



*THE LAST MAN
ON EARTH*

Raine Weaver

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**THE LAST MAN
ON EARTH**

by

Raine Weaver

CHAPTER 1

“It was a dark and stormy night.”

“I can’t believe you really said that.”

Iris cringed as the monstrous peal of thunder rumbled over, and nestled closer to Russ. There was something disquieting about this particular tempest, something that seemed to unnerve her as storms rarely did. It had been going on for hours now, with layers of beating sleet sealing the house in an icy shroud, and thunder playing about the heavens like an angry, evangelical voice.

But here, relaxing with him, all was safe, warm, and secure.

Playfully wriggling her toasting toes, she rubbed her bare feet against his and noted the frown on his face as the television screen went snowy with static. “Captain!” she called frantically in her best Scottish accent. “We seem to be losing power to the dilithium crystals!”

He stared at the screen, suppressing a smile. “Your voice sounds rather high-pitched of late, Mr. Scott. I would order you to requisition larger underwear; but you’re wearing a red shirt.

According to Star Trek lore, that means you probably won't live through the night anyway."

She jumped at the sound of another clap of thunder, so deafening it might have been the explosion of a nearby cannon. "I'm not sure it was such a good idea to watch this Star Trek marathon tonight. I've already got the creeps."

"It's Halloween. And it's nearly midnight. You're supposed to feel creepy." He nodded, satisfied, as the picture cleared. "Besides—would you rather be in here, all cozy and comfy, or out in that storm?"

He had a point. Right now, there was no place she'd rather be, or anyone she'd rather be with. There was a comfort in being here with her best friend, even with the lights turned off, the wind howling like a crazed beast, and sharp, noisy shards of ice pelting the old house on the hill. All of that seemed somehow beyond them, as if nothing from the outside world could touch them. They had a hearty blaze crackling in the fireplace, the remnants of their won-ton soup and fortune cookies, two large mixing bowls of hot buttered popcorn, and three bottles of champagne on ice to share between them.

Life could, occasionally, be good.

She moved restlessly beside him as they watched a grotesque creature with suction-cupped fingers creep across the screen. “Well, we’ve seen two movies about the end of the world, one about dead people coming back to life—and now this. I’ve never really been into this horror-Sci-Fi thing. Couldn’t we find something else to watch?”

“Let’s check it out.” He pointed the remote and clicked, and the channels cruised quickly by. “‘Nightmare on Elm Street’... ‘The Texas Chainsaw Massacre’... ‘Scream’... ‘Invasion of the Bodysnatchers’...good stuff.”

“Never mind. Star Trek is looking better and better.” She watched him frown as the picture shivered apart, came back, went blank, and popped into focus again. “Your satellite dish is catching hell up on the roof. Fortunately,” she sighed, retrieving a crystal goblet, “there’s enough champagne to keep me from caring. Why so much, Russ? Three bottles?”

“We’re celebrating. Remember? One year in business. I think we’ve done pretty well.”

She had to agree. And a very good year it had been. Oh, she still had to keep her day job; but working at the craft store hadn’t seemed such a chore since she’d started pulling in a healthy second

income. And now she had hope that she might actually be able to do what she loved for a living one day.

It had been Russell's idea to have her do decorative paintings on the intricate wood and silk screens he created; and, after a year of mouth-to-mouth advertising, they already had a backlog of customers eager to purchase their work. Russ was a natural with creating the one-of-a-kind designs, and she thoroughly enjoyed painting both the wood and silk with motifs ranging from Oriental to African to Cubism.

Iris snuggled closer. "Aren't you worried about all this lightning coming through your television, man?"

"Dammit, Jim, I'm an entrepreneur, not a weatherman!"

She studied him in the light of the fire, grinning to herself. No one could look less like an entrepreneur than Russell Carr. His hair was cornrowed, and a rich ridge of sideburns merged with the two-to-three day growth of beard he always seemed to have. He wore his trademark black teeshirt with baggy jeans and a tiny golden hoop through the lobe of his left ear. He was the epitome of tall, dark and gorgeous, wide across the shoulders and narrow in the hips, a strong man of dry wit and relatively few words. A master craftsman when it

came to his woodwork, he could do incredible things with his hands—although verbal self-expression often rendered him stuttering and frustrated. He could carve an animal frozen in the act of springing, tiny toys and massive totems, complex designs of infinite care—but he couldn't find the words for a breathtaking sunset, or describe his feelings for a friend. He expressed himself with his hands, with his work—and nobody did it better.

But it was his attitude, his uncaring swagger, that had always impressed her, even when they were children and he ran with her brother. He was relaxed and comfortable with himself, not concerned about money or success. In fact, he often kept his most beautiful pieces, refusing to sell them, even when offered a small fortune. He knew who he was, and damn anybody who didn't like it. That was why he'd always been self-employed, and successfully so.

And why half of the women in Corinth, Ohio chased him shamelessly around town.

"I can hear you thinking," he murmured, nudging her shoulder with his.

"You're right. I am."

“Well, stop it. The monster bitch is about to suck all of the salt out of Kirk’s body, and...”

“I’m thinking about ending the drought, Russ.”

He sat forward on the sofa, staring at her. “What? What drought? Oh, you mean...you don’t mean...”

“I’m thinking about ending my celibacy.”

He reached for his cigarettes, lit one, and poured the remnants of the first bottle into their two glasses. “And what, may I ask, brought this on? You’ve been at it for about a year. Why stop now?”

“That’s just it. I *haven’t* been at it for a year now.” She tasted the champagne, loving the way it fizzed against her lips. “I’m afraid I’m only human, partner. I’m lonely. Oh, the work keeps me busy—which is probably why you asked me to join you, of course. And the occasional evening out with the girls is fine. But I still have to go home to an empty bed at night. Sheets get awfully cold this time of year, and there’s nobody to warm my feet.”

The cigarette seeped smoke between his fingers. “I’ll buy you a hot water bottle.”

“Cute. It isn’t quite the same thing. And ever since Bluto died...” She stopped, swallowing a great gulp of the frothy liquid. She

despised women who put on public displays of emotion; but she still couldn't talk about her beloved dog without getting choked up. "Let's just say that little condo seems pretty empty. Pretty lonely."

"I see." He blew a blast of smoke toward the ceiling. "And exactly who were you planning to invite to this little coming-out party?"

"Well..." She hesitated, puzzled by the sarcastic hostility she sensed from him. What was wrong? Hadn't they always been able to discuss anything? "I was considering Christopher Harris."

"Pig."

"Or Edward Swann."

"Pimp."

"Okay. There's always Milton Edwards..."

"Good old silver-tongued Milton? Been in the joint twice, and might be going for three from what he told me."

"Milton? You talked to Milton?" She stared at him, surprised. "I thought you couldn't *stand* him."

"I can't. I...we..." He scowled in frustration. "I just hired him to do a little job for me. Trying to give the man a chance, that's all."

Some new enterprise of his. And I figured that, since you two were so close and all—”

“Close?” Where was all this coming from? “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t seen Milton since...”

“He took you to your prom.”

Mr. Spock was pummeling the creature and shouting, desperately trying to make Dr. McCoy understand. “He took me to my prom. And?”

“Well, we all know what goes on prom night, don’t we?”

“Just because *your* class rented a few private suites and played musical bedrooms doesn’t mean *everybody* did,” she murmured into her drink. “I did not sleep with Milton Edwards. I didn’t even *want* to sleep with Milton Edwards. It was a last-minute-arrangement-sort-of-thingy.”

Russell gave her leg a patronizing pat, angering her even more. “You don’t have to tell me everything. I understand. But I can tell *you* one thing: he’s still bad news. He actually wanted me to pay for his little service by giving him The Screen.”

She nearly smiled at that. The idea of Russell *giving* “**The Screen**’ to *anyone* was ludicrous. It was his most prized possession.

It had taken him nearly two years to hand-carve the exquisite treasure from the finest burl wood, a seven-foot, three-panel piece of art featuring erotic figures frozen in passionate poses, very like the ones of the Khajuraho Temples of India. He considered it the greatest work of his life, and kept it locked away in an upstairs closet. Even Iris had only seen it twice since he'd finished it last year.

“If the best you can do is somebody like Milton Edwards, you’ll have to do without,” he concluded quietly. “You need a man you can trust. He ain’t the one, and don’t let me catch you near him.”

“Then I guess I can’t think of anybody who’d meet with your approval,” she huffed. “Maybe I’ll just pick up somebody in a bar!”

“Try it, and I’ll give you a sound spanking—after I finish breaking his neck.”

And he would. She knew her Russ. She could feel her buttocks tingling already. The man did not play that way. He’d always been far more protective of her than even her own brother had. She’d made it through school without a single catfight, and her brother had never had to brawl. When Russell quietly asked somebody to step aside, they *moved*. “You can threaten all you want, but I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to do this.”

“Then why go shopping? Why not just go back to Barry...or Kerry...or Gary, or whatever the hell his name was?”

The mere mention of the name made her lip curl. “Not if he were the last man on earth! May I remind you that *he* ran out on *me*. You don’t seriously think I’d go chasing after that sorry excuse for a relationship! God, talk about *insensitive*. What kind of Neanderthal walks out on you just when you need him, just hours after your dog dies?!!”

She could feel his jaw muscles working against her forehead. “I guess any excuse is as good as another.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’re going to defend—”

“Iris.” He spoke calmly, rationally. “I was crazy about Bluto too, but—”

“It’s not just about the dog. It’s about the principle of the thing! It’s about trust and honesty, and understanding, and being able to communicate with each other. That man—”

“Wasn’t much of a man,” he added quietly. “Men don’t run away. They might walk, if it’s for the best. But they do it with honor. Or sadness, I guess. So if he ran, I’d say you oughtta count yourself lucky.”

“Mr. Carr,” she sighed. “If only life was as cut-and-dry as you think. I don’t expect you to understand. You live here all alone, and you like it. And that’s fine. You’re independent, and you’re tough. I’ve watched you for years. I’ve seen you cut yourself while you’re whittling away on your precious wood, wipe the blood off, and go right back to work.” She moistened her lips with the cool, damp glass. “But some of us bleed a little more than others.”

“It’s alright to bleed. It’s just not healthy to give up whittling.”

“Gary was my first—my only serious relationship. You know that. You’d think he’d understand me. Bluto ate with me, slept with me, traveled with me, took care of me...” She smothered a snuffle. Dammit, it was impossible to make this uber-independent man understand such a loss. “It was a little tough, losing them both around the same time.”

“We’ve never talked much about this. You never wanted to talk about this. You’ve never even told me the reason behind the breakup.” He ran a finger down the nape of her neck. “I’m here for you, y’know.”

So he was. As he’d always been. But her breakup with Gary was not something she cared to share. “Never mind. We’re here for a

good time, and if I talk about this I'll get upset. Don't want me upset, do you?"

"No."

"Then let's forget about men and dogs. Oops, I'm being redundant."

"Hey! Hey!"

"Sorry. But this is supposed to be a celebration. Let's drop the subject. I don't want to talk about Bluto *or* Gary. Ever." She effectively ended that thread of their conversation by nearly emptying her glass. "But I am ready to move on and take a lover. And that's all I want right now. I don't want to deal with the 'love' crap. No relationship, no understandings, no searching for the perfect 'soul mate'. Just sex. There's nothing *wrong* with having sex. God knows you've had your share and then some."

"Doesn't mean you have to jump in the sack with just *anybody*," he grumbled. "There are *toys*, y'know."

She swatted his thigh, resting her head affectionately on his shoulder. There wasn't another man in the world she could comfortably have such a conversation with. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. I know women who have hired Sherpas to guide them up

this little mountain of yours, just so they could talk their way into your bed. Like Shasta...or Sheena...or Sheila, or whatever the hell her name is.”

“I haven’t seen Sheila in over six months.”

Iris turned to him, stunned. “Russ! You never told me you two broke up. I’m so sorry. What—”

An explosive barrage of booms shook the house, and he irritably butted his cigarette. “It’s not important. What is important is that this freaking weather is gonna take out my dish if this keeps up.”

His thumb worked the remote, jabbing harder with each passing shadowy station. The sounds of the static sizzled in the air, occasionally accompanied by broken sentences and shivering newscasts.

“...swarms of them have turned up in the Midwest, destroying...”

“people running for their lives...hoards of...”

“...devastation...”

He clicked to another channel and laughed, delighted. “Hey, look! It’s ‘Attack of the Killer Tomatoes’! Even *you* can’t be afraid of this one.” He gently kissed her cheek, his eyes bright with amusement. “Let’s just relax, hmm? Enjoy each other and a silly, uninterrupted movie.”

“BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEEEEP!!

This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System...”

He groaned, slouching back against the cushions. “Well, *almost* uninterrupted. Damn public service announcements.” He cursed beneath his breath as a flurry of pixels possessed the screen. The television went dark for a moment, and blinked back to life, grayish-white, with no discernible picture, and sputtered a fragmented sentence.

“This is NOT a test...”

The television screen flatlined, winked, and whispered into black.

CHAPTER 2

They sat, still and unmoving, for several minutes, continuing to stare, dumbfounded, at the darkened screen. Even the thunder seemed to dissipate into silence at the announcement, and only the dry, spitting sound of the fire could be heard in the darkness.

They turned to face each other at the same moment, speechless, open-mouthed and stunned, before swiveling woodenly back toward the dull, deadened screen.

“Russ?”

He made no answer. The stillness of the room was so intense she could hear the hard blinking of his eyes in the ghostly silence.

“Russell?” Iris whispered as if someone were eavesdropping, her wide eyes still glued to the TV. “Did—did you just hear what I heard?”

Noisily scratching his beard, he continued to stare. “I heard.” He jabbed a thick thumb upon the remote, trying to regain the picture. “I just don’t believe what I think I heard.”

She reached over to turn the switch on the lamp beside the sofa. Nothing.

“Russ. The power’s gone.”

He lit another cigarette, easing toward the edge of the sofa. “That’s okay. I happen to know how that particular Star Trek episode ends.”

“Russell?” She kept blinking at the screen in disbelief. “They—they said something about swarms. And hoardes. And devastation. They said this was *not* a test. Russ? What does that mean?”

“It means there’s been a mistake. Or it means some genius finally figured there should be a severe weather warning. Or it means we caught the tail end of some garbled message and misunderstood.” He leaned forward, and she could feel his biceps tense as his eyes narrowed, willing the television back to life. “It means,” he said quietly, finally, “that my plans for the evening are shot. Stay here. I’ll get some light.”

She briskly brushed her forearms, suddenly cold without the warmth of him beside her. He was right, of course. A warning of severe weather, possibly a tornado. It wasn't unusual this time of year. Picking up a word here, a word there—who could tell?

She watched in silence as he returned, arms full of large, columnar candles, his skin like red earth in the light of the fire. He placed them in strategic locations, sparking them one at a time, until the living room pulsed with lances of light. “What kind of Trekkie are you?” she deadpanned. “No spare generator?”

“Never bothered,” he shrugged. “If the power goes out, I wait until it comes back on. It always does.” He retrieved two oil lamps from a back room, using his lighter to torch the wicks. She gave him a blank stare as he opened one of the windows to a height of about three inches, allowing the gale to gush in. “I want to be able to hear,” he explained. “A sudden loud, rushing wind...sound of a freight train...landing of an alien ship...stuff like that.”

“Oh, that's good, that's good. You got joke, eh?”

“Let's crack open another bottle.”

Iris tilted her head, confused. He intended to go on with the evening as if nothing had happened? Had she somehow

overestimated the implications of the announcement she'd heard?

"You don't seem to be taking this very seriously."

"Well, I know it's a tough break, but we can always rent the 'Killer Tomatoes' movie some other time..."

"You think this is *funny!*" she gasped. "We have no idea what's happened! Aren't you even a little bit...nervous?"

"About what?"

"About what?! What about the destruction, the devastation?"

"Babe, there's always some kind of 'devastation' going on somewhere in the world at any given moment." He grinned, spreading his arms wide, looking around. "And it doesn't seem to have hit home, does it?"

"Oh, now there's a selfish attitude." She shifted uneasily on the couch, peering suspiciously at the hard, broken shells with paper entrails on the dining room table. "Russell? Do you...do you remember what the fortune cookies said?"

"Something about not reading while you eat?"

"Yours said 'all of your problems will soon be resolved'. Remember that? And mine—mine said something like 'live each day as if it is the last'."

He paused with bottle in hand, blinking. “And?”

“Well, doesn’t all of that sound...well, a little ominous to you?”

He frowned, grabbed her empty glass and sniffed it carefully.

“Are you sure you and I drank out of the same bottle?”

“Russell—”

“Iris. You have the imagination of a visionary. I admire it more than you know. You’re the only person in the world I’d trust to add color to my carvings. But when you start believing that little stale fortune cookies are somehow delivering warnings of imminent danger, I have to think you’ve had too much to drink. Or not enough. Let’s try another glass and see.”

“Oh, and standing there cracking jokes makes more sense?”

There could be a deadly tornado on its way, or some enemy attack, or the world could be coming to an end—and you think this is *funny?!?*”

“No. But by the time we finish this bottle I will.”

Okay, she might be overreacting a tad—but he was seriously pissing her off. “Mr. Carr. Even if you’re not worried, there are other people to consider. You should get on the phone! Call somebody! Find out if they’re okay, if we’re the only ones who heard this weird message.”

He paused in the process of working the cork. “Why? Do you figure the aliens tapped into this particular television, made the announcement just for you and me?”

“Russell!”

“Oh, relax, Iris. What’s the point in panicking? It’s just a blackout.”

Of course it was. Common sense told her it was. But the queasy feeling in her stomach wouldn’t allow her to settle for that. “Then call the power company. Report it. Invite the crew over for cocktails. Do *something!*”

He lifted the telephone receiver in casual resignation. “It’s just the power of suggestion, babe. My fault. All those movies about the end of the world. You’re gonna feel awfully silly when we find out it’s all just a misunderstanding, and...”

She watched as he stopped cold, as the stunted breeze through the window made the flames of the candles waver.

A violent tremor shook his powerful body as he paused to listen, the phone pressed hard against his ear. Never, ever in all their years of friendship, had she known him to be afraid of anything. “Russ?”

“Omigod.” His voice was hoarse, barely recognizable.

Iris gripped the armrest of the couch, a jolt of fear snaking down her spine. The muscles of her legs tensed, ready for flight, and she could barely speak. “Oh, no.”

His eyes, glazed and unseeing, fastened on her as his hand convulsed around the receiver. “It’s...it’s...”

“Oh, God, Russ. God, what is it?”

“It’s too late,” he whispered, dropping the telephone. “Too late to run.” His eyes went wide as his jaw dropped in horror. “They’re coming. They’re coming for the celibates...”

“You shit!” She threw the nearest pillow at him as he replaced the receiver, grinning. “You scared the piss out of me.”

“Lighten up, little sis. It’s dead. Figured it would be, with this kind of wind and ice.”

Jesus. She felt so tense that a sudden movement might make her break. Where had all the comfy-coziness gone? “I don’t suppose you have a battery-operated radio?”

“No. Got a battery-operated karaoke machine, though.”

“Useless. You can’t sing a lick. Cell phone?”

“I never remember to charge the damn things. But I have a glow-in-the-dark watch around here somewhere. At least we’ll know what time it is, and—hey! Where are you going?”

She was up and moving toward the hall closet. He could laugh it all off as he pleased, kick back and wait to see what was coming, but she had no intention of remaining in the dark. “I’m going to get my jacket. Then I’m going to take your car keys and drive into town, and find out what the hell’s going on.”

“No, you’re not.” His tone was cool and controlled. “I won’t give you the keys.”

“Fine.” She glared at him, reaching for her pea coat. “Then I’ll walk. I’ll send Mr. Spock back with a landing party to check on you.”

“Iris.” He grabbed her, holding her shoulders firmly. “You can’t go. This house sits on a serious hill. A very steep slope for nearly a quarter mile with a narrow drive and no guardrails. In case you haven’t noticed, this is an ice storm. Tires and tennis shoes will have no traction. You could go right over the side. We’ll just have to wait things out here. Besides,” he grinned, wiggling his eyebrows.

“We may be the last two people left on earth. We may have to repopulate the planet. Oh damn.”

Funny. Very funny. She twisted in his arms. Normally, he had a knack for putting her at ease. It simply wasn't working this time. He was kidding, trying to make her feel better. And failing miserably. "You...you really think it's just a weather alert, right?"

"Of course. You know, maybe you shouldn't watch so many scary movies. Come on." He pulled her out of her coat and gently led her back to the couch, wrapping himself around her as she molded against him. "Don't worry, brat. I'll look after you." Handing her more champagne, he made sure she drank until the rigidity in her shoulder muscles softened, humming softly to her as they silently watched the fire.

When her eyelids began to droop wearily, he took the glass away from her, kissed her forehead, and rocked her until she fell asleep in his arms. "Rest easy, Iris. I promised your brother I'd take care of you." He whispered gently into her hair. "I've always wanted to take care of you."

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He watched her as she slept, glad she couldn't see the tumultuous emotions that raged in his heart, fierce as the storm. The

face was that of a little girl in slumber, the girl he'd known so well for so long, and loved as his dearest friend.

It was the body that bothered him.

It was the body that plagued his dreams, that kept him from thinking of her as a 'sister' any longer, that had squelched his interest in Sheila or any other woman for the past six months.

It was her body, so intimately close to his now, that seemed to be making the room unbearably warm, and his nice, baggy jeans unusually tight.

He'd always loved her, he supposed, in different ways at different ages. Iris Foley was not a beautiful woman in the traditional sense of the word. At five-foot-ten, she'd never completely outgrown her gangly adolescence. Her arms and hands were long and slim, her behind tucked and tight. She had a bad habit of chopping her dark, curly hair off whenever the mood struck her, but she had, at least, progressed past the purple-with-mousse stage. The dance lessons she'd taken as a child had left her body limber and toned, with a bosom that was not large but round and firm, and a graceful way of moving that had, on occasion, nearly taken his breath away. And the legs...

Oh, my, the legs, he thought grimly. Yes, the legs had started it all.

Pest that she was, she'd insisted on accompanying her older brother to a pool party when she was sixteen. Russ remembered it as a tiresome affair with mosquitoes and blaring music. But he was unemployed, doing freelance carpentry jobs at the time, and trying to keep the bank from foreclosing on the old family home. The party offered free liquor and food. That was reason enough to go.

He had hardly said hello, had barely noticed Iris as he dodged the advances of the other women there--until she removed her wrap, revealing her new bathing suit as she stood alone on the board, preparing to take a dive. And the awkward, coltish legs of the little girl he knew had developed into long, deadly weapons that rocked him back on his feet.

It was then that he began to *really* notice her. He thoroughly approved of the stubbornness which often made her refuse to wear a bra she didn't need, emphasizing her very large, succulent nipples; the mouth she considered too wide, which he found to be full and lush, dusky-rose against mocha colored skin; and the behind,

tightened by years of dancing, that swayed so enticingly when she walked, like an invitation to dance...

Russ had no doubt that Thomas, her brother and his friend, had noticed his reaction. He chose that time to secure The Promise from him—the vow that he'd always look after her, take care of her. In a brotherly sort of way, of course.

And how could he refuse to promise?

He'd managed to keep himself in check all these years, even when she bounced playfully upon his lap, even when she hugged him tightly in simple gestures of friendship—even when she'd finally taken her first lover. That had been the most difficult ordeal of all.

He *still* wanted to kill that man for having her.

It had been a bad idea, he supposed, to ask her to work with him. Too much closeness, too much time together, alone. But the business had taken off like a shot with the addition of her superbly delicate painting to his screens. And her aggressive, competitive nature made a perfect counterbalance to his laid-back *laissez-faire*.

And she'd been so upset about that ass-wipe Gary and the death of the damn dog...

