

## FORGOTTEN WISHES

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BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR, edited by *Martha Punches*

THREADS OF FAITH, edited by *Sheri Ross Carucci*

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## FORGOTTEN WISHES

Love's Tender Fury

By MaryJanice Davidson

Be Careful What You Wish For

By Joanna Wylde

Threads Of Faith

By Joey W. Hill

Love's Tender Fury

MaryJanice Davidson

### CHAPTER ONE

It began as it always did, another endless book signing in an overcrowded bookstore. The themed *du jour* was controlled chaos—lots of clerks dashing about, long lines at the checkout counter—a consumer's nightmare, a store manager's dream. Any other author would have been thrilled, positively joyful at such a busy book signing. Not Marnie Hammer. *Never* Marnie Hammer.

She could hear the babble of her fans around her. Instead of thrilling her, as it had in the very beginning, or infuriating her, as it had the last few years, now she merely found the enthusiasm profoundly depressing.

Head down, signing like an automaton, she could hear the next two women in line chatting.

"Is that the time? I've been here for an hour already."

"I've been here since lunch," her companion gushed. "Who cares? You know what a signed Jessica LeFleur is worth? I'm still hanging onto the one I got from last year's book tour. See?" The woman, a smartly dressed brunette, dug a hardcover out of her totebag and flipped open the cover, reading aloud.

“Why don’t you try *Les Miserables*? Jessica.”

“Doesn’t she have the best sense of humor?”

Puke, thought Jessica. “Next!”

The first woman elbowed her way to the head of the line. “Could you sign it, “To my number one fan, Love, Jessica?”

Jessica snapped her gum, quelling irritation. She had so many “number one fans”, she needed to employ a census taker to keep track of them all. “*I could .*” She took the proffered book, her newest release, and scribbled, ‘Help! I’m trapped in a publishing contract and I can’t get out!’” Then she handed the book back.

The customer read the inscription and smiled uncertainly. “Um...thank you.”

Jessica cracked her gum again. “Next!”

Seated beside her, her best friend, Joe Halloran, growled to show his disapproval. He knew why she was rude to her fans, but didn’t tolerate it. “Cut the crap,” he muttered in her ear, “or no more M&M’s.” He added to the still smiling, still puzzled customer, “Don’t mind her, ma’am. She’s on medication.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better soon. I just love your work.”

Oh, here we go, she thought. “Why?”

“Because—” The woman faltered, then plunged ahead. “Because you write such beautiful love stories. You’re my favorite author. Better than Danielle Steele and Julie Garwood put together!”

Jessica sighed. It never ceased to amaze her. She wrote crap, which people mistook for gold. Libraries were stuffed with dusty classics, and meanwhile people were standing in line for three hours to get a signed Jessica LeFleur. It was beyond ridiculous. Worse, it made you lose respect for them. Almost as much respect as she had lost for herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toward the end of the line, Tony Freeborg was amazed at the number of women in line. And not your everyday hausfraus, either; many of them were in business suits that cost more than everything in his closet put together. Not such a trick, given where he shopped and how often he shopped—which was bi-yearly at *themost*—but still...

“I can’t believe it!” his mom was raving, in itself a startling development. Elinor Freeborg did not rave. “I can’t believe I’m going to get a signed LeFleur! Now, when we’re up there, smile nice and give her your card.”

“Ma. I’m a nobody. I have exactly zero clients, which is why I still work for Mutch and Musch. She’s Jessica C. LeFleur, worldwide sales in the bazillions. She doesn’t need an agent, she needs an accountant.” His cell phone rang; he pulled it out and flipped it open. “Freeborg...I can’t talk right now. And for the tenth time, I don’t want the service!” He paused, listening, while his mom looked on, unabashedly curious. “No...no! Just leave me alone. I don’t want to talk! About anything!” He slapped the phone shut and stuffed it back into his pocket.

“What in the world?”

“My boss is making all the editors carry cell phones, and she bought us free hours of Dial-A-Shrink.”

“Well. That was nice.”

He snorted. “Yeah. A nice pain in the ass. None of us were using the service, so my boss is *making* the shrinks call us. All day long, my damn cell phone is ringing, and on the other end I hear, ‘Tell me about your mother.’ The trouble with people in therapy—like my boss—is that they think everyone *else* should be in therapy, too.”

Elinor smiled. “Think about the state of the world for a moment. Then tell me more people shouldn’t be in therapy.”

“Ha! Good—”

“Look! It’s almost our turn.”

His mother, who hadn’t gotten excited when his brother graduated magna cum laude or when his father won the local lottery, was actually jumping up and down on her little size fives. He had to laugh.

“All right, ladies.” There was a man at the signing table, standing and holding his arms up like a television evangelist. “Ms. LeFleur is finished signing books for the day.”

As one, the crowd groaned. The man winced, but bravely continued. “She’ll be in attendance at the Romance Readers’ Convention tomorrow at the Civic Center.”

Remarkably mercurial, the crowd perked up.

“But now she has to go.”

Tony could see the man standing beside Miss Hot Stuff Author was clearly uncomfortable at being the bearer of bad tidings. Tony could also see Miss Hot Stuff Author didn’t mind making her flunky do the dirty work. She wasn’t even looking at her loyal fans, just lying there, her head pillowed on her arms, eyes closed. Meanwhile, Flunky Boy was still yapping.

“I’m sorry. She’ll be signing books tomorrow...”

It was maddening. They finally made it to the head of the line, only to be told Miss Hot stuff Author had writer’s cramp or whatever and was blowing off the rest of her fans.

He cleared his throat. “Um...Miss LeFleur...”

Miss Hot Stuff Author, he noticed, couldn’t be bothered to look up. All he could see was the top of her head.

“Don’t call me that,” she groaned into her forearm. “I can’t take it. My name is Marnie.”

His mother tugged so hard at his sleeve, she practically ripped his arm off. “Don’t bother her.”

He ignored her, bending toward the table like a testy maitre 'd. "I realize it's asking too much of you to sign books for fans, thereby increasing sales and your bottom line. It must be a terrible burden. We're really sorry to put you out like this. But if you could bring yourself to sign just one...more...book. If you try to make that extra effort that separates champions from schmucks—"

What's-her-name stood, and then she was gone, stomping past the crowd. At no time, he noticed, did she trouble herself to look him full in the face.

Disgusted, he straightened. "Andspeaking of schmucks..."

His mother shook her head. "She's tired. We only waited in line for half an hour, but she's been here all day, signing. It's okay."

What's-her-name's flunky, meanwhile, had been shifting from one foot to another, and now he cleared his throat. "Why don't you give me your address, ma'am? I'll send you a signed copy."

Tony had been about to answer when his mother sent a sharp elbow into his ribs. He glared at her, but obediently reached into his pocket and...

"Here's my card."

Flunky Boy took it, studied it. "Mutch and Musch?"

"It's a small publishing house," he explained. "We do mostly poetry anthologies and a few literary novels. You can send the book to my attention."

Flunky Boy was now looking at him appraisingly, tapping his business card against his teeth. "*Ah-hmm*. Maybe we could have dinner sometime. I know a charming bistro that doesn't skimp on the bread. I can give you *Love's Tender Fury* then."

His mother jumped in. "He'd love to."

"Ma."

"He's free for a date tomorrow. Or anytime!"

Tony swallowed a groan. Matchmaking was one thing, but... "First of all, I'm not free tomorrow. Second—"

"What's the matter with you? He's about your age, he seems to like you, he's handsome...if you like skinny...he hangs around writers so he must be smart—"

"But I'm not gay."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, picky, picky."

Flunky Boy snorted. "You can't blame me for trying."

"Tony, he's nice! And how do you know you're not gay unless you've tried it?"

As God was his witness, he had no idea how to answer such a ridiculous question.

“Well, if you decide you do want to try it...” Flunky Boy was trying very hard not to laugh.

“You’ll be the first person I call,” he said dryly.

“I just think,” his mother said with cool dignity, “you should keep your options open, is all.”

“Great, Ma.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Mystery writers got together and tried to solve fake murders. Science fiction writers went to Star Trek Conventions, planetariums, and toured NASA. Literary writers went to graduate school. And romance writers? Romance writers held giant conventions with half-naked men parading down runways, while women screamed themselves hoarse and vied to buy the chaps off the models’ bodies. And then complained that no one in the publishing industry took them seriously.

Marnie Hammer, a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur, watched the pandemonium, and with great difficulty, stifled a yawn. A few of the men on the runway had modeled for some of her books, but she had never gone for the overly-muscular, blond, long-haired type.

“Maybe it’s just me,” she told Joe Halloran, her best friend and, occasionally, worst enemy, “but I could never date someone prettier than I was.”

Watching the show with avid curiosity, Joe didn’t look at her as he replied. “Maybe, but you have to admit, it’s hard to resist a man wearing crotchless chaps.”

She had to smile at that. She and Joe had been best friends since high school. They did everything together...she couldn’t remember the last book signing she’d had to do solo. He was always at her elbow, joking with her fans, fetching her water, reading her books, flirting with the bookstore clerks. She and Joe had lost their virginity together, and had been lovers right up to the day Joe had come out of the closet. Sprinted out of the closet, actually.

Fool that she was, his being gay hadn’t changed her feelings for him. Now here he was, drooling over the cover models, and if just once he’d ever looked at her that way, just one time...

Abruptly, Joe whooped. “Passion’s Warrior! Yeah!”

“Will you shut up? You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

“I can’t help it. Buff, gorgeous men as far as the eye can see. This is, like, gayGraceland!”

The announcer boomed, “You’ve seen him on the cover of *Savage Bliss*. You swooned when he carried his virgin bride over the threshold of his manor house, Cresthaven. A big hand, ladies, for...Blanco!”

The crowd, as they say, went wild. The hall absolutely erupted with cheers and feminine shrieks. Marnie could see a tall, muscular man with shoulder-length brunette curls prowling the runway. He was classically handsome, the *de rigueur* romance novel hero. As he approached the end of the catwalk he

turned slowly...and, to Marnie's surprise, somehow spotted Joe in the throng.

She and Joe looked at each other, then up at Blanco, whose gaze was riveted on Joe.

"Blanco?" she asked. "That's Spanish for white. What the hell kind of name is that?" Joe, she was irritated to note, was still staring helplessly. And Blanco, she was doubly irritated to note, was blowing her ex-boyfriend a kiss. "These women are making fools of themselves. And so are you."

Instead of being chastised, her friend only sighed. "I love romance conventions."

### CHAPTER THREE

An hour later, the reluctantly famous "Jessica C. LeFleur" was seated at her table, and *Love's Tender Fury* was stacked all around her. She made herself sign books like a zombie, never looking at her fans. As always, Joe was at her side, constantly scanning the crowd.

"Will you cut that out?" she murmured. "What is this, your Secret Service impersonation?"

"Just watching for a familiar face."

She scrawled something unintelligible on a copy of *Love's Tender Fury*, slammed it shut, and handed it back without looking. "Next! Let's keep it moving, people, I'd like to get some lunch before midnight." She turned to Joe. "Who are you looking for?"

Joe didn't answer, and she went back to her work, trying to hold her temper. Book signings always brought out her worst traits, and she had promised herself she wouldn't be a bitch today. Should have promised something easier, like ending infant mortality in Calcutta.

Beside her, Joe gasped. "Oh my God! How do I look?"

"Like your usual drippy self. Luckily I'm not the type to be hung up on looks, or I'd definitely trade you in...for...a newer...uh...model." It was hard to concentrate. It was extremely hard to concentrate. While she was signing, an enormous pair of white, fringed buckskin pants had entered her line of vision at crotch level. She slowly looked up...and up. Blanco in person was huge—well over six feet. "Guh."

Blanco stretched out one huge hand, grabbed *Love's Tender Fury*, and handed it to her.

"Sign, por favor."

Recovering, she smirked and took the book. "Big fan of romance novels, are you?"

Blanco, of course, was staring at Joe, who was staring back. Marnie tried to make eye contact, in vain.

"Sí. I am...how to say? *Libro grande*."

She raised her eyebrows. "You're a big book?"

"Big fan. Sign, please."

“*Okey-dokey*. Love the fake Spanish accent, by the way.” She flipped open the book and began writing. “To...my good...friend...Blanco. I’ll remember...last night...always. Your passion...your stamina...your broken English. Yours, Jessica C. LeFleur.”

She slapped the book closed, wondering if he would actually read the inscription, and gave it back to him. Blanco took it and looked her full in the face—finally.

“I have a flat tire.”

She rolled her eyes. The guy was transparent and unbelievable. “This isn’t the Triple A booth, pal.”

“Jack!” Joe yelled, startling everyone around them.

“Gosh, how rude of me,” she said with *faux* brightness. “Blank-o, this is my friend Joe, who likes to refer to himself as Jack. Joe, meet Blank-o.”

“I mean...I have a jack.” Joe smiled weakly.

“Bien. Vamos.”

Just like that, he turned and marched out, and Joe scrambled out from behind the table to follow. Amused in spite of herself, she watched them go. So did about fifty awestruck spectators.

\* \* \* \* \*

About ten fans back, Tony Freeborg was standing in line. He’d asked himself again and again why he was here, and could find no satisfactory answer. Instead, he kept pulling out his business card, then stuffing it back into his pocket, then pulling it out—it was getting a little crumpled from all the handling. He kept peeking around the people in front of him to look at Marnie—a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur.

“Hi, I’m Tony Freeborg,” he practiced. “Tony Freeborg, Mutch and Musch. Hi there...hi, I’m Tony...how are you? Hello. Freeborg’s the name...books are my game. Ugh!”

Get hold of yourself, moron, he instructed himself sternly. *Don’t know why you’d be nervous, anyway, she’s rude and full of herself*. “Hi, I’m Tony Freeborg, Mutch and Musch. Are you looking for representation? I realize this isn’t the time or place, but perhaps we could discuss it over dinner?”

That was about right. Interested and friendly, but not a potential stalker—exactly the image he wanted to project.

Before long, it was his turn. Marnie grabbed yet another copy of *Love’s Tender Fury* and signed it without looking up. He wasn’t surprised; he didn’t know her that well (at all, actually), but it was clear she hated being where she was. The woman was a mystery, and Tony Freeborg had never, ever been able to resist a mystery.

He took a deep breath and prepared to launch into his speech. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

He’d been prepared to be ignored. When she spoken so abruptly, it threw him off. So did her looks—he hadn’t gotten much of a glimpse yesterday, but today he did. And she was spectacular, like a



heroine out of one of her own romance novels. Shoulder-length blonde hair, big green eyes. Fair skin. Mouth in a frown, but he could see the lips were full, the lower one tender and waiting for kisses, kisses that—

“Next!”

And that was that. He’d been so busy staring at her like a school-boy, he’d blown his chance. And, walking away, he knew he’d never have such a chance again.

His cell phone beeped at him and he fished it out. “Biggest chump in the world speaking.”

The voice that greeted him was a pleasant contralto, slightly breathy, and ridiculously young. “Having a rough day, Tony?”

“You could say that. If this is about the Girl Scout Cookie thing, I told you, the check’s in the mail.”

“Har, har. Why don’t you tell me about it, dude?”

“Oh, man, not you guys again. How many times do I have to explain this? I don’t want to make use of your service.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Your boss bought, like, a humongous block of time. I’m obligated to make myself available to my patients.”

Tony glanced back; he could barely see Marnie, surrounded by fans, but that one glance was enough to weaken his resolve. “How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“And you’re a real psychiatrist?”

“Board certified. I’m sort of a genius. But call me Dr. Doogie just once and I’mso hanging up on you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“So come on, man. You’ve got the time, I’ve got the time...to use a psychological term, spill your guts.”

He hesitated, but he was dying to confide in someone. He supposed the trendy dial-a-shrink would have to do. “Well...there’s this woman.”

“Isn’t there always?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Thank God that’s over for another year. Jesus! I don’t know why I let myself get talked into going every time.”

Joe laughed at her and drained his drink. “A little thing in your contract called a publicity clause?”

“Don’t talk to me about contracts. I’ve got to see Don when we finish up here.”

Before Joe could comment, the waitress came over and set down more drinks. “Absolut on the rocks,” she said, deftly sweeping their trash out of the way.

“Ewww, Joe! How can you drink that liquid hell?”

The waitress didn’t change expression, but Marnie thought she detected a twinkle in the woman’s eye as she added, “And a Shirley Temple...with a tequila chaser.”

Now that was more like it. Marnie gulped down her tequila as the waitress left, then followed it with a swallow of Shirley Temple while Joe looked on in mingled fascination and nausea. “My editor’s going to want a title for my latest literary bowel movement.”

“Will you knock it off? You write great books. Even I like to read them.”

“I’m a whore for the entire paperback book industry.”

“Waitress!” Joe screamed.

The waitress, who hadn’t had time to get far, came back.

“Take these away, please,” he continued, shoving the glasses toward her, “and bring the lady some coffee. Repeatedly.”

“I loathe coffee,” Marnie muttered.

“You get so obnoxious when you’ve been drinking. It’s either drink coffee or be slapped.”

“Can’t we do both?” She paused, trying to decide if she was joking or not. Since she didn’t know, Joe was probably right...itwas time to switch to coffee. “We’re still on for the movies tonight?”

“Assuming you can crawl out of your self-pity pit long enough to fork over eight bucks to General Cinemas, yes. Listen—for a title, how ‘bout*Passion’s Fury*?”

“Done that. But that’s a good try. Anything with Fire or Flaming in the title works, too.”

“How about Love’s Blazing Inferno?”

She laughed. “Sounds like a cross between*Die Hard* and*Gone with the Wind*. Nice try, though. There’s a list.”

“What?”

“There must be a list. Some editor wrote up this list and sent it to the marketing department of every romance novel publisher in the world.”

Joe looked at her and, when she didn’t crack a smile or otherwise indicate she was joking, said, “Okayyyyy, way past time for you to sober up.”

“Ardor,” she said. “Beauty, bride, bliss, caress, dawn, desire, dusk, evening, fire, flaming, flower, fury, garden, heart, jewel, lady, love, moon, moonlight, moonstruck, morning, night, passion, pirate, plunder, queen, ravish, ribald, savage, sweet, sunrise, sunset, tender, wanton.”

“Seek help, Mar.” He paused, then asked, “What’s the new book about?”

“It was about Bard and Deirdre, a poet and a psychologist who meet at an environmentalist convention. They fall in love while implementing a terrific recycling program that will cut paper waste by twenty-two percent.” She gulped coffee, grimaced, then took another swallow. “But after this meeting, I’m guessing it’ll be about...ah...Brad and Debbie. They meet at a singles bar. She’s there on a dare, dressed up as a prostitute because she lost a bet. He falls for her disguise. They have mindless sex and fall in love while implementing a new martini menu for the bar.”

“How about Cocktails for Two?”

“How about I just kill myself now?”

“Passion’s Plunder”?

“Been there, done that.”

“Come the Dawn”?

“That has possibilities,” she admitted. “Let’s remember that one.”

“Come the Dusk”?

“See how easy it is? I could do a whole series. *The Come Trilogy*. Remind me to put you on my acknowledgments page. ‘And thanks to my best friend, Joe Halloran, for a mediocre, yet provocative, title.’”

“I’ve been on your acknowledgments page and honey, the thrill is gone. In lieu of seeing my name in print for the fourth time, can I have cash instead?”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. No matter how down she got—and these days, she was always down—he could always crack her up. It was one of the nicest, yet most irritating, things about him. “Off the subject, how did Blank-o work out?”

He shivered. “Badly. As you suspected, the accent is a fake—I happen to know *el cabeza estúpido* doesn’t mean ‘I can’t live without you’. Blanco’s looking for love in all my wrong places...never mind. You know what you should try?”

“A home lobotomy?”

He ignored that. “Why don’t you write gay romances? There’s a great market, and I bet you could have some flexibility. A lot of my friends complain they don’t have anything to read.”

“That’s a really good idea, but it’s not for me. I’d better stick to what I know.”

“Ha! And yet you’re writing about happy women having sex. When you’re about as happy as a

chocoholic on a diet, and I know perfectly well you haven't gotten laid since Earth Day, 2001."

"Let's skip that subject, okay? I can only focus on one aspect of my sucky life at a time."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but..." He yawned theatrically.

She made no attempt to hide her irritation. "If I were a nobody, I could write the kind of books I want. But because I'm "Jessica C. LeFleur", I'm stuck in the bodice ripper niche."

"Bullshit."

"Truth! Even if I switched publishing houses, they'd expect a certain type of work from me. The stuff that makes money...that's all the big houses care about. And if I actually managed to convince someone to give a literary manuscript a chance, the critics would hate it before they read a word."

"The critics don't hate you now. How can you be so sure they—?"

She snorted unbelievably. "Are you kidding? Most critics won't even condescend to review a romance novel. But they'd all rush to review my literary work, and trash it, to keep me in my place."

"Bitchy and paranoid. Nice combo."

"They'd think I was overstepping my bounds," she continued morosely. "Because I'm not a real author. Not in the eyes of anyone who matters."

Joe leaned forward on his elbows, and in spite of her dreary mood, she was again struck by his fine good looks. His eyes were large, blue, and soulful. His hair was so black it was nearly blue under certain lights. He was exactly her height, lean and wiry, and not for the first time did she think AmerAsians were some of the best-looking people on the planet. Born of a Japanese-American and a Northern European American, Joe was one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen.

If he was only ugly, she thought desperately. I'm shallow, I'm sure I wouldn't be so in love with him if he looked like he drank water out of a toilet bowl.

"A) About five hundred thousand readers would disagree with that," Joe was saying in that lecturing tone she knew well. "B) What do you care what a bunch of stuffed-shirt critics think, and C) You're *making mesick*. Do you realize how many aspiring authors would sell their sisters to be where you are?"

"So what? I never wanted to be a best-selling author. But my agent sold my soul to a publishing house that builds fiction giants, not literary little people."

"*Please!* Not another 'my life sucks even though I sell gobs of books and have money falling out my ass' speech. Besides, your agent didn't do shit without your permission."

Her grip tightened on her coffee cup as she glared across the table at Joe. "My permission?!? I didn't know what I was doing back then, I trusted his advice! The only reason I wrote *Love's Sweeping Tide* was because that spawn of Satan told me the romance market was the easiest to break into!"

"Well. He was right."

She had to agree with that one. Once all she dreamed of was getting published; she had never thought

beyond that. Now...now she was hearing herself whine about her good fortune and it made her sick.

“I always thought I’d be so grateful to be published that I’d write whatever they wanted. Now that I’m stuck writing crap, it’s just not enough. I know I sound whiney, I know you’re sick of hearing it, but I’m not happy.”

“Think about your money! Works for me.”

“‘It is neither wealth nor splendor, but tranquility and occupation, which gives happiness.’ Thomas Jefferson.”

In response to this, Joe scooped his bag off the floor, rooted around in it, and produced a battered paperback. He thumbed rapidly through tattered pages and, when he had found what he was looking for... “‘There are two things to aim at in life: first, to get what you want; and, after that, to enjoy it. Only the wisest of mankind achieve the second.’ Logan Pearsall Smith.”

“Cheater.”

“You’re the cheater,” Joe retorted. “You’ve got a photographic memory, for God’s sake. It’s not like you stay up late memorizing this stuff. How many grading curves did you wreck in high school? Used to drive me crazy, especially since you only sound smart.”

“*Cogito ergo sum*,” she said smugly. “I think. Therefore I am.”

“You look like a monkey, and you smell like one, too. How ‘boutthat?”

“Great, Joe.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Incredibly, being at the bar with Joe was probably going to be the highlight of her day, though all she had done was complain like a spoiled child. Now she was seated in front of her editor’s desk, having a stare-down with a man she cordially detested. She wondered: would she speak first, to complain, or would he?

The mystery was solved when Don cleared his throat. “I just had a lovely chat with the hostess of the last book signing. She was thrilled to have a famous romance novelist in her establishment. Only, next time, she hopes you remember to take your medication before you stop by.”

Marnie had no comment. They had done this dance before, she and Don. They did it during every publicity tour. She was certain he disliked her at least as much as she disliked him. She supposed they were both being punished for sinful past lives.

“Since you’re not on medication,” he continued, “I’ve come up with another explanation for your ridiculous behavior. *That you’ve gone right the hell out of your mind!*”

“This, from a man who eats aspirin like they were Tic Tacs.”

“How shall I put this to a writer of your delicate, creative nature? Your attitude blows.”

“Also, I’m clearly unstable. You’d better release me from my contract.”

“Nice try, Jessica—”

Marnie slammed the palm of her hand on the arm of her chair. The sound was very loud; she was gratified to see Don jump. “*Don*’t call me that. My name is Marnie. I have a perfectly fine name and it disgusts me that you won’t let me use it on the books.”

“Be reasonable. Your full name doesn’t project the image we need.”

“There is nothing,” she said through gritted teeth, “wrong with my name.”

Don snorted. “Marnie L. Hammer? You sound like a Spanish hitman, for Christ’s sake. That’s not the image we want to sell romance novels. Jessica C. LeFleur has style and pan-uh-chee.”

“That *spanache* .”

“Whatever. LeFleur’s got it, Hammer doesn’t. For the nine billionth time.”

Marnie rubbed her forehead with her fingers. She felt like the “before” picture in a headache ad. “I can’t believe they’re letting you edit my books.”

Her editor fumbled for a bottle of aspirin. He popped the cap and dry-swallowed three tablets. “What ‘let’? Honey, they don’t let me, they *make* me. As in, I lost the coin toss. As in, in addition to listening to freaked-out bookstore managers and wading through letters from weirded-out fans, I get to read through this...” He gestured to the piles of paper on his desk. “...and try to pull a love story out from the crapola you keep tossing in there.”

“Crapola? Oh, that’s nice.”

He grabbed a sheaf of manuscript pages, put on his glasses, and flipped randomly. She cringed, knowing what was coming. “Here we go. ‘Deirdre—’ That’s changing, by the way. I’m thinkin’ ...Debbie. Yeah. Debbie. ‘Debbie stood at the window, her thoughts as quick and silvery as many small fish being chased by a predator.’”

“I hate it when you do this. You could pick random lines from Tolstoy and make them sound stupid.”

Don paused in his reading and looked up, puzzled. “Tolstoy? That’s the guy who wrote about hobbits and stuff, right?”

“Oh my *God* ,” she moaned.

“Whatever. Now listen: ‘She could not but help reflect upon the words of some unknown philosopher, who said, ‘But at my back I always hear time’s winged chariot hurrying near, and yonder all before us lie deserts of vast eternity.’ *Zzzzzzzzzzzz* . . .’” Don had tilted back in his chair, eyes closed, mouth open, and was fake-snoring loudly. She glanced at his desk for something to throw, and just as her fingers closed around his stapler, he pretended to wake up and leaned forward.

“And that’s on page two. It only gets worse from there. Why do you do this to me every damn time?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

He gestured irritably and leaned back in his chair. “Knock it off. You know why I called this little meeting today?”

“To further ruin my life?”

“Give me a break, okay? You’ve got a great life. You’re rich, you have gobs of fans *and* your own web site, people read your books all over the world. In a nutshell: quit your bitching.”

“I write fairly good books,” she corrected him. “You turn them into crap. Then you sell the crap to millions of women who insist on calling me Jessica. In a nutshell: you’re ruining my life.”

“It’s only fair, because you’re sure as hell ruining mine.” He flipped through the manuscript pages and picked another paragraph at random. “‘Bard—’ I assume that’s Brad misspelled.”

“It’s *snot* a misspelling, it means poet. The hero is a sensitive man. Contrary to the example before me, that’s not an oxymoron.”

Immune as always to her insults, Don shrugged. “Doesn’t matter what it means; we’re changing it to Brad. Try this: ‘Brad gave Debbie a look of apprehension, for though he longed to make her his, to possess her utterly, he worried for her. His penis was a symbol of man’s tyranny, man’s need to rend and tear and make things his. How could she see him as anything but a monster?’”

“Good question.”

“I got a news flash for you—heroes of historical romance novels aren’t feminists, okay? They don’t read Gloria Steinem and they don’t fret about the symbolism of lovemaking in the post-modern world. They ravage. They plunder.” He gestured to the manuscript pages scattered all over his desk. “Four hundred seventy-five pages of this! Don’t you get it? I’m saving you from yourself! Women don’t want this! Romance readers don’t want this!”

“Really?”

“They want to get lost in the fantasy, they want to escape from board meetings and emergency surgery and whatever else it is they do when they’re not reading. Your books should pull them out of that, not push them in deeper.”

She clapped, slowly and mockingly. Don flushed. “Just because my uncle owns the company doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“No man’s knowledge here can go beyond his experience.”

“Thanks a lot. Now everything’s nice and clear. Now we won’t have these fights anymore.”

“It’s from John Locke,” she explained testily. “Read a book some time, Senior Editor.”

She got up to leave. Don watched her, clearly frustrated. “This thing needs a title once I get done. If I can get through it without killing myself. Give it a shot.”

“You hate my titles,” she sighed.

“Just try, okay? Please. I’m begging you. Keep it under five words, okay? And we’re working on the cover design—”

She sighed again. Cover design—always a special torture. “Already?”

“Hey, advance printing. Three hundred seventy-five thousand, baby. Time to get cracking. We’re talking to Fabio’s people to get him to pose. . .he’s been trying to get away from that for years, but we think the publicity’d be good for both of your careers. His comeback, and your continuing climb to the top.”

This, she decided, was as good a time as any to leave. But Don jumped to his feet and shouted after her.

“So for Christ’s sake, don’t pull his hair this time!”

## CHAPTER SIX

If seeing her editor was a little like being inside one of the circles of hell, seeing Joe’s parents was heaven. James Halloran, Joe’s dad, was hugging her so hard she feared her ribs would crack, while Tina, his wife, kept trying to elbow him aside so she could hug Marnie as well.

“It’s so great to see you!” Tina said happily.

“You’re looking good there, kiddo,” James crowed. “You do something different to your hair?”

“I—”

“Joey!” Tina bellowed, startling her. “Marnie’s here!”

“I know,” Joe said sourly, coming down the stairs. His parents’ love for his former girlfriend was aggravating only because it let them remain comfortably in denial about his lifestyle. “I heard the celebration. How’s it going, Marnie-the-Great?”

“It’s—”

Tina saw Marnie was holding yet another copy of *Love’s Tender Fury* and grabbed it. “Is it signed? I’ll add it to my collection.”

“Don’t you mean the shrine?” Joe asked.

“Don’t be bitchy,” Marnie said under her breath, hiding a grin. She noticed another copy of her book on the couch; there was a bookmark two thirds of the way through it. “Tina, how many times do I have to tell you not to buy my books? I get two hundred promo copies. . .you don’t have to plunk down nineteen ninety-five. No one should have to,” she added frankly.

“It’s okay, hon. I didn’t want to wait. Is the paperback coming out soon?”

“This new one’s pretty spicy, kiddo.” James clapped her on the back, hard enough to jolt, then winked.



“Maybe you been doing some research with my kid here, eh?”

As always when teasing her about Joe, he was a little too hale and hearty. It was painfully clear he was praying the answer would be yes. Marnie didn't know what to say.

“Dad, please. You're embarrassing yourself and humiliating me. Again.”

“No,” she said kindly, “I didn't research with Joe.”

“You outgrew him,” Tina declared. “He was just a high school fling for you.”

“Uh, sure, that's *some* explanation for why we broke up.”

“Mom...” Joe whined.

But Tina was headed toward the mantel, where the Joe and Marnie photo collection took up most of the wall space. As she had a thousand times before, Tina pointed to their high school prom picture: a much younger Marnie, grimacing for the camera, and a teenage Joe, eyeing the prom dress—not Marnie—appreciatively. The photographer had caught Joe feeling the fabric with his fingers, testing for texture. “Is there a cuter couple on the planet?”

“Couple of what?” Joe muttered.

Enough of this, Marnie thought. “Can I get a drink of water?”

“Sure, hon.”

Tina and Marnie walked into the kitchen, leaving Joe staring at the photo shrine and shaking his head. In the kitchen, Tina deftly produced a glass and filled it with ice-cold water from a pitcher. “Here you go. You're looking so good. And the books are doing well.”

Marnie managed to finish her water without choking. “Yes. Thank you.”

“We're so proud of you, dear. James and I talk about you all the time. It's like you're our own daughter.”

“Which is kind of gross, given mine and Joe's romantic history...never mind. You're very good for my ego. What I don't get is, neither of you like the romance genre. But you can't wait for my books.”

“They're about good men falling in love with good women and having good sex. It's nice to know you're so normal.” Tina gave her a pat.

“Uh...thank you?” This woman, she thought, was insane. Nice, but nuts.

“I don't mean to be *abuttinsky*, but have you ever thought about settling down? Maybe what you need is right in front of your face. And Joe needs you...this phase...it can't last. He'll get over it soon.”

Marnie stared at Joe's mother, startled, and there was a long silence while she thought about what Tina just said. Then she took a deep breath and spelled it out for the woman, as tactfully as she could. Explained a truth she herself had spent years facing.

“You ‘get over’ the chicken pox. Not this. If you’re hanging onto this hope that he’ll come home one night and present you with a wife and two-point-three children...well...you’re really kidding yourself.”

Tina took Marnie’s empty water glass from her and rinsed it out, too thoroughly. She couldn’t look at Marnie; instead, she concentrated on scrubbing the already-clean water glass.

“Haven’t you ever thought about trying again?” she asked wistfully.

“I’m crazy about your son. But we’re better as friends...we knew that when we were seventeen. We were each other’s first. And that’s always going to be special. But we can’t go back.”

“You don’t date much. And you and my son are always together, it seems. That’s why I thought—”

Marnie spoke the hated, bitter truth, mouthed the worst words in language. “We’re just friends. Once, I thought...”

Unfortunately—or not, depending on how you looked at it—James entered the kitchen right then. He went straight to the fridge and began rooting around for a snack. “Thought what?”

“That her new book is much better than the last one,” Tina lied smoothly. “What was it? *Passion’s Sweet Fever*?”

“No,” James said thoughtfully, “I think it was *Pirate’s Lady*.”

“It was *Sweetest Desire*,” Marnie corrected. “And thanks. But Tina, I could publish my grocery list and you’d rave about the pathos I evoked with my superb characterization.”

The doorbell rang, surprising them all. James straightened up from the fridge. “Are we expecting anyone else?”

Puzzled, Tina shook her head and headed for the living room. Marnie chewed her lower lip, dreading what was coming. “Joe said something about his date meeting us here.”

James turned toward her so sharply his hip slammed into the corner of the fridge. “He’s bringing a date? When he’s going out with you?”

“He likes me to meet them,” she explained, knowing she sounded lame, but helpless to stop. “The men he likes. He values my—he’s not going out with me *per se*. We’re just friends.” Ugh! Having to mouth the hated phrase twice in two minutes. Worse, she could have cried at the crestfallen look on James’ face.

“I thought...something else,” he said stiffly, and abruptly stalked out of the kitchen. Marnie trailed after him unhappily.

In the living room, Tina was greeting Joe’s date, Curtis something-or-other, and the reception was bit chilly, to put it mildly.

“So nice to meet one of Joe’s little friends.”

Marnie had to smother a laugh. Curtis, shaking Tina’s hand, was clearly a bit taken aback, but rallied gamely. “So nice to *be* one of Joe’s little friends.”

Dead silence, which Marnie broke. She could hear the false note of cheer in her voice, and hated it, but what else was there to do? Stay in the living room and stare at each other? Watch Joe lose his temper again at his parents' refusal to accept him for who he was?

But, by staying in love with him for this long, wasn't she guilty of the same thing?

She put that thought out of her mind in a hurry. "We'd better get going, you guys. I don't want to miss sitting in the theater for half an hour with nothing to do."

"Goodbye, honey. It was just wonderful to see you again. Are you coming over for dinner this Friday?" Tina's invitation held all the warmth she had withheld from Curtis.

Marnie stole a glance at a tight-lipped Joe, at the silent Curtis. "I'll let you know."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The three of them—Marnie, Joe, and Curtis—didn't have a lot to say in the car, but once at the theater, Joe laid it all out for Curtis.

"My parents are in total denial about my life," he said, clearly aggrieved. "And they adore the monster over there."

Marnie smirked. "That's Ms. Monster to you, buster."

"We dated in high school—if you can picture that without barfing—"

"Lord knows I can't."

"And my parents were pretty annoyed when I broke up with her—"

"Ennhh! Thank you for playing, but the correct response is, when *she* broke up with *me*."

He shot an irritated glance at her. "When we came to a mutual parting of the ways, and I came out of the closet."

"Lunged out, is more like it. You could have thought about my needs, for once. How do you think it looked to people when you slept with me, then publicly stated—more than once—that you prefer men? The cheerleaders made fun of me for weeks."

"*Anyway*. They won't see that we're just friends."

"Only friends."

"That there's no spark there."

"We're in a spark-free zone," she declared.

"And the thought of us ever getting back together is just extremely very stupid."

“An impossibility of nature.” Somehow, this wasn’t as much fun as it had been a few seconds ago.  
“Never happen.”

“But they refuse to see it,” he continued to an enthralled Curtis. “Take tonight—perfectly innocent, right? Mar and I are going to see the new Sandra Bullock flick—”

“*Loveher*,” she agreed.

“—because going to the movies together is this totally innocent thing that we’ve done forever. And Mom and Dad had to paint it like some big romantic evening.”

“When it’s not big. And certainly not romantic,” she added.

“Which is where I come in.” Curtis didn’t phrase it as a question, but he did raise his eyebrows.

“Eeeee. . . yeah,” Joe said reluctantly. “And I’m sorry I put you on display like that. But rubbing their noses in it is the only way to make them see.”

Marnie munched popcorn while Joe and Curtis talked, and realized she was as content as she could be while the man she loved was flirting with another man. Maybe it was the locale. She adored going to the movies.

The lights went down and she sat up straight. The familiar green “this preview has been approved for all audiences” logo came up; then the first preview unfolded. On the screen, Marnie could see a beautiful woman, dressed in 18th-century clothing. The movie announcer’s dulcet baritone boomed through the speakers.

“She was a woman of noble blood. Untouched. . . innocent. . . with a terrible secret.”

On screen, the woman of noble blood was standing on a beach gazing out to sea, looking pensive. The scene shifted to a handsome, bearded man, shirtless and standing behind the wheel of a ship. A wave broke over the bow, drenching him. He threw his head back and laughed like a manly man.

“He was a rogue,” the announcer intoned, “the bastard son of royalty. . . and her only hope.”

Marnie could feel the blood draining from her face. This was absolutely not happening. Absolutely not. No.

“From the author of *Passion’s Sweet Caress* and *Flaming Surrender* comes the movie based on the national best seller. . .”

She opened her mouth in a yowl. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa—” She dropped her box of popcorn and jabbed an elbow into Joe’s side. Joe was staring at the screen, his mouth open in delight.

“Maybe it’s not your book.”

“—aaaaaaagggggggggghhhh—”

“For God’s sakes, Mar. Breathe or your going to pass out on this disgusting floor.”

“The breathtaking saga of Shyla and Marcus, brought to the big screen. Their passion. . .”

Onscreen, Shyla belted Marcus across the mouth. “You cad!”

“Their pleasure...”

The scene shifted, and now Shyla looked ecstatic. By contrast, Marnie thought she might vomit soon. This wasn’t happening. It wasn’t happening!

Okay, it was. She’d known the movie was going into production. It had been her decision to sell the film rights three years ago, after all. Her reasoning had been simple: it was a bad book (one of many), so what did she care if they made a bad movie out of it?

Only she did care.

“The only thing more unthinkable than being together... was being torn apart.”

“You call that unthinkable?” Marnie shrieked at the screen. “This can’t be happening. I thought I was safe here!”

“Take me, Marcus,” Shyla breathed, fumbling with one of the several hundred buttons on her dress. “Take me as only you can... make me *awoman* .”

“Shut up, you ninny!” There were several “shhhhhhhh”s around her, but Marnie ignored them all. “Your name used to be Ramona! And you never wore dresses that low cut in any of my manuscripts!”

“*Love’s Eternal Caress*... experience it at a theater this fall.”

“Not fucking likely!” She sat up straight, her despair gone and replaced with a new resolution. “That’s it. I’m taking steps. This can’t be allowed.”

Joe looked thoughtful, his arm up to the elbow in his popcorn bucket. “Guess you shouldn’t have let your agent sell the movie rights, huh?”

“Just because I sold the movie rights doesn’t mean they actually had to make *amovie* out of it!”

“You sound just like Anne Rice, complaining when Tom Cruise got cast as Lestat. You didn’t hesitate to cash the check, I can’t help but remember.”

“You’re so lucky!” Curtis gasped, staring at her, dazzled.

She stood slowly. “I’ve been a victim long enough. Persecuted wherever I go. And I’m not going to whine quietly about it anymore!” She shook a fist at the screen, ignoring the muted shushes around her from her fellow movie-goers. “As God is my witness... as God is my witness! If I have to lie, cheat, steal, or kill... I’ll never write romance novels again!”

The music from the preview swelled around her. A box of Sno Caps hit her on the back of the head. That was all right, the way she was feeling. That was just fine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Staring at the bizarrely dressed mannequins, Joe asked, “Tell me again why we’re at Macy’s?”

“You know why,” Marnie replied shortly.

“Well, count me out, honey.”

With difficulty, she restrained herself from seizing him by the lapels and giving him a good shake. “You’re going to help me do this or I’ll tell your mother you made a pass at me last night.”

Joe’s gasp wasn’t entirely unfeigned. “Don’t you dare!”

“She’d be mad?” Curtis asked

“She’d be thrilled.” Marnie said this with a very dry smile, wondering why Curtis had tagged along. She supposed she could put up with him until Joe came to his senses.

“You’re so ruthless when you’re not getting your way,” Joe complained. “And there’s nothing wrong with the way you look!”

“That’s the whole point. I look too healthy and normal. I need to look cadaverous. Brooding and complex. I need to look like a Serious Writer. And I absolutely cannot be recognizable as Jessica LeFruit.”

“Yeah, but... a disguise?” He looked doubtful. “For how long?”

“As long as it takes. And you’re going to help me. You know everybody in this industry, and you go to all my promotional stuff. You’ve got to have a contact for me.”

Joe got a funny look on his face, took out his wallet, and extracted a business card. “What are you, a witch? I got this just the other day. Nice enough guy and his mom—of course, you completely blew them off because you’re a jerk and a snob, but—”

She snatched the card and read it. “Mutch and Musch. Perfect.”

“Perfect if you’re a nobody. They’re teeny and nobody’s heard of them.”

“That’s the whole point,” she repeated patiently. “If I give them a serious manuscript and look like a serious writer, a serious *nobody* writer they’ve never heard of, I’ll get a contract. Or at least an open-minded editor to read my book. Heck, I’d settle for that—it’s better than what I have now.”

“But what about your contract at the other place?” Curtis asked.

“Jessica LeFruitLoop is under contract, not me,” she explained. “It’s the name, not what I produce. Besides, they won’t mind if I sell something they won’t buy, anyway.”

Joe was already shaking his head. “This isn’t an episode of *Love Lucy*, moron. Disguises? Tricking people? Think about what you’re proposing.”

“‘Fortune sides with him who dares!’ Virgil.”

“Yeah, okay, *that’s* relevant.”

“It’s from the *Aeneid*, and it’s my new motto.”

“What happened to ‘I’ve fallen and I can’t get up’?”

“Quit with the jokes already. Now let’s get to it!”

“Get to what?”

She managed not to shriek. “Pay attention! I need a new look.”

Incomprehension, irritation, and confusion were now being replaced with offense. “What, because we’re gay we can help you with a makeover?”

“You dress better than I do and you know it.”

“Like that means anything?” he yelled. “In high school you were voted Most Likely to Be Mistaken for a Homeless Person!”

“My point! I need you.”

“We’re not your gay fashion police, okay? Lose the stereotypes, honey.”

“You want me to quit bitching all the time? You want me to stop pretending I’m a victim? Then help me do this.”

That did the trick. And much later, Marnie couldn’t believe the transformation. An hour in the hair salon had left her blonde hair slicked back into a bun. Joe had borrowed letter openers from the receptionists’ desk; they were now sticking out of her bun with just the right kooky-artistic touch. She was clad head to toe in black, all the way down to her ballet slippers. Another kooky artistic touch—Marnie couldn’t *plie* if someone stuck a gun in her ear.

“Perfect,” she said, supremely satisfied. She looked weird, she looked tormented, she looked long-suffering. Nothing like a romance novelist.

“Not quite.” Joe handed her a pair of dark sunglasses, which Marnie obediently put on. Getting out of her chair, she tripped and would have brained herself on a table if Joe hadn’t steadied her.

“Never take them off,” he warned.

“I can’t see shit!” Despite the grumble, she didn’t remove them. “This is going to work.”

“Almost.” He went back to the hapless receptionist, nipped a cigarette out of her hand, and trotted back, giving it to Marnie.

“A final touch. How can you be brooding and tormented if you don’t have a filthy life-destroying habit?”

“This is why I love the man with all my heart,” Marnie informed Curtis. He laughed, but she could only manage a small, very dry smile.

## CHAPTER NINE

Tony Freeborg was having trouble believing he wasn't dreaming. While waiting for yet another appointment with a would-be author, in walked the woman of his dreams, the woman he couldn't stop thinking about. Jessica C. LeFleur in the flesh. In his *office* in the flesh.

He couldn't begin to imagine what she wanted. He got his first clue when she made no mention of her publishing history. She was—he was sure he was misinterpreting, but it seemed as though she was in disguise. She was pretending she'd never been published, that she—big laugh—needed him to succeed.

And why was she smoking a cigarette, when she obviously didn't smoke?

"So what do you think?" she asked him, then bent forward and coughed harshly.

Mystified, he stared at her, wondering if she was going to yark up a lung or what. "You have no idea."

"Pardon?"

"Miss...uh...Hammer, I'm not sure if you're aware, but Mutch and Musch is a very small literary house. We're talking six books a year. Maybe."

"Great!"

"And they never make the best seller list," he continued doggedly, positive she wasn't getting it. "*Windows on the Niles* sold eight thousand copies, and we threw a party."

"That's wonderful!"

Sure, he thought, wonderful for a small literary house. But six thousand sales for a best-seller was peanuts. Worse than peanuts. Sub-peanuts.

What was she up to? How did she pick him out of the crowd to try and fool? He had recognized her in an instant, despite the ridiculous disguise, but it was obvious she was unaware they had met—sort of—twice before.

"We don't have much in the way of marketing budgets, we don't do much promoting, and we never print more than two thousand for a first run."

"I know. *Windows on the Nile* was brilliant. But literary novels about Egyptian dogs don't make the best seller list. Too bad."

She coughed out more smoke, her eyes watering, and looked around in vain for an ashtray. She was holding the cigarette with the ginger care of someone who's been a smoker for all of ninety seconds.

He decided to try once more. "I'm proud of the work we do here. It's excellent quality. But it's not very marketable. I'm not sure we're what you're looking for."

"Trust me. You're exactly what I'm looking for."



“Well...I’m actually leaving this house to open my own agency. I’m hoping to represent more...commercial pieces to bigger houses. Maybe you’d consider writing something—”

She sat bolt upright, so quickly her dark glasses fell off her face and into her lap. Weirdly, this aroused him. He could actually feel all the blood start to leave his head and go...er...somewhere else.

“No! And I don’t need an agent, thanks very much. Are you going to help me, or do I need to talk to someone else here?”

“Help you how?” he asked, and the vague question actually made him feel like blushing; she was so cute and so pissed off, he wanted to call it a day, hustle her over to his apartment, and fuck her until they were both sweaty and out of breath.

Try to get ahold of yourself, man!

“Uh...help you how?” he asked again.

She was so angry, she didn’t notice her cigarette, which had burned down to her fingers. She yelped and dropped it, then jumped up and stomped it out before the carpet could catch fire.

Tony watched this and waited to wake up. He assumed he was having this bizarre dream because he’d had a hot fudge sundae just before going to bed. Well! No more of that.

