

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

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Lighthearted Lust:

Three Not-So-Serious Tales

LIGHTHEARTED LUST: THREE NOT SO SERIOUS TALES
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There's No Such Thing As A Werewolf

By MaryJanice Davidson

CHAPTER ONE

As any werewolf knows, smells and emotions and even raised voices have colors and texture. And as any blind werewolf knows—not that there were any besides him, to the best of his knowledge—you could take those smells, emotions, and conversations and do a pretty good job of seeing. Not a great job, comparably speaking, but enough to get around. Enough to have a solid sense of the world.

"But I can't be pregnant," Mrs. Dane was saying. "There's just no way."

"There's at least one way."

"But I'm infertile! The clinic said!"

"Accidents happen," he said cheerfully. He knew she was stunned, but pleased. And as soon as the shock wore off, she'd be ecstatic. He could have told her that her fallopian tubes had managed to unblock themselves over the years, but that would raise awkward questions. After all, he was just her G.P. He wasn't treating her for infertility.

"I'd say you're..." *Thirty-nine and a half days along* "...about six weeks pregnant. I'm going to write you a scrip for some pre-natal vitamins, and I want you to take two a day. And the usual blandishments, of course, ease off on alcohol, don't smoke, blah-blah-blah. You know all this." Mrs. Dane was an OB nurse.

"Yeah, but...I never thought I'd *need* it."

He heard her weight shift as she slid off the table, and thus was ready for it when she flung her chubby arms around him in a strangler's grip. "Thanks so much!" she whispered fiercely. "Thank you!"

"Mrs. Dane, I didn't do anything." He gently extricated himself from her grip. "Go home and thank your husband."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Now she was brighter in his mind's eye, glowing with embarrassment. "I read somewhere that blind people don't like it when their balance is thrown off."

"Don't worry about it. You couldn't throw off my balance." *Not without a truck.* "Don't forget to fill this on the way home," he added. He could write perfectly well, which was to say his prescriptions didn't look any less legible than a seeing doctor's.

"Right. Right!" She darted around him, nearly careened into the closed door, and left without her clothes. The gown flapped once as the door closed behind her.

"I don't think they'll let you in the pharmacy dressed like that," he called after her.

* * * * *

"I'm just saying you should think about it," his nurse, Barb Robinson, argued. "I hate the thought of you going home to an empty house every night. And it would—you know. Be helpful."

"Put a harness around a dog and expect it to lead me around all day?" He tried not to sound as aghast as he felt. "That's awful!"

"Drake, be reasonable. You get around fine, but you're not a kid anymore."

"Meaning, since I'm looking at the big four-oh, it's time to check out nursing home brochures?"

Barb's scent shifted—it had been lemony and intense before, because while she was embarrassed to broach the subject, she was also determined. Now, as she got annoyed, it intensified until she damned near smelled like mouthwash.

"Very funny," she snapped. "Pride's one thing. Your safety is another. For crying out loud, you don't even use your cane most of the time."

"Will it get you off my back if I start lugging the stick around?"

"Yes," she said promptly.

Oh, for God's sake. "Fine. You may now refer to me as Dr. Stick."

"It's just that I don't want you to get hurt, is all," she persisted. "You bugged *me* about moving to a safer neighborhood."

"Repeatedly?"

"Oh, hush up. And you'd better get going—isn't tonight another one of your big nights out?"

You could say that. "It is indeed."

"Well...maybe you should take it easy. You look kind of worn out today."

"I was up late," he said shortly. "Give me the damned cane."

He heard her rummaging around beneath the counter, and then she tapped the floor in front of him. He snatched it out of her hand. "There, satisfied?"

"For now."

"Also, you're fired."

"Ha!"

"Maybe next time." He obediently started tapping his way to the front door, though he knew perfectly well it was eight feet, nine inches away. "See you Monday."

"And think about the dog!" she yelled after him.

"Not likely," he muttered under his breath.

CHAPTER TWO

The small gang—two boys and one girl, not one of them out of their teens—followed him off the subway. Typical thugs; they needed reinforcements to rob a blind man. He led them down Milk Street and let them get close.

"Just so you know," he said, turning, "in about half an hour the moon will be up. So this is a very, very bad idea. I mean—" They rushed him, and his stick caught the first one in the throat. "—it's a bad idea in general. There are only about a thousand—" His elbow clocked down on the skull of the second. "—more respectable ways to make a living."

He hesitated with the girl, and nearly got his cheek sliced open for his trouble. He pulled his head back, heard the whisper of steel slide past his face, then grabbed her wrist and pulled, checking his force at the last moment. She flew past him and smacked into the brick wall, then flopped to the ground like a puppet with her strings cut. "Seriously," he told the dazed, semi-conscious youths. "You should think about it. And what are *you* up to?"

"Nothing," the other werewolf said cheerfully. "Just came down to see if you needed a hand. Christ, when was the last time these three had a bath?"

"About two weeks ago."

"How's it going, Drake?"

"It's going like it always does," he said carefully. He had known Wade when they were younger, but it paid to be careful around Pack.

He held out his hand and felt it engulfed by the younger man, who smelled like wood smoke and fried trout. Drake was a large man, but Wade had three inches and twenty pounds on him. If he wasn't such a pussycat, he'd be terrifying. "Still keeping to your place in the country?"

"Sure. This city is fucking rank, man. I only came in to stock up. The day got away from me."

"Try not to eat any of the populace."

"Yuck! Have you seen what *they* eat? I wouldn't chew a monkey on a bet."

"That's not nice," Drake said mildly.

"Yeah, yeah, pardon my un-fucking PC behavior. Humans, okay, and never mind what they originated from. No, really! They should be *proud* to be shaved apes."

"Tsk."

"Hey, I'm glad I ran into you. You should head out to the Cape, say hi to the boss and Moira and those guys. Did you hear Moira got hitched?"

"I did, yes. To a monkey, right?"

"Yeah, well..." Wade stretched; Drake could hear his tendons creaking and lengthening. Their change was very close. Luckily, adolescence was far behind them both; they would stay well in control. "The new alpha gal, Jeannie, she heard about...uh...she noticed that none of the Pack...uh..."

"Was cursed with a devastating handicap?" he asked pleasantly. He tapped his cane for emphasis.

Wade coughed. "Anyway, she hit the fucking roof when Michael told her the score, and they pissed and moaned about it for, like, a damn month, during which time our fearless leader was so *not* getting laid, and finally Michael said it wasn't an automatic, it would be up to the parents, and they both had to agree."

Drake was silent. For the Pack, this was forward thinking indeed. Handicaps were so rare they were nearly unheard of, and when a Pack member was born blind, or deaf, or whatever, it had been tradition since time out of mind that the sire killed the cub. The dam was usually too weak from whelping, but was almost always in agreement.

His sire, however, had died in Challenge before his birth, and his mother had wanted him. Had hidden him away at the time so the well-meaning Pack leader, Michael's father, couldn't find him and kill him. Had raised him defiantly and heartlessly – absolutely no quarter given, or asked.

Drake had eventually left the Pack on his own, made his way to Boston, made a life among humans. Here, at least, he could hold his own. Humans didn't care about Challenges. They didn't even *know* about them.

"Well, maybe I will pay them a visit," he lied. "It's been a long time." Michael hadn't even been pack leader when he'd left...Moira had been a precocious brat, one of the few who'd tried to talk him out of leaving.

No. Done was done.

"A long time?" Wade was saying. "Yeah, like about twenty years. It's a little different now. Michael's a modern dude. No one will fuck with you."

"Thanks for passing on the news. But I didn't leave because I was afraid of being fucked with."

"You did win all your Challenges," Wade admitted.

"I left because I was never allowed to be myself."

"You think you're allowed that *here*? In Monkey Central?"

He shrugged. Loneliness was such a central factor of his life, he barely recognized it anymore. "It doesn't matter."

"Well, think it over. I know Jeannie'd like to meet you. If nothing else, to be proved right. She lives for that shit." This was said in a tone of grudging admiration.

"We'll see."

Drake heard Wade inhale, and stretch again. "Fine, be a stubborn ass, *I* don't care. Better beat feet out of here. Gonna be a long one. Last night of the full moon."

"Happy trails," he said dryly. "Again, try not to eat anyone."

"Again," the larger man said, loping off, "don't make me puke. Company coming."

"Yes, I—" He nearly fell down, right there in the alley. "I know."

"Jeez," the girl said, coming closer. She glanced over her shoulder at the rapidly retreating Wade, then turned and glared at the unconscious gang. "You gigantic losers!"

Everything was suddenly very bright, very sharp. The exhalations of the would-be attackers, Wade's retreating footsteps, the girl's perfume—L'Occitane Green Tea.

He could *see* her.

Not sense her, not get an idea of where she was and how she felt by her voice. *See* her. Everything around her was shades of gray, but she stood out like a beacon.

She was short—her head stopped right around the middle of his chest. And her hair was that light, sunny color he assumed people meant when they said blonde. Her eyes were an odd color...not blue like ice was blue, and not purple like people had described irises...somewhere in between.

Her hair was brutally short and so were her nails. She was wearing six earrings in her left ear, and eight in her right. She had a nose ring, a hoop through her left eyebrow, and her shirt was short enough to show off the bellybutton ring. Her stomach was sweetly rounded, and she was wearing shorts so brief they were practically denim panties. Her black tights were strategically ripped, showing flashes of creamy skin. Her tennis shoes (what color was that? Red? Orange?) were loosely tied with laces that weren't any color at all.

"Are you all right, guy? I'm really sorry if they tried anything. I told them to cut the shit. I didn't think they, y'know, meant it."

He gaped at her.

"Oh, sorry," she said, glancing at the cane. "I didn't realize. Do you need me to walk you somewhere? Did they hurt you?"

"I can see you!"

"Ooooookey-dokey." She took a cautious step backward. "Listen, I've got stuff to do tonight—last chance. D'you need me to call you a cab or something?"

“Holy Mary Mother of God!”

“So, no. Well, ‘bye.” She turned, and, frozen, he watched her walk away. Her butt was flat, and she hitched up her shorts, which gaped around her waist. He couldn’t begin to imagine her age—twenty-two? Twenty-five? He had at least fifteen years on her.

He heard a crack, and dropped the cane—he’d been gripping it too hard, and it had split down the middle. Why could he see her? Why now? Was it a function of the full moon? If so, why hadn’t it ever happened before? Who was she? And where was she going in such a hurry?

The clouds scudded past the moon, and suddenly he had twice as many teeth.

CHAPTER THREE

Crescent stood on the rooftop and stared down at the street. It wasn't so far. One measly story. Shoot, people fell that far all the time and survived...mostly...and besides, she wasn't a regular person. Probably.

If she was ever going to fly, now was the time.

She put her hands on the ledge and started to boost herself up, when she felt a sharp tug on the seat of her shorts and went flying backward. She hit the gravel rooftop and all the breath whooshed out of her lungs. So she lay there and gasped like a fish out of water, and when she was able, rolled over on her knees.

The largest wolf she had ever seen was sitting three feet away. She was too startled to be frightened. And he wasn't growling or biting, just staring at her in the moonlight.

A dog she could almost understand, even here, in the middle of the city. But a wolf? Where had it come from? Did it escape from a zoo? And how did it get up on the roof? Could wolves climb fire escapes? *Was* there a fire escape?

If she spread her fingers as wide as she could, its paws were just about that size. And its head was almost twice as wide as hers, with deep, almost intelligent brown eyes. His fur was a rich, chocolate brown shot with silver strands, and when the breeze ruffled its pelt, the wolf looked noble...almost kingly.

"What'd you do *that* for?" she asked the wolf. "If I want an animal biting my butt, I'll start dating again."

It stared at her. She supposed she should have been scared, but had no sense of menace from it.

"All the better to see you with, my dear," she muttered. "Now you stay here. I have to do something." She got up, brushed the dust off her knees, and started for the ledge. She got about a step and a half when she heard a warning growl behind her. She threw up her hands and spun around. "Jeez, what *are* you? Why are you picking on me? And why do you care? Look, I won't get hurt. I can fly. I mean, I'm pretty sure. And if I'm wrong—but I don't think I am—it's only one story."

Nope. The wolf wasn't buying it.

"Well, hell," she said, and sat down cross-legged.

It had been a long day, and a longer night. Almost before she knew it, she was tipping sideways. The gravel was probably cutting her cheek, but it felt like the softest of down pillows.

She slept.

CHAPTER FOUR

She was stiff, and freezing, and someone was shaking her by the shoulder. What the hell had happened to her cot?

She opened her eyes to see a man down on one knee beside her. And, hello! *Not bad* for an old guy. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and had great dark eyes, brown hair touched with gray, and smile lines bracketing his mouth. His shoulders, in the dark suit and greatcoat he wore, were impossibly broad. His thighs were almost as big around as her waist, and he was crouching over her like a dark angel. It was a little disturbing, but kind of cool.

"Good morning." His voice was deep, pleasant. He probably worked in radio. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," she said, but she groaned when she sat up. "I can't believe I fell asleep up here." She brushed gravel off her cheek and looked around. The wolf was gone, thank goodness. "Oh, shit! I never got to—never mind."

"What are you doing up here?"

"Mind your own beeswax," she said. "You can go now."

"You don't seem suicidal," he commented.

"I'm not!"

"Then why are you up on a roof?"

"You'll laugh at me."

"Doubtful."

"Also, it's none of your business."

"Well," he said pleasantly, "I'm not leaving you up here by yourself. So you might as well tell me."

"Dammit!" What was going on? First the gang decided to be dumb (dumber than usual, anyway,) then a weird-ass giant wolf tormented her, and now *this* guy. God hated her is what it was. "Fine, I'll tell. I'm pretty sure I can fly. I've felt I could all my life. It sort of—runs in my family. Except my family's all dead, so I never really knew for *sure* for sure, y'know? So, anyway, last night I finally screwed up the courage to try, but I couldn't because—never mind, you'll think I'm a nut-job. More so than now, I mean. Anyway, that's why I'm up here. Not to die. To fly."

"Mmmm." He put a big hand on her face and peered at her pupils. "Well, you're not on drugs. That's something."

"I quit doing drugs when I was seventeen," she snapped, and batted his hand away. "I've been clean for ages."

"And you're not terminally ill," he finished.

"How d'you know *that*?"

"I'm a doctor, it's my job to know."

"What, did you do a blood test in my sleep?"

He ignored that. "What's your name?"

"Why do you care?"

He looked at her soberly. "I care."

Weird. But cool. Okay, fine. "It's Crescent."

"That's it?"

"No, I have a last name, but I'm not telling."

"Why? Are you a fugitive?"

"I wish. It's just that everybody laughs. You'll laugh."

He raised his hand, palm out. "I promise I won't laugh."

"It's Muhn."

"Crescent Moon?"

"The h," she said with as much dignity as she could, "is silent."

"That's all right," he told her. "My last name is Dragon."

"Doctor Dragon?"

"Doctor Drake Dragon."

"Oh dear." She giggled. "We're both cartoons."

"You realize, of course, that we must get married." He said this with a perfectly straight face, which made her laugh harder.

"It's just too good a story to tell our grandchildren," she agreed. "But first I have to do this. So, good-bye."

"Come down and have breakfast with me instead," he coaxed.

Interestingly, she was tempted. He really was a stone fox. And she hadn't been on a date in... Let's see, she had been able to legally drink for three years, and there was that guy who took her to the rave right after...

Wait a minute.

"Wait a minute!" God, she was slow this morning. "You're the blind guy from the alley!" Except he didn't *seem* blind. He'd checked her pupils, for crying out loud.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"You don't seem very blind."

He hesitated, then said again, "Have breakfast with me."

"Why?"

"You might as well. I'm not going to let you jump."

She sighed. "Well. I am hungry." And I can ditch this guy after I cadge a free meal off him. *"Okay. Lead on, MacDuff."*

CHAPTER FIVE

He offered her his arm when they were at street level, and her smell shifted to amusement – ripe oranges. After a moment, she grasped it.

“Cripes, I can’t even get my fingers around your bicep. D’you work out, like, nine times a day?”

“No. But I like to keep in shape.”

“Y’know, we don’t have to go anywhere fancy,” she said. “We could just get a cup of coffee.”

“You’re underweight for your height. We’ll get a proper meal.”

“Bossy,” she coughed into her fist.

He smiled. “Yes.” It was all he could do not to gape at her like a schoolboy. He had no idea why he could see her, but the effect hadn’t worn off with daylight...she was like a flame in a street of shadows. “I’m afraid it runs in my family.”

“Can I ask you something? How come you don’t use a dog? And where’s your cane? Didn’t you have one last night?”

“I get around pretty well,” he said, avoiding her question. “I’ve been blind all my life. It’s all I know.”

“Oh. Well, like I said, you don’t seem blind.”

He shrugged. Humans always told him that.

* * * * *

Over a breakfast of three pancakes, six pieces of toast, and two cups of coffee (hers), and a bowl of oatmeal (his), they talked.

“Don’t you want some ham or bacon? Please, order whatever you like. I can assure you I’m good for it.”

She shuddered. “No, thanks. I’m a vegetarian.”

“Oh.” Hmm. That could be interesting. “You know, that’s really not the best diet for an omnivore.”

“Dude, I’m not chomping on dead flesh, and that’s the end of it.”

“Drake,” he corrected.

She mopped up syrup with the last pancake. “Yeah, whatever. Can I get more coffee?”

“Of course.” He signaled the waitress, then asked, “Why are you so thin?”

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

"I'm interested in you," he said simply.

"Uh-huh. Dude, you're, like, twice my age."

Yes, that was annoying. But it couldn't be helped. "Stop calling me dude. And it's probably not twice. I'll be forty this year."

"Oh." She seemed surprised. "You look younger. I'm twenty-four."

"You look younger, too. If I may ask, where are you staying?"

"There's a shelter on Beacon Street," she said without a trace of embarrassment. "I lost my job—the economy, you know—and couldn't make rent, so I've been bouncing around a bit."

"Is that how you fell in with the little gang who attacked me?"

"I didn't know they were going to do that," she said earnestly. "I thought it was just talk."

"I believe you. What about your family?"

"Don't have one."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I never really knew them. Like you—I guess—being by myself, it's all I know."

"Why don't you stay with me for a while? I have a big house in Cambridge, and there's plenty of room for a guest."

She snorted into her coffee cup. "Right. Go home with the strange guy who showed up out of nowhere, who says he's blind but doesn't trip over anything. Not *too* creepy."

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could kill me in my sleep."

He tried not to show offense. "That's ridiculous. In your *sleep*? I would never."

She laughed at him. "Oh, okay, so, we've established you won't kill me in my sleep. *That's* promising."

"The homeless shelter is preferable to my home?"

"Well...no offense, dude...Drake, I mean...but put yourself in my shoes."

"I understand. But consider this, you could have pancakes every morning," he coaxed, "and all the coffee you could drink. Until you get back on your feet."

She shook her head, but looked tempted. "Jeez, I can't believe I'm even considering this. If this was a horror movie, I'd be yelling at the screen. 'Don't do it, you dumb bitch!'"

"That's nice. I would really enjoy your company. I live a...solitary life. It would be nice to have a...a friend over."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Well. I have to admit it's the nicest offer I've gotten all year. But here's the thing. I'm getting these 'take-the-poor-waif-home-and- take-care-of-her' vibes from you, but I'm not sure you get it. My family died when I was a toddler, and I left the foster home when I was ten. I've been on my own a long time. I can take care of myself."

"Of course."

"And the thing is, there's nothing I'll...uh...do for you. You know. In order to stay at your house."

"No, I wouldn't expect you to." And, fortunately, she was a good two weeks from ovulation. He'd be nowhere near his change then. It could be problematic when a roommate's cycle coincided with a male werewolf's, but he didn't have to worry about that, at least. "There aren't any strings, Crescent."

"Well." She finished her coffee. "I can't believe I'm saying this. But we'll try it. For a while."

"All right, then." He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He'd never seen a smile before. Hers made him dizzy.

CHAPTER SIX

They walked in and she was instantly dazzled. Like the big colonial house hadn't been impressive enough on the *outside*. "Wow! How many windows do you *have*?"

"I have no idea."

"Right. Sorry. It's so bright in here!" She was staring; she couldn't help it. Her first, jumbled impression was lots of light, a soaring living room ceiling, a loft, and lots of hardwood flooring. "You don't even need to turn any lights on during the day. Not that you would."

He was hanging his greatcoat in the closet. "I like to feel the sun on my face," he said simply.

"Did anyone ever tell you, you live in a pink house?"

"A few have mentioned it." He shrugged. "What do I care?"

She laughed. "I s'pose. It's just sort of funny. I mean, you're this big, super-masculine guy, and your house is the color of a faded pink sweatshirt. It's a little weird."

He smiled. It was disconcerting—like he was looking *right at* her. But of course he wasn't. He probably knew she was standing by the door because of her voice. "Super masculine?"

"Dude, you're about the biggest, boldest guy I've ever met."

"Thank you. And stop calling me dude."

He was the sharpest "handicapped" person she'd ever seen. He paid for breakfast with cash...and she noticed the twenty-dollar bills were folded into triangles, and the ten was a rectangle. Of course...it made perfect sense. He couldn't see the denominations, and the bills would all feel the same. Did he get them that way from the bank? Or did he have a helper to fold his money? Maybe she could fold his dough, earn her keep...

But it was just so weird, because he always seemed to know where she was—he caught her before she started to trip on the curb, for God's sake.

"Why don't I show you to your room?"

"Yeah," she said, kicking off her sneakers and following him. "Why don't you?"

She expected a simple guest room with a utilitarian twin bed and an empty bureau. Instead, he escorted her to paradise. The bed, a mahogany four-poster, was against the window, and sunlight was splashed all over the Shaker quilt.

Through the open door on the opposite side of the room she could see a gleaming bathroom with tiles the color of the sea, and the bureau beside her was almost as tall as she was.

"Uh...you sure you don't have a cot in the basement or something?" she asked nervously. The room was so clean, so beautiful, she was afraid to move, lest she destroy it all. "Or maybe a blanket I could spread out on the kitchen floor?"

"Nonsense. This is your room now, for as long as you like. I'll leave you to get settled." And, abruptly, he was gone.

"Get settled?" she asked the empty room. "How?" She hadn't wanted him to see the shelter, so she had no extra clothes. Well, she'd sneak out tonight and go get them. And she'd find Moran and his little gang of retards, and give them a piece of her mind. Imagine, trying to rob a *blind* guy.

She wandered back out to the living room and eyed the loft.

Hmmm...

She noiselessly climbed the stairs, and had time to notice the loft was actually an office—desk, computer with big-ass speakers, bookshelves—before she clambered up onto the railing. This would be even easier—this was only one story. Less, actually. Just a few feet. Piece of cake. If she couldn't fly here, she couldn't fly anywhere.

"Something for lunch?" Drake called from the kitchen. Good, he was a couple of rooms away.

"I'm still stuffed from breakfast," she called back, and dived off the railing.

She flopped over in mid-air, and had time to notice the living room doing a one-eighty around her, and then she fell into Drake's arms.

"Wow!" she gasped. "How'd you do that? You were, like, fifty feet away!"

"Will you *stop* that?" he snapped. "Stop climbing things and leaping off of them, before you give me a heart attack."

"But how'd you know I—?"

"Promise, Crescent. As long as you're in this house, no more crazy jumps."

"But I won't be hurt," she explained earnestly, resisting the urge to snuggle into his arms. He was holding her like she weighed as much as a bag of feathers, like it was nothing. And the way he was scowling down at her—it should have been scary, but instead, she wanted to smooth out the frown lines with her fingertips. "Really! I'm sure I can do it."

"Not in my house," he said firmly. "Now promise."

"Or what?" She wasn't being sarcastic. She was curious.

"Or I won't put you down."

Now she did smooth out the frown line over his eyebrow. Weirdly—but nicely—he leaned down and nuzzled her nose. She felt her nipples tighten and fought the urge to squirm in his arms.

“You’re just going to carry me around all day?” she teased.

He smiled down at her. “It wouldn’t be much of a hardship.”

“Okay, okay. I promise. No more jumping off stuff in your house.” *But I can’t promise I won’t jump anywhere else...*

“All right, then.” He set her on her feet, gave her a warning smack on the ass which stung like hell—

“Hey!”

—and walked back to the kitchen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He heard her as she tiptoed past his room. Actually, he heard her when she opened her eyes and sat up in bed. He knew from her smell she hadn't slept, and made sure he didn't either.

When she stole out of his house like a thief in reverse, he was right behind her.