The legs, those luscious legs, were curled upon his outstretched ones now, relaxed and at rest. It was not what he wanted. He wanted her out of those crisply-creased black trousers, wanted those legs locked around his waist, straining to pull her body as close as humanly possible, attuned to his every movement...

Unable to resist, he grazed her lips with his, absurdly pleased when she smiled in her sleep. It was a mistake. She tasted of softness and champagne, of salty butter and sweet woman. And it was not enough. He was aching to touch her, to fondle the treasures beneath the snug red shirt, to slide his hands up and deep between her thighs...

Russ carefully adjusted her position, propping her against a stack of pillows without disturbing her slumber and, shrugging into a worn leather coat, headed for the door. He wanted to check out the weather conditions. And he desperately needed a slap of cold air in his face about now.

Despite his rubber-soled boots, his legs went flying from beneath him with his first step out the door. He landed on his rump with a loud grunt and a thud, and remained sprawled there for a

moment, shaking his head. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had gone right today.

He had picked her up after work, as planned. Pausing to pick up the Chinese food before leaving town, he had brought her to the house. She was in a pleasant mood--an *agreeable* mood--and his hopes for the evening soared. They'd taken a long walk through the surrounding woods, talking and laughing arm-in-arm as they relished the tang of fall and swished their way through the ankle-deep crispness of gold and crimson leaves. He loved this land. Passed down from his great-great-grandfather, the son of a slave, it was important to him, a part of who he was. And she seemed to belong there, with him, as much a part of it as the old gray house perched upon the summit of the hill.

But the weather turned, becoming suddenly violent. They'd had to dash for the house when the threatening skies had hardened into ice and began to batter the earth with sleet. He'd burned their steaks and overcooked the baked potatoes. The frozen cheesecake he'd bought had never thawed completely. And the erotically suggestive movie he'd rented for the evening had jammed in his VCR.

And now she thought it was the end of the world...

All of this on the evening he'd planned to tell her that he wanted to be her lover. That he was dying to get her into his bed. To show her how much he needed her.

And that was why there were three bottles of champagne, and why he hadn't been able to stay with Sheila.

She'd put a smashing halt to all of his plans by announcing that she was looking for a lover—and naming every bozo she could think of *except* him. He wasn't even in the running.

And now it would have to wait. The evening, the proposition—even the little gift he'd arranged for her would have to wait. If she decided she didn't want him, it would all be pointless.

And wouldn't it be his luck this day if something really *had* gone seriously wrong with the rest of the planet...

He duck-walked to the nearby car in a world that had become monochromatic gray, then had to do battle with the frozen locks. After much frustration and several hard kicks, he managed to wrench the door of the battered vehicle open. It took several minutes to get the engine to turn over, and even then it grumbled uneasily, like the thunder that still filled the sky. Allowing it to run for a few minutes, he finally turned on the radio with half-frozen fingers.

Static.

He punched up a number of different stations.

Amazing, he mused, how many different kinds and keys of static there were...

A strange uneasiness began to seep into his skin along with the biting cold. Switching the car off, he sat there for a few moments. Listening. Despite the growling heavens and the sound of ice pelting metal, there was an uneasy silence about the countryside.

A major power outage. Probably all of the nearby transmitters were out, and power lines down everywhere. Yes. That must be it. That *must* be it...

Russell literally crawled to the ridge on the edge of his property, glad that he'd refused to let her attempt the drive. She would've killed herself. He struggled, buffeted by the strong winds, his beard brittle against his cheek, his coat already gleaming with a pearly sheen of sleet. Layers, he thought vaguely, struggling to catch his breath. Layers of ice over snow over ice, as if the land was attempting to bury itself.

He cautiously pulled himself to a standing position, supported by the massive trunk of a tree whose branches creaked and groaned beneath the weight of the frozen glaze.

It had always been one of his favorite vantage points. He spent a lot of quiet time beneath this oak, older, probably, than the house itself. From here he could sit on top of the world.

He looked down upon Corinth, Ohio, holding onto the tree for dear life as the punishing wind whipped about him and the sky wept cold, cutting tears.

There were no lights to be seen in the small town below.

No movement in the night.

No sign of life.

Jesus Christ. What if...

He determinedly made his way back to the house, a fist of anxiety forming in his solar plexus. It was just a blackout. Nothing to be nervous about. Incredible how dependent everyone had become upon a little thing like electricity. But he suddenly felt the need to be with her, even more strongly than when the urge was simply hot blood surging to his groin. He ran, slipped, scraped his hands, got up and ran again. The cold air seemed to burn into his lungs as the

thunder shook the sky apart. And still he ran, desperate to reach the house and the warm comfort of her arms.

His resolve, after all, had not changed. He was going to make love to Iris Foley if it was the last thing he ever did.

CHAPTER 3

Iris awoke to near-darkness and the acidic taste of champagne on her tongue.

And her hand firmly cupping the crotch of a man with a conspicuously large erection.

She blinked hard and peered up at him. He was watching her through half-closed lids, a wry smile on his lips. “Welcome back.” His voice was deep and husky, and there was an indefinable suggestiveness about it. “Ain’t this one helluva way to wake up in the mornin’?”

Her mouth was dry, and she couldn’t seem to find a voice to answer. Or the right words. What did one say while holding onto her best friend’s crotch?

She made a silly attempt to discreetly inch it away, only to have the bulge lunge at her. She stopped, color flooding her cheeks, and looked away from the challenge in his eyes. “I...um...I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Beats the hell out of caffeine.”

She quickly pulled her hand back. “I didn’t mean to...well, you know.”

“It happens. Especially in the mornings. Must be those cold sheets you were telling me about.”

Carefully straightening her legs, she looked around the room, memories of the previous night flooding back. The wind still tossed the curtains of the open window ruthlessly about, and the thunder still reverberated like an angry god through the sky. The fading embers of the fire were barely visible below a somber layer of ash, and the room had grown distinctly cold.

And yet, as nervous as she’d been, as crowded as the two of them were on the couch, she had slept like a baby upon the solid, comforting wall of his chest. Her shirt had inched upward during the night, and his arm was still wrapped securely around her bare midriff. It felt for all the world like it belonged there. “I suppose the power’s still out?”

“Fraid so.”

She ran her hand absently through her short hair, trying to think. “The car radio—”

“Tried it. It’s not picking anything up. You’re gorgeous in the morning.”

“I look like hell, and feel even worse.” She climbed to a sitting position. “It feels colder now than it did last night. Isn’t that unusual?”

He was staring at her as if he’d never seen her before. “Dunno. I’m not a weatherman. But I can start another fire and get you a blanket.”

“No. I want to get up, move around. Do something. I need a nice, hot shower and a big breakfast; sausage and eggs and biscuits and...” Her voice died in her throat. “I keep forgetting. No power.”

“Baby girl, you just say the word, and I’ll run out with a kite and a key.” He gave her midriff a squeeze. “I’ve got a few basics in the kitchen. We won’t starve. And if you can wait a few minutes, we can heat up a little water over the fire—at least enough for a sponge bath. We may need to conserve for a day or two. I’ll even loan you a shirt.”

The upstairs bathroom was as cold as a meat locker, but the basin of soap and warm water he'd managed did wonders to revive her. She rubbed hard with his loofa sponge, bringing her circulation back to life, and dressed quickly. The thunder sounded even more ominous from the higher elevation, and the sleet beat against the small bathroom window as if frantic to make its way inside.

She couldn't wait to get back to him.

She had to settle for the pants she'd worn there, but Russ' black teeshirt was loose and warm, and, after hurriedly finger-combing her hair, she sprinted back down the stairs, feeling alive and invigorated.

Iris returned to the living room to find him grilling enormous patties of sausages in an iron skillet over a fresh, spirited fire. Squealing happily, she ran toward him and, grabbing him from the back, encircled his waist and squeezed. "You did it! You got sausage for me. Magician! Okay, now I want a Jacuzzi full of hot water, lights on all over the house, room service, a helicopter to pick us up...Russ? Is anything wrong?"

He had stepped out of her embrace, making a show of flipping the meat as he turned away from her. "No. No of course not. Everything's fine."

“Oh, please. The whole world’s gone crazy. I don’t need you to go whacko on me too.”

“I said it’s nothing!” he snapped.

He was actually *angry* with her. Something was wrong. He shrank away from her as if she had the plague. “You’ve heard something else, haven’t you?” She could hear the hysteria creeping into her voice, like some expendable actress in a low-budget horror movie. “What? Tell me! I have a right to know. There’s been some kind of invasion, right? Terrorist attack? Or some nuclear accident, a natural disaster...crop circle? That’s it, isn’t it? You’ve spotted a crop circle, and you know the aliens have landed and...”

“Christ, I swear I’ll never show you another horror movie as long as I live. No. Nothing new. And there’s nothing wrong. I’m just...on edge. Guess I didn’t sleep well. I could use one of those sponge baths myself. But I think I’ll take mine cold.” He grimaced, carefully handing her the spatula. “Mind watching breakfast while I clean up?”

“No. No, of course not. But you didn’t have to bother cooking breakfast, Russ. I would’ve done it, or we could’ve had the leftover Chinese food.”

“It’s gone,” he said abruptly. “I mean, I tossed it. Didn’t smell quite right. Figured it was spoiled. Don’t sweat it. Relax, I’ll be right back.”

Iris determinedly thought rational thoughts, assuring herself all was well. She tended to forget that her childhood idol was also a very human being. Why, after all, should she expect him to remain unaffected when they might very well be facing a long, tense stretch of time together—or even the End of Days? He was a little nervous, that’s all, just as she was.

She preferred the word ‘nervous’ to ‘terrified’. It was difficult for her to confess her own fear. She’d never been put to an extreme test, of course, but she was sure she was not a coward.

So why was it that every shutter that rattled, every boisterous bang of thunder—even the sizzling of the sausage steaks had her ready to jump at any moment? Her ears seemed attuned to every suspicious noise. The curtain at the open window sounded like a flag flapping frantically in the wind. The wooden thud of his shoes hitting the floor overhead made her jump. She heard him pouring hot water into the cold of the basin in the bathroom, heard the sound of his jeans collapsing as he tossed them to the floor...

She was, of course, scaring the hell out of herself. It was all his fault, damn Russell Carr. One horror movie after another had warped her brain, and he had teased her at every opportunity.

Even now he wouldn't give it a rest. She could hear him taunting her, making silly, moaning noises from the bathroom.

Unless, of course, he was doing something very odd with that sponge...

"Very funny, Carr," she called out, viciously jabbing at the long, firm sausage. "It's a sick man who gets his jollies from frightening women. I ought to come up there with this spatula and...Russ! Can you hear me?"

Apparently he could not. The heavy breath of the wind through the window was her only answer.

But she could hear him. She could hear the splashing of his water, the little tune he began to whistle even as the moaning became louder...

Whistling? Whistling and moaning at the same time?

Iris turned her attention to her ears as the sausage shrank, listening carefully. She was imagining things. Had to be.

And in her imagination what began as a soft, sorrowful moaning sound, blossoming from nothing, was slowly gathering both pitch and power.

It seemed now to come from underground, from beneath the house, from Hell itself as far as she knew. It managed in sound what a skunk did with scent; it permeated the air, soaking through the old wood of the farmhouse, filling the living room with a lost, mournful melody. She dropped the spatula, shivering on the spot, unable to move. It was the wind, she assured herself as it died away; the howling of that awful wind through the ice-petrified trees.

“Get a grip, girl,” she scolded herself, retrieving the utensil. “Where’s your backbone?”

And then it began again, soaring up from the dark recesses of the netherworld, and her backbone trembled, turned to ice, and spurred her into action.

She raced up the stairs, taking two to three at a time. She thought of screaming for him, but all of her oxygen was being used for running and terror, pumping from her lungs in horrendous gasps.

She couldn’t spare the time to scream, and she was sure her legs would get her there faster than the speed of sound.

Tripping on the landing, she disintegrated into a mass of pounding heart and spasmodic limbs as she fell. There were three more steps to take to the second floor, and a few more to the bathroom. Clutching at the railing, she tried to pull herself up.

There was no strength left in her.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she opened her mouth.

And screamed.

“Russell!!”

She heard the pounding of his legs, and he was standing above her within seconds. “Iris!” He ringed the corner, landing beside her, his powerful hands supporting her. “Iris, what is it?”

She could not move. Could not speak.

But if she’d thought that strange, haunting sound had unnerved her, he had done it one better.

“Baby, did you fall? Hurt yourself?”

In a matter of a few shattering seconds, he had stunned her into silence and changed the flavor of their friendship forever.

He had come to her rescue, without hesitation, without thinking.

And without clothes.

“Iris? What happened?”

“Huh?” Happened? Had something else happened? She had no idea what he was talking about. She’d completely forgotten what had frightened her so. He had driven it completely out of her mind.

He was kneeling beside her, a mass of wet sinews and muscle, his chest still frothy with soap.

And he looked like a god.

Hadn’t she known him forever? Hadn’t she seen him without his shirt dozens of times, swimming, cutting grass, relaxing here at his home in the brutal heat of summer? How had she failed to notice that his skin was like smooth, scrumptious caramel, his searing eyes fringed with thick, black lashes--and there, between his legs...!

Good God! Where had he been hiding *that* all these years?!

“Sweetheart? You okay?”

She couldn’t take her eyes away from him. From *it*. His body wouldn’t let her. The hair upon his chest narrowed and tapered, forming a near-perfect arrow, directing her attention, just there.

No wonder the man wore baggy pants!!

“Come on, little one, *talk* to me. What? Klingon attack? See a mouse? Grease splatter? Did you hurt yourself?”

In the flash of time it had taken him to round the corner, he had changed to her. He had changed *her*.

“Iris!!”

She licked her lips, trying to speak. “There was a noise, Russ. A weird sort of wailing noise coming from...well, it sounded like it was coming from under the house!”

“A noise?” He blinked. “From the basement?”

The basement? Of course. She should have thought. It was a little difficult to do at the moment, of course, with his strong arms wrapped protectively around her, and the clean scent of him assaulting her senses. “Yeah. That’s possible, I guess. I’m not imagining things, Russ. There’s somebody--or *something*—down there. I know what I heard.”

He glanced away, squeezing her arm. “Okay. Wait here.”

She watched him walk away. The view from the rear was just as impressive. Now, there was a taut, seriously sexy butt. Something a girl could really latch on to at just the right time...

“Iris. Come on.”

“Huh?” She had zoned out again.

Russell had slipped back into his jeans and was gently leading her down the stairs. “I want you to wait down here. Stay by the fire. Don’t move until I get back.”

He deposited her in the living room and left as she quickly removed the overcooked sausages from the flames, shaking her head in disbelief. What the hell was wrong with her? The world as they knew it could be gone, there might be a monster in the basement, and all she could think about was the sight of her best friend’s *equipment?!*

Hadn’t she known that there was something lurking below his waistband? Hadn’t she seen him in cutoffs, bathing suits, gym trunks? It was the celibacy, she assured herself, that was making her act this way. Her sex life had always been fairly humdrum, but apparently that year of doing without was coming back to haunt her.

And he was partly to blame, too. If he hadn’t rounded that corner flashing all that naked muscle, she never would have thought of him that way.

What kind of hero doesn’t stop to dress before responding to a scream?!

She paced before the fireplace, worrying, until she heard him return, clicking off the flashlight he'd carried with him. He shook his head sadly, his damp feet barely managing to shuffle across the floor.

"I'm sorry, Iris. I'm sorry it has to be this way. I always liked you," he muttered.

"Liked me?" There was something stiff about the way he moved, something dead about his eyes as he lurched closer and closer to her. This was not Russ. Dear God, something had happened to him in that basement. "*Liked me?*"

"I did. For a long time. But now you know. Now it can't be helped. Now you've heard the sound of The Hatchlings. Now you know where we hid the pods. So, I'm afraid I'll have to kill you..."

She pitched the spatula straight at him, fuming as he ducked. "This is not the time to play, you sadist!"

"Sorry," he laughed. "I couldn't resist." He relaxed into familiarity. "The idea of something sneaking around the basement--there's nothing there, honey. Trust me. Nothing breeding, nothing lying in wait." He padded over to the refrigerator, opening the door just enough to peer inside. "But I'll admit you had me going there. Like beer in your eggs?"

“Beer? For breakfast?” Iris stuck out her tongue. “I’ll pass.”

“Just as well. Don’t see any. Thought I had a few cans.”

“Russell. I heard...”

“One of the windows has a tiny break. I suppose that, if the wind was blowing in just the right direction, and if the chip in the window was right in line with one of the air vents, and if a certain imaginative young lady was already scared by recent events...” He balled her hand up in his and gently kissed it. “Feel better? Alright if I go rinse off now?”

He was still bare from the waste up, stashing all that good stuff into those wonderfully deceptive pants. She nearly laughed as an insane impulse struck her. He had no idea. If the soap on his chest had been flavored, she would’ve licked it off *for* him...

Iris frowned, loosening her hand from his grip. “Get dressed. You’ll catch your death. I’ll finish breakfast.”

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Russell pulled several deep breaths into his diaphragm, trying to relax the tension in his body.

She was killing him. Unintentionally, slowly, agonizingly, she was killing him. He’d have blue balls for sure before the day was over.

He'd awakened with her hand on his crotch. Drowsy at first, it seemed to him one of many dreams he'd had of her. And even after he'd come fully awake, fully aroused, he hadn't moved, hadn't touched her.

He gave himself an 'A+' for resisting that one.

But then he'd imagined her upstairs in his bathroom, sponging that long, lean body clean, and was forced to conceal his hard reaction when she'd hugged him from behind.

And she was wearing his shirt. He'd very carefully selected a black tee, fully aware that she was braless, and the white ones might be too sheer, too revealing. Curse his luck, it didn't matter. The loose shirt skimmed just the tips of her breasts, emphasizing those prominent, nut-like nipples that he was dying to squeeze, to taste.

And worst of all—when she'd screamed for him, needed him, he'd completely forgotten his own damn clothes. Whoever heard of a buck-naked hero coming to the rescue?! And when she'd sat there, staring at him, unconsciously licking those lips, those full, wonderful lips, he thought for sure he'd become fully erect right there in her face and scare the living daylight out of her once and for all.

Angrily shoving his foot into his shoe, he silently cursed his awkward way with words. She was a beautiful woman. She'd want compliments and romance, want someone to *tell* her how desirable she was—not just shove champagne down her throat and hope for a moment of weakness.

Why couldn't the power go off before the television belched out that last, cryptic sentence? She was so preoccupied with fearing the apocalypse, she couldn't give him a second thought.

Damn, damn, damn, dammit--why couldn't doomsday have waited another forty-eight hours or so?!

He frowned at the frowning face in the mirror. Maybe, subconsciously, he had *wanted* her to see him naked. Maybe it was his way of compensating for not being able to express himself with words. Maybe, without knowing it, he thought it might nudge their relationship to another level.

Maybe he was full of it, and should stick to woodworking and leave the psychology to the shrinks.

Sighing in resignation, he finished dressing and galloped down the stairs. Iris was sitting on the sofa, staring into the fire and nibbling the edges of one of the sausages.

“I left the eggs sitting on the kitchen counter, Iris. Thought you might want to cook those yourself.” She didn’t seem to hear him.

Had something else gone wrong?

Impossible. There was nothing *left* to go wrong. He moved closer, leaning cautiously in. “Aren’t you hungry?”

She chewed slowly, shifting her gaze toward him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“If you really thought this might be your last day to live--what would you do with it?”

He shuffled his feet uncomfortably. That was easy. He’d screw her silly, rest a bit, and have at it again. And then he’d hold her in his arms, comfort her, and assure her they would certainly be spending whatever eternity might be beyond this together. There was no deity, no demon, no dark plane that could keep him from her. And then he’d oh-so-eloquently tell her how much she meant to him, and lose himself inside of her one last time...

But he couldn’t tell her that. Not here, not now. Not under these circumstances, even if he knew how. “Iris, this is not...”

“I know, I know. I know you keep *telling* me it’s not ‘The End’. But you said I could ask you anything. So, suppose this was it? Suppose there was no tomorrow? What would you do with today?”

He’d never given it any serious thought. After all, he was still a young, healthy man with a lifetime of tomorrows ahead of him.

Wasn’t he? “Hell, Iris, I don’t know. Maybe have a bottle of my favorite wine, listen to some nice music--and pray my ass off, hoping it’s not too late. How about you?”

She took a big bite of the meat and chewed vigorously. “If I knew this was the end? I don’t think I’d like to go out being celibate. I think I’d like to have sex with you. And since we’re not sure one way or the other—do you think you might consider it?”

CHAPTER 4

He watched her scoop up the last of her scrambled eggs, enjoying every mouthful, as if it was her last meal on earth.

He, unfortunately, had not been able to swallow a bite.

“Okay.” Iris finished the small sample of orange juice he’d provided and, satisfied, sat back in the dining room chair. “I’m relaxed. I’m well-fed. I’ve taken the time to think things through, just as you asked. Can we have sex now?”

He blanched, using his fork to stab his cold sausage in frustration. “Iris. This is not something to be taken lightly. Just because there’s no electricity—”

She laughed, and the sound of tinkling light filled the old, cold house. “You think I want to have sex with you because there’s nothing on *television*?”

“I didn’t say that. I think...I just don’t want you doing something rash under duress, something you’ll regret afterward.”

“Suppose there is no afterward?”

“Stop that! Everything is fine!”

“But just suppose—”

“No. Let’s have *you* just suppose.” A wee, small voice somewhere in the back of his head was screaming at him in its wee, small way: “*what the hell are you doing, man?! She **wants** us!!*”

No, it didn’t seem to be coming from his head at all; it was coming from a lower, far more sensitive extremity, one that seemed to be making him feverish and edgy and more impatient by the minute. “Suppose this is all, as I said, just the result of a pre-winter storm and some freakish blurb of dialog we picked up at exactly the wrong time. And suppose, due to this misunderstanding, we go ahead and do this—this thing you’re suggesting. How are you going to feel when the lights come back on?”

She nodded slowly. “You mean, will I still respect you in the morning?”

“You think this is *funny?!*” he retorted. “I’m serious! I promised your brother when he went into the Navy that I’d look out

for you, take care of you. We have a life-long friendship going here, a business partnership, and I don't..." He paused, scrubbing his face with his hands. "I don't want to lose that."

Her smile faded into softness. "That's either the sweetest thing anybody's ever said to me, or—or you're trying to let me down easy. If you don't want to have sex with me, Russ, just tell me. I'll understand."

"I never said—"

"I mean, we're not talking serious commitment or anything."

"It's not that—"

"And it's not as if we're total strangers."

"I'm just worried that—"

"Then you're saying it would be alright for us to climb all over each other if we were *not* friends?"

He pounded the tabletop with both fists. "God, woman, you're making me crazy here!"

"You wouldn't have to worry about a thing," she persisted. "I don't expect you to suddenly get the hots for me because I suddenly want to 'do it'. I know you don't think of me that way. But I'd handle all the preliminaries, do all the persuading, take care of everything."

You could just sit back and enjoy--or tolerate, whichever you prefer. I mean, it's not about lust or anything silly like that. We could just be fuc...er, sex buddies. Just for whatever time we might have left. I'd try to make it worth your while."

"Dammit, Iris, here I am trying to be noble, and..." He paused, eyes widening. "What did you say?"

She looked downward, her cheeks coloring slightly. "I said I'd spare you the effort. I said I'd be happy to seduce you. Or give it a try, anyway."

He fell back in his chair, his body boneless.

Dear God. It really *was* the end of the world...

"We could start now, if you think you can manage. I'd like to get as much in as possible."

He blinked, then blinked harder, his thoughts losing the race against his hormones. "Iris? That is you sitting there, isn't it? I mean, you didn't have any memory lapses last night, or dreams about being abducted by aliens?"

"It's almost funny," she said wistfully. "Here I was, wallowing in celibacy because the jerk I was with wanted sex without an

emotional relationship--and now I'm propositioning a man who just wants a relationship without sex. Isn't that funny?"

