feel so very small and insignificant, which I really was, if you think about it. In the course of history, man was very small potatoes. There was no denying that. Our little problems were not only microscopic, but fleeting. A hundred years from now, nobody would even remember who I was, of course. They might remember Slade, but hopefully they would because his drugs would still be in circulation, not because he murdered somebody. He didn't murder that guy.

Did he?

I hated that I had no idea. Slade was way too closed off for me to get a decent read on him. That was why I was there at the beach. Clearing my head was necessary here. It was like a palate cleanser at a fancy restaurant. You had to get the taste of the previous meal out of your mouth before going onto the next course. I was going to approach Slade that evening, and observe him at the party, but I had to do it with a cleared head and no preconceptions.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the seagulls, who were crying loudly. The distant sounds of sea lions barking on far away rocks also permeated, as well as the excited talking and laughter of the people all around me.

Finally, I heard Michael. I looked up, and he was standing there. "Hey girl," he said to me.

"Hey," I said. "Glad you could make it."

"Of course. I had to, because you don't usually call me like that to meet with you in the middle of the day. I figured you needed to talk to me about something important."

He offered me his hand, and I took it, standing up and dusting myself off. "Let's go to Piatti's. We can sit on the patio; have a glass of wine, and talk."

"Cool," he said. "You drive and bring me back here? I got my surfboard, and I'm going to surf after we get done with lunch."

"You got it," I said. I loved Piatti's, because their cauliflower cakes were divine, and the waiters there knew me. They knew not to bring me anything that had animal products in it, and the aioli that was served with the cakes was made with oil, especially for me. I always tipped extremely well, too, so they didn't mind giving me a bit of extra service. Also, their outdoor

patio was elegant and beautiful, with white table cloths, wrought iron chairs, umbrellas, lots of shade and a large central area that was filled with plants and flowers. I couldn't believe that such an elegant place was dog-friendly, but indeed it was.

Sadie and Gigi started to whine in their cage, and Michael looked at me quizzically. "What's that? Did you get some dogs?"

"I did. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. If you need me to move, I understand. I should be closing on a house soon."

Michael just shrugged his shoulders. "It's cool with me. Just pay the pet deposit to the landlord, and it's all good."

"I thought you would say that, and thank you." I wasn't usually as thoughtless as that, to bring in animals without asking my roommates first, so I was relieved that Michael was as nonplussed as he was. I knew that Donny would also be fine with the dogs, seeing as he loved dogs even more than me, and was thinking about getting a dog himself. I felt a little bad that Donny would have to hold off getting a dog, because he obviously couldn't get one in that small apartment while there were two other dogs in the house, but I knew that I would be gone soon enough and Donny could get one of his own.

We got to the restaurant; I got the dogs out and let them potty on the grass. I picked up their mess and put it into the trash can nearby, and then we headed to the patio, where a waitress was soon there. Sadie and Gigi settled in beneath my feet, and both of them conked out and, almost immediately, started to snore.

"Puppies sure do sleep a lot," I said.

"Dogs do in general. I've noticed that – dogs kind of sleep all day and all night. Guess it's pretty boring to be a dog."

"Yeah."

"So, what's on your mind?"

I took a sip of water. "I have a case. Now, I'd like to bounce some things off of you, but you can't say anything to anyone." I felt that I could trust Michael, even though I really didn't know him all that well.

"What's the case about?"

I took a deep breath. "It's the Slade Bridgewell case."

Michael's eyes lit up. "Seriously? You're working that? You just got on at that firm, and you're already assigned to something like that?"

"No. I mean, I'm on the legal team, but I couldn't imagine I would take the lead on this. I'm doing the preliminaries, though."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm staying there with him all this week. I have to, as Malcolm put it, 'find out what makes him tick.' The translation for that, of course, is that Malcolm feels that I can use my abilities to find the truth of the matter."

"And? Is it working?"

I shook my head. "No. It doesn't seem to be." I sighed. "He's very closed off. I could sense that from the very beginning. He has this affable, friendly demeanor, but it's all a façade. Unfortunately, I'm unable to get anything clear from him. It's like he has this brick wall up."

Michael sat back in his chair. "Ah, I get it. You got the hots for this cat." Then he shrugged. "Not that I blame you. He's pretty smoking." Then he looked at me. "What? I can say a guy is smoking. That doesn't make me gay."

I smiled. "I didn't say that it did. You know that men your age are much more likely to say a guy is attractive than older guys do. That doesn't make any of them gay, either."

"That's cool. So, what's the problem?"

I shook my head. "I do find him extraordinarily attractive. I can't help it. He has this magnetism. He's virile and handsome and...graceful. Discerning. My head is going haywire. So, my attraction to him, combined with the fact that he's closed-off." I shook my head. "I'm worried that I can't do my job. The job that Malcolm wants me to do."

Michael sipped his water, and the waitress came back around. I ordered the cauliflower cakes, "aioli made with oil, not butter," and Michael ordered the grilled salmon.

"I don't understand," Michael said after the waitress left. "Why does Malcolm even care if the guy is guilty or not?"

"Well, he doesn't want to look bad if it turns out that Slade is acquitted, when the whole world knows that he's guilty. Not to mention the fact that he doesn't want to lose this case. And it will help the defense if we know if he's guilty or not. And, really, I'm the perfect person to do the preliminaries if you think about it. We can't put him on the stand if he confesses to his guilt, so we certainly don't want him to admit to anything. Yet I can presumably tell if he's lying. The only problem is, I can't tell at all if he's lying."

"That is a problem," Michael agreed. "What are you going to do about that?"

I took a deep breath. "What do you recommend? Should I try to talk to Malcolm about excusing me from this case, or do I keep going, knowing that I'm probably not going to get a good read on him? Or should I just try to keep getting a solid read? I'm only human, after all. I can't always turn on my psychic abilities on command, as much as Malcolm wants me to. I'm kind of in a dilemma here."

"You are, that's for sure. If you want my opinion, and I think that you surely do, then I say that you need to stick it out. You're not a quitter. And if you don't give Malcolm accurate information, then you don't give him accurate information. You're not a trained monkey. You can't just dance on command. So, don't worry about it. You won't lose your job over it."

"No. But I might lose my reputation. Not to mention the reputation of the firm."

Michael broke open the bread that had just appeared in front of us, and looked at me. "He shouldn't have put you in that position. If you lose your job over something like that, I would think that you would have grounds to sue."

I smiled. "Sue for what? Psychics aren't exactly a protected class under the Civil Rights Act."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Race, gender, national origin and disabilities are all protected. You can't fire someone just because they're black or a woman or they're disabled, unless the particular disability interferes with the job description. But I can get fired for not providing an accurate empathic reading."

"Ah, I see. Well, it sounds like you might get fired either way." Then he smiled. "And, Serena, you probably will be fired for sleeping with this guy, so don't go there. Even though I know that you want to. I can see it in your eyes."

"Thanks for the warning," I said. "I'm not stupid. I know that sleeping with him would be a no-no, to say the very least."

"Ummmmkay," he said. "Well, then..." At that, the waitress brought us our food. We dug in with gusto, talking the rest of the time about things that had nothing to do with Slade.

For the first time in days, I truly felt relaxed.

After lunch, I headed back up to Los Angeles. I caught the Pacific Coast Highway when I got north of Del Mar. This was a much more scenic route up the coast, even though it didn't go all the way up to LA. But parts of the PCH went through quaint little coastal towns, the ocean gleaming close by. I loved this part of California, and I wondered how I ever managed to live for so long in New York City, in that cramped brownstone. Not that I didn't love the vibrancy of that city, because I did. And Luke was nearby, and, probably more importantly, Dalilah. I loved her more than I loved my own sister, Amy, because Dalilah got me. She got me far more than any member of my family, probably because she didn't know me before I changed. She didn't know the brat that I used to be. She embraced me fully, and that meant the world to me.

A few hours later, after exiting the PCH and getting on the Five, I was on the road to Malibu. I felt considerable anxiety, and I had no idea why. All that I knew was that there was a prickly, icy-cold feeling that I tried hard to shake. I was getting close, I knew, to getting to the point where I could uncover Slade's demons. They were there, just beneath the surface. I knew it. I could feel it.

Winding my way up the steep hill to his house, I felt a bit calmer. Then, when I approached the gate, and there were more reporters than ever, not to mention a helicopter, I felt the anxiety rising again. I had no clue what awaited me, but it couldn't be good. It was six o'clock, and I didn't know when the party was going to start, but I would imagine it would be soon. I ignored the reporters, of course, and they didn't try to harass me, and I was soon in the gate.

I made my way to his home, and it was completely abuzz. There were waiters in black ties and pants, with tuxedo shirts, everywhere. They were busy setting up tables in the grand room, which was as large as any ballroom. It was filled with tables with white tablecloths, a centerpiece of star lilies and wildflowers, and candles. In the kitchen, there was an entire crew of people back there, preparing lobster and filet mignon, risotto and salads. In the bar area, there was another crew of people who were standing at the ready.

I found Slade, who was busy directing somebody, presumably the head of the wait crew, about everyone's stations. He glanced at me, barely, and then asked the wait crew head to find him the head chef, because he needed to talk to him too.

I waited patiently, and then he turned to me. "What happened to you today?" he asked me.

"I went out." I didn't really want to give him any more information than that.

"Out where?"

I didn't like his tone of voice. It was accusing, with a hint of bitterness. "Out."

"Well, you probably should check with me before doing that. You're lucky that you weren't followed by a reporter."

"Why should I care if I am?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You're my lawyer. Are you new to this? You obviously are. I can tell that you've never been involved in a case like this one." Then he clicked on the television, and Fox News came on. They were discussing his case. He clicked on another channel. CNN. Also discussing his case. Another channel. MSNBC. Discussing his case.

"Do you get the picture here? You don't want some reporter stalking you. You might give them more information than you should, if you aren't properly trained on what to say. Which I suspect is the case."

I felt my bile roiling. “Mr. Bridgewell, I’ll have you know that I’m a professional. I’ve had plenty of courses on legal ethics, thank you very much, and I know better than to discuss a single word of what you told me, which wasn’t much. But if you think for one second that I would ever, and I mean ever, slip up to a reporter about your case, then I’m disappointed in you. You obviously believe that I’m some kind of green first year law student who is seeking the limelight. You couldn’t be more wrong about that.”

At that, he put his hands on my shoulders, and looked me right in the eye. In spite of my anger, I felt electricity shooting throughout my body where he was touching me. It almost burned. I tried to ignore my aching nether parts, which suddenly, and without will, were standing to attention as well. I blinked my eyes, trying to ignore how captivated I suddenly felt. My breathing was shallow as his face got closer to mine.

“I apologize. Of course, you’re a professional. It’s just that I’ve had more people selling me up the river than I care to fathom. People I have trusted have talked. None of these people are in my inner circle anymore, of course. I just don’t want to lose another one. That’s all.”

I closed my eyes, feeling his sincerity in my bones. “It’s okay Slade,” I said. “You have every right to be angry. From now on, I’ll be sure and let you know personally when I leave and what I’ll be doing. It was very unprofessional of me to leave like that.”

He stared at me for a second. “I think that’s the first time you called me by my first name.” Then he smiled. “I kinda like it. Lawyers usually don’t do that unless I give them permission, which I didn’t with you. But it makes me feel that you and I are a bit more than lawyer and client.” At that, he seemed to get a devilish look in his eyes.

I then felt the heat between us, and I looked down at the floor. “Maybe we should keep it lawyer-client. After all, I’m staying here with you for the week. It might be weird.”

He put his finger on my chin and lifted up my face. I tried to ignore the weakness in my knees as his face got closer and closer to mine. Then, just like that, he pulled away. “Not weird. It’s nice. Please, continue to call me Slade. That’s my name, after all.”

