

Praise for the writing of MaryJanice Davidson

In a recent review I wrote "laughs are great but they can only take you so far" and this book drives that point home. Though the humor hooked me in, it was the combination of bold sensuality, the fun-filled plot that kept me on my toes, the bit of painful family angst (a step-mother who steals your designer shoes and a father who wants you to stay dead, can it get worse than that?) and the characters who leapt off the page that made this book an exceptional read. If you desperately need a laugh and enjoy vampires who gleefully misbehave, grab yourself a copy of Undead and Unwed.

-- Laurie Shallah, All About Romance

Undead and Unemployed is the hilarious second book in the Undead series by Ms. Davidson. Betsy is just as irreverent as she was in Undead and Unwed and she's still determined to give Sinclair the cold shoulder. This is one of the funniest, most satisfying series to come along lately. If you're fans of Sookie Stackhouse and Anita Blake, don't miss Betsy Taylor. She rocks. An excellent read!

-- Lory Martin, The Best Reviews

Undead and Unwed and Undead and Unemployed are available from Berkely Sensations.

Fans of Ms. Davidson will like the wit displayed in The Royal Treatment, and especially how she ties in a connection with modern-day personalities. The characters are wonderful, especially the young prince

and princesses. Their individuality is great, and threads this story together nicely. For a pleasurable read, be sure to pick up your copy of *The Royal Treatment*.

-- Robin Taylor, In The Library Reviews

MaryJanice Davidson has a wicked sense of humor and it is showcased in this collection [*Under Cover*] of three novellas that had me snickering, giggling and laughing out loud throughout the whole entire book.

-- Kathy Boswell, The Best Reviews

The Royal Treatment and *Under Cover* are available from Brava.

BEGGARMAN, THIEF

MaryJanice Davidson

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This book is rated:

Contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Beggarman, Thief

MaryJanice Davidson

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Dedication

For Karen, who reads everything I ask without complaint...in fact, she does a credible job of feigning interest.

This little story, which has been lurking in the bottom of my heart for several years, would not have been possible without the formation of Looseld. And so I thank the entire lizard gang, not only for giving me a chance to write about a mutant and a cyborg, but for giving voice to many other authors who might otherwise not have been heard. Thank you..

Prologue

Spring, 2072

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mitchell Hunter stood at his window and looked out at the city. His city. He owned one third of it. He owned the very hotel he was living in. Top floor. The penthouse.

All his.

He took another swallow of his drink. The sixty-year-old cognac went down like liquid silk. He pulled on the cuff of his shirt. It had been hand-tailored in London. He paced and then sat down on the bed. The sheets were Egyptian cotton, over six thousand dollars per king-sized set, and were laundered in France.

He had taken to tucking thousand-dollar bills into the cups of panhandlers. When the nearby church solicited funds to replace their old stained-glass windows, he gave them a check so large the reverend had to sit down. When one of his employees came to him to resign so she could care for her family while her husband found work in Alaska, he gave her five years' severance. She had to sit down, too.

He'd given a ridiculous amount of money to the Independent Party candidate for the presidential election, more out of idle curiosity than anything else. Would the lady win? She had, but it hadn't mattered.

Nothing mattered. He had more money than he could spend in five lifetimes, and it didn't mean a damned thing.

He could see his reflection in the glass, a dark shadow. He looked perfectly normal, which was, of course, a lie. He was as far from normal as you could get. He wasn't even really a man.

Take away the plastic and the metal, and what's left? One third of me. Is that a man?

No more than the metal and glass building he owned made a whole city.

He swallowed the last of the cognac, and crushed the cup--it had been carved out of a single piece of Venutian rock--in one hand. He watched the powder drift to the carpet, and thought again about jumping out the window. He was thirty stories up, but he was afraid it wouldn't kill him. And what would They do? Would They replace all of him with metal and plastic? Then what?

He'd volunteered the first time, because he thought he knew what he was getting into. Now he really did know. And it wasn't worth it, being stronger and faster and smarter than just about everyone on the planet. It wasn't worth it, because he was alone. There was no one else like him.

He was afraid to die. And he couldn't bear to go on living.

Chapter One

"Say! Is this where Mitchell Hunter lives?"

"Lady, you can't--"

"Because I just wanted to thank him for saving our church."

"Lady--" The petite, gorgeous redhead had walked right up to Harry Gould, barely coming up to his jaw. He'd been on the job a week--night security for HuntCorp--and so far it had been cake. Shooing away reporters--seemed like they all wanted a piece of the boss. Nightly patrols. Escorting the occasional bar drunk back to his (or her) room.

But now here was this teeny redheaded honey with great legs and phenom tits, crowding him in the service entry. How she'd gotten in, he had no clue. And it was tough work, telling her to hit the trail. He'd rather tell her to hit his trail. "Lady, you can't--"

"He saved it." Her hands knotted together between her breasts, and she blinked up at him like a red-haired Bambi. "All our windows were yucky and we wanted new ones and thanks to him we got a whole new church! And a parish center, too. The bingo committee is thrilled. Where is he?"

Harry cleared his throat. She smelled like lilacs. Lilacs, in March! Shit, in the city at all. "He--he's really busy, ma'am."

"Oh, so he's in town tonight?"

"Ma'am, it's real late. Why don't you come back tomorrow--during business hours--and I'll see if I can get you in to see him." Who knew? Maybe the sight of this fervid cutie would cheer the morbid bastard up. Harry liked his job, and he loved the salary, but Mr. Hunter gave him the creeps. There were livelier statues. "What's your name?"

"Oh, never mind that." She stepped away. "I'll come back tomorrow. Thanks for your help!" She walked away, hips swaying sweetly beneath the black micromini.

Harry watched her go, giving thanks that the miniskirt had been out, then in, then out, and recently in again, with a vengeance. She flipped a wave over her shoulder, shoved open the service door, and stepped out of his life.

* * * * *

"Well, shit," Jamie Day muttered. Hunter was home! All that research, for squat. Now she'd have to wait until he went to sleep. He only had the Rock in his safe for one night; it was being shipped to the moon tomorrow.

She'd thought Hunter, of all people, would stick to a schedule. And tonight he was scheduled to be in Washington, D.C., at the Inaugural Ball...he had, after all, been a major campaign contributor, and everybody was crapping themselves over the new lady president.

Instead he'd blown it off...why? She'd been watching him for weeks; she knew his habits and schedule as well as he did. Once something was on the Sacred Schedule, he stuck to it. But to blow it off at the last second...

It was almost as if he just couldn't be bothered to take the trip.

Weird.

One way or another, she was getting her hands on the Rock. If he got in her way--well, it wasn't like he could hurt her. He couldn't even stop her. By the time he raised the alarm, she'd be long gone.

Jamie cheered up as she ducked into her car. Fresh plates, clean car, and it'd be in pieces sometime tomorrow. No way to trace it back to her. Not that anybody could trace anything to her anyway--among other things, she didn't leave fingerprints. Ever.

Jamie pulled off the skirt, revealing her thick tights were really thin black leggings. She pulled off the bustier and pulled on a black turtleneck. She reversed her jacket, so the lime green lining was on the inside, and the black was outside. She kicked off the bright yellow pumps and slipped on black ballet slippers, and pulled off the outrageous red wig, revealing her short-cropped, Easter-egg-blue hair. The guard had been so busy staring at her boobs and hair and clashing jacket and shoes, it was doubtful he could place her in a line-up if his life depended on it.