Oh, yeah. Funny. He was laughing so hard inside his testicles ached. "I...I don't know what to say--"

"I think it's the right thing to do. It's strange that we never think of these things," she mused. "We live as if we've got all the time in the world. Well, I don't know how much time I've got left. I guess nobody does. And I'd like to squeeze in as much living as possible."

Russ stuttered, choking on the words he wanted to say to her, the words he couldn't find.

"You've always been so sweet, so caring, so honest with me," she said gently. "I can't think of anybody I'd rather do this with."

He brushed the pang of guilt quickly aside, his eyes focusing on her generous mouth, and what it would be like to have it prompt him into hardness, to have her slip those taut, round nipples into his mouth, to feast until she begged for something more...

And he wouldn't have to say a word? No stumbling attempts to explain his feelings, no coaxing, no persuading, no seduction?

He leaned forward in his chair, ready for action. Even if it was the Judgement Day, God would understand. He was, after all, a

masculine God. Everybody knew that. “You said something about starting *now*?”

A delighted smile spread across her face. “You agree then? You really don’t mind?”

He humbly shrugged, reaching for her hand. “You’re one of my best friends, sweetie. I think I understand. If this is the end, I wouldn’t want you to check out feeling deprived, or denying yourself the pleasure of one last sexual encounter. Let’s go upstairs and—”

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s cold up there, and I don’t want to waste any time. How about right here, on the couch in front of the fire? Will that do?”

He was dizzy, actually deliriously dizzy with excitement. “Well, if that’s what you want, I’ll try to manage. For you.”

“Good!”

She pushed away from the table and grabbed his hand, eagerly leading him to the sofa. He blindly followed, his mind muddled with disbelief. After all this time, and all his wasted planning, she was really going to be his. And he didn’t have to cloak the proposition in champagne, or worry about getting tongue-tied and flustered.

It was a gift.

He watched her from behind, already imagining what it would be like to get his hands on that tempting tush, to feel her feverish against him, to savor her mouth, rather than resign himself to the usual friendly peck on the lips.

Russ took a deep breath, trying to control himself. If he wasn't careful, she'd wonder why he was already hard enough to cut diamonds.

She placed him in the center of the sofa and sat beside him, chewing the nail of her forefinger. And there she sat. And sat, forever, it seemed to him, nibbling away. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, trying to appear relaxed, fervently praying that she had not changed her mind. "Okay," he ventured, trying to sound casual. "Here we are."

"This is sorta awkward, isn't it?" She gave a nervous, tittering laugh. "It's just occurred to me that I've never seduced a man before. Never had to."

"I don't suppose so," he muttered, a pang of jealousy knifing through him. "That's probably all Gary and Milton ever thought about."

“Why do we keep coming back to Milton Edwards? I told you I never slept with him.”

This was not the time to provoke an argument. This was the time to fulfill his fantasies. “Sorry. Guess I just feel like neither of them deserved you. And this is a tricky situation for me too. I’m not accustomed to being so...passive.”

She smiled, resting her hand on his thigh. “I think I like that. That makes this more of a challenge, more interesting, doesn’t it?”

God, if it were any more interesting he’d shoot the works before she even started.

“Let’s start with the clothes. We’re both a little over-dressed for this. Your shoes—no, no, let me,” she said as he started to kick them off. “Having sex was all my idea, remember? Just let me take care of everything.”

Russ stared, fascinated, as she dropped to her knees to remove his socks and shoes. He had not been undressed by a woman since the day he’d decided he was old enough to do it himself. And once he was aroused by a sexual partner, he was far too aggressive to wait for such niceties. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to feel like a sheik being serviced by his favorite harem girl.

The delicious ideas it evoked amazed him. It was like giving in to a craving for candy.

She was right. This was going to be very interesting...

Iris rose, standing between his wide-open legs, and tentatively fingered his tee. “Is it okay if I take your shirt off?”

“Well, I—”

“I know it’s a little cool in here, but it won’t be painful. I’ll try to keep you warm.” She grinned, obviously beginning to enjoy herself.

“And I promise not to bite—unless, of course, you want me to.”

“Sure.” His voice sounded strained in its attempt to be casual.

“I guess it’d be okay, if that’s what you want.”

She smoothly lifted the black shirt over his head and folded it neatly beside him. “Mmmm,” she murmured, surveying the package she’d unwrapped and sending a prickling heat skipping along the back of his neck. “Very nice.”

She tangled her warm fingers in the thick hair on his chest, bending forward to inhale deeply, drawing in the scent of him. “You smell good. All strong and woody. I never paid much attention to the smell of a man before. It must be the lack of distractions here, huh?”

His toes curled against the hardware floor, dying inside.

Her hands swam along his forearms and chest, and he nearly choked when her fingertips grazed his sensitive nipples. “I like your body. It’s cut and clean, with just enough muscle to handle yourself without seeming too bulky.” She skimmed the breadth of his shoulders and clucked her tongue. “Your shoulders are tight as bowstrings. All this stress. We’ll have to get you to relax.”

Leaning into the cut of his legs, she began a deep, vigorous massage of his shoulder muscles. But there was nothing relaxing about it. For every deft twist of her arms, her breasts jiggled mere inches from his face, and he tensed even more, unable to suppress a groan this time.

“Aha! That’s the sound of all that stress being released. Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, you have no idea...”

“Russ?” She inched closer to him, resting her arms around his neck, and a fresh sheen of perspiration bloomed on his forehead. “Is it okay if I taste you?”

Without waiting for an answer, she tilted his head upward, slowly, tentatively kissing him, melding her mouth into his so softly

and sweetly that he thought he'd gone to heaven without the preliminaries. He held onto the edge of the couch with a death-grip, to keep himself from grabbing her, from kissing her back too hard, too hastily, from ripping the clothes off her body, planting himself inside of her, and showing her what *real* tension would feel like.

“You don't mind if I kiss you, do you? Lord knows I've learned it's not a necessary part of having sex; but I like your mouth. When you smile, it reaches all the way up and crinkles the corners of your eyes.”

He managed a slight movement of his head. “If it'll help you feel better about all this—no, I guess I don't mind.”

She slipped her tongue into his mouth and he shivered, his knuckles locking. He closed his eyes to the sensation of her sucking lightly on his tongue as she tightened her hold around his neck and leaned into him. “You feel good, Russell Carr, and taste even better. Funny I never noticed it before. All that wasted time.”

“I...um...”

“Don't say a word. Just relax.”

Her lips slipped over to his ear, nibbling lightly before delicately plunging her tongue inside. He lurched beneath her, and she chuckled in delight. “You like that. Good. Let’s get this going.”

Moving just enough to close his legs, she positioned herself astride him, her knees digging into the cushions. She nuzzled his throat, peppering it with small, sweet kisses before attaching herself to his neck and sucking vigorously. He moved his head to allow her access, his pulse responding wildly. Hell, if she’d suddenly sprouted fangs and began to drain him of blood, he wouldn’t have minded at that moment.

Slowly kissing her way down his chest, she lapped a teasing circle around each of his nipples, then kissed her way along the hairy path leading to his stomach. He gasped, sucking in his gut as she tongued his navel and went quickly to work on his belt.

She was far more aggressive than he’d imagined. No little girl, this. No need for kid gloves. Thank God, thank God. “Iris...Iris, are you sure about this?”

She had already unsnapped his jeans before pausing and smiling up at him. “Oh, I’m just real sure. You’re asking because you

can feel my hands shaking, can't you? And you're worried about me being afraid. You are so sweet."

"Well, I just want you to be sure. To be happy."

"If my hands are shaking, it's because I'm...well, a little eager."

A thin crease formed between her eyebrows. "But I do want you to enjoy some of this too, Russ. Oh, wait—I know."

Pulling away from him, she casually grasped the hem of the shirt he'd loaned her and slipped it over her head. His eyes immediately fastened on her exposed breasts, the tips hardening in the cool air of the room, a few tempting inches away from his mouth. "I was being selfish." She lightly cupped his crotch. "I forgot. The power of the visual turn-on. It was seeing you naked for the first time this morning that really made up my mind." She smiled, pleased with his conspicuous reaction. "And this seems to have done the trick."

His heart was tripping so loudly it nearly drowned out the sound of the thunder in his ears. Never, ever before had he been so excited, so hungry to have anyone. He could not take his gaze off her breasts, full and round before him, begging to be touched, to be tasted.

And he was, for the first time in his life, totally unsure of himself. Should he intervene and become a partner in his own seduction? Should he wait, keep himself restrained, and continue praying that she would ask him to touch her? What if he did something to betray his own hunger, something to turn her off, something—

“Do you like them?”

“What?”

“Do you like my breasts?”

He was feeling woozy, as if it was all some sort of drug-induced dream. “I...they...you are...well, yes. Actually, they are kinda nice.”

“I like the way they feel right now,” she whispered huskily. “I like exposing myself to you like this. I like the way you’re looking at them. It feels like a slow flame burning through, starting at the tips and searing inside, all the way down between my legs.”

He should get either the Purple Heart or the Oscar for this performance. But he couldn’t stand much more. Her nipples danced before him, knuckle-large, making his mouth water. And when she inched forward, her heat settling on his hardness, he nearly hyperventilated.

Iris quickly unzipped his pants and carefully slid her hand inside as Russ' head fell back against the top of the couch, his jaw clenched in stifled agony. "Feels pretty crowded in there, Russ," she murmured playfully. "What say we get to it? After all, we may not have much time."

He could not speak, could not manage a word as she dismounted and yanked both his jeans and underpants down, tossing them carelessly aside. A blast of cold air skimmed his skin as he sat up and found her staring at him. Hungrily. Naked before her now, as he'd often fantasized being, he was surprised to find himself feeling shy. And when she made no move toward him, he self-consciously crossed his arms over his insistent erection.

"Now, now, Russ—you can't run, you can't hide," she teased.

"I'm not hiding! I just...well, maybe I'm just not so sure I want to do this now," he sniffed defensively.

She gave him a half-grin, her eyes locked on his lap. "That's not what I'm seeing. And that's quite an impressive weapon you've got there." In an instant she had unsnapped her own trousers and stepped out of them. "I can't wait."

He watched, dazed, as she removed her lace panties and teasingly twirled them around her finger before slinging them across the room. She was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Her body was a series of long, lean lines, slinky and sensual, from her firm hips to her pert, rounded breasts. Every ounce of his blood pumped frantically to his groin at the sight of her, demanding satisfaction.

If he knew that he would, indeed, die tomorrow, he could still never find the words to describe her, or the way she made him feel right now.

But if his indecisiveness had led to this, it was worth it. This moment was worth everything.

She leaned into him, her fingertips tickling the nape of his neck, nipples puckering in anticipation. “Russ? Would you mind...” She paused, biting her lip. “Would you mind touching my tits? I’ve always loved watching you work with your hands.”

He needed no further prompting. His mouth went dry as he cupped them immediately, watched them form to his hands, the nipples pouting for attention. Smooth, supple, and honey-soft. He knew they would be.

They’d been meant for him all along.

His hands began to squeeze, ever so lightly, as she thrummed deep in her throat in response.

“That’s nice.” And then she was straddling him again, running a teasing finger along his length as he felt it expand into aching, iron insistence. “There now—that isn’t so bad, is it?”

“Well...no...” He was losing his mind...

“So, what do you think, partner?” She cooed wickedly into his ear. “Can I persuade you to take a stab at it?”

If she only knew. His heated head was trembling hungrily, weeping for the soft mound of her pubis. She was ready for him. He could feel how hot she was, how moist; and he had not needed to lift a finger. Eyes ovaled in disbelief, he held his breath to keep from exploding as she slowly, wrapped a coaxing hand around him. “Yes. Oh, god, Iris, yes...”

Lights. He was so turned on, so eager that he’d forgotten to breathe. The lack of air was causing him to see sparks, little bursts of white as he waited to feel her envelope him...

“Russ!”

Her hold on him abruptly loosened, and he jumped at the tone of her voice.

“Russ, the lights! The lights are blinking back on!”

CHAPTER 5

Iris pushed hard against his chest, launching her body away from him. “Russ! The power! It’s coming back on!”

He quickly rolled to his feet, his brain clicking into gear. The lights were flickering, as if gasping for air, and there might be no time to lose. “The television!”

She was running frantically around the room, oblivious to the fact that they were both still naked. “The remote! Oh, God, oh God, where is it?”

“Damn the remote!” He leaped over the top of the couch, fell to one knee, and stumbled toward the set. “Hit the switch!”

The house hummed to life for a brief, bright moment. The lights blazed like small, second suns to eyes now accustomed to the shadows, and the old furnace in the basement chugged slowly into operation. Even the sound of the refrigerator could be heard between

the grumbling blasts of thunder, buzzing noisily as if to make up for lost time.

Russ scrambled across the floor, stretching, reaching for all he was worth for the power button that would turn the television on. It was a thin, metal rectangle at the bottom left of the large set, situated right next to the two for volume, two for color, and one for switching antennas. He landed on his stomach, arm extended, his fingertip touching cold steel.

But he managed to push a button. And another. And another. He seemed to be making contact with all of them, except the one he wanted.

“That’s it!” The switch moved beneath his finger, and the implosive noise of the television coming on rewarded him. “That’s it. I’ve got it!”

A small diamond of white light pulsed in the center of the set and slowly began a diffused spread across the dark screen.

Russell held his breath once again. They had to know, had to find out for sure what the hell was going on. “C’mon, baby, c’mon,” he muttered. “Give.”

The lights around them blinked, sizzled, and died once again with a queer, sobbing sound.

“Shit!”

He pummeled the floor with his fist, cursing furiously, then lay prostrate against the cold, hard planks.

It wasn't fair. None of this was fair. Either he should be listening to the news right now, or getting the lay of his life. He was getting screwed in every *other* way imaginable.

With a frustrated twist of his body, he sat cross-legged on the floor and glanced in dismay at his loins.

Gone. The mood. The delicious anticipation. The chance to feed his voracious hunger for her. The lights. And the biggest, hottest hard-on he'd ever had in his life. Gone. All gone.

Maybe God was feminine after all.

“Iris?”

He turned to find her jamming her legs into her trousers. She didn't even bother with her undies. Shimmying into his oversized shirt, Iris began to search the room without uttering a word.

Russ scooped her panties up from the floor, allowing them to dangle from the tip of his finger. “Unless there really is a New World

Order,” he said quietly, “these should probably be worn *underneath* your pants.”

She dropped to her knees, peering beneath the couch. “That’s not what I’m looking for.”

“Then would you mind telling me what you are doing?”

“We have been so wrong. No, no; *I’ve* been wrong.” There was a slight quaver in her voice, just enough to make his heart muscles tighten. “We should’ve been ready, should’ve been sitting there with our fingers on the buttons, should have made sure the TV and radio were in the ‘on’ position. Our whole world could be going to hell in a handbasket, and I waste time insisting that we play this--this silly game.”

He had to be careful. She was just a nudge away from hysteria. “Actually, I was beginning to enjoy the ‘game’. Just a little.”

“You don’t have to be nice about it. I was being short-sighted and selfish. I should’ve obeyed my first instinct.”

“And that was...?”

“To haul my butt into town and find out what’s really going on. Have you seen my shoes?”

Russ casually reclined on his left side, resting on his elbow—just enough to hide the discarded shoes from sight. “Iris. My nearest neighbor is nearly three miles away. Corinth is a good eight. You’ll never make it in this weather.”

“Wanna bet?”

He didn’t dare. Iris was a competitor. She’d take him up on it, just to prove that she could do it. “Iris—”

A glassy reflection of the fire ran in a red stream down her wet cheeks. “Thomas is miles and miles away in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He’s my only brother, and he just got promoted to Corporal, and his girlfriend is pregnant. They’re planning to get married in a couple of months or so, and raise their children to be healthy and happy. My mother just moved to Florida, Russ. You know how hard she worked her whole life at that damn post office. She deserves a lot of retirement time to make up for it. She’s been struggling alone for so many years now, and I can’t bear the thought that she might need me, and I can’t be there for her. I need to know what’s going on. And I don’t want to wait two days or weeks or *whatever* to find out. Now, where did I put—”

“I won’t let you go.”

“Oh, really?” she laughed shortly. “And how did you think you were going to stop me?”

“Simple.” With a grand flourish, he tossed her tennis shoes, one at a time, into the nearby flames.

Her mouth fell open as she watched, horrified. “You didn’t! Oh, no, you didn’t!” She rushed over to grab one of the pokers, trying to rake them out of the flames. “Are you out of your mind?!”

“I must be.” He rose and, calmly climbing back into his jeans, removed the iron implement from her hand, returning it to its place. “I’ll go.”

“What?”

A huge blast of wind rattled the frosted windows of the old house. “I said I’ll go.”

* * *

She watched him prepare to leave with mixed emotions as she huddled into the curve of the couch. “Layered clothing.”

Russ paused, giving a strangling twist to the laces of his boots. “What?”

They were good, practical boots, she noted, with rubber soles and enough tread to rival that of a tire. Good. She wanted him to

have every advantage. “They say layered clothing is the key to keeping warm in the cold.”

He climbed into a thick, cable-knit sweater and tucked his jeans inside the boots. “I’ve been dressing myself for a coupla years now, Iris. I think I can manage.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted him to manage. She didn’t want him to dress. She wanted him as he’d been, his skin hot and bare to her touch. She wanted to taste him, to feel him slowly filling her. But most of all, she wanted him safe, right here with her.

But she needed to know the truth.

She curled her bare feet beneath her, hating the feeling of helplessness. “Are you sure it’s best to take the car? Maybe you should walk. It might be safer.”

“I’d be a popsicle in less than a mile. And if I should fall and break something, you’d have nobody to seduce.” He bit his lip to suppress a smile. “And then hour by hour, minute by minute the thought of dying celibate would possess you, eat away at your good breeding, and you’d wind up sitting here playing with yourself while I became road-kill in the making, and that would really piss me off.”

She sighed. “You are one sick pup, Russell Carr.” She wanted to laugh, to give him the encouragement he needed, but she couldn’t seem to manage it. She was having enough trouble holding back her tears.

Pulling on a thick, goose-down parka, he searched the shelf at the top of the closet for his leather gloves. “As soon as I get to town, I’ll hit the video store and pick up that ‘Attack of the Killer Tomatoes’ tape. I was considering ‘War of the Worlds’, but that’s hitting a little too close to home just now. Anything for you?”

“Chinese,” she said softly. He really didn’t want to go either. He was doing this for her, practically risking his neck for her. “I’d like a little more Chinese take-out food. This time with better fortunes.”

“Done.”

She followed him to the door, dragging her feet as he pocketed his keys. It suddenly occurred to her that she might never see him again. A childish thought, a foolish one. But she couldn’t shake it off. “This is all Charlene Weller’s fault, y’know.”

“Who?”

“Charlene Weller.”

He hesitated with his hand on the knob, blinking back at her.
“Who the hell is Charlene Weller?”

“You brought her to my brother’s eighteenth birthday party. You were twenty years old. She wore a 38D and lipstick and expensive perfume. She was the prettiest girl in town. I was fourteen and a half, with a big zit on my forehead and a broken toe from trying too hard to win a dance competition.”

“It rings a bell,” he replied cautiously. “But how do you figure that poor Charlene’s responsible for all of this?”

She raised her shoulders, as if warding off a chill. “Because that’s when I knew. That’s when I realized that you wouldn’t wait for me.”

Russ stood absolutely still, his keys slicing into his hands and saying nothing.

“Not that I expected you to,” she added hastily. “But I wanted you to.” Iris fastened her eyes on the floor, avoiding his. What was she doing? This wasn’t the time for pointless confessions. He didn’t need this now. It could be done later, when he came back to her. And he *must* come back to her. “You wouldn’t understand. It was all a silly, little-girl kinda thing.”

“So I’ve never been a little girl. So tell me anyway.”

She hesitated, sorry she’d brought it up. As if her attempt to seduce him hadn’t been embarrassing enough! “I...I just had a lot of silly ideas about you. I mean, you were this strong, silent masculine archetype to me. Thomas was so into his girls and sports, and with Daddy gone—well, it was like you were the last man on earth to me. The only real man left. I guess I needed to have *somebody* to believe in, y’know?”

Russell remained silent and still.

Iris took a deep breath, and the words, at last, broke free. “You were older, and I could never seem to catch up to you, and you just thought I was this pest of a lanky kid, and you always had all these silly women chasing you and I never wanted to be like that. I wanted to be better than that, more important to you.” Her voice tightened, hoarsened as he stared at her. “Except for that one night. That night I wanted to be Charlene Weller.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he reached out to touch her, to run a light finger across the cheek that, minutes ago, had been wet with tears.

“And little girls have silly thoughts, ideas that are hard to dismiss even after you’re all grown-up and sensible,” she continued shakily. “I always blamed Charlene, because I could never be like that. And if it weren’t for her and all the others like her, you might’ve waited for me. And then I wouldn’t have needed Milton or Gary, or anybody else, because you’d secretly wanted me all along.” She sniffed, trying to smile. “Silly stuff, I know.”

“A crush,” he murmured, his sharp eyes holding hers. “It was just a schoolgirl crush. But maybe...maybe if I had known...”

Her fingernails sank painfully into her palms. “Maybe what?”

He tilted his head, staring at her mouth, and for a moment she thought he might kiss her. And then she found herself praying that he would. It might be their last chance. “Maybe I would have tried to wait.” He grazed her bottom lip with his thumb. “For you, Iris—maybe I would’ve waited until hell froze over.” He brusquely removed his hand and shoved it into his glove, gesturing toward the icy world outside. “And see? I *did!*”

She loosely wrapped her arms around his neck, hiding her tears behind her eyelids, afraid that if she held him too tightly she could not let him go.

Russ gave her a gentle, friendly pat on her back, then quickly turned away, shoving the bolt back on the door. It immediately flew open, propelled by the gale, and he zipped his coat, prepared to do battle.

“I want you to stay down here, right here, by the fire,” he ordered, turning to her one last time. “Don’t let it go out, and don’t go wandering around the house. There are a few bad floorboards here and there. The radio in the kitchen’s set to ‘on’, so if the power comes back, grab a listen. Don’t leave, and don’t sit around worrying. I don’t wanna worry about you worrying. And above all, you keep this door locked. If it’s not bolted, it has a tendency to gradually swing open. I’ve got my key, so don’t unlock it for anybody. If something has happened out here, there might be people...” He paused, and she understood that he was trying not to frighten her. “There might be people looking for a handout.”

She nodded, trying to find words, sure that her heart had given up the ghost. But she would not cry, refused to cry, even though her parting view of him was blurred by a veil of tears.

She couldn’t even feel the cold whipped in by the ferocious wind. She felt completely numb. “You hurry back, Russell Carr.

Don't you leave me here all alone. I need you. For the work, of course," she added too hastily. "We have a business to run. We wouldn't want to disappoint our customers."

He seemed to be about to speak, but turned abruptly away, waving, and took his first cautious steps toward the car.

"Russ!!"

He stopped again and nearly fell, shielding his eyes from the pellets of ice as he struggled with the storm.

What to say? What could she say? She wanted to tell him that she loved him, that she had always loved him, that she really didn't want him to go and that she would die if he didn't come back to her... "Never mind."

"What?"

The wind was drowning out her voice. The voice of the little girl who couldn't catch up. And maybe that was just as well. "Never mind about the Chinese food. Just drive safely!"

She saw his grin beneath the gap of the parka's hood as he waved once again. "Then maybe I'll have time to look up Charlene," he shouted back. "I hear she's still in town..."

She laughed, unable to stop herself, and slammed the door behind him. Running to the nearest window, she held her breath until she saw him climb into the car, let the engine warm, and take off at a snail's pace down the drive.

And then she cried for all she was worth, burying her face in the hem of the shirt that still smelled of him as the storm relentlessly battered the building, the only sound now in the still, small silence.

