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# FEAR'S WHISPER

Club Risqué Book Two

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POPPY FLYNN



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Prologue

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Charlotte Chapman was a really terrible friend. There was no doubt about it. Here she was, sitting in Desirae Harper's apartment listening to her best friend tell her all about her recent engagement to the delectable Jake Blackwood, and instead of being happy and excited about Desi's news, she was...jealous?

Yep! Definitely jealous. Big, black, nasty, hateful jealous. With knobs on!

Instead of squealing with glee at the idea of the upcoming wedding, Charlotte was broodingly quiet and silently cursing her old roommate's intentions.

Instead of congratulating her, Charlotte was busy dribbling literally and figuratively at the thought of putting herself in Desi's place, and not from her mouth!

She was actively lusting over her oldest friend's fiancé. Nope, you didn't crawl very much lower than that.

And not only was she lusting, but she felt broken-hearted that now there would never be any hope of anything between herself and Jake. Not that there ever would have been, of course, but there had always been the fantasy...and the hope. A hope that

had lasted twelve long years since she had first met Jake Blackwood back at university and never managed to quite get him out of her mind. A fantasy that had been fired even higher just moments ago when Jake had wrapped her up in his strong embrace, crushed her against his hard chest, kissed her cheeks and had her daydreaming about what it would be like if she could feel him like that skin against skin, if his kisses hadn't been quite so platonic...until Desi had told her she and Jake were getting married and reality had dumped her on the floor and bitch slapped her with embarrassment and jealousy.

Yes, siree! She was an absolutely lousy friend.

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SIX HOURS LATER, Charlotte was asking herself what kind of friend she was all over again as she walked into the hotel bar and looked around for the distinctive six-foot-one frame of Jake Blackwood, topped with thick black hair that she'd love to run her fingers through and vivid blue eyes that she could drown in forever. Jeez! She really needed to get a grip.

Desi had rung and implored Charlotte to go and check on Jake after what was possibly the shortest engagement on record and Charlotte was truly mortified at the mental happy dance she had done when Desi had explained that Jake's cousin, Joel Blackwood, the true love of her friend's life had finally come to his senses and rushed in on his metaphorical white charger to claim Desi for himself before it was too late.

Jake wasn't truly heartbroken, Desi had said, although he had seriously wanted to settle down. But that was another story.

Charlotte found Jake hunched over the bar and her tummy did an inappropriate little flip. He might not be heartbroken, but he was doing a pretty good job of looking damned dejected as he nursed what was at least his second whisky, and she couldn't help

wondering if his feelings for her best friend ran deeper than Desi realised.

Charlotte bit her lip, took a fortifying breath, and smoothed down the front of her black silk wraparound dress as she made her way over to where Jake sat.

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JAKE SAT in the hotel bar and sipped at his second whisky. He wanted to toss it back like he had the first, but he fiercely controlled the need.

He'd spoken to Desi briefly. She had wanted to come over and talk to him face to face but he'd denied the necessity.

He was glad she was happy. He was glad his cousin was happy. His inflammatory words to Joel earlier that evening had been nothing if not calculated to make Joel confront his true feelings for Desi. The plan to bait the man who was like a brother to him into taking action had worked faster than Jake could have dreamed.

So why the hell was he feeling so sorry for himself? On a logical level, Jake knew he didn't love Desi the way that she deserved, but a little, tiny part of his brain couldn't help reminding him that they'd have built a good life together, achieved a successful relationship, brought up beautiful children.

Those nasty little biting teeth of loneliness started to gnaw at the edges of his awareness once again and Jake took another sip of his drink, resigning himself to the bleak solitude that his future held.

For a few golden hours, Desi had chased away the despair that had started to grip him more and more often when he thought of the gaping void that lay ahead of him.

Now he was on his own...again. No woman stuck around long once the insidious rumours about him, borne of a gossip article almost twelve years ago, started to seep into his relation-

ships. Despite the fact that it named no names and hadn't even been aimed solely at him, Jake battled the stigma of that story to this day since it had been written by a woman he'd been in a relationship with. A woman who had duped him, posing as a student, when, in fact, she was a reporter looking for her big break. The Blackwood's prominence had given her that break and even while his family had managed to gag the press in naming names, the association was enough to have damaged his reputation. People had long memories, as one particular, recent event had all too clearly shown. A kernel of old anger tickled his already subdued disposition and he pushed it back with a noisy exhale.

"Now that was a heartfelt sigh!" a soft, feminine voice said from behind him.

Swinging around with the sole intent of getting rid of the woman, since he wasn't in the right frame of mind for company, Jake found himself face to face with Desi's best friend, Charlotte Chapman.

He laughed humourlessly, knowing it would be rude to send her away, mindful that Desi had probably sent her to check on him.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, and Jake wondered if it was just his imagination that her words had come out a touch breathlessly.

"Not at all," he murmured, signalling the bartender for service. He looked back at his imposed companion. She was tall and slim with long, straight hair the colour of dark chocolate, but he knew she was as vanilla as they came. There was a slight colour to her cheeks and her changeable hazel eyes betrayed her awareness of him as a man.

Jake couldn't help but quirk an eyebrow at the obvious interest she showed in him and wondered if she was aware of how transparent she was.

A rueful smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. Hell,

maybe he should just take what was on offer. He couldn't claim to be immune. He had felt the tug of attraction to this woman over a decade ago and he'd felt it again when he'd seen her at Desi's earlier that evening, as inappropriate as it had been at the time.

Way back then, he'd kept his distance, knowing that Desi and Charlotte had discussed BDSM but pretty sure she'd never handle his kink.

Right now? Well, he could think of worse things than sinking himself into a hot, willing woman. Even a vanilla one. Maybe she would help him keep the loneliness at bay for a few more hours.

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CHARLOTTE SIPPED NERVOUSLY on the white wine Jake had ordered for her and tried to settle the swarm of hornets that were buzzing about in her stomach. An expectant vibe crackled in the air between them and Charlotte wasn't sure if it came from him or from her or maybe a little bit of both. Although she was sometimes accused of being a little bit slow on the uptake, a consequence of her cloistered and restricted childhood, even *she* wasn't completely oblivious to the sensual speculation that gradually fired in Jake's stunning cobalt eyes.