His cell phone rang and, without taking his eyes off her, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Not now, doc.” He slapped the phone shut and put it away. “You’re quite confident for a fledgling writer. Surely you know this is a tough business for newcomers.”

Marnie finished putting out the cigarette and sat down, carefully folding her sunglasses and putting them away. His heart broke a little at the helpless, almost desperate look on her face.

“I’m just asking for a chance,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry I lost my temper earlier. It’s just...I don’t have a lot of use for commercialism.”

While he stared, she took out another long, black cigarette, looked at it doubtfully, then put it away. She stuck out her tongue and picked off a piece of tobacco, then longingly eyed the glass of ice water on his desk. He slid it over to her. She picked up the glass and gulped gratefully.

“Look, why don’t you think about a few ideas to pitch to my boss? I’ll try to set up a meeting so she can meet you.”

She was so excited, she started to thank him while drinking, and water dribbled down her front. She set the glass down with a thud and water sloshed over the side, wetting his blotter.

“Okay! Great! Jeez, that was easy.”

Under the desk, where she couldn’t see, he pinched his thigh, hard. It stung like a bastard. Definitely not dreaming. “Well, it’s clear that you’re a great—I mean, you seem like you’d be a great writer. Very...uh...deep.”

“Thanks!”

She jumped up and for one glorious moment, he thought she was going to hug him. Instead, she settled for vigorously shaking his hand, hard enough to make his fingers ache. Then she gathered up her stuff and practically skipped out of the office.

Maybe, he thought to himself, they're re-making *Candid Camera*, and I just starred in the pilot episode. Maybe...

His cell phone rang again. He snatched it. "Whaaaaaat?"

Dr. Jorenby's girlish voice filtered through the phone. "Is now a good time?"

"My goodness, is cheerleading practice over *already*?"

"As if! I can't do a cartwheel to save my life. Want to chat? Any repressed childhood memories surface recently?"

"Yeah, I dreamed I was being tortured by a psychiatrist younger than my socks. You're not going to believe who was just here."

"Jessica C. LeFleur."

He had been leaning back in his chair, and when she guessed correctly he nearly fell on the floor. He opened his mouth but Dr. Jorenby interrupted him.

"Don't even ask me, dude. Who else would make you sound so surprised and happy? It was a totally logical deduction on my part."

He got out of his chair and went to the window. He was only two stories up, so it was easy to spot the small figure in black skipping down the sidewalk. Marnie Hammer, a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur, happier to get a meeting with a small literary editor than she had been at a book signing with a thousand fans.

It was all very strange. And for some reason he was in the middle of it. God was good.

"Dr. Jorenby, I am in love."

"Well, duh. Like I hadn't figured *that* out in two nanoseconds."

"Oooh, you're so smart."

"You see LeFleur as the embodiment of all you enjoy about literature, and women. She's passionate, articulate, intelligent..."

A little thrown by the surfer-girl voice sounding like a mental health professional, he rallied gamely.

"Rude, snobbish, ungrateful..."

"And way cute."

"How do you know that?"

"Got her latest novel right in front of me. Cover photo looks like something from *Glamour Shots*."

He spun away from the window and started pacing in front of his desk.

“Why did you buy her book?”

“Research, oh obsessive one. Don’t know how I’m going to wedge this thing into your chart, though. So why’d she come to your office?”

“Ah...I’d better not. I think I need to keep her secret for a while, until I figure out what she’s up to.”

“Dude, ever heard of doctor-patient confidentiality? I could not be more silent on the subject of La LeFleur if I had been born without vocal cords.”

“But I’m not your patient.”

“What are you, my pool boy? Spill. Start with, ‘Imagine my surprise when Jessica came into my office,’ and end with, ‘and then my brilliant psychiatrist called, and I told her everything.’”

He grinned in spite of himself. Shrugged. And told her everything.

## CHAPTER TEN

Joe opened the door and she almost dropped her purse. He looked ghastly—eyes swollen and bloodshot, face too pale. He was holding a glass full of what she assumed was whisky. The glass was so big, it looked like a mixing bowl on a stem.

“Uh...I got your message.”

He shrugged. “That bitch.”

“Do you mean Curtis? Don’t tell me, let me guess—he thinks *you’re* too smart for *his* own good.”

“He’s thinking about going back to his ex-girlfriend. He’s with her right now...” Joe actually shuddered. “Discussing it.”

“What a slut! Both of them.”

He stood back from the doorway. “Come on in.”

She followed him in, wrinkling her nose at the state of the apartment. The shades were drawn, there were dirty dishes everywhere, and the television was on.

“Sit,” she ordered.

He listlessly complied. She bustled about, throwing open the shades, picking up dishes, making a cheerful racket. Joe, she was annoyed to notice, was unmoved. He was slumped in front of the television, gulping at his whiskey and feeling pretty damned sorry for himself.

She came over and shut off the television. Joe jerked in surprise and glared at her.

“Dammit! Let me die in peace.”

“Forget it, pal. Hey, this ought to cheer you up—I have to work here for the next few days. They’re painting my apartment.”

“After seven years?”

“They finally believed me when I said the walls weren’t supposed to be beige.”

“Good,” he said listlessly. “I could use the company. Especially now that you’ve pulled out of the pity party you’ve been throwing*forever* .”

“Which reminds me, let me tell you about my great day! Then you’ll realize that even though your life sucks, just being associated with me is something to be grateful for.”

“I can hardly fucking wait.”

“I went to see the guy, Tony Freeborg, at Mutch and Musch?”

“Try to keep my name out of these meetings, okay? I don’t want him to find out I sicced you on him.”

“He’d thank you!” she said brightly.

“With a bullet.”

“Well, he’s going to get me a meeting with his boss, how about that, wise guy? I’m going to pitch her a few novel ideas.”

While speaking, Marnie had been rooting through her tote bag, pulling out a T-shirt and shorts, and changing out of her “serious author” costume. She had just stripped down to her bra and panties when Joe sat up straight.

“Oh my God!”

She froze, startled. It never occurred to her that Joe might be shocked—possibly excited?—by her undressing in front of him.

She smiled tentatively. “What?”

“What the hell is that thing on your leg?”

She glanced down and saw the fist-sized bruise on the outside of her thigh.

“Oh. Walked into the corner of a low bookshelf. Then started swearing. A lot.”

“Ouch, looks nasty. Anyway...you were saying about meeting Freeborg’s boss?”

She stared at him for a long moment. He stared back. His hair was so untidy it was actually standing up in spikes all over his head, but he still looked yummy to her.

Don't do this, she thought.

"Do you feel anything?"

Bad idea, she warned herself.

"What?" he asked.

Stop now. It's still possible to stop. "Right now. I'm in my underwear, and it's expensive stuff. How does that make you feel?"

"Like you must be freezing your ass off. Want a sweater?"

She shook her head and got dressed. Of course, he didn't feel anything. He thought they were friends. She didn't know if that made him the fool, or her.

She cleared her throat. "So...what? Curtis was just using you to get back at his lady love?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"It's so ironic. Men do to you what you used to do to me. They use you for sex, even if they don't feel anything."

"This is fun. You should come over more often when I'm depressed. Are you implying I deserve this treatment?"

"No. I'm implying that it's ironic."

"Is that what you think I did to you?"

"That's what you did to me. I was your experiment, your 'Hey, maybe I'm not gay' attempt to fit in." She coughed, surprised at how anger surged up at the thought, even after all this time. "Your token woman."

"You're nobody's token anything. And we were seventeen...that hardly qualifies you as a woman."

"It doesn't qualify me as a trout!"

He put his arm around her and hugged gently, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. She submitted sulkily.

"For what it's worth, you really confused me. You were the only woman I was ever attracted to. You know, besides Tom Brokaw."

"Well, you really confused *me*. You were the only man who had sex with me and then decided he preferred men."

"I dunno...maybe you should have switched deodorant...or something."

She stared at him incredulously, then realized he was teasing. She seized a couch pillow and let him have it right across the face. He retaliated with a couch cushion. They fell to the floor, shrieking and wrestling.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tony knew he would have a tough time convincing his boss, Robbie Todd, Editor-in-Chief, to see a best-selling author who was pretending to be a nobody. Not because Marnie was pretending to be a nobody. No, it would be tough because his boss was completely out of her mind. Since book publishing was a tough business, Tony didn't know if Robbie being a nutcase worked for her or against her.

But he had his theories.

He had a hard time believing he was even doing this...if only he wasn't so damned mixed up! He liked Marnie a lot, and he'd sure love to get her between the sheets, but when it came to how she felt for him...total blank. He had no idea. In fact, he strongly doubted she was aware he had a penis at all. Which was annoying, to say the least.

Fuckit. He could do this for her, regardless of how he felt. And he wasn't the sort of man who did favors with strings attached.

While he tried to convince her, Robbie was lining up her daily dose of medication and vitamins on her spotless desk blotter. There was exactly one piece of paper in her in-bin. Her out-bin was empty. The office was as barren as a cell, and she appeared to be caught up with her work—a near impossibility in the publishing business.

"I'm telling you, Robbie, this is a great writer."

"How's Dial-A-Shrink working out for you?" Robbie asked without looking up.

"It's the biggest waste of company funds since you decided we needed bi-weekly physicals."

Humming, she said, "A healthy staff is a productive staff." She suddenly straightened, and her eyes went wide with alarm. "Is there a bee on me?"

"No. Listen, cancel Dial-A-Shrink, will you? I don't need to tell Jorenby all my deep dark secrets."

"Dr. Muffy Jorenby was a child prodigy."

"Muffy?"

"She's published dozens of academic papers, and is making quite a name for herself in the field."

"I've been baring my soul to a *Muffy*?"

"Lucky bastard."

"If she's so great, why is she working at Dial-a-Shrink?"

"Right now her youthful appearance puts patients off."

“Ya think? She sounds like a cheerleader coming down from acid—I can’t imagine what she looks like. Look, I’d rather talk about this new writer.”

“No manuscript, no meeting.”

She put her head down on the desk, her cheek against the blotter, and flicked the first in a long line of pills into her mouth, then sat up straight and chewed placidly, like a cow.

He was so used to his boss’s oddities, he barely noticed. “She’s had some experience. And she’s brilliant, Rob. Intense and brilliant. Ten minutes of your time. Let her pitch.”

“She knows we’re small and she wants us anyway. She doesn’t have a manuscript but she expects a meeting with the Queen.”

“That’s an honorary title. You aren’t actually royalty.”

Robbie flicked two more pills into her mouth in rapid succession, then crunched them up and swallowed them. “Let’s keep reality out of this for a moment, shall we?”

“Don’t we always?”

“I say this woman has something up her sleeve. Is there a bee on me?”

“No.”

“She’s hiding something, and you know what it is, and for some nasty reason, you’re keeping it from me, the greatest editor who ever lived. *Ergo*, it’s probably something I don’t want to get anywhere near.”

Flick. Crunch. Swallow.

“Unfortunately, you wretch,” she continued, “you know I’ve got a curiosity bump the size of Washington State. So, she can have ten minutes. Starting right now.”

He turned and sprinted out of her office, racing down the hallway until he came to the reception area. Marnie was waiting for him, dressed in her absurd costume, reading what appeared to be one of the volumes from “The Encyclopedia Britannica”. A quick glance confirmed she was reading the letter M.

He screeched to a halt in front of her, but Marnie was—or was pretending to be—engrossed.

“Ms. Hammer?” he wheezed.

No response, except her face was so close to the book her nose was practically touching the print. She shook her head in pseudo-fascination and quickly turned the page.

“Marnie. My boss is waiting to see you.”

She jumped and slapped the book shut. “Oh! Sorry, Mr. Freeborg. I didn’t see you there. Don’t you think marmosets are fascinating?”

“I think about them day and night. And please call me Tony. This way.”

He ushered her into Robbie's office, noticing without surprise the extreme change in the room. Gone were the neat little lines of pills; now the desk was covered with galley pages. The phone kept beeping, but Robbie, intent at her work, didn't answer it. Her computer was on and a mail icon was flashing on the screen. It was controlled chaos.

"Robbie, this is Marnie Hammer."

His boss didn't look up from her work. She was, Tony knew, afraid of people whose last names were things, i.e. Gunn, Hammer, Rock. It was one of the many things that made her an interesting woman to work for.

"I need a manuscript."

Marnie nodded, then seemed to realize Robbie couldn't see her because she still hadn't looked up.

"Of course. How about an outline and three sample chapters by the end of tomorrow? I can download it right to your E-mail account, or courier over a hard copy, or a disc. If I could trouble you or your assistant for a copy of your writer's guidelines, I could get right to work."

Robbie slowly raised her head. Marnie smiled at her. "Of course, I couldn't produce more than three sample chapters without discussing the possibility of an advance. But there's time for that later."

"How very... professional of you. What did you say your name was again?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is what I produce, yes? 'The use of language is all we have to pit against death and silence.'"

"Joyce Carol Oates."

Marnie, who'd been opening her mouth to give the quotation's source, stared at Robbie like a diabetic stares at ice cream, then beamed.

And speaking of staring, Tony was doing his share. Marnie was awfully spectacular when she smiled. Hell, who was he kidding? She was spectacular, period.

On the spur of the moment, he asked her to lunch. And to his amazement and delight, she accepted. They went to Hoolihan's, which, as it was well past lunch time, was nearly empty.

He couldn't get over the change in her. The sullen, depressed woman he had seen before was gone. A smiling, laughing charmer had taken her place.

"Your boss is incredible. Imagine, an editor who actually reads."

"You mean, reads the sort of thing you find appropriate."

"I mean, reads books without pictures." She snorted and took a sip of her water. He watched her, amused.

"Do you have an eye infection?"



“No.”

“I only ask because every time I’ve seen you, you’ve had dark glasses on.”

“It’s...uh...to shield my vision from the state of the world. I’m very sensitive, you know.”

““Where there is no vision, the people perish.””

She stared at him, then slowly took off her sunglasses. She would look beautiful if not for the two letter openers sticking out of her bun, the hideous black clothing, and the tobacco leaf sticking to her upper lip.

“I’m—I don’t know that one. Where is it from?”

“The Bible. Proverbs. You see before you a proud graduate of Catholic high school. But I’m about to sorely disappoint you—I can’t remember the chapter, or verse, or where the text appeared on the page. Aren’t photographic memories great?”

“But if you don’t remember the page number and such, then you don’t—”

“No, but my mom does. Used to drive me crazy when I was a kid. Never, but never, ask that woman to help you with your homework. I’m lucky I made it through senior high without choking her.”

“Consider me warned. She must be pretty proud. You turned out all right.” She paused, then lightly touched him on the wrist. “In fact, I’d say you turned out great. You really helped me out today. Thanks a lot.”

He swallowed hard, then tried to break the tension. “You can make it up to me by picking up the tab.”

She laughed a little and drew back. He dabbed sweat from his forehead with his napkin when she wasn’t looking. He couldn’t believe he was nuts about a woman who ran around in disguise trying to fool his crazy boss, who pretended she *was* a smoker and *wasn’t* a best-selling author.

“My mom really likes—would really like you.”

“Why?”

“Because. Actually, what she’d do is try to set us up. She’s been after me to get married for years.”

“Oh, God, mine too! Like a marriage license is going to solve all my problems. Like picking out china is going to improve my outlook on life!”

“Exactly. There’s more to life than saying I do.”

“Right!”

“The lone wolf. Answering to no one. You can come and go as you please.”

She rapped the table with her knuckles. “Come as I please, go as I please.”

“Sure, it gets a little lonely at holidays...and on birthdays...and practically every weekend...”

“Cut it out. Traitor. So what?”

He shrugged and picked up the dessert menu.

There was a long silence while she studied him. “Actually, my mother’s got this dumb idea that I’ll never find anyone because I’m still in love with my high school boyfriend.” She paused, appearing to think it over. “The annoying thing is, she’s right. I think about him—this guy—all the time. But he thinks we’re good friends. Which we are.”

He smiled through his disappointment. “But you want to be good naked friends.”

She laughed. “Well...yeah...”

“Well. Good luck with that. And to head off the awkward silence that’s about to descend, I’m going to change the subject. What kind of book do you want to write?”

“Something evocative, yet meaningful.”

“If you’re going to write for us, you have to actually think about what you’re going to say. ‘Evocative, yet meaningful’ won’t cut it.”

Her eyes widened with surprise. “You’re sure different from the people at my old...um...job. The only time they noticed me was when I tried to deviate from the norm.”

“Deviate from the norm? You? Never happen.”

“All they cared about was junk,” she said bitterly.

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s a lot to be said for junk. Otherwise, we’d all be driving Ford Escorts and eating nothing but tofu and fat-free crackers.”

“There’s no place for junk on bookshelves.”

He managed to look unknowing, though he finally had an idea what her problem was, and where she was going with this. “Junk on bookshelves, huh? You mean like comic books and *TV Guide*?”

“And romance novels.”

Oh, boy, he thought. *Time to jump in with both feet.* “Actually, my mom’s a big romance fan.”

“Your mom and half the world. It’s disgusting.”

“Yeah. Reading for fun. A real abomination.”

She picked her purse up off the floor, wrenched it open, and irritably stuffed her glasses into it. He winced when he heard the small crunch.

“Please! Did you know that all romance novels have to have a happy ending? It’s the law. No realism, please, we only want Disney endings.”

“Well, Disney with sex...”

“And the hero has to be older, preferably by ten years or more, preferably richer than God. And the heroine has to be rescued. And God forbid if you try to inject a little realism into the books, like HIV or starving children or the state of the world.”

“I don’t think that’s true anymore. In the seventies, maybe...besides, I think some people have a little too much reality in their lives. Maybe once in a while it’s nice to sit down with a book that’s going to make you feel good. What’s the harm?”

She slammed her hand on the table hard enough to make the cutlery jump. “The harm is, forty-nine percent of all paperbacks sold are romance novels. Almost half! One out of every two!”

“What the hell is your day job—census taker?”

He was trying to hold his temper, but it was tough going.

“Don’t mock me. Those figures mean almost nobody’s interested in what’s going on around them. They just want to read about Rachel and Brad and will she Save-It-For-The-Marriage-Bed? It’s sick.”

“You would have made a great Eva Braun. Why don’t you go blow up a book warehouse or something? Make you feel better, force people to read the books *you* want them to read. God, I—”

‘Can’t believe I liked you’ was what he was going to say, but that obviously wouldn’t do. So he didn’t finish the sentence. Instead, he glared at her, which worked out nicely because she was glaring at him. They both stood and threw their napkins down at the same time.

“No you don’t!” she snapped. “*You insulted me*. Stay here. *I’m walking out on you*.”

“Like hearing you rant and rave about people making their own choices wasn’t insulting? *I’m walking out on you*.”

She gasped. “Don’t you dare!”

“Watch me.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

They left, taking different routes away from the table but running into each other at the doorway. Tony shook a finger under her chin and was about to continue lecturing her about the evils of censorship, when he was interrupted by the waitress, who appeared like a genie, waving the bill.

“And...who gets the check?”

“Eva over there. Careful she doesn’t set it on fire if she doesn’t like the way you added.”

With that, he left—angry at her, and even more angry at himself for being so blind.

Stomping down the street, he noticed other pedestrians getting the hell out of his way, which suited his mood just fine. He reached into his coat pocket and yanked out his phone, then irritably stabbed out a

number.

It rang twice, and then—thank God!—she picked up. “Muffy Jorenby, M.S., M.D., PhD, PhD, speaking. What’s up, doc?”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into having lunch with that jerk!”

“Daddy? I thought you and Mama were going to give it another try.”

He nearly walked into a street light. “Uh...this is Tony Freeborg.”

“I know. Just messing with your head. Which, by the power vested in me by the American Psychiatric Association, is not only fun, but totally profitable. How’d lunch go with the Empress of Erotica?”

“It’s worse than I thought,” he said glumly. “She’s a closed-minded snob.”

“Yeah, but she’s totally salvageable.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, she’s with you—Mutch and Musch—to try and improve her self-image. She doesn’t get why other people like reading what she hates writing. That’s not snobbery. That’s someone who doesn’t feel good about herself and takes it out on everyone else.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do about it?” he whined.

“Be her agent. Help her sell the manuscripts she cares about.”

He nearly choked at the absurdity of the idea. “She doesn’t need *me* .”

“Wrong, oh bastion of insecurity.”

“I’m not insecure!”

“Scared to death, then.”

“Is that supposed to be a professional opinion, you little twit?”

He heard the distinct sound of popping bubblegum. “I know you are but, like, what am I?”

“Goodbye, Muffy.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Marnie was trying to work in Joe’s home office; her gaze was riveted on the computer screen as she reads a few lines from her literary effort.

“Rachmaninoff’s Misery,” she read aloud. “Ahhh...no.” She backspaced and tried again.

“Rachmaninoff’s Tears. A literary novel by Marnie L. Hammer.

“Chapter One. Kirsten sensed the coming spring, sensed it as an alcoholic sensed the nearness of fine wine. Too long she had been a virtual prisoner in her apartment, with only the company of her flat-mate, Jeff, to beat back the boredom of the long winter days. She had known Jeff exactly four months and twenty days, and thought him splendid in all ways, save for his manner of speaking without thinking. And, of course, the way he sprayed saliva when he spoke.”

She backspaced; tried again. “And thought him splendid in all ways, save for his manner of speaking without thinking. But he was young. Time would teach him restraint. And speaking of restraint, she wished he would exercise a little less of it. Rather than remaining aloof as a well-fed cat, she wished he would notice her. She yearned for his touch on her face, her shoulders, her creamy, upthrust breasts. She wanted him to take her, to know her, as a man knows a woman, intimately, deeply...repeatedly. She...

“Oh you numbskull, this isn’t working!”

She brought her fists down on the keyboard, instantly typing gibberish. More gibberish, anyway. Then she took a deep breath, deleted the chunk, and started again. “*Rachmaninoff’s Tears. A literary novel by Marnie L. Hammer. Chapter One. Kirsten sensed the—*”

She cut herself off as the front door slammed, and cocked her head, listening. She could hear someone stomping around in the living room, the rattle of keys, a grocery bag being slammed onto a table. Then the *beep-boop-boop-beep-boop-boop-boop* of someone dialing a touch-tone phone. A long pause, as if someone was listening to an answering machine message, and then...

“You jerk,” Joe spat in a low voice...one that carried perfectly. “I thought you cared about me. Don’t ever call me again.”

She breathed out, her heart contracting a little in empathy. “Oh boy.”

She heard Joe, obviously dumped again, slam the phone into its case. After a long moment, she got up and headed for the living room.

Once there, she saw him pouring himself a drink. Pure whiskey, straight into a gigantic water glass. This was usually for show—Joe liked to walk around with a glass full of hard liquor, but gagged after the second swallow and ended up pouring the rest of the booze down the sink. But tonight he had the look of a man who was planning to drink until he puked, gagging or no gagging.

“Don’t do it, hon,” she said sympathetically. “You’ll be going to the bathroom all night. You know that stuff’s a diuretic.”

He didn’t answer, just took a defiant gulp, then coughed explosively.

She cleared her throat. “So...ah...Curtis decided to go back to the ex-girlfriend?”

“Ex-boyfriend. The one before Sara. Austin somebody.”

“A flexible young man, Curtis.”

He flinched and she was sorry to see it; she hadn’t meant to add to his pain.

“But him being a cheesy slut doesn’t mean *you’re* a bad person,” she continued. “In fact, his decision

probably doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Next you're going to tell me it's not me, it's him."

"Well, it's true."

"Basically, I wasn't enough for him. But that doesn't have anything to do with me. I mustn't blame myself."

"He was a bimbo! You were smarter than him *and* better looking, I might add. Frankly, there was nothing for him to bring to the relationship."

"It's not that I don't appreciate this—actually, I *don't* appreciate it."

"You'd rather be here sulking by yourself?"

"To preserve our friendship, I won't answer that. Listen, if I'm as great as you say...why can't I find anyone?"

She rubbed her temple. "Oh, jeez. Why do you think that because you haven't found anyone, it has to be a failing in you?"

"Because *it's* a failing in me."

"By that logic," she said reasonably, "then I deserve to be alone, too. Is that what you think?"

"Well. You're a snob...and irritating, sometimes...and you don't know how to dress...and you get pissy when you don't get your own way...and you take your good fortune for granted..."

She waved him along. "Yes, yes..."

"But no. I don't think you deserve to be alone."

"There you go. I don't think *you* deserve to be alone. See? We agree."

She waited expectantly, but Joe didn't get it.

"Why are you still here?" he asked.

"Hey, you didn't let me wallow in self-pity when I was Jessica LeFahrvegnugen. Now it's your turn to be cheered up against your will. To start..." She tried to take his whiskey glass away; Joe held on; they struggled. Then he spitefully let go and she found herself drenched with Canadian Club.

"Nice try, but that didn't cheer me up."

"You bastard! I'm—God, this stuff *stinks* ! I feel like I should be lying in a gutter."

She smacked him on the arm; he smacked her back. They glared at each other, then attacked like crazed alley cats, kicking, scratching, growling. They ended up on the floor, Marnie on top; she grabbed his shoulders and jerked him to her until they were nose to nose.

“Repeat after me. The bimbo. Wasn’t. Good. Enough. For me.”

“I smell booze,” he said sternly. “Have you been drinking?”

She clutched her head. “Aarrgh!”

“The worst part is, that’s the last drop of liquor in the place. And I’m not nearly drunk enough to quit.”

He managed to flip her off him and then pounced, grabbing her shirt collar and then sucking on the cloth.

“Stop!” she shrieked. “That tickles!”

“Now if you kept cocktail onions in your hair, you’d be the perfect woman.”

She tried to slap him away, but she was laughing too hard. And when his lips moved to her neck she stopped laughing. Practically stopped breathing.

Joe pulled back and looked down at her. “You’re the greatest.”

“Yes. FYI, if you don’t kiss me, I’m never speaking to you again.”

He bit his lower lip. “Marnie…”

“Shut up, fool.” She grabbed him and pulled him toward her for a long, searing kiss. He half-heartedly resisted for a moment, then gave up the pretense and began—oh, thank God!—kissing her back in earnest.

“*Do not* stop to wring my shirt out over a glass,” she muttered.

“Later,” he growled back.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Afterward, Marnie thought, *well, I guess it just didn’t occur to him that anal sex wasn’t the goal of the day*. It didn’t matter, though. Well, it had stung like crazy, and she was still mystified by the whole thing—*what was the big deal?*—but at last, at last they were one.

It had been amazing at first, like being a teenager again, when sex was the most exciting thing in the whole world. When it was all you could think about, and when, when you were finished, you couldn’t wait to do it again. She and Joe had been like that when they were dating—curious, insatiable.

This time, they both had some years under their belt. They certainly weren’t kids anymore. And they both had their own condoms and, in Joe’s case, a truly amazing selection of lubricants.

He hadn’t gone anywhere near her cunt, but had lavished attention on her ass, and when he eased inside her she’d been stroking her clit from sheer hunger, and had been able to bring herself off while he pumped inside her.

Okay, so, not exactly fireworks. But that was all right. They had years to get it right. Hell, they had the rest of the day to get it right. What mattered was, Joe had finally realized they were meant to be together, it was fate, destiny, it was...

“This was a terrible mistake.”

“What?”

“I amso sorry.”

“What?”

“You must be so pissed at me.”

“I’m starting to be.”

“I know, I know. I don’t blame you.” He sat up and looked at her, shaking his head. “Like things weren’t bad enough. Then we had to go screw up a perfectly good friendship. No pun intended.”

“Joe, this just makes our friendship*better*. I love you and you love—”

“Stop trying to make me feel better! The last time you did that I took advantage of the best friend I’ve ever had. It was stupid,*stupid* .”

“I thought it was okay. No bells and whistles, but...we’re a little out of practice.”

“Make that a lot out of practice.”

“Well. Let’s get back into practice. Try not to call out another man’s name this time.”

“You’re joking, right?”

She said nothing.

“Are you insane? I’m gay, Marnie.”

“I’ve heard the rumors.”

“Last night didn’t change that.*Nothing* will change that.”

“Don’t you have any feelings for me at all?”

“Have any—I love you, idiot! You’re my best friend. But we’re not going to be lovers, Marnie.”

“Again.”

“What?”

“We’re not going to be lovers again.”



“Right. You got it. We’re not.”

“I can’t think why not.”

“God, I’m so sorry. I’d give anything to go back in time and un-do last night.”

That did it. Bad enough he was denying her, denying *them*. But then to wish what had given her such happiness had never happened...

“Well, I *wouldn’t* un-do it! I thought it was wonderful, I thought *you* were wonderful. You’re talking like I poured hot water on your gonads.”

“You’re great in bed, Marnie, but I prefer my partners with a little less estrogen.”

Everything inside her froze. Before, she had been so happy. Now, five minutes later, she had never been so humiliated.

“You son of a bitch.”

“That’s the spirit.” He started to leave the room, then stopped and whirled like an angry cat. An angry naked cat. “Goddammit, Marnie! Why isn’t my friendship enough for you? It *snever* been good enough. You’ve always wanted more—*always*. To be published. Then to be published *again*. Then more respect as an author, more time to write what *you* want to write, more of me. And *none* of it was ever enough for you! Not once, *not once*!”

Stunned, she sat there as he pulled on his clothes with fast, furious motions. He strode to the door, yanked it open, and paused, turning for one last shot.

“And you know what? I knew you could never be satisfied, but I loved you anyway. And what I could give you, I did. But you took everything I was able to give and it wasn’t enough. That’s like spitting on fifteen years of friendship. I love you more than anyone... and it’s never been good enough for you. And after today, I see it won’t ever be good enough. So go spit on somebody else for the next decade.”

The wall shook when he slammed the door on the way out.

When she was sure he wasn’t coming back, she lowered her head to her knees and cried.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hunched over Joe’s desk, Marnie tried to lose herself in her writing. She refused to let her personal problems affect her art. If she worked hard, she could temporarily forget about Joe and how he had broken her heart—again.

“Sands and Dollars, by Marnie L. Hammer. Chapter One. Barbara stood looking out a large window, holding back the curtain with her finger and talking to herself. As it reads in the first book of Corinthians, ‘When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.’ I would imagine that could apply to women as well, even though I did

not get around to putting away childish things until well after my thirtieth birthday.”

Ooooooh, yeah. Good stuff.

“At that moment, Peter strode into the library, spotted her by the window, and said, ‘I’m really sorry about all those years I repressed you.’ He paused to pick his nose, and added, ‘It’s nothing personal. Just the nature of man. We’re forever condemned to rape, pillage, plunder, and then keep women down for centuries. Sorry.’”

She was typing so hard, the tips of her fingers were numb. But pain was irrelevant. This was good stuff!

“Barbara smiled sweetly and said, ‘That’s all right.’ She brought her arm up and threw a really huge filet knife at Peter, killing him instantly. Blood splattered like a thousand tomatoes...no, no, no!”

Marnie massaged her temples, where a truly gigantic headache was forming. She had to focus. She had to concentrate. She had to quit writing this crap.

She took a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s try again. Go back to what you were working on last night. And quit talking to yourself.

“Dara, a glorious redhead, was sitting on the lush green grass of her father’s country home, her arms filled with flowers. She could hear hoof beats in the distance, and looked up to see Daniel, her beloved, thundering toward her on his charger. She ran to him as he dismounted. He held out his arms to her, his handsome face flushed with happiness and triumph. She reached him and, as his head was bending toward hers for a passionate kiss, she slammed her knee into his groin. Daniel dropped like he’d been axed. ‘That,’ Dara informed him, ‘was for letting me get kidnapped by pirates.’”

Marnie stopped typing, stood, yanked the keyboard plug from the back of the computer, and dropped the keyboard in the trash. She wondered bitterly what else was going to go wrong this week. Always before, no matter how much she hated the work, no matter how useless she thought the subject, always before she could write. Now she had even lost that.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Marnie sat amid the chaos of Tony Freeborg’s office. Boxes were everywhere; she remembered he had said something about leaving the publishing house to start his own literary agency.

She was back in her disguise, but her heart wasn’t in it. She had left her hair down and she had lost her dark sunglasses. She was holding a cigarette, but couldn’t bear to light it and cough out her lungs for the next half hour. The only thing she clung to was wearing black.

Tony finished reading her manuscript pages, and looked up. “This is...interesting reading.”

“It’s crap. It’s puerile, predictable, and nugatory.”

“Nugatory?”

“‘Of little or no importance; trifling. Without force; invalid.’ American Heritage Dictionary.” She sighed. “Page eight-sixty-two.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, can you pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time?”

To her surprise, he proceeded to do just that, surprising a laugh out of her. She tried to copy his actions, and found she couldn't.

“It's all in the wrist, sugar... well, well, we can't do everything, can we?”

Just like that, her temporary cheer disappeared. She scowled and gestured to the pages on his desk. “Obviously not.”

Tony, still rubbing his stomach and patting his head, leaned forward. “The words are great. The way you string them together... not so much. It's clear the ability—the talent—is there. I get the feeling you're trying too hard. Reaching for... well, I don't know. Do *you* know?”

He finally quit rubbing his stomach and patting his head. She looked him in the eye and, for a moment, saw something there she could trust.

No, you don't.

Yes, I do.

She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the edge of his desk. “This is going to sound... beyond stupid, I know. But here it is. For the longest time, I only wanted two things. To be a respected author. Not a famous one. Respected. There's a difference, you know.”

“Sometimes.”

“I wanted critical acclaim, and... well, one other thing. One other *person*. And now I'm wondering if the two things I wanted most, that I've spent years working for and pining for and wishing for, I've got to wonder if I really wanted him—*them*—after all, and how much of that time spent wanting is dead time, wasted.”

There was a long silence. Then he cleared his throat. “Y'know, I never wanted to write. But I love books. That's why I got in this business. And you know how they say those who can't, teach? Well... one of the first rules of writing is do it because you love it. Not to be famous. Excuse me—respected. You should write literary novels because nothing in you will rest until what's inside, is out on paper. Not because you think people should write good reviews about you.”

She was giving him her careful attention, even as she could feel her eyes filling with tears. “I can't help what I need.”

He laughed, without humor. “Tell me about it.” To her surprise, he took her hand, and when he spoke again, it was most gently. “Marnie L. Hammer, what's wrong with doing what you're good at?”

“What if what I'm good at isn't worth anything?”

“Why don't you let me be the judge of that? You know—someone objective, who doesn't—” He coughed suddenly. “—have any sort of emotional investment in you?”

She pulled her hand out of his grasp. The moment, if one had ever existed outside her imagination, was

over.

“Look, feed those pages to the shredder or use them to line the bottom of your birdcage or set them on fire. I’ll do better. I’ll work on it some more this week and I’ll do better.” She got up, then looked back at him and managed a smile. “Thanks for listening to me whine, though. It was pretty great of you, considering the words we had at lunch the other day.”

He had the grace to look embarrassed. “About that—”

“Forget it. We both said awful things.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “True, but one of the two of us was significantly more awful.”

She scowled. “Let’s not talk about it, all right?”

“*You* brought it up.”

“And now I’m dropping it. I’m sorry I’ve wasted so much of your time. I’ll let you get back to work.”

She moved toward the door. Tony jumped up. “Wait a—”

But she was gone. He sat back down, dispirited. He hadn’t ever seen her so depressed, not even when she was signing books she hated. Obviously, writing literary novels meant a great deal to her. She had been devastated to find out she couldn’t do it.

What to do, what to do?

He fished out his cell phone and hits the speed dial.

“Thank you for calling Dial-A-Shrink. If you’re depressed, press one. If you’re hearing voices in your head, press two. If you’re—”

He impatiently hit a number and waited, drumming his fingers on the desk blotter.

“If you know your psychiatrist’s extension, please—”

He again cut off the voice, stabbing in four numbers.

“This is Dr. Wechter. How may I help you?”

Dr. Wechter’s tone was deep, soothing. Tony realized the man he was speaking to had a voice right out of central casting, and sounded extremely capable. He was unmoved.

“I want Muffy!”

“Dr. Jorenby is on the other line, sir. May I help you? What would you like to talk about? Work? Family? I’m here to help.”

“Stay out of my head, you quack! I want Muffy. Tell her to call the bastion of insecurity when she gets a moment.”

He hung up without waiting for an answer and then headed for the window to watch Marnie walk away. But it was too late. He couldn't see her anywhere.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marnie was looking through a bookstore window. *Love's Tender Fury* was prominently displayed and she realized for the first time that it didn't look like an awful book. The cover was tasteful and the colors were nice. She wondered if people were enjoying this one.

"Excuse me...Miss LeFleur?"

She rolled her eyes and turned. A short, dark-haired woman was standing behind her, timidly holding *Love's Tender Fury*. When Marnie faced her, the woman smiled, relieved, and held out her hand. "Hi. I'm a big fan of yours. Barbara Lorentz."

She shook Barb's hand. "My name isn't Barbara Lorentz."

Barb laughed.

"Hallelujah! A fan who gets my jokes."

"We're not all illiterate housewives, MissLeFleur. Just like not all romance novelists wear cheesy silk robes and lie around nibbling caviar while writing love stories with a feathered quill pen."

"Who let you spy on me? Touché."

"Um...I hope I'm not disturbing you. I thought maybe...you were on your way to a funeral or something."

Marnie glanced down at her black shoes, black pants, black turtleneck. She realized she was still holding the unlit cigarette and self-consciously tucked it into her fist. "I sort of am. I'm mourning the death of my literary talent. Although you can't really mourn for something that never existed, can you?"

"Who told you that? People are sad for things they never had, pretty much every day. Anyone who says different is a fool or a liar."

"You are *really* refreshing. Ever think of going into publishing?"

"Never once. I'm sort of prejudiced. I love my job, and I think anything outside my field is sort of a waste."

"Uh-huh. And what do you do?"

"I'm an ICU physician."

"Oh."

"You walked right into that one," Barb said kindly.

“Well. You know. Books can save lives, too. Um—you can stack them under an unconscious person’s feet so they come around quicker. Speaking of books, did you want me to sign that for you?”

She reached for the book tucked under Barb’s arm, but Barb clutched the book and slowly shook her head. “I’m going to be really forward, here. If you’re not doing anything for the next hour, could I get you to come with me? The book’s not for me, it’s for a friend. And meeting you would make her day. Her year.”

“Go off with a stranger instead of attending to my mysterious business?” Marnie shrugged. “What the hell. The day I’ve had—the *week* I’ve had—walking off with a perfect stranger to meet another stranger seems logical.”

“Actually, studies show that less than thirty percent of strangers are perfect. In fact, some people think it’s more like seven percent.”

“Do you stumble across a lot of trivia in Intensive Care?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Listen, if you’re going to smoke, you’d better do it before we get to the hospital.”

“God, no. I don’t want it. I don’t smoke.”

“Oh.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The friend Barb wanted her to meet was in the hospital. As they opened the door, Marnie could see a middle-aged woman sitting on the bed, talking on the phone. Chemotherapy had left her completely bald, she was so pale she was the color of the bed sheet, and she was much too thin. But her voice was cheery and upbeat.

“Aunt Kathy, listen. To. What. I. Am. Saying. I feel fine. I look great. You know that problem with split ends I kept having? Totally taken care of. And I’ve lost a ton of weight. Seriously. I’m going to recommend lung cancer to all my friends.” She paused, listening to the voice on the other end of the phone. “Uh-huh. . .uh-huh. No, I have everything I—well, I’d love a cigarette or ten, but I don’t suppose you’d—no? Oh, fine, refuse a dying request. That’ll get you straight into Hell, no waiting. . .aw, cut that out. I was only kidding, Aunt Kathy. Yes, I’m sorry. Yes, I won’t joke about dying anymore. Which reminds me, did you hear the one about the corpse and the pathologist? Okay, well, the pathologist is walking down the street, and he realizes he left his bone saw in the—” Lynn looked up, saw Barb, and waved. Then she noticed Marnie and her eyes widened. “Holy shit! I have to go, Kath. Dr. Doofus and a best-selling romance novelist just walked in. . .no, I haven’t had my medication yet. . .I’ll call you back.”

She hung up the phone and turned to greet her visitors, folding her hands primly on the sheet. “When you said you were running out to pick up a LeFleur, I sort of thought you meant the book.” She smiled broadly at Marnie. “Hi. I’m Lynn Filkins. It’s really great to meet you.”

Marnie crossed the room and shook Lynn’s small, hot hand. “Thanks very much. I ran into Barb just outside the bookstore. . .”

“And she hit you over the head and brought you here. Well, I can’t say I condone her methods, but I sure appreciate the results. Could I get your autograph, Miss Hammer?”

Marnie was already digging in her purse for a pen, but at the sound of her real name, she looked up. “How did you know my real name?”

Lynn rolled her eyes, clearly disgusted with such a stupid question. “Puh-leeze. Every real fan knows your name is Marnie Hammer. The name is on the copyright page of all your books, for God’s sake. Which reminds me, were your parents into, like, really bad Hitchcock films?”

Marnie grinned, delighted. “Yes! Marnie isn’t even short for anything. I can’t tell you how many times people think my name is Barney. Especially when I have a head cold.”

Meanwhile, Barb had been busy on the other side of the room, and she returned to the bed with an armful of LeFleur paperbacks, retrieved from their place on the counter. She dumped them on the bed, where Lynn shuffled through them expertly.

“Would you mind signing the whole lot?”

“I’d be honored.”

The hell of it was, she would. She had finally found a pen, and pulled up a chair to start signing. Barb handed her *Love’s Tender Fury*, and Marnie flipped the cover open to a blank page, as she had done thousands of times before, and bent to her task.

“How long are you going to be here, do you think?”

“Until I die.”

She froze in mid-autograph. Oh, shit. Nice question, loser. By the way, are we done feeling sorry for ourselves yet?

Lynn was looking at her kindly enough, but when she spoke it was as if to a small—or dumb—child. “I have end-stage lung cancer. And only one lung left to have it in. It’s pretty much hopeless. Didn’t Barb tell you? No, I guess not.”

“But you can’t—you aren’t more than—how old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

Marnie shook her head. That couldn’t be right. Lynn looked as if she was in her late thirties, at least. She had no idea what to say, what to think.

“I’m so sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“My own stupid fault. Well, mine, and the tobacco company’s. Hey, come on, you look like somebody just die—I mean, cheer up. I’ve come to terms with it. And you coming here really makes my day. I love your books.”

“Tell her about your goals.”

“Oh. Well, after I got the bad news—you know, that they don’t get cable on this ward—and then the very bad news—that I probably wouldn’t live to see Thanksgiving, which, given my family’s history of overeating and then picking fights wasn’t exactly the worst news I’d ever—”

“Lynn.”

“I’m getting to it! Anyway, once I found out my time was more finite than I’d thought, I set a goal—hang on until *Love’s Tender Fury* came out.”

Marnie didn’t know whether to be appalled or flattered. “You’re kidding.”

Lynn patted her bald head. “Hello? Do I look like I’m kidding? What, that’s not a worthy reason to hang around the planet for a while longer? I should have decided to hang around for the Super Bowl?”

“I—I didn’t—I don’t—that’s—”

“Boy, you’re probably the least articulate best-selling author I’ve ever met. Anyway, the book is out, right? I mean, you’re holding it in your hands. So the new goal is to see the movie.”

Marnie just sat there. She remembered her actions at the movie premiere and wanted to squirm with shame. And had she really thought she had a life full of problems? Had she really?

“Helloooooo? Are you still in there? Don’t make me slap you; I haven’t got the strength.”

Barb shook her head. “She’s so stubborn. The doctors gave her six months to live. Ten months ago.”

Marnie laughed. “Shame on you. Not listening to your doctors. Naughty girl.”

Lynn laughed, too, but the laugh soon dissolved into a coughing fit. She turned an alarming purple color and Barb hurried to her side, but Lynn got control of it and ended up flat on her back, exhausted.

“Shit. Can’t even have a good laugh anymore...that’s the worst part.” She sighed, then forced a smile. “Anyway, you coming here...that means a lot. I’m so glad to finally meet you. I wanted to tell you how much I liked your books before I couldn’t tell anyone anything.”

Marnie inched her chair closer and took Lynn’s hand. “Don’t thank me again. I should thank you.”

“Why?”

“You’ve really helped me get a handle on...on some things that have been happening lately. I was trying to write a different kind of book...not because I could, but because I didn’t think these...” She gestured to the small stack of paperbacks on Lynn’s bed. “...were worth anything.”

“Well, you write what you like, Ms. Hammer. But those books are gold to me.”

Barb cleared her throat. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’ve got to get up to the floor...rounds start...” She looked at her watch. “...ten minutes ago.”

“So?” Lynn asked. “Who’s stopping you?”

Barb blew a kiss to Lynn and shook Marnie’s hand. “Thanks a million for coming back here with me.”



Lynn, behave yourself. I'll come down on my break.”

“Okay, but I can't promise to be alive.”

The doctor rolled her eyes. “That's some disgusting sense of humor you've got there. ‘Bye.’”

“You know, I have another book coming out. But it's not slated for release until after the New Year.”

“You're trying to trick me into enduring another Thanksgiving with my family! Well, I won't do it.”

“I could get you the galleys next month. They're like a rough draft.”

Lynn smiled tentatively. “Really? I could get a LeFleur book before anyone else? Oh, the advantages of being terminal!”

“‘Dying is an art, like everything else.’ Sylvia Plath.”

“Quote Ms. Plath to me again, I'll be forced to get out of this bed and kick your ass, literary idol or no.”

She snorted. “I wouldn't be your idol if you'd seen some of the dreck I've been producing lately.”

“Hey, if it works, don't fix it. You write great love stories. Your heroines have functioning brains. Your heroes are honorable and don't smack the ladies around. It works.”

“I don't know, the romance genre is so...it's got such a trashy reputation. Nobody takes it seriously.”

“What's that line from *The Fisher King*? ‘There's nothing trashy about romance.’ Besides, there's worse genres. True Crime, how about that? How'd you like to write about nothing but murder cases...ooh, *there's* a literary goal.”

“Hmm.”

“And while we're getting all cozy, here, what's with the black clothes? You look like a gangster...or like you were on your way to a funeral. I'm not dead *yet*.”

“It's sort of a long story.”

“Do I look like I'm going anywhere?”

Marnie leaned back and got comfortable. “Okay, well, you asked for it. See, in high school, I fell in love with this guy, this really great guy...”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Joe slowly went to his door. The sound made his head and his heart hurt—Marnie used to pound on it that way, that ‘hurry up, we've got things to do’ way that always made his day. But she wasn't likely to be pounding on his door anytime soon.

He missed her so much, and wasn't sure if he was angrier with himself—for spoiling their friendship by

giving in to her in a moment of weakness—or her, for wanting more than he could give.

So it was with a heavy heart that he opened the door.

Marnie grinned at him. “If you’re ready to apologize, I’m ready to listen.”

She was standing there, having the nerve to look prim and wait for *his* apology, it was just so typically Marnie, and he suddenly knew. It was going to be all right.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“So I told my friend Joe...” Marnie chewed and swallowed. “I told you about Joe, right?”

Tony nodded. “The good friend you want to get naked with.”

“Right. Anyway, I had a long talk with him last night and he and I decided it’s time to tell you everything.”

“You’re both secretly in love with me?”

“No.”

“Rats.”

Suddenly, it was very hard to look him in the eye. You’d think she was about to confess to murder, rather than writing successful romance novels. “The thing...the thing is...I’ve sort of...got...a publishing history. That is to say, I’ve...had some experience writing.” She glanced up and froze in surprise. Tony’s mouth was hanging open and he had dropped his napkin in his soup. He clutched his heart, rocked back in his chair—and toppled to the floor in spectacular fashion.

A long moment passed, and then she saw a hand reach up, grope around, and grab the edge of the table. Tony hauled himself back in his seat, dabbing his forehead with his napkin.

“I’ll...I’ll be all right,” he gasped. “Just give me a minute. The news...such a shock...”

She narrowed eyes. “Son of *abitch* .”

He smirked at her. “May I have your autograph, Miss LeFleur? I’m just your biggest, biggest fan.”

“Oh my God. You knew. The whole time, you knew. You let me make a fool of myself!”

“What was I supposed to do? Tell you I knew you were lying through your teeth?”

