

DREAMING IN MOONLIGHT

An Exclusive Short Story By Francis Ray

“DREAMING IN MOONLIGHT”

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DREAMING IN MOONLIGHT

Shawn Donovan radiated a lethal sexual energy that caused sensible women to throw caution to the winds and fall willingly into his bed. Three inches over six feet, he was lean and trim with not an ounce of fat on the hard muscles of his rugged frame. Smoky gray eyes beneath incredibly long lashes promised the fulfillment of every woman's fantasy. His laugh was as rich and as tempting as dark chocolate truffles, and just as addictive.

Not many women could be expected to withstand such temptation unless they were blind or senile. Rebecca Ames' nineteen-year-old sister, Nikki, was neither. But she wasn't going to be Shawn Donovan's next victim. One victim at that age in the family was more than enough. Rebecca had crashed a party he was attending at a penthouse in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel near downtown Dallas to throw another woman into his path...herself.

Her quarry stood in the center of a group of admiring females on the terrace. With consummate ease and skill of a seasoned hunter searching for his prey, he had kept on the move.

Men looked at him with envy; the women who hadn't been able to gain his attention with longing. Rebecca didn't have the luxury of waiting for him to notice her. Taking a deep breath, she started toward the small group.

After a week of thinking and worrying about Nikki working at Shawn's cooperation, and finding out everything she could about him, Rebecca didn't think reasoning would do any good. He was known as a fierce corporate raider. Reportedly, nothing stood in the way of what he wanted.

The only thing Rebecca could think of to divert his attention away from her little sister until they left for their New Orleans' vacation in three weeks was another woman. Rebecca had dressed the part to grab a man's attention and keep it solely focused on her.

Her long red-silk gown clung reverently to the sleek curves of her five-foot-five body, plunged to her trim waist in front and draped so low in the back that a rounded hip was revealed with each step in the four-inch red stiletto heels. It had taken most of her courage to wear the dress; the rest was being exerted walking toward the man who had suddenly looked up.

She was caught by the unexpected impact of his eyes. Hot shivers raced down her spine. Her body felt restless. She tried to swallow and couldn't. The sultry smile she'd planned never materialized. She came to a dead stop. Shawn Donovan was even more dangerous than she had imagined.

How could her sister, who seldom dated, be expected to withstand his sexual magnetism when Rebecca was having trouble from fifteen feet away? Unsteady fingers gripped the beaded evening bag. She made a quick decision to flee. Turning abruptly, she headed for the front door. If necessary, she'd kidnap Nikki.

"Change your mind?" queried a deep voice cloaked in velvet and as tempting as sin.

Rebecca's mouth dried. *Shawn Donovan*. Although she had never heard him speak, her body recognized his voice on some elemental level. Bad. Very bad.

Lean, surprisingly gentle fingers closed around her bare forearm. Hot shivers raced through her as she wondered what she had gotten herself into?

Exerting a minimum of pressure, Shawn Donovan turned her to him. He was so close she felt the heat from his muscled body, smelled his spicy aftershave. His size dwarfed her, but she didn't feel fear, perhaps it would have been better than the frisson of heat, the dawning desire.

Slowly, Rebecca's gaze moved from the startling white pleated shirt to the stubborn chin, the sensual curve of his mouth, his strong nose until she encountered his intense gray gaze. The stunning impact caused her breath to catch in her throat. She worked hard to get an answer past the constriction.

"I beg your pardon?" Rebecca finally managed, hoping her voice held just the right amount of hauteur, and that it sounded steadier than her shaking knees felt.

An indulgent smile curved his beautifully shaped lips. "Since you arrived an hour ago, you've done nothing but watch me and rebuff men trying to pick you up."

Unease filled her. She thought she'd been discreet. She would have sworn Shawn never looked her way. "I haven't—"

"Please don't bother denying it or the fact that I've seen you a couple of times near my office building. If you weren't so beautiful and looked harmless, I might have thought you were a stalker and reported you to the police," he said, still studying her.

This man saw too much. She should have suspected he'd be perceptive. Two of his close business associates were Daniel Falcon and Blade Navarone. Both were immensely wealthy men who were known to make others quake with just a look.

"Do you always threaten people you just meet?" she asked.

Shawn shrugged broad shoulders beneath an impeccably cut black dinner jacket. "If it's necessary. You've been following me. I'd like to know why."

The playfulness had left his voice. The mouth she thought so beautiful flattened into a hard, unforgiving line. Shawn Donovan was a powerful businessman in Dallas. The city and the state loved him.

He might have transferred his corporate headquarters from Atlanta only six months ago, but the city and state had welcomed him with open arms. One word from him and her gourmet chocolate shop, which was steadily gaining a reputation as one of the best in the area, would die a quick, painful death.

"I'm a free-lance writer and I wanted to do a story on you," she glanced away. She'd never been a good at lying or bluffing. Tonight she had to do both.

"What have you written?" he questioned, reaching out to turn her face toward his. The light touch went through her like quicksilver. From the sudden narrowing of his gaze, he'd felt the same impact.

Wrong man. Wrong time. With an effort, she met his gaze. "Mostly art pieces, but I want to branch out," she improvised. "You're the perfect choice. You're an art patron and haven't given an interview in the last year, not after you were--" She stopped abruptly. Heat flushed her cheeks.

His eyes chilled. "Named in a paternity suit," he finished tightly.

"Yes," Rebecca answered, deciding if she had his attention she might as well try to keep it. Besides, Shawn didn't impress her as the type of man to put up with shrinking violets. She didn't like deception, but she'd do whatever it took to keep Nikki safe and happy.

Since their parents' death five years ago, Rebecca had sole responsibility for her baby sister. Because Nikki won a full scholarship to Southern Methodist University in

Dallas, and hadn't wanted them to be apart, Rebecca had quit her job as manager of Sweet Temptation, a gourmet chocolate store in Washington DC, relocated and opened her own store, CocoNikki. That had been two years ago.

"You people had a field day at my expense," he complained, his jaw tight.

"You're news. People wanted to know."

"All the media wanted was to sell magazines and newspapers or increase their ratings on television and the radio...no matter what it did to my personal life." His face harshened. "Once she was proven a liar, I didn't receive one word of apology."

Rebecca didn't understand or like the sudden urge to comfort him. The media had done a number on him until the woman's ex-lover came forward to proclaim he was the father. A paternity test proved the man was right and Shawn was vindicated. Shawn Donovan was news; a spurned woman in Atlanta hoping to hit the jackpot was not. "Perhaps if you let me interview you and you explained your side of the story, you could show the media was biased," she suggested.

"Let's get a drink," he said instead of answering her.

"Wait," she said and was ignored. His hold was gentle but inflexible as he easily maneuvered through the crush of people to a portable bar.

"What'll you have?" he asked.

"My arm." She didn't like the way his touch made her feel, all tingly and fueling a growing yearning to be held by him.

Unexpectedly, he smiled. If he was handsome before, he was devastating now. Rebecca caught herself before she succumbed and reached out to touch one of the irresistible dimples in his cheeks.

"I think I'd rather keep it, but if you insist," he replied.

