
TIES THAT BIND

Club Risqué Book Three

POPPY FLYNN

Blushing Books

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Prologue

Lulu was scared. More than scared, in fact, she was really terrified. Tears prickled at the back of her moss green eyes and she fought to keep them from falling at the same time as she struggled against giving in to the devastating fear that crawled insidiously through her mind and threatened to overwhelm her.

She needed to keep calm. She needed to think. She needed to be sensible and work out what to do without falling apart.

She needed James, but so far, there was no sign of him. Still, Lulu waited at the meeting place where she'd arranged to meet him in the note she'd slipped to him during their English class, earlier today.

It was the first day back after summer break, and Lulu hadn't seen James at all during the holidays. Not that that was surprising. His family was rich. They usually went abroad, somewhere exotic, for the duration. He'd sent her a postcard.

James and Lulu had been going steady for over eight months now. They were tight. True, she hadn't seen much of him in school today, but it was the first day back. It had been hectic. New classes, new timetables, new teachers. General education

was finished, and she had a decent set of basic exams under her belt, but now it was time for the hard work to start. It was time to knuckle down and get the advanced grades she needed so she could get into a good college.

Lulu closed her eyes as her breathing sped up and the tears threatened to overflow again. She took a deep breath and pretended it hadn't juddered on a near sob as she'd sucked it in. Everything would be okay when she spoke to James. He would know what to do. Together, they could face anything. Lulu let the thought calm her and settled down to wait a bit longer.

An hour later, she forced herself to move and acknowledge the fact that James wasn't coming. What was she supposed to do now? She couldn't talk to him about this in school, and she couldn't risk ringing him from home and having their parents overhear. Did she try to arrange another meeting, or should she go over to his house? Perhaps his parents had him doing something that had stopped him from coming out this evening. It wouldn't be the first time. That seemed to happen a lot, especially when they'd gone to the trouble of making more specific plans.

Lulu wandered across the park in the direction of Fulford House, the family home that had been in James' family for generations, and saw a group of her classmates heading in her direction.

"Hey, Lulu." Tom Schwartz bounded up and grinned. He was like an overgrown puppy, with feet that he still needed to grow into and hair that was a bit too long. He grabbed her hands theatrically as the rest of his friends ambled up behind him.

"So, what are the chances of you coming on a date with me, now that you and 'the lord of the manor' have split up?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows, his smile infectious.

Lulu shook her head and smiled back. Tom had been asking her out forever, although, sometimes, she wasn't sure he was completely serious. Still, she tried to be kind in her knock backs

because he was a nice guy and she didn't want to hurt his feelings, but he never seemed to take no for an answer.

"Give it up, Tom. James and I haven't split up!" She nudged him casually, trying to keep things light.

"Umm." Tom frowned and, for once in his life, looked like he didn't know what to say. A frisson of unease skittered down Lulu's spine as he looked away from her, and she caught a couple of his friends share a glance and then deliberately avoid eye contact with her.

"Really?" Cindy McCall, one of the school's resident mean girls, asked, and Lulu didn't like the gloating smirk that she eyed her with. "Because we just saw James come out of the cinema with Kimberly Scott, and they were looking pretty cosy."

Lulu felt her stomach bottom out and a wave of increasingly familiar nausea had her jaw clenching as a watery, metallic sensation filled her throat.

Lulu swallowed carefully and breathed slowly through her nose, willing herself not to embarrass herself in front of one of the people who would have the story of her humiliation embellished and spread to the entire senior school before class even started tomorrow morning.

"Don't be a bitch, Cindy," Tom called her out. "You know the Scotts and the Fulfords are old family friends; their kids probably don't even get a choice."

Lulu smiled weakly, glad of his defence.

"Sure." Cindy waved him off. "I heard they all met up overseas during the summer. Of course, with Kimberly and James being the only two even close to the same age, it's probably inevitable that they pair off together," she finished with a sly glance Lulu's way.

"Take no notice of her," Tom soothed, but she noticed that his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Even worse was the hint of pity she saw there instead.

Lulu beat a hasty retreat; at least she had an idea where she

might find James now if what had been said about the cinema was true. James was a creature of habit. After the cinema, he liked to go to the smoothie bar and buy the biggest, most decadent milkshake with all the trimmings. She didn't want to think about the two straws he usually got to share. Just like she didn't want to think about whether the rest of Cindy's words were actually true. There were a lot of things she didn't want to think about right now.

When she got to the smoothie bar, her eyes went automatically to the booth they always shared. Lulu bit her lip hard and told herself that it hadn't done a little jib when she saw James there, in their own special booth, with Kimberly, one milkshake and two straws.

Smoothing down her long auburn hair, taking a deep breath, and filling her backbone full of determination, she headed his way, ignoring the eyes she could feel following her all the way across the room.

Since her quiet, studious parents had drummed into her the importance of politeness and decorum, even in the face of adversity, Lulu gritted her teeth and firmed her jaw, pulling her face into an impassive mask that belied her sixteen years.

"Good evening, Kimberly," she said pleasantly, even though she could hardly bear to look at her supposed boyfriend's 'date'.