At first, she wondered if he was drunk. She wasn't the type of woman who sparked that kind of interest in men like Jake Blackwood, but he seemed alert enough and he wasn't slurring his words or anything.

Anticipation fizzled in her veins, fuelled by her earlier fantasies of this man, and Charlotte wondered if she was brave enough to take the proverbial bull by the horns and seize the opportunity that seemed to have been plonked squarely in front of her. She knew from her college days with Desi that Jake and Joel Blackwood, as well as several of their friends, had adopted

some serious fetishes. It was a lifestyle that Desi had embraced but Charlotte had never had the guts. Of course, she'd been an unsophisticated and sheltered teenager back then. Freshly liberated from a repressive and dictatorial religious cult that her susceptible mother had taken up with after the death of her father, she'd had zero interest in getting involved in anything that even remotely threatened her newfound freedom. The very idea of submitting to anyone's control had set all her inner warning bells clamouring so loudly that the noise alone terrified her.

Not that she was much more sophisticated these days, but she could put on a good show if she had to. And she'd managed to live her own life for long enough now that she understood a whole lot more about the big, wide world—understood enough about herself to know that she was her own person and that no one could take that away from her. Not unless she allowed them to.

Then again, she wasn't the kind of girl to just flutter her eyelashes, whisper sweet nothings and take a man home with her for a night of no strings monkey sex. She required slightly more in the way of commitment before she yielded to the panty shredding stage. A few dates, a complement of mutual interests, some constructive information about whether there were any mad axemen hiding in his family tree.

That said, even then, she'd never actually experienced either phenomenon. So maybe panty shredding and monkey sex required something a little more spontaneous. Or, more likely, they didn't actually exist. She liked to think that was the case, so then she could happily ignore the niggling void that kept telling her she was missing something.

Yes, she'd like to think it was all just literary hype dreamed up to sell books. But then she'd remember her college days with Desi. Her friend hadn't gone into all that much detail, but Charlotte remembered well the way Desi behaved after visiting Club Risqué with Joel. How she'd oozed serenity and a languid



contentment for days afterwards. Something had to have made her that way and it sure as hell wasn't the kind of mediocre sex that Charlotte had been enjoying...or not enjoying, as the case may be.

"Charlotte?" Jake's velvety voice filtered through her musings and her eyes flew to his oh-so-pretty face.

"Penny for them?" he queried. Those piercing blue eyes seemed to see far more than Charlotte was comfortable with.

A penny for her thoughts? Just the idea of him knowing what she'd just been thinking had her colour deepening and her ears burning and Charlotte ducked her head again, unable to look him in the eye.

The soft, deep chuckle that rumbled from Jake's chest seemed to vibrate all the way down to her girly bits, and when he covered her hand with his own and stroked his thumb across the back, she couldn't help the shiver that snaked up her spine.

Charlotte kept her eyes glued to where their hands rested together on top of the bar. It was a seemingly innocuous touch but Charlotte's lips parted as she tried to find the oxygen that appeared to have fled the room and left her breathing shallow.

"So, have you come to distract me and take my mind off my woes, sweet Charlotte?"

Jake's voice was as rich and smooth as warm, melted chocolate and it seeped inexorably into her senses, making her all sweet and gooey.

"Yes," she whispered, raising her eyes back to his, regardless of the innuendo with which his words were tinged. All she knew was that he was smiling that one hundred megawatt smile right at her and it seemed to have short circuited all her good sense.

"Good!" Jake murmured, removing the wineglass from her nerveless fingers. Then he stood, drew Charlotte off her seat and took her hand. He'd led her all the way to the bank of elevators and pressed the button before any kind of caution could assert

itself above the jolt of electrical awareness that had accompanied the feeling of his big hand engulfing hers.

"I-I don't think..." she stammered.

Jake silenced her with one look from those intense blue eyes. He nodded, but the words he spoke were a direct contradiction. "No, don't think."

The command in his tone had her ceding the tiny sliver of prudence that had been seeking to make itself realised, while the smoky tone of his voice stroked over her senses like a velvet glove, settling and soothing her as the lift doors opened and Jake pulled her in behind him. They'd barely closed before he backed her up against the wall, his hard body pressed against all her soft places as he buried his hands in her hair and held her still while he took her mouth in an all-out sensual assault that left her mindless to any form of reason.

And really, who the heck was she trying to kid anyway? Right in front of her stood the chance to fulfil at least a dozen of those Jake Blackwood filled fantasies that she'd indulged for so many years. Hot damn! She was already in the middle of the first. She sure as hell wasn't going to turn that down.

Jake's lips were surprisingly tender as he traced his tongue across her bottom lip. She had expected him to devour and plunder, but instead, his lips feathered against her own, sipping, nibbling and coaxing and causing Charlotte to melt against him in a way no other offensive would have achieved. It was as if he could read her mind, like he knew exactly how to play her and just as that cautious notion uncurled in her awareness, Jake fisted his hands in her hair, the light pressure making her insides quiver and her breath catch. Then he took the advantage, stroking his tongue against her own and driving all thought away once more.

As the lift doors opened on his floor, Jake swept Charlotte into his arms and strode towards his hotel room door. Looking down at her face, he found her expression slightly dazed and her pupils dilated with desire. Jake could relate; the kiss they'd just

shared had been soft and almost cautious, a completely undemanding contrast to his usual dominant behaviour. And it had almost blown his socks off. The fact that his cock had raced from zero to ready to pound nails in one point five seconds from the most innocent of encounters had Jake's head spinning in astonishment. Usually, he'd have had to thrash a mildly masochistic submissive soundly with his signature single tail whip for a good ten minutes to build up that kind of response, and lately, even that hadn't been leaving him all that satisfied. But here, a simple kiss with a standard vanilla woman had left him reeling.

Renewed lust thundered through Jake's veins. If this was the result of an almost innocent encounter, he could barely wait to get his hands on Charlotte and get down and dirty. Already, he was wondering how hard he could push. Charlotte showed classic signs of submissive behaviour; looking down when he spoke to her, automatically deferring to his authority...blindly agreeing to no strings sex, when he was pretty certain she wasn't a one-night stand sort of girl.