And, just like that, he turned his back and walked away. I saw him speaking to a guy with a tall chef’s hat on, and I had to admit that I had to recover from him touching me so intimately on my chin. For a second, it looked like he wanted to kiss me, and I was embarrassed to admit that I was begging for that.

We were more than lawyer and client. I hated to think about what that might mean to him.

I had to talk myself down, because my heart was pounding out of my chest, and my hands were shaking like leaves in a strong wind. *You’re his lawyer, Serena. You can’t have him. That would be completely unethical. And, besides, he’s not interested in you.*

When I told myself that last part though, I wasn’t so sure. There was certainly something there in those piercing green eyes of his, while he looked at me so intensely. I could feel it coming from him. He seemed to be as attracted to me as I was to him.

I sighed. I was in trouble; that was for sure. That electrical spark between us was going to cloud my judgment and possibly send my natural intuitive senses completely haywire.

I might never get to the truth about him.

At 7 PM, the party was in full swing. Everyone was standing around, eating hors d'oeuvres, which consisted of caviar, salmon puffs, enormous prawn cocktails and beef carpaccio. There was light classical music floating through the air, and I saw a four-piece quartet in the corner. The hall was filled to the brim with people in black tie and evening gowns. It seemed like the *crème de la crème* was there, from Senators to models and actors. There were quite a few people that I recognized as major film producers and actresses, as well as people that I knew were prominent artists and business people. I didn't recognize everyone there, of course, but I knew that there had to be quite a few billionaires in that room.

And, of course, I noticed that there were a few people in the room taking pictures. I went over to Slade, who was holding court in a tuxedo. I felt underdressed, even though I was wearing a sundress and heels. I didn't think to pack a formal evening gown, of course, never imagining that Slade would have what looked to be a charity ball right when he was under investigation for a brutal murder.

Tone-deaf. That was the only word for him at that point. "Slade," I said.

He put his arm around me and smiled. "Everyone, I would like for you to meet Serena Roberts. She's the person who is going to put this whole sorry affair to bed for me. Serena, this is Senator Johnson, Charlotte Boswell and Max Pierson. Max is an amazing artist who actually just got a showing at the Louvre, of all places. You really should check out some of his pieces – they're amazing, and I have more than one in this home."

I nodded to everyone, and Charlotte, who was a willowy brunette with large breasts, long legs and a perfect face, looked at me suspiciously. "I'm very pleased to meet you," she said. "I'm Slade's girlfriend."

Slade just looked at me, and shook his head. It was then that I recognized her from all the cosmetic ads that she had done. She was a famous runway model who just got a major part in a film coming that fall.

I had to admit, my heart fell when she introduced herself as Slade's girlfriend. I wasn't aware that he had a girlfriend, of course. I thought that he had lots of girlfriends, not just one, although I had to admit that every other girl that I had seen him with were just like this Charlotte person. Gorgeous, statuesque, and without an ounce of fat on them.

Slade looked at the little group of people. "Would you please excuse me," he said. "I believe that Serena needs to talk to me in private. I will be right back."

At that, he took my hand, and I felt the electricity shoot up through my arm again. Every hair stood on end, and I cursed these involuntary reactions to him. My body was betraying me. It was betraying my mind, too, because all I could think of when I was led through the crowd of people was what it was like to see this magnificent man naked. That image was burned in my brain, and, even though I had tried to let it go, I just couldn't. I craved seeing him naked again, but in bed this time.

We finally got to the den, which was closed off to the party at the moment. However, judging by the way that it was set up, I assumed that there would come a time when the party was going to be heading that way. There were candles and flower arrangements everywhere in that room, where there weren't these things in that room before.

"I can see that you need to talk to me. And, thanks, by the way. Charlotte can't seem to get into her head that we're through. I didn't even invite her. She just showed up, and I didn't want to make a scene, so I just let her stay."

I nodded my head. "I wanted to tell you that there are paparazzi in this place."

“Of course,” he said. “There always is. I always invite a few reporters and photographers to my functions. How else can I get publicity for the cause?”

“I’m embarrassed to even ask this, because I guess I should have asked this before. But what is the function for tonight? I guess I didn’t realize that it would be so formal.”

He smiled. “What, you thought that there would be a host of topless floozies here and men bashing guitars? That’s next Saturday night.” He wasn’t smiling, but I got the joke anyhow. Then he broke into a grin. “Nah, I don’t tend to have those other kinds of parties anymore. I go to some, though. But this is a charity ball for the ASPCA. I’m on the board, and it’s my pet cause, no pun intended.”

I shook my head, feeling ashamed. I berated him for partying while he was under suspicion of murder, and I didn’t even bother to ask him what the party was for. ASPCA was a charity that was near and dear to my heart, too, as I annually donated thousands to them. I kind of loved that this was his “pet cause,” no pun intended.

He looked at me, and took my hands. “Was that all that you wanted to say to me? That there are photographers here?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling my face go white-hot.

He nodded his head. “I love that you’re looking out for me, but I got this. It’s your job, though, to make sure that my image isn’t tarnished while I’m under investigation. Not indictment, though. Hopefully I won’t be indicted. But, seriously, I got this. I wouldn’t imagine having a charity ball would make me look bad to the public, but you just never know.”

He put his hand in my hair. “I forgot to mention, but you have gorgeous hair.”

I closed my eyes, reveling in his touch. “Thanks,” I finally said. My heart rate was going through the roof, and his fingers were leaving a trail of burning flesh in their wake.

Then, just like that, he dropped his hand. He looked around, because the door was opening. There stood Charlotte, big as life, giving me the stink-eye like nobody had ever given me the stink-eye before. “There you are,” she said tightly to Slade. “Senator Boxer is looking for you. I know that you don’t want to keep her waiting, since she’s so integral to your cause.”

Slade just nodded his head. “Of course.” Then he turned to me. “So sorry, Serena. I know that you’re looking out for me, but I do have to do a little ring-kissing. There’s legislation pending and I need all the congressmen and women I can get on-board this thing. We’re trying to end gestation crates for all pigs, and I can’t think of anything more important.”

He left, and I caught my breath again. He looks like that, *and* he’s passionate about animal rights? I shook my head. I was getting way, way over my head on this one. All I could think was that I couldn’t possibly do my job correctly.

I had to detach myself. I knew that I had to try to do that, so I closed my eyes and found my center. Sometimes meditation helped me when I was feeling stressed out or out of sorts. I needed to find the calm that I was just starting to find when I was thrust into this man’s life. I wished, anew, that I was home, where I felt safe.

Home, where the demons haunted me much less.

The party wore on. The guests were served dinner, and there was a silent auction, and the winners were announced. After the silent auction, the guests dispersed throughout the house. I wandered around, and, everywhere I looked, there was live music, and people laughing, dancing and talking. It seemed that everyone who was in the ballroom earlier was still in the house, enjoying themselves. I went out to the terrace and looked at the pool area below. There were a

group of intoxicated people, throwing each other in the pool in their evening gowns and tuxedos, although one guy was enterprising enough to strip down to his underwear before doing a cannonball into the pool. There were peals of laughter as everyone splashed around, and one person after another got pushed in.

I usually liked a good party myself, but I felt out of place with these people.

As I stood on the terrace, a man joined me. Tall and blonde, fortyish and handsome, he stood next to me, looking out at the people below. "Looks like fun, doesn't it?" he finally said to me in a thick Australian accent. "I'm Dane. I was a friend of Sam's."

I nodded my head. "Serena."

"I know who you are," he said. "I asked about you, just because I'd never seen you around before." He stood there with his hands at his side, and sipped a glass of champagne. "He did it, you know. He and Sam had lots of words before Sam died. He was the only one who would have motive."

I cocked my head at him. "Why are you here? You obviously have no loyalty to Slade. And you should know that I cannot discuss his case with you or anyone else."

He looked back at the crowd and shrugged. "I guess he's just keeping his enemies close, as they say. Slade certainly isn't a stupid man. Anyhow, I hope that you don't get him off. A man like him certainly shouldn't be walking free."

At that, Slade himself came out on the terrace. He put his arm around Dane. "Dane, my man. You're being summoned in the great room. I suggest you go in there."

Dane shrugged his shoulders and walked back into the house without another word.

"What did he say to you?" Slade asked when Dane was out of earshot.

"I think you probably know. He has no love for you, that's for sure."

"Of course not. Bastard's been going to the news media, feeding them crap. I'm quite sure that he's one of their many anonymous sources."

"Why is he here?"

He smiled. "I'm quite sure that he probably told you that I'm keeping my enemies close, which is exactly what I'm trying to do. Believe it or not, there are a lot of people here at this party who would love to see me fry. I'm keeping tabs on every one of them, and I have more than one loyal friend who is reporting to me everything that they're saying about me. That's the best way to know who's a rat, and it's the best way for me to keep on top of things." Then he smiled. "I hate that they're eating my food and drinking my Dom, though, not to mention all the high-end liquors I always have at these things. Bastards have no shame, really. They'll smile to my face, drink my \$20,000 bottle of Scotch, and then spread lies about me to the media. Don't think for a second I don't know exactly who is saying what."

The two of us stood looking at the people below, who were still giggling and throwing each other into the pool. We could also see his hot tub in the woods, and we could just make out the fact that there were three people in that hot tub, all of them naked and groping one another. There were two guys and a girl, and the two guys were all over each other as well as all over the woman.

He shook his head. "They'll get what's coming to them, though, once I beat this thing. Ostracized won't be the word. Socially dead is what they're going to be. And I can't wait."

I saw the flash of anger in his eyes, and I felt it in my bones. This guy had a temper, that much was clear, and that worried me. But, really, everyone had a temper. A breaking point. That was just human nature. It would be odd if he wasn't angry at these "friends" of his who were selling his story to the media.

Still, I wondered. How bad was his temper, and could it have led him to do something like what had happened to Sam?

I hated that I still doubted him, but I couldn't help it. I was having more and more difficulty getting a decent read on him. His emotions were too scattered, and I was getting more confused with each passing moment. One moment, he was unruffled, the next he was intensely angry. And, of course, there were moments that I was feeling pure desire from him. I hoped that wasn't wishful thinking, in spite of myself, because, even if I couldn't act on it, I could fantasize about him. I could imagine what it would feel like to have those sensuous lips on mine, devouring me. Those green eyes looking through my skin into my soul, drinking me in and twisting my insides like a pretzel. There were so many things that I wanted to do to him, and I wanted to imagine that he felt the same.

Of course, imagining is all that could happen, because I was his lawyer.

He finally smiled at me, and put his hand on my shoulder. "I better get back," he whispered in my ear. The involuntary tingles flushed through my body as his hand lingered on my bare shoulder. "I'll see you later."

Then I saw him go back into the house and go from one group to another.

I sighed. I was really in trouble. Perhaps I needed to call Malcolm and tell him, definitively, that I was the wrong woman for this job.

Then I thought better about that. I was a professional, goddammit. I wasn't going to let this guy derail me. Perhaps that was his MO.

I hated to think that I was yet another victim of his charm.

The next day, I stretched and yawned and padded gingerly down the steps. To my surprise, there were still stragglers around, although they were no longer in their evening wear. They were wearing normal clothes, apparently anticipating staying the night. There were about five people in one of the many entertainment rooms, leisurely watching television while eating breakfast. There were more people out by the pool, sunning in their bathing suits.

One of the people was Charlotte, who had a disturbingly perfect body. She was holding court outside by the pool, and she waved at me when she saw me.

I went over to her. I had to remember that I was supposed to learn all that I could about Slade, and I supposed that befriending a woman who was his girlfriend at one time, who now appeared to be a stalker, would be a part of that job description. "Hello, Serena," she said in a friendly manner. "Sorry about last night. I think that I had too much to drink."

I sat down next to her. "Don't worry about it. You weren't rude."