Time to wait. She'd go up around three AM. Pop into the safe. Get the Rock--and any other pretty baubles that caught her attention--and be on her way. She had about a zillion pockets, and each one could hold several diamonds. Or thousand-dollar bills! Hee!

She passed the time by re-reading the King Corporation's latest (The Shining VI... The Hotel Strikes Back!) and gobbling Twizzlers.

Chapter Two

Mitchell turned. Something was wrong. Something had been wrong for the last few minutes, but he'd been unable to figure out what. At last he had it. The sound, so faint only his cybernetic eardrum could pick it up, was someone breathing, quickly and lightly.

All the lights were off, of course--he could see in the dark like a cat--and he'd been standing before his window for hours. Now, it seemed, he had company.

He stole softly across the carpet, slipped through the bedroom door, into the living area, and saw at once the door to the saferoom was open.

He avoided the furniture, the table, the piles of financial papers, and the squeaky spot by the piano. He paused in the doorway and nearly gasped in surprise.

A woman was working on his safe. His safe. Where he kept his money. She was short--barely up to his shoulder--with short hair that looked--er, pastel blue--slim limbs, and--and never mind what she looked like. How the hell had she gotten in? She'd have had to get past security, multiple alarms, and three locked doors.

He could see she was wearing night goggles. He knew from experience they only weighed about sixteen ounces and looked like regular sunglasses, except for the thick lenses. He closed his natural eye to get a better look--and nearly gasped again.

She'd disappeared.

He opened both eyes. She was back, still working on the safe.

He closed his artificial eye. She was still there.

He closed his natural eye, the better to scan her--and she was gone again.

Interesting. She couldn't be seen by artificial means. His cybereye couldn't see her, nor could the security cameras.

A mutant. He'd read about them but had never met one--not that he knew of.

Fascinating.

Completely, utterly, compellingly fascinating.

It had been only a matter of time, the scientists had warned. Thanks to all the nuclear testing, the earth was clicking hot--much hotter than it had been five hundred or even two hundred years ago. And now and again, according to Scientific World, a mutant popped up.

The dangerous ones--the ones who couldn't think, but who could set fires when they got angry, or crack cement, or drive others mad with a single touch, had been squirreled away. Most of the time, the flip side of a major mutation was cataclysmic retardation. No one knew why, or where the government put the dangerous ones.

The less dangerous ones kept out of sight, and made darned sure not to do anything extraordinary when people were watching. He'd always assumed they weren't terribly bright--but this one certainly was. She'd picked the right night to rob him, after all.

He watched his thief take a big gasp of breath, and then charge the safe door. Not exactly the door--the crack along the side where the door rested on its hinges. She shoved herself against it, grunting softly, eyes squinched shut. And after a long moment, she started to--to slip through. It was like her molecules had stretched out, or something. Suddenly she was a living ghost, slowly wedging herself through the

safe, and after a minute, she popped inside.

Mitchell stared where she had been for a long moment. Then he closed his artificial eye--yes, she was really inside the safe.

Amazing. How did she take her clothes and accessories and goggles with her? Was she able to affect their molecular structure because they were items close to her skin?

Amazing. He had a thousand questions for the blue-haired lady, chief of which: is that hair color natural?

No. Ridiculous.

He didn't care. No, he didn't, not really. She could empty the entire contents and he'd still be a zillionaire. He should just go back to his window and drink some more and let her take what she wanted. Let her leave, never to be seen again. Yes, he should do that. After all, he didn't care. About anything.

* * * * *

Jamie chortled with glee when she saw the Rock. It looked exactly like it had in the pictures, except a thousand times better. It was as big as her fist--one of the largest diamonds on the planet. And to think it had come from a meteor! Just fell to earth like a present from God. Well, as far as Miss Jamie Day was concerned, that meant it was anybody's game. Just because construction workers from HuntCorp had found it and brought it to Mr. Hunter didn't mean it was his.

Besides, it was shiny and she wanted it.

She gathered herself for the arduous trip out of the safe. It was tough work, phasing through solid objects. Took a lot out of her--she supposed molecules weren't meant to be stretched out like that. Well, she'd take a vacation after tonight. Rest up. She just had to get out of the safe (and through all the locked doors), and she could nap for a week.

Jamie took a deep breath...and pushed. And pushed! Cripes, it was like being born. If she was stuck being a mutant, why couldn't she have a power that didn't take it out of her each time?

At last she popped out of the safe and leaned against it, panting. Her nightglasses had slipped, and when she brought up a hand to adjust them, something smacked into the back of her neck, and everything went black.

Chapter Three

"Oh, that's just rotten!" she screamed, sitting bolt upright in bed.

"I--" Mitchell began.

"And sneaky!"

"--have--"

"And weird, not to mention depraved."

"--some questions--"

"And you've got a lot of nerve, being home!"

He laughed at her, which shut her up as effectively as if a switch had been thrown. Her blue brows wrinkled in a scowl as he chortled. “Let me see if I understand you correctly. You’re angry with me because I’m home?”

“Like I said. Nerve. Lots of nerve.” And by the way, what the hell am I doing in your bed, big boy? What was that old story she heard when she was a kid? Little Red in the Hood? My, what big teeth you have, Grandma.

Never mind. What was the other motto from that other story? Never let ‘em see you sweat.

She lay back down and twiddled her thumbs on her chest. “I’m waiting for your apology. And make it good.”

“I’ve never met a mutant before.”

She sighed. “First of all, that’s the worst apology I’ve ever heard. That’s worse than the ‘I’m sorry, but...’ apologies. You’re either sorry or you’re not. It’s not qualified.”

“Fascinating,” he said to the air.

“Second, you have no idea if you have or not.”

“Have what?”

“Met a mutant. It’s not like we walk around with signs taped to our chests. And third, we prefer the term ‘interestingly abled.’”

“You do not.”

She snickered. “You’re right. We don’t. Save that PC shit for the twentieth century.”

He pulled a chair up beside the bed and sat down. She noticed that the sleeves of his blue dress shirt were rolled up, revealing heavily muscled forearms sprinkled with black hair. Mmmm... hairy...

“How is it that you’re...um...that you...er...that is to say...”

“That I don’t drool into my cornflakes?” she asked dryly.

He coughed. “Well. I had read--seen on TV--that mutants have--that is to say, they--I don’t mean to offend you--although why I’m fretting about that when you were caught breaking and entering--”

“I didn’t break shit. I was only entering,” she added primly.

He laughed again. She stared at him. Instead of calling the city guard and hauling her off, he was playing Twenty Questions. She wasn’t quite sure which one she preferred.

The guard. Definitely.

“Are you stalling me so I don’t flee before the guardies get here? I mean, don’t you have a board meeting to be in or something?”

“At two o’clock in the morning? No. I really want to know.”

“Well, tough.” She sat up again and felt the back of her neck. It was sore, but nothing that would kill her. “Do you make a habit of lurking in corners with crowbars?”

“No.”

“My throbbing neck says different,” she snapped.

“I didn’t hit you with anything.”

“Well, why did I decide to suddenly take a nap, then? Huh? Why? Huh?”