That thought had a tiny kernel of guilt whispering through his fantasy filled brain, but the feel of her fingers plucking open the buttons of his shirt and sneaking inside to caress his bare skin soon snuffed out that brief attack of conscience and had Jake manoeuvring Charlotte in his arms so he could reach for his key card and push open the door to his suite.

One more glance at the woman in his arms, who now had all his buttons undone and was trying her best to pull his shirt from the back of his waistband while her head dipped to nuzzle his chest, and Jake disregarded all semblance of courteous decorum and strode directly to the bedroom, not stopping until he'd deposited Charlotte unceremoniously in the middle of the huge king-size bed and followed her down without so much as kicking off his shoes.

The kiss that followed as she yanked at his shirt tails and moaned into his mouth had none of the finesse of the first. Jake

thrust his hands into her hair and held Charlotte's head immobile while he plundered her lips, demanded entrance and devoured, while he ground the hard evidence of his erection none too subtly against her softness.

Charlotte whimpered and tried desperately to push his shirt off his shoulders, the fabric becoming caught on his biceps because of the angle of his arms. Jake cursed, pulling away for a moment to free himself of the fabric. Then he took it in his hands and twisted it into a makeshift bond which he wound around her wrists and pulled taut as his innate dominance surged to the fore. It wasn't tight; she could free herself if she truly wanted, but even in a primarily vanilla encounter, Jake would never manage to completely throw off his need for control. He didn't want to. This was who he was, take it or leave it. He could keep his baser urges at bay, and he ruthlessly tucked away his desire to inflict any delicious kind of painful pleasure. He knew that would be far too much for sweet little Charlotte. But he wasn't ever going to put aside his need to push her boundaries. He would respect them, of course. If she told him to stop, he would. He wasn't the monster the news rags had made him out to be a decade ago; he never had been. He respected women and their right to choose. It was the cornerstone of everything he believed in the BDSM lifestyle. 'Safe, Sane and Consensual', it was more than just the catchphrase of the club he co-owned back home, it was Club Risqué's mission statement and it was a morality code that he lived by.

Jake pushed Charlotte's arms above her head. "Keep them there!" he demanded, carefully watching her reaction with an intense stare.

Charlotte's breath hitched, and her pupils dilated. The corner of Jake's mouth lifted in a devilish hint of a smile. Yeah, she wasn't averse to a little bit of dominance and his pulse leaped at the knowledge.

Jake peppered kisses across her face and down her neck and

stroked his long fingers up and down her arms to soften the effect, but he couldn't resist the urge to sink his teeth into that succulent area where her neck met her shoulder. Hard.

Charlotte bucked underneath him, and a low rumble gritted from the back of her throat as she pushed her torso closer to his in a reflexive response which had Jake releasing a groan of relief that it hadn't been too much but enticed him to encircle that same milky throat with one long fingered hand. Not tight, just enough to stake his possession and pick up the vibrations of the soft, sexy noises she tried not to make. Charlotte was self-consciously quiet, but Jake planned to have her letting loose entirely and screaming for him by the end of the night.

Jake's lips feathered down the deep V created by the bodice of her wrap around dress and he rubbed his thumb against the pulse point in that shallow hollow where his hand rested. Levering himself up far enough on his elbow, he pulled on the tie that held it secured at her waist. It was like unwrapping a beautiful gift. Jake undid the bow, then smoothed his hand across her breast to sweep the fabric aside.

She stiffened and sighed quietly as he grazed her breast through the barrier of her lacy bra. A second later, she cried out breathlessly as, in one lightening swift move, Jake released the front fastening and, without warning, pulled one waiting, pebble hard nipple into his mouth, sucking hard and making Charlotte arch up off the bed to instinctively offer more of herself. Jake responded by capturing the other tight little bud between his thumb and forefinger, plucking and pinching until she writhed and twisted beneath him, her breathing contracting into short, gasping pants.

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CHARLOTTE FELT as if she'd been blindsided. Sensations

bombarded her faster than her mind was able to process them, leaving her totally off balance and drunk on pleasure.

Intimacy with Jake Blackwood surpassed even her wildest of fantasies, and she'd sure had plenty of those. And they hadn't even had actual sex yet!

Charlotte felt close to being overwhelmed, but this was one roller coaster she sure as hell wasn't getting off of any time soon. No, siree! She was just going to lie here, revelling in this encompassing, gratifying pleasure, and let Jake take control.

It was just so liberating to be lightly bound and following commands. She didn't have to worry about what to do and what to say, whether she should be reciprocating in some sensual, provocative way that seemed to come naturally to some women, but which she had never understood.

Prior to this experience, sex had always been something awkward and slightly stilted. Like some kind of complicated dance that no one had shown her the steps to and which she had no chance of following after the music started. So instead of relaxing, she fretted and second guessed herself, wondering if she was doing the right thing but feeling like a failure regardless, until she was so stressed that the whole thing became an ordeal to endure until the man she was with got off and she lay there feeling disappointed and vaguely unfulfilled and wondering if that's all there really was.

But not tonight. Tonight, something magical was happening. Tonight, she felt free, as if someone had waved away the burden of unrealistic expectation and replaced it with the permission to just feel. And boy was she feeling! Every touch, every kiss, every...thing seemed startlingly magnified. This was the closest thing to bliss that Charlotte had ever experienced and intuition was telling her that this time there was certainly more to come. Hopefully, her! Yes, definitely her. It would be the first time. Well, not the first time. But the first time with a man. Oh, goddesses! What if it didn't happen?

Would Jake be able to tell? What if she disappointed him anyway?

Suddenly, Jake bit down on her nipple and the light bolt of pain wrenched her away from her thoughts before he laved at the small hurt and it bloomed into a tingling pleasure.

"You're thinking so loudly I can hear you," Jake growled. "Keep it up and I'll be forced to spank you to take your mind off whatever is winding you up."

Spank her? Charlotte's pussy clenched at the thought and she felt her panties dampen some more.

Jake chuckled darkly against her breast. "I don't think you find that idea too dreadful, do you, sweet Charlotte? Would you like to feel my hand warming that pretty ass until it's all hot and pink and branded with my palm?"

"No," Charlotte panted. "I mean, yes!" Her back arched as Jake bit down tenderly on her other nipple, taking away her ability of coherent thought. "Oh, goddesses! I mean, were there two questions there? I can't think..."