“*Inever* lied about who I was. Marnie is my real name.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie.”

She gnashed her teeth, but he was right. “So why play along?”

“It seemed to be something you needed to do. And I wanted to help you.”

Still shocked, and feeling more than a little foolish, she tried to get her mind around what he was telling her. He had known. All along, he had known. And he had done nothing but help her. She had misled him and deceived him and he had helped her.

“How’d you know who I was? You’re not exactly in my demographic.”

“My mom’s a big fan. We stood in line for a while to get the new book signed. Incidentally, you’re much cuter when you’re not pretending to be a pretentious, chain-smoking, pseudo-intellectual.”

She sputtered wordlessly, trying to respond to pretentious, chain-smoking, and pseudo-intellectual at the same time. After a moment she gave up and shook her head.

“All this time, you’ve been letting me run around in black, trying to smoke those gross cigarettes, reading the crap I’ve been—”

“Who told you it was crap? *Where* do you get these ideas about yourself? About your work? Don’t you know how great you are? Most of the time, I mean?”

She laughed suddenly; she couldn’t help it. “This was supposed to be my meeting. I was going to reveal myself as Jessica LeFruitbat, you were going to be revolted and kick me out, and I was going to go back to writing romance novels.”

“Now, as to going back to writing romance novels, sure, why not? You should do the things you’re good at—and take pride in them.”

“How uplifting. You should write fortune cookies.”

He gave her a look, and continued. “Why don’t you get yourself a new contract with your House, one that stipulates, say, two bodice rippers and one book in another genre? For that matter, why haven’t you tried it before?”

“It won’t work. I don’t have the talent for a literary novel.” She managed to say this without flinching. And was surprised at how easily the truth came. Strange that it didn’t hurt, admitting she was a failure. It should have hurt.

“So? Maybe it’s not your style. Write a children’s book. Write a mystery. Hell, write a book on writing. You’ve got a lot to teach.”

“There are other genres out there, aren’t there? Duh. Actually, a friend of mine reminded me of that very thing...that’s a good idea, Tony.”

“You mean I’m not as dim, as dull-witted as you thought I was? Did you know my knuckles *don’t* drag on the floor when I walk? Not since I had the operation, anyway...”

“You’re insufferable.”

He stretched out in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. “Naw. I’m an agent. Speaking of which, how are you fixed for representation these days?”

“I’m my own agent. I fired mine after he signed me to write six romance novels in two years.”

He dug in his breast pocket, pulled out his card, and handed it to her. “My card.”

She looked at it for a long time, thinking. “You knew. You even got me an appointment with your boss. And you didn’t tell her who I was.” She smiled. “We’re going to be great good friends, aren’t we?”

“At least.”

His cell phone burped, startling them both, and he said, “That’s my psychiatrist. You mind if I take this call?”

“You’re in therapy?”

“Not exactly.”

Marnie excused herself, looking puzzled, while he flipped his phone open.

“Muff! Where the hell have you been?”

“Tanning. Did you win the fair maiden?”

“Not yet.”

“*Carpethedim*, dude.”

“Working on it.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

It was showdown time. The participants of the literary gunfight were all highly intelligent—well, two of them were. The other was dim, but catching on.

“You’re willing to sign another contract,” Don said, fiddling with his pen. “For three books.”

“See?” Marnie said to Tony, delighted. “I told you we didn’t need the hand puppets. He understood you just fine.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Why so suspicious?” Tony asked.

“I know the psycho, there. She’s got something up her sleeve. Probably a .357 Magnum. What’s the catch?”

“Well.” Tony coughed. “There is one minor stipulation.”

Don Peter, Senior Editor, groped for the aspirin bottle on his desk. Marnie saw without surprise that it was roughly the size of a milk jug. “I knew it. You’ve come bearing gifts to the pig in the poke, and now you’re thinking you’ll get two birds with one stone.”

“You’ve really got a way with words, Don.”

Tony leaned forward. “Two of the books will be romance novels. Historicals, three hundred pages or more...the moneymakers.”

“And the third?”

“Marnie gets to pick the genre.”

“No freakin’ way.”

“Told you,” she said.

“You did, but I never thought he’d throw away the potential hundreds of thousands of dollars of profit, because he was too gutless to gamble on a third book.” Tony paused. “But, I hear Pocket has been interested in signing you for a while. We’ll—”

“Siddown!”

They sat. Don stared at them, his gaze unblinking. Like a lizard’s.

“The romances come first,” he said after a long beat.

She yawned, concealing her joy.

“Sure,” Tony replied easily.

“And the third isn’t literary-like. Something else. True crime or something. And under your own name. *Weown* Jessica C. LeFleur.”

Oooh, Marnie thought. That’s telling me.

“Oh, all right,” Tony sighed. “You drive a hard bargain, my man. You’ve got yourself a signed contract.”

“I’ve got it!” she said, jumping up. “How about a gripping mystery? Beautiful, intelligent authoress is accused of murdering her simian editor. While no jury in the world would convict her, still, she—”

Don was crunching more aspirin. “And no funny names in the romance novels. And knock off the quotes!”

“‘It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations.’ Winston Churchill.”

“‘I hate quotations,’” Tony replied, “‘tell me what you know.’ Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

She stared at Tony, feeling a quite goofy smile come over her. He grinned back. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her editor shudder and put the top back on the aspirin. All was right with the world.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I still can’t believe how easy it was! I’ve been miserable for so long—and it was so simple to fix!”

“Easy, you’re about to bounce into traffic. Besides,” Tony added, “that’s hindsight. I think you had to go through all that disguise nonsense to find out what you wanted to do. Not what you thought you wanted to do. Why go into a contract meeting unless you know exactly what you want? Since you and I knew what we wanted, knew what to ask for, it was easy. If you’d tried it a month ago, maybe not so much.”

“I guess. Thanks for walking me here. Unnecessary, yet touching.”

“Well, since I’m now your agent, I have a vested interest in making sure you don’t get creamed by the number sixty-seven bus on your way home. Is this where you live?”

“No. An old friend lives here. I’m staying with him while my apartment’s being re-painted.”

His face fell, and she was startled at his expression.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said shortly. “I’ll talk to you later. I’d better—”

Like that, it hit her. When she spoke, it was almost accusingly.

“It’s Joe’s apartment! But you didn’t know that. You thought I was staying with a boyfriend!”

“Did not.”

She smiled, a giddy grin full of hope and promise. “Did too! Did I mention my friend Joe—”

“Repeatedly.”

“—is about as interested in me carnally as I am in him?”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s got this funny idea. About me. And my head being up my ass. But I’m better now. I’m not into crying for the moon anymore.”

“No.”

“What?”

“No, you hadn’t mentioned it.”

“Pity. Why don’t you come inside, and we can talk about it over cups of international coffee?”

He laughed, and followed her inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, Christ!”

“Yup.”

“Holy God!”

“Uh-huh.”

She was still out of breath, and they’d finished ages ago. “Seriously, do you take vitamins, or what?”

He laughed and pulled her on top of him for a hug. “No. But I’d better start. You’re going to wear me out, aren’t you?”

“I think so, yes.”

He rubbed her buttocks and kissed the hollow of her throat, and she closed her eyes and gloried in the sensation of being held, being cherished.

It had been like flying. It had been heaven. It had—she couldn’t think of the exact word, she, who always had a quote or an adjective for every occasion. Tony had been hungry, he’d been skilled, he’d been phenomenal. His mouth had been everywhere, his hands, his fingers, his tongue. He’d made her laugh and come in the same breath. He’d made her come before she had all her clothes on the floor.

And he hadn’t gone anywhere near her ass.

Not, as Seinfeld would say, that there was anything wrong with that. But Tony did so many other things. Instead, he’d made himself at home between her legs and licked and sucked and nibbled until she was screaming at the ceiling. When he’d surged into her, her vision actually went dark around the edges as her orgasm bloomed within her like a black orchid.

She’d begged, she’d screamed, she’d shuddered around him, she’d left tracks on his shoulders...and he had asked for more, demanded more.

Oh, it had really been something.

“I think you’ve ruined me for life,” she said, stroking his hair.

“Ruined you for gay men at least.”

“Well, that, too.”

She felt two of his fingers slide up inside her and shuddered as he quickly worked her to another orgasm. “Oh, jeez, you’ve got to let me get my breath back.”

“Why?”

“So I can return some of those amazing favors you’ve bestowed upon me.”

“But you’re so slick and slippery,” he teased, and oh God, she was, his fingers were still sliding around

and she squirmed against his hand, “I can’t stay away.”

“Well, I never said—said I wanted you—you to stay away—oh, God—”

“If you don’t mind,” he said into her mouth, “I really need to fuck you again.”

“Mind?”

He slid inside her with a laugh, and she wrapped her legs around his hips and pumped back at him. Oh, Christ, it was so sweet, it was delicious, it was heaven in bed. “Look what I’ve been missing,” she gasped.

“Well, I didn’t want to rub it in,” he teased, though she was gratified to hear he was out of breath, too. His breathing started to hitch and he buried his face in the hollow of her throat, nipping lightly as she clenched around him, as she felt a new wave of heat race down her limbs, through her stomach, through her cunt. . .

“Oh God!”

He groaned something in response and then shuddered above her.

“Oh God,” she said again, slightly more calmly.

“I must be crushing you,” he moaned, but didn’t move.

“You’re all right. Stay right there.”

“Forever,” he moaned again.

She laughed, and kissed the top of his head.

## EPILOGUE

Fourteen months later, Marnie was at another book signing and, for a wonder, was enjoying herself. Sales of *Be Careful What You Wish For* were brisk, and if it didn’t do as well as one of her romance novels, she wasn’t going to cry about it. This was the book she wrote for the pleasure of it, not because she was trying too hard to be what she was not.

This signing was different in other ways, too. For one, Joe and Tony had come with her. Joe, poor bum, had a rather large crush on Tony. Tony was oblivious, but Joe had no secrets from her. She was sorry for him, but not immune to irony. Hopefully after her wedding next spring Joe would recover from his case of puppy love and settle down himself. She supposed it was about time she turned matchmaker, which was another irony.

“Say, didn’t you used to be Jessica C. LeFleur?”

Startled from her thoughts, Marnie looked up and saw Barb, the ICU physician, standing at her table,



holding a copy of *Be Careful What You Wish For* .

“Dr. Barb! How are you? I haven’t seen you since Lynn’s funeral.”

“I’m good, thanks. It was kind of you to come.”

“It was the least I could do, believe me. She fought to the end, didn’t she?”

Barb nodded, and Marnie saw the woman’s smile tremble a little.

“Ah—don’t you dare buy that book, I’ll give you one of my copies.”

“It’s a wonder you make any money at all. No, I’ll buy it, thanks.” She flipped the book open and, with a twinkle in her eye, read the dedication out loud. “For the late, great Lynn Filkins, who hung around long enough to show me the truth, and then went on to a better place. We miss her so much.” Barb smiled and slapped the book shut. “She would have loved that.”

“I wish she could have seen it.”

Barb sighed. “Baby, don’t we all. What kind of book is the new one?”

“Well, it’s not literary. But it’s not awful, either. It’s kind of a mystery, I guess. I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will. I have to run, Marnie. It was nice to see you again.”

Before she could answer, Barb was gone. Marnie couldn’t help but again think of Lynn’s influence. She’d spent one afternoon with the dying woman, and it changed her life. It was all very—

“Hi...I know you’re promoting your new book...but I was hoping you could...maybe sign this one?”

Marnie looked up and saw an older woman with a kind, lined face. She was neatly dressed, but her clothing had seen years of use. She tentatively handed Marnie a battered copy of *Love’s Tender Fury* . At the sight of the familiar cover, a tangible symbol of her past unhappiness, Marnie had to smile. She had been unhappy, yes, dreadfully so. But it was of her own doing. She’d never been a victim, no matter how much it had pleased her to think so.

“No problem at all. What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Karen. I really liked it. It’s my favorite.”

“I’m so glad. If you like my style, you might want to try Julie Garwood or Catherine Coulter.”

Tony, returning with coffee and sandwiches for her and Joe, stopped short by her table. “She’s recommending other romance authors! My heart! Can’t...take...the shock...”

After setting the coffee down, Tony dramatically tumbled to the floor. Marnie didn’t turn around, though her fan gasped and looked suitably alarmed. She handed the book back, explaining, “That’s my fiancé. He hasn’t taken his medication today.”

Karen was backing away. “I-I hope he gets better.”

“Unlikely. But thank you.”

Marnie glanced behind her, toward the floor. “Tony, you’re scaring the customers. Joe, get off him! He *does not* need artificial respiration. Will you get off? I said get off him right now!”

For heaven’s sake, she thought, trying not to laugh. I need to get Joe fixed up, pronto. Say . . .there might be a book in that . . .

THE END

About the author:

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Also by MaryJanice Davidson:

Canis Royal: Bridefight

Lighthearted Lust

Love Lies

Naughty Or Nice

Thief Of Hearts

Things That Go Bump In The Night II

Be Careful what you wish for

Joanna Wylde

Chapter One

Sandra rubbed her hands together vigorously, letting the soap cut through the remnants of the massage oil.

Fat old prick.

The cheap bastard probably wouldn’t even pay her, not that she expected it. That’s what she got for agreeing to do a private appointment with a new client. At the time it seemed like a dream come true. Edgar Williams’ secretary had said her boss was desperate, had even offered to pay twice her fee.

Of course, for what he seemed to believe a massage therapist did for a living, her price was a steal. She could still feel his fat, hairy fingers gripping her ass. Why on earth would a man like that think money could possibly be enough to make her have sex with him? She'd rather be eaten by a snake!

The pipes made a moaning noise as she shut off the faucets, and she wrinkled her nose. For a couple of lawyers, Edgar and his partner didn't seem to make much. Their office was nothing more than an old, converted house, and it was a dump. She grabbed at the towel to wipe her hands and shuddered as her fingers hit crust. *Yuck*. She wiped them on her jeans instead, then turned and opened the door.

"I'm out of here. You should be ashamed of yourself, Williams," she declared as she stalked out of the bathroom into the office. "I have every intention of reporting you to the Better Business Bureau—"

Her voice cut off abruptly as she took in the scene before her.

Edgar stood frozen, facing a tall shadow of a man. Neither spoke.

"What's going on here?" she asked. The shadow stepped forward into the light. He was big, a man who had clearly spent a lot of time lifting weights. The clothes he wore fit poorly, as if they made for a smaller man. His long, black hair was pulled back in a ponytail and his face seemed chiseled in ice. His arm moved, catching her eye.

Something glinted in his hand. *Shit*. It was a knife.

"You aren't supposed to be here," he said to her slowly, his voice so low she strained to hear it. "I'm sorry you have to be a part of this." Her eyes flew to his face, meeting a cold gaze. What the hell?

"Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you, too," he continued, watching her closely. "I'm here for Edgar, and I hardly figured he'd have a piece like you around. What should I do with you?"

Her heart seemed to stop beating.

"I don't even know this guy," she whispered. "Just let me go. I won't tell anyone anything. I don't want to be a part of this."

"How stupid do you think I am?" he asked softly, eyes slipping down her still form. "You'll scream bloody murder if I let you go. You'll have to, or they might pin his death on you. In fact, I think I like that idea. You're a masseuse, right? I thought guys had to go to special parlors to find women like you. A call girl is the perfect murder suspect."

His mouth twisted, giving the word "masseuse" an ugly connotation. She stiffened.

"I'm a licensed massage therapist," she said. "I went to school for a long time to learn my craft, and I've helped heal a lot of suffering people."

"Shut up, bitch, nobody cares," Edgar muttered. "Sean, you don't have to kill anyone. I'm willing to work with you. We can make things right between us."

"It's too late for you Edgar," Sean said. "I'm touched by your concern for your girlfriend, though."

"I'm not his girlfriend," Sandra said firmly. She edged slowly into the room, trying to control the shaking

of her legs. Sean stepped toward her, eyes trailing across her body once more.

“I could use some of that *licensed healing*,” he said, the words sounding dirty. He dropped one hand slowly to his crotch, and cupped himself. Her eyes followed his hand, noticing a large, long ridge beneath his pants. Edgar shot her a glance and sidled to one side of the room. Maybe he had an idea? Not likely, but she couldn’t bring herself to give him away by following him with her eyes.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked, letting her voice go soft. She straightened her shoulders, pushing her breasts out. If Edgar needed a distraction to help rescue them, she was ready and willing to help out. Thankfully her T-shirt had a scoop neckline. Now if only she had some more cleavage...

“Not right away,” Sean murmured, running his hand slowly up and down the length of his erection. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Edgar slip through the door. What was he doing? He was supposed to thump the bad guy over the head while she distracted him, not run away. “Not before I’m done with you. I haven’t had a woman in a hell of a long time. You look just like a ripe peach to me, all soft and filled with juices.”

A bolt of lightning flashed, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Edgar bolted down the hallway.

“Edgar, you bastard!” she screamed. Sean spun around, giving out a mighty bellow of anger. Sandra looked around desperately for some kind of weapon. The closest thing she could see was a wooden chair. She picked it up and brought it crashing down across the back of his head. He staggered to one side and she pushed past him out the door. She could hear his muttered curses as she ran down the hall, through the living room that masqueraded as a waiting room, and out the front door. There was no sign of Edgar. She jetted across the wet pavement toward her aging hatchback and fumbled in her jeans pocket for the keys. Where were they?

Fuck.

She’d left them inside.

A noise came from behind; he was coming. She needed to *getaway*.

She took off down the street, passing boarded-up houses and small, closed businesses. Nine at night, and the entire block had shut down. Why had she agreed to an evening appointment in this part of town? It was a cesspit, dangerous for a woman alone.

She could hear his footsteps thudding behind her. Damn, he was fast.

Lightning flashed again; rain burst from the sky, hitting the pavement in splatters. Within seconds she felt it soaking her hair and her T-shirt. She slipped and almost went down, but managed to flail her arms and pull herself back upright.

He was gaining on her. She wouldn’t be able to outrun him.

She turned a corner and a light called to her from a storefront diner? She put on an extra burst of speed and started toward it. Not fast enough. His fingers caught the back of her T-shirt, ripping at it viciously. She almost went down, but she managed to keep to her feet, somehow tried to keep moving. Maybe she could rip the shirt and get away...

He jerked back on the fabric. Hard. She choked, falling backwards, hitting the ground with such force

that she couldn't breathe. He rolled onto her, roughly covering her mouth with his hand.

"You aren't getting away just yet, little girl," he said, his voice low and menacing. "I've worked too hard for this to let you fuck it up. Edgar will keep his mouth shut, he'll be too scared not to. You're another story."

Oh, she was scared all right. She choked back a sob, wishing desperately that she hadn't taken the appointment. What had she been thinking?

He lay on top of her for several tense seconds as her pulse pounded in her ears. Her chest heaved against his, the hard points of her nipples flattened against his muscles. Nothing about him gave even an inch of space. She opened her mouth, gasping against his hand for air. She couldn't get a deep breath. One small part of her mind registered he wasn't breathing hard at all. Bastard.

"I'm going to let you up slowly," he said, whispered in her ear. His breath seemed hot, menacing. "You need to keep your mouth shut. If you don't, I'll kill you. If you do exactly what I say, you may have a chance to live. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head, her gaze darting toward the diner. Why didn't anyone see her? Sure, it was dark and wet, but they were right in the middle of the street. Didn't they realize she needed help?

"Look at me," he said. "Convince me that you understand."

She turned her eyes toward him, getting a good look at the man for the first time. Pale blue eyes met her gaze, so pale they seemed unnatural. *Witch eyes*, she thought, shuddering. They bore through her without a trace of warmth, two orbs of ice penetrating her soul.

"Are you going to make any noise?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head as well as she could, meaning it. She had no doubt that he'd kill her if she didn't obey. Not that he'd enjoy it, she thought. Killing her would be no more than swatting a fly to him. He wouldn't think twice about it.

"You keep quiet and stay next to me," he said. "If we run into anyone, you agree with everything I say."

She nodded, and then he leaned up on one arm. The movement pushed his hips down into her, and to her horror she felt something press against her. That same bulge she'd seen before, only much bigger. He wanted her.

Her startled gaze flew to his face again.

"If you're good, I'll keep you around for a while," he said slowly. "You might have all kinds of uses."

With that he let her go, pushing himself to his feet and then pulling her up roughly beside him. He grabbed her upper arm and marched her down the street toward Edgar's office. As they walked, a van pulled up next to them, and for one shining moment hope filled her heart. Then the door slid open, and a black man with eyes as dead as her captor's looked at them.

"Who the hell is she?" he asked.

"She's my new toy," the man said. "She fucked up my little visit with Eddie-boy, and now she's seen

too much.”

“Why is she still alive?” the man asked as casually as if they were discussing a sick plant. “Valzar isn’t going to like this.”

“Why do you think she’s still alive? Look at her,” Sean replied, jerking his head in the general direction of her breasts. “I could use the services of a pro right now, and she’s feeling motivated to stay alive. We’ll work something out.”

The man shrugged, apparently indifferent to her fate.

“So long as she can’t ID us when this is all over,” he said. “Oh, we got Edgar for you. He’s in a dumpster about a block the other direction.”

“Thanks.”

Sean pushed her into the van and hopped up after her. She lurched against the other man, and he pushed her back into a seat. His touch held no kindness.

“Let’s go,” Sean said, thumping the back of the seat before him. The van swerved out into the street, tires squealing across the wet pavement. Sandra sank back into to the seat, wishing with all her might that Sean and his friends had gotten to Edgar long before she’d ever heard of the asshole.

## Chapter Two

Sean collapsed on the seat next to the hooker. He was exhausted, soaked and had missed out on getting personal revenge against the man he hated more than anyone on earth. He’d waited years for that revenge. It was revenge for his fallen men, too, although they would never know about it. They had died to feed Williams’ greed, along with the hostage they were trying to rescue.

Now he wanted to howl, to punch out with his fists and kill. He forced the feelings back, maintaining his frozen exterior. He had to stay calm, had to escape. Because of her, he’d lost the chance to kill Williams. He wanted to hate her, but she smelled too good, even wet and muddy. It had been five years, two months, and ten days since he’d touched a woman.

He wanted desperately to touch this one.

His old friend Del sat in the seat next to them, carefully ignoring their guest. His silence spoke volumes. She was a liability; she could link all of them to Williams. He should have killed her.

Del was right, of course. She *was* a liability. He really couldn’t afford to let her live, but he’d be damned if he wanted to kill her just yet. Or at all, really. A pro like her would understand, they would come to an arrangement, he told himself. Hell, she might like South America. He sure did.

He reached between his legs, adjusting his pants to a more comfortable position. His cock throbbed. He could almost feel her squirming beneath him on the ground, feel her soft breasts pushing against his chest as she gasped for air. Her belly had given way to him so easily, and he knew instinctively that her legs would have cradled him to perfection. She was a whore—she *knew* how to touch a man in all the right places. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on her.

She shivered beside him. Probably cold, he thought, and scared. Sean wrapped one arm around her shoulder, pulling her stiff body against his. She didn't want to be touched—he could feel the fear radiating from her. But she was so soft and small next to him, like a little rabbit. He wanted to squeeze her. Sean lifted her onto his lap, pulling her head to his chest.

“We'll work something out,” he repeated softly, trying to calm her fears.

Beside him Del gave a snort of disgust.

“You can sit up front if you like,” Sean said, giving Del a pointed look. Del shook his head slowly, but leveraged his large frame up. He stood, bracing himself against the seatbacks as he moved forward and dropped down into the broad passenger-side chair.

Sean ignored him, turning back to his newfound treasure instead.

Her little ass was tight and warm against him, and he could feel himself swelling even larger. He closed his eyes, and his hands clutched her body almost spasmodically. Hot. Female. His.

She moaned and gave a whimper of protest.

“Don't worry, I'll be a better customer than Edgar Williams,” he said, not wanting to think about those fat hands touching her. It was better to imagine she wasn't a whore, that she was his woman, and he could do whatever he wanted with her. Of course, he *could* do whatever he wanted with her, he reflected, so long as he paid her enough. Once upon a time, the thought might have bothered him, perhaps even disgusted him.

Now it just made him harder.

He knew they'd arrive at the airstrip soon, but he couldn't help himself. He had to touch her. He grasped her small waist, lifting her and repositioning her so that she straddled his lap, facing him. He lifted his hips, pressing his erection up into the juncture of her thighs.

Damn, that was good.

She moaned once more, and he opened his eyes to look at her face.

Her eyes were large and brown in her face, pixie eyes, he thought with bitter bemusement. Not the kind of eyes you should find on a working girl. She had pale skin with a smattering of freckles across her nose, and she bit her lip nervously as she searched his face. The gesture drew his attention to her lips, and he studied them thoughtfully. They were full, slightly chapped. He imagined kissing them, knowing full well she'd probably bite him if he tried. At least he hoped she would. He liked a woman with a little spark. She didn't seem to have much fight left in her at the moment, but she'd sure given him a run for his money earlier. He'd actually thought for a moment that she might get away from him.

He wondered what she was thinking, and then decided he didn't care. She was sexy as hell. He looked lower, and realized that if they had more light he'd probably be able to see right through her wet shirt. As it was, he could see the faint outline of her bra. It must be black, he realized, to stand out like that. He closed his eyes, imagining her rounded, pouty breasts draped in wisps of black lace. He groaned and rocked her forward over his cock.

He didn't want to think about how many men she'd had; he wanted to think about the soft, warm spot between her legs. He wanted to thrust up into her so hard she screamed. He imagined doing it, and his hips bucked up at her again. The friction of their clothes rubbing felt almost painful to his sensitive flesh, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. Grasping her hips firmly in his hands, he lifted her slightly and then rubbed her down the length of his cock. He did it again, repeating the motion until he thought he'd die. Tension spiraled down toward his groin, building with each motion until he thought he might burst right out of his pants.

Or worse yet, burst in them.

He reached down, determined to free his length from the imprisoning cloth. She could touch him, wrap her fingers around him and massage him right there. It would be amazing, the most perfect sensation he could imagine.

Let her earn her keep; they all had to do their part.

But even as he wormed his hand between them, the van came to a stop and Del turned to look at him with a toothy, humorless grin.

"You're lucky," he said, "Valzar's come up in the world. He's got a private jet with a bedroom. I suggest you wait until you're on board before doing anything else. We're not out of the woods yet, you know."

Sean nodded, knowing Del was right. He'd already wasted precious time hunting Williams; his deal for protection and cover from the CIA wasn't worth a damn if he didn't even make it out of the country. The locals were still trying to catch him. Hell, he was kind of surprised they weren't waiting for him at the airstrip. For once, though, his luck seemed to be holding. The door on the side of the van slid open, and a dark-skinned man in a loose shirt and jeans smiled at him.

"I see you haven't changed, *amigo*," Valzar said in his soft, lightly accented voice. "Always a girl in tow. Let's board the plane—we've been waiting for you. It hasn't occurred to your stupid *gringo* prison guards to shut down the airspace around here, but they'll figure it out soon enough. Let's leave before they think of it."

Sean smiled, unexpectedly pleased to see Valzar. Damn, he'd missed the man.

"Out," he said, pushing the woman off his lap and ahead of him as he jumped down onto the tarmac. In the distance he could see Valzar's plane—small, sleek and fast.

"You've come up in the world, friend," he said, giving the man a hug. The woman stood next to them awkwardly; he didn't bother watching her. Del eyed her coldly, fingering his gun.

Valzar took his arm and started walking him toward the plane. Del followed, pushing the woman along beside them. His little bird wouldn't get away while Del stood guard.

"You're a lucky man, Sean," Valzar said. "Deals like this one don't come along very often. We all thought you were long lost."

"I thought I might be, too," Sean said. He'd been out of his prison cell less than four hours, but already it seemed like some kind of horrible dream.



He'd rather die than go back.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked, nodding toward the plane. "I know you must have paid them to help me escape, not to mention the tab for that little beauty."

"When I heard that an opportunity was coming, I couldn't resist," Valzar said, shrugging with Latin elegance. "Don't worry about the money. We're partners, remember? You still have plenty of cash lying around, you know. I've been taking good care of it for you."

"I didn't expect that," Sean said, shaking his head. "We always said that if one of us got caught, the other shouldn't look back. That was the plan."

"Fuck the plan," Valzar said, grinning broadly. "I enjoyed tricking the *gringo* prisonguards. It was worth it just to see their stupid pig faces on the television set while we waited. They still have no idea what hit them."

"How many men escaped?" Sean asked.

"Couple hundred?" Valzar said, giving another fluid shrug. "They probably aren't even sure that you're gone yet. There's still plenty of confusion at the prison. They're rioting, you know."

"How did you arrange that?" Sean asked, almost afraid to hear the answer. Valzar had always been ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted.

"I didn't have to," Valzar said. "Our mutual friends took care of everything. All they want in return is some consideration down the line, which I was planning to give them anyway."

Sean nodded, not wanting the details. The less he knew about CIA operations the better.

"How long will it take us to get out of U.S. airspace?" he asked. "Will that be a problem?"

"You've been in prison a long time, *amigo*," Valzar said, flashing his playboy's grin. "I guess you haven't heard. I have diplomatic immunity now. This plane belongs to my government. If they try to stop us, they'll create an international incident."

### Chapter Three

Sandra watched closely as the two men walked ahead of her, talking in what seemed like friendly enough tones. Del marched next to her, face sullen. Her eyes darted around, looking for ways to escape. The rain was falling harder now, and she wondered for a moment if it would be too dangerous for the plane to take off.

Of course not, she realized in disgust. These were men who weren't afraid to commit murder and kidnapping. Why would they let the weather stop them?

Of course, the weather might serve her purpose. If she found just the right moment to break away, the darkness might provide enough cover to escape. She stole a look at Del, who seemed to be ignoring her. Lightning flashed again, and a thunderclap hit so hard the very ground seemed to shake beneath their feet. It was her shot.

She took off running as fast as she could, deliberately heading for the darkness along the side of the runway. There were no buildings there, only a few lonely-looking crop-dusters tethered with worn ropes. Beyond them were trees and cover. If she could just make it that far she'd at least have a chance to escape.

She heard Del shouting behind her. It took him a couple seconds to register her escape, and then something made a cracking noise.

Shots.

Holy Mother, he was shooting his gun at her! She'd thought she was already going as fast she could run, but suddenly she found more speed. The noise cracked again, and then once more. She heard more shouts from behind, and then a thudding sound. Holes appeared in one of the planes ahead of her and she gulped, terrified. She made it past the first of the planes, ducking behind it and pausing for a moment to catch her breath and clutch her side.

Big mistake.

Her captor, the one they called Sean, was right behind her, all but plowing her over when he came barreling around the plane. She lurched away from him and took off again, ignoring the terrible stitch in her side. Why hadn't she signed up for that aerobics class? She'd been meaning to do it for weeks now. Mom had been right, laziness really *would* be the death of her.

The pavement beneath her feet abruptly disappeared, and her feet sank into sandy gravel. It threw her off and she fell forward, hard, hands hitting the ground with enough force to tear off the skin. She heard him coming. She crawled forward, trying to push herself to her feet. Moving was hard, she'd knocked the breath right out of her lungs when she fell.

He hit her with the force of a train, slamming her into the ground as he came down. He was hard, wet, angry, and for one moment she wondered if he'd kill her right on the spot. Instead he just held her there, panting hard and muttering under his breath.

"That was stupid, girl," he said roughly. "Very stupid. You made me look bad in front of my friends and they aren't the kind of people to forget something like that. Neither am I, for that matter. You'll be sorry you did this."

She had no doubt he told the truth. She was sorry already. Her legs were already cramping, and she knew she'd ache in the morning. If she survived to see the morning.

"I'll do what you say," she muttered quickly. "Please don't kill me. All I want is to live. Please."

"Oh, you'll live," he said, his voice rough. "After the hassle you've given me, I'll be damned if I'll let you go this easy. You owe me now."

She didn't respond to the patently illogical statement, knowing that arguing with him was foolish. If he said she was the problem, she'd accept responsibility. Whatever it took to keep him happy was good enough for her. He pushed himself up slowly and reached one hand down to her. She took it with resignation; she was beat. Whatever chances she might have to get away were over for the moment. Now she needed to conserve her strength.

He pulled her to her feet and marched her along next to him, one hand wrapped firmly around her upper arm. It hurt and she knew she'd have bruises there the next day. Then again, she probably have bruises all over.

They walked in silence back through the parked planes. Del sat on the tarmac near the jet, clutching his jaw and giving her a look of such hatred that she shivered. How had he gotten hurt? The other man, Valzar, watched her with cool speculation in his eyes, as if she were some sort of strange and exotic bird he was considering eating.

She didn't like that look at all.

Sean stayed silent, marching her past both of them toward the jet. She was freezing cold now, and covered in mud, but nobody seemed to notice or care. They reached the foot of a small flight of steps leading to the open hatch of the jet. Sean pushed her up ahead of him, and she stumbled. One of her shoes was gone, she realized. She was walking half barefoot through the rain and she hadn't even noticed. Her toe throbbed, and she wondered if she were bleeding.

They entered the plane and he pushed her toward the back. Along each side were comfortable loungers. Nobody was in them. He kept her moving until they reached the end of the hall where a narrow door awaited them.

"Through that door," he said roughly. "We'll be able to get cleaned up in there. I'm sure Valzar doesn't want us getting mud all over his pretty airplane."

She opened the door, finding herself in a surprisingly spacious room. A large bed stood against one wall, as well as several chairs and a closet. Another door, just past the bed, seemed to lead into a bathroom.

"We'll shower in there later," he said coolly, letting go of her arm for the first time. "We'll be taking off in a couple minutes, and until we're in the air, we shouldn't be moving around the cabin. Take off your clothes."

She stood frozen, unable to process his words.

"I said take off your clothes," he said again, opening the buttons of his own shirt. His fingers revealed a well-muscled chest covered in springy black hair. It was broad and finely muscled. She gaped at him, hardly believing this was real. Was he going to rape her like this? It seemed so...*sudden*. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

"Do you want me to take off your clothes for you?" he asked coldly. "I don't want you getting mud all over the plane, and you'll do that if you don't get that stuff off right now."

"Oh," she said, turning away and blushing. She started pulling the shirt over her head, and then froze. He'd stopped moving behind her. She turned to find him watching her.

"Take them off."

She pulled her wet T-shirt up slowly, wishing desperately that she'd worn a plain white bra. Why had she gone with black that morning? What had she been thinking? The shirt was gone all too soon, and she reached down to unzip her jeans.

They were soaking wet, and the zipper stuck.

She turned away from him once more, working at it and feeling her breath come in short puffs. Then she felt the warmth of his body behind her; she froze. His hands reached around her, grasping the zipper in firm fingers. He worked it down slowly, and then reached his hands into the waist of her jeans to slide them down. His touch was almost gentle, a complete contrast with his tone of voice. She felt fingers graze her flesh as he pushed the wet fabric lower, across her hipbones and down the side of her thighs. The jeans clung to her, but he slid them down with the same strength he'd used to capture her earlier. She had no doubt in that moment that he'd be able to rip them off if he wanted.

As her jeans moved lower, he knelt behind her. She felt his hot breath on her back as he dropped down, could feel the start of surprise he gave as her red thong panties came into view.

Oh Lord. She'd only worn them because she needed to do laundry. They'd been a gift from Matt, the idiot who'd dumped her two months ago for a grad student. He'd said she bored him. Oh, to go back to those boring days again... And to think she used to wish for a little more excitement in her life!

Sean stopped moving as the thong came into view, his breath hitting the small of her back in short, sharp puffs. He was seeing her bare ass in a way only a lover should see it, she thought miserably. Then he started moving again, sliding his hand within the jeans down to her knees.

"You can get it from here," he said roughly. She nodded, unsure of what to say, waiting for him to step back.

He didn't move.

She tried to kick her feet free of the fabric but she kept getting tangled. With a sinking feeling, she realized she was going to have to bend over and pull the jeans off. She did so slowly, wondering if the blush she could feel in her face extended all the way down her body. He had to be getting quite the view of her ass. Matt had always said it was her best feature, usually in conjunction with some kind of a comment about how her brains weren't worth a damn. Sean didn't say anything, though. He didn't touch her, either, and then she was free from the heavy fabric. She stepped forward turning slowly to face him.

"What now?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer. From the feel of his erection earlier, she had a pretty good idea what his plans were. She thought about fighting him, refusing his touch, but dismissed the idea with frightening ease. She wanted to live. If that meant accommodating him sexually, so be it. She wasn't some shrinking Victorian flower, she knew what it meant to *do it*. Hell, it couldn't be worse than Matt's drunken caresses and stinking breath.

"Get in the bed," he said, jerking his head in that direction. "You're freezing and you need to warm up. It's the best we can do for now."

"What about the sheets, won't they get wet?" she asked, and then wondered why she bothered. This was a kidnapping, not a decorating show. To hell with the sheets.

"They'll be fine," he said in a bemused tone of voice, apparently sharing her thoughts. "We can change them later. Right now I just want to get warmed up."

She turned away from him and walked slowly toward the bed. They would have sex now, she was certain of it. Maybe she could make a break past him and run out the door?

The plane's engines powered up, and she heard a thudding noise. The doors had closed. Too late. They

would land eventually—she'd try to escape then. The key was to stay alive long enough to take advantage of whatever opportunities might come down the line. Staying alive meant sex.

“Come on, move,” he said roughly. “We’ll be taking off soon, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She smothered an absurdly inappropriate laugh, and climbed into the bed before pulling the sheets and covers up around her. The fabric was slippery, and very smooth. Any other time she might have taken a moment to simply enjoy the texture of the silk, but not now. He walked across the tiny cabin all too quickly, pulling off his shirt as he moved. He stood beside bed and unzipped his pants slowly, watching her with an intensity that frightened her. She tried not to watch, tried not to see those fingers pull down the zipper slowly and steadily, but she couldn’t help herself.

He was so finely built that at any other time she'd probably be breathless by now. He was the kind of guy who never looked at women like her. Six-pack abs, a tight waist... For a moment her breath caught, and she was overwhelmed with sheer appreciation for his figure.

Then he started pulling his pants down.

He wasn't wearing any underwear.

Nothing.

His penis sprang into view, fully erect and pulsing with dark red arousal. He dropped the pants down, kicking them off, then leaned over the bed toward her. His face lowered towards hers, and he whispered in her ear.

“I won’t hurt you, but you have to accommodate me,” he said softly. “I’ve been without a woman for a long, long time, and if I don’t feel you next to me pretty soon I’m going to die. Understand?”

She nodded her head, although she wasn't quite sure what he meant by “accommodate.” For all she knew he was some sick bastard who got off on telling women they were safe and then killing them.

She wanted to believe him, though. Desperately.

He pulled the covers down and slowly slid in next to her. The plane lurched; she felt panic rising in her chest. He was too close to her, his heat was all around her and she could smell him. Slightly sweaty, male, damp.

She couldn't take it anymore. Throwing off the covers, she tried to roll out of the bed. He was on her in a flash, pulling her into his arms and wrapping his legs around hers. She struggled for a moment then fell limp against him.

His naked cock pulsed against the flesh of her stomach. Groaning, he pumped his hips into her softness and she gave a little moan of fright.

“Don’t tempt me too much,” he said tightly. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t guarantee what I’ll do if you keep wiggling around like that.”

She froze. The heat of his erection burned through her. It was too much.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she asked with a panicky voice. “I don’t deserve this. I was just doing

my job.”

It seemed to be the wrong question.

“Funny, I was just doing my job, too, and I ended up in jail for five years,” he muttered. “Do you know what it feels like to go without fucking for five years? I want to slam into you so hard it makes my head hurt. Do what I say, and that won’t happen to you. At least not tonight.”

Had she heard him right? Everything was happening so fast, it felt like she was spinning.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked. “Tell me exactly what I can do keep you happy.”

“For one thing, I want you to lay in this damn bed and stop trying to run away,” he said, loosening his hold on her. He didn’t let her go completely, but he no longer squeezed her.

“I want you to hold me and make me come. It doesn’t have to be in your prissy little body, although why you’re so uptight, I don’t understand. If you can let Edgar fuck you, I sure as shit don’t understand why you don’t let me.”

His harsh words cut through her, and she had to hold back a sniff. She felt like crying. *Don’t be a wimp*, she told herself sharply. Be strong, be brave. Survive and move forward.

“I can touch you,” she said slowly. “Will you let me move?”

He held her for a moment longer, then let her slide out of his arms.

“Can we turn the light off?” she asked, looking around the brightly lit cabin with distaste.

“So you can pretend I’m someone else?” he asked, his face twisted with dark humor. “I don’t care if you imagine that, but I do want to see you. It’s been too long for me.”

She nodded, and looked around again. What was she supposed to do?

“You can start by touching me,” he said, as if reading her mind. “Rub my chest.”

She reached out with one hand, laying the fingers flat between his nipples. The plane shuddered again; they were starting their taxi down the runway.

“Is it safe to fly like this?” she asked hesitantly.

“Well, it’s against FAA regulations to fly without a seatbelt,” he said in a low voice. “But I’m relatively certain they won’t be inspecting us, so don’t worry about it.”

Her breath caught, and she realized he’d made a joke. What kind of kidnapper made jokes?

“What if we hit turbulence?” she asked.

“I’ll hold you,” he said. “Trust me, I’d enjoy it. Now do your thing.”

She moved her hand lightly on his chest, unsure of what should come next. He gave her a look of impatience, then grabbed her hand and pulled it over his right nipple.

“Let your hand drift back and forth,” he said. “Play with it. And smile while you’re doing it.”

She did as he told her, allowing her fingers to brush back and forth across his taut skin. The nipple was hard and nubby, and as she let her fingers graze across it, she could see goose bumps rising on his flesh.

She kept moving her hand as his head fell back and his eyes closed. The plane stopped, and then the engines started making a different noise. Louder. They were going to take off. No sooner had she thought it then the plane started moving again. They were going very fast, and the force of their acceleration pushed her down into the bed. He reached out and took her into his arms once more, anchoring her.

“I don’t want you falling out of bed and hurting yourself,” he said, and she felt absurdly grateful for the small comfort. She could tell the instant they left the ground, felt the pull of gravity that crushed her into his embrace. The entire cabin tilted sharply and they were in the air. He pulled her more closely into his arms, turning her to face him. His legs tangled with hers, and his hands reached down to cup her bottom. Without understanding quite how it happened, she suddenly found his cock slipping between her legs. It pressed at the entrance to her womb, but the sheer fabric of her panties kept him out.

“I thought you weren’t going to come in me,” she gasped, trying to pull away. The plane lurched, throwing her onto him. He rolled to his back, taking her with him.

“Touch me,” he muttered, his voice harsh. “Touch me and I won’t come in you.”

She reached a hand down, worming it in between them. Her earlier shyness melted away. She wanted to touch him, to get him off as fast as she could. She didn’t think those scraps of red lace would keep him out much longer. Her knees slipped to either side of his hips, supporting her as she raised her pelvis.

He pulled his body back from hers a bit as she reached down, giving her access to his groin. Her hand found his penis. It was long, hard and smooth. She wrapped her fingers around it, her grasp slipping from the moisture leaking from his tip. *It’s just another way to give a massage*, she told herself, knowing it was a blatant lie.

This was no legitimate massage.

He gasped as her fingers took him firmly, and she slid her hand down his length slowly. His entire body was rigid and hard, a study in tension and arousal.

“Again,” he muttered. She did as he said, looking up at his face while she did. His eyes closed, his head tilted back. The cords in his neck were taut, and she realized just how much control it was taking for him not to move. She slid her hand down his shaft again, and felt hope for the first time. He seemed almost concerned for her comfort.

His cock was stiff, quivering beneath her hand.

“That’s just right,” he whispered, and her breath caught. His voice was low, husky, and filled with a longing that gave her chills. A twinge of sensation caught her between her thighs, and her nipples peaked beneath the black bra.

Oh, this just kept getting more and more complicated.

## Chapter Four

Her touch was almost more than he could bear.

Five long years he'd spent imagining what it would be like to have a woman's hand on his body. Years spent closing his eyes, lying back on his bunk and stroking himself when he could bear the loneliness no longer.

Five years of hatred and waiting, lifting weights in the yard and plotting his escape.

Five years knowing everything he'd worked so hard for could be stolen at any moment.

It overwhelmed him.

He suddenly thrust against her hand powerfully. She gasped. Skittish as all hell, and afraid, too. He knew he should care, knew he shouldn't take her, but he'd be damned if he'd stop now. Taking care of men like him was her job. She might say she wasn't that kind of masseuse, but he knew better. Williams wasn't the kind of man who would go for a straight massage. Her nimble fingers slid up and down his cock, cupping and squeezing him in a way that made him want to explode on the spot. Back and forth across his flesh, skin tightening with every motion.

He shifted, and trying not to imagine what it would feel like to push her back, thrust his knee between her legs, and fuck her hard. *She's a whore, she expects it*, his cock whispered greedily. *Don't push her too hard*, his brain cautioned. *She'll break*.

Her fingers came closer and closer to the head of his cock with every stroke. The little ridge of skin that defined it twitched as she edged toward it; then her fingers grazed his most sensitive spot.

"Not there," he muttered, and she stilled. "If you touch me there I'll come off like a rocket, and I want to enjoy this a little longer."

She started moving again and he made himself focus on more than just the feel of her hot skin rubbing him. The smell of her hair, wet with just a trace of floral scent. Shampoo?

It was better than any perfume he'd imagined in the joint.

Her breasts formed taut peaks against his chest as if aroused, burning into him like hot pokers. He knew it was probably from the cold, but that didn't matter to his hungry body. If only she were wet for him, too. His hand reached down automatically, he wanted to check. He felt her breath catch as she realized what he was doing and he stopped.

He wasn't going to touch her there. If he touched her, he'd fuck her. He didn't want her screaming and crying, didn't want to hurt her.

So instead he forced his hand back, took a deep breath and spoke.

"You can start moving again," he said gruffly.

Her fingers flexed around his taut flesh and he grunted. The tension in his body leapt back to where it'd



been just seconds before; he wasn't going to last long. Her strong hand moved up and down, and without thinking he pushed against her. Her fingers tightened again, and she squeezed him. He thrust once more, and this time her fingers squeezed in time with his movements. They fell into a rhythm, him thrusting his hips and her fingers caressing him. The blood sped through his body, pounding in his ears, making his breathing grow harsh.

Tension curled inward in his body and he grew harder. His balls tightened, gathering for his release, and then he exploded in her hand. His seed blew out with explosive force and he grunted, thrusting into her hand as she pumped him dry. For one second darkness took over his vision, the sheer animal pleasure of his orgasm more than he could comprehend. He lay there, sucking air into his lungs and sweating, for what seemed like eternity. She stayed next to him, frozen, her hand still cupping his softening cock. For a moment he wondered if she was trying to harden him again, but then he realized the truth.

She was afraid to move her hand without permission.

"You can let go," he grunted. She pulled away instantly, rolling as far away from him across the bed as she could.

Absently, he noted that the plane had leveled off.

"We can take a shower now," he said, and he heard her breath catch.

"Together?" she asked breathlessly.

"No, you can go by yourself," he said slowly. An image of her body, dripping with warm, wet water entered his head and he almost moaned aloud.

She'd only taken the edge off so far.

"Alone," he replied. "But don't take a long time. I might change my mind."

"I'll go fast," she said, voice fervent. She rolled out of the bed, trying to take the sheet with her as a cover.

"Leave it," he said shortly. Watching her was half the joy; he wasn't going to give it up that easily.

She stood quickly and crossed her arms across her barely covered breasts. He wondered if she had any idea how sexy she looked. Her hair hung down around her shoulders in scraggly lines, and the little red thong she wore hardly covered a thing. Her hands and the lace-bound breasts they covered were more of a taunt than anything.

He felt himself stir once more as she moved quickly past the side of the bed to the small bathroom, lurching as she walked. The air was fairly smooth, especially considering what a storm raged outside, but he could still feel the motion of the plane around them. He heard the shower come on and imagined her in there. Her fingers were probably sticky with his seed. He'd be willing to bet she'd wash it off first, eager to remove any trace of his touch from her body. There were splashes of it on her belly as well, and he thought about her hands rubbing against the creamy flesh as she cleaned it off.