"James, I need to speak to you." There was the tiniest tremor in her voice, but mostly, she was pleased with her performance. The nausea, fear, and now, betrayal were all bubbling pretty close to the surface but, for the moment, at least, she had them under control.

Embarrassment, closely followed by irritation, flitted across James's almost handsome but still boyish features.

"I can't right now, Lulu," he evaded.

He was giving her the brush off. Despite the overwhelming desire to turn tail, run away, and lick her wounds, Lulu stood her

ground. There was more at stake here than just her own bruised feelings.

"It's important," she pressed, noticing for the first time the discomfort and embarrassment on Kimberly's pretty face and how she squirmed under the unabashed interest from the other kids in the popular teen hangout.

Lulu couldn't drum up very much sympathy for the other girl at the moment. Kimberly Scott was nice enough. They weren't particularly friendly, but she wasn't one of Cindy's bitchy crew. From the corner of her eye, Lulu noticed as Kimberly elbowed James in the ribs when he looked ready to settle in and ignore her.

"You need to tell her!" she heard the other girl mutter under her breath.

"I'm pretty sure she's already worked it out," James whispered back petulantly.

Boy, he was weak. The realisation hit Lulu, and she acknowledged it with surprise. Funny how you thought you knew someone. How you could spend so much time with another person, share secrets and intimacies, and never notice some of their most enduring characteristics. But then, right now, she wasn't looking at James with her usual mixture of girlish pride and gullibility.

"James!" Kimberly admonished, taking a surreptitious look around her at the show they were providing with obvious mortification.

James made a loud harrumphing sound and glowered at her as if she was the bad guy in this scenario but he got up out of the booth and stalked toward the rear exit of the smoothie bar and headed down the nearby river path, while Kimberly gathered together her belongings and kept her head down as she rushed out of the front door and onto the street, away from the prying, accusing eyes within.

Ignoring everyone else, Lulu followed James, ready to have it

out with him, though probably not in the way that everyone inside imagined.

The overblown angst of tragic teenage relationship calamities seemed childish and histrionic and so very far removed from where her head was right now. Suddenly, she felt displaced; timeworn, like the child she had been just a week or two ago was just a distant memory. When had she started feeling so old?

"Look, Lulu, I know I should have said something sooner," James started. "But my father wasn't keen on us seeing so much of each other; he thought we were getting too close, so he invited Kimberly's family to holiday with us. He thinks she's a more suitable girlfriend for me—" James trailed off and, for a brief moment, had the grace to look slightly ashamed.

Lulu just looked at him. Really looked. Had he always been this way? In her own youthful ignorance, had she really managed to simply overlook his most obvious character traits, or was it simply the process of being slammed between the eyes by an unwanted maturity, with the force of a two by four plank of wood, that made them so obvious now? Lulu wondered if James ever considered anyone else's feelings. Hers, Kimberly's, even his own? Even without her devastating suspicions, had he really imagined that she would just fade into the background and he would never have to man up and deal with her or the fallout of his actions with Kimberly?

Yeah—weak!

"I think I'm pregnant," she interrupted his inane babbling with something infinitely more important than the drivel he was spouting.

James stood with his mouth agape, the colour bleeding out of his rounded, boyish face.

"That's impossible; we only did it once!" he stammered.

Lulu rolled her eyes. "How many times do you think it takes?" she asked, suddenly irritated by his immaturity.

James shook his head sharply in denial, his sun bleached blond hair flopping over his forehead.

"No! You're just saying that 'cos you're mad about Kim."

Lulu all but growled her annoyance. "Yeah? And how do you figure I managed to come up with a scheme like that when I didn't even know about Kimberly, since you haven't had the decency to mention it?"

James fisted his fingers into his hair. "This can't happen; my father will go berserk!" he whined.

"James!" Lulu said sharply. "I need you to help me. I don't know what to do!" A sliver of the fear and uncertainty, flowing swiftly just beneath the surface of the calm she struggled to maintain, seeped into her voice.

"You said you *think* you're pregnant; maybe you're not," James dithered. "Maybe it's just your imagination. It was way back at Prom, after all," he argued. "That was months ago. June! It's September now. Shouldn't you be fat or something?" He eyed her middle in dismay but seemed to take some relief from the fact that she didn't look any different.

"I haven't had a period, and I keep throwing up." Lulu couldn't keep the quiver out of her voice this time. Talking about it seemed to make it all the more real.

"That's girl stuff," James blustered with embarrassment. "I don't know what any of that means, so why are you even asking me?" A hint of petulance coloured his tone.

"I need you to help me, James. I don't know what to do!" Lulu reiterated. The quiver had turned into a judder and the words sounded broken and fragmented. Her hands shook as she clamped them to her mouth in some vain attempt to stop the tremor in her voice and, suddenly, she felt every bit as young as her sixteen tender years.

James lashed out. "Well, I don't flippin' know!" He scowled. "Ask your mum or something. This is nothing to do with me!"