Charlotte could feel the laughter rumbling in Jake's chest. "That was the idea. Don't think! Just feel. You were doing such an excellent job of it until your brain kicked in."

Charlotte preened under his praise. "Go back there, that's all I'm asking from you. Go back to just feeling. That's your role here; I'll do all the rest," he whispered as his hands brushed the fabric of her skirt away from her hips, exposing the rest of her to his sight and then trailing his fingers across the taut skin of her belly and down the swell of her hip.

When Charlotte might have been self-conscious, Jake spread nipping kisses across her abdomen and murmured, "You're so beautiful." In that second, as he worshipped her body with his fingers and his mouth, even Charlotte believed it. Jake made her feel beautiful and not at all like the tall, gangly girl with the beanpole figure that she had always perceived herself to be, with hair so straight it didn't hold so much as a hint of a wave.

It was just long and skinny like the rest of her, in a boring brown colour that contrasted painfully with her pasty white skin.

But at this moment, under Jake's expert ministrations, Charlotte bloomed.

Nibbling at her belly, Jake hooked his fingers under the waistband of Charlotte's panties and whisked them down her legs and away before nudging lower.

Charlotte was wet and so turned on, she could detect the smell of her own desire, so when Jake divested her of her underwear and continued down *there*, she tried to shrink away from him, embarrassed by the state of her arousal.

Jake took a firm grip of her hips, his fingers sinking into her flesh. "Be still!" he commanded bluntly, and his dominant tone made her tummy flutter.

Slowly, inexorably, he pushed her thighs wide and wedged his broad shoulders between them then, piercing her with his penetrating cobalt eyes, he swept his tongue along the entire length of her opening.

Charlotte had lifted her head to watch him, but with the first electric touch of his clever mouth, she sucked in a shocked breath then just as quickly expelled it and collapsed back on the pillow, her inhibitions forgotten in the face of the tumbling wave of pleasure that washed over her.

Jake groaned. "I always knew you'd taste this sweet," he breathed reverently before renewing his task with gusto.

Charlotte thought she was going to implode. It surely wasn't possible to endure this much pleasure for quite so long and still survive. Every time she slipped closer to that ephemeral peak, Jake seemed to pull back. Did he do that on purpose? How could he possibly know?

Charlotte writhed and burned, a sheen of perspiration blooming on her overheated flesh, but Jake held fast and continued his erotic torment. Just when she thought she couldn't



possibly take a second more, he plunged two fingers into her sopping wet heat.

Charlotte bucked off the bed with a strangled cry which turned into a plaintive mewl as he crooked his fingers inside her at a deliberate angle and stroked some special spot within her tight walls which had her ready to detonate.

Before she could reach that pinnacle, Jake tore himself away with a curse, shed his remaining clothes and sheathed himself with a condom before she had time to even protest his absence.

Charlotte scarcely glimpsed his long, thick cock and had barely managed to form the thought of how on earth they could possibly fit together before he'd covered her, aligned himself and thrust inside in a single, powerful sweep.

Charlotte heard the impassioned cry but her befuddled brain couldn't compute that it had been torn from her own throat before Jake launched into a heavy, driving rhythm that forced her higher and higher, winding her tighter and encouraging her to wind her legs around his waist and cling on for dear life. Her grasping fingers found purchase on the shirt tails that bound her wrists and as Charlotte raced toward what had been, until now, an elusive crest, she couldn't contain the gasps of pleasure that erupted with each wild plunge.

Finally hurling herself off the peak, Charlotte screamed her release and her eyes flew open as the most powerful orgasm she had ever experienced shattered her completely.

Her hazel eyes, glinting green with her pleasure, collided with his powerful blue gaze and the moment seemed to hang, suspended. An instant that stretched into a lifetime which seemed to bind them together in a far more intimate way. One that transcended the physical act in which they were engaged.

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JAKE STARED into Charlotte's face at the moment she came.

Pure shock painted her features, as if she'd never known that this pleasure might exist, and as the scream died in her throat, her eyes captured his, opening wide just as her mouth moved to form a little 'o'.

The look of awe and rapture on her face sent him hurtling over the edge himself. He thrust once, twice, and emptied himself inside her tight sheath.

The silence around them seemed deafening, the sounds of their panting loud against the sudden hush as they both tried to catch their breath.

Jake rolled to her side, his arm flung across her stomach and his head tucked into the crook of her neck.

Charlotte released her death grip on Jake's shirt and slipped her hands out of the loop, so she could wind her arm around his back, desperate to touch him and convince herself that he was really here, and she wasn't just dreaming, because surely something quite so mind bogglingly amazing couldn't be real.

"That was...awesome!" Charlotte whispered, her voice strangely scratchy, though she couldn't quite work out why.

Jake kissed her collar bone. Yes, it had been awesome. Who knew that vanilla could be such a decadent flavour, after all?

"Maybe there's something to be said for this dominance thing," Charlotte sighed dreamily.

Jake frowned, and a sliver of unease skittered up his spine that Charlotte should think such a thing about an encounter that had barely skirted the tamest edges of BDSM.

Jake scrunched his eyes up and exhaled. Damn it! What was he doing and what the hell had he been thinking?

Regret stabbed at his conscience. Charlotte was not one-night stand material and she certainly wasn't kink material. If she was bowled over by the merest hint of dominance, there was no way her tender disposition would ever cope with Jake in full out Dom mode while he brandished his beloved signal whip!

Silently, Jake cursed himself while Charlotte floated in sated

ignorance. Jeez, he should have sent her away when she first entered the bar, instead of allowing himself to wallow in self-pity and indulge his momentary melancholy with a woman who would never understand his lifestyle and who deserved better than to be bedded and discarded.

As Jake desperately tried to think of a way to extract himself from this clusterfuck of his own making without making Charlotte feel like she'd been nothing more than a convenient piece of ass that he was throwing over now that he'd had his fill, because that surely hadn't been his intention, Jake's phone rang and he'd never been more grateful for its intervention.

Rolling over to grab it from the pile of discarded clothes that littered the floor, Jake answered with one hand as he disposed of the condom with the other. Casting a guilty look at Charlotte who lay boneless and replete on the edge of sleep, with a slight smile playing at the corner of her mouth, he couldn't help feeling that he'd been thrown a lifeline as he agreed with the disembodied voice on the other end of the line.

