



## **Wild Women**

Michele R. Bardsley

Hard Shell Word Factory

This story copyright 2004 by Michele R. Bardsley. All other rights are reserved.

Thank you for honoring the copyright.

Cover Art by: Mary Z. Wolf

Hard Shell Word Factory.

PO Box 161 Amherst Junction, WI 54407 [books@hardshell.com](mailto:books@hardshell.com)

<http://www.hardshell.com>

Electronic book created by Seattle Book Company.

eBook ISBN: 0759944318

*All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.*



## Acknowledgements

My eternal thanks to Patricia A. Rasey, author and friend extraordinaire, who helped Marissa Vanderson kick some serious butt.

I owe my critique partners, Ruth D. Kerce, Teri Heyer, and Nancy McLane, a never-ending supply of chocolate. Nancy's constant refrains of "Will you just write the damned book?" still echo in my mind. A big thank-you goes to Kathy Awe, who edited the damned book.

Gratitude must given, often and in great quantities, to Janice Strand, whose inspired "I'll race you!" ensured I got to this novel's finish line. Her ears are raw from listening to my whines and her lips chapped from reassuring me. (Only a true and forgiving friend puts up with that much crap.)

As always, I'm grateful for the support of my husband, Dean, and my children, Katie and Reid. They tolerate my cranky moods, weird questions, and paper-strewn floors, yet still tell people, "She's a writer," in a tone of voice reserved for nobility and movie stars.

And finally, to Mary Z. Wolf, who bought my first book and introduced me to the wonderful world of electronic publishing. No matter what happens in my writing career, in my heart, I will always be a turtle.

## Dedication

In memory of award-winning graphic artist and novelist, Ariana Overton, who will always be one of my favorite wild women.

To Friends In Deed: I'm glad we have each other.

## Prologue

*"GO TO THE ZOO?"*

Fourteen-year-old Marissa Vanderson snatched the pink paper from Gillian's hand. Her cheeks flamed at her sister's soft laughter. Just because Gillie was four years older didn't mean she knew everything. "What's wrong with going to the zoo? We've never been there. We've never been anywhere *fun*."

"Except Paris, Rome, and London."

"We saw hotel rooms and restaurants and landmarks—with armed guards. Why can't we do normal family things? Picnics in the park and boating on the lake and—and visiting the zoo."



“Our parents have tried to make sure we have extraordinary experiences.”

“*Humph.*” Marissa looked at her sister. “They only want us to have extraordinary experiences in protected environments. If they’re not with us, we don’t get to do anything. We have private tutors, private parties, private everything.”

“You know why.”

“Zachary.” Marissa sighed. “I know he was our brother, but we never knew him. His kidnapping happened twenty years ago.”

“Why do you think Mom and Dad try to stay low-key? Why do think they’ve been so protective?”

“I know that they love us, but why don’t they spend more time with us? It’s like they love each other more than...than...their own daughters!”

“It’s complicated, Rissa.” Gillie made a “gimme” gesture with her hand. “The list, please. We’ll write it together, okay? Tomorrow, I’ll take you to the zoo.”

“But it’s your birthday. You know Mom and Dad have planned a big *private* bash.”

“As of midnight, I’m a legal adult and I can do what I want. And I want to take my sister to the zoo.”

As much as she envied Gillie, Marissa loved the way Gillie made everyone around her feel special. She eyed her sister’s outfit. The fringed purple top, sparkly leather pants, and army boots didn’t look like pajamas. “You’re sneaking out again, aren’t you?”

“You want the zoo. I want Michael Feeney.”

“Huh?”

“Michael Feeney. He’s amazing, Rissa. He has the body of a Greek god and the soul of a poet.” Gillie’s expression turned dreamy, her eyes glistening with a light that could only be inspired by teenaged love.

Marissa grimaced. “Yech. Spare me the details.”

“One day you won’t find boys so disgusting. In fact...” Gillie took the paper and grabbed a pen from her nightstand. She scribbled, “Toe-curling kiss,” under the already-listed items and smiled. “French kissing. It’s the best.”

“I’m going to retch. No boy is sticking his tongue in my mouth.” Still, Marissa decided to leave it on her list...for now.

For the next few minutes, they argued over what should be put on Marissa’s Fun Stuff (a.k.a. The Wild) List. Rissa loved debating with Gillie; her sister was smart and funny and beautiful. Rissa knew she had



brains, too, and lots of 'em, but she lacked any other glowing qualities, especially beauty. She might as well have been Gillie's shadow rather than her sister. Now Gillie had one more thing she didn't: a boyfriend she loved so much, she risked the wrath of their parents to be with him.

"Hey, kiddo, I gotta go."

Marissa watched Gillian raise the window. "The alarm!"

"I re-routed the leads to this one." Gillie grinned. "I'll be back before dawn. Don't worry about me, Rissa. I'll be fine. Like I said, tomorrow we'll go to the zoo, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Giraffes, popcorn, and the rain forest display...the whole caboodle. Pinky swear." She extended the little finger of her right hand and Marissa extended hers; they gripped pinkies. Gillie swung her leg over the sill and hopped out, then pushed down the window. She blew a kiss at Marissa. The glass fogged momentarily; Gillie wrote *love you* in the white circle created by her breath, then parted the shrubbery and disappeared.

Marissa stared at the reversed "love you," until it faded. A few minutes later, she heard the distant sound of a motorcycle gunning its engine.

AT 2 A.M., THE loud gong of the doorbell had Marissa scrambling out of bed. Her heart pounded fiercely; dread made her limbs shake. She didn't bother with her robe or slippers. Didn't care that she wore nothing but a blue nightie as she stumbled to the door. Her hand slipped on the knob; the second try, she wrenched it open, dashed out of her bedroom and ran down the elaborate staircase. At the front double doors, her parents and Geoffrey, their long-time butler, stood in shocked silence listening to the woman in the police uniform utter phrases like, "fatal accident," and "sorry for your loss," and "need dental records."

Her parents held onto each other, tears of disbelief marring their perfect faces. They didn't look at Marissa, didn't invite her join them. As usual, they had only room enough for each other. Geoffrey enclosed Marissa in his strong, warm embrace and utter nonsensical comforts.

"I'm the last," she whispered.

Her mother turned and pulled Marissa out of Geoffrey's arms. The flowery perfume she'd forever associate with grief settled around Marissa as her mother fiercely hugged her. "We won't lose you, baby. I will never allow anything to happen to you. Never."

Her mother's vow seemed more like a threat than a promise.



# Chapter One

HE SAT IN THE silver Mercedes parked across the street from the smoky hellhole called the Paradise Club. A few minutes passed before he caught sight of the woman sashaying toward the squat flamingo-pink building. Damn he loved the way her hips moved. And the curve of her ass...he exhaled. Her lush body inspired a man's lust and his raging hard-on was a testament to her feminine power. She paused outside the teal door and bent to smooth her hose; she rose and straightened her skirt. His gaze caressed her long, smooth legs. *How easy to envision those beautiful limbs wrapped around him...* he pressed his face against the rolled-up window, watching as she entered the club.

He'd wait awhile.

Then he'd follow her.

*And she would learn that she belonged only to him.*

"EXCUSE ME, SIR."

Dane Sinclair barely caught the soft-spoken words. Pounding music reverberated through the Paradise Club, pulsing in time with multi-colored lights, and with the throbbing of his headache. He turned and leaned on the bar, coming face-to-glasses with a woman. "What can I get you, sweetheart?"

Her lips curved upward, exhibiting a nice set of white teeth. For a smile, it wasn't bad...except for the trembling lower lip.

Dane noticed the fine cut of her clothes, the proper chignon balanced on her head, and the delicate, precise movements as she folded her hands on the slick black counter. An expensive floral scent infiltrated the usual bar smells of sweat, cigarette smoke, and beer.

What the hell was a society type like her doing in the Paradise Club?

Dane looked around, knowing from experience that *they* traveled in packs of four or more. His ex-wife had never gone anywhere without her entourage and she wouldn't have put a pedicured foot in this place. His gaze returned to the woman. She looked young, but he knew she had to be at least twenty-one. His brother, Charlie, owned the club and checked IDs at the door. The father of two teenaged daughters, Charlie took a dim view of underage drinking.

Dane took a dim view of bluebloods trying to slum it.

"Lady, I got other customers. You want a drink or not?"



“Can I have um...oh...champagne?”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

She bit her lower lip. “I’m afraid I don’t know too much about drinking.”

Yeah, he just bet she didn’t know much about real booze. Her idea of an alcoholic beverage was probably a hoity-toity drink like a Mint Julep or a Cosmopolitan. Needed a little education, did she? Dane grinned. “Forget champagne. You need a Slippery Nipple.”

Her mouth rounded into a perfect O. Her gaze dropped to her shirt then she looked from side to side. She leaned across the counter. “Does it involve disrobing?”

Dane choked back a laugh. Would she take off her shirt if he said yes? He shook his head. “No. It’s made in a shot glass.” He picked one up from under the bar and showed it to her. “I use Bailey’s Irish Cream and Butterscotch Schnapps, but you can make it with Sambuca and grenadine, too.”

Her shoulders drooped in apparent relief. “Oh. Is it a good drink?”

He kept a straight face as he answered in a low voice, “I love a good Slippery Nipple.”

Despite the dim lighting in the club, Dane swore he saw a blush stain her cheeks. “Is there something else you’d recommend?”

“Sex On The Beach? Or maybe I can slide you a Between The Sheets.” He snapped his fingers. “How about an Orgasm?”

She peered at him. “These are sexual innuendoes, correct? Are we flirting?”

Dane’s smile faded. Her blunt query surprised him. He’d been trying to rattle her, not flirt with her. “I’m just making conversation.”

“I should have read a book about alcoholic beverages instead of looking up *Kama Sutra* positions on the Internet.” “*What?*”

“*The Kama Sutra*,” she shouted. “I was particularly interested in the Snake Trap position. It really is quite interesting how the participants arrange themselves. See, the hands are placed—”

“Save me the details. I’m an old-fashioned guy.”

Dane watched the shaggy young man on the woman’s right touch her shoulder. “Honey, I’ll put my hands wherever you want.”

Instead of punching the guy’s lights out, she squinted at him. “Are you familiar with the *Kama Sutra*?”

“No, but I’m looking for an instructor. Interested?”





“You interested in keeping your hand attached to your arm?” asked Dane. He looked pointedly at the guy’s fingers clutching the woman’s green blouse.

“Relax, dude.” The arrogant jerk winked at Miss Prim. “I’ll be on the dance floor if you change your mind.” He slipped away into the crowd.

The woman smiled at Dane. “Thank you.” She reached across the bar and tucked her hand into his reluctant grasp. “Marissa Vanderson.”

Vanderson? He seemed to recall meeting the Vandersons at one of Lorraine’s endless social engagements, but his memories of those days spent in elite circles were fuzzy and dim.

The delicate bones of the woman’s fingers pressed against his and her smooth, soft skin reminded him once again of her breeding. He dropped her hand. “Dane Sinclair.”

“Delighted to meet you, Mr. Sinclair.”

Dane couldn’t see her eyes due to the glasses and lack of decent lighting, but her lips curved into another nice smile. She had a wonderful mouth. Whoa...what was he thinking?

“I’ll fix you a drink—on the house.”

He grabbed the bourbon, wishing he hadn’t let Charlie talk him into working tonight. If his brother hadn’t thrown in the courtside seats to next week’s basketball game, he’d be sacked out on the couch watching a late night action flick instead of fixing a drink for Marissa Vanderson. He pushed the glass in front of her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Perfect for you. It’s called a Presbyterian.” Dane tapped the rim. “Bourbon, soda, ginger ale.”

She nodded then drank it down. Dane gaped at her. Forget delicate sips and raised pinkies. *She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.* Had he pegged her wrong? Lorraine would have died of thirst before exhibiting such crude behaviors.

“Another one, please.”

He debated arguing the point, since she appeared to have little experience with real alcohol. Hell, she was an adult. She had a right to get walloped if she wanted. Still, he dosed the second with more ginger ale than bourbon, and watched as she did the same gulp-it-down-quick routine.

“Hit me again,” she said with a silly grin. “That is the appropriate phrase, is it not?”



Dane couldn't help it. He grinned back. "Yeah, you got the language down. But don't you want to pace yourself?"

"Oh, no. It's very wild, isn't it?"

"I'd consider it tame compared to other things."

"Like what?"

Dane's brows rose as a feeling of unease snaked through him. Miss Society or not, the little darling did not belong in the Paradise Club. Why was she here? He squashed his concerns. The woman was capable of making her own decisions. He shouldn't care what she did or where she went.

"Tell me about other wild things," she asked with the enthusiasm a student would quiz a teacher about a favorite subject. "And give me another Presbyterian."

He didn't bother adding the bourbon this time. He watched her fine-boned fingers with the manicured nails slip around the glass. She tossed down the drink, smacking her lips in satisfaction.

"How long until I'm—I'm—" She frowned, then heaved the biggest, ugliest, puke-orange purse he'd ever seen onto the bar. She opened it and pawed through the contents, her elbows poking into the people on either side of her. With a cry of triumph, she yanked a crinkled, ripped pink paper from the purse, then read it.

"Buzzed. Of course, I would prefer not to have the hangover, but I will suffer through such a thing if it means having the whole experience."

Her statement hit him like a bolt of lightning. She wanted to get drunk and have a hangover? She acted like doing such a thing was an amusement park ride she'd never been on.

She glanced at the list. "Would it be appropriate to have sex with each other? Later on, I mean. After the flirting."

*No way. She did not ask for sex.* He leaned forward. "What did you say?"

She tucked the list inside and closed the purse. "I was merely inquiring if our current situation would eventually lead to sex. Remember, The Snake Trap?"

*Snake Trap. Yeah, that about sums it up.* Dane stared at her. The music pounded, people jostled closer to the bar, and Charlie shouted at Dane to get to work. Instead, Dane motioned the woman to go to the end of the counter. She did so without questioning him and her naive trust set his teeth on edge. He took her by the arm and led her into Charlie's small office. Silence mercifully descended when he shut the door.





“Are you going to make a pass at me?” she asked in a breathless voice.

“What?”

“Make a pass—you know, come on to me.”

“No.”

Her shoulders drooped and she wilted into a nearby chair. “Why not? It’s the next step, isn’t it?”

He’d disappointed her. For God’s sake, she should know better than to just offer herself to a man.

“Mr. Sinclair—”

“You just asked me to have sex with you,” he snapped, “at least call me Dane.”

Her cheeks blazed like a four-alarm fire and Dane realized he’d embarrassed her with his harsh tone. “I’m sorry, Marissa. It’s not every day a guy gets propositioned by a nun.”

“I’m not a nun. In a literal sense, anyway.” She looked up at him and smiled. Her lower lip trembled, and Dane bit back a curse. She *was* going to cry.

“It’s all right. I appreciate your candor. I know I’m rather plain, but I did hope willingness would make a difference in desirability.”

“Willingness to have sex?” asked Dane dubiously.

“To have passionate, uninhibited sex.”

Dane sucked in a breath, feeling gut-punched. She blinked at him behind those ridiculously large glasses, head tilted, teeth pulling on her full bottom lip.

“It’s the last item on my list,” she continued as if she hadn’t asked for *wild sex*, “so I have plenty to experience before the one-night stand. Can you hire for that sort of thing?”

He inhaled deeply and counted to ten...twenty...twenty-five. “Let me get this straight. You want to hire someone to have sex with you?”

“No, not really. I hoped to entice someone sufficiently so they’d take me on—on something like that.” She pointed to the desk. “I want my skirt jerked up and buttons popping off my shirt...”

Dane looked at the emerald-green top with big, gold, poppable buttons; he couldn’t help but notice the roundness of her breasts under the well-fitting fabric. The dip of her small waist, the curve of her hip...barely covered by the short skirt...he tugged at the collar of his T-shirt. *Jeez, it’s hot in here.* His gaze traveled down the enticing lines of her legs—encased in shimmery white hose. Damn nice legs.



“...wearing my crotchless panties because there’s no reason to ruin the silk ones.”

He stopped breathing, choked, coughed. She frowned at him and he waved away the concern marring her brow. “Crotchless panties?” he repeated in a hoarse voice.

“I wasn’t sure about protocol...book knowledge only gets you so far.” She laughed as she tugged on the skirt. “I suppose it was silly of me to wear hose over them. That nullifies the use, doesn’t it?”

Dane’s heart skipped a beat, then re-started at a frantic pace. He was having a heart attack. No. A lust attack. He would not think about crotchless panties, long legs, and crazy women. He closed his eyes and thought about the North Pole. Ice. Cold. Snow.

Too late. His body had already decided the desk fantasy was a damned fine idea.

Dane tucked his hands into his jean pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Let me give you some advice.”

“You have experience with women’s lingerie?”

How the hell was he supposed to answer that question? He knew a thing or two about lingerie, but what he liked best on a woman was...nothing. Okay. Maybe nothing but red spiked high heels. He liked red. *What the*— Dane bit back a curse. His libido was raging out of control and it was all her fault. “I don’t want to discuss women’s underwear.” *Especially yours.*

“Okay.” She focused completely on him. “I value any advice you can give me about my situation.”

Her total attention unnerved him and the lecture about her outrageous behavior getting her into trouble jumbled around in his mind. Searching for a nice way to say, “Get therapy,” he examined her face for signs of insanity or inebriation. Heart-shaped, delicately pale, her features were a bit sharp with her honey-blond hair pulled back. The glasses overshadowed the high cheekbones, pert nose, and the color of her eyes.

“You seem to be a nice man,” said Marissa before he could speak again. She checked her watch. “I only have twenty minutes until the wet T-shirt contest begins. Thank you for your time and for your kindness.”

Dane watched as she pulled out the mangled pink paper from the ugly orange purse. He took it from her. Some words were faded and others were scratched out. Different inks had been used and the handwriting had changed; childish, boxy letters with heart-dotted I’s



transformed to strong, clean lines. Some of the items seemed immature, a girl's wishes. Several were double-starred, including....

"Go to the zoo?" Dane queried with raised brows.

"I've never been. My sister was supposed to..." she hesitated. "It's important to me that I complete the list. By Saturday."

"Why the deadline?" She shook her head. "Let's just say I need to keep a promise." "You want to do all of these things? There's a lot of stuff on here and some of it you can't even read." "I know what every line says. I don't need to accomplish everything this week—just the starred items." Dane frowned. "Have sex" was starred. So was

"toe-curling kiss," "get a pet," and a couple more sentences he couldn't make out. "Marissa, you don't have to do these things to experience life."

She stood and extracted the list from his grasp. "Yes, I do. I wasn't kidding about my sheltered life. You compared me to a nun. I bet nuns have more fun than I ever did. I won't bore you with the details. Let's just say I'm free for a short amount of time and I desperately want to finish this list."

Her vulnerability sliced into him. Wasn't this how Lorraine had gotten to him? She'd appeared to be a fragile princess in need of rescuing. He'd fallen for the "poor rich girl" trap once.

"You're not an escapee, are you?"

Her eyes widened. "Why would you say that?"

"I knew it. Prison or the psych ward?"

"Neither." She answered too fast. She'd make a terrible poker player. Little Miss Priss was hiding something...no, not really hiding, just not telling the full story.

"I'm on a tight schedule, so I must go." That sexy, trembling little smile assailed her lips. "You're the first person I've met all by myself and look how I messed it up." She heaved the purse over her shoulder and extended her hand. "Good-bye."

Dane clasped her hand and pulled her close. Her head reached his shoulders, but she tilted it back, met his gaze, and waited for him to speak. *Here I go again.* He'd help her out tonight, but that was the end of his participation. He refused to think about the trouble she'd get into with The List.

"I know I'm going to regret this," he muttered. He slid the purse from her shoulder. It thunked to the floor. "I'll help you tonight, princess."

"Wonderful! Can we—" He waved one finger. "No sex."



“Darn.”

He stepped back. “You can’t enter a wet T-shirt contest without a T-shirt.”

“O—of course not.”

“What have you got on under that—” His gaze devoured the poppable gold buttons; he made the mistake of looking at the lush curve of her breasts outlined by the soft material of her top. *Damn*. “—your...uh...thingy.”

Her brows rose. “Define thingy.”

“Shirt. Blouse. Whatever. What’s under it?”

“A bra. It matches the crotchless panties. I went for the front snap and white lace. The black silk with red lace didn’t appeal to me.” She frowned. “Do men prefer a more, please forgive the word, but a more *slutty* look?”

“All most men need is a woman naked and willing.”

“You’ve proven that theory quite wrong.”

Dane ignored her comment. If she knew how tempted he was to show her the delights of sexual pleasure, she might do something stupid—like take off her clothes. “Do you want to enter the wet T-shirt contest or not?”

She nodded.

Dane reached up and undid the topknot; silky, honey gold hair fell around Marissa’s shoulders in soft waves. He removed her glasses, folded them carefully, and put them on the desk. When he returned to her, he drew in a breath. Blonde brows slanted over green eyes flecked with gold. Her features were not sharp at all, but perfectly defined. Golden curls trailed down her slim, white neck.

Marissa Vanderson was beautiful.

“Wow.”

“You don’t have to pretend,” she murmured.

“I’m not pretending.” Good Lord, he’d been a blind man. She was exquisite.

He saw her swallow and the movement of her slender throat urged him to plant a soft kiss at the dimpled base. His gaze fastened to her generous mouth, and he nearly groaned when a pink tongue licked her lower lip.

“You’re asking me to kiss you,” he warned softly. “Be careful about giving signals.”



Her gaze flickered. Lust? Curiosity? She was too naive to hide her uninhibited desire and his conscience refused to allow him to sip even a drop of Marissa Vanderson's innocence.

"How else do I give a signal?"

Dane sighed. "You don't want to give signals."

"I don't?"

"No."

She moved closer and the same light flowery scent he noticed earlier infiltrated his senses. "You're right. I should be more direct." She squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eyes. "Kiss me, Dane."

## Chapter Two

DANE'S HEART STOPPED, then started thumping again triple time. Marissa disarmed him with her forthrightness. How damn long had he been in her presence? Hours? Years? She looked at him, her eyes soft and welcoming, her body just within his arms. *Why not? a sneaky little voice asked. It's not like you're taking anything. She's offering.*

He hesitated too long. She blinked, her face registering resignation. "Never mind. I simply refuse to surgically improve on what Mother Nature gave me. I suppose at least one man exists who will accept me as I am."

Her blatant, though unintentional, signals he could withstand. Her blunt request for a kiss wavered his resolve, but her weary acceptance of not being wanted as she was tore at him. Did she truly believe she was plain?

His mind wandered around the idea of her crotchless panties. He bet she wore sexy silk stockings attached to garters. Did she say white lace? *Yeah. White lace panties with a slit in just the right place....*

*ENOUGH!*

He needed to show her pretty backside out the door. Now. He looked down at her, saw the trembling lower lip, and made the mistake of looking into her eyes. He saw every emotion she was feeling: hope, fear, doubt, desire.

"One kiss for the lady." Dane tipped her chin. With a forefinger, he trailed a gentle line down her jaw then cupped the back of her neck.



Her hands crept up his chest, her fingertips resting on his collarbone. He lowered his head, his lips a whisper away. She stared expectantly at him, her shallow breath fanning his chin.

Slowly, Dane captured her lips and tasted her. Pliant and warm, the tartness of the ginger ale still lingering on her mouth, Dane battled the desire to plunder. Heaven help him, he wished he could indulge in Marissa's desk fantasy. Flipping up the skirt—*no*. Dane gentled the kiss, settling his hands on her shoulders instead of tracing her spine, instead of molding her firm buttocks, instead of parting her legs and... *damn*.

Her mouth mimicked his, her tentative movements a powerful aphrodisiac. When her tongue dabbled the corner of his mouth, her teeth grazing his lower lip, raw heat surged into his loins. He wasn't going any farther. He couldn't. Dane pulled back and let her go.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Luminous green eyes focused on him. He felt a fine tremor shuddered through her, her desire echoing his. "No, princess. You did it right." Dane inhaled a steady breath.

"Is that it, then?"

"Afraid so."

The disappointment etched on her face twisted his guts into knots. If she'd been experienced at all...but she wasn't, so he refused to think about taking things to another level.

She crossed her arms. "It was wonderful, Dane, but it doesn't qualify as toe-curling. I believe tongue contact is required for that."

He laughed, grateful for the distraction. The simple kiss had shaken him—shaken him far more than it should have. "Tongue contact, huh? Are you criticizing my technique?"

"No. But I'd rather like a French kiss," she said, looking at him hopefully.

His body remained on full alert, ready to French, Italian, and Outer Mongolian kiss her. The combination of sincere green eyes and honest demands tested his self-control. But Marissa wasn't prepared to accept mere sexual gratification—no matter what her damned list said. Dane voiced his suspicion. "You're a virgin, aren't you?"

"I don't wish to discuss my sexual status." Her indignation faded. "Is it obvious? I should hate to appear inexperienced for the person I choose for the one-night stand."

Kissing Marissa Vanderson had been a mistake. Her determination for sexual conquest suddenly annoyed him. "Don't you want to lose your





virginity with someone who cares about you? Why give it to some guy on a whim?"

"Virginity is overrated. I'm twenty-two years old and I want to have sex." "You can't go around announcing that to the world. Not every guy is...well, is..." "Nice, like you?" "I'm not nice, Marissa. I just know how to control my libido." *Barely*. She spread her hands in supplication. "Then help me. Please, Dane."

*Oh no*. He'd danced to this tune before and he was through listening to the song. "I just met you. What you do—crazy or not—is your business." He looked at the paperwork scattered on the desk then at the shelf crammed with books, files, and family photos. He didn't want to see the disappointment in her green eyes or that trembling lower lip. *Damn that lip. No, damn both lips*. He still tasted her, felt her against his mouth.

"Suppose you just show me a few things on the list. And you could introduce me to your friends. I'll—I'll pay you."

Marissa picked up the purse and proceeded to paw through it again. She lifted out a wallet. Plucking out ten bills, she handed them to him. \$100 bills. A thousand dollars sat in crisp splendor on his palm.

"Is it enough?" she asked anxiously.

Dane's hand fisted around the money. "I'm not for hire."