"It's your baby!" Lulu hissed, taking hold of his hand when

he would have distanced himself, the tears she'd been battling earlier finally bleeding out of the corner of her eyes and dribbling down her cheeks.

"Says you!" James sneered nastily, pulling from her and starting to walk away. "Could be anyone's. If it even exists. You don't even know for sure!"

Lulu bit back a sob and ran after him, grabbing his arm. "James, wait!" she implored. "Help me!"

James wrenched forcefully out of her grasp, the forward momentum unbalancing her and bringing Lulu to her knees.

"James, please stay, I need you!" Lulu begged at his retreating back, oblivious to the many looks of sympathy, pity and just plain nosiness of the crowd that had gathered at the back entrance of the smoothie bar and the odd expressions of disgust that followed James' withdrawal.

"Please!" The scream trailed into a sob as her shoulders shook under the sudden weight of knowledge that she was alone, that her future was effectively wrecked, and that judgement would follow close behind.

"This is your problem, not mine, Lulu. Just leave me alone." James glared at the group bunched in the small doorway and veered off to make his escape down the side of the building, leaving her alone and pathetic on the cold ground, surrounded by the whispers and occasional sniggers of her peers.

NINE WEEKS HAD PASSED since that horrible day, and now, there was really no doubt. Lulu had buried her head in the sand and she'd almost been able to kid herself that everything was normal. She'd stopped feeling sick and had enjoyed the mid-term break with her friends last week. This morning, she sat on her bed and cried. No matter how much she pulled or squeezed or tugged, she simply couldn't zip up the skirt of her school

uniform. She could no longer hide under loose tops and stretchy leggings. Her Catholic school uniform was unforgiving. Skirt, tailored shirt and blazer, there was nowhere to hide her growing tummy.

A light knock on the door heralded her mother's growing concern, her soft voice drifting through the wooden barrier. "Luanna, are you okay, sweetheart?"

Lulu curled up on the bed in a foetal position and let it all out. She couldn't hide it any longer. She was going to have to see the censure and disillusion in both her parents' faces.

ANOTHER FIVE WEEKS. It was almost Christmas. The baby was due in March. There had been no shouting or recriminations in the Morgan household. Just quiet acceptance and a gut-wrenching disappointment, which was somehow even worse. The knowledge that she had let her wonderful parents down led to a silent depression that Lulu couldn't seem to shake off.

Despite everything, they had taken it all in their stride. There had been no questions regarding the circumstances of her pregnancy or even the identity of the father. Lulu imagined they had guessed. She and James had been an item for a long time, prior to her fall from grace. He had spent time in their home, eaten meals at their table. He'd arrived outside their house in a limo with the requisite corsage to escort her to that fateful junior Prom.

Neither had there been any comments about the fact that he no longer came around.

Sometimes, she wondered what her parents really thought about it all, but she wouldn't ever ask. They existed in a happy state of 'non-discussion'. Her mother had bought her a school pinafore which hung from the yoke and did an admirable job of

covering her growing baby bump, and she had driven her to see their doctor and to the subsequent pre-natal check-ups.

If there were rumours beginning to circulate, then no one acknowledged them. Certainly, there was the usual bitchiness around school, but not even Cindy had dared to say anything to her face. If there was gossip in the community, then Lulu didn't know about it, but what flew around the school would undoubtedly spread to the rest of their relatively small and rural neighbourhood.

Sitting on her bed, absently twirling her pen and wondering if there was really any point in trying to finish her English essay, since it was obvious she wasn't going to be able to sit her end of year exams, Lulu was surprised to hear the front door slam and raised voices in the kitchen.

Slipping off the bed, she frowned as she ran quietly down the stairs but stopped short in the hallway, startled when she heard her usually placid father shouting. She started to back away, leaving her parents to the privacy of a rare argument, when she heard her name mentioned. Freezing in place, Lulu tried to make sense of the words then slumped against the wall and wished she hadn't heard.

"That bastard thinks his son can knock up my daughter and not only have no obligation, no accountability, but that he can just conveniently brush it all under the carpet, as well?"

"Calm down, William." Her mother's voice was still soft but held a heart-breaking tone of resignation. "We always knew there might be repercussions."

Her father's voice, on the other hand, held nothing but disbelief. "You expected something like this?"

"Getting upset won't change the facts, love. We need to work out how we move forward," her mother reasoned stoically.

"Hah!" her father spat. "We could always slap them with a paternity suit and make them take responsibility."

"You know that's not in the best interest of any of us," her

mother soothed. "Luanna doesn't need all the attention that would bring; she's already down enough. Besides, nothing could be proven until after the baby is born in three months' time. In the meantime, he'll have followed through with his threat to fire you and ruin your employment reputation. You'll have no job, no income, and no prospects. We won't be able to pay the mortgage, and the last thing we need is to find ourselves homeless with a new baby to care for."

Lulu's legs gave way beneath her and she slid slowly down the wall, oblivious to the silent tears that streamed down her face and fell in fat drops on the hands that she clamped over her mouth. Her dad worked as an accountant for one of the Fulford businesses. She had never imagined that his job might be in jeopardy because of this. She flinched as she heard a thump and a crash, closely followed by the sound of shattering glass.