Instead of releasing her, his large hand slid up her arm, then down her back to rest above her hips on bare skin. Fire and an increasing need trailed in the wake of his touch. She moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue.

His narrowed gaze followed the movement. His smoky eyes went almost black. "The next time you do that, be prepared to suffer the consequences."

Her breath hissed with a sharp intake of breath. She wasn't naïve enough not to know what he was talking about. In spite of herself, something inside her stirred in anticipation of his mouth against hers - hungry and fierce.

His hold tightened. She realized he must have seen the yearning in her face. She was out of her league with Shawn. She'd been too busy working and taking care of Nikki to even think about men. Besides, after Ben Carter had done a number on her when she was a sophomore in college, men hadn't been high on her list. Their shotgun wedding was over in less than nine months. That was over ten years ago. In all that time, she hadn't had more than a casual interest in men - until tonight.

Embarrassed, she tried to pull away. The gesture proved futile. Moving them away from the bar to a quiet alcove, Shawn's other hand settled on the curve of her waist, exerting enough pressure for their lower bodies to mesh. Belly to belly, thigh to thigh. There was no way to hide each body's hunger for the other.

As heat and desire coursed over her, her nipples tightened and hardened. She fought the urge to move against the hard, urgent arousal pressing against her belly.

"Please," she murmured, knowing if she didn't get away soon, she wouldn't want to.

The pad of his thumb began making lazy, enticing circles in the small of her back, making her want to arch against him, to take his mouth. "On one condition."

"Anything," she blurted.

His smile became predatory, a flash of brilliantly white teeth in a darkly handsome face. "Perhaps you shouldn't have said that."

Her heart thudded. "I...I meant within reason."

"Have dinner with me tomorrow?"

Her relief was so great that she almost sagged in his arms. "All right."

"Now that's settled, where I can pick you up?" he asked, the teasing light back in his face.

"Why don't I meet you here in the lobby? We can have dinner at Fearing's."

"Will seven work for you?"

She nodded, pleased that he had been thoughtful enough to ask. "I have to leave now."

The predatory look returned to his face, but now it held a hint of possessiveness. "Any other time I might argue, but I don't like the way most of the men are looking at you."

She'd forgotten about the dress. Her shoulders hunched; her head lowered.

"Don't," he said tightly. "Never bow to or beg anyone! If you do they'll walk over you."

Her head came up; her spine straightened. From his unforgiving profile she got a quick impression of how, right after graduating from college, he had taken over his father's almost bankrupt manufacturing company.

Within two years he was turning a profit. By the fourth he began expanding, gobbling up smaller, weaker companies. Donovan Corporation had been on Forbes' Top 100 list for the past seven years. He'd be a hard man to fight against and win.

But that was just what Rebecca had to do. Without a word, she moved away, much too aware that Shawn was beside her as she made her way to the lavish bedroom serving as a cloakroom.

Obtaining her long black cape, she thanked the attendant. When she opened her clutch to tip the woman, Shawn handed the woman a bill that made her eyes widen. Taking Rebecca's arm once again, he led her to the foyer, then waved the waiting butler away, leaving them alone.

"Good night, Shawn."

"Are you going to tell me your name, or should I call you the beautiful lady in red?"

She flushed. "It's Rebecca, Rebecca Ames." Her real first name and her mother's maiden name.

"Good night, Rebecca."

The way he said her name made her toes want to curl. Well aware that she had to quickly get out of there before she did something very foolish, she started past him.

The instant she was even with him, his arm shot out and curved around her waist, bringing her flush against him again. Her startled cry was captured by his mouth against hers. She expected the power; she wasn't prepared for the assault to her senses. The quick blast of heat, the turbulence, shocked her, dazed her. Her heart raced. She grabbed a fistful of his shirt and held on.

His tongue, hot and thorough, stroked hers, teased her, leaving her weak. She strained closer, lost in the pleasure of his mouth, his hands caressing her bare skin.

His head abruptly lifted. She wanted to cry out at the loss. Their breathing loud in the foyer, they stared at each other. Large, tender hands cupped her face, his warm lips brushed over hers in a caress so sweet, tears pricked her eyes. Tenderness from a man reported to be unforgiving almost undid her.

“Now that you have my attention, wear something tomorrow that both of us will feel comfortable with.”

There it was again, his uncanny ability to discern her thoughts. She fought to recover from his kiss that had emptied her mind and filled it with need. “Why did you say that?”

Ignoring her question, he bent to pick up the cape she had dropped when she’d been clinging to him like wet tissue paper. Draping the cape over her shoulders, he fastened the clasp.

“Well,” she prompted.

“You skirted the room with your evening bag clutched in front of you like a shield. It wasn’t difficult to figure out that you usually wear more than a wisp of cloth.” His hot gaze ran over her like silent, greedy fingers. “Do you have any idea what it does to me to realize all you have beneath is perfumed silken skin?”

Desire rushed through her. Confused she stared at him. How could only his words make her want him with this almost mindless need?

Leaning over, he ran his tongue over the sensitive cord in her neck, then nipped. She whimpered, her head lolling back.

His breathing unsteady he muttered, "Perhaps you do." Reluctantly, he stepped back, his thumb grazing over her moist lower lip as if he couldn't keep from touching her. "I'll see you downstairs to your car. You're too tempting to be left alone."

Too many erratic, and yes, erotic thoughts were in Rebecca's mind to answer. Taking her silence for consent, Shawn led her to the elevator. Inside, he pushed the lit button for the lobby.

The doors had barely closed in the polished enclosure before Shawn removed her cape, tossed it over his shoulder and pulled her into his arms again. His kiss blocked out everything except the heat and hardness of his body against hers.

"You could be addictive." Once again he draped her cape over her shoulders, then as if he hadn't just ravished her mouth, he politely took her arm just as the elevator doors began to open.

Stepping off, they were greeted by a uniformed security guard. She'd been able to slip by him earlier by going up with two women who did have an invitation to the party. Both women had been loud. Obviously they'd wanted everyone to know where they were going.

"Hello, Mr. Donovan." The security guard pulled a radio from his belt. "Do you need your car?"

"No thanks, Vince." Shawn smiled easily at the young man. "Ms. Ames does." He turned to Rebecca. "If you'll give me your claim check, they'll get your car."

"Of course." Opening the clutch, she handed Shawn the ticket, which he promptly handed to the security guard.

“Mr. Donovan’s guest’s car is number 78924. Please bring it up. Guest waiting.” He shut the radio off and handed the ticket back to Shawn, who unobtrusively exchanged it with a folded bill. Vince pocketed the money without looking at it. “Thank you, Mr. Donovan.”

Taking Rebecca’s arm, they started toward the entrance. Nearing the front, the noise level increased. People spilled out of the Rattlesnake Bar to the opulent lobby or lounged in the area waiting for a table at Dean Fearing’s famed restaurant. Rebecca was caught again by the huge table in the center of the lobby that held beautiful glass candles. In the middle was an elegant white floral arrangement on a raised platform. Shining down on the table was a spectacular crystal chandelier. She paused.

“You like candles and flowers?” he asked.