The door to the office opened and Beatrice sashayed inside, holding a tray full of drinks and her usual saucy smile. "Charlie's been asking about you, sugarcakes. Better get your cute butt back to security detail." She winked at him then sized up Marissa. "A little on-job noogie, Dane? That's not like you."

"Nothing like that, Bea. Tell Charlie I'll be back in a few minutes. The lady's interested in participating in the wet T-shirt contest. Do you have anything she can wear?"

Beatrice looked Marissa over once more. "I think I have something that'll do. Gotta get these drinks out first." The door shut and Marissa turned a pleased gaze on him. "You're going to help me, then?" Dane deposited the money into her hands. "Nope. I'll get you into the contest then I'm through with you and your list." "You're in security? As in a guard?" "Not really. Sometimes I help out the bouncers." He frowned at her, wondering at this new angle. She pushed the money at him. "You can be my bodyguard. A thousand dollars now and five thousand at the end of the

week—after we complete the list."

"Six thousand dollars?" Dane asked, incredulous.



“Not enough?” She bit her lip. “I’ll give you ten thousand dollars.”

Shocked, Dane stared at her. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of damned money and to earn it, all he had to do was spend the next seven days with Marissa Vanderson. In his real job, he was the sports program director at the TeenCenter; he was always trying to get funding for events. Marissa’s donation meant he could expand the sports program. New equipment, uniforms, and repairs to the grounds...hell, with that much money, he wouldn’t have to turn away kids.

Still...he’d be Marissa’s employee. He’d had enough of the subservient role he played for Lorraine—and he’d been her husband. Was he really thinking about taking a job for an obviously naive, probably spoiled, and definitely rich socialite?

“Only for a week?” he asked.

Soft golden curls bounced around her shoulders as she nodded. Her green eyes pleaded with him. *I need you.*

*Damn it.* “All right.”

“You’ll help me complete the list?”

Dane hesitated. “On the condition that I will not participate in the one-night stand.”

“Deal.” She stuck out her hand and Dane grasped it.

Beatrice bustled inside and held up a tiny white cotton halter-top and a pair of blue-sequined shorts. “Okay, sweetie, time to get wild.”

*SHIT!WHAT THE* hell was Marissa Vanderson doing at the Paradise Club? It figured the little idiot would end up at the one place she shouldn’t be—and all because of that damned list.

Anger and fear threaded through her—emotions she hadn’t felt in a long time. She hadn’t felt anything in a long time. She hated feeling empty, alone, and tired. So damned tired. The surge of emotions drained away, fading into the familiar numbness she’d cultivated over the years.

She fiddled with the napkin under her drink and thought about the phone calls she’d gotten this afternoon. The first one annoyed her; the second one panicked her. She’d cleared out—again—and headed into the anonymity of the party scene. The Paradise Club was a decent bar in a not-so-decent part of town.

She searched the room and saw a big-chested waitress with flaming red hair exit a door behind the bar. Her gaze flicked from the waitress to the muscled bartender flirting with a blonde. There’d been another guy a few seconds ago. The one she’d seen talking to Marissa.



She sipped her Tequila Sunrise and acted like she wasn't anything but a vapid sexpot waiting for Mr. Wrong to take her home and rock her world.

Sometimes, she really hated her life. Again, she searched the room, but Marissa had disappeared. She sighed. She would have to find her. Then deal with her.

"WHERE ARE WE going?" asked Marissa as Dane led her out of the bar. "The wet T-shirt contest hasn't started yet."

The night was sultry, filled with sights and sounds that delighted Marissa. Cars passed by on the rain-slicked streets. Lights on the surrounding clubs blinked a welcome to passersby. She'd never felt so free. She'd spent eight years in a basement—a luxurious one filled with everything she demanded from her parents—but a basement, a *prison*, nonetheless.

She clutched her purse, the one she bought on a street corner just a few hours ago in honor of Gillie, and tried to keep up with the fast-moving man who'd apparently decided to take her somewhere else for a wet T-shirt contest.

"Mr. Sinclair. Dane. Excuse me, but can you—"

He kept going. Her shoes clicked along the sidewalk as her newly hired bodyguard guided...well, dragged...her down the street. The scenery was hard to enjoy at this pace, so Marissa practiced glaring at Dane's backside. She'd never glared at anyone before, never really having a cause to, and besides, she didn't like hurting people's feelings. However, as she concentrated on narrowing her eyes, she noticed how well Dane's jeans outlined his rear end and thighs. Marissa watched in fascination as Dane walked. The jeans tightened around his buttocks. She liked jeans. She particularly liked jeans on Dane.

Maybe she should get a pair, but they looked rough. Did they rub the skin? Maybe they were soft and only looked rough. Marissa reached forward and slid her hand across Dane's rear end. He stopped abruptly and she plowed into him, her hand grasping his right cheek as she steadied herself.

"Nice," she said, touching the fabric. "Soft, but not too much. I like them."

Dane turned around. She noticed *he* was good at glaring. The slight wind blew his longish dark hair across his square jaw. His nose was slightly crooked and he had a dip in his chin. Marissa's heart stuttered. She wished he'd change his mind about the one-night stand. If



she was going to have sex, she thought she might truly enjoy it with a man so rugged and handsome.

“Marissa.”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Walking.”

His took a deep breath, and his nostrils flared. “I meant—why did you grab my butt?” Heat rushed to her cheeks. “I wanted to feel the jeans.

I

didn’t mean to grab you.”

“I work for you, but I’m not your property.”

*Oh dear.* She’d made him angry. Right now, paid or not, he was the only friend she had. As soon as her parents discovered she’d escaped, they’d search everywhere for her. Of course, they were in Europe for the next week, and Geoffrey would only be incapacitated for a few days more. She had, at the most, six precious days to live a whole lifetime.

“I’m sorry, Dane.”

His gaze softened. “It’s just that...you’re very pretty. And I could get attracted to you. And we’ve agreed I’m not going to have sex with you. So we should keep physical stuff to a minimum.” He nodded. “Yes. That’s it. We shouldn’t touch each other.”

Marissa blinked. He thought she was pretty? He could get attracted to her? Staring at his face, the dip in his chin and the slant of his cheeks, and the strong column of his neck, she felt tingly and itchy and quite ready to accost him. Maybe if she wrapped herself around him, he might change his mind. But he had rejected her. He had made a choice. Marissa respected a person’s choices. Choices were precious indeed.

“No touching each other.” She tilted her head. “Could you recommend someone who’s good at having sex? I have a number of things I’d like to try.”

“Yeah, I remember. The Snake Trap.” Dane made strangled noises and clenched his fists. “Why don’t you choose something else on the list? We’ll deal with the sex issue later, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Great. Terrific.” He sighed. “Let me see the list.”

“You’re very imposing. Can you teach me to do that?”

His brows furrowed. “Do what?”

“Glare. Why, you could frighten a girl right out of her wits by just frowning at her.”

“I don’t frighten you.”



Surprised, Marissa stopped digging in her purse and looked at him. “No. You don’t. Isn’t that strange?”

“Compared to what? The last hour has been right out of *The Twilight Zone*.”

She found the list and handed it to Dane. “Did you see the one where the man wishes for all the money? One problem after the next. There’s a lesson to be learned.”

“Money doesn’t bring happiness?”

“No, that’s not it. The lesson is to be very specific when making a wish.” She smiled when he stopped perusing the list to stare at her open-mouthed. “Money is only a tool. The person wielding it can choose to do harm or to do good.”

“I’ve never thought about it that way.” Dane pointed to the paper. “Your list doesn’t say anything about wet T-shirt contests.”

“I can add to it if I want. It’s my list.”

While Dane continued to read, Marissa examined her surroundings. She’d ended up in an untidy part of town. Some of the buildings were boarded up and others were crumbling remnants; graffiti marred the walls, the sidewalks, and the street signs. She shivered at the ugly despair around her.

She’d been lucky to find Dane and not some unscrupulous miscreant. The only reason she’d gone to the Paradise Club was because of Gillie. In her sister’s things, Marissa had found a shot glass with the bar’s logo on it. Her heart clenched in anguish.

On that horrible night so long ago, she’d gone into Gillie’s room, and cried herself to sleep in her sister’s bed. When she awoke, she went through the entire room and stole items her parents would be shocked to discover: cigarettes, mini-bottles of alcohol, condoms, photographs of Gillie at wild parties. She’d hidden it all from her parents—allowed them to enshrine the room, given them the wherewithal to remember their eldest daughter as angelic and virginal and perfect.

Ever since she’d escaped the confines of the mansion, she’d felt...happy freedom. Yes, happy freedom was an excellent way to describe how she felt. She’d been happy, somewhat, in her parents’ home, but they’d forgotten she’d grown up. She’d finished high school and college with private instructors. Her parents and Geoffrey had been her only companions since that fateful night when her sister had died.

A *clip-slish-clip-slish* sound interrupted Marissa’s morbid thoughts. She stood on tippy-toe to see over Dane’s shoulder and spotted a teenaged boy on Rollerblades racing toward them. He wore a black cap,



jeans, and an oversized yellow sweatshirt. His grin was shiny and white and mischievous. Dane, still concentrating on the list, didn't glance up as he moved out of the boy's way. She tried to do the same, but the boy whipped past her before she could move an inch.

Marissa felt like her arm was being pulled out of its socket. She spun around, lost her balance, and fell. She skinned her palms on the rough sidewalk and, to her dismay, her hose tore at the left knee. The cuts on her hands stung, but not nearly as much as her pride. She sat up and stared at the retreating teenager.

The boy whirled and skated backwards just long enough to show off his thief's prize—her purse.

“Marissa, stay here!” yelled Dane.

The pink paper on which she'd written her list floated down and landed in front of her. Dane's sneakers rubber-scraped the concrete as he took off after the boy. *Wow*. Jeans looked really good in action, tightening in the right places. *What am I doing?*

She grabbed her paper and, knees throbbing from the cuts incurred from her fall, managed to stand. Her legs felt like wet noodles and her breathing was unsteady.

She leaned against a stop-sign pole. Dane and the boy had disappeared. The street ended at the freeway entrance. She doubted they'd made it to the on-ramp; they must have gone west up the last street, just past the Paradise Club. She squinted. Everything past the bar looked blurry and indistinct. *Terrific*. She'd tucked her glasses into the purse.

With Dane gone, her surroundings seemed more menacing. The dark, derelict buildings with broken windows and empty doorways looked like monsters with unseeing eyes and screaming mouths. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself. The nape of her neck tingled. She glanced around, unable to shake the feeling of being observed by someone...or something...in the shadows.

Her gaze flicked to the club's neon green sign glowing atop the square flamingo-pink building. While the club lacked the security of a castle keep with a hundred knights to protect her, and it looked like *Miami Vice* on acid, it was safer than standing alone in the creepy darkness of a barren sidewalk. It was only a couple blocks away. Taking a fortifying breath, she headed toward the bar.

Just as she reached the edge of the building, its doors burst open. Ear-deafening music blared; the minty-burn scent of cigarette smoke rolled out with two men clumsily exiting the club. They were propelled





by a large gentleman who had their shirts twisted in his hands. Taller than Dane and bigger than one of those professional wrestlers she'd seen on television, the mountainous fellow turned the intoxicated men toward each other and proceeded to bang their heads together. Marissa cringed as the men moaned in pain with each resounding thud.

The bouncer let go of their shirts and they slid to the ground. "You losers stay out of this club. Don't come back again or I'll get rough." He turned around and lumbered back into the noise—and-smoke-filled club.

*Get rough?* Marissa wondered what the giant thought attempted skull cracking constituted. She crept closer, wondering if they needed medical treatment. She stopped short and stared at the so-called losers.

Probably in their early 20s, both had spiked hair, pierced faces, and tattoo-covered arms. Dressed in tattered shirts, hole-riddled jeans, and Army boots, they looked like rejects from a punk-rock band. They had yet to realize that Marissa stood a mere foot away from them. Fascination outweighed fear. She felt like a biologist who'd just discovered a new species.

"Snipe?"

"What, Bullet?"

"That's the third club we've been tossed out of tonight."

"Fourth."

The one called Snipe grinned, revealing teeth that hadn't seen a toothbrush in years. "Wanna go for a fifth?"

Bullet, whose two eyebrow rings trumped Snipe's demure one, grinned back, also revealing a lack of concern about dental hygiene. "Yeah, man."

They stood up, whooping and hollering and dancing around like a pair of demented cranes. When the strange ritual ended, they turned toward Marissa. Surprise registered on their faces.

"Hey, it's a babe," said Snipe. "You working 'round here, girlfriend?"

"Yeah, little momma...you lookin' for a date?" asked Bullet.

*Babe? Girlfriend? Little momma?* Marissa didn't like their snide tones or the glazed looks of interest entering their red-rimmed eyes.

"Cease your name-calling," she said, pointing an imperious finger at them. "You should be more respectful of a lady."

"A lady?" Snipe's yellow grin promised trouble. "I don't see no lady. Hey, Bullet, you ever seen a lady?"

"Not on this street. Seen a lot of hookers, though."



Marissa's mouth dropped open in outrage. "I'll have you know I'm not a—" Her lips wouldn't form the word. "A woman who grants sexual favors for money."

Snipe and Bullet looked at each other, then at Marissa.

"What did she say?" Bullet scratched the side of his spiked head.

Snipe punched Bullet in the arm. "Never mind, stupid. We'll tape her mouth shut so we don't have to listen to her talk."

They slouched toward Marissa, their grins curled with gleeful malice.

## Chapter Three

FEAR CHILLED MARISSA. Too late, she realized her predicament. These boys intended to harm her. No use thinking about how she should have kept walking until she found Dane. She would have to speak to him about remaining at her side. What was the point of having a bodyguard if he wasn't here to guard her body?

Marissa tucked the crumpled list into her bra then took the guard's stance she'd learned from her karate master. "Aye ah!" she yelled.

Bullet sneered. "We seen *The Karate Kid*, babe. You can't fake us out with that crap." Snipe lunged for her; she spun and struck him in the chest with an around kick. He stumbled backwards, fell to his knees, and collapsed.

"Holy shit!" Bullet looked at her with wide eyes then bared his ugly teeth. "You won't do that to me." He grabbed her arm. She snap-kicked her leg. Her shin contacted his groin then she threw a power punch to his stomach with her free hand. He fell backwards, aided by Marissa's thrust kick to his stomach, rapped his head solidly against the concrete, and joined Snipe in unconsciousness.

"Marissa!"

She turned to see Dane, dragging the skate-less purse snatcher in a headlock, walking toward her.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"They started it. I was only defending myself."

"They...you..." Dane clamped his jaw shut. "I told you to stay put."

"You did?"

"Yes, damn it. I did."



“I’m terribly sorry, Dane.”

He stared at her. “You are?”

“Of course, I am. I didn’t hear you tell me to stay put.”

“You’re apologizing to me and admitting you should have listened to me.”

Dane acted like he’d never received an apology before. She touched his arm. “Do you forgive me?”

“C’mon, man, forgive her before you cut off the rest of my oxygen,” said the thief.

“Shut up.” Dane’s gaze pierced Marissa. “How did—” He sighed. “We need to have a long talk, princess. You’re going to explain to me why you need protection if you’re a black belt in karate.”

“I’m a brown belt.”

The thief squirmed and Dane tightened his hold. “I should let her beat the crap out of you, too.”

The boy’s gaze drifted over the punks’ prone bodies. “It wouldn’t be good for my rep if I got beat up by a girl.”

“One should never employ the use of martial arts for anything but defense. Dane, I think your prisoner is turning blue around the lips.”

Dane abruptly let go of the kid’s neck and grabbed him by the arm. “Give the lady her property.”

“Name’s Tuesday Jones, ma’am,” he said. He winked at her as he gave Marissa the orange monstrosity. “That’s the ugliest purse I’ve ever stolen.”

“I caught him before he could take anything, but you better look through it and make sure.”

“You’re a rather charming thief, aren’t you, Tuesday?” Marissa made sure the purse’s contents were intact. “Is Tuesday your real name?”

“Yep. I don’t believe in aliases. If I get caught, I take the rap.”

Dane snorted. “A responsible thief. Yeah, right.”

“Your mother named you Tuesday?” asked Marissa.

“I’m the sixth of seven kids and Momma was tired of naming us. I was born on a Tuesday and that’s what she called me.” He grinned.

“Better than answerin’ to Number Six.”

Marissa closed the bag. “Everything’s here.” She stepped closer to Tuesday. “Do you steal because you’re poor? Do you need money?”

“Look at his clothes, Marissa. He wears top of the line stuff. Those blades he was wearing cost a fortune.”

“Do you steal because you can’t afford nice things?” asked Marissa. Pity at his misfortune crept into her heart.



“I steal because I can.” Tuesday’s shiny smile dimmed. “I get on just fine. Don’t feel sorry for me, lady.”

“Why not?”

He frowned. “What do you mean ‘Why not?’”

“Why shouldn’t I feel bad about your situation? You’re one of seven children. I imagine you dropped out of high school and you live in a gang-infested area. Are your parents divorced? You don’t sell drugs, do you?”

Tuesday’s brows rose. “Are you for real?”

Tears crowded Marissa’s eyes. She had more money than she could spend in ten lifetimes. The least she could do was share it with someone needy. Someone so needy, he’d turned to a life of crime. She dug in her purse and pulled out a fistful of hundred-dollar bills.

“Here, Tuesday. Go back to school. Don’t do drugs, okay?”

“Marissa!” The censure in Dane’s voice made her look at him.

“He needs it more than I do.”

Tuesday’s eyes bulged. “You had that much dough in your purse?” He stared at the money in Marissa’s hand. “You better put it away before someone steals it.”

“You stole it,” said Dane. “C’mon, Marissa. We need to call the police.”

“No! Let him take the money. He can start anew.”

“This isn’t a television sitcom, Rissa. It’s real life. Giving him money won’t solve his problems.”

“Oh yeah? What do you know?” Tuesday’s charm disappeared under a deep frown. “I could start anew, dawg.”

“I see boys like you every day, Tuesday. You think you got the world in your pocket, but all you got is trouble. You need more than a bad attitude to make it in life.”

“You’re the one with a bad attitude,” interjected Marissa.

“You’re unbelievably naïve. You can’t walk around giving away money and spouting off moral platitudes.”

“I can, too.” She crossed her arms.

Dane opened his mouth then closed it. “We better get going before dumb and dumber wake up.”

“Where are we going?” asked Marissa.

“The police station. Tuesday’s going to turn himself in for petty larceny, then you and I are going to a hotel.”

Marissa’s protest on Tuesday’s behalf stilled in her throat.

She looked at Dane. “A hotel? Really?”



“Don’t sound so hopeful. We’re getting separate rooms, princess.”

“Honestly, Dane, you are so stubborn.” She looked at Tuesday. “I don’t want to press charges.”

“I do.”

“Your property wasn’t stolen.”

“Do you want him to steal someone else’s purse?”

“No.” Marissa looked at Tuesday. His casual stance and bored expression belied the vulnerable look in his dark eyes. He was just a boy. All he needed was a chance to prove his worthiness—to himself and to the world. “I want to hire him.”

“What?” said Dane and Tuesday at the same time.

“I need an assistant.”

“To do what?” asked Dane.

“Stuff.” She paused. “He can keep track of the list. Run errands. Take notes of my adventures. Maybe I’ll write a book.”

“This is a bad idea.”

Dane’s cynical outlook needed an adjustment. Marissa looked at Tuesday. “Do you want the job? It’s for a week and I’ll pay you a thousand dollars.”

“A grand? To follow you around and scribble notes?” Tuesday frowned. “Why would you give me a job, lady? I stole from you.”

“Everyone deserves a second chance.” She smiled. “You can change your life one choice at a time.”

Tuesday shook off Dane’s grip, extended his arm, and shook Marissa’s hand. “You got a deal, lady.”

DANE SIGNED THE hotel’s register, then handed Marissa a card key. “We’re on the fifth floor.”

They got on the empty elevator. Dane leaned against the wall and studied Marissa. Purple shadows smudged the delicate skin under her eyes. She looked exhausted. She was so out of her element—just like Dorothy in the Land of Oz, only Marissa was a mix of all the characters who’d followed the yellow-brick road. Except the lion. Marissa had an annoying amount of courage.

A loud ding announced their arrival on the fifth floor. Dane walked his charge to Room 506. “I’m across the hall in five-oh-seven. Don’t leave your room. I’ll knock on the door in the morning.”

“We’re supposed to meet Tuesday at that café for breakfast.”

“Marissa—”



“No more discussion. You argued with me all the way to the hotel and frankly, I’m tired of defending my actions. You don’t have to like that I hired Tuesday, but you do have to accept it.”

“Right, Miss Vanderson. After all, I’m only an employee. I should just shut my mouth and do my job.”

“That would be marvelous.” She slid the card through the slot and opened the door.

“Wait just a damn minute.” Dane tugged on her arm, stopping her on the threshold. “I’m trying to protect you. If you want me to protect you, you have to trust my judgment.”

“I trust you.” A smiled curved her lips. “It’s just that you’re very good at talking and very bad at listening. Good night, Dane.”

The door clicked shut. He stared at the gold-painted numbers for a long moment, then turned and crossed the hall to his own room. Marissa wouldn’t have to worry about his listening skills anymore. Tomorrow, he was quitting this insane job.

SHE PRETENDED TO check for a hole in her stocking while the man stared at Marissa Vanderson’s door and cursed a blue streak. She needn’t have bothered with the distraction because he turned, stomped across the hall, opened then slammed his door. She straightened and walked to the end of the hall, inserted her hotel key, and went inside.

Following the arguing couple to the hotel had been a pain in the ass. It was strange...as she circled the block in her nondescript rental car, looking like a lost tourist, she felt as though she was the one being followed. She should have figured out tall, dark, and Lothario would hoof it to the nearest hotel. Luckily, she’d arrived at the check-in counter in time to hear the clerk say their room numbers, so she’d been able to request a room on the same floor.

*Separate rooms.*

*So the handsome guy didn’t want the beautiful girl.*

*Why?*

Exhaustion poured through her and she flopped onto the bed. Kicking off her shoes, she thought of the sweet young thing a few doors down. *Poor Marissa.* She’d gone out into the world to finally claim it—and would soon find the ultimate disappointment.

She didn’t bother to undress. She curled under the covers and bunched up the too-soft pillow under her head. Tomorrow. She’d do her job, her duty...and move on. It’s what she always did. Would always do.





Her eyes drifted shut and the dark world in which she lived fell away. Memories of light, laughter, family, invaded her dreams. Her lips curved into a contented smile.

HE SLIPPED OUT from the stairwell, turned, and made sure the heavy metal closed with a quiet click. *Fifth floor. She's here. Somewhere.*

He scanned the empty hallway. *Which room was she in?* He strained to hear anything that might tell him where she'd gone. Not a single sound penetrated. *It'd be stupid to press his ear against every door just on the off chance he'd recognize her voice...her laughter...her soft moans.*

Long legs wrapped around another man's waist.

*His fists clenched.*

Taut, coral nipples caught by another man's mouth.

*His breath quickened.*

The spasms of her pleasure felt by another man's cock.

*No!*

He reached into his jacket pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes and his gold engraved lighter. With a trembling hand, he put the cigarette between his lips then flicked open the lighter and brought the tiny flame to light the cancer stick. That's what she called 'em. Cancer sticks. He traced the initials on the lighter and smiled. She'd given it to him. Didn't want him to smoke, but gave him a goddamned lighter as a present. He blew out a stream of smoke and felt a little better, a little more in control. He held up the lighter and thumbed the wheel. The flame grew higher and higher.

She was fucking that guy from the bar.

And she had to be punished.

He walked to the floor-to-ceiling window near the exit door. Such lovely, sheer curtains. The flame licked the fabric like a hungry child with an ice cream cone. He watched parts of the burning curtains fall to the floor; the fire loved the carpet, too. It danced a fickle path down the hall.

"Burn in hell," he whispered. Then he flicked his cigarette into the swelling fire and left the way he'd come in.

THE BEDSIDE CLOCK blinked 1 a.m. when Dane awoke to a blare of noise. He'd been in bed a mere fifteen minutes. He groaned as the alarm's high-pitched whine threatened to deafen him. Dane reached over to the nightstand and smacked the buttons on the "complimentary" alarm clock.



The damned thing continued to screech. “What the—” “Fire! Fire!” Someone pounded on the door. “Fire! Everybody out!” The pounding stopped and the shouts faded.

*Marissa!* Dane jumped out of bed and sprinted to the door. It wasn’t hot to the touch, but when Dane opened it, he heard the crackle of flames and smelled the choking fumes of smoke. Hot air wafted across his chest. He looked down.

“Shit!” He ran to his clothes, tugged on his boxers, and grabbed the wallet on the nightstand. He rushed into the bathroom, wet two hand towels, and slung them over his shoulder. Then he opened the door, got on the floor, and belly-crawled across the hall to Marissa’s room.

“Marissa!” He banged the door with his fist. “Marissa! Are you in there?”

“Dane!” Marissa’s voice wasn’t coming from inside the room. Dane searched the grayish haze enveloping the hall. His heart squeezed in his chest. *Where is she?*

“Dane? I’m four doors down on the left. Help!”

What the hell was she doing there? He’d have to yell at her later for not staying in her room—not that it would do much good. Dane wrapped one towel over his mouth and felt his way along the wall. The haze thickened into dense smoke. Staying as close to the floor as possible, he wiggled on his belly until he came face-to-face with Marissa. Relief made his bones feel rubbery. He pushed the towel from his mouth. “Are you okay, princess?”

“Yes, thank you. Are you all right?”

“I’m terrific.”

“Dane, can you get us out of here?”

“I hope so. Here.” He tucked the other wet towel around her face, covering her mouth. “I’ll turn around. You hold on to my ankle, okay? We’ve got to make it to the staircase at the end of this hall.”

She nodded.

He scooted around and waited until her slim hand grasped his ankle. Conscious of the delicate feel of her fingers, afraid she might let go, Dane scooted as fast as he dared. The emergency exit sign glowed a welcoming red at the other end of the hall. Smells of singed fabric and burnt wood accompanied the cloying smoke. Dane coughed and felt Marissa’s grasp tighten on his ankle. “I’m okay. Don’t worry. We’re almost there.”