"We risk losing the house, regardless!" her father raged. "There's no way we'll be able to sell quickly in the current climate. Fulford wants this move to be immediate. How the hell are we going to make that work?"

Lulu had never heard her father curse so much in her entire life. Her mother remained the voice of reason. Thank goodness for her calm pragmatism. Right now, Theresa Morgan was the glue that was holding their family together while circumstance did its best to tear everything down around them. And it was all her fault.

"We'll rent the house and take Fulford up on the relocation package."

"Pfft! I don't want to take anything that bastard's offering. Not his so-called promotion and not his 'alternative' accommodation offer! It's all a bloody sham, anyway. Just a convenient way to ship us all out so he and his randy flaming son don't look bad," William argued.

"We'll take it and look at it as a blessing in disguise," Theresa said firmly. "Once we're settled, we can find somewhere else to

live and you can start looking for a new job. We'll leave all of this behind, and we'll all be far away from any kind of retribution from that family."

Her mother sighed loudly. "We should be thankful for small mercies, William," she said seriously. "If the Fulfords decided they wanted this baby, they could just take it from us." Everything in the kitchen fell silent, and Lulu strained to listen with growing horror. "They're rich. It wouldn't be hard for them to claim that they have more to offer a child than a single teenage mother, and we wouldn't have any way to fight them."

Lulu wrapped her arms protectively around her waist. Until now, everything had seemed like a bad dream. A reality that she tried not to think about too often. Something that might be happening to someone else but not really to her. The fears her mother was voicing were more like a nightmare. Luanna braced herself as reality hit her in way that brought all her dormant maternal instincts surging to the surface with the force of a tsunami. This was *her* baby, and no one was ever going to take it away from her! She'd be the best damn mother she could be, regardless of her age, and she'd work just as hard as she had to, to make the best life she could for them both. There and then, she vowed never to give her parents any reason to regret their sacrifice.

In the kitchen, the lengthy silence was broken by another curse, followed by her father's voice, newly coloured with a menacing determination as he bit out, "Start packing!"

Chapter 1

Luanna sent silent thanks that Danny was staying with his grandparents for the weekend. At fifteen, he was plenty old enough to have stayed home alone, but she still would have worried. This way, she didn't have her attention pulled away from the very posh, very traditional, and very media intensive wedding of her two bosses, Desi Harper and Joel Blackwood. Of course, Danny had been invited, too, but, with Luanna being a member of the wedding party, he would have been all alone amongst a boatload of strangers. Not the most enjoyable way for a teenage boy to spend one of the precious days of his weekend.

It also meant that she didn't have to explain to her all too knowledgeable son exactly why she had invited a man to stay at their house overnight.

Not that there was anything untoward going on with Logan Thornton. Quite the opposite, in fact. There had been the most dreadful scene at the hotel, where the manager had gotten some ridiculous notion that Desi's chief bridesmaid, Charlotte Chapman, was some kind of high class call girl. He'd called security and had the poor woman thrown, none too gently, out onto the

street. Then he'd called the police, who had arrived to arrest her for soliciting.

The fiasco had led the best man, Jake Blackwood, to call for a boycott of the establishment, which was not only supposed to be hosting a private supper for the wedding party but was also providing the overnight accommodations for most of the out of town visitors.

For all Charlotte's resigned and stoic arguments against disrupting the wedding arrangements, Desi and the rest of the guests had been suitably horrified and so disgusted that they all wholeheartedly agreed to be relocated, despite the late hour, utilising whatever alternatives were available from a hastily sourced bridal suite in a newly established boutique hotel to Desi's empty apartment and any spare rooms that the local guests were able to offer.

And, for her own part, Luanna had been more than happy to offer up her guest room to Logan, the Blackwood lawyer and the groomsman with whom she'd been paired for the day.

There was nothing she detested more in life than the discrimination and prejudice of small-minded, pig-headed bigots. She'd endured enough of it in her thirty-two years to know exactly what it felt like to be on the receiving end, and she was glad that Desi had supported her friend and not taken the easy option of downplaying the incident. Despite Luanna's reputation as always being calm, serene and composed, there were some things that she would never, ever tolerate. If Desi had decided to continue with the hotel dinner and accommodation, Luanna might have been forced to vote with her feet and leave the celebrations, which would have placed her in an awkward position both personally and professionally.

The fact that Desi had chosen to disrupt her own wedding plans, in deference to Charlotte's feelings, just proved that her relatively new friend and boss, was exactly the kind of person

that Luanna believed her to be and one she was privileged to know.

As she showed her unexpected visitor to the bathroom, she excused herself to get out of her wedding outfit so she could progress to making up the guest bedroom. Well, that was a bit of a stretch. It was actually her son's room that Logan would be slumming it in. As she changed her clothes, it occurred to Luanna that her son's modest single bed was probably very much too small for a man the size of Logan Thornton. It was getting too small for her son, but Luanna had been waiting until she was more established in her job before she started splurging her fairly healthy salary on luxuries. Plus, she'd been socking every spare penny into a college fund for Danny before she ran out of time. Maybe she should have thought this invitation through a little better.