He grinned at that, then stopped smiling. Too bad. He had a nice smile. For a ghoul who skulked in dark corners. “I asked you a question.”

“No, you stammered and mumbled a question. And I asked you one.”

“All right,” he replied calmly. “I’ll answer yours if you answer mine.”

She thought it over. In the end, she had to know. Everything! How he spotted her, tracked her, nailed her. It hadn’t happened since she was too young for training bras. “Okay. The newsies have it wrong. Not all mutes are massively dumb. Only about eighty percent of us are.” More like ninety, but he didn’t know that.

She thought about a girl she’d grown up with in the Districts, a girl who could tell colors by feel. She was blind and deaf and had an I.Q. of twenty-two, but she could tell a red piece of paper from a blue one without any trouble. Or a black marble from a yellow one. Like most mutes, it made for a cute parlor trick that had no actual, real-world application. She had died just before her twenty-first birthday. Also like most mutes.

“The ones of us who aren’t...let’s just say we don’t go around advertising the fact.”

“I tapped the nerve cluster at the base of your neck.”

She made the old-fashioned time-out sign with her hands. Ah, football. Now there was a game. Too bad

it had been outlawed in 2052. Too dangerous. But she didn't care if it was the national pastime, she wasn't taking up golf. "You want to try that one again, Hunter?"

"Mitchell. There's a nerve cluster at the back of your neck. If you hit it just right, it induces temporary unconsciousness."

"Huh. And don't call me Mitchell. I have to admit, that's a little on the weird side."

"Some people collect recipes," he said, perfectly straight-faced.

"Right," she said, sitting up and swinging her legs over the bed. "Well, since you're here, I shouldn't be here, so I'll just be on my way. It's been just gobs and gobs of fun, but tra-la, and all that."

His fingers settled lightly in the center of her chest and he pushed her back. "Stay a minute," he said, and it wasn't a request. He reached up and felt a bit of her hair. "It's real," he added, visibly surprised.

"Of course it's real. It's part of my mutation, duh."

"Duh?" he echoed, eyebrows arching.

"Enough about my hair." She glared up at him. "Kidnapping! They execute people for that, you know."

"I'm sure the guard will believe you over me," he pointed out.

"Oh, stuff yourself."

"Temper, temper. I take it you were after the Medici Stone?"

“Dumbest name in the world. Worlds, rather. I’m after the shiny moon rock.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s shiny and I want it.”

He blinked. “Well, you can have it.”

“Excellent! Gee, I wish I’d known that earlier. Would have saved me gobs of trouble.” She narrowed his eyes at him. “What’s the catch, Hunter?”

“Mitchell. Stay with me for the next...ah...seventy-two hours. And when you leave, you can take the Medici Stone.”

“Hmm. Tempting, but I’ll pass. And don’t call me Mitchell.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Because it’s not my name.”

“No, why won’t you stay?”

“Because you don’t mean it,” she explained. “It’s a trick. It’s got to be a trick. Why would someone like you want someone like me to hang out for the weekend? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Someone like me?” he asked quietly.

She puzzled over the dark tone in his voice, then shrugged it off. “Yeah. You’re rich and tall, and you own half the city and stuff. I’m a mongrel nobody from the Districts. Hell, from C-block!”

“You’re interesting.”

“You mean I’m a genetic freak.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“Say it with me, Hunter: juh-net-ick freek.”

“Yes, but it’s interesting to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeesh. Not too terrifying.”

“I’d like to find out more about you.”

“Suuuuuuure you would.”

“No, really.”

“I believe you! That’s not the problem.”

“What is, exactly?”

“Forget it,” she snapped.

“Why?” he asked, seeming honestly surprised.

“Because I’m not your fucking science experiment, pal. Now call the guards or let me out of here.”

“I think...neither.” And he smiled down at her. Weird, how a smile could be so handsome and so scary at the same time.

Chapter Four

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she announced.

“No, you don’t.”

She gasped. “Hunter, you arrogant swine! I think I would know.”

“Mitchell. It’s a ploy to escape me.”

“By the way, who talks like that?” she wondered aloud. “And it is not. And I’ve asked you repeatedly to stop calling me Mitchell.”

He leaned over, caught her by the hand, pulled her off the bed, touched her hair again (almost like he couldn’t help it, and again, yeesh) and escorted her to a luxuriously appointed bathroom. The place

smelled like roses, and Jawheh only knew what it smelled like during, um, other times.

He stood next to her (and the toilet) and waited patiently.

“What?” she asked.

“So. Go.”

“I can’t do it with you standing right there,” she said, shocked.

“I thought you said you grew up in the Districts.”

“I grew up poor, not barbaric. I don’t know how it is with the country club set, but we don’t stand around watching each other pee all day. We’re a little more preoccupied about not getting evicted, paying the electric bills, boring stuff like that.”

He sighed dramatically, then turned his back.

“I don’t trust you,” she declared. “You’ll peek at me.”

His back stiffened and he turned around. “I will not!”

“All right, all right, don’t yell.” She was looking around for something to hit him over the head with. Maybe she could bind him up like a mummy with toilet paper? “Turn back around. And don’t listen, either.”

“How can I not listen?” he asked the wall.

“Oh, stuff yourself. Hey, you got any aspirin or something? You’re giving me a splitting headache.” She eased open the medicine cabinet door, keeping a wary eye on his back at the same time. Success! An old-fashioned straight razor nestled in its case...who shaves with straight razors? What year was this? Yeesh.

Never mind. Focus! Jamie silently manipulated the blade open and, quick as a flash, had seized the back of his thick black hair and whipped the blade around, under his chin.

He yawned.

“All right, buddy-punk. You’re gonna walk me out of this place, or I’m gonna fingerprint with what’s in your jugular.”

He yawned harder and stretched, causing her to lean away from his long, windmilling arms. “I mean it! Now march! No time for a nap now.”

“Are you done going to the bathroom?” he asked politely.

“Am I--what’s wrong with you? Do you think I won’t cut your throat? Because it’s not really a problem for me, I can assure you!”

“Really?” he asked, sounding interested. “Why not?”

“Because--because I’m a cold-blooded killer, and you’re between me and what I want and--and I’m just a scumskank from C-block with nothing to lose and--and I’ll do it!”

He laughed again, more a soft chuckle this time. “You’re a thief. And your mutation allows you to ply your trade with minimal confrontation. So I would imagine you go out of your way to avoid just this sort of thing.”

“Uh--you’re not going--uh--to--to bleed to death, are you?”

“Not today,” he said, with something very close to cheer.

“But you’re not like me.” That had come out tentatively, but she thought about it and her voice was firmer. “You’re not a mutant. You can say anything you want about us mutes--”

“Can I? Thanks.”

--but we’re all one-hundred-percent organic. We’re not--y’know--enhanced by science or whatever.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Is that what I am? Enhanced by science?”

“Well. Aren’t you?”

She took a wad of tri-ply toilet paper and dabbed ineffectually at his bloody throat. He took her hands and held them. “I don’t know what I am,” he said quietly, looking down into her eyes. “I’ve never known. But I know what I like. And I like you. If you promise to cease and desist all throat-cutting activities, if you promise to stay the weekend, I’ll give you whatever you want when it’s time to leave.”

Whatever...? She wanted the moon rock, for sure, but he had a few other baubles in his collection she’d been dying to get a look at...and now he was offering them to her on a plate!