The smoke dissipated as they neared the exit door to the stairway. Finally, they made it. Dane stood and helped up Marissa. Black grit



smudged her face and her hair looked like she'd stuck her finger in an electrical socket. The green dress had been replaced by a long white T-shirt with "Kiss Me, You Fool" emblazoned in big purple letters on the front. He resisted the urge to follow the shirt's advice. For some reason, the idea of kissing her offered him a sort of primal reassurance.

*Oh man, I'm losing it.*

"Dane?"

Her voice trembled, and he realized she must be scared to death. "Let's get out of here, Rissa." He pushed the bar on the exit door.

It wouldn't open.

Dane shoved hard with his hands then used his shoulder for a battering ram. The door wouldn't budge. He slumped against it.

"What's wrong?" His gut clenched when he heard the fear threaded into her words.

"It's just being stubborn." He looked at her. She was cradling the orange purse like it was a sleeping child. It jerked in her arms and Dane swore it barked.

He blinked away the weird sight, then glanced down the hall. Smoke crept toward them. Using an elevator was out of the question and trying to get to the other stairwell would put them too near the fire.

"Crap!" He smacked the door with the palm of his hand. It swung open. He wasn't going to question the whims of fate. "Let's go!"

He ushered Marissa through the door and they hurried down the five flights of stairs. When they got to the lobby, two firemen and a paramedic spotted them stumbling into the entryway. In seconds, they were rushed out of the building.

Fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances crowded the two-lane driveway in front of the hotel. Dazed people in varying states of undress milled about the parking lot. Dane led Marissa to a black Mercedes and lifted her to the hood.

"Are you okay?"

"I believe that was more excitement than I was prepared for." She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. The gesture struck Dane as vulnerable and needy. Ignoring the voice of reason telling him it was not a good idea to touch Marissa, Dane pushed aside the purse in her lap, and gathered her into his arms. She snuggled into his embrace, placing her head against his shoulder and her arms around his rib cage.

She smelled like smoke, but her hair and skin were softer than rose petals.



“I should’ve added hugs to the list,” she murmured. “This is quite wonderful.”

Her sigh of contentment whispered across his chest. Dane resisted the urge to stroke her backside. He might do something stupid like cup her bottom and pull her closer. He was already between her legs. The thin cotton fabric of his boxers was the only barrier between him and Marissa. If she wiggled the wrong way, he was in big trouble.

She eased away from him. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For this.” She slid her arms from around his waist and cupped his face. “I appreciate you breaking your rules to comfort me.”

Dane cleared his throat. “Uh, well, I enjoyed it.” Heat singed his face. “I mean—that is—you’re welcome.”

She laughed. Dane’s gaze was drawn to the fullness of her lips. They were dangerous, those lips. Even more so when curved into a smile. He was so tempted by that luscious mouth. *Just a taste. What would one tiny taste hurt?* He leaned forward, knowing his gaze reflected his intentions, enjoying the surprised anticipation in Marissa’s eyes.

The purse barked.

Dane blinked. Marissa’s face was turned toward him, her eyes wide, her mouth forming a cute little “o.” He hastily stepped out of the embrace.

“Your purse is yapping.” The handbag wriggled and writhed next to Marissa’s hip.

“Oh, dear!” She unzipped the purse and removed a tiny, brown-and-black ball of hair. The pink bow on its head vibrated as it yipped at Dane.

“Isn’t she precious? Do you want to pet her?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not a big fan of animals. They stink and drool and mess up your stuff.”

“I love animals. I was never allowed to have one, you know.” She showed him the gold tag dangling from a faux diamond collar. “I can’t make out her name.”

He looked at the noisy hairball. “Who the hell paints a dog’s toenails?”

“I think that shade of pink is very charming.”

“I take it she’s the reason you weren’t in your room?” Dane couldn’t keep the disapproval out of his voice.



“I heard her barking when I came out to see what was going on. It seemed like everyone else was gone. I—I should’ve waited for you, Dane. I’m sorry.”

He really wished she’d stop apologizing when she was wrong. Her sincere remorse made it difficult for him to maintain his righteous anger. Lorraine would not have apologized to a pharaoh of Egypt. He’d learned that arguing with his ex-wife was like trying to change the color of the sun.

Marissa cooed to the puppy and let its slimy little tongue lick her face. He couldn’t believe she’d left the relative safety of her room to rescue a powder puff with an attitude. He should—should spank her, but damned if he didn’t admire her spunk. “Princess, you need to learn to rely on me. I’m your bodyguard, remember?”

“Yes, I remember.” Her eyelashes fluttered down. “You’re taking the job rather seriously, aren’t you? I didn’t expect quite so much...body.”

Her teasing had a weird affect on him. He cursed the threatening hard-on. Maybe it was being too near her half-naked body or the fact they’d gotten out of the hotel without becoming barbecue. Or maybe the desire ripping through him was the result of not being with a woman in quite a long time.

But he wanted Marissa Vanderson.

More than he’d ever wanted any woman.

“Oh, Romea, Romea, wherefor art thou?” cried a shaky female voice. “Poor, poor precious puppy. I loved you so.”

A woman trudged down the row of parked cars, her hand held dramatically against her brow. She wore a pink chiffon nightgown and slippers with puffy balls of pink fuzz. Her face was heavily made up and she looked about hundred years old. Dane thought she resembled Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Lane*.

Wrapped up in her display of emotion, the woman didn’t see them. She paused, and to Dane’s surprise, splayed herself on the Mercedes’ trunk. “Romea!” she cried in a theatrical voice.

The mutt barked and tried to leap off Marissa’s lap.

The woman’s head slowly rose. “Is that you, sweetie? Or do I hear you talking to me from heaven?”

“Oh brother,” muttered Dane. Then he called out, “Hey, lady, is this your dog?”

She dragged herself off the trunk and peered around the car. “Romea?”



“Yip! Yip! Yip!”

“Romea!”

The woman nearly tripped on her chiffon in an effort to reunite with Romea. “My teeny tiny precious doggy-poo!” she cried, lifting the ball of fluff and claspng it to her rather large and heaving bosom.

“Oh, thank you, kind and gentle sir, for rescuing my Romea.” Dark, painted-on brows rose invitingly and the woman fluttered long fake lashes at Dane. He jerked a thumb toward Marissa. “She saved precious doggy-poo, Mrs.—”

“*Miss Lenetta Devereaux,*” she said. “I’ve never been married.” The lashes fluttered again. “But I’d consider it if I had a hunk of a man like you.”

He backed up a step in case she decided to drop the dog and grab him. Fortunately, Lenetta turned to Marissa. “My dear, I can’t thank you enough. Romea means the world to me.”

“You’re welcome,” said Marissa. “She’s such a sweetie.”

Dane felt a little safer since Lenetta’s attentions had been diverted by disgusting doggie kisses. “Why did you call her Romea?”

Lenetta lifted a brow. “Because she’s a girl, of course.”

“BRENT, I’M STANDING in my underwear at a payphone. Damn it, stop laughing!”

Marissa leaned against the brick wall and sipped on a cool confection known as an Icee. The simple drink reminded her of all the things she hadn’t been able to do—all the experiences that awaited her.

Many of the hotel’s guests had wandered across the street to the convenience store. Earlier, hotel personnel filtered through the crowds reassuring everyone that their rooms would be comped and transportation would be provided to another hotel.

The night sky gave way to morning splendor: purples, oranges, yellows, and other brilliant hues left Marissa breathless. She glanced at Dane’s stern expression. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he explained the situation to his friend. Dane had already attempted to call his brother, but the line had been busy.

“Just come get us!” Dane slammed the receiver so hard the phone cubicle shook. “My friend will be here any minute.”

The nearest hotel was only a few blocks from the convenience store, but Dane seemed reluctant to go to it. She wondered if he’d used that hotel for assignments. The thought of Dane enticing a woman to a hotel for a sexual encounter weakened her knees. At the same time,





jealousy pricked her. Why would he make love to other women and not to her? Disappointment stabbed her like hot little knives.

“Why didn’t you bring your car?” To her surprise, her question sounded like an accusation.

“My brother gave me a ride to the club last night. Everything okay, princess?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” She sipped the Icee and avoided Dane’s quizzical gaze. “We still have to meet Tuesday. It’s already six-thirty.”

“We’ll go to my apartment, shower, and get dressed.” He looked at her wrinkled and smoke-smudged T-shirt. “Where did you get that? You didn’t have any luggage.”

“It was in my purse.”

“Another impulse buy?”

“Yes.” She slurped the last bit of the drink and tossed it in the trash bin next to her. “Is your friend married?”

“No.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s a troll. Long hair, bad teeth, bushy eyebrows, big ears. Has a hump, too. Walks with a limp and spits when he talks.”

“Oh, my.” She knew Dane was teasing, although his frown indicated he was less than pleased with her questions. “Where did you meet him? Under a bridge?”

“He works with me at the TeenCenter. He’s a counselor.”

“Are you a counselor?”

“I’m the director of the sports programs.”

“Oh.” She’d pursue those tidbits later. She was too fascinated with Dane’s thunderous expression and clipped speech. Whatever was the matter with him? If he didn’t want her, why not approach someone who might agree to be a temporary bed partner? “Muscular, like you? What color are his eyes? Is he tall?”

“You planning on having his children?” She considered it. The idea of a husband and children delighted her. “Maybe.” “I knew it!” exploded Dane. “You’re thinking about having sex with him, aren’t you?” “If he’ll consent.” She played with the strap of her purse. “I—I don’t suppose you’d ask him for me, would you?” “You’re not sleeping with him.”

“I’m paying you to help me with the list. You said *you* wouldn’t participate in the one-night stand. Don’t you trust your friend to show me a good time?”



Dane crossed his arms, his face a mask of anger. “You’re paying me to be your pimp, is that it?”

Hurt speared her. He thought she was behaving like a—a whore? Was that what he believed about her? She wanted to experience physical love, like the kind she’d read about in the romance novels Geoffrey had smuggled to her. Her parents allowed educational material and the occasional entertainment. She’d had no access to television programs, but her DVD collection was unrivaled. Her favorite film of all time was not part of her parent-approved movies: *Sweet November*.

Marissa was tired of being told what to watch, what to believe, what to do. *Is it so wrong to want physical pleasure?* She swiped at the tears welling in her eyes. “If you are uncomfortable with our agreement, you can terminate it at any time. Right now, if you like. All I ask is that you allow me to purchase some clothes and that you drop me off at the café to meet Tuesday.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Yes, you did.” She pushed away from the wall and put some distance between herself and Dane. “What I don’t understand is why. I’ve done nothing to indicate I wish to prostitute myself. I simply want to enjoy what you and everyone else take for granted.”

“Marissa, I—”

*Beep! Beep!* A teal truck whipped into the parking space in front of them. A handsome, blond-haired man stuck his head out. “Hey, buddy! Good thing you didn’t wear your Batman underwear, huh?” The man’s gaze assessed Marissa. His hundred-watt smile indicated he liked what he saw. “Hi there.”

“This is Marissa Vanderson,” said Dane. “Rissa, Brent Williams.”

He put his hand on the small of her back as if to guide her to the truck, but she moved away from the possessive touch. She didn’t much like him right now and she didn’t have to put up with his behavior. She had choices, too.

She found herself squeezed between the two men, straddling a stick shift. Dane stretched his arm across the backrest; her neck tingled as his arm slid across it. Dane’s naked thigh heated her right leg and Brent’s jean-clad thigh produced interesting friction on her left leg. Her nightgown only stretched so far, giving both men bird’s eye views of a considerable amount of flesh. If she wasn’t careful, her panties might make an appearance.

She felt decidedly hot.

Really hot.



In her wildest dreams, she never thought she'd be sandwiched between two handsome men. She had a healthy fantasy life, but this....

“Is it warm in here?” she asked.

“No,” answered Dane.

Brent reached between her legs to shift the gear. When the truck hit a pothole, his arm—going for the gearshift—bumped against her inside thigh. He shot her a wicked grin and winked. Next to her, Dane stiffened. She glanced at him and found him staring out the window. She might have believed his nonchalance if she hadn't noticed the tenseness of his jaw.

Marissa wasn't sure what to do. She didn't understand Dane at all. Men were much more complicated creatures than she'd been led to believe. Daddy *always* gave in to Mommy's demands. Her father and mother finished each other's sentences. They did silly things like intentionally misquoting Shakespeare to suit their romantic moments and wearing those ghastly matching Hawaiian shirts when they went golfing. They loved each other, and they loved her, but their protectiveness had turned into control. It was almost as if they believed she would be fourteen-years-old forever; somehow, they had convinced themselves that time would stop for their little girl. But time didn't stop. Eight years had passed and she had grown up.

For the millionth time, she wondered what her life would be like if Gillian hadn't died. Shaking off her thoughts, she turned to Brent. “So, what do you do?”

“In what circumstances?”

She almost said, “This one,” but thought better of it considering Dane's grumpy mood. Brent was nice-looking, sure, but so far, Dane was the only man she'd met that produced in her a peculiar heart-pounding, breath-catching response—just by thinking about him. *Hmmm*. She needed to analyze these feelings and figure out how they were reproduced.

“I meant what do you do for a living?”

“When I'm not working at the TeenCenter as a counselor, I'm a pilot.”

“Private or commercial?”

“Instructor. I teach people how to fly.” He grinned at her. “What do you do?”

The question startled Marissa. She chewed her lower lip as she thought about it. She'd never considered a career. Her life was one of luxury. She could have just about anything she wanted, except her



freedom, by asking for it. The idea of a job—of doing something productive with her time—interested her. “I don’t really do anything. How does one go about finding out what to do with one’s life?”

Brent blinked. “Huh?”

“Don’t go there, Rissa,” said Dane. “You’ve got enough to do on your current list without adding anything else. In fact, you should probably pare down the list. Get rid of a few items.”

*Like the one-night stand? Not likely.* “I’m not giving up a single thing.” She sized up Brent. Handsome with a to-die-for body, he was a prime specimen for a sexual encounter. She resisted the urge to squeeze his biceps, only because she didn’t want him to feel like a choice bit of meat. Dane had made it clear he would not ask Brent to engage in a one-night stand with her.

If Dane wouldn’t ask, she would. “Brent, I know we just met, but since you’re a good friend of Dane’s, I feel comfortable asking if you would consider—”

“We’re here,” interrupted Dane. “Just stop the truck by the building. You don’t have to park and come in.” “Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Brent. Dane opened the passenger-side door and grasped

Marissa’s arm. “C’mon, princess.”

“But what about—”

“Later.”

She scooted to the edge of the bench seat, attempting to resist his grip. “Can I just ask if—”

“No.” Dane grabbed her purse from the floorboard, slung it over his shoulder, then grabbed her by the waist and slung *her* over his other shoulder. Her T-shirt threatened to ride up and expose her lacy panties.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving you from yourself.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She huffed out a breath. “I’m feeling a bit light-headed.” She looked down and saw the view. “Oh, my. You do have a wonderful butt.”

She heard Brent’s choking laughter, then the slam of the truck’s door. “Thanks for the ride, Brent.”

“Sure you don’t need any help there, buddy?”

“Get outta here. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Marissa heard the clank of the gearshift and the truck motored off.

“Honestly, Dane, I’m perfectly capable of walking.”



“You’re perfectly capable of getting into trouble.” He put her down in front of a staircase. “My apartment is up there. Number seventy-one.”

His eyebrows nearly touched his hairline and “don’t mess with me” glittered in his eyes. Marissa realized Dane wasn’t in a negotiating kind of mood, so she tucked away her questions about sexual relations with his friend and jogged up the stairs. His low groan stopped her movements. She turned around. “Are you—”

Dane crashed into her. She stumbled back, gasping when his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her close. Pressed against his naked, muscled chest, she felt a delicious chill skitter up her spine. She grasped his arms, holding on tight since her legs felt wobbly. Her nipples pebbled. The thin T-shirt nightgown didn’t provide much of a barrier and she heard Dane’s teeth click as his clamped his mouth shut.

“Princess...”

Her breath left her lungs in a whoosh. He looked so dangerous, so kissable. Dane was such a beautiful specimen. She wanted to explore the planes of his face, trace the firm full lips, stroke the strong cords of his neck... “Is—is it warm to you?”

“It’s like living in hell.”

She swallowed. Dane’s gaze had dropped to her mouth and her lips tingled. “I suppose you should let me go—unless you’d like to kiss me.”

A door opened and closed. Marissa glanced up and saw two young boys carrying a basketball lean on the railing. “Hey mister, dontcha know it’s illegal to have sex in public?”

“We’re not having sex.” Dane’s glower didn’t faze the freckled-face kid with shaggy blonde hair. His companion was just as freckled and just as shaggy, except his hair was dark brown. The imp grinned. “Whatcha doin’ outside in your underwear then?”

“None of your business, kid. Why don’t you go play basketball?”

“Cuz you an’ her are blockin’ the way.”

Dane ushered Marissa up the stairs and toward a door with #71 painted in black above its peephole. “It’s all yours, boys.”

They pounded down the staircase, then the blonde-haired one stopped and looked up at Dane. “Your purse is really ugly, mister.”

His friend laughed and they took off, running like Satan was poking their backsides with a pitchfork.

Marissa pinched her lips together to prevent the laughter bubbling up. Dane looked even grumpier as he silently handed her the purse.



Luckily for Dane, his boxers had a back pocket and he extracted his wallet. Marissa wondered if all boxers came with pockets. It seemed on odd feature to put on underwear.

“You keep your keys in your wallet?”

“No. I keep two keys in it. One for the apartment and one for my car.” He inserted the key into the lock, opened the door, and ushered her inside. “Always keep spares—you never know what might happen.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Dane opened the door and gestured for Marissa to enter. She stepped into a small living room decorated in dark browns. Scents of vanilla and cinnamon tickled her nose. She expected a more sweat-and-cigar-smoke kind of smell from a bachelor’s apartment. Sports memorabilia cluttered tables and shelves; posters and framed photos of various sporting events covered almost available inch of wall space. She rounded the corner of a leather easy chair and stumbled to a stop. “Oh, my heavens!”

Against the far wall, under a huge picture window, was a tan couch. On it, lay a teenaged girl sleeping.

She was dressed in a lacy red teddy.

“Are you hungry? I make a mean cheese ome—” Dane stopped; his gaze followed Marissa’s.

At that moment, the girl awoke. She stretched becomingly, her pert breasts straining against the revealing lingerie. She aimed a sleepy smile at Dane. “Hi lover. Where’ve you been?”

## Chapter Four

“JANEY!”

Dane’s annoyed tone startled Marissa. Emotions swirled through her. A cold, hard knot formed in her stomach as she watched Dane stomp across the living room, grab an afghan, and throw it around the girl’s shoulders.

*Surely this girl isn’t his lover.*

“What the hell are you doing here?” asked Dane in a pissed-off voice.

The girl’s gaze assessed Marissa. Her eyes narrowed. “Who’s she? Why is she half-naked?”

“Why is *she* half-naked? Why are *you* half-naked?” Dane stood about a foot from the girl, his arms crossed, his expression thunderous.





He'd apparently forgotten he was in his boxers. "How did you get in here?"

"Don't pretend, lover," purred the girl. "You can tell her about us."

"There *is* no us. You're just a kid, for God's sake."

"I am not!" The girl flung off the afghan and stood. "I'm a woman. Look at me!"

"I see a little girl playing dress up."

"I'm fifteen." She sauntered to him and pressed against his folded arms; her fingers trailed his biceps. He jumped back like she'd dropped acid on him. "I'm old enough, damn it." Her

gaze skittered toward Marissa. "How old is she?"

"I'm twenty-two."

Dane sent her a shut-up look.

"I-I'll be twenty-three in a couple of months," she added lamely.

"Get dressed, Janey."

The girl's lips formed a mutinous pout. "I did everything right. Candles. Dinner. Lingerie."

The girl plopped on the couch, pulled up her knees, and put her arms around her legs. It was a position that suggested vulnerability and a need for protection. Janey was a girl wanting badly to be a woman. Marissa felt a tug of sympathy. She knew well how Janey felt.

On the table next to the couch were several candles of varying heights and colors—all half-melted. They explained the sweet scents filtering through the apartment. She also noticed two table trays. Dinner for two had been arranged carefully. Each tray had a dinner plate, dessert plate, utensils, and champagne flutes. The girl had attempted to create a romantic atmosphere.

Janey obviously had a huge crush on Dane.

If the frowning, confused expression on Dane's face was any indication, the big galoot was clueless.

Tears formed in the girl's eyes. "I want you to like me."

"I do like you." Dane's harsh features softened. "You're the best softball pitcher at the Center."

"That's all you ever see. How good I am at sports." Her head dipped as if she didn't want Dane to see her cry. A shuddering sob shook her shoulders and she tightened into a ball.

Sympathy flowered into a need to act. Marissa stepped forward. "He thinks you're beautiful."

Janey looked up. "He does?"



Marissa dared a glance at Dane. His mouth was opening and closing like freshly-caught fish. She sent him a just-go-with-it look. His answering look said I-will-kill-you-later.

“He was just telling me how beautiful you are. How your blonde hair shines in the sunlight when you’re pitching.”

“Really?” She sniffled. “He said that?”

“Yes. And how nice you look in your uniform.” Marissa’s smile faltered. “But, alas, he knows that you can never be his.”

“I-I can’t?”

“You’re young. Beautiful. Out of reach. He’s already made the decision that he must admire you from afar.”

“But why?”

“Because he’s old.”

Janey and Marissa both looked at Dane. “See the lines around his eyes? The graying hair? Soon, his gut will start to sag. His muscles will turn to mush. He’ll go bald.”

“Eew.”

Marissa thought the tiny blood vessel pulsing in Dane’s forehead was going to explode, but she pressed on. He couldn’t know the fragility of a young girl’s self-esteem. Better that Janey walked away from him than face his rejection. “You’ll be in the prime of your life. Do you really want to take care of a doddering old man?”

“No.” Janey swiped her tear-streaked face. “He’s so nice to me. He treats me with respect. He’s good-lookin’ right now.”

Marissa silently agreed. “It’s not really fair, though. How do you think he’ll feel walking around with a gorgeous young woman? He’ll be afraid that you’ll leave him for another. He’ll watch you grow more beautiful as he gets older, grayer...fatter.”

“F-fatter?” Janey looked at Dane with alarm. “I-I wouldn’t want to hurt him.” “It’s up to you,” said Marissa. “You can let him go now or be the source of his greatest sorrow in his golden years.”

Janey examined Dane with a scrunched-up expression. The girl was obviously giving him a mental makeover. She must have imagined a really old, really gray, really fat Dane because she looked horrified. She stood, gathered the afghan around her shoulders, and walked to Dane. “I’m sorry, but I like you too much to hurt you.” She offered her hand. “Can we just be friends?”

“Yes,” said Dane, shaking Janey’s hand. “I’ll have to live with admiring you from afar.”



“I’ll call Tommy for a ride.” She bit her lip. “He’s the one who let me in. Said you gave him a key in case he needed a place to crash. I’m glad you trust him, Mr. S. It means a lot to him. Just so you know, he thought I was making you a surprise dinner. He’d be really mad if he found out—well, you know.”

“It’s our little secret,” said Dane. “I suppose your mother thinks you’re someplace else?”

Janey blushed. “That I’m staying over at a friend’s. Are you going to rat me out, Mr. S?”

“No. But if you ever pull another stunt like this one, I’ll rat you out—big time.”

“The pain of your rejection is making him grumpy,” interrupted Marissa. She wished he’d stop frowning and acting so imposing. At this point, a statue had more animation than Dane. He was going to ruin her pining-after-Janey scenario.

“Why don’t you call Tommy, then get dressed?”

Janey turned to face Marissa. “You know, you’re not so bad. Maybe if you don’t mind that Mr. S is gettin’ old and all—well, you could be his girlfriend.”

Marissa pretended to ponder the possibility. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Janey went into the bathroom to dress. Dane put on some jeans and offered a pair of soccer shorts to Marissa. She tucked her T-shirt inside them and knotted the drawstring a few times.

Tommy arrived fifteen minutes later. He looked at Janey with what Marissa had once heard referred to as googly eyes. Marissa found it achingly sweet to watch the two interact. Janey obviously felt something for him, too. Maybe now that she no longer considered Dane as a possible boyfriend, a relationship with the sixteen-year-old Tommy would develop. A no-sex relationship. It bothered her to realize that kids as young as Janey and Tommy might indulge in physical acts they weren’t ready for emotionally or mentally.

Didn’t kids have enough to worry about these days without the additional burdens of venereal disease and pregnancy?

What about her? Her desire to have sex...was it a naïve foray into an area she wasn’t ready to explore?

After the kids left, Dane cornered Marissa in the living room.

“What in the hell are you doing to me?”

She blinked. His ferocious tone made her back up a step. “What do you mean?”



He pushed a hand through his hair. “My life has turned upside down since I met you. Not one single *normal* thing has happened to me in the last twenty-four hours.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Dane, if I’ve upset—”

“That’s another thing. All this apologizing. Why do you have to admit you’re wrong all the time?”

“I’m not wrong all the time. But there’s no reason to—”

“You’re reasonable all the time, too. Except when it comes to that damned list. And hiring thugs. And beating up assholes. And saving disgusting rat dogs. And convincing young girls that I’m old. Never mind. You’re not reasonable at all.” He advanced on her.

She backed up until her legs smacked into the couch. Her heart pounded, not in fear, but in answer to the primal need she saw in Dane’s eyes. Somehow, she understood that he wanted her, but that he didn’t *want* to want her.

“I don’t know if I should throttle you or—or do this!” He grabbed her shoulders and planted a fierce kiss on her lips.

Her knees weakened and she fell back onto the couch. He landed on top of her and nearly crushed her ability to breathe—not that she could’ve drawn a steady breath. He’d taken away that vital function with the onslaught of his mouth.

She didn’t think kissing could get any better until Dane teased open her lips and slipped his tongue inside. Marissa thought she was going to faint. Her head buzzed, her body tingled, her emotional thermometer went into the red zone. Her ideas about being too naïve to experience sex melted like candle wax exposed to a flame.

Dane stilled then scooted away from her. “Shit.” He rubbed his face as if he’d just wakened from a dream and he was trying to brush away the last of sleep. “I’m sorry, Rissa. I asked you not to touch me then I almost...”