Donning a pair of comfy pyjama bottoms and a stretchy vest top, without giving so much as a thought to allure or artifice, Luanna brushed out her thick, dark red hair and decided she should offer her own bed to Logan. She could sleep in Danny's bed, herself.

Padding out of the room in her bare feet, Luanna stopped briefly, looked down at herself, and wondered if she should pull on a robe. Shrugging, she shook her head. It was too warm for that, and one look at her in her cosy pjs should be pretty convincing that she wasn't planning any kind of enticement. She laughed inwardly at the thought. For the past sixteen years, ever since she had first gotten pregnant with Danny, she had thought of herself as pretty nonsexual. There hadn't been time for relationships or even the odd dalliance. She had been too busy trying to restore a small amount of her parents' pride, by being the best mother she possibly could be, struggling to get herself some worthwhile qualifications while bringing up her son and learning to gracefully shrug off the taunts and the prejudices that inevitably came with being a single, young teen parent.

Neither had there been the opportunity. As supportive as her mum and dad had been, finishing school had been out of the question. They had given up a huge amount for her and Danny, though, to this day, they had never, ever mentioned it. All they had expected in return was for her to handle Danny's day to day care and apply her free time to correspondence courses to further her education, so that she would, one day, be in a position to be independent. In the meantime, they had both gone out to work to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. They had never been able to sell the old house, and although it was rented much of the time, Luanna knew there were periods when it had been empty and her parents had struggled to cover that mortgage as well as the rent on their new home.

If she'd felt lonely when she was younger, well, that was her own stupid fault. She'd made her bed and she had to lie in it. No one to blame but herself. Of course, she hadn't felt she'd deserved a lot of what had been thrown at her. The taunts from both other teenagers and adults branding her as a whore. The subtle and not so subtle rebukes from parents determined to keep both their sons and their daughters away from her, since she must undoubtedly be some kind of dreadful influence.

It had been character building if nothing else. And things hadn't been so bad since Danny had started high school a few years ago and she no longer had to loiter on the periphery of the school gates, shunned and gossiped about by the older parents. Although there had been that one occasion, a few months ago, when she had been mortified to hear one of Danny's school friends comment on how hot his 'older sister' was. Surprised, too. She had worked so hard when she was younger to exude an aura of calm maturity, in order to somehow compensate for her actual age, that it was second nature now. She didn't think she came across as young anymore. She certainly didn't have the willowy figure of Danny's female friends. In fact, Luanna was decidedly curvy. She had never been stick thin to start with, but she'd

carried extra weight ever since she fell pregnant and sported an hourglass figure that was heavy on the bust and pretty similar on the hips. Much more of an old fashioned 1950s pinup girl than the twig thin models that were endorsed by today's society.

Dated! In fact, despite her history, sometimes she felt like she had never been young at all.

Luanna sighed. She couldn't complain. She'd been lucky. Her parents had been amazing, supportive, loving and non-judgemental.

They still were. Danny had never lacked for a strong father figure in his life, because they had lived at home with her parents until Luanna was twenty-five. By then, Danny had already had his eighth birthday and it wasn't as if they had moved far away. Just enough to establish some independence and to give her parents a much-needed break from the responsibility of Luanna and their grandson. Now, Danny was a credit to them and to her, as well. He was responsible and mature, and she considered him to be her friend as much as her son. If she found it odd that he kidded with her about finding a boyfriend, then she just laughed about it. If he'd been here to see Logan, he would have teased her unmercifully and ribbed her about jumping his bones and remembering to use protection. It was almost as if, as he grew older, he had subconsciously taken on the role of a brother or something. Maybe he was establishing himself as the man of the house.

Whatever; she knew that she would find the situation far more embarrassing than Danny would.

As she potted around the kitchen, she heard the shower shut off and busied herself making a pot of tea for a nightcap. She was just pouring it out when Logan finished in the bathroom and came to find her.

Luanna's gaze locked onto his bare, washboard abs and naked, muscled chest adorned only with a somewhat surprising tribal tattoo which feathered elegantly from the crest of his left

pec, entwined his shoulder and looped gracefully down his bicep. For a moment, she was so startled, she forgot to breathe.

A moment later, she recovered herself and hastily looked away, cursing her red hair and the fair skin that came with it, knowing that the flush that started on her chest and crawled up her face would be evident. The only thing she wasn't sure about was whether that flush was caused by being caught staring at her guest's undeniably sexy body or from the wave of unexpected desire that took her by surprise. She hadn't had that sort of reaction to a man since...ever!

Luanna swallowed and kept her eyes lowered while she pushed a mug of hot tea towards him over the kitchen counter and fumbled the milk and sugar as she placed them in front of him, not daring to reach for her own cup in case the sudden tremor that shook her fingers gave her away.

Logan Thornton smiled at the reaction from the woman in front of him, quite charmed by the blush that warmed her cheeks.