"Of course I was. Listen, I suppose that Slade told you that I'm not his girlfriend anymore. Technically, that's very true. But I think that we're going to be getting back together at any time." Then she smiled sweetly. "I'm very surprised that you're his lawyer. You certainly don't look the part."

"What are lawyers supposed to look like?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I always imagined Susan Dey. I watched that show when I was a small child and it was on reruns. LA Law. I'm sure that's before your time."

"No, it's not," I said. "I mean, it was pretty much off the air before I was old enough to enjoy something like that, but, like you, I did catch reruns. But I'm curious why you would use a show that was on in the eighties and early nineties as your touchstone on how a lawyer should be."

She sipped her mojito daintily. "These are delicious. You should get Slade to make you one."

I closed my eyes, and I felt her vibrations, which were surprisingly strong. She was far from the sunny person she was trying to portray. She was angry, extremely angry, and jealous. Her jealousy was the emotion that I felt most acutely from her.

I opened my eyes, knowing not to trust her. Not that I ever would have trusted her anyhow, considering how much she always seemed to be glomming onto Slade.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What was it that you were just asking me?"

"Nothing," I said. "And lawyers are nothing like on that show. Trust me, most of the work that we do is boring as hell. Very rarely do we get something juicy coming across our desks."

She nodded her head. "And this one is very juicy for you, isn't it?" She narrowed her eyes, and I could feel, imperceptibly, the judgment from her. She was trying to trap me into admitting something, and I thought that I knew what that something was.

She wanted me to admit that I was attracted to Slade, at which point she would go right to my law firm and rat on me. Her motives were becoming clearer and clearer. She wanted me out of the way.

I guessed that I should have been flattered that she saw me as a romantic rival. I had to compose my face and give nothing, absolutely nothing, away. "Of course," I said. "Murder cases do tend to be more interesting than, say, corporate mergers, although sometimes corporate mergers have a sexiness and an intrigue all their own."

She cocked her head, and then caught a beach ball that was thrown at her. Slade was approaching the pool area, and, with a sly smile, she took off her top, revealing her perfect, and apparently natural, breasts.

Slade approached our chairs and sat on the end of mine. “Serena, I see that you don’t have anything to eat, so I brought you some of these vegan brownies and a tofu frittata. Marina made it this morning just for you.”

I looked over at Charlotte, who was glaring at me. “Oh, you’re one of those,” she said. “A vegan.” Then she rolled her eyes. “A dime a dozen out here in LA. Probably only doing that because it’s the thing, aren’t you?”

I opened my mouth, and Slade said “why Serena is a vegan is none of your affair, Charlotte. I would appreciate it if you would mind your own business for once in your life.”

She said nothing, but turned her attention to the people who were in the pool, and then, with a perfect dive, she was in the water.

I dug into the tofu frittata, which was amazing. I was always impressed when somebody who ordinarily prepared non-vegan food had a deft hand in preparing vegan food as well, and Marina was certainly in that latter group.

Slade looked at Charlotte and then back at me. “Sorry about her. She’s a beast.”

“Yet she’s still here.” I raised an eyebrow at him. “Either you like the drama, or you really don’t mind her presence.”

He shook his head. “I’m trying to stop her from going to the media and the police and spreading lies. She’s one of the many people who I’m trying to control the best that I can.”

It was then that I saw it in his eyes and felt it emanating from his every pore. He was worried. Very worried. I wondered exactly what he was worried about. Was he just worried about all the Benedict Arnolds who were feeding the media crap about him? Was he worried that he couldn’t get a fair trial? That he would lose? Or was he worried that I would catch onto him if I stayed there long enough?

That was the bad thing about being an empath. I could feel others emotions, but their reasons behind their emotions weren’t always clear. Sometimes it was, as with Cindy back home. It was clear that she wanted the job that I got, and it was also clear that she had the hots for Slade. But Slade was more of a mystery to me. I was having a difficult time discerning where his various emotions were coming from.

I put my hand on his and tried to get a better handle on him. But, like before, he was apparently able to cover up that negative emotion, because I no longer felt that he was worried. “I would chase all these people off, but I really don’t want to,” he said to me. “Believe it or not, I sometimes feel comfortable having a bunch of people around. It’s easier to escape that way.”

He didn’t elaborate on what he meant by “escaping,” so I asked him. “What are you trying to escape?”

He looked at me, and I felt like I was going to melt into the chair. “Nothing. It’s just a figure of speech.” Then he looked down at the chair, and he almost seemed like a young boy. “You look dry,” he observed, because I drank the orange juice that he had offered to me. “Let me get you another one.”

“My legs work,” I said, getting up off the chair. “You don’t have to bother.”

He grinned. “Oh, I wasn’t. I was going to get one of my help to bring you something.” Then he looked down again, and I could tell that he was teasing me.

I laughed and made my way up the stairs into the kitchen.

While I was standing in the kitchen, pouring myself a glass of water, I felt Slade come up behind me. He stood there, his chest on my back, and he put his arms on either side of me. "Let me help you," he said, taking the glass of water out of my hand. His breath, hot and moist, was in my ear.

My breath caught as I felt him pressed up against me. It felt uncomfortable, yet completely exhilarating. "I got it," I said. "I know how to get a glass of water."

He ignored me, and turned on the sink, filling the glass to the brim with water. He was still right behind, pressed up against me, his hands on either side of me.

I turned and tried to sneak underneath one of his arms, but he didn't move. I was now facing him, and he was extremely close to me, his hands on either side of me, gripping the side of the countertop. "You feel it, don't you?"

I swallowed hard. "Feel what?"

"You know what." Then he put his finger underneath my chin again. "You're goddamned beautiful. I hope you know that."

I felt my face flush scarlet. "I--"

Then it happened. He gently put his full and sensuous lips on my own, and I literally lost my breath. I closed my eyes, and got completely and utterly lost as his lips were gliding over, sucking and biting my own. His tongue found mine, and the electricity that I felt before was magnified by a thousand. By a million.

I sighed as he continued to kiss me gently, his hands running through my hair. He leaned into me, and I could feel his erection, enormous and proud, through his shorts. I reared back my head, wanting, longing for him to continue, yet, at the back of my mind, I knew that it was completely, and utterly, wrong.

His lips made their way to my clavicle and neck, his hands gently stroking my hair. His kisses left burning trails all over my skin. I summoned every nerve in my body to tell him to stop, but it was useless. I felt like I was being consumed by him. Consumed by his touch, surprisingly gentle, and his kisses, which were also gentle, but were becoming much more heated and passionate with every passing second.

As his hands were making their way to my sides, and then were planted firmly in the curve of my back, I finally managed the strength to push him away. "No," I said. "I'm your lawyer, and, I'm sorry, I really don't want to be another notch on your bedpost."

He looked stricken at my words, and I felt how my sudden rebuke stung him to his core. I sensed that nobody had ever rejected him before, and, at first, I felt that he was hurt. Then, as with the other times before, I didn't feel his hurt anymore. I felt nothingness. His wall had returned.

He simply raised an eyebrow and turned on his heel and walked away.

Once he was safely out of the kitchen, I turned back to the sink, putting my hands on the edge. I was trembling all over, and my mind was going 1000 miles per hour. I had never felt desire like I just felt with him, and that worried me. I was already having problems trying to get a read on him, and this was just complicating matters that much further. And I was his lawyer. I knew the ethics of sleeping with a client, and that was that it was generally frowned upon. It could very well leave me open for a major complaint or a lawsuit for malpractice. I knew this. There wasn't a law against it, but it was well-known to be an ethical grey area that was like the third rail – you shouldn't ever touch it. And the American Bar Association's model rules for professional conduct, which was what all attorneys observed, stated that attorney-client sexual

relationships were forbidden. California's rules were more lax, but, still, there could be an entire Pandora's Box that would be opened if I gave into my desires.

I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts. Every cell in my body, however, was on fire and screaming for Slade. I wanted him to do things to me that nobody ever had. However complicated it would be to have sex with him, I didn't care. My body didn't care, anyhow, but my mind was still focused on how wrong it would be for so many reasons. Not just the ethical reasons, but also because I wouldn't be able to do the job that I was sent to do. There would be no way I could get a good reading on him if sex complicated the matter.

I had to be a professional. Besides, what I said to him was how I felt – I didn't want to be another notch on his bedpost. Slade was a notorious womanizer. At least that was the story that was always reported to the tabloids. I could think of nothing worse than sacrificing all – my career, my peace of mind – for a fling that would mean zero to him.

I therefore made up my mind. I was going to keep it together. I wasn't going to give into my body, which was still feeling the heat from where Slade had touched it. My body might have been aching for him, but I had to ignore that.

I went out to the pool area, and my mind was made up still further. Slade was sitting on a pool chair, talking to Charlotte, who was still topless. She was giggling and touching him, and he didn't seem to mind.

I sighed, watching him interact with Charlotte, whom he allegedly couldn't stand. It certainly looked like he was into her from my vantage point. I just sighed, and stopped watching them after a little while. As far as I was concerned, those two deserved one another. They were both fake and superficial and hot as hell.

I then fielded a call from Malcolm, who was calling right at that moment. "Serena," he said. "How are things?"

"Not so good," I said. "I don't think that I'm going to be able to get the information that you're looking for. I can't always get a decent reading, and I feel that maybe my talents aren't going to be on point for this case."

"Why?" he asked me. "Serena, you have to concentrate. It's important."

"Malcolm, I'm not a goddamned trained monkey. I think that I told you this. You're putting an awful lot of pressure on me here, and I don't appreciate that one bit. I tried to warn you that it probably wasn't going to work out." I was, all at once, extremely angry with Malcolm. There was a part of me, though, that started to think that my anger at Malcolm was misplaced. Seeing Slade with the bimbo Charlotte had me seeing red. "I warned you, and you forced me into it, and then, what? If I give you wrong information, I'm going to be the one you're going to shove under the bus when it turns out that Slade is as guilty as sin."

Malcolm didn't speak for awhile. Then, after a long pause, he simply said "I'm sorry, Serena, but you have to try. I won't blame you if you're wrong, I promise."

I didn't have words for the real reason why I was so upset. I felt trapped into this situation, and, as attracted as I was to this guy, I could think of nothing worse than having to stay there with him for another six days. To see him drape himself all over any whorish female who came his way was not my idea of a good time.

I was tempted just to tell Malcolm to shove it. I was going to go home, whether he liked it or not, and, if he didn't like it, I'd just quit. There were other jobs. Jobs where my boss wouldn't push me into a situation that made me feel as uncomfortable as this one did.

But I closed my eyes, and tried to find my peaceful center. It was there that I usually made my decisions. They hadn't always been the right ones, but I had found that, ever since I

went through intense counseling and hypnosis, that my calm center was right more often than not.

I finally was able to reach a place in my conscience that made me realize that I did have to see this whole charade through. It was my inner voice that was telling me that I did need to stay there, for whatever reason. "Okay," I told Malcolm. "But I want your word that I won't be blamed if this whole thing goes south."

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "I'm really happy that you made that decision, Serena, because, really, we do need you. I do realize that your insight isn't always going to be 100%. I've seen enough shows featuring psychics to know that. But, imperfect or not, I believe in you. I think that you can get at the truth. So, I'm happy that you're staying on."

I didn't want to tell him that my scorching attraction to Slade was going to cloud my judgment. That Slade was indiscernible, for the most part, anyhow. That there were a number of factors that made the entire mission that much more complicated.

We got off the phone and I went into my room, and lay down on the bed and just stared at the ceiling. I imagined Slade and the slutty Charlotte going at it in his bedroom, and I simply cringed.

This was going to be a long, long, long week.

I woke up with a start to find that Slade was lying next to me in my bed. I was fully clothed, I guess because I conked out. He looked at me with his boyishly handsome face and smiled. "Sorry to startle you," he said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him. "Did Charlotte kick you out of bed?"