CHAPTER 6

A wayward shutter, loosened by the powerful winds, banged relentlessly against the upper floor of the house as Iris stared into the flames, unconsciously counting every blow.

She wondered what time it was. Without the electricity, there seemed to be no way to tell. The dull gray skies of morning had become the leaden skies of afternoon, blending perfectly together in a depressing watercolor wash. She had failed to bring her watch, and God only knew where Russell had left his. He made his own time.

The exact hour of day was irrelevant, of course; but the number of passing minutes made all the difference in the world. She could not tell how long he'd been gone, couldn't even speculate on how long it might take him to return.

It already seemed like hours.

Despite the large size of the house, she was already beginning to feel like a prisoner. A prisoner not only confined to one room, but tormented by the blustery, repetitive sounds of rampaging nature.

And tortured by the thought that Russell was out there alone and vulnerable to the storm, and she could do nothing to help.

The sleet dinged like popcorn against the roof, and she gazed sadly at the buttered bowls and champagne flutes from the night before. What would it have been like, she wondered wistfully, to make love with him...

“No!” she shouted, startled at the sound of her own voice. “No, not making love. Sex. Just plain, simple, raw, down and dirty sex. ‘Fucking buddies’. That’s all we’d be, just until this nightmare is over, and...”

A sizzling flash of lightning, immediately followed by a deafening explosion of thunder made her hold onto the sofa for dear life. “That’s it,” she whispered. “The earth is going to open up and swallow me any minute, just for telling that lie.”

As if agreeing, the earth seemed to tremble and heave, and another ear-razing sound brought her quickly to her feet and racing toward the window.

Almost afraid to look, Iris yanked the curtains back. Something had happened, something that made the house shudder on its foundations, as if in fear.

She was not superstitious. She did not believe in omens. But the sight of the huge old maple, toppled by the tempest, its clawing, brittle branches laying claim to half of the garage roof, took her breath away.

It had landed exactly where Russ had been parked, where she had last seen him get into his car.

She clutched at the curtain in fear. It meant nothing. He was fine. He was a strong, capable man. And he would return to her in a short time, laughing about how silly they'd been and teasing her about her eagerness to abandon her celibacy, and about giant tomatoes chasing people down the streets of the city.

She was perilously close to crying again, and she would not have it. She was of no use to him right now, but, at least, she could make herself somewhat useful here.

Iris stoked the fire, adding fresh logs and removing the remnants of her shoes so that it burned with a cheerful intensity. She cleared all of the dirty dishes, tempted to wash them, but decided it

would be best to save the water. She lugged the sofa closer to the heat, and whimsically arranged the pillows so that they would be perfectly positioned for the two of them to lie there together.

Because no matter what news Russell brought back with him, she fully intended to end her celibacy—with him.

Grabbing the remaining full bottle of champagne, she parked it in what was now the slush of his ice cube bin and removed a rubbery package of thawing steaks. Placing it near the heat of the flames, she paused, wishing she had something delicious to wear for him. For all he meant to her, and all he'd tried to do to set her mind at ease.

The groaning sound of the felled tree, still buffeted and stirring on its side, brought her quickly back to reality. What if it should continue to move, if it should roll right against the house? What if she needed to clear quickly out? He'd burned her damned shoes! She couldn't run, couldn't find shelter...

And then she froze, her bare feet adhering to the floor. There it was again.

It was not her imagination.

There, between the death moans of the tree and the galloping thunder--there was the same mournful sound that she'd heard before, drifting up from the bowels of the house.

And it was not the wind. She was sure of that—and of what to do now.

* * *

“Easy, baby. Steady as she goes. There’s a good girl.”

Russell cooed softly and patted the dashboard of the car as if he were comforting a skittish pet.

He had stopped in the middle of the road, allowing himself a moment to breathe and to still his hyperactive heartbeat. It was a relief to be *able* to stop; he'd only managed a few hundred yards, and even that had felt like sailing a glider on glass.

The hill from his house seemed longer than it ever had this day.

Perhaps it was because he was preoccupied with other things.

Generally, he wasn't one to worry. It was pointless. Life took care of itself. And even today, with his world turned upside-down, he wasn't really worried.

He was afraid.

He'd never been so macho that he couldn't be honest with himself. The slow drive down the hill was scaring the shit out of him. There seemed to be no road, nothing for the tires to cling to.

And the storm seemed to have worsened. He was surprised to see the small aluminum storage shed that housed his riding mower and gardening equipment still stood intact on the opposite edge of his hill; but the small amount of road he'd managed so far had been littered with broken branches, and icicles grew between earth and trees, like the path through a gigantic, frigid cave. Other than his sighting of a small red car, eerily driverless and abandoned on the side of the road, there was no sign of animal life, no trace of the rabbits or deer who frequented his property. Even the birds had deserted the skies.

They'd taken shelter, of course, as anything in its right mind would do. He was the only lunatic on the loose, trying to verify the continued existence of the human race—if it still deserved to exist.

But this was not what frightened him. It was the gangly little girl who'd grown into a woman and secretly stolen his heart that scared him.

She had confessed to having a childhood crush on him. Was it possible that those feelings were still there, that they ran deeper than the friendship he'd thought?

"She was just frightened. This shit is suicide. And I'm an idiot. Let's go, sweetheart." With the Jeep in low, and his boot barely an inch off the brake pedal, he continued his creeping pace down the decline.

Unfortunately, that truncated bit of conversation changed his life nearly as much as the snippet of news from the television. He knew he loved her. The idea of marriage had occurred to him more than once. But as long as she just thought of him as a 'friend', it was hopeless. What was he going to do--casually bring up a conversation and propose out of the blue?

She'd never take him seriously.

And there was always the chance that he might convince her with time—but he couldn't wait. He needed to touch her, to feel her respond, to lose himself inside of her, and he needed it now. The desire he felt for her far outweighed any sense of practicality.

And once he'd gotten her into his bed, he could gradually establish a more serious relationship.

However...

If it was possible that she *already* loved him...

Like a cat who'd suddenly decided to chase it's tail, the car made a sharp turn, did a three-sixty on the ice, and settled back on course, it's nose straight, the tires mere feet away from where they began.

Russell opened his mouth to curse, realized it was too late, that the vehicle had already righted itself, and clung to the steering wheel with a cramped grip, turning the radio on and allowing the static to keep him company.

But if she loved him...

* * *

Russell's hand gun.

She rapidly retrieved it from the old seafaring trunk that served as his coffee table. She'd spotted it there before, when he'd been searching for customer contracts he'd recently misplaced. The snub-nosed .38 looked clean and ready to use, and, pointing it carefully away from herself, she checked it for ammunition.

Empty. Great. Mr. Safety-First.

She emptied the trunk.

Nothing.

And she had neither the patience nor the nerve to search every corner of the damned house for bullets. It was bad enough not knowing what she'd find in one room.

The basement.

The woeful wailing increased in volume, and she steeled herself for combat. So she'd have to gut it out. She could do it. She was an empowered woman. She had the pistol and a steady hand. And whoever was in the basement didn't *know* she didn't have bullets.

Unless, of course, that *who* was a *what*. And then the ammunition might not matter anyway...

Somewhat surprised by her own gumption, Iris made her way to the basement door and tentatively turned the knob.

The low, mourning cry immediately ceased.

Her throat was dry and tight, but she managed to shout in a raspy, trembling voice.

"Whoever you are, I've got a gun!!"

Glad beyond belief that no one responded to her war cry, she took a deep, bracing breath, emphatically straightened her back, and pulled the door open.

*

*

*

But if she loved him, it made all the difference in the world.

He'd wanted—*needed*—to get her into his bed. As soon as possible. It would not only solve the problem of his miserably sleepless nights, but set the stage for what could become a *real* future together.

He had to get back to her. He had to find out whether he was still a 'big-brother-idol' sort of figure to her--or whether he had noticed a glimmer of something else in her speech, her eyes. Something he was dying to see.

And wasn't he being silly, after all. He should be as honest as he wanted her to be. Truth was always the best path to take.

Russ unconsciously drew in a hopeful breath as he reached the bottom of the long hill, and, with infinite patience and caution, inched the wheel to the right, around the broad curve that would lead to his neighbor's house.

For a moment, a fleeting moment of light-headed giddiness, he allowed himself to smile at the senseless chatter of the static, at the Iris-filled images that crowded his mind.

And before that moment had ripened and passed, the old Jeep sailed weightlessly sideways, carrying him swiftly, silently away from the surety of his road and down the deadly embankment below.

* * *

She'd have to have a nice, long talk with Russell once he got back. No emergency supplies, no generator, and the stream of light from the flashlight he'd left her was decidedly weak. Low batteries. Of course.

Hadn't everything else gone wrong?

With the flashlight and gun in hand, she propped the baseball bat she'd also brought with her against the doorjamb. If whoever was haunting the house should challenge the empty gun, she had a backup. And she'd been known to swing a mean stick.

The basement was nearly pitch black, illuminated by only four small windows, widely spaced and dulled with ice. The fury of the storm was muffled down here, making the daytime darkness seem even more eerie.

She carefully made her way down the thirteen stairs, lighting one at a time, until she reached the cold concrete of bottom. Flashing

the hazy beam on her immediate surroundings, she breathed for the first time since she'd opened the door.

The basement was large but fairly empty, and there seemed to be nothing unusual in sight.

She examined the room from the foot of the stairs. There were cleaning utensils, a few closed crates and boxes, a spare toilet and a washer and dryer in a small laundry nook in the back, and Russ' woodworking bench and tools in the middle of the floor. Everything in its place.

Clearing her throat of fear, she yelled across the room, rather than risk the crossing.

"Hello?"

A slight, hollow echo mimicked her in response.

"Hello, is anybody down here?" Iris shifted from freezing bare foot to foot, ready to take off at the slightest sound. "You might as well know up front that I'm not alone in the house. And I do know how to use this."

Iris started, for only an instant, at the vague sound of something like paper shuffling, and immediately retreated, taking back two of

the steps, legs poised like springs beneath her. “Whoever you are, I’m not kidding. I know you’re down here. Show yourself!”

She immediately regretted her bravado speech.

Whatever it was had finally decided to respond.

Her heart swelled into her throat, nearly suffocating her, as she detected the sound of rapid, heavy breathing. Frantically trying to follow the noise with the weak light, she backed up another step, and then another as it seemed to move toward her, louder now, keeping to the shadows, a dark, formless thing darting between objects.

“Stop!”

It was too fast, too clever.

Her voice became high with hysterics. “Stop, or I swear I’ll shoot!”

Whatever it was didn’t seem to be buying the lie. She watched the mop in the nearby corner teeter then fall, the handle hitting the hard floor with a sharp crack.

Swinging the flashlight in a dizzying arc around the room, she still saw nothing. But she could hear it breathing, raspy and dangerous, and the sound of something scraping against the floor as it moved...

Claws. Whatever the thing was, it had claws.

And when a small cardboard box a few yards away skidded toward her, pushed away from the wall, she decided it was time.

It was time to give up the bravado and go for survival.

And the bat.

She turned, tripped, and immediately scrambled back to her feet, remembering every fool woman in every scary movie she'd ever seen who had fallen down and been destroyed. Even with limbs leadened by fright, visions of being dragged back down the steps by some sharp, cloying hand spurred her on.

Hastily dropping the useless gun, she locked her hands about the flashlight as she focused it directly on each step before her—one, then another, then another, and another...

She could feel the warm air of the living room drifting through the open door ahead, and, at last, caught sight of the bat, leaning, waiting against the frame.

She didn't have a gun. But she did have a weapon.

Abruptly, before she could reach it, before she could even think of being afraid, a scream trilled from her throat, and she nearly fell backward, away from the horrible sight.

Away from the bloodied creature who reared up before her,
barring the doorway which led out of the basement—and to freedom.

CHAPTER 7

There was blood everywhere.

And to her mind, still charged with adrenalin, it seemed the only bright color she'd seen since the blackout.

Only now, now that she could feel her heart settled in her chest again and warmth returning to her limbs—only now did she become aware that she had blood on her pants, her shirt, even on her bare feet.

And she couldn't have cared less, as she busied herself effectively cutting off the breath of the man who had nearly frightened her to death.

Gingerly pinching his nostrils shut, she urged him into a forward sitting position, pressing his head down. "Hold your nose."

Russell complied, sighing through chattering teeth. "It isn't as bad as it looks."

“It couldn’t be.” She blinked away her tears. Whether they were the result of sorrow or relief she could not tell. “Let’s get you out of that coat.”

Iris struggled with the frozen zipper, then slipped the ice-encased jacket from his shoulders, shaking her head in dismay as it crackled like a shattering outer shell.

He was still shivering, and small rivulets of water ran down his face from his thawing hair and eyebrows. And he looked absolutely miserable.

“Sit right here,” she chided. “Don’t you move.”

He nodded, his voice nasal. “Always obey a woman with a bat, an empty gun, and a scream that could shatter your eardrums.”

Hurrying into the kitchen, she dampened a dishtowel with a trace of cold water from the faucet. Sadly removing the bottle of champagne from the freezer, she deftly loaded a plastic baggie with icy slush and returned to his side.

He sucked in a shuddering breath when she placed the ice on his nose and gently draped the towel over the back of his neck. “Iris, I need to tell you—”

“It’s not important, really.” She carefully dabbed at the dried blood on his face with a diluted mixture of alcohol and water. “It’s only important that you came back to me.”

“I hear that broken noses give a man character.”

She pulled the bloodstained sweater over his head and removed his boots as he tried to breathe normally. “I hear that, if they’re bad enough, they require medical attention. Something we’re sorely lacking at the moment.”

“I screwed up, Iris. I tried, I really tried to get there. I didn’t want to let you down.” He seemed to be searching her face for some sign of disappointment in him. “Just couldn’t make it. Sorry.”

“Stop that, or I’ll bloody your nose again.” Tossing a colorful old quilt about his shoulders, she hung the jacket upon a hook near the fire to dry. “We’ll be able to make our own horror movie by the time this is all over. Can you feel all of your fingers and toes? Any dizziness, headache?”

“No.” He grabbed her hand as she approached, his eyes intent. “You’ve got to listen to me. I wanted to do this. I *needed* to do this. To see if anybody out there was in trouble, to prove that it was all a

mistake, that the rest of the world was safe and sound, so that you...so we could..."

He stared into the fire. "I made it down the hill. Took half of it sideways, but I made it. Figured that was the worst of it. Didn't see anything out of the ordinary, except for some old, abandoned car, so I headed for my neighbor's place. I think I was about halfway between here and there when the car started sliding on that slow, lazy curve at the bottom. Like sailing on ice. Not a damn thing I could do.

"Before I knew it, I was sledding down an embankment. I thought I'd hit a tree, and good night Russ. Skidded into a big rock instead. She rolled. A minute later, I was upside down. Guess I must've hit my nose."

She gently squeezed his hand. "I guess."

"So, there I was, icing up in this pinched-in metal can. And I had to choose; either make my way to the neighbor's house and see if they and the rest of the world were okay..." He held her hand to his cold cheek. "Or to say the hell with the rest of the world. And to come back here and be sure *you* were okay." He shrugged. "Here I am."

Damn her, she would cry anyway. She scraped her tears impatiently away, smoothing the frown from his forehead with a gentle kiss. “Thank God.”

“You always thought...” He released her hand, huddling beneath the blanket. “You always thought of me as some sort of big, protective brother, I think. I hate the idea of letting you down.”

Why did everything he said make her cry? “Russell Carr, I’ve always loved you. You know that. You could never disappoint me. Now, give me those pants.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said give me your—”

He held onto his belt, pulling away from her. “Why?” he growled defensively. “What did you have in mind?”

Iris gaped at him, laughing with surprise. “I have it in mind that you’re letting me off easy with this little story of yours. That you’re not telling me the whole, hard truth. The seat and knees of your pants are torn. It looks like you spent a lot of time on them while trying to make it back here. Your kneecaps are bordering on blue and aiming for purple. You’re bloodied, beat up, and half frozen—partly because I was silly enough to let you make the attempt.

I'm just trying to help, and if you weren't so busy being so stubborn and hard-headed you'd let me."

"I'm being hard-headed?" He sat up straight, eyebrows raised. "I seem to remember that the last thing I told you was to keep your trim little ass right here, safely in front of the fire. But *nooooo*...the new, improved Miss Alpha Female has to go exploring and scare the shit out of *both* of us."

"Russell, there's something in that basement."

He dropped his head between his knees, shaking it in despair. "And you were going to take it on with an empty gun and a flashlight that was damn near dead."

"Well, what did you expect?" She'd raised her voice, despite her best intentions. "You torch my shoes so I can't run away, and leave me trapped here with that—that whatever it is..."

"Iris. I checked the basement before I left. I told you, there's nothing there."

"I heard it! I heard it breathing, running around the place on little monster paws! It knocked the mop down and made the box scoot away from the wall and—"

"Rats."

“I beg your pardon?”

“It was probably just a rat. I’ve had one or two down there since I moved in the joint. It happens in rural areas, hon. Like erections in the morning.”

She fixed her jaw and determinedly shook her head. “Not unless they’re the size of a raccoon and living down there has made them asthmatic.”

Russell removed the damp towel from his neck and dabbed at his nose. “Food of the Gods.’ Great old cult horror movie. Giant rats and all, devouring everything in sight.”

“Is this your idea of making me feel better?”

“I’m sorry.” The stream of blood from his nose had nearly stopped. “You want comfort and reassurance; somebody to tell you that everything is going to be okay. I’m sorry. Guess I’ve never been very good with words.”

She shrugged, feeling slightly guilty. After what he’d been through, it was petty of her to complain about something as silly as a rodent. Even if it was the size of a pony. “No, no, *I’m* sorry. I’m probably overreacting again. We’re both on edge. We just need to relax. Let’s start with getting you out of those wet pants.”

He leaked bright red polka dots of blood onto the towel. “I’m not going to sleep with you, Iris.”

Her hands fell out of the slit of her pocket. “Wha—what? What did you say?”

“I said we’re not going to have sex. It ain’t gonna happen. So, if your runaway imagination is right, and we are the last two people on earth, I guess the human race can call it a day.”

CHAPTER 8

“You realize, of course, that we’re a little too close-quartered for you to keep ignoring me.”

Iris continued to stare out of the window at the fallen tree, all rough bark and stiff limbs delicately frosted with a silvery sheen of ice. “The sleet seems to have stopped. But I don’t think Hell’s quite thawed out yet.”

Russell winced at the hostility in her voice. She wouldn’t even turn to look at him. “No, but the steak you left out has. I can cook dinner for us. Aren’t you hungry?”

She pointedly ignored him, and he wound the blanket he’d secured from upstairs more tightly around himself. Damn, the room felt colder. “We could try a game of Scrabble. You’re probably bored to death.”

“That’s quite all right. I think I’ve had enough truth spelled out for me today.”

She was wallowing. And she was very good at it. And he couldn't believe how unwittingly, how *easily*, he'd inflicted pain on the person he cared most about in the world. "I know it's hard to tell, but you've been sitting there for nearly two hours."

She gave an impressive imitation of the terse, staccato speech of Rod Serling. "There is a fifth dimension. A dimension beyond time. It's called The Rejection Zone. I bid you welcome."

He felt like cowering beneath the coverlet. They'd spent the last two hours dancing around each other, as he tried to explain without telling her everything.

How was it possible he'd handled all of this so badly? "Iris. You're being unreasonable."

"If the temperature rises a few more degrees, we can get the devil out of here. And I can't wait. Hell, I won't even need shoes. I can ride the elephant you've got lurking in the basement."

"Alright, alright, you win!" He threw up his arms, surrendering. "Fine. Seduce me, if that'll make you happy. I'll willingly sacrifice my bod. Take me. Use me. Anything to end the silent treatment."

She glared at him, incredulous. "You must have lost what little mind you came back here with."

He barely managed to fend off a grin. Lord, they were beginning to sound like an old married couple. And that idea sat surprisingly well with him. “You could give me a chance to explain.”

“Sure. Why not?” She gestured eloquently, her long fingers moving like butterflies through the air. “Everybody wants a blow by blow description of why they’re not sexually attractive.”

“I never said—”

“And you seriously believe that I would want to touch you now?”

“If you would just listen—”

“The thunder’s moving away. It sounds fainter, like muted timpani. The storm may be over. Maybe we’ll know the truth soon.”

“You’re going to hear the truth right now.” With one powerful heave of his arms, he turned her small armchair to face him. “And you’re going to stop pouting like a little girl who didn’t get exactly what she wanted for Christmas. And you’re going to be logical and stop giving me the damn weather reports and listen to what I’m saying.” He hesitated as she looked at him expectantly, suddenly stumped.

Christ, what was he going to say?

“I...I can’t have sex with you because I brought you here to have sex with you.”

Iris calmly crossed her arms and legs, nodding. “And *I’m* being illogical?”

“This is gonna be tricky to explain, so stay with me for a minute.” He took a deep breath. She had to understand. She had to. His butt was sore, his knees were swelling, and his nose was probably broken. But the only thing that mattered to him right now was that she understand. Even if they never became lovers, he needed her in his life.

“I had an ulterior motive for bringing you here last night.”

“If you’re going to tell me that this was all some sort of sick Halloween prank...”

“I brought you here last night to tell you that I wanted to become your lover.”

Iris’ expression remained unchanged. There was only the hard blinking of her eyes to indicate that she’d heard him at all.

No matter. He’d come this far. He couldn’t turn back now.

He heaved a great sigh, as if a weight had been removed from his shoulders and, smiling, continued. “I knew it would be hard, but I

had no idea how hard. You've just been so off men, so determined not to make the same mistake. And then you were going on about only becoming involved with somebody you didn't care *anything* about. Made it even more difficult. I was having a helluva time trying to figure out how to broach the subject.

“And then you handed it to me on a silver platter! You offered to seduce *me*. It seemed to solve the problem, and...and I admit that I couldn't resist the idea of having you touch me, getting me all heavy and hot. I have waited so long to...” He paused, losing the words. “It seemed like a God-given gift! And I was sure that, once we did it, I could persuade you to consider having a relationship. A purely sexual one, of course,” he added hastily.

“It wasn't *really* a deception. I never actually said I didn't want you—but I wasn't really honest about how much I did. And that really bothers me. So here I am, being noble again, and refusing to sleep with you under false pretenses.” He grinned happily, glad to have gotten it all out. “Understand?”

She casually examined her fingernails. “You don't have to make excuses, Carr, especially pathetic ones. You don't want to have sex.

I'm a big girl. I can deal with it. You didn't really think I'd believe this crap, did you?"

"But you have to believe me! It's the truth! Do you think I'd lie to you about something like this?"

"According to what you just said, you've been lying to me for the past two days. Which lie is it that you want me to believe now?"

Damn him, he'd asked her to be logical. And she was right. Everything had become so twisted between them that *he* was having trouble remembering everything he'd said.

"Alright. That's it. Get up." He yanked her to her feet and practically dragged her up the stairs. "We're going to get this straight right now. Let's go."

"Where?"

"To my bedroom."

"Russell Carr, I have no intention of—"

"You have to know what you *want* before you know what you *intend*. That was *your* mistake." He led her firmly by the arm, allowing the quilt to trail behind them. "And I should've made it clear that I intended to become your lover from the beginning. That was my mistake. Idiot that I am, I've been so damned worried about

being in love with you that I forgot who I was. I don't need to *ask* you to come to my bed." He paused with her on the landing, felt his eyes become dangerously dilated. "You'll give yourself to me because you want it as much as I do—if not more. Understand?"

"That rock must have scrambled your brain if you really believe I'd—" She stared at him. "Love? Did you say—"

"Never mind that," he snapped. "Enough of this tiptoeing around. Get in here."

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He entered the room ahead of her, carefully lighting the single candle there as she huffed in the doorway.