“Ravished me?” She licked her lips. “Ravish me some more, please.”

“I can’t. I meant it about the one-night stand. I don’t think two people should just have sex just because they’re attracted to each other. There should be more and I don’t have more to give you. Understand?”

“No.” She looked at him, resisting the urge to yank him down on top of her and beg him to get on with the ravishing. “I’ve never asked for more.”

“That’s just it. You should ask for more. You should want the whole thing.”



“What whole thing?”

Dane got off the couch and paced. “Love. A relationship. Marriage.”

“Why do I need to want those things in order to have sex?” Marissa swung her legs over the side of the couch as she sat up. “I’ve studied the subject in depth and there have never been any indications that one must be in love with a partner in order to achieve an orgasm.”

Dane looked at her as if she’d spoken ancient Greek. “Making love is a lot better when you care about the person.”

“Responses are increased when emotions are involved...that makes sense. Yes, of course, there must be several benefits to making love when partners care about each other.” She looked at Dane. “I will give the matter some more thought.”

“Good.”

“Could you hand me my purse? I need to find the list.”

Dane took the purse from the chair she’d dropped it into and gave it to her. “You’re not going to add anything to it, are you?”

“I’m going to mark something off.” She dug out the pink paper and a pen.

“The one-night stand?”

“Close.” She looked up at him and grinned. “The toe-curling kiss.”

“SO LET ME get this straight. You want to pay me a thousand bucks to follow you around and take notes.” Tuesday shook his head. “Why?”

The café, nearly filled to capacity, buzzed with activity. The waitresses’ tennis shoes squeaked on the linoleum as they continually passed by the booth. One waitress with long blonde hair and fading make-up stopped to fill their coffee mugs.

“Why are you here, Tuesday?” asked Marissa.

“My hair appointment isn’t until nine o’clock and I had some time to kill.”

“Are you honorable?”

Marissa saw Dane’s grimace. Frowns were making regular appearances on his face. He looked so much nicer when he smiled. His eyes crinkled up a bit and his lips had this wonderful, kissable curve...oh, dear. She sipped her coffee. She really should stop acting googly-eyed over the man.

“I stole your purse and you’re asking if I’m honorable? I’m just a...” Marissa saw the movement of his throat as he swallowed the words.



He slouched at the table and looked at her. “You’re nice and all. But this isn’t my thing, you know what I’m sayin’? You want me to walk around like some, I don’t know, *secretary*.”

“Would you like to create your own title? What about assistant?”

“Assistant? Hah. Like a valet? A limo driver? A butler? You want me to join my brothers in servitude?”

“I don’t understand. Your siblings are servants?”

Tuesday leaned forward, an incredulous expression on his handsome face. “Do you know I’m black?”

“What does skin color have to do with anything?”

“Black isn’t just a skin color. It’s a lifestyle. An attitude.”

“Really?” Marissa was instantly fascinated. “I’ve studied sociology—it’s one of my favorite subjects, but I’m afraid I’ve never had any experience with America’s sub-cultures. You could teach me. Take me places, explain things.”

“What?”

Dane’s bark of laughter drew their attention. “She wants a field trip into the black community.”

Tuesday crossed his arms. “You crazy.”

“Maybe I am.” She sighed. She’d botched this whole situation. Wanting to help and actually helping were not the same things at all. Tuesday was a nice boy who deserved a chance, but only he could decide to take it. She reached inside her purse and pulled out the thousand dollars she’d paper-clipped together. “Here. Take this as payment for your time.”

“Put that away!” said Tuesday and Dane at the same time. They looked at each other, then at Marissa.

She shoved it back into her purse. “Honestly. What’s wrong with you two?”

“You can’t show off that kind of cash,” said Tuesday in a low voice. “Don’t you believe in banks?”

“I can’t afford paper trails.”

“Paper trails? What are you—on the run?”

Marissa glanced at Dane. Yep. There was the insidious frown. She zipped up her purse and put it on her lap. “Sorta.”

“Sorta *how*?” asked Dane.

“It’s a long story and I don’t feel like telling it right now.

Be assured I didn’t break out of jail or a psychiatric ward.”





Tuesday's grin was conspiratorial. "Say, Miss M, I'll need a couple of legal pads—and one of those fancy pens, you know the kind that never run out of ink?"

Excitement rushed through her. "Oh, Tuesday! Does that mean you'll be my assistant?"

"It means I'll take a few notes. But I'm not driving cars or bringing out drinks to guests or caddying at the golf course."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to do such things."

"Then you got a note-taker." Tuesday grasped her hand as she reached for the purse. "I don't get paid until the job is done."

"Fair enough." She turned her hand so her palm met his, then shook his hand.

"Welcome to Marissa's World," said Dane. "I hope you survive the trip."

## Chapter Five

"IT'S LILLIAN," SHE said into the pay phone. "I'm okay."

The voice on the other end was gruff—and pissed off. She knew he'd be furious, but she'd risk the wrath of God to finish what she'd started almost a decade ago.

The convenience store was located across the street from the hotel. She'd managed to follow Marissa and her pick-up from the bar; she'd indulged in a mondo cup of coffee and, thank the bakery gods, a Krispy Kreme chocolate-iced donut.

Unfortunately, she'd exited the store in time to see her quarry leave in a new Ford 150 teal truck. So new, it didn't have tags yet. She still hadn't gotten a good look at Marissa's new friend. He was tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, and had a nice ass. Unfortunately, the backsides of half the men in the world matched that description.

"Lillian, did you hear me? Return immediately," he said. "I can't protect you anymore."

"I never asked for your protection."

"You did once."

Lillian closed her eyes. Her life had come full circle. The man she had once chased now chased her. And the one who'd protected her secrets now threatened to expose them.

"You know I can't come in. As soon as I take care of Marissa, I'm going to disappear."



“No!” Did she detect an edge of desperation to his voice? She smiled grimly. *Yeah, right.* He cared less about the world than she did. Just a few weeks ago, she’d told him he was the loneliest asshole on the earth; he hadn’t changed.

But she had.

“I’ll find you, Lillie. Or he will.”

He knew she was after Michael. *Great.* “You know better. You taught me.”

“Not everything.”

“Enough.”

“Damn it, Lillian! It’s too late for you. For Marissa. Just let it go.”

“Is the trace almost finished?” She laughed. “I’ll save you the trouble. I’m on the corner of Fifth and Main, enjoying the best damned donut in the world. Coffee sucks, though.” She hung up on him, mid-curse.

Lillian disposed of the Styrofoam cup and sticky napkin, then licked chocolate icing off her fingertips. With a casual stride that belied her urgency, she walked across the parking lot and headed toward the hotel. Once she got her car, she’d find a place to hole up so she could consider what to do next.

TUESDAY WAS LAUGHING so hard he almost fell out of Dane’s car when he opened the door to get out. Wiping tears from his face, he handed the crumpled pink paper to Marissa.

“I can’t wait to get my legal pad.” He looked at Dane. “You gonna let her do all that shit?”

“First, don’t cuss. It’s against the Center’s rules. Second, it’s *her* list. I’m an employee, just like you.”

“Third, it’s impolite to speak about me like I’m not standing here. And fourth, Dane isn’t going to let me do anything. He’s just supposed to protect me from...” Marissa waved her hand. “Stuff.”

Dane crossed his arms. For the thousandth time, the thought entered his mind that he should ditch this crazy job. Never again would he worry about being in a rut. A normal, stable, boring bachelorhood sounded like heaven compared to life with Marissa. But he couldn’t leave her. God knew what she’d think up next.

Besides, he didn’t have Marissa’s faith in Tuesday. Dane worked with boys like him almost every day. Time, effort, and constant supervision were all necessary components of getting street kids to reform their ways. They all arrived at the center in survival mode—and the need to survive blurred the lines of ethics. It was hard to have



principles when a kid didn't know where he was going to crash or when he was getting his next meal.

"Hey, buddy!"

Dane turned and saw Brent walking toward them. *Terrific*. The sex-god had arrived.

"Hello, Marissa."

Dane resisted the urge to scoop out his friend's eyeballs with a dull spoon. That dickhead was taking too long and too close a look at Rissa.

"Hi, Brent. How are you today?"

"Much better. The view's improved in the last couple of seconds."

Marissa blushed; the rose tinted her pale cheeks so prettily Dane felt like punching Brent. He added "cutting out tongue" to his list of Violent Things That Would Happen To Brent if his supposed best friend didn't stop flirting.

"So you hangin' around to see Dane in action?"

"I'm very interested in seeing what the TeenCenter is like."

Marissa grasped Tuesday's arm and pulled him forward. "This is my friend, Tuesday Jones."

Brent extended his hand and shook Tuesday's. "You here to enroll in the sports program?"

"No way, man."

Dane looked at Marissa. "Let's go inside. We'll get one of the volunteers to give you and Tuesday a tour while Brent and I talk about some business."

"If you get a moment, would you mind asking Brent about—"

"Yes, damn it. I'll ask."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Thanks."

An enthusiastic Marissa and a reluctant Tuesday followed one of the volunteer clerks through the TeenCenter's main doors. Dane and Brent entered the office they shared. The room was fairly spacious—Dane's desk, shelves, and files occupied the left end, Brent's, the right. In the middle was a living room-type area Brent used to counsel the teens and, occasionally, parents. Two couches faced each other and two wingback leather chairs faced each other, making a furniture square. Against the wall was a table with a coffeemaker, coffee-making supplies, and a stack of Styrofoam cups.

Dane closed the door, then walked to one of the couches and collapsed on it. "What the hell am I doing?"

"Excellent question. Who's the girl?"



“A rich runaway who thinks having sex is like getting on a really cool roller coaster ride.”

“Uh...what?”

Dane sat up. “She’s got this list. She thinks the best way to experience life is to buy stuff, and have sex, and go to the zoo.”

“Go to the zoo?”

“Yeah. I agreed to be her bodyguard for this whole week. I’m in hell, Brent.”

“Bodyguard?”

“Would you stop repeating my sentences in question form?” He sat up and looked at his friend sitting on the opposite couch. “She’s paying me ten grand to help her out with the list and guard her body.”

“What a body.”

“Yeah.”

A moment of silence passed as both men contemplated Marissa’s curves, then Dane remembered about the one-night stand. “I’m supposed to ask you if you’d consider having sex with her.”

Brent’s eyes bulged and his mouth dropped open, then he shook his head and grinned. “Can’t we date first?” “By the way,” said Dane conversationally, “if you even think about going to bed with her, I’ll have to kill you.” “Why would you...you like her, don’t you? Why don’t you have sex with her?” “I said no. Just like you’re going to.” “You want me to turn down no-strings-sex with that gorgeous woman because...”

“I said so.”

“You like her.”

“I don’t like her. She’s paying me to protect her so I’m protecting her.”

“You don’t like her?”

Dane stood up and went to the coffee machine. Knowing Brent, the coffee in the pot had been made earlier in the morning and was now burnt swill. He poured some into a cup and dosed it with liberal amounts of sugar and powdered creamer.

“She’s young. Naïve. Running away from something...or someone. I’ve been trying to convince her that her first sexual experience should be special—worth something.”

“Holy shit. She’s a virgin?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you meet her?”



“Paradise Club. She was trying to get drunk.” Dane told his friend the rest of the story, including how they ended up outside a convenience store waiting for him. Brent didn’t bother trying to hold back his laughter. Tears streamed down his face and he held onto his sides.

“Some friend.” Dane sipped the coffee then grimaced at the sweet–burned taste. “This is disgusting.” He threw away the cup and returned to the couch.

Brent managed to downgrade his guffaws to chuckles. He wiped his eyes. “Maybe I can get through to her. I’ll take her out for some dinner, get her side of the story, and talk some sense into her.”

Dane didn’t want Brent anywhere near Marissa. Knowing her, she’d have Brent promising all sorts of sexual favors. The idea of her sharing herself with anyone but him, no, with anyone, *period*, made his gut clench. On the other hand, Brent was a counselor, and a damned good one. He could influence Marissa to tear up the list—or at least he might be able to get some information about who she had escaped and why.

“All right. But if you get horizontal with her, I’ll rip off your arms.”

“Don’t worry, Dane. I won’t touch her.”

“Yeah, but what are you going to do if she touches you?”

TUESDAY JONES HADN’T seen a butt that fine since—since never. Her name was Rozzinda Lewis and he hadn’t heard a single thing she’d said about the TeenCenter since they’d started the tour. Her skin was like creamy chocolate and her eyes...he’d never seen eyes like hers. So dark they were like black pearls. They were looking at him with a quizzical expression. Rozzinda’s thin brows raised. “You like what you see?” she asked.

“Yeah, baby. You the finest woman I’ve seen in a long time.”

Marissa touched his shoulder. “She was talking about the equipment.”

“I like her equipment, too.”

Rozzinda laughed. “Boy, you a player. I’m finished with players.” She walked around him and he followed her movements. “Get your eyeballs back in your head, *player*.”

Embarrassment burned up his neck and his cheeks heated. He wasn’t no goddamned schoolboy; he resented that he felt like one right now. He’d just turned eighteen last week and he knew more about life than most people did if they lived to be a hundred. He pried his gaze off the woman and managed to look around the room. Bats, basketballs, tennis rackets...they had stuff for any sport ever played. So what?



“Sports is a big part of the center?” asked Marissa.

“Sports is an integral part of our program, but our focus remains on education. We help drop-outs get their GEDs and, depending on what the client wants, we get them enrolled at the community college or get them a job.”

“It sounds wonderful. Doesn’t it, Tuesday?”

“Yeah. It’s great.” He knew he sounded sarcastic, but he didn’t care. He was here because he needed the money and he wanted to earn it. Stealing Marissa’s purse had been a last-minute decision born of desperation. He needed to pay off that asshole, Jeremy.

The thought of the drug dealer sent chills up Tuesday’s spine. If his youngest sister, Slane, hadn’t gotten hooked on the crack pipe... She was only fourteen. *Just a baby*. She’d given up her virginity and her dignity to Jeremy so she could have access to free drugs.

Ain’t nothing free, he’d told her. She’d come to his crib with a black eye and a cut lip and begged him to help her.

“Tuesday?”

Marissa’s soft voice broke through his thoughts and he looked down at her. “Yeah?”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s cool. Are we done here?”

Was it his imagination or had Rozzinda’s cynical gaze softened? He wondered if his despair was evident. Lately, it felt like a palpable thing...crawling over him and threatening to choke him.

“I’ll take you back to the counselor’s offices. That’s where you’ll find Dane and Brent.”

“Thanks, Rozzinda,” said Marissa.

“Call me Z. Everyone else does.”

“Z.” Marissa grinned. “I wonder if I can get away with being called M. What do you think, Tuesday?”

“Right on, Miss M.” He couldn’t help but match her grin. The woman’s naiveté and enthusiasm shone like the sun breaking through the clouds. He liked being part of her adventure. He liked her. Surprise filtered through him. What was up with him? Chasing a white woman and taking notes on her craziness—and he *liked* it.

“Tell you what. You and Z go back to Dane. I want to look around some more. I’ll meet up with you in about ten minutes,” said Marissa.

“Okay. See you in a few.”

SHE’D ESCAPED THE hotel fire. He knew she would. If she died, his soul would shrivel and die, too. He felt so restless. So helpless.





Why didn't she just come back to him? Didn't he love her? Didn't they have a good life together? Anger cut through him so sharp and so swift, he looked down to see if he was bleeding.

He leaned against the brick building and smoked another cigarette. Across the street was the ugly pink building that housed the Paradise Club. He was hoping she would return. It had been one of their favorite places. Hadn't she run here first? It proved that she still loved him.

*Lillie!* Anguish crashed through him, mixing with the anger that stabbed at him. He felt like a black flame, dark and hot and needy. The doors to the club opened; a blonde woman stepped out. Long legs, high breasts, tiny waist, and black vinyl skirt hugging a perfect rear end. His vision blurred, refocused. Lillie? Yes. She'd come back. She wanted him. He flicked away the cigarette and straightened. The woman glanced at her watch then tapped her stiletto-heeled foot in impatience.

She's waiting for me.

He crossed the street, a smile on his face. She watched his approach with anticipation. Of course, she did. She loved him. She looked surprised when he touched her arm. She tried to pull away, but he grabbed her around the shoulders and covered her mouth.

"Ssshhh, Lillie," he crooned. Why did she struggle? He dragged her around the corner and into one of the abandoned buildings. The need for her grew warm and heavy in his groin; he pressed his bulging hard-on against her buttocks.

He removed his gloved hand from her mouth and turned her around. "Lillie."

"Look, mister, I'm not Lillie."

"Don't lie to me." He lifted her skirt and felt the smooth silk of her panties. She wasn't wearing hose. She never did. "I know you."

"Please. Don't."

A game. She wanted to play a game. He ripped off the panties. She screamed and tried to claw her way out of his embrace. Her heels caught on debris and she fell backwards. Her beautiful blonde head smacked against the bare concrete floor.

"Sweet Lillie." He leaned over, kissed her smooth cheek, and felt the pulse at her neck. It beat strong against his fingertips. He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a long red silk scarf. Gently, he wrapped the material around her slender neck and pulled it tighter and tighter.

*"Good night, sweetheart, well it's time to go..."*



## Chapter Six

MARISSA STOOD IN Dane's bathroom, looking into the mirror, applying the finishing touch to her make-up: coloring her lips with Kiss-Me red. Marissa smoothed the red dress, though the "slinky little number" as described by the sales clerk, didn't have any wrinkles. She pressed a hand against her stomach to still the nervous fluttering.

Tonight she would have sex.

When Dane had told her Brent would like to take her out, she knew his friend had agreed to accommodate her wishes. She had to admit that arranging a liaison this way felt cold-blooded. If she were to evaluate her feelings honestly, she feared she wouldn't enjoy her first sexual experience with Brent as much as she would have with Dane.

"Tuesday, where do you think you're going?"

Marissa smiled at the ferocious sound of Dane's voice. He'd been in a bad mood since they'd left the TeenCenter. Shopping for make-up and clothes didn't improve his disposition, either. At least this time his ire was directed at her handsome note-taker. She leaned against the closed door to listen.

"I'm going with Miss M."

"Don't you think it would be awkward for Brent and Marissa to have you there scribbling down their every move?"

She imagined Tuesday's grin was unrepentant. "This is the best job I've ever had."

"This is probably the only job you've ever had."

She'd better save Tuesday. Marissa patted her long curls—courtesy of her new rollers—and opened the door. Both men in the hallway turned toward her.

She cleared her throat. "What do you think?"

Tuesday's whistle was long and low. "You clean up real nice." He held up his legal pad and pen. "I'm ready to write shit down."

"Tuesday." Dane's voice held a warning.

The boy rolled his eyes. "Stuff, okay? I'm ready to write *stuff* down."

Marissa's gaze strayed to Dane. She saw the hunger in his eyes before he blanked his expression. Tension radiated from him even though his stance was a casual one; his strength and his heat seemed to envelop her. The sensation was so weird she shivered.



“You look fine.”

Tuesday punched him lightly. “C’mon, man. You can do better than that. You’re gonna ruin the woman’s self-esteem.”

“Can you excuse us a moment, Tuesday?” asked Marissa.

“Yeah, sure.”

She waited for Tuesday to go into the living room then she folded her arms across her chest and looked at Dane. “You’ve been very moody. Do you want to talk about what’s wrong?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She looped the small red purse hanging from her arm over her shoulder and started to slip past Dane. His hand shot out and encircled her wrist. She stopped and glanced at him.

“You’re not going to nag me?”

The slight pressure of his fingers sent tingles up her arms.

“No.”

He pulled her closer. “You’re not going to insist I share my feelings with you?”

“No.”

He pulled her closer still. Her hip grazed his thigh; her breasts brushed against his chest. “Not going to pout because I won’t tell you what’s on my mind?”

“No, Dane.”

He let go of her captured hand, but she couldn’t move away from him. She felt connected—no, not connected, but irrevocably drawn, like one of those hapless female victims in the old black-and-white movies who always fell under the vampire’s gaze. Would Dane devour her, too?

As if he’d heard her thoughts, he lowered his head toward her. She resisted the urge to show him her neck so he could nibble it.

“You are unlike any woman I’ve ever met.” He brushed a loose curl away from her temple. “You look gorgeous.”

He kissed the spot above her right eyebrow, then stepped back and gestured for her to go past him. She felt as though she’d just run a marathon: Her heart pounded, her breath quickened, her limbs shook. But she managed to escape the hallway...and Dane.

“I UNDERSTAND THAT some men take women out for dinner before they make love.” Marissa gestured with her breadstick. “But, really, you don’t have to do that. I’m not interested in the mating ritual. No offense. You really are quite charming, but I don’t want to develop a relationship with you. It seems pointless to spend money on dinner when



I've already agreed to sleep with you." Marissa watched Brent choke on the wine he just drank. "Oh, my. Are you all right?"

He nodded, his face turning an alarming shade of red as he attempted to regain his breath. Marissa put down her breadstick and offered him her untouched water glass. He accepted it and sipped the water.

"Did I upset you?"

Brent took a deep breath. "I wasn't prepared for you to say what you said. It took me by surprise."

"Dane says I've an annoying tendency to be too honest."

"That's about the twentieth time you've mentioned Dane in last hour."

"I'm sorry. How rude of me to keep bringing him into the conversation." She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "I can't promise that I won't mention Dane again. I've been unable to stop thinking about him." She leaned forward. "I'm not experienced, but I am willing to learn. Have you read the *Kama Sutra*?"

"Why do you want to sleep with me?"

"You're handsome and strong and confident. I presume you'd be a good lover."

"That's very flattering, Marissa." He took a gulp of water. "But I wasn't planning on going to bed with you."

Relief snaked through her and she relaxed. How surprising! She wasn't the least disappointed by Brent's rejection. Marissa looked down at her salad. She was acting so silly. Was sex all that important? Since meeting Dane, she'd begun to doubt her desire to experience the mere physical act. It made more sense for making love to be the culmination of an emotional relationship rather than one night of incredible passion.

"I appreciate your candor," said Marissa. "Frankly, the only person I want to have sex with doesn't want me." To her horror, tears gathered in her eyes. She grabbed her cloth napkin and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "I don't know what's come over me."

"You like Dane, don't you?"

"Yes." Her sigh was soul-deep. "But I annoy him so much. He's grumpy most of the time. The only reason he hangs around is because I'm paying him."

"You think so?"

She sniffled, giving in to the aching pain gathering in her chest. "Brent, I think I'm going to start sobbing."



“It’s okay, Marissa. Despite Dane’s grumpiness, I suspect he likes you, too.”

“I want to believe you, but I’m afraid your assessment is incorrect.”

“It’s not your fault he’s got a bug up his ass.”

Marissa blinked. *A bug up his ass?* What an interesting phrase. She hoped she’d be able to use it sometime.

“It’s Lorraine’s fault.”

“Lorraine?”

“His ex-wife. She did a real number on him. Then there’s his mother—a rich bitch if there ever was one.”

“He doesn’t like me because I’m rich?” Marissa tucked away the information about Dane’s ex-wife and mother for later contemplation.

“He likes you. I’ll prove it.”

“How?”

“I’ll sleep with you.”

“You will?”

“Sorta.” He grinned. “I guarantee that the last thing Dane wants is for me to make love to you. If he thinks we’re going to have sex, it’ll drive him crazy. He won’t let it happen.”

“What if he does?”

“He won’t.”

Marissa thought about Brent’s suggestion. While she liked the idea of confirming how Dane felt about her, she had doubts about Brent’s methods. “It sounds deceitful.”

“It’s for his own good, believe me.”

“I don’t lie well.” Her fingers drummed the table. “I get twitchy when I fib.”

Brent covered her hand and squeezed it. “He’ll mistake it for nervousness about losing your virginity.”

“I *am* nervous about losing my virginity. I’m thinking about keeping it for a while longer.”

“Good for you.”

Marissa saw the kindness in Brent’s gaze. Mischief lingered there, too. “You like the idea of fooling him, don’t you?”

“I like the idea of waking him up to the possibilities of a relationship with a beautiful and charming woman.”

“All right. I’ll do it.”



DANE WATCHED FROM the rear view mirror as Tuesday exited the restaurant and sprinted across the street. The boy slid into the car and eased the door shut.

Tuesday flashed a grin. “This is like *Mission Impossible*.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

He flipped open his notebook. “It doesn’t look good, man. They’re holding hands and laughing. It looks like they’re having a blast.”

*Holding hands?* Brent was supposed to be his friend. *That bastard!* “I’ll kill him,” muttered Dane.

“You turned the girl down flat. Brent looks like he’s got it goin’ on, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Dane exhaled. Brent wouldn’t sleep with Marissa. He wouldn’t. “Did you get close enough to hear what they were talking about?”

“Just once. I circled around the restaurant and lingered near this dessert cart for a minute.”

“Well?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Tuesday...”

“Okay, okay. Your friend said, ‘I’ll sleep with you,’ and Miss M said, ‘You will?’”

Dane clutched the steering wheel, wishing it was Brent’s neck. “What else?”

“Man, I don’t know. Some old white lady asked me for a slice of cherry cheesecake. I ended up serving the whole damned table.” Tuesday closed the notebook. “Do I look like a waiter to you?”

Dane looked at Tuesday’s black pants and white shirt. “Yes.”

“I didn’t even get a tip.”

“Speaking of dessert, did they order any?”

“You mean did they order whipped cream to go?”

The image of Marissa covered in whipped cream made Dane clutch the steering wheel even tighter. “Don’t be such a smart ass. I wanted to know if they were getting ready to leave.”

“Are we going to follow them?”

“You’re damn right we are.”

“Cool.” Tuesday rubbed his hands together. “If you want me to spy, you need to provide some tools. I need one of those supersonic devices—you know, where you point this little dish and you can hear all the way to Cuba? And one of those little headsets so I can talk directly to you. A mini-cam wouldn’t hurt, either.”





“You watch too much television.”

“I gotta do something in the afternoons.”

“How about going to school?”

“What for? Besides, man, after Miss M’s adventure is over, I gotta find another job.” The boy grimaced. “I don’t eat fast food no more. You know why? ’Cause I’ve spent too much time flipping frozen burgers and wearing paper hats.”

Dane glanced at Tuesday. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“What?”

“If you go to school, I’ll give you a job at the TeenCenter.”