Tapping the button to hang up, Jake grabbed his ruined shirt, shrugged, then threw it into the laundry service hamper and grabbed a fresh one from the wardrobe. He wasted little time dressing, then took a deep, fortifying breath and sat on the edge of the bed next to the supine Charlotte and tenderly brushed the hair away from her face.

Charlotte opened heavy lidded eyes and vaguely noted that Jake was dressed but she was far too comfortable and relaxed to move.

"Who was calling you at this time of night?" she mumbled, acknowledging the interruption.

"I've been recalled to head office for an emergency, sweetheart," Jake replied as he continued to stroke her hair. Charlotte frowned, still drifting at the edges of sleep.

"I'm sorry, this isn't how I would have chosen to do things,"

Jake sighed. "But I have to leave now so I can be in the office first thing."

Charlotte's frown deepened. "But when will you sleep?" she mumbled.

Jake closed his eyes against the weight of his remorse. Here he was, effectively seducing her and then walking away and Charlotte was worrying about his wellbeing. She was an angel whom a man of his dark desires didn't deserve.

He dragged a hand across his face. "I'll sleep on the plane, angel, don't worry about me." The endearment slipped out probably because of the direction of his thoughts. "You just snuggle down here and get some sleep, yourself."

"When will you be back?" Charlotte murmured, watching him quietly.

The silence stretched before Jake answered and he saw some of the light dim from her expressive eyes.

"I don't know," Jake sighed. "Everything's changed now that Joel has come to his senses and asked Desi to marry him. Obviously, he'll now stay here to oversee the merger between the Blackwood Corporation and Universal Holdings and that means I'm the one who has to go back to head office and deal with things from the other end."

Charlotte was well aware of the newly proposed merger between Jake and Desi's companies which had replaced the takeover bid that Jake's uncle had declared several months ago. It was what had brought the Blackwood cousins back into her best friend's life...and Jake back into hers. And now, it seemed, it would take him a thousand miles away again.

"I don't want to make promises I can't keep, Charlotte," Jake said softly, but there was a certain finality in his words.

Charlotte nodded her head and closed her eyes to hide her conflicting emotions. She didn't need Jake to see just how much more this night had meant to her than it did to him; she had some pride. And what sort of shmuck fell in love with an impos-

sible dream and kept that candle burning for twelve years, anyway?

Instead, Charlotte pulled together every molecule of self-preservation that she could muster and evened her breathing to stop her voice from wobbling and simply said, "You'd better get a move on then, so you don't exhaust yourself."

She felt Jake press a sweet kiss to her forehead, but she didn't dare open her eyes again until she heard the door close behind him and the first tear tracked down her cheek.

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## Chapter 1

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Charlotte fretfully smoothed her hands down the pale gold coloured bridesmaid's dress she wore and tried to calm her nerves as she looked around the large ante-room that she stood in with the other bridesmaids, Laurel Stanton, Desi's PA at Universal Holdings—or rather what had now become the recently amalgamated Blackwood Universal Corporation—and Luanna Morgan, Desi's relatively new finance manager.

Charlotte knew Laurel fairly well; they had met often enough during the five years that the girl had worked for Desi. Luanna was new on the scene, though. Charlotte had only met her a couple of times and then only in regard to the plans for Joel and Desi's marriage in which they were both part of the wedding party.

Luanna had only worked for Desi a matter of months, but Charlotte knew that the two of them had hit it off straight away. Right now, Charlotte was wishing she could channel a little bit of Luanna's relaxed disposition. The other woman appeared calm and unruffled, totally unlike herself. She felt as skittish as a newborn foal and could feel the tendrils of a vague kind of panic

curling at the edges of her consciousness that had nothing to do with the pomp and ceremony of the upcoming nuptials. Well, not directly, anyway.

Charlotte's anxiety had everything to do with another member of the wedding party, the best man, to be exact. The same man she had rolled in and out of bed with in the space of a few stolen hours...after less than thirty minutes at a bar where they'd exchanged even fewer words.

It had been one of the most wonderful experiences of her life. And also, one of the most humiliating. She hadn't seen or heard a word from Jake since he'd rushed off, leaving her lying there in his own hotel room where she'd eventually cried herself to sleep at his sudden departure—only to be rudely awakened the following morning by the hotel staff who had stiffly informed her that Mr. Jake Blackwood had checked out and they needed to clear his suite. Denied even the courtesy to shower, Charlotte had barely had time to pull on her wrinkled clothing before she had fled the room in abject mortification as they treated her to looks of disdain and contempt that she didn't understand. She may well have just picked Jake up in the hotel bar and indulged in what had amounted to a one-night stand with him, but that wasn't really any of their business. She wondered if she had overstepped some kind of protocol by not being signed in at reception as a guest, or maybe she'd slept past check out time. They had sure been hell bent on getting rid of her fast. Her hair a mess and her makeup smudged, Charlotte had kept her head down in the light of day and prayed that no one recognised her as she fled through the hotel and made for her car while the staff sneered and looked down their noses at her. They were a bit goddamned harsh for the relatively minor misdemeanour of a late check out. She supposed they must have new guests due to take residence. Undoubtedly, people who were far more important than she was.

She pushed the embarrassing memories aside and damned the recollection.

Now, in just a few short minutes, Charlotte would have to face Jake Blackwood again with her shame and humiliation fresh in her mind. It was going to be awkward enough facing him without the added baggage.

Charlotte turned her attention back to the window. Outside, the last guests filed in through the ornate church doors. Photographers, with all their equipment, and news vans lined the opposite side of the road. Joel and Desi were having a big, traditional, society wedding. Hundreds of people were present, and in the face of the vast media interest, everything had been planned with military precision and completely by the book.

For Charlotte, as chief bridesmaid, that meant no way to avoid being automatically thrown together with Jake Blackwood in his role as best man.

Thankfully, so far, no one had picked up on her tension. Luanna didn't know her well enough. Desi was understandably preoccupied with the ceremony that was about to start and the last-minute primping and fussing from the stylist and her mother, and Laurel was so full of energy and excitement that her bouncing distracted everyone from Charlotte's quiet strain.

A few minutes later, there was a discreet tap on the door and Desi's father was shown in.