Did she have any idea how soft and smooth her skin was?

He was willing to bet she didn't.

She probably took her flesh for granted, never thinking twice about what a treat it would be for a man like him. Of course, he wouldn't have had any idea either before he went into the joint. Nobody could. He rolled on to his back, crossing his hands behind his head and looking up at the cabin ceiling. They were still over the States, but he doubted he had anything to worry about. Not in a plane like this. Trust Valzar to get appointed as a diplomat. What the hell were they thinking? That was certainly putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

He heard the water shut off, and he smiled with bitter amusement.

She didn't want him joining her.

A moment later the door opened and she came back into the room, a white towel clutched around her body.

"I thought you might like to shower next," she said, sidling back into the room.

"You were afraid I'd come in there," he said, watching her coolly. She probably thought holding the towel tight to her body provided cover. Instead it simply teased him with her curves.

His cock stirred to life.

"Although it'd be nice if you offered to wash me," he said slowly. She froze, eyes cutting through him. "Perhaps another time. I don't want you to think I don't appreciate what you've done for me already."

She simply looked at him, eyes haunted.

He rolled out of the bed abruptly, coming to his feet in one smooth motion. She jumped back and he laughed.

"I'm just going to shower," he said, looking at her pointedly. "Trust me, when I decide to fuck you, you'll know it."

She didn't reply, and he laughed again. Her fear should have made him sick. Instead it simply awakened his hunter's instinct. He considered making her fears come true but decided against it.

There would be plenty of time when they landed.

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched in a daze as he stalked into the bathroom.

When he was gone she could hardly imagine he'd been there. He was too unreal, too scary. It reminded her of the one time she'd tried drugs during college. Intense, scary, almost unbelievable when it ended. Only the pictures her friends had taken of her dancing wildly in a club were enough to convince her she'd really been that crazed girl.

Her gaze drifted across the room, coming to rest on the door. No point in trying to run. Even if they weren't in the air, that outside cabin was filled with his friends. She wasn't sure about Valzar, but she'd bet every last penny she had that Del wanted her dead, assuming he was on the plane. She had no way of knowing who might be out there. The cold reality of the situation was that as long as Sean wanted her,

she was his.

It was the best way to stay alive.

She thought of the heroines in romance novels, fighting bravely to preserve their precious virginity.

Fuck that.

She'd do whatever it took to keep alive, including blowing every man on the plane.

The thought was so overwhelming that she sat down on the bed, letting the towel fall the floor. She really was prepared to do whatever it took to stay alive. It was as if a switch turned within her head. Suddenly she felt lighter, freer. The old inhibitions fell away as everything stood out with stark clarity in her mind.

Staying alive was all that mattered.

The shower stopped running as a burst of turbulence hit the plane. He gave a muffled grunt from the bathroom, and she fell back on the bed, bemused. He was strong, the other men respected him. Even Valzar, their leader, listened to him. As long as she kept him happy, he would protect her. Eventually she'd find a way to escape. All she had to do was make him want her...

He came out of the bathroom. Mentally she poured herself a shot of vodka, drank it back and sat up.

"We didn't exactly finish before, did we?" she asked, hoping her voice was sultry and sophisticated. He froze, eyes searching her face. A slow, curious smile came over his features.

"No, I guess we didn't finish," he said.

Sandra sat back, spreading her legs across the silk sheets. Her breasts thrust forward as she leaned back on her hands.

"I think we need to come to an understanding," she said softly. "I don't know what's going on here and I don't care. All I care about is me. If you take good care of me, I'll take very good care of you."

He didn't react at first, and she flushed nervously. Would he notice? She hoped not. She wanted him to see her as a sophisticated woman of the world. If he took her offer at face value, he'd be less careful.

"I suppose we could do that," he said slowly. "Although I think we should make things clear from the start. It sounds to me like you're a professional?"

"Yes," she said, hoping her smile wasn't slipping. "You were right about that before. I'm a professional, and I don't make it my business to pry into the personal affairs of the men I serve."

"So why weren't you more accommodating before?" he asked softly.

"Because you startled me," she said, trying to look up at him through her eyelashes. "Even a professional can get spooked when her new client tries to kill her old client."

His face grew thoughtful, and she bit the inside of her lip. She shouldn't have reminded him that she knew about the murder. Big mistake.

“Enough about that,” she said quickly. Pushing herself forward, she stood and strolled slowly toward him. “Why don’t you turn those lights down and come over here?” she asked softly. “I like to work with my hands, and you strike me as being very...tense.”

He watched her without moving, and she thought he’d seen through her for sure. Then he turned and walked across the room to the light switch, turning it off. A dim glow—emergency lights?—came from the corners of the room. Not bright enough to keep a person from sleeping, but enough that she could see the outline of his form as he came toward her.

Lord, he was big.

His bulk came from muscles, too. She realized with a start that if he really *was* a client of hers, she’d be thrilled. There was nothing she loved more than going to work on a body that was well put together. She could tell just from watching him move where his trouble spots would be... Tension in the shoulders, of course, and perhaps in the lower arms. His thighs. There would be tension there, too, although not the kind she could easily massage away. She backed slowly around the bed, beckoning him to follow her. Instead, he crawled on to the silken sheets like some great predatory cat. She met him halfway across the bed with a smile. He reached for her, but she raised one hand and planted it in the middle of his chest.

“This is what I do best,” she said firmly. “Let me do my work and I’ll guarantee you won’t regret it.”

He hesitated before allowed her to roll him on to his belly.

She knelt beside him and closed her eyes, formulating her strategy. He was just like any other massage client, she reminded herself. The only difference was that this massage would be more sensual.

She knew how to do it.

She’d had dreams about giving a massage like this, private fantasies about taking one of her clients and changing his entire worldview in an hour. She couldn’t *do* such a thing, of course, even if she had a client she wanted to do *it to*. It wasn’t right; it wasn’t professional.

Professional ethics hadn’t been created for situations like this, however.

She stretched out her fingers and touched him.

His flesh was cooler than she’d expected and still slightly damp from the shower. She started at the back on his neck, slowly running her fingers down along the smooth line of his back, gaining a feel for how he was built. She’d underestimated just how muscular he was; thank goodness she wasn’t doing a deep tissue massage. It might kill her fingers to work with those muscles. After a few experimental strokes she allowed herself to move more aggressively. Not too hard yet, she was still warming him up, but hard enough that she could feel his strength.

In the darkness it was easy to imagine this was nothing more than a dream. It was easy to let her fingers wander, and before long, she noticed that she wasn’t following her regular routine. Rather than moving across his flesh systematically, seeking out every muscle group and testing it for tension, she found herself following his contours. She leaned over, breathing deeply of his scent. A tendril of desire whispered its way up across her spine.

She shook her head, denying it. She didn’t want him; it was the fantasy.

But as she moved down his back to his tight butt, she knew it was more than fantasy. He shifted restlessly as she massaged the globes of his ass, parting his legs ever so slightly. She thought about his scrotum down there, waiting for her touch, and without thinking she let her hand drift between his legs. The skin there was smooth and soft. He moaned as her fingers danced across the tender skin. He lifted his hips slightly and she cupped the sac in her hand. His testicles, those same tight balls that had shot their seed over her just half an hour earlier, slid between her fingers. She played with them, and secretly acknowledged that she liked the power touching him made her feel.

That's what it was, she realized suddenly. This new touching gave her power, a kind of control over her situation she hadn't had before. Like millions of women before her, she could control a man using her body. It wasn't something she would normally have considered a good thing, but now it was priceless. That power could save her life.

His hips lifted ever so slightly, and she realized he was rubbing the smooth silk sheets with his penis. She removed her hand, and placed it firmly in the center of his back. She pushed him down, stilling his motion.

"All in good time," she said quietly, then traced her tongue across the small of his back. She worked down the backs of his thighs, letting go of her massage technique and using feminine instinct to guide her touch. Here he was definitely tense. She could feel his arousal in every bit of skin, every wiry hair her fingers grazed. Massage wouldn't help that. She started down again, moving toward the back of his knees. He seemed especially sensitive there. She kissed him once, twice, tracing the skin with her tongue, wiggling it back and forth to tickle him.

"No more of that," he muttered after a moment. She considered ignoring him, but stopped herself. Instinct might tell her to continue, but she wasn't so sure of her hold on him that she felt it safe to disobey. Better to do as he said. She took deep breaths for several moments, and then muttered, "All right."

She started back down his legs until she reached his feet. Then she knelt at the end of the bed, taking them into her lap and rubbing first one and then the other between her strong fingers. He actually shuddered in pleasure, giving a mighty stretch. Once again she was reminded of a giant cat, something one might find in a jungle. Something that ate only that which it caught, killing without mercy. She shivered and dropped his feet.

"Why don't you roll over now?" she said, trying to keep her voice strong. She wanted to whisper, she wanted to run away, but that wasn't going to happen. She'd already dealt herself the hand she needed to win; now she just had to play it.

He did as she said, and in the dim light of the room she could see his erection jutting above his flat belly. That monster was going to be in her body. As she shook her head, trying to rid herself of the imagery, he tilted his head up at her.

"Second thoughts?" he asked with a challenge in his voice.

"No," she said, and to prove him wrong she started crawling up his body with one knee on either side of him. "I'm just getting started."

Chapter Five

Her words sent a shiver racing down his spine.

Fuck, this was better than his fantasies in the joint. She slithered up his body so smoothly he hardly knew what hit him, and everything about her screamed *female*. His senses, already attuned to her, leapt to life and screamed at him to take her, roll her over and thrust into her body with every last bit of his strength.

Instead he stilled himself, allowing her the freedom to continue her exploration. He'd been dreaming about this moment for years. He wanted to savor her, like he'd savor a fine whiskey.

He couldn't stop himself from running his hands up her arms, though. He could feel the fine strength in her. These were the arms of a woman who worked out, who kept herself in good shape. He couldn't help but admire that about her. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them softly, flicking the nipples with his fingers. They perked up, and he looked into her eyes to see surprise there.

Apparently she wasn't used to being attracted to her clients. He felt a moment of smug satisfaction. He'd gotten through to her, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

She leaned forward, resting her weight against his hands. She straddled him, one knee resting on either side of his upper thighs, and the soft flesh of her belly brushed the head of his cock.

"Touch me there," he commanded, and she gave a low laugh. The kind of laugh only a woman in control could give. For a second he wondered if he should be concerned, but he wiped the thought away. He controlled her, whatever she might think. That was the way it would be between them.

She pulled back, and took one of his hands in each of her own.

"Put these down," she said, giving him a sly smile. "I don't like to work on someone unless they're totally still."

"That must be kind of hard sometimes," he replied softly. "Do all your clients do what you say?"

"If they want me to keep them as clients," she said lightly. "I'm very picky about who I'll work on."

He rolled his eyes, but let his hands fall back as she asked. He had plenty of time to play with her. Apparently she had some kind of kinky specialty; he might as well take advantage of it.

"Do your worst," he said, closing his eyes. An image of her strong, slender hands wrapped around his throat drifted through his mind. He shook his head, willing the image away. She didn't have half his strength; he could easily defend himself. After all, where was she going to run? They were on a plane, and there was no escape from his friends up front.

Her fingers came to rest on his chest, digging into the muscles. He tried to think back to the last time he'd been touched like this. There had been that whore two nights before he'd been caught, but she didn't have this woman's talent. She was definitely higher class than the average call girl. Although what was up with her clothing? He'd never seen a hooker dressed like that before...

Her fingers made their way down his chest, coming ever closer to his stomach and the jutting length of his erection. Every touch, every gentle nudge, brought him a little closer to the edge. Each time, though, she seemed to back off. Why was she so bound and determined to hold him back?

She gripped the tops of his thighs and started sliding down and away from him. This was too much.

“Enough,” he said, his voice harsh with need. He sat up abruptly, reaching down and pulling her across his body. “Enough of this teasing, I want to fuck. You can stay on top or be on the bottom, I don’t care.”

She stilled, and for a moment her expression clouded. He almost wondered if she was going to say something, but then a strange, strained smile stole across her face.

“I’ll stay on top,” she said, her voice soft and thready. “I’d really rather be on top.”

“Fine,” he said, and pulled her hard against his chest. He fell back across the bed, grasping her head firmly in his hands. He pulled her close for a kiss, hands gripping her face so she couldn’t escape, and then his mouth took hers.

She tasted sweet. Her mouth was soft, *too* soft for a whore. No woman should taste like that unless she was meant for just one man, he thought almost angrily. He pushed his tongue into her mouth forcefully, wanting to wipe that taste of innocence away. She was too sweet, too nice to touch. It wasn’t right.

She sank into his kiss, and before he realized what he was doing he’d rolled her under him. His legs thrust between hers, spreading them apart. Still kissing her deeply, he drove into her, amazed at how tight she was. She gasped into his mouth, and her entire body stiffened around his. He’d hurt her, had pushed in too fast. He pulled away from the kiss, burying his head in her hair and breathing deeply.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “It’s been so long. You have no idea how good you feel.”

He felt her flex her muscles around him experimentally and groaned. How was he supposed hold back when she felt like that?

“If you keep doing that I won’t be able to control myself.”

She stilled, and he took several deep, harsh breaths. Blood roared in his ears, and Sean fought to slow the pounding of his heart, fought to control the need to take her. An eternity passed, then he took control again.

He pulled back, sliding out of her with a slick wetness that belied her tension. However tight she might be, she still wanted him. Her juices were flowing thick. He slowly pushed back in. It was easier this time. Following his instincts, he tilted his hips back and pulled out once more. This time he could feel himself rub against her clit as he slid home. She moaned, deep and low, and he did it again. Within moments her arms came up around him, and he felt her hips lift to meet his. He smiled into her hair, feeling pleased for some strange reason. Pro or not, she was definitely enjoying this.

He moved faster, taking deep, long breaths each time, pacing himself as he listened to her breathing. She gasped with every thrust, and he felt her legs come up around his hips to clench him close. That was more like it.

Faster and faster he moved, the pressure building up inside his body with each thrust. It was so much better than he’d remembered, this falling into a woman’s warm body. He had to stop several times to regain his control.

She was slick and hot now. There could be no doubt how much she wanted him. With a smile of satisfaction, he slid in and out of her body with new purpose. He was going to come soon, and he wanted her to come with him. As his flesh slapped against hers, he could feel her release start to

overcome her. He moaned as little twinges deep in her body danced along his length and. She started to curl up into him as if her life depended on his touch.

Then it hit her.

Her entire body went tense as her vaginal muscles gripped him with such force that it should have been painful; instead it was amazing and wonderful. He thrust again, forcing his cock past the rigid layers of muscle, each delicious touch tantalizing and torturing until he reached his limit. Sean exploded into her body.

He grunted, and his hips spasmed violently as he shot his seed. All thought ceased as pleasure rushed through him and he squeezed her until she cried out in protest. Slowly he came down, taking in deep breaths and collapsing on to her body. He felt something pushing at him, and he realized it was her hands. Why was she pushing him away?

Sean rolled off her and she turned away from him quickly. Her shoulders shuddered, and he realized she was crying. What the hell? He touched her back hesitantly, suddenly out of his realm. He liked whores because they didn't cry. Or if they did, he dismissed them. What was going on here?

She shook her head as he rubbed her shoulder, then she sat up, wiping the tears away from her face. Her skin was blotchy and her nose ran. Not pretty crying, certainly not done for effect. He opened his mouth to speak and she cut him off with one raised hand. He bit back his question, trying to figure out what to do next.

“Can we please just get some rest?” she asked softly, wiping the back of her hand across her face once more.

He nodded his head hesitantly, utterly confused. She rolled into a small ball facing away from him, pulling up the silken sheets to her chin. Sean watched her for another moment in puzzled silence, then turned away and rolled off the bed. They had a long flight ahead of them, maybe she was right. Sleep would be good. He was far more relaxed now than he'd been in months. Safer, too.

He walked across the room, allowing himself to enjoy the feeling of the plush carpet between his toes. Casually he flicked off the dim emergency lights and then returned to the bed. He hadn't lost his sense of direction in prison, he noted wryly. If anything he was even more attuned to moving without being seen after spending five years in shared cells.

He made it back to the bed and crawled in. Her crying had died down, leaving only the occasional muffled hiccup in its wake. Definitely not crying to get attention.

He lay there in the darkness for what seemed like hours until she fell asleep. Then he curled himself around her, pulling her into the circle of his arms, and letting his head rest against the soft mass of her hair. Damn, she smelled good. His cock stirred in interest, but he stayed still.

There would be plenty of time to play with her more when the arrived in San Beneficio. Hopefully she'd stop crying, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra came awake slowly, unsure of where she was. The bed was soft and comfortable, but there was a strange humming noise all around her. The floor dropped, then came back up beneath her, and she



realized she must be on a plane.

But what kind of plane had a bed?

A soft snore drifted into her consciousness, and startling her awake. She wasn't alone. Memories of the night before filled her mind. She looked around the room, startled that it could be real. Where was she, and how could she escape?

She turned to look at the big man sleeping beside her. His long, dark hair spilled across the pillow, hiding his face from her. She shifted, feeling sticky between her thighs.

Shit.

She'd had sex with him and they hadn't used any protection. Visions of HIV filled her head, followed by the thought of a black haired baby. Or worse yet, a black-haired baby with HIV.

She clutched one hand to her stomach and moaned in horror. How had this happened to her?

He shifted and she stilled. The last thing she needed was for him to wake up. The longer he slept, the happier she'd be. Moving carefully so as not to disturb the bed, she slid out from between the sheets and walked back toward the tiny bathroom. Dark humor pierced her cloud of unhappiness as she noted that even rich people had to make due with small bathrooms on airplanes. Still, it was a very expensive plane. She had no doubt that her mysterious captor and his friends had money.

She stepped into the tiny shower and cleaned herself quickly, trying to rub herself free of the residue of his touch. She scrubbed extra hard at her breasts and between her legs, punishing her traitorous flesh for enjoying his attentions so much. When she'd decided to martyr her virtue to stay alive, she hadn't counted on enjoying it. Sean was definitely the best lover she'd ever had, and she didn't like that one bit. It wasn't fair.

Life is not fair, Sandra reminded herself as she stepped out of the shower. She pulled out a plush towel out of a cupboard and dried herself off, noticing a stack of thick terrycloth bathrobes above the towels. Just what she needed. Concealing, comfortable, and utterly unsexy.

She pulled on the robe and walked back out into the bedroom. It was light outside, but the shades drawn over the windows kept things dim. She stood for a moment, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Before she could see anything, he spoke.

"Feeling better?" he asked slowly, and the sound sent a tingle rushing down her spine. Sternly she reminded herself he was the bad guy. Bad guys shouldn't have voices like that—it wasn't fair.

"Yes, thank you," she said. As her eyes adjusted she made her way over to a chair, then sat down in it as demurely as possible.

He leaned forward in the bed, covers falling to his waist, and she made herself look away.

"You want to come back to bed?" he asked. "We've still got a while before we land, and I could use another roll."

She closed her eyes against the surge of longing his words lit in her. This wasn't right.

“Do I have to?” she asked bluntly. He looked startled.

“Why should you care?” he asked. “You’ll get paid, I already promised you that. I guess my promises don’t mean very much to you, do they?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll do what it takes to survive,” she said slowly. “But I’m concerned about health and safety. We didn’t use protection last night. Do you realize that I could already be pregnant? Not to mention AIDS.”

He froze, peering at her closely through the darkness.

“You aren’t on the pill?” he asked quickly. “I don’t have AIDS, so I’m not worried about that. Unless you have it?”

She pondered telling him she did, but figured that might set him off.

“No, I’m clean,” she said slowly. “But I’m not on the pill.”

“Is that really wise for someone in your profession?”

She gave a brief, harsh laugh. She hadn’t had sex since Matt, and here Sean thought she did this every day. It would be funny if it wasn’t so damn pathetic. She couldn’t say that to him, of course. Safety lay in making him believe she was a professional who knew how to take money and keep her mouth shut.

“I prefer to use condoms,” she said simply, looking down at her folded hands. “It’s just always seemed a lot smarter to me. Protects against disease, you know.”

He nodded his head, eyes filled with a speculative look.

“Sure,” he said. “I have no problem with that.”

Silence fell between them. There was a knock at the door.

“Yes?” he asked, his voice sharp and businesslike.

The door opened a crack, and Valzar stuck his head in.

“I know you’re busy,” he said in accented tones. “But I think you should come out and see me. I’ve got some good news for you.”

Sean nodded and slid out of bed, apparently unconcerned by his nudity.

“Stay here,” he told her with a trace of humor in his voice. “Valzar, you got any clothing in here I can use?”

“In the drawer,” Valzar said, nodding his head toward the built-in dresser. “I brought some just for you. I’ll be out front.”

With that he closed the door behind him and the room fell silent again. Sean pulled on his clothes and left without a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valzar sat in one of the large, comfortable-looking chairs, a laptop computer propped open in front of him. He looked like a businessman, flying to some important meeting, but he was no ordinary businessman. Sean marveled again at his friend's ingenuity. How had he wangled diplomatic immunity?

"Good news," Valzar said, flashing Sean a grin. "Did you know you're dead?"

"Already?" Sean asked. "They move fast. How did it happen?"

"Well, according to our friends at the CIA, you stole a small plane from the airport and disappeared soon afterward. The wreckage will be found outside Fort Wiconda in about three days, and your body will be recovered. They're not too happy about the fact that you took a hostage, by the way."

"Oh really?" Sean asked, dropped into the chair across from Valzar. "I suppose it complicates things on their end?"

"That's the gist of this message," Valzar replied with a quick smile. "Apparently they're doing some fast work to trace her down and get enough information to fake her death believably. They said that it would have been a lot easier if you'd just killed her. At least then they'd have a body. I can see their point."

He shot Sean a pointed look. Sean sighed, and then closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"I didn't want to kill her," he said. "There's been too much killing already, and she didn't do anything to deserve it."

"You've always been soft," Valzar said, his face growing serious. "But your little toy is going to get us in trouble. She's the only one who knows you aren't dead, and that's going to cause serious problems. You can't let her go home and you can't trust her. What are you going to do with her, keep her forever?"

Sean shook his head, knowing Valzar was right. But when he thought about closing those brown, pixie eyes forever, he couldn't do it. Not now. Maybe later.

"She's my problem, not yours," he said finally. "She can't tell anyone anything as long as she's with me; you have nothing to fear from her."

Valzar nodded his head.

"That's certainly true," he said. "But I'm worried about you. I've gone to a lot of trouble to save your sorry hide, and I'd hate to see you blow it for a woman."

"I'm a big boy," Sean replied. "I can take care of her when the time comes."

## Chapter Six

Heat pressed down like a pillow, muffling her breath.

She couldn't remember ever feeling such heat, and such punishing humidity. Thank God the car was air conditioned, Sandra thought grimly. Otherwise she'd be dead by now.

She and Sean sat in the backseat of a Lexus SUV, a far cry from her worn Honda. Valzar sat in the passenger seat, drumming his fingers idly against his leg. Their driver, a tall, dark-featured man with a scarred lip, drove in silence. In fact, she hadn't heard him say a single word since he'd picked them up at the airport. She hadn't seen Del.

She wanted to ask where they were going, but judging from the looks Valzar had given her before, conversation wasn't a good idea. He seemed to take her presence as a personal insult, so instead of talking she watched out the window as they drove. She was pretty sure they were in South America. The accents and climate told her that much. They had landed on a small airstrip in the mountains. Now they were traveling through dense jungle, and she could only see the road ahead. Trees and foliage surrounded them on both sides, making the way nearly passable.

"Almost there," Valzar said from the front seat. "You can stay as long as you like, of course. When you're ready to discuss your future and other options, let me know. I've got some ideas we can look into."

Even as he spoke, they came around a bend in the road into a clearing. Perched on a hillside before them was a white, stucco-covered villa four times the size her parents' house had been. Two wings extended to either side, accented gracefully by the explosion of tropical flowers from the well-manicured bushes.

"It's paradise," she said softly, then blushed as both men turned to her. Sean smiled; Valzar's expression was more difficult to read.

"We're hundreds of miles from the nearest town," Valzar said. "This jungle is filled with animals that would love to kill and eat you. Don't think for one moment that there's any way for you to get away unless we send a plane for you."

She bit her lip and looked away. Sean nudged her and grinned.

"You'll be fine," he said. "I promised you that already."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, friend," Valzar said tightly.

They fell silent. The driver turned off the large SUV, unlocking the doors with a click. Sean opened his and stepped out, pulling her behind him, and the heat hit her like a wall. The house seemed further away. They walked toward it quickly, but she could already feel the sweat running down her back and pooling between her breasts. It didn't help that she wore oversized men's clothing; that had been all they had on the plane. The legs were far too long for her, and she only had one shoe. She watched her step carefully, expecting some kind of poisonous tropical bug to run out and bite her, but nothing happened.

They entered the house and another wave of cool air conditioning washed over her. She all but moaned with pleasure. They were in a large entry hall. It held a high ceiling adorned with a giant chandelier. The floor was tiled with cool, brown stones, and a broad staircase opened into the center of the room before them. Halfway up it split into two opposing staircases. They led to an open, galleried second floor.

"Nice," Sean said shortly, casting a glance at Valzar. "Do I want to know who this place belongs to?"

“My family,” Valzar said, sketching a short, mocking bow. “My father has always believed that wise men should have a nice, secure place to wait out a revolution. It’s come in handy over the years. We have a skeleton staff here. They’ll see to all your needs. They’re very discreet, of course.”

Someone coughed, and she noticed a man dressed in khaki pants and a white shirt standing off to one side. Valzar nodded at him, and he stepped forward.

“I’m Eduardo,” he said in softly accented tones. “I run the household here, as well as being in charge of security. If you need anything at all, please just let me know.”

“Thank you,” Sean said.

“Eduardo has been with our family for more than 20 years,” Valzar said. “He does far more for us than simply run the household.”

“I understand,” Sean said, and his eyes took on a new look. Sadness? It was hard to know. She could tell that something was going on here, but she had no idea what it might be.

“I trust that Eduardo isn’t so zealous in doing his duty that he won’t check with me before doing me any favors?” Sean asked pointedly. “I would take that as a personal insult, no matter how good the intentions were.”

“I respect your right to handle your own affairs, *Senor*,” Eduardo said. He shot her a look Sandra didn’t like one bit. “The situation is fully under your jurisdiction. I’m simply available should you need any help.”

Shit, they were talking about her. About *killinger*. She shivered, and edged closer to Sean without thinking. He wrapped one arm around her, comforting her, and Valzar shot her another sharp look. She was tired of all these men looking at her, judging her. All she wanted was to go home.

“*Senorita*, Maria will show you to your room,” Eduardo said smoothly, nodding at a young woman who seemed to appear out of nowhere. She was pretty, with dark hair and flashing eyes. Her lips were red and pouting, and her maid’s uniform did nothing to hide her lush figure.

“Please come with me,” she said. “I have a room prepared for you in the guest quarters.”

“She’ll stay in the same room as me,” Sean said, looking down at her proprietarily. “She’s mine.”

Rosa’s mouth tightened, but she nodded and gestured toward the stairs. “Please come with me, *Senorita*.”

Sandra didn’t want to leave Sean, but he dropped his arm and nodded for her to go. She didn’t trust these people, and it occurred to her that she probably shouldn’t trust him, either. Sean was her enemy, the man originally responsible for kidnapping her, but now she longed for his presence. He seemed so much safer, so much less frightening than all these other people. What was that called? Stockholm Syndrome? She’d heard of it before but never dreamt she’d experience it for herself.

Something so unnatural shouldn’t feel so right—it wasn’t fair.

Slowly she followed the maid up the stairs, unconsciously noting the quality of workmanship that had gone into creating the villa. Everything was made of solid wood or tile, all of which bore the signs of hand-workmanship. Large paintings hung on the walls, including portraits of strong, menacing-looking

Spaniards and delicate white beauties. Family portraits? Valzar's people went back a long way; he must be some kind of aristocrat. Definitely old money.

They came to the top of the stairs and she followed her guide through the gallery. As they left the entrance hall and started down a hallway, she realized the house was even larger than she'd initially thought. The hall was bordered by rooms for a few meters, but as they turned a corner one wall fell away, revealing an open courtyard. Hot air hit her again, but it wasn't as bad as outside. How did they do that?

The house enclosed the entire courtyard, all of which seemed to open either on to the gallery above or the courtyard itself on the lower levels. There was a large, luxurious swimming pool, as well as immaculately sculpted gardens and several fountains. Even a fake stream had been cleverly designed to run through the grounds, and in the distance, she could hear the chirping of birds. It was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen in her life.

Rosa seemed hardly to notice. She abruptly stopped in front of two large, wooden doors, then opened them and nodded toward the cool, dark interior. Sandra walked in and the doors closed behind her. She whirled, expecting to see Rosa behind her. Instead, she heard *snicking* sound and realized the maid had locked her in.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll be leaving in the morning," Valzar said. He and Sean sat in a tastefully decorated study, a room more likely to be found in a British hunt club than the jungles of the Amazon. "You can reach me any time with Eduardo's help. We have a full communications center here, including subscriptions to all the mainstream news services, as well as more specific researching tools. I've prepared a file of financial information for you. You'll want to know how much money you have, I'm sure, and you'll need to make decisions as to what you'll be doing with yourself."

"Thanks," Sean said, nodding his head in appreciation. He reached out to take the file Valzar handed to him, flipping through it. Right on top was a passport. He opened it up, discovered a worn picture of himself. Next to it was a name, Joe McMurray, Irish national.

"It looks good," he said slowly. "As always, I'm impressed with how thorough you are. You always think of everything, Valzar."

"Thank you," his friend said, smiling briefly. "I've got more for you, though. Here's some information our friends have come up with on your girl. Fresh off the fax."

He handed another file to Sean, and then sat back. Sean took it and flipped it open. The fax transmission was grainy, but there was no mistaking his little toy in the picture. She smiled broadly at the camera. Probably a driver's license photo. He scanned the accompanying information quickly.

Sandra Vicars, 27 years old, single. Residence: 1536 N. Welby, Apt. #6, Danforth, Texas. Five feet, six inches in height, 135 pounds. Next of kin listed as an aunt in New York. Occupation: massage therapist.

He flipped the page, moving on to the next sheet, absorbing the information quickly. Her parents were dead, her only brother in prison for drug trafficking, 18 years left to go on a federal charge. She had worked at a sports health clinic for five years before starting her own practice, a bad move since the economy had been down for quite a while. Now her bank accounts were all but empty and her practice seemed to be languishing. No criminal history, no suspicions of prostitution.

That caught his eye fast enough.

“It says here she’s a massage therapist with no history of prostitution,” he said slowly. “She told me she’s a working girl. How do you figure that?”

“Keep reading,” Valzar said slowly. Sean nodded, eyes quickly covering the page. She was well liked by her neighbors, all of whom were horrified that she’d be taken hostage by a dangerous escaped felon. The press was already hard at work digging up her background for their stories, and the sports clinic where she’d worked was offering a 10,000 reward for information leading to her whereabouts. Her former fiancé, a man who had broken up with her nearly nine months back, was devastated, and had already made a public appearance on one of the local television stations to beg for her return.

“This isn’t good,” Sean said, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “I thought she was a pro, someone who would be easy to buy off. That’s not going to happen with a woman like this. She’ll never understand.”

“I know,” Valzar said slowly, shaking his head. “I can see you’re attached to her, although I can’t fathom why. Perhaps it’s because you’ve been without a woman for so long? It doesn’t matter, though. You have to get rid of her. I brought in Rosa for you, she can see to all your needs. I’ll take care of the Vicars woman.”

“No,” Sean said, a wave of anger washing over him. The thought of Valzar touching his little toy made his head hurt, and he had to restrain himself from reaching across and hitting the man. “She’s mine and I’ll be damned if I’ll let you touch her. It’s not open for discussion.”

“Have it your way,” Valzar replied, one eyebrow raised and a knowing expression on his face. “She’s not a threat to me, it’s your ass on the line. Our CIA friends don’t like to be embarrassed, and I can assure you that they don’t like loose ends.”

He handed another sheaf of papers to Sean, then stood and walked over to the full bar that took up the far end of the room.

“Drink?” he asked. Sean nodded his head.

“Scotch,” he said, reading the new information restlessly. It was the rough draft of a newspaper article about his escape. Dangerous criminal, riot, hostage, etc. He skipped down toward the end, and read about his own death with a sense of grim satisfaction. His hostage had been identified as Sandra Vicars, and her burned body had been discovered with his in the plane wreckage. By the next morning, every one of her friends in Texas would read about it in their newspapers. Somebody would inform the aunt, and Sandra Vicar’s small estate would go into probate.

The former fiancé would have to find a new way to get on TV.

Valzar returned with a small glass of amber fluid, handing it to Sean. He drained the drink in one smooth motion, enjoying the way it burned down his throat. Damn, it was good to be out of prison.

“I need to be leaving soon,” Valzar said. “Is there anything that you need from me before I go?”

Sean shook his head, lost in thought.

“No, everything you’ve done for me is wonderful,” he said. “I can never thank you enough. I’ll let you know when I decide what my next step is.”

“Sounds good,” Valzar said. He stood, and Sean started to follow him. He waved him off.

“No, sit and relax,” he said. “I want you to enjoy yourself for now. It’s been far too long since you’ve had any privacy and space. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

With that he turned and left the room, leaving Sean alone with his thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra sat quietly in the room, unsure what to do with herself. She’d explored a bit, discovering that their bedroom was attached to a large, lovely balcony overlooking a private courtyard. There was a spacious bathroom complete with a whirlpool tub and shower for two.

It was nicer than anything she’d ever seen. What kind of money did it take to maintain a place like this out in the middle of nowhere, and how had it been earned? She shuddered to think. She stood and walked over to the balcony, looking out at the small courtyard. She could climb down easily enough, but there was no point. Even if she managed to get away from the house, she had no doubt the jungle would kill her. She didn’t even like camping back home; a jungle trek was completely out of the question as far as she was concerned. She’d last about ten minutes, if that.

No, her salvation lay in convincing Sean to let her go, making him believe she was no threat at all. In all honesty, she wasn’t. If she could magically transport herself home right now she wouldn’t call the police. Hell, no. She was more of afraid of him than anything else, and if he didn’t get her, his friend Valzar would.

She had to make peace with him.

The door opened behind her, and she started. It was Rosa, her face cool and hostile.

“I have clothing here for you,” she said. “You are probably too fat for it, but it’s the best I could do.”

She dumped a pile of fabric rudely on the bed and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Whatever else Rosa might be, she certainly wasn’t a potential ally.

She walked over to the clothing and sifted through it, discovering several light, simple cotton blouses and long flowing skirts in bright colors. No bra and underwear, but she could wash out the ones she wore. Not wearing underwear might turn him on. . . anything she could do to keep him interested was a good thing.

She pulled off her oversized, male clothing and pulled on the fresh garments. The light cotton blouse had a loose, wide neckline that dipped low. She looked in the mirror, noting that her breasts filled it out nicely, and thankful that they were small enough that she could get away with not wearing a bra. Her nipples formed pert peaks underneath the fabric, and she imagined she could see just a hint of color through the thin cotton. She pulled on the skirt next, enjoying the swirl of it around her ankles. The thin cotton might be enveloping, but she had no doubt direct sunlight would render it nearly transparent. Normally she would have been embarrassed to wear something like this, but now she put her shoulders back and shook out her hair. There was power in being female, a power that she needed to tap into and use to the best of her ability. This clothing was perfect.



She went into the bathroom and had started to rinse out her bra when she heard the door open again. She walked back out and saw Sean standing there. He looked at her with darkened eyes, a thoughtful, calculating expression on his face.

“Hello,” she said softly, smiling at him. Things seemed less strange with him in the room. He was her link to reality, the reason she was there.

“Rosa gave me some new clothing,” she said unnecessarily. His eyes flickered across her figure, pausing at her breasts, and she thrust them out toward him.

“I like it,” she said, walking toward him, allowing her hips to swing as she moved. “It’s cool and comfortable.”

He stayed silent, so she sashayed closer, resting one hand on his chest.

“You seem tired,” she said. “Do you want to come to bed and rest? I’d be happy to give you a massage.”

“How about a blow job?” he asked, his eyes boring into hers. “That’s more along the lines of what I’d like.”

He seemed distant, almost angry, but she nodded her head and gave a hesitant smile. She could do this, nothing to worry about. She reached for the waistband of his pants, unfastening them carefully. He wore boxers, plain white ones. What now? He didn’t do anything to help her, and she pulled back hesitantly.

“Where do you want me to do it?” she asked softly. “There’s got to be a better place than right here in the middle of the room.”

“Why do you care?” he asked, all but snarling. “I thought you were a professional. Don’t tell me you’re uncomfortable giving me a simple blowjob. Drop to your knees and do it.”

She nodded, and wished for the thousandth time that she hadn’t taken the private appointment with Edgar. Then she gave herself a mental shake. No time for regrets.

Sandra dropped to her knees, grasping the fabric of his pants to steady herself as she swayed. Kneeling, she could see the bulge of his penis beneath the boxers. She took a deep breath, reached both hands up and grasped the waistband. She had done this with Matt, she reminded herself, and at least this guy wasn’t lying to her like her fiancé had.

Slowly the boxers came down. His penis bobbed before her, an angry red giant that seemed far too large for her mouth to accommodate. She licked her lips nervously and shot him a quick glance. He still stared at her with that strange, angry expression on his face, as if she’d disappointed him. What did he want from her?

It was too scary to imagine what was going through his head, so she turned her attention back to the task at hand. She reached out, tracing the edge of the head with one finger. He didn’t respond, although his erection bobbed under her touch. She let her hand fall lower, grasping the smooth, silky shaft with gentle force. Then she leaned her head forward and delicately touched her tongue to the very tip of his length.

He shuddered, and she took it as a sign of encouragement. Sticking her tongue out further, she swirled it around the head a couple times, allowing her saliva to run out and lubricate his flesh before closing her mouth around the tip. He shuddered, one hand coming to rest on the back of her head, giving an ever-so-slight pressure as he pulled her closer to him. She opened her mouth further, allowing his hard length to come into her.

At first it seemed he was so large he would choke her, and she hadn't even gotten more than a few inches past the head. But after a moment her mouth relaxed and opened further, and he pushed in deeper. She laved her tongue along his length, then pulled back her head and let some of him come free. Time to start the rhythm that drove men crazy. She'd done it for Matt, and he'd always said she was a good little cocksucker, she thought in disgust. Of course, he'd never said anything so foul to her face. He'd waited until they had broken up, and then shared the story of their last time together with all of his friends. Sean might be a kidnapper, but so far he was more of a gentleman than that asshole.

She pushed the horrible thought out of her head, preferring to focus on the task at hand. She found that if she rubbed her hand up and down along his shaft as she sucked at him, he seemed to appreciate it. He still said nothing, but his hand tightened on her hair. She could feel the first drops of his seed in her mouth now, just a little salty taste of what was to come. She had always hated the taste of a man's semen, but his wasn't that bad. Almost sweet in a way, and very pleasant. Without thinking she sucked harder, as if to pull more of the juice from him.

He grunted and she swallowed more of his cock. It had gotten to the point where she actually wanted him in her. She could feel her breasts swelling, and knew there was moisture building between her legs. What kind of slut was she? The kind who wants to stay alive, her brain told her firmly. The kind who knows that having sex to survive would be more palatable if she could bring herself to enjoy it. There were worse fates than being forced to make love to a man who was incredibly handsome, and more than a little attractive to her. Her situation might be precarious, but she still had a few chances left. She needed to make the most of the fragile bond he'd formed with her.

She sucked him in deeper, wrapping one arm around his waist to support herself. Unconsciously she dug her fingers into the taut muscle of his ass, and he seemed to like the sensation. His cock surged within her mouth and more of his fluid seeped out of his slit.

With every thrust she tried to massage him with her tongue, and each time he pulled out she used suction to hold him as long as she could. Back and forth, in and out. Her hand worked furiously, rubbing along his length and taking care of the parts that her mouth couldn't reach. She felt his other hand grip the back of her head and knew he was getting close.

Then he shifted, letting his legs stand apart a bit, giving her better access. She used the opportunity to reach between his buttocks, allowing her fingers to play with the tightened skin of his scrotum. His balls pulled up close to his body as he neared ejaculation. She suctioned harder, working him as hard as she could, driving him closer to orgasm even as her fingers plucked at his balls, pulling on them lightly.

He gave a startled groan above her and his fingers tightened in her hair to the point of pain. She ignored it, putting everything she had into sucking him. He started to thrust into her harder and she felt the skin of his cock harden almost beyond imagining.

With a harsh cry, he shot his seed into her mouth, all but choking her. The salty, sweet fluid tasted better than any she'd had before, and she found herself swallowing it without feeling sick as she had so often with Matt. Burst after burst of his essence filled her and she sucked it down greedily.

Finally it stopped. She took a moment to lick around his cock, cleaning it up, and then sat back on her heels. His hands were gone from her head, and when she looked up at him he seemed lost in thought.

“We have to talk,” he said after a moment. He wiped his forehead and she noticed a bead of sweat making its way down his temple. “Let’s go out on the balcony. It’s a lovely place to sit and visit.”

Absently wiping her mouth against her sleeve, she accepted the hand up he offered. His fingers were hard, filled with strength, and once again she sensed that tension in him. Whatever was bothering him, sex hadn’t taken the edge off. When they were sitting comfortably in the two chairs on either side of the small table on their balcony, he turned to look at her.

“I know who you are, Sandra Vicars,” he said softly. “And I know you’re not a whore, even though you’re doing your best to act like one. Now I need to figure out what to do with you. Valzar wants me to kill you, says I need to do it for my own safety. What other options do you have for me?”

## Chapter Seven

She froze, completely unable to think of anything to say. How had he figured it out? She could only think of one way.

“Am I really that crappy in the sack?” she asked.

His face froze and he made a sudden choking noise.

“I can’t believe you just asked that,” he said. “Of all the things you have to worry about right now...”

She bit her lip, realizing he was absolutely right. She wasn’t thinking at all. She didn’t want to think, it was too scary.

“If you just let me go, I promise I won’t tell anyone about you,” she said. “Honestly, I don’t care if they catch you at all. I just want to get out of this alive. Is that so hard for you to believe?”

“I can’t let you go,” he said slowly.

“You don’t trust me, I can understand that,” she said, feeling herself grow hysterical. “But I honestly don’t know anything about you. I don’t even know what country we’re in. I don’t care; I just want to go home!”

She cut herself off abruptly. She needed to calm down, think clearly. This was her big chance to make a case for herself and she couldn’t afford to blow it. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them, peering directly into his.

“Please, let me go,” she said softly.

He shook his head slowly, and she thought she saw genuine sadness there. It puzzled her.

“I can’t let you go, Sandra,” he said slowly. “You’re already dead.”

She cocked her head at him, and then moaned as his words sank in.

“You’re going to kill me right now?” she asked, and something inside snapped. It was too much. She stood abruptly, the chair she’d been sitting in falling to the floor behind her with a loud clanging noise. Fury filled her. It was time to fight back.

“Fuck you,” she said in a cold voice. “I hope they catch you and kill you. I hope that they stick you in an electric chair and fry you, and if I had the chance I’d push that needle plunger down myself.”

“They don’t use a needle in the electric chair,” he said reasonably, standing and reaching out toward her. Sandra stumbled back, desperate to get away from him. She wouldn’t go down easy. She balled her fist up and slammed it into his stomach with as much force as she could muster. Pain seared through her clenched hand. She shook it, hissing and trying to catch her breath. Apparently unfazed by her attack, he grabbed her upper arms and shook her.

“Settle down and listen to me,” he said. She responded by lunging forward and biting into the solid muscle of his chest with every bit of strength she had. Her teeth struck deep and true, and she shook her head like a rabid dog, worrying at his flesh. She brought her knee up to attack his groin, but the motion threw her off balance and he managed to block her attack.

“Stop it,” he roared. “Listen to me, I’m not going to hurt you. Please let me explain, and stop biting me.”

The words filtered through to her enraged consciousness. Slowly she let up on her attack. Her jaws held him so tightly she had to will them open, the muscles not responding at first. Then she was free, though she noted with some satisfaction that his shirt was rapidly turning red from blood.

Her teeth had hit home.

Good.

Let him feel some of the pain he’d caused her.

“Calm down,” he said again. She must have looked like a madwoman, and for a moment, hysterical laughter hovered right on the edge of her throat. She swallowed it back with no little difficulty. Listening and staying calm was the key to survival.

“What?” she asked after a long pause, her words sounding harsh and forced even to her.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said. “I said you’re dead already because according to the newspapers in the United States, your body was found this morning, along with mine. Everyone thinks that we were killed together when our plane crashed. If you go back now, they’ll know I’m not dead.”

His words sank in slowly, and she shook her head.

“You can’t just *do* that,” she said. “I don’t know what bodies you’re talking about, but they’ll realize that it’s not me. I have dental records. They’ll figure it out.”

“No they won’t,” he said. “The people who would be figuring it out, the investigators, are the ones who planted the evidence. Sandra Vicars is dead, and she’ll be buried within a few days. Your family has been notified, as have your neighbors.”

She shook her head slowly, willing his words to go away.

“I don’t want that to happen,” she said slowly. “I was doing something with my life. It isn’t fair for you to simply step in and say that I can’t go back. You shouldn’t be able to take all that away from me.”

“It’s too late for that,” he said softly. “It’s already gone. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I’m sorry for what I did. I won’t go back, though. I’ve already been in jail too long for that. I’m done with that forever. I’m dead, too, and I’m starting life over as a new man.”

“Does that mean you’ll be giving back all the lovely money you earned in your old life?” she asked caustically. “Because this place doesn’t come cheap, I’m relatively certain of that. If you don’t kill me now, when do you plan to do it? After you finished fucking me?”

“That’s what I originally planned,” he said slowly, his eyes boring into hers with cruel honesty. “Then I decided I’d pay you off. Whores expect that. I figured I’d give you enough money to set yourself up some place new and we’d both go on our ways. But I somehow doubt that you’ll be willing to do that.”

She shook her head, thinking.

“Yes, I would,” she said suddenly. “If it means I get to live, I’ll do it in a heartbeat. Please, let me do it.”

“I might let you do that, but I doubt that Valzar would,” he said. “He doesn’t like to leave loose ends lying about, and you’re definitely a loose end. He’s already offered to take care of you for me.”

“Yes, I kind of picked upon that,” she said softly. To her disgust, she could feel moisture welling up in her eyes. She would not cry, not now. She needed to stay strong, to think things through. To convince him that he could trust her. It was her only shot.

“What if I just stay with you for now?” she asked, trying not to sound too coy. “Do we really have to figure all these things out right now? Can’t we just have fun?”

He assessed her coolly, nodding his head.

“We can do that.”

“Good,” she said brightly. “I saw that there was a swimming pool in the other courtyard. Would you like to go swimming?”

“No.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Why don’t we take a nap?” he asked, raising his hands to cup her head. He wiped at her cheeks with his large, strong thumbs, and she felt moisture there. Damn, she’d cried after all. “You seem worn out.”

“I don’t think I can sleep,” she said honestly. “This has been too much for me—my mind just races trying to figure everything out.”

He pulled her against his muscled chest with surprising tenderness.

“You don’t have to get everything figured out right now,” he said. “You can just relax. Sandra, I promise you, if you do as I say you won’t get hurt. But you’re going to have to trust me.”

Fat chance, she thought to herself, but she nodded her head against him. He saw her as helpless, as dependent on him for survival. While that might be true, there was no reason for her to give up that easily. As long as she was alive, she could fight.

He released her and reached down with one arm behind her knees. Before she quite understood how he'd done it, she was in his arms, being carried across the room as if she were as light as a feather. He laid her down on the bed very gently, lowering himself beside her. He reached around her with one arm, spooning her and tucking her against his body.