“What woman doesn’t?” she answered and continued. “You don’t have to wait. There’s no telling how long this will take,” she told him when she saw the line of people waiting for their cars, the valets rushing to get their vehicles as fast as possible.

“Why don’t we see?” he said.

“Your guest’s car is on the way, Mr. Donovan,” a uniformed man said.

“Thanks, Henry,” Shawn said. “The service here is always outstanding.”

“Only the best for our guests,” the man said. “Here it is.” He held out his arm toward the black Lexus. The valet got out and stood by the driver’s door.

“Change your mind about leaving?” Shawn asked.

“N-No,” Rebecca stammered, finally moving. She’d forgotten she’d rented the car to go with the sophisticated look.” She could just imagine Shawn’s reaction to her seven- year-old Volkswagen.

Personally seating her, Shawn swept her cape out of the way of the door.

“Tomorrow at seven.”

She nodded, then reached for her purse. “I’ll take care of it. Drive safely.” He closed her door and stepped back. Throwing him one last uneasy look, she fastened her seatbelt and put the car into drive. She’d gotten Shawn’s attention. Now, what was she going to do with it?

Driving home, Rebecca could still remember the texture and taste of Shawn’s mouth on hers. It was only when she let herself into her house that she remembered Nikki. She gripped the door knob as shame hit her. She loved Nikki more than anything or anyone. There wasn’t any sacrifice too great. Yet, the moment Shawn kissed her for a second time, she had forgotten her sister and became a woman attracted to a man.

She paused briefly by her sister’s closed bedroom door down the hall from her own. Thankfully, Nikki had a group project due tomorrow and had met her team at the library, leaving Rebecca free to entrap Shawn.

Troubled, Rebecca continued to her room and prepared for bed. This wasn’t working out the way she’d planned. She, better than anyone, knew how a man’s lies could sway you to believe anything. She’d believed every one of fellow Howard University sophomore Ben Carter’s sweet lies that he loved her and wanted them to be together forever.

That had abruptly changed when she’d become pregnant. After her parents found out, her father, a minister, married them himself. Two months later she’d lost the baby.

Tears pricked her eyes at the memory of the loss. Ben quickly filed for divorce. He hadn't wanted her or the baby.

She'd learned a bitter lesson. Easing between the sheets, she switched off the lamp on the nightstand, and stared into the darkness. She promised herself that the next time she saw Shawn, she wasn't going to be swayed by his good looks or hot kisses.

A little before seven the next evening, Rebecca pulled under the portico of the Ritz-Carlton. Waiting hands opened the door of the rental, and gave her a claim ticket. Rounding the back of the car, she saw Shawn. She paused in surprise as much as from the sheer impact of the man. He was dangerously sexy and absolutely gorgeous. Her heart thudded, the palms of her hands dampened. She wanted to touch him, stroke him. He was a walking angel with a devil's smile. The promise she'd made last night came rushing back.

She'd failed and he had yet to touch her.

More than a bit panicked, Rebecca took a step back and looked at her car, but it was already pulling away. Then she felt a warm, masculine hand on her arm, scattering her thoughts.

"Come on, Rebecca. It's dangerous standing here." Taking her arm, Shawn entered the Ritz-Carlton's lobby, smoothly taking the claim ticket from Rebecca's unsteady hand and putting it into the pocket of his charcoal gray suit jacket. "You look beautiful."

Inescapable pleasure spread through her as his possessive gaze wandered over the peach-colored suit she wore. “Thank you,” she managed, her voice a bit breathless, longing in her eyes.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I might let us have each other for dinner,” he said, his voice low and filled with promise.

Her lids closed as a sudden shaft of heat and need swept through her. The erotic picture of their bodies entwined entered her mind, but just as quickly it was replaced by Nikki’s tear-stained face. She wouldn’t let Shawn leave her sister in tears, as Ben had left Rebecca.

Her eyes opened. She stepped away. “We should go in before all the tables are taken.”

Dark brows arched. “I don’t wait on a table or anything else.”

His terse words were like a back-hand slap, unexpected and painful. Her hurt was no less because she had led him to believe that she was easy prey. “I don’t come under the heading of ‘anything else’. Good bye, Shawn.” Pivoting, she headed back outside.

She’d barely taken three steps before Shawn’s hand clamped on her arm. He maneuvered her to a quiet alcove, his large body blocking her from view. She was too angry to be afraid, yet somehow she knew he wouldn’t hurt her. He just made her mad as hell. “Turn me loose or I’m screaming. Security will be here before the sound fades.”

Shawn's anger was just as hot. "Don't you walk away from me unless you plan to keep on walking. I don't have time to play games. Either you want me or you don't. Bottom line."

"Wanting you doesn't mean I have to pay off like a slot machine. There's more to a relationship than sex. Did it ever occur to you that I might not be sure of myself?" He straightened away from her and looked taken aback. "This is not a takeover you're conducting," she said tightly, hating that her voice trembled, hating even more that she wasn't sure if she was still trying to help Nikki or explain herself.

Blowing out a breath, he shoved his hand over his close-cropped hair. "I'm...sorry." He said the last word as if he was unfamiliar with it or hadn't used it in a long time. "The only thing that occurred to me was that we were about to play the ritual where you retreat and I follow. Frankly, I don't follow worth a damn."

Rebecca wasn't appeased. Her unsmiling face told him as much.

A slow smile replaced the austere set of his sexy mouth. "But I guess in your case I'll make an exception. I promise to be on my best behavior if you give me another chance." His smile widened. Twin dimples winked. "Please."

Rebecca studied him. Shawn Donovan didn't use charm to sway people. He was more the sledge hammer type. He was known for taking what he wanted, asking for and giving no quarter. He went in to win. He was unrelenting, but she'd never heard that he was vicious or cruel in his business or in his personal life. As he'd indicated last night, he didn't beg or bow to anyone.

But if he wanted a woman badly enough, would the rules change, would he use Nikki's naiveté against her? Or had Rebecca made a mistake in assuming he was leading Nikki astray? Needing to know the answer, Rebecca nodded.

Taking her arm once again, they went through the bar to the hostess counter of Fearing's restaurant. The smiling maitre d' warmly greeted them, showing them to their private booth in the modern décor room with clean, sleek lines and imported wood.

Rebecca slid into the seat that allowed a lovely view of the patio bursting with colorful blooms and shimmering candlelight. Shawn slid in beside her. The maitre d' placed their napkins in their laps just as a waiter arrived with the red wine Shawn apparently had ordered ahead of time. He had certainly been right about not waiting on a table. The question remained, would he wait for a woman?

Rebecca reached for her wine flute. The taste was smooth and dry. "Delicious. You selected an excellent vintage."

"Good." He looked at her over the rim of his own glass. "I don't like making mistakes, but if I do, they're quickly corrected."

Rebecca barely managed not to choke. Hoping the smile on her face didn't look as brittle as it felt, she placed her glass on the table. If he found out she was lying, there would be hell to pay. Nikki was on a scholarship to Southern Methodist University, and doing summer intern work at Shawn's company. He could ruin both of their lives if Rebecca messed this up.

"Would you care to order now, sir?" asked the waiter.

"Please give us a moment," he said, then turned to her and lowered his glass. "What are some of the publications you've written for?"