“No way, man. That place has rehabilitation written all over it. I like who I am.”

Dane dragged his gaze away from the entrance of the restaurant long enough to look Tuesday in the eye. “And who are you?”

“I’m the one spying on your potential girlfriend because you don’t have the balls to tell her you like her.”

“It’s more complicated than that, Tuesday.”

“Yeah, man. So am I. I’m not a project and I’m not a cause. You can’t right my wrongs.”

“But you can.”

Tuesday rolled his eyes and turned away. “Hey! There they are!”

“We’ll talk some more later.”

“Whatever.”

Dane started the car. Despite his initial reservations, Dane liked Tuesday. He wasn’t going to back off or give up on the young man. Just as soon as his ordeal with Marissa was over, Dane vowed to work with Tuesday—if he didn’t disappear after he got paid.

“C’mon, man, they’re leaving.”

They both watched as Brent’s truck exited the parking lot. Dane put his car into gear and followed his ex-best friend and Rissa to their rendezvous.

“This isn’t a hotel,” said Tuesday. “This looks like—”

“My apartment complex,” said Dane. “He’s taking her to my place.”

“We’re supposed to be at your house playing checkers or something.”

Dane wanted to bang his head against the steering wheel. Had Tuesday misheard the conversation between Brent and Rissa? Maybe Brent had been trying to talk her out of sex. *Yeah. Otherwise—*



“We’ve got about a minute to get to your house. By the way, Brent just parked in your space.”

Dane pulled into the visitor’s parking area and backed into one of the spots. Then he grabbed a basketball out of the backseat and handed it to Tuesday. “There’s a basketball court on the grounds. We’ll meet up with them at the door and claim we were playing b–ball.”

“Okay, man, but I kicked your ass. I got some serious game. Should we try to sweat or something?”

“What?”

“I’m just trying to make it authentic.”

Without responding, Dane got out of the car and Tuesday followed. They jogged across the parking lot then turned the corner of Dane’s building just as Brent and Rissa reached the stairs. Rissa was on the second step, her hand on Brent’s shoulder, her head bent to catch what he was saying. She laughed then cupped his cheek. Brent pressed her palm to his lips.

“Oh, shit,” muttered Tuesday.

Small black dots danced in Dane’s vision and buzzing filled his ears. He felt like a cloud of bees had descended on his head. His legs stiffened and it was an effort to keep walking. *What’s wrong with you, Sinclair? She can screw whoever she wants.*

Tuesday sprinted ahead, tossing the basketball up with one hand and catching it behind his back. Dane wished the boy would slam the ball into Brent’s head. Instead, like a big show–off, he twirled it on his finger and asked, “Hey, Miss M! Did you have a nice time?”

U.S. MARSHAL KADE Murphy took a beer out of his refrigerator and slammed the door shut. He stomped into his living room, turned on the television, and sat down on his worn leather couch. Twisting off the lid of the beer, he flicked it onto the coffee table, and watched the metal lid spin in a lazy circle. It hit the side of his unused glass ashtray and stopped with a tinny clink.

“In other news, a hotel fire nearly claimed the lives of five hundred guests. Fortunately, no one was hurt in the blaze, which destroyed the fifth and sixth floors of the ten–story hotel.”

Kade’s gaze shifted from the beer lid to the TV. Death and destruction. That’s all the world cared about anymore. No wonder Lillian preferred cartoons to CNN. The corner of his mouth lifted as he remembered how she’d lay around in nothing but his T–shirt and watch Dragon Ball Z. He hated that cartoon, but man, he loved watching her.



She'd sounded scared when she called him yesterday. Damn it, he hadn't traced the call. The corner of Fifth and Main? In what city? Like he had to ask. He knew where she was—and she knew it was only a matter of time before he came after her.

A burst of sound from the television drew his attention to the hotel fire. Flames burst through windows and ate through the brick building; people scrambled through a parking lot, helped by firemen and paramedics. A leggy blonde, assisted by a fireman, limped toward an ambulance.

Kade's heart froze.

"While authorities haven't determined the cause of the fire, one policeman was quoted as saying its origin looks suspicious."

The blonde glanced over her shoulder, almost looking directly into the camera, and his worst nightmare was confirmed.

*Lillian.*

"Son of a bitch!" Anger surged hot and heavy in his gut, accompanied by the sickening feel of fear—the same ugly fear that had terrified him so much he'd driven her away. She'd told him he was the loneliest asshole on the earth and walked out of his life and right into trouble.

His cell phone rang. He unhooked the slim metal device from his belt and flipped it open. "Kade."

"Got another one, Murphy."

Kade's jaw tightened. "Where?"

"He's back on his old stomping grounds."

"I'm leaving now."

He shut the phone, re-hooked it, and walked to the closet. From the top shelf, in the back corner, he removed a shoebox and took off the lid. The single pack of Marlboros beckoned him; he grabbed the cigarettes and tossed the box to the floor. He hadn't lit up a cancer stick since Lillian left.

Kade grabbed his jacket and tucked the unopened pack into the left pocket. Then he went in search of a killer named Michael Feeney—and the woman they both loved.

## Chapter Seven



WHEN DANE WALKED into the darkened living room, he noticed two things. The front door was open and Marissa's pert rear end, not at all covered by the wisp of pink silk that was supposed to be underwear, peeked out from her nightshirt as she bent over to inspect an object on the ground.

His groin took immediate attention. It pissed him off how she could play cuddly with Brent, but still put his body at attention with a skimpy show of flesh. He should have sex with her just to get even.

"Marissa!"

She screeched and jumped backwards, straightening up and whirling around, a hand pressed against her chest. A furry mewling monster skittered around her and into the apartment. The cat had any number of objects to climb on or hide under, but it chose Dane's right leg as a sanctuary, sinking its stinging little claws into his calf.

"You frightened Sophocles!"

The censure in her tone made his jaw clench. "Who the hell is Sophocles?"

"He was a rather well-known Greek writer. Is this the first you've heard of him?"

Now she was questioning his intelligence. Dane crossed his arms to keep from strangling her. "I'm aware of who Sophocles was. Since he's been dead awhile, I assume you named the feline using my leg as a scratching post...Sophocles?" He knew his words sound tight and harsh. But he found that he couldn't normalize his tone. A hot, dark feeling slithered through him and he didn't try to control it.

"Are you upset?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I'll pay for his room and board. Can we keep him?"

"No."

"I hate to put him out again. Nobody wants him. It's rather sad."

"There are a lot of strays, princess. You can't save them all."

She took a step, then hesitated, deciding not move closer. "Can he stay until we can take him to an animal shelter?" She seemed to sense the darkness of his mood, but she obviously couldn't give up on the cat.

"No." Dane picked the cat up by its scruff, strode past Marissa, and put Sophocles outside. "Go write a play or something," he muttered. Two baleful gold eyes regarded him then the orange-striped tom sprinted down the stairs. Dane shut the door and locked it.

"That was mean."



The disappointment in her voice pricked his conscience, but hell if he was going to feel guilty about defending his own home against hairballs. Marissa watched him. Her hands were clasped in front her like she was a nun getting ready to take her vows. The image of Marissa's slim, perfect fingers splaying against Brent's cheek had haunted him all night. His stomach churned.

"Get over it, princess. The world's a mean place." He walked into the kitchen and flicked on the light.

She followed, leaning against the stove as she regarded him. "Please stop calling me that insidious name. You only do it when you're trying to be patronizing and I haven't done anything to deserve your wrath."

He ignored her and opened the refrigerator, digging through the pizza boxes and KFC containers until he found a carton of orange juice. "You know, *princess*, you shouldn't be wiggling your fanny in front of my open door at two in the morning."

"I wasn't wiggling," she said matter-of-factly. "Although it appears you must have studied the subject quite extensively before rendering an opinion."

"If you wiggle like that in public, some guy might think you're issuing an invitation."

"Like you?"

"How many rejections will it take, Marissa, before you get it through your thick head that I don't want to sleep with you?" He slammed shut the fridge to punctuate his statement, then walked around her to get a glass from the cabinet.

"It appears I've hurt you in some way I'm unaware of and for that, I apologize. However, I wish you'd stop acting like an injured bear and just tell me why you're so upset."

Her quiet voice cut through his anger and made him realize how much he was acting like a big jerk. He couldn't share his feelings with her. He couldn't tell her that his resolve was weakening, that her body and her mind and her spirit were blinding his moral vision, that he wanted her more than any woman he'd ever met.

"I don't like that touchy-feely crap." He poured the orange juice, even though he'd lost interest in it. "Here's a little piece of advice. Don't nag men to share their thoughts or feelings or anything else. Guys don't like it. If they want to tell you, they'll tell you."

"I'll make a note of that, Dane."



The sarcasm in her voice surprised him. He was used to her sincerity and openness and honesty. He looked at her and saw those fabulous lips pressed together. Her gaze was flinty, and he realized he'd never seen her angry before.

"I'm not asking for an emotional commitment. I'm not nagging you to pour forth the complexity of your manly thoughts. I'm just asking what...what put the bug up your ass?"

Stunned at her less than hoity-toity language, Dane paused mid-drink. She left the kitchen and he watched her walk into the living room. She stood in front of the window, looking at the moon through the gap in the curtains, apparently too agitated to return to bed.

The anger drained from him. He didn't want her to be upset. He wanted the other Marissa, the one who was innocent and kind and naive. Dane sipped the orange juice. The acidic sweetness added to the bad taste formed in his mouth—the taste of his regret.

He strode into the living room and touched her shoulder. "I'm a class—A bastard."

"I've already come to that conclusion. Any other thoughts you want to share? Or do I need a crowbar to pry them from your mind?"

"I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Apology accepted."

Dane stared at her back; it was stiff as a board. She wasn't going to make this easy.

"Would you turn around?"

She did. Hurt and anger still glittered in her eyes, but at least her lips were back to normal. One blonde brow rose as if to say, *Well, moron, are you gonna stand around all night or what?*

"I was jealous." The admission popped out of his mouth before he knew it. She looked as startled as he felt. Heat crept up his neck.

"Of Brent?"

"Yes."

She looked down at the floor. Dane followed her gaze and noticed all ten of her toes were wiggling.

"Dane, I have a confession."

He stopped looking at her twitching toes and met her gaze. He saw the familiar expression of vulnerability and determination, and crossed his arms. "This is a new thing on the list, isn't it?"

"No. You need to know that I don't plan to sleep with Brent. We thought if we pretended to be together, you would get jealous and you—well, you might change your mind about me." Her bottom lip trembled;





she nibbled it then sighed. “I suddenly realized the only person I really want to make love to is you. And, well, you don’t want me. It’s a conundrum. I haven’t quite figured out the answer. Other than keeping my virginity, of course.”

She’d done it again. Gotten to him. Twisted his insides until he wasn’t sure what he was feeling. She wasn’t anything like Lorraine—damned sure not a poor, little, rich princess like his ex-wife. She was honest and kind-hearted and, if he wanted, she was his. He knew she’d open her body to him the same way she’d opened her heart and mind to those around her.

It was a frightening responsibility.

Dane wanted her. He didn’t want to think about the implications anymore. She was an adult and so was he. What was so wrong about making love to a beautiful woman? It wouldn’t be the first time two lonely people had found solace in sharing their bodies.

Dane leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

He fisted his hands to keep from touching her, then turned and walked away.

MARISSA STARED AT the darkened hallway, unable to believe Dane had just disappeared through it without reacting to her confession. *We’ll talk about it tomorrow.*

She’d just ruined everything. He would probably quit or try to send her home or any number of things that did not include getting naked and sweaty with her. The ache crawling through her chest threatened to turn into a prolonged sobbing fit, so she distracted herself by turning off the kitchen light and counting the steps to the couch. She leaned down to fluff her pillow.

“Marissa?”

Dane’s quiet voice startled her. She turned and found him standing behind her. A thin stream of moonlight highlighted the seriousness of his features. For some odd reason, her heart began to pound furiously.

“Yes, Dane?”

“I forgot something.”

“What?”

“This.”

He kissed her, just a whisper of his lips against hers. His hands cupped her face and he deepened his possession of her mouth. She thought she’d faint from the sensations he created by the simple



movement of his mouth against hers. She felt like he was paying homage to her lips.

Then he pulled back. Moonlight slashed across his face and his eyes glittered with what she could only describe as lust. The air felt thick around her—she felt like she might stop breathing any minute.

“Good night, Rissa.”

She couldn’t get any words out. A grin tugged the corners of his mouth, as if he was amused by the reason for her silence, then he disappeared—again—into the dark hallway.

“WHAT ARE WE doing here?” Marissa lifted the Styrofoam cup to her lips and sipped the convenience-store cappuccino. A headache threatened. Her head felt like it’d been stuffed with cotton when Dane had shaken her awake a mere hour ago. She’d been unable to sleep and it irked her to see Dane looking so rested.

Fresh from a shower, he’d hovered over her, tempting pectorals just out of reach, the woodsy scent of his cologne torturing her senses...it would have been much more fun to see him had he followed through with the promise of last night’s kiss.

Dane parked the car in front of a dingy white building surrounded by a monstrous chain-link fence. Big black letters spelled SPCA on a crude wooden sign hanging crookedly above the screen door.

“C’mon, Rissa.”

She put the cup on the dash and got out of the car. To her surprise, Dane clasped her hand. She instantly loved the feel of his warm, calloused palm against hers. Her headache faded, too.

Dane led her through the gate, up the cracked sidewalk, and into the building.

A bell jangled as they entered a small room as dingy as the outside of the building. Piled haphazardly all over the room were bags and bags of dog and cat food. A rickety table and two mismatched plastic chairs occupied one corner. Marissa noticed a long table filled with flyers and pamphlets. To the left of the table, she saw another doorway.

“Whew,” she said. “It smells like wet dogs and spoiled lima beans.”

“Just remember that when you become a pet owner, okay?”

“Pet owner?”

He tugged her forward, leading her through the doorway. To the right was a long counter and behind it, a mish mash of desks, file cabinets, a lone ancient computer, and more bags of food. An older woman was on the phone, but she smiled and gestured for them to wait.



Her long gray hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she wore a tie-dye T-shirt and jeans.

Marissa examined the rest of the room. There were four more doors, two in front of her, one behind her, and another on the right. More rickety chairs offered places to sit. Pictures of dogs and cats along with a number of newspaper articles were pinned to the grayish walls. The muffled sounds of barking dogs and people's voices filtered into the room.

"Is this whole place depressing?" ask Marissa.

"We don't think so."

Marissa turned and saw the woman leaning on the counter. Heat seared her cheeks. "I'm sorry. My comment was rude."

"It's okay. Any money we get goes to the animals. We'd rather care for them than paint walls or buy new furniture. Besides, the animals don't mind." The woman held out her hand. "My name's Peggy."

Marissa offered her free hand to Peggy, the other she kept in Dane's solid grip. "I'm Marissa and this is Dane."

"Nice to meet ya." She pursed her lips and appeared to size them up. "What kind of animal do you want to adopt?"

"Adopt?" Marissa looked at Dane. "We're adopting? An animal?"

"Any hairball you want."

"Oh, thank you, Dane!" She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. He squeezed back then let her go.

Joy surged through her. She'd always wanted her own pet—she'd even put it on the list. After the way Dane threw out Sophocles last night...she nibbled her lip. Dane was probably doing this out of guilt. It didn't really matter, did it? She looked at Peggy. "I want to see all of them."

## Chapter Eight

BRENT OPENED THE door and looked down at the little ball of black kitten fluff in Dane's arms. His gaze traveled to Marissa, who held a tiny, shaggy creature of indeterminate breed. Four pairs of eyes were trained on him.

"We need a favor," said Dane. "You have plenty of room—"



Realization dawned and Brent shook his head. “No. No way. This is my brand new, just-built house. With white carpet. And leather furniture.”

“And two acres.”

“No, Dane. This is my dream bachelor pad. No kids. No animals. No way.”

“Please, Brent,” said Marissa in a soft, vulnerable voice. “I can’t bear to take them back. We had to fib—a little—about Dane’s living arrangements so we could adopt the maximum number.”

Brent’s eyes bulged. “You mean there’s more?”

“Four dogs and four cats.”

“You left them in your car?”

Dane grimaced. “Actually...can we borrow your truck?”

“What?”

“The Great Dane wouldn’t fit,” offered Marissa.

Brent’s brows rose. “Dane bought a *Dane*?”

“Adopted. He only has three legs,” said Marissa. “And this little guy here—” She pointed to the kitten. “—is blind. We couldn’t leave them there. They need us.”

“Let me get this straight. Dane, who’d rather jump naked into a rattlesnake pit than own a dog, adopted eight animals?”

“*She* adopted eight animals. Your place is only a temporary home until Marissa can find one of her own.”

Brent laughed. He laughed so hard Dane thought his friend would bust a gut.

He clenched his teeth. “Look, are you going to help us out or what?”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Brent opened the door to let them in. “Sure. Bring that new, furry family of yours right on in.”

MARISSA AND DANE returned to the shelter with Brent’s truck and six newly purchased animal carriers along with various cords to keep the creatures from sliding around in the truck bed. Dane realized he was just plain crazy. He’d never been fond of animals. His mother had been too tight-assed to even consider having a pet in her perfect home. She was obsessed with vacuuming and dusting.

Hell, he wasn’t allowed to even sit on the pristine living-room couch. The living room was for guests. Her guests. When he was four, she left. He and Dad had gotten along just fine—they’d sold that damned couch—but getting a pet had always been the least of their worries. If it



hadn't been for his dad, he might have ended up like one of the kids at the TeenCenter.

His mother, a debutante who'd fallen in love with a bartender and gotten pregnant, made no secret about how much she hated her blue-collar life and how much she wanted back her blue-blooded one. Dane knew that if his father had given in to her demands to live on her parents' money, she might not have grown so bitter and bitchy. She might even have stayed.

But Dad had wanted to support his family his way. So Mom finally left, married a wealthy man, had other children, and promptly forgotten about her terribly uncouth existence with Bernie and Dane Sinclair.

Then he had to go and repeat his father's mistake by marrying Lorraine Whittaker. At least they'd come to their senses before children entered the picture.

"Are we going in?"

Dane started. He realized Marissa had been staring at him. He shook off old memories and opened the door to the truck. Marissa got out, too. They met at the gate and she touched his arm. "Is everything all right?"

"Yep."

She frowned and a cute little V formed between her brows. He tapped her nose. "Don't worry about me, prin—uh, Rissa. I'm just trying to figure out if I'm crazy or not for letting you talk me into this."

"You are crazy." She smiled. "But I love you for it."

His heart leapt in his chest. His rational mind knew her words were just the same as one of those empty phrases people say when they're grateful, like "*you're the best*," "*that was nice of you*," "*wow, what a fantastic guy you are*," yet his mind discarded all the words around the *I love you*.

Surprise fluttered through him, followed quickly by a thick coating of cold fear. He wanted her to say the words for real. To look up at him with her tempting mouth and innocent eyes and say, "I love you, Dane."

Panic clawed at him. He didn't want another needy, aloof, rich woman twisting his insides and emasculating him. His physical attraction, his *painful* physical attraction, to Marissa had fried his brain. Yeah. He didn't want her love...he wanted her body. To bury himself in her sweet, luscious, beautiful body.



Today was Thursday. If he could last until Saturday, the day Marissa promised to walk out of his life forever, he would be fine. He'd find a Marissa look-alike and slake his lust. He grimaced. *You penis-for-brains. You can't do that. Use a woman? No. Never.* He would never use a woman, just like he would never trust a woman. Women connived. Women lied. Women abandoned.

He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets, watching Marissa open the door to the shelter. She turned and looked over her shoulder at him and he lost his breath. Her hair, honey blond and soft, glistened in the morning sunshine. Her dewy lips parted with expectation and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

He wanted her underneath him, naked and wanting, and wearing only that expression.

"Dane," she said, her voice breathy and low, "are you coming?"  
*Not yet, damn it. And not with you.*

"Yeah. Let's get this over with."

MARISSA HADN'T EXPECTED Brent to react the way he did. When they arrived with the animals, Brent had his suitcase ready to go. He looked at Dane, who was trying to restrain the three-legged Dane he'd just released from the truck. "Two days, buddy, then I'm coming back and claiming what's mine.

Where's the key to your apartment?"

"What?"

The Dane sat on its haunches not seeming to mind it only had one back leg. Marissa admired the graceful way it leaned forward on its front legs.

Brent frowned at the dog. "How does he scratch his ears?"

"He won't have to," said Marissa. "I'll scratch them every day. He won't need to scratch anyway because we'll get rid of his fleas."

"Men will always have itches to scratch." Brent was speaking to her, but his stare was directed at Dane. "Just remember that, will you?"

She had called Brent at the first opportunity and told him that their ruse would not work because she'd confessed their intentions to Dane. She had no idea if the two men had spoken, but in the peculiar way men had, she supposed they wouldn't talk about it at all. Yet, they'd be okay with it. This sort of silent man ritual left her with mixed feelings of admiration and confusion.

"Look, Brent, I appreciate you taking the animals in, but it won't be for long. And...well..."





Marissa looked at Dane. He'd looked desperate. Out of his element. She found it quite stimulating to observe his reactions to Brent's decision to switch living arrangements. She suspected Dane didn't want to be left alone with her. She smiled in satisfaction.

He wanted her.

All she had to do was convince him to follow through on those wonderful, intoxicating kisses.

"I will let you use my home as a kennel," said Brent. "But I'm not babysitting those mongrels. The blind kitten you left here keeps running into the walls. It creeps me out."

Marissa put down the carrier that housed cat No. 3. "He shouldn't run into the walls. His other senses are very developed. He has whiskers—which are navigational tools for felines."

"The kitten is very young. He's barely weaned if the way he keeps trying to lick my armpit is any indication. He hops like a bunny and smacks into furniture and it's just too pitiful to watch. I'm not made of stone, you know." Brent picked up his suitcase then extended his hand.

Dane grimaced, took his keys from his jean pocket, and handed them to Brent. "It's the gold one with the blue rubber ring on it." He turned to Marissa. "We're going home hunting today, princess."

"Yes, my liege. As soon as we pick up Tuesday."

Dane rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

BRENT WHISTLED as he entered the pool area. The one thing his new digs didn't have—yet—was a pool. About the only advantage of living in Dane's hovel was the access to a body of water. He tossed his towel on a turquoise-and-peach lounge chair, placed the cooler of canned soda next to it, and turned toward the pool. That's when he realized he wasn't alone.

A goddess emerged from the water.

Watching her step out of the pool was like watching one of those health-club commercials where an impossibly beautiful woman touts the benefits of buying summer memberships at the gym. Rivulets of water sluiced down a perfect pair of tanned breasts, held snug by the copper bikini top, dripped enticingly down a pair of long legs, and splashed across the deep-brown nail polish of her toes. A silver toe ring glittered on the second toe of her left foot. Wow. She had great feet.

Brent's gaze wandered around the lush curves as the woman swung her honey-brown hair to the side and squeezed out the excess water. Then she straightened, and the wet hair swung in a perfect arc



before coming to rest against her back. Brent looked at her face, then, and his heart stopped beating.

He hadn't been mistaken. She was a goddess. Her face looked somehow familiar: heart-shaped with long cheekbones, a pert nose, and eyes the color of brandy. Maybe she was a model. An actress he'd seen on a commercial.

Maybe he'd died and gone to heaven and she was his personal angel in paradise.

She noticed him. Her stare was intelligent, exacting, and...did he see a flash of emotion? Anger? What could he have done to piss her off?

*You mean besides ogling her, you jerk?*

The heat of embarrassment crept up his neck. He cleared his throat. "Uh. Hi." She walked toward him with a sashay so confident, so sexy, he almost swallowed his tongue.

"Number Seventy-One, right?"

*Number 71?* "I don't play sports. Professionally. I counsel. Kids." He tried to pry his gaze from her breasts. Damn, they were beautiful, tender mounds. The most perfect set of—

"They don't do tricks and they don't respond to questions posed to them."

Brent looked at her. She looked amused and annoyed. Her smile was rueful. And familiar. "I apologize. I'm just...I've never—"

"Seen a woman's breasts?"

"I've seen breasts. Lots of them." *And I'd love to see yours.*

One thin-plucked eyebrow rose. "Really? Do tell."

He groaned as his face flamed. She made him feel like he was twelve-years-old again, trying to convince Marly Hayes to kiss him on the mouth. She didn't, either. She hauled off and punched him, just like this woman would, if he didn't stop thinking with his dick.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I don't usually act so—so—"

"Lustful?"

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." He meant it, too. He'd never been this taken by a lady at first sight. He enjoyed the fairer sex, loved their bodies and their minds and their hearts, but not one, *not one*, had ever affected him this way.

"Well, Number Seventy-One, I figured you for slicker moves. Not an original line."

"It's not a line. It's the God's honest truth." He frowned. "Why do you keep calling me Number Seventy-One?"



“Your apartment number. I saw you come out of it earlier. Dane Sinclair, right?” She shrugged. “I just moved here. I live in the building across from yours.”

Something weird flickered in his belly. Not lust. Suspicion. *She’s been watching the apartment? She knew Dane’s name, but not his face?*

“You know a lot for someone who just moved here.”

Her gaze flicked away, then returned. “I saw you and I asked about you.”

Suspicion faded under her smoky stare. He wanted, more than he wanted his next breath, to taste those full, wet lips. “You, uh, asked someone about the guy living in my building?”

“Yeah. The apartment manager liked my breasts, too.” She sighed, apparently at the shallowness of men, then grinned, that same rueful curving of the lips that made his blood thicken with instant lust. She stepped closer and her scent, a musky smell with the faint tint of chlorine, filtered into his senses. “Is it a crime to ask after a good-looking man? Am I supposed to twitter and giggle and bat my lashes waiting for you to notice me?”

“God no. I’d be your slave if you’d only ask.” Brent shook his head. “But I’m not Dane. I’m just staying at his apartment for a day or two.”

Surprise flickered in her gaze. “I thought I saw a girl going in that apartment yesterday. Is that his girlfriend or yours?”

“His. Definitely his. I’m unattached. So available my mother is ashamed. She tells her friends I’m dead rather than admit I’m single. Do you want to marry me and remedy that?”