* * * * *

Bags were always in short supply at the shelter, so she just gathered a few changes of clothes to her chest and stole back outside. Unfortunately, she caught Maria's eye on the way out. Well, it couldn't be helped. The woman gobbled speed like it was Tic-Tacs, and she never slept.

Crescent crept down the alley behind the shelter, thinking she still had time to catch the Red Line back to the bus stop near Drake's house, when she heard running footsteps and turned to see the Asshole Brigade.

"New crib?" Maria asked. She was one of those women who always smiled – who smiled when you knew they were screaming inside. "New man?"

"Yes, and no, and mind your own business."

"Hold up, Cress." *That was Nick Moran, the leader of the incredibly lame group.* "You got something for us?"

"It's Cress-ent, and no, I sure don't. What's wrong with you?" She shifted her weight and clutched her clothes a little tighter. She did *not* want to let these three put her in the middle of their nasty little circle. Her gut almost always led her right – why else was she staying with a stranger? – and maybe it did this time, too. Maybe when she fell in with these idiots, they didn't really know how bad it could get. Her gut was good, but it couldn't foresee the future. "Robbing a blind guy? Trying to, anyway. You couldn't even pull *that* off."

"Shut up," Nick said roughly. He was a tall, cadaverously thin man with the bare beginnings of a mustache, and a scar that bisected his left cheek. "We had it under control."

"Sure you did. 'Bye."

Jimmy, the other schmuck, clawed at her elbow and managed to grab it. "Whyn't you take us to his place?" he asked. His tone was reasonable, but she wasn't fooled. "Cute piece of ass like you, bet you've already got a key."

As a matter of fact, she did. As a further matter of fact, she certainly wasn't going to let *them* have it. "Forget it," she said, trying to pull away. "Fuck off, you three, before I lose my temper. I can't believe I ever felt sorry for you."

"Sorry for us?" Nick echoed, expression darkening. "Be sorry for you. Because when we get done, you won't be so pretty no more."

"It's *any* more. For God's sake, Nick, you went to private school before your folks kicked you out."

Nick blushed—he hated being reminded he hadn't been born to the streets—but Marie's smile widened, if that was possible. Crescent observed that the woman had a nodding acquaintance at best with toothpaste. "We can do this the easy way—" she began.

"Oh, spare me your thug clichés." Crescent was more annoyed than frightened, which she supposed was something. She'd been a moron to come back here by herself—and for what? So Drake wouldn't see the shelter? Who cared what he thought? Big overprotective dope. And she wasn't going to be winning any College Bowls, either, unless she starting relying a little more heavily on instinct and less on pride.

Jimmy's other hand—the one not squeezing her elbow—darted forward like a pale spider and grabbed her nipple. Then he started to pinch. Hard. Crescent could drop her clothes all over the filthy alley floor, or she could stand there.

She stood there. Never in a thousand years would she show these three how much he was hurting her. "Cut the shit," she said through gritted teeth. "You think acting like bullying assholes is going to change my mind about you?" She looked at Nick, waiting for him to call off his dog.

Jimmy was giggling and Maria was grinning, and Crescent's eyes were watering, and she had just decided to drop her clothes and kick Jim in the 'nads when Jim was flying away from her, *literally* flying. He sailed through the air and crumpled to the street a good ten feet away.

She had a glimpse of big hands cupping the curve of Maria's skull, and Nick's, and then there was a *klonk* as their heads banged together. It sounded awfully like the time she dropped a cantaloupe on the floor.

And then Drake was towering over her. Scowling, as usual.

"Have I mentioned," she said, gaping up at him, "that for a blind guy, you get around pretty good?"

"Once or twice." He pushed her crossed arms down, and carefully raised her T-shirt, then eased her bra cup down so he could examine her nipple. This was startling, and quite nice. She reminded herself that he was a doctor, and hers was probably one of about six thousand nipples he saw in a year.

"It's pretty red," he said after a long moment. He was leaning so close, she could feel his breath on the swollen peak, and shifted her weight again.

Suddenly her shorts felt too tight, in a pleasantly irritating way. "But I don't think it'll bruise."

"How—" Her mouth was suddenly very dry, and she coughed. "How do you know it's red?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he smoothed her hair away from her eyes. "If you steal out of my house in the middle of the night again," he said, quite pleasantly, "I'll beat you."

"No you won't."

He sighed. "No. I won't."

"Drake, seriously. Why d'you care?"

He sighed again. "I care." Then he pulled her up on her tiptoes and kissed her with bruising strength.

She dropped her clothes. *Fuckit.*

Kissing Drake—well, being kissed by Drake—was an entirely novel experience. For one thing, the man didn't have an ounce of flab anywhere. For another, she had the distinct impression he could snap her spine like kindling. But this thought was as exciting as it was slightly scary.

He pulled away and she stumbled forward. "Oh, no, don't stop," she gasped. "Kiss me some more—I'm not dizzy enough."

"I can't," he said, and she was delighted to see his breaths, too, were coming hard. "I don't want to take you in the alley like a—come on."

He grabbed her hand, hauled her out until they were under the streetlights, and flagged a cab. He practically threw her inside, then slammed the door and tersely told the driver his address.

"My clothes," she said, staring out the back window. "And after all the stupid trouble I went to..."

"I'll buy you a Gap store," he replied, and didn't let go of her hand until the cab pulled into his driveway.

Drake fumbled for his wallet, then grabbed a bunch of cash and threw it at the driver, dragging her out in the same instant. She heard the driver's gasp of surprise and appreciation, and then he was pulling out of the driveway and, in typical Boston driver fashion, pulling into traffic without looking.

She jumped into Drake's arms. He held her easily, his hands cupping her bottom, and she nibbled his lower lip. "I think you tipped him 'bout a thousand percent," she teased.

"Ask me if I give a fuck," he growled back. He shifted his grip, reached, and tore her shirt from the neck down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They didn't make it to the bedroom. They didn't even make it to the front steps. Instead, he took her in the lilac bushes, and to the end of her days she would associate that scent with Drake's urgency.

"This is insane," she panted, helping him tear out of his coat, his shirt, his pants. "We don't even know each other."

"I know you."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say." Except she felt as if she knew him, too. Independent and proud and kind and gentle, but a hard man when he had to be. A velvet fist when circumstances demanded it.

He tore her panties off and then gently parted her. She was slippery and he groaned when his fingers slid through her, into her, and while his fingers were busy stroking and parting the slick folds between her legs, his thumb was on her clit, gently rubbing, and his lips were on her sore nipple, licking and kissing.

"Later," she groaned. Oh, Christ, had she ever wanted anyone this badly? Had anyone? "Later for that stuff. Fuck me, before I go out of my mind."

He left her nipple after one last kiss, then caught her hand, brought it between them, and let her fingers curl around his enormous length. He throbbed beneath her touch and she could feel his slippery tip. She ran her thumb over it and he shuddered in her arms.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"You're so small, I don't want to—"

"Yes." She wriggled beneath him and licked her lower lip. "I'm small and you're big, and it's going to hurt just right. Now stop talking and...fuck...me."

He obliged, parting her and surging forward, filling her up, forcing her to open for him, and still he came forward, pushing, thrusting, until she thought she would soon feel him in the back of her throat.

He withdrew, and in the waning light of the moon she could see the sweat on his brow, the way his eyes were shining, almost glinting, and then he surged forward, *shoved* forward, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and shrieked into the night air.

They rocked together in the grass, and when she put her hands on his taut butt, she could feel the muscles flexing as he worked over her, as he thrust and withdrew and pushed and surged. She opened her mouth for another yell—it

was too sweetly divine to keep quiet—when his hand clamped over her mouth. She writhed in silence beneath him and, several seconds later, heard the couple walk by on the sidewalk a bare ten yards away.

“They’ll hear you,” he murmured in her ear, his voice so thick it was nearly unrecognizable. “They’ll come over her and see me fucking you in my side yard.”

The thought was so blatantly exciting she came at once, actually felt herself get wetter. He groaned in her ear, then bit her earlobe.

It went on like that for some time—she would never be able to guess how long they went at each other in the lilac bushes. Every once in a while his phenomenal hearing would pick up something and he’d cover her mouth again, without missing a stroke. But when he finally came, his shout was a roar that made her ears ring.

“Oh, Christ,” he gasped, collapsing over her.

“If anybody heard *that*, you’ll have some explaining to do, Doctor.” She tried to sound saucy, but mostly, she just wheezed.

“Umm.” He was kissing the side of her neck, wet snuffly kisses that made her shiver and press closer to him. “Don’t leave in the middle of the night anymore.”

“All right, then. Think we can make it inside without showing the neighbors our bare butts?”

“We’re about to find out.”

CHAPTER NINE

"I think I got something caught on your bellybutton ring," he said later, simply because it was much too soon to ask her to be his mate, and he had to say *something*.

"What can I say? Life with me is a constant adventure." She yawned and flopped over on her back. "And, may I add, *not* bad for an old guy. Seriously. You must take, like, super Geritol, because..."

"Thank you so much," he said wryly. They were in his bed, watching the stars through the skylight. "I was just about to compliment you on being adequate in bed despite an obvious lack of experience."

She smacked him on the bicep. "Hey! And...ow...that was like slapping a rock. FYI, dude, I've got gobs of experience. There was that time in the movie theater...um...and once during a snowball fight a boy fell down on top of me..."

"Stop it, you're embarrassing yourself."

"Drake, what *is* it with you?" she asked abruptly. Her scent shift warned him—from playful soap bubbles to fresh green leaves—even if her tone hadn't. "Seriously. I mean, you swoop down on me all Knight in Shining Armani, which is nice, if weird, and you don't ask for anything at all, and you're super nice, but you must want something."

"Well," he said, sliding his hand up her thigh.

"Oh, spare me. Like you were going to kick me out for not putting out...don't think so. I mean, here we are, and frankly, most men—"

"Spare me your knowledge of most men."

"Okay, okay. But seriously. What's your deal?"

"It's a double deal," he said after a long pause. "And either one will, as you might say, freak you out in the extreme."

"Oh, dude, I'd never say anything so lame...well, why don't you try one, see how that goes."

"Uh..."

"Come on, come on! Then I'll tell you something about me. Something nobody else knows."

"You mean besides the fact that you have smelly feet?"

"Draaaaaaaaake!"

"All right, don't yowl. Okay. Well. Here it is, then."

She propped her chin up on her fist and waited.

He coughed.

She kept waiting.

"Well. Ah. You see, it's difficult to just—you know—blurt it out like this—"

"Are you hoping I'll die of old age so you won't have to say it?"

"Fine, *fine*," he practically snapped. "I'm a werewolf."

Silence.

"I know," he continued, emboldened when she didn't run screaming from the room. He patted her thigh tentatively. "It's startling, but you don't have to be afraid, because I'd never hurt you or eat you—ah, that is to say, outside the bedroom I would never eat you, and—"

"Oh, Christ! That!" She batted his hand away. "I knew about *that*! You were supposed to tell me something I didn't know."

He actually shook his head to check his hearing. No, there was her heartbeat, *lub-dub, lub-dub*, and her breaths, and the hum of electricity, and the cool clink of the freezer making an ice cube...everything was working fine. "What?"

She lunged upward, hopped off the bed, and started pacing back and forth. Moonlight splashed her as she stomped; an enraged goddess etched in cream. "Well, what else would it be? You're super-strong, super-fast, you're blind but you get around better than I do...plus, you're a *doctor*, for God's sake. How could you be such a good doctor without, I dunno, super everything else? It was either that or I figured you were an alien. But after just now—the bushes, you know—I figured you probably weren't an alien. Besides, this wolf stops me from throwing myself off the roof, and then you just *happen* to show up a few hours later?"

He blinked at her. "Oh. I must say this is very anticlimactic."

"Serves you right for assuming I was a dumb-ass."

"I did not! No one's ever guessed before. And I've had...ah...lady friends who have hung around quite a bit longer than you have."

"Oh, that." She waved 'lady friends who have hung around' away. "Well, that's the thing about me—the secret thing—I was gonna tell you. I can tell things about people. That's why I came home with you. I didn't just think you wouldn't hurt me, I *knew* you wouldn't. It's like I can get into a person's head and tell exactly what they're feeling."

"Empathic, hmm? That's interesting. Well, Crescent, for heaven's sakes, why do you keep giving that gang of yours a second chance?"

"I think they might be a little crazy," she replied matter-of-factly. "When we meet up, they never *feel* like they're going to hurt me. Then they get mad, and...anyway, obviously my radar isn't 100% right all the time. Close enough for jazz, though."

"And this fixation with flying?"

"Dude, I totally can! I know it! *You* just have to stop getting in the way when I jump off of things."

Empathy...flight fixation...and her build, small and speedy...but surprisingly heavy for her height...could it be? He had assumed they were legend. Rather like werewolves.

"Crescent," he said abruptly, "have you ever had an X-ray?"

Startled by the abrupt subject change, she blinked at him like a blonde doe. "Uh...not in the last few hours."

"And you never knew your family?"

"Nope."

"Hmmm."

"Have I mentioned you're sexy when you go all 'pondering physician-esque'?"

"No," he said, pouncing on her and bearing her back on the bed like a cat with a new toy. "You haven't. Please elaborate."

"Nah...I've had enough of talking." She grabbed his ears and pulled him down for a kiss. He could feel her tongue dancing in his mouth and suddenly everything was much louder, much clearer. It was amazing to make love with a woman and be able to see her, really see her. He couldn't get enough.

He broke the kiss, having forgotten about her origins and regained new interest in her breasts, which were small, like winter apples. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and tongued it gently. She squirmed beside him and wriggled closer. He slipped his hand between her thighs and slid his fingers through her curls, still damp from their lovemaking. In fact, she was deliciously hot and sticky down there.

He slid his fingers through her slick folds, found her clit, pressed lightly, then rubbed the tender area around it, and dipped a finger inside her. He licked her cleavage, tasting her sweat and trying to resist the urge to give her a good nip, a mark that would last for days. His mark.

"Oh, Christ," she gasped. "How do you do that? I thought we were done, but I could fuck you to death right now."

"There are worse ways to go," he teased, but his tongue felt too thick in his mouth, and now there were two fingers inside her.

Quick as a fish, she slid away from him, shoved him over on his back, and straddled him. "Stop me if you've heard this, like, a hundred times before, but you're really good—"

"I've heard it be—ouch!" She'd reached back to cup his testicles, and her grip had tightened. "Never mind."

"Good dog." She giggled.

"I really don't think *you* should mock *my* origins," he said, but talking was getting much harder, as she had wrapped her fingers around his cock and was squeezing, then releasing, then squeezing. "After all, you—uh—what were we talking about?"

Now her hand was sliding up and down with delicious, if agonizing, slowness. "Origins," she prompted helpfully.

"Right. *You* descended from apes. And that's—actually—that's quite fine—really—ah—you're not going to stop, are you?"

"Fraid so, big guy." She must have taken pity at his horrified expression, because she shifted her hips and then he was sliding up inside her. "Why should you have all the—all the—fun?" She'd been riding him while talking, lifting up and then slamming back down. Now she was just as breathless as he, thank goodness, and oh Christ, she was so sweet and it felt so good, it felt *amazing*. Her hands were clutching his shoulders as she pumped and pumped, and he grabbed her knees and spread her thighs wider on the down stroke. Her eyes rolled up in her head and he felt her uterus contracting around his cock as she came.

"Oh, God!" she cried at the ceiling.

"Too bad," he panted. He grabbed her hips and lifted, released, lifted, released. She shuddered all over and he felt her clench again. "It's going to be a while for me, dear. That whole middle-aged thing, you know. Hope you've buckled in for a long ride."

She wriggled, trying to lift herself off him, but he held on because he needed her right where she was, and because he knew she wasn't truly worried. He used her roughly, because he knew she wanted him to do so, but also because he needed to be a little rough—needed to make an impression on her mind, if not her body. He wasn't sure if that was a werewolf thing, or strictly a male prerogative.

When she was clawing at his shoulders and begging him, when she was very nearly sore from coming, he finally let himself go. Shooting off inside her was like a dream, the best he ever had.

She collapsed over him, panting. He stroked her back, savoring the fine sheen of sweat he found there.

"Oh, dude," she said at last. "A girl could fall in love."

He snorted, and then they laughed together, like mates.

CHAPTER TEN

"Drake. Seriously. How many T-shirts do you think I need?"

"But they're *so* versatile," the Gap saleswoman piped up.

"Not to mention fragile," Drake whispered in her ear, and was gratified to see her blush.

"You go away," she ordered the woman, smiling. "You're helping him spend way too much money as it is. And you – put that down. Khaki – yech."

"But this is the Gap," the saleswoman said ("Ask me how to save 15%" was emblazoned in hysterical red ink on her lapel button), obediently retreating.

"What, so *I* have to wear the uniform, too? Keep going."

"I'm offering you any woman's dream," he said, "and you're still making mischief."

"A) Chauvinist much? Any woman's dream? Shopping at Faneuil Hall? And B) put those *down*. I already picked out pants."

"You'll need more than two pairs."

"Not according to some," she said, arching an eyebrow.

"Hmm," he said, advancing on her, momentarily slowed by a whirl of khaki as she threw the pants at him.

"Forget it, pal. Neither the time nor the place. Excuse me," she added, bumping into a silver, headless mannequin. "Oh, gross! I hate when I think they're people."

"That's some empathy you've got at work there," he commented.

"Off my case, Dr. Furball. What, you never ever made a mistake?"

He thought hard. "Nothing springs to mind."

She let out a yelp of anger and he could tell she was sorry she had nothing in her arms to toss at him any longer. "Dude, I hate to point this out, but you can't see. You must have screwed up something. Clashing tie, maybe?"

He tossed her a blouse the color of her eyes and said in a low voice, although the saleswoman was across the store, "Homo saps are more handicapped than I, dear."

"Oh, sure, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind, and all that."

"Essentially."

"We're not that bad."

He shrugged. "I can smell an iron deficiency. I can hear a heart murmur without a stethoscope."

"Well, *I* can tell this blouse doesn't go with those pants, so put it right back on the rack, pal. God, aren't you bored? These are all for me and I'm just about bored out of my tits."

He grinned. "Thanks for the visual. I'll make a note to catalog order for you from now on."

"Well, *thank* you. Not that you need to keep buying me clothes."

Want to bet? "I suppose taking you to Anne Klein to look at dresses would be a complete waste of time?"

"Barf out! Jeez, look how late it's getting! The sun's actually gone down. God, how long have we been doing this?"

"Since supper. Stop complaining, we're almost done."

"Well, I'd like to see you make me," she said pertly.

"Done and done. If you're quite—" He paused suddenly. Was that a whiff of Pack? It sure was. Hmm, two in one week. It wasn't often he ran into one a year. That was interesting. Now what to do about it?

"Dick, I swear to fucking God, if you don't stop bitching I'm going to pull out your eyeballs and shove them down your pants." The voice was strident, loud, and female.

"That could be fun," a low-pitched male voice he didn't recognize said cheerfully. "And who's bitching? I just got up. What are we doing here? I didn't know you liked the Gap, m'dear."

"I fucking well hate it and you damn know it. But they're having a sale and I can stock up. I fucking hate shopping!"

"A woman after my own heart," Crescent muttered, holding up a sleeveless sweater. It was touching her, so he could see it was the color of mucous. Everything else was the usual gray blur...but that scent...he *knew* that scent...

Drake moved to get a closer look. It couldn't be. And with a man? No. It had been too many years; he was mistaken. Still, no one else he knew packed that many 'fucks' into everyday language.

He stepped around the stack of red miniskirts, nostrils flared. Yes. It was she. "Janet Lupo?"

He heard her drop the pile of clothing, and could smell her shock. Despite her completely flabbergasted expression, he could tell by her scent that she was looking good—great, in fact. Very healthy, with a vitality about her that had been lacking in the girl he'd once known.

Interestingly, he had no sense of the man with her except as a bundle of formidable power. No real scent at all, but tall. Very strange.

"Fuck a duck," Janet said.

“Hello, Janet. It’s nice to —”

Drake had an impression of blurred motion, and then he went sailing through the window front and bounced onto the cobblestones. Broken glass rained down everywhere.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Crescent worked very hard on not shrieking. It wasn't easy. There they'd been, minding their own business, when this bitch came out of nowhere and threw Drake through a window – *through* the damn window! – and now the two of them were rolling in the street like a couple of alley cats – or wolves, probably; wolves would be more accurate, and the place was emptying pretty quick as the stampede started, and Drake was down, was on his back, and –

"Get off!" Crescent leapt forward, but a brick fell on her shoulder and yanked her back.

"I wouldn't," the blonde hottie said mildly. He was a yummy one, all right, and towered over her almost as much as Drake did. Skinny drink of water, though. She observed that the brick was his hand. Strong drink of water, too. "I think it's a family thing. Better let them – ow."

She'd never hit anyone in the face before, and was disappointed. Blondie just sort of shook it off and rubbed his jaw. "Now don't *you* start. There's only one woman permitted to smack me around, and she's currently rolling in a mud puddle with your friend."

Show him your necklace.

Obeying the inner voice that was never, ever wrong – but which didn't speak up nearly often enough – she fumbled for one of the three necklaces around her neck, broke the chain, and thrust it at him. To her amazement, he stumbled backward and threw a hand over his face. Just like in the movies!

"Now you're just being mean," he said reprovingly, groping for her. "Put that cross away before you hurt someone. Like me!"

She ignored him, turned her back, stuffed the cross in her pocket, grabbed the cow around the waist, and pulled. "Get off," she huffed. Grabbing her lover's attacker was not unlike trying to stop an army tank – the woman absolutely did not budge. But she shrugged – nearly dislodging Crescent – and punched Drake in the eye for good measure.

"Your monkey's bothering me," she told him, and punched him again.

"Crescent, *don't*," Drake said sharply. There was a rill of blood trickling down his chin, but other than that he looked unharmed. Anybody else would be spurting blood from about six different arteries after sailing through a plate glass window – thank goodness for werewolf constitution! "Get back. Get out of the way. Don't worry about me."

"Yeah, short stuff." Bam! Another punch. "He'll be just fine. Why don't you go get a Frappuccino?"

She ignored them, and stubbornly tugged again.

"Crescent, *get away from here*. In a minute I'm going to forget to be a gentlemen—Goddammit, Janet, if you hit my jaw again I'll put you over my knee!"

"It's a date, gorgeous."

"Oh no you don't!" Crescent tried a new grip and pulled harder. "Nobody's getting spanked but me."

"Really?" Hottie said from behind her.

"I said get off him!" She suddenly felt her forearm clutched in an unbelievably strong grip, and then she was sailing over the woman's head, only to hit the sidewalk ass-first. The shock went all the way up her spine and she yelped.

"Unwise," Drake said, shrugging out of his coat.

"Oh, please. Nothing personal, Blind Man's Bluff, but you're fucked. Can't have anybody ratting me out to Mikey Boss Man, so sorry, sit still and die now, okay?"

"I'll pass. And I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Really, Janet. Can't you two solve this a little more amicably than introducing death into the equation?"

"Pipe down, Dick, no one hit your buzzer."

Crescent bounced up from the pavement. All three of them looked surprised to see her still in the game. "I *said*," she growled, "keep your hands off my man, bitch!" Then she punched the cow in the jaw.

This was infinitely more gratifying than when she'd hit El Hottie. The woman rolled away from Drake like a bowling ball and slammed up against the Gap's front door, cupping her hands beneath her chin to catch the blood, and Crescent felt the shock of the blow race all the way up to her shoulder.

The woman spit a tooth into her palm. "Hey, that actually hurt, you little cunt!"

"Now *that's* interesting," El Hottie said approvingly. He was the most detached man she'd ever met. What a weirdo! "You don't *smell* like a meat-eater."

"Crescent!" Drake was utterly shocked. It was almost worth getting jumped, just to see the look on his face. "How did you manage that?"

"Do we have to talk about it now? Or do I have to keep kicking the shit out of what's-her-cow?"

"Hey, hey," what's-her-cow said warningly. "Watch the language."

"You have a problem with *cow*? You put your hands on him again, I'll kick your ass up so high people will think you have a second head. *Cow*."

"Says the midget." But the woman's lips were twitching—like Drake's did when he was amused, and trying not to show it.

"You know what they say. All cow and no cow makes cow a cow-cow."

The woman reddened...then laughed reluctantly.

"For heaven's sake, Janet," Drake was saying, limping over to her and helping her out of the dirt. "What's the problem? I haven't seen you in—what? Fifteen years? And you attack me?"