He looked perplexed. "Charlotte. No, she didn't kick me out of bed. I didn't give her a chance to. I asked her to leave yesterday afternoon."

"Oh. Well, it looked like you and she were very much into one another." I glared at him. He wasn't invited to join me in my room, let alone in my bed, and I had already told him that I couldn't be intimate with him because I was a professional. So why was he there?

He smoothed my hair out of my eyes. "You must have been tired. I didn't see you after our kiss, so I came to look for you, and you were already out at 3 in the afternoon. I've checked on you every hour, on the hour, since then, and you've been out the entire time."

"What time is it?"

"It's 8 AM."

I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs out of my brain. "8 AM. I never sleep this much at one time."

"Well, you probably needed it." At that, he reached over next to him and brought me over a tray of pancakes and orange juice. "Here. This is for you. The pancakes are probably cold, though, because I brought these up over an hour ago."

I looked at him suspiciously, but nonetheless, dug into the pancakes. They were delicious, as they were whole grain and topped with sweet strawberries and a dusting of powdered sugar. I poured some maple syrup on them, and sipped the orange juice. "You certainly do seem to be in a good mood today," I said. "Or maybe you always entertain women by bringing them breakfast in bed."

He looked at me with longing in his eyes. “I don’t know why you seem to think that I’m some kind of manwhore,” he said. “But, if that’s what you think, it’s inaccurate.”

“Slade,” I said. “I admit that I don’t know that much about you. That’s by design. Malcolm asked me not to read up on you too much because it would possibly prejudice me either for or against you. But I do know a few things, mainly because it has always been like ambient noise to me – much like I know more about Kim Kardashian than I ever wanted to know, because there’s just so much written about her that you can’t avoid it. I don’t try to follow her, but she’s everywhere. You’ve been the same way. I’ve seen your face on so many supermarket tabloids that it’s been impossible to completely avoid you. And the only reason why you’re on these tabloids is because you’ve just about dated every A-list star there is. I’m surprised that Taylor Swift hasn’t written a song about you by now. You’re the John Mayer of billionaires.”

He smiled impishly. “The John Mayer of billionaires. I kinda like that. He does get some gorgeous girlfriends; you got to hand it to him.” Then, in a flash, he seemed to get serious. “Listen, I know that my life might look a certain way to you, and that’s understandable. I’d think the same damned thing if I were on the outside looking in. But I haven’t loved any of those women. They’re not what I want.”

I shook my head. “What you want, or don’t want, from a woman is none of my concern. My only concern is whether or not you bludgeoned your business partner to death in your lab. That piece of information is what I came for, and that’s the only reason why I’m here. So, you can date your supermodels, your pop singers and your A-list actresses all you want. I really don’t care.”

He put his hand on my thigh, which was uncovered by the sheet that was covering the rest of my torso. “Oh, but you do care.”

I removed his hand from my leg. I had to resist his charms, or I would never get at the truth about Sam’s murder. “Slade, I told you...”

At that, he leaned into me and kissed me full on the lips. I involuntarily lay back down on the bed, my head hitting the pillow as his hand was once again on my thigh, stroking it gently. My mind was still yelling at me to resist, but my body was overruling my head. My body was craving this, and my body was telling me just to stop resisting and give in. I could feel myself shaking from the tip of my toes to the top of my head.

Slade was wearing a button down shirt and a pair of shorts, and I couldn’t help but unbutton the top of his shirt. I ran my hand on his chest, which was rock-hard. I opened my mouth further to receive his kisses, and his hands were exploring underneath my blouse. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that I wasn’t wearing a bra, so he was easily able to gently and smoothly cup my breasts, one and then the other. I moaned and tried mightily to not get lost in him. Not to lose myself in his touch.

Stop Serena, you have to stop. You can’t go down this road. My head was feeling so many things – guilt, confusion, fear – all of which were overruled by my body, which was feeling pure, unadulterated lust.

I reared back my head, and he covered my neck and upper chest with kisses. His hands were expertly unbuttoning my shirt, and he finally exposed my breasts. He hungrily sucked one of my nipples, and then the other, and this was a feeling unlike any other I had ever experienced.

He lay on top of me, his mouth covering me with kisses everywhere. I found myself spreading my legs, and he took the bait, pulling down my skirt after unzipping it in the back, while removing my thong underwear, and he put his head between my legs.

I stretched out and reared up as his tongue and lips were gracing my nether parts slowly, then quicker and quicker. He put his fingers inside of me, and I burst into an orgasm almost immediately. He was amazing with his fingers and tongue, more deft than anybody I had ever known. By far. He then started to lick my inner thigh, putting my leg high up in the air.

I let him guide me, control me. I was a mound of clay that he was molding exactly how he wished. I let the feeling of helplessness, coupled with white-hot longing, wash over me. I knew that he had noticed the faint scarring. He had to have. It was obvious for anyone to see. In fact, he graced his fingers lightly over the scars on my wrists, and his tongue longingly grazed over one of the scars on my legs. He said nothing about these marks, though, but I knew that he had noticed them, and he seemed to attend to each one.

I didn't want to answer questions about these scars, though, and I prayed that he never asked me about them. I couldn't let him know about my dark desires. Not that I was entirely ashamed of them, but they weren't necessarily things that I discussed with just anyone. Or, really, anyone at all. I wondered if he would even understand, although, when I looked into his eyes, I knew that he did.

Your pain is my pain, his eyes told me. And you will be healed.

I sighed as I realized that he not only understood my pain, but that he was interested in alleviating it somehow. As his beautiful eyes gazed into my own, and then ran the length of my body, it was like an absolution. When he put his arms behind my back and lifted me up to meet him, so that we were sitting on the bed, staring at one another, I felt, for just a brief moment, healed. I closed my eyes, and felt the warmth of his skin, and, with our chests touching each other, I felt his heart pounding against my flesh. His skin was burning my own, searing me, yet molding me into him.

From this sitting position, with both of us naked, he put his hand in back of my head, and ran his fingers through my hair. And then his mouth devoured mine, our tongues interlocking in a frenzy, his lips biting and sucking my own. He put his fingers into my wetness, and he lifted me up off the bed with his strong arms. Without a word, he stretched his legs underneath me, and gently lowered me onto his enormous manhood. I closed my eyes, feeling him rooted inside of me. He filled me up, and he gripped tightly, his hands clasped around my back. He moved inside me gently, slowly and deliberately, as my lower region tightened around his cock, gripping it greedily.

It was as if my vagina suddenly had a mind of its own. I breathed heavily as he continued to slowly move inside of me. He was kissing me again, his lips warm, moist and gentle. While our kissing earlier was hungry, passionate and consuming, it was now slower, more deliberate, more feathery light. His lips sought my breasts again, and grazed over my nipples slowly. His thrusting slowed down as well, and I sighed.

I excommunicated the voice in my head that said that there was going to be hell to pay for my transgression, because, at that moment, I only felt ecstasy. Pure, unadulterated ecstasy.

He lay me down on the bed and flipped me over onto my front. His fingers caressed the light marks that were on my back and buttocks, and I felt his tongue brushing them lightly. It was almost as if he were trying to heal me with the wetness of his passionate tongue. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feeling that I was getting from him doing this to me. His cock was no longer inside of me, but was just on the outside of my opening. He was teasing me as he lay down on top of me, his lips and fingers grazing my neck. I spread my legs open, desperate to receive him again. But still, he made me wait.

I bit my lower lip, not knowing what to expect from him, and the anticipation was making me literally ache. My nether area was tightening in anticipation of his enormous cock plunging itself into me again. I needed to feel him inside me again. It was like when I was addicted to pain – I had to have it. I needed it to heal my traumas. When pain was an addiction, it was worse than any drug. Not that I had tried a lot of drugs, but I had known drug addicts in my life, and my addiction was just like theirs.

I gradually had learned to live my life without requiring pain, but now, feeling Slade teasing me in this way, I felt the familiar feeling of aching, desiring and requiring something. I needed to have him inside me again, and his teasing me was almost as piquant as the pain I used to be addicted to. I closed my eyes, willing him to plunge himself deeply inside of me and just root there for the rest of time. My fear in needing him in this way, when I barely knew him, was just below the surface, threatening to consume me. To drown me. I couldn't let it. I had to hold on, and not let my severe misgivings ruin me again.

I groaned as he continued to tease me, his cock now rubbing on the small of my back while he massaged my neck and shoulders. His tongue found my spine and slowly, in a circular fashion, traced the length of it.

I tried to control my breathing and my patience, but I could feel the anxiety welling up inside of me. I *had* to have him inside of me, and I hated that it had become a need. I hated that I was losing control, but, at the same time, giving him control sent me into paroxysms of ecstasy. It was the delicate push-pull that was so familiar to me. It was like a dance, my willing to give up all control, which was always fighting with my intense desire to not allow someone to totally dominate me. It was fear that prevented me from completely ceding control to somebody else, yet it was my inner desire, that I kept hidden from everyone, especially myself, that demanded that I become subservient to passion and lust. It was a voice that commanded me to let myself go and become the servant of another. That I become completely submissive.

His fingers were still lightly brushing my shoulders and neck, and his hands were on my ass and parting the flesh. His fingers were in my ass, first one, and then two more, and his other hand was lubricating the opening with something sticky and wet. He lay down on top of me, his breathing coming faster and faster, and then he pulled my hair. The violence with which he snapped my head back with his hands, which were clenched in my hair, brought back the familiar rush. I orgasmed mightily as his cock plunged itself into my ass.

I groaned, as the pain from where he was holding my head in place, his hand still firmly gripping my hair, pulling it so roughly I feared that he would end up with a clump in his hand, fought with the pain of his enormous manhood plunging deeper and deeper into my ass. I shook violently, the extreme pleasure heightened and magnified, completely overcoming the severe pain of what he was doing. I closed my eyes as he broke through to where there was no more pain, only extreme pleasure, and I cried out in ecstasy.

I stretched out my arms and gripped the brass rails of the headboard. His hands covered my wrists and held them tightly as he continued to thrust in and out. I could barely contain my orgasm that started in my vagina and moved, in violent waves, all over my body. Every pleasure sensor was on high alert. Every hair on my body felt like it was standing on end.

Finally, he shuddered as I felt him come inside of my ass. I closed my eyes, feeling my legs shaking beneath him. He pulled out, and lay down next to me, bringing me close. Our bodies were melded to one another, and he tightly gripped his arms around me. I could feel the absolute heat of his skin as it touched my own, his heart pounding into my back.

It was crazy how we were able to just lay there together, without saying a word, yet, in the quiet, I could hear his thoughts. I smiled as I realized that he was vulnerable, his walls having come down completely as he spooned me. He put one long leg over my body, as if he wanted to possess me. Indeed, that's what he was doing – possessing me. Claiming me as his own. Branding me with the heat of his skin, because his touch was burning me the same way a brand would burn a calf.

I could hear him thinking, because his emotions, right then, were so strong. *You're mine, Serena. There's no going back. You want to give in to me, and I want the same from you.* Then, as he started to kiss the back of my neck, while his erection was growing once more, he thought some more words. I closed my eyes as I listened to them. *You're hurt, and so am I. I can heal you. And you can heal me too.*

I closed my eyes, feeling the aching again as his cock was teasing me from behind. I opened up my legs just a little, but it was enough. He sheathed his manhood, which he didn't before, and then he slowly thrust inside of me. He slowly, deliberately, and longingly moved inside my vagina. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feeling.

He rocked inside me slowly, his hands running from my stomach to my breasts. It didn't take him long this time, as I felt him groan. He slipped out of me, his hands still wrapped tightly around my waist.

Then, with a kiss, he said "thank you, Serena. You're beautiful."