“How your eyes gleam,” he commented, “when you’re contemplating theft.”

“Shut up,” she said automatically. And...she had to admit...she was curious. She’d never met anyone like this guy. And she’d thought that before she sliced him up.

“You’re gonna have to change your shirt,” she told him, then flushed the bloody toilet paper down the toilet.

Chapter Five

He took her quickly, almost as if he wanted to get “that” out of the way. They were both products of the looser sexual mores of the latter half of the twenty-first century, so there was no virginal squeamishness, no “let’s have a drink and get to know each other” bushwah.

No, he pulled her clothes off and stripped and pushed her down on the bed, worked her with his fingers until she was gasping and squirming and ready for him, then took her until she had had enough, took her until orgasms were bursting within her like fireworks, took her until she begged him to come.

And afterward, he asked her questions.

“Can’t we at least get something to eat first?” she griped, coming out of the bathroom, freshly showered. “And maybe some clothes? Or am I supposed to scamper around naked all weekend?”

“As you wish,” he replied, and favored her with a rare grin. “But if not, help yourself.”

She did, stepping into a pair of dark blue boxer shorts and buttoning up one of his dress shirts. Then she flopped onto the bed and wouldn’t say a word until he ordered up a steak from room service.

“That’s better,” she said with her mouth full. “I was starving.”

He looked concerned, or as concerned as anyone could look while sniffing a brandy glass. “Is food a--um--an issue where you live?”

“You mean, am I malnourished because I’m poor? No. This is America. They make it easy for you to eat...as long as you don’t mind eating crap. This--” she gestured to her steak and salad--”this is much better. By the way, you are excellent in the sack.”

“In the what?”

“In bed. How shall I put this so a man of your sensibilities can understand?” Her eyes tipped up, and then she said, “You fuck good.”

“Thank you so much. Likewise. I must say, I’ve never seen dark blue pubic hair before.”

“Don’t start on my hair again.” But she was blushing. “Of course it’s dark ...it doesn’t get much sun. I was thinking of dying it in red and white strips for the Fourth of July, but never got around to it.”

“Fascinating. Would you like another supper? Some dessert, maybe?”

“What is this, like a Pretty Woman thing going on?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” He was smart and rich and all, but she doubted he was into classic twentieth-century movies like she was. “So what’s your deal, Daddy-o?”

He barely concealed a shudder. He hadn’t bothered to get dressed again, she couldn’t help but noticing, and it was distracting beyond belief. There wasn’t a spare millimeter of fat on the man. He was all long legs, flat stomach, and, not to put too fine a point on it, big cock. And his throat...his throat had healed

completely. When had that happened? Did he call a mechanic and somehow she missed it?

“First off, please don’t call me that again. Second, I don’t have a deal.”

“Right. You convince strange women to spend the weekend with you so you can play Twenty Questions.”

He shrugged. “You’re interesting. I confess I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

“And never will again, Daddy-o,” she said, satisfied.

“Oh, my. The ego on you.”

“Hey, if you’re not going to toot your own horn, who’s gonna do it for you?”

“Toot your what?”

“Never mind. And pass the salt.”

Chapter Six

“I want to see it,” he said as she was polishing off her second bowl of peach ice cream.

Jamie laughed. “You didn’t get enough half an hour ago?”

“No, I mean...I want to see you do what you do. Again.”

Her smile disappeared. “This isn’t a peepshow, chum.”

“Now, now,” he said gently. “A deal is a deal.”

“Yeah, well, I thought you meant sex. If I spent the weekend, I figured we’d be doing it ‘til we were sore.”

“Well, that, too.”

She ignored his teasing. “That’s fine. I don’t mind the sex. Gods, I haven’t gotten laid in...ugh, I don’t want to think about it. Anyway, having some naked fun with you, no problem.”

“That’s something else I wish to discuss,” he said quietly.

“What? Why?”

“I’m just...curious. Curious and gratified. That you would consent to letting me...touch you. After what you saw.”

“Well, you do have an unnaturally clean bathroom,” she said, understanding mixing with a little pity. Big, strong badass, and he looked like he was going to bolt from the room any second if she so much as laughed at him or asked where he kept the spare oil can. “I admit, that was a little off-putting. Who dusts their toilet paper? As for the rest of it...” She shrugged. “Who am I to judge? I’m a genetic freak. You’re the way you are because it was your--your will, I guess. I mean, something happened, right?”

“...right...”

“And you could have died, or you could have let... whoever... fix you. So you paid the price, but I bet you did it on your own terms. I think that’s pretty stokey, y’know?”

There was a long pause, and then he sat on the bed beside her and said, “Something did happen. A crash. And they fixed me. But nothing is free.”

“You’re telling that to a thief? Mitchell, I know nothing’s free. Not even these days, when the government’s regulating every damn thing they can get their hands on.”

“Ah.” He looked gratified. “I knew I could get you to call me by my first name. Eventually.”

“Well, hooray for you. Okay, fine. But this is a one-time-only thing. And for the record, I never do this.” She squinched her eyes shut and held her breath, and wriggled her shoulders, and the last things she saw before she disappeared through the bed were his dark brows, arching in surprise.

She hit the floor beneath the bed with a thump. “There,” she said, coughing on the dust bunnies. “You happy?”

“Amazing!” he cried. She felt him grope under the bed, grab her by the ankle, and haul her out. “Can you go through anything?”

“Sure.”

“Rocks? Cement?”

“Sure.”

“Doesn’t it--ah--tire you?”

“Sure.”

“Would you...” He seemed to reconsider what he was about to say, because he cleared his throat and said, “Would you like more ice cream?”

“Sure!”

Chapter Seven

She was awake in the dark, and wondered why in the world she was still there.

Because it was nice. It was nice to be here in Mitchell’s bed, cuddled into his side, listening to his deep breathing. It was comfortable and warm, and her life had had few moments of comfort and warmth. As for men, there hadn’t been many over the years... and there was no one like Mitchell. She suspected that would be true even if he wasn’t--how had he put it, and with such a sarcastic smile, a smile it hurt to look at? “Half man, half machine.”

The only reason she had agreed to stay was because she knew she could slip out anytime. Piece of cake...phase through the bed, the floor if she had to, all the way down to the lobby, and out the door.

So why was she still there?

Good damn question. She should have phased out two hours ago, instead of watching him sleep, big gooshy softy that she was.

Okay. So, fix it. Go now.

Okay.

She eased away from him, intent on the door and moving noiselessly, when his hand shot out and seized her elbow, which startled the shit out of her.

“Forget something?”

“Aaaiiggghhh! Don’t do that!” In retaliation, her own hand shot out and closed around...his dick.

“Don’t do that,” he retorted. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Well, I was escaping,” she said reasonably.

He snorted. “I didn’t expect you to admit it. Going back on our deal already?”

“Sure. Me, thief. You, amoral zillionaire. My conscience--”

“Such as it is!”

“--is clear.”

“Well, too bad. You can’t sneak out on me, dear. I hear like a bat. My...enhancements...are good for more than scaring you in bathrooms.”

“Well, hip-hip-hor-fucking-ray.” Disgruntled, she sat and thought. She could still make a break for it. She didn’t think he could stop her...no one had ever been able to stop her.