"I don't suppose we could talk about this over a drink," Hottie commented. He grinned, and Crescent nearly screamed. He had about a thousand teeth, and they all looked very sharp. "So to speak."

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"—so now we're sort of...uh...in love and stuff. And I'm not going back," Janet added defiantly.

"You don't have to sell me on the advantages of going rogue," Drake said.

"What, so, you'd get in trouble with your boss? The—what d'you call him? Pack Leader?" Crescent dumped a third packet of sugar into her coffee. "What's he care?"

"He probably wouldn't," Janet replied after a long pause. "But it's not worth it to me. The risk, I mean. He could order me to stay on the Cape and I—I would have to obey, or disobey."

They were sitting in the corner of the Starbuck's on Park Street, speaking in low voices. Although Crescent wasn't sure why they bothered. This was Boston, after all. Nobody gave a shit.

"Well, you don't have to worry about me. You're only the second Pack member I've run into in the last year," Drake said. "And even if I were to run into Michael—which isn't likely—I certainly wouldn't mention you."

"Well, thanks. I guess I shouldn't have... Uh." Janet coughed. "You know. Kicked the shit out of you without asking questions first."

"That's all right," he said kindly, ignoring Crescent and Richard's snickers.

"You might think about moving," Crescent suggested. "If your boss and all his lackey werewolves live on the Cape. I mean, you're only ninety miles away. If you lived in—I dunno, Argentina? That would be better."

"Our home is here," Janet said stubbornly. "Besides, we're all over the world. Might as well stake out a small claim and defend it here as well as anywhere else."

Crescent noticed the hottie—Richard—hadn't touched his frozen coffee. "Aren't you thirsty?"

"Yes."

"Well, why aren't you—"

"So what's your story, blondie?" Janet asked. "Getting smacked by you was like getting smacked by a two-by-four. What do you have for bone marrow, steel ball bearings?"

Crescent blinked at the interruption. "Well, I think I—"

"—might be part fey." Drake finished for her.

Richard's eyebrows arched. "Really? I thought your kind died out years ago."

"It's fairy, not fey, and most of us have—at least, I've never been able to find anybody else like me. And Drake, how the hell did you know that? I never got around to telling you!"

"I guessed yesterday," he explained, "and when you smacked Janet I knew for sure."

"Whoa, back up." Janet put her palms out like a traffic cop. "You're a fairy? Like Tinkerbell? With wings and shit?"

"Do you see any wings?" she snapped.

"Jeez, nobody told me fairies had such rotten tempers," Janet muttered.

"She's just mad because I figured it out," Drake said with annoying smugness. "She was saving it for a surprise."

"You're so insufferable!"

"Yes."

"It runs in the family," Janet added with a grin. "The men especially. So annoying."

"Oh, yes," Richard said. "*Male* werewolves are the annoying ones."

"You shut up. Listen, I always heard fairies were these little delicate things. You hit like a bulldozer. I'm gonna have to wait for that tooth to grow back, which sucks."

"Dense bones," Drake said.

"Difficult to break," Richard added. "I ran into one of your kind about seventy years ago, and he nearly killed me. He was quite old even then, dear, so don't get your hopes up. I'm sure he's dust by now."

"Oh," Crescent said faintly.

"Don't sound so disappointed. He was a nasty old man."

"This explains your fixation with flying," Drake said, thinking out loud.

"Dense bones, *and* she can fly?" Janet snorted into her Caramel Mocha Frappuccino. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"You ever see an airplane take off?" Crescent asked. "You look at it and wonder how something that heavy can ever get off the earth...and then it goes...and you're left on the ground."

"Well, of course you can't fly with all those accessories." Whip-quick, Richard flicked his spoon at his whipped cream, and a dollop appeared as if by magic on the end of Janet's nose. "But you knew that."

"What?"

"Dammit, Dick! Quit throwing whipped cream on me; you *know* I hate it."

"What?" Crescent nearly yelled.

Richard looked startled. "All your piercings. You probably set off metal detectors in airports. And of course your kind can't tolerate certain metals."

Drake's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. Crescent knew exactly how he felt. How had she never thought of this before?

"What are you guys talking about?" Janet had finally gotten the last of the whipped cream off her nose. "Drake, you look like you just crapped your pants."

"I—um—I want to fly, but I can't. But I never made the connection—"

"What are you guys talking about?" Janet practically yelled.

"Fairies have a legendary fear of metal, especially iron," Richard explained. "In Crescent's case, I would guess that translates into being unable to get off the—what are you doing?"

Tearing out all her goddamned earrings and rings, that's what she was doing. Between her ears, nose, and belly button, she had over a dozen.

"I guess we're done talking," Janet commented when Crescent stood up so quickly, her chair fell over.

"There's a back door behind the second coffee machine," Drake said, "but I'm not sure now is the appropriate—Crescent?"

She ran for the door and it was right where he told her it would be. She was through it in a flash and bounding up one, two, three flights of stairs, and praise all the gods, the door to the roof was propped open and then she was out in the open.

She dove off the roof. At the last moment, she closed her eyes—she'd been disappointed too many times not to feel a twinge of anxiety. She knew she wouldn't break any bones, but landing hurt, all the same.

Except she wasn't landing.

She cracked open one eye and saw Janet, Richard, and Drake standing on the roof, looking at her. Except they were upside down.

Correction: *she* was upside down. In mid-air.

"There we go," Richard said cheerfully. "Problem solved."

"Uh." She could feel the grin split her face. "Can somebody reach my foot? I have no idea how to get down."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Now, it's none of my business," Janet began with, for her, heartening tentativeness.

"Oh, here we go."

"She's a little young for you, don't you think?"

"I have to take relationship advice from a woman who hangs out with a dead guy?"

"Figured it out, did you?"

"Took me a while. He doesn't really have a scent, you know? In fact, he smells more like you than anything else."

They were back at Drake's house, and the sun would be up soon. Crescent's feet hadn't touched the ground in three hours. Richard was amusing himself by bouncing her off the roof, seeing how high she would go. His personal best was sixteen feet. Drake and Janet were sitting cross-legged near the edge of the roof, watching.

"She's one of a kind."

"No shit. But she's a little—uh—that is to say—you think she's in it for the long haul?"

Crescent shrieked with joy as Richard bounced her on the balls of her feet and she shot into the air again.

"I have no idea," he said.

"It's just—you know, I didn't really know what I was missing until Dick kidnapped me—"

"What?"

"Long story. Anyway, you're a pretty good guy. I mean, I always liked you. It'd be nice if you could finally settle down."

"Why, Janet, I never dreamed this tender side of you existed."

"Shut the fuck up."

"And it's kind of you not to mention my grossly debilitating handicap."

"What? Oh, that. I'm not being *nice*. I just keep forgetting. I mean, you don't act like a blind guy."

"How exactly does a blind guy act?"

"How the hell should I know? So anyway, back to Blondie. You just, like, saw her and knew? Well, I know you didn't *see* her..."

"Actually," he said suddenly, "I did. See her, I mean. I can."

"For real? Not just make a picture from how she smells?"

"For real. I can see her perfectly. But only her. Everything else is the same. For example, I know your height and weight from your voice, and how you sound when you walk, but I don't know what color your eyes are. Hers are beautiful," he added dreamily.

"Wow. That's the weirdest shit I ever heard. And *I* live with a vampire." Janet rested her chin on her knees for a moment. "I don't know dick about fairies. Except I remember this story from when I was a kid—you remember Sarah Storyteller? Michael's grandma?"

"Sure. She used to read to all of us on the grounds, under those trees by the pond."

"Right. Well, there was this one story—about fairies? They were little and invisible. They'd only appear if you caught them. And if you caught them, they'd grant wishes. So maybe Crescent appeared to you. You know, maybe that's why you can see her."

"Or maybe," he said slowly, "she granted my wish."

"You wished you could see? Not that I could blame you, you poor handicapped freak of—"

"Oh, quit that. No, I never really minded not seeing, but I always wondered what my mate's face would look like. What her hair would look like, the color of her eyes...like that."

"Hum. Well. You can see her. Only her. So...maybe she *is* in it for the long haul."

"There's that tender side again. My, Richard has been *quite* the good influence."

"Oh, shut up. So, what are you going to do?"

He sighed and shifted his weight. "Hope she flies back to me, I suppose."

"Lame."

"Mature."

"I kicked your ass all over Faneuil Hall, you know."

"Then my girl kicked *your* ass."

"Oh, shut up."

* * * * *

Janet and Richard left, but Crescent refused. He'd tried to explain why she should go, but she wasn't having it. "What, is this that dumb 'if-you-love-something-let-it-go-if-it-comes-back-blah-blah-blah' thing? Because that sucks. You said I could stay as long as I wanted, you welsher."

He tried to disguise his joy. "Crescent, there's something you should know —"

"Later. God, I'm *starving*. Listen, I'm going to run up ahead and see if those guys are serving breakfast yet."

"It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I *know*, that's why I want to *check*. Be right back."

He shook his head as she hurried away, then realized they were quite close to the shelter where she'd been living. Foolish to be concerned—she was a tough one to hurt, after all—but he decided to catch up with her anyway.

That was the last rational thought he had for a while. Stupid, really—the punk shaking Crescent like a maraca looked far worse for the wear. An obvious beta type—he needed to be led. And, in abandonment, couldn't take care of himself. He certainly wasn't worth getting worked up over. He supposed Nick and what's-her-name had gone on to greener pastures...or easier marks.

"Jimmy, you idiot," Crescent was saying, prying his fingers off her arm, "will you give it up? Grabbing me is not going to fix your life. Now buzz off."

"It's all your fault," Jimmy was insisting. "Nick and Maria took off because of you."

"My ass! They took off because you can't walk ten feet down here anymore without tripping over a cop. Too bad they didn't bring you with, huh, Jimbo?"

Jimmy's eyes flashed murky murder and Drake moved quickly, spinning him away from Crescent. "Just once I'd like to take a walk with you without your being assaulted," he muttered, carefully examining her arm.

"What can I say, I've got a dark past. He's harmless. Let's go eat."

He ignored her. Then he whirled and grabbed Jimmy by the throat, lifting him in the air as easily as a mother picked up her toddler.

"Did you really," he began. He was so angry it was hard to talk. He wanted to growl and bite. "Did you *really* think you could put your hands on my mate and live to see the sun come up?"

"Whoa!" Crescent said, tugging on his arm. Before them, the punk squeaked and kicked, his face turning an interesting shade of purple. "Let go, Drake. He's just an asshole."

He was shaking the man—really just an overgrown boy, but surely old enough to know better—like a dog shakes a rag doll. "Did you really?" he said again. "Did you?"

"Drake! You are freaking me out, dude!"

You're a doctor.

She'll have bruises. He actually marked her—marked her with his filthy hands!

But you're a doctor.

"Drake, will you put him down already? He's passed out, for Christ's sake. And I really don't want to finish the day at the Cop Shop."

He growled, then flung the man away. They both watched the unconscious tough sail through the air and then hit the street like a sack of sand. Jimmy groaned, but didn't regain consciousness.

"Jeez, overprotective much?" But she was smiling. "Remind me to never tell you about my years on the streets."

"You *will* tell me."

"Later. When that vein in your forehead isn't throbbing. Yuck, by the way."

"He touched you. He should never have done that."

"Yes, and I think he gets that now! Your mate?" she added, teasing. "Is that what I am?"

He put his arms around her. "Yes. That's what you are."

"Well, all right. Let's go eat."

"If I have to look at another pancake, I may well vomit."

"Dude, it's fine. I'll get waffles," she added with a wicked grin, and stretched up, and kissed him.

"I have to tell you something. No waffles. I've put this off long enough—"

"What, no waffles, like, *ever*?"

"Crescent...this may be hard to believe..."

She kissed him again. "Your intolerance of starchy foods?"

"Be serious. I'm talking about—"

"The fact that you can see me?"

He blinked. "Well...yes. You're not surprised."

"Of course not." She smiled at him and he swore he could almost see her glowing. "I granted your wish. Apparently it's what we do."

"News to me! What exactly did I wish for? To have you in my life, or to see you?"

"I don't know, but it's kind of nice that you got it all in one package, isn't it?"

He supposed it was.

THE END

About the author:

MaryJanice Davidson welcomes mail from readers. You can write to them c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

Also by MARYJANICE DAVIDSON:

Canis Royal: Bridefight

Love Lies

Naughty or Nice

Thief of Hearts

Things That Go Bump In The Night 2

The Lust Bastion

by Michele R. Bardsley

Dear Reader,

In creating my hero, Smenkare, I used creative license with the facts of his birth and the circumstances of his disappearance from Egyptian history. Not much is known about Smenkare. Speculation about his relationship to Akhenaten, the Heretic King, is much in debate. Some scholars believe he was Akhenaten's brother or nephew, others that he was the half-brother of Tutankhamen. A few have gone so far as to suggest Smenkare, who served as co-regent for a couple of years before the king's death and ruled Egypt for a very short time afterward, was really Nefertiti disguising herself as a man. Yet another theory is that Smenkare was Akhenaten's beloved male lover.

I chose to make Smenkare the half-brother of Tutankhamen, the older brother destined to rule Egypt. In my story, Smenkare does not die, but succumbs to another fate. I've made him the son of Kiya, who was, in reality, the second wife of Akhenaten and the mother of Tutankhamen. I've made Nefertiti, the King's Great Wife, the mother of Tutankhamen, but in truth, she birthed six daughters for the King, but no sons.

Another Egyptian historical figure I mention in this tale is Ay, who was the part of Akhenaten's high court and some speculate the real power behind the throne. After King Tut died, his young wife, Ankhesenamun, married Ay, and not long after, disappeared. No one knows what happened to her, but scholars discovered a letter from her written to the Hittites, historical enemies of the Egyptians, begging for one of their princes to marry. Some believe that Ay married the young queen to secure his position as pharaoh then killed her.

One final note: You may notice that I spell King Tut's name as Tutankhamen and Tutankhaten. Both spellings are correct. When Akhenaten died, his religion died with him. When Tut came to the throne, he embraced the old gods, probably as a political move to garner favor from the people and from the ousted priests of Amun.

Thank you for your indulgence. I hope you enjoy the story of Smenkare and Kira Maxwell. I welcome your comments and invite you to drop me a line at michelebardsley@yahoo.com.

With love and laughter,

Michele R. Bardsley

CHAPTER ONE

Kira Maxwell wanted a vibrator.

Not just any vibrator.

An ultra-orgasmic won't-leave-after-it's-over long thick take-me-to-heaven vibrator.

She wanted a Pharaoh 3000.

Kira pulled into the parking lot of The Lust Bastion Erotica Emporium and parked her Saturn in the one available space. She turned off the engine, tucked her keys into her coat pocket, and took a deep breath. A fresh pine scent assaulted her, stinging her nose, and she sneezed.

Stupid air freshener. When would Selena stop putting the darn things in her car? She tugged off the tiny foul-smelling paper tree and threw it into the backseat. Kira looked into the rearview mirror and faced her scared reflection. "Go in, make the purchase, leave."

She opened the door.

And shut it.

She hugged the steering wheel. *HOOONNNNNKKK*.

"Shit!" Heart pounding, Kira released the wheel and the horn ceased its whiny protest. Geesh. Even her car didn't want affection. It must be male.

Hands trembling, she dug her lipstick out of her purse and dropped it on the floor. "Oh for heaven's—ow!" Her head smacked the dashboard and she straightened, rubbing the sore spot on her forehead. Giving up on the lipstick, she checked her reflection again. Naked lips. Damn. She fluffed her hair and checked her earrings.

I can't believe I'm primping for a vibrator. It's not like I have to date it.

Kira opened the door.

And shut it.

The only time she'd ever been in a porn shop was in college when she and some girlfriends went to buy gag gifts for a bachelorette party. She'd been too embarrassed to look at the weird contraptions, blow-up dolls, and assorted body gels. When she moved to Las Vegas two years ago to take the job at Marketing For Morons, she'd noticed the adult bookstores were almost as numerous as the casinos. Now, here she was, contemplating a trip into Naughty Naughty Land because she wanted a pleasure tool all her own.

God, she was tired of lousy sex. *And lousy, fuck-me-once men.*

Kira opened the door.

And rammed the large rear end of a woman trying to get into the car next to her.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" Kira couldn't get out of the car because the woman took up most of the space between the two cars. She closed the door, the woman scuttled past, and Kira dashed out of the car, managing to push the lock in before shutting the door.

"Margaret, honey, are you okay?"

Another portly woman rounded the car and grabbed the arm of Large Rear End. Kira grimaced at her uncharitable thoughts. "I'm truly sorry."

"It's okay, honey. Plenty of padding there. No bumps or bruises."

To Kira's shock, Margaret's friend grabbed her ample rear and massaged it. "You're sure it's all right? Maybe I should check it out."

Margaret giggled. "Thelma, you are so ornery."

Thelma grinned. They turned to look at Kira, who couldn't stop staring at them with an open mouth.

"First lesbian sighting, dearie?"

"Uh, no. Well, yes."

"Don't worry. You can't catch it."

"Catch it?"

"Lesbianism."

"Oh."

Margaret tapped Thelma's arm. "Don't tease her. We'll just get out of your way. Headed to the Emporium?"

"Uh..." Kira looked behind her at the building, made to look like an Egyptian palace. "I was just going to—"

"There's no shame in sex, no shame at all. Go on in, find some fun." Margaret winked at her. Then she kissed Thelma. They pulled apart, sloppy grins on their grandmotherly faces. "Let's go, sweetheart."

The older women got into their car, leaving Kira to go into the store or jump in her car and forget about buying a Pharaoh 3000 vibrator.

She took a deep breath and, before she could change her mind, walked to the building. She grabbed the ornate gold handle and paused, studying the huge wood doors. Carved in individual squares were images of people having sex. All kinds of people in all kinds of positions. Men and women. Women and women. Men and men. She leaned closer. Was that a *goat*?

"In or out, lady. Ain't got all day."

Kira yelped and released the handle. She looked over her shoulder at the scruffy little man behind her. She moved aside, allowed him to open the door, and followed him into The Lust Bastion.

Kira gaped at the inside of the Emporium. She felt like she'd been transported to an Egyptian temple. Beautiful pillars carved with hieroglyphics and painted with bright reds, blues, and yellows reached from floor to ceiling. She felt excessively respectful...until she noticed the blow-up dolls in a glass case near the door. The blow-up girl was bent over, her round plastic ass arched toward the blow-up boy, who'd put his "realistic" penis into her "realistic" pussy. Kira read the display sign: "Mighty Mike and Pussy Galore in Dogs Rutting Position."

"How romantic," muttered Kira. She looked at Mighty Mike and wondered about the possibility of taking him home. A man she could deflate, fold, and put away in a drawer until she needed him appealed to her. No broken promises. No insincere lies. No fake feelings.

Across from the "Dogs Rutting" display was another glass case with another pair of blow-up dolls. The woman doll lay on a zillion rose petals, one leg up on the guy's shoulder. Her hand covered her clit. The guy had one plastic arm behind him, another in front of the woman's prostrate leg, and his penis inserted in her vagina. "Big Ben and Grace Slick in Sideways Fuck Position" said the sign above the dolls.

Who the hell came up with these names? Drunk frat guys watching pornos? Sheesh. Kira stopped gawking at the displays and walked into the main part of the store. An electric *zing* pinioned her between the pillars. The odd feeling lasted only seconds, but she felt strange, as if she'd been momentarily examined and judged.

She shook her head. Of course, she would feel like she was being judged. She felt guilty about being in a porn shop. She felt guilty about seeking an instrument for her own pleasure. She felt guilty that she couldn't attract a single decent guy into her life.

"There's no reason to feel guilty," purred a low feminine voice.

Kira turned and found herself under the scrutiny of a beautiful woman. Dark eyes assessed Kira. She was dressed like an Egyptian, from flowing white garments to multi-colored jewelry, from the thin sandals on her slender feet to the band of gold surrounding her dark hair. Dark kohl lined her eyes, but that seemed to be the only concession to Egyptian make-up. Her skin was so flawless, she didn't need the war paint most women used just to look halfway decent. Her features were almost cat-like, and her feline smile only solidified Kira's impression of a prowling kitty.

"You read minds here at the ol' Emporium?" Kira, wondered if this exotic woman was as psychic as she was gorgeous.

"I read expressions." The woman's smile twitched. "A young woman alone in my store of erotic wonders...you have been mistreated by men. You seek to fulfill your own pleasure."

"Someone told me about the Pharaoh 3000," said Kira, before she lost her nerve. No way was she going to peruse the shelves. From the size of the vibrator section, she'd be in here for three days trying to find the one she wanted.

"I am Bast." The woman held out her hand.

Kira took it, wondering at the unusual name. The woman gripped her hand a few seconds longer than necessary, her gaze so intense Kira blushed.

"You are the one," announced Bast.

"Uh...what?"

"The vibrator you asked for, it is not for you. I have something special, something you will like better."

While she wasn't an expert on vibrators, Kira was damned sure about the product she wanted to buy. She'd clipped the ad from a porn magazine she'd stolen from her co-worker's desk. The ragged paper had been in her purse for the last two weeks. It had taken her that long to gather enough courage to drive to The Lust Bastion.

"Look, I know what I want. Just sell me the Pharaoh 3000 and I'll be on my way."

Bast did not reply. Instead she led Kira behind the cashier's counter, through a dark purple curtain, and into a small room. Unease crept up Kira's spine. It shouldn't be this difficult to purchase one stinkin' sex toy!

The woman gestured for Kira to stay put then she continued through a second purple curtain. Kira debated about leaving the room, running out the door, and never returning. Wasn't her hand just as good a tool as a vibrator? An orgasm was an orgasm, right?

"For you," said Bast as she re-entered the room. She held up a white box with symbols carved on the top of it. "Sit."

Kira looked down at the small exquisitely carved wood table and its matching chairs. She hadn't noticed them before. Curiosity piqued, she scooted onto a chair and waited to see what was in the white box.

Bast opened the box, unfolded layers of tissue paper, and removed a large gold vibrator. *Gold*. Long, with a thick head and realistic balls, it was lust inspiring.

Kira stared, fascinated. "Why is it gold?"

"It is the appropriate color for a gift." She handed it to Kira.

Kira took it, amazed at how real it felt—almost as warm and soft as a man's flesh. She flipped it over and saw a tiny black button. She pointed to it. "I turn it on here, right? How do I control the speed?"

"The vibrator knows what you need," replied Bast. "It's intuitive."

"How is that possible?"

"Computer chips with emotional sensors."

"Oh." Kira wasn't sure she believed such technology existed. "What's this one called?"

"The Great Smenkare."

"The Great *Smenkare*? That's a sucky name for a vibrator."

Bast's smile suggested a private joke. "It fits for this one. You may take it with you for two hundred and fifty dollars."

Kira dropped the vibrator; it thunked to the table. "Are you nuts? That's enough for a gourmet lunch and a spa treatment. And maybe some new eye shadow from Estée Lauder."

"You don't need those things. You need this." Bast plucked the golden dick from the table and placed it back in the box. "You won't regret the purchase. I guarantee it."

"Is that a money-back guarantee?"

Bast lifted an elegant shoulder. "If you like."

Kira frowned. That sure didn't sound like a guarantee. She looked at The Great Smenkare nestled in the tissue paper. Truth was, she could afford it. She tended to be a penny pincher, which a former therapist had pointed out was due to her growing up in a poor family who had survived on government welfare and charity. Kira had already figured out that much and that's why Captain Obvious was now her *former* therapist.

She wasn't sure why she wanted the vibrator, but the need to own it crept inside her like a thief sneaking into a museum. Desire overtook her in an odd sweeping rush. She wanted to feel it rub her clit, stroke her pussy, sensitize her nipples. Images of her and the golden cock consumed her thoughts. Her lips parted and her breath exited in a pleasurable gasp. Her glazed eyes looked at Bast. "I'll take it."

"Somehow, I knew you would."

Bast's cat-like grin unnerved Kira. There was something weird about the woman. Something...mystical. And creepy.

"In order to use the vibrator, you must say the incantation." One glossy gold nail tapped the symbols on the box's lid.

"I thought I turned on the button."

"Incantation first. You only have to speak it once. After that, you merely press the button."

Kira peered at the squiggles, dots, and lines. "I can't read whatever this is."

"The English translation is inside the box."

"Should I light some incense and wear a white robe?"

"If you wish."

"I wasn't serious."

Bast's brows rose, but her gaze was steady, intent, and *serious*.

Yep. This chick was a 10 on the creep-o-meter scale. Kira cleared her throat. "So what does it take to buy this thing? Firstborns? Or do you take credit cards?"