“You don't have to be afraid,” he said. “I'm going to take care of you. I'm not quite sure what we'll do just yet, but I'll find a way for you to stay safe. As long as you're with me, nobody will be able to touch you.”

His words shouldn't have been as comforting as they were. He was her enemy, her captor. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't be stuck in this situation. But her traitorous body didn't seem to see things that way, and every particle of her being reveled in being held so close. He was big and strong, warm and safe. She felt so comfortable.

He nuzzled the back of her neck through her hair as his hand wormed its way up beneath her clothing to her breast. He cupped her, squeezing slightly, and her nipple hardened. It seemed unfair that it should feel so good. She felt secure with him touching her, happier than was decent under the circumstances.

His hand burrowed through her hair, and his lips became more insistent. She rolled over into his arms and gave herself up in the comfort of the moment. Life was short—she wanted to feel good.

He responded quickly, rolling her beneath him, and for one brief moment they forgot about the future.

## Chapter Eight

Sean stared at the fax, eyes failing to focus.

Why now?

Life had been so perfect. He and Sandra had fallen into a blissful routine. Every morning they'd go swimming, followed by a breakfast on the terrace. In the afternoons they'd hike or read, or perhaps even watch a movie. Their dinners were magnificent, celebrations of wine and desire that seemed to go on for hours. Sometimes he'd take her right on the table, other times he'd slowly seduce her over the course of the evening, then whisk her away to their bedroom for nights of wild lovemaking.

It would all come to an end now.

The fax was from Valzar. He needed the safe house for someone else. He didn't give any details, and Sean didn't want to know them. He'd been there for a full month—it was past time for him to start pulling his life together.

It was too easy to relax here, nothing seemed very real to him. That kind of relaxation was dangerous.

The fax made a pointed reference to Sandra, too, Valzar offering once more to help Sean with his little

liability. Sean leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and trying to think.

Why had he brought her with him?

He'd told himself at the time that it was because she'd seen him, could identify him to the police. It was a valid concern, but they could have worked around it. More bodies could have been found in that plane crash. The real reason he'd taken her was because he wanted her; he could admit that to himself. He'd seen her, wanted her and decided to take her. He hadn't cared about the consequences. All he'd cared about was getting her under him in bed.

Valzar had lost patience with his little obsession, though. And he was right. They couldn't just stay here in the jungle forever, pretending they were on some kind of bizarre vacation. He could see the questions and the fear in her eyes sometimes, and he knew that it was always in the back of her mind. What would happen to her? Would he grow tired of her? Would he kill her?

Killing her wasn't an option—he'd realized that long ago. He simply wouldn't allow it to happen. She was too special, too beautiful. He wouldn't let anyone hurt her.

At the same time, he didn't know what to do with her. Even if he set her up in a new town with new money, he wasn't entirely sure Valzar wouldn't go after her. His friend was very loyal and very thorough. He'd only held off this long because Sean was actually *with* the woman.

He had to keep her with him. There was no other option. Otherwise, she'd never be safe.

How it would work he couldn't imagine. He had some ideas of what he wanted to do, but he wasn't sure if she'd be interested. Hell, no matter what he did, he'd have to watch her like a hawk. If she got away her life would be forfeit, and he couldn't allow that to happen.

He'd simply have to find a way to keep her with him all the time. It would be easiest on a boat, he'd decided weeks earlier. Hell, he'd always liked the idea of living on a boat. There was one waiting for him in the Cayman Islands already, along with his money. Valzar had invested it well, spreading it around the world with a diversity and thoroughness that was frightening. Financially, Sean was doing better than any time in his life.

He'd always wanted a sailboat, and now he could have his dream. He and Sandra could sail the seas together, exploring exotic ports, swimming in warm waters. All he had to do was convince her to go with him. And watch her every moment of every day when they were in port to make sure she didn't run off.

Of course, none of that changed his central problem—he wasn't entirely sure he could live without her.

That's what scared him the most.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra lay out by the pool, paging idly through one of the books she'd found in the library. It was surprising to her how many different English language volumes there were. Of course, the selections were a little out of date. Whoever the reader was, they hadn't been coming here for a while. She suspected there was a story behind that, but she didn't want to ask anyone. Rosa was hostile at the best of times, so light conversation wasn't really an option.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the maid stalked out on to the patio, a grim look on her face.

“You’re getting fatter,” she said bluntly. “I was doing your laundry, and your shirt is all stretched out.”

Sandra rolled to one side and looked up her.

“It got stretched when Sean pulled it off me,” she said sweetly, unwilling to admit how much she enjoyed the disgusted look on Rosa’s face.

Rosa glared at her, and then spoke abruptly.

“Senor Sean wants to see you inside,” she said, a smug look stealing across her face. “Senor Valzar needs the house for someone else and Senor Sean has to leave. You know what that means for you?”

Rosa’s cold eyes glinted, and she drew one finger across her throat menacingly.

“If I’m lucky, he may even let me do it,” she added. With a flip of her hips she turned and left the patio. Sandra felt frozen. She’d put off thinking about this for weeks now.

It had been so easy to just pretend she was on vacation, to simply fall back and relax into the glory that was her time with Sean. And it *was* glorious. She could hardly believe how little she missed her old life. After all, aside from her neighbors and a few friends, she didn’t have anyone waiting for her at home. Her brother was in jail, long lost to her even before he’d been sentenced. Her Aunt and Uncle, the only other close relatives she had left, had never been close to her. They were cold people, and had always disapproved of her parents. In fact, she couldn’t remember seeing them since the funeral.

It was been easy to put all that out of her mind, along with her bills and her tiny apartment. The only living things that needed her were the houseplants, and she had no doubt that her kindly neighbors had divided those between them. It had been depressingly easy for her to drop out of sight. Twenty-seven years old, and nothing of value to show for it.

She shook her head, and stood up. That wasn’t true. Her life had value. She’d helped hundreds of people at the sports clinic, and had been building a clientele that included many elderly people who had been soothed by her touch. She had healing hands, and she knew how to use them. She had something of value to offer the world.

She pulled a swim cover-up over the string bikini she wore. It, along with an entire tropical wardrobe, had arrived just days after they’d reached the villa. She had no idea how he’d done it, but Sean had arranged for her to get everything she could possibly need.

She walked slowly toward the house. She needed to talk to Sean, to find out what was really going on. It was too easy to listen to Rosa, and too easy fall into the trap of fear. Yes, her situation was tenuous, but against all rational thought, she found she trusted Sean. He had been good to her, and she knew he got as much pleasure from her company as she did from his. It was time for them to talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Thanks for coming in,” Sean said. She’d found him in the study, his face serious. She’d tied her cover-up around her waist sarong-style. He liked it on her—she knew that from past experience. He’d told her once that nothing was sexier than a woman in a bikini with just a little fabric draped around her hips. She figured it wouldn’t hurt to remind him of that when they had their little talk about the future. If ever a time to pull out the big ammo had existed, this was it.



She sat down across from him, deliberately crossing her legs so the fabric fell open. She could feel her nipples coming to attention beneath the thin fabric of her bikini top. The air conditioning always did that when she first came into the house, and she saw his eyes darting there before returning to her face.

“I got some bad news this morning,” he said slowly. She nodded her head.

“Rosa told me.”

He grimaced, and then shook his head.

“Rosa isn’t exactly a reliable source of information,” he said.

“No, I try not to pay too much attention to her,” Sandra replied. “But it can be kind of hard to feel secure when the only thing I know for sure is that I’m already dead.”

“Well, that is a good point,” he said dryly. For some bizarre reason she felt a giggle crawling up her throat. She bit it back, knowing it was just tension.

“So, what now?” she asked, laying their central dilemma out on the table.

“I have a plan,” he replied. “I’ve always wanted to live on a boat. A sailboat, to be exact. I’ve purchased one in the Cayman Islands. I’d like you to join me on it.”

He sat back, seemingly relaxed. She tried to think, unsure of what response to give. A boat could be good...

“I’d like that,” she said slowly. “I think we could have a good time on a boat.”

It seemed like such an inane statement. Her entire life depended on this man’s decisions and all she could think to say was *I think we could have a good time on a boat?*

But she couldn’t say what she was *really* thinking. A boat might make it easier to escape. She could even kill him and dump his body overboard. Of course, she didn’t have a clue as to how to run a boat by herself. But she could watch him. She could learn.

“How big of a boat?” she asked, wondering if she’d have to deal with a crew as well.

“Fifty feet,” he said. “Sailboat. We’ll have two crewmembers to start with. They’ll be teaching us how to sail it.”

“When do we leave?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“What about documents? Won’t I need a passport?”

“That’s not a problem,” he replied, handing her a manila folder filled with documents. “You have a whole new identity now. Your name is Shannon Bradley, although I think I’ll call you Shan. Seems to fit your personality better.”

“It sounds like you’ve got everything figured out,” she said slowly. She didn’t ask what Valzar thought of the new arrangement, or what he expected to have happen to her long-term. It was a good enough sign that he’d gotten her a passport. Sean must plan on keeping her around for a while at least.

“I’ll pack my clothes,” she said reassuringly, willing him to understand. “I want to make this work, Sean. I’m very highly motivated.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She was highly motivated. He knew that already. In such a short time she had become an important part of his life, yet at heart he knew she was so good to him because she was afraid.

Despite the nice clothing, despite the long nights of making love in the cool air of the villa, Sandra was fucking him to stay alive. Simple, and not particularly pretty. She didn’t care about him at all and he couldn’t blame her for it in the least.

It was a terrifying thing to realize that your happiness depended on someone else. Especially when it was someone else who had little or no reason to care for you. He’d seen the calculations behind her eyes when she’d asked about the boat. She tried to hide her feelings from him but she wasn’t accustomed to deceiving those around her. She was an innocent, a child compared to him in a thousand little ways. She had no concept of what a man like him could do to another person.

He supposed he should feel guilty, but if he allowed himself to feel guilt over everything he’d done wrong over the years, he’d have killed himself by now. God help him, he would keep her by his side whether she liked it or not. The commitment was made and the plans were already well underway. All he had to do was follow through. She’d be his forever, and if having her was less sweet for her lack of cooperation, then so be it. Having her was worth any price.

## Chapter Nine

Valzar waited for them on the dock when they arrived in the Caymans two days later. He was dressed in an immaculate white linen suit, his eyes shielded by dark glasses. With his black hair slicked back and hands tucked in his pockets, he was the picture of a Latin playboy.

Once again, looks were deceiving. He was all business as he shook Sean’s...no, Joe’s hand. She repeated the new name to herself again and again. He was Joe and she was Shannon. That was her new reality and she had to get used to it.

“I see you haven’t decided to take care of your little liability yet,” he said as soon as they came close. He looked over her coolly, but this time he seemed less hostile. More bemused, and perhaps a bit curious.

“I find that I enjoy her company a great deal,” Sean said. “You have no idea what it’s like to have a companion who isn’t always asking for things.”

“That’s certainly true,” Valzar said, and he gave a rusty laugh that startled her. “My women tend to be fairly high maintenance. Always some new jewel or toy. Speaking of toys, I think you’ll enjoy the boat. I

had some special modifications made in the interests of meeting your needs.”

Together they stepped into the boat, Sean turning to help Sandra. It wasn't large, but still bigger than she'd expected. There was a wide, flat deck broken by a cockpit that thrust up out of it, sort of like a small house. They walked over to the hatch and she stepped in, stumbling at first. Valzar and Sean caught her at the same time, their strong hands pulling at the fabric of her blouse and nearly choking her.

“You need to be careful,” Valzar said, his tone low and silky. “It doesn't have steps; it's more of a ladder. You'll do better to go down backwards.”

She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and slowly climbed down into the darkened interior of the ship's cabin. Her eyes took a moment to adjust, and then she was able to see around her. It was lovely. Everything was done in natural woods and brass.

She was in a small galley, everything tucked away neatly against one wall. A little table curved against another wall. The men joined her, and she shuffled forward uncertainly. It was cramped with all of them in the same small space.

“Go on through the door,” Valzar said, nodding to an opening just past the table. She opened the door before her and stepped into another room, this one dominated by a king-size bed. Small doors flanked either side of the cabin.

“The head is through there,” Valzar said, nodding toward one of them. “This will be your room. There's another small one behind the galley, where the crew sleeps. I've stocked it with everything you'll need, and I'm sure you'll be very comfortable.”

“What's that other door lead to?” she asked, and then bit her tongue. The last thing she should be doing was opening conversations with Valzar. The man was a snake, and he would swallow her whole given half the chance. She knew it instinctively.

“That's the communications room,” he said. “Normally it would be another sleeping cabin, but I've had it converted. You will not be in that room.”

“Please don't take that tone with her,” Sean said in a cool voice. “You're a good friend Valzar, but you're overstepping your boundaries here.”

Valzar bristled at his tone.

Sandra pressed back against the wall, wishing herself invisible. They were like two large, caged cats, both filled with coiled tension and seeming to take up far more space than was available in the small cabin. The moment passed, and Valzar nodded his head at Sean.

“I see how it is,” he said. “You've made your choices. I'll respect them. Just don't forget that I warned you.”

“I won't forget,” Sean said, his voice equally chilly. “You've done many things for me, but this is something I choose to do for myself.”

“I'm sorry,” Valzar said. “I'd hoped we could go back into business together, but I can see now that that isn't going to happen. I won't allow her to destroy me, too.”

“I don’t plan on destroying anyone,” she said suddenly, and then clapped one hand across her mouth. She’d done it again. Why the hell couldn’t she keep her mouth shut? Both men looked at her, startled. “I’m just trying to stay alive and make my way in the world like anyone else. Destroying either of you isn’t part of my plan. I have no idea how I’d go about it for one thing. Heck, I don’t think I’d want to. At least not in Sean’s case.”

They looked at her a moment longer, then turned away.

“Wait for us here,” Sean said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Valzar and I need to go over the communications equipment.”

She nodded her head, feeling as if it was all some surreal dream. They treated her as if she didn’t exist in her own right, as if she weren’t a full human being capable of making her own choices. Neither of them seemed to realize she was more than a doll.

It was extremely frustrating.

The men disappeared behind the door, Valzar having keyed in a series of numbers to the small, electronic lock. She turned, surveying the room once more. This time she noticed more details. There was an inlaid headboard with shelves at the top of the bed, seemingly built right into the structure of the boat. There were several small portholes lining the cabin walls, barely large enough to let in the light, but it would be enough to let the inhabitants tell if it were light or dark.

Behind her, flanking the opposite wall from the bathroom, were drawers and what appeared to be a small closet, all made of the same smooth, highly-polished wood that most of the interior featured. She opened one of the drawers, and was only slightly surprised to find it already full of women’s clothing. She pulled out a lacy black bra and checked the size.

They’d definitely been ordered for her, she noted. Valzar and Sean were nothing if not thorough.

She turned and left the cabin, feeling a bit rebellious. She passed quickly through the galley and then climbed up the ladder-like stairs. On the deck were two large, tough-looking men in suits similar to Valzar’s. One of them nodded his head at her, his eyes drifting down her body in an appreciative if distant manner. She didn’t bother saying anything to them. They were there to keep her from running away, she understood that. She wondered if they would also be the crewmembers. It seemed odd, as they were hardly dressed for sailing.

The boat rocked slightly as someone stepped on board, and she turned to see a small, scrawny man with a scar running across his cheek hopping over to the deck. He carried a black rucksack and wore only a pair of shorts. The two men in suits bristled.

“Don’t worry,” he said, nodding at them in a friendly manner. “Valzar sent me. I’m one of the new crewmembers. The other’s on his way.”

The suits still looked skeptical, as did Sandra. This man hardly looked strong enough to work, let alone run a sailboat as big as this one.

“Oh, I know what I’m doing,” he said, giving her a crooked smile and spitting briskly into the water. “I grew up in these islands, lived my entire life on the water. Have my own boat, too. Only came out because Valzar begged me to help his good friend *Joe* .”

She cocked her head, trying to imagine Valzar begging anyone.

“Call me Skip,” he said, moving quickly across the deck and reaching out one hand to her. She took it, and he leaned in close to whisper in her ear. His voice was hardly friendly and harmless now.

“Valzar’s told me all about you, chippie,” he said in low tones. “I have a great deal of respect for our mutual friend, and don’t think for one moment I’d hesitate to slit your throat if I thought he was in trouble.”

He leaned back, all smiles again.

“We understand each other?” he asked, his tone friendly once more. She nodded her head quickly, feeling faint. Valzar’s presence hung around her like a dark shadow. The man wanted her dead, and she had no doubt that given enough time he’d find a way to make it happen.

Skip nodded to the men in suits and walked quickly over to the hatch. Within seconds he was out of sight, and she stood on the deck once more, looking at the boats around her and wondering if anyone on them could help her.

She thought about screaming, jumping off the ship into the water and making for a friendly face. But none of the boats around appeared to have anyone on board, and the two men in suits had their eyes glued to her. She wrapped both arms around her body, a part of her wishing they were still at the villa. At least there she’d *known* she was trapped. She’d hate it, but in another way it had been strangely comforting. There had been no hope of escape, and that meant she didn’t have to worry about it. All she had to do was lie back, relax and enjoy the bizarre situation in which she’d found herself. It was a place out of time, out of space.

Now she was back in the real world. There were other people around her, places she could run. There were probably even policemen in the harbor, if she could just think of a way to contact them.

Of course, given the way things had gone for her so far, they were on Valzar’s payroll, too. *Everybody* seemed to work for that man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later Valzar was gone, and they were slowly motoring out of the harbor. She sat up on the bow, watching idly as they passed a variety of other vessels, occasionally waving to a friendly face on another boat.

Sean came and sat down beside her. Surprisingly, he wore a ragged pair of cutoffs and nothing else. He cocked one eye at her startled expression.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen you look so... casual,” she said after a moment.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this relaxed,” he replied, leaning his head back against rise of the boat’s cabin “Do you realize that we don’t have to do anything?”

“Well, we have to leave to sail the boat,” she said.

“Yes, but we don’t have to do it right now.”

“How long will the crew be with us?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” he said, reaching one arm around her shoulders to pull her close. “Why, do you dislike them already?”

She looked back to where Skip sat at the wheel. Their second crewmember, a youngish man named Jose, scampered about, checking ropes and tightening things.

“No, I don’t like them,” she said. “Did you know that Skip threatened me?”

“I’m not surprised,” Sean, dropping his head to kiss the top of hers. “We already knew how protective Valzar is.”

“I think he’s jealous of me,” she said suddenly. “He wants you to work with him again, and he thinks that I’m the reason you’re not. Is that true?”

He stayed silent, rubbing the top of her head with his fingers instead.

“It is true,” she said softly. “You can let me go, Sean. I don’t want to hurt you. I want you to go on with your life, and I want to do the same.”

Once again he didn’t reply. Instead, he reached down and tilted her head up toward his. His lips dropped down, kissing her softly on the mouth, and then straying across her cheek. His hands started a restless crawl across her body, reaching down and grasping her hips, turning and pulling her until she straddled him. She could feel the length of his erection through her shorts. Liquid fire jetted through her and she melted against him. Why was he able to do this to her so easily?

“Don’t,” she whispered nervously.

“Why not?” He asked, his tone bemused.

“Because they’ll see us,” she said, her voice tense, eyes darting across the horizon at the other boats.

“I don’t care if they see us,” he said softly into her ear. His clever fingers slid her zipper down, even though her hands batted at him, trying to stop him. He took no notice.

“I care,” she hissed back. “And I’ll bet they care, too. Why should they have to put up with that? You’re sick.”

His hands were inside her shorts now, cupping the curve of her buttocks, rubbing her back and forth against his cock. She shuddered in need, and then took a deep breath before pushing at his shoulders hard to catch his attention.

“I’m not going to do this,” she said firmly. “It’s simply not going to happen.”

He cocked his head at her then lifted his hands.

“You win,” he said.

She sniffed, pulling herself free and sitting beside him on the deck. Her pants were still loose, but she couldn't quite figure out how to fasten them without sitting up on her knees, and that would give the two men behind them too much of a show.

They sat together quietly for a time. The sun started to lower in the far horizon when he reached over and pulled her into his lap again, this time facing away from him.

She started to fuss, but his hands came up and stilled her.

"Just sit and enjoy the moment," he said softly. His strong fingers rubbed her shoulders, easing the tension of the moment. She relaxed, and it seemed entirely natural when his hand drifted down her shoulders until it cupped her breast, rubbing absently at her nipple through the soft cotton fabric of her shirt. She leaned back against him, enjoying the sensation. For some reason it didn't seem as threatening as before... perhaps because they were out of the harbor. She could feel the bulge of his erection growing beneath her bottom, but he wasn't intent on rubbing it against her this time. He seemed more inclined to simply be close to her, enjoying her presence and the touch of her body.

She felt each breath he took against her back, his muscular chest swelling and falling in time. She let her head loll back against him, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it washed over her with a gentleness that hadn't been present in the jungle.

His hands left her breasts, moving slowly down her body to her stomach to loosen her shirt. His finger slipped under it with deceptive ease, and then started rubbing the soft skin of her belly. It felt so good. She knew she should make him stop, but she couldn't seem to make herself move. Just breathing had become an effort.

Gently, the fingers of one hand slipped beneath her panties. She tried drawing her legs together. Before she got far, his knees came up between hers, and his legs levered hers apart with a gentleness that belied the firmness of his touch. She found herself draped across him, butt in his lap, legs sprawled across his, and she knew in that instant that no matter what he did to her, she wouldn't try to stop him. It simply felt too good.

She shivered when his fingers grazed against her clit. He knew how to touch her, knew how sensitive the little nub was. So sensitive that it was almost painful at times, but his hands were soft. Back and forth, squeezing and working, his fingers slipped across her clit, their way eased by the flood of moisture seeping out of her. When his hand dropped lower, his fingers slid into her opening with a gentleness that was almost embarrassing. So much for her earlier protests. At that moment she didn't care who might see them, all she wanted was to make sure he kept touching her.

Then he pulled his hand away, and she gave a little whimper of protest.

"Wait," he whispered in her ear, and then he wrapped one arm around her waist and lifted her body ever so slightly. His hand dipped down behind her. Then it came back around and he pushed her legs together a bit, pulling her shorts down from behind. When they were around her upper thighs, he brought her back over his lap.

"Just hold still," he said, and she could feel the hot length of his cock against her ass. He lifted her body, and to her surprise, his cock slid neatly into her vagina.

He was big, and he'd always filled her completely, but this time was different. Perhaps it was the strange position, or the fact that her legs were nearly closed, but he seemed to be larger somehow. She could

feel every delicious inch of him coming into her, a slow slide from behind that almost made her gasp several times. His hands came around front again, and this time he reached up inside her shirt to work her nipples. She hadn't worn a bra, leaving her breasts completely exposed to his touch. His fingers sought out the stiff little peaks, massaging and pulling on them as he slid into her waiting body with slow determination. She tried to move, tried to wiggle her hips, but he clamped down on her, pinning her to his body with his hands.

"You do what I tell you," he said softly. "I'm in control here."

She nodded her head, a secret thrill running through her. After long seconds of slowly sinking, she reached bottom. She felt his belly against her ass, and unable to control herself, she squeezed him once with her internal muscles. His hips bucked up involuntarily, and he gave a muffled groan.

Not completely in control, she thought wickedly.

He head still lolled back against his shoulder, arms at her sides and her breasts being worked by his hands. He cocked his hips a bit, and then whispered, "Touch me."

She nodded her head, knowing instinctively what he was asking. She flexed herself within, and felt an answering twitch from him. One of his hands left her breasts and drifted down, fingers diving between her legs to the tiny nubbin of her clit. As he plucked at it, and then rubbed her firmly, she arched her back and gasped. Inside she clenched him once more, wringing a moan of satisfaction from him.

"That's what I want."

She nodded her head against him, and squeezed him again. She supposed she should try and do some kind of steady rhythm, but that seemed impossible. There was a tension within her, spiraling out with every tantalizing rub of his fingers, and she could only respond by clutching him tighter. Every few seconds she forced herself to release, concerned she might be hurting him, but he never said a word. Instead his fingers worked her, rubbing in small circles while pushing with just enough pressure to drive her mad.

Tiny twinges built in her body, and suddenly she was filled with a sense of terrible energy. She couldn't move, couldn't shake it, even though she desperately needed to. She shifted restlessly, clenching and unclenching as his fingers continued their slow, terrible torture of her body.

She was close to the edge. She shivered in tension, and with every breath she clutched at his cock, the solid pressure and presence driving her crazy. She wanted him to move, *needed* him to move. She wanted him to push her forward on the deck and pound into her, crushing her with his weight and filling her with his seed. She wanted that terrible tension to ease, and she'd do anything to make it happen.

She moaned out loud, and he gave a long, low chuckle. His fingers stopped moving, and he whispered in her ear once more.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me," she said, each word a gasp. "Oh Sean, I need it so bad. Please."

He laughed, wrapping one arm firmly around her waist and holding her to him as he shifted. As if he'd read her mind, he lowered her before him face first to the deck. Somehow he managed to pull the shorts off her completely, although she had no clue how. She found herself on her hands and knees on the prow



of the boat, speared by his cock and poised on the edge of insanity.

“Do it now,” she demanded, her voice hoarse with frustration. His hands gripped her hips, pulled back, and then slammed forward into her with a force that nearly dropped her.

He was huge. He pushed her delicate tissues open, a marauder set on taking her for his own. Eyes closed, it was easy to imagine she was on an old sailing ship, prisoner to a pirate’s lust and subject to his every whim. Again and again he pummeled her, each stroke bringing her closer to the edge. His fingers reached around her, dancing cleverly across the center of her desire, and then she exploded into a thousand pieces. She felt her limbs give way, and he lifted her by the waist, torso dangling forward. He swung her around, laying her face down across the top of the cabin, arms spread out before her and knees braced on the deck. He started thrusting into her again, and her sensitive flesh cried out for relief. It was too much, she couldn’t take any more. Again and again he thrust into her, and she hovered desperately on the brink of another orgasm.

He rode her hard, never giving an inch. Her muscles clenched and unclenched, grasping at him as if she could hold him into her body if she just tried hard enough. Each time he pulled away from her before slamming into her again.

Finally, right on the edge of her orgasm, her head lolled to one side and her eyes drifted open. Standing before her were both of the crewmen, their faces intent. To her horror, Skip rubbed an enormous erection through his pants. Jose stood behind the smaller man, arms wrapped around him, nuzzling his neck. The two men must be lovers.

She wanted to scream at them, to wilt in shame at being seen this way, but all she could do was focus on breathing. She closed her eyes again, pretending they weren’t there. Sean thrust into her one more time and she was done.

Starbursts exploded behind her eyes, and every bit of her seemed to cease for one brief, shining moment. She could hear Sean crying out behind her as his seed burst forth into her body. He shuddered against her, and then collapsed over her, sucking in deep breaths of air.

Gradually she became aware again of the rocking of the boat, and the soft sighing of the wind as it whispered through the empty rigging. Sean lifted himself, and then pulled her back into his lap, cradling her and kissing her face softly. She felt tears building up and welling out of her eyes, and then it washed over her. Everything that had happened, from her kidnapping to this strange new existence hit her at once. She missed her old life, that was true—but what scared her the most was she’d just allowed herself to be fucked by the man who’d captured her, in front of his crew, and all she could think was how much she wanted it to happen again.

What had come over her, what kind of person was she deep down inside?

She sobbed quietly in his arms for what had to be an hour, and he simply held her, rubbing the top of her head and giving her small kisses on her face. Then he led her slowly around the deck to the ladder, taking her down into the cabin. She realized later that she still wasn’t wearing her shorts, and that the two other men had seen everything.

It doesn’t really matter, though, she told herself that night as she looked in the mirror. Once two men watch you fuck doggy style on a boat deck, a little casual nudity isn’t all that serious in comparison.

Chapter Ten

No one should be enjoying life as much as this, she thought in disgust. There was something vaguely obscene about how pleasant it had been over the past week. Much like her time at the villa, she found herself falling into a sensuous routine on board the boat. The only thing that made it less than perfect was the fact that Skip and Jose were still with them. She and Sean had a much better understanding of how to sail the boat, but Sean still didn't want to get rid of the two men. She wished he would—they frightened her. She knew they still had a lot to learn, but surely there were better people out there to teach them.

They had gone ashore three times, and each time she and Sean stuck together. At first she'd had some dim idea of escape, but it was pretty clear that wouldn't happen any time soon. For one thing, she didn't have any money. For another, she was terrified of Skip. Her earlier fantasies of killing the crew and taking over the boat had been ludicrous. She didn't want to kill anyone, even if she could.

She knew Sean would be able to find her if she ran, but that didn't scare her. He wouldn't hurt her. If Skip found her, though, she'd be finished. He'd gut her without thinking, using that long, wickedly sharp knife he kept in his belt. Where the hell had Valzar found a man like that?

Every time he looked at her, he had a smug, smirking look in his eyes. As if he knew all about her, and wasn't particularly impressed. She supposed part of it was in her head—after all, it was hard to feel friendly toward a man who'd spied on you during sex. But she wasn't imagining the entire thing. He watched her closely, and his looks weren't friendly. She felt sorry for Jose. Skip wasn't the kind of man she'd wish on anyone, and couldn't help but think that sharing his bed wasn't the kindest of fates. Still, the young man didn't seem to be unhappy. He did all that Skip asked of him cheerfully, and each night they disappeared to their tiny cabin near the engine compartment without comment.

Despite this, though, things were good. Skip wouldn't be around forever.

She'd made a decision, too. She wasn't going to leave Sean. She didn't like everything that he did, but she'd realized something a while back. She wanted to be with him. Regardless of "Stockholm Syndrome," she knew her feelings for him were real. She hadn't left anything behind that was so important to her. Living with Sean was good, and she wanted it to continue.

Once she made that decision things got a little easier.

The days blended into each other, and she spent her mornings lazing on the deck, occasionally dipping in for a swim when they weren't under sail. Much of the time they spent anchored off small islands, many of them almost untouched by the tourist trade. She had always been a strong swimmer, and practicing in the warm Caribbean waters only made her better. So when, on the spur of the moment one evening, he asked her to swim to shore with him, she didn't think twice. She simply pulled off her sarong revealing the two-piece swimsuit underneath and dove in.

They played as they swam, him catching up to her and ducking her under, and her pulling him down with her. He was stronger, of course, but in the water he was still vulnerable. They raced the last hundred yards to the beach, wading up out of the water laughing and gasping for air. She ran to a coconut tree beyond the water line and tagged it.

"I win!" she called, although touching the tree hadn't been part of the original race. In response he growled, running toward her with a look of mock menace. She squealed, and ran down the beach. He followed, catching her up in his arms within a few yards and tossing her around as if she weighed nothing.

She clutched his neck, steadying herself, and before long they were both in the sand, laughing and giggling like children.

Sean's face stilled, and he leaned over and kissed her suddenly. It was a quick kiss, hard and full of intent. Humor faded, and he looked down into her eyes, pinning her beneath him with his body.

"I love you," he said suddenly. "I don't know how I was lucky enough to find you, but I love you."

"Thank you," she said softly, not quite ready to say the words back to him. "I wish I'd found you earlier."

"Me too," he said. "Although you'd have had a hard time visiting me. They didn't let anyone in to see me most of the time, let alone women."

She stilled, and a shadow crossed her face. She didn't like being reminded of his past, of who he was. She didn't like thinking of him in Edgar's office and the pool of blood flowing across the floor.

"Will you tell me why you did it?"

"Did what?" he asked.

"Why you had Edgar killed," she said softly.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

She thought of saying no for a moment. It was easier to pretend he hadn't planned a man's death, easier to imagine this was just some wonderful dream free of context and consequences. But it wasn't. If she wanted to be with this man and to truly love him, she needed to understand what he had done.

"I want to know," she said softly. "If you don't tell me, I won't ever understand and maybe there's a part of me that won't trust you."

"What if my explanation makes you trust me less?"

"I don't know," she said softly, trying to be as honest as possible. "I guess we'll take that as it comes. What I do know is that if we aren't honest with each other, we don't have a chance."

He nodded his head slowly, and then rolled off her to lie in the sand next to her. She snuggled into his side as he cradled her with his arm.

"Well, I started out in the Special Forces," he said slowly. "I did that for several years, and then some friends of mine and I decided to go freelance."

"Freelance?" she asked, unsure what he meant.

"We started hiring ourselves out to the highest bidder," he said. "At first we thought we'd be fighting. You know, fearless mercenaries and all that. And we did do some fighting. But what we mostly ended up doing was training other people how to fight."

"I see," she said.

“No, I doubt that you do,” he said with a bitter laugh. “But I’ll keep telling you anyway. I met Valzar around this time, by the way. He and his family go way back, descended from *Conquistadores*. They’ve owned and sold people for generations, controlling entire countries. They’re always working on some new deal, some new angle. Half the things that happen down here they have a finger in, legitimate and illegitimate.”

“He’s not a very nice man,” she said softly.

“No, he isn’t,” Sean replied with a harsh laugh. “Although he’s a damn good man to have at your back. I hooked up with Valzar because I wanted to get into a new field, hostage rescue, and he had the money. I was tired of teaching peasants how to fight. I knew that whatever I taught them probably wouldn’t save their lives, not as long as the guerrillas and the government refused to even consider peace. It’s always the peasants who get caught in the middle of these wars. With Valzar’s backing, I started contracting with several large insurance companies who offer kidnapping insurance to foreign businessmen.”

“I’ve never heard of insurance like that,” she said. “It sounds like a different world.”

“That world is all around us,” he said softly. “It’s just that most people don’t have the background to notice it. That’s the difference between people like me and people like you. I notice things.”

She didn’t say anything, knowing he was probably right. She hadn’t had a clue something was wrong at Edgar’s until she’d walked out of the bathroom. She’d be willing to bet Sean wouldn’t have been fooled like that.

“So, Valzar and I started our little business, contracting with these companies and bringing in a nice revenue stream. Most of the time we’d just pocket the profits, and even the occasional hostage situation wasn’t too bad. Ninety percent of the time we’d manage to negotiate a ransom for our hostages and get them out safe.”

“What about the rest of the time?” she asked.

“We’d go in after them,” he said, his voice going lower. “Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. It’s a messy business.”

She nodded her head, as if she knew what he was talking about.

“So, how did you end up in prison?”

“I ended up in prison because I murdered a man in the United States where I could get caught.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t.

“Why did you kill him?” she asked finally.

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it matters,” she said.

“I murdered him because he got six of my men killed, not to mention two hostages,” he said, his face emotionless. “Their lives were worth 25,000 to him. I learned later that he blew all of it in Vegas the next

weekend. That's why I killed him."

She stayed silent for a moment, and then shook her head. "I don't understand," she said softly. "Will you tell me the whole story?"

"Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I think if I don't, I'll always question what happened."

"You can't just trust me?" he asked. She looked at him sadly, and then shook her head.

"No, I don't think that I can," she replied. "I wish I could, but you've never given me the chance to make any decisions for myself. If you won't trust me, how can I ever trust you?"

He rolled to his back, and put both hands behind his head. She did the same, looking up at the stars and marveling at how bright they seemed. She'd never seen anything quite like it. If only life wasn't so complicated, she could spend her time with him simply enjoying the life they were leading. But she couldn't just do that, she needed to learn what was really going on, and he was the only one who could tell her. As much as she wanted to turn her brain off, it wasn't happening. She had to know.

"Well, I told you I did contracting with insurance firms," he said. "I was negotiating a hostage release in Sinaloa, up in the mountains. There were two businessmen who'd been snatched off the street in Mazatlan by drug dealers, and I suspect there was more going on between them than a simple ransom demand. Anyway, it was complicated by the fact that one of them had ties to the CIA."

He paused took a breath, and she drank that in. What a strange world he lived in. Who had ties to the CIA in real life? It sounded like a movie...

"When they heard about the situation, they sent an advisor down to work with me. Someone in his office had a big mouth, because they told a co-worker, who just happened to be a drinking buddy of Edgar's, about the situation.

"Now I suppose that any human being with a scrap of decency would have pity on hostages, but not this guy. He decided that information on our operation might be worth something to someone. Edgar found him a buyer. We'd made arrangements for the exchange at a little airfield outside El Quelite. When we arrived the kidnappers were waiting. We were poised to do the exchange, and then they struck."

"Who?" she asked, breathless.

"A rival cartel," he said softly. "Edgar and his pal sold us out to them. They swooped in, killed everyone in sight and took the money. Only five of us got out alive."

She stayed quiet, unsure of how to respond.

"When I recovered from my wounds, I started investigating what happened," he said, his voice growing hard. "I found out about Edgar from one of the drug dealers, and when I came up to the States, I found him and his friend. I watched those bastards for weeks, waiting for just the right moment. I waited until they went out drinking one night and ambushed them in the parking lot. I killed the CIA leak first, but I underestimated Edgar—he pulled a gun on me and shot me. I woke up handcuffed to a hospital bed."

"What did he tell the police?" she asked softly.

“He said he thought it was a random act of violence, that I’d been trying to mug them,” Sean said softly. “I didn’t bother contradicting him. I figured that I’d do better pretending it was a crime of opportunity rather than a hit. They’re a little too excited about the death penalty in Texas to take chances. They offered me a plea bargain and I took it.”

“And Edgar just got away with it?” she asked softly.

“Until I got back to him,” Sean said with dark satisfaction. “He killed my men, Sandra. He deserved to die.”

“Why did you get caught in the first place?” she asked softly. “I’ve seen you in action. I wouldn’t have thought a man like Edgar could get the drop on you.”

“Honestly?” he said, his voice still toneless. “I lost my cool. I’d intended to follow them for a while, learn their habits and make it a clean hit. Instead I lost my temper. When I saw them drinking and laughing together I couldn’t stand it. I had to get them. And I had to do it right then.”

“I guess I can understand that,” she said softly. “The world probably is better off without him. Did you ever consider going to the police with the entire story? I mean, before you decided to kill them yourself?”

He gave a quick bark of laughter.

“No, that was never an option,” he said softly. “Not with the CIA involved. They don’t like any kind of publicity, and they’ll do whatever it takes to keep information on their little mistakes from coming out. They preferred to let me handle things, and when I finally found a way out of prison, they were more than happy to assist in my disappearance. They owed me, you see.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said. She rolled over toward him, running one finger along the bridge of his nose. In the moonlight he was little more than a stark profile beside her, cool and almost untouchable.

She let her finger trail down the smooth curve of his throat, then trace along his chest until she reached his stomach. She laid her hand flat, watching his chest rise and fall, and wondered how she had ever met up with this strange and terrifying man. She knew then, right there in the moonlight, that he was worthy of her love. She was glad Edgar was dead. He’d deserved what Sean had done, no questions asked. She just wished he’d been able to get to him sooner, that he hadn’t wasted five years of his life in jail.

“I love you,” she said suddenly, realizing it was true. He froze, a profound stillness coming over him. Even his breathing seemed to stop, and then his hand came up over hers and clenched it tight.

He started to reply, but was cut off abruptly as a booming explosion tore through the night.

He rolled over her suddenly, one hand covering her mouth. He pushed her head down into the sand, his body covering and protecting hers. A second explosion ripped through the darkness, and then silence drifted back over them.

“I’m going to let you look up,” he whispered in her ear. “Don’t say anything and don’t move, or they might find us.”

She nodded her head, and he shifted his weight. She rolled over and looked out across the water. A mass of fire lit up the night where their boat had been moored.

“Skip and Jose were on there,” she whispered numbly. “We have to get help!”

“They’re dead,” Sean said softly. “There’s no way they could have survived that. We’re supposed to be dead, too.”

She looked at him blankly.

“Why else would someone blow up the boat?” he asked. “They wanted to kill us, Sandra. The good news is that they probably think they succeeded. We just have to keep it that way.”

## Chapter Eleven

Sandra trudged through the underbrush doggedly, ignoring the insects buzzing around her painfully exposed flesh.

She felt like a boiled lobster.

The hot sun tore into her pale skin ruthlessly, and she cursed the skimpy bikini she’d worn for their midnight swim. Still, she struggled forward, refusing to complain. Whining wouldn’t do either of them any good.

The night had seemed endless. Sean had insisted that they remain still and out of sight until morning, and even then they’d spent a few more hours hiding. He’d gone out looking around a few times and had spotted two men watching the remains of the boat. They’d left a few hours later, climbing into a jeep and driving off down the sandy beach.

She’d thought they should stay and wait for help. After all, there couldn’t be that many midnight explosions on the island. Someone was sure to notice eventually. Sean nixed that idea immediately, telling her it was too dangerous. Whoever rescued them would probably talk about it to someone else, and then the attackers would learn they were still alive.

So here they were, trudging through the jungle in the direction Sean insisted would lead them to a village. She had no idea what they would do when they arrived. After all, it couldn’t be too often that white tourists in bathing suits appeared out of the jungle asking for a phone, but he seemed to know what he was doing. She certainly had no clue, so she was content to let him lead her.

Surprisingly, they reached the village after only an hour of walking.

She’d expected them to go right in, but he’d installed her in the bushes and went by himself. Ten minutes later he was back wearing a loose pair of cotton pants held up with a rope and a faded, button-up shirt. When he handed her a ratty T-shirt and oversized jeans, she’d never been so happy to see anything in her life.

“Where did you get these?” she asked.

“I traded my watch for them,” he said. “The farmer said he’d give us a ride into a town with a phone, too.”

“Won’t he tell people about us?” she asked.

“Probably,” he said. “Although I’ve asked him not to. The people in this village are very close-mouthed, they don’t like outsiders.”

“How do you know that?”

“I research every place we go,” Sean replied. “It isn’t an accident that we came to this particular island. You never know when you might need a bolt-hole, and a small village like this one can be a great place to lose yourself. I promised him more money if he gets us out of here without anyone seeing us.”

She nodded her head, amazed at how he managed to pull these things off. He handed her a small pair of sandals made from braided rope and she slid them on her feet. He reached down, pulled her up, and they were off. Twenty minutes later they crouched beside a narrow, one lane track. After what seemed like hours, they heard the sound of a sputtering engine. Sean stood up and waved as he recognized the farmer, who drove a pickup that had to be at least thirty years old. The cab was tiny, but she felt so happy to be on her way to civilization that she didn’t mind sitting awkwardly on Sean’s lap.

Two hours later, after bumping across the road and hitting her head on the roof of the truck every two or three minutes, she had a blinding headache. She hardly even noticed when they pulled out of the jungle into a small village. She did notice, however, when the truck passed through the village and hit a paved road. Their surroundings grew steadily more modern until they reached what could only be a tourist area, several hundred feet of beachfront lined with graciously aging hotels. Twenty years earlier this place had been a real hot spot.

The truck pulled to a halt in front of one of the buildings. With Sean’s muttered thanks to their driver in a language she didn’t understand, they were left standing in front of the hotel as two startled doormen looked around for their bags.

Sean had her sit in the lobby, and half an hour later he came back and escorted her up to a well-appointed suite, possibly the best the hotel had to offer. She collapsed on the bed, utterly exhausted, and barely paid attention as he went into the other room to talk on the phone. After a while he joined her, pulling her into his arms and kissing the back of her neck softly as they fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning she found herself alone. She considering calling down to the desk and asking for him, but she didn’t want to do anything to draw attention to herself. After all, someone had tried to kill them. The last thing she needed was to call down and ask for him by name, especially if he hadn’t used his real name. She didn’t even know what names they were using. Was he Sean or Joe?

Instead she took a long, hot bath and tried to calm her thoughts. She seemed to be getting used to this life on the run, she realized wryly. The things that would have driven her crazy just a few months ago, the uncertainty, the fear she managed to push to the back of her mind. For the first time in her life she was living for the day, not of the future. Refreshing in a way. Zen.

She snickered at the thought as she toweled off and pulled on a fluffy bathrobe. She walked into the main room. There was a shadow, a man talking on the phone. Her heart leapt. Sean? No, Valzar.

“What are you doing here?” she asked coldly.



He dropped the receiver back in the cradle, and then turned to her.

“I’m here to take you away,” he said, eyes watching her without expression.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Sean won’t like this and you know it.”

“I’m here because Sean asked me to come,” he said softly. If she hadn’t known better, she might have said he had pity written on his face.

“That’s not true,” she replied. “Sean doesn’t trust you. He wouldn’t leave me alone with you.”

“Yes, I’m afraid it is,” he said. He walked toward her, and she clutched the robe more tightly to her chest, backing away from him. He smiled, but there was no happiness in his expression.

“For reasons I still don’t understand, he cares for you,” Valzar said. “He’s worried. Last night scared him, made him realize that his enemies are still out there. He needs to be alone, *chica*. You’re his weakness.”

She shook her head, denying it.

“I’m not his weakness, you are,” she said bitterly. “You’re the one who got him into this, and for all I know you’re the one trying to kill him. You need to leave us alone.”

“You need to realize what kind of man you’ve been sleeping with,” Valzar said. “Sean is not the kind of man who can settle down, who can afford a family. None of us are. Sean needs to be free so he can do his work.”

“Sean’s tired of his work,” she said, her voice cold. “He’s been out of your business for five years—all he wants is to sit back and enjoy his freedom. Why can’t you just let him do that?”

“I’m not the one he has to protect,” Valzar said, his voice gentle. “You are. He sent me here because he wants me to spirit you away, to make you disappear. He wants you to be safe. You’ve made him desperate, and desperate men do foolish things.”

“You’ve made no secret of the fact that you want me dead,” she said. “Why should I trust you now? This is some kind of game you’re playing, and I won’t be your pawn in it.”

“There’s a spy in my organization,” Valzar said softly. “It’s the only way they could have found the two of you. That means they knew I want you dead. I’m the perfect person to make you disappear. That’s why Sean asked me to help, because it’s my fault. I owe him more than I can repay.”

“You’re full of shit.”

He stepped closer to her, invading her space. He smelled warm and male, and for an instant she could imagine that some women would find him very attractive. Fools who weren’t smart enough to realize the man didn’t have a soul.

“I’m not full of anything but the desire to help my friend,” he said, touching her shoulder. She stiffened. “He has asked me to help you, and I’m going to do that, regardless of what I think should be done with you. I’ve given him my oath.”

“You can’t force me to do anything,” she said.

“Yes, I can,” he said. “You can come easily, or I can have my men inject you with a sedative and take you out while you’re unconscious. I don’t care either way.”

They glared at each other for long, tense moments, and then she let her gaze fall. She wasn’t going to win this way.

“All right,” she said quietly, disgusted by the submission she could hear in her voice. “Let me go get dressed.”

## Chapter Twelve

Five stories was a long way to fall. Just looking over the edge of the balcony made her dizzy, but she thought she had several minutes before Valzar came into the bedroom to check on her. She’d be damned if she’d go with him quietly. Somewhere out there Sean was fighting for his life, and she wasn’t going to leave him to do it alone. Fuck Valzar.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she swung her leg over the railing and set it firmly on the ledge. She figured she had no more than seven minutes at the most before he became suspicious. Clutching the side of the building, she slid one foot forward and then followed it with the other until she reached the next balcony. She climbed over the rail with relief, and tried the door. Locked, naturally. Taking another deep breath she crossed the balcony and stepped back out on to the ledge. There weren’t any more balconies on this side of the hotel, but she wasn’t far from the corner and she hoped that there was something around it.

Luck was with her.

When she reached the corner and peeked around, she could see the roof of the building next door. There was a narrow gap separating the two hotels, and not far below she could see a metal fire escape. If she could get around the corner, she’d be able to jump on to the fire escape and climb down.

Easier said than done.

The gap between the buildings wasn’t that wide, but the roof was a good six feet below her. She had never been particularly athletic. Visions of broken limbs danced through her head, but then she reminded herself what was at stake.

Her future with Sean.

Damn, she was tired of other people making decisions for her. If staying with Sean meant risking her life, that was her decision to make. He had no right to send her away with Valzar, none at all. She needed to get out and find him and explain that little fact to him.

She’d finally had enough.

Taking a deep breath, she whispered a prayer and launched herself across toward the other roof. She hit with a thump, rolling several times before coming to a stop. There were scrapes on her hands and she was sure she’d be sore after a while, but she none of that mattered. She’d done it.