She laughed, her gaze dark with amusement and...what else? Disappointment? The bare edge of desire? Brent watched the movement of her slender throat, the tilt of her head as she looked at him. “What’s your name?”

“Brent.”

“Lillian.” She extended her hand and he took it.

Her fingers were damp, slightly chilled from the water, but he felt like he’d been electrocuted. She looked at their clasped hands and frowned, then carefully withdrew, staring at her palm as if touching him had left a mark on her skin.

She’d left a mark on *him*. He felt seared to the bottom of his soul. This kind of desire was almost painful. “Do you want to go get a bite to eat?”



“I’d like that.” The smile again. The one he wanted to kiss right off her mouth. “But I’m not on the menu, okay?”

He grinned. *Maybe not the main course, but they’d just see about dessert.*

## Chapter Nine

TUESDAY LOOKED OKAY for a guy with a three-legged Great Dane collapsed on top of him. He was in the middle of the living room, spread-eagled on the floor, trying, in quiet tones, to convince his new pal to get up. The dog licked his face.

“Whew! Three-week-old garbage smells better than his breath.” The Dane lapped Tuesday’s forehead and nose. “Damn, girl, get this monster some doggy mints, will you?” His gaze found Marissa’s. “This isn’t part of my job description. I want a raise.”

She sat on the couch with two cats and a trembling, long-haired creature that was some breed of miniature dog. For all her desire to have pets, she knew very little about them. Smiling at Tuesday, she said, “I’ll give you another thousand dollars if you let Dane, Jr. sit on you, okay?”

“Quit calling him that!” yelled Dane from the kitchen. “You are not naming any furballs after me. Especially that one.”

“Fine. I’ll call him DJ.”

“Rissa! You will not call—ouch!” Dishes clattered followed by human thuds. “Tell this cat my toes are not for nibbling.”

*Nibbling?* Something truly risqué popped into her mind involving nibbling, herself, and Dane, but she managed to hold her tongue. She didn’t want to embarrass herself in front of Tuesday by blurting out her fantasies. The cats settled deeper into her lap, purring, as she petted their soft fur.

Well, soft, after she, Dane and Tuesday had bathed them. All the animals had received a thorough cleaning in the backyard, though almost all of them complained about it. Despite the loss of a back leg, the Dane ran well and fast—especially when chased by a water hose and two irate men.

Fluffy leapt off the couch, vibrated more than walked to Tuesday, and plopped onto his neck. DJ lifted his head from Tuesday’s chest and licked the little knot of fur.



Dane walked into the living room and Marissa's gaze immediately went to him. He'd donned a pair of khaki shorts and a tan-stripped shirt. Earlier, during what he'd dubbed Animal Hell With Water, he'd worn cut-off jeans and, *gulp*, no shirt. Her senses had hummed the whole time—not even the perpetual scowl creasing his face had dampened her feelings of desire. Her senses hummed now, too. He settled into a recliner and a huge sigh of relief billowed out of him.

The blind kitten, which Marissa had named Shadow, simply because the poor dear had attached itself to Dane and followed him everywhere, leapt onto Dane's lap, curled into a black ball, and began to purr. Dane rolled his eyes, but stroked the kitten's fur. Marissa bit back a grin. Dane would never admit he liked the cat, but he did, even if he wanted to pretend he was putting up with all the animals for her sake.

"I think we can mark going to the zoo off your list," he said, "since you've created your own animal kingdom right here."

*Oh dear. The list.* Soon it would be Saturday—the anniversary of Gillie's death. Somehow, finishing the list, the last thing she'd done with her sister, would be her final good-bye. It was time to let go of her old life and start a new one. "Sorry, Dane. Going to the zoo is of the utmost importance."

Had it only been five days since she'd met Dane? For the first time in years, she felt like she'd lived a normal—okay, not *normal*—but happy, free life. Now that she'd put aside her fear and taken that list of dreams into the world...she felt all grown up. If only Gillie were here to see her succeed. Sudden grief gripped her. *I miss you, Gillie.*

"Rissa?"

To her horror, tears filled her eyes. She removed the cats from her lap and stood. "Wouldn't it be terrible if I were allergic to animals?" She laughed, almost choking on the falseness of the sound.

She couldn't meet Dane's hard stare, so she crossed the living room to look out the floor-to-ceiling window. The not-yet landscaped grounds were a tangle of long grass, summer flowers, and old trees. The area looked as wild and as untamable as she felt at this moment.

The swiftness of the emotions claiming her made her realize the depth of her denial. She had done a fabulous job of pretending this week that she didn't have a care in the world, as if the list were the most important thing in her life. She didn't have to think about how her sister was dead and how her parents would fear the same for her if they knew she'd escaped from Geoffrey. She blew out a breath.



They wouldn't know. Geoffrey was her friend and, even though she'd duped him, he wouldn't trouble her parents. She'd left the note and promised to return. Yet, if Geoffrey had panicked...had called her parents to return from Europe, they would search for her. They would find her, too.

She shook away the thoughts. What did it matter if she returned or if her parents found her? She was a legal adult; they couldn't force her to live in their house anymore. She'd only stayed after her eighteenth birthday because, well, because every year they convinced her to do so.

And every year, she caved in because through their love and their worry, they'd made her fear. Fear living. Fear the outside world. Their first child had been kidnapped and their eldest had died because she ventured out from their protection. Marissa didn't need a psychologist's degree to understand their motivations.

Ultimately, that was why she'd left. That and because Millie had entered her life and instilled the desire and the courage to venture out of the "cocoon of wealth."

She missed Millie, too. It was a pity she hadn't been able to locate her. She had thought that Millie would be delighted to see her and would help her with the list. The young woman with red hair, green eyes, and the most adorable cockney accent had been her beauty instructor for a mere two weeks. But her phone number had been disconnected, the apartment abandoned. More than likely, her friend had chosen money over friendship.

*Whew. That stung.*

Marissa wrapped her arms around her torso, misery lodged in her chest like a lead weight.

"Is everything all right?"

Dane's quiet question so near her startled her. She put a hand to her throat and glanced at him. Concern softened his still-present scowl.

"I-I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. Want to talk about it?"

"No, not really." Before Dane could question her further, she turned from him, from his comfort, and fled up the stairs and into the master bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

"SO WHY ARE you hanging out at Dane's apartment?" asked Lillian.

Her steady gaze revealed casual interest; she could have been inquiring about the weather by the bored tone of her voice. But Brent





noticed the tense set of her shoulders, the nearly imperceptible way she leaned forward to hear his answer. As a counselor of troubled teens, he knew how to read body language. She was interested in Dane or in the apartment and he couldn't figure out why.

He scooped up ketchup with his potato wedge and ate it, took his time chewing. Her eyebrows rose as if she didn't understand his hesitation in answering a simple question. She straightened s-l-o-w-l-y, swung her long, gorgeous hair over her shoulder, then looped her arms overhead and stretched s-l-o-w-l-y.

She leaned forward, extending her arms up. The jagged edges of her half-T-shirt revealed the fullness of her breasts. The copper bikini top showed through the white of the shirt and her nipples, tight hard peaks, strained against the thin material.

Heat rushed through him, thickened his lower extremities with instant, unbearable lust, and gave him a hard-on that tented his shorts.

The French fry lodged in his throat. He choked. Coughed. Sputtered. She watched him, a smile dancing across her lips.

"Are you okay, Brent?"

She'd asked, "are you okay" in that husky purr, but his body heard, "Do you want to have sex?" and blood surged anew, even with the damned French fry playing havoc with his throat. He grabbed his Coke and drank it, finally swallowing the annoying food and regaining his breath.

Eyes watering, he glared at her. "You did that on purpose."

"Did what?"

"You know what."

"Ah. You mean I plucked your eyeballs out of your head and pointed them toward my tits?"

"You might as well have," he said, once again feeling embarrassed, but he wasn't letting her get away with pretending she was Miss Innocent. "You can't use your breasts to encourage a guy to look, then blame it all on him when he does what you want."

Lillian laughed. "You're right. I'm sorry." She paused. "Why didn't you answer my question?" "Why did you ask it?" She shrugged and relaxed into her chair. "You're a

suspicious sort. Are you a spy or a hit man?"

"Neither."

"I wouldn't think so." The delicious kiss-me smile flitted across her lips.

*Damn.* Why was that curving mouth so familiar?



“Because you’re too easily distracted to do a good job as either one. So what do you do?”

“I’m a pilot and I’m a counselor at the TeenCenter.”

“Admirable.”

“What do you do? Are you an actress?”

Surprise lit her gaze. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“You’re damned beautiful for one thing. For another, you look familiar.”

Her expression blanked. “You’re mistaken.” She laughed—a sharp, bitter sound that startled him. “You might say, Brent, I’ve had to be a very good actress these past few years, but I’ve never been filmed.”

Her vulnerability sliced through him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes. But I can’t.” She sipped her drink, turned to look at the memorabilia hanging on the restaurant’s walls, her gaze troubled. “Just ignore me. I guess I’m tense because I’ve been looking for a job and can’t find one. I’ve got enough money for one more month of rent and then...who knows.”

“What do you do?”

“This and that. My best attribute is my housecleaning skills.” Her gaze settled on him again. “I don’t suppose you need a housekeeper?”

“Yes,” said Brent. “I do.” At least he would when Dane and Marissa left with their new brood. He grinned. “Do you like animals?”

GEOFFREY SNEEZED. HE wiped his nose then buried his face into the nearby pillow. The darkened bedroom and the delicate sound of Enya’s voice were supposed to lull him to sleep. Instead, worry gnawed at his gut and the supposed short-term viral infection continued to attack his body, and after seven dreadful days, his will to live.

The phone rang. He didn’t bother trying to raise his head. He just reached out and grabbed the first solid plastic thing he touched. “Hello?”

The phone rang again. Geoffrey flipped onto his back and looked at the object in his hand. “Bugger.” He put down the stapler and grabbed the receiver from its base on the nightstand.

“Hullo. Vanderson residence.” His eyes widened and he straightened when he heard the voice. “Dear heavens! It’s about time you called.”

“I found her.”

“You did?”



“The guy she left the Paradise Club with is the brother of the club’s owner.” A soft laugh escaped. “It took some convincing, but he finally relented and gave me the information I wanted.”

“Where is she?”

“Not important.”

“It’s important to me.” He sighed. He knew from experience that Millie would not tell him anything else. “I’m worried. We have very little time. Alan and Fiona return late Friday night. Saturday is Gillian’s birthday. The family always does a memorial for her. There is the...other matter.” He cleared his throat. “Can you handle that, too?”

“Him again? Did you tell him anything?”

“What could I tell him? There’s a beauty consultant with a gun and an attitude chasing a serial killer?”

“Very funny, G. Your eyes are too sharp. How could I have fooled her, but not you?”

“As if you need to ask. *Achoo!*” Geoffrey sneezed and grabbed a tissue to wipe his nose. “Your gentleman friend is very persistent.”

“Kade is not my friend. Don’t talk to him again. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Okay, but—”

The dial tone met his protest. “Doesn’t even say a proper good-bye,” he muttered as he replaced the receiver. He pulled the covers up and nestled into the bed, then closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

“SO YOU GONNA leave her up there cryin’ her eyes out?”

Dane looked at Tuesday. They both sat in the living room, surrounded by furry, sleeping bodies. He figured the kid must have noticed him casting worried looks at the stairs. Tuesday aimed the remote control at the big-screen television and started flipping channels.

“How do you know she’s crying?” asked Dane.

“I’ve got good hearing.”

“She’s not crying.” Dane plucked the kitten off his lap and stood. He gestured at the ceiling. “She’s probably taking a nap.” “Yeah. Sleeping sounds just like sobbing.” Tuesday

continued to flip channels. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ve been watching you, man. You like her, but you don’t want to like her. You snap at her all the time and she don’t do nothing about it.”

“I don’t snap at her. And use correct grammar. She *doesn’t do anything* about it.”



“I talk the way I want.” Tuesday’s lips formed a mutinous line. “She’s too busy trying to figure you out to give your sorry ass the kick it deserves. That got enough proper grammar in it for you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I’m making it my business.” Tuesday stood and walked to Dane, getting nose-to-nose with him. He thumped Dane’s chest with the remote control. “You don’t deserve her, man.”

Dane recognized Tuesday’s aggression for what it really was—concern for Marissa—but he still felt anger flare. He quelled his emotions and backed up a couple of steps. “You’re right. I don’t. That’s why I’m trying to stay the hell away from her.”

“The girl don’t want you to stay away from her. You ever think that she has a right to make up her own mind?”

“And I don’t?”

Tuesday shook his head. “Man, you are stupid. Beautiful woman wants you and you dis her.” He plopped on the couch and returned his attention to the television. “You want to go upstairs or you want me to go?”

“I’ll go.”

Dane climbed the stairs and entered the hall. All the doors were open except one. He knocked on it. “Rissa? It’s Dane. I...uh...maybe we should discuss the list.” He grimaced at the lack of reply. “Maybe you’d like to go get something to eat. Are you hungry?” Silence met his second inquiry, too.

Frustration nibbled at him. If she’d just talk to him, they could work out what was bothering her. He grasped the knob and turned; the door opened. “Rissa, let’s just talk—damn it!”

The bedroom was empty.

## Chapter Ten

DANE HURRIED DOWN the stairs and into the living room. “She’s gone.”

“What did she do? Make a rope out of sheets and climb out the window?” Tuesday tossed the remote control on the couch and stood.

Dane’s panic receded. Rissa hadn’t left. Not unless she’d gained the power of invisibility. “She didn’t come down the stairs. I don’t think she’d have jumped out the window.”



“Did you check all the rooms?”

“Yes, I checked all the rooms. Most of them are empty—no furniture. There’s a balcony in the master bedroom. The sliding glass doors were closed, but unlocked.”

“I’ll check upstairs. Maybe you missed something.”

“I’ll look outside. Brent lives in the boondocks. There’s not another house for miles. Maybe...maybe she decided to take a walk and clear her head.”

Tuesday frowned. “Without telling us? That’s not like her.”

“HONESTLY, I DON’T know what you’re—” Marissa grimaced as the man who held her wrist dragged her through a rough patch of tall grass.

“Shut up. I want my Lillie back. You’re the key.”

“Lillie? Lillie who?”

“Don’t act stupid.”

“I’m not. My IQ is quite high.”

“So is hers.” He stopped and looked at Marissa over his shoulder. “The only person she gives a shit about is you. If I’ve got you, then I’ve got her.” His gaze narrowed. “I’m smart, too.”

A cold finger of fear swept her spine. If only she hadn’t gone onto the balcony for a breath of fresh air. If only she hadn’t answered his child-like pleas for help. He’d been hiding behind a tree, waiting for her as she tried to find the source of the pitiful cries.

“I don’t know Lillie. I swear!”

“For someone so smart, you sure are dumb.”

“Marissa!” Dane’s voice echoed through the forest.

“I’m here!” she yelled. “Hurry, Dane! There’s a—”

The crazy man covered her mouth and pulled her against his chest. “Shut up.”

Marissa gagged against the heavy scent of cheap cologne and the lingering stench of beer. *Whew. When was the last time this guy washed his shirt?*

“Rissa! Where are you?”

Her heartbeat kicked up a notch as she realized Dane’s voice sounded farther away. The darling idiot was going in the opposite direction. Her captor must have had the same thought because he loosened his grip, giving her just enough space to maneuver. She stomped his foot, rammed her knee into his groin then jabbed his throat. He doubled over grabbing his crotch with one hand and his neck with the other. She turned and ran toward the house.



“I SWEAR THIS GUY read a textbook or something. *Serial Killing For Morons*,” muttered Kade. He looked at the pretty young woman and felt grateful, goddamned grateful, he wasn’t looking at the beautiful, forever–still body of Lillian. What would happen if Michael caught her? His guts clenched. “A red scarf at every scene? Lillie hates red. If he’s killing her over and over again, why the scarf? I’ve never seen her wear one.”

“Maybe *he* wears one,” answered Pete. Kade looked at his partner. His new partner. The guy who’d replaced Lillie when she disappeared. The young psych major shrugged. “Cross–dressing isn’t out of the realm of possibility.”

“It is for this asshole. Did you read the case file?”

“Yes, sir. Michael William Feeney. He witnessed the murder of his mother, testified against the murderer, a man named Casey Crumb—who was the dead woman’s husband and his stepfather. Crumb went to jail, and Mr. Feeney and his girlfriend, who was also present at the murder, went into the Witness Protection Program.”

“Michael set up Crumb. Michael wanted to get rid of his mother and get control of his girlfriend. He’s smart, Pete. Smarter than you and smarter than me, but not smarter than Lillie.” Kade stood and motioned to the waiting men from the coroner’s office that he was finished inspecting the body. The crime scene investigators had finished their jobs before he’d arrived, and they were already processing evidence from the scene.

“I understand that Ms. Greene was a fine Marshal, sir.”

“*Is*, Pete. Lillie *is* a fine Marshal. Don’t use the fucking past tense when you talk about her.” Kade turned a fierce glare onto the kid. “In fact, don’t talk about her at all. Got me?”

Pete nodded so vigorously, his glasses slid to the end of his nose. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Kade sighed and rubbed his jaw. “Go talk to the owner of the Paradise Club. Get us some useful information, okay, Pete?”

“Yes, sir!”

The boy scurried away, visibly relieved to be out of Kade’s range; he smiled grimly. Lillie had never cowered before him. She’d argue with him toe–to–toe, not caring about his mean–ass reputation, his seniority, or his physical strength. Beautiful, tough, smart. God, he missed her. And for all his resources, his twenty–odd years in law enforcement, and his so–called investigative skills, he hadn’t been able to find her.

*Where the hell are you, baby?*





MARISSA RAN, HER leg muscles straining, her heart pounding, her eyes blurred with tears. She knew, to the depths of her soul, that man intended to do her harm. But there was more...he wanted her because of this Lillie woman. Lillie...Lillian. Change one letter and it would spell...WHAM!

Her breath left her chest in a painful whoosh as she smacked into a solid object. Her fuzzy mind calculated the possibilities of hitting a tree, but a tree didn't have arms, and this object did. It was also muscled, strong, and...what the hell had happened to her vision? She couldn't see—Dear God, she was blind!

“Marissa!”

Dane's voice seeped into her consciousness and she relaxed into his embrace. “Dane. I'm so glad it's you.”

“What happened to you?” She felt the gentleness of his fingers as he tilted her chin. “And why are your eyes closed?”

*Closed? Oh.* Her eyelids fluttered open and she peered at Dane. He looked angry, relieved, and scared. For her?

“Don't you ever— *ever* —run away again? Do you hear me?” He hugged her fiercely.

“I didn't run—”

“Tuesday's about ready to call the police. Or SWAT. Hell, the FBI.”

“I hardly think—”

“Damn it, there's nothing we can't work out, okay?”

“I realize that, Dane. But a man dragged me away into the woods. I just—I just escaped him.” Dane's features hardened. “Did he hurt you? Who was he?” “No, I'm not hurt. I don't know who he was. But he seemed to know me.” “A stalker?”

“Impossible.”

“C'mon, princess. It's time the call the police.”

“No!” Marissa stopped him from pulling her toward the house. “He—he didn't hurt me. I'm fine. Really.”

“Rissa, this is crazy. We're talking about your safety.”

“Then take me somewhere else. Where he can't find me. We need to finish the list, too.” She looked at him. “I don't have much time left, Dane. I want to spend it with you. Besides, I couldn't identify whoever it was. I didn't see his face.” She wiggled her toes inside her tennis shoes.

She disliked lying to Dane, but she didn't want to speak to the police—for many reasons. She suspected the man had known her sister. And perhaps...perhaps she could find out more about Gillie's death.



*Crazy idea, Marissa.* She nibbled her lip. She couldn't go to the police. It would open all kinds of questions about who she was and, worse, who her parents were.

Police Chief Henderson was a regular dinner guest at their home. He knew Fiona and Alan would be less than pleased to know their daughter was running around alone and unprotected in the big, bad world.

"Rissa?"

"Please, Dane. I'm begging you not to call the police."

He looked as if he was about to argue so she reached up and captured his lips. Her heart skipped a beat when he returned the kiss, gathering her into his arms, and angling her head to better fit the curve of his mouth.

Too soon, he pulled away, and looked down at her. His eyes were dark like melted chocolate, and she wanted him so badly, she felt ready to attack him.

"No police. For now." He drew in a shaky breath.

"Maybe...maybe I'm cranky...a little...but it's only because...you...I..."

Marissa waited to hear his next words. Waited with insane hope that he would admit he cared about her, that he desired her, that he needed in his heart and in his bed. Was that too much for a girl to want?

Instead, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her. She snuggled into his embrace, sought the warmth and comfort of his lips, soaked in the gentle way his hands cupped her jaw. He drew away and she clutched his arms. "Please don't reject me again, Dane. I couldn't bear it."

He gathered her close. "I don't want to hurt you, Marissa. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want you, but I can't—"

"Don't say it." Marissa extracted herself from his arms. Tears pricked her eyes; an intense ache lodged in her throat, threatening to choke her. "Let's go back. I don't want Tuesday to worry."

She turned and walked away.

"HOW'D YOU TALK me into this?" whispered Lillie. Even though she'd long given up on her relationship with Kade, she felt guilty about her attraction to Brent. She still felt attached the man who'd showed her kindness and love and who'd shut down his emotions like a robot and let her go. Kade hadn't been her first lover, but he'd been her only true love. But Brent...maybe Brent...he nibbled her neck. His fingertips caressed the line of her jaw then dropped to her collarbone. She



groaned with pleasure and slid her hands into his hair. His lips continued their slow investigation, venturing onto the curve of her shoulder.

Somehow, they'd ended up back at Brent's...Dane's...apartment. They'd made it into the living room and onto the couch. *Barely*. Why had they even pretended he wanted to interview her for a position as a housekeeper? The only position he wanted...she wanted...was horizontal. The desire buzzing between them should have blown out the streetlights on the way here.

Hungry for his mouth, Lillie bent her head to capture his lips; she bypassed his gentle nibbling and slipped her tongue inside. A wave of pleasure crashed through her when he responded. Heat pooled between her legs. She needed more...she wanted the fulfillment Brent could give her.

He slid one hand up her back then slipped the other one under her T-shirt; skirting along her rib cage, his fingers found her breast. He cupped it, kneaded the firmness, then grasped the hardened nipple and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. Intense enjoyment radiated to all points in her body.

He shoved up the T-shirt and took her nipple into his mouth. Lillie cried out at the pleasure invoked. "More," she begged. He knelt between her legs and removed her shorts and swimsuit bottom. He stroked her inner thighs until they trembled, though his fingers never quite reached the apex.

"That's it." She toppled him onto the floor. She ripped off her T-shirt and swimsuit top before she made swift work of his jeans and boxers. She grabbed a condom out of her purse and slid it onto him. Impatient, she got on top and took his hard length inside. Her body shuddered at the contact; she was already pulsing around him.

She leaned forward, offering her breasts, moaning when he cupped them and suckled her nipples. Sensations throbbed, swirled, threatened...she closed her eyes and thought of Kade. *Beautiful, rough, gentle Kade*. She exploded into a million pieces; he grabbed her hips and jerked inside her, his shout matching hers.

Lillie collapsed on top of Brent, enjoying the feel of his muscled chest. She had to admit that he was a handsome man, a kind lover. He held her, his hands rubbing her back, soothing her.

"You're in trouble, aren't you, Lillie?" he whispered.

"No." She tensed under his fingers as he swirled patterns down her back. "What makes you think so?"



“Instinct.” He rolled her off and raised himself on his elbow then tucked her close, thigh to thigh, hip to hip. Smiling, he pushed a loose strand of hair away from her cheek. “Just got out of a relationship? Are you running from an old boyfriend?”

Her heart stuttered. Brent couldn’t know anything about her, about her life. About Michael. But he was damned good guesser. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

His smile softened, his eyes reflected a mix of regret, sympathy, and hurt. He kissed her forehead then scooted away from her. The odd expression on his face sent warning tingles down her spine. His rejection stung, but most men weren’t into snuggling. Most times, neither was she. But somehow the small distance between her and Brent seemed like the Grand Canyon instead of a few inches.

“Guess the fun is over, huh?” She sat up and reached for her discarded panties and shorts. “Suppose I can’t count on the job now. Stupid me.”

“Lillian.”

The reproach in Brent’s voice stilled her movements. She looked at him, horrified to feel her throat close up, her eyes fill with tears, her lips tremble.

“I think I’m in love with you,” he said. “I feel like a truck ran over me and left me flat. I could marry you right now and never regret it.”

Surprise wrapped through her pain. Was he serious? “Brent, I—”

He held up his hand to halt her words. “I know you’re in trouble. I want to help. But first...who the hell is Kade?”

## Chapter Eleven

LILLIE FELT THE blood drain from her face. She’d called out Kade’s name? What was wrong with her? “I’m so sorry, Brent. I was in a relationship with a man named Kade, but we parted ways. For good.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“It’s complicated. Look, this was...you were wonderful. I’ve never met a kinder man. But this was all a mistake. I—” She stopped and debated the wisdom of telling him the truth. She needed to find Marissa before Michael did. Michael planned to go after the person she loved most and destroy her.



Lillie had been the one to escape him. She'd been the one to capture him. She'd been the one to put his ass in jail. Then a few weeks ago, he'd escaped...taunted her and Kade with one murder after another. She knew that he wanted her. The only way to save the people she loved was to find him and offer herself as the sacrifice.

Then kill him.

"Lillie?"

She smiled. "Sorry. I'm zoning out. Incredible sex does that to me."

"It was beyond incredible." He stroked her cheek. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"I have to." She kissed his palm. "I wish things were different. I wish I was a normal woman starting a relationship with a normal man." The urge to confide in Brent remained, but doing so might put him in the same kind of danger that Marissa faced.

"Let me decide."

"What?"

"You're debating whether or not you should tell me something important."

"It might mean putting your life in danger if I talk to you."

"I'll take the chance."

She started to shake her head, but he grasped her chin. "Lillian, I'll take the chance."

DANE SAT IN the darkened bedroom and stared out the window. Almost midnight and he'd been unable to get a wink of sleep. The moonlight skated across the forest behind the house. A fierce wind blew through the trees; he watched leaves detach and twirl to the ground. He glanced at the gathering clouds in the sky and sighed. Just what he needed—a thunderstorm.