"I haven't taken a firstborn for payment since the twelfth century. A credit card will do nicely."

Kira took the box and followed Bast to the cash register. She paid for the Great Smenkare with her never-used Visa.

Bast gave her a black plastic bag with The Lust Bastion emblazoned in gold swirls across it. "Be sure and tell your friends about us."

"Yeah. I'll do that." *When it snows in hell.*

* * * * *

When Kira arrived at her apartment, she found her co-worker Todd Groman standing next to her door. So much for the security entrance and announcement buzzer visitors were supposed to use to enter the building.

"Here for your porn mag? How'd you know I took it?"

Todd's gleaming smile dimmed. "What mag?"

"Never mind. What do you want?"

He held out a rose. "I've been thinking about you. I know we didn't part on the best of terms last weekend."

Surprised by the gesture, she put down her bag and accepted the rose. "You mean when you fucked me and left five minutes after it was over? I didn't even get dinner."

"I brought wine."

"Yeah, the screw cap was a nice touch." She stuck the rose in her Emporium sack then turned and unlocked her door. Like a chastised puppy, Todd followed her inside.

"I want to make it up to you." He glanced at her bag. "You go shopping?"

"No, I collect logo bags from stores."

Todd sighed, his handsome face looking woeful. "How about a movie? Or coffee?"

She paused, her heart picking up its pace. Could it be that Todd hadn't used her for sex last Saturday? Sure, he got her plowed with cheap wine, then he *really* plowed her, but she'd been willing enough. He'd been a jerk to leave so soon after they finished and a bigger jerk at work when he ignored her every time they passed in the hallways. Rumor was that he was seeing Nanette, the

receptionist. She had big boobs and a tiny brain and a full social calendar through the year 2029.

"You want to go on a date?" she clarified. "Movies, popcorn, and Junior Mints?"

"You want snacks, too?"

"Cheapskate."

Todd laughed, but the sound rang false. "I was just kidding. Of course you can have some popcorn."

Kira thought about the evening she'd planned on the way home from The Lust Bastion. She was going to order Chinese food, light every candle in her home, run a hot bath, and initiate her new toy. Just thinking about putting the Great Smenkare between her thighs made her wet.

Damn, she was horny.

She looked at Todd. He was a nice-looking guy. He worked out so he didn't have an ounce of beer belly. He was tall, tanned, and when he smiled, a single dimple graced the corner of his mouth. It hadn't been so bad between them. He had a nice-sized cock and she sure could use one of those right now. She tucked the bag under her coffee table and put her purse on top of it. Her keys jangled as she tossed them down, too.

"Why don't we skip the movies?" She removed her light jacket and unbuttoned her blouse.

Todd's grin lit a fire in her belly. He followed her into the bedroom then shucked his shoes and sat on the edge of the bed to take off his socks. By the time she'd taken off her blouse and pants, Todd was completely naked, his cock already half-hard.

She crooked her finger. Her body tingled with anticipation as Todd walked to her.

"Let's go, stud."

Two minutes later, Kira was having really lousy sex.

Stuck on her hands and knees while Todd thrust into her pussy and occasionally slapped her ass, she pressed her face into the pillow and prayed for suffocation. Her knees and palms felt rubbed raw against the cheap cotton sheets. She needed new sheets. Silk ones. Maybe she'd get a whole new bed, too.

"Oh baby. Oh...oh!"

Todd reached around and clumsily rubbed her clit. She gritted her teeth at the ineffective effort. If only he'd come and get off her.

She bit her lip, feeling guilty. It was a miracle her good-looking co-worker had even noticed her. She should feel grateful Todd was in her bed instead of that vapid Nanette's. She needed to relax. Get into the groove and try to enjoy herself.

She thrust up her hips and matched his rhythm, adding a deep moan for effect.

"Yeah. You like that, don't you, honey?"

I need to balance my checkbook.

His thrusts were harder, faster.

When's the last time I washed my car?

"Oh God, Nanette. I'm coming!"

Kira grimaced as Todd grabbed her hips and rammed into her as he came. His fingers bit into her skin, his cock throbbed inside her. Seconds later, he pulled out, removed the condom, and slipped off the bed. Kira collapsed onto the pillow, angry tears wetting her face.

"That was great, Kira."

She rolled over and stared in disbelief as Todd put on his Dockers and knit shirt.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't stay, babe." His regretful smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'll call you."

She sat up, pulling the pillow across her chest. "You yelled Nanette's name."

"Did I?" Todd tucked his socks into his pockets and slipped his feet inside his loafers. "Look, Kira, I'm not looking for a serious relationship. I thought you realized that this was just some...entertainment."

"Really? Shouldn't I get a tip?"

He grinned. "I gave you more than just the tip, sweetheart." He tucked his wallet into his back pocket and smoothed his hair with his hands. "I'll see you at the office. Thanks." He winked and left the bedroom.

She listened to him walk through her living room then heard him open and close her apartment door.

That prick.

Kira felt like the stupidest woman alive. He'd come over to get screwed and had dangled the offer of a movie like a carrot to a starving bunny. She fell against the bed and rubbed the hot tears from her face. Todd was a prick in a long line of pricks. Men wanted women for one reason – to fuck.

Before Todd, there'd been Hank. Hank was the water guy who serviced her building. And, apparently, the women in the building. One day, he'd delivered more than her water bottles. He hadn't cared that she wore her cucumber mask or that her hair was in curlers or that she was wearing her oldest terry cloth robe. She'd let him take her against the wall. She'd halfway enjoyed that encounter. At least Hank had given her an orgasm before leaving. When he didn't call...when

he didn't even bring her fuckin' water the next week, she cancelled the service and threw away that stupid robe.

Before Hank, she'd dated the computer geek from down the hall. A month after they'd started going out, he invited her to his apartment and attempted a clumsy seduction. At the time, she'd thought his efforts cute. He'd been a rotten lay, too, but he cuddled with her until dawn. He moved out the next week without leaving a forwarding address.

Kira dragged herself from the bed and into her bathroom. Her body felt sore and cranky. Todd had gotten his release, but she hadn't. She wasn't sure she had the energy to finish the job herself. She looked in the mirror at her smeared make-up and red, puffy eyes. "You're pathetic."

Maybe she'd have better luck with women. Kira considered the idea of becoming a lesbian as she turned on the hot water and drew a bath. The two ladies she'd met in The Lust Bastion's parking lot seemed happy. She lit the candles around the tub's rim then opened a bottle of rose water. The sweet scent tickled her nose. She poured it into the tub. After capping the bottle and returning it to the shelf, she picked up some bubble beads and tossed them into the churning water.

Hmmm. A woman probably wouldn't screw over another woman, would she? Kira imagined herself suckling another woman's tits, touching another woman's pussy...how would it feel?

Nah.

She grabbed her bath pillow, slid into the tub, and sighed as the water covered her body with soft heat. She leaned against her pillow and thought about the perfect man. The perfect sex slave. A man who would do whatever she said, whenever she wanted, and however she desired. He wouldn't lie to her. He wouldn't call out another woman's name when they made love. And he would never, ever break her heart.

She shifted in the tub. The water lapped over her breasts, slipped between her thighs, and tickled her sensitive neck. It felt almost like a lover's touch. She slid her hands along her rib cage and cupped her own breasts. They tingled with the need to be touched, to be suckled. The ache of desire lodged between her thighs, her throbbing clit a reminder that Todd hadn't give her an orgasm. She pinched her own nipples and gasped with the pleasure that zapped her to the core.

Her hand slid through her pubic hair and covered her mound; she slipped a finger into her pussy, then two, all the while using her other hand to pinch one nipple then the other. She writhed against her hand, the water surrounding her, sensitizing her skin with its movement. She slipped a third finger into her slick wet heat, and stroked faster, deeper.

She pressed her palm against her clit as she felt the pulsing of her vagina around her fingers, but though the attention felt good, her body hypersensitive to the sensations of the water and her hands, she didn't feel too orgasmic yet.

Then she remembered her toy.

The Great Smenkare.

She got out of the tub so fast, half the water splashed out. She took a moment to dry herself because, knowing her luck, she'd electrocute herself with the vibrator and die wet and naked on her couch.

Throbbing, aching, and horny as hell, she hurried to the living room and tore through the bag she'd tucked under the coffee table. With trembling hands, she opened the box and took out the gold vibrator. She lay down on the couch, pushed the vibrator's little black button, and spread her legs.

Nothing happened.

Kira opened her eyes and sat up. She pushed the button again.

Nada.

She shook it, jiggled it, and gave it a hand job.

"What the hell is —" Then she remembered the incantation.

She dug through the box until she found a small piece of paper wrapped like a tiny parchment scroll. She untied it, rolled it open on her thigh, and read the words.

CHAPTER TWO

"Fuck me."

Smenkare did as his mistress bade him, slipping between her thighs and entering her wet heat with a rough, penetrating stroke. The leather strap around his neck chafed his skin, but the rattle of the chains that kept him a prisoner of the four-poster bed chafed his pride. Sweat dripped from his brow; his lips and tongue were sore from suckling the bitch's nipples and pussy. He wished for her death.

A thousand times he wished for her death.

"Harder, slave," she hissed, smacking him on the ass.

He complied. She slapped his ass again, then kneaded his buttocks with hard fingers as her long nails dug into his flesh.

He hated this woman. She'd been a cruel mistress, a soulless creature with insatiable appetites for sex and humiliation. But even as his hatred coursed through him, he felt the building of his own pleasure, the rising crest of orgasm.

"Faster, my darling. Faster. Oh God! Fuck me, baby."

Her hands slid to his hips and she urged him deeper into her pussy. She bucked against him, her whispered words of pleasure turning to a scream as she came, her body arcing against his. As her orgasm faded, he pulled out, knowing the action would anger her, and emptied his hot seed between her breasts. He watched with satisfaction as come dripped down her neck.

"Goddamn it! You prick!" His mistress struggled out from beneath him, rolling off the bed, and stomping into the bathroom. "You'll pay for that, slave."

Smenkare collapsed against the silk sheets and grinned. This small rebellion was worth the whipping he'd receive. It wasn't that his mistress cared about being sprayed with his seed. No, she hated when he did anything without her express permission. She made him beg for his food, for his sleep, for his own pleasure.

Him! A prince of Egypt forced to degrade and humiliate himself for this common woman.

He watched the bathroom door, seething at his helplessness. Finally his mistress appeared, a cat o' nine tails in her hand.

"You've been naughty." Her slow smile was malicious.

He turned away from her, preparing his body for another battering. His mistress loved to hurt him, loved it when he bled, sweated, raged. This was no

game between lovers. They did not love each other. They did not even like each other. He hated her with every breath in his being. But his choice had long ago been taken away. Women chose him. And he obeyed their whims because three millennia ago he'd dared to defy a goddess.

"Watch me," she commanded.

Reluctantly, he turned his head and watched her sashay across the room. She rubbed her breasts with the whip and let it drop between her legs as she approached the bed.

Bright light assailed the room, bathing the torture-chamber bedroom in an almost angelic glow. Smerkare felt the familiar tingling pull, the sense of rushing through space and time as he faded from the bed.

The last sound he heard was the bitch's frustrated scream.

* * * * *

"Okay." Kira tossed the scroll onto the coffee table. She peered at the vibrator and gave its tip a kiss for good luck. Wow. It felt just like human flesh, warm and soft and almost pulsing with life. "Now make me happy, damn it, or it's back to the store for you!"

This time when she pushed the button, the vibrator worked. Closing her eyes, she settled onto the couch again and allowed a fantasy to unfold as she slid the vibrator down her pussy and rubbed it along her clit.

A man appeared between her legs. He was tall and muscled with caramel skin and dark-as-sin eyes. His hair was black, soft as a raven's wing, tied behind his neck with a leather thong. He was gloriously naked, his big cock hard and ready.

He bent close to her and whispered, "What do you wish of me, mistress?"

"Love me," she commanded.

"But how?" His smile was sly. "There are so many ways to love a woman as beautiful as you are."

She blushed at the compliment. No one had ever called her beautiful before.

"Tell me what you want, my mistress."

"I want..." She hesitated. What did she want? "I want tenderness."

"As you wish."

His head dipped down and he took her mouth in a gentle caress, his breath skirting her lips. Only when her mouth was pliant, willing, did he deepen the kiss, thrusting his tongue inside to mate with hers. His hand slipped through her hair then lowered to cup her jaw. She reveled in each tender gesture, each slow sensation caused by his patient tending of her. Too soon, he released her mouth.

His lips moved down her throat, lingering at the base. He trailed a path to her breasts, raining tiny kisses over each of them, cupping them in his hands to bring them closer to his mouth. His warm lips closed over one turgid nipple. She cried out at the contact. He suckled, licked, nipped. Her hands fisted against the couch's fabric as she arced toward him. He turned his attention to her other nipple, giving it the same torturous attention, suckling in a way that made her pussy wet and aching.

"Please, I need..."

His hand coasted down her stomach and found the nest of curls at the apex of her thighs. He gently pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger, released the tiny nub, and pinched again.

Kira moaned.

God, this was the best fantasy she'd ever had.

Her dream lover laved her nipples and slipped two fingers inside her pussy. She moved in rhythm with his strokes, and pressed his head against her breast, wanting more from him. He bit her nipple, the rough edge of his teeth sending waves of pleasure cresting through her.

"I want you inside me," she said.

"As you wish, mistress."

He moved on top of her, parted her thighs, and entered her in one swift stroke. With one hand, he captured her wrists and raised her arms above her head. With the other hand, he steadied himself over her. His cock filled her, his motions slow, steady, and tender. Oh so tender.

"Faster."

He increased his pace. His obsidian gaze captured hers. "Faster?"

"Yes. Please...oh yes."

He pounded into her now, his strokes deep and sure. Still he held her wrists, his thumb pressing against the erratic pulse. She bucked against him, her clit throbbing. "Mistress..." he breathed. A moan escaped his lips and he bent to kiss her neck. "Please, mistress."

Kira wasn't sure what he wanted, what he asked. Her body was awash in need, desire. A buzzing climbed her spine then zipped down again, sensation after sensation vibrated from her core.

The orgasm burst inside her, so brilliant, so pure, she screamed, caught in a web of pleasure that crisscrossed her entire being.

Her dream lover stilled, his expression unreadable. "What does my mistress wish now?"

Kira stared at him. "Isn't it your turn?"

"My turn?"

"To...uh...come."

"You wish me to come?"

"Yes. I wish you as much pleasure as you've given to me."

His eyes darkened. "Will you allow me to choose my pleasure?"

What an odd fantasy lover she'd chosen.

Kira nodded. "Of course."

Her lover's expression turned hungry, feral. "Hold your breasts together, mistress."

She did so without question. He removed his cock from her pussy then scooted forward until his knees were even with her arms. He inserted his cock into the tight space created by her breasts squeezed together.

Kira gasped. The intimacy of having his cock so close to her face was unnerving. His penis was so wet from her it was slick against her skin. He increased his pace, groaning. Kira closed her eyes, feeling her body rev up again. She liked this man thrusting between her breasts; her fingers curled around her nipples and tugged. She moaned, her eyes opening and finding the man's gaze on her.

"Mistress, I'm going to come. Drink from me."

She'd never done such a thing in her life, but she was more than willing. He stopped his thrusts and pushed the tip of his round, thick head against her lips. A drop of pre-come lingered there and she licked it. It tasted salty and not unpleasant.

"Open your mouth. Take me."

She opened her mouth and allowed him to slide between her lips. She cupped his balls with one hand and curled the other around his cock. Her tongue lapped and suckled his head while her hands stroked the hard flesh of his penis and the round softness of his balls.

"Mistress!" he cried out.

He pushed his cock into her mouth and she clamped her lips around it. He jerked once, twice...and warm salty come filled her mouth. She swallowed it with surprising ease, drinking from him until he was dry. She slid her tongue along the slit then swirled around the head. After a moment, her lover eased away from her mouth and settled beside her on the couch.

"You have given me more pleasure than any woman I've known. What do you wish of me now?"

She warmed at his compliment, though it probably wasn't true. But dream lovers were supposed to say such wonderful things, weren't they? Exhaustion poured through her as she snuggled next to him. "I wish to be held, and to sleep." Before she closed her eyes, she added, "And I wish you'd really be here tomorrow when I wake up from this dream."

* * * * *

Kira woke on Sunday morning, but she didn't open her eyes. Not yet. The fantasy she'd created last night still held her enthralled. In fact, she swore she felt a male body pressed against her back, his arm draped against her stomach, his steady breath fanning her neck. She even felt his cock nestled against her buttocks.

She had one hell of an imagination.

Exhaling a contented sigh, she opened her eyes. She was in her bedroom, tucked into the ugly flower comforter like a burrito. Her orgasm last night must have made her black out because she sure didn't remember moving from the couch to her bed. She grinned. "Use The Great Smenkare with caution. May cause amnesia."

"You flatter me, mistress," said a sleepy male voice.

Kira screamed and tried to wrestle herself out of the tight covers. The male arm she'd imagined draped across her stomach tightened to keep her still then pressed her against the imaginary male body.

She screamed louder.

"Ssshhh, mistress," commanded the same voice. "It is too early for womanly hysterics."

That shut her up.

Her imaginary man was chastising her.

Goddamn it. She couldn't even create the perfect fantasy man. She had to create one that accused her of being hysterical.

Taking a deep breath, she squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe she was still dreaming. Yeah. One of those dreams within a dream people talked about. She steadied her breath, trying to ignore the feel of the man behind her.

He didn't exist. He was the imaginary manifestation of a vibrator. He was just –

Wait a minute.

Did his penis just twitch against her ass?

Her eyes flew open and she struggled against the covers. She couldn't extract herself so she wiggled off the bed until she landed in a floral-blanket lump on the floor. The covers clung to her legs like a begging boyfriend, but she managed to kick off the damn thing with lots of flailing and cursing. Blanket-free, she scooted against the nearest wall, and covered her eyes. After a moment of deep breathing, she spread her fingers and peered through the gaps.

Her handsome fantasy man's face appeared at the edge of the bed. He stared at her quizzically. "Is this your normal way of waking up, mistress?"

Kira screamed and scrambled to her feet. She backed against the wall and glanced at the bedroom door. It looked like it was a zillion miles away. Her bathroom was located on the other side of the bed so she couldn't lock herself in it and yell until neighbors heard her pleas for help.

Her heart pounded furiously. She'd never been so scared in her life. How the hell had this guy gotten into her apartment? And what kind of sicko pervert crawled into a woman's bed naked just to hold her like she was some kind of precious treasure?

She inched toward the bedroom door and smacked her hip into the dresser. "Ow!" She glanced at the man and found him stretching leisurely across the bed, his gaze assessing her in a way that made her whole body blush.

"You have firm breasts. And round hips. Your legs are long, like a colt's. But I especially like your mouth." His grin was sexy, knowing.

"Th—that wasn't real," she said, moving along the dresser. The drawer knobs poked her in the rear end. "You're not here. I created a fantasy and I'm trapped in it. I went crazy and I'm really in a padded room living out a sexual lie."

"You are here," he pointed out. "This room is not padded. But it's possible you are crazy."

"Gee thanks," she managed.

"Where are you going, mistress?"

Mistress. She remembered her fantasy man had called her that, too. Was it possible this was real? That she had somehow conjured this guy from her fantasy life?

He sighed. "She did it again, didn't she? When she doesn't explain, it sometimes takes a day or two to convince my new mistress that I am real."

She'd reached the end of the dresser. Just a few steps and she'd be at the door, but she hesitated. "When *who* doesn't explain?"

"Bast."

"The woman who owns the adult bookstore sent you to my house?"

"No," said the man. "You did."

"I did not."

"You bought the vibrator." He sat up. "How much did you pay?"

"You're saying you're the vibrator?"

"It is my prison."

She wasn't crazy. He was. She lunged for the door, scooted through it, and shut it. Heart pounding, she grabbed a chair from the dining table and shoved it under the knob. The man's size and strength would surely smash the thin door

to pieces. But for an intruder, he sure was lazy. He'd watched her leave, apparently unconcerned about what she planned to do.

She reached for the phone and hesitated. Call the police? How would she explain his presence? He looked like her lover, lying around in her bed as if he belonged there. Bast. She should call Bast and ask her what the hell was going on.

The air conditioning kicked on and a cool blast hit her from the vent above her head. Her nipples hardened and goose bumps pimples her skin.

Shit. She was naked. And all her clothes were in the bedroom with Mr. Macho.

* * * * *

Smenkare stretched on the bed, enjoying the soft feel of the mattress. Bast had not given him a rest period. Though she had yet to forgive him in three thousand years for his terrible deed, she had softened toward him. Sometimes she waited centuries before giving him to another woman, but other times she moved him from woman to woman for years with no time for recovery.

His last mistress had been the worst of his captors. It was possible Bast did not know how mentally sick the woman had been, but then again, she might have known and wished his suffering for the thirty days he'd been bound to the bitch.

His first vessel had been a marble dildo given to one of Amun's godswives. He was sure the irony pleased Bast to no end. As the centuries passed and technology changed, he found himself trapped in a vibrator—and this one was truly a part of him. Bast used his own cock and balls to create his latest prison. Turn on the button and he formed around it.

As he thought of last night, a smile creased his lips. Using what little powers he was allowed, he'd encouraged his mistress to believe she was creating the fantasy, not enjoying a real encounter. He found it was less of a shock for his mistresses if he began this way. Most women, no matter how badly they sought companionship, did not appreciate a man with a hard-on suddenly appearing between their legs with an offer to satisfy their every whim.

Grabbing a pillow and tucking it under his head, Smenkare studied the bedroom. The white bed with its matching dresser and nightstands overwhelmed the tiny space. The bedcovers, covered in little purple flowers were scratchy—and ugly.

His gaze took in the knickknacks on the dresser, the clothing draped over a purple chair in the corner, and the few framed pictures adorning the walls. He saw two doors on either side of the room. His mistress had gone out the one on the right. He suspected the rest of her home was through it. That meant the other door probably led to the bathroom.

It appeared that his mistress lived in an apartment, the smallest of all domiciles. Each time he manifested for a woman, Bast infused the knowledge of the era into his mind so he knew the words, the customs, and the culture. He knew the modern era well, too well. Its noise, its pollution, its lack of soul were terrible for him to endure.

Despite the passage of time, he never lost the ache in his heart for his homeland. In the palaces he'd known, rooms were spacious and beautiful, painted in fine colors, kept in prime condition by servants. He remembered the cool breezes of early spring days filtering through open windows, the succulent fruit and soft bread served at breakfast. How he missed his Egypt! Would he never forget the chariot races with Tutenkhaten? The shy smiles of his sister as she asked for stories about Thebes? The daily walks in the garden sanctuary of the Aten?

Kiya, his mother, had been a lesser wife, but had given the King a son. For ten years, he knew he was destined to rule Egypt. Then Nefertiti, the Great Wife, offered his father the son he'd always wanted from her. Despite Tutenkhaten's frailties and the fact he was the youngest boy, he was the favored son. Akhenaten had loved Nefertiti more than his own life. To gain a son from her was a prayer answered, he said, from the great Aten. And deep in his heart, Smenkare had known Nefertiti would not tolerate anyone but Tutenkhaten ascending the throne. But he never imagined the lengths to which she would go to attain her goal.

Tired of reliving memories and attacked by hunger, Smenkare rose from the bed and walked to the door his mistress had exited. He twisted the knob and pushed, but the door would not open, obviously blocked on the other side. He knocked.

"Mistress? Do you wish me to stay in the bedroom? Or may I join you for breakfast?"

He swallowed his pride for the thousandth time as he asked a woman for permission to do things that should be done freely.

She did not answer and he wondered if she'd left and if she expected him to stay in the room until she returned. He knocked on the door again. "Mistress?"

"Stop calling me that!"

"What should I call you then?"

"A cab."

He paused. "Acab, may I have breakfast with you?"

He heard a short bark of laughter. "As a fantasy guy, your sense of humor of sucks. Look, I really want you to stay in there until I figure out what to do about you."

"As you wish, mist – Acab."

"Oh for the love of Pete! My name is Kira, okay?" He heard a rattling sound and looked down. Near his feet, a foiled wrapper appeared under the inch gap at the bottom of the door, followed by a second, then a third. He picked up the first one. *Nutri-Grain Bar*. He tore it open and took a bite. Not a bad taste. He scooped up the other two then took them to bed where he settled in to wait until his mistress — his *Kira* — wanted him.

* * * * *

Kira plucked the green curtain from the front window in the living room and tucked it around herself toga-style. Then she picked up the phone to call Selena. Her best friend answered on the first ring.