I fought back tears as I nodded my head. Inside, the voice was rearing its head. It was saying that this encounter with him was an aberration, one that couldn't be repeated if I wanted to do my job properly. I had to let him go in the morning. I had to get back to the professional that I was, and try to put this whole incident behind me. As difficult as it was going to be, I had to do the job that I was hired to do.

But, for that moment, I had him. I had him in my bed, and I had his flesh melded to my own. That was all that mattered. I was going to live in the moment, without feeling the fear and anxiety of what was going to happen with us when he left the room.

The sun was streaming through the windows and I looked anxiously at the clock. It was noon, meaning that our love-making had been going on for several magical hours. I gripped his hand tightly around me, and squeezed. I felt like I had passed the point of no return, and that terrified me.

"Slade," I said. "I know that it's early in the day. But I'd like to feel you close to me for a little while longer."

At that, he flipped a switch, and the room darkened as heavy black drapes descended from the ceiling. It was as if it were night. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. Then he kissed me again, his cock, once again, standing to attention. "Not anytime soon."

We finally climbed out of bed that evening, our hunger for food finally overcoming our hunger for one another. I didn't feel that it was possible, anymore, to sate my desire for this elusive man, but I certainly had to try.

And, one thing was for sure – I wasn't going to be able to give Malcolm any accurate reports on Slade, for he had consumed me and occupied a space inside of me that was sacred. I couldn't sort out my feelings for him, and I really couldn't separate my white-hot passion that was burning inside of me, from the job that I was hired to do.

So, as we had dinner on the terrace, which consisted of rice pilaf, beans and veggies for me and salmon for him, served with the most delicious mimosas on the planet, I broke the news

to him. “Slade, I think that what happened this afternoon undermines everything that I was hired to do. It was incredibly unprofessional of me, and I really don’t have any choice but to call Malcolm and tell him that I need to come home.” I hung my head. “I’m really embarrassed that I let it come to this.”

He put his hand on mine. “You can’t leave,” he said, his eyes boring into me. “And you don’t want to.”

I shook my head. “Of course I don’t want to,” I said. “That goes without saying. But I need to.” I felt the familiar anxiety welling up. “Malcolm is paying me good money to come up here and try to get inside your head. To tease out what you’re thinking and feeling, and come up with a narrative about whether or not you’re good for your partner’s murder. There’s no way I can do that job now.”

I knew that what I was saying to him was the absolute truth. I was now a biased observer, and any evidence that I gleaned from him was going to be skewed in favor of his absolute innocence. Knowing that, there was no way that I could ethically continue to let Malcolm pay me to get at the truth. That would be not only wrong and deceitful, but also grounds for my dismissal from the firm.

That is, if the fact that I slept with our client didn’t already doom me.

He put his hand on my wrist, and then turned it over. He lightly brushed the faint scar that marked me. “You have secrets,” he said. “And you love pain. I understand that. I understand you. You can leave if you want to, of course. I won’t hold you here. But I think that you know that you’ll be back. Either I’ll come to you, or you will come to me. But we will be back, making love and fucking like we did all afternoon.”

I bit my lip, scared to get at what was underlying his message to me. He loved to give pain as much as I loved to receive it. I shook my head, knowing what that might mean.

Perhaps he loved to give pain only to women who he bedded.

Or maybe he loved to give pain in general.

Maybe that’s what really got Sam killed.

The next day, I packed my bags. Slade had given me a proper send-off, in my estimation, as he and I ravaged one another late into the night. It started after dinner, as he picked me up, as if I was a feather, and brought me into his bed.

“If you’re really going to leave tomorrow,” he said, “then we need to get as much fucking in tonight as we possibly can. I want to leave my mark on you, so that you don’t feel the need for anyone else. Because you’re mine now. You can’t possibly belong to anyone else. Not until I release you. And hopefully I never will.”

So, we spent the evening and night just consuming one another. I didn’t think that anybody could brand me in quite the way Slade did that night. So, I knew that his words were true. I was his, hopelessly his. He possessed me in the way that nobody ever had, and I had no need for anyone else to possess me. His touch scorched me in such a way that I positively felt branded.

So, when I packed up to head back home, I felt sated for the time being. But I knew that there was going to come a time, not so far in the future, where I was going to feel an aching need for him. I hoped against hope that he was right – he would come for me. I was terrified about what I was going to do if he didn’t.

I got the dogs out of their yard out back, where I sent them to play while Slade and I had our fun indoors. I harnessed them, leashed them, and brought them to my SUV. Their little bodies were delighted to see me, of course, and they covered my face with kisses. I inhaled them, finding comfort in them. I might never see Slade again. More likely, I would see him, but in a professional capacity only – assuming that Malcolm didn’t fire me when I told him the truth about what happened between Slade and me.

So, what happened between us the past day or so was probably something that wouldn’t be repeated. I had to let it go, no matter how much I was possessed by him and attached to him. I knew the reality of the situation, and that was that the odds were against us sustaining anything lasting.

But Sadie and Gigi were two creatures who I knew that I could always count on. They were ready with unconditional love, as only dogs could give, and I found great comfort in that. They weren’t prone to vagaries or capriciousness as men like Slade were. They definitely were not full of deception, as humans often were, and as Slade might be. They just were, and that’s what I needed more than anything in my life.

I put them in their kennel in the back of the SUV, and I opened the door. Slade wrapped his strong arms around me tightly. “Don’t go,” he said, as his hands were massaging the back of my head.

“I have to. I can’t stay here on Malcolm’s dime. That wouldn’t be right, and I have to face the music for what I have done.” I was going to be strong and invincible. I had the capability of walking away from Slade, of freeing myself from the destructive bond that was starting to form between the two of us. He had an aching need to inflict pain. I sensed that, and I caught fleeting glimpses of it. I had just as aching of a need to suffer pain. He knew that about me.

I had to walk away. My plan was to tell Malcolm, and then suffer the consequences. If he fired me, he fired me. I still had enough money saved up that I could close on a home, although the home was going to be in a less desirable area of San Diego, and it was going to be in worse shape than I had hoped. But I could still get a home, and I could live there until I found something else. In the meantime, I would throw myself into beautifying any home that I would find, and let that occupy my headspace. Drawing up home improvement plans and carrying them

out, one board and pipe at a time, would be something that could consume me so that I wouldn't be aching for Slade's touch every minute of every day.

Of course, the ideal situation would be that Malcolm would understand what had happened between Slade and me, and would forgive me.

Then again, that would mean that I would, for sure, have continued contact with this man who had possessed me and branded me, in a matter of days. It would almost assure that I would give in to my own dark desires, because he wanted to fulfill them. The hints that he would be more than willing to fulfill them were sprinkled throughout last night. I would be sucked into something that I swore I was going to leave behind, and there would be no turning back.

As he leaned his head into the car, and kissed me passionately goodbye, I found that I was warring inside. There was a part of me that didn't want to leave, that wanted to shirk all my responsibility to my firm, and just forget the world around me. Forget that Slade was facing a murder charge, and forget that Malcolm would fire me for sure if I continued to stay there without admitting the truth to him.

But the responsible part of me won out. "Thanks for everything," I told him. "Goodbye."

And, at that, I put the car in gear and drove down the winding path, where the familiar hoards of reporters camped out, just beyond the gate. As I made my way through the throng, with the reporters attempting to thrust their microphones into my face, I simply said "no comment."

Just like that, I was free.

I got into San Diego in the early afternoon, and I called Malcolm's cell phone. "It's Serena," I said to him. "I need to see you."

"Serena," he said. "I was going to wait until tomorrow to call you. How are things in the city of Angels?"

I took a deep breath. "I wouldn't know."

He was quiet for a long time. "Serena, I don't like the sound of your voice. What's going on?"

"Can we meet somewhere for lunch? I really need to just talk to you."

He sighed. "I guess I can take a long lunch. Meet me at The Fish Market at noon. I'll get a table outside." Then he paused. "It sounds like I'm going to be needing a Bloody Mary for this meeting with you. Why do I have a sneaking suspicion that I'm not going to be in the least bit pleased with what you're going to be telling me?"

I didn't say anything. I had no desire to tell him over the phone what had happened between Slade and me. I had no desire to tell Malcolm, period, but I really didn't want to blurt it out over the phone while I was driving.

"I'll see you at noon," I said. Then I called a dog daycare place and arranged for Sadie and Gigi to be dropped off.

"What time will you be picking them up?" a pleasant-sounding female asked me when I called the place.

"I don't know," I said. I didn't want to explain to her that I might be picking up the dogs very soon. That would be if Malcolm fired me on the spot. Then again, maybe it would all be smoothed over, and I would be returning to work. "It might be around 2; then again, it might be around 7 or 8. I hope that's okay."

"Of course," she said. "But if the dogs stay past 6 PM, we have to charge you for another day."

"Okay," I said.

"It won't be like that if you start bringing your pooches over daily. We try to work with our regular customers who keep irregular hours. We'll talk about that when you drop them off."

I got off the phone, and tried to concentrate on the road. It was difficult to do, though. I had never, in my life, had such satisfying sex as I had with Slade. He just seemed to know exactly how to make me come, and come hard. He was a sensuous lover, yet he injected just enough roughness that it made it exciting for me. I felt my nether parts tingling just thinking about the hours we were ravaging each other.

Then I shook my head. I was going to have to forget about him, and forget about the way that he made me feel. There was a very good chance that I would never see him again, if Malcolm fired me. And, even if I stayed on at the firm, Slade was our client. Our client. A torrid affair with him could get the entire firm in hot water, potentially.

Whatever happened, he was going to be off-limits to me from that point on.

After dropping off the dogs, I headed over to The Fish Market, which was in the harbor. I parked the car and walked past the enormous statue that was modeled on the D-Day kissing couple. The infamous pose of the sailor kissing a random woman while he bended over her, was made into this statue that stood watch over the restaurant. I loved that statue, and it meant something to this town that had been a naval city for many years. It still was, but it didn't have as large of a base as it used to, but the vestiges of the military were still everywhere I looked.

Walking in, there was a large crowd of people who were milling about in the waiting room, looking at the menu. There were fish in aquariums, and also a small place where the restaurant-goers could purchase fresh seafood for themselves. This was an enormous restaurant, and I always enjoyed either sitting in the glass-covered patio or the open patio, because you could look out onto the water and see sailboats passing by.

I headed back to the open-air patio, and found Malcolm who was, just as he said, already nursing a Bloody Mary. He saw me and stood up. "Good to see you," he said. "I got here early so that I could start drinking early."

I smiled, in spite of myself. "I would tell you that my news isn't as bad as all that, but...." I raised my eyebrows and sat down.

"It is as bad as all that." Malcolm stated that as the fact that it was. "Well, Serena, you got me here. Let's have it."

I took a deep breath, and nervously cracked my knuckles.

"Ouch," Malcolm said. "Why do you do that?"

I shook my head. "Bad habit. One of the few bad habits I have left."

The waitress came around and I ordered a gin and tonic. We both ordered our food, too. I got the veggie roll and grilled edamame, and Malcolm ordered the surf and turf. "I know I'm going to regret getting all this food and alcohol for lunch. It's going to put me right to sleep."

I didn't want to say it, but he was absolutely right about that. Heavy food and alcohol usually were a deadly combination in the middle of a work day.

Malcolm and I then just sat there, looking at one another. I felt humiliated and ashamed of what I was going to be telling him. He was going to be livid, absolutely livid. I knew that. I cursed my body, which betrayed me. And, what was worse, it was continuing to betray me. I could still feel the heat on my skin where Slade had touched it. I still could feel the aching in my nether parts for Slade. I swallowed hard, and tried to put all that away. All those feelings, which had come cascading out of me while Slade made love to me, again and again, were not welcome to me anymore.

I finally took a sip of my gin and tonic, which the waitress had just brought, and sighed. "Well. I don't know how I'm going to tell you this, so I guess I just need to tell you. I had sex with Slade." I shook my head, not meeting his judging eyes. "I had sex with him, and, well, I'm useless now. There's no way I can be unbiased on this. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen. I didn't want for it to happen, either. But I have strong feelings for him, so, even if he was guilty as the day is long, I wouldn't be able to tell. I'm human."