"If you think you can bully me into believing you—"

"This is my bedroom. I want you to see it."

"I've seen it. I'm not exactly new to the house, and I'm not one of your silly women. Wanna impress me? Pull out some kind of laser weapon to kill that Godzilla that lives below."

"All I'm asking you to do is *look*." He curled his arm around her waist, drawing her in. "Tell me what you see."

She sighed impatiently, her eyes darting about the wavering shadows. “I see that you threw your bloody clothes on the floor and left them there.”

“Not that. I’ve always been a slob. You know that. What else?”

Iris stood rigidly beside him, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She wasn’t in the mood for this game. There could be little about the room to surprise her. It had always been as spartan and bare essentially as the rest of the house, as uncomplicated as it’s owner. One queen-size bed, a full-length mirror, it’s frame six inches wide and hand-carved by him; a small chest that held his clothes, and a rickety old rocking chair.

But its owner, apparently, was not as uncomplicated as he’d seemed.

There was a magnificent royal blue comforter on the bed, plump and ripe with down, it’s upper corner turned teasingly back. The candle he’d lit glowed gold and smelled of spring flowers, and he’d put thick, cranberry-colored draperies in the place of the headboard, as if to shield the intimate scene from prying eyes.

But the biggest change, the largest shadow to catch her eye was cast by a large, rectangular divider which separated the bed from the

rest of the room—from the world itself. She nearly gasped at the sight of the multitude of supple, orgiastic figures as they danced in the wavering golden light, their intimacies brought to life right before her eyes.

“The *Screen*. The one you refused to give Milton. The one you wouldn’t let me even wave a paintbrush at. That gorgeous screen you created out of that magnificent burlwood, and refused to sell. So this is where you put it.”

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Russell’s hand tightened about her waistline, splaying across her stomach and gradually drifting lower. “I put it here because it was the best thing I’d ever done. I put it here because you’re the only person in the world I could imagine sharing it with.” His forefinger lingered on the indentation of her bellybutton. “I put it here to keep the outside world outside, to create my own very private...place, I guess you’d call it.”

He sighed, obviously frustrated at the inadequacy of his choice of words. “I was never able to *explain* how much it meant to me, how I carved out every ivy leaf, every acorn, every single one of those plump grapes without a pattern or template.” Moving behind her, he

lightly nuzzled the nape of her neck, and she shivered at the touch of his lips. “Every one of those figures had a life, a personality to me. Each one of them told me what they wanted, how they wanted to be portrayed.” Tasting the tender edge of her ear, he allowed the quilt to fall away, already beginning to perspire despite the chill of the old cold room. “They told me what kind of sex they enjoyed, Iris. And I did my best to give them exactly what they wanted.

“Remember I told you that I’d decided to use multiple coats of wax instead of varnish? Those figures were so real to me that I wanted the wood to be able to *breathe*. There’s a special glow to something waxed with care, you know. Like the flush of a woman’s cheek after she’s been well-satisfied.”

“I remember.” She suddenly seemed unsteady on her feet, her voice vague and unsure. “I remember something about the wax...”

“It all turned out to be a lot more trouble than I thought it would. The finest sandpaper, the best steel wool, and the best buffer I could manage. After all my intricate carving and preparation, the wood’s surface had to be scored, ever so slightly.”

He lightly raked his nails up her diaphragm, and heard her breath catch in her throat. “Wax. Lots of soft, buttery wax,” he murmured into her ear. “I lost count of how many coats of wax.”

Russ had not planned this approach. But everything he *had* planned had gone haywire. And he could feel the heat of her body through the tee shirt, could tell that her breathing had become shallow and irregular.

And he was already ready, more than ready. He was hard and pulsing, dying to end his agony inside her.

Moving closer, he pressed his hips suggestively against hers, keeping his voice languid and inviting. “And the buffing,” he breathed, beginning a slow, inviting gyration. “Not to mention all of the endless hours of rough and gentle buffing...”

He felt her relax against him, his teeth tightening at the feeling of her softness against him. He was going to take his time with this if it killed him. And it probably would. “Tell me what else you see.”

She seemed dazed, responsive to his every move, but absorbed in the game. “Something else,” she murmured, her eyes taking in every dark corner as he deftly, almost imperceptibly, unbuttoned the waistband of her pants. “Something else ...”

He pulled her shirt from the confines of her trousers, his hands slipping inside as he felt her breath catch. “Oh, wait. The bed!” She pointed as if finding a treasure, even as his fingertips skimmed the lower swell of her bosom. “Your bed is made up. I’ve never seen your bed made up. You’re right, I remember—you’re a slob. ‘Why bother?’ you always said. ‘I’m just gonna jump right back in it.’ But it’s perfect! The comforter looks brand new. Not a wrinkle, not a crease. And the corner’s turned down, and you’ve got...” She choked off a gasp as he tentatively, delicately cupped her breasts. “You’ve got satin sheets?!”

Her skin was smoother, softer than anything ever manufactured by man, the firm mounds molding perfectly into his hands. Unable to contain himself, he lovingly squeezed them until she pressed her behind against him, her eyes slowly drifting shut.

“Not yet,” he whispered. She had to be ready for him. He’d been waiting his whole life for her. “Not yet. What else do you see?”

Her breathing was becoming harsh in the dead silence of the room. “There’s—there’s a bottle of champagne—another one—on the nightstand by the bed. But why—”

He smiled into the softness of her short hair as he ground against her, harder, more aggressively. “Looks like I was hoping for company, doesn’t it?”

He could feel her heart racing beneath his hands, even as she attempted a note of levity. “Charlene Weller, perhaps?”

He thumbed both of her nipples, and her head fell sharply back against his shoulder as she sighed. “Enough. The guessing game’s over. Yes, I was expecting company. I was hoping to enjoy the favors of the girl in the picture by the bed.”

His fingers were actually trembling with eagerness. This had to be the time. He would lose his mind if he couldn’t have her now. “I know it doesn’t seem like much. But all of my little efforts here were for her. I wanted to blot out everything else, so she’d feel like...like we were the only two people left in the world.”

Russell’s hands swept down from her breasts and crept into her pants, easing downward with a patience he did not know he possessed. “I was going to carry her up to this bed, rip her clothing to shreds, and lose myself inside of her until she screamed--and then screamed for more.”

“Picture?”

Her voice was gone, some pale imitation of itself trying desperately to hang on to reason. With the probing fingers of one hand, he made his way between her thighs, lightly grazing the silky fabric there, already wet with expectation. “The picture by the bed.”

She leaned forward slightly to get a better view of the small golden frame, and he groaned, the hunger of his erection roaring in his ears from the pressure of her buttocks.

“The picture—it’s *me!*” She turned to face him. “It’s my high school portrait. You keep a picture of *me* by your bedside?”

Unwilling to relinquish so much as an inch, he kept his hands inside her trousers, sliding them around to her backside and gripping it possessively. “It was as close as I could come to having you here—except in my dreams.”

He began to back her, inch by inch, toward the bed. “I never knew how to put it into words, how to tell you. But in my fantasies, I never had to use words. I just *showed* you how much I wanted you. Night after night after night.” He placed his mouth against hers, tasting her, then devouring her, more insistently, with all the pent-up passion of the months he’d waited. “God, Iris. God, let me show you.”

Her knees buckled against the edge of the bed and he grabbed her, gently guiding her down beneath him and hurriedly lifting the shirt. She seemed stunned as he slipped between her legs and grasped her bare breasts, taking one immediately into his mouth.

Iris inhaled sharply as he tongued her nipple, that taut, teasing peak that had tortured him for years, peeking from beneath thin slivers of clothing in the heat and blatantly budding beneath his gaze when the temperatures were cold. She tasted of honey and heat, of lingering longing, and he suckled hungrily. His at last, and well worth the wait...

“Wait.”

It was his turn to feel stunned as he paused, his head swimming with one overwhelming purpose. “What? What did you say?”

She firmly placed her hands flat between them, giving his chest a determined push. “I said wait. Hold on just one minute here.”

She couldn’t mean it. She was breathing as heavily as he was, her skin hot and moist to the taste. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She stared at him as if he were a complete stranger. “You were telling the truth.”

“Yes! I told you it was time for truth.”

“Then...then you really did invite me here to try to seduce me? You’ve wanted me all along?”

“All along.” He licked stern circles around her nipples with a stiff tongue. He smiled as they peaked for him, darkening and begging for more. “And now that we know we both want each other--”

“So you told the truth about lying?”

What was this? What the hell was this? He was tasting her, touching her, seated between her legs, rock-hard—and she was saying *what?* “Huh?”

“This is the true truth?”

“Of course. What...”

“You lying, conniving sonofabitch.” She gave him a hard shove and slid from beneath him, pulling her shirt down and securing it in her pants, her face red with anger. “You led me on! You let me proposition you, let me make a fool of myself while you sat back and sucked it all up! And all the time...”

He lay upon his stomach, open-mouthed in total disbelief. “And all the time I wanted you too! Can’t you see? That’s what makes it perfect! You were just as determined. You didn’t want to die

celibate—remember? Wanted to live life to the fullest, right? What difference does it make who propositioned who?”

“It was *deceitful*,” she spat, fumbling with her zipper.

Russell rolled limply over on his side.

He was not surprised when the laughter began to gurgle out of him; slowly, reluctantly at first, then with increasing force, until tears were crowding his eyes.

For now *he* knew the truth, the *real* truth, at last.

And the truth was that she had, finally, driven him mad. Hormonally, completely, stark, raving mad.

She fastened her waistband with a flourish. “You don’t seriously think I want to have what may be my last orgasm with somebody who would deceive me?”

It would all be very simple, he mused, falling onto his back and massaging his tense stomach muscles. He would wait until she was asleep. Yes, that was it. She must sleep sooner or later. And then he’d do it. He’d smother her with one of those soft, plump sofa pillows she’d arranged so very nicely for their comfort...

Iris stomped over to the other side of the bed and snatched her picture from the nightstand, energetically tossing it into a small

wastebasket. She stopped before the mirror to finger-set her hair back into place and took a deep breath. “I think I’m ready for that dinner now.” Turning on her heel, she stalked from the room.

So nice and clean, he mused. Yes. Asphyxiation would be the least messy way to do it. He had a large property. He could bury her somewhere on it. Anywhere. He could relax on his porch come warm summer evenings, and stare at the spot in satisfaction. And chances were the body might never be found--if there was anybody alive out there to find it. He chuckled to himself, mentally planning every minute detail.

And even if the body was found, once he explained his motives, once he revealed what had happened, as long as the jury had even one man seated on it, he would never be convicted. Never.

Russell dragged his sore, aching body up from the bed, staring at the strange, bedraggled being in the mirror. His nose was swollen, the skin on his face chapped, his pupils peculiarly large and dark.

It was, of course just another foolish fantasy. As if he could ever harm a hair on her hard little head.

Cloaking himself in the blanket again, he slowly made his way down the stairs. He could hear her fumbling around in the kitchen.

He was still horny as hell, but he was even more hungry. He had not eaten all day. And there was still that little matter to attend to in the basement, the big secret he still kept from her.

He might be crazy, but he was not stupid. The only important truth *had* been revealed. He'd seen the signs, read all the signals. She still wanted him as much as he wanted her. And as long as they were stuck here together, he still had a chance.

And the next time that chance presented itself, he intended to take full and complete advantage of it.

CHAPTER 9

Boy, she was good 'n mad at him.

He could tell by the way the pans were being banged around.

Russell eased quietly down the cold, dark stairs to the basement. If there'd ever been any doubt in his mind before, there was very little now. Iris Foley was the most important thing in the world to him. And she was going to be his.

However, for the moment, even she would have to wait. There was something here he urgently needed to take care of.

And then he'd prepare her for The Time.

As the faint beam of the flashlight swept the room, he listened carefully. For the response from It. For any sound that might indicate she was coming or spying on him. He'd even removed his shoes, wary of making too much noise during his descent.

Everything seemed to be in order. And there was the fallen mop, and the box shoved away from the wall, just as she'd said. He

moved stealthily past his work tools toward the smaller room in the back, where the appliances loomed out of the darkness, gleaming like towering teeth in the shadows.

There was a strong smell of urine here. But it had been two days. That was to be expected.

Russell placed the flashlight on its end in the middle of the floor and crouched beside it, peering into the corners. Waiting for the latest barrage of thunder to complete its roll, he pursed his lips and emitted a soft, nearly silent whistle.

The scattered sound of small claws sounded in the corner. And then there was silence.

“It’s alright,” he whispered encouragingly. “It’s safe. Come on out now. Come on.”

He opened his arms in welcome to the small, hesitant figure which virtually slithered across the floor, pausing every few inches as if afraid. As it finally reached him, it cowered at his knees, shivering in anticipation.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” Russ soothed, comforting the quivering mass until its breathing slowed and it seemed to relax. “It’s almost over now. I know, I know,” he murmured. “Hasn’t been easy

for you, has it? I haven't fulfilled my obligations to you very well, have I? But that's about to change."

He paused to listen again. The thunder, although still intimidatingly loud, had a more muffled edge to it, and the explosions were coming farther apart each time. "The storm is moving away. We won't be able to keep this secret much longer."

Russ removed a moist, gooey wad of food from his pocket and placed it on the floor. "Sneaked upstairs to eat the leftover Chinese stuff, didn't ya? Well, it won't be necessary to hide much longer. I'll prepare the way. I promised to see that you were taken care of, and I keep my promises."

He stood and carefully made his way back to the stairs, smiling slightly at the sound of the creature gorging himself. "She'll accept what is to come. First I have to clear the way for myself—then you. She won't be able to resist. I'll see to it. And I'll be back. And this time I'll bring her with me. It's time. It's time that the two of you met."

* * *

She'd been out of his sight for half an hour. It was half an hour too long.

Having just left the basement, he knew she wasn't down there, and that was the important thing. And he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't bear to be away from her. But he couldn't have her wandering around the house either. She might stumble upon something he wasn't quite ready for her to see.

Some sixth sense led him to the attic of the old house. And there she was, in the short, squat room that was little more than thin floorboards, rafters, and walls, sitting in a quiet corner.

Reading.

She didn't look up as he emerged through the narrow trapdoor, or when he carefully approached, despite the floorboards creaking painfully beneath him. She had a stack of old comic books on one side and a single candle on the other. And she seemed totally absorbed in what she was reading.

“Hey lady. New game? Are we playing hide and seek? Whatcha doin' up here? Alone? In the dark?”

She barely spared him a glance before returning her attention to the comic. “For some strange reason, I felt the need for space. And a little privacy.”

“Want me to go?”

“No. It’s alright.” She looked absolutely breathtaking, he thought, curled up in the corner, her body in half-light, half-shadow, her eyes wide and vulnerable. “You really love your sci-fi stuff, don’t you? You must have a couple of hundred comic books up here.”

He shrugged, slightly embarrassed. “They’re old. One or two of ‘em might actually be worth something. Just my way of escaping. We all have our ways, don’t we?”

“You’ve saved so much stuff from when you were a kid!” she marveled. “All your school pictures, Halloween costumes, masks, science experiments, report cards—everything!”

“Is that so unusual? Don’t you have any of your old dolls, toys—”

“No.” Her voice was clipped and sharp. “Personally, I couldn’t wait to grow up.”

She had crawled into her shell in this little forgotten area of the house. He took another step forward, ready to be comforting, and the floor bowed beneath his foot with a warning whine. “Babe, this isn’t a good place to be. Some of these floorboards are probably rotten.”

“See? There’s a perfect example of why I was glad to grow up. Nobody bossing you around, trying to tell you what to do. You make your own mistakes, and there’s nobody else to blame.”

“You are a brat. C’mere.” He grabbed her by her arm and hoisted her to her feet, scattering the comic books. “Let me show you something.”

Russell rarely came up here, had never much cared if the attic remained unfinished or if bits of it were slowly decaying. He’d been busy making a living, and it was only used for storage anyway. Now he rather regretted it. His childhood memories, bits and pieces of his father’s futile dreams, carvings left unfinished by his grandfather, and some of the finest wood planks and boards Russ had collected over many years were here, neglected and abandoned.

But right now he was looking for one thing, one very special piece of himself to share with her.

He dragged her to a small, dusty cabinet on the opposite side of the room and proceeded to remove several old photo albums from its belly, tossing them carelessly to the floor in small explosions of cobwebbed dust. “It’s in here somewhere. I know it’s been a few years, but...ah!”

The photo album was black, embossed with gold trim that had long since faded to coppery flakes. He opened it with infinite care, and she had to edge closer to see through the yellowed vinyl that protected the ghostly pictures on the pages. “I should probably put these in a safer place,” he whispered confidently. “They’re the only pictures I have that are really important to me. See that? That’s my grandpa.”

He watched a gentle smile creep across her face at the sight of the old gentleman in oversized dungarees. Grasping a shovel in one large hand, his grandfather stood proud, if stoop-shouldered, and stared straight at the camera. The picture had faded with time, but the face was still high-cheeked and strong, the eyes heavy-lidded and tired. “Aint’ he somethin’?” Russ beamed, patting the page affectionately. “Dirt poor most of his life. Barely had a bucket to spit in. Could hardly read and write, didn’t care much for people, and spent most of his life right here in this house. I adored him.”

“You don’t look much like him,” she mused. “You’re taller, a little fairer, and your face isn’t nearly as narrow. But you *stand* like he does, just like that, with most of your weight on one hip, kinda cocky, like you dare anybody to try to move you.”

“Here. Look at this.” He turned the page, and there was a dapper, mustached seaman, posing in his navy blues with a stylishly dressed young lady wearing a big smile and a saucy beret. “That was Jean. They were married as soon as he got out of the service. He used to say, ‘boy, was I crazy about that gal. She was so scrumptious, I would’ve licked her up off the floor.’ Said she was the only woman in the world for him, and that marriage was gonna last forever.”

Iris laughed, caressing the borders of the cracked photo. “He must’ve loved her very much.” She turned the page, looking for more pictures of the couple. “Russ? Is that...that is your grandpa, isn’t it? But that doesn’t look like the same—”

“Woman?” He grinned. “That’s because it isn’t. That’s Pearl, his second wife. And this,” he pointed triumphantly, “is Lily. She was my grandmother. They never even bothered to get married, I hear. Just lived in sin for forty years or so. How great is that? Buried side-by-side in the cemetery a few miles south of town.”

“Hmmp. So much for love and marriages lasting forever.” She turned up her nose. “I guess men aren’t made for monogamous relationships, are they?”

“You,” he sighed, “are making an assumption. Grandpa was always faithful to his women. Jean died in childbirth, and Pearl ran out on *him*.”

“Oh.” She had the good grace to be embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. I just assumed...”

“That men cheat? That men leave? Nothing in this world lasts forever, Iris. I’m sure Grandpa and Jean felt like they’d be young and in love always, as they are in this picture. And I’m sure he loved Pearl with all his heart, even after she left him. In the end, he and Lily were so inseparable that they died within three days of each other. But he lived a full life, long enough to see the world change around him. And despite all of his bad experiences, he never gave up on love.”

She turned deliberately away from him, her eyes scanning the attic. “It’s a little amazing to me that you’ve made this house so much a home, that you have such a sense of belonging. I know you didn’t really have much in the way of family.”

“Grandpa and Lily did alright by me. They were old, of course, but they did their best. My father just didn’t know what to do after my mother divorced him. Solved the problem by drinking himself to death.” He regretted bringing up the subject as he caught the twinge

of pain in her expression. She was right. Some people bled more than others. “And I had your mother to take me under her wing, and the closest thing to siblings with you and Tommy.”

She nodded, casually choosing another comic book to leaf through. “You two were so close. Is that why?”

“Why what?”

“Why you never tried to get me into bed before?”

Russell sighed, slipping the cherished photo album beneath his arm. “That was a big part of it—yes. I would’ve felt disloyal, like I was going behind his back if I’d tried to get with you. He asked me to look after you, to take care of you. I did. I never planned to fall...”

Her body snapped to attention, her eyes glinting in the shadows. “To fall—what?”

He hurriedly continued, ignoring her question. “And it wouldn’t have been right. You needed to grow up, to make your own decisions. When you’re inexperienced, it’s easy to mistake one kind of love for another. I couldn’t take advantage of that.”

“My God,” she whispered. He held his breath as she drew closer, her eyes searching his for truth. “You wanted me before? Before Gary and I became lovers?”

“Gary was never your ‘lover’.” His best effort could not keep the contempt out of his voice. “He wouldn’t know the definition of the word. Any man who would walk out on a woman because she wouldn’t have sex with him just hours after someone dear to her died doesn’t deserve to be called that. He didn’t deserve you, Iris.”

Her lips parted slightly, and she spoke so quietly he could barely hear her. “No?”

“No. And maybe that’s why you chose him. Maybe that’s what you think of men—that they get fed up and leave. And maybe that stubborn little competitive subconscious of yours is so determined to be right that you chose such a man so you could say, ‘see? I knew it all along.’”

“Are you saying I deliberately chose a man I thought would hurt me?”

It was hard, this. Trying to make her see was like striking out at her. “Metaphysics. It’s a tricky mix of karma and free will, this is.”

“But Gary was nothing like my father. He—”

“Left you.” Russ shifted uneasily at the sound of the thunder, so overwhelming from this high point of the house. “He was constantly unfaithful to your mother, and he left all of you. He walked to the

store to get a little air and a pack of cigarettes, and never came back. Gary told you that your refusal to have sex with him right after Bluto died proved that the dog meant more to you than he did. So he left. We did agree that one pathetic excuse was as good as another. Remember?"

"I remember." He searched for some sign of tears in her eyes. There were none. "I remember a lot of things."

He wanted to hug her. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, and kiss her, make love to her until all thoughts of anything else vanished. "I'm sorry, babe. But it is a little something you might want to think about."

"Oh. Yes. I'm thinking." She raised one dangerous brow. "I'm thinking, all right. I'm wondering how you knew."

"Knew? Knew what?"

"How did you know that Gary used Bluto's death as an excuse to leave?" She tilted her head, frowning. "I never told you it was because I didn't feel like having *sex* with him. I never told you *what* his excuse was. *Never*. I just told you he left right after the dog died."

Oh shit, and dammit all to hell. Boy, he'd messed up on this one. "I...ummm..."

“*You*. You sneaky, conniving bastard!” She pointedly jabbed her forefinger into his chest as he sheepishly back away from her. “You had something to do with this, didn’t you? The only way you’d know that was if he told you. You made him leave me! How? What’d you say? You threatened him, didn’t you?”

Russell eased two more steps back. “Well...I wouldn’t exactly call it a threat...”

“And I thought you were *honest!* I thought you were my *friend!* I thought you were decent and *honorable!*” Her voice bounced from rafter to rafter. “You threatened a man, to make him leave a woman just so you could have her all to yourself. How low can you *get?*”

“Iris, it wasn’t like that.”

“Of all the *shits—*”

She gave the wall of his chest one surprisingly vigorous shove—
And his world collapsed beneath him.

Three of the sagging floorboards gave way beneath his weight. Without a moment to curse or cry out in surprise, he felt his body plummet through the floor as Iris leaped back in horror.

With the blind instinct for survival, he instantly spread his arms wide and caught himself as two-thirds of his body dangled

precariously through the jagged hole and shattered plaster of the guest room below. “*Jesus...*”

“Russ!” She ran forward, then stopped, teetering on the brink. “Russ? Are you alright?”

“Am I alright?” he gasped. “What the hell—what d’ya think?! No, I’m not alright! Give me a hand here. No, wait—not too close!”

“Are you sure you’ve got a firm grip?”

“At the moment, yeah, but...” He gasped, sucking in a big breath. “These other boards could go at any time.”

“Wow, you’re really stuck there, huh?” Iris clasped her heart, staring down at him. “You’re sure you’re alright? I mean, you’re probably not going to fall through, at least for a minute or two? And you can’t just get up and walk off, right?”