This time Rebecca was prepared. “None that you might know. I recently relocated here. I read several articles about you and thought you would be the perfect way to guarantee my story would be picked up.”

“Then I was just a means to an end?”

His expression didn’t change, but she sensed the answer was important. He didn’t want to be used again. “Initially.”

He leaned closer, bringing with him a seductive heat, rousing her desire and tempting her to lean closer as well. “And now?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered honestly. “I didn’t expect...this.”

“That makes us even.” He sipped his wine. “Do you still want to do the interview?”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t talk just to hear the sound of my voice. I have to fly to New York tomorrow to close a business merger. I should be gone for a couple of days. We can talk when I get back.”

“About the interview—” She wanted clarity.

“I can’t guarantee it, but I’ll consider it. That’s the best I can do.”

Despite Shawn’s reputation as a womanizer, Rebecca had heard he was a man of his word. “Is that the only reason?” she asked in spite of herself.

His large hand gently covered hers. “We both know the answer to that. But one is not contingent on the other. I won’t force you, but I want you.”

Rebecca briefly closed her eyes. His deep voice throbbed with tenderness and sincerity. Had he used the same line with Nikki to try to seduce her? Rebecca pulled her hand away and placed both in her lap. Her sister wasn’t going to suffer the

consequences of believing the lies of a smooth-talking man. She wasn't going to become pregnant and give up all of her dreams the way Rebecca had done. "All right."

When Shawn spoke, his voice was guarded. "For a moment you looked angry. If you think I'll put pressure on you, forget it."

"No," she quickly assured him. As long as he was with her, he wouldn't be with Nikki.

Shawn relaxed. "Good. What's your address and phone number?"

Rebecca had prepared for this as well. She gave him her cell phone number and the address of her best friend.

He leaned closer. "I'll miss you."

"Excuse me, Mr. Donovan. You have a phone call."

He never looked away from Rebecca. "Please tell whoever it is that I'm busy, and send over the waiter to take our orders."

"It's Shane Elliott. He said to tell you that it's urgent."

Muttering, Shawn straightened away from Rebecca. "Please tell him I'll call him back on his cell."

"Right away, sir." The maitre d' moved away.

"Excuse me." Shawn pulled a Blackberry from the pocket of his jacket and placed the call. "Donovan." After a few seconds he cut a look at Rebecca. "There can be no mistake. I see." His gaze flickered to the entrance of the restaurant where a wide-shouldered man stood. "Lou is already here. If you're wrong, be prepared for the fall-out." He returned the Blackberry to his jacket.

Rebecca felt the change in him. Where there had been warmth, it was if he was now encased in ice. "Is there a problem?"

"Possibly. I have to leave. Please order whatever you'd like. I'll have valet bring your car up so it will be waiting for you after you finish your meal." He began to slide out of the booth.

Without thought, she placed her hand on his arm, felt the hard flex of muscle beneath. "I hope everything is all right."

"You don't know how much I want that as well." The pad of his thumb feathered across her lower lip, causing her to tremble, to want. Then he was striding away. He passed the wide-shouldered man at the entrance without pausing. The man fell into step behind him.

Rebecca didn't know what the phone call was about, but she was suddenly uneasy, her stomach in knots. Scooting out of the booth, she left the restaurant. She exited the glass door leading outside to see the man who had left with Shawn holding open the door to a vintage gray Rolls Royce.

Shawn glanced over his shoulder, their gazes collided, then he climbed inside. The man closed the door, quickly circled the car and drove away. Rebecca wasn't sure why she felt her life had taken a decided turn, and not for the better.

Twenty-five minutes later, Rebecca let herself into her house from the garage. Loud rock music greeted her. Nikki was home. Rebecca could easily picture her model-thin sister swaying to the pulse-pounding beat, her beautiful face animated. It

was difficult to believe she would be a college junior in the fall and had always been an honor student on the President's List.

It seemed like yesterday her baby sister had splashed happily in the tub while Rebecca bathed her, was so attached to her security blanket that she carried the ratty thing everywhere, and clung to their mother's leg her first day of kindergarten.

In the kitchen, Rebecca passed the collage of photos of her and Nikki with their parents, and then just the two of them, proof that her sister was indeed grown. She'd been lost when their parents had been killed in a head-on collision. Pushing aside her own grief, Rebecca had supported her sister, encouraged her.

Rebecca hadn't cried or cursed or become angry about her parents' death or her sudden responsibility; she'd just done her best to raise Nikki, giving her love, support and guidance, trying to let her be her own person.

She thought she'd done a good job until two weeks ago.

Nikki had been so excited that she was the only sophomore business major chosen for the summer work-study program at Donovan Corporation. It wasn't long before her sister exchanged her usual jeans and tee shirts for flirty skirts and sheer blouses. She said it was because she was now in an office environment. Rebecca hadn't believed her.

Sure a boy was the cause, Rebecca had casually asked Nikki about the change in the way she dressed. Instead of talking as they'd always done, her sister had shut her out. It wasn't until she was cleaning Nikki's room and found a picture of Shawn and Nikki beneath a stack of text books, that Rebecca became suspicious that he was the reason for the change in the way Nikki dressed.

Rebecca had confronted Nikki that night when she arrived home. She'd been surprised, then defiant. She and Shawn loved each other and there was nothing Rebecca could do about it. It hadn't mattered that Shawn was almost twice her age and enormously more experienced.

When Rebecca couldn't get an appointment with him, she had waited for three days outside his office building hoping to speak with him. She'd seen him, but couldn't get past his security. It was only by accident that she'd heard one of the men mention the party at the Ritz-Carlton, and that he wasn't looking forward to dealing with anymore women trying to get to Shawn.

After touching the baby picture of Nikki grinning back at her, Rebecca started for Nikki's room. She knocked, but there was no answer. Thinking the reason was the music, Rebecca open the door just as the song ended and the DJ on the radio started talking. Her back to the door, her sister stood a few feet away talking on her cell phone.

"Of course, I'll miss you. You know how much I love you. I'll prove it just as soon as we're together again. I promise. This time I won't stop you."

A giant fist punched Rebecca in the stomach. "Nikki!"

She jumped and swung around, her eyes huge. "Becca, I thought you were having dinner with a friend."

"Tell....." She couldn't say Shawn's name. "...him goodbye."

"My sister is home. I'll call you back," Nikki said, then disconnected the call.

Trying to control her fear and anger, Rebecca closed the door behind her. She'd been a fool. For a moment tonight with Shawn, she'd wanted to believe there had to be

some kind of mistake. “Nikki, I know you’re nineteen, but don’t you think he’s too old and too experienced for you?”

Her sister’s chin lifted defiantly. “All that matters is that he loves me and that I love him.”

“How many other women do you think he’s said those same words to?”

“It doesn’t matter because I’ll be the last one,” she said with all the assurance of a woman in love and sure her love was returned.

Praying she could maintain control and be patient, Rebecca advanced further into the room. Picture book perfect, it was done in pink and white for a little girl who wanted desperately to become a woman.

“You have two more years of college before you have your Bachelor’s degree. You’d planned to continue on and get your Master’s. Are you prepared for the consequences if you become pregnant?” she asked. “I certainly wasn’t.”