Across the hall, Marissa slept with her animals, except the blind kitten. That little puffball was curled on his lap, purring. He stroked the kitty's ears, smiling when it arched its head against his hand.

Marissa hadn't spoken a word to him the rest of the day. She responded to his attempts at conversation with one-word answers and hurt looks. *Damn it.* He didn't want to hurt her. Didn't she understand that? If he slept with her...took her virginity...she'd never forgive him. He couldn't be the man she deserved, couldn't give her the relationship she needed. He was a selfish bastard, he knew, but he would never open his heart to another woman.



Especially not to a loving, kind-hearted, silly fool like Marissa Vanderson.

Dane hadn't told Tuesday about the man who'd taken Marissa into the woods. He wasn't sure he'd done the right thing to agree not to call the police. His instincts screamed that Rissa was in danger, but he had no proof. And he couldn't help but wonder if she knew more about the situation than she was telling him. *Did she know this guy? Was he the one she was running from?*

Frustration propelled him to his feet. He scooped up the kitten and put it out in the hallway then he walked to the window and looked at the ever-darkening sky. *Marissa*. He turned, crossed the room, and grabbed the doorknob.

What was he thinking?

Hadn't he considered all the reasons he shouldn't make love to Marissa? He needed to be logical, rational, and practical. He didn't want a relationship and Marissa did. Or she would. He couldn't accept that she would be satisfied with a few nights of sex. She would get hurt and he didn't want to be the cause of her disappointment. His hand slipped away from the knob.

*Two more days.* He could survive Marissa's presence for two more days. Then she'd be gone...he exhaled slowly, not liking the pain creasing his heart. He turned from the door. He needed a cold shower, a tall drink, and a good night's sleep.

MARISSA CREPT INTO Dane's bedroom and closed the door with a soft click. She'd tired of his rejection. He was just too stubborn. He desired her as she did him. She wanted no other man and she didn't care that she might not be the only woman in his life. Jealousy jabbed at her guts. Okay, she did care that he might have multiple girlfriends. She shoved away the thoughts of sharing Dane with other females and climbed into his bed.

"What are you doing?"

Dane's voice startled her and she yelped. She heard rattling noises then the small lamp on the bedside table clicked on. He stared at her. He didn't look sleepy or surprised. More than likely, he'd watched her progress across the room. The rat.

She refused to back down. "I've decided to sleep with you."

"Oh really?"

Marissa ripped off the bedcovers, straddled him, and placed her lips against his.





“I shouldn’t be doing this,” he mumbled. “Just one taste. Just one—”

His kiss was hungry, demanding. He shoved up her nightgown and cupped her breasts, breaking off the kiss to take a nipple into his mouth. Marissa cried out and clutched his shoulders. His tongue did marvelous things, wicked things she’d dreamed about for such a long time.

She grasped his hips and strained against Dane, rubbing her tingling center against the hardness protected by his boxers. She wished he’d rip off her panties and her nightgown so she could press her flesh against his.

His hand crept inside her panties, found the throbbing nub, and stroked it. Sparks of sensation skittered through her. Oh. My. God. The reality of lovemaking was a hundred times better than she’d ever imagined.

“Damn it.” He withdrew from her breasts and let the nightgown drop, but his thumb remained...stroking, stroking, stroking.

Thanks to Dane’s mouth and hands, her nipples felt deliciously sensitive—even the rough cotton of the gown caused tiny ripples of sensation.

“Marissa...”

“Hmmm.”

She was wet, ready, and willing...but Dane looked as if he might bolt from the bed. She removed her nightgown and leaned forward to offer him her breasts. He kept his wicked thumb on her clit, but his free hand cupped a breast. He leaned forward and sucked the nipple. Arrows of heat shot through her; she moaned.

“It feels good. I’ve never felt this way. It’s all so amazing, but I feel like—well, I’ve read extensively on the subject of sex and I think what I’m looking for here is an orgasm.”

He looked dumbfounded. Maybe he wasn’t used to such plain talking when it came to sex, but she didn’t want to waste time with a euphemistic approach to a normal and healthy function of the body. She’d been led to believe that men had a more practical mindset about having physical relations and she was surprised and frustrated at Dane’s refusal to pursue what they both obviously wanted.

“An orgasm?” he asked.

“It comes from the Greek word, *organ*, which means ‘to swell.’ According to the dictionary, an orgasm is ‘the climax to a sexual act.’”



“I know what an orgasm is, Rissa.” “I suppose that’s because you’ve had one,” she complained. “I know there are plenty of ways to do it myself,

but I’ve never indulged. I guess it’s those stupid romance novels. I’ve always wanted to reach completion with a partner.”

“That’s admirable.” Dane’s voice sounded strangled, so Marissa glanced at him.

His eyes had that feral look again and she wondered what she’d said or done this time to invoke his wrath. Every time she thought she was having a normal discussion, he acted like she was speaking a foreign language.

He pursed his lips. “Since it’s my fault you’re all hot and bothered, I suppose I should do something about it.”

Her breath left in a whoosh and her heart kicked up a few beats. “Y—you’ll finish making love to me?”

He flipped her onto her back and brushed a loose strand of hair from her cheek. “What exactly did you read in those romance novels?”

“Romance novels have all those lovely forever relationships and the sex is so good.” She paused. “I read other kinds of books, too.”

“*Kama Sutra*, right? I remember.”

She nodded, inexplicably feeling shy. Reading about sex and performing the act were entirely different. Would Dane get impatient with her inexperience?

“Since you know all about the subject, you probably won’t be too surprised when I do this.”

He knelt between her legs and removed her panties.

He spread open her legs and placed his warm mouth on her very center. His tongue stroked her until she thought she’d go mad. He lifted his head. The sensations threatening to burst subsided.

“Dane!”

“*Ssshhh*.” He sat up, untangled her hands from the sheets, and pushed them onto her aching breasts. “Touch yourself, Rissa.”

She cupped her breasts, daring to pinch her own nipples. Waves of sensation enveloped her and she cried out. Dane slipped down between her legs, cupped her bottom, and drew her to his mouth. He licked, nipped, sucked, tortured...and paused.

Looking down, she met his dark gaze. “You turn me on,” he said. “*This* turns me on.” He kissed her clitoris and her thighs shook as sensations struck her like mini-lightning strikes.



She cupped her breasts and wound her fingers around her areolas, grasping the turgid peaks. “And this?” she asked in a tremulous whisper. “Especially that.”

His sigh coasted down her stomach. She wiggled closer until she felt the heat of his mouth hovering above her woman’s core. “More,” she demanded, arching so his lips skimmed her swollen nub.

“More,” he agreed then lowered his head and suckled. Hard.

She came, an explosion of pleasure so immense, she screamed, and trembled against the lips that attempted to soothe her pulsing center. Then he suckled again, hard and fast, licking and nipping until another orgasm claimed her.

Sweat trickled down her neck, her body felt as if it had imploded then pieced back together by an inept surgeon, and ragged joy filled her. Making love with Dane was all she had imagined...and more.

What would actual intercourse feel like? The idea of him slipping inside her wet heat, stroking, thrusting, pumping...she swallowed her gasp of unexpected desire. Two orgasms and she was ready for a third. She was ready to give Dane the same pleasure he’d given her.

But Dane didn’t enter her. Instead, he crawled beside her and cuddled with her as she recovered. She had never imagined the absolute bliss of an orgasm. No wonder women talked about them all the time.

“I feel wonderful,” she murmured. She stretched then looked at the man who had introduced her to a marvelous version of making love. “What about you? Shouldn’t we continue? Surely you need—”

“I can handle it.”

“Literally?”

Dane grinned. “Very funny.”

Marissa looked at his boxers. His hard-on tented the material. Boldly, she stroked him through the boxers and smiled when his shaft jumped at her touch. “It’s your turn, Dane. Then mine again.”

His brow lifted. “Again?”

“Is there an orgasm limit?”

“No, Rissa.”

She reached inside his boxer shorts and grasped the smooth, hard flesh of his penis. She wondered how it would feel in her mouth, if Dane would get as much pleasure from oral sex as she had. She grabbed the top of his boxers and tugged them down.



“Dane!” Tuesday’s voice sounded panicked from the other side of the door. He pounded a fist against the thin wood. “You better get out here, man.”

## Chapter Twelve

DANE TOSSED THE sheets over Marissa and leapt from the bed, his heart pounding. What fresh hell had descended upon them now? He pulled open the door and blinked.

Tuesday was covered in....

“Are you...what the...is that *peanut butter*?”

“Just on the left side.” Tuesday pointed to his legs. “I got eggs down here and potato salad between my toes. It’s nasty, too. Is that shit supposed to be fuzzy and green?”

“Uh...no.” Dane swallowed the rumbling laugh in his throat.

Tuesday didn’t look as if he’d appreciate any form of joy right now.

“How did you...” He cleared his throat. “...get that, uh, way?”

“Dane, Jr. That dog done tore up the kitchen. I opened the fridge to get a Coke and he thought it was Christmas at the dog pound. His big ass pushed me down and he tried to jump inside. All the shelves broke and everything fell on the floor. Where I was laying.” He wiggled his hips. “Damn. I think there’s a pickle in my shorts.”

Dane pressed his lips together in an attempt to prevent the threatening guffaws.

It didn’t work.

He laughed so hard his guts ached.

“Hey, man, this would only be funny if it happened to you. I need help getting those animals under control.”

“Why is peanut butter in the refrigerator?” asked Marissa. She scooted around Dane and pinned Tuesday with her curious stare.

Dane was relieved to see she’d donned her nightgown. Knowing her, she’d walk around naked, unashamed of her body, and spout off the scientific facts of orgasms—in Latin.

“Wouldn’t it get too hard to spread on the bread?”

“Miss M? Whatcha doin’ in there?”

Dane placed a hand over her mouth before she blurted out the truth. “Just talking.”



“Uh—huh. Talking. Yeah.” Tuesday cocked an eyebrow, but his mock ire was ruined by the slash of ketchup on his forehead. “Do you s’pose you can talk downstairs and help me clean up? I don’t think cats are supposed to eat butter.”

KADE TOOK A long drag of the cigarette. The sting of nicotine pierced his lungs and his lips curved in a satisfied smile. *Oh yeah. Cancer sticks? Hah!* He took another drag and blew out a thin stream of smoke.

“Clerk at the convenience store didn’t recognize Michael’s picture, but she nailed Lillian. Said she left in some kind of white or beige sedan. Maybe.”

The pleasure of smoking diminished. Kade eyed his eager, young counterpart and sighed. “It’s seven o’clock on a Friday morning.” He looked at Pete’s empty hands. “Where the hell’s my coffee?”

For a fraction of a second, Pete’s eyes narrowed and his lips pursed. *That’s it, kid. Show some spirit.*

Then his features smoothed and he squared his shoulders. “Of course, sir. Sorry, sir.” He marched into the convenience store in a near military posture.

Kade rolled his eyes. The pup was still in cadet mode. He wondered how long it would take before the boy showed some backbone. He leaned against the brick wall and puffed on his cigarette, thinking about the first time he’d demanded coffee from Lillie....

His newly appointed partner, longtime object of lust, and fresh—from—the-academy trainee was settling in at her tiny cubicle when he’d rounded the corner and barked, “I want some coffee.”

She looked at him, smiled sweetly, and said, “I take mine with cream and two sugars. Thanks.”

Yeah. Lillie passed the coffee test, the very first time, with flying colors. And he’d gotten her that coffee, damn it, just like she’d known he would. On that day, he’d felt a terrible strange, tender feeling. It persisted, too, worming its way into his stone heart and, later on, it was what made him push her away.

He’d been too much of an asshole to say that he loved her more than his next breath. He’d been too goddamned afraid. She left him and soon after, Michael had escaped prison and she’d followed him here—to the very place where it had all began.

“Your coffee, sir.” Pete handed him a Styrofoam cup.

Kade sipped and grimaced. “Tastes like motor oil.”

“I believe that’s the special ingredient, sir.”



Surprised, Kade looked at Pete and grinned. Maybe the pup had gumption, after all.

TUESDAY SAT ON the couch and tried to convince DJ to let go of the TV remote. “You’re slobberin’, man. Doggie saliva ain’t good for electronics.” He patted the Dane’s head. “C’mon, buddy, drop the remote.”

The dog bounded off the couch and ran around the living room.

Tuesday stayed on the couch and watched the dog’s antics. “Man was not meant to use the controls on the television. Those are just for show.”

DJ ran toward the picture windows, turned around, skidded across the carpet, and headed up the stairs.

“Shit.” Disgusted and amused, Tuesday jogged toward the staircase. The phone rang. He paused, with one foot on the first step, and looked at the fancy mobile phone trilling in its holder.

Marissa and Dane had gone house hunting, but they hadn’t given him instructions, much beyond Dane’s terse, “Don’t let those mongrels in the kitchen again, damn it.” They were due back in time for dinner, and Marissa had promised to bring Chinese food.

Thuds, growls, and yips drifted down to him. *Great. What furry hooligan had gotten the remote now?*

The phone rang again. “You better stop chewing on that,” he yelled. “I ain’t playing!” He hurried to the phone. “Hello?” “Tuesday?”

The shaking whisper caused chills to trail his spine. “Slane? Baby girl, what’s wrong?” He’d given her the phone number yesterday, telling her to only call it if it was an emergency.

“Jeremy. He...hurt me. Bad. I didn’t have the money.”

He flinched. He’d promised her the money, but he wanted to earn it from Miss M. Guilt twisted through him...he’d put his pride before his sister’s life. “Where’s Momma?”

“I don’t know. She washed her hands of me, Tuesday. You the only who loves me. You the only who wants to help.”

Tuesday grimaced. His mother took the “tough love” concept to new levels. No child who did drugs, had premarital sex, joined gangs, or sassed her, stayed under her roof. He’d bailed at age sixteen, found a job, his own place, and dropped out of high school. If Slane had gone to Momma, the woman would’ve said, “Help your ownself, child.”

“Where are you?” “I’m here. Right here. Where I always am. Where are you?” She sounded exhausted. Fear drove a spike into his





heart. “Wake up, Slane. Can you get to the hospital?” His heart pounded now, a thrumming beat keeping track of time lost.

“I’m so tired, T. So tired. I gotta take a nap.”

“No! No, Slane. Are you at Jeremy’s?”

“He’s gonna kill me,” she admitted in a little-girl voice. “Whose blood is this? So much blood...”

The phone clicked off and the dial tone buzzed in his ear. How was he going to get to his sister? He had no transportation, no friends to come get him, no way to get hold of Dane or Marissa. *Damn it, one of them should at least own a cell phone!*

His gaze traveled around the house, looking for some sort of inspiration. Then he saw the business card emblazoned with the Teen Center logo lying on top of the television. He snatched it up and dialed. *Hold on, baby girl. Just hold on....*

MICHAEL FEENEY BROODED. Sooner or later, Lillie’s sister would return. He watched the driveway from the edge of the forest, waiting. She’d left earlier with that asshole who’d ruined his chances to kidnap her. Screw secretive maneuvers. When they returned, he’d kill that interfering bastard and grab the bitch. She was sweet as honey, that one, a morsel he needed to bait the trap, but maybe he’d take a little taste.

*Wouldn’t that chap Lillie’s perfect ass? Oh, she’d be jealous.* She’d hate him for fucking her sister. But hadn’t he shown her deep devotion time and again? She always wanted more, demanded more, needed more.

*Women.* He shook his head and grinned at the insensibilities of women in general and of his Lillie in particular. Never satisfied. But that was the price paid by men all over the world.

Dust churned and his gaze jerked to the dirt road. He lifted the rifle and sighted the car in his scope. *Damn it.* He didn’t recognize the vehicle, but the dark-skinned woman in it wasn’t his target. The nondescript sedan skidded to a stop in front of the house and a young black male ran from it and jumped in the still-running car. The sedan sped away.

His gaze turned toward the now empty house.

Michael grinned.

He clicked on the rifle’s safety, looped the strap over his shoulder, and strolled out of the woods.



## Chapter Thirteen

BRENT FOLLOWED LILLIE into the kitchen and watched her rummage around in the fridge. His gaze landed on her luscious behind. He hadn't touched her since they'd made love on the floor last night. They'd spent the day at the pool, then in the late afternoon, came home to make sandwiches and laze around. She was a pro at avoiding subjects she didn't want to talk about and refused to tell him why she was in trouble. Despite their attempts to relax, the tension was so thin and taut, he knew it was a matter of time before it snapped.

She asked about nine zillion questions about Dane and studied his apartment like a med school student studying anatomy. At the same time she was dragging information out of Brent, she refused to reveal anything about herself.

Brent didn't want to think about the man named Kade who owned her heart. Lillie might not want to admit it, but she harbored love for this guy, Kade. Maybe she believed she was through with the relationship and maybe she would heal her broken heart...damn it. As much as he wanted to believe it, he knew she wasn't done with Kade.

Jealousy pricked his heart. What kind of asshole turned away such a beautiful woman? Yeah, she had great looks, but her insides were better. She was funny with a streak of goofy, smart—she'd just kicked his ass at Scrabble—and self-protective.

“When do you think we can check out your house? Is it going to be a bitch to clean?”

“No. Most of the rooms are empty.” He looked at the wall so she wouldn't catch him checking out her form. “There's no reason we can't go out there tonight. You'll get to meet Dane and Marissa's little brood.”

Her head popped up so fast she banged it on the top of the fridge. “Ouch!” She grabbed her skull and whipped around to look at him. “She has a brood? *A brood?*”

Brent blinked at the ferocity of her tone. “The four-legged variety. She and Dane adopted eight animals from one of the shelters.”

“Oh.” She returned to the fridge.

“Don't like kids, huh?”

“Sure I do. It's just...um, cleaning up after them is a lot of work.”

“Yeah. Or maybe you know Marissa and you were freaked by the fact she might have kids.”



She straightened and looked at him over her shoulder. “Why would I know Marissa?”

Brent shrugged, but his instincts hummed. He was on the right path. Her distress *was* related to Marissa. “So you don’t know Marissa Vanderson?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Everybody knows about the Vandersons in this town. Less than a decade ago, they locked up Marissa after their eldest was killed in a motorcycle accident. It’s a shame, too. Their first child, Zachary, was kidnapped and never found.” Her lips quirked. “Are you saying Dane’s girlfriend is *the* Marissa Vanderson?”

He’d never heard of the Vandersons, but he’d moved here a couple of years ago. Dane wasn’t native to the city, either, so he probably hadn’t guessed about Marissa’s past. Knowing she’d spent most of her life trapped in a mansion by parents who could buy her everything but freedom sure explained a lot. *Yep*. This little piece of information was interesting, but not as interesting as Lillie’s offering of it.

“Her sister was killed?”

“Yes. The night before her eighteenth birthday, Gillian Vanderson snuck out to meet her boyfriend. They were both killed when his motorcycle hit an embankment.” Lillie’s voice softened as she spoke and she turned away, obviously searching for a distraction. She moved to the sink with its dirty dishes, opened the dishwasher, and started loading.

Brent kept quiet. Sometimes the most effective tool to encourage someone to talk was to stay silent.

The dishes clinked, clanked, and slid into the wire slots with teeny bangs. When she’d finished with the dishes, she took paper towels and wiped out the sink, then scrubbed the counter.

After tossing the towels into the trash, Lillie looked at him, a tight smile creasing her lips. “All I know about the Vandersons is what I read in the paper.”

Her steady gaze met his and had he not fallen in love with her, he might have missed the sadness hiding in her forthright look. She sought to fool him with her straightforwardness, daring him, on some level, not to believe her. Was she asking him to call her on the lies that fell so easily from her lips? Begging him to dig harder and deeper to find the truth? Or was she asking him to leave her alone and to abandon his questions and concerns?

She tilted her head, her gaze still matched to his, and waited.



“Lillian...” *Lillian*. Then it clicked. All of it. The familiar smile. The interest in Dane. The desperate hope lurking her eyes. “Or should I call you Gillian?”

KADE MURPHY STARED at the ugly pink building that housed the Paradise Club. He’d managed to ditch Pete after a fast-food dinner. While the pup did the endless paperwork that came with the job, he drove to the bar. It would be nuts for Lillian—or even Michael—to show up. But since the vic had died in one of the vacant buildings on this street, he was damned sure someone had seen either Lillian or Michael.

Flipping open his cell phone, he called the Vanderson residence again. That old-World, pissy butler got on his nerves; the snobby ass insisted he hadn’t heard from Lillian or Marissa and he refused to tell Kade the whereabouts of Alan and Fiona.

Kade unfolded from the economy-sized rental car, locked the piece-of-shit, and turned to cross the street. A man and woman hurried to the club’s entrance; his breath hitched. Lillian? *No*. She had the same kind of hip-wiggle walk, but her hair wasn’t blonde. She looked familiar, though. He jogged across the pavement and entered the Paradise Club scant seconds after the couple. He saw them wind through the crowded tables to a door marked “Employees Only.” He caught the woman’s profile just before she ducked through the door. Then he recognized her.

*Hello, little sister.* He grinned. Sooner or later, Lillian would contact her sibling and he’d be right there, waiting.

GEOFFREY SNEEZED VIOLENTLY, secretly satisfied when Fiona Vanderson flinched. He’d managed to crawl out of bed, into a uniform, and get to the door minutes before the Vandersons arrived home from their one-week vacation in Europe. Without their daughter. Again.

It wasn’t that Fiona and Alan didn’t love Marissa. They did. Too much. After Zachary’s disappearance and the death of Gillian, they’d done everything to protect Marissa. But, truth be told, they loved each other more than anyone else in the world and simply didn’t realize how exclusionary their devotion had become. They had spent the last nine years protecting Marissa from the big, bad world, but had spent little time developing a good relationship with their only living child...well, the only living child they knew about.

When Gillian lived in their home, they’d spoiled her senseless, again leaving Marissa in an emotional snowdrift. He’d tried to be her friend and confidante, but the truth was, he’d never be what she really needed—a good parent. Alas, it was too late for Fiona and Alan to be a



decent mother and father. Marissa had run away from her boxed-in life and her parents. Maybe he should have encouraged her to leave long ago.

Alan entered the house, talking on his cell phone, and was followed by the baggage-laden chauffeur.

“Geoffrey? Have you been to the doctor?” Fiona peered at him, concern marring her Botoxed brow.

“No, mum.”

“Why ever not? You look miserable.”

“I’ve been resting and taking doses of Nyquil.”

“Sonia.”

The maid hurried forward and accepted Fiona’s Gucci purse and huge make-up bag. “Call Dr. Meehan this instant and tell him our dear Geoffrey is on the verge of collapse. And would you call down to Marissa and let her know we’re home?”

Sonia hesitated, her startled glance meeting Geoffrey’s stoic one.

Fiona’s brows rose as she caught the maid’s questioning look.

“My daughter. Where is she?”

“She’s gone, mum.” Geoffrey looked his employer in the eyes.

“And it’s about damned time she left, too.”

TUESDAY AND ROZZINDA took the stairs three at a time. He prayed his little sister had called him from Jeremy’s crib and not one of the bastard’s crack houses. When they hit the fifth floor, he ran to the end of the hallway and banged on the last door. “Open up, Slane. It’s Tuesday.”

Silence greeted him. He glanced at Z and saw her worried expression. He pounded on the door, screaming his sister’s name, but no one answered. Then Z stilled his movements with one gentle hand, reached past him, and turned the knob.

The door creaked open.

Tuesday didn’t want to go in, but Z saved him the decision and crept inside. Watching Z’s courage in action made him feel like a pussy. He grabbed her hand and gestured for her to stay behind him.

“Slane? Baby girl?”

Jeremy’s crib didn’t fit in with the rest of the apartments in the tenement. Everything electronic was state-of-art, every stick of furniture cost thousands, and he’d hired a celeb decorator to create a *House Beautiful* atmosphere. But nothing Jeremy did could hide the ugliness of the drug lifestyle. The stench of his inhumanity clung to his possessions like a vile poison.

“Tuesday...”



He turned, realizing he'd been staring at the living room like a zombie, and saw Z standing the doorway of the bedroom. He didn't like the piteous expression stealing the loveliness from her face or the tears pooling in her dark eyes.

"No. No!" He sprinted to the door; she moved aside and he entered the room. The heavy metallic smell gagged him, but he stumbled toward the bed, holding his mouth to keep from vomiting.

Slane lay on the plush four-poster bed curled in a fetal position. Blood soiled the white coverlet, the beige floor, the muted blue walls, and the caramel skin of his youngest sister. She was naked except for the pair of green cotton underwear tattered on her hips. *Little girl underwear*. Fourteen, hooked on crack, no one to love her, but still clinging in a small way to her girlhood.

He nearly choked on the bile rising in his throat. His guts roiled in disgust; hatred turned the churning nausea into hard knots. "Slane? Oh God. Slane..."

Kneeling next to the bed, he looked at her pale face, and cried. "Slane?" he whispered. He was afraid to touch her. *What if she...* her eyelids fluttered then her bloodshot eyes focused on him.

"T." Her voice sounded like a rusty gate. "I'm so c-c-cold."

He grabbed the coverlet and drew it over her body. He noticed the fine trembling of her arms and thanked God her body still felt something, anything. Hope slid through him.

"Why you cryin', Tuesday? Ain't never seen you cry."

"I'm allergic to your beauty, baby girl. You got Mariah Carey beat hands down."

Slane's lips attempted a smile, but dried blood stilled their movements. "You a player, T." She snuggled into the comforter and her eyelids drifted shut.

"Slane? You gotta stay with me. Stay awake. I mean it, girl, you open them eyes."

"You ain't the boss of me," she muttered.

Tuesday lifted his gaze to Z. She made a phone gesture with her hand and he realized she'd called emergency services. He mouthed "thank you," and looked down at Slane, who still mumbled smack about him bossin' her. A siren's wail cut through his despair.

*Hurry, damn it. Hurry...*





## Chapter Fourteen

MARISSA BUCKLED HER seatbelt and looked at Dane. “Is your brother usually so...”

“Pissed off?” Dane pulled out of the parking lot of the Paradise Club and drove toward the freeway. “No. But I left him short-handed. I usually work the weekends to help him out.”

“You said he bought the club a few years ago?”