"I have a very handsome, very crazy, very naked man trapped in my bedroom. He claims he's been imprisoned in a vibrator that I bought at The Lust Bastion yesterday and I released him from it when I used it."

"Sweetie, did you forget to take your meds?"

"I'm not on meds unless you count my multi-vitamin."

"Did you inhale Liquid Paper again? Remember the last time? You hallucinated Keanu Reeves in your cubicle."

"Selena! Focus! Handsome, crazy, naked man in my bedroom."

"And you bought a magical vibrator. I heard you." She paused. "You really bought a vibrator?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations, honey, it's about time."

Kira rolled her eyes. Selena didn't believe her and why should she? Kira wouldn't believe it if Selena had called *her* with the same outrageous tale.

"I'll prove it. Can you come over?"

"I have to paint my kitchen cabinets today. Can you bring him over here?"

"No, I cannot. I'm dressed in a curtain that used to hang in my living room. I have a naked man who calls me mistress in my bedroom eating Nutri-Grain bars. Do you think you could spare a moment of your time to drop by and help your insane friend?"

"Will you help me paint my kitchen cabinets?"

"Yes, because when I kill you, the blood spatter will ruin the woodwork."

"Don't get dramatic," said Selena. "I'll be there in half an hour."

It was the longest thirty minutes of Kira's life. The scratchy curtain rubbed her skin raw, but damned if she was going to take it off. She sat on the couch and tried to watch TV, but she was too restless.

Was he still in there?

Had she imagined the whole incident?

Was she a loon?

Maybe she should call her therapist and make an appointment. Admitting that she had somehow manifested a man from a vibrator would make a shrink ecstatic just thinking of the billable hours.

Her intercom buzzed. She ran to the door and pushed the "In" button that opened the building's security door. Selena must have taken her time walking up the one flight of stairs, but after an eternity, she knocked on the apartment's front door.

Kira opened it and dragged her friend inside. "What took you so long?"

"I decided to drop by Keanu's house and see if he'd join us." Selena appraised her with raised brows. "Nice toga. Where's your imaginary friend?"

"In the bedroom."

Selena dropped her purse on the coffee table and walked toward the bedroom. "Let's go have a look."

Kira trailed her friend across the living room. "Are you nuts?"

"No, you are." Selena removed the dining room chair from doorway and put her hand on the knob. "C'mon Kira. We'll open the door and you'll see that your bed is as empty as your wallet after a three-day sale at Macy's."

"Fine. But you go first." Kira's heart pounded and her palms felt slick with sweat, but she reluctantly followed Selena into her bedroom. Her gaze zeroed in on the bed.

It was empty.

"B—but...he was there! Right there! He was holding me in his arms. Hey! His penis twitched against my ass. Who in their right mind imagines a penis twitching?"

"Apparently, you do." Selena approached the bed and whistled at the mangled covers on the floor. "Looks like you had a helluva night with your vibrator."

"The woman who sold it to me didn't say anything about it causing hallucinations. I'm returning it and getting my two hundred and fifty dollars back."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars for a vibrator? You *are* nuts."

"I feel so stupid." Kira sat on the bed and sniffled. "I can't even pick out a decent vibrator. I not only wear some kind of weird relationship repellent, I am a sex moron."

"I think there's a twelve-step program for that."

"Ha. Ha."

Selena plopped down next to Kira and put an arm around her shoulders. "There's nothing wrong with you, sweetie. You're going through a rough spell,

that's all. What do you say we go shopping today? We could stop at Cold Stone Creamery for ice cream on the way to the Fashion Show Mall."

Slightly cheered, Kira smiled. "All right. I'll take a quick shower and get dressed."

She stood and headed toward the bathroom, but before she reached the door she heard the toilet flush. She turned and looked at Selena, who scrambled from the bed and hurried to stand next to Kira. Together, they stared at the door.

It opened.

The gorgeous, naked, and aroused man who was supposed to be a fantasy lover leaned against the doorjamb. His gaze traveled from one woman to another, a smile curving his sensuous lips. "Do you wish a threesome, mistress?"

Kira glanced at Selena. Her mouth had dropped open. For a moment, Kira enjoyed the fact that her normally unshakeable, down-to-earth friend was speechless. She tapped Selena under the chin. "You're drooling."

Selena's mouth snapped shut. "Oh. My. God."

The man walked to Kira and cupped her cheek. "What does my mistress wish?"

Stunned at his familiarity, at the teeny tiny flame that leapt in anticipation of his touch, Kira stood rooted to the floor. Her fantasy lover bent and kissed her, his mouth moving across her lips in such a gentle way she almost swooned. "I want you again," he said. "I ache for my mistress." He pushed closer, his rock-hard penis pressing against the vee of her thighs. He glanced at Selena, who looked like a Technicolor statue as she stood and stared at them.

"Selena?" Kira waved her hand in front of her friend's eyes. She didn't even blink.

"She is..." the man paused as if to search for a word, "frozen."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Smenkare."

"What?"

"I am Smenkare." He drew Kira away from Selena. "She is unharmed, mistress. I will release her from the spell, if you wish. Did you want her to participate?"

Her mind clouded with confusion. "Participate?"

"In our lovemaking."

"Hell, no."

Kira allowed Smenkare to remove the curtain from her body. She couldn't shake herself out of the sensual fog surrounding her. All she seemed to want was Smenkare's hands on her breasts, his tongue in her mouth, and his cock in her

pussy. It seemed the most important thing in the world to have sex with him. Right now.

"I—I can't do it in front of her," she said, gesturing at her friend.

Smenkare led her into the bathroom and shut the door. Smenkare took up most of the space, making her small bathroom seem tiny. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. This wasn't a fantasy. This was real.

Wasn't it?

"Sssshhh, Kira. Do not think. Feel."

Smenkare lowered his head to one plump breast and suckled the nipple. It hardened against his warm, wet mouth. Kira moaned as his tongue laved the sensitive flesh. The moan turned to a cry of outrage when he raised his head.

Her fantasy man chuckled. "Worry not, Kira. I merely seek to give the other attention, too."

He cupped the breast still throbbing from his tongue and gently twisted the nipple. Kira gasped at the pleasure-pain this invoked. God, this guy was *good*. As he pinched the still-wet nipple with his thumb and forefinger, he wrapped his lips around the taut peak of the neglected breast and sucked hard, nipping the tip with his teeth.

She pressed closer to him, suddenly ravenous, needy. Her hands glided over his smooth chest. She felt the ridges of his stomach muscles, the firm skin of his thighs, and the roundness of his ass. One hand cupped his buttock, the other touched his cock pressed against her stomach. With one finger, she stroked it from base to tip. She encircled the head then slid her hand down its firm length.

If there was ever such a thing as a perfect penis, Smenkare owned it.

He released her breasts and looked at her. His gaze was so dark, it seemed like she was looking into a starless sky. "I like your hand on my cock," he whispered. "I want your touch everywhere, my Kira."

She swallowed at the rush of emotion clogging her throat. *My Kira*. As if she belonged to him. As if he were claiming her.

As if she would never be alone again because Smenkare deigned it to be so.

His hands drifted down her rib cage to her hips. She slid her hand up and down his cock, reveling in the smooth hard feel of it, grinning when, every time she reached the tip, it jerked against her palm.

"My Kira."

She looked up. His expression was pained and his gaze held a shame that belied the confident strength he displayed. She didn't understand the shame, but the pained expression was universally male and had one interpretation.

"What do you want?"

"Your mouth on my cock."

Bingo.

"I want your mouth on my pussy," she said. "Whatever will we do?"

He lifted her to the countertop and got to his knees. Kira scooted to the edge of the counter. She held on to the edge with one hand while using the other to thread through Smenkare's hair. His tongue flicked against her clit and slid along the inner folds until he found the entrance to her pussy.

"Oh yes. Please. Right there." She pressed him against her pussy, reeling from the intensity of the emotions ricocheting through her. No one had ever shown her the tenderness, the caring for her pleasure the way this man did. She no longer cared if he was real; she wanted him to stay with her always and make her feel this way all the time.

Smenkare's tongue darted in and out of her, the strokes rough and fast. Without warning, his mouth moved to her clit and closed over it, sucking deep and hard. Just as an orgasm threatened to overwhelm her, he stopped.

She cried out in protest.

"When you come, my mistress, say my name."

"Smenkare," she whispered as the ache of unfulfillment settled between her thighs.

His head lowered and once again his mouth found her clit. He inserted two fingers into her pussy; the thrust of his fingers matched the thrusts of his tongue. The orgasm ripped through her, shattering every sense. "Smenkare!" she screamed. He didn't stop the thrusts of his fingers or his tongue and seconds later, another orgasm built, released, and made her see the stars in the heavens.

Before she had fully recovered, Smenkare rose and placed himself between her legs. His gaze was all heat; never had she seen such fire in a man's gaze. She glanced down at his cock, as hard and thick and luscious as she remembered. He cupped her breasts, pinching the turgid nipples. "Oh God. Do it again."

He pinched them again and again and again until she was writhing toward him, ready and willing to take his cock inside her.

"Mistress," he whispered, "May I choose my pleasure?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"Do you have lubricant and a condom?"

Kira blinked, the fog of sexual satisfaction temporarily lifting. She fumbled for one of the drawers next to the sink and extracted a new tube of KY gel, purchased for use with her new vibrator. The box of condoms had never been opened. Smenkare prevented her from closing the drawer. He reached inside and pulled out an object that looked like an oversized bullet.

"What is this?" He flashed her a wicked grin.

"I don't know." She'd never seen it before. The Great Smenkare was the only vibrator she'd ever owned. What was a teeny tiny one doing in her bathroom drawer?

"This," said Smenkare, showing her the glossy white nub with symbols etched on it, "is pussy therapy."

The symbols looked like the ones on Smenkare's box. She reached for the bullet, but her lover put it aside. "Not yet."

After Smenkare put on a rubber, he took the tube of KY, opened it, and squeezed the gel onto his penis. He rubbed it on with his hand, his eyes momentarily closing at his own touch. After he wiped his hand on a nearby towel, he took Kira from the counter and instructed her to kneel down, bend over, and hold onto the edge of the tub.

"You want me to do *what*?"

"I would never hurt you, mistress. It is my job to show you the ways of pleasure." His gaze was dark, feral. Kira felt her pulse leap at the raw desire he showed to her. *For her*. She did as he asked, holding onto the tub and offering him her ass. His arm snaked under her stomach and pulled her close to his penis.

"Relax," he whispered.

A feeling of total relaxation washed over her. It was almost supernatural the way her body responded to his gentle command. She felt limp as a wet noodle, but Smenkare's cock sure didn't. He inserted the tip of his penis into the tight ring of her anus and moaned.

Kira clenched the edge of the tub, amazed that she enjoyed the feel of him entering her from behind. He withdrew and entered again, this time going further. Each time he re-entered her, his penis inched deeper still, until he was sheathed to his balls. Kira breathed hard, her knuckles white from gripping the tub. Her enjoyment of the sensations he created surprised her. Never in a million years would she have agreed to be taken this way, but this man, this beautiful man could have her any way he wanted.

Smenkare moved slowly, his gentle thrusts causing little discomfort. His gasps and moans sent arrows of desire through her. Her pussy was wet and aching and demanding some action. As if he could read her thoughts, Smenkare paused, reached around, and placed the white bullet against her clit. He whispered some words she didn't understand and the thing pulsed to life. He slid it down and into her pussy. Smenkare whispered more mysterious words and it felt like the thing elongated inside her.

"Oh God." She shuddered at the feel of double penetration. Nothing had ever felt so fucking good.

"Take it, Kira. Fulfill your pleasure."

With a trembling hand, Kira reached underneath and took the vibrator. She was so wet it glided in and out of her pussy with ease. The vibrations were low, gentle, teasing.

As she found a rhythm, Smenkare started moving again, too. He grasped her hips and fucked her, moving a little faster each time, until he pounded into her. The sound of his hips smacking her ass turned her on even more.

She moaned at the building pleasure. "Smenkare..." She screamed when the orgasm rocked her to the core. She spasmed hard against the vibrator, warm come dripped down her thighs, and still she felt the orgasm shuddering through her. The vibrator fell from her hand and she clutched the tub for dear life.

Before she had taken another breath, Smenkare pressed the vibrator against her clit.

"No, I can't—"

But she could. Another orgasm rolled over her almost immediately, then she heard Smenkare's ragged cry of release. He pressed so far into her she felt his balls against her pussy and the pulsing of his cock inside her.

Smenkare kissed the center of her spine, withdrew, disposed of the condom, and helped her rise. Her hands felt cramped from clenching the tub, her body sore from Smenkare's attentions, and her ass was feeling kinda weird, too. Her lover turned on the shower and stepped inside with her.

They didn't speak. He washed her from head to foot, leaving no skin untouched, no tender spot unsoothed. Then he shampooed her hair, rinsed it, and, after a quick wash of himself, led her out of the tub and gently dried her with a towel.

She'd never felt this way before. Never felt so worshipped. So...loved. No. This wasn't love. It couldn't be. But she could pretend making love with Smenkare was a forever thing instead of I'm-gonna-wake-up-in-an-institution-tomorrow thing.

CHAPTER THREE

Sometime later, Kira awoke in her bed, tucked into her covers. A glance at the digital clock revealed it was noon. She felt a little sore and a lot relaxed, and really confused. What had happened last night? This morning? Her memories were like a puzzle missing some pieces. Nothing quite fit together.

Her fantasy lover. *Smenkare*. She felt all warm and toasty just thinking about him, the gorgeous man who'd given her such pleasure.

Wait.

The Great *Smenkare*. *Her vibrator*. Blinking, she sat up and felt around the covers until her hands touch something long and hard. Digging under the blanket, she withdrew her \$250 sex toy. She just knew there was something she needed to remember, but for the life of her, she couldn't. Her body felt great, but her mind was frazzled. Maybe she just needed a cup of coffee and attacking some mundane tasks, like cleaning the oven, to feel normal again.

She hugged the vibrator then kissed its tip. "Thank you," she whispered, somehow knowing she should be grateful to it.

* * * * *

"Why did you make her forget?" Bast stood in her office at The Lust Bastion and peered into her looking glass. She watched Kira leave her bedroom to take a shower.

"She was frightened. And she will remember soon enough. I scrambled her memories, not erased them."

"You have never used the powers I gave you to help your mistresses forget. You took pleasure in their fright and you enjoyed coaxing them into sex."

"She is different."

"How?"

Smenkare shrugged. "I do not know how, only that she is."

Bast didn't allow *Smenkare* to see her smile of satisfaction. Finally, he had found what she meant for him to find. It had only taken three thousand years to get the message through his thick skull.

"And what did you think of your last mistress?"

"She was a bitch."

"Indeed, she was," Bast agreed. "And if you think to attempt to escape my punishment again, as you did with that virgin who begged for your life, I will

only send you to women whose pleasure is derived from the pain they inflict on you."

"Have I not been punished enough?"

"No." Bast moved from the looking glass to the chaise and stretched out on it. As always when he was in her presence, Smenkare stood in the manner of a military man at attention, his gaze never meeting hers directly. Even though his physical form was attached to the vibrator, Bast was able to separate him from it whenever she chose.

"Mentari took her life because of your selfishness, your mistreatment of her. She was a vessel to you, a way to power. Women are not vessels, but this lesson you never learned. And now you are the vessel and will remain so." Bast gestured to the looking glass where Kira was now dressed and lacing up a pair of sneakers. "You must fulfill the thirty days. How do you plan to return to her?"

"I beg a favor. When I unscramble her memories, take away her fear and help her to accept me."

Bast considered his request then nodded. "It will be done."

* * * * *

Kira entered The Lust Bastion, clutching her white box with the Great Smenkare inside. Bast had called her and asked her to bring it. She worried there was something wrong with the vibrator. She couldn't imagine any circumstance where a porn shop, even a classy one like Bast's, would recall its sex toys. Maybe men everywhere had banded together to protest its orgasm-inducing abilities

Disheartened at the prospect of losing her vibrator, she entered the store and went straight to the cash register. The same little scruffy man she'd seen on her first visit here sat behind the counter looking at a magazine called, "Humping Hooter Honeys."

Before she could ask for Bast, he jerked a thumb toward the purple curtain. "She's waiting for you in there."

"Thanks." Kira pushed through the curtain and entered the same little room she had been in two days ago.

Bast sat in one of the intricately carved chairs. On the table, Kira saw a squat clay pot, painted with Egyptian figures, and two matching clay mugs. Bast poured a fragrant liquid from the pot into both mugs, then added honey to each before stirring them with what looked like a reed.

"Sit, Kira Maxwell. Have some tea." It was not a gracious invitation, but a gentle command.

Kira sat, put the white box on her lap, and grasped the nearest mug. The warm liquid tasted exotic, its tartness softened by the honey.

"The Great Smenkare is more than a vibrator," said Bast. She sipped from her tea, her intense gaze on Kira. "It is the key to your innermost fantasies."

"I figured that out already."

A cat-like smile creased Bast's mouth. "Three thousand years ago, I took the soul of an Egyptian prince named Smenkare. Because he used women without a thought for their needs, their feelings, I cursed him to the life of a sex slave. He is bound to service the women I send him to in whatever way they desire. But I am not without mercy. He is only bound to one woman at a time and only for thirty days at a time."

Kira blinked and in the nanosecond it took for her eyes to close and open again, the memories of her weekend flooded through her. *On the couch, experiencing the best straight-on fuck of her life. Drinking from his penis like a cat sipping cream. In the bathroom, her pussy pressed against his hot mouth. On her knees, clutching the tub, allowing liberties she'd allowed no other.* Her cheeks heated at the images of her sexual encounters with her fantasy man, the things she allowed him to do to her because it wasn't real, because it *couldn't* be real.

"I don't believe you." But she did. Smenkare was a flesh-and-blood man trapped in a vibrator, her vibrator, and the truth of it settled into her memory as if she'd always known. Somewhere in a fuzzy corner of her mind, she knew she should leave Bast's emporium of insanity and drive straight to the nearest mental hospital, but she wasn't afraid. In fact, everything Bast said made perfect sense except for one issue. "How can you trap a man in a sex toy?"

"I am the goddess Ubasatyia." She pronounced it oo-bahst-ee-yaht. "I am the protector of women and relationships and sex."

Her head morphed and Kira watched the transformation as if she'd seen the same thing every day of her life. Ears sprouted through Bast's luxurious black hair, whiskers unfolded from the sides of a nose that shrank into a triangle, and her eyes narrowed more, the pupils lengthening. Her face resembled a furless cat, yet the rest of her body remained pure human femme fatale. Kira's gaze was drawn to the gold ankh necklace that dangled between Bast's breasts; the goddess' hand closed around it.

"You're a goddess." She held up the white box. "And this is a man trapped in a vibrator."

"What other proof do you need?" Bast gestured toward the box. "Press the black button and see what happens."

Kira pulled out the vibrator, flipped it over, and touched the black button. She held it out, the penis pointing toward her, the balls pointing down, and waited.

A few golden wisps drifted from the dick, hovering in the air, slowly solidifying. Before ten seconds had passed, Smenkare stood before her, his hard

cock held captive in her hands. His gaze was as she remembered, dark with desire, as if he could fuck her right now without a single regret.

Kira turned to Bast, who had resumed her full human form. "He's mine for thirty days?"

"Twenty-eight."

She nodded, gazed up at Smenkare, resisted the urge to suck his cock like a lollipop, and turned to Bast again. "How do I get him back in the box?"

* * * * *

"You're distracting me," said Kira as she slanted another look at the naked man in her passenger seat. "I almost hit the car in front of me three times."

"I am sorry, mistress," said Smenkare, not sounding sorry at all. He sounded smug. He adjusted the seatbelt across his broad, muscled chest. Her gaze dipped down to his big, hard cock. She swallowed. How could she still want him? She was hornier than she'd ever been in her entire sexually active life.

She pulled up to another stoplight, glad for the respite. It'd been a long drive from The Lust Bastion and it was still five miles to her apartment. She couldn't help another peek at his equipment. He knew she was looking, too, because his penis twitched as if he were intentionally making the organ pulse.

"Doesn't that thing ever go down?"

"I am always ready for my mistress."

"Look, the whole mistress thing is creepy. I feel like I should wear black leather and snap a whip while yelling, 'Who's your momma!'"

He tensed in the seat, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "If you wish."

Kira pursed her lips. "I could do anything I wanted to you, couldn't I? That's part of your curse, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"What the hell did you do to piss her off?"

His answer was his silence. The light turned green and Kira punched the gas, cursing the slow Las Vegas traffic. She needed to get her naked man home and figure out some way to dress him.

"What happened to Selena? She came over...then you and Bast messed with my head. Does she remember, too?"

"She went home. She does not remember coming to your home or meeting me. It is better that way."

"Yeah. Probably."

Her gaze slid toward his crotch again. "Aren't you allowed to wear clothes?"

"Most of my mistresses did not want me to wear clothes."

She knew why, too. He was tall, muscular, beautiful, and always ready to perform. In a way, she appreciated the idea of a gorgeous naked man at her beck and call, but in another, she felt sad about his circumstances. Maybe he deserved Bast's punishment, but three thousand years of sex slavery? What crime could a man commit that deserved three millennia of retribution?

"You didn't rape anyone, did you?"

"No."

Relief swept through Kira. Other than murder, rape was the worst crime against a woman she could think of...wait a minute. Murder? Her throat dried. "Did you kill someone?"

"No." He turned toward her. "Wouldn't you rather fuck me than ask all these questions?"

"Well, yes, but we're in a moving car and I have to use the car's gear shift, not yours, to get us home." She sighed when they had to stop again. "I prefer not to treat you like a piece of ass, Smenkare. I know too well what it feels like to be used."

"Mistr – Kira, can you find a secluded place for us?"

"Why do you –" She caught the glance of a woman driver in the lane next to them. Her eyes were wide as saucers as she checked out Smenkare's luscious nude body. Then Kira saw her pick up a cell phone. Either she planned to call her girlfriend to brag about what she'd just seen, or more likely, she was dialing the police to report indecent exposure.

The minute the light changed, Kira gunned the engine, racing ahead and switching lanes. She could only hope the lady was too befuddled to write down her license plate number. She turned at the next street and took back streets to the next major crossroad. Instead of turning toward the direction of her apartment, she went the opposite way. If Smenkare wanted secluded, she'd show him secluded.

In fifteen minutes, they were cruising along a lonely paved road into the desert. In another ten, she turned onto a dirt road and drove until she reached a thatch of trees. She stopped the car and looked at Smenkare. He stared at the lush foliage, an anomaly in the desert, and at the small pool of water just visible through the trees.

"What is this place?"

"The oasis. When Selena and I were in high school, this is where everyone came to make out."

"They still do this?"

"Apparently, it was an eighties thing," said Kira. "Most teenagers these days don't want to go too far from the Strip."

"We are alone?"

"Even if someone wanted to come out here, they wouldn't be here at this time of day."

Smenkare undid his seatbelt. "Come, mistress."

"Smenkare —"

His smile was apologetic. "It is difficult to be treated as an equal. I am not used to it anymore. Long ago, I was..."

Kira waited for him to finish, but his gaze sought the oasis, a far-off look in his eyes. Was he thinking of Egypt? Of his life there? Everyone he'd known had been dead for centuries, every place he'd lived reclaimed by the sand. She touched his shoulder in empathy, once again tainted by the sadness she felt for him.

"Let's go," she said, unbuckling her seatbelt.

They slid out of the car and walked to the tree line. Beyond, the small pond shimmered in the dying light, the setting sun turning the water purple.

"It is beautiful," he whispered. He turned to her and grasped her hands to pull her close. "You are beautiful, too."

"Please, Smenkare. You don't have to lie to me. I want honesty between us. I know what I look like in the mirror."

"You are blind if you do not see the beauty of your own face." He stroked her cheek. "Soft as a flower's petal." He touched her lips with his. "Succulent, talented mouth."

His grin made her blush.

"Eyes like the Nile on the first day of spring. Never have I seen such a shade of green, my princess." He picked up a strand of hair and rubbed it between his fingers. "Hair as fine and soft as a bird's wing."

She trembled at his words.

He kissed her neck, the hollow of her throat, the thin line of her collarbone. Through the thin T-shirt and silk bra, she felt the warmth of his mouth as he sought her nipples through the material. They hardened, tingled.