Malcolm sat there, mulling over my words. He didn't say anything for a long, long time.

I had no idea what he was thinking, and, when I closed my eyes, I got a read on what he was feeling. At first, I felt rage bubbling up. I could feel it, and it flooded over me. My heart started to quicken, and I felt rage as well. I started breathing heavily, willing myself to turn away from the feelings that I was getting from him. That was the worst part of being an empath – when someone close to me was feeling negative feelings, I felt them as well. I felt them just as strongly as that person was feeling them. I closed my eyes, and consciously turned away from his rage. I had learned to do that as a coping mechanism – I could turn off my empathic feelings as quickly as I turned them on.

I blinked my eyes, and Malcolm was still staring at me, but his expression was different. I, once again, tried to tune into how he was feeling, and I no longer felt that he was enraged. Rather, he seemed to be calm and thinking about things.

Finally, he spoke. “Well, Serena, I must say that I’m surprised that you would do that. You weren’t up there but a matter of days. I didn’t peg you to be somebody who got around like that.”

That was an insult, but I let it slide. After what I did, I deserved it. “Malcolm, I’m not like that. Truly, I’m not.” I didn’t tell him about my past, how I *was* like that at one time. When I was hurting so much, and I had no idea where to put that pain, I was like that. I never sought sex, though, only physical pain. Physical pain which was given to me in various underground clubs. “I haven’t had sex in a long time. Not that that’s any of your business.”

“I don’t understand. You don’t sleep around, yet you ended up in the bed of our client, not three days after you arrived there. That doesn’t compute.”

I sighed. “I know that doesn’t compute. Believe me, I know. But I can’t explain it, except...”

“You lost all self-control,” he said. “Hey, I’m human. I get that. I try to tame my own dark side, but it doesn’t always work. But, Serena, there could be serious implications here. I don’t just mean the implications that will come from the fact that you won’t be able to get a good empathic reading on this guy. But we’re going to be open to a bar complaint or malpractice claim if things go south between the two of you.”

Malcolm seemed calm, which was weird to me.

“Well,” I said, taking a sip of my gin and tonic. “I’m guessing you would like for me to resign. And I totally understand it if you do.”

He put his hand on his chin and studied me. “No, Serena, actually, I was thinking the opposite. You’re under his skin. That might actually work for us, not against. What’s done is done. I’m just trying to figure out how to mitigate the damages and turn this around to a positive. There’s always a silver lining.”

“What are you thinking?”

He shook his head. “Serena, you could still be valuable. You could remain in a relationship with this guy, and then report to me any kind of pillow talk that might occur.”

My eyes got big. “Malcolm, you can’t be serious. I’ll be committing all kinds of ethical violations by remaining in a relationship with him, and there’s no way that I can do that to him. I think that I know what you’re getting at, and what you want me to do is exactly the reason why sexual relations between clients and lawyers are frowned upon.”

“You know what the rules are. The federal rules, of course, state that you can’t have a sexual relationship with a client, period. But we aren’t operating under the federal rules. We’re operating in the State of California, and, as you know, in California, sexual relationships between clients and attorneys are only forbidden if you are using the sex in lieu of payment or if you use coercion to enter into the sex.”

“It also forbids sexual relationships when the sex might cause the attorney to perform legal services incompetently. And that’s a real fear here with me.”

“Simple. If you feel that having sex with this guy will make you feel like you’re going to commit malpractice, then you have to stop it. But, Serena, just because you’re having sex with him doesn’t mean that you’re going to perform incompetently. And it just might be the best thing, because you’re going to make him vulnerable. If he falls in love with you – “

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Fall in love? I hardly know him.” Even as I said that, though, I wasn’t convinced that I meant it. I might have just met him, but, there was no doubt about it, there was something there between us. It was an unspoken understanding. I felt that he got me, and I got him. I didn’t know exactly why, but that was just what I was feeling.

“Would you let me finish? If he falls in love with you, then he’s going to show some vulnerability. There’s no better way to get to a truth that somebody is hiding than to make that person fall in love with you. People tend to spill secrets to the person that they care about. It just kind of happens that way with intimacy.”

“Malcolm,” I began. “First, you send me up there to try to use my psychic powers to get the truth out of him. Now you want me to use sex to do that. Why don’t you use, you know, the evidence and things like that to try to get to the bottom of the whole affair? What a concept – an attorney using evidence to get at the truth.”

“Because the evidence is ambiguous, at best, in this case. Let’s face it, the guy had motive to kill Sam. His fingerprints were all over that lab. Granted, it was because he worked in that lab, too, but it doesn’t help that his fingerprints were the only fingerprints found, with the exception of Sam himself. That lab had more security than Fort Knox, so it would be next to impossible for a random person to get in there. And the videotape of the murder is missing. There’s video surveillance of that lab, but there’s about a half hour missing, and, of course, the missing part of the video was the part where Sam was murdered. Our guy would have the best access to the video, and he would be able to edit it better than anybody else.”

“In other words, it’s not looking so good for Slade.” Malcolm suspected that Slade was guilty, and that pierced my heart. I knew that I was emotionally invested in Slade, already, and I couldn’t possibly provide an unbiased representation of him.

“Listen, of course it’s not looking good for him. It hasn’t been looking good for him since the beginning. We have to go with a SODDI defense, but the bad part is that we have no idea who that other dude might be.”

SODDI meant “some other dude did it,” which was always the major way that murder suspects are defended. It was imperative that we find the “other dude” who did this, and I knew that Malcolm had his own investigators on the case. He wasn’t going to just let the police do their work, because the police seemed to be fixated on Slade, to the exclusion of all others. That’s what happened in high profile cases, unfortunately – the police decide early that a certain person did it, and they look at all the evidence in the light that would support that theory, and dismiss evidence that didn’t. It was called “confirmation bias” or “tunnel vision,” and, unfortunately, it was just human nature. It was only human to look at evidence with a jaundiced eye, supported by prejudice or some other unconscious process. Unfortunately, the confirmation bias tended to be exacerbated in high-profile cases such as this one, because the cops were dying to bag a big kahuna.

I bit my lip. “I could help with that,” I said, and then immediately regretted opening my mouth. I was going to volunteer to do something that was dangerous for me, more than dangerous. It was going to be something that could very well damage my psyche beyond repair, and could plunge me into the darkness that I felt for the first 25 years of my life. I was going to volunteer to try to commune with the dead guy, and, once I did that, I was afraid that the gates would open, and I wouldn’t be able to silence the spirits again. They had left me alone for 3 years, and, for 3 years, I was actually able to try to find some peace in my life. It was a hard-fought peace, buoyed by hypnotherapy and constantly trying to fixate on something healthy.

I was going down the rabbit hole. I not only was drawn to Slade for reasons that weren’t entirely healthy – I felt that he was a dominant, and I desperately wanted that – but I also, possibly, was going to open up the spiritual floodgates. That would spin me completely off my axis.

But, at the same time, I wanted to do it for Slade. I had no idea why, but I was willing to sacrifice for him. I felt, for some odd reason, that I would go to the ends of the earth for him.

“Oh,” Malcolm said. “What do you mean, Serena?”

“I can communicate with Sam. All that I need would be an item of clothing from him. If you could get that from his widow, I can try to find out what happened to him by communicating with him directly.”

Malcolm nodded his head slowly. “That sounds fantastic. But how will I be able to get that from his widow? I can’t very well subpoena it. A court would quash that subpoena in a heartbeat, unless we happened to find a judge who believes in spirit empathic abilities, which would be a long-shot, to say the very least.”

“I could always just ask the widow. I could explain to her why I need it.”

“You can’t just go and ask her. She would think that you were nuts.”

“How do you know this? She might believe.”

“Listen, his widow is a scientist. A scientist tends not to believe in things like psychics and spirits and all of that. I would be extremely surprised if you get somewhere with this woman.”

“I know that, but perhaps she would give me an article of clothing to humor me. Maybe there’s a doubt there in her mind that there’s no such thing as a psychic or a spiritual empath. She has nothing to lose, after all.”

“Well, I suppose. She is coming into the office this week. I can certainly ask her then. She’ll laugh at me, and then that will be it. And we’ll be back to square one – trying to find out who did this to Sam. Right now, Slade is the only suspect that the police have. Our investigators are trying to find out more, but this Sam was a private guy. He was also extremely secretive. He kept almost everything from Slade himself, as far as what he was working on. We’ve reached a dead-end so far on finding out another suspect for this murder.”

“We’ve got nothing to lose, then.” I started to relax. We were getting away from the issue of my continuing a relationship with Slade, and I didn’t want to revisit it. We were on a much more comfortable path, talking about the case. “I’ll see if I can ask her about the clothing when she comes in to see us.”

“Yes,” he said. “Now, Serena, you need to tell me the truth about your relationship with Mr. Bridgewell. I would encourage you to keep seeing him romantically. I will not tell anybody at the office about it, of course that goes without saying. But it could very well lead to us breaking the case.”

I shook my head. “I thank you for your permission, but I’m not interested in him anymore.” I was lying when I said that, of course. I was lying to him, and I was lying to myself. Truth be told, I craved him. I craved him like I used to crave the feeling of the belt on my back. Like I used to crave the feeling of my nipples being clamped. Like I used to crave the exquisite pain and helplessness of being tied to a St. Andrew’s Cross, while being slashed with a cat-o-nine tails. I wanted that feeling of not being in control at all. Of having a total loss of control.

I had to overcome that feeling, though. I knew that.

I had to stay away from Slade, whatever it took. When I saw him again, I would treat him professionally, and wouldn’t go there with him ever again.

That evening, when I went home from work, and I picked up my dogs, I got a phone call. I picked up, and Slade's voice was on the other end. "Serena," he said. "Meet me in Del Mar. I have a surprise for you."

I took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. "No, Slade, I can't meet you. I'm sorry. I told you at your house that I can't see you like that anymore."

"Meet me at..." He gave me an address that I didn't recognize. "Be there in an hour. Be there, or suffer the consequences."

I had no idea if he was joking about that last comment. But I was intrigued. "I'll be there," I said.

And then I called Michael. I wanted a buffer when I saw Slade again. If I brought Michael with me, then there could be no chance that I would be in bed with Slade that evening. After all, he invited me to a place that could be a house. I didn't know if Slade owned a house in the San Diego area, but it wouldn't surprise me. And I had no desire to see Slade in a private home. That would be a recipe for disaster. At any rate, I doubted that I could stay out of his bed if I met him in a private home.

"Hey, Serena," he said. "What's up?"

"I was hoping you might be free this evening."

"I'm not, but Donny is. He's just sitting around the house right now; binge-watching *Orange is the New Black*. As usual."

"I'll call him."

"Later."

I then called Donny. "Hey," he said when I called. "When you gonna be home? I'm starving for some vegan nachos. I don't know how you make those, but they're like crack. Not that I know what crack is like from personal experience, of course."

"I'll make those for you special, and I'll do your laundry if you do one thing for me this evening."

"I'm listening."

"Come out with me to meet this guy in Del Mar."

"You need a wing man, or you need a buffer? It's not another Internet date, is it? The last time you dragged me to meet a dude you met on the Internet wasn't exactly the time of my life. No offense."

I laughed in spite of myself. I did drag Donny along to meet a guy, because I wasn't sure about the guy. Turns out I wasn't sure about this guy for a good reason, because that date was a total drag. Donny had dinner at a different table, and I called him while my "date" was in the restroom. I told my "date" that I was sick, and then Donny and I high-tailed it out of there and had drinks at a bar in the Gaslamp. The evening started out rotten, but I had to admit that it was fun afterwards. Donny was a funny guy, and I always had a good time with him.