She ducked her head. “We haven’t yet.”

“But you plan to?” Rebecca pressed.

Her head came up in defiance. “Yes.”

“What if I can prove the man that you’re so in love with is seeing another woman? Was with one last night and tonight while you were studying?” she asked.

Nikki shook her head of dark curls. “You can’t. While you were gone we talked last night and tonight. Give it up, Becca. Nothing is going to turn me against him.”

Rebecca grabbed her sister’s shoulders and held on fiercely. “I won’t let him ruin your life. You’ll do as I say as long as you stay under my roof.”

“Then maybe I should move out,” Nikki blurted

Rebecca's stomach knotted. She hadn't missed the fear and uncertainty in her sister's eyes. Rebecca had pushed too hard. Her mind whirled, trying to find a way out of the quicksand she found herself in. Nikki wouldn't back down, and if Rebecca did, she'd lose whatever control she had over her.

She faintly heard the ringing of the doorbell and was eternally grateful. Releasing Nikki, she stepped around her and turned off the radio. "We'll talk as soon as I get rid of whoever is at the door."

Folding her arms defiantly across her chest, Nikki slowly nodded. Rebecca wanted to hug her, to somehow go back to the old days when they got along, but she simply went to the door. She might be grateful for the interruption, but she planned on getting rid of whoever was at the door as quickly as possible.

She swung open the door and froze.

"Hello, Rebecca Ames," Shawn said, his eyes colder than a blizzard. "Oh, my mistake. Ames was your mother's maiden name. Yours is Carter after your marriage to your college sweetheart. I might have thought you harmless but Shane Elliott, my security expert, didn't. He doesn't believe in coincidences. I should have called you a beautiful liar."

Rage overwhelmed her. "What about you? You won't ruin my sister's life. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her away from you."

Shock crossed his face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Nikki Stewart. Business 203 in the summer intern program at Donovan Corporation with Professor Peterson. You were supposed to be showing her the world of business, but it included a side trip to your bedroom."

He didn't say anything, just stared at her as if she'd gone insane, then a man she hadn't noticed stepped next to Shawn and whispered something into his ear. The frown on his face cleared. "So that's why you were trying to get my attention."

"Yes," she snapped, quivering with anger from head to toe.

"Then you're after the wrong man. I barely remember your sister, and she certainly hasn't been in my bedroom," he said, ice coating each word.

"Liar," she shouted. "Nikki said it was you."

Fury swept over his face. "I don't lie." He said each word precisely. "If anyone is lying, it's your sister. I'd walk away, but I don't plan to have my name linked to another woman thinking to gain at my expense." He brushed past her, slamming the front door after him. "I understand your sister lives here. Call her and let's see who the liar is."

He was so coolly enraged, she hesitated.

"I said, call her!"

Rebecca went to the hallway, very much aware that Shawn followed, fury vibrating from him. "Nikki, please come into the den." After a few moments, she called again. Nikki came out of her room, her hands jammed in the pockets of her jeans.

"What?" Nikki asked defiantly.

"Hello, Nikki."

Nikki whipped her hands out of her pockets, her mouth formed a silent O. Her eyes widened, her frightened gaze jerked from Shawn to her sister's. There was no softening of her features, only fear. In that moment, Rebecca knew her sister had lied.

"Oh, Nikki," was all Rebecca could manage.

“Have I ever acted in any way unprofessionally toward you or anyone else in your class?” Shawn asked tightly.

Tears rolled down Nikki’s cheeks. She tucked her head. “No.”

“Who is he, Nikki? And I want the truth this time,” Rebecca said, going to her sister. She brushed the tears from her face. “Answer me. Do you realize the consequences this has for both of us?”

“John Peterson.”

“Your professor! Nikki, he’s married.” Rebecca briefly closed her eyes. “Go to your room.”

Without a word, Nikki hurried away. Rebecca faced Shawn. “I know an apology doesn’t go far enough, but I was only trying to protect her.” Shawn’s eyes remained glacial, his posture unforgiving.

“Your report probably noted that I was two months pregnant when I married. I got pregnant trying to ‘prove’ my love. My father made us get married. My ex-husband never forgot I ruined his chance to play professionally. Instead of throwing a football, he got a job to support a wife and baby he didn’t want. When I lost the baby, he left as fast as he could. People never let me forget that the daughter of the minister got pregnant. I didn’t want Nikki to go through what I went through. Sexual desire is too easy to mistake for love.”

“So you thought to take her place in my bed and prove your point,” he ripped out.

She flinched, but her gaze didn’t waver. “Yes.”

He closed the distance between them. “How far were you prepared to go?”

“I....” Tears trailed down her cheeks.

“Answer me, dammit!” he shouted, taking her chin in his hand.

“All right,” she cried, willing to be honest in that at least. “I wanted you. I still want you. Does that satisfy you?”

His hand fell. He stepped back. “Neither one of us will ever know.” Spinning on his heel, he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

Rebecca felt the loss, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it now. She went to Nikki’s room and found her curled up, crying on the bed. Quickly going to her, she pulled her sister into her arms. “Shhh. It’s all right. I love you.”

Her sister burrowed closer. “I called James and told him Mr. Donovan was here. He-he called me horrible names and said I’d ruined his career, that I would lose my scholarship, would never get a job, that he didn’t want me back in the program. Becca, I thought he loved me. He said he loved me. I’m sorry. You were right.”

Tramping down her rage, Rebecca swept her hand up and down her sister’s trembling back. “First, when I get through speaking with the Chancellor, your professor will be the one looking for a job. Second, just let anyone try to take away your academic scholarship.”

Nikki lifted her tear-stained face. “But what about Mr. Donovan? He was really mad. He’s a member of the Young Presidents Association. He has contacts all over the world. Even if I graduate, he can still blackball me. Once you reach a certain level, the business world is smaller than people think. It’s more about who you know than what you know.”

Rebecca hid her own fear that her sister might be right. Shawn had been extremely angry, but she desperately hoped the situation wouldn’t make him vindictive. She

wasn't thinking the worst of him again. "Let's not borrow trouble. We'll take one day at a time."

"I-I don't think I want to go to work tomorrow," Nikki murmured.

Rebecca held her sister closer. "Why don't I stay home with you?"

"I'd like that." After a few moments, Nikki whispered. "I love you, Becca."

"I love you too, honey. I love you too."

She'd stayed with Nikki all night. Promptly at nine, Rebecca put in a call to the Chancellor of the university. SMU had an outstanding reputation in the business world, and extolled its graduates. The university wouldn't let the professor's breach of ethics go unpunished.

She and Nikki were in the den watching a television cooking show when the doorbell rang. Rebecca's heart lurched before she could stop it. Nikki unfolded her legs and slid them over the edge of the sofa cushion. "Do you think it's Mr. Donovan?"

"No." As much as Rebecca wished otherwise, Shawn wasn't known for giving second chances.

"He's the one you were with last night and the night before, isn't he?" her sister asked.

"Yes." Rebecca came to her feet.

"You saw him two nights in a row, which means something." Nikki stood and studied her sister's unhappy face, both of them ignoring the ringing doorbell. "You liked him, didn't you?"