Trouble was, she didn’t especially want to. Except for the small matter of Brennan and fellows, to whom she owed the moon rock. They’d be expecting her. In fact, she was late already. Then there was the--

“Dear, what are you doing?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Well, can you--ah--loosen your grip a little while you ruminate?”

“Oh.” She realized she had a vise-like grip on his dick, and loosened accordingly. “Sorry.”

“Not that I mind. Much. Ah, Jamie, while you’re down there...”

“Pig,” she said automatically. Although it would be fun. Escape or blowjob? Escape or blowjob? A question for the ages...

“Jamie? Are you still with me, dear?”

“Shut your pudding hole--I’m thinking.”

He snorted again in the dark. “You know, most people in this situation would assume I have the upper hand...”

“Sure, sure. Most people couldn’t phase your dick into the comforter and let go.”

“Ouch,” he said respectfully.

“Oh, the hell with it,” she sighed, and yanked the covers out of the way, and covered his dick with feathery kisses. He grew beneath her lips in an amazingly short time, and she licked his hot, hard length, pulling the velvety head into her mouth and sucking and even (very gently) nibbling around the tip. His hands were buried in her hair, and he was groaning and thrusting his hips against her face. She cuddled his plum-sized balls with her hands and gently stroked while she licked and sucked.

“Oh, Christ,” he rasped in the dark. “That’s amazing. You’re amazing. Don’t--don’t stop, I’m going to--to--”

Then he was pulsing in her mouth, and when he was finished, she bounded off the bed, found the bathroom, and spat in the toilet. The taste of him hadn’t been unpleasant, but strong and metallic.

“Yech!” she called cheerfully. ”What have you been eating?”

He laughed so hard, she heard the thump as he fell off the bed.

Chapter Eight

“So, what do you do, Mitch? Besides kidnap women and make them hang out with you?”

“More like apprehend thieves,” he corrected her dryly. “How many pancakes are you going to eat?”

“As many as I want, pal. You can’t get stuff like this at McBurgerKing. So what are you going to do this weekend? It’s only Saturday.”

“Oh, you know. Seduce, betray, impregnate.” He looked at her through narrowed eyes. “The usual.”

“Yech. Forget it, I’m on city water.”

“So am I,” he admitted. In 2047, the city had voted to spike the drinking supply with contraceptives. If you wanted to have a baby, you certainly could, but first you had to see the doctor to get a prescription for daily medication to counteract the effect. And you could only get that prescription if you passed the physical, the I.Q., and the light battery of psychological tests.

“I’d never pass it, anyway,” Jamie admitted.

“Because you’re...”

“A genetic freak.”

“I was going to say,” he corrected gently, “special.”

“Six of one, pal.” She shrugged bravely. “What would I do with a baby, anyway?”

“I could pull some strings. If you wanted a baby.”

She looked down at her plate. “It’d be...just another mouth to feed.”

He didn't say anything.

"You're out of syrup," she informed him.

"Mmmmm. I'll call room service."

"Then I'll have to take a bath," she called after him as he went to the phone. "I'm all sticky. Pervert," she muttered, as he flashed a diabolical grin over his shoulder.

* * * * *

"Look, having sex in a bathtub--even one the size of my living room--doesn't work."

"You just have to be committed."

"Seriously," she gasped as his fingers disappeared beneath the bubbles and stroked her. "It looks great in the movies and--ah!--and all--uh--but it doesn't--ooooh--doesn't--it's just not that easy."

"I'm sure we have the fortitude for the task. I'll be back." Then he took a deep breath and disappeared beneath the water. She felt him spread her knees apart, and then his tongue was lapping at her, licking her, spreading her lower lips apart and stroking. She let her head fall back and nearly drowned--it was a big tub. Instead, she clung as best she could to the sides while he brought her body to wracking orgasm.

He popped up, gasping, and she said (gasping a bit herself), "How did you do that?"

"My cybernetic enhancements are superior at extracting oxygen from their--"

“Yeah, way to kill the mood, Science Boy. So you can hold your breath for, like, five minutes?”

“More like ten,” he said, leaning in and kissing her deeply. “Or fifteen. But who’s counting?”

“I still say this won’t work,” she said, as he gripped her hips and positioned her exactly the way he wanted her. “But hell. I’ll give it a shot. By the way, you have a devilish mouth.”

“Yes,” he said smugly, and she bit him on the ear, hard. Then groaned as she felt him pulling her onto him, impaling her like one of those old-time bugs you used to be able to see in the country--a butterfly! He pulled her to him and she wrapped her legs around his waist. It was a tight fit, unbelievably tight, but mind-numbing in its intensity, the pure goodness of how it felt.

“Oh,” she sighed, resting her head against his shoulder.

“Told you,” he said smugly, if slightly out of breath. He pushed her onto him and pulled her back, again and again, forcing her to be the friction, the force bringing them together, the force bringing her to orgasm again, so hard she saw black roses when she closed her eyes. And at the last, he pulled her onto him so hard her hips went numb from the pressure of his fingers. Then he was shuddering so hard, water splashed over the sides, and then he was relaxing, falling away from her and slipping under the water.

“Hey!” she shouted at the bubbles. “Get back up here! What, that’s it? You come and, what, go swimming? No pillow talk? Are you listening? You can hear me, you cybernetically enhanced prick.”

He popped up, laughing, and she brushed bubbles out of his eyes, and complained when he snatched her to him for a friendly squeeze, but she didn’t really mean any of it. And for some reason, that was the scariest thing that had happened to her so far that weekend.

“I think you should stay longer,” Mitchell said, rubbing more vanilla-scented oil into her shoulders.

“Why?” She groaned, as he worked his talented fingers into her knotted shoulders.

“My goodness, for such a laid-back individual, for someone who can never get caught, you’re tremendously tense.”

“Rich people have no idea,” she said, grumpy.

“Oh, hush up. Try managing a coup without anyone tumbling to what you’re up to sometime. That’ll knock the needles on a stress machine.”

“Yeah, yeah, cry me a fucking river, RoboBoy.”

He groaned. “Please don’t call me that. Unless you’d like to be called Blue.”

She shivered. “Sorry. And why should I stay here? Why the hell would someone like you want someone like me hanging around?”

“Well,” he said reasonably, pounding the kink out of her left shoulder, “why wouldn’t I?”

“Um, because we’re totally different and we’d drive each other insane?”

“Besides that.”

“That’s not enough? Ooh, don’t stop.”

“Ah,” he said. “If only I had a ten-dollar bill for every time I heard a woman say that. Oh, wait. I do.”

“Shut up,” she snapped. “Pervert. Look, I’m out of here tomorrow...with any piece of your collection I want. You promised, right?”

“...right.”

“Well, I’d think you’d be glad to see the ass end of me,” she pointed out reasonably.

“Ah, your ass.”

“Seriously, that’s what I think.”

“You shouldn’t think,” he said sweetly. “You’re too pretty.”

Quick as a flash, she phased through the table, then grabbed his ankles and yanked as hard as she could. He went flying, the vanilla oil went flying, and he was flat on his back in the suite.

“Served you right!” she crowed, then tried to crawl away, but he pounced on her. A minute later, they were both exhausted from the impromptu tickle fight, and he was complaining about the oil stains on his shirt.

* * * * *

“I want you to stay with me,” he said quietly in the dark.