"I need a buffer, but it's not what you think. This guy is..." I had no words for how I felt about Slade. I barely knew him, yet I felt more strongly for him than I had about anybody ever before. I couldn't explain it, even to myself.

"Is what?"

"I'm just very attracted to him, that's all. And he's a client of our law firm, and I just can't go there. I'll come and get you, but please be ready when I pull up." I felt anxious that I was going to be late meeting Slade, and, for some reason, I knew that he wouldn't be pleased. I wanted to please him. It was imperative to me that I please him.

“Okay,” he said. “Why not? I got nothing else going on around here. Buy me dinner tonight, or sometime this week, and I’ll be there with bells on.”

“Great, thanks,” I said.

I picked up Donny, fed the dogs and put them in their kennel, and then we headed up to Del Mar. I had my GPS on, and it was leading me to a nice neighborhood, not that there were any other kind in Del Mar. This was a seaside community where the well-heeled San Diegans lived. It was difficult to find a single-family home that sold for less than a million dollars in this area. Some homes were less than a million, but they tended to be townhomes and condos, and even those were hardly ever found less than \$600,000. It was a highly desirable area of town; that was for sure.

I finally got to the home where Slade was supposed to meet me. It was in a residential neighborhood and was close to the ocean. The home was large, with two stories, and it was a modern stucco home with a Spanish tile roof and was surrounded by palm trees. I walked in with Donny. Slade was in the kitchen of this home, which was empty, making some kind of salad.

I was absolutely confused, but this home was gorgeous inside. Twenty foot ceilings, a skylight, Spanish tile in the foyer, hardwood floors in the living area. Granite countertops in the enormous kitchen which opened up into a sun room, which, in turn, opened up into a large backyard with a pool. It also had a large formal dining room on the main floor.

I looked at Slade, and he saw me, his face lighting up. Then he looked at Donny, and his face fell. He returned to making his salad, without greeting me.

I concentrated on what I was feeling from him, and he was clearly angry. I closed my eyes, and I could feel that anger flashing through me, white-hot. At first I was confused on why he was angry, and then it occurred to me – he was angry that Donny was there with me.

But, to look at him, you wouldn’t know that he was that angry. He wasn’t looking at either of us, but, to an untrained eye, it simply looked as if he was very into making that salad. He was chopping up a cucumber and an onion, and was sprinkling on herbs, salt and pepper. He was even humming a tune that I didn’t recognize at first, but I soon recognized as *Creep* by Radiohead. His knife made quick work of chopping up some more vegetables, including bell pepper, carrots and a tomato.

I finally broke the ice. “Well, well, well. I guess that you’re not so helpless. I’m surprised that you didn’t get Marina to come down here with you and do this for you.”

He looked up at me. “You’d be surprised on what I can do in the kitchen. Granted, I usually have Marina make food for me, but that’s only because I work so much that I need help in that area. And, when you were there with me, I was interested in talking with you, not cooking. But I can cook more than you think.”

I smiled. “I was only teasing you.”

A smile edged around the corners of his eyes. “I know that. Besides, making a salad isn’t exactly a huge feat.” Then he looked at Donny questioningly.

At that, Donny extended a calloused hand. Slade shook it firmly. “I’m Donny, Serena’s roommate for the time being.”

I closed my eyes, and still felt the anger that was emanating from Slade. I opened my eyes, and saw Slade shaking Donny’s hand with a smile.

That concerned me, to say the least. Slade was an expert at covering up what he was feeling. That wasn’t a good sign, because if he could be deceptive about something as simple as this, who was to say that he couldn’t be deceptive about everything?

I also felt jealousy coming from Slade, and I smiled. I was flattered that he was jealous, to be honest.

“Well,” Slade said. “I made more than enough food, so Donny, you’re welcome to join us.” That was what his lips were saying, but, inside, he was clearly seething.

“Cool,” Donny said. “Whatever it is you’re making, it smells fantastic.”

Slade shrugged his shoulders. “It’s just spaghetti and vegan meatballs. The sauce is authentic, though. My mother is Italian.”

It struck me that I had, up until that very moment, known nothing at all about his family. “Tell me about your mother,” I said to him.

“Later,” he said. “For now, let’s eat.”

We all went out onto the patio, which had a table and four chairs. It was the only room in the house, however, that had any furniture in it at all. There was a vase of flowers in the middle. Slade brought out a bottle of wine, and he poured each of us a glass.

I sipped the wine, and observed the food. The spaghetti looked scrumptious, to say the very least. He also made garlic bread. “That garlic bread is made with non-dairy butter,” he said to me. “I picked it up at Whole Foods.”

The food was as wonderful as it looked. “Well, Slade, I think that you mastered the art of making marinara sauce. This dinner is amazing.”

“Thanks,” he said.

We ate in a strained silence for a little bit, until Donny piped up. “I don’t want to be rude,” he said, “but I wanted to give you my sympathy, dude, about what you’re going through.”

Slade glanced at me. “What do you know about me?”

“I don’t know that much, but a friend of mine watches Anna Place all the time. She really has it in for you.”

Anna Place was a southern blonde woman with a nightly show on CNN. She was loud, aggressive, pushy, and proclaimed guilt until proven innocent. She also was nasty in how she engaged in lurid speculation about her victims, right there on air. She invited “experts” on her show, all of whom engaged in a breathless analysis of the case, all of whom also proclaimed Slade guilty. Anna disgusted me, to be perfectly honest. She hurt people all the time, and was constantly just on the verge of a huge slander lawsuit.

Slade rolled his eyes. “Anna Place has me already on the gurney with a needle in my arm. I don’t listen to her.”

“Well, even so, I feel for you, dude. I couldn’t imagine being put through the ringer like that night after night.”

“I appreciate that,” Slade said. Then he turned to me. “You haven’t heard what dear old Anna is saying about me, have you?”

I shook my head. “No. I haven’t wanted things in my head that might prejudice me. Listening to her would definitely prejudice me. She certainly does tend to go after people she hates, like a dog after a bone, and, even when she turns out to be wrong, she never apologizes. I don’t know how she gets away with it. I really don’t.”

Actually, I did know how she got away with it. She was always on the verge of slander, but never quite crossed it. She engaged in plenty of dirty speculation, and her expert witness guests were careful to tell the audience that they are not connected to whatever case was being discussed, but nobody actually told lies about their subjects.

“Good,” he said, as he helped himself to some more spaghetti.

“I wouldn’t worry about what she says,” Donny said. “She’s kind of a stupid bitch.”

Slade grinned and nodded his head at that one. “Understatement of the year. Marijuana is being legalized in more and more states, and it’s been fun watching her head pop off about that.”

Indeed, Anna had been one of the more vocal critics of legalizing marijuana. The fact that Slade was growing marijuana legally on one of his farms was probably one of the reasons why she was so out to get him.

Donny laughed and raised his glass. “Ain’t that the truth. Just wait until the federal government legalizes it. She’ll really have a Defcon fit.”

I finally asked Slade the question that was on my mind. “This house is pretty empty. Is this house yours? Did you just buy it?”

Slade cleared his throat. “Yes, I just bought it,” he simply said. Then he narrowed his eyes. “Dinner is almost over. I need to see you alone.” He cocked his head, and his meaning was clear. I knew that he was annoyed that Donny was there, even if he covered it well. Now he wanted me alone so that we could get back to doing what we were doing at his home.

I simply sat up straight, and took a sip of the wine that was in front of me. “I’m sorry, Slade, but when Donny leaves, I have to leave as well. I drove, and Gigi and Sadie are home in their kennel.”

At that, Slade disappeared into a different room. He came back in five minutes. “I just solved both of your problems. My driver is coming to give Donny a ride home, and he’s been instructed to pick up your dogs when he drops Donny off.”

I felt irritated that he would do something like that without asking me. “Slade, I can’t stay. I told you this when I left your house this morning. What happened at your home can’t happen anymore. I’m sorry.”

I closed my eyes after I said that. My body was betraying me again. I felt flush, and my breathing was coming faster and faster, as I thought about what it felt like to be ravaged by Slade. I willed those thoughts away and opened my eyes. Slade was staring at me, his expression indiscernible.

“My driver will be here in twenty minutes,” he said. “Donny will be driven home, your dogs will come here, and you’ll stay here tonight with me.” His cheek twitched imperceptibly, and I could see that he was roiling underneath his calm façade.

I looked at Donny, and he shrugged his shoulders. “It’s up to you, Serena. I’m good either way, you know that.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Slade’s will, which was considerable, had an almost hypnotic effect on me. I wanted to protest some more, and tell Slade that he needed to call off his driver, but, somehow, no words of protest came out of my mouth.

Slade smiled. “I thought so.”

“You thought what?”

“You want to stay here with me. As much as I want you to stay, you want the same thing.”

“No,” I said. “Where is there to sleep?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You loved my Vividus mattress, didn’t you?”

“Of course. That mattress costs more than my brand-new BMW X5. At that price, it better be goddamned comfortable. At that price, it really should come with men with fans who will peel all my grapes.”

Slade smiled. “Glad you love that mattress.” He sipped his wine and said no more.

This entire encounter was becoming more and more peculiar. He apparently bought that home, that day, I would guess. There was no furniture to be seen, yet he wanted me to stay there

with him, so there was probably at least a bed. A Vividus bed, if his little hints were to be believed.

I tried to calm my breathing, and, I was startled to note, I was yearning to see Donny leave so that I could be alone with Slade. I hated that I felt like I was completely losing control when I was around him, but there was no denying it. I craved him like I had never craved anything.

Finally, the doorbell rang, and Slade went to answer it. “Raphael, this is Donny,” he said, as the man shook Donny’s hand. “Please take him home, and bring the two dogs that are at the house here. Bring their kennel as well, and don’t forget their toys.”

The two of them disappeared, and Slade came back to the kitchen. I was clearing off the dishes and putting them into the dishwasher, and he came up behind me. “Why did you bring him here?” he demanded. He put his hands on either side of me, and he gripped the counter. His breath was hot and moist in my ears.

I turned around. His face was close to mine, and his eyes looked hurt.

“I don’t trust myself around you,” I said. “When you look at me like that, I can barely remember my own name. I needed a buffer.”

“A buffer,” he said. “What are you afraid of, Serena? Do you think that I have a dark side, one that’s darker than most? Do you think that I’m capable of bludgeoning a man to death? Are you afraid that I’ll end up doing the same to you?”

I shook my head, but I felt my entire body shaking. My feelings were so confusing to me. Slade could very well have done it, and I would never know, because my emotions for him were so strong.

“Look me in the eye, Serena. Look me in the eye, and you’ll know the truth.”

“That doesn’t work for me. Not when it comes to you. I can look you in the eyes all day long, and I wouldn’t know the truth about you and Sam. You cloud my judgment, and, because you cloud my judgment, you also cloud my natural intuition. And you’re blocking your feelings most of the time. I think that you’re the one who’s scared, not me.”

I looked at him, and I knew that I had touched a nerve. He was blocking his feelings most of the time. He knew it. And, for one brief moment, I did feel something emanating from him. It was brief, but I felt genuine affection and even love coming from him. I cocked my head, not sure if I was feeling what I was feeling. But, before I got a chance to analyze it, that feeling from him was gone.

“What do you think that I’m afraid of?” he whispered to me. He put his finger on my chin and raised my face. He kissed me, gently and slowly, and then looked at me some more. “Huh, Serena? What keeps me awake at night?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. I’m sure that something keeps you awake at night, but I have no clue on what it is. You have to bring down your walls, Slade, or I’m going to have problems getting any genuine readings on you.”

“Maybe you can bring down my walls,” he said. “You can uncover what’s truly bothering me, and I’ll give you a hint – it has nothing to do with my guilt over killing Sam. Because I didn’t kill Sam. I close my eyes, though, and I see his lifeless body, and that’s an image that I can never, ever, get out of my mind. It’s an image that has been burned into my brain.” He shook his head, and I could see the grief in his eyes.