Rebecca palmed Nikki's smooth cheeks. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry."

"The important thing is that you're safe." Rebecca lowered her hands. "Which is more than I can say for the door. It must be the UPS man. He always bangs on the door."

"I'll get it." Nikki went to answer the door.

"I'm going to call the university again to see if the Chancellor is in." Rebecca started for the phone in the kitchen. She was halfway there when she heard Nikki scream her name. Snatching the wooden meat mallet from the rack, she ran to the front door. Her heart stopped when she saw her sister struggling with a man.

"You ruined me! How could you be so stupid?"

"Let her go," Rebecca snarled, raising the meat mallet.

Seeing her, the man turned Nikki loose and stumbled back off the porch. "You'll pay for this. You'll both pay."

Rebecca positioned herself between her sister and the enraged man. She didn't have a doubt who he was. "You're the one who is going to pay! You're a disgrace to your profession, preying on the students you should be protecting!"

"She asked for it."

Lifting the meat mallet, Rebecca advanced on the man. "Get your sorry behind out of here. And, if you come near Nikki again, you're the one who's going to be sorry."

The man's eyes went cold. "I'll ruin her. When I'm through, she won't be able to get a job at the city dump."

"That about describes your future."

Nikki's professor pivoted. Standing on the sidewalk was Shawn. Behind him was the same man who had been with him last night.

"Mr.... Mr. Donovan. It's as I told you when you came to my house this morning. There is no validity to her claim." Professor Peterson's voice cracked. "You have to believe that the girl is lying. She came on to me. I'm up for tenure. You of all people know how women lie. You yourself were maligned." He looked back at Nikki and Rebecca. "Nikki is just trying to get back at me because I rebuffed her attention. Don't ruin my future because of a girl's jealousy and her sister's lies."

Shawn gazed at Rebecca. No matter the reason, she had lied. They both knew it.

Nikki stepped away from Rebecca. Tears sparkled in her eyes, but her voice was strong. "I still have the text you sent me to meet you at the Best Western hotel. I have the other text messages as well."

"You were supposed to de--" the professor began, then he abruptly snapped his mouth shut. "You stupid nothing!" He lunged for Nikki again.

Rebecca swept Nikki behind her and swung the wooden meat mallet, hitting the professor on the side of the head. Howling, he went down. Shawn promptly jerked him to his feet, shaking him like a dog with a bone. "You're finished, Peterson. If you ever so much as come within ten miles of Nikki or her sister again, you'll know what hell unleashed feels like." Shawn shoved the dazed professor toward the man standing behind him. "Put him in his car."

Catching the professor none too gently, the man shoved the unsteady man toward the car parked at the curb. Rebecca kept her arm around Nikki. "Thank you for believing her."

“I almost didn’t. I had Shane do some checking on Peterson after we left last night. I didn’t want anyone like that at the university or with my program. There had been other female students in the past, but there was no proof that he was involved with Nikki,” Shawn said, then he spoke to Nikki. “You tipped the scale. That took courage.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Donovan. I-I know I won’t be allowed to continue in the program, but please don’t hold it against my sister. Becca is a master chocolatier. Her gourmet shop is just taking off.”

“You’re still in the program. Your sister was just trying to protect you,” he said. “Love should be rewarded, not punished.”

“Does that mean you’re going to ask her out again?” Nikki asked.

Hope flared in Rebecca’s heart before she could stop it. She’d misjudged Shawn. Badly. What’s more she had used lies and her body to do it – just as her ex-husband had done. She was no better than her ex or the woman who had brought the false paternity suit against Shawn. Her stomach knotted at the realization. She’d hurt an innocent man.

Shawn’s eyes went flat. “Goodbye.”

“Wait.” Rebecca took a halting step toward his rigidly held body. “I’m sorry about my deception. I was desperate to protect Nikki. For the first time she wouldn’t listen. I didn’t want her to end up like me.”

“An accomplished liar,” he said coldly.

She flinched. She deserved his condemnation, but she had to try to make him understand. “I tried to contact you through your office, but my calls were never returned. Waiting outside of your office building to speak with you proved just as futile.

I was scared and out of options. I didn't have a choice."

"There is always a choice." Turning, he walked away.

Nikki pushed her sister toward him. "Go after him before he gets away."

Rebecca caught up with him on the walkway and stepped around him. "Please try to understand. I'm sorry."

He glanced at the mallet in her hand. She stuck it behind her back.

"Do you think you could possibly give me another chance to see if we might get to know each other better?"

"And why should I?" he asked, the words clipped.

Taking her courage in her hand, she kissed him, putting her body and soul in it. She was willing to put her feelings out there for him to trample on if he wanted, but she also wanted him to remember the quick jab of desire, how good it had been to be in each other's arms.

She wanted to appease his anger, beg his forgiveness. The hardest thing was lifting her head to see his face. His body might be with her, might want her, but that didn't mean the man did.

The intensity of his eyes made her pulse pound and her body tremble even more. His hands clenched on her arms as if he would draw her back into his embrace, then he let her go and walked to the waiting Rolls and got in. The man with him got in behind him. The car drove away. She'd lost.

Rebecca didn't realize she was crying until she felt the tears on her cheeks, her sister's arm around her shoulder.

A little after nine, Rebecca sat on a padded bench on the patio staring up at the full moon. It had been twenty-three miserable days since Shawn had walked away. The ache of his leaving was just as acute.

She missed him, admitted to herself that she'd fallen in love with a man who probably hated her. She realized it was fast and accepted that her love was unshakable. Her body might have lusted at first, but now her heart yearned and ached for Shawn.

At least Nikki's future at the university and in business was secure. Her professor had resigned and Nikki had received an A and a glowing letter of recommendation from her department head at Donovan Cooperation. Today had been her last day. Rebecca had sent chocolate truffles to help celebrate. She was positive neither of them would ever see Shawn again.

Sighing, she popped another raspberry truffle into her mouth. She understood why women stuffed themselves with chocolates to feel better. But apparently there was something wrong with Rebecca, because the dopamine in the rich dark chocolate from Africa that she exclusively used to make her all-natural candy wasn't having any effect on her mood.

She closed her eyes, remembering the heady thrill of being held in Shawn's powerful arms, the intense pleasure of his mouth on hers. Not even her signature chocolate could compete with the taste of him. And nothing ever would.

She'd give herself tonight to brood and feel sorry for herself, but tomorrow she was going after him. Somehow, she'd get him to listen. She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, remembering the taste of him and promised herself she'd taste him again.

“You dreaming in moonlight?”

Rebecca almost fell as she jerked up. Shawn’s strong hand was there to steady her. Slowly she came to her feet. She could do nothing but stare. He was captivating and tempting in a knit shirt and dark pants. He was undeniably the most attractive and sensual man she’d ever met. “Shawn.”

His forehead rested against hers. “Rebecca, just hearing you say my name shouldn’t make me feel--”

“Like you can now breathe without your heart breaking,” she finished for him.

“Yes.”

“Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?” she asked, her hands holding his forearms, her eyes searching his face, uncaring that she was unable to erase the fear from her voice and eyes.