“Yeah. I moved here about five years ago to take the TeenCenter job at the Center. Charlie moved his family out here a couple of years later and he bought the club. He owned a couple of bars in California.”

“So you’re from California?”

“Yeah.”

Dane seemed disinclined to talk so Marissa settled into her seat and stared out the window. After a day of looking at luxury apartments and condominiums, she was exhausted. She sensed Dane’s frustration as she turned down eligible after eligible property. Well, not so eligible if she wanted to keep all her new furry friends. She couldn’t confine eight animals in a small space and looking at houses seemed strange, especially since everyone had assumed she and Dane were married.

To look at houses, the dream of many newly married couples, would be surreal. Besides, contemplating an abode of her very own scared her. She’d lived as Fiona and Alan’s daughter in their home her entire life. What would she do alone in a condo with only pets for company?

Dane had spent the day pulling away from her emotionally and physically. After making love last night...if one could call it that...he’d been more distracted than usual. He was always emotionally distant, but now, oh, her heart knew he wanted nothing more to do with her. It hurt, too. If he’d shoved a hot poker into her chest, it would’ve been kinder.

She wondered why he continued to sacrifice time and effort for her until it struck her that the end of the week was tomorrow and he’d finally earn his ten thousand dollars. Not that they had completed too many items on her list, but she had accomplished many wonderful things...like falling in love with Dane.

*Oh! In love with Dane?* She stole a glance at his profile and her heart stuttered. Yes. Diagnosis: Love. For her, it was a terminal case. For Dane—the 24-hour flu.



Tomorrow, she would go to the zoo and honor Gillie's memory. Tomorrow, she would tear up the list and let go of a fourteen-year-old's dreams. Tomorrow, Dane would leave her and she'd start a new life...alone.

MICHAEL SHUT THE door and leaned against it. Goddamned animals. That three-legged Dane was a monster. He'd considered shooting them all, but he didn't have time to play. He had to set up for a new game, one with Marissa as the prize. He knew Lillian would find her sister soon, but as usual, she'd be too late. When would she learn that he was master and she the pawn?

He laughed. Oh, he loved that she kept trying. He even let her catch him once just so she could feel confident in her skills. But he couldn't indulge her little whims anymore. He wanted her where she belonged—with him. Wasn't the role of a wife to minister to her husband? Oh, yes. He'd indulged her *quite* enough.

Whistling, he headed downstairs to begin preparations. Once Marissa was out of the way, Lillian would be his and their lives would be beautiful, perfect, and free.

"ARE YOU HUNGRY?" asked Brent. He slanted a look at Lillian. She gazed out the truck's window, her thoughts elsewhere.

They just left Dane's apartment on their way to Brent's house. He prayed his furniture, carpet, and, please God, his big-screen TV were intact.

"Gillian?"

"It's Lillie. I haven't been Gillian in a long time."

Brent sighed. She hadn't told him much more than that she and her high school boyfriend had been put into the Witness Protection Program after they'd witnessed the murder of his mother. He knew there was a lot more to the story, including why she had returned to her hometown and why she believed Marissa was in danger. He still hadn't figured out Kade's role in the whole mess, but he was sure he wouldn't like the guy no matter how he fit.

Up ahead, he saw the familiar sign of a family restaurant he knew made great hamburgers. He whipped into the parking lot and killed the engine. "We might as well eat. I'm starving and I don't think I can face the state of my house on an empty stomach."

Lillie looked at him and grinned. "I guess I could eat something. But now that you know I'm not really a housekeeper, don't expect me to clean it up." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "And thanks."

"For what?"



“For giving me the time I need to figure out what I’m going to say to Marissa.”

Brent turned away from her knowing gaze and opened his door. “I’m just hungry, that’s all.”

“Yeah, right.”

TUESDAY PACED THE hospital’s lobby, the can of soda in his hand unopened. Z sat on a couch, a magazine on her lap, covertly watching his restless progress.

“What’s taking so long?” he asked. “She’s been in there two hours.”

“Let’s go to the cafeteria. I’ll buy you some dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Z tossed the magazine aside and rose. “You gonna wear a hole in the carpet, Tuesday. Walk to the cafeteria with me.”

Not knowing where Slane was, what the doctors were doing to her, whether or not they’d gotten her to the emergency room in time...he rolled the Coke can between his hands wishing it was Jeremy’s neck. Why hadn’t he protected Slane better? Why hadn’t he taken Marissa’s money when she offered it and paid off Jeremy? Why hadn’t he done something to get his sister off the crack pipe?

Z crossed the room, plucked the Coke from his grasp, and grabbed chin with her free hand. “You’re a good man, Tuesday Jones. You done all you could for your sister. Now it’s between her and God.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close, taking in the comfort she offered, the comfort he needed. He closed his eyes and prayed God would give his sister a second chance to live the life she deserved.

The doors slithered open and determined footsteps crossed the foyer. Tuesday released his grip on Z, but held her hand as he lifted his head and faced his Momma’s steady gaze.

“Good evening, Tuesday.”

“Momma.”

“How’s Slane?”

His mother’s gaze assessed Z. He nearly smiled when he saw her not only stand up to Momma’s frank stare, but return it with equal vigor.

“I thought you washed your hands of her, Momma.” Tuesday felt weary to his bones. Z slid her arms around his waist as if her strength could hold him upright. “She was half-dead when I found her.”



“Child made her choices, just like you.” Momma marched to the couch Z had vacated and sat. “I was at choir practice. Leela called the church and gave me your message.”

“I didn’t think you’d come.” He looked at his mother, really looked at her. She’d lost weight, her face was pale, her eyes red. She’d been crying, probably wiped away those tears right before she entered the building. Then he realized she’d been grieving for Slane a long time.

He thought about his siblings still at home and the ones who’d made it into the world without doing drugs or turning to violence. Leela was just a year older than him, still living at home and working two jobs to save for college. He’d lost track of his family, his brothers and sisters, during the last couple of years. He’d been too busy trying to make it on his own, to prove to his momma he didn’t need her or anyone else.

What a damned fool he’d been.

Releasing Z, he went to the couch and wrapped his arms around his mother. She’d spent the last thirteen years a widow, raising seven children on her own. All she ever had to give was her love and her strength and, until this moment, he’d never understood that loving someone meant letting them go.

It was a difficult lesson. As her mother turned her face into his shoulder and sobbed, he released his guilt for Slane and his hatred for Jeremy.

FIONA AND ALAN sat in the main living room with Police Chief Henderson and tried to convince the chief to call in the FBI. Geoffrey had been surprised at the ferocity of Fiona’s reaction when she realized her daughter had been gallivanting around the city for the last week, well beyond the protection of the mansion.

“I don’t know where she’d go. I don’t know why she’d go.” Fiona blew her nose on the wad of tissues in her hand and sniffled.

Chief Henderson leaned forward. “Fiona. Alan. Marissa is almost twenty–three–years old. She’s a legal adult and can go where she pleases, when she pleases.”

“What does age matter?” asked Alan. “She’s a little girl. She’s our only little girl!”

Geoffrey placed the tea tray on the marble table and poured Chief Henderson’s coffee. “Cream, no sugar, sir.” He handed the cup to the chief, pleased to see the man trying not to roll his eyes at his friends.

“She’s missing. I want the FBI. I want the CIA. I want...NASA. I want everyone looking for her.” Fiona accepted the tea laced with bourbon from Geoffrey, but her glare was enough to tell him she blamed



him for allowing Marissa to leave. “She’s never really been outside this house, not unless we were with her. I don’t understand why she’d leave here. It’s the only safe place. After what happened with Zachary and with Gillian...” Fiona downed the tea and gestured for more.

“Maybe she needed to grow up,” said the chief. “It’s time you let her make up her mind about life...and it’s time let her go.”

KADE PASSED THE car as it made the turn onto a gravel road. He counted to thirty, looped around, then made the same turn. He’d followed Marissa and her male friend to the outskirts of the city. The full moon outlined the skeletons of large homes being built in this area, but he saw the taillights of the car as it passed the new housing development. He kept those lights in his sight, but stayed as far back as possible. It was obvious no one else should be on this road.

Where the hell were they going?

Finally, the car pulled onto a dirt road that cut through a forest. Kade followed, but slowed down to a crawl and doused the headlights.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the car parked near the two-story house. The only illumination was the full moon; everything was dark, including the porch light. The hair rose on the back of his neck. He parked, got out of the car, and jogged around the perimeter of the forest until he was a few feet from the house. He unholstered his gun, flicked off the safety, and crept closer.

Before he got within a foot of the porch, a woman’s scream and the blast of rifle had him on the ground, rolling toward the cover of Marissa’s car.

He peered over the top of the hood. The front door opened, the body of man flopped out, then the door slammed. Kade waited a few seconds then crawled on his belly toward the pouch.

The man lay on his side, blood seeping from a wound in his shoulder.

*Shit.*

Kade dragged him off the porch and around the side of the house. He staunched the blood flow with his jacket, grateful to see it was a superficial wound. Michael was an excellent shot. Why had he allowed this guy to live?

It took forgoddamnedever to pull the vic to the rental car. The bleeding had slowed, but he needed a doctor to see to the wound. Kade pulled out his cell phone and dialed for backup, all the while watching the house. Just as he was filling in Pete on the situation, a truck ambled from the road and stopped near the house.



Kade's heart nearly beat out of his chest. Lillian, that blonde goddess bitch, exited the truck, and flirting with the bastard getting out of the driver's side, headed toward the house.

*Holy God.* She was walking right into Michael's trap.

## Chapter Fifteen

MARISSA SAT IN the chair, staring at the rifle pointed at her head. If she hadn't flipped on the lights and temporarily blinded the killer, the shot would've killed Dane. As it was, he might be bleeding to death on the porch. *Dane, please be okay. Please be okay.*

"I want to see if he's all right."

"I don't give a shit."

Marissa gritted her teeth. "What do you want?"

Her questions were met with silence. Cold fear wound through her, squeezing out the heat of her anger. She wrapped her arms around herself and thought about what to do. If Dane gained consciousness, what would he do? What if he never regained consciousness? What if he was dying?

*Please be okay. Please be okay.*

"Where are my animals?" "Killed 'em." "What!" Shock numbed her. DJ, Shadow, Pumpkinface...all of them...dead? Dead!?

"You son-of-a-bitch." She stood, bile rising in her throat at the thought of her pets being shot, one by one, by this maniac. Everyone who loved her, everyone she loved, killed by a man who had no value for life.

"That's the truth, all right." He gestured with the rifle for her to stay seated. "My mother was the queen of bitches and I am her son. You're not a therapist, are you? I wouldn't want to waste time telling you my problems. You don't have any solutions. You're just a spoiled little rich girl who's going to die the way you lived. Alone. Alone. Alone."

Marissa curled into the chair. Who was he waiting for? He'd shot Dane. Her life was forfeit, too. Why wait to kill her? Was he an enemy of Brent's? Of Tuesday's? Where was her young friend? Was he dead, too?

"Oooooooh. I can see your wittle thoughts clicking along, Marissa. Who am I? What do I want? Who am I waiting for?" He leaned forward, the rifle never wavering, and whispered, "My name is Michael Feeney."

*You want the zoo. I want Michael Feeney.*





“Gillian?” Her thoughts whirled, dove, twisted, banging around in her skull until she wanted to scream. “You were killed. Both of you. In a motorcycle accident.”

*He’s amazing, Rissa. He has the body of a Greek god and the soul of a poet.*

“Nope. Alive and well. All these years, too. Guess she didn’t care that much about you, did she?”

*I’ll be back before dawn. Don’t worry about me, Rissa. I’ll be fine.*

“Gillian is alive.” The words sounded as though she’d shouted them through a tunnel—long and loud and angry and echoing.

Just as she leapt from the chair, she heard the chattering of two voices, then the creak of the front door opening. All she saw was the gun, the rifle swinging away from her and toward the people entering the house. She jumped on that man, that awful, terrible man who’d taken away her sister, and struggled

for the gun.

“Marissa! No!”

Shouts. Grunts. Screams. Marissa found herself wrested from Michael and tossed on the floor. Brent and a blonde-haired woman fought for the rifle, but the killer held on to it all the while chanting, “Lillie is my flower, my lady, my love. Lillie is my flower, my lady, my love. Lillie is my flower, my lady, my love.”

“Shut up, asshole.”

Dazed, blood trickling from her mouth, Marissa turned toward the front door and saw a man enter the house. He had the authority of a police officer and he held a gun.

“Shoot him!” Marissa shouted. “Shoot him!”

“I wish I could, lady.” He neared the melee on the couch and kept the gun trained on the struggling people. “Lillian, get your ass out of the way.”

“Shut up, Kade. I’ve almost got it.”

“Lillian, goddamn it!”

Michael giggled as the rifle popped free of his grip. Brent and Lillian jumped away in opposite directions, leaving Michael open to Kade’s gun.

“One twitch, dickhead, and I’ll shoot you right between the eyes.”

Michael’s gaze sought Lillie’s. She aimed the rifle at his chest, her blue eyes as hard as sapphires.

“We’re finally going to be together, my flower.”



“You got backup coming, Kade?”

“Hell, yes.”

“That simpering ass, Pete, still your partner?”

“Yes.”

“Has he been fucking up my filing system?”

Kade laughed, a sound as rusty as an old metal hinge. “I’ve missed you, Lillie.”

Marissa couldn’t deal with everything that had unfolded in the last few minutes. The only thought in her head was to get to Dane. She scrambled from the floor and stared at the man named Kade. “Where’s Dane?”

“By my car.”

“Is he—”

“No. An ambulance is on the way.”

Brent stood by the door, waiting, as she hurried out. Together, they ran across the field and found Dane leaning against the car.

“Marissa? Thank God! Are you okay?”

“Yes, Dane, I’m fine.” She kissed him on the lips then rained kisses on his face. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live.” His gaze found Brent’s. “Do you know what the hell is going on?”

“Nope.”

“Where’s Tuesday? And the animals?”

“I don’t know where Tuesday is, but the animals... The man that shot you...he killed them.”

“What?” Dane grimaced. “Marissa, honey...”

The wail of sirens interrupted their worries and fears for Tuesday and the pets. Brent hurried to the road to direct the ambulance to Dane.

Marissa wanted to hug Dane, but knew his shoulder was a painful mess. She kissed him again. “Promise you’ll be all right. Promise you’ll—” She paused, her gaze swinging to the house. “Did you hear that? It’s DJ!”

Dane had enough strength to roll his eyes. “Rissa.” A faint bark echoed. He cocked his head. “I think you’re right.”

Paramedics arrived and Marissa stepped away to give them room. “I’m going to find Tuesday and DJ. I’ll be back.”

“No! Let the police go through the house, Rissa. Wait here. With me.”

She looked at him, torn between rescuing her friends, and staying with the man she loved. As the paramedics peeled away the jacket



covering Dane's shoulder and worked on the gaping wound, she made her decision. "I'll be right back. I have to know everyone's okay."

"Rissa!"

She jogged to the house, slipped inside, and headed upstairs. She paused on the third step. Something smelled like gasoline and the carpet was gooshy under her Keds. Had Tuesday spilled something on the stairs? Distracted by the unfolding drama in the living room, she watched the police wrestle Michael to the floor and attempt to secure his arms and legs with plastic ties.

"We'll be together, my flower," he moaned. "But these bastards can go to hell!"

He roared, rising from the floor like an angry god, and flicked open a gold lighter. He tossed it toward the stairs at the same time realization struck Rissa.

Gasoline.

Carpet.

Fire!

Rissa flew up the stairs, catching the horrified expression on her sister's face before the whoosh and heat of the flames followed on her heels.

FROM THE AMBULANCE'S open door, Dane watched people run from the house, shouting and screaming. Three police officers dragged out a dark-haired man and one tall guy had a blonde female tossed over his shoulder. She pounded his backside and screamed obscenities.

Brent sat beside him, a flabbergasted expression on his face, and shook his head. "What the hell?"

Then they heard it.

The crackle of flames. The quiet, insidious roar of fire. The silence of those who watched.

"No! Oh, shit. No!" Brent jumped out of the ambulance, but was stalled by a police officer.

"Where's Marissa?" yelled Dane.

"I'm sure she's out here, buddy. I'll find her."

He got off the gurney, pain streaking through his mangled shoulder. *Damn.* He jumped out of the ambulance, gritting his teeth against the jolt reverberating up his spine, and ran toward the house.

Brent caught his arm and wheeled him around. "You can't go in there. You'll both get killed."



Dane searched the small crowd for Marissa, but found only one woman, the blonde still in the fierce grip of the tall man. Her gaze was riveted on the house, tears in her eyes.

He followed her line of sight to the upper story, but saw nothing but smoke and flame.

“TUESDAY!” YELLED RISSA. She’d checked three of the bedrooms and found nothing. The smoke was already thick and choking. She prayed he wasn’t in the house as she pushed open the door of the master bedroom. The minute she opened it, eight joyous animals ran out. One look at the fire climbing the stairs, and eight scared animals ran right back inside.

She followed, slammed the door, and got on the floor. Her lungs burned, her eyes watered, and she felt like she’d gotten a sunburn. The animals whimpered, hissed, and barked, all of them cowering near the sliding glass door. She crawled to it, unlocked it, and slid it open.

Fresh air rushed in as the animals rushed out. Marissa crawled through the door onto the balcony and lay there, breathing blessed oxygen and listening to the pounding of her own heart.

A wet swipe on her cheek and the hot smell of old gym socks made her look up. DJ sat next her, wagging his tail, looking from her to the stairs that led to the backyard. His eyes seemed to say, “Get moving.”

Marissa sat up, scooted to the staircase, and bumped all the way down it, landing face-first in the grass. God, it smelled so good. So clean and earthy. DJ offered another wet, stinky kiss before taking off. She wondered why she felt so tired and figured, what the hell, she’d just take a tiny nap. Her eyes drifted shut.

DANE HEARD THE dog before he saw him. DJ bounded around the burning house just as fire trucks and another ambulance arrived. Dane wasted no time. Rissa had let out those animals and that meant she was somewhere near. He ran as fast as he could. He heard Brent’s shouts then heard the slapping of grass against his jeans.

Marissa lay near the balcony’s staircase, a limp, pale, but alive woman who was going to get her ass kicked the minute she woke up. He struggled to pick her up, but his lousy shoulder wouldn’t allow it.

“Let me.” The tall guy and the blonde stood next to him on the left, and Brent stood on the right.

The blonde smiled. “Hi. I’m Lillie. The big take-charge oaf is Kade.” Her worried gaze assessed Marissa. “She’s my sister.”



Dane wasn't sure how to process that information. Marissa had never mentioned her family. Was Lillie the person she'd been running from? Or was it the asshole who'd tried to kill him?

"Dane, you're looking worse for wear." Brent slipped an arm around his shoulder and helped him walk. "Let's get you lovebirds to the hospital."

"Your house. Brent..."

"Don't worry. It's insured."

TUESDAY STEPPED INTO the emergency room lobby and grinned at Z. He'd just seen his sister, comfortably sleeping and on the road to recovery. Momma planned to stay the night and had been reading Bible passages when he left.

"She's gonna be okay." Relief swept through him. "I can't thank you enough. You didn't have to stay, you didn't have to help."

"I wanted to." Her arms slipped around him and she lifted her head. "But you owe me dinner. I'm starving."

Tuesday laughed then bent his head and kissed her. She tasted like chocolate mint and her lips melted against his so sweetly, he didn't think he could ever kiss another woman.

Sirens wailed and emergency room personnel rushed through the entrance. He lifted his head, wondering what poor soul had been injured, and nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw Marissa and Dane being rushed through the doors. Brent, a tall blonde, and huge guy he'd hate to meet in a fight, followed through the doors then found themselves in the lobby.

Brent grinned and pounded Tuesday on the back. "Good to see you, man. We didn't know what happened to you. How did you know to get to the hospital?" Brent leaned down and brushed a kiss on Z's cheek. "Hey, girl."

"What's going on?" asked Tuesday. "It's a long story," said Brent, his gaze catching the blonde's. "But it has a happy ending."

GILLIAN BRUSHED THE lock of hair from Marissa's cheek and smiled. Her sister was alive and well—no thanks to that asshole Michael. She brushed a kiss on Rissa's forehead. When she rose, Rissa's eyes fluttered open.

"Gillian."

"Aye, luv. What'd I tell you 'bout washing yer face?"

"Twice a day without fail." Marissa grinned. "Millie?"

"I had to see you again, sis." She held out her pinkie. "No more secrets or lies, promise."



Rissa extended her pinkie and grasped Gillian's.

SOMETIME LATER, AFTER Marissa's parents had arrived and found not one daughter alive, but two, and a reunion of epic proportions ensued, Brent walked outside and stood next to Kade.

"She's special."

Kade blew a thin stream of smoke into the air then took another long puff of his cigarette. "I know."

"She loves you."

"I know that, too."

Kade flicked the stub to the sidewalk and crushed it under his heel. He looked at Brent long and hard and after a while, Brent felt like squirming away or confessing crimes he'd never committed. Instead, he stood still as a stone and returned Kade's cop stare.

"She belongs with me. I'm not going to lose her again."

Brent nodded, the jagged hole in his heart tearing a little more.

"Fine. But if you fuck up...I'll be there, waiting."

"That a threat?"

"Yes." Brent turned away then looked over his shoulder. "I'll only let her go once. If there's a next time, Kade, I'll fight for her."

He walked into the hospital and left Kade leaning against the brick wall, contemplating the night sky.

## Epilogue

MARISSA SAT ON the porch, Shadow in her lap and DJ by her side, and watched her sister chase the frenetic puppy Gillie had renamed, Pete. After the fire, Tuesday had returned to the house and gathered all the animals, taking them to the TeenCenter until Marissa found a home of her own.

Just a couple of weeks after the fire that destroyed Brent's house, Gillie found the perfect place for them to live. A one-story, four-bedroom monstrosity with a wraparound porch—a leftover from a time long past.

Her parents, still clueless about why she wanted to leave the mansion but somehow willing to indulge her, visited her and Gillie every Sunday. They ate dinner together and talked—really talked. Without the fear, the secrets, the guilt, the manipulations...she shook her head. It was nice to be on the road to having a real family.





Now that Gillie had come home, she quit her job as a U.S. Marshal and taught self-defense courses at the TeenCenter. She and Kade were getting married. He'd left the Marshal service, too, and had procured a job as a homicide detective in town.

Gillie would share the house, on its twenty acres, until she married Kade.

The only thing...person...missing from her life was Dane Sinclair. He helped them move into the house and sometimes he called, but he hadn't kissed her, touched her, or asked her out. He wouldn't accept the \$10,000 so she gave it to the TeenCenter.

Why didn't he want her?

"Brooding again?" Gillie climbed the porch steps and scratched DJ's head.

"What else is there to do?"

"Let's go to the zoo."

Marissa blinked. "Are you serious?"

They hadn't been to the zoo yet. Her desire to go to the zoo had started the whole journey. It seemed appropriate that it should end there, too.

After Dane left her, she'd torn the list into tiny pieces and burned them in the fireplace. She felt sad, but at peace, too.

"Yeah. Let's go to the zoo."

DANE'S HEART POUNDED furiously when he saw Marissa near the elephant pen—in the exact spot Gillie promised to put her.

Would Marissa forgive him for being so blind, so foolish? He'd feared that he'd lost her that night...first by bullet then by fire. He'd known then she wasn't a spoiled princess like his first wife or selfish socialite like his mother. She was Marissa. Beautiful and sweet and courageous and, if he was lucky, forgiving. It had taken him too long to realize the reason he'd felt as if he'd been ripped in two was because he loved her.

He approached her, the ring in his pocket, the list in his hand, and said, "I was wondering if you could help me."

She turned, shock in her eyes, then she backed up and looked away.

*Damn. Not a good beginning.* He swallowed the knot in his throat. "Item one. Ask forgiveness."

"I forgive you." Her voice was stilted, unsure.

"Item two. Tell the woman of my dreams that I love her." Dane looked at her. "I love you, Marissa."



Her mouth dropped open. She blinked.

“Item three. Ask the woman I love to marry me.” He cleared his throat. “Will you marry me?” He fumbled for the ring. It flipped out of his pocket and onto the pavement. “Oh, hell.” He reached for it at the same time she did and they bonked heads.

She laughed as they rose and the constriction in his chest loosened.

“Item four?” she asked, holding the black velvet box.

“It’s starred.” He pointed to the list, she read it, and smiled. “A forever–night stand?”

“Yes.” He took the box and opened it. “What do you say, sweetheart? Will you help me with my list?”

She gasped. A gold cat and a gold dog met in the middle of the ring, each with paws on the sides of a two–carat pear–shaped diamond. “Dane...”

He waited, never more uncertain, more afraid, more in love than he’d ever been in his life.

“Yes,” she whispered, slipping on the ring. “I’ll forgive you, love you, and marry you.” She leaned against his ear. “And on our wedding night, I’m going to...”

Dane grinned.

## **Michele R. Bardsley**

Michele received her first taste of recognition as a writer in high school when she took Third Place for an essay contest about patriotism. Soon after, she won a coveted spot in Oklahoma State University’s anthology, *SPOKES OF A WHEEL*, with a short poem called “My Neighbor.” She also wrote a lot of angst–driven poetry and never–finished short stories with depressing themes.

Her love of writing led to working on the high school newspaper and the yearbook. After graduating high school, she attended Tulsa Community College and was hired as an associate editor on the college newspaper (she stayed long enough to garner the position of Managing Editor). About this time, she attempted to write a novel (yes, angst–driven). Her instructor gently suggested she write the kind of book she liked to read. Michele began writing a slightly angst–driven romance novel with paranormal elements. She finished the novel, discovered she



sucked at writing angst-driven books, and turned to writing romantic comedy.

Michele's articles and short stories have appeared in electronic, local, national, and small-press publications, including Fodor's guidebooks, Byline Magazine, and Northwoods Journal Magazine. Her works have received recognition (and sometimes award money!) from writers' organizations and publications such as Writer's Digest, Oklahoma Writers' Federation, Byline Magazine, Northwoods Journal Magazine, and Silhouette Books.

Despite living in Las Vegas for several years, she's never hit a Megabucks jackpot, so she's earning a living as a freelance writer and editor. She lives with her husband and her two adorable children.