They had just finished another bout of lovemaking, this one less energetic and more tender. She was curled into his side, her hands on his ribs, listening to his soft breathing in the dark. When he had been inside her, his breathing had been harsh, almost like panting, and then stopped altogether for a long moment, and then he was soft inside her, soft and slipping out, and she shuddered all over from the pure sweetness of it.

“Mitchell, I’m really flattered. But I have responsibilities. I can’t just--”

“And I have a checkbook. If you’re looking after a family, I can take care of them. If--”

“But see, you don’t even know. For all you know, I’m married with six kids.”

“It’s against the law to have more than three,” he said automatically. “And you’re not wearing a ring.”

“Still.”

“And I don’t think you could be...like that...with me. If you had a husband.”

“Well, okay, as it happens, I’m not married. But my point is, we don’t know much about each other.”

“You know my greatest secret,” he said quietly.

“Well, yeah.”

“And you stayed anyway.”

“The food’s great.”

“Jamie.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I stayed anyway.”

“That meant...everything. Everything.”

“Look, Mitchell, I like you, okay? I really do. And not because you’re fucking phenomenal in bed, no pun intended. You’re a smart guy; I can talk to you. And I’ll admit it, there’s attraction in the fact that you didn’t run out of the room screaming when you saw what a blue-haired freak I was.”

“Jamie, I wish you wouldn’t refer to yourself as--”

“But,” she continued, cutting him off, “there’s got to be more to it than that. Right?”

“Well,” he said reasonably, “stay. And find out. You can still leave whenever you wish. But this sort of thing... I’ve had women up here before--”

“Oink!”

“--but none of them knew my secret, and I never wanted any of them to linger in the morning. You’re different. This is different.”

A line from an old, old movie popped into her head: This is true love. You think this happens every day?

“Okay,” she said, kissing his shoulder. “I’ll stay. I’ve got some stuff to take care of--”

“I’ll help you,” he said quickly.

“--but then I’m all yours, as they say.” Her hand slid down his flat stomach and found him, already hardening. “Oh, my, what have we here?”

“I’m happy to see you,” he said, and giggled.

Giggled!

She climbed on top of him, felt him slide inside her, slick and sweet on the juices they had already made together, and did some giggling herself as she bounced up and down, as his big hands reached up and found her breasts and played with them, as she arched her back and stared at the ceiling and felt her uterus clench around him, as she shook from coming and coming and coming once more. She collapsed over him, panting.

“Did you...?” she gasped. She’d been having so much fun, she honestly hadn’t noticed.

“Oh, yes,” he groaned, stroking her back.

“That’s all right, then,” she said, and climbed off.

“That’s not the only thing,” he replied, and walked her to the bathroom, and cleaned her with a warm washcloth, and his lips, and his tongue.

Chapter Ten

Mitchell woke up and reached for Jamie who, to his surprise, wasn't in his bed.

An immediate scan showed she wasn't in the bedroom. Or the bathroom. Or the hot tub room. Or the floor.

Or the building.

Cursing, he tossed the blankets back.

* * * * *

"We don't have an explanation, sir. The moon rock was just...gone. No alarms were tripped, and look." The security guard gestured to the large monitor taking up most of the wall. "On the screen, it's still there. But if you go into the vault, it's gone. We're going crazy trying to figure out what--"

"Don't bother," he said curtly. "I know what happened. And I know where it is. I'll be back with the rock, and the perpetrator. Have a cell ready, I'll want h--the thief transferred to state custody by the end of the day."

"Uh...yes, sir." The guard watched nervously as Mitchell stomped out, then wiped his damp brow.

* * * * *

Fool, fool, a thousand times a fool! He'd been tricked by a pretty face and a sympathetic ear and a fascinating mutant talent. And she certainly had his number, the whore. A little sympathy, a little bedroom gymnastics, and he'd found himself thinking he wanted her around for--for--well, forever. Idiot!

She'd clearly never forgotten her initial mission: to steal The Rock. Never mind that he promised it to her

by the end of the weekend. She'd obviously been scared off by his whole "stay with me" nonsense and fled the moment she could.

And he...he had thought...thought she would...and so he had slept. Deeply, and for the first time, and never noticed her slipping through the walls like a deceitful ghost.

Well. She wasn't the only deceitful one. He could track her down--there were only so many places one could take The Rock for quick cash. He had resources all over the city...the county, state, and world, quite frankly. When you were sinfully rich, you could find anyone, given enough time. And he would find his little ghost.

Find her. And make her pay.

Chapter Eleven

A lot of people think being slapped in the face is the worst thing someone can do to you. Robs you of your dignity, a direct affront, an insult, blahdy-blah.

The truth is, Jamie would take a slap in the face any day (and twice on Sundays) over a gut punch. Those were the worst. They were so bad that for a second, she didn't feel any pain. She always had time to think, "That wasn't so--" and then found herself bent over, sobbing for breath and trying very hard not to puke. It got worse, too, hard as that was to believe: a sickening wave spread from her stomach to her neck, and that wave clogged her throat. She'd get goosebumps, and the corners of the room would go dark.

What was worse, a gut punch doesn't hurt the guy punching at all. At least if he went for the jaw, he might crack a knuckle or two and lose his taste.

No, a truly dedicated asshole could gut punch all day.

She'd known all this by her tenth birthday, and spent the following fourteen years trying hard not to learn any more about it.

Not today, though.

“What did I say, Jamie? Huh? Did you turn stupid like the other mutes and forget English?”

She opened her mouth, but all the air in her lungs had taken a quick vacation, and she had no breath for words.

“Because I thought it was pretty simple. I want the moon rock. I work for people who want the moon rock. So who did I come to? I came to the best mute on my C-block, the one who can get the job done.”

“I got the job done,” she whispered.

Brennan ignored her, pacing around her like a broad-shouldered moon. “And then what? You disappear for three days, and I’m left with my dick in my hand. You know how that looks?”

She didn’t want to even think about his dick. “Bad?” she ventured.

“Yeah. Bad.”

She straightened painfully. “Well. You got it now.”

“Yeah, my buyers are out of town now. I can track them down, but I’ve lost face. You know about

that?"

Jamie rubbed her throbbing stomach and didn't say anything. She was wondering how she could get the watch off Brennan's wrist. Among other things, Brennan had contacts in the military, which was always interested in the question of mutes: could they serve their country? Could they be a weapon? And, most important, could they be neutralized? The president of the United States, who was a very savvy lady, was rabid on the subject of mutes: They Must Be Stopped. Never mind that most of them couldn't remember which shoe went on which foot.

So, there was an inhibitor chip in Brennan's wristwatch. A gift from his military pals. Poor Brennan, always hanging around D-Block and C-Block uptown. You never knew what kind of scum he might have to come across. Better keep all the bases covered, yep yep.

As long as she was in the room with him, she couldn't phase. This was alarming, for several reasons. Brennan was a jerk whose mother had never let him breastfeed. He liked to use his hands. He liked to hurt people. And she hated getting hit. Managed to avoid it most of her life, in fact, thanks to her handy dandy powers, which were on coffee break until she could smash that watch.

"So," Brennan was concluding cheerfully, "I think the best way to go about it is, beat the living shit out of you. I mean, just beat you until you can't see, walk, stand, move, or eat. I'll feel better. Like, it'll be closure, y'know? Then I'll take your rock--finally! Bet you won't be late again, eh?--and hunt down my buyers.