“I tried not to,” he said, his voice softening. “But your face haunted me. Even when I was asleep. I’m not known for giving second chances.”

Her grip on him tightened, then she released him and stepped away to extend her hand. “Hello, Shawn Donovan, I’m Rebecca Carter, a woman who has made her share of mistakes in her life, but I’m hoping you’ll forgive me and let us start over.” Her hand trembled slightly when he didn’t take her hand, simply watched her. She swallowed the lump in her throat and met his gaze. His coming there had to mean something.

His hand came up and closed over hers. “You’re as gutsy as your sister.”

“It’s easy when it’s important to you,” she said, bringing their joined hands to her lips, nibbling on his knuckles as her eyes watched his. In the next second, his mouth took hers, fierce and just shy of desperate and wild. She melted against him.

"I missed you," he finally breathed, tightly holding her.

"I almost ate an entire box of chocolate today, I was so miserable," she admitted. "My chocolates are the best, but all I could think about was that they didn't compare to the heated thrill of your mouth."

Lifting his head he stared down at her with a frown as his fingers trailed over her face. "I don't think I've ever met a woman like you."

"Is that good or bad?" she questioned, wishing he'd smile at her.

"Definitely good," he said, his mouth curving into a smile that softened his beautiful face and made her heart sigh. "I'm glad Nikki cornered me at the luncheon I gave for the students and made me listen to her. She loves you."

"No one makes you listen, Shawn."

"Let's just say she caught me at a weak moment." His hand briefly covered hers, then he kissed her palm. "She told me how you'd sacrificed for her, moved across the country because she wasn't ready to be away from her only living relative. How, even after the incident with her professor, you never blamed her, even when she knew you missed me."

"I love her," she said simply.

"As I said, love should be rewarded, not punished." He pulled her closer. "Especially when I finally admitted that I was punishing myself by staying away from you."

It felt right being in his arms. Maybe... She jerked upright. "Tomorrow we leave for a week's vacation to New Orleans."

"Nikki mentioned the vacation." He frowned. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't either, but she worked all summer. I promised we'd do something fun before she went back for the fall term," Rebecca admitted. "We've never been to New Orleans. Everything is all planned."

"Becca."

Rebecca turned at the sound of her sister's shaky voice to see her at the back door with her hand cupping her stomach. She rushed to her. "What is it?"

"I don't feel well." Nikki sat down on a nearby chaise. "Do you think we could get the money back for the trip? I think we should stay home."

Rebecca knelt in front of her. "Don't worry about that. If you feel that bad, we're going to a doctor."

"No," Nikki squeaked, coming unsteadily to her feet. "I just need to rest. I'm going to bed."

Rebecca's eyes narrowed as she stood. She'd seen Nikki sick before, and she liked nothing more than for Rebecca to coddle her. And, although she must have let Shawn in the house, she had yet to acknowledge him.

"Perhaps I have the perfect solution," Shawn said. "We could fly down on my private jet. It would be much more comfortable and you could rest if you wanted to."

"Why don't you just take Becca?" Nikki suggested. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

"We couldn't do that because she loves you, and we'd both worry," Shawn answered. "I know New Orleans very well. It would be my pleasure to show you both around."

Nikki's face gleamed with excitement, then she ducked her head. "That's very nice of you, Mr. Donovan."

“Call me Shawn,” he said. “And although I appreciate you wanting to help, perhaps you should admit to your sister that you’re not sick. She’d worry.”

Nikki’s gaze flickered to her sister’s. “She already knows. If she didn’t, I would be on my way to the hospital by now, no matter what I said.” She leaned over and hugged her sister. “I’m already packed. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

Rebecca turned to him. “I should probably try to at least make some protest about taking you away from your business, but. . .” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m too happy that you’ve forgiven us and want to be with me.”

“I didn’t come to my senses just to let you go away for a week,” he said. “Any objections if we stay at my place in the French Quarters? Its three floors. Guests on the second floor. I have the top entirely to myself. “

Her heart beat so fast she felt light-headed. “I wish we were there now.”

“Rebecca,” he breathed her name, then he took her mouth, his hands running freely over her body, sending her senses reeling. “The next time I kiss you, I won’t stop.” He left her standing alone on the patio, but this time she wore a smile.

The trip to New Orleans the next day went as seamlessly as Rebecca had expected. A limousine picked them up at the airport and took them directly to Shawn’s house. It was as charming and as magnificent as she’d expected. The housekeeper and cook, Rene, greeted him with a hug which he readily returned. Rebecca recalled his easy way with the employees at the Ritz-Carlton. She finally understood. He was no tougher than he had to be.

Shawn personally showed them to their separate rooms. Nikki briefly touched the bouquet of fresh-cut flowers on the dresser, then went to the balcony overlooking the courtyard with a tinkling fountain, blooming pink roses climbing the brick wall, and towering trees draped with moss.

Her hands on the black wrought iron railing, she spoke over her shoulder. "This is better than any hotel. Thanks for the flowers, Shawn."

"You're welcome." Taking Rebecca's hand, he took her next door to her room. The enormous bouquet of white roses on the night stand filled the room with its scent. The heated look he gave her at the door said she wouldn't be spending the nights there. She returned it full measure. "I'll meet you back downstairs when you're ready."

"Since I don't want to be away from you, I'll hurry," she said with a smile.

"I'm not sure I can wait until tonight." He reached out his hand to her, then jammed it into his pocket and hurried down the stairs.

Rebecca was back downstairs with Nikki in less than five minutes. She'd changed into a lemon yellow sundress that bared her shoulders and stopped above her knees. She felt pretty and desirable. She hadn't been kidding when she'd told Shawn she didn't want to be away from him. They'd spent too much time apart already. Just seeing him, strong and gorgeous waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, made her heart giddy and put a huge smile on her face.

She'd realized something on the trip. Everything in her life had been as it was supposed to be. The heartache, the pain, the sorrow had brought her to this point in her life, brought her to this man she loved.

“Ready?” Shawn asked, taking her hand in his.

“More than,” she said, briefly leaning against him for the sheer pleasure it gave her before straightening. “Show us the city.”

Shawn did just that. He took them to out-of-the way antique shops and art galleries, but they also did the touristy thing and ate beignets, pralines, and the best shrimp gumbo and fried catfish she had ever tasted.

They strolled hand and hand down the narrow streets with Nikki just ahead of them. It was liberating and wonderful to be open and not worry about betraying Nikki because of her attraction to Shawn. They laughed, talked and thoroughly enjoyed themselves as they wandered the French Quarters. A little after eight that night, they returned. Nikki immediately said good night.

Shawn grabbed Rebecca’s hand and practically ran to his room. She had a fleeting impression of flowers, but then she was in his arms, his mouth devouring hers. She ceased to think about anything except the man doing incredible things to her body, making her feel treasured and needy.

His teeth nibbled, teased, bit. The sundress went flying. She jerked his polo shirt over his head and reached for his belt buckle. She’d barely pulled it free when she found herself naked on her back in the bed with Shawn straddling her.

Her breath caught at the sight of his bared body, the roped muscles; the needy way he looked at her, the reverent way his fingers trailed over her heated skin. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I’ll try to go slow, but I’m not sure I can.”