She didn't stop him from unsnapping her jeans, from dipping his hand inside, from finding her pussy wet and ready. He scooped her into his arms and walked to the Saturn. When he put her down, she shed her jeans and panties. He sat on the hood of the car and scooted backwards until he rested against the windshield. She didn't need a map to know the destination. She crawled onto the hood and lowered herself on his cock, shuddering at the contact.

His hands crept under her T-shirt and unsnapped her bra. When it loosened, he wasted no time cupping the tender mounds, kneading them before finding and tugging her nipples. She moaned low in her throat and increased her movements. He felt so good inside her, so hard, so right.

"Kira," he murmured, his eyes closed, his hips matching her movements. "My Kira."

One of his hands traveled from her breast to her clit. While one hand cupped her breast, played with the nipple, the other stroked her clit, murmuring words she didn't understand. His voice had changed, an accent thickening his tone. Pleasure vibrated through her body, centering on the magic created by Smenkare's finger and their movements together.

"Oh God," she moaned, "I'm going to come."

She shattered, her cry of release echoing through the desert night. Smenkare grasped her hips and pumped into her until he, too, cried out and arched against her, his cock throbbing its release.

Kira collapsed against his chest, smiling when his arms encircled her. His heart beat furiously under her ear, his breath harsh in his chest, and his still-hard cock filled her. He felt warm and solid and with his arms tight around her, she felt the affection she'd been missing for so long.

"Is it always like this?" she whispered.

"Like what, princess?"

"So...out of this world...so perfect."

"No," he said. "It has never been this way."

His fingers combed through her hair; the repetitive motion made her feel drowsy, content. With hundreds of liaisons notched on his bedpost, she couldn't imagine he was telling the truth about their coupling. But for this once, she didn't care if he lied.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You just did."

"Ha. Ha. Why are you circumcised?"

"I am not. Bast can create me any way she chooses. In the last century, most of my mistresses have been Americans. There is a peculiar tendency among American males to trim their penises. So I am the same."

"That's almost too much information."

"You asked. Can I ask you a question—after this one?"

Kira laughed. "What?"

"Why did you buy the vibrator?"

Her laughter subsided. She rubbed her palm across his flat nipple. "I'm not good at relationships. Men are just... I don't know. They don't like me unless they're fucking me."

"You underestimate yourself, my Kira." He tipped her chin so that she was forced to look at him. "I will teach you the ways of love and you will find the man of your desires."

Her heart thudded in her chest. "What if – what if I just want you?"

"It is not possible." His gaze softened.

"You're the only man I've ever known to treat me like a woman worthy of respect instead of a woman worthy of a cheap bottle of wine and quick sex."

"You get what you expect. Raise your expectations."

"Just like that?"

Smenkare kissed her and the gentle movement of his lips started her engine running all over again. Such a simple gesture and she was ready to attack him. How many times a day could she want a man?

His always-hard cock still filled her so she rose and offered her breasts to him. He cupped them and brought them close to his face. He suckled one nipple then the other. His movements were tender and unhurried. She placed her palms on his chest and moved forward and back as slow as she could. When his hands fell away from her breasts and his eyes closed tightly, she rose on her knees, keeping the tip of his penis just inside her pussy and squeezed her vaginal muscles around it. Then she slid sloooooowwwlllyyy down it.

Then she did it again.

And again.

Smenkare's whole body shuddered. When she lifted her pussy to torture him again, he grabbed her hips. "It is too pleasurable."

"I am your mistress."

He opened his eyes and stared at her, uncertainty in his gaze. "Yes."

"I will pleasure you how I wish."

His eyes lowered. "Yes, mistress."

"Look at me, Smenkare."

He did. A flare of resentment resided with desire and she knew he wasn't angry with her, but with his circumstances. Her heart ached for him. If only there was a way for him to feel like a normal man. Or a normal Egyptian prince. Smenkare would never be a normal man.

Then it hit her.

Of course.

She lowered her head as if in obedience. "What do you wish of me?"

His eyes widened and she saw a flash of surprise. Then his jaw clenched. "It is not my place."

She bent down and kissed the underside of his jaw. Her lips grazed his as she whispered, "What do you wish of me, my master?"

Kira waited, a knot lodged in her throat, as the silence stretched between them. Then Smenkare said, "I wish you to free me."

Her sexual desire disappeared like smoke from a dying fire. She slid off him. This wasn't how she imagined he would play the game. How was she supposed to free a mystical sex slave? She liked him—a lot—but what did he want from her?

Her soul?

No way. Not even for him would she sacrifice herself. She'd already given up pieces of her soul for other men.

She gathered her panties and jeans from the ground. She shook out the sand from the jeans and put them on, tucking the useless underwear into her pocket.

"You do not wish to free me, do you?"

"Of course I do," she said, tears in her eyes, "but how do you propose I do that? Challenge a goddess? You did that and look what it got you."

"I am sorry, my mistress." He got off the hood and gathered her in his arms. "I should have never asked you. You wanted sex, not truth."

His statement hit her in the solar plexus and she sucked in a breath. He was right. She'd wanted to please him in a sexual way. She'd never considered he would ask for the one thing she had no power to give him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wish I could free you." She sniffled against his chest then looked up at him. "We could stop the sex for the rest of the time you're with me and you could just go do what you wanted. You don't have to stay with me."

He kissed her brow. "I must stay with you."

"Because of the curse?"

"Because I wish it."

Kira blinked away her tears. "You want to stay with me? The only freedom I can give you is the next twenty-eight days. And you don't want it?"

"I want you more." He kissed her. "And I will not give up sex."

"Thank God."

* * * * *

Kira couldn't find a decent pair of pantyhose. Every pair she pulled from the drawer was ripped. She threw the fourth pair onto the floor and muttered curses under her breath.

"Your legs are beautiful," said Smenkare. "They do not require the vanity of pantyhose."

"I can't believe an Egyptian is counseling me on vanity."

"It is not vanity when it is true."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. He lay on the bed, his head propped on his hand as he watched her. His gaze smoldered as he looked at her. She wore

a plain cotton bra and underwear, her hair was in curlers, and she was at least five minutes away from finishing her make-up. But Smenkare's gaze made her feel like a supermodel. She was already running late because, after the alarm woke them, he had pinned her to the bed and fucked her senseless.

"I'm not vain. I work for a corporation that has a dress code."

"What do you do for this corporation?"

"I'm in marketing."

Smenkare didn't look too impressed. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "I wish you to stay home with me."

"I can't," she said, digging under her socks. Didn't she buy some new stockings the other day? She grasped a small plastic bag and pulled it out, triumphant. "Yes! Hosiery prevails!"

"I do not wish you to cover your legs. I do not wish to stay in this claustrophobic domicile all day. I do not wish you to leave." He sounded petulant, like a spoiled boy whose favorite toy had been taken away.

"I'm sorry, Smenkare." She sat on the bed and ran her hand over his smooth chest. "I have to work so I can pay for this claustrophobic domicile."

His fingers curled around her hand. He brought her palm to his lips and kissed the center. Her hand tingled from the contact. "Stay with me, my princess."

Kira wanted nothing more than to stay with Smenkare all day, every day, for the rest of her life. But though she had a fantasy man—at least for the next month—she still had to live in reality. She didn't have many vacation days left and, due to a vile case of the flu earlier in the year, she'd used most of her sick days. Her heart ached knowing that Smenkare would be gone soon. Yet she couldn't chuck her normal life out the window to please him or to please herself.

He must have seen her decision in her eyes because he sighed and kissed her palm again. "I will miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," she said, and meant every word. Had there ever been a time a man had looked at her the way Smenkare looked at her now?

Never.

Her heart lurched. He really was going to miss her. So what if he only missed her because she was his only entertainment? She didn't care—*no, not really*—if it wasn't because he loved her so much he couldn't be out of her presence.

"Listen, you can spend the day doing whatever you want. Put on the sweats I bought you yesterday and lounge around. Watch TV and eat Twinkies."

"Twinkies?"

"You'll love them."

"When will you be home?"

"By five-thirty or six. I'll stop on the way home and get us dinner and movies."

"All right, Kira." His lips lifted in a half-smile and he cupped her breast. "Perhaps you could be a *little* late to work."

She smacked his hand. "No."

But already her body was responding to the swipe of his thumb across her nipple and the desire darkening his gaze. She slipped off the bed and headed to the bathroom. As she plucked the curlers from her hair, Smenkare entered the bathroom and knelt next to her. His strong warm hands coasted up her thighs then his fingers looped the edge of her panties and pulled them down.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

She unpinned more curlers and almost stabbed herself with one of the metal pins when she felt Smenkare's lips on her ass. He kissed her inner thighs and stroked the backs of her knees. She quivered...and spread her legs apart to give him better access. He turned, sat, and scooted under her.

"You have a beautiful pussy."

The last curler fell into the sink. "Thank you."

She took her eye shadow from her make-up bag, but wasn't sure she'd be able to apply it. Her fingers trembled too much. Glancing down, she caught Smenkare examining her privates like an eager gynecologist.

"Yes, I like your pussy very much." His finger stroked her clit. "It is not too hairy."

"Gee, thanks."

He pressed his mouth against her, tasting her. When his tongue plunged inside her, she gasped and dropped the eye shadow brush.

"You should probably stop," she said. She pushed against his mouth, encouraging him to suck her clit. He took the hint. His hands crept around her ass and cupped her, bringing her closer.

"Really, Smenkare. This isn't a good time." Grabbing the edge of the sink, she bent her knees and moved slowly against his mouth. His tongue dipped into her vagina and she shuddered.

"Oh no," she moaned. "No. Definitely not..."

He moved to her clit and suckled. Streamers of shocked pleasure shot through her. Then his tongue licked her, stroked her, his fingers digging into her ass as his strokes became more insistent. His mouth was hot and wet against her, so hot and so wet...she screamed when she came, clutching the sink's rim so hard she broke two nails. Violent shudders wracked her body. She didn't protest when Smenkare pulled her down onto his cock. Her still-sensitive clit rocked against him as she rode him, her knees scraping the vinyl of the floor.

"You taste sweet." His eyes were dark, darker than midnight. He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "I like it when you ride me. When you fuck me. Fuck me, Kira. Harder."

She increased her movements, sliding up and down his cock. His mouth found a nipple through the thin cotton of her bra and his finger slid over her clit. She moaned at the sensations rocketing through her. Another orgasm rose, crested, and shattered her.

She collapsed on top of him and smiled when his arms wrapped around her. "Smenkare," she said against his smooth chest. "No means no."

"Of course, my princess."

He grasped her arms and tugged her off, then put her on the floor on her side. Kira propped herself on one elbow and watched him. She'd had two orgasms and she was still horny as hell.

Smenkare got on his knees and opened her legs like a pair of human scissors.

"Hey! I'm not a wishbone."

His grin promise wicked delights so she shut up.

He placed one of her legs between his, and put the other on his shoulder. Holding her ankle with one hand, he scooted closer until his penis slid achingly slow into her pussy. His eyes closed and his jaw clenched. Then he opened his eyes and looked at her. "Put your hand on your pussy."

"I'm using to hold up my head."

He rolled his eyes. "The *other* one."

She slid her hand over her belly and into the soft nest of curls. Her finger rubbed her sensitive clit. *Whoa*.

"Stroke it," demanded Smenkare.

She moved her finger against her clit, sliding it through the wetness, caressing the sensitive nub. Smenkare entered her, shuddering at the contact. The next strokes were fast, deep. As his pace increased, so did Kira's pleasuring of her clit. She closed her eyes and rubbed her whole hand along it, matching the rhythm of her lover's thrusts. Oh God. She was already close. So close...

"I'm going to come," she moaned.

Smenkare's thrusts quickened. She heard his gasps, felt the grip of his hand on her leg, then she came, shattering against her own hand, her vagina pulsing around his penis.

"Kira!" he yelled. Then she felt the jerking of his cock inside her as he emptied his seed into her.

Kira collapsed to the floor, so sexually sated she could die happy.

Or at least go into a sex-induced coma.

Her arms ached; one from holding her head up and the other from its pussy-rubbing workout. Smenkare grabbed a hand towel from the cabinet and handed it to her. As she wiped herself off, she looked at the man who'd brought her so much joy in the last couple of days.

Her heart lodged in her throat.

She didn't want to waste a single second with him. She had less than a month. She'd make every day count. Every moment. Even if it meant she was doing the unthinkable: Falling in love with a man who would leave her.

"I have two things to say." She handed him the towel so he could clean himself. "First, you're coming with me to work."

He smiled. "And the second?"

"I gotta get a carpet for my bathroom floor."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hello, Nanette," said Kira as they breezed into the lobby of Marketing For Morons' office building. "This is my friend Kare."

"Karey?" asked Big-Boobs-No-Brain.

"Kare. It's pronounced like a car with an 'e' on the end of it," corrected Kira. She glanced at "Kare." He looked terrific in a brown knit shirt, tan Dockers, and dark-brown loafers. His hair was bound with a leather strap. He'd wanted to use her eyeliner and blue eye shadow—to block the sun's rays, he said—but she forbid him to look like a drag queen and bought him a pair of sunglasses instead. He refused underwear saying he did not like the way the boxer shorts bound him. He wanted unrestricted movement. She had to admit she liked the idea of him walking around without anything on under those Dockers.

Nanette rose from the receptionist desk and took Smenkare's outstretched hand. "Sounds so exotic, Kare. You're not from around here, are you?"

"I am Egyptian," said Kare. He extracted his hand from her talons. "How do you do, Miss Nanette?"

The ninny giggled and blushed. Kira resisted the urge to poke out her eyes. She was so beautiful and so vapid and so goddamned annoying. "We gotta go. I'm going to make this a half-day, Nanette, so please make a note of that."

Nanette's blue-eyed gaze reluctantly left Kare's face to focus on Kira.

"Why?"

"In case I get messages."

"What messages? No one ever calls you."

"I meant *business* messages."

The blonde blinked then tilted her head. "You don't have any clients. You're just an assistant." She put a hand to her mouth as if she'd given away a secret and turned to Kare. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you tell your friend you were a vice president or something? I didn't mean to ruin your story."

Yeah, right. Kira gritted her teeth. What she wouldn't give to tell Nanette that Smenkare was her sex slave and that he had fucked her sideways on the bathroom floor this morning and that he was required to do anything she asked—including bitch-slapping nosy fake-blonde receptionists.

"Kira does not have to lie to impress me," said Smenkare in a soft voice. "I do not like her because of what she does at work." He threaded his fingers through Kira's and kissed the tips. His gaze heated her to the core.

"We ran out of condoms this morning," he whispered a little too loudly as he nuzzled her neck. "We should buy a bigger box, my love."

"Who knew we could go through a six-pack in one night?" Kira smiled at Nanette, whose look of surprise was interrupted by a flash of envy. She kissed Smenkare on the cheek. "Wait for me by the elevators, okay?"

He nodded and left her alone with Nanette. Kira picked up a stapler and turned it around in her hands. "He's exhausting, you know, but the best I've ever had." Kira put down the stapler on the wrong side of the desk and leaned forward until she had Nanette's complete attention. "*Much* better than Todd."

Nanette's gasp of outrage soothed Kira's pride, but not her guilty conscience. If the receptionist hadn't known about Todd sleeping his way around the office, she did now. Kira was glad Nanette knew the truth about the jerk, yet she shouldn't have told her in such a mean-spirited manner.

"Nanette, I'm so —"

"Just leave," she hissed, sitting back down at the desk and returning the stapler to its rightful place. "You don't have to lie about sleeping with Todd." Nanette's tight smile turned catty. "Or with *him*. What did you do, Kira? Hire a guy from a local strip club to impress your co-workers?"

Her mouth dropped open in shock. She couldn't find a single word to utter and she knew she looked like a gaping fish. Nanette's look of satisfaction stung, but not nearly as much as her words. Did the people she worked with really believe she'd hire someone to play her boyfriend? That she was so deficient in mind and body she couldn't find a decent, good-looking guy on her own?

It hurt to think that they were right. After all, hadn't she gone to The Lust Bastion because she'd been unable to find a man who not only wanted to satisfy her, but who wanted stick around longer than it took to get dressed?

"Everyone knows that male strippers are gay." Nanette took a tube from her desk drawer and refreshed her lipstick. It was deep, shiny red—the color of blood. "And everyone around here knows that you're..." Nanette's pitying stare was ruined by the calculating look in her cold blue eyes. "...well, sweetie, that you're a loser in the bedroom department." Her gaze dipped to Kira's clothes. "Not to mention fashion-challenged."

Red-hot fury flashed through Kira, but it fizzled into blind hurt. She felt as though someone had stabbed her through the chest and twisted the knife. Straightening her new and fashionable—*thank you very much*—black jacket that matched her flared-at-the-knee skirt, she turned away from the desk and marched toward the elevators. Nanette's laughter followed her, clawing at her insides until she thought she'd scream.

Or cry.

"What is wrong?"

Kira shook her head and swallowed the tears of humiliation that threatened to fall. She blinked them back, willing them to disappear. She wasn't a loser in the bedroom department. Just ask...Todd? The water guy? The computer nerd? *The sex slave*? She choked back ashamed laughter.

"I'm not good in bed, am I?" she asked Smenkare. "I command you to answer honestly."

His brows rose. "What did Nanette say to you?"

"Nothing. I'm just—I'm just being insecure. Never mind."

The elevator doors swished open. They entered the empty car. She pushed the number 5 button then readjusted her purse strap on her shoulder. Maybe she should have smacked Nanette in the head with her fashion-challenged Wal-Mart special and knocked that nasty little smile right off the blonde's perfect face. Smenkare slanted her a concerned look, but she knew he just felt obligated to look concerned.

The elevators were notoriously snail-paced. It took forever just to reach the second floor. She rolled her eyes at the car's slow rise and tried to ignore Smenkare's level stare.

"Oh for Pete's sake! What is it?" she asked in an exasperated voice.

"You are muttering."

"I am not."

"Why do you want to smack Nanette with your purse?"

Shit. She *had* been muttering. She sighed and turned toward him. "She said I have reputation for being a loser in the bedroom department. It's not like I've slept with every guy in the place. I've only been with Todd and, believe me, he's not that great in the sack. Why is it the guys who are bad lays tell everyone it's the girl's fault? Now I know why no one from work has ever asked me out. They think I'm bad in bed. You know, bad-bad, not bad-good. And that's not true." Kira took a deep breath. "Is it?"

"Who is Todd?"

"A guy who would have sex with anything that moves."

"And he works here?"

Did she detect a smidgen of jealousy in his voice? No. Why would he care who she slept with? But if he did... Her heart stuttered. If only he could love her instead of just make love to her. She should have been more specific about what she really wanted—a lifetime relationship with a good man instead of a short-term fuck with a goddess' play toy. She wanted to love Smenkare the way he deserved to be loved, but it would do no good to love a man who could not love her back. They would only hurt each other in the end.

"When did you last sleep with this Todd?"

"Smenkare, will you focus? I'm having self-esteem issues here. Where's the reassurance about my bedroom prowess?"

As the elevator inched toward the fourth floor, Smenkare smacked the big red emergency button. The car jerked to a stop and a loud, annoying bell clanged. He pinioned Kira to the wall, reached under her skirt, and jerked down her panties and hose. Loosened, they drifted past her knees. She wasted no time kicking off her heels and pushing the material from her legs. Smenkare unzipped his pants and placed his hard cock between her thighs.

Her purse thunked to the floor.

Her body trembled.

Her heart rejoiced.

"You are everything a man desires," he whispered. "And more than any man deserves."

His hands coasted around to her buttocks. He grasped them and pulled her closer. She swallowed the knot in her throat. His obsidian gaze was so filled with want and need she lost her breath.

"What do you want, my mistress?"

His penis teased the edge of her cunt.

"You." Her arms crept up his shoulders. "I want you."

He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. When he entered her, she was wet and ready and aching, the way she always was with him. He pushed her against the elevator wall and plunged into her again and again. His teeth nipped her neck, his tongue traveled her neck, his lips found her earlobe. He whispered words only her heart understood.

She teetered on the edge of an orgasm when Smenkare cried her name. His cock emptying his seed into her sent her flying over the edge.

For a moment, they leaned against each other, panting and recovering. The bell rang shrilly and unceasingly, but Kira didn't mind. It was worth the ear-shattering noise to have elevator sex.

Smenkare slipped out of her. She silently handed him her torn panties to use as a wipe. After he was finished, he tucked his penis into his pants and her undies into his pocket. Then he helped her straighten her clothes.

She showed him the ruined hose. "My last good pair," she lamented and shoved them into her purse.

Smenkare released the button and the elevator started moving again. The bell stopped shrieking and the sudden silence sounded weird. She rubbed her ears with her palms as if the gesture would somehow help the tinny ringing in her head.

The smell of sex permeated the small car, which smelled a helluva lot better than the perfume some companies put into the air to cover the stench of humans

and their bad habits. She breathed it in and smiled. Oh yeah. They should bottle it and call it Sex Of Smenkare.

"Kira?"

"Yes?"

He tipped her chin so that she looked him in the eyes. "I ask a favor."

"Anything."

"Do not ever speak the name of Todd again."

She blinked at the fierceness of his tone. "Why?"

He slid his thumb along her jaw. He leaned close until his chocolate-brown eyes were even with hers. "Because you are mine."

Her pulse leapt. What was he saying? Was he telling her — no. He didn't have the right to claim her. To love her. Especially not after three days.

"I thought you were mine," she teased, hoping to lighten his mood.

"I am." He hesitated. "I have claimed no other as my own, Kira. Not in three millennia have I chosen a queen."

"A queen?"

He placed her palm against his heart. She felt it beating, strong and fast. "If I were still a prince of Egypt, I would share my throne with you and only you, my Kira." He turned her palm up and kissed its center. "I can offer you no other gift than this pledge. You are my queen."

Before she could answer his unspoken question, the elevator doors opened.

A security guard, maintenance man, her supervisor, Todd, and several co-workers, mostly males, waited. Everyone broke out into fervent applause—except for her boss, who looked pissed off, and for Todd, who looked like pouting two-year-old.

"I'm guessing there's nothing wrong with the elevator," said the maintenance man, a sly grin on his face. "So I'll be on my way."

He slipped past them as they exited the car.

The guard's expression was part embarrassment, part admiration. He, too, entered the elevator. Before the doors closed, he gave Smenkare a big smile and two thumbs up.

"What's going on?" asked Kira.

"That's what I'd like to know, Miss Maxwell," answered Jerry, her boss. "Please come to my office."

Her heart thudded in her chest. Something was *so* wrong. Co-workers were thumping Smenkare on the shoulders and wiggling their eyebrows at Kira. One guy made a V with his fingers and stuck his tongue through it.

Then she knew.

She'd had sex in the elevator with Smenkare in front of a goddamned security camera. Every elevator had one.

"People, that's enough," barked Jerry. "Go back to work while you still have jobs."

Everyone but Todd dispersed. Jerry marched down the hall to his office and Kira turned to follow. Todd grabbed her arm. "What the hell, Kira? You act like a cold fish with me, but you'll fuck a gay stripper in the elevator?"

Gay stripper? Had Nanette called Todd and told him what Kira had said? Had she told him Kare was a gay stripper Kira had hired to pose as a boyfriend? Humiliation washed over her and she felt heat singe her cheeks. Her work place was tolerable. She didn't have friendly chats at the water cooler or go to lunch with the girls. No one really socialized with her and she was beginning to suspect Todd and Nanette were why she'd always been treated as a pariah.

Todd squeezed her shoulder to gain her attention and she winced.

Smenkare plucked Todd's hand from her and crushed his puny white fingers within his dark, strong hand. "Touch her again and I will disembowel you."

Todd's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Let go of me, you prick." The words would have had more force if his voice hadn't sounded like a door squeaking. He cleared his throat. "Please."

Smenkare released the coward's hand. "Do not talk to her again. Do not look at her again. Do not *touch* her again."

"You can't tell me what to do."

Kira rolled her eyes. Todd the toddler. What had she ever seen in him? He'd never be good for a long-term relationship. The only person he'd ever care about was himself. Too bad it had taken her two lousy fucks to figure it out. Loneliness and desperation had made her accept less than she deserved. And it had only taken three days with beautiful, tender Smenkare to figure *that* out.

"You may grovel to her. You may kiss the earth she walks upon. You may beg her forgiveness for being a worthless mongrel. But that is all."

"Fuck you." Todd's face turned red and his eyes bulged. "Kira and I are involved."

"No, you are not. She is mine."

Smenkare drew Kira away from the infant trapped in a man's body and down the hall to the boss' half-opened door. She asked Smenkare to wait outside. Given what her boss was about to tell her, she'd rather not have him threaten ancient Egyptian punishments to the man who signed her paychecks. She entered the office and closed the door behind her.