"It's time," he whispered to his wife, before deftly ushering her out to take her place at the front of the church. As the door closed behind her, Charlotte heard the demure strains of Pachelbel's 'Canon in D' begin the herald of the bridal procession.

Laurel and Luanna took their positions at the front of the group, where they would scatter fresh white rose petals ahead of Desi and her father and Charlotte took up her place at the rear of the group, where she would help Desi with her train and take her friend's bouquet as she stood to make her promises to her new husband before each of them paired off with one of the



groomsmen. Laurel and Luanna with Connor Griffin and Logan Thornton and Charlotte, inevitably, with Jake.

As the doors opened and the music was at a crescendo, Charlotte tried to avoid rubbing her sweaty palms down the pale silk of her dress for fear of leaving marks on the delicate material and took a deep breath. Damn Jake Blackwood, anyway. She wouldn't let him spoil this special day, no matter how uncomfortable or awkward things might get.

With that, Charlotte pulled up her proverbial 'big girl panties', plastered on what she hoped was a serene smile and stepped out into the aisle.

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DESI WAS blissful and radiant as she repeated her vows and Joel, soft eyed and adoring as he looked at his new wife. Such a vast transformation from the two distant, prickly individuals they'd been just six months before.

This could have been his wedding, Jake thought. Well maybe not quite the scale, but certainly the timing. Jake was happy that Joel and Desi had worked out their differences, finally, even if it had taken them damn near twelve years and his own drastic intervention to do so. He wondered if he would ever find a fraction of the happiness the two of them exuded for himself.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, Jake couldn't help mentally kicking himself. Standing right next to him, all prim and demure, was a woman who practically screamed 'perfect wife material'. And yet for all his pronouncements of wanting to settle down and start a family before he got too old to enjoy his kids, he had done nothing but push her away despite the vast attraction he felt for her—one she seemed to reciprocate.

He couldn't even use the excuse of not wanting to rush into marrying the wrong woman. He'd been happy enough to propose marriage to Desi when it looked like Joel would never

pull his head out of the sand. Even knowing they didn't love each other at a depth more profound than friendship, he'd been content that it would ease the loneliness both of them felt and satisfy their mutual desire to start a family.

So why was Charlotte any different? Jake could sense that she was a forever kind of person and that, with two like minds, they could build a relationship easily. And the sex had been phenomenal, even if it had been vanilla. Maybe that was the problem. Jake had never thought himself to have as much of a need for control as his cousin, but maybe D/s was more ingrained in him than he imagined.

Jake sighed as the ceremony came to a close. It was a moot point now, by all accounts, if the stiff posture and carefully blank expression on Charlotte's face were anything to go by. She had deliberately avoided any eye contact with him and stood just far enough away to avoid any accidental touches but not too far as to look obvious. It pained him that she felt the necessity to take such actions. Enough women did it when they heard the rumours that painted him as some kind of abusive pervert. They judged and reacted based on twisted truths and misinformation, never because he personally had ever given them any reason to behave that way. Never, until Charlotte. And she wasn't responding to any whispers of fabricated depravity. With her, it was simply a reflex action to mask the damage he'd done to her feelings and maybe that was even worse.

Jake had never been the 'love 'em and leave 'em' type. Not even in the world of D/s, where there was a wholly different mind-set that shaped the exchanges and play between consenting participants, where interactions lasting maybe only as briefly as the negotiated scene were commonplace and understood.

Guilt overwhelmed him as he realised that he hadn't even extended that small courtesy to Charlotte. He had just up and left her in his own hotel suite without finding out if she was okay after he'd undoubtedly pushed her sexual boundaries, however

gently, or even checking that she got home safely. Jeez, he'd been a first-class jerk.

He closed his eyes as the newlyweds turned to lead the recessional down the aisle to the traditional strains of Mendelssohn's Wedding March. That was his cue to escort Charlotte, in her role of chief bridesmaid, from the church. Then there would be the top table where they'd be seated together and, after that, the dances they'd be expected to share and, later, the private supper for just close family and friends, away from the three-ring media circus that would inevitably surround the rest of Joel and Desi's day.

Waiting solicitously and offering his arm, he noted Charlotte's discomfort as she begrudgingly took it. He stroked his free hand across the back of her knuckles where they lay against his sleeve, hoping to ease her. Instead, he noted the tremor that coursed through her willowy frame as she pinned her lips into a thin line.

Accosted by photographers the minute they exited the grandiose building, official, private and media, Jake plastered on a smile as he tried to guide a resistant Charlotte through the throng. Damn it all, somehow, he had to try and make things right.

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CHARLOTTE PRAYED to the goddesses for just a few minutes alone, but it seemed her prayers were not to be answered. Everywhere she looked or went, Jake Blackwood was somewhere close by and their roles in the wedding party meant no escape any time soon.

She had endured through reams of photographs and then been tucked into a car beside him for the journey to the reception venue. She was seated beside him at the top table once they reached their destination, and now, the newly married couple

was gracefully skimming the dance floor for the first dance, which meant, in a few short moments, she and Jake would be expected to join them.

She pulled in a couple of deep, hopefully calming, breaths because, inside, she was seething. Jake had been polite and courteous, a front of complete propriety which, in itself, ticked her off because it seemed so very false given their history—albeit brief and obviously ill-considered. But mostly because, no matter how hard she fought it, her senses reeled at his proximity. Goosebumps raised on her arms whenever he touched her, leaving her breathless and heated, and no matter how shabbily he had treated her prior to this, desire still skittered through her veins and her constant awareness of the best man made her feel robbed of the enjoyment in her best friend's wedding. Never mind that finding herself continually on edge was completely stressing her out and she was feeling dangerously close to breaking point.

Charlotte pulled in another lungful of air, closing her eyes and tipping her head back as she exhaled, hoping to expel her turmoil at the same time as her breath. She just needed to get through this one dance and then she'd be home free for a couple of hours. At least until the private dinner, and hopefully, there, things would be a little more informal and she wouldn't find herself thrown together with Jake any longer.

Hope was all she had left, Charlotte realised as she noted the signal from the floor which was the cue for the other members of the wedding party to join in the formal dances.