With desire rushing through her straining to be free, her breathing harsh, she circled her arm around his neck. “Then I’ll just have to keep up.” She nipped his shoulder.

As if his tenuous control snapped, his mouth and hands worshiped her, inflamed her body as his teeth and tongue, nipped and lapped at her skin. Her hands clutched at him. With the scent of roses in the air, moonlight draping the balcony, their eyes locked on the other, he made her his. Both moaned with the rightness of it, then he began to move.

He stroked her, filled her, loved her. Her legs wrapped around his waist and met him thrust for thrust. She felt herself flying and held tighter. Her climax ripped through her. He went over seconds later. He caught her sob of pleasure with a tender kiss, held her as aftershocks rippled through her.

Afterwards, Shawn drew her possessively against his naked length and pulled a sheet over them. “I almost didn’t give us this.” His deep voice trembled. “It was even more incredible than I imagined.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Rising up on her elbow, Rebecca brushed the back of her hand against his face. “It still scares me to think of how close I came to losing you with my lies. I’m sorry about deceiving you.”

He kissed her forehead, brushed her hair from her damp skin. “I know. It’s behind us now.” Once again he drew her into his arms.

The following days in New Orleans were magical. Rebecca was comfortable with Shawn whether trouncing him in a card game – and he hated to lose – or asleep in his

arms at night. He wasn't the tough corporate raider people thought, but she'd already begun to figure that out in Dallas. If they happened to meet his friends or business associates, he proudly introduced them.

On the third morning they were there, Rene asked if she could go to the hospital later on to be with her granddaughter who was having her first baby. Shawn asked her why she was still there and took off her apron.

"You have guests. I haven't cooked breakfast," Rene protested.

"My mother insisted we all know how to cook," he said, grabbing her handbag, scarf, and car keys.

"You burn water," she said, digging in her heels.

"I didn't say I learned." He gave the woman a hug. "We won't starve. Give Cheryl my best. What hospital?"

Rene eyed him, put her on scarf, took her handbag and keys. She turned to Rebecca. "Can you cook?"

"She's the best," Nikki answered, smiling before she linked her arm with Shawn's. "We'll be fine. Shawn and I will do the dishes."

"I'm drying," Shawn said. "What hospital?"

"All Saints," Rene answered. "I guess it won't do any good to tell you not to send a flower store like you always do."

"Women deserve flowers." Shawn urged her toward the back door again. "Go do what you do best, and take care of those you love."

Smiling, Rene patted Shawn's cheek as if he were a little boy, then she was gone.

Rebecca had watched the interaction with a smile on her face. Shawn had long

ceased being the hated villain trying to take advantage of her sister. In fact, they were becoming friends. He was a good man. "Pancakes or waffles?"

Nikki and Shawn looked at each other, grinned and said in unison. "Both."

The last night in New Orleans, Nikki stayed at Shawn's house while he took Rebecca to an exclusive supper club where they had a fabulous meal and danced to almost every song. They came home long after midnight and made slow, tender love.

"I wish we had more days here," Rebecca said, her naked length curved against Shawn.

"It doesn't have to end here."

She lifted her head, a smile curving her mouth. She kissed him. "In Dallas you'll be busy. I won't have you all to myself."

"You can if you want," he said slowly.

"What?"

He rose up in bed and stared down at her. "Haven't you guessed? I'm a proud man, but love is stronger."

"W-what?" The word wobbled out of her mouth. Air became harder to draw into her lungs.

His smile was tender. "I love you. I know it's quick, but it won't change. It will only grow stronger. I'll try to be patient until you can say you love me and agree to marry me. However, you know I'm not a patient man."

"You don't have to wait. I've loved you since the second kiss," she told him, laughing. "How soon do you think we can get married?"

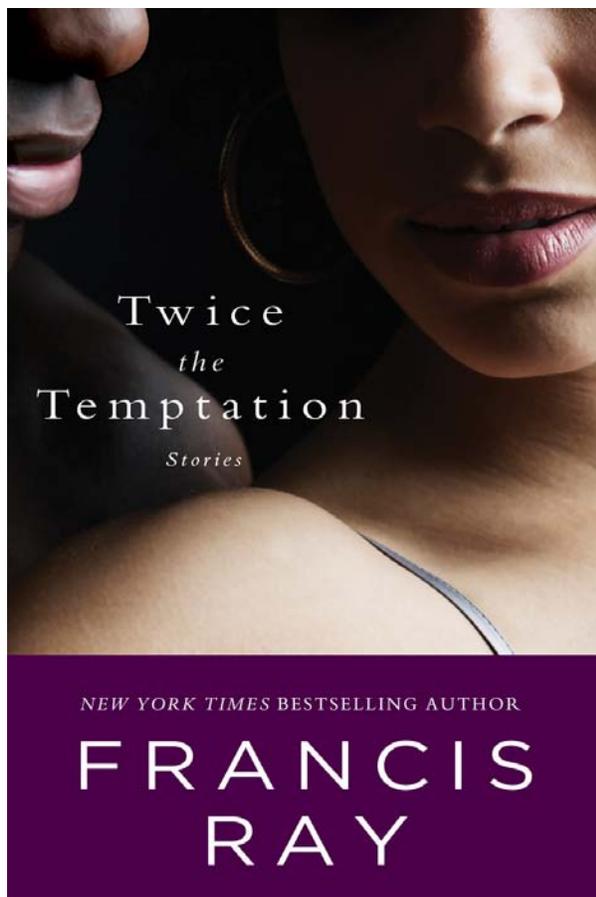
His laughter joining hers, he hugged her to him. “I’d love to say as soon as we can get a license, but if we did, my mother would never speak to me again. We’ll fly to Atlanta tomorrow and tell her, tell the whole Donovan family. There’s a lot of us, so be warned.”

“I love you, Shawn. I didn’t know I could love a man this much.”

“You’re the beat of my heart, the keeper of my dreams.” He drew the sheet away, claimed her body and her heart that he would forever treasure.

A satisfying time later, with a smile on her face, she went to sleep, wrapped in moonlight and dreams and the arms of the man she loved.

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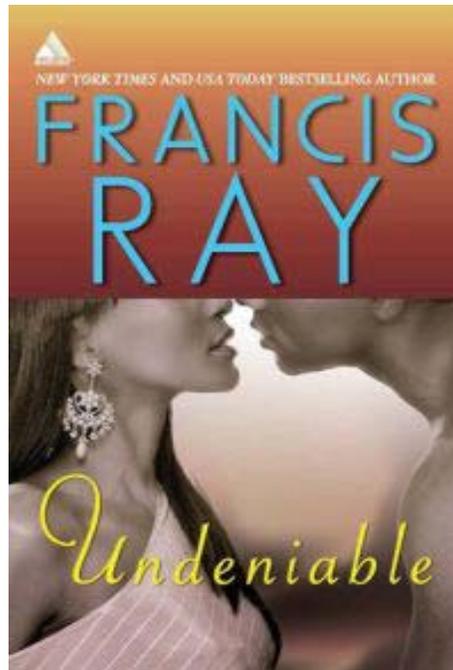
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