After being involved with the BDSM Club Risqué for almost fifteen years, he thought nothing of walking around shirtless, and he'd almost forgotten that there were still women in the world who didn't look at him with a certain speculation and calculation in their eyes rather than honest appreciation. It was quite refreshing if he was honest.

Things had been interesting in recent months, what with the Blackwood Corporation's threatened takeover of Universal Holdings, which had led, instead, to a merger or two. Firstly, that of the two companies and then the marriage of Joel, the CEO, and Desi, the CFO, of their respective companies. That, in turn, had led to him and his friends—Jake, Joel and Connor—buying the local club, Perversions, which was currently undergoing refurbishment to turn it into the second Club Risqué, here on the east coast. The original Club Risqué was a thousand miles away on the south coast and, though the four of them had been members

there since their late teens, they had gotten together to buy it out four years ago. Now, this new club was being modelled on that one. Not identical. The first club was sumptuous and lavish, whereas the new club had a much younger, industrial vibe going on and also incorporated a dance club—albeit with some rather 'exotic' entertainment—but the ethos remained the same. Providing an exclusive and strictly monitored venue for members to enjoy the BDSM lifestyle under their mission statement of 'safe, sane and consensual'.

Still, regardless of the kink, just like any lifestyle choice, there was still the danger of getting jaded and stuck in a rut. It was good to shake things up a little bit, on occasion, and Logan considered the chance to spend a little time with a beautiful woman outside the D/s community his good fortune. It was nice to kick back sometimes and explore the alternatives. It was something he had little opportunity to pursue, as a rule. Not that he was tempted to stray too far out of the box. His was a pretty mild kink, compared to many, but it would still never be viewed as anything but a fetish.

Hojojutsu, the ancient Samurai martial art of restraining captives with cord, which had evolved into Kinbaku, or erotic rope bondage, was now generally referred to in the west as 'Shibari'. Of course, Logan liked to pair it with suspension techniques, as well. Recently, he had been turning his attention to photography, another hobby of his, but one he had been increasingly interested in pairing with his first love. He had yet to find a satisfactory model for the series of artistic Shibari photographs he was keen to produce, but he was constantly looking.

He couldn't help the speculative look he gave Luanna, as inappropriate as it might be. It had become almost a reflex action to consider virtually every woman he came into contact with for their suitability to his pet project.

In fact, Luanna Morgan ticked a lot of boxes. She was curvy but tall with it, exactly what he was looking for; and her red hair

and pale skin would provide the ideal canvas for his rope work and would look stunning in photographs.

Logan bit back a groan. If he started teasing himself with just how perfect she might be, then he'd drive himself mad because he knew damn well that Desi's finance manager probably wouldn't be open to the suggestion. Just his luck!

The truth was that he found himself hugely attracted to the woman, in a way that hadn't hit him for years. It wasn't just her looks, although he had to admit that, for him at least, she had the perfect figure. It was her whole persona.

Throughout the day, regardless of the normal wedding stresses and nerves, never mind the appalling fiasco with Charlotte Chapman and the subsequent, last minute change in plans and accommodations that had sent everyone else into a frenzy, Luanna had remained composed, serene and supportive. Her well-modulated voice had stayed calm and soothing throughout, and her compelling aura of tranquillity had rubbed off on everyone around her for the entire time. The woman was quite beguiling, and Logan couldn't help but find himself irresistibly drawn to her. And he also couldn't help fantasising about just what it would take to ruffle all that poise and self-control.

Damn, but she was appealing. It wasn't like him to be thrown so off kilter by a woman. Within his circle of friends and, further, throughout his career and even the club, Logan was considered to be the male counterpart of Luanna. Always the cool, calm and collected attorney, always the dignified, unflappable voice of reason. And maybe, if he was honest, always the most dull and unexciting. Hence the tattoo, the shoulder length hair and the contact lenses that he replaced his spectacles with outside of the office in an attempt to counter the staid and sombre lawyer persona that he seemed to carry with him everywhere. Logan frowned and wondered if Luanna was perceived in the same manner. Never one to beat about the bush, he had the feeling that Luanna was indeed of the same ilk.

Rounding the breakfast bar that separated them, Logan stood in front of Luanna and placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. She tipped her head only slightly to look at him, a good five-foot-nine to his own six-foot. Her eyes were clear and questioning—no coyness and no calculation.

"I'm attracted to you, Luanna. Are you involved with anyone?"

The slight widening of her eyes was the only evidence that he had surprised her, but she held his gaze and neither pulled away nor swayed against him.

"I've been a single parent for the past fifteen years," she replied frankly. "I've had my son to think about and haven't considered myself as a participant in the dating game."

Though she remained smooth and unfazed, Logan noted the gallop in the pulse at the base of her throat. His lips drew up slightly in the merest hint of a smile, and he searched her eyes.

"Do you have any objection to trying?" he asked.

"I..." Luanna was momentarily lost for words, but the truth settled undeniably into her consciousness. She was thirty-two years old. She had no ties. Her son was old enough to take her dating in his stride and not be disrupted by it. In fact, he'd be delighted. For the first time since her mid-teens, her life was her own. Dating had never been a consideration but now that she was confronted with the opportunity...