Jake appeared at her elbow and led her out. She knew the drill, drummed into her head by the rather anal wedding planner. She and Jake were to dance with the wedded couple for precisely one minute, along with the parents of the bride and groom. Joel's father partnered with Desi's mother and Desi's father partnered with some maiden aunt, since Joel's mother had died several years ago. Then the other groomsmen and brides-

maids would join the floor for one further minute prior to the dancing being opened to the remainder of the guests. She was expected to remain dancing with her partner for the duration of the second dance in order to encourage those more reticent guests to join in. A total of exactly eight minutes and forty-two seconds.

The planner ran everything like a strict military operation, which did little to help Charlotte's already frayed nerves as she panicked about missing the prompts and upsetting the carefully mapped schedule. She made a sharp mental note that, in the unlikely event that she ever got married, she certainly would not take this route!

Jake stopped in their allotted position on the dance floor—yes, even that had been pre-determined—and pulled her close, wrapping his right arm around her waist and taking her left hand in his to lead while she settled her free hand on his shoulder for a traditional waltz. The planner had even insisted that anyone in the wedding party who wasn't proficient have lessons and it seemed to Charlotte that the woman had squeezed every bit of joy and spontaneity out of the entire occasion. But at least it allowed for a valued fragment of formal distance.

Still Charlotte's pulse quickened as her treacherous body moved closer to Jake as he led her through the steps with practiced ease and a confidence that alluded to an upbringing where the ability to perform a waltz was considered normal—unlike Charlotte's upbringing; not that there'd been anything even close to 'normal' about that! In the religious commune where she'd spent her teenage years, any type of dancing had been considered a sinful enticement, the lure of the devil into temptation, and therefore prohibited. Not that there'd been any music to actually dance to. That had been prohibited, too.

Charlotte had taken the lessons. There had been few occasions in her life that called for dancing and despite unreservedly throwing off the debilitating entrapment as soon as she'd been

able to escape from the cult her mother had gotten them both ensnared in, Charlotte still felt uncomfortable participating in what had been forbidden deeds throughout her formative teenage years.

She remembered, all too well, the punishments for those infractions. The awful rooms where the guilty were sent to repent. Rooms so dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Rooms that were soundproofed so that not even the tiniest whisper of sound could be heard from within. Rooms with not one stick of creature comfort, not a bed or a chair or a blanket. Not even a toilet for the sinner who might have committed the crime of humming under their breath or twirling around in the semblance of dance.

Just the chilling depths of sensory deprivation so that the offender could commune with God without distraction and contemplate his or her sins while their tongues parched from thirst and their bellies cramped from hunger and just being allowed out made them grateful for small things like light and clothing and water. And the fear of going back there kept everyone in line.

Worse things happened in those rooms. Things she'd thankfully never had to endure. But threats and whispers abounded, and Charlotte hadn't doubted any of it.

"Are you okay?" Jake's words brought her back from the trek into her nightmares. She shuddered and drew in a cleansing breath, drinking in the sparkling atmosphere, the harmony of the music, the pleasure of the guests.

In retrospect, none of this was so bad, was it? The planner just wanted everything to be perfect and to remove the burden of responsibility from Joel and Desi's shoulders, so they were free to enjoy their special day; and she had spent a beautiful, blissful night with Jake that had been her own free choice, the memory of which she mostly treasured. Their time together had been nothing short of wonderful, and if things had gone wrong after-

wards, well—there were worse things in life, and she had been forced to live a few of them.

It was good to remember the repression of her previous existence. It reminded her to treasure everything she had today.

Charlotte looked up into Jake's stunning face, appreciating his male beauty and the sense of safety she felt, enclosed within his strong arms.

She smiled at him and relaxed. The waltz finished and the soft notes of the second song began. The formality of the first dance was over and Jake pressed her against him, his hands warm at her hips as she curled her arms around his neck and lay her head on his shoulder, letting all the perceived tensions of the day drain from her psyche.

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JAKE DIDN'T KNOW what transformation had gone on in Charlotte's head, but he knew it had been huge. Suddenly, all the indignation and resentment that had twisted up her body and mind simply flowed away, replaced with a tranquil acceptance that left him stunned in its dichotomy.

He felt a certain peace settle into his own bearing as he wound his arms around her waist, held her close and rested his cheek against her hair.

And as suddenly as the brittleness and tension was released, it was replaced with awareness and desire. Jake almost gasped at its intensity. What was it about this woman?

If Charlotte felt at all uncomfortable with the hard evidence of his hunger, then she didn't show it. In fact, she snuggled closer in his embrace, content to stay there past the end of the second dance and the third and many more after that. And despite the discomfort straining his tuxedo pants, Jake was content to hold her there.

The evening wound down, or maybe it wound up. The live

musicians with their romantic ballads, classical instruments and haunting vocals gave way to a hopping DJ with funky music and a smoke machine.

The older generation retired, and the younger ones got noisy. It wasn't late, but it had been a long day and there was still the private supper to come.

With the efficiency of a drill sergeant, the wedding planner corralled those attending the exclusive dinner at 8.30 pm, precisely thirty minutes after the DJ had been let loose. They were to attend pre-drinks in one hour and sit down at 10 pm. The venue was just a few minutes by limo and a short break had been built into the schedule to allow the wedding party to change into something more informal.

As the limo carrying the groomsmen and bridesmaids pulled up in front of the hotel that was hosting this final event of the day, Charlotte knew a moment's discomfiture at having to spend any time at all at the site of her recent mortification, since they had as good as thrown her out of here just twelve short weeks before. Even more so since she had discovered that the Blackwood family kept four suites on permanent retainer so their behaviour towards her had been completely unjustified. It wasn't as if they had been awaiting the vacancy of Jake's suite for another booking, after all.

This evening, one of the suites was being used as a changing area for the ladies and Charlotte was looking forward to divesting herself of the strappy sandals that had been torturing her feet for the latter half of the day and letting her hair out of the intricate swirl of loops and flowers and crystal bling that was held in place with so very many pins that Charlotte could swear her hair was actually groaning from the contortions.

She had treated herself to an extortionately expensive but very beautiful jade satin dress with a mandarin collar and intricate beading for this evening's supper. The colour brought out



the green in her hazel eyes and the Chinese influences suited her long straight hair and made her feel exotic.