"Maybe you should get to the buyers first," she suggested.

He considered for a moment, his large, bullet-shaped head tilting as he thought. The fluorescent lights bounced off his shaved skull, making Jamie wince. "No, that won't work. I'll be distracted the whole time. Thinking about how you kept me waiting. Thinking about how embarrassing it was, not having the rock when they wanted it. Thinking about you walking, standing, moving, or eating. No," he said regretfully, shrugging out of his overcoat, "I really have to get this off my chest. Then we can move on."

"Uh-huh." Note to self: stop taking freelance jobs from crazy people. "You touch me again, and I'm warning you...I'm gonna bleed all over you. You'll never get the stains out of that shirt."

"I'll risk it," he said, and his big fist looped through the air, straight for her face. She side-stepped and

slashed out. She wasn't a fighter, didn't know a single self-defense move, so when her hand blurred out, it was pure instinct. She didn't realize she'd pulled her fingers into claws until she heard Brennan's shriek of surprised agony, and saw the furrows on his cheek fill with blood.

"Whoa," she said, backing up.

"You--you--" Blood dripped off his jaw and he touched one of the scratches, winced, and showed her the tip of his bloody finger, looking amazed and horrified. "You--you did that. You hurt me! You..."

Like any deviant sociopath, Brennan loved dishing out the pain, but practically had a breakdown if he was hurt himself. Torture, beatings, the occasional rape...those were all fine and dandy. Those were his to do because he took by force, and what he reached out and took, he deserved to have. But he could never...EVER...be hurt. It was...it was beyond an outrage. It was...sacrilegious. Yes. That's what it was. Sacrilege.

"I have to admit," Jamie said, "that went a lot better than I expectedaaaaarrrrrgggggggggggghhhhhh!" She bent double as Brennan's fist once again buried itself in her stomach. Oh, you're gonna pay for that one, Jamie my girl, she thought, and would have groaned if she hadn't been so busy throwing up. And it's almost worth the beating you'll get. The look on his face when he saw he was bleeding. Yep, almost worth it.

Then the door banged open so hard it actually cracked down the middle when it hit the wall and rebounded. Which was crazy, because that would mean somebody--cop?--had gotten past the six or seven goons Brennan usually kept around him. And who'd come around C-block unless they absolutely had to?

Whoever it was kicked the door open again and stepped into the room.

She wiped her mouth and climbed to her feet. "Hi, Mitch. What's new with you?"

"Fuck off," Brennan replied, less warmly. "I'm working here."

Mitchell took it all in...the bloody scratches, the way Jamie was hunched over, the vomit on the floor,

the watch. Which, among other things, had a tracking device. Brennan's military buddies (who really weren't his buddies, but that is a story for another time) had neglected to mention it. They did not, however, hesitate to mention it to the richest man in the country.

"If you touch her again," Mitchell said, speaking slowly and carefully, "I will break your neck."

"And then he'll really go to work on you," Jamie wheezed cheerfully. Maybe it was silly romanticism, but she sure felt a lot better now that Mitchell was here. Or maybe it was the internal bleeding. Either way, she was glad to see him.

"You're out of your neighborhood, Rich Guy," Brennan said. "Go back to your skyscraper."

"Indeed. But not alone, I think. Actually, my large, ugly friend," he said, looking down at Jamie with narrowed eyes, then back up at Brennan, "I might break your neck just on general principles."

"Well, in that case, what have I got to lo--" That was it. "Lose" would have been his last word, except while Brennan was reaching for Jamie, Mitchell walked up to him, cupped Brennan's chin in the heel of his hand, braced his other hand on the back of Brennan's head, and twisted. It had taken about half a second, and the ensuing sound, Jamie thought, was a lot like the noise you heard when you were twisting the leg off a piece of fried chicken, sort of a cartilage-grinding snapping sound, and really, it was all just so--

"Gross," she managed, and then passed out.

Chapter Twelve

"I am so furious with you right now," he told her when she opened her eyes.

She groaned. “Be furious later. Can I have a glass of w--”

He carefully helped her sit up, and held a glass of water to her lips. “Where to begin.”

She gulped. It was cool and good. “Please don’t.”

“Waking up alone...bad. Finding out you were consorting with a city crime lord...bad. Finding out he appears to be interested in beating you to death...bad. Oh, and you stole my rock. Bad.”

“It’s my rock,” she hissed. “I spent the weekend for it, and I fucking bled for it.”

“You did not spend the weekend--”

“I left after midnight. Learn to tell time, Captain Neckbreak. Ohhhhhh, my head...my stomach...”

“When you are recovered,” he said through tight lips, “we will discuss your...infractions...in detail.”

“Who...talks...like that? Fuck you, I had a job to do. I couldn’t stay with you until the job was done. Shit, I was two days late and look what happened! Imagine if I’d never come back! We’d have spent our lives looking over our shoulders. No, thanks.”

His face was like granite, so terribly immobile, like he was afraid it would crack if he showed emotion. Weirdo. “You left...to protect me?”

“No, I left because the room service sucked,” she snapped. “Jesus, Mitchell, OF COURSE I left to protect you. What’s the matter with you? You saw that guy, right? You think I wanted him showing up here? I couldn’t let him hurt you because of choices I made. I figured I’d get him the rock, then slip back to bed and be here when you woke up.”

“Ah, but your little plan failed when he commenced--”

“Beating the snot out of me. Yes, well, the plan needed some modifications,” she admitted. “Okay, so, I should have figured he’d be mad. In fact, I did figure he’d be mad. But I figured I could smooth him down. Stupid, stupid. Thanks for showing up in the nick of time, by the way.” She said it casually, but she had never meant anything so fundamentally, so deeply. He had come into the room like one of the Knights of the Round Table. She had never been so glad to see anyone in her life. The scary part was, it didn’t have much to do with what he could do for her. It was enough that he was there. That she wouldn’t have bled to death alone in a filthy warehouse office on C-block.

“I--I didn’t come to save you.”

“News flash! You did save me. And on behalf of all my bones, none of which are broken, thank you.”

“I came to arrest you.”

“That’s so romantic! But you’re not a cop.”

“I’ve been granted certain privileges by state government. And I thought--when I woke up and you were gone--and the rock was gone--”

“So, what’s your point? Next time leave a note?”

“I didn’t realize you had. . . you had responsibilities. I was focused on how I could keep you in my world, and I arrogantly and stupidly thought it would be as easy as gaining your agreement.” He shook his head. “I have been a bigger fool than I thought.”

“Well, cheer up. Nobody’s perfect, RoboBoy.”

He shuddered. "You must never call me that again."

"And can we get some room service up here? If I eat, I'll puke--again--but I sure could go for a margarita. Or five."

He stared at her. "You seem...oddly cheerful."

"Are you kidding? Brennan's dead!" She happily kicked her feet, dislodging the covers. "And even if he wasn't, I did what I said I would do. Now I'm free lak ze baird, and I'm lovin' it." She snuggled up to him on the bed. "And I'm lovin' how you rode in to rescue me like the Lone Ranger on Silver."

"Like the what on who?"

"Never mind."

His arms tightened around her, and he rested his face against the side of her neck. "I was so angry...and then, when I saw him...saw you...I was so frightened..."