"No," she replied then clarified, "I don't have any objection." Still mesmerised by his stunning amber eyes—eyes that reminded her of those of a lion. Eyes which, right now, had darkened and softened but were still no less intense.

His lips curved sensuously. "Good," he breathed against her mouth as his head dipped closer. And then all thought ceased as his soft, full lips covered hers.

The world spun away as Logan nipped and nibbled, feathering licks against the edges of her mouth, softly probing and discovering. He gathered her closer, one arm around her waist,

the other cupping her cheek while her soft curves nestled perfectly against his hard edges as if they had been made for each other. Two halves of the same whole, being fitted back together. In a brief moment of clarity, Luanna was shocked at her own uncharacteristic romanticism, but then his tongue breached the seam of her lips and tangled with her own, and all her usual sensibilities receded in the wake of the pleasure he invoked.

She was surprised at how she felt the loss of his lips as Logan buried his hand further into her hair and grazed the skin below her ear. But then he tightened his fist, and the slight pull against her scalp sent splintering sensations zinging all the way to her core. Her nipples pebbled against the thin tank she wore and, as he nibbled his way down her neck to her collarbone, her skin felt unusually sensitised. Luanna shuddered and pressed instinctively closer. She could feel the hard length of his erection pressing into her belly and was overcome with the desire to throw her customary caution and reserve to the wind and revel in the new and decadent responses this man evoked in her.

Since Danny's conception, she'd had only one other sexual encounter. In her mid-twenties, not long after she had moved into her first flat, when she was newly independent, finally out of her parents' home and feeling unusually lonely, she'd given in to what had turned into a brief fling. She'd been flattered by the interest, overcome by the longing to have something for herself—a little personal consideration, a little attention.

Of course, Michael had decided he didn't want to become an instant father to a ten-year-old and had kept his distance from Danny, which, at least, meant that her son hadn't become attached to a man who would have eventually let him down. And sadly, that was probably the only good thing to come out of the whole encounter. The novelty had worn off within weeks. The reality of trying to juggle a child-reserved boyfriend and the inevitable babysitter requirement was exhausting and expensive

and, coupled with the mediocre sex, she decided that it simply wasn't worth the time or the effort. She had chalked it up to experience, resolutely learned from the brief encounter and not bothered to consider men as an addition to her life for years... not until now. Not until Logan Thornton had whirled into her life, caused her to throw out an uncharacteristic, overnight invitation and proceeded to turn her carefully crafted life upside down.

The question now was how far she was prepared to let things go.

Logan drew back, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he apologised. "I didn't mean to overwhelm you and take things quite that far...just a simple kiss; that was my plan, but you are so very tempting." He smiled softly, genuinely, as he took her hand in his and placed a sweet kiss on the back of her fingers.

In that moment, Luanna knew exactly how far she was prepared to take things with this man. The speed with which things had progressed may have surprised her, but she instinctively knew that she would always regret not exploring all the possibilities with someone who could turn her insides to jelly with just a kiss. Someone who had elicited more of a response from her entire body, with only the slightest intent, than any man before him.

"I'm not very experienced, and I don't know the first thing about seduction," Luanna said plainly. "But I think I would like it if you made love to me."

"Oh, I'd make certain of that!" Logan murmured, kneading his free hand down her back, gentling her. The sensual stroking did more for Luanna than if he'd fondled and groped at her. She had too many sour memories of that kind of behaviour from her teenage years when her big boobs had led to all the lads having a one-track mind.

She felt an inherent respect radiating from Logan, which filled her with the certainty that he would never push, never try

to manipulate her into more than she was happily ready to concede. Conversely, that knowledge made Luanna all the more willing to acquiesce to anything he wished to propose.

Luanna shook her head and laughed. "This isn't me! I don't do one-night stands with men I barely know. I haven't had a lover in over five years." She looked carefully at his expression, watching to see if she could detect horror or doubt in his features, since he was undoubtedly so much more worldly-wise and experienced, but there was nothing but appreciation in his eyes.

"I'm not looking for a one-night stand, Luanna," Logan reassured, feathering long fingers down her cheek. "I'd like to see where this goes."

Luanna nodded and pressed an almost chaste kiss to his tempting lips. "I'm a pretty straight forward kinda gal. If I decide to do something, then I'm all in. No matter how this works out, there'll be no regrets. No recriminations. I don't persist in unrealistic expectations; whatever we decide, here and now, I'm very well aware that there are no guarantees."

"I like that attitude, sweetheart. It's very refreshing." Logan's fingers continued to massage her spine, each movement sending little pulses of sensation to run throughout her nerve-endings and pool in her lower abdomen. The feeling was as thrilling as it was alien, and it made her uncharacteristically squirmy.

"That said, I don't go in for the whole 'subterfuge' thing. Despite having a teenage son, I'm not up for creeping around and pretending we're not what we are, so you need to be on board with that," Luanna declared. "If office politics dictates that you refuse to acknowledge me in front of our co-workers, then say so now. We can enjoy what's left of the night and go our separate ways."