He was still very close to me. He leaned into me, and I could feel his hardness through his pants. He ran one hand through my hair, and then wrapped his arms around me tightly. My arms involuntarily rose, and I ended up gripping his neck. I closed my eyes and willed him to

kiss me again. As if he read my mind, he lowered his lips onto mine. I drank him in, trying hard to remain there at the sink, just kissing him, without us leaving the room. I couldn't have sex with him again. I tried to make my body calm down, but it was completely on fire, much to my dismay.

He stopped kissing me, but his face was still close to mine. "I know that you're curious about this house."

At first, I didn't know what he was talking about. My brain was still feeling scrambled, and all that I could think of was how badly I needed Slade to take me to his bed again. How much I yearned for that.

Then it dawned on me that I *was* intensely curious about that house. "Yes," I said. "Tell me about this house. Did you just buy it?"

"Yes. I bought this house for you."

My jaw dropped, and I looked at him, trying to see if he was serious. He was. I could tell by looking into his eyes. He was not sure how I would take that piece of news, and he was bracing for my reaction.

"You're serious," I said to him. "What the hell? I barely know you, and you're already buying a house for me? You're insane." I pushed him away from me and went out to the deck, where we were just eating spaghetti, and looked over the edge. The yard was beautiful, with mature avocado and orange trees, bougainvilleas and enormous date palms. As with most of the homes in that area, there was a gleaming pool and hot tub.

Slade was soon joining me. "You needed a house. Malcolm called me on the day that you came to see me, and he told me that he wasn't sure if you could make it out, because you had your eye on a house that you wanted to close on. You showed up anyhow, so I figured that you didn't get that house."

"So you decided to take matters into your own hands and just buy me something. Not just any house, either, but a house in a housing complex where every house is a million-five and up. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you need a place of your own. You shouldn't be living with those two surfers in that little shack on the beach."

I furled my brows at him. "How the hell did you know about the fact that I'm living with two surfers in a small house in Ocean Beach, and who are you to tell me where I should and shouldn't be living?"

I shook my head as I looked at him. What a stupid question! He obviously found out information about me by delving into my background without my knowledge. I felt more and more irate as I stood there looking at the beautiful backyard.

He raised an eyebrow. "Answer me this, Serena. What yard do you have for those two dogs?"

"I have a yard."

"Bullshit. I know your neighborhood, and generally where you live. You have a patio, and that's about it."

"I walk my dogs, same as anybody else who's in an apartment. And, when I go to work, I take them to doggie day care. They aren't being neglected, and I have the means to take excellent care of them." Even as I said those words, though, I had to concede the point to him. Sadie and Gigi did deserve to have a nice yard to run around in, and this house had a beautiful one. I imagined the two dogs running around and exploring, and I smiled, in spite of myself.

“Nonetheless, you’ve been trying to leave that house. You’ve been looking for something. I just made it easier.”

I felt like blowing up at him right then. “Slade, I was looking for a fixer-upper. There’s a very specific reason why I wanted a fixer-upper. Basically, I need a project to take my mind off of things. I need a place to focus my energy, and I do a wonderful job when I set about to renovating. I knock out walls and rip up floors, and do all the replacements on my own. I did it on my brownstone in New York, and I was going to do it here as well. You buying me a turnkey ready home has deprived me of doing things on my own.”

He put his hands on my shoulders, and I shrugged them off. I was wound up tight, and I felt the need to get out of there.

“I won’t apologize,” he said. “You needed a new place to stay, and I gave it to you. And I really don’t want you living with two men, anyhow. You’re mine, Serena, and I’m not willing to share you.”

“Share me? Share me? Those two guys are like brothers to me. There has never been anything between the three of us, and there never would be. I would say that you need to examine your need to possess me, but it would be talking to dead air. We barely know one another, and you’re already dictating to me who I can and cannot live with.”

He put his hands on my shoulders again, and I wasn’t able to shake them off. I stood there, my feet rooted to the floor, trying to regain my equilibrium. “You don’t want me to possess you? Are you sure of that?”

No. I wasn’t sure of that. There was a part of me, a large part of me, which desperately wanted just that - for him to possess me. For him to control me, and make me do things that my body desperately wanted, but my mind kept me from fully enjoying. I wanted him to make me feel like I felt at his home, as he made love to me again and again.

He lightly kissed my neck, and one of his hands grazed my arm. I reared back my head, reveling in feeling his tongue, which was languidly covering my clavicle, neck and shoulders. His lips found my own, and I lost my breath as he kissed me passionately at first, and then more and more gently.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I didn’t want him to possess me. I wanted to lie to him while I was lying to myself. As one of his hands touched my breast, I closed my eyes and summoned all my will and strength. With one mighty shove, I pushed him off of me, and he fell backwards against the wooden railing. “Slade, you’re going to be my downfall. My life was so controlled, and that’s how I wanted it. Ever since I met you, I’ve been stirred up, and not necessarily in a good way. Now you’ve bought me my own home, and if you think for a second that I can accept this home, then you have another thing coming. I’m going to go with my original plan of finding my own place and fixing it up.”

“Serena,” he said. “You’re going to keep this place. What’s more, I have my eye on the house across the street. I’ll be buying that home within a matter of days.”

That was too much. Now he was not only trying to force me into staying in this home, but he also wanted to live across the street from me. Why? He wanted to keep an eye on me, that was why. “Why do you want to live across the street?”

“Because, my lawyers are here in San Diego. It would be inconvenient for me to have make that drive down from LA every time I needed to meet with my legal team. Besides, the paparazzi are too concentrated in LA. It’s nice to come down here and actually not see reporters hanging around.”

“You don’t think that the reporters are going to be swarming this street soon? I’m sure that your neighbors will be thrilled when they look out the window and see hundreds of reporters lining the streets.”

“They won’t be welcome here,” he said. “Obviously. This isn’t like my house that is pretty secluded, so the reporters can get away with hanging around outside my gate. This is a residential street, where they will be disturbing the peace. It’s a different thing. Different ordinances and all of that.”

I crossed my arms, annoyed that he was making so much sense. Of course it would be better for him if he lived on a street like this, as opposed to him staying at his beautiful, but relatively secluded, mansion. He was absolutely right – if the reporters started to gather around on this street, the residents would be able to call the police to get rid of them. That was certainly one way to dispose of the paparazzi.

“Well, okay, I guess those are good reasons for you to stay here. Not here, I guess, but in another home around here. But I have no clue on what you’re going to do with this house, because I sure as hell am not going to live here.” I shook my head. “I don’t like feeling indebted to you or to anyone else.”

“You’re going to be stubborn about this, aren’t you?”

I was incredulous by his arrogance. “Seriously? You’re going to call me stubborn, just because I won’t accept a house from a man that I barely know?”

He took my hand and kissed it lightly. “Oh, but you do know me. You know me very well.” He wrapped his arms around me lightly, as if he were trying to dance with me. “You know every inch of me,” he whispered to me.

I put my hands on his chest and pushed him away. “I know you in the sexual sense. But I don’t really know you at all. I have no idea what makes you tick. I don’t even know the first thing about your family.” I paused. “I don’t know if you’re capable of bludgeoning a man to death. If I can’t figure out something as fundamental as that about you, then I don’t think that we’re ready to play house together.”

He took a deep breath, as he obviously was trying to keep his temper in check. “We aren’t playing house together. I bought you this house, and I’m buying the house across the street. I’m not asking you to move in with me.”

“What about everything else that I said? About not knowing your family and not knowing what you’re capable of? Those revelations from me aren’t sending alarm bells into your head yet?”

“No. I’ll tell you about my family in due time. And, as for you not knowing if I’m a murderer, I can’t really help that. I’ve told you one hundred thousand times that I had nothing to do with Sam’s murder. You’ve chosen not to believe me. That’s on you, not me.”

I couldn’t believe what he was saying to me. “That’s on me? I’m telling you that I don’t trust that you wouldn’t be capable of doing something like that to Sam, and you’re not bothered by that?”

“No. Not bothered by that. Because, if you think about it, anybody is capable of doing anything at any given time. Just for the sake of argument, if I did kill Sam, it wouldn’t be out of character for me. It wouldn’t be out of character for anyone, because we all have our breaking point. Even you. If someone pushed you far enough, you would be capable of anything at all as well. Or anyone else. So, no. If you think that it’s possibly in my character to do something like that, you’re absolutely correct.”

I felt a cold chill when he was saying those words. I narrowed my eyes. “What are you saying?”

“I didn’t kill Sam. That hasn’t changed. But I’m just trying to say that I’m capable of doing something like that, just like anybody is in this world. Nobody really knows what they’re capable of until they’re presented with a given situation.”

I stepped back from him. “Slade, I think that I better leave.”

“Where are you going to go? Your dogs are coming here, and you live here now.”

“I don’t live here. I live in Ocean Beach with Donny and Michael, and that’s where I’m going to live until I can close on a house of my own. Now, I have an idea. You said that you’re going to buy the house across the street. Why don’t you just transfer the deed for this house into your name, and then you can live here? It’s a gorgeous space, very fitting for a man of your means.”

He was glowering, and I saw that he was used to getting his way. He crossed his arms, and then made his way over to me again. He narrowed his eyes. “Maybe I should tie you up and force you to stay here. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I opened my mouth, and then closed it again. “No,” I said weakly. “I wouldn’t like that.”

“I’m calling shenanigans,” he said. “You enjoy that. I know that you do. You like being dominated, and you like pain. I get that, too. I don’t judge you for it. I know that you have your reasons for being like you are, and I know that these reasons are good ones.”

I turned away. “I suppose you already know what those reasons are? After all, you seem to know so much about me. Must be nice to be able to invade the privacy of anybody that you want.”

“No. I have no idea what those reasons are. I hope to get to know what they are, though, eventually.” He paused. “I’m interested in you, Serena. I feel that you and I have a lot in common, and I think that we can help each other. I also feel a connection to you, and I felt it from the first time we kissed.”

I knew what he was saying, because I felt it the first time that we kissed as well. The connection, the heat, the passion. I felt like I was being consumed by him, and that feeling was there from the first time our lips met. My fingers involuntarily went to my lips, as I was remembering what it felt like the first time we kissed.

I sighed. I could feel my resolve breaking down, in spite of myself. Still, I managed to protest some more. “No. You can’t have me. Not like this.”

He nodded his head. I could feel that he was defeated, but, as I closed my eyes, I knew that he was feeling that his defeat was only temporary. He recognized that he was possessing me, and that wasn’t going to change anytime soon. I might have won that battle, but he was going to win the war.

“Okay,” he said. “You can have the bed. I’ll sleep on the floor.” He shrugged his shoulders as I started to protest. “It’s not a problem. I have a sleeping bag.” At that, he disappeared into a room and shut the door.

I shook my head and waited for Slade’s driver to arrive with my dogs. After he got there, I would take the dogs and go on home. To my home, not this beautiful home that was allegedly mine.

Within fifteen minutes, the driver arrived. He brought the dogs into the house, along with their kennel. Sadie and Gigi excitedly greeted me, their tiny bodies wriggling with delight. I stooped down, and let them kiss my face. I closed my eyes, and thanked the man, Raphael, for bringing the dogs to me. “I would give you a tip,” I said. “But I don’t have cash.”

Raphael nodded his head. “That’s fine, Senora. I’m not allowed to accept tips.”

I thought that I knew why Raphael couldn’t accept tips – probably because Slade paid him so much that tips weren’t necessary. Of course, that could be just a hunch, but Slade struck me as someone who would pay his help handsomely.

Raphael left, and I went out to my SUV. I put the kennel in the back and the dogs in the kennel. And then, without even telling Slade, I left.