She was frightened, not making sense. And normally he had more than enough upper body strength to hoist himself up. The question, however, was how much of the surrounding wood was also rotten. “Now, don’t panic, babe. I’ll think of something. Don’t get upset, I need you calm.”

She sat down, yoga-style, before him, her eyes as bright as her blooming smile. “Whatever you say, big bro. How’s this? Is this calm enough?”

He stopped struggling for a moment, gaping at her. “Huh?”

“Maybe we should talk about this situation, Russell. Maybe this is something you really subconsciously wanted, to prove you were above the sort of mistakes we average people make, to prove you’re right about everything on God’s green earth. Maybe that’s just a little something you might want to think about.”

“What?” He kicked futilely at the air below. “What the—”

“Or maybe the road down the hill is passable now,” she continued pleasantly. “The ice is starting to melt. Maybe this would be a good time for me to get a little air, step out for a pack of cigarettes.”

Russell peered downward at the photo album that had slipped through the hole, its spine broken, lying far below him on the floor of the dark bedroom. Shit. Guess that meant it was too far to risk the jump. “Iris. This is not a *game*. Help me!”

“But that’s what I’m trying to do, big brother,” she said innocently. “I’m trying to help you understand—don’t you see? Now.

As long as we're relaxing here—why don't you tell me what it is about me that reminds you of your mother, hmmm? I mean, that's what we all do, yes? Choose somebody who reminds us of our parents?"

If he fell, there was a chance that he could land badly and break his neck.

So why was he trembling with the overwhelming desire to laugh?

"Iris." He forced a smile. "Sweet, sweet Iris." She tilted her head to one side like a curious pet, and he nearly gave up the ghost. "There are a few boards over there, propped up against the wall. They're good, solid boards. Don't try to pick them up—but if you could just slide one across the floor here, just so it spans this rotten section of wood, just so I can hoist myself up—"

"Oh, I don't know if I should do that." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Metaphysics and all. It's a tricky mix of free will and karma, that is."

"Goddammit, girl—"

"I mean after all, sweet, sweet Russell—I couldn't possibly make such a decision for myself. I may not be grown up enough yet! Which board would I choose? Suppose I chose one that would deliberately

hurt you? And if I chose the wrong one and it gave way, and you fell, how would I live with my stubborn little subconscious saying, ‘See? I knew it all along...’”

No use. He was doomed. Even as his arms grew numb, he threw his head back, closed his eyes, and roared with laughter.

He felt the board slide across the hole before he saw it, and grabbed for it, wrapping his forearms around it just as the rotten timber he’d been holding onto broke away and crumbled to the floor below. Focusing all of his strength into his shoulders, he gave an athletic heave, hoisting his body up through the hole until he sat safely upon the thick oak panel that had possibly saved his life.

“I think I’ll start that dinner now.”

Her voice seemed distant to him, muffled by the thunder—or his heart—pounding away in his ears. “Iris. Wait.” He swung to his feet, clearing the man-eating hole and carefully countering her belligerent glare. “I never wanted to come between you and Gary.” He recognized the defensive posture she assumed immediately. “He was cheating on you. I saw him around town with other women. More than once. I tried to ignore it. I swear I did. Tried. Just couldn’t. So one day when I ran into him at the gym, I asked him to

stop. I *asked* him, very nicely. I told him you didn't deserve it, and he should either get his shit together or get the hell out. And the very next day, I saw him out on the town again. He was not alone. I waited and, when I got the chance, jacked him—er, I mean, confronted him in the men's bathroom. I gave him a choice. Three days. Either he could get out of your life with the quickness, or I would break his face. See? Free will!" He felt his half-hearted smile fade to sadness. "I'm sorry, babe. I didn't know the dog would die, or that he would give such a sorry-assed reason for checkin' out. When he told me the excuse he'd given you, I was tempted to..."

"Enough." She lowered herself onto the ladder and carefully began her descent. "This isn't about Gary. The hell with Gary. This is about the fact that I don't know you anymore, Carr. Too many lies, too many secrets. And here I've been beating myself up about not being able to make up my mind. Maybe you're the one with the problem. You can't seem to decide whether you want to be big brother to some little girl you have to protect, or lover for a grown woman who's capable of managing her own life and making her own decisions. You took that right out of my hands. And at this point, I wouldn't take you as a lover if you *were* the last man on earth."

He watched her go before retrieving her candle and carefully making his way after her.

His house was falling down around him.

But the floor could be fixed, and so could this mess.

One more secret to reveal. Just one more, the one that had been driving her crazy from the first.

And then there'd be nothing else to keep them apart.

CHAPTER 10

“Care to try a little Ouija Board fun?”

Iris focused a suspicious eye on Russ as she dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin. She’d grilled the meat carefully, and wrapped the precious two potatoes in foil, baking them over the fire until they were just right, and serving them with butter.

She knew how important each bit of food was to them right now.

She also knew that the meal seemed tasteless and unappealing to her. And she knew why.

But he had lingered over his food, eating very little and picking what was left to pieces, stashing bits of it in his napkin when he’d thought she wasn’t looking.

It made her watch him even more closely.

“There’s nothing fun about the Ouija on a *normal* day,” she retorted. “It’s just plain old weird. Like the way you were behaving at dinner.”

He flicked the ashes of his after-dinner cigarette onto his plate, eyes wide with innocence. “Oh? Was I acting weird? Hmmm. Maybe it’s because the world is ending, Iris. Maybe this is the way people act when they don’t get laid. Maybe an alien’s gonna hatch out of my stomach any minute now and demand sex. I mean, as long as the monster’s up front about what it wants, you won’t mind cooperating, right?”

She tossed her napkin aside. “I don’t see how you have the nerve to get mad at me because *you*—”

“Because I what?” His eyes locked on to hers and would not let go. “Because I tried to treat you to a wonderful day? Because I’ve put my own feelings on hold because I valued our friendship so much? Because I’ve dreamed of having you in my bed? Because I went out of my way to try to make the conversion of friend to lover as comfortable as possible for you?”

“So you’re saying you’ve wasted your time being nice to me, since you didn’t get laid!” she replied bitterly. “Don’t you dare use me

as an excuse for being weird. And don't think I haven't noticed you setting those scraps aside in your napkin."

"Don't much care for the fattier portions." He grinned, staring frankly at her chest. "I tend to prefer the leaner cuts of meat."

If he wasn't the most infuriating, frustrating, mouth-watering...

"Let's cut out all the sexual innuendoes. I'm not interested in that, or the Ouija. Unless, of course, it can tell me why I'm stuck here, and what it is I'm supposed to do about it."

He laughed, and the sound was startling. For the first time she noticed the absence of the thunder that had ruled their world for the past two days. The house was unnervingly quiet.

"Suppose I promise you that it can?"

She skeptically clucked her tongue. But she could not turn away. His eyes held hers with a power and magnetism that made her stomach quiver as his smile made her squirm in her seat. "You're trying to tell me that your Ouija board knows all, sees all, and you stand behind everything it says?"

"I do."

“Then that means you’re going to make it *your* truth,” she snorted, “and just move the little marker around so it says whatever you please. Fat chance. If I listened to you, I’d be—”

“In my bed before the evening was over?”

She flushed furiously, backing her chair away from the table.

“It’s just a wooden board, and a piece of plastic with a nail, Carr.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

Within moments he had pulled his old board set from the living room trunk and set it up at the dining room table. Iris watched him wipe the surface with a soft felt cloth, angry with herself for being duped. He knew she couldn’t resist a dare or a challenge. But if it would make the time pass and change the subject, it was worth it.

“Come, little lady.” He sat opposite her, grinning for all he was worth. “Allow the magic of the Ouija to flow over you, to mesmerize you with its power, to—”

“Oh, let’s just play the stupid game, Russ.”

He set the marker on the board, wiggling his eyebrows. “You will note that the marker is reminiscent of the shape of a heart?”

“I think I liked you better when all you had to say was ‘aw, shucks ma’am.’”

“Then let’s get to it.”

She placed her fingertips lightly on the edge of the marker, carefully watching him as if he’d somehow stacked the deck.

By the light of a single white candle, Russell moved the marker in slow, sensuous circles around the board, then stopped dead center. “I think she’s all warmed up. Now remember, you have to treat this seriously. You can ask just about anything, but don’t ask anything trivial or silly. Try a question about something important. Like *me*.”

Iris gave him her prettiest smile. “I want to know what’s in the basement.”

“Iris...”

“You said I could ask anything important,” she persisted. “This is important to me. I want to know I’m not imagining things. I want to know I’m not crazy. I want to know what’s hiding out in that freaking basement, Russ—I mean, Ouija—and I want to know now.”

“Now, now. Being emotional will hinder the vibrations. Oh, Ouija,” he chanted mysteriously. “There is one among us who is seeking knowledge. One who, through all the trials and tribulations of life, through the ups and downs, the familiar and unknown, the inferior sex and chafing chastity...”

“Will you cut to the chase?!”

Russell solemnly nodded. “Oh, Ouija. Is there something lurking in the basement?”

The wind moaned outside the house, lovingly filling the silence with sound as they waited.

And waited. And waited.

“Russell.” Iris whispered, as if afraid of disturbing the spell.

“This is not happening.”

“Patience. You must be patient.”

“No, I must be out of my mind. The hell with this. Why don’t we just go downstairs and *look?*”

The marker abruptly responded, moving a fraction of an inch forward, then slightly to the right before zooming in a straight diagonal across the board to land with its nose directly over the printed “YES”.

Iris glared at him from across the board. “And you’re going to tell me that you didn’t push that pointer over there.”

“I didn’t.” He shrugged. “But maybe it’s just as well.”

“Okay, then, if we’re going to play this game, let’s ask what...”

“Ah-ah-ahhh. You asked a question. Now it’s my turn.”

She nearly held her breath at the sight of the smug expression on his face. Set up and suckered was what she'd been. She could only hope that the damn board was really as phony as she thought.

He moved the marker in a small figure-eight, back and forth between them, like a dance. "Oh, mystifying oracle. Tell me—when will Iris have sex with me?"

The marker slid slightly above the "YES" to the symbol of the sun above.

"See that?" he crowed triumphantly. "It hit on the yes *and* the sunshine! It's all symbolic. It means..."

"It means they don't have a symbol for when hell freezes over!" she bristled. "I'm not going to do this if you keep cheating."

"I'm *not*."

"Enough. It's my turn." She shifted her hips in the chair, ignoring the flare of interest it solicited from her partner. "So, tell us oh hot-shot Ouija. What's lurking in the basement?"

The loose shutter on the upstairs guest-room window banged for attention, keeping time as the pointer slowly, painfully spelled out the words:

"THE BEAST"

Iris backed her chair away from the table. Silly game or no, her fingers had turned cold on the marker and her heart was hammering inside her chest. “This isn’t funny. I don’t want to play anymore.”

“No. You’re right. It isn’t funny.”

Russ slowly folded the board in half. “And it’s time. Time to put an end to all the pretense. Time to set the secrets aside. Time to reveal everything, at last. Only truth between us now—and this last, this very special secret keeping us from it.” He stood, holding out his hand for her. “Come on, Iris. We’re going now. We’re going down into the basement.”

*

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Russell held her hand firmly in his as he led her down the stairs.

The small circle of illumination from the flashlight seemed even less comforting now, now that darkness had swallowed what little gray light there was. The rays bounced off the small windows like streaming gold. She was sure of it now. The temperature outside was rising, and the sheets of ice which coated the house were beginning to melt.

And still she felt a strange foreboding as he stopped in the center of the room, placing the flashlight on end on the floor and shuffling his weight from foot to foot like a tongue-tied little boy.

“I wasn’t sure,” he said at last, “that I was ever going to tell you about this. It’s difficult even now—*especially* now that we’re so close to becoming...well, close.”

Her eyes were methodically scanning the corners and, for a moment, she thought she saw something move. Something stirring in that nook in the back which housed the washer, dryer, and extra toilet. “Russ, I don’t like this. Let’s go back up.”

“But Iris, you wanted the truth. And you were right. It’s time you knew everything.”

She moved uneasily beside him. “Maybe I was wrong. Let’s just go back to the fire, and wait for—”

“I should’ve told you from the beginning. But I didn’t think you were ready. You see, you may have a point about men being kind of insensitive, and I was afraid this...this little ‘secret’ might actually drive you away from me.”

There it was again. The sound of paper rustling, the heavy, rapid breathing, the sudden scampering noises. The back of her neck

prickled with alarm, and she instinctively moved closer to Russell. “You heard that, right?” she whispered. “Tell me you heard it this time.”

He nodded, almost sadly. “Yeah. I heard it. I’ve heard it all along.”

“Whoa...Okay. I don’t know about you, but that’s a hint and a half for me. I’m outta here.”

He still held her hand in his, his hand that had sought to comfort her as they descended. His hand that now gripped hers with greater force, halting her retreat. “No, Iris. I’m afraid I can’t let you leave now.”

She glanced back in some surprise. His skin felt cold and dry against hers. “What do you mean, you can’t? Either come with me, or let me go, Russell.”

He slowly shook his head, pulling her back. “No.”

She attempted a laugh, a nervous little twitter, devoid of humor. “Okay, partner, we’ve had enough of this scary movie stuff. A rat. A large rat. That’s what you said. Good enough. Works for me. I believe you.”

“I lied.”

He gathered her fingers between his in a claw-like grip. “I’m sorry. But it was necessary. And I promise you it’s the last lie. The last lie you’ll ever have to worry about.”

Either she was imagining things, or that statement had a very ominous tone to it. “Wha—what could be so important down here that you’d have to lie about it?”

“I didn’t want to leave the house. Remember? There was a reason. Not just the danger outside, but the secret within. And I tried to warn you to stay in the living room. It was stupid of me; I should’ve known better. Fortunately, I got back just in time.” The pupils of his eyes were large and dilated, as if they, too, were melting. “You never found the bullets because they’re stashed down here. They’re on a shelf in the back, right over the sink. And I’m glad you never found them. You might have done something...well, something I just couldn’t allow. You see, I took on the responsibility. And I really couldn’t allow you to hurt Him.”

“Russell?” She was straining, trying to pull away. Vivid visions of a club-footed demon or some gray, anemic little space alien romped through her mind. “Russell, are you okay? You’re really starting to scare me here.”

He smiled. “No need to be afraid. That’s all behind you. It’s the dawn of a new day, Iris. No more secrets, no more lies.” His voice dropped as he licked his lips. “You could say that our relationship, changed as it is, is an initiation, of sorts. You’ll have to be accepted now.”

Iris’ pulse pounded in her ears, as loudly as if the thunder had returned. She shook her head, unable to speak, limbs quivering with the urge to flee.

“I’ve been dying to introduce you to Him.” The sight of his smile frightened her more than anything that had happened. “And now it’s time.”

“Russ,” she pleaded, twisting her wrist in an effort to escape. “Don’t do this. Whoever He is--*whatever* He is--you can fight against this. I’ll help you, fight with you. We can do it together.”

He blew a low, beckoning whistle between his moist lips. “Listen. He’s coming.”

The sound was running toward her now, faster and harder, scurrying between boxes, the eager, panting breath barreling straight at her. She screamed before she saw it, before she knew why,

screamed and managed to jerk her hand away from her captor. But it was too late, too late...

It launched itself at her, grabbing her by the leg. Sinking sharp little nails into her pants, it nearly knocked her to the floor as she screamed one last, desperate time.

“Russell!!” she shrieked. “Russell, it’s got me! Russ, it’s...it’s...a *puppy?!?”*

Russell knelt as the hurricane of fur galloped over to him, whining and cowering behind his legs. “Of course it’s a puppy! What’re you trying to do—scare him to death?”

“But I didn’t...I thought...oh, my God.” She, too, dropped to her knees, softly entreating. “C’mon, boy. Come on, come and see me. That’s it.” She held out her hands as he cautiously approached, sniffed her fingers, and decided he liked her.

In a moment, he was covering her face with wet, energetic kisses.

She laughed in delight, rubbing him briskly. “This is it? This was the big secret? That you finally got yourself a dog? God, he’s precious. Look at the feet! He reminds me of...” She felt the tears

forming in her eyes and dismissed them. “He looks so much like Bluto!”

“That’s because he’s supposed to. That’s because he’s yours.”

“For me? You got him for *me*?” She really was crying now, hugging the puppy’s neck as he slathered her face. “Why on earth didn’t you *tell* me?”

Russell stood, shoving his hands into his pockets. “He’s been here for about a week now. I bought him for you because I wanted to make you happy. It’s been a year now, and it didn’t occur to me that you might still be so upset about your old dog that you wouldn’t accept a new one—until our little conversation about good ol’ Gary yesterday. This is the big, enterprising ‘business’ your old buddy Milton has launched. Breeding pedigree dogs.”

“Milton? Milton Edwards is actually being allowed to handle live things?”

“I didn’t say he was very good at it,” Russ drawled. “The poor little fella still wasn’t completely weaned when I got him. And I wanted to get him trained to paper, since he’ll be living in your condo.”

She gently stroked the dog into calmness, stunned. This man. Dear God, this man...

“We were so close to becoming lovers that I didn’t want to ruin it. And I didn’t want you to think that I was trying to coerce you into caring about me, trying to buy your affection. And if you couldn’t accept him because of your memories of Bluto, I knew I’d have to return him. So I waited.”

“But when I came down into the basement before, he didn’t bark or snarl or anything.”

“At this stage, I’m afraid he’s more chicken than Newfoundland. But I am surprised he was so quiet when he saw you. Unless I’m right there with him, he barks his head off every time somebody comes to the door, then runs down to hide in the basement. Needs the security of a master. Milton brought all his papers over early yesterday. I gave him a warm blanket, food, a box with newspaper. The blanket was his mother’s, so he was comfortable and happy with that. So I waited.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “Looks like a match made in heaven after all.”

She felt her heart melt as the pup snuggled against her neck. There was no use in fighting it. She was in love. “Oh, wook at the

poor wittle snookie-wookums; stuck down here in this cold basement all this time, all by his wonesome...”

“He’s fine, Iris. I made sure he had enough food and water, and he’s already taken to the paper. Besides—if I could wait all these years for you, I guess he could wait a couple of days.”

She wouldn’t do this now, *couldn’t* do this now. Her heart was gaping wide open, and she couldn’t think straight. Maybe later, after the baby was all settled in, after the lights came back, after she’d reached the point of just wanting to jump his bones with no emotion attached.

But not now.

“It’s alright, babycakes,” she cooed, hugging him securely as she headed for the stairway. “Come with me. Iris’ll take good care of you from now on.”

“Hey, whoa, whoa.” Russ spread his arms wide. “What about me? What’s happenin’ with that?”

“The dog and I are going to finish dinner,” she said with finality. “And then we’re going to sleep on the couch. As for what’s going to happen to you...gee, I dunno, Russ. Ask the Ouija, why don’tcha?”

CHAPTER 11

Russell tossed on his parka and, without bothering to fasten it, stepped quietly outside. She was there, he knew, and she was safe and sound. And when things settled down, and there was light in the world once again, he wouldn't be concerned at all.

But right now he wanted her beside him.

She was standing in front of the house, her face directed at the dramatic play of the diffused lightening among the clouds, her head bare to the elements.

And she did not move away when he approached her from behind, wrapping his arms gently around her waist and hugging her to him.

"The hard stuff seems to be letting up," he murmured, resisting the temptation to kiss her neck. "This is more like freezing fog, I

think. Just icy moisture in the air. Fog often indicates a change coming in the weather.”

The tiny face of the puppy peered out of the shelter of her coat, its creamy eyes blinking against the weather. She leaned back against his strength, and his heart soared. “The air feels good. It’s cold and raw—but it’s real. I needed it. And space.”

“I know.”

“You scare me to death, Russell Carr.” She hugged the animal, and it snuggled against her for warmth. “I never imagined myself saying such a thing. You were always...my rock.”

He pulled her closer. He wanted to comfort her, to promise that all would be well, to paint a bright future for them with words that would touch her heart.

Never before had he felt so inadequate at anything.

“I can still be your rock, babe.” He struggled to keep his tone light. “It’s just that now I want to be your hard place, too.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” she continued, her voice barely managing a whisper. “You’ve shown me more consideration in the past two days than I’ve ever known from any man. The thoughtfulness, the pampering...and I already loved you, you know.”

His head began to spin. Her scent was intoxicating him. “I know.”

“But I don’t know if I can make this transition. And I don’t know if we can go back. And that would leave us nowhere, and I can’t imagine not having you in my life. And I can’t keep pretending to be mad at you while you’re making my heart leak all over the damn farmhouse, and...”

“Come inside, Iris.” He gave in to the temptation to nuzzle her neck, and noticed the first frigid tear slip down her cheek. It tore his heart in half. “Come lie with me. I’ll be sweet; I swear it. I could never do anything to hurt you.”

“Damn you.” She shivered ever so slightly. “Why couldn’t you have left things as they were?” She turned to face him, her eyes wide and vulnerable. “I miss my Russ.”

“And that’s what this has been all about all along, isn’t it?” He pulled her close, gently wrapping his arms around her and the pup. “It’s about all the upheaval in your life lately. It’s about your mother moving away, and Thomas going into the service, and losing Bluto after so many years, and then Gary leaving. All within a couple of months.” He heaved a great sigh, understanding. “It wasn’t that you

were worried about the end of the world. It's that you were worried about the end of *your* world."

"Maybe so." Her eyes glistened, trapping the dim light from the house. "Maybe you have become an alien, of sorts, to me. Why'd you have to go and mess things up?"

He couldn't bear it, couldn't stand to cause her pain. "Iris, change doesn't have to mean an ending. It can also mean a beginning. People will walk out of your life, and new ones will find a place. They'll grow old, they'll die; some will live with you forever, some will walk away. This isn't a still photograph, like that tintype of my Grandfather. It's a motion picture, and it lives and breathes." His breath escaped as a thick puff of smoke in the night air. "Babe, if you want me to stop, I'll stop. If you want to pretend that none of this ever happened, I'll make it so. And if you want me to go away..." He broke into a heartening grin. "If you want me to go away, I'm on the next flying saucer outta here."

Her breathing was irregular with the effort of holding back tears. "Everything is so cut and dry with you. Black and white. It always has been. But there are things that you don't understand, Russell Carr." She placed her hand over the one he'd wrapped around

her waist. Her fingers were ice-cold. “I was only seven years old when I was forced to understand that my father had simply left us without notice, without caring. My mother never spoke a bad word about him. It was her way of preserving the good memory of him for us. But all I understood was that you can’t hold on to them. Men leave you. They stop loving you, and they just walk away. I think I carried that with me for a long time. And then I took a chance on Gary. And he proved I was right. And it seemed to me that most of the men I’ve ever known were the same. They weren’t what I thought men should be. But they were what I *expected* men to be.”

He felt the puppy wiggle into her warmth as she paused. “There was only one man I knew I could always depend on, always trust, always lean on. And I never had to worry about the silly complications of romance and jealousy and expectations, because we were beyond all of that. We were the best of friends.”

“Iris...”

“Don’t you see?” She swallowed a sob. “You have been the one real man in my life. If something should go wrong, or if I lose my faith in you, I could never open myself up to anyone else. So you are,

in a way, the last man on earth to me. And I'm just not sure I want to take a chance on spoiling that relationship."

He nearly laughed. Nearly. "So you won't give me a chance because I'm exactly what you've wanted all along."

She nodded. "Pretty sick, I know." She turned to him, but he couldn't read her eyes in the dark. "I think we'd better go inside. I think the baby's cold. And I think we'd better find something to do. Something distracting. How about a game of Monogamy?"

He grinned, carefully tracing her lips with his forefinger. "You mean Monopoly."

Iris wrapped her small hand around his, lightly kissing his knuckles. "Yes. Of course."

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The problem with being stranded in an old house alone with a sexy man who's dying to get in your pants is that there's no place to hide.