Logan had the feeling that Luanna would always keep him on his toes. She had surprised him yet again. Basically, confirming that, even if he balked at the prospect of dating

someone within the company, she would still be prepared to take him to her bed and make the most of the chemistry which sizzled electrically between them in the here and now. The knowledge deepened his fledgling feelings for this woman in an instant. He liked a woman who was prepared to be honest about her pleasure. She was definitely a keeper.

"I'm too old for creeping around, myself, believe me. I have no interest in any kind of subterfuge. That's not how I work," Logan reassured. "But what about your son? If he's used to having you to himself, will he be okay with you having a new man in your life? I don't want to rock the boat."

"Danny is fifteen and mature for his age." She chuckled wryly. "We are very close but, to be honest, he's been at me to date for a while now. I think it's so he can leave for college with a clear conscience instead of entertaining any guilt at leaving me on my own."

An unexpectedly cheeky grin spread across Luanna's face. "He might be quite surprised if I actually do it, though!"

Logan smiled back at her, surprisingly content just to hold her in the circle of his arms.

But before he could do more than dip his head to taste her lips again, Luanna spoke once more, the seriousness clear in her tone. "There is one thing." She brought one hand to his shoulder as if to hold him back.

Logan nodded once in acknowledgement and waited for her to continue.

"My friendship with Desi means I'm privy to certain..." she paused, clearly thinking about how to word whatever she had to say "...'sensitive' information."

Logan frowned, wondering where this was going, but he didn't jump in.

"I'm aware that Joel and Desi—and also Jake—share certain...ah...appetites."

Logan raised an eyebrow. He hadn't expected a conversation about kink quite so early on in their relationship.

Luanna pursed her lips and considered him carefully. "I also know, from the conversations we've had, that several of their friends share those proclivities." She took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but seeing you all together today and how you interact, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that you are probably one of them."

Logan gave a measured nod and held her thoughtful gaze. "What is it you want to know?" he asked.

She seemed to relax imperceptibly in his hold, now that first hurdle was breached.

"I want to know what that means for any relationship we embark on."

Logan's smile lit up the corners of Luanna's dimly lit kitchen before he dipped his head and nipped possessively at her lips. "You are a remarkable woman, you know that?" He chuckled.

Luanna shrugged. "I'm just honest."

Logan nodded. "Like I said, remarkable," he reiterated, pulling her close and wrapping her tight in a protective kind of hug and burying his face into the crook of her neck, kissing the skin there before he loosened his hold and looked down at her again.

He let out a deep breath. "I had no agenda when I accepted your invitation to stay here tonight," he told her candidly. "I've been attracted to you since we first met, six months ago, but I wasn't necessarily going to act on that. I didn't know whether it would be acceptable or appropriate."

Luanna nodded, appreciating his frankness.

"After spending the day together, getting to know you better, experiencing the chemistry between us, I realised that I wanted to explore the possibilities." Logan cupped her chin and smoothed his thumb across her cheekbone, enjoying her dewy,

soft skin and wondering idly if the rest of her body would be as sweet.

"Even when I stated my interest, there was no calculation involved. In the back of my mind—and I'm definitely speaking subconscious here—I guess I imagined that we'd see how things went. If it seemed like something you might be open to, then I suppose I would have broached the subject, but I definitely thought it would be one of those conversations that we'd have when we knew each other a whole lot better and had a more definite idea about where things were heading."

Luanna frowned. "So it's not something that you can't live without, then?" she asked pragmatically.

"I've never tried," Logan replied honestly. "I've never been in a position where I've needed to make a choice, but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't, if the right woman came along."

Luanna shrugged. "I don't know anything about any kind of kink." She frowned. "Heck, I barely know anything about sex!" she added, her voice laden with self-mockery. "But I'm not generally against trying new things." She tipped her head to one side. "What is it you like doing to your kink partners, Logan?" she asked guilelessly.

Logan stroked his thumb against her mouth, liking the way his name sounded on her lips, his eyes intense as they bored into hers.

"I am generally considered to be a Dominant, and my 'kink partners', as you so quaintly put it, are submissives."

Luanna drew in a breath. She wasn't so far behind the times that she didn't have an inkling of what those things meant. She'd read 'Fifty Shades of Grey', even found it titillating. For a moment, however, her mind went completely blank and she forgot to breath.

Logan watched Luanna's pupils dilate, and one side of his mouth kicked up in a half smile as he wondered what she was

thinking. The silence swirled heavily around them for several long seconds.

"What I like to do with those submissives..." he whispered when she didn't say anything more "...is tie them up."

Luanna swallowed and realised that her mouth had suddenly gone dry.

"Have you ever heard of Shibari?" Logan asked, moving his thumb to stroke at the length of her throat and short-circuiting her thought processes.

Realising that he had asked her a question, Luanna scrambled for an answer. "No," she rasped, stopping to clear her throat before she continued. "But I have heard of Google."

Logan threw his head back and laughed; the sound was deep and throaty, and it did funny things to her insides all on its own. Jeez, the man was lethal!

"Damn, I like you, Luanna," he replied with an equally killer smile. "I think we could have something really good together."