Sandra pulled herself up, all too aware of how visible she must be. She crawled over to the edge of the roof, looking for the fire escape. For the first time she wondered why the other hotel didn't have one. The thought was rather chilling. If there had been a fire, she'd have been out of luck... Even more chilling was the state of the fire escape she needed to use now. It was rusty, and seemed to sag away from the building in several places. She reached out and pushed on it gingerly and it made a creaking noise.

Good Lord.

She reminded herself once more why she was doing this. She was tired of being passive, tired of other people telling her what to do. This time it was going to be about *her*, and *her* needs. She needed to be with Sean, and she was damned if she let him get away. Screw everyone else.

She reached one leg over the side and tested the fire escape. It seemed to hold the weight she put on it. She lowered herself gingerly off the roof and onto the rickety contraption. It made a creaking, moaning noise, but nothing else happened.

I can do this, she told herself.

Down she went, trying not to imagine what it would feel like to plunge four stories. She didn't think about whether anyone could see her, about whether Valzar had goons posted all around the buildings. All she could think about was climbing. One foot down, then another. Step after step, rung after rung, until she was on solid ground. She looked around and realized that nobody watched her. She'd done it. She was free.

She found her way along the side of the building until she reached the alley running behind it. She moved down the alley as quickly as she could, wondering what to do next. She had no idea. For all she knew Sean wasn't even on the island any longer. How was she going to find him, and how would she convince him to allow her to stay with him? She had no money, no papers. Officially she didn't exist.

She walked down the narrow streets, wishing desperately that she'd paid better attention when they'd arrived. A small group of mixed-race children started tagging along after her. She ignored them at first, but it got harder a while. They swarmed around her, eyes filled with curiosity and mischief. What did they want?

"Yo' lady," one of the kids said, and she whirled. An English speaker!

"You wanna take my picture, lady?" the girl asked. She looked to be about ten years old, and her eyes gleamed with capitalistic fervor. "You give me dollah, lady, I let you take picture."

"I don't have a dollar," she said quickly. The girl rolled her eyes, and spoke quickly to the children around her in rapid Spanish patois.

"You lost, lady?" the girl asked after a moment.

"Yes," she admitted. "Can you help me?"

The girl cocked her head, and another child spoke to her again. She nodded at him, and the other kids clapped their hands.

"We gonna help you, lady," the girl said. "You look pretty sad all alone here. You gotta tell the people at

the embassy that we're good kids, though, that we help you."

"There's an embassy here?" she asked, suddenly filled with relief. She could get help!

"Little one," the girl said. "You got papers?"

Sandra shook her head. The child shrugged, and then started walking.

"You come with me," she called over her shoulder. The children seemed to think she needed their escort, because most of them started walking with her as she followed the girl. People watched as the strange little convoy moved down the street, and she wondered if it was foolish to allow such a spectacle to be made of her "escape." But it wasn't really as if she had much choice, she reminded herself. She had no idea where she was going or what she was doing. Hopefully they could give her some direction at the embassy. At the very least, they should be able to tell her where she was and give her access to a phone. She could call Valzar, and demand that he have Sean call her, she thought suddenly. If she called from the safety of the embassy, there wasn't anything he could do to her. She could threaten to tell them everything if he didn't put her in touch with Sean immediately.

She smiled, feeling rather pleased with herself. She had it all figured out.

After walking for 20 minutes the streets were getting noticeably cleaner, and then she saw an American flag in the distance. Her heart lifted, and she felt a burst of patriotic pride that she'd never felt before. How beautiful it was in the distance! In that building there were people who could help her — she would be completely safe with them. It was a wonderful feeling.

A few blocks from the lovely, gated complex the little girl turned into another alleyway.

"The embassy is over that way," Sandra said, confused.

"You gotta go this way to get to gate," the child replied. "Much faster."

Sandra shook her head, but the girl had helped her so far. Within seconds they turned again and she found herself in an open courtyard. The children started giggling, and she realized something was very wrong.

She spun around, ready to go back toward the flag, but two large, armed men were already there, blocking her escape. Valzar strolled out of the shadows, shaking his finger at her disapprovingly.

"Now Sandra, that's no way to behave," he said. "If you keep this up, I'll start to think you don't like being around me. Wouldn't that be a shame?"

### Chapter Thirteen

Wretched children, she thought darkly. How could she have trusted them? Their little eyes glowed as Valzar pulled a handful of bills out of his pocket. He'd given one to each child, patting them on the head as he did so, and spoke softly in their own language. She might have been impressed with his thoroughness if she wasn't so disgusted. Bastard.

He'd used her—she'd gone through all that stress for nothing. She was no better off than she'd been

better.

“You do realize that I could tell Sean you died trying to escape,” he said as he escorted her out of the alley into a waiting SUV. A driver and one of Valzar’s thugs sat in the front. “Sean would never know the difference.”

“Why would he care?” she asked softly.

“You’re a fool if you don’t know the answer to that question,” Valzar said. “He’s waiting for you to leave, Sandra. He wants you to be safe and he trusts me to make sure it happens. I’ve never known him to hold back his plans for anyone. He cares about you a great deal.”

She sat passively beside him in the back seat as the car started moving.

“Do you ever do your own dirty work?” she asked bitterly, nodding her head at the man in the front seat. Valzar smiled briefly, his teeth gleaming in the darkness of the car. The tinted windows screened them completely from whoever might be waiting outside.

“Yes, I do my own dirty work,” he said. “You’d probably be surprised at how much time and effort I put into running my little business empire. But that’s not really something you need any further information on at this point.”

She nodded her head, wishing she could kick him. She watched as they drove past the lines of buildings. Before long she there were more and more patches of green. Then they were turning off the paved road, entering the jungle she’d come to despise.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To a small airstrip,” he replied. “Sean and I would prefer it if you didn’t have to answer any awkward questions at the airport. This way you won’t have to.”

“How far do we have to go?”

“It will take at least an hour,” he said. “Perhaps two. You might wish to try sleeping.”

She nodded, doubting sleep was possible. Her heart pounded from the attempted escape. Smug bastard.

Valzar shrugged his shoulders, and she glanced quickly at the door. Locked, naturally. She waited until she was sure nobody watched and tried to push back the little button. Nothing. Clearly, they’d disabled the locks. Perhaps there was some other way to escape. She pretended to go to sleep, slowly counting to a thousand. By the time she was done, the men around her seemed fully relaxed and settled into the drive. The bodyguard talked to the driver quietly, occasionally leaning forward to fiddle with the radio. She could see his gun, nestled between the seat and door in front of her. It wasn’t a big gun, but she figured it would do the trick if she could get her hands on it.

Still pretending to be asleep, she slowly slumped forward. Moving very carefully, counting to a hundred between each little shift, she edged her hand forward and waited for her opportunity. The road was bumpy, barely a track through the brush at this point. When they hit the next big pothole, she lunged her hand forward and grabbed the gun. She jerked it back, and slid it under her leg, then squawked in pain.

"I hit my head," she said shrilly, and the men jumped. "This is insane. I need to go to the bathroom. You need to stop the car right now."

The driver looked in his mirror to Valzar, who nodded his head with a vaguely disgusted look.

"Go ahead," he said. "Stop the car."

They stopped right in the middle of the dirt road, and then the driver unlocked the door with a click.

"Get out and go," Valzar said. He nodded at the men, and said something in Spanish. The driver opened his door and stepped out. He strolled around to the front of the car, pulling out a package of cigarettes. The bodyguard joined him, while Valzar stepped out and stretched.

She slid out her own door with a whine, going behind the SUV, unfastened her jeans, and crouched as if to relieve herself. She took a moment to study the gun until she was sure how it worked. It was simple enough, exactly like she'd seen hundreds of times on TV and movies. She went over it once more, checking to make sure the safety was off, and then rose, ready to make her move.

She came up behind Valzar and raised the gun steadily.

"Be still and do what I say," she said quietly, her voice as cold as she could make it. She wanted him to *know* she'd shoot. He turned to her, a look of slight surprise on his face, followed by a slow smile.

"Well this is a surprise. I wonder if Sean has any idea how violent his little toy can be?"

"Be quiet," she snapped. "I'm not interested in listening to your bullshit. Have the driver toss you the keys, and then have them both walk away from the car."

"And if I don't?" he asked.

"I'll kill you and take your bodyguard hostage," she said. "I don't like you, and I'm not going to let you send me away from Sean. I'm feeling more than a little pissed at you right now. Don't test me, because you'll end up dead."

He studied her for a moment longer, and she let some of the hate she felt toward him show in her eyes. He'd offered to kill her more than once, threatened her continually. She'd do what had to be done.

He must have believed her, because within moments he held the SUV keys and the men were walking back toward town.

"Do you have a cell phone?" she asked. He nodded his head.

"I want you to get on the line and call Sean. I want you to tell him that he needs to meet us at the airfield."

"How do you know I can reach him?" he asked.

"You'd better hope you can," she replied. "I'm going to get tired eventually, and when that happens, I'll have to shoot you and make a run for it. If I let you go now, you'll kill me, and believe me when I say that if I have to choose between my life and yours, you'll lose."

He nodded his head again, and reached into a pocket. She watched closely, half expecting him to come out with another weapon. What she'd do if he did, she didn't know. She wouldn't back down, though. It was too late for that.

His hand came out again with a small flip phone, and he flicked it open with a nonchalance that belied their situation.

"Sean, your woman has taken me hostage," he said after a moment, speaking as casually as if describing an insect he'd found on his shoe. "She's going to kill me if you don't meet us at the airstrip."

He looked at her and held the phone out.

"He wants to talk to you," he said.

"Nope," she answered, shaking her head. "I'll give him two hours to get out there. If he doesn't come, I'll shoot you in the knee. It will get worse after that."

He nodded slowly, and relayed the message to Sean. Then he closed the phone with a smooth click, and nodded toward their vehicle.

"Shall we?" he asked, his voice almost gallant.

"After you," she replied mockingly. He gave her a slight bow and opened the door for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour and forty-five minutes later she was starting to sweat.

If Sean didn't show up soon, she would have to shoot Valzar. She didn't want to do it, couldn't imagine inflicting that kind of damage on another human being. What did a man's knee look like after a bullet tore through it? She was desperately afraid she'd find out in the next twenty minutes.

Holding him hostage was tiring. She knew he had men all around her, knew that they probably had guns. Every moment she expected to feel a sniper's bullet hit her, but so far they were doing well. They were holed up in the tiny concrete block hut on the edge of the airstrip, and she felt relatively safe. It would be hard for anyone to get a clean shot at her, at least while she was inside. Of course, she'd had the element of surprise on her side when she'd brought him here. Leaving the shack would be much trickier, if not impossible.

Seven long minutes passed, and for the first time she began to seriously doubt that Sean would come. Valzar watched her, eyes following every nervous tick of her feet, monitoring the trembling of her hands with a calm that was creepy. Then his cell phone rang, the sudden noise making her jump. She nodded at him to answer it, and he did.

"It's Sean," he said softly. "He's waiting outside."

"Tell him to come in," she said. "No weapons, please."

He gave Sean the message, and she stood, directing him to join her with a wave of her gun. A moment later there was a knock on the door.

“You can come in,” she called. Sean stepped inside, looking at her with a strange expression on his face.

“This is a little extreme,” he said softly, gesturing toward her hostage.

“Oh really?” she asked caustically. “It seems pretty in line with everything that’s been happening around me lately. One more hostage situation isn’t much, all things considered.”

“What are you hoping to accomplish with this?”

“I’ve made a decision,” she said softly. She looked to Valzar, and then nodded her head toward the door. “You can go, asshole.”

Valzar’s expression didn’t change. He strolled out of the building without a second glance at her, although he shared a meaningful stare with Sean. What that meant she had no idea, and she didn’t care. They would be leaving soon anyway. Sean started toward her, and she waved the gun at him threateningly. He froze.

“Like I said,” she continued. “I’ve made a decision. I’m tired of you calling the shots in this relationship. I’m an adult and I can think for myself. We’re staying together whether you like it or not.”

“You do realize how ridiculous this is?” he asked softly. “You can’t take me hostage and force me to be in a relationship with you.”

“Oh really?” she asked softly, cocking her head at him. “Funny, because that seems to be exactly what you did with me.”

They both fell silent for a moment as he considered her words. Then he took a step toward her and reached for the gun. She shook it at him warningly, and he laughed.

“You aren’t going to shoot me,” he said. “I already know that. You just told me you want to be in a relationship with me.”

“Correction, *I am* in a relationship with you,” she said. “Remember? We’ve been living together for almost two months now. I don’t even have a home to go back to. You kidnapped me, made all the decisions for me, and then decided to get rid of me when things got tough. I hate to break it to you, but things don’t work that way in my world. We’re in this together, and don’t you think for one minute you’ll make it outta here without me. You won’t.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, his expression genuinely puzzled. “Valzar wasn’t going to hurt you. Even after you took him hostage he wouldn’t have hurt you. You belong to me, and he would never take anything of mine away without my permission, no matter what he says.”

“Listen to yourself!” she replied, disgusted. “That’s what you don’t get! I don’t *belong* to you. I’m a free human being, and I make my own decisions. You’re going to take me with you and we’re going to build a life for ourselves. We’ve come too far for you to try and weasel out of it.”

He seemed stunned for a moment, and then he shook his head.

“You silly fool,” he said. “Don’t you understand that I’m trying to protect you? There are people who want me dead. They blew up my boat! If you stay with me, they’ll kill you too.”



“They think you’re already dead,” she said, rolling her eyes at him. “And even if they don’t, we’ll fight them together. I’m not some kind of doll who can’t talk and think and act, you know. I have this gun and I’m willing to use it to protect what we have. Don’t imagine for one moment I wouldn’t. What kind of pansy do you think I am?”

He looked at her steadily for a moment, and then shook his head.

“I’m not going to change your mind, am I?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head firmly. “You aren’t. You can do this the easy way or the hard way, but it’s going to end the same.”

“Do you have any idea how much seeing you hold that gun is turning me on?”

His comment was so startling that she blinked, unsure of what to say. In that instant he struck, pulling the gun away from her and flinging it across the room. He twisted her arm up behind her, pulling her against his body. She’d gone from being completely in charge of the situation to helpless hostage in less than ten seconds. She felt the length of his body up and down her front, the unmistakable bulge of his erect cock pushing against her belly.

She looked up at him, tears welling up in her eyes as she realized she’d failed. He’d just been toying with her. She’d been easy prey for him, and all her thoughts of empowerment meant nothing.

She wanted to bash herself over the head in sheer disgust.

His eyes searched her face, the warmth she’d seen in them earlier completely gone. Instead there was a need, a desire so intense she could hardly fathom it. His mouth came down over hers, and his strong hands crushed her against his body.

Unable to stop herself, she followed his lead, pushing her body against him. She wanted to crawl into him, drink up his essence. The layers of clothing between them scratched at her and she wanted them gone. She needed his touch, *now*.

He felt the same. She could see it in his every move, feel it in the urgency of his hands against her body. He wasn’t holding her arms prisoner any longer. She was free to hold him, and she wrapped them around his neck as he hoisted her in his arms. He carried her over to the low, metal desk, lips glued to hers. His tongue thrust in and out, giving her no chance to reciprocate. He wanted her and he was taking her. It was that simple.

Then he pulled his mouth away from hers. Of one mind, they scabbled at their clothing. Her jeans came off and his came down, and then they were in each other’s arms once more. He lifted her bottom to the desk, pulling it forward to the edge. His cock thrust into her. Hard.

His entry was harsh, no room for tenderness in his touch. He was taking her, claiming her, just as he’d claimed her initially. Again and again he thrust into her, and she pushed back, more aroused than she’d ever been in her life. If he was a stallion mounting her, she was the mare. She wanted him, needed him. When her orgasm hit, she clawed at him, gasping and bucking like a wild animal. Then he burst within her, shooting his seed high into her body. They collapsed together, spent, their heaving breath echoing through the small concrete hut.

“Wow,” she said softly, unsure of what should happen next.

He gave a little laugh and leaned his forehead against hers, eyes closed for a moment. Then he opened them and looked directly into her face.

“What now?” he asked.

“I won’t let you leave me again,” she firmly. “I’ll hunt you, Sean. You don’t have the right to end this without me. We’re together now, and there’s no way you can deny that.”

“You’re right,” he said softly. “We are together now, and I don’t have the right to end it by myself.”

She pulled back, startled by his easy capitulation.

“How long do you think I would have lasted without you?” he asked, laughing lightly. “By the time I got the phone call from Valzar, I was about to call him. I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t live without you. I know it’s dangerous for you to be stay with me, but I’m not going to give you up.”

“I’m not going to give you up either,” she replied. “We’ll just take things as they come. We’ve been pretty lucky so far, you know.”

“Lucky?” he asked snorting. “How do you figure?”

“Well, neither of us has killed the other yet,” she said lightly. “Considering the circumstances, I’d say that’s pretty damn lucky. So now what?”

“Well, we have a plane waiting for us,” he said. “Valzar has a leak in his organization, so he’s not setting anything up for us this time. We’re hoping that whoever blew up the boat doesn’t realize we’re alive. They’re going to report that four bodies were found instead of two. If they believe the reports, we may be safe.”

“I don’t want to endanger anyone else,” she said seriously. “You know, it’s one thing for you and I to make a decision like this. Skip and Jose didn’t know what they were in for.”

“Yes, they did,” Sean said quietly. “There weren’t any secrets there. But I agree with you, I don’t want to see that happen again. From now on it’s just you and me.”

“So, I guess we go out now?” she asked, looking toward the door. “I would imagine some of the people out there are pretty pissed off at me right now. I hope you’ll stand between us...”

He laughed and dropped a kiss to her nose.

“Don’t worry,” he said quietly. “I’ll always be with you, whatever comes next. We’re in this together. Although I do have one concern.”

“What?” she asked, suddenly anxious.

“I think we should put our clothes back on first.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Valzar leaned back against the jeep casually, hands in his pocket. Sean and his woman were taxiing

down the small, primitive runway in a little Cessna. Soon they'd be gone, and he had no idea if he'd ever hear from them again. It would probably be for the best if he didn't.

There were serious flaws in his organization, leaks that needed to be plugged, sources that needed to be cut off. Two good men had died in that boat blast, and it was just dumb luck that Sean and Sandra were still alive.

He suspected that Rosa might have something to do with it, although he wasn't sure. He had a lot of suspicions. Now he just had to give his people enough rope to hang themselves. Then the entire house of cards would fall, and he could pick up the pieces of his organization and move forward.

The Cessna was in position now, and he could hear its engines roaring as Sean started his takeoff. The little plane charged down the runway, and then the wheels lifted off the ground. Up into the air it soared, smoothly sailing over the treetops until it was a speck in the distance. Then it was completely gone.

Something like sadness washed over him. Sean had been a good friend for many years, and he was sorry to see him go. He didn't like to admit it, but he felt something else, too. Envy. Envy touched with jealousy. Sandra was a woman willing to fight to the death for her man. When he'd first met her, he'd thought her weak, but he knew better now. She might be soft and subtle, but she was hardly weak. She was a tigress, and a worthy mate for his friend.

He turned away from the airstrip and nodded to his driver. For a man who had walked six miles through the jungle, he seemed surprisingly unfazed. The driver came around and opened the SUV door for him, and he got in, noting that the leather seats were as perfect and undisturbed as ever. The SUV had cost him nearly 100,000 when all was said and done, fully customized and capable of surviving a hail of bullets. This car was one of ten or twenty that he owned, spread out across the various countries and islands where he did his business. Like him, it was self-contained, holding everything he needed to survive and manage his empire.

For one brief moment he wondered what it would be like if he had met Sandra, if she had fallen in love with him instead of Sean. Of course, he had many women in his life. They fell all over him. After all, he was rich, powerful, relatively young and handsome.

He could snap his finger and have any woman he wanted.

But he knew deep down inside that none of them were interested in him. They liked his money, his power. They found him sexy because he was dangerous. They giggled with their girlfriends over him, and talked about him in hushed whispers. Briefly, he found himself wishing that he had a woman like Sandra, a woman who would risk her life to stay with him. A woman interested in more than his money and power.

His cell phone rang and he picked it up automatically. It was his lieutenant; they'd found one of the spies. All business now, Valzar listened closely to the man's words, his mind spinning through possibilities and planning his next step.

As the SUV pulled away from the airstrip, he didn't give a thought to the wish he'd made just seconds earlier. Like so many of his wishes in life, it hung in the air behind him, left behind.

Just another forgotten wish...

About the author:

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Also by Joanna Wylde:

Aphrodite's Touch

Dragon's Mistress

Taken

The Price Of Freedom

The Price Of Pleasure

Wicked Wishes

Threads of faith

Joey W. Hill

"I know you're there," the old woman murmured. She inched forward on her knees and pulled a handful of weeds from the tangle at the base of the rose bushes. The heavy clusters of blooms arched over her head, tickling her nape with their silk petals and her nose with their heavy fragrance.

"Ow!" She laughed and made a grab at the black paw that shot out from the cover of the hedge to bat at her hand. The claws had been sheathed. It was her instinctive jerk that caused her pain, knocking her hand into the thorns.

"Beezle, you are a menace. One of these days I'm going to have cat stew for dinner."

A whisper of breeze, a rustle, and she realized she had let down her guard. She spun around, a hand up, and the stone struck her forehead, propelling her frail body back into the bushes, thorns pricking through her light cotton dress like a bed of nails. She heard Beezle scramble away, frightened. She was frightened, too, because her head was spinning and she couldn't marshal her wits to raise a defense.

The laughter of teenagers was reassuring, their act of unkindness likely a fleeting gesture of bored cruelty as they pressed on to mischief deeper into the woods.

She was wrong. Another stone struck the bridge of her nose and she cried out, averting her face. The pain drove her to one knee.

“Ain’t no one around to help you, you old witch.” The jeer came from the trees. “You’re all alone, and we’re gonna get you!”

Cackling laughter. She struggled to right herself. If she could just focus, get her sense of balance together...

“Jesus fucking Christ!” A frightened yelp and a crash, as if someone had been tossed out of a tree. Was that a snarl?

Marisa staggered toward her door and stumbled over her garden tools. The world was blurry, and something warm and wet trickled down her forehead into her left eye and mouth. Metal and salt, substance of earth, of herself.

“Wards of earth, fire, water and wind, may your powers rise and blend. Take this home out of evil’s view, Lord and Lady allow no harm to break through,” she rasped, seeking to connect to the power. The concussion made the connection tenuous, and the wards flickered weakly, even where she could discern them on the clearing’s edge. Fear clutched her low in her stomach. She’d not been this vulnerable in a long time.

A pair of feet came toward her. She crawled across the ground and clasped a rock, perhaps the same rock that had struck her. She could see the fragility of her blue-veined hand, the skin shimmering beneath her gaze. No, surely she was not that weak. The illusion spell had a life of its own. She had made sure it existed separate from her consciousness.

The feet, sizeable ones in hiking boots, were attached to long calves and a pair of muscular thighs. Her attacker had the physique of a lineman for the school football team. She tried to scramble away, but he caught her in one stride.

She squalled like Beezle and turned on him, the rock gripped in her fist. Even wounded, she was quick, but he was more so, and caught her wrist in a strong grip.

“Be easy, miss. They’re gone. I ran them off. It’s all right.”

His voice stroked her frantic emotions, soothed them down, even as his hands gentled her physically. She felt his fingers stroke her hair. Not the brittle and sparse strands of an aging woman, but the raven, waist-length locks of her true form.

“No,” she whispered. The only thing that could dissolve the spell was a more powerful witch, or a person who possessed True Sight.

“It’s all right,” he repeated, and gathered her to him. He lifted her off the ground easily, as if she were a child, and gave her the words of universal comfort, as empty as they might be. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her heavy head wobbled onto his shoulder. His fingers tangled in her hair at her shoulder, his other hand

curled around her thigh beneath her plain calico smock dress.

Men did not touch her. Most women did not. It was shocking, this easy familiarity of a man's hands upon her. People were afraid to touch a witch, even if they claimed not to believe she was one. They stood at her door with averted eyes and insisted they were there on a dare, or a lark. The way he held her was possessive, intimate, as if they knew one another far better than they did.

He stepped across the open threshold to her three-room home. "Where's your bed, miss?"

She shook her head. "Just put me down in the kitchen chair," she said. "Sitting up will help me get my wits about me."

"If you had your wits about you, you wouldn't be living out here in the middle of nowhere with no one to protect you."

She aimed a frosty glare at him, and collided with a sexual heat that startled her. It threatened to melt her ire before it could be vented.

He had eyes like Beezle's, a yellow-green, but more blended, a vibrant hazel. His hair was the brown of rich, dark earth, almost black. Brows like slivers of fine dark silk, and firm lips that looked somewhat angry at the moment, but once she saw him clearly, she wasn't afraid. His face had the strength of character immortalized by old film. Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck. The face of a white knight, a hero, the man who would never think to leave women and children behind, who would guard the back of a friend no matter the cost, who would face up to his mistakes with the same unflinching courage. He possessed the True Sight. To her trained gaze, it was as obvious as the fact he was a man. He would see through any spell, any deception, the smallest white lie.

He wore a brown soft twill shirt, and blue jeans. Not tight, but snug in the way that men of good physique wore them. He smelled like sweat and soap, and a light aftershave.

"My name is Conlon," he said, with a nod. "Conlon Maguire."

"Marisa," she responded automatically. "I'm fine now. I appreciate your kindness, but I don't need—"

"I was coming to see you."

"Oh." That startled her into silence. People only came to her door for one reason, and she found that reason hard to reconcile with the handsome, confident man standing in her kitchen.

He found a cloth in her sink, a basin of water she drew from the deep creek behind her home. "Here." He touched at the blood on the bridge of her nose, catching her chin to hold her still. He ignored the hand she latched onto his powerful wrist to tug his touch away.

"I can do it."

"I'm sure you can, but I want to do it, so be still, kitten, and stop squirming."

His shirt was open at the neck, so the fabric gapped with the forward cant of his body. She saw the smooth curve of a pectoral and a soft pelt of chest hair, narrowing down to a line over a flat, muscular stomach. After that it was shadows, as the shirt tucked into his waistband. She pulled her gaze away, back to his face, which was intent on hers, washing away the blood with small gentle pressures on her

forehead, her nose, her lips. He cradled the side of her face as he moved downward. What would it be like to feel his fingers delve into her hair, tug her head back so that he could place those firm lips over hers?

The unexpected thought surprised her. Men did not interest her. This was her quiet world, the world she had created for herself with great effort and painful sacrifice. Her wits were just beyond her fingertips, waiting for her to reach out and reclaim control of them, and the situation.

He pushed back the hair over her left ear and the damp cloth slid there, touching in those tiny crevices. The trickle of blood and dirt down her neck went next as he moved his touch there. His thumb rubbed her jugular, his fingers curved around the side of her throat. Her wits moved a deliberate step out of reach as she discovered how sensitive her throat was to a man's caress.

Her cats rubbed against her in affection and slept close to her at night for companionship, but this man's hands made her think of wild, unsettling actions, far beyond affection. With little effort, she could imagine his body heat and strength curled around her as well as her cats, keeping them all safe while they dreamed.

Marisa surged out of the chair and clambered over his knee awkwardly to get into the more open space of the kitchen. He rose, and the kitchen shrank.

"How...how did you get here?"

"They told me it wasn't accessible by car, so I hiked in. I thought it odd, an elderly woman living so far from civilization. They didn't mention you." His gaze coursed down her body in a way that flustered her.

"You're teasing me, sir," she said coolly. "You and I both know you can see through the illusion I maintain. Further, I doubt someone who looks like you needs a potion to attract a woman. So perhaps you should tell me why you are really here."

He reached out, and the table behind her blocked her retreat. He caught his fingers in her hair, wrapped it once around his knuckles so she was tethered to him. He pulled her a step toward him.

"Based upon the illusion you maintain, Marisa, I'd say you already know that looks don't bring you everything you desire. Sometimes it brings things you don't want at all."

Like big, unsettling men in her kitchen. His body and hers were only a deep breath apart, and she felt their auras touching, exploring the shape of one another. Her fingers were itching to do the same, to tug his shirt from his waistband, feel the hard line of those muscles. She wanted to let her fingers glide through the soft hairs on his stomach and chest and get to know the hot skin and muscle beneath.

Despite the table, she did take a step back, and the legs scraped their complaint on the wood floor. There was a strange feeling in her chest, and it was moving lower. It grew more noticeable each time she drew in his scent and met those steady, hazel eyes.

Potion. He was here for a potion. What was the matter with her? Perhaps that rock had done her genuine harm. Perhaps she should consider a trip into town to the doctor.

"Even if I weren't here for a potion," he added, "you're stuck with me for awhile. I'm not leaving until I'm sure you're okay."

“You can’t stay on my property if I tell you to leave,” she said. “That’s trespassing.”

“Call a cop,” he responded. “Oh, that’s right. No phone.” He glanced around. “No electricity.” His fingers curled around the back of her neck, and she snapped her glance up to him, uneasy. “No way to call for help if you were injured, or needed help.”

“You seem overly obsessed with my protection, Mr. Maguire,” she managed. “If it makes you feel better, I have a two-way radio for emergencies, and I keep transportation in my shed, if I need it.”

“A broom?”

She narrowed her eyes and jerked free. “I’m beginning to see why you need a potion.”

When he smiled, she saw a dimple at the left corner of his mouth. “So you think you can help me, then?”

“The potion makes that decision. I just mix it. Belief is important to its success. If you’re here as a joke, or on a dare, then the potion will be useless to you.”

“What’s the cost?”

“The potion also sets the price. The magic that fuels it speaks to me and tells me what it demands in exchange.”

“That’s convenient.”

“That’s how I acquired my mansion and Ferrari, Mr. Maguire,” she said dryly, circling around the table to her cabinets. “It usually requires acts of service,” she added, “not donations to me. I am bound by its will, as much as the recipient. The seed of love must be there, and the person must be willing in their hearts to accept the potion’s will. You can have a seat if you like. This will take a few minutes.”

“Can I get things together for you?” He frowned, studying her unsteady movements, the cut on her head. “I told you, I’m not leaving until I’m sure you’re all right. You can take your time.”

“I’m fine, really. I’m getting my bearings back.”

The sooner she made what he wanted and assured him of her health, the sooner he would go, him and his disturbing presence. So she opened the doors of the large oak cabinet on the wall, revealing a larder full of bottles and jars with a rainbow of liquid and plant contents.

“I need to focus for a few moments in silence,” she said, her back to him.

“All right,” he murmured, and the tone of his voice told her he was watching her, with a penetrating intensity that sank into her skin and bones like the warmth of the sun. She drew a deep breath. Despite her personal preferences, she did not block him. No matter Conlon Maguire’s arrogance, at the moment he was part of the Web that bound them all, the body of the Lord and Lady, one of the many cells of the blood that ran through Their Veins. She accepted his presence, his life force, into the circle of her own. She let the magic feel his shape and form, his worthiness, purpose and desires.

The exercise always gave her a necessary sense of a person. Usually it was a fleeting touch, like the brushed kiss of acquaintances. In this instance, the soul of Conlon Maguire reached out and surrounded hers, and pulled her into him. She felt the man from the inside out.



He was a man of True Sight, as she had already sensed. A man who would always protect those weaker than himself. A man generous in opening his heart, but who had never given his heart away to a woman. A man who liked to laugh, a physical man, a man who would not be denied what he wanted. Heat washed through her, and for a moment she was in the body of the woman he sought. His chest pressed against the softness of her breasts. His hands clasped her waist, his palms sliding down to cup the cheeks of her backside, holding her against his rigid desire. She felt it move against the quickening flesh between her thighs. His tongue claimed hers. The name of the woman hovered on his lips. Marisa struggled to hear that name, though she had never before asked or tried to discover the name of a person for whom a potion was mixed.

She started out of the vision, her pulse pounding.

“Are you all right?”

Marisa nodded, a quick jerk, and held up her finger to keep him back. “The magic has agreed to mix a potion for you.”

With unsteady hands, she withdrew three of the four ingredients she would need and set them on the sideboard.

The potion didn't often call for the fourth ingredient, and so she turned to drag her chair over to use it as a stepping stool. She bumped into him. He stood behind her, considering all her bottles and jars. Conlon looked down at her. “Which one, kitten?”

She frowned, and pointed. He reached up and over her, and took down the large jar with one hand, putting it into both of her waiting ones.

Something curled in her stomach, unsettling but not unpleasant, roused by the unfamiliar sensation of being able to count on someone's help, someone's strengths balancing out her needs.

She nodded courteously and skirted around him, going to where the other ingredients waited. She spread out a clean linen cloth and laid the herbs she had chosen on it. Marisa took up her athame, a curved and sharp blade of stainless steel she had fired and stamped herself, and cut the proper measure. She dropped the plants into a mortar and pestle carved of white stone.

He had turned from his study of her stores to a study of her, and she felt a need to fill the silence that seemed too comfortable to be having with a stranger.

“So, why will this woman not have you?”

While she did not ask names, she did sometimes ask other things, to help the potion along by giving the seeker an additional dose of common sense. In this case, she suspected her motives were not quite so selfless.

“I think she will, but she's very unique. I need a special approach, something to help me get my foot in the door.”

Marisa nodded. She ground the herbs with deliberate turns of the pestle, infusing them with the power of the Lord and Lady and of the four elements. When she was satisfied, she scooped the herbs out and dropped them into the small cauldron of water she had simmering on a gas burner. Curious, she dipped a

spoon into it to get a sense of what color the steeped mixture would take.

This time it was going to be Marisa's favorite, a sparkling amethyst, but the sight of the hue startled her. Amethyst was the color of strongest intent. This man's request was closely aligned with the Lord and Lady's Will, and great good would emanate along the strands of the Web from its success. It was almost a certainty that, with or without the potion, his suit for his chosen lady would prevail.

Why should she be surprised? Only those of pure hearts, coupled with great courage and integrity, were blessed with the True Sight. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she felt so disturbed around him. There was nothing she could hide from him, and yet he was not a man from whom one *needed* to hide.

She took the small cauldron from the burner and set it on a quilted square potholder on the sideboard. The linen cloth went over the top to protect it from debris in the air while it steeped, and to block the steam from scorching her face as she leaned over it. Marisa placed her palms flat on either side of the cauldron, cleared her mind, opened her energy centers, and drew in the aroma, waiting for the magic to tell her the price of the potion.

The answer was immediate, a rush of information and images that were clear and impossible to misunderstand. Regardless, Marisa asked again. The same answer came, just as clearly. Emphatically.

She took her hands away and stepped back. She was a servant of the Craft, a priestess, and she was obedient to the Will of the Light. She understood that Its ways might be beyond her understanding, but that they were what was meant to be. This was the first time she had ever thought the Lord and Lady might have fried a circuit.

"Problem?"

Conlon had taken a seat on the other side of the table to watch her finish the preparations, and now her desperate eyes flitted to him. He should have looked out of place in her kitchen, but he didn't. In fact, she could well imagine him being there everyday, watching her with those intent hazel eyes that became gilded verdigris in the shadowed light inside her home.

She continued to stare at him, speechless, her face drained of color. Frowning, he rose and came around the table. It drew her attention to the broadness of his shoulders, the lean strength of his thighs, the fine structure and power of the man beneath the clothes. He reached forward, as if to lift the cloth and see what had caused her such consternation.

"Don't." The word snapped out of her like a whip. "You can't touch it until you hear its cost."

"All right." He settled back, his hips propped against her table. He crossed his arms across his chest and hooked his fingers under his armpits. She was distracted by the firm, unsmiling curve of his lips. For some reason, she wanted to reach out, trace them with her fingertips, feel their texture.

"Tell me," he prompted, lifting a brow at her startled jerk.

Just say it, and it will be over. He can refuse, and it will be nothing to you.

That was a lie and she knew it. The color of this potion said his intent would serve the highest good. The love he pursued, if consummated and brought to be, would enhance the Pattern and the Will of the Lord and Lady. How could she refuse? How could she possibly find the courage to convince him if *he* refused?

“You must lie with me by full moonrise tonight. That is the potion’s price.”

Surprise crossed his features, but not the pigment-draining shock she had experienced. He straightened, freeing his arms, drawing her eye to the way his fingers slid across his own skin. “You are sure.”

“The voice is clear enough.” She rubbed her temple. “You know I do not lie. You have the right to refuse, and the potion becomes powerless. The Lord and Lady’s Will is focused through the potion, but it is a tool. You may find your desires will prevail without it, if They support your cause.”

There, that was fair. Hadn’t she thought much the same thing when she first explored his soul? “If you believe in honesty, the woman you desire may be displeased with the price you paid to win her heart, regardless,” she added, a bit tartly.

Conlon gave her an even look and stepped forward. Marisa did not move, her body frozen like an anxious doe. Her head tilted back as he got closer so she could still meet his gaze. She had her hand over the linen cloth, and could feel the heat of the cauldron’s lip beneath it. He laid his hand over hers, covering her fingers and bringing his own in shared contact with the potion’s vessel.

“What about you, Marisa?” He reached out, touched her chin with a fingertip. “You don’t have to accept the potion’s price. I want the love of this woman, but I won’t have it at the price of forcing your affections.”

While his words did not ease the quaking in her belly, it reminded her that he was an honorable man. An honorable man deserved a truthful response.

“I serve the Light, Conlon, and if it says this is the price of your potion, and the love you seek serves Their Will, then I will obey it. I know it serves a greater purpose than my own fears.”

“Fears?” His brow furrowed, and his touch became a firm hold on her delicate jaw. “Tell me what you fear.”

“I just...” She couldn’t avert her face, but she did shift her gaze to the wall, feeling heat wash over her skin under his fingertips. “I’ve never done this, Conlon.” She crossed her arms over her body, a protective gesture she knew suggested vulnerability, but she could not stop herself from making the gesture of self-comfort. “I’ll be fine,” she said, more firmly. “I just need a little time to get used to the idea.”

He studied her, and his hand gentled, stroking her cheek, so she looked at him. “You *will* be fine. I won’t hurt you, Marisa. I’ll make sure you feel only pleasure, no pain.”

His easy acquiescence startled her. “Are you sure? What of this woman? Won’t she...”

“The people in town hold your power and your potions in very high regard, Marisa. You’ve told me my cause is true, and that the potion has named a price. I want this woman for my own.”

She nodded, a quick dip of her head. “Then you must say you accept the potion’s price, out loud.” She put her hand back on the cauldron, over his this time. The firm skin, the light layer of hair on his knuckles, felt different to her, intriguing.

“I accept this potion’s price,” he said, formally, his gaze never leaving hers, “because the woman I wish to claim is the total of my desires. I knew the moment I heard her name that she is mine. I knew, when I

first saw her, that she is the one. The only.”

He was wrong. He would cause her pain, a shrieking banshee within the hollow emptiness of her chest. To have someone want her like he wanted, that was beyond anything Marisa could hope for in her reality. From the time she was born, isolation had been required for her survival. Now she must bear to have such a man in her arms for nearly a full day, knowing he was only there for another, and let it shatter her, as she knew it must.

She slid her hand off of his. “The potion is now charged. When you leave me, I will put it in a flask, and you will share it with this woman, and the Lord and Lady’s Will be done.” She found her palms nervously damp, and wiped them on her skirt.

“Marisa,” Conlon bent his knees to catch her eye, a reassuring look on his face. He took her hands in both of his. “I assume the potion doesn’t require us to hop on each other like rabbits. We can take some time to get to know each other. Enjoy each other. The sun’s still high in the sky.”

Enjoy a taste of something she might never have again. But every day was like that, wasn’t it? Today might be the last day she got to watch dew melt off a flower, or see Beezle chase a butterfly across the yard. If today was all she had, how could she spend any part of it regretting what she might not have tomorrow?

She took a deep breath, nodded her head.

Quirking his brow to give her some warning, Conlon exerted a gradual but inexorable pressure on their linked fingers, bringing her closer to him, until she leaned into his body. He folded one of her palms low on his waist, over his hipbone. She felt his warmth, the softness of the shirt, and the firmness of him under her touch.

“Your willingness is a precious gift to me,” he said. His voice dropped, got rougher in a way she liked, though she didn’t know why. “Every man hopes to be a woman’s first lover, to experience her innocence.”

“To take it.”

“To open and pleasure it, together.” His face drew closer to her upturned one, and his arm slid around her waist, gathering her up against him.

He did not let her other hand go when he brought her to him. As his arm came behind her, he took her hand with it, turning her wrist so her elbow bent and her arm folded up behind her back. The position pushed her breasts up and forward, displaying them on the hard platform of his chest. He increased the pressure and pushed her up onto her toes, his fingers laced through hers at the small of her back. The ends of his fingers curled into the skirt and dug into the thin elastic band beneath, so she felt a tug on her panties against the sensitive cheeks of her bottom.

“I’m afraid,” was all she managed. His lips touched hers at the moment she formed the words, so his tongue eased between her parted lips, and his mouth closed over hers, sealing in the heat.

She had been kissed once years ago by a boy who had been dared to kiss her. That swipe of clammy lips was so far from Conlon’s kiss that she forever discarded the idea of even calling it a kiss.

Surely the bones had melted in her body, because all of a sudden she couldn’t stand on her own. She

lifted her hand from his hip and gripped his shirt at his ribs for balance. He caught the back of her head in his large palm, his fingers in her hair, and deepened the thrust of his tongue. He ran it along the edges of her teeth, the inside of her cheek, learning her, and stroked the quivering surface of her tongue with his when he was done with that.

His body was all a new experience to her, the hard muscle, the musk of sweat from hiking through the woods, male. No doubt of the last, as the strength of his hold against the small of her back pressed her against a hard ridge growing larger under straining denim. It rubbed against her belly, and her hips rocked forward in an instinctive reaction to it. The place between her legs contracted with a startling sensation that flooded her body.

A key turned, tumbling open a locked room of her subconscious. It was as if she was a person who had wandered in a desert for so long that she did not know she was thirsty, until someone offered her a glass of ice water. Her thirst was abrupt, all-consuming, but she found herself staring at that glass, lacking the knowledge of how to reach out and bring it to her lips.

It was disturbing to have to depend on him. She was helpless to do anything but let him lead. Academically, Marisa knew the urges of the human body, but she had divorced herself from her own. With one kiss, he was reconciling her with them.

His middle finger straightened and pressed against the thin gauze fabric of her skirt, even as his other fingers remained intertwined with hers at her lower back. He insinuated the fabric of the skirt, along with his finger, under the waistband of her panties and rubbed a small vertical stroke in the dip at the top of her buttocks. Marisa gasped into his mouth. She wiggled against the touch, against his strength, increasing the friction. He tightened his grip and her feet left the floor. He settled the apex of her thighs directly over that hard ridge in his jeans. She moaned at the pressure and panic filtered in, as she floundered in the wash of unfamiliar sensations.

“Stop,” she managed against his mouth. “Please, let go...let me down.” She turned her head so her cheek was pressed hard against his jaw, hiding her face. His fingers stilled and she felt his unsteady breaths moving the loosened strands of her hair against her skin. Slowly the grasp of his fingers in her scalp eased off and became a caressing stroke. His chest expanded beneath her breasts, a slow, deep breath, and he let her down, one inch at a time. She had to bite her lip as that hard part of him dragged along her vibrating tissues.

He did not let her feet touch the ground. As she slid down those excruciating inches, his thigh came forward, parting her legs. She came to a halt seated on that column of muscle that shifted against her throbbing center.

“Holy Mother, you could make a man lose his mind with one kiss, Marisa. No wonder they call you a witch.”

“I suspect that’s not the reason,” she whispered. His eyes were now pure gold, because heat had melted the green, like the summer sun burnishing everything in a meadow. His lips were moist from her mouth.

He held her fast as she made to wriggle free. “No, Marisa. If we’re going to do this, I want you to be thinking about having me there, and keeping your mind on it. Do you know what this is?” He lifted his ankle, so he increased the pressure of his thigh between her legs.

“Of course.” She tried to be casual, but knew her flushed wild expression and trembling body betrayed her. “I’m a virgin, Conlon, not ignorant.”

“Tell me, then.”

“It is...” She blew out a breath, shot him a glare that seemed to amuse him, “it’s my vagina.”

He smiled, passed a thumb over her lip. “You said that so primly, like my sex ed teacher, Mrs. Patterson.”

“You never needed a sexual education teacher,” she retorted. “Etiquette class wouldn’t have been amiss, however.”

“You also speak like you’ve spent more time reading than talking,” he observed. “All formal. ‘Amisss’. I haven’t heard that word used in years.” He increased his hold on the hand he still held pinned at the small of her back and began to rock his foot, heel to toe, counterbalancing it with the strength of his arm so he was rocking her back and forth on his long leg.

“How about this, Teacher?” His teeth nipped at her ear. “Pussy. Cunt. I like both of those. Cunt reminds me of a cave, deep underground, with a hot spring. The steam condensing and glistening on the slick inner walls, creating a smell of heat and earth, the way your cunt would smell if I buried my nose in it. Or pussy, like a pussy willow, soft under my fingertips, but round and firm too, the size of a finger pad, like your clit is.” With a ripple of muscle, he stroked her in that exact spot, so no further English lesson was needed to identify it for her.

“I said I needed to go slow,” she said desperately, clutching at his shoulder for balance as he worked his leg against her pussy.

“I plan to, Marisa. I won’t try to claim your maidenhead until nightfall, and it’s barely lunchtime now. I want you wet and aroused, so you won’t be afraid.”

“It’s...you’re making it hard for me to think,” she said.

He smiled, though there was a tension around his mouth, and his eyes were a fire of desire that was almost as effective on her senses as his leg’s movement. He began to bounce his leg gently. Since he kept her seated hard against him with that one relentless hand, each impact sent a ripple to her womb. Her breasts moved freely beneath the loose smock and his eyes followed their quivering movement.

“I...I need to know more about you,” she managed, trying to fight off the spiral of sensations that screamed from that jarring focal point between her legs.

He let her go abruptly, and caught both hands in her hair. She fell against him, but froze at the ferocious need in his face. His mouth hovered just above hers, touching her with the heat of his breath as he spoke. “No man has ever had you, truly?”

“You know I speak the truth,” she said, her body trembling against his.

“Yes,” he said. “But your body responds like a woman born for sensual pleasure.”

She pushed away, shaking her head, and he took her hand, holding it in a secure grip. She moved as far back as that link would allow and tried to keep her attention on his face, rather than the heat and need vibrating off that powerful body.

“Please, Conlon, I can’t. This feels too fast. My body understands your desires and appears all too willing to capitulate, but I have to face myself in the mirror when you’re gone. Whether it be the Lord and Lady’s Will or no, I need to get my balance.”

“All right.” In a gesture that surprised her with its tenderness, he raised both her hands, brushed his lips across her knuckles. “So how do you want to do this?”

She pushed her hair off her forehead, a confused scrubbing motion. “What do you do for a living?”

He smiled, and something in her stomach tilted like the corners of his mouth. “Security. Professional bodyguard.”

She blinked. “Like Secret Service?”

“Not anymore. I do private jobs. Businessmen traveling in countries with unstable governments, celebrities being stalked, witness protection work occasionally.”

A protector, a white knight. Her initial vision had been more accurate than she expected.

“So you don’t have much time to develop a relationship. The potion’s a way to sidestep all that.”

“Now see, that’s why I didn’t want to ease off,” he said, tightening his grip on her fingers. “You want to retreat behind that serpent tongue of yours. It’s a lot sweeter when it’s occupied with something, like mine.”

“I want to take a swim in the creek and get cleaned up.” She backed away, keeping the tether of their arms taut. “I’ve been gardening all morning. I’m sweaty and dirty, and I’ve got blood drying in my hair.”

“So you do.” His gaze went back to the spot, and he released one hand to touch her there, gently on the sore area, though the slightest pressure made her wince. “Okay, let’s go do that.”

“What? I meant—” Marisa had to swallow the rest of the statement because he was guiding her out the door. He stepped neatly over Beezle, now stretched across the sun-drenched threshold. The black cat seemed utterly unconcerned by the big man’s presence in their home. Marisa tripped over him, and the cat gave her an aggrieved look.