Iris absently combed the hair of the woman in the mirror, staring at the large, vacant eyes in concern. If she thought she was having trouble recognizing the new Russell Carr, she was even more confused by the behavior of the old Iris Foley.

It was unimaginable to her usually logical mind that she was going to such lengths to avoid having sex with a man she wanted so much. Anger was an effective excuse, but a cowardly way out. Her reasons were as piss-poor as Gary's had been.

And she'd never thought of herself as a coward.

Russell was everything, absolutely everything, she'd ever imagined wanting in a man. Handsome, desirable, dependable, thoughtful; and he *wanted* her.

What was the question she'd asked when she'd first gathered the nerve to proposition him? 'If you really thought this might be your last day to live...'

Would she be worried about some future disappointment in love? Would she waste time blaming him for being protective, or for not telling her that he'd had sexual feelings for her all along?

And who could ever tell, after all? Semi-hysterical reactions to storms and newscasts aside—this *could* be her last day. Or his. Any day, at any given time, could be the final one. Did she want to waste it protecting herself from injuries that might never come, or spend the rest of her life dwelling on 'what-ifs' or 'should-haves'?

He'd told her he was going into the basement to clean up the puppy's mess, and she'd silently sought the refuge of the intimate little sanctuary he'd established for them in his bedroom. Her picture had been retrieved from the trash and restored to the nightstand, and the bed still lay smooth, undisturbed, and inviting. An intimate, tiny little corner of the world he'd set aside, just for them. The thought of it made her heart bleed with love for him.

She firmly set the comb aside and took a deep breath, happy to see the spark of decisiveness return to her eyes. Seizing her stunted candle, she carried it to the bedside and placed it beside her photo.

Iris caressed the triangular tongue of the ice-blue satin sheet as she slipped onto the bed and sat with legs crossed, gathering her courage. He would come looking for her, and she'd be ready and willing this time. No more hiding behind anger and excuses. Already her heartbeat was tripping in anticipation.

The hell with tomorrow. She was ready to live *this* day.

The footsteps on the stairs were nearly silent; but she heard them, and felt the welcoming smile blossom on her face. If only the champagne was still chilled, if only she had been honest with herself

from the beginning, if only she had something silky and slinky to wear...

She saw his shadow fall, flickering, across the open door before he entered. He was carrying something in his hand—another gift of some kind, no doubt. Her grin broadened as she turned to greet him.

“Hello, Iris.”

Her smile quickly faded to fear as the shadow pointed the snub-nose .38 directly at her and cocked the hammer.

“Nice to see you again, Foley. What say you and I get reacquainted?”

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“Iris! Did you catch it? Did you??” Russ’ voice was raspy with excitement. “It came on! The power came on for just a few seconds! Iris, you were right. It is the end of the world! We’ve got less than twenty-four hours to live! We really shouldn’t waste that time, now, should we?”

The puppy stared up at him with sad eyes, fidgeting nervously.

“You’re right. Waste of time,” he muttered. “Even *you* don’t believe me, do you, little...hmmph. We’ve gotta get you a name, don’t we?”

The dog whined nervously, making circles in and out of his legs.

“Don’t worry, little man. She’ll give you a good home. And at least one of us will have somebody to cuddle up to tonight.”

Russell stepped carefully, trying not to tread of the feet of the puppy as it charged back and forth before him. “Yeah, I know. It’s a dirty job, but somebody’s gotta do it.” Swinging the flashlight before him, he made his way back toward the utility room. “And cleaning up your mess is gonna be a lot easier than cleaning up my own.”

He was a beaten man. Dangled, dented, deflated and defeated. And rather than proving himself a capable lover, or a heroic figure to his worried lady-in-distress, he was reduced to picking up dog poop.

No sex, no matter how jaw-droppin’, back-hunchin’, hip-poppin’, or head-rollin’, was worth all this. Yeah, she was beautiful, and yeah, he wanted her, and yeah, he had a special feeling for her—okay, okay he probably loved her; but *nothing* was worth all this trouble. There were millions of other women in the world.

That is, if they were all still alive.

“Take this as a lesson, kid,” he grumbled, pointing a stern finger at the animal. “See, this is what you get for trying to be a gentleman. For trying to help and protect people; for being a man. If you don’t

take women seriously, and figure you can get over just talking smack, and behaving like a *dog*...oh. Sorry. No offense.”

The weather was definitely turning. Instead of the frigid cold he'd encountered in the basement before, the room actually seemed to be sweating now, as if the house was a frosted cake, and all of the icing had run off and pooled at the bottom.

Russell jammed his hands into the large rubber gloves, setting the flashlight on the washer to light the room. Wrinkling his nose, he deposited the soiled newspaper into a huge trash bag, determined to toss it outside as soon as he went upstairs. Retrieving the mop from the main room, he thoroughly cleaned the floor, using as little water as possible, finishing off the job with a liberal spritz of air deodorizer.

He stood there, puzzled, for several minutes afterward, absently scratching his beard. Something was screwy here. He placed the trash bag by the steps and returned to the utility room. It didn't make sense. The odor should've been at least slightly diminished.

And still the room smelled of urine.

There was one other possible explanation. The sewers might have begun to back up. On an impulse he lifted the seat of the small, rust-soiled toilet.

It had been well-used. Not flushed, but used. And recently. Cocking his head in confusion, he stared suspiciously at the puppy. “And what’s this about, little man?” he whispered, petting the pooch as it pawed his legs. “You learn a trick or two down here all by yourself?”

Slamming the lid down, he peeled the rubber skin from his hands and pushed the lever on the toilet. It flushed slowly, doggedly, but effectively.

If the dog had done his business on the floor, then somebody else had used the head. Somebody who didn’t want to flush, or make noise.

Somebody who didn’t want to be detected.

Somebody else had been in the house.

His thoughts tumbled over themselves in haste as he urgently tried to remember. When? How? That demonic wind would certainly have betrayed any open windows. And Iris had bolted the door when he’d tried to make it to town. It was still locked when he returned; he’d had to use his key. And the only other time they’d been away from the house in the past two days was when...

Was when they’d taken their walk, just before the storm.

There'd been the missing Chinese food, and misplaced beer... Someone had been in the house, hiding in the basement, all along.

“Iris!!”

Russ took the steps three at a time in a mad dash upward, forgetting the flashlight and pausing as he hit the entry to the kitchen at the sound of the puppy's bark.

The animal was struggling to make its way after him, yipping excitedly until it was happily planted by his side again, tail wagging.

Russell froze, staring at the animal, understanding searing its way into his brain.

The *dog*. The dog had not barked. Even when Iris descended the stairs, the dog hadn't barked. And the pup *always* barked at strangers, unless it was in the company of...

“Iris!” He ran for the living room at top speed. “Babe, I've been an idiot! You were right. There was somebody else in the house! And I think it was...Iris?”

The flame in the fireplace wavered uncertainly, dampened by the cold, stiff wind that blew freely through the living room door, the

door that would swing open if not locked from inside; the door that stood wide open now in terrifying welcome.

CHAPTER 12

“My feet are cold.”

He cackled as he firmly tightened the knot around her wrists, shaking his head. “You people crack me up. The Apocalypse, alien invaders, celibacy, Ouija boards. And here you are, kidnapped, threatened, and trussed up like a turkey—and all you can say is ‘my feet are cold’.” He stood before her, inspecting his work, satisfied.

“Aintcha ever heard of an old-fashioned power failure?”

She immediately tested her bonds. Damn him. She’d never known him to do anything well in his life. He *would* be good at tying knots. “You must be out of your mind, Milton Edwards. Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Unlike you and your lover there, I know *exactly* what I’m doing. Good to see you too, Iris. How ya been?”

He knelt before her, grinning for all he was worth as she gave him her most venomous glare. He hadn't changed much since high school, she noted. He was solid and slightly stocky, his skin pocked with scars from teenage acne; and he seemed to have developed a penchant for large, flashy jewelry. He'd been forced to remove at least seven large rings from his hands just to tie her up.

"You look good, girl. But then, I always knew you were a zircon in the rough."

"Diamond."

"Whatever. Sorry our first meeting after all this time has to be like this. I'm afraid I've gone astray. Maybe if a good woman had given me the time of day—"

"If you wanted the time of day, you could've bought yourself a clock. If you wanted a good woman, you'd behave like a decent man. After all, we only attract the kind of people..." She paused, her eyes glazing over for a moment. Was she really about to say this? "We attract the kind of people who serve our purposes," she continued quietly. "Even if it's harmful to us."

"Oh, I've heard crap like this before," he nodded. "This is that meteorologist stuff, right?"

“Metaphysical.”

“Whatever. I still say if you’d given me a little encouragement along the way...”

“Milton.” She spoke quietly, with the intensity of restrained fury. “You drag me down the stairs, covering my mouth so I can barely breathe. You don’t even allow me to grab my coat. I have no shoes. You force me to come here to this...this...” She glanced around in frustration. “This stupid storage shack, half walking, mostly sliding all the way. My feet are nearly frozen, and the right one’s bleeding— *and you want to know why I never encouraged you before this?! You’re a crazy man! What are you doing?*”

He nodded, still smiling. “Crazy like a dingo.”

“Fox.”

“Whatever. And I am sorry about the feet, Iris. But don’t worry. You shouldn’t be here too long. I just needed a little bait.”

“Come again?”

“I needed to use you as bait. Just for a little while, and then we can both get what we want. You’ll get your knight in shining *amore*, and I’ll get—”

“What?” she snapped. “What is it in that house you could possibly want so much that you’d...” Her eyes widened with understanding. “The Screen. Damn you. You’ve been after the screen all along.”

“Should’ve had it by now,” he growled. “Two days. Been waiting on that sucker for two days. First it was the damn freakish storm, and ya’ll came back to the house sooner than I expected. And then the power outage, and I definitely couldn’t get the thing out with Russell in the house.”

“Because you know he would’ve kicked your ass.”

“Damn straight he would. I’m no fool. And the thing weighs a ton. So I’m trapped down there with that silly-assed dog, and every time I think I can manage a way to sneak it out, ya’ll come up with something *new*. I was all set when Russell left the house to play hero—and here you come, trippin’ down the steps yelling ‘I’ve got a gun!’ And then I accidentally fell asleep, and I had to keep the stupid dog quiet, and...”

“He didn’t bark,” she murmured vaguely. “That’s why he didn’t bark when I came down the stairs. He was in the presence of his master.”

“Hell, after all I went through, there was no way I was gonna leave without that wood. Carr’s an idiot. That thing would be worth a fortune in the right hands!” He tapped the tip of her nose with teasing softness. “And I got the right hands, sugar.”

“It won’t work.” She tried desperately to think of some reason that it wouldn’t. She couldn’t bear the thought of Russell losing his greatest prize because of his concern for her. “Russell will never—”

“By now he’s probably noticed that you’re a little scarce. He’ll have to search the house. Russ was always real slow and careful. And then he’ll have to look around the grounds, check the garage, and all that. By the time he gets here to rescue you, I’ll be back at the house. And by the time he gets back there, I’ll be gone. I’ll get the thing out in pieces if I have to. But I’ll get it.”

Iris struggled from the awkward, cramped sitting position he’d placed her in, succeeding only in causing the bonds to cut into her wrists. “Now, don’t get yourself all lathered up, Iris. Everything will work out fine. Carr can always make another screen. But you’re the only lady he really cares about. And once I’m gone, you can comfort him by giving him a lil’ bit—like you know good ‘n well you’ve been

dying to do anyway.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. “Ya’ll are so crazy.”

“*We’re* crazy??” she snapped. “Who’s been hiding out in the basement like some peeping-tom pervert for the past two days?! Didja get your jollies, Milton? Is that why you stayed hidden for so long?”

He casually placed his boot and forced a good portion of his weight on top of her bare foot until she cried out in pain. “Now what kinda talk is that, huh? Here I am, trying to be nice and see that nobody gets hurt, and you’re gonna insult me? Hell, you two made it *impossible* for me to come out! Ya came back early from your little walk in the woods, and then there was that stupid blackout. And what was I gonna do—challenge a woman with a gun? For all I knew, you might’ve known how to use it! Hell, whatever happened to femininity?”

“If you were a real man...” Iris winced in pain as he ground her foot harder into the pebbly-stoned floor.

“Oh, shut that shit up, Foley. I was man enough not to come upstairs once I had the gun and blow both of you away. But I didn’t want any violence. And it was for damn sure that maniac Carr

would've tried to take me out to save *you*. Big dumb geek. Shoot, with half the encouragement you gave him, I woulda hit that stuff of yours so hard and fast—”

“Which is why you'll never get—”

He grabbed her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “Don't push me, Foley. I've still got a coupla minutes. More than enough time to make up for prom night.” He smiled as she pursed her lips and stepped away from her foot. “There's a good girl. Now, I've gotta get it in gear. Coming down this hill was hard enough, but getting back up to the house and out before your boy gets back will be tricky.”

“I'm telling you it won't work. Russell will find you.”

Milton casually pulled the weapon, the gun she'd dropped in her flight from the basement, out of the pocket of his coat and, smiling, checked the chambers. Obviously this time it was loaded. “Let's hope not, honey. Let's hope not.”

CHAPTER 13

“No, oh no, wait! Milton, you can’t just leave me like this!”

“Sure I can.” He slipped the gun carefully into the pocket of his coat. “Russell won’t be long. And those ropes will hold ‘til he gets here. Be grateful that I’m not gagging you, that I’m gonna let you scream so he finds you faster.” He laughed, tossing his hood up as he headed for the door. “Or maybe the space aliens will get to you first. Like ya’ll ain’t never seen electricity go out before. Crazy people.”

Iris flexed her throbbing foot and kept talking. Any company—even his—was preferable to being left here alone in the cold. “Then you think that’s all there is to it? A power outage? Are you sure? Do you know something?” She leaned eagerly forward. “Have you seen other people? Talked to anyone?”

“Nope. Left my old car parked off the side of the road a little down the hill so it wouldn’t be seen. But once the storm got going, it

would've been suicide to..." He stopped in mid-sentence and smiled broadly. "Nice try, Iris. But I ain't dumb enough to hang around here 'til Russell finds me. Now, if you'll excuse me."

His gloating goodbye halted as he pricked up his ears, almost as the pup would. She, too, had detected the peculiar sound. Strange. It was the sound an angel on ice might make, swishing closer and closer at a rapid speed toward the shed.

Iris slowly craned her neck toward the door. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I heard it." Milton frowned, heaving a big shrug. "Ice. Loose ice sliding around. Yeah, that's what it is. The stuff's melting like crazy out there. Nothing to worry about."

Yet he paused, waited before making his exit, his eyes suspicious slits. Gun and greed notwithstanding, he would not leave, she guessed, until he discovered the source of the noise.

And in a moment, the strange, racing sound came to an abrupt end as something hard and dull struck the outer wall of the shed with a loud "*thunk!*".

Iris cringed as Milton pulled the pistol, brandishing it in the air. "That," he breathed, "was *not* ice."

“What are you doing?” she cried. “It’s just thawing, probably branches breaking off the trees.”

“No it’s not.” He swung the wide door open so that it banged against the wall, standing firmly in the opening. “It’s Russell.”

Iris’ heart hammered cold in her chest. She had the same idea. And if it was true, he was risking his own safety to help her.

“Hey, Russ!!” Her attacker screamed out at the thick night air. “I know it’s you, man. So you caught on earlier than I expected. Well, we can still cut a deal, bro. All I want is the screen. And I’ve got your lady in here with me; so come out, come out wherever you are!”

There was no response—only the minute cracking sounds of tree limbs shedding icy bonds. She tried to peer around him, but could see nothing. He looked like a cut-out figure centered in a dark cameo. “Milton?” She spoke quietly, a hint of fear in her voice. “Suppose it’s not Russell? Suppose it’s...well, something else?”

He crowed hysterically, filling the still air with harsh tones. “Oh, yeah, I forgot. It’s the little green men, come to take me away. Well, beam me up, Scotty! I’m standin’ right here, waiting for transport!” He chuckled, glancing over his shoulder at her. “Ya’ll so crazy!”

She gulped, trying to swallow her panic. There must be something she could do. *Anything*. “Milton?” He might be easy to shake up, to unnerve enough to make him run. He was already on edge. The hell with whatever was *really* going on—she had to scare him enough to make him wonder.

Iris twisted her wrists behind her back until they burned against the rough ropes, trying to get numbed fingers into position. They wouldn’t reach. “Maybe you shouldn’t stand there announcing our location. Maybe they’ve come for *you*.”

He gleefully slapped his thigh. “This is so off the hook!” He literally began jumping up and down in excitement. “If I wasn’t trying to rob you folks, I’d like to hang out with ya! Hey, Russ! Little gray people! Whatever! Here I am!” Raising the pistol at the blank slate of sky, he fired.

One.

Iris instinctively ducked, screwing her eyes shut in silent prayer that Russ was safe, wherever he was. “Are you out of your mind? Put that thing away!”

“Are you kidding? The party’s just starting. We’ve gotta have fireworks!” He turned, pointed the gun straight out the door, and shattered the stillness with another shot.

Two.

“Hey, Russ. I ain’t for playin’ man. Drag your sorry ass ‘round here where I can see you, and we can talk like men. Otherwise, I ain’t responsible for what might happen to your bitch.”

Iris squinted at his pacing form, trying desperately to see whether he had anything else in his pockets. She couldn’t tell. She couldn’t tell whether he’d brought the box of ammunition with him.

But she remembered that the Saturday night special would hold five bullets. And he’d already fired two.

“Russ?” Milton nearly bent over to peer out the door. “Don’t think I won’t hurt her, bro. I will. What say you and me just take a little walk up to the house. I get the screen, you get the girl. Sounds fair, don’t it?”

She couldn’t decide what was more frightening—the idea of Milton Edwards playing cowboy, or the silence that answered his call. Russell valued his masterpiece well enough, but he would never allow her to be harmed for it.

Unless, of course, it *wasn't* Russell...

Apparently, Milton had the same thought at the same time. The cavorting figure in the doorway seemed to wind slowly down, and Milton took a few steps backward, then slammed the door noisily shut. “Shit. This ain’t right.” He glanced back at her, and the joy on his face had morphed into worry. “Something’s wrong here. No way that man would take a chance on you getting hurt. That ain’t Russell.”

“Milton? You could untie me.” She spoke tentatively, nearly expecting Russ to charge through the door any minute. “I could help you. You could cut me loose, and we could go back up to the house. And I could see to it that you get the screen. Really I could. If I asked Russell, explained that you didn’t hurt me and how much your dog really does mean to me—”

He bit his lip, hesitated, then shook his head. “Carr would break me in half before he’d let me go. Naw. We’ll do this my way, and...”

Iris turned sharply, then froze, her mouth gaping at the sound of a faint scratching noise outside the back wall. Whatever it was had

decided not to use the door. It was going to make its own way in.

“Omigod. What—”

“Damn you, Carr,” Milton hissed between clenched teeth.

“Okay, if that’s the way you want it.”

She cringed as he approached her, his face etched with anger—and smiled up at him in hopeful surprise as he pulled angrily on the rope that bound her ankles until they were free. “You—you’re letting me go?”

“Hardly.” He yanked her to her feet and dragged her roughly toward the entrance. “I want him to see you. I want him to think that the next shot I fire might be at that hard little head of yours.”

Iris stumbled on her sore feet, lunging for freedom when he swung the door open again. He effortlessly jerked her back and held her in front of him. “Milt, you wouldn’t really hurt me, now would you?”

“Shut up. Hold still.” The insistent scratching continued at the back wall, harder now, faster, but his eyes focused on the darkness before them. “There’s somebody, something out there.”

She blinked into the blackness. And, although she couldn't see, she could hear. Beneath the sound of crackling ice and the labored breath of the dying storm, there was another noise.

Something was moving in the nearby bushes.

The brittle limbs bent, snapped, and parted before whatever was a part of that darkness, providing camouflage and betraying the presence at the same time. Iris' eyes widened in sudden fear.

If Russell was trying to come through the back—who was lurking in the bush in front?

“Damn it!”

The gun exploded right next to her ear, but she quickly struck out, trying to ruin his aim. “Stop it! Stop!” she cried desperately.

“Don't shoot. That damn screen isn't worth killing anybody!”

Three.

“Are you stupid, or what?” he snarled. “Look!”

A small, green circle of neon light wafted in and out of the branches, disappearing, re-emerging, then leaving a ghostly tail like a tiny comet as it made its way toward the shed.

She could feel Milton's heart thudding against her back as a new sound filled the air—the sound of horrid, heavy breathing and the deafening gnashing of grinding, carnivorous teeth.

“Shit. *That ain't Russell.*” Milton backed away from the door, pulling her with him, his eyes shuttling back and forth between the back wall and the door. “That is not a human sound. And whatever it is, there's more than one of 'em.”

In the next moment he grabbed his head as an ear-splitting frequency, rising and falling in waves, sliced through the silence. Iris, released, dropped to her knees, too afraid now to run.

“Alright you sons o' bitches!” Milton shouted frantically. “You want some? I'm comin'. I'm comin' for you!!”

Without thinking, Iris stretched her long dancer's leg out just as he was making his run for the door. Wincing at the sharp pain of his foot kicking her, she watched him fall face down, spread-eagled—and curled away as the force of his hand hitting the threshold pulled the trigger yet again.

Four.

With a wild, maniacal cry he charged through the door. Iris sat up again, squinting, listening intently, as he was swallowed by the

night. There, there she could still hear him running, raving in his fear, shrieking crude, useless threats...

There was a long, horrible moment of silence. Just a moment. A moment before she heard his high-pitched, blood-curdling scream and the report of the last, echoing shot.

Five.

And all was silence again.

She sat on the floor of the shed. She had no idea how long she sat there before she slowly, painfully stood and began to inch toward the open door. She was cold and perspiring, her feet felt like pulp, and every nerve ending on the surface of her skin seemed to have exploded into awareness. But she was almost there, almost. Escape was just a few steps away...

A small, flaming finger of light shot out of the darkness before her and she jumped back, gasping for breath. She needed it. She needed it to fuel the gut-wrenching scream that issued from deep in her throat as the drawn, gray face with empty eyes appeared suddenly before her and slowly, ever so slowly, began peeling its head away.

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“I am going to kill you.”

His face spread into a smile, and she waited very patiently as he tried to untie her wrists. There was no rush. She could throttle him now or later. It didn't really matter.

“That was definitely a B-movie actress scream,” he murmured, laughing softly. “You’ve definitely missed your calling.”

“Did you *enjoy* doing this?” She could feel herself growing hot with anger. In another second or two, she'd burn right through the bonds herself. “I nearly pissed my pants, Russell Carr. And they're the only pair I have! And what have you done to poor Milton? And how did you—”

“Milton and I had one thing in common.” With a sure twist of the end of the knot, he released her hands, kneeling before her as she massaged her wrists. “Neither of us wanted to see anybody get hurt.”

A lesser man would be gushing right now, eager to detail his own heroics.

Getting answers out of this one was like pulling teeth. “You seem to have come up with your own special-effects lab, Mr. Carr. The little green fairy I saw floating outside?”

“Glow-in-the-dark watch.”

“The alien assault from the rear? Who was tearing at the door?”

“Your pooch. Insisted on following me.” He gently kissed her hand, and suddenly she was no longer cold. “Huddling in the bushes right now. Turns out he’s not gun shy, but Milton’s scream scared him all to hell.”

“And the flame that set me back on my ass was your lighter.”

“You’re catching on.”

“And this...” She paused, fingering the rubbery face-cover gathered like folds of flesh about his neck. “One of your old Halloween masks from the attic?”

“We should get back to the fire. Your fingertips are a little blue.”

He helped her back to her feet. “And the sounds?” she persisted. “How’d you manage that awful munching sound, that horrible breathing? It sounded as if the woods were alive!”

“Battery-powered karaoke set. Remember? You said it was useless.”