"You already know what this is about, Miss Maxwell." He scribbled on a piece of paper and slid it across the desk. "Here's your last check. Given the circumstances, I don't believe you'll want to give a two-week notice."

"Are you allowing me to resign?"

He nodded. "You're a good employee. Your work is exemplary even if your judgment is not. I'm sorry to lose you, but if you have sex in the elevator and I allow you to stay..."

"Then you'd have to let everyone else have sex in the elevator."

His frown indicated he didn't appreciate her sense of humor. "What you did was illegal, Miss Maxwell and if I so desired, I could fire you and press charges. As it is, I don't wish to besmirch your reputation or the company's."

Oh. Now she got it. Getting caught having sex in the elevator was about making Marketing For Morons look bad. As if their name wasn't enough of an indictment. But to suggest they were immoral and worse, unworthy of their corporate accounts... "Men like Todd Groman can screw every woman in the office, but a little boink in the elevator puts me in the unemployment line."

"He screws them on his own time and not on company property."

Kira rose and took her check. "Maybe you should check security tapes again. The copy room, the conference room, the receptionist's desk, his cubicle—"

"Thank you, Miss Maxwell. Please clear your desk immediately."

So Jerry knew about Todd's sexual escapades and did nothing. She wanted to feel furious, violated, and self-righteous, but all she could work up was a good laugh. God, she hadn't wanted to admit it before, but she hated this job, this building, and these people. She wiped the tears from her eyes, leaned a hip on the desk, and stabbed at a button on Jerry's desk. The building's intercom system hummed to life.

"This is Kira Maxwell, formerly a lowly assistant working for that esteemed and well-named company Marketing For Morons. I am resigning today because I got caught fucking a gorgeous Egyptian prince in the elevator. I just wanted everyone to know it was worth it. And while I'm sharing my personal business with you, Todd Groman was the lousiest fuck I've ever had." She flicked off the button. Then flicked it on again. "And Nanette's boobs are as fake as her hair."

She looked at her boss, expecting him to be furious. He was shaking, all right, with laughter. "Go write your resignation, Miss Maxwell," he managed to gasp, "and consider yourself avenged."

CHAPTER FIVE

Smenkare watched in awe as they cruised the Strip. He knew about Las Vegas, but he had never visited it before. Most of the time, he never left the bedrooms of his mistresses, unless they wanted to show him off. Sometimes he got to attend cocktail parties or luncheons. Most were boring affairs with watered-down drinks, bad food, and dull conversations.

They had passed a circus tent, a harbor with two ships, a palace fit for Caesar and the most amazing glittery, showy buildings he'd ever seen. They lacked the soul of Thebes, even of Amarna, but they were impressive all the same. It was slow going, but Kira didn't seem to mind the pace. She glanced at him. "Tourists. On the sidewalks and sky bridges, in cabs and rental cars, jaywalking like idiots. I don't usually go this way, but I thought you might like it."

"I do." He looked at the pedestrians crowding the sidewalks. "I am sorry you lost your job."

"Thanks." Kira smiled. "You know what? I don't really care."

"Didn't you like your job, Kira?"

"I like marketing, but I didn't like working for that stupid-ass company. Any time you're part of an office environment, there are politics and backstabbing and all kinds of crap unrelated to the work. That's the part that sucks."

Smenkare gazed out the window and thought about the royal intrigues he'd deflected and initiated. Perhaps running a palace was a lot like working in an office. Although, he suspected being a king of Egypt was a far better job than *marketing*. He imagined Kira in Egypt, dressed in royal robes, sitting across from him during breakfast. They would discuss the business of his kingdom, his people. She had a sweet disposition, but a core of strength. She was intelligent, too, yet not ambitious. She would have been a beautiful queen. A partner worthy of his love, his life, his kingdom.

He shook away the thoughts.

Never had he thought about one of his mistresses as his queen, much less claimed one as he had claimed Kira. None had deserved the title. He knew she did not understand the significance of his words.

He glanced at Kira. She was beautiful without knowing she was beautiful. It was an odd combination. Yet a woman who knew nothing about her own beauty was a woman who could not wield it as a weapon.

Men used women, yes. But women...women knew how to use men, too. Nefertiti had used the love of her husband to dispose of his eldest son. She had

manipulated his father with sweet lies and sexual conquests. If he had not been sent to the Hittites...his brother would not have taken the throne. He and their sister would have lived. And Smenkare would have smite Ay, the murderous bastard.

He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes against the memories, but they invaded his mind like soldiers swarming the land of a conquered enemy.

This night, he entered Thebes under the cover of darkness, dressed as one who lives in the desert. Egyptians respected these wandering souls and believed they were gods in disguise. He had come to Thebes to find Mentari. She'd been one of many women who'd given him pleasure. She had been his favorite lover and she pleased him as no other ever had. Yet, while she, like many Egyptians, pretended to follow his father's religions, her loyalties belonged to the old gods. Now, with his father dead, the Aten was no more.

He found Mentari near Amun's temple holding a dagger and food offerings.

They had met at the same temple two days ago. He'd taken her to Bast's temple, a ten-minute walk from here, and made love to her on the altar. She did not protest and after they were finished, he felt as if he'd given the goddess some kind of offering.

Mentari gave him her body willingly, but never her heart. That belonged to Bast. He disliked knowing Mentari served another, loved another more than him. When he was pharaoh, he would be a god and none would worship any but him. He would wipe Bast from every record, statue, and building.

He could see nothing but his own wish to be pharaoh. Nothing was more important than taking the throne from Ay. Before the Aten, Amun's godswives had the power of pharaohs. To marry one was to gain the kingdom. Now that his father and his religion were dead, Amun and the godswives would rule again.

And so would he.

"Mentari, you are Amun's godswife. Marry me and we will claim the throne together."

"I will marry you, Smenkare. If you love me."

"You know I do."

Her laugh was soft, disbelieving. "You use me for your own desires just as you did in Amarna."

"You did not complain."

"To a prince? No." She tweaked his ear as she used to do when he annoyed her. "I fell in love with you."

"And I, you. Did I not promise to make you my consort?"

"I did not see your ambitions then. I was a girl who only wanted to please you. Now, I am a woman and I see what you want from me. But I do not see what it is you can give me."

"I will give you power, prestige, and wealth." He clenched his fists in frustration. "You will be the Great Wife. Is that not enough?"

"You will tire of me, of your promises. I will bear your children, but you will seek others for your bed."

"It is the way of the pharaoh."

She cupped his cheek. "Does the ocean tire of the rain?"

"The ocean does not need the rain."

Her smile was sad, knowing. "I must make a sacrifice to my goddess."

"This place belongs to Amun."

"All things belong to Amun, even Bast. And even you." She shushed his protests with a finger against his lips. "Meet me at Bast's altar in one hour. You will have my answer then."

He stopped her, searched her gaze. She was seeking an answer from him that he did not have. Foreboding made his gut clench, but he could not figure why he suddenly felt afraid.

"Is it wrong to want what is mine?"

"No," she whispered. "It is wrong to ask for the sacrifice of my heart when you know nothing of what such a thing costs."

"Hey, sleepy head," said Kira. "We've arrived."

Smenkare opened his eyes and blinked. A huge bronze pyramid rose to the heavens, glimmering in the late morning sunlight. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. "It cannot be."

"It's the Luxor." She opened her car door and got out. He did the same and followed her through the parking lot to the pyramid. They walked into the lobby and saw fountains. Children and parents sat on the wide flat edges and tossed coins into the pale blue water. The *ching* and *chang* of slot machines competed with the conversations of the people in the casino.

"They have a replica of Tut's tomb here," she said, pointing up. "We could go see it if you like."

He had never seen his brother's resting place. A replica of a pharaoh's tomb would be the closest he'd gotten to Egypt or to his family since the early days of Bast's curse. He wanted to go. He did. But he could not bear it. His heart already ached too much for what he could not have. He cupped Kira's cheek and brushed his lips across hers. "Thank you, Kira. But this does not feel right. This is not Egypt." He turned to gaze at the fountains. "I am never going home again."

"Don't say that." Kira wrapped her arms around him. "I'll take you to Egypt. You can spend the rest of the month in your homeland."

Amazement made him speechless. He stared at her concerned face and felt joyous. No mistress had ever asked what he desired. No mistress had ever offered to give him up so that he might have temporary freedom. No mistress had looked at him the way Kira did now.

"You would do this for me?"

"Yes."

"Egypt is in my heart. It is as if I left yesterday, not three thousand years ago. To see it now would..." He shrugged, unable to formulate his feelings into words.

"I understand." She grabbed his hand and led him outside. "We'll do the next best thing."

"What?"

"Get mind-blowing drunk."

"I was hoping we'd have sex."

Kira stopped. "Here?"

"Anywhere you like."

"It's illegal to have sex in public."

Smenkare grinned. "Only if you're caught."

They found the perfect spot—right between the Sphinx's paws. The fake Sphinx sat in the front of the Luxor much as the real Sphinx sat in front of The Great Pyramid in Egypt. They were tucked behind one extended paw, into a rounded groove under the beast's chin. Usually the area swarmed with tourists taking pictures, but it had been cordoned off for repairs. The shuttle wasn't running, either, so the chances of getting caught were slim—unless a construction worker or rebellious teenager happened to walk by.

Kira had never in her life imagined having sex in a public area. And yet, here she was, right next to the big ol' paw of the Sphinx, unbuttoning her blouse so Smenkare could suck her tits.

He wasted no time undoing her front-snap bra. His warm mouth closed over one nipple and she gasped at the contact. His hands reached under her skirt; one cupped her ass, and the other stroked her clit.

He released her breast and rained kisses on her collarbone and neck before taking her mouth and thrusting his tongue inside. She returned the eager strokes of his tongue with her own and moved against the finger tickling her clit. He was the only man who had ever given her this much pleasure. So what if he'd spent a hundred lifetimes making other women feel this way? She wanted him—she wanted him forever.

"Turn around," he whispered against her mouth.

She did as he asked. He put his hands on the sides of her breasts and gently pushed her distended nipples against the rough wall. Pleasure-pain zinged through her. She moaned, excited by the rasp of the concrete on her flesh. Smenkare lifted her skirt and she felt his penis between her thighs.

"I can't get enough of you," he whispered as he slid his cock into her vagina. "You are my queen."

Smenkare held onto her hips and thrust inside her. His movements made her nipples scrape the wall and she cried out at the sensations zapping her. She put one hand on the wall and the other under her skirt, touching her aching clitoris. She lowered her fingers so that the tips brushed against Smenkare's penis as he entered her...then she was through teasing herself. She rubbed her clit in rhythm with her lover's thrusts and pushed her breasts closer to the wall.

Everything was feeling and sound and movement.

"I'm going to come inside you," said Smenkare. "Oh Kira!"

Smenkare thrust one final time. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pushed deeper. She felt his ejaculation as intense pleasure washed over her again and again until she was limp and hugging the wall for dear life.

* * * * *

"He's got a good voice, but his timing's off," said Selena.

Kira watched Smenkare on the tiny stage, butchering "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" with his Karaoke imitation. He kept putting his mouth too close to the microphone so he sounded thunderous. He was having a hard time reading the words scrolling on the side monitor—probably because he'd downed three Jell-O shots, two Rattlesnakes, and a Long Island Tea. She'd stuck to tequila and was feeling really fuckin' good.

"I'm glad you came to get wasted with me and Kare," she said to Selena.

"See you get drunk? I wouldn't miss it. The last time you had a cocktail—"

"I had a cock," interrupted Kira, pointing to Smenkare. "And he had some tail." She patted her own rear end.

Selena cracked up. In fact, she laughed so hard, she doubled over and smacked her head on the little black table. "That hurt." She rubbed her forehead.

"Looked like it," agreed Kira.

Smenkare finished his set and returned to the table.

"That was fun." He looked at the women. "How did I do?"

Kira and Selena looked at each other then at him. "You rocked the mike, baby," said Kira.

His lips twitched into a smile. "That bad?"

Selena nodded. "Wanna do another Jell-O shot, Kare?"

"Only if I wish to vomit."

"I'll take that as a yes."

An hour later, they all piled into a cab and went to Kira's apartment. They crept up the stairs even though it was only seven o'clock in the evening.

"I've never gotten stinkin' drunk this early," said Kira as she attempted to fit the key in the lock. The third try, the key went in and she turned the knob.

"You've never gotten stinkin' drunk," said Selena. "Tipsy. Buzzed. Giggly. Never stinkin'."

"I resent being called giggly."

"I call 'em as I see 'em."

They entered the living room. Kira managed to shut the door, but her keys slid out of her hand and onto the carpet. They stumbled toward the couch and sat down. Smenkare sat in the middle; Selena and Kira settled on either side. He looked at Kira, then Selena, then at his crotch. "I am horny."

"I thought your name was Kare," said Selena.

"Smenkare," corrected Kira.

"What kind of name is that?"

"Egyptian."

"Oh." Selena scrutinized Smenkare. "Where did you guys meet again?"

"Magical vibrator," said Kira.

"Isn't that a club downtown?"

"Nope. I bought a magical vibrator. Turned it on." She jerked a thumb toward Smenkare. "He popped out."

"I do not pop," he said in an offended voice. "I form."

"He formed," echoed Kira making wavy motions with her hands, "then we had really great sex."

Selena nodded. Then she said, "You guys are so full of shit."

"How do you feel about a threesome?" asked Smenkare.

"I'm drunk enough to try it," said Selena, "but not drunk enough to black out and forget I tried it."

"I'm drunk enough to black out and forget," said Kira. "Do you think you could live with the embarrassment of screwing your best friend and her lover and keep it a secret from me?"

"No." Selena pursed her lips. "Why don't we play a game instead?"

"Does it involve sex?" asked Smenkare.

"No more alcohol for you," said Kira. "It makes your horny-o-meter rocket into the red zone."

"Truth or dare," said Selena.

"Okay." Kira patted Smenkare's knee. "You'll like this game."

"You first, bestest friend. Truth or dare."

"Truth."

"Chickenshit." Selena grinned. "How did you meet Kare?"

"I bought a vibrator and he was in it. An Egyptian goddess cursed him to sexual slavery and since I own the vibrator, he has to do whatever I say."

"I can't believe you're sticking to that story. Since you're such a liar-liar-pants-on-fire, it's still my turn." She looked at Smenkare. "Truth or dare."

"Dare."

"I dare you to turn into the so-called magical vibrator."

Without a word, Smenkare rose and shed his clothes. Selena's mouth dropped open, but it snapped shut when he stood in front of her, his cock jutting inches from her face. "Wow." She looked at Kira. "I gotta get me one of those."

"Only Kira or Bast can return me to the vibrator." He moved in front of Kira. "Put your hands on my cock, mistress, and tell me to return."

Kira did as he asked, resisting the drunken horny urge to stick his penis in her mouth and suck on it. He was so beautiful, so perfect. She cupped his balls and enclosed his penis with her free hand. "Return."

Poof. He disappeared.

Selena stared at the golden dick in Kira's hands then looked at her friend. "Holy shit."

"Yeah."

Kira pushed the black button. Smenkare formed almost immediately. He looked relieved and Kira wondered if he'd thought she would leave him in the vibrator. He got dressed then resumed his seat between the two women.

Silence settled as thick and heavy as a wool blanket.

After a few awkward seconds ticked by, Selena rose from the couch and entered the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" asked Kira.

"Making coffee. We're getting undrunk. Either we were all hallucinating that your boyfriend is a part-time vibrator or there's some very weird shit going on and I want to know what it is."

Selena forced everyone to take some ibuprofen, down two glasses of water, and load up on coffee.

"I'm starting to feel sober, but my stomach feels like I ate a metal sandwich," said Kira. "Tequila kills."

"Nice epitaph. Keep drinking the java, honey." Selena turned to Smenkare. "It's time for you to spill your guts."

"How would you propose I do that?"

"I don't mean literally. Tell us about the curse. Why are you stuck in that damned thing?"

Smenkare looked at Kira. How would she feel about him if she knew his sins? She cared for him like no other had before, not even Mentari, who'd loved her goddess more than him. "Do you wish to know, mistress?" he asked softly.

She nodded, her gaze compassionate.

"When I was a young prince at Amarna, I fell in love with a girl named Mentari. I wanted her to be my consort, but before I could bring her into the palace, Nefertiti sent me on a diplomatic mission to the Hittites. She hoped they would kill me, but I made peace with our enemies and lived as a son to their king.

"Years passed. Then my sister's letter arrived. Tutenkhamen had died and she needed me to come home. I left immediately and was ambushed before I could reach Thebes. I survived the attack, but arrived too late to save my sister."

"I don't understand," said Selena. "What does this have to do with being cursed as a sex slave?"

"The only way for me to claim my rightful place was to marry a godswife of Amun and arrange a coup. I had the support of General Horemheb, but I needed more than my father's blood in my veins to claim Egypt."

"Mentari was a godswife," said Kira.

"Yes. She loved Amun and Bast more than she loved me. She let me have her body, but her heart belonged to her gods. I wanted the throne and saw no other path but that which led to Ay's death. I did not know what she asked of me...

"She told me to meet her at Bast's altar and there, she would give me her answer." Smenkare bowed his head and took a deep breath. He could not face Kira. He did not want to see her revulsion at his shameful act. "When I arrived, I found her on the altar, the dagger she used for her ceremonies plunged into her heart."

"She killed herself? *That* was her answer?" Kira sounded outraged. "Bast made you a sex slave because one of her priestesses committed suicide? That's fucking insane."

He dared to look at her and saw that she did not condemn him for his single-minded pursuit of power or selfish desire to wed Mentari to gain the throne. She was angry — for *him*.

"You can't condemn a man to three thousand years of sexual slavery because your priestess is a moron with a knife and death wish."

"Kira, you must still your tongue," warned Smenkare. "Bast watches us. She will not tolerate insults."

"I wish I was still drunk," said Selena, looking into her empty coffee mug. "This kind of shit is way beyond my ability to deal with it."

* * * * *

Bast looked into the silvery glass and watched Smenkare tell his story. This was not the first time he'd told a mistress his tale of woe. In the beginning, he'd hoped his captor would free him or convince Bast to free him so that he could still claim Egypt.

She stopped sending him to women in his homeland, but he didn't lose hope.

No. It took centuries for him to lose hope. To stop thinking about power and wealth and becoming god-like.

She pursed her lips as she watched Smenkare caution his mistress not to insult her. She smiled. Smenkare felt differently about this mistress. They had been together a mere four days and he sought to protect her, to do as she wished not because he must, but because he wanted to please her.

Oh, there had been others he had liked. Many women treated him well and wanted him for marriage and fatherhood. Some had asked, others had begged, and yet others had let him go. She wondered what Kira would choose to do.

The woman had done what so many before her had done.

She'd fallen in love with Smenkare.

Bast lounged in her chaise and watched the drama unfold. Smenkare did not understand his punishment was not just about Mentari's death. It was about his disrespect of the gods. Of losing his soul to ambition and greed. Of choosing the throne of Egypt over the love of his woman.

He did not understand sacrifice.

Smenkare's sexual slavery was not just about him, but he'd been unable to see it any other way. Had he thought about how much joy he'd brought into the lives of women who had nothing for themselves? They doubted their beauty, their sexuality, their dreams until Smenkare arrived and showed them how to open their minds and their hearts. He made them feel beautiful and special and worthy.

That was a gift, not a curse.

"Bes."

The short, scruffy man entered her chambers.

"I have a task for you. It must be done tomorrow morning."

Bes nodded his compliance and left.

She looked at the glass and watched Kira tuck her friend onto the couch before retiring with Smenkare to her bedroom.

"Enjoy him while you can," Bast whispered.

And smiled.

* * * * *

Smenkare woke Kira with a kiss. She blinked awake and looked at him.

"You are beautiful."

"You are a liar."

He laughed and tapped her nose. "I do not lie, Kira." He drew down the sheet to her waist and gazed at her nipples. Just his glance made them pucker and he felt male pride at her response. He loved her body, her passion, her quick wit. She made him feel whole again. Like a man with his woman instead of a slave with his mistress.

He bent down and suckled one nipple. Then he suckled the other. He felt her hands slip through his hair and press him closer.

"I intend to worship you," he said, cupping a breast. He kissed the areola with slow, wet attention then swirled his tongue around the taut peak. He moved to her other breast and repeated the loving gestures.

She wiggled impatiently beneath him.

He grinned.

His hand coasted down her thigh to her knee. His fingers traveled up again, stroking the outer lips of her pussy, her inner thigh, the sensitive area around her anus. He hovered over her clit then skipped touching it, pressing his palm against her quivering stomach.

She groaned her frustration and her hands fisted in the sheets. "I thought you said worship, not torture."

He bent to kiss her stomach and stopped as a familiar tingling sensation washed over him. His breath caught in his throat. He sat up and clenched the covers as if they could anchor him to the spot. "No! It is not time."

Kira sensed his panic and sat up. "What's wrong?"

"My Kira." He kissed her. Her lips felt soft, too soft. He was fading from her. But thirty days had not passed! What was Bast doing? She had never cut short his time with any woman.

Tears pricked his eyes. He was leaving and he did not want to go. He took Kira's hands and memorized the features of her lovely face. "The last words Mentari spoke to me were 'It is wrong to ask for the sacrifice of my heart when you know nothing of what such a thing costs.' I did not know what she meant...until now."

"Smenkare, your hands are —"

"You are my queen, Kira."

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

"She will beg for you," murmured Bast.

Smenkare stared at the silver glass and watched Kira tear up her bedroom looking for him. She was crying and screaming. She feared for him. Feared that Bast had done something cruel. It broke his heart to see her so afraid.

"Why did you take me?"

Bast lounged on her chaise in her cat form. She wore nothing over her lightly furred breasts, but a white silk skirt covered her lower half. Well-shaped furred calves peeked out from a side slit.

She looked as she always did—unconcerned and all-knowing.

"I offer you freedom, Smenkare."

Freedom? To be his own man? His own master? To go where he wished and do as he pleased? His heart thudded in his chest. Bast had never offered him freedom. Never.

Bast smiled. "You merely have to make a choice."

Foreboding lodged in his gut. He dared to look her in the eyes. "What choice?"

"If I were to tell you that Kira would meet a man tonight who would love her, marry her, and give her children, what would you say?"

NO! his heart cried. He could not bear the thought of another man touching her, wanting her...loving her.

"Does your silence speak for you?"

"I wish her happiness."

"Ah." Bast rose and walked to him, her tail flicking under the skirt. "What if this man could give her happiness, Smenkare? I promise you that they would have a good life together. They will have a boy and a girl, a big house, and more than enough money."

"She deserves such a life."

"A choice then. I return to you Egypt to rule as pharaoh or I give Kira the life she deserves with a man who loves her."

"I don't understand. If I choose Egypt...Kira will not have a happy life?"

"She will not have true love. She will not have a husband, family, or financial security."

"And if I choose Kira's happiness?"

Bast's eyes filled with empathy. She placed a paw on his shoulder. "Your time on this Earth will come to an end."

* * * * *

Panic clawed at Kira. Smenkare was gone and so was the vibrator. She still had the box and the parchment, but those items did her little good. She didn't understand the symbols. After she searched the bedroom, she threw on a robe and ran into the living room. She saw Selena sprawled on the couch and shook her awake.

Selena opened one eye. "What the hell do you want?"

"Smenkare is gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She cradled her head. "I feel like someone tap-danced on my skull."

"Smenkare!" yelled Kira. "The man who sang bad Karaoke last night. The man who lives in a vibrator. The man I—" She froze.

She loved him.

It shouldn't be possible to love a man she'd only known four days.

No, not possible. But true. She felt it all the way through, from her skin to her bones.

She loved him.

"God. I thought I dreamed that whole genie-in-a-vibrator thing." Selena sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Bast took him. We have to get dressed and go to The Lust Bastion."

"Whoa, Kira. You can't charge into a porn shop and demand your sex slave. Especially if this chick Bast really is a mystical being." Selena frowned. "I can't believe I said 'mystical being.' I mean, if I hadn't seen what I saw last night, I wouldn't be saying what I'm saying."

"How about you zip those lips and get your ass moving?" Kira marched toward the bedroom. "We've gotta save Smenkare."

She'd gone three strides when someone knocked on the door. Smenkare! Maybe she'd imagined his fading away, maybe he went for donuts or coffee or condoms. She whirled around and rushed to the door, flinging it open.

The scruffy little man she'd seen at The Lust Bastion stood there. He bowed. "Bast requests the return of her box and its contents," he said in a deep, formal voice.