Leaving the suite with the other ladies, with five minutes to spare, Charlotte realised she had forgotten her matching clutch. While the staff had been advised to swap out the bridal wear and package it up for dry cleaning and deposit any personal items with the wedding planner who would ensure delivery back to their owners, Charlotte wouldn't be able to get back into her flat tonight if she didn't keep hold of her keys. Waving the others ahead, she returned to fetch it.

"I'll barely be two minutes behind you," she assured Desi. "Even the event planner won't have time to miss me," Charlotte joked. Nevertheless, she took off her shoes, so she could make better time and avoid keeping everyone waiting.

She was almost back at the lobby and about to stop and put her shoes on when a burly security guard came barrelling towards her, a look of fury on his face. The man grasped hold of Charlotte's elbow none too gently and propelled her toward the door.

"You need to leave, madam," the man growled, and Charlotte was surprised at his gruffness for such a high-end establishment.

She pulled out of his grasp. "Oh! Well, just let me put my shoes on!" Charlotte dropped her matching jade heels to the ground, so she could step into them but was startled when the man grabbed her roughly around the wrist and wrenched her so sharply that she dropped her bag as well. She had to trot to keep up with him and immediately started to panic.

"What's happened?" she shrieked. "Is there some kind of emergency? Where are my friends? Are they safe?" Charlotte pleaded. She hadn't heard any kind of alarm going off, but the Blackwood wedding was a huge, well publicised event. Perhaps there had been some kind of security threat. Were they all being evacuated?

Adrenaline rushed through her system and Charlotte's heart beat double time, but she fought to keep her head and try to make sense of the situation. The others might need her. Poor Desi. How could someone ruin what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life like this? Tears prickled Charlotte's eyes at the thought, but she forced them back. She needed to keep a clear mind and face whatever crisis had befallen her friend's special day with as much calm as she could muster for Desi and Joel's sake.

Damn, she hoped it wasn't activists out to make a big media splash for their cause; that would be so unfair. Then again, she supposed that was somewhat better than the threat of actual physical harm. Charlotte felt sick to her stomach, but the guard just kept dragging her along and he wasn't at all forthcoming. She guessed he had a job to do, though, and one that didn't entail being distracted and pandering to an errant wedding guest, but she couldn't just let it go.

"Please!" she begged. "What's going on? Are the Blackwoods safe?"

The big oaf scowled, but at least he answered, "The Blackwood group is perfectly safe, and you are being escorted off the premises."

Charlotte knew a moment of profound relief before she was thrust brusquely through the automatic sliding door at the main entrance and pushed forcefully into the street. She wheeled her arms to stop herself from falling on her face and swivelled around in shock only to see the doors sliding closed behind the security guard who was already off back through the lobby. Was he off to find someone else? He'd said the Blackwoods were safe, but where was everyone?

Charlotte swung from side to side looking for the others. It was dark, but the pavement outside the hotel was well lit. A few random passers-by gave her strange looks and a wide berth, but

Charlotte couldn't see anyone familiar. Besides, they wouldn't have just left them all on the street, would they?

She scurried back to the door, swearing and hopping when she stubbed her bare toe, but as the doors swept open again, a thin, squirrely man hurried towards her, his chest puffed out and his eyebrows knitted together in a frown. Charlotte felt her colour rising as she recognised the same man who had asked her to leave Jake's suite. The shiny name badge on his lapel labelled him as a Mr. Fitzwarren, the manager.

"You are not permitted to enter this establishment, madam!" he hissed furiously. "The police are already on their way."

She couldn't go back in and the police were en route? Oh, goddesses, it must be more serious than she'd thought. Charlotte fought against the hysterics that threatened to overwhelm her even as she started to shake, her head darting this way and that as she tried to find a familiar face.

"Wh-where are the others?" she stammered. "Where's Desi?"

"I have no idea who you are talking about but, believe me, any more of your kind will be dealt with in exactly the same manner!" The man crowded her, forcing her backwards from the door even as she bounced on her bare feet, trying to see over his shoulder.

Suddenly, Charlotte stilled, and the blood left her face as his words penetrated the panic that bubbled inside her. *'Her kind'?*

Behind her, tires screeched and blue flashing lights reflected in the glass of the door and cast an eerie illumination on the brickwork of the walls. Time seemed to slow as she heard car doors slamming and the sound of running feet. She screamed as her arms were wrenched behind her and the metallic rattle of handcuffs being secured around her wrists sounded disproportionately loud against the words that seemed to recede in her head. Words that made no sense as they talked about reading her rights and charges of soliciting.

"I believe she has an accomplice," the snooty, squirrel faced

manager told one of the officers. "She mentioned someone called Desi."

The man laughed. "Now there's irony for you. Isn't that the name of Joel Blackwood's bride?"

The manager sniffed and looked down his nose. "I believe you'll find that Ms. Harper's—Mrs. Blackwood's—name is Desirae. Now kindly remove this woman from here; it's causing a scene."

The mention of Desi's name brought Charlotte marginally back to her senses. A crowd was forming in the street and the media staking out the wedding had been alerted to the unfolding situation at the Blackwood's hotel. Despite the fact that the plans for the supper hadn't been made public, there were already flashes from cameras invading whatever privacy Charlotte had left to her and she tried to hide her face from this new humiliation.

The security guard returned, and the doors swished open as he lumbered back through them carrying Charlotte's purse and shoes which he threw at her feet. Her bag landed with a thud and her first thought was to scramble for it and see if her phone had survived so that she maybe could call someone to get her out of this mess. But the plan never fully evolved into a deed as, behind the man, on the far side of the lobby, she saw Jake heading for the bank of elevators. Jake would help her. She called out, but the soundproofing of the doors muffled her plea and he carried on. Still, Charlotte saw her chance. The guard turned to head back through the doors, and the moment they slid unsealed, Charlotte made her move. Diving away from the policewoman who held her arm, she raced for the opening, screaming his name in desperation.

The hotel manager grasped at her, and somewhere in the back of her mind, Charlotte heard the delicate satin of her sleeve rip as he grabbed a handful of the fabric. The action made her stumble and Charlotte fell to her knees, unable to stop the

momentum, with her hands cuffed behind her. But it didn't matter; Jake turned towards the commotion just as the male police officer tried to haul her back. He saw her; that was all that mattered, and the sight of a friendly face in all this surreal nightmare brought the last threads of her control crashing around her and Charlotte collapsed to the ground and sobbed.