Iris sniffled. For some reason her nose became runny as she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to laugh or cry. She struggled to

her feet, teetering dangerously. Her socks were freezing wet, sticking to her feet, and the right one was slightly bloody. “Well, I’m glad everything turned out so freaking *well* for everybody! Milton kidnaps me, ties me up, threatens me with a gun, gets off scott-free—and you get to keep your precious screen after all.”

“Would you have thought me more of a man if I just charged the door and got myself killed?”

“Of course not!” The thought of him being hurt made her angry at him all over again. “But that man could’ve blown me away while you were out playing Trick or Treat in the bushes!”

“He wasn’t going to hurt you. He wanted to keep living. You’ve got a nasty cut on that foot. May need stitches.”

“Come near me with a needle and I’ll sic my dog on you. You’re really going to let Milt go?”

“Nobody got seriously hurt here, Iris. And if he ever comes back or tries anything else, I’ll break him in half. He knows that. Milton doesn’t need any help to self-destruct. He’s not a bad person. Just makes bad choices. Guess we can all relate to that, can’t we?”

She refused to be soothed. Dammit, she'd been angry for two days now. How could he be so freaking understanding? "Well, as long as *The Screen* is safe," she sniffed irritably.

Russell sighed. He looked rather worn, she noticed—and very weird with that ash-gray skin pouched around his neck. "I told you I did all this because I thought it was better than risking everybody getting hurt. You think I'd put that 'thing' before your safety?" She refused to look at him, refused to answer. "Then maybe you're right. Maybe we don't know each other very well. Can you walk?"

"Of course I can—"

He whisked her effortlessly off her feet and into his massive arms, and for a brief second she nestled there, burying her face in the fragrance of him, tired of fighting.

Carrying her easily outside, he slipped and nearly fell after only three steps. But it wasn't the ice this time. Something dark and very solid had crashed and jammed into the corner of the little shed, tripping him in the shadows. "Wait. Wait a minute," she murmured. "What is that?"

“That? That’s my sled,” he grunted. “I had to find a quick way to get here. Loaded the karaoke box on, grabbed the pup, hopped aboard—and *swish*.”

“But you’ve never said anything about having...you don’t own a...put me down,” she commanded tersely. Wincing slightly as her feet hit the ice again, she grabbed his lighter from his pocket, flicked on a gassy gush of flame, and bent over to examine the sled.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. Her vision wavered behind tears as her fingers traced the dancing figures. “The Screen. It’s one panel of your screen. You took it apart to...to use as a sled to reach me? Oh, no, Russell, oh no,” she sobbed. “It’s ruined. The whole thing’s scraped and scarred and ruined. You’ll never be able to fix it.”

“Maybe I can.” He whistled for the pup, who cautiously joined them. “Or maybe I’ll make a new one, with different figures in different poses. You’re classically trained. You know that the dancers may change, but the dance is eternal. Gotta dance,” he grinned, leaning toward her, as if to pick her up again.

“No,” she murmured, stopping him. “I don’t want to be carried.”

He cursed beneath his breath, obviously frustrated. “Okay, then I can sit you on the panel and tie a rope to it and—”

“No. I don’t want to be pulled along like a child. And I don’t want to take every bump on my backside. And I don’t want to be dragged behind and have to look up at you. I don’t need to play catch-up. I can walk just fine on my own bloodied, battered two feet, thank you very much.”

“Yes.” She thought he sounded rather surprised. “Yeah, I guess you can.”

“But I’ll take a supportive arm, if you don’t mind.”

If he smiled in the darkness she couldn’t tell. But his arm was strong and firm around her waist. And although the ground was just as cold and hard, and they both slipped, even fell along the way, they made it safely back to the old gray house, waiting warm, silent, and ageless at the top of the hill.

CHAPTER 14

“It’s your move.”

Iris hated chess. She always had. But there was something about games, any kind of game, that brought out her competitive side in a very ugly way.

At least it did help to fill the time. She couldn’t pretend to be interested in the remaining dinner, but she had agreed to the uncorking of the last bottle of very dry champagne.

The puppy, however, had been very well fed, and placed on a mound of cushions near the fire. When he sleepily shuffled down to the basement moments later, she started to retrieve him, but was discouraged by Russell.

“Either he has to take a dump, or he wants to be close to Momma. That blanket in the utility room has her scent. Leave him be. He’ll adjust to you gradually.”

However, that left her with nothing to do. Except, of course, the one thing she really *wanted* to do.

Have sex with him until she passed out cold.

She'd had him in hand, had come within inches of feeling him raw-red and tight inside of her. She could not look at him without recalling the raw hunger in his eyes as he'd backed her onto the bed, the hands that had claimed her, the way his mouth savored the taste of her skin.

And most of all, the feeling of him, hot and hard and nestled against her need. She could still feel him, and the pressure building inside of her as she stared at the board, remembering...

"Iris? I said it's your move."

She cut her eyes at him and swallowed a great gulp of champagne. Was it her imagination, or did the room seem to be warmer than before? "I don't like this game."

"You just don't like it because you're losing. Move."

Well, wasn't he Mr. I'm-in-control-of-my-hormones now? He looked a little too smug sitting there across from her—as if he could read her mind. Damn him.

Three o' clock in the morning, and the two of them still wide awake. The storm had ended. They'd actually seen stars on their trek home. She wondered whether they were both so eager to see the sun come up that they couldn't sleep.

The icy ache in her feet had subsided with a soaking in warm water and Epsom salt, and the cut was not as bad as it had seemed. An antibiotic cream, a gauze wrap, and two pair of his thickest woolen socks had managed to make her feel human again.

Maybe *too* human. She wanted him so much right now she could taste him.

The problem now, of course, was how to go about it. He'd seemed a little distant since their return to the house. Little wonder, considering the roller-coaster ride they'd been on. So what was she supposed to do? Jump up and say, "okay, Russ, I've changed my mind yet again, let's see if you can get it up one more time just for me, hmmm?"

She tried to concentrate on the game. It was a beautiful board, one that he had made himself of marble and mahogany, with each figure hand-carved to resemble a unique, miniature totem pole. She nearly smiled at the sight of the queen, long and tall, with a firm,

mounded bosom and distinct, knobby nipples. “I don’t want to play. I’m bored.”

“Really? Okay. How about Yahtzee?”

“Puh-leeze.”

“A little Trivial Pursuit?”

“No more games. I’m tired of games.”

“Is that right?”

Grinning for all he was worth, Russell gathered up the chessboard and pieces and set them aside. She watched him walk, the clean pair of jeans fitting snugly beneath his soft, bulky sweater. It was, she thought dreamily, big enough for the two of them.

Russ returned to the dining table with an ashtray and cigarettes and emptied the rest of the champagne into their fluted glasses.

“Then maybe you’d like to try a different kind of game. A slightly more *challenging* game. Just a little something to pass the time—but with a harder, more intriguing edge. *Hmmm?*”

He had something up his sleeve. He knew her better than anybody on the planet, knew that when her competitive fervor kicked in there was no holding it back. She shrugged, trying to seem casually interested. “Depends. What did you have in mind?”

He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, toying with his lighter. “How about a betting game?”

“A betting game? C’mon, Russ; I don’t exactly have much with me to wager here.”

“It’s a simple game with simple rules. Won’t cost you a thing, but I promise you won’t be bored. Interested?”

She sat forward, tempted by the devilish gleam in his eye. He was so doggoned irresistible. “Okay. What’s the game?”

“A wager. Just a little something to brighten our night.” He inhaled half of his cigarette and let the smoke seep slowly out of his mouth. “I’ll bet I can make you come before you can make me come.”

Iris did a quick double-take. She must have heard him wrong. “Wanna run that by me again?”

“I’ll betcha I can make you—”

“Come? You mean, as in having an orgasm?”

“Yup.” He winked. “You remember those, don’t you?”

She bit her lip, trying to stifle her laughter. It didn’t work.

“You’re out of your freaking mind, Carr.”

“Now, now, stop and think about it. It’ll definitely help pass the rest of the night. By the time I’m done, you won’t know what *day* it

is. I promise. It also helps to warm the body and get the circulation going, and effectively puts an end to your celibacy without messy complications. It's not a relationship. It's a contest." He turned the lighter on high and a long, thin finger of flame shot straight up before her. "And since we're into truth now, I'll be honest with you if you'll be honest with yourself. I want sex, Iris. Hot, wet, hard, dirty sex. I want it right here, right now. I've been walking around with a hard-on for nearly two days, and I want—no, *need*—relief. If I don't get some soon, I may go wandering around the hillsides in search of sheep. And I do remember your reaction in the bedroom. I think you felt somewhat the same. So? How about it?"

Her blood was already stirring, and the fluttering in her stomach was shifting rapidly to her lower extremities. "I don't know..."

"Think of it as a truce. A truce with honor. Nobody's wrong, nobody leads or follows, and everybody's satisfied." He took another long draw upon his cigarette. "Or are you afraid? Worried that you won't be able to compete, huh?"

She ran the tip of her finger along the cool rim of the glass, squirming in her chair, unable to keep still. "I'm not a child, Russ.

You're not going to goad me into doing this." Crazy, absolutely nuts. Sex on a bet? But Lord, how she wanted to. She could get what she wanted from him and easily win this wager. Slowly sipping her champagne, she let it tickle the inside of her mouth before allowing it to slide down her throat and warm her stomach. "When do we start?"

Russ' eyes narrowed dangerously as he immediately butted his smoke. Reaching down to his waist, he pulled his thick sweater over his head and threw it aside, baring his chest as if issuing a challenge. "Right now."

She set her glass aside, eagerly wiggling her toes beneath the table. "Rules?"

"No pain. Shifting positions to your own advantage is permissible, but no restricting your adversary's efforts." He smirked wickedly. "And after you lose—after you climax—I still get to satisfy myself, any way I please. Or vice-versa."

Grasping the bottom of her tee shirt, she removed it with exaggerated slowness, tossing it on top of his and smiling demurely. "Then let the games begin."

She felt a surge of confidence mix with her adrenaline as she watched his eyes zero in on her breasts, bare just above the level of

the table. The cool air against her skin made her nipples pebble, and the hungry look in his eyes made them ache to be touched.

She already had him halfway there. This was one competition she was going to win.

Leaving her seat, she approached him with a kittenish expression. He immediately slid his chair back and reached for her, but she held up a warning finger. “Let’s at least be civilized about this. I’ll help you out of your pants, and then I’ll let you get into mine. Reasonable?”

Some muffled, incoherent sound escaped his lips as he stood. Iris coyly unsnapped his jeans and, with agonizing slowness, lowered his zipper. Kneeling before him, she didn’t bother to try hiding her smile of triumph. The bulge that lurked there would burst his seams in another minute. She slid the pants down his legs, lightly licking her lips, fully aware of the effect of having her mouth so close to his expanding excitement. With the lightest of touches, she peeled his briefs away, her heart skipping as his manhood sprang free.

But she did not touch him. Not yet. Temptation was sweet, and she was enjoying this game.

His hands were already fisted at his sides, and she could hear the grinding of his teeth. “Lift your feet, partner, so I can get these impediments out of the way.”

He held onto the chair for support, his sore knees slow to cooperate, and she swept his clothes aside before standing. “Now do me.”

His fingers were trembling, she noted, as he struggled with the button, then the zipper of her trousers. The loose pants fell easily away, and she stepped out of them without assistance. “Let me,” she whispered when he reached for her panties. “You’ll have trouble bending.” She hooked her fingers into the narrow sides of her underpants and inched them down her long legs, pausing at her calves and turning her back to him so that he could see her bare buttocks sway enticingly as she bent over to ease the lacy barrier away.

Yes, indeed. She had this sucker sewn up, she assured herself as a moan escaped his lips. She faced him again, folding her arms shyly behind her. Goosebumps began to sprout on her skin as she stared at him. Damn, he was a magnificent specimen. Abs you could bounce a quarter off, chest hair you could burrow into, and follow the

tapering trail all the way down to the goodies. A tingling sensation spread across her abdomen at the sight of his swollen shaft, and she silently ordered herself to maintain control. “So. Here we are. What—”

Russell scooped her off her feet without wasting a word, depositing her upon the edge of the dining room table and assuming the chair before her. He quickly captured one breast in his mouth while squeezing and thumbing the other, suckling voraciously as she gasped, taken completely off-guard.

His manipulations sent currents of raw, wanton need through her body, and she tried to think through the haze of desire. ‘No restraining the adversary’ he’d said, so she couldn’t make him stop, didn’t want him to. She clung to his shoulders as he persisted, transferring his attentions to one breast and then the other, and oh, it was so good, so good that it never occurred to her to resist, even as he spread her legs and pushed her back onto the table.

With one stiff, teasing finger he traced a trail along the tract of her heat, kissing her so thoroughly, so violently that she could barely breathe. And try as she might, she could not resist that finger, that maddening finger as it lightly delved between the thin folds of her

flesh, seeking and finding her clit and lightly caressing it as she nearly lurched off the table.

“You like that,” he growled, nibbling upon her neck as his finger relentlessly circled. “Tell me. Tell me how good it feels.”

“Unfair.” She barely managed the word as her body moved with the delicious skill of his hand. “You used superior physical strength to strike first.”

“All’s fair in love.” He kissed his way down the length of her torso, his scant beard as stimulating as his lips. Urging her thighs even farther apart, his soft lips found her portal as his tongue strummed the sensitive nub.

Her back bowed as she whimpered for more, as she felt his smile. “Now *this*,” he murmured, “is the Food of the Gods.”

All thoughts of resistance were rapidly fading as her body betrayed her. And when his finger slipped inside of her as he gently sucked her clit, she was sure she was lost. Already she could feel the pressure building within her with each sure stroke, could feel her woman’s muscles grasping at his finger, frantic for relief.

Her arms flailed uselessly about, trying to find the edge of the table, to grab something, to hold on to her sanity. When her hand

made contact with something cold and wet, she started, as if awakening from a dream. In a last, desperate act of will, she seized the champagne glass and sent it flying off the table.

“Russell! Wait, wait!” she panted as it crashed upon the floor. “The glass. We’ve broken the glass.”

“Damn the glass,” he muttered, drawing her closer to the edge.

“No, no, wait! We...we’re both running around here without shoes, and I’ve already cut my foot, and if you’d just give me...” She mewled as he continued his finger exercise, nearly forgetting what she meant to say, precariously close to surrender. “Just give me a second to pick up the glass. I think there are only two pieces. Just a second.”

He stopped, breathing heavily as he dropped back into the chair and released her. Iris rolled from the tabletop, landing adroitly upon her feet. Carefully avoiding the broken glass, she scampered under the table and crawled over to his chair, grasping his heated rod firmly in her hand.

His legs stiffened in surprise. “What the—”

Iris laughed demonically as she wrapped her fingers around him. He swelled into her hands, his body shuddering as she slowly began to slide her fingers up and down his shaft.

“Liar!” His voice sounded strangled, and the top of the table rocked above her from the strength of his grip. “Cheat!”

“All’s fair,” she cried triumphantly as she slipped the dark, quivering head into her mouth.

Russell groaned as if in pain as she possessed him, taking him in fully, her lips sliding tantalizingly from root to throbbing hood, over and over. She imagined what it felt like, to be a man, to have some faceless, unseen woman doing you from under a table, shamelessly sucking the molten desire out of you. The idea aroused her even more, and she stroked the iron length of him with both hands as she swirled her tongue around the bulb of his cock, until his fists pounded against the tabletop in agony.

She had him now. He was hers for the taking—that is, if the excitement of giving him a climax didn’t give her one first...

She could taste his sex in her throat as his hips began to pump, and increased her tempo as he rocked helplessly with her. She knew she’d won now; he was close, so close...

But she had forgotten.

She had forgotten that superior physical strength.

With one massive heave of his shoulders, he overturned the table so that it landed with a loud thud behind her. And before she knew it, he had swept her up from the floor and held her effortlessly by her waist over him, her legs astride, his expression dark with purpose.

Without wasting a word, he firmly lowered her onto him, sliding easily into her wetness, opening her wide and filling her as she dug her nails into his shoulders.

She inhaled the shock as he drove deep, grinding his pelvis against hers, his gaze locked upon her eyes. Lifting her slightly, he slid out of her, only to penetrate again and again, faster and harder. His hands held firmly onto her buttocks, controlling each and every movement. There was no escape. And her traitorous body urged him on, arching into him as his mouth again captured her breast, undulating against him with each powerful thrust. She locked her jaw, intent on holding off the climax that threatened to overwhelm her, trying to turn her mind to other things, the weather, the power crisis, the broken glass, and only managed to make it worse. The more she tried to resist, the more intense the sensations became, and

the longer they built up inside of her, the more desperate she became for relief.

He must have been just as close to the edge, she tried to assure herself, must have been just as ready to give in, to explode with the heat, the madness...if only she could hold on, another moment, another thrust, another second, and another, and oh, God, the rippling pressure was overcoming her and she couldn't stop, couldn't stop...

She heard her voice cry out, felt herself shiver into nothingness as her vision went white and she quivered against him, holding on to him for dear life.

Iris drifted slowly back, her body still convulsing around him. There was a sound, a voice in the distance, she imagined, droning on about nothing, and the room still seemed filled with light. His breath was hot and heavy against her bosom as he held her, still straining for control.

“You lose.” His voice was whiskey-hoarse, his hands trembling upon her hips.

She whispered softly, still trembling, still aroused. “Wanna bet?”

He gathered her into his arms and held her for a moment, until her heart began to beat normally again. “Russell?”

“Mmmm?”

“Russell...I think the lights are back on.”

He was still hard and heavy inside of her, a thin sheen of perspiration glimmering upon his body. “Frankly, my dear...”

Keeping himself locked within her, he strode quickly to the nearest wall, pinning her firmly against it as he impatiently plunged into her again. “I want you to wrap your legs around me,” he muttered. “I want to feel them, long and strong and silky and urging me to push in deeper and deeper, until you can’t tell where I end and you begin. I want to see that you want me. Fuck the game, the lies, the mistakes. I want you to look at me, to let me see your reactions, to let me have you the way I want you, the way I’ve always wanted you, and to love it. The way I’ve always loved you.”

He moved forcefully in and out of her as she wrapped her legs around him, wanting every inch of him as much as he wanted her, dying to have him. The wall felt cold and raw against her back as he pumped desperately in and out of her, as she held on to his neck, his shoulders, the sensations the only thing that mattered. He was

relentless, merciless, his huge hands clutching her hips as he thrust with the strength of his whole body, mindless of any injury to his knees. And it was coming again, stronger than ever, before it had completely deserted her, the pulsing wave taking possession of her senses, her body responding in kind as he literally drove her up the wall, harder and faster until his roar mingled with the sound of her own delirious scream, and they both collapsed into a limp, satiated heap upon the floor.

EPILOGUE

They lay exhausted, spoon-style, upon his blanket before the fire, their eyes focused on the local newsman.

The house was flooded with light and the furnace blasted at full force. In the excitement following their sexual excitement, they had run through the house like lunatics, lighting every lamp, flicking every switch, squealing in delight at the sight of the vanilla-white sun gradually peering over the horizon.

Dawn. The first they had seen of it in nearly forty-eight hours.

Iris shifted her position slightly, making pseudo-pathetic whimpers. “Good God, man. I’ll be sore for a week.”

“Well, you won’t have a week to recover. I’ll give you a half-hour, tops. Then it’s on to Round Two of the competition.”

She ran her hand along the arm that possessively encircled her waist. “I’ll win this time.”

“I’m counting on it.”

The temperature was rising with the sun, and the rough rushing of ice sledding from the roof had replaced the roll of thunder. The television had been turned down immediately after they’d learned that the rest of the world was alive and well—and seriously pissed off.

“...Police are considering charges against The Mercurial Players, the local drama group that incited some small amount of panic with their play, presented on the local community channel. A spokesman for the group denies any ill-intent, and claims it was simply a tribute to Orson Welles’ broadcast of ‘War of the Worlds’, their own updated version. This, in the midst of one of the most devastating outbreaks of tornadoes in U.S. history, alarmed some residents so much...”

“They oughtta give the kids a break,” Russell drawled lazily. “Hell, how were they to know the power would go out at just the wrong time?”

“You’re right.” Iris rubbed the gauze-wrap on her foot absently along his battered leg. “No harm done, after all.”

The swarthy newsman shifted papers and smiled brightly, as if pleased to have an audience again.

“...And on a somewhat bizarre note, police have taken into custody a man, suffering from exposure and a broken leg, found in a ditch near his abandoned automobile. He claimed that he had barely escaped an alien invasion, and had injured himself while trying to warn the rest of the world. He has been admitted to Mercy Hospital for drug testing and psychological evaluation...”

“That’s it!” Iris cried, propping herself up on one elbow. “That’s what we’ll name him.”

“What? Who? Name who?”

“The pup! I’ve got the perfect name. We’ll call him ‘Orson’. I think Mr. Welles would appreciate the irony of that.”

“Orson it is.” Russ slid a heated hand along the curve of her hip, and she felt him hardening behind her. “The mutt’s got huge feet. He’ll be quite an animal. A big dog like that really needs a lot of room, y’know.”

“It would be nice. But my little condo will have to do.”

“I was thinking.” He pulled her closer, and she wiggled provocatively against him, hiding her smile in the pillow of his arm.

“I was thinking you might consider staying here for a while. Give the beast a chance to adjust. And it’d be good for the business.”

“The business, huh? Well, yup,” she replied. “S’pose it would.”

“And if that worked out okay, maybe we could make some kinda legal arrangement. You know, like landlord and tenant. But with perks.”

Iris lifted one slim, enigmatic eyebrow. “Was that supposed to be your idea of a proposal, Mr. Carr?”

“Dammit, you know I’m lousy with words,” he muttered, despair in his voice. “I suppose you want to hear all that stuff about love that lasts for always and happily ever after, but I don’t know how to—”

“How about a little betting game?”

His mouth widened into an appreciative smile as he possessively cupped one tingling breast. “What did you have in mind?”

Iris chuckled, lowering her voice to a sinful whisper. “If you can make me come within, say, the next five minutes, I’ll consider marrying you.”

She curled into him as he caressed her and murmured into her ear. “And if I lose?”

“If you lose, you’ll have to marry *me*.”

“I do like bargaining with you, brat.” His eyes were bright as he sprang from the couch, grabbed her hand, and headed for the stairway. “I’ve been itching to get you on those cool satin sheets ever since I bought them. Fortunately, I’m pretty good with my hands. I should be able to cinch this.”

“Ummm...Russ...”

“No? Okay, okay, we can try something else.” He paused at the bottom of the steps, grinning wickedly. “How about Orson-style?”

“Russ. Wait.”

Noting the sober expression on her face, he stopped before the window at the base of the stairs, exasperated. “*What?! Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind already!* We have a deal. I’ve got at least three minutes left! And you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy the sex, or you don’t like being with me, or that—” His hand tightened around hers as a sudden fear gripped him. “You can’t tell me you don’t love me.”

She turned her face to his, softly stroking his cheek, her eyes glossy with tears. “You’re right. I can’t. That’s something I don’t think I could ever deny. If I haven’t said it, I think it’s because I—I’m actually taking it for granted. It would be like saying, ‘I breathe’.

Dear God, after all this denial! We don't need the words, Russ. We never did."

"Then what is it? Why the hesitation?" He kissed her lightly, dreamily. "You know I adore you. Even if I turned out to be the last man on earth, there's only one woman I'd want. You, with your feisty attitude, your gorgeous legs, those beautiful, bottomless, honest eyes, and that wild imagination. I'd want only you."

"Oh, I don't doubt your feelings for me, Russell. I never will. It's just...just..."

"What? Come on," he gently urged. "After all we've been through, you can tell me anything."

"Well, it's just that...Russell? Have you looked outside?" She pulled him over to face the window, pointing. "Russ, there's a bright, funny light in the sky, and it's hovering right over this house..."

E N D

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