“As familiars go, he’s not tremendously intimidating,” Conlon observed, dragging her along with him around the corner of the house, headed for the creek where she did her washing. He paused, glanced down at her. “There’s not much to screen you here from Peeping Toms.”

“I don’t get many visitors, and those I do see an old woman. They’re not interested in watching an eighty-year-old crone bathe.”

“Maybe because they’re looking at the flesh, not the woman. You’d be beautiful at any age, Marisa.”

What was it about that steady gaze and set mouth that made her believe him? It raised that pain in her heart again, that futile wish for someone who would say such words to her, for her. Someone who wouldn’t be afraid of her, who would be willing to stand by her as the inevitable changes of time altered her body, but not her mind. Not her need to be loved and cherished, not the need to be thought beautiful and worthy of love.

Such a person would be a quiet man. Perhaps a bookish sort with wire-rimmed glasses that liked to garden, like her. Certainly not a large, overbearing brute of a man with gentle, powerful hands and a mouth that turned her brain into a bowl of soup.

“How about I sit here while you bathe? Do you need a towel, soap?” At her look, he raised a shoulder. “If we’ve both accepted the potion’s terms, I’m going to see you unclothed eventually. Wouldn’t it be easier to get used to it, in a way like this, where you’ve got some distance from me?”

“Do you always take over?” she demanded.

He slid his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and cocked a hip, studying her. The posture only enhanced the size of his chest, the pull of the cloth against the impressive pectorals. “You said you wanted to take a bath,” he pointed out, as if that were a reasonable response to her question, rather than an absolutely irrelevant point.

She turned her back on him to face the waters of the creek. The midday song of the cicadas vibrated patterns against the heavy summer air. She heard the far-off call of a hawk, and smelled the mint in her nearby herb garden.

Conlon let her be a moment, as she watched the current move. The shallows gurgled over slick rocks and dampened the sand on the banks. The deeper waters in the center moved in a tranquil but inexorable progress toward their destination, the Broken Sound River, a hundred miles to the south, which would eventually pour into the Atlantic.

Is this what she wanted? The potion had set the price, and she had never questioned it, but Conlon had asked her what *she* wanted. He had given her the choice. She was just scared. She had not been this close to another person, had not spent this much time with one, in a long time. Marisa now knew how to keep herself from shattering and letting in the images that could destroy her mind, as they had come close to doing too many times. Intimacy had the power to undermine her efforts, strip down her shields. Conlon already could see through her illusion magic. Could she protect herself and honor the potion?

She steadied herself with a mental shake. She had to trust the Lord and Lady knew what They were doing. She would have to trust Conlon.

As if he knew the conclusion she had reached, he moved. She heard him approach her, his hiking shoes moving deliberately over the ground. His hands, large and capable, settled on her shoulders, and rested there a moment. He gathered her hair in one hand, pushed it over her left shoulder, revealing her nape and the fragile joining of her right shoulder to her neck.

She watched the water and trembled as his fingers unhooked the row of buttons down the back. The dress was loose and could easily lift over her head, but she did not stop him from working each button through its eyelet, his knuckles brushing the bumps of her spine and the shallow channel of it as he worked his way to her waist. He pushed the sleeves down her unresisting arms so the bodice tumbled to her waist and pooled low on the flare of her hips, one button away from dropping the dress to her ankles.

The warm summer air and his breath mixed, touching her bare shoulder, and then his lips were there, tasting her flesh at that sensitive juncture. She had her head bowed, so she watched gooseflesh prickle up along the tops of her breasts. The shape and color of her nipples shifted, from a soft pale pink, like impatiens growing in the shade provided by an oak’s canopy, to a deep, sun-kissed mauve bud.

She stayed very, very still. Being touched at all, let alone being touched like this, was new to her, and



she wasn't sure if there was a right way to react. His lips felt good on her neck. They felt wonderful there.

His light kiss turned into a nibble, and her nipples grew fuller and longer, like stamens attracting the ministrations of the plush-backed bumblebee. Only in this case, the flower's response to heat attracted the stroke of Conlon's fingers. She tensed as his hands cupped her breasts, and the thumbs rubbed over the tips. She shuddered, her bare shoulder blades making contact with his shirt front, her bottom brushing the crotch of his jeans and tops of his thighs, causing those fingers to tighten.

"A further lesson in vocabulary, Teacher," he said against her ear. "These," his hands lifted her breasts, brought them together before her eyes with the reverence of an offering to the gods, "are the most beautiful tits I've ever seen. When I see your nipples tight like this, I want to suck on them until you come, just from the pull of my mouth."

His palms slid down to the curve of her hips, leaving her breasts aching. She felt the lingering imprint of his hands as if they were still there. With a flick, another button was free. The garment fell to her ankles, leaving her standing in her panties. His thumbs hooked in their elastic and slid them down her thighs. She had to turn and place a hand on his shoulder to balance herself as she stepped out of them. He rolled them into a neat ball and folded them up in her dress, laying them to the side. His hand at her hip held her to his side as he straightened. She stared down at her left bare breast, raised up higher than the right by the pressure of his body against it.

"Now," his voice was husky above her ear, his jawline brushing the crown of her head. "Go wash for me. I want to watch you."

Marisa swallowed. Took one step, then another, away from the shelter and imposition of his body. She focused on the creek, its laughing banks, its somber and thoughtful depths.

She kept a covered basket near the edge and she bent, her long hair falling forward and brushing her knees as she retrieved the soap and cloth there. His indrawn breath drew her gaze back to him. He stood stock still, his gaze coursing over her heart-shaped bottom and what her bent position revealed to him. She straightened quickly, flushing, and stepped into the water, the familiar warm mud sucking at her toes. Minnows brushed her calves as they scampered out of her path.

The water rose to her hips and then her waist. It was above her head from here, so she dropped below the surface to wet her hair. She swam a few strokes and rolled over beneath the water's surface, feeling in wonder the different texture of the water on her heated, aroused skin.

She knew about sex the way she knew how to mix vinegar and water to make a universal cleaner. She did not create the elements, did not truly understand how bringing them together achieved such a simple but effective purpose, but she knew how to make it happen. Her potions helped the process of sex indirectly, but it was never something she had understood as a participant. The unfocused yearnings of her body, particularly strong in the spring when so many animals came together around her in mating rituals, merely amused and puzzled her.

There was nothing amusing about her body's instant reaction to Conlon Maguire. Men had come often to the cottage seeking potions, some handsome, but she had never felt attraction, not even unvoiced admiration for a well-toned body. Of course, perhaps it was Conlon seeing her as she actually looked that roused her awareness of him as a man. Or perhaps it was the blasted potion placing such an unexpected condition on its price that had her focused on her up-until-now dormant libido.

She heard something. A voice, shouting? Marisa emerged in a turbulent wake caused by Conlon's splashing. He had come in to his waist, the water lapping at his hips, his face a worried mask as he called her name.

She paddled toward him, back to where she could stand, the soap in her hand. "It's all right," she said, a bit impatient with him. "I swim here everyday." She kept her knees bent as she moved into the shallows, so she wasn't exposed.

"I didn't realize it was that deep, and then you just vanished."

His expression softened her. His concern for her showed in his struggle to rein back his anxiety, and temper the edge of it in his voice.

"I'm all right," she said. Her gaze flickered to his wet jeans. A shy smile came through, despite her efforts to prevent it. "I didn't mean to make you jump in."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a wry gesture she liked. "My own fault. Occupational hazard. Always assume the worst."

He moved forward, lapping the water around her shoulders. Marisa watched him come to her, stared up at him as he put his hands on her upper arms and lifted her.

When she stood, she was in water that wavered at her hips, just above her pubic bone, and the dark hair there could be seen, just below the water's surface. The creek's soft tears slid down her breasts from the silken skeins of her hair resting on her shoulders.

One fingertip reached out, followed the track of a bead of water. It rolled down the outer curve of her breast, under it, over the ripple of her rib cage, and past her navel. His thumb brushed that shallow connection to her mother, and every mother of her lineage through her. The drop went into the water, but his hand stayed above the water line, tracing that indentation, the soft but defined rim, and caressed the tiny tight folds inside. Her stomach contracted under his hand.

"Conlon—"

"Give me the soap."

He took her handmade jasmine-and-orange-scented cake of soap from her hand to lather his hands. He passed the soap back into her palm, for he apparently wanted to have both of his hands upon her. Marisa could not dredge up a single protest to the idea.

The water they stood in was mid-thigh level on him. He had gotten the bottom of his shirt wet, so it clung to his abdomen. The wet jeans drew her eye to the way they stretched across his hips and sculpted out the groin area, the weight of his genitals.

His soapy hands started on her hair, working the scent of flowers into it. His touch made it hard to think, but she had spent twenty-three years learning that a person who could not be a part of society had to depend on herself. She had to pull her weight and contribute to the potion's success as much if not more than he did. If she was ignorant, she would have to learn, and learn quickly. There was nothing to be so apprehensive about. Animals, people, everyone did this. It would certainly be easier than learning how to make her own soap, plant a successful garden, or dig her own septic system.

“What do you call your...” She gestured vaguely toward his crotch. At his raised brow, she flushed.

“Well,” she groped for his logic, “if I’m going to see it eventually, I should know what you call it. I mean, I know what it’s called, but I know...from what you said inside, that you think of these things differently. Stop laughing at me.”

He worked his expression from a grin into a suppressed smile.

“That’s my cock, Marisa.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes as his strong hands massaged the soap into her shoulders. Reaching out to him for balance was hard, but holding on wasn’t. She caught her fingers in his shirt just above the waistband of his jeans and rested her wrists on his hipbones.

Sexual longing merged with pure pleasure as his hands worked magic on her shoulders and neck, and she arched, almost purring at the bliss of his soothing touch. Then his hands worked down over her breasts, soaping them, and she caught her lip between her teeth. She breathed through her mouth in shallow spurts as he massaged them, weighed and fondled them, squeezed them until her hold on his shirt became a tight clench.

“A man needs all the cold water he can get around you, Marisa,” he muttered, but she didn’t open her eyes to ask what he meant, surrendering all senses to his fingertips and what he could do with those hands. He seemed to be able to drive away her worries and rouse her body in this amazing way without disrupting her carefully managed protections. She hadn’t known she would be allowed to feel this, not without the pain coming in as well. But a person of pure heart like Conlon didn’t have any pain to drive into her.

Her eyes opened when his soapy fingers dipped beneath the water’s surface and stroked through her curls, finding her...what did he call it? Pussy, or cunt. She liked the way he said both words. It made her imagine his mouth hovering just above that part of her, coming closer until his lips and tongue were upon the slick folds as he whispered the words. *Pussy. Cunt.* She would open to him, as if those were the words of truth that would win him the right to take all that was there.

His fingers worked the soap over her clitoris, slid down over her opening. She gasped, and her grip moved to tough denim as his fingers worked her, not allowing her to close her legs against the rising, coiling need he stirred, his large hand not permitting her any escape.

“Conlon—”

“You’re going to turn this into a hot spring, kitten. Gush your heat over my fingers.”

Her toes strained upward, taking her higher out of the water, as if she was trying to get away from his touch, but she didn’t want to get away. Something rushed over her, shooting up through her, faster than she could muster a defense against it.

He used her elevated position to get the hand further under her, move the heel of it against her clit. He massaged her in circles as his devilishly knowledgeable fingers played all around the outside of her pussy and dipped within, ticking the base of the clit from the inside.

“No,...I,...no...” Her hand flailed, splashing hard and awkward into the water. Her feet slipped out from under her, and his arm caught her around the waist, bringing her close and holding her up. The

anchor allowed him to keep ruthlessly manipulating her, his fingers the pounding of raindrops beneath the water's surface. The wave of feeling crashed over her, arching her back in his arms. She cried out her passion, a wild lagoon bird, her pale body writhing like a flash of outstretched wings.

"Conlon, please. . ." She pushed against him and pulled him to her at once, as he worked the last spasms through her body. He bent and fastened his teeth on her exposed throat, a gentle, possessive pressure that made her mewl in yearning wonder. The emotional sensation rolled through her, spiraling and twisting together with the physical.

At length he raised his head. She was cradled in his arms, floating, her feet off the ground. His face was all that was in her vision and she could not look beyond him, did not want to do so.

"Let's get you rinsed, kitten," he said, his voice thick, almost violent in its need. "Close your eyes."

His mouth covered hers, and he took them both beneath the water's surface, his body wrapped around her, his fingers moving over her, caressing the soap from her skin, from the soft waving silk of her hair. Marisa held onto him. She'd lost the function of her muscles, including those of her vocal cords.

She didn't need any of them, though, for a moment later he was striding from the water, carrying her in his arms, the sun on her bare skin.

"I want to dry you, and then I want to dress you. I want to do everything for you, and to you. I want you to let me. Say yes."

Marisa closed her eyes and turned her face against the pulse beating in his throat rather than answering, making silence her acceptance. She didn't know if her shields were even in place. For the moment, she was dependent on him for protection, and she could only hope he would not be the key to the destruction of her mind she had always feared.

He set her down to dry her off, and she simply held on, unable to stand without his aid. He said nothing, but she felt his attention as if he were speaking a hundred thoughts in her head. She was mute, listening to the rush of whispered images that came through his touch on her body. He lifted her and she simply watched his face, feeling no need to say anything. She closed her eyes when he pressed a kiss to her forehead, and then there was a shadow as he crossed the threshold into her house.

He shouldered past the woven cloth dividing her bedroom from the living area, and found where she hung her clothes, behind a curtain she'd made of dried herbs and grasses, giving her clothes the fragrance that clung to her skin.

She didn't have many clothes, and most were sewn by her, simple shift dresses comfortable and appropriate for an old woman. Toward the back, however, was an outfit she had worn only once. It had been a gift from Laraset, the witch who had taught Marisa her craft as well as ways to protect herself. Laraset had been a tarot reader and seamstress on the Renaissance Fair tour before she fell in love with Kohana, a Sioux medicine man. Her gift to Marisa had been a gift of that time in her life, her "time of discovery", she had called it. It was this outfit Conlon lifted out now as Marisa sat naked on the bed watching him, her hair falling around her, covering her breasts and pooling in her lap.

When he turned to her, still clothed in wet jeans and shirt, and her completely naked, she felt even more vulnerable.

"I'd like you to wear this," he said. "I want to see you in a young woman's clothing."

There was a curious lassitude to her limbs and he seemed aware of it, for he laid the clothes on the bed and began to help her dress without asking. He threaded the linen shirt over her head and helped her find the sleeves. It was a peasant blouse with a wide scooped neck. When he slid the velvet skirt over her head and pulled it down to her hips, it tightened the fabric of the shirt over her upper torso. The untied drawstring allowed the neckline to dip so it was just above the line of her nipples. The fabric was transparent. Why that felt more provocative than sitting naked before him, she could not say, but before she could adjust it, he caught her hand.

“No, let me see them,” he said. He lifted the last piece of the outfit, a corset to go over the blouse. He drew her to her feet and turned her so she faced the bed, and guided her hands through the armholes. The corset’s neckline was even lower than the blouse, and it pulled the softer fabric down further, particularly as Conlon began to work the lacings through the eyelets and tighten the garment around her upper torso.

The binding of the corset felt curiously arousing. She was very conscious that it was his strong hands restricting her in this fashion, almost as if he were binding her to him.

She tried a deeper breath, and her eyes widened as she looked down and saw how close her breasts were to being revealed. The fit of the garment had restricted their space so they had been pressed together and up, as if they were on display for a man’s eye. She could see the pale ring of color just above her nipples, and so could Conlon as he turned her around to adjust the points of the corset over her hips. He gazed down on her displayed bosom with full male appreciation.

“You were right to conceal your appearance, kitten,” he said, his voice full of heat. “Any man who got a look at you wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Including you?” she asked, raising her chin.

He caught her about the waist and lifted her up above his head so her hair fell down around them, curtaining their faces in an isolated enclave. Marisa caught his shoulders, but more for her balance, for his strength was undeniable, not even a quiver in those arms that held her off the ground. He slowly lowered her, until her round breasts were there before his face. His tongue curled over the top of the right areola, tracing its arch, bringing the friction of her bodice and shirt into the blend of textures rubbing over it. He shifted his hold, circling one arm around her waist, the other around her hips. His large palm took a firm grip on her right buttock and he continued his delicate ministrations on that one tiny spot of her body, just above a confined nipple that was erect and begging to be in his mouth. He did not heed it, instead tracing his tongue up and over the lifted mounds of both breasts, and working a warm, wet path into the dark crevice between them. Her grip slipped from his shoulders, bringing her more fully against his mouth, and she curled her nerveless fingers on his neck, in the dark short ends of his hair.

He raised his head at length, pulling her back from him enough to look at her flushed face. His eyes coursed over the excited heave of her breasts from her arousal and the tight fit of the corset.

“You won’t ever say no to me, Marisa,” he promised, and she could not argue at the moment, as painful as that possible truth was. Perhaps once her sexual experience quotient was much higher, like a rain gauge, she would be saturated and able to resist someone with Conlon Maguire’s magnetism, but by then he would be long gone, wouldn’t he?

Something warm and wet was trickling down her thigh and she shifted to press her thighs together. Conlon’s brow lifted and he lowered her to her feet. He went down to one knee, which brought his head

level with her breasts, and his large hand dipped, lifted the hem of her skirt. Marisa tried to stop him from moving aside the fabric to reveal the tiny drops of fluid that had splashed to the ground. He caught both her wrists in his and held them against her right leg, along with the gathered folds of skirt, as he studied the track of moisture that had run down her left thigh.

“I’m sorry. I need...let go, and I’ll get a towel.”

He lifted his gaze to her, and it was brilliant in its intensity. “No.”

She sucked in a breath as he bent his head, brought his lip to the point of her knee where the moisture had dropped to the floor. Conlon followed its path back up her leg, using the warm pressure of his tongue and the brush of his soft hair against her bare thighs to loosen them, give him better access as he cleaned the moisture away up over her knee, up her thigh.

He stopped at mid-thigh and lifted his head to look at her flushed face and parted lips. “The flow of your honey tells me what I’m doing to you, Marisa. I like it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Not ever.”

“I’m not.” She swallowed. “Why don’t...I’ll make us some lunch. Would you like something for lunch?”

It was a desperate plea for space and she was relieved when he smiled and stepped back, though he kept his hands on her, as if to keep her aware of his impending claim on her flesh. She should be offended by his presumption, his easy command of a situation where she was out of her depth, but she couldn’t seem to find such an aggressive reaction, not with her physical self so off-balance. Perhaps she had been hit harder than she thought by the rock, and all this was an unusual dream, a dream of things and responses she had not thought possible.

“You may choose to live away from the noise of people’s thoughts,” Laraset had told her, “but do not close yourself off from your own growth. Don’t shut yourself off from the love people will give, no matter how much or how little. Just a moment of love, freely offered, is a powerful magic.”

“Let’s eat,” Conlon said.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I don’t understand.”

He broke off a piece of bread, offered it to her. Marisa took it from his fingers, which brushed and held hers for a moment before they relinquished the food to her. “What don’t you understand, kitten?”

“You just...” She shook her head. “I’m sexually inexperienced, yes, and you’re overwhelming,” she scowled at his grin, “but I’m not stupid.”

His smile disappeared. “I don’t believe you’re stupid at all, Marisa.”

“So why are you*really* doing this? This isn’t the type of thing a person like you does. I can tell you’ve given your heart to this woman. How can you—”

Offer me so much that I can’t think straight, and yet utterly convince me that you are pledged, heart, mind and soul, to the woman for whom you seek your potion?

His now bare foot moved, curled over her smaller one under the table. “I can’t really answer that,

Marisa. I trust you, and I trust the potion. Seems to me, if the potion demands a night with you as the price for the woman of my dreams, I should devote my whole heart to it, and to you.” He lifted a shoulder, tried out some of the bread, gave a grunt of male appreciation that amused her. He swallowed.

“When you have the True Sight, it takes the guesswork out of decisions. You still have free will, but you don’t have the option of rationalizing. You can see what’s right and wrong pretty clearly. It may seem to you that our being intimate is a betrayal, but the Sight tells me it isn’t. Maybe it’s not even about me.” He pointed his spoon at her. “Have you considered that the force that guides the potion may have been thinking of *you* this time? Maybe it decided it was time for you to know a man.”

Her brow furrowed at the startling observation. He reached across the table, smoothing the wrinkle away, and he winked at her, a curl to his sensual mouth that made the bite of bread she had just taken do a slow somersault in her stomach.

“How did you know you had the True Sight, what it was?”

“Irish gift. My great-grandmother recognized it early on, told me what it was. The family used me more often than the dog to determine if business associates could be trusted, if my sister’s boyfriends had honorable intentions.” He gave her a wolfish grin that made her own mouth lift in a smile.

“I feel sorry for your poor sister.”

“Don’t. She married a good man, and she’s mean as a pit bull.” He took a swallow of water. “Let me ask you something now. How long have you lived here like this, disguised as an old woman?”

“Five years.”

“Five years?” He put down his cup. “Marisa, you’re only, what? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-three. I’m twenty-three.”

“You’ve lived here, by yourself, since you were eighteen years old?”

“I’m not defenseless, Conlon, despite what you saw.” Her spine stiffened. “I usually hear visitors coming and can ward the house for intruders. I was just distracted today.”

“I don’t think you’re defenseless, Marisa. But you’re alone. Why? Why stay here? Don’t you want to travel, to see different places?”

“This is a beautiful place.”

“Yes, it is. But home is where you live, not where you hide.”

“I’m not hiding,” she snapped. “Sometimes people choose to be alone, Conlon. Sometimes that’s their destiny.”

He reached out, his large hand cupping her resentful expression. “I don’t think it was meant to be yours, Marisa. In fact,” his eyes were as fixed and steady as the center of the earth, “I can guarantee it.”

She drew back from his touch, refilled both their water glasses from the jug on the floor, quelling the urge to conjure an invisibility spell and vanish. He would see through it anyway.

“Who hurt you?” he asked quietly.

“No one. Everyone.” She gritted her teeth at his expression. “I just always have this hope when I travel that I’m going to find a place beyond the cruelty, and there is no such place, not where people exist.”

“Maybe it does, you just haven’t found it yet.”

She inclined her head. “Maybe. I haven’t traveled much.” *But I can’t endure the repeated disappointment of not finding it.* “I think it’s much better to watch the Discovery Channel.”

“I didn’t see your satellite dish.”

“I don’t have a television here, but I have watched TV,” she informed him, suppressing the itch in her palm to slap him. “When you watch a documentary, you know the dark underside exists, but you can filter it, absorb the beauty without being drowned in the darkness. You can at least imagine it might be a wonderful place, instead of a place like any other.”

“Sometimes good wins, kitten.”

“Yes, and often evil triumphs, because the human spirit isn’t strong enough to fight it. Or even worse, it can’t pay attention long enough to stick with the fight and win it.” She propped her elbows on the table with a thump, like a sentry setting the butt of her weapon before a closed doorway. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. My turn again. Have you had to take a life?”

At his startled look, she pointed her spoon at him, mimicking his gesture. “Seems to me,” she said, “if you’re going to ask me difficult questions, it’s only fair that I be able to do the same.”

He sat back, eyeing her. “Yes,” he said at last. “During a riot in Peru. The mob tried to pull my client out of the car.” His expression flickered. “I had to fire into them to break it up, push them back so the driver could get through. I remember the faces of the three men I killed. There might have been more. When you’re shooting at close range, it can happen. I fired seven shots.”

Marisa reached out, covered his hand. “Oh, Conlon. That must have been awful. I’m sorry.”

He lifted a shoulder. “It wasn’t one of my favorite days. Truth, kitten, it was probably the scariest moment of my life.” He turned his hand and closed it around hers, though his other hand traced the condensation on his glass, his eyes following the track of water there. “There’s a claustrophobic heat when you’re surrounded by a crowd that’s become a mob. Their desire for blood is so strong it presses down on you. It’s surreal, because the same people a few minutes ago were shopping in the market or talking to neighbors. Suddenly they’ve transformed into something else. For a moment I thought it wasn’t going to be enough to drive them back and we’d be torn to pieces. It didn’t work out that way, fortunately. I got Grace Fielding, that was my client, back into the car, and we got out of there.”

Her grip tightened on his hand. “You took care of her, brought her home again.”

“And thanked every deity of the Western and Eastern world for it, because there was no way in hell I did it alone.”

“But you still do it,” Marisa marveled. “It didn’t turn you from it. Did you ever protect someone you felt didn’t deserve it?”



“Yes. That’s when I left the Secret Service, though I stayed until he left office.”

He offered her a bite of bread. He held it away when she reached for it, and nodded at her mouth. Marisa hesitated, then opened her lips and he placed the bread on her tongue, as if she were a baby bird. He withdrew, touching her bottom lip, and then watched the movement of her mouth, the quick flick of her tongue to catch the crumbs. She found it hard to swallow, but she managed it.

“So you don’t take on clients not worth protecting.”

He nodded. “I spent the first part of my career sometimes having to do that, but once I made enough, I stopped. I only take jobs now that my conscience tells me I should take.”

“Where they need the best.”

His gaze lifted to hers. “Where someone of my experience is needed. Someone who can be trusted to do the job or die trying. Once I commit to protect someone, I’m there, as long as they need me. If that means forever, then forever it is.”

Marisa rose from the table, turned away from him to the basin of water and dipped the bread knife, rubbing her fingers over it to loosen the bread cuttings. “She’ll be very lucky, this woman you love,” she said, trying to keep the longing for something she would never have out of her voice.

“No, I’ll be the lucky one, if she’ll have me.” He pulled on his hiking shoes, laced them, then leaned forward, lifting a wooden spoon out of the arrangement of cooking utensils she kept in a clay pottery piece in the center of the table. “So.” He caught her attention by waving it at her. “I think we’ve both had enough of questions for now. When was the last time you played, Marisa? Other than playing footsy with your cats? When was the last time you played with a human?”

She studied the glint in his eye warily. “You’re a little grown up to be playing games, don’t you think?”

“Mmmm. Maybe. But you’re barely out of girlhood, and I don’t think you got enough time to play with dolls, or play tag.” At her blank look, he lifted a brow. “Tag? One person has to catch the other, then says ‘You’re it’, and gets chased in return? ‘Course, it’s best played with more people, but if it’s just the two of us, I think we can still make it fun.” He twirled the spoon’s handle in dexterous fingertips. “For instance, say I catch you, I get to bend you over my knee, lift your skirt and spank that pretty bottom of yours with this spoon.”

“What? Conlon, you’re teasing me. I…”

He rose from the stool, deliberate intent in his sparkling eyes. Marisa was distinctly reminded of Beezle, right before he pounced. A startled laugh bubbled up into her throat. She dropped the knife in the basin, circled left as he dodged right, a grin crossing his features.

“Really,” she said, “this is very childish, and—”

“Run, Marisa,” he suggested, and lunged after her.

She shrieked and ran through the open door to the yard outside. He was right behind her, but she ducked behind the hedge of roses where a small woman had plenty of room to do her pruning and a large man would be pricked mercilessly. She giggled as she heard him swear. The sound of her mirth

shocked her. It spread warmth through her chest and stomach like a special spell. She scuttled to the corner before he could cut her off and headed for the copse of pine and cedar trees that shaded the side and front of the house.

The damn corset restricted her breathing, which suggested a man had invented the thing. She paused, uncertain which way to go. He stalked her, weaving through the same trees, that same menacing grin on his face, the spoon in his hand.

“Now, Conlon.” She scampered around a cedar as he made another grab for her, and then danced left as he went the other way. Laughter made her hiccup out words and it felt wonderful. “This is silly.”

“Mmm-hmm,” he acknowledged, and kept coming. “It’s worth it to see you laugh. But, Marisa?” His expression sobered and he came to a stop.

She stopped as well. “What?”

“I’ve been holding back.”

She had time for a short squawk, an aborted dash. He came around the tree, too fast to follow his movements, and had her about the waist, tumbling them to the ground. He rolled so she landed on him, keeping her from harm. It made her body come to a state of high alert, that combination of physical mastery and gentle protection at once. He sat up with her in his lap, turning her face down, not face up, her cheek pressed to the soft earth of the forest floor. The fresh smell of fallen pine needles was there as her fingers curled into them. Panic lighted on her like the tickling brush of falling leaves, and something else, something that sent an instant flood of reaction between her legs.

His hand pressed firmly into her back, holding her there. The long fingers of that same hand gathered up her skirt, inching the fabric up the back of her legs. Marisa drew in her breath as his hand beneath her body turned and cupped a breast. The play of his fingers on her bare nipple was shocking, making her aware that her position had brought her breasts spilling fully out over the top of the corset.

“Conlon—”

“God, you’ve got a beautiful ass.”

She quivered as the air and the stillness of his hand told her she was fully exposed. Her thighs were draped awkwardly and split open by his knee, so when his hand dipped into the crevice, finding the wetness of her pussy, she could only writhe and whimper helplessly.

“I want to spank you, Marisa. I want to see that pretty little backside you’ve got thrust in the air turn red and know you’ll think of me when you sit down. So hold on.” His tone roughened, sending shivers up her spine. “I want it to hurt a little.”

Her stomach pressed against his jeans and his cock felt enormous, making her cunt weep for him even further. She was shaking like an autumn leaf unsure when it would lose its connection to its branch. When it let go, the leaf would journey to places never seen before, places that it never imagined existed, except from the fanciful whispers of the wind.

The slap of the spoon on her bottom reverberated to her toes. It hurt, but in a way that made her crave more, craved him to use more of his strength, make her bottom red as he said he would, as if in controlling the response of her skin he was branding her, making her his in truth. Her image of a bookish,

quiet man to fulfil her needs was obliterated by the rage of need in her mind, connected to the hand wielding that spoon.

Again. Again. The thwack was loud in the silence. After twenty strokes, the pain got genuine, but he was rubbing her bottom with his broad, gentle palm between each blow, soothing the skin, preparing it for the next. She was weeping, she realized in shock, though her body shivered uncontrollably from pleasure. His blows were drawing forth tears to wash out emotional refuse gathered in the bottom of her heart, things she couldn't understand or name.

By thirty strokes, she flinched at each strike, and he stopped. His fingers stroked her abused skin, and then the spoon's flat, round head was pressing her clit, caressing it. Her blood pressure rebounded, pounding deep in her womb like her clit and pussy had a heartbeat that matched the one thundering in her chest.

The spoon slid to the forest floor and he turned her over, cradling her. She lunged and brought her mouth to his, clutching at his body with both hands. Appeasing her hunger was the only demand in her mind as she attacked his mouth, pulling his tongue into hers, biting his lips, sucking on the moisture and heat of him.

She twisted without breaking the oral contact, and wrapped her legs around his waist, depositing her bottom into his wonderful waiting hands. The position brought his cock against her swollen clit. Layers of fabric, the folds of her skirt and his jeans, separated the two, but that did not matter to her straining body. She had no experience, only a complete surrender to the primal urges of her long denied body. She rubbed against him, panting, needing. Just needing. His hands slid up to her hips, pulling her closer, helping her move up and down along his length, though her undulating hips did not seem to need any assistance.

“Don't leave me. Please don't leave me alone.”

She heard the words, but it was a full minute before she realized it was she who had said them, pressed them against his mouth.

The realization was as effective as if a hand had picked her up and dropped her in the creek in mid-winter. She shoved back and away, startling him with her abrupt departure such that she was out of his embrace before he could stop her. She scrambled backwards several feet and then stopped, the world tilting so she gripped at ground that was no longer steady beneath her.

He'd done it. He was working his way under her shields. She could feel him, feel his desire, his tenderness. Yet he wasn't hers. He wasn't ever going to be hers.

“Marisa—”

“No. *No*. Don't—”

Of course he paid no attention to her. He was beside her, and she shuddered when he touched her.

“It's all right...”

“No, this can't possibly be all right. Don't touch me...”

“That's the problem,” he said. “No one's touched you enough.” He somehow had pulled her back on

his lap and was holding her cradled there. Even stranger was the fact that, despite her protestations, she was holding onto his waist, her cheek pressed against his chest.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, stroking her hair, letting her snuffle against his shirt.

His comforting hold and his tenderness were as unbearable to her as they were hard to resist.

“This is appalling behavior.” Her voice hitched. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, kitten. Nothing at all. A good spanking works that way sometimes. Hasn’t anyone been there for...don’t you have parents?”

She shook her head, kept her hand curled in his shirt, all too aware she was clutching at him the way a child would a parent, for comfort and the reassurance of his presence, the undeniable connection between their life forces.

She knew that humans were social creatures who longed for physical and emotional contact. She had trained herself to do without it, because her life depended on being able to stand on her own two feet.

That’s what you’ll have to do tomorrow, no matter what, *her inner demons pointed out slyly*. So why not lean on his strength while it’s being offered?

What if I lose the strength to face the world alone tomorrow?

“Marisa, your parents?”

She sat up, pushed against him. “I need...let me have some space, Conlon. Please.”

He reluctantly let her ease into a cross-legged position on the ground in front of him, but he held onto one of her hands. She wiped at her nose and eyes gracelessly with the back of her other one. He found a handkerchief in his pocket and offered it to her, and she used it, hiding behind the action until he put both hands on hers, bringing them and the kerchief back to her lap. “Tell me.”

“I wasn’t well when I was young, Conlon,” she said, focusing on the kerchief to help her say the words. “I had an illness no one could diagnose. I couldn’t bear to be touched. The only place I could achieve any type of calm was...” She hesitated, wondering at how difficult it was to say the words. “In an isolated environment, an institution.”

His eyes narrowed, his grip tightening. “A padded cell?”

She nodded. “By the time I learned to cope with my problem, I was nearly eighteen, and they hadn’t come to see me for years. What was the point? All I remembered was their pain, how helpless they felt.

“When I was five, my mother, she tried to kill herself. That was when my father...” she drew a deep breath to get it out in a rush, “he had to decide. They always made sure I was in the best facilities, that I received the best care. The nurses told me they adopted two children. They were terrified that it was genetic. I sent them a letter when I got out, thanking them for making sure I was safe all those years, but I never could bring myself to go see them. I sent them the letter because I wanted to bring closure to them, to let them know I wasn’t angry with them, either of them, that they shouldn’t feel they had failed me, because they did everything they could.”

He tipped her face up, studied it. “You really believe that. You’re not just saying it.”

She nodded against his hand. “It’s difficult for me to live with my . . . illness at times. How can I blame them? What would I do with a child that always seemed to be in pain when I touched her, who seemed as if she couldn’t bear to be in the same room with me? Year after year, with no change.”

His eyes were dark with thoughts, his jaw tight. She swallowed, pushed herself onto her own two feet, even though the desire to crawl back into his lap was overwhelming.

“You made my bottom hurt,” she accused, rubbing the offended area, and eyeing him. “Didn’t you say once a person is tagged, she gets to chase after the other person and catch *them*?”

At her words, his expression eased a fraction. She reached out a hand, a courteous gesture to help him to his feet. He studied her hand as if the curve of her fingers, the pale skin of her palm were a mystery to him, then he surprised her by placing the spoon in her hand, like a scepter being given to a queen. He rose to his feet. “I did say that.”

“Well, I had an unfair handicap, with this corset.” She tugged it up and wiggled until her breasts were covered as much as they had been before she had landed face first on his lap. When she looked up, she found him watching the play of her breasts with a wry twist to his mouth.

“If you think you had an unfair handicap with the corset, kitten, I think you just balanced it.” He caught her hand and before she could guess what he was about, he placed it on the erection starting to swell back hard and firm against his jeans. “Trust me, running with this between your legs isn’t easy.” His grin flashed wide and bright. “Catch me if you can, kitten. You going to give me a head start?”

She sniffled, swiping away the last evidence of her tears and tucked the kerchief fastidiously into her skirt’s waistband. “If you think you need one.”

He bolted and she was after him, her bare feet sure on the forest floor. She had played such games with Beezle, and she knew how to anticipate the feint and double back of a lithe cat’s body, but Conlon Maguire had a panther’s dangerous grace and the long legs of a giraffe. He widened his lead on her despite her ability to anticipate his movements around the trees, down to the brook, splashing through the shallows, scrambling back up the banks.

She saw no reason to physically compete with those long legs. She concentrated, and a moment later a dead branch on the forest floor spun into his path. He leaped over it, and she gained a stride. A mass of vines fell from the canopy of a water oak and tangled around his shoulders. He got out of that, cursing, but missed the root she pulled several inches out of the ground. He stumbled, and she latched onto the waistband of his jeans and hung on like a small burr. He swung around, and caught her deftly about the waist to help her keep her feet.

“You cheat,” he laughed. “You witch.”

“I am not a cheat,” she said with dignity. “I leveled the field between us. You never said I couldn’t use magic, and debilitating factors or no,” she waved at his crotch, making him grin wider as she flushed, “your legs are much longer than mine, so it was fair for me to do as I did.”

“Well then,” he drawled. “Since we’re being fair, do you want me to drop my pants? After all, I gave you your spanking on bare skin.”

Her color climbed to her hairline, but she lifted her chin at his teasing, challenging look. “Yes. That’s what I want.”

His brow raised, but he inclined his head and unbuckled his belt, pulled open the button of his jeans. When she swallowed, and her embarrassed color started to drain from her face, he turned with a cough that might have been a chuckle. He pushed the pants and underwear beneath down to his thighs, and she saw a pair of muscular buttocks, revealed as he gathered up the tail of his shirt. Buttocks that flexed as he shifted his weight to his hip and glanced back at her. “Well, kitten?”

His small witch stood there with the spoon clasped in her hand and a look of something between fascination and terror on her features.

“I just...just...” She stammered. “I just wanted to catch you, to show you I could. I don’t need to do...the rest.”

“Maybe you’d like to do something else,” he suggested, his eyes warm and gentle, but apparently aroused at her innocence as well. “Would you like to touch me, Marisa, any way you wish? Have you ever been able to touch a man’s roused body, Marisa?”

“Of course not.”

His eyes flamed hotter, surprising her with his reaction. He drew his pants back up, covering himself. He zipped them but left them unfastened and the belt loose, and took her hand. “*Good*. Come on.”

He led her back into the quiet seclusion of her home, took her through the doorway into her bedroom. He released the tieback on her curtains at the door and windows, so the fabric swung closed, enclosing them in a cozy, dimly lit nest, where there was little room for more than the bed and them, standing there facing each other.

“What do you want, Marisa?” he asked. “Anything. I’ll do anything you want. There’s nothing we need to rush. Ask me anything.”

“Why does it...you seem to like it, very much, that I’ve never had a man, never touched one,” she said. “Why?”

“Because it means I’m the first to know you, that you’re mine, that my cock will be the first to fill your sweet cunt, be slicked down with your warm juices when I slide into you.” His voice was rich and warm, like the honey he was coaxing from between her legs.

“Oh,” she said faintly. The room had gotten much warmer, she supposed because the curtains did not allow as much air to circulate.

“Would you like me to take off my shirt?”

She nodded, and his fingers rose, slipped the second button, the third, and the rest. He tugged the shirt out of his waistband and shrugged out of it, baring the broad shoulders and wide chest, the defined muscles that marked his stomach, the low ride of his jeans on his hips.

Living so close to nature, Marisa had a highly developed appreciation of beauty. Whether it was the tiny artistic perfection of a ladybug’s wings or the complex symphony of a tree’s canopy as the wind brushed strokes through its leaves, she understood each was a miracle. She had never had occasion to study the

male form, but that enervated awareness rewarded her now, and for a moment all she did was look. He did not move, letting the dim light settle onto his muscles, limning their perfection for her pleasure.

He was so different. He was so much bigger, not just in height, but in the span of his shoulders, the more developed upper body, the size of his hands, the length of his fingers. Small nipples, surrounded by those fine hairs of gilded bronze. The diagonal slashes of muscle from the hip bones, pointing the way to the groin area, still covered by his jeans. Her gaze could not help but settle on that heavy bulge of his genitals contained in the juncture between his long thighs.

“You’re beautiful,” she said softly. “The most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

She moved toward him, and he did nothing, remaining still as he promised, those green-gold eyes watching her. The lack of lighting shadowed his expression, except for the quiet ease of his mouth, inviting her to do as she would to him.

Marisa reached out, and his flesh quivered under her light fingertips. She stroked his fur, felt the texture of his nipple. She took a shallow breath, and watched his eyes automatically go to the swell of her breasts, barely tucked back into the tight corset. “I’d like...” she pressed her lips together. Instead of speaking her desire, she reached for it.

She touched the open button on his jeans, traced her finger into the zipper, and took it down. She did not look up, absorbed in what she was doing, though she could feel his head bent over hers, his breath on her neck.

“Marisa.” It was a husky caress of heat against her skin.

She managed to work the zipper over the head of his engorged cock, moving carefully, instinctively aware of how sensitive that powerful looking organ could be, and noticed the spot of thick fluid on the tip. Fluid like her fluids, wetting his dark underwear as evidence of his desire for her. She could smell it, that musky scent, and it was new to her, so she bent close, inhaled it, breathing softly on him.

“I want...” She wasn’t brave enough to go further.

“What, kitten?” His voice was a rough whisper. “Anything you want. Tell me.”

“Can you take all of it off?” She straightened, looked up at him. “I want to see all of you.”

“I wouldn’t know how to tell you no, Marisa.”

He bent and unlaced the hiking shoes. As he worked the strings she reached out, traced the movement of his back muscles, felt the soft short hair on his nape. She envied the person who got to cut his hair and run her fingers through it, feel the texture as she was feeling it now. It would be a woman, she was sure, because he was a man who enjoyed the touch of a woman.

He straightened, catching her fingers and kissing them so she did not feel he was drawing away from her touch when he turned to toe off the shoes. He slid the jeans and underwear down his haunches, and rid himself of them and his socks, so he stood before her in only the glorious creation of skin and muscle with which the Lord and Lady had blessed him.

He had heavy testicles, covered with the same soft down of dark hair that covered his chest in a light mat, and his cock was fully erect above the scrotal sac. He was large in all ways, and it gave her some

trepidation.

She placed her fingers against his rib cage, followed the channel between two of them around to his back, and spread her hand out, a fan against his firm flesh there. She felt the life and strength pulsing within him. "I can barely breathe," she whispered. "You're so wonderful."

A ripple went through his skin and it took her a moment to realize he had swallowed, and his hands had closed into tight fists. She hesitated. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Never." He kept his head averted, but she saw his profile. "You just don't know, Marisa. A virgin in...the outside world, for lack of a better word to call it, is different. She may not have had a man inside her body, but you wouldn't be able to call her sexually inexperienced. She would know so much already. To you, all of it is new, wondrous. It humbles me." He turned then, his body held rigid against some enormous feeling he appeared to be holding back. "A man would look all his life to find someone as special as you. Let me pleasure you while you touch me. I can't keep my hands off you."

"How?" she asked, not certain of his intent, but certain she would not deny anything he asked of her in that ragged voice.

"Come here." He drew her to the bed and stretched his long body out on it, laying his head on her pillow. If he stayed there long enough, she'd be able to smell him long after he was a memory. She was glad she had made the bed oversized for her and all of the cats, because his feet were almost at the bottom railing.

"Come here," he repeated, tugging at her, at her skirt. He pulled the drawstring, untied it and loosened its fit, so the skirt went tumbling to her ankles, leaving her only in the corset and shirt beneath. From his point on his back, he took her elbow, guided her up onto the mattress and then brought one of her legs over his chest to straddle him, with her head facing his feet.

"What—"

He slid her back, his hands on her thighs, and she was on her knees, her hips over his face, her hands braced on the bed on either side of his ribcage.

"Touch me however you wish, Marisa," he told her, his hands closing on her waist as she tried to twist about and look at him, "while I bring you pleasure this way."

She understood then, and before she could become embarrassed or ask desperate questions, he brought her down full on his face, her pussy onto his waiting mouth.

It was like the exhilarating shock of cold water on a very hot day. Pleasure shot out in all directions through her bloodstream from that point of contact between his mouth and her body. She couldn't think of a proper analogy for it, the feel of a man's hot, hungry mouth on her wet, aroused cunt. He flicked his tongue back and forth like the lash of Beezle's tail, then around in a circle. She struggled, not to get away, just unable to be still. He seemed to understand, for he held her more tightly. His tongue made a slow, broad lick, from back to front, up and down, again and again, all while he made soft, wet sucking noises against her skin that inflamed her body and her senses.

Marisa fell forward, unable to sit upright, and found a feast waiting for the ravenous hunger he roused in her. She opened her own mouth and used it upon him. She started with his flat stomach, using her teeth to taste the roll of muscles there, biting and licking wildly like Beezle did when she scratched his back and



hit the spot he liked so much. If it felt anything like this, she now knew why he got more and more aggressive as the pleasure continued building, until the best expression of appreciation was savagery.

Conlon used his greater strength to show her how to enhance her pleasure, manipulating her hips in low grinding circles, allowing him to stab his tongue deeper into her heat.

Her arms stretched, her fingers biting into the tops of his thighs. She sucked on his hipbone. His tongue stabbed deep and she mewled, curling her claws into him, her knees straining to clamp onto either side of his head. His hands held her wide, so her body shuddered in the grip of an unbearable level of arousal, unable to go forward, screaming to be pushed over that pinnacle he had shown her in the forest. Her clit was aching for his mouth, but now when she wanted it most, he offered only the smallest rations to that aroused center. A brief nuzzle, a quick lick. She cried out at the teasing contact, throwing back her head.

His cock brushed her cheek and her hand slid back, to the crease between thigh and testicles. Marisa turned her head and rubbed her nose and the edge of her lips against the broad head, tasting wetness and salt. She marveled at the peculiar velvet softness of skin stretched over steel.

Conlon settled into a rhythmic nursing at her pussy, so slow it felt as if her cunt were the eye of the storm raging through her body. Every slight movement of his mouth and every hot breath were as excruciating as an electric jolt.

She was quivering, her breath sobbing in her throat, and she tasted him again, more boldly, running her tongue along the ridged base of the head of his cock. She used a hint of teeth, as he had on her. He groaned against her slickness, and the convulsive clutch of his fingers on her thighs told her he liked it.

She cupped her hand under his testicles, feeling their weight, and licked his cock again, from the base up to the tip. She wanted to hold it, this staff that would take her maidenhead, and so she wrapped her fingers around it. She slid her grip up, feeling the unusual give of the soft flesh over firm rigidity. It had incredible heat, warming the skin of her palm. She rose up and put the head fully into her mouth, just barely able to close her lips over it, touching it lightly inside the cavern of her mouth with little flicks of her tongue, learning his contours.

He stilled, his lips motionless on her pussy, but still *there*. His fingers lightly stroked the inside of her thighs, making her tremble even more.

He was very thick. Her index finger and thumb were barely able to meet as she grasped him to slide her mouth further down on him. She went as far as she could go before the head touched the back of her throat. His thighs quivered, just a shiver of movement, but it flooded her with a sense of power. She could do to his body what he did to hers, make him helpless with pleasure. She slid back up his length, feeling the way he stretched her small mouth, and she used her teeth, scraping, and sucked on his skin.

“No, Marisa...” His breath rasped hard over the words, and she felt his heart pounding beneath her thighs. “You’ll have to stop, or I’ll be no good to you at all.”

She shook her head, made a murmured protest, her mouth still firmly fastened on him. She had no intention of relinquishing her new toy. He answered her willfulness with his mouth. He clamped his lips back over her soaking cunt, only this time there were no gentle licks or nibbles to draw out her pleasure. His hands shoved her thighs impossibly wider, and he suckled her clit hard. He lifted her hips off him and then drew them back down in a pumping motion, to give his tongue room to stab in and out of her labia, emulating the act they would eventually do with the organ in her mouth. He alternated the sucking of her clit and the invasion of her pussy with his tongue with long, thorough licks from the top of her clit to the

tiny opening of her bottom. He stabbed back into her pussy on each downward stroke, an amazing feat of coordination that shot her up a ramp toward orgasm like a slalom skier. His afternoon beard rasped against her delicate skin, tightening the coils in her lower belly impossibly further.