"You didn't seem frightened," she said. "You seemed mildly annoyed, like we were making you late for a business meeting."

"Well, you were."

"I hope you know what this means, Mitch."

"That I have to keep a constant close eye on you?"

"Ugh, creepy, no. It means now I can stay. You'll never be rid of me," she said gleefully.

“I guess that’s a nicer way of looking at it than what I had in mind,” he admitted, “which is, ‘you’ll never escape me again.’”

“Aw. That’s a little romantic. Okay, not really.” She kissed him. “We’ll work on it.”

MaryJanice Davidson

MaryJanice Davidson is the award-winning author of several books, most recently *Undead* and *Unwed* from Berkley, and *The Royal Treatment* from Brava. She currently writes for *Loose Id*, *Kensington*, and *Berkley*, and has eleven releases scheduled for 2004. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and two children, and is currently working on her next book(s). She loves getting e-mails from readers at maryjanice@comcast.net and you can visit her Web site (and read lots of sample chapters!) at

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* * * * *

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For the Heart of Daria

by Doreen DeSalvo

Now Available at Loose Id

For the Heart of Daria

Daria opened her eyes and found him--Gray...the target...God, the man who'd saved her life--gazing at her with a satisfied smile on his face.

She wanted to slap him. To slap that arrogant smile off of his face.

But it wasn't really an arrogant smile. He didn't look triumphant; he didn't look like a man who'd just made an easy conquest. No, his smile seemed...genuine. Tender. Like he was simply happy to have given her pleasure.

And he had.

Even his eyes were lit up with that smile, those stunning golden brown eyes, more compelling in person than in any of the holo-projections she'd studied. Amber eyes. And like amber, his eyes held secrets.

She knew most of them. But he didn't know it. And he didn't know that she had secrets of her own.

His fingers, the fingers that had brought her to a shattering climax, were still nestled between her legs. One finger was even partially inside her, a subtle invasion of her body, staking a claim. She felt unbearably exposed, looking into his smiling eyes while his hand rested on her most private parts. She couldn't think of a single thing to say.

She'd been prepared to fuck him to stay close to him. She'd steeled herself to endure it. To fake pleasure at his touch. To hide her revulsion, her hatred.

She hadn't been prepared to enjoy it.

Nothing could have prepared her for the way he'd kissed her. The way he'd touched her.

Why couldn't he have jumped on her like a horny space-sailor, fucked her quickly, and left her mildly disgusted? She'd expected him to treat her like a whore. Why did he have to treat her like a...like a

lover?

He'd made a traitor of her body. And she'd gone down without a fight.

When he lifted his hand away, she almost thanked him for letting go. But he brought his fingers to her breast and rubbed wetness over her nipple. Even though she'd just climaxed, his wet fingers made her tingle.

His head dropped to her chest, his mouth closing over that nipple and suckling. Hard and deep. God, her breasts were excruciatingly sensitive. No one had ever played with her like this. Not after she'd climaxed.

She lifted herself against his sucking mouth and felt his chuckle deep inside her breast.

Enough. She needed to satisfy him. That was the whole point of sleeping with him. To make him want to keep her... just until she found a way to finish her mission.

She pushed at his shoulder. "I want to touch you."

He rolled off of her and settled on his side, facing her. "As you will."

An odd way to say "OK," but that must be what he meant. She stroked his chest, let her hand wander down to his belly, felt his muscles tense. Leaning closer, she kissed his neck, then gave him a little bite. His breath caught; she felt it against her lips. She kept going, laying down a ring of nips and kisses on his neck. He'd have a few hickeys to hide in the morning.

His fingers wove through her hair, holding her close. She moved her face down to his collarbone, ran her hand down his taut stomach, then back up again. Why did he have to have such a great chest? Tanned and broad, just enough hair to tease her skin with masculine roughness. Not too broad, not too muscled. Just... perfect. She followed the trail of hair down to his navel, dipping into his bellybutton.

She kept her face against his neck as she reached lower and found his cock. God, he was hot. Hot and hard...and longer than she'd expected. Not that she'd known what to expect. Her lips quirked up in a smile. That information hadn't been in the files she'd studied.

She wrapped her hand around him and gave a tentative stroke. Would he like it hard and fast? Soft and slow?

A firm hand caught her wrist before she could do more. "No."

"Why not?"

He rolled her to her back and bent his head to her breasts, licking across a sensitive nipple. "Because you'll make me climax too quickly, dahsh'kara."

She didn't know that alien word. And she didn't care to. But she couldn't muster up any outrage at him for speaking in that hateful alien language, not with his mouth on her breasts, planting sucking little kisses on her straining nipples.

She whimpered. God, she shouldn't feel this good. Not with him. Not with a collaborator. "Stop. Let me..." She could barely think. "Let me touch you."

"I'm not done touching you yet."

"But I already..." Her face heated. Ridiculous, considering she was naked in bed with him. Even at twenty-seven, she still blushed like a nervous virgin. "I already came."

She felt him smile against her breast, but he didn't lift his head. "Yes, dahsh'kara, you certainly did. But only once."

Could he possibly be serious? "Once was..." He nipped at her breast, just hard enough to sting her gently with his teeth. "Oh! Once was fine." Understatement. "Once was more than I expected."

He chuckled. “I won’t settle for less than three.”

“Three?” She’d heard rumors about Prendarian women—insatiable sex maniacs, every one of them, or so the legends said. She’d never believed those stories.

“At least three,” he murmured. “And you’ll find me very determined. Best for you to accept my will.”

“What’s the most...” No, she didn’t want to know. She didn’t want to be interested in his past. Or in him.

“The most times I’ve seen a woman climax?”

Well, since he’d guessed... She nodded.

But he couldn’t see her nod. He was still nuzzling at her breasts, flicking the hard tip of his tongue over an even harder nipple.

“Yes,” she said on a gasp.

“Five.”

“Five?” God, he must be a tireless lover...and an arrogant one, for sure. Her mouth hung open. She closed it quickly, even though he hadn’t lifted his head.

“Mmm-hmm.” She felt him smile again, probably at her astonishment. “Fear not. I’m certain you can exceed that record.”

Hell, two would be a record for her. But she wasn't averse to faking them. Not if it kept him happy. Not if it kept him wanting her.

She'd planned on faking one anyway. So much for that plan. He'd barely touched her and she'd gone off like a barrage of missiles.

She felt his tongue, so hot, wet and raspy, licking across her breasts, from one to the other and back again.

His hair, softer than she'd imagined, slid through her fingers. With his mouth teasing her like this, she couldn't resist him. And why should she? The more he enjoyed himself, the more likely he'd be to keep her with him.

Yes, this was strictly for the sake of the mission. The fact that she wanted it, that she wanted him, that he was working so hard to please her...oh, that was irrelevant. She'd enjoy his wonderful mouth...his wonderful hands...

One of those hands slid over her hip, stroked her bush. She parted her legs shamelessly, and then those curious, knowing fingers were spreading magic over her sensitive clit.

A climax built inside her...inexorable.

Unbelievable.

His hands were wondrous.

He nuzzled his mouth against her neck. "You're very wet, dahsh'kara." His breath rushed over her ear, set her heart racing. "And I'm very thirsty." He teased her earlobe with the point of his tongue. "I'm going to take a long, long drink

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