The banked heat while she explored him now leaped high. She whimpered, her mouth still upon him, but unable to coordinate a sliding motion to tease him as he was tormenting her. In fact, she could do little other than hang on, her hands clutching his legs, her mouth panting on his cock, vibrating it with her soft cries. The head bumped the back of her throat as he mercilessly undulated her body toward a shattering peak.

“No...no...” She did not know why she was saying no, denying him, except it felt like too much, too frightening and overwhelming. The power that grew in her pussy coiled in her lower belly with the power of a diamondback about to strike, and then it did, in a blinding flash as brilliant as venomous fangs. She saw hues of silver, and light sparking in the back of her eyes as his teeth scraped her convulsing clit, consuming her heat and juices as if he dined on a meal of flesh prepared just for him. Indeed, at the moment she could not imagine belonging to anyone else but him.

She could accept that, would have to accept that. As unlikely as it had been more than a couple hours ago that he would be her first love, Conlon Maguire would likely be her last, with her life being what it was. She let go and was ripped away from the edge of reason, spiraling into the world of silver, her cheek pressed against his thigh, for she could hold her mouth on him no longer. He continued to drive her higher, even as she begged him for mercy. His arms were banded on her waist and hips, and his mouth worked her hard, bringing forth a primal passion and need she had not suspected were there, stored like a thousand unshed tears in her subconscious, just like the emotions released by his spanking. She sank her teeth into his flesh and the blood of his thigh gave her the anchor she needed, her cheek pressed against the heat of his erect cock and nest of testicles.

The pounding rhythm of his blood matched hers, but hers slowed first as she came down. She focused on herself with wonder, feeling the way her climaxing body contracted on his tongue, then pulsed down to an easier cadence, like a settling heartbeat. His hunger became a nibbling, just a feather touch of his mouth that made her wriggle a bit against his hold as the sensitive tissues were tickled.

His hands at last let her go, but only to lift and turn her.

“Come up here, Marisa,” he murmured. “Taste your pussy on my mouth.”

She let his hands guide her so she lay full on him, his cock trapped between her belly and his, her response trickling down her thigh onto his leg.

He lifted her under the armpits, slid her up to where he could kiss her, which meant his cock sprang up between her thighs and nudged the crease between her buttocks.

His mouth was warm, and gentle, and she could taste his leashed need beneath the flavor of her cunt, a slippery exotic taste. His hand came up and cradled the back of her head, his thumb stroking her ear. She loved how he liked to touch her face when he kissed her. She was reduced to a still peace by his gentleness, and a desire that was more than physical, though she could feel a stirring in her lower belly. She felt like a languid cat who had enjoyed her supper so much, she might want more sooner than expected.

“Conlon,” she whispered, shyly meeting his gaze. “I’d like to take off the corset, so I can feel all of you against me.”

His fingers worked the laces free and the pressure eased. She sat up so he could pull the garment away, leaving her soft and bare sitting upon him. As she sat up, she lifted, so his cock came forward through the opening of her thighs and lay on his belly again. When she lowered herself, she found it nestled against her pussy, the long hard length of him channeled between her wet lips.

Conlon reached up, fondled her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her still aroused nipples. "Holy Mother, I want you. Can you feel how much, kitten?"

She thought he meant his cock beneath her, but he took her hand, laid it over his heart and held it there, as he stared up at her through the dim light.

Blessed Lady, what was the man trying to do to her? When she started this day, she could not have imagined she would be sitting on a naked man by late afternoon, but here she was, and now he seemed determined to crack open her insides the way he had pushed past her physical defenses.

He had roused powerful emotions in her, and perhaps that was what happened during sex. For just a few moments, you got to be everything to one another, even if you were nearly strangers. She had never been anything special to any person, not for a second, much less for an afternoon, so how could she resist it? This moment was a gift, a memory she could polish every day so it would not dim, like a lamp in her soul. She had always accepted darkness there, but she was afraid he had made it impossible for her to accept it anymore.

"I want you to..." She paused, her fingers resting beneath his, her other hand holding her up on his body. She loved the way his eyes coursed over her, again and again, as if he was trying to memorize everything about her, and then his gaze returned to her face, studying it with equal intensity. "Do you say, 'have sex with me'?" she asked.

She had certainly read books, but she had stayed away from modern literature. It was a world she could not join, and so reading those books caused her only longings for things she could not have. Her naivete and innocence were real things, her questions to Conlon genuine, his every answer a new wonder for her to ponder.

He reached up, cupped her face in both of his hands, bringing her down for a kiss on her forehead, her nose. The tips of her breasts brushed his bare chest, making them tingle.

"Sometimes," he murmured, kissing her lips, "when you especially want it, and there's just an overpowering physical need inside you, you say, 'I want you to fuck me. Now.'" His lips brushed over her brow again. "Hard." Her ear, to nibble. "Long." Back to her lips, this time for a much longer kiss, during which her world spun off its axis and drifted away on a cloud.

"Then," he raised her face and she caught hold of his wrists to keep her balance, staring into his eyes, "sometimes it's more, so much more, and you say, 'make love to me.' Say that to me, Marisa. Please."

She closed her eyes, turned her face into his hand, pressed her temple there. "I can't," she whispered. "You're going to leave. You can't take everything from me, Conlon. You can't." She brought her gaze back around to him, her lips trembling. "Fuck me, Conlon." She stumbled over it, but she drew a breath and strengthened her resolve. "Fuck me. Now. Hard. Long. Make me yours for today, and I will live with that, if you can, and your potion will be served."

The last was a challenge, and her anger surprised her. It wasn't supposed to have gotten personal, but it

had, because there was no way to get this close physically without it becoming that way, a painful lesson she would not forget. She didn't have the experience to be casual about it. He did, but his husky words, begging her for verbal intimacy, had not sounded casual. Neither was his reaction now.

There was a flash of frustration, a deep disappointment that made her want to withdraw, break the physical link of flesh with him, but he stopped her, his fingers biting into her arms. He pulled her down, put his forehead against hers, and she kept her palms open and light against his chest as he fought a battle for control she could feel quivering through his body.

"Before we do that," he said at last, "we need to take a little break. Your body will need some time to get roused again, to make certain you can receive me as comfortably as possible. After climax, the tissues are very sensitive, too sensitive."

"I can bear it," she assured him.

He shifted his grip and collared her throat, giving her a hard look that swallowed anything else she had intended to say to goad him to finish, to be done with it.

"I won't let you rush this, Marisa. You'll open every part of yourself to me, not compartmentalize to protect yourself. You never need to do that with me."

Didn't she? Why did he act as if he was not going to leave her when the day was done? Why did he want her to act the same way?

He gave her ass a friendly squeeze as if he had not just insisted she put her heart in his hands.

"Right now," he lifted her off of him, putting her on her feet on the floor next to the bed, "I need to answer the call of nature."

She knew they were serving a Will greater than her own desires, but he irritated her beyond the capacity for speech. She wanted to tear out her hair, or better, his. As he rose and turned to leave her small bedroom, she snatched up the spoon and gave him a solid whack on his muscular ass.

Conlon jumped and spun, shock flashing over his expression for one delightful, vindicating moment. Then a wicked grin crossed his face. "You're going to wish you hadn't done that."

Marisa dropped the spoon and bolted, but he snatched her by the waist and hefted her over his shoulder kicking and shrieking. She used her hands and smacked him again, taking out her frustration with a cheerful enthusiasm on his handsome backside all the way from inside her house to the creek. By the time they got to the water, she was laughing at his mock sounds of pain and missing every other blow. He tried to lift her, she was sure to toss her into the water, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist as he brought her forward. "I'm not going in unless you are," she informed him.

"All right then," he said, and plunged in with her locked in his arms. He took four strides and dove below the surface of the deeper water.

It was marvelous, having him hold her, water rushing over them both. Even when he rose, she continued to cling, water pouring off their naked bodies, the melting afternoon sun warming their skin as they emerged. Beezle sat on the bank, watching them with yellow eyes rounded in amazement.

"Kitten, you've got quite an arm." He grinned, pushing her hair back from her face as she did the same

to him, smoothing it back on his temples. “You’d be a hellcat of a mother.”

The light in her heart died, and he saw it, for his face sobered. “What, Marisa?”

“I’ll never have children, Conlon. My . . . problem, it makes it impossible.”

“I thought you said it was cured. Is it life threatening?” He gripped her arms. “Are you sick? Tell me.”

“No, I said I learned to manage it. It’s not something you cure.”

“Why won’t you tell me what it is?” He gave her a firm shake. “I want to help.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Please don’t ask me to talk about it. It’s nothing that threatens my life, not that way. I just want to swim. Go . . . do what you need to do, and let’s swim. Okay?”

She was grateful when he let her pull away, when he didn’t push. She knew how difficult that was for a man who wanted to protect all those around him and remembering that, she resigned herself to the fact that she couldn’t seem to hold onto her anger against him.

She knew Conlon did not mean to upset her with his insistence that she open herself to him. He did not know how susceptible her emotional well-being was. He was simply encouraging her to offer herself fully to the passion between them.

When he splashed back into the water, his face was more composed.

“Come on.” He retrieved her hand, pulling her into the deeper water, beyond where her feet could touch. “Keep me company out here.”

He let her go and sank below the water, then came back up, tossing his hair out of his face. He could touch bottom here, the water lapping at his collarbone, so she stroked over to him. His fingers linked with hers and he pulled her in, guiding her thighs so they wrapped around his waist and she could use him to keep herself afloat without treading. His waist was firm beneath her soft thighs, the hair on his belly brushing and tickling the hair of her pubic mound. Her calves pressed down on his muscular buttocks, her crossed heels resting on the backs of his thighs. She realized if they were lying down, this would be the position of coitus, and it turned the emotions fluttering in her stomach to liquid heat.

“I can see why you live here,” he acknowledged, looking around them. “It is peaceful. But don’t you get lonely, Marisa?”

“Sometimes.” She used her arms to keep herself upright, her upper body leaning away from him. “But I have Beezle, and six other abandoned cats that come here to eat.”

“Who built the house?” He studied the simple log cabin construction.

“I did,” she said, with some pride at his look of surprise. “I studied survivalist manuals, everything from Robinson Crusoe to Walden Pond, and modern journals. Especially those written by women. Then I just followed the blueprint of what they did. Laraset and Kohana are the healers that helped me learn how to cope with my illness, and got me to the point where I could leave the care of a medical facility. They’re married, and they came with some of Kohana’s cousins and helped with the heavy lifting when I was constructing the cabin.”

“Why didn’t you stay near them? If Laraset and her husband helped you reclaim your life, they must be good friends.”

“They were my healers.” She nodded, tightening her thighs on his bare hips as he shifted. “They cared about me as physicians care for those they heal. But I spent my whole life under medical care, Conlon. I wanted to see what it was like to have my own home and my own life, as much as I could. My parents set up a trust fund for me so I could choose where to live and what to do with my life, and have whatever level of care I needed.”

“But you’re so isolated here.”

“Not so much.” She shrugged. “People like you are company, those who come here looking for potions. I go into town,” she added, laying her head back in the water to float her upper body, though she continued to hold onto him with her legs. “I see people then.”

“Well, it’s obvious how often you go there.” The flatness of his voice had her raising her head. “All the window shopping for trinkets, the pretty dresses you buy.”

“I don’t stay that long.” She dropped her legs from their hold around his hips and swam away, rolling in the water, rewetting her shoulders. He swam alongside her.

“You strike me as someone who would enjoy looking at lovely things, Marisa. Trying on a pair of earrings, a hair comb. Do you go in as yourself? Or do you go in as an old woman to keep anyone from noticing you?”

“Stop baiting me,” she snapped.

She had retreated enough that she was back on solid ground and she faced him, anger in her eyes. “You want to hear what you’re fishing for, Conlon? I go to town once a month, for about two hours. That’s what I can handle, okay?”

“Until what?” He stood up, his shoulders broad enough to block the sun setting behind him, making the wind raise a chill on her upper arms a moment before his hands closed on them. “Tell me what happens, Marisa.”

“Why do you insist on making this about me?” she said, jerking away from him. “This is about *you*. Your potion, your life, your woman. I will never see you again after today. I am an instrument of other people’s fates, not part of fate itself.”

She saw it in his face. Pity. Pity for her. Marisa snarled and she spun away from him. “We’ll do this *now*, and then you and your potion can be gone.”

He caught her about the waist and she whirled on him like a cat, clawing at him. He caught her wrists and she resorted to teeth, snarling at him, fighting the needs he had roused. Needs that exposed her terrible isolation and the inadequacies of the world she had been forced to create to survive.

“Marisa—”

“Bastard!” She wrenched away from him. “You pry and pry, because you think I’m interesting and different, because I’m beautiful, but you don’t live in my head every day. You don’t know what it’s like to live in fear of the pain coming back, the constant hammering of a million dark voices raised in threats,

anger and pain until you can't hear the voice of a good person standing next to you shouting. Do you have any idea how shielded I must be to survive? How much effort it takes every day to hold those shields in place? And you come here with your patronizing attitude and your sexist assumption that I'm some weak, stupid female."

"Marisa, no—"

"You want to know what happens if I stay in town longer?" Her lip curled derisively. "My shields break down and all the ugliness pours in. Everyone's meanest, most petty thoughts and deeds, the things deep in their heads that no one knows about."

"Jesus. You're an empath." The light dawned in his eyes.

She nodded, a short, sharp jerk. "Yes. A *veryspecial* type of empath, Conlon. I only sense emotions motivated by evil. And guess what? Almost all of us have them, even if they're dormant within us. I can sense them. Greed, petty selfishness, unjustified violence, the dark yearnings that everyone harbors deep inside. You know those primal instincts that turn a group of pleasant shoppers into a murderous mob? Well, I feel it in them in the marketplace, while they're still shopping, even if all they ever do is shop." She set her jaw to keep her voice from trembling. "Only the shields I've learned to build protect me, and the moment I come into town, it's like my mind is a fortress under siege by an army. Those with true Darkness in the active part of their minds make it far worse."

He reached out but she shook her head, stroked back from him. "That's why I spent all those years in an institution. Can you imagine being a child, and all these terrible images are pounding into your head from everyone you know? It's like one of those horror movies, where people look normal, but you're seeing them as demons, their innermost gremlins exposed on their faces, in their voices."

"Oh, Marisa."

"Laraset was a volunteer in the children's ward. She's a witch, and she brought her husband, Kohana, to see me. He's a Sioux medicine man, and he figured out what I was, looked beyond the physical and chemical to the spiritual. They helped me, helped me learn how to shield myself for short forays among others, and taught me the things I needed to do to cope. One of them is living apart from civilization, where I can keep it down to just a murmur of static in my head."

"There's no permanent cure for it."

Somehow, she knew he was going to ask. "There's only one permanent solution for it, a reference in a book that might or might not be true. When Laraset found it, and told me about it, I wished for it so much I almost put myself back in the same state again. Just like the shields, I learned to protect myself by not wishing for it any more."

Liar. His presence here had brought it to the surface like a predator floating in the shallows, just waiting for her fragile psyche to put one vulnerable leg into those dangerous waters.

"You won't tell me what it is?"

She shook her head. "I don't speak of it. I won't. I can't." She could not keep the desperate note from her voice.

"And the potions?" he asked quietly.

“An act, a joining of love, eases the drain on my shields. The success of my potions, no matter how far away, fuels the wards around this place, around me.”

“So your potions are for you as well as for them.”

“They make the world a better place, so everyone wins.” She set her jaw. “I live alone, and maintain my wards and my illusion, and I survive. It’s the life I have been given, and it has many blessings in it.”

“Marisa.” He reached beneath the water, caught her hand, and stepped closer. His other fingers touched her chin, lifting it so she would meet his intense hazel gaze. “You don’t have to tell me what you and Laraset found, but I know faith grows weak. I know it.” His hand tightened on her, and she saw the truth in the shadows of his eyes. “My faith nearly broke, after Peru. I never thought that kind of darkness was in people. But I learned that as long as your faith is still inside you, even just a thread of it in your heart, it can call your heart’s desire to you, if your intent is pure. You have to believe.”

“I have to survive,” she said flatly. “And enjoy what I’ve been given rather than always wishing for what I can’t have.” A man in her life exactly like Conlon Maguire. “Anyway, by nightfall, I’ll no longer be such a pure vessel, will I?” The porous ground beneath her feet sucked her down, sliding her closer to him, despite her struggle to pull back.

“Innocence is not purity, Marisa,” he said seriously. “Physical intimacy doesn’t taint the soul. In some cases, it can enhance the shine.” He drew her closer, so her breasts and her stomach were pressed against his wet skin. She had to tilt her head to look at him, which put their mouths distractingly close. “You have every right to be proud. I wasn’t trying to pick that apart. You just have an incredible amount to give, Marisa.” His hands slid up her sides, palms resting on her rib cage. “I wish there was someone in your life with whom you could share it all. Not someone to nurse you. Someone to be with you, be your helpmeet. Share your life.”

“You think I don’t wish for that?” she demanded, stiffening against his hold. “Laraset said...”

“What? What did she say?”

“She said that maybe one day I’d find someone.” There, she’d said it. “Someone who might get close enough to me that they could lend their strength to my shields. But it can’t be just anyone. So it’s impossible.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she’d had enough. Marisa wrenched away. “You see, you’ve got me messed up about this again. You’re just like Laraset, always pushing, always wanting me to offer more. Well, none of you are in my head. It isn’t about what all of you want me to be able to do, it’s what I can do to serve the Lord and Lady, and still survive from day to day. So as far as I’m concerned, the whole bunch of you can just go to hell. This is my life.”

She stormed out of the water, leaving him there, and snatched up her towel from the basket. She wrapped it around herself and plopped down on the bank, deciding he could finish his bath alone, and if he got his legs tangled in some water weeds and started to drown she might just wait awhile before deciding to fish him out.

After a few minutes he joined her. She chose not to look at him, though she couldn’t help her peripheral vision, which noted the way the sunlight played off the water sluicing down the muscles of his body, the dark pelt of pubic hair, the movement of his genitals as he strode from the water. He picked up the other



towel she had provided and knotted it loosely on his hips. He sat down next to her, joining his hands around his bent knees.

“If you were one of your cats, your tail would be lashing and your ears would be laid back.”

Her gaze shot to his face. She could feel the fire inside her shooting sparks from her eyes, but his expression was open and apologetic. “So,” he ventured, “want to have sex now?”

The anger slid away with her glare and she looked away, her lips twitching. “Idiot.”

“Yeah, it kind of goes with the whole male-female dynamic.” He carefully laid an arm around her shoulders and she felt his warmth, the comforting touch of something she’d rarely had, a friend.

“I didn’t really mean I wanted you to all go to hell,” she said after a moment.

“Even me.”

“Even you. I did kind of want you to drown, for a second or two.”

He chuckled and she laid her head on his shoulder, let herself lean for just that moment, because, after all, once the moon rose, it wouldn’t matter.

“Does that mean I can talk you into having dinner with me?”

“Didn’t we just eat?”

“That was a snack. This is dinner.”

“What are you fixing?” she asked, a smile touching her lips, curving against the skin of his shoulder.

He nudged her so she lifted her head.

“You tell me what you have, and I’ll make it into something worth eating. I’m a great scratch cook.”

She considered. “Well, I’ve got fresh vegetables, bread, and...” she slanted him a glance, “Hershey chocolate bars. A case of them, one a day to last me until my next trip into town.”

“My God, you’ve fallen in love with me.”

“What?” She jerked back.

“A woman doesn’t offer her chocolate stash to someone she’s not madly in love with.”

“Perhaps I just have a generous nature,” she said, recovering her dignity.

“I’ve no doubt you do about most things, but a woman and her chocolate? Kitten, you’d be the first.”

He grinned and rose, offering her a hand. When he tugged her to her feet, he brought her close, so her towel-clad body was pressed against his bare upper torso. She was suddenly aware of how loosely that towel draped about his lean hips. But he stepped away after a moment and just held her hand as they walked back to her house.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Play ‘what if’ with me.”

“You don’t play ‘what if’ if there’s no possibility you can ever have what you’re wishing for.”

“With all you do to ensure the success of your potions, you don’t think anything’s possible?”

“Are you trying to be cruel?”

“I want you to share your dreams with me, kitten. That’s all.”

Marisa studied him across the table. He had indeed prepared an excellent meal, concocting a spicy light soup of vegetables from her garden. She had sliced up more of her wonderful bread. Now they faced each other, and the candles she had lit upon the table were becoming necessary to illuminate the room, every flicker of the flames like the ticking of a clock, tightening a coil of anticipation in her belly. She saw the awareness in his eyes as well, though they kept up their conversation as if they were both oblivious to the significance of the impending twilight.

“It’s more than the empathy that makes me choose isolation. I’m not a prisoner of this place, Conlon. The noise of towns, the way no one pays attention to the natural world except as an accent to their possessions, it’s not for me. Here, I’m connected to the Lord and Lady, as part of the cycles around me, and I can hear Their Voices, and my own.”

“So that’s why no electricity.”

“I don’t need it.” She shrugged. “People get far too dependent on such things anyway.”

“Hmmm.” He rose, collected the dishes and deposited them in the basin of water in a considerate gesture that had as much of an impact on her senses as the physical implications of the moon rising. It made her think of his words.

Someone to be with you, be your helpmeet... Someone to share your life.

Someone to share mundane tasks like washing the dishes. Another person to stand on the other side of the wide bed in the morning and help her make it. Someone to help her take a jar off a shelf just out of reach of her fingertips.

He lifted his backpack to his shoulder and extended his hand. “I think it’s time, kitten. Will you come to the bedroom with me?”

Her throat suddenly went dry, but she nodded, rose and took his hand, let him lead her into the bedroom.

Conlon set the backpack down. “Will you lie back on the bed for me, Marisa?”

They had worn their towels at the table. His clothes were wet and he did not want her to put on one of the shift dresses. She lay back on the pillow and pressed her cheek to it as he rummaged through the bag. She smelled him on the pillow, just as she’d hoped.

She opened her eyes to find he had removed a small item of pale blue rubber, shaped like a butterfly. He was using his fingertip to spread a fluid from a tiny bottle onto the butterfly's wings.

"What is that?"

He sat down on the bed next to her hips and slid his hand holding the butterfly up her thigh, nudging the terry cloth out of his path so her leg from knee to pussy was exposed to his gaze. "Spread your legs for me, kitten," he murmured. "I have a surprise for you. Courtesy of the Eastern invention of the alkaline battery."

She trembled but obeyed, trusting him in a way she knew she had never trusted anyone.

His fingers touched her, pressed her gently, and the wings of the butterfly closed over her clit, the substance he had spread onto them adhering to her skin so it stayed in place, like a hood for the tiny bundle of excited nerve endings.

"What is it?" she repeated again, breathless.

"Something to change your mind about electricity."

The whirl of the tiny motor was almost noiseless, but its impact was immediate. Marisa stiffened as the vibrations kissed her clit, little frissons of current drawing the blood so it began to swell in arousal again.

"Ah." She caught her lip in her teeth as he watched her, his eyes steady on her face, his hand on her thigh, his fingers aching close. His hand held the control at his hip and he turned the knob. She bucked up as the sensation intensified.

"Your nipples are hardening," he said quietly. "They have jewelry for them, did you know? Rings to go around them, make them stay stiff and large. There are even vibrating shields for them so they can become as aroused as your clit is now. I can turn this up to its highest setting and you'll come instantly, Marisa. You're getting wetter even now. I can smell it. You're ready for it again."

"Conlon." She clutched the covers, sensations shuddering over her skin. She opened her legs wider, lifted her hips toward him. She felt like a wanton, wanting to offer all of herself to him, but she couldn't help it. From the flare of heat in his eyes, she could see he didn't mind.

However, he turned the control down, easing the vibrations so she could think somewhat again, and stroked his hand down her trembling leg. "You could come that way, but I want you to come this time with my cock inside of you. It's just about dusk," he murmured, glancing toward the open window.

The crickets were starting their evening serenade, and the air had the soft quality of early summer evenings. It was a lovely time of day to embrace a change to her life, for she knew that was what this was. The price of the potion was never set without deep purpose, and the amethyst color, the color of the crown chakra, had underscored its significance.

"Conlon, could you... would you mind stopping it just a moment? I have to... it's important I tell you something."

He acquiesced to her wishes and even went a step further, leaning forward to take the butterfly off her. The touch of his fingers peeling it off her clit was enough to make her gasp, her thighs tighten. He bent, pressed a kiss to her pubic bone, nuzzling her soft hair, then he straightened, met her gaze.

“Are you afraid?” His voice was soft, though she could feel the tension in his man’s body, the ache of wanting her so close to the surface it emanated from his skin. It helped, knowing that.

“Not of the act. Just of what it might mean. Conlon.” She pressed her lips together. “It’s possible, when we come together, that I won’t be able to maintain my shields. Great emotion widens the scope of my empathy, and...” She stopped to steady her voice, felt his hand close on hers. “I know this will overwhelm me. If the negative emotions rush in, promise me you’ll finish the consummation, no matter how much pain I appear to be suffering.”

His expression hardened. “I’m not going to cause you suffering, Marisa. If there’s any danger to you, we’re not going to do this. I don’t care what—”

“No, it’s important to the magic that sets the price that we come together in this way. I wish to serve its purpose. Please, you must promise me, despite your strongest instincts, to do this.”

It was she who turned over her hands and gripped his, hard, her expression beseeching. “I serve the Lord and Lady. Don’t deny me the right to control my own destiny. That’s far more important to me than anything else, do you understand?”

He studied her. “All right,” he said at last. She knew it cost him to go against his own inclinations to support hers and she lifted his hands to her mouth, kissing them.

“I will do as you say,” he warned her, “but I will do everything I can to keep you safe. You’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

Would he talk to his chosen woman so possessively, so arrogantly? Marisa closed her eyes and imagined that woman’s lips lifting in an indulgent smile as his hands and mouth and words asserted his dominance over her, all the while knowing she held his heart and soul in her gentle hands. It was the way of the Lord and Lady, the unique way male and female expressed their sense of belonging to one another, their mutual reverence and devotion. She understood it now, after only one afternoon with a man. Not just any man, but the right man, to teach her such truths.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak further. He drew her forward, into his arms, all the way in, pressing her into the curve of his body so she was sheltered there. He wrapped his arms around her back so she was in a cavern of male heat and strength. He tipped her chin back with a nudge of his jawline, and he kissed her.

They’d had a whole afternoon of loveplay, so she had anticipated that he would quickly move to the intimacy of baring both their bodies again, stripping away the towels, claiming her breasts and thighs with his mouth and hands.

Instead, he seemed to want to take his time now, seducing her only with his mouth. He started with a persuasive rubbing of his lips against hers, pushing her bottom lip down with the pressure of his so his lips were moistened by the inside of hers. He rubbed that moisture against both of her lips. The tip of his tongue came out, making a delicate touch here and there, as if he was marking each tiny crease of her lips that enabled their movement. Marisa’s fingers uncurled and fluttered onto his abdomen, pressing against his hot skin. She caught the light covering of hair there, a reflexive clutching for balance, as he took hers away.

Her lips parted, welcoming him deeper, but he would not take the plunge. His tongue touched the edge

of her bottom front teeth, delicate licks to her gum line, his large hand coming up to hold her jaw still for him.

She made a noise at the back of her throat, and her body pushed against his, insistent.

“Tell me you want me to make love to you, Marisa,” he said, his harsh whisper no less a demand because it was a heated breath along her cheek. “This is not sex, not fucking. No matter what happens after this night, you know that’s the truth. You serve the truth, and love. Let me in. Trust me for this one moment, the most important moment in the world.”

The hard-won mental wall she had built crumbled like a sandcastle against the onslaught of the ocean, just from those few coaxing words. His strength and goodness surrounded her, made her feel desired and protected, revered and enjoyed at once.

Marisa now understood why desperation for this feeling bloomed in the many hearts that visited her door. This was the greatest of magics. Even if a person had never had this blissful feeling herself, the sacred Joining of the Lord and Lady to renew the cycles of life emanated outward and encompassed all Their creations. All who were a part of Their Body would feel those emanations, and long to have it for themselves, be a part of it. As above, so below, as within, so without. It could be measured in an hour or a second, but it would never be enough until it became a state of existence, an infinite instead of a finite experience.

“Yes.” She looked up at him, his beautiful, handsome spirit, the desire waiting to be unleashed in his eyes, his hands, his cock moving against her. “Make love to me, Conlon.”

She gave a glad cry as he plunged, mating their mouths in a full penetration, his hands moving down to hold her hips firmly against him.

He slid onto the bed, covering her body with his own. She lay down in the comfort of this bed every night. Lying down in it now, with his body settling on top of hers, felt more welcome than the best dream she had ever known in it. Her thighs opened to cradle his body, and her towel slid to the floor as he unknotted his own, so there was nothing but the waiting precipice between the meeting of their flesh.

Their sexual interludes to this point had been flashes of fire. This was a slow, hot burn, his kisses upon her throat and lips taking an eternity until she was only sensation in his arms. She couldn’t think past each place his mouth pressed and held, tasting her flesh with bare movements of his lips that rocketed through her nerve endings from the point of contact to her toes. She gripped her fingers in his hair, holding him to her, and realized her body was moving with a life of its own, her hips rising, circling, stroking against him in insistent demand.

He lifted his head, his body lying upon hers, his arms sliding up so his elbows were on either side of her shoulders, holding some of his weight off of her.

“How does this feel?” he asked, his fingertips doing a light stroke of her cheek, his eyes darkening as her head turned and she caught his finger in her mouth, biting him with sharp teeth. She curled her tongue around the imprisoned digit and let him withdraw it slowly, glistening with the moistness of her mouth. He groaned and caught her face in his hands, pressing his body down on hers to keep her still. “I need to know if you’re okay. You’re trembling.”

“I’m not afraid. I want this. I want you.” She reached up and touched his face, tracing his forehead, the slope of his nose, the curve of the bone under his eye. He brought his lips to the pulse point on her wrist,

and she rested her hand on his face. Her blood pounded against his mouth. His cock moved against her, a bump of movement, and she felt wetness against her thigh, her wetness mixing with his. Something in that place between her legs was pulsing as hard as the blood through her wrist, and thousands of years of instinct told her what it wanted. It was an ache connected to the tightness in her chest, the trembling in her body. If this was merely lust, she could understand why it was so often confused with love, but she knew Conlon was right. Whatever this was, it was more than lust, even if it was too sudden to be called love.

Her hips rocked up, brushing her pussy against him, and he groaned against her wrist.

“Slow down, kitten,” he muttered. “I don’t want to rush this.”

He moved down to her neck, and she arched her whole body, telegraphing the ancient female message of surrender and trust, that she was open to him, his to claim.

His arms curled under her waist, holding her in her arched position as he bit her neck, then tortured it with his tongue, the rough afternoon shadow of his beard rasping against the pale skin of her breastbone. She could do little with her arms but let them lie on either side of her. All her energy seemed to be drawing toward one place. Her hips pressed up, circling, rubbing in a manner she could not stop, a continuing call to his body to come into hers, to bring her to that place that the magic, and now her own desires, demanded.

Instead of succumbing to her body’s plea, he heightened it, by sliding down her body and bringing his lips to her breast, nibbling the skin to her nipple, and then covering it with the warm, sucking pressure of his mouth.

Now she did catch hold of him, her fingers gripping those massive shoulders. “Conlon,” she said. He murmured, an incoherent noise of desire against her flesh.

She closed her eyes, and suddenly the world turned over. She surfaced in the hot spring of Conlon’s body and mind. The red heat of his desire rolled over her, through her. She felt the tightening of his body, preparing to take the woman beneath him, as clearly as if it were her own body. Her mind seesawed between shock and the muddled confusion of arousal. Her empathy had never received anything but negative emotions, emotions of darkness. This was a melding of two desires in a heated rush of sensation, and she felt both of them.

Her muddled mind tried to make sense of it. Perhaps as this physical act opened her mind, her empathy gave her the gift of being able to merge in this way with her lover. She had never done this before. Anything was possible.

It was a very plausible explanation, and her moment of fear turned into wonder, and then a wild craving, for now she felt his desire as well as her own, and the demand was overwhelming. For the first time in her life, she experienced joy in her ability to experience what lay in the mind of another.

I feel it, too. Marisa, I feel you. In my mind, in my body. In my heart.

She had a brief flash of his intense hazel eyes focused on her own before his mouth was on hers again, driving away any rational thought. His hand moved in between them, guiding himself to her.

He had brushed his cock against her as he suckled her breast, but now his intentional navigation brought his broad head firmly against her moist lips. She had no fear of this. He had taken that away. Now, she just wanted. She opened her legs wider and he murmured hot approval, biting at her lips as she answered

with a soft cry of encouragement.

Her pussy stretched to take his head in, her thighs spreading and lifting. The warm wetness of her body eagerly welcomed him. The shaft of his cock followed, that impressive column of flesh and steel she could not get her fingers around. He was widening her, but taking his time, moving in slowly, his fingers sliding up off his shaft once he had it inexorably in its track to gently pinch her clit, making her hips wiggle and move faster, her breath coming in pants at the sensation that spiraled through her in rhythm with the pump of her hips.

She felt the tremendous control he was exercising to hold back, and she didn't want that. She wanted him, all the way inside, now. Her hands slipped down, finding the slick muscles of his buttocks. She clutched him, lifting her hips as if she could impale herself.

"Jesus," he rasped, "hold on, kitten. I don't want to hurt you. You're such a little thing."

She did not listen, her clutch insistent. Her legs rose to fold over her hands on his buttocks, her muscles inadvertently squeezing, tightening on him in her channel. Being in his mind at the same time she was in her own, she knew how much he wanted to be inside her, and exploited every image she could see through his mind's eye to try and make him surrender to her will.

He met the shield of her maidenhead and stopped, resisting her with his greater physical strength and a mental control she would have admired if she didn't want him so desperately.

"No turning back," he whispered, his face above her, framed by the soft light of a dying day. "Hold on, kitten, and trust me. Let yourself go."

He surged forward, breaking through her innocence in one sharp, clean movement, seating himself to the hilt in the same motion. Marisa cried out, but it was a short pain, one that could not detract from the overwhelming experience of having a man's body so deeply within her, so irrevocably connected to hers. It was an intimacy she had never had, never hoped for. In that one act of burying his cock in her, he had filled the empty place in her heart.

He whispered to her, the words not important. He held still, his powerful body trembling as he let her get accustomed to the feel of him, and then he pulled back. One inch, another inch, the thick shaft teasing her clit, the head stroking her inside. Then he came forward again, as if he was drawing a bow over the strings of an instrument, and her body tightened, rippling with the music he was creating.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh."

He smiled then, a faint gesture, as dream-like as the twilight air, and he did it again. And again. Just as slow each time, even though the fire burned exponentially hotter with each stroke, and her body screamed with the desire to push to full conflagration. He kept her smoldering, hotter, hotter, his teeth gritted, the tense muscles of his jaw giving his handsome face the appearance of smooth creek rock, slick with his sweat.

"You need the slowness, kitten," he rasped. "I know you want to go over, but you need an easy pace."

And she did. He was so large that her newly stretched muscles needed time to learn how to ease and tighten on him in a way that brought them both pleasure. So she trembled on that pinnacle, and focused inside herself, marking the give of her muscles as he pushed inward, then their jealous squeezing as he pulled back, communicating her desire to hold onto him and which made her gasp with the mutual

pleasure she gave them both. She found the rhythm, matched him, stroke for stroke, and felt the beat of their hearts, the pump of their lungs and the motion of their bodies become aligned.

“Trust me, Marisa,” he repeated, his words lost in a groan of restraint. “Let go, kitten. Let go.”

Why did he keep saying that, when he would not let her get to that wonderful precipice of sensation? His hips changed their angle so that his thrusts rubbed a seesaw motion against the opening to her cunt, her clit, and a circle of pleasure inside that seemed no bigger than her pinkie print. Each rub of his head against it, and the stroke of his shaft out against the clit, drove her higher, but not over.

As her arousal grew, her consciousness expanded as she had predicted, but also much further than she had anticipated. Beyond the room, beyond the clearing, it flung itself out like a roll of clouds, farther than it had ever been able to reach, into the nearby town and beyond. Marisa felt the height as if she was on top of a mountain, looking down on thousands of souls. As suddenly as she became aware of them, they became aware of her.

Her fingers clutched on his skin. “Conlon.”

She tried to speak further, but she couldn’t get the words out. He pressed his lips against her ear, and it felt as if his voice spoke from deep within her. “I’m here, kitten. Don’t be afraid.”

They were coming toward her from all directions, like a tidal wave from which there was no escape. She could not move, frozen in their sights as they descended upon her, shoving aside her shields, trampling them beyond repair, leaving her completely vulnerable.

Their darkest emotions poured over and into her like a flood of bright flashing lights, hurting and blinding her inner eye. Her body stiffened. That pinnacle of pleasure so close a moment before was now lost in the confusion, blasted away beyond her reach.

Use me, Marisa. Look. Use me. LOOK.

Conlon’s voice was a roar in her head, a command that she thrashed around within herself to find. As she turned, amidst all the light, she saw a point of blessed darkness. She fought toward it, her survival instinct shoving down her panic enough to make her focus on getting to it.

As she kept it within her sights, it grew larger, a dark vortex before her inner eye. The harsh lights surrounded it, but none penetrated that welcoming blackness. Her subconscious ran for that shelter, scabbled for it, urged on by his voice in her head, calling her, over and over.

Come to me, kitten. Come now.

She stumbled and fell into the darkness, wrapped its protection around herself like a cloak. As abruptly as she had been sucked under by fear and despair, she exploded back into her consciousness and gasped, gripped by spiraling strokes of pleasure in a dizzying wave of sensation, for Conlon was still moving within her.

Only now, his movements were fierce and strong, as he pulled her to him with the demands of his body and her own, breaking the power of the invading force over her will and desires.

Her body arched and all those complex nerve endings in her pussy began to vibrate, a warning, a promise of the strength of the magic sweeping over her. The climax struck with the power of a summer



storm, rumbling out of the depths of the sky and earth, taking her over, opening her mouth in a scream she could not stop. It erupted from her, the force of her orgasm electrifying the lights gathered like hungry demons just beyond Conlon's protection and driving them back even further.

Conlon's hands tightened, a bruising but welcome grip on her body and he let go, pouring hot seed into her. It shattered her emotional shields, her personal defenses against his impact on her emotions, the yearnings he had raised in her. Their bodies moved together as one, synchronized by mysteries that were centuries old.

In the amazing link their joining had forged, she could feel the limitless space within him for her spirit to turn and draw his essence around her. With that around her unprotected psyche, she could face the world she so often had to shut out. She sensed them, those many consciousnesses, but they could not attack her. They could not come within the circle of his protection without her permission. She could filter them. She felt the ones genuinely in need of healing, the good soul gone astray, and the ones who had willingly succumbed to the petty desires of the selfish heart. However, without the attack on her senses, the cacophony from the negative vibrations could be dimmed, and she could see how best to help, how to set any of them on a better path. Not just with her potions, but with her empathic understanding of their needs.

She could not see him physically on this plane of awareness, but it was a place where emotion was more powerful than physical sense. He was there with her, his soul and mind, seeing what she was seeing, standing with her, lending his protection to her power. That was Conlon Maguire's gift, a limitless well of protective power to offer, fueled by his pure spirit and the accumulation of a life spent protecting others, a White Knight in truth.

When the powerful grip of the orgasm started to ease, like the ebbing tide of a sparkling ocean at sunset, something even more amazing happened. She saw all those flashing lights fade away, back to their respective souls, and yet she was still warmly ensconced in Conlon, their spirits intertwined like their bodies.

Yet it was no spirit, but a human male under her fingertips, with sweaty, muscled skin pressed against the inside of her thighs. Who even now scratched her neck with his stubble as he nuzzled her, his heart thundering against hers. A real man who could answer the quiet desires of her woman's heart and stand by her for the life the Lord and Lady had given her.

The miracle Laraset had promised was in her arms. Her soulmate. Capable of giving her the strength and shielding to live the life she chose, not the life forced upon her to survive.

Marisa was so overcome she could not speak, and the shudders of her body were now fueled as much by her tears as the post-coital aftershocks of desire. Conlon did not speak for a long while. He simply held her, kissed away each tear. He let her see the knowledge in his eyes, the promise that had been there all along, that she had not recognized until the magic was released by their joining.

When the emotional and physical tumult had ebbed enough that she lay quiet in his arms, she spoke at last in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"Why didn't you tell me?" She held onto him as if he might vanish if she let him out of her body, and he tightened his hold around her, understanding her need. "Why the potion?"

"I couldn't have told you, kitten. Something like this, I had to show you, and I could only show you if you let it be more than sex. Your heart had to be open to the possibility of love between us, of forever. If

you had closed down, only given me your body, it wouldn't have worked."

She ran the palms of her hands down the muscles of his broad back, arched with a sigh as his thighs tightened at her touch, driving him more deeply within her. "How did you find me?"

"It's been a thirty-two year search." He smiled, rubbed his nose against the side of her face. "It ended when I went to a Sioux medicine man by the name of Kohana." He pulled back so he could face her surprised look. "I went there to do a sweat lodge, after Peru. To heal."

Now it was her turn to press upward, put her cheek against his rough jaw, caress his ear and neck with her fingertips. His jaw moved against her skin.

"In my vision in the sweat lodge, I saw you clearly for the first time, but at that moment, I knew you had always been there, in me. Like that moment when you find your destiny and you think, 'ah, there you are.' You were it for me, kitten.

"No, no more tears." He raised a lock of her hair, pressed it to the corner of her eye. "Imagine my joy at having a vision of you when I'd been locked in a sweat lodge for three days with a bunch of other unwashed guys." She managed a smile and he used his lips to catch the next tear that fell. "There you were among us," he said. "But I was the only one who could see you. You were like Snow White. Ruby red lips, pale, perfect skin, raven hair falling forward over ripe breasts cradled in lace and velvet. I wanted you so much that from that moment forward you were a constant ache in my heart, and my cock." He wound his fingers around her hair, tightening his hold. "From the first moment I saw you in my dreams," he murmured, "I wanted to spread your legs and make you mine."

He kissed her neck, bit. Marisa trembled in his arms, aroused and overcome by his words, but he showed no mercy, taking her from laughter to tears to passion to joy. "I wanted to curl my arms around you, shield every part of your body and soul with the strength of mine, reassure you, be your lover and your friend, be everything you needed, forever. Your shadow was already printed on my soul. I wanted the real thing in my arms."

He lifted his head, their eyes less than a finger width apart. "I told Kohana all I saw and he said, 'This woman is your calling, your true destiny, and your lifemate. I will tell you how to find her, but winning her will not be easy. You will have to approach as the true hunter who respects and reveres his prey must. With strategy, and stealth.' " Humor flitted through his eyes at that, reflected in her own, as Marisa could well imagine the eccentric Kohana laughing at them both.

"He told me to go halfway across the country, to this tiny hole-in-the-wall town, and find an old woman living in the woods on its outskirts. This woman, he told me, would be the key to finding my soulmate. It was the only warning he gave me. He didn't tell me I'd find you here. It took everything I could do not to fall down at your feet and beg when I first saw your face."

Marisa smiled. "Strategy and stealth." She cocked her brow, bit her lip when he shifted within her. "Well, Mr. Maguire, you did a very good job with both." She placed her hands on his face, held him there so she could stare at him, this miracle that she didn't quite believe wasn't a dream. "With you, I felt what people were feeling," she said, "but I could control it. I could pick and choose, and I could feel the bad *and* the good, not just the bad. It's like I always could, but the volume knob on the bad was just turned up so high it drowned the good out." She blinked more tears from her eyes and he smiled, kissing them away again.

"I know. I felt it when you turned it down, took control. It was marvelous, kitten."

With a groan she found endearing and amusing, he rolled off her, taking her with him, so she lay on his chest. “We don’t have to be joined physically to do that. Laraset and Kohana told me, if we made it work, we’d eventually be able to link spiritually and I’ll be able to protect you, even if we’re not together. Like if one of us is traveling, or at the grocery store,” he added, seeing her sudden look of apprehension. He reached up, touched her cheek. “You can go anywhere, kitten, anywhere you want to go. Though I’ll admit, I kind of like doing it the physical way.”

She found a tiny smile, her worries easing. His large hand cupped her face. “Forever, Marisa,” he said quietly. Firmly. “I’ll talk you into falling in love with me. I might even confuse you enough to get you to marry me in a weak moment. Maybe have my child.”

He looked at her steadily, waited for her reaction. Marisa swallowed down a lifetime of fear and chose to believe in miracles again, accept his reality.

“Yes,” she said.

His eyes darkened and he raised up on his elbow, taking her down to her back to kiss her, long and hard, curling his arms under her to pull her up against his body. When he lifted his head, he kept her tight within his embrace. Her arms were folded against his chest, between the two of them like a pair of delicate bird wings, and her fingers fanned out on his collarbone, touching him.

“I’m scared, though,” she admitted. “The idea of children.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “That’s the thing you can fear least, kitten. When I had my vision in the sweat lodge, I saw you in three images. First, I saw the face of the old lady, your illusion. The Crone face, Kohana called her. Then I saw the raven-haired beauty, as I said. The Maiden. But my soul knew neither of these was the true face of the woman I loved. It was when you appeared to me as a Mother, I knew I was seeing your true self. The mother of my child,” he shifted, laid her hand on her stomach, “a child we may have just planted in your body.”

Marisa felt a thrill flutter through her as he laid his hand on hers. He stroked her knuckles, traced the delicate skin of her bare stomach in the open spaces between her fingers. “But more than that, you’re a Mother in the sense of capital M. A Mother and healer to the souls of many, as many as your generous heart and what you call the Lord and Lady will bring to you.”

She turned her hand, linked it with his and wiggled around so she was lying on her side, facing him. Her mind could not digest the enormity of it all, so she chose to focus on a random thought niggling at the edge of her mind. “So, that butterfly thing. That was part of your strategy?”

He grinned at her, stretched his free arm over his head. “Never know what methods you’ll need to convince a woman to see your point of view. It worked, didn’t it?”

“Ooh, you...” she scrambled, snatched the spoon off the floor and went after him with it. They wrestled in the bed a moment or two, him laughing until he got it away from her and set her on his loins, seating his cock firmly against her. She quieted like a child given a pacifier, her hands braced on his solid chest, feeling the beat of his heart as he lay beneath her.

“Eventually,” he said, “we’ll go see your parents.”

“Oh, Conlon, I don’t know.”

“Kitten, if your mother and father got the chance to hold you in their arms once without causing you pain, it would do more to bring healing and closure to their lives than a thousand of your letters, no matter how well written they are. You’ve got adopted siblings out there. They deserve to know you.”

She shook her head. “But, I don’t know—”

“There’s no rush on anything, Marisa. None. We have time. We definitely have tonight,” he smiled, a slow, sexy gesture that made her stomach somersault, “and I’m in no hurry to leave a bed with you in it. You remember me talking about those threads? They’ll guide us, and they’re strong. They’ll bear us up no matter where we go, even if we decide to spin all our dreams from here. Fate finds us anywhere. All you have to do now is think about tonight.” His fingers eased down her spine and his gaze descended as well, considering her naked body. He cupped her breasts, brushed the tips of her nipples with his thumbs. “I’m thinking—”

“Conlon, you couldn’t.” She felt him hardening beneath her pussy and her gaze flitted to his intent one. “Or, I could be wrong.”

“Any objections?”

A smile crept onto her face, its light coming from her heart and the growing warmth of her own body. “I hope those are REALLY strong threads,” she said, as he banded his arms around her, bringing her body down fully on top of his. “Because if we spin them from this bed, I don’t know of a potion strong enough to hold up the frame.”

“I do,” he murmured, bringing her breast down to his eager mouth. “Let me show you how to make it.”

About the author:

Joey W. Hill lives on the Carolina coast with her wonderful husband, a houseful of animals, and their dauntless sailboat, Shadowfax. She is published in two genres, contemporary/epic fantasy and women’s erotica, and has won awards for both.

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