"That's *my* box," said Kira, irately. "And my vibrator and my Smenkare. Go tell Bast to return my property." She slammed the door, turned around, and screamed. The little man stood in front of her, his expression wavering on friendly.

"I understand your distress," he replied. "But Bast will not be denied."

Selena got up and rounded the couch. "Look, short stuff, we're not giving Bast a damned thing." She poked him in the forehead. "Got it?"

His eyes blazed with interest and he drew closer to Selena. "I would not need to get on my knees to lick your pussy."

"That's true. And I just have to extend my leg to kick your little balls."

"I want to see Bast," said Kira. "Now."

The man grinned. "As you wish."

One eye-blink later, Kira found herself in Bast's purple-fabric-draped office, sitting at the little wooden table. In her hands, she held the white box.

"Right on time."

Bast sat across from her drinking tea. She'd discarded her human face and wore the cat features of her Egyptian heritage.

"The box, please."

"No." Kira clutched it.

The goddess rolled her eyes. She put down her cup and snapped her fingers. The box disappeared.

The sudden loss of her only connection to Smenkare drove spikes of fear into her heart. "Why didn't you do that at my house?"

"I needed you here."

"Why?"

Bast's smile was secretive, but she didn't answer. She merely sipped her tea. Her gaze assessed Kira's robe and tousled hair. "You enjoyed him."

"It hasn't been thirty days."

"He fulfilled your every desire."

"I want him back."

Bast waved a furry paw over the table. Two \$100 bills and one \$50 appeared next to Kira's elbow. "Money-back guarantee."

Kira flung the money onto the floor. "I don't want the money. I want Smenkare."

"You and the hundreds of women before you." Bast sighed. "I am sorry he was unable to fulfill the full month."

"Did he finally win his freedom?"

"In a way."

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "You would let him die?"

Bast shrugged. "He is a slave. Nothing more."

"He is pharaoh!" Tears gathered in Kira's eyes, an ache crowding her heart. "He is the man who holds my heart, who rules my life."

"You love him."

"Yes, damn it. How do you plan to free him? By letting him die?"

"No," said Bast. "I would not kill him. He would die because he should have died more than three thousand years ago."

"B – but you prolonged his life! Made him a slave in that damned vibrator."

Bast pursed her lips, her cat eyes uncharacteristically sympathetic. "The gods cannot change the cycle of life. We can twist the rules, of course, but life begins and ends for all mortals. Always."

"Make him immortal."

"That is a rare privilege, Kira, and requires the agreement from a council of gods. We have not granted such a thing since Cupid begged for the life of Psyche."

"I will beg for Smenkare."

Bast shook her head. "Only a god may plead the case."

"Then you –"

She laughed. "I imprisoned him for three millennia because he took the life of my priestess. I cannot forgive him for that."

"She committed suicide," said Kira, a tremor in her voice.

"He might as well have pierced her breast with his own sword. It would have been kinder."

"Please, Bast!"

"No." Bast turned from the counter. "I am glad Smenkare has learned to love. That he regrets the life that led to his punishment. That he found you. But I will not advocate his immortality."

Tears coursed down Kira's cheeks. "Then what can I do?"

"If I free him, his life will end, but if he stays a sex slave..."

Understanding flooded Kira. "He will live forever."

Bast stroked her hair, tucking an errant strand behind Kira's ear. "If you want him to live, you must let him go."

* * * * *

"Todd Groman?"

"Who wants to know?"

The beautiful woman sat next to him on the barstool. He'd been drinking steadily since noon. After Kira's little stunt yesterday, he'd been fired and Nanette had dumped him. He felt like cold shit on a hot day. His gaze skittered over the buxom brunette's curves. She wore a body-hugging white halter-top

dress. Gold hoops dangled from her ears. She had a heart-shaped face with big green eyes and suck-my-dick lips.

Maybe his luck was changing.

"How'd you know my name?"

"The bartender." Her smile was soft. "You're a handsome man." Her fingers stroked his arm. "And I'm a lonely girl."

Todd straightened. If he knew anything, it was the fuck-me glance perfected by horny women. This sweet little bitch wanted him. "What's your name?"

"Mentari."

"That's unusual. I like it."

"Wanna get a table in the corner?"

The bar was dark, seedy, and empty other than for a few losers swilling beer at the bar and watching CNN. In the far corner, past the pool tables and dart stations were a few ratty booths. The farthest one away was darker than the rest because the overhead light had burned out. Todd led Mentari to the booth and scooted in after her. He'd used this one before. He made sure, every so often, that the bulb remained broken.

"So Mentari —"

She kissed him, her hand trailing across his crotch. Man, she wasted no time. He untucked her breasts from the halter-top dress and played with them while she unzipped his jeans and pulled out his penis. She encircled it and stroked it until he went from half-mast to full hard-on. She released his mouth, slithered on top of him, and inserted his cock into her pussy.

He shuddered from the contact. God, she was aggressive.

He grasped her hips, attempting to control her movements, but she refused his direction. She held onto his shoulders and moved up and down at a pace that kept him hard, but brought him no closer to orgasm.

"C'mon," he said through gritted teeth. "Move that ass."

Her breathy moans in his ear annoyed him. She increased the pace, her knees squeaking across the cracked vinyl seat. "Squeeze my breasts," she commanded.

"Fuck you." But he found himself grasping her tits and squeezing them.

"Suck my nipples."

He didn't want to, but his mouth captured one taut peak, then the other.

"Make me come, slave."

Todd adjusted his position and bucked beneath her, not wanting to do the movements, yet unable to stop his body from doing as she asked.

"You will learn what it means to please a woman," she murmured. "You will do as she commands."

She moaned low in her throat. It almost sounded like a purr. Then she threw back and her head and meowed.

Meowed?

Her strong vaginal pulsations milked his cock and he came, too, the orgasm ripping through him until he shuddered and collapsed against the booth.

"I didn't tell Kira there was a third option."

He looked at her, feeling dazed. "Kira? What third option?"

"Curse replacement."

She knew how to fuck, but she was crazy.

He felt uncomfortable, hot, and dizzy. "Get off me."

She shook a finger at him and tsked. "You will have to learn who is the slave and who the master. Let us hope it does not take *you* three thousand years to learn."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'm sorry," said Selena, patting Kira's back. She handed her another tissue. "He was a nice guy."

"Is. He *is* a nice guy. He's just someone else's nice guy." Kira blew her nose. "This sucks so much. Death or sex slavery. What a choice."

"You did the right thing." Selena rose from the couch and retrieved a couple of Cokes from the refrigerator. "You can't sit around all day moping. Why don't we go out?"

"Uh...no."

"I don't want to leave you."

Kira took the Coke, opened the tab, and sipped it. "I'd like to be alone for awhile." She glanced at her friend. "You got a hot date or something?"

Selena's face turned the color of a ripe tomato. "Remember short and scruffy?"

"Yeah."

"He really can lick my pussy standing up."

Kira laughed. "You're kidding."

"Nope. And for a little guy, he has one helluva package."

Kira laughed harder, even though her heart still hurt and the tears wouldn't stop falling. How could someone feel joy and pain at the same time? "Go. Enjoy yourself. Check on me later, though. I might need Ben & Jerry's and 'While You Were Sleeping.'"

"You got it."

After Selena left, Kira wandered around the apartment. She still wore the same robe, her hair needed a brush, and a hot bath sounded almost as good as a long nap. The nap won out. She took off the robe and climbed into bed naked, hating that Smenkare wasn't in it with her.

How could she love a man she'd only known a few days?

How could she mourn a life without him?

She turned to face the pillow and let the tears fall. Exhaustion poured through her and she soon relaxed enough to turn off the water works, but not her mind. With her eyes closed, she thought of him, as if she could simply imagine hard enough, it would break the curse and bring him to her.

Smenkare appeared between her legs. He was tall and well muscled with caramel skin and dark-as-sin eyes. His hair was black, soft as a raven's wing, tied behind his neck with a leather thong. He was gloriously naked, his big cock hard and ready.

He bent close to her and whispered, "What do you wish of me?"

"Love me," she commanded.

"I do." His smile was sly. "Tell me what you want, my Kira."

"I want you. Forever."

"As you wish."

His head dipped down and he took her mouth in a gentle caress, his breath skirting her lips. Only when her mouth was pliant, willing, did he deepen the kiss, thrusting his tongue inside to mate with hers. His hand slipped through her hair then lowered to cup her jaw.

His lips moved down her throat, lingering at the base. He trailed a path to her breasts, raining tiny kisses over each of them, cupping them in his hands to bring them closer to his mouth. His warm lips closed over one turgid nipple, swirling around the nub, suckling it. He turned his attention to her other nipple, giving it the same torturous attention.

Tears gathered in her eyes; she choked back a sob.

Smenkare lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't real."

"Sssshhh."

His hand coasted down her stomach and found the nest of curls at the apex of her thighs. Before he could touch her aching clit, she sat up and pushed him onto his back.

"This is my fantasy," she said. "The only thing I have left with you."

She got on top of him so that her pussy hovered inches above his face. His hands crept around her buttocks and brought her cunt close enough for him to lick. His tongue's strokes were long, tortuous, perfect.

He'd taught her that fantasies were sometimes real and this, like all the other times, felt real.

She sucked the tip of his cock, running her tongue over the slit, then around the edge, before taking it all into her mouth. His penis was long, not too thick, with a beautiful round head. It felt so warm and hard.

So real.

Tears fell again.

"Stop. Just stop."

She rolled off him and lay on her side. "It's too painful to remember. To imagine."

Smenkare kissed the inner dimple behind her knee and stroked her thigh. "Open your eyes, Kira."

"No. Then you'll be gone forever."

"Open your eyes, my queen."

Kira sniffled. "I like queen much better than mistress."

He laughed and patted her ass. "Open your eyes and see me."

Her eyes popped open. She still felt his hand on her butt, the wet heat of his kiss on the sensitive flesh behind her knee. She took a deep breath and looked over her shoulder.

Smenkare lounged on his side, as naked as the day she'd met him. "I admire your ass very much," he said, rubbing it. "It is not too big."

"Smenkare!"

She sat up and stared at him. "How? Who? Why!"

"You're crushing my hand."

"Oh. Sorry." She lifted her butt and he moved his hand.

"You are too far away." He tugged on her leg. "Come here."

Kira threw herself on him and hugged him so hard he begged for breath. "Does this mean Bast gave us the rest of the month?"

"No."

Kira felt her joy die a new death. "How long?"

"Forever." A smile hovered on Smenkare's lips. "If you want me for that long."

"Yes!" She rained kisses on his face, neck, and shoulders. "But—but what about Egypt? What about... Bast said you would die if she released you from the curse."

"I want you more than Egypt," he said. "As for dying—I do not know. Bast released me and I came here. You are my heart, Kira."

She stretched over him, aligning her legs to his, arms-to-arms, stomach-to-stomach, thigh-to-thigh. His cock was hard and ready and nestled between her pussy lips. "You can have all of me. Every day. As much as you like."

He nuzzled her neck, kissing the underside of her jaw. "This is good news."

"You are my king, Smenkare."

He kissed her, his lips warm and soft and real. His fingers threaded through hers and he flipped her on her side. She lifted her thigh and allowed him to enter her wet pussy with one long stroke. She put her leg over his, drawing him deeper. He stilled, releasing their joined hands.

"This feels good." He kissed her, his tongue darting along her lips before plunging into her mouth. He twitched his cock inside her and she gasped. He released her mouth and grinned.

"This feels right," she agreed, kissing him again and contracting her vaginal muscles around his cock.

He moaned. One of his hands went under her head to serve as a pillow and the other fluttered to her hip. His movements were slow, tantalizing. His gaze never left hers. She saw love reflected in his eyes. Pleasure. Desire.

And forever.

Just like the starless night.

Epilogue

"Is this really necessary?" asked Todd.

The short, ugly, fat she-troll nodded and bounced on top of him, her flat breasts flapping like cold pancakes against rolls of stomach fat.

His permanent hard-on offered her a target on which to sit. And sit she did. Her jerky movements made him clench his teeth.

"Do it!"

He heard the passion in her squeaky voice, but felt none. But he'd learned that passion or boredom, he could come anyway. Orgasms were easy. Being controlled by women was not.

This little piece of nightmare owned him for thirty days and he had to obey her every sexual whim.

He sighed. "Double-cheese hamburger with bacon."

"Oh yeah, baby." The woman bounced on him, her chunky thighs squeezing him.

"Lettuce. Tomatoes —"

She stopped and slapped his chest. "What are the rules?"

"No fresh veggies."

She started moving again. "You were saying?"

"Side order of apple pie with vanilla ice cream."

She closed her eyes and moaned, her movements smoothing out. The clutching of her vaginal muscles brought him reluctant pleasure. "French fries with extra salt. Deep-fried onions with ketchup."

"Oh yeah. Oh yeah. More. Give me more!"

"Hot dog with chili, cheese, and mustard." He grabbed her fleshy hips and pumped into her. "Corn dogs. Candy bars. Donuts."

"More," she cried. "I'm so close —"

"Ben and Jerry's New York Super Chunk Fudge."

She screamed and came, pulsating so hard, his cock slipped out. She wiggled down him and put her mouth on his penis, sucking it until orgasm claimed him. She swallowed his cum and licked every drop from his cock. Her beady eyes looked at him. "Tastes like...Krispy Kremes."

The End

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Drenched With Affection

By Chris Tanglen

INTRODUCTION

The literary world is filled with classic tales of romance, such as *Romeo & Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, and that novel with the guy who looked like that other guy and in the end one of them got his head chopped off so the other guy could marry some girl. These are wonderful tales that staple the spirit of romance to your heart and make the world a better place, or at least a more populated one.

Then there are other romances out there trying to mess things up for everyone else. Vile tales like *She May Be Covered in Chocolate But She Ain't No Cherry*, *Cupid's Special Operation*, and *The Shocking Tale Of The Man Who Sucked Gophers Through a Straw (On Valentine's Day)*. These wretched stories have no business calling themselves "romantic," and should be immediately discarded by any serious reader of literature.

The story you are about to read falls somewhere in the middle.

CHAPTER ONE

Last month, Tim Neffster had spent an entire weekend painting his home, which was only one of the reasons he was so concerned to see his wife driving toward it with a bulldozer.

"Diane, stop!" Tim leaped out of his car and rushed across their front lawn, arms flapping wildly. The bulldozer plowed into the side of the house, breaking through the wall with a loud, expensive-sounding crash.

Tim hurried through the brand-new entrance as Diane pulled a lever, raising the bulldozer blade and wiping out an entire wall's worth of horror movie posters and memorabilia.

"Diane! You're hurting our home!"

She steered the bulldozer a bit to the left, causing more destruction to Tim's collection. Her plaster-covered hair hung down in her face as she turned toward him and shouted something that was obviously very important, but which he couldn't hear over the heavy equipment.

"What?" he shouted back.

She repeated it. Though Tim could tell that his name was in there somewhere, he couldn't read lips well enough to make out the rest of what she was saying.

"Turn off the engine!"

"What?" Diane's lips formed.

Tim made a key-turning gesture. "Turn off the engine!"

She did so. "I've had it with you, Tim! I just can't take any more!"

"Whatever I did, I'm sorry!" Tim insisted. "I'll make it up to you, I promise!"

Diane turned the bulldozer back on and inched it forward.

"No! Not Gill-Man!" Tim rushed past her and tried to protect his life-sized model of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, but it was crushed with as much savagery as the bug-eyed monster had shown his helpless victims.

"Diane, please!" Tim frantically scooped up an armful of horrific collectibles. "You're wrecking all of our stuff!"

Diane shut off the engine again. "What did you say?"

"I said that you're wrecking all of our stuff."

"Your stuff," Diane corrected, spitting out some debris. "Mine's in storage."

Tim threw himself in front of the bulldozer, although he was pretty sure that he wouldn't do this kind of thing if the engine were still running. "I really think we should discuss this. Tell me what I did wrong."

Diane was silent for a long moment. Then she shrieked with inhuman fury. "*You didn't notice my hair!*"

Tim blinked, confused. "I beg your pardon?"

"I spent three hours in the salon yesterday and you didn't say a thing!"

Tim tilted his head and regarded her closely. "Oh...wow, honey, it looks great. Especially the...uh...plaster highlights and...stuff..."

The bulldozer's engine roared to life. Tim leapt out of the way, and then quickly climbed onto the machine next to Diane. She scowled at him but didn't resist as he shut off the engine once more.

"Why are you going so berserk?" he asked in an aggrieved tone. "*I never* notice when you get your hair done."

"That's the point! For three years you never noticed anything! But you noticed *this*, didn't you?"

Tim glanced around at the ruins of their home. "Yes," he admitted somewhat woefully, "I certainly did."

"I want a divorce, Tim. You can keep what's left of the house."

Tim sighed sadly and nodded. He climbed off the bulldozer. "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry I was such a lousy husband."

He reached for Diane's arm. Her thirst for destruction was apparently quenched, and she allowed him to help her down. He patted the side of the bulldozer.

"So, what, they just rent these things to anybody?"

"I'm not sure. My friend at work got it for me."

"Oh. I wonder what kind of deposit you have to put down on something like this."

"I could get you his number if you want."

"Nah, I was just curious." Tim kicked at a piece of porcelain that had once been a Hannibal Lecter collector's plate, feeling like a complete jerk. He thought that the whole bulldozer destruction thing might have been a bit excessive on her part, but there was no denying that he'd been selfish and inattentive.

And it wasn't even that he was a workaholic, putting in long hours at the restaurant to better provide for his wife. He was just as likely to plop down in front of the television after working eight hours as he was after working fourteen. No, he'd just been...oblivious.

Well, he'd learned his lesson. It was never going to happen again.

* * * * *

Eleven months later...

FRIDAY

Melody Talaway writhed and squealed as Alex thrust into her over and over, making the poor bedsprings beg for mercy. They were fairly old bedsprings, unused to this type of abuse, but they were holding up admirably well, though Melody half-expected the mattress to break right through them and crash to the floor. Of course, if that *did* happen, most likely Alex would keep thrusting away until the mattress broke through the floorboards and spilled them down into the living room below. At that point he'd probably stop, unless they landed on the couch.

Her leg was starting to get a bit sore from being wedged between the two of them, her foot draped on his shoulder, and she *knew* her pussy was going to be sore in the morning despite the river of natural lubrication, but it was completely worth it.

Very little of Melody's adult life had involved having somebody fuck her brains out. She was thirty-six, and though she'd lost her virginity in high school, getting her brains fucked out was a rare occurrence. Her lovers were few and far between, and most of them were merely adequate in the bedroom. Alex, on the other hand, was a powerhouse in bed, and the fact that he had a huge, beautiful cock was merely a fringe benefit.

He had far and away been the best boyfriend she'd ever had, and the only one to actually move in with her. The two months they'd shared her house had been the best two months of Melody's life. Alex was handsome and charming, and he didn't care that she was a good twenty pounds above what scientists had determined was her optimum weight. Nor did he care that she had black hair that was less likely to hang glamorously over her shoulders than to go into total frizz mode.

Her only real concern with the relationship was that he'd just turned nineteen.

Yeah, she felt like a vicious cradle-robber. But she was a vicious cradle robber who was having the best sex of her life, so there was only so much guilt she could feel.

He leaned forward to kiss her, and she met his tongue with her own. They kissed deeply, their tongues exploring each other's mouth, not breaking the kiss until Melody had to gasp for breath.

"Ooooh, yeah, fuck me," she said, closing her eyes. Of course, he already *was* fucking her, and had been for quite some time, but for some reason she felt comfortable talking dirty with Alex, and liked doing it. "Fuck me," she repeated.

Alex continued to do as he was instructed.

After about a minute, the heavy metal song blasting over the stereo (some group that Alex liked) ended and Melody decided that her leg wasn't going to be able to take much more of this position. Anyway, she was developing a hankering to be taken doggy-style.

As the next song began, she gently pushed him away, took a moment to stretch her leg, and then crawled onto her hands and knees, raising her ass in the air. She knew it wasn't the finest ass in existence, but with Alex she didn't have to feel self-conscious about it. He crouched behind her and she prepared for another fine round of vigorous, frantic, joyous fucking.

Instead, she was treated to the sensation of his tongue on her extremely wet pussy. Alex was a huge proponent of the idea of frequently licking her there, and insisted on non-lubricated condoms for just that reason. Melody was not inclined to complain.

She squirmed as he moved his tongue in quick up-and-down strokes, nearly making her come as soon as it touched her clitoris. Melody pressed her face into the pillow and tried to grab a handful of bed sheets, but those had already been thrown to the floor earlier in the session.

Alex caressed her buttocks as he licked her, sending her into a frenzy. She was going to come any second now, and it was going to be *good*.

The sadistic bastard pulled away. He clearly knew how close she was to an explosion of ecstasy, and was determined to postpone her pleasure until the absolute perfect moment. She let out a loud whimper to let him know how cruel he was being, although he probably couldn't hear it over the music.

Moments later his cock was back inside her again, and he resumed the process of fucking her senseless. She had no idea how such a young cock could be so incredibly skilled, but it wasn't a matter that she really wanted to delve into. Instead, she contented herself with the knowledge that this awesome cock was inside her right now, despite where it might have lurked in the past.

"Ooooooh..." she moaned. She tried but failed to think of something clever to say after "oooooh," and just settled for saying "oooooh" a few more times. God, he was good! Alex pounded into her with a jackhammer rhythm, his hands tightly gripping her waist. Though she wasn't into the whole submissive thing, there was definitely something appealing about having a man take her this forcefully.

He fucked her like that throughout the song, releasing her waist with one hand halfway through so that he could very gently probe between her buttocks

with his finger. Her ass was mostly off-limits, but there was certainly nothing wrong with a gentle probing now and then.

Finally, Melody decided that it was time to take *him* just as forcefully.

"On your back!" she ordered, just as the song ended.

Without hesitation, Alex pulled out of her and flopped onto his back. Melody spun around and stroked his condom-covered cock with her hand a few times before climbing on top of him and impaling herself upon it. Deeply upon it.

His hands slid over her large breasts as she rode him for all he was worth. And he was worth a hell of a lot. He groaned and said "oooooh" several times. Melody bounced up and down, her body slapping against his, his thumbs working her erect nipples. She had many years of insufficient sex to make up for, and by golly she was going to make up for it and collect the fucking interest.

She moved her hand down to her clitoris and began to vigorously rub it with her index and middle fingers. She'd been embarrassed to do this trick the first few times she'd had sex with Alex, until the time he placed her hand there for her, encouraging her. She'd finished him off and then given him a show.

"I'm close..." Alex warned.

"One more minute...please..."

She slowed down her thrusting but increased the speed of her fingers. It wouldn't take long. Not even the full sixty seconds. Possibly not even...

She sucked in a deep breath as she realized that she was almost there.

Melody came, letting out a howl of pleasure that made her extremely thankful she lived in a house and not an apartment. Alex came immediately afterward, howling even louder than she did.

It took a while for her to coast down from it, but finally she collapsed on top of him, covered with perspiration and completely exhausted.

"Holy shit..." Alex moaned.

"Holy shit..." Melody agreed.

Alex glanced over at the clock, which read 7:32 A.M. "I have to get going. I've got a class at eight."

"Okay, sweetie."

He gave her a kiss and got out of bed. She watched his adorable ass as he walked into the bathroom.

Jeez, he was half her age.

Well, no, not really. She'd have to be thirty-eight to be twice his age. And when he turned twenty, she'd be thirty-seven, so the gap would narrow even further.

She'd lost her virginity while he was still in diapers.

She put that out of her mind. The sex was fantastic and legal.
Life was good.

* * * * *

That night, Alex seemed uncharacteristically rushed as he looked over what Melody had written that day. Before Alex, Melody had never let anyone so much as glance at her works-in-progress, but his comments were always invaluable, and she'd gotten to the point where she insisted that he read her new pages for the day.

"I don't think an eyeball makes a popping sound when you stab it." Alex tapped the pages on the edge of the desk to straighten them and then laid them down.

Melody finished typing her current sentence then turned around and looked up at him. "It doesn't? What kind of sound does it make?"

"I'm not sure. I think it probably would sound sort of squishy."

"Demonstrate a squishy eyeball stabbing sound."

"Jeez, I don't know...maybe something like..." Alex contorted his mouth to get the sound effect right, "...*pwook!*"

Melody considered that. "Maybe I should look this up next time I go to the library."

"You could probably just call a doctor. Or you could buy a frog from a biology lab and...nah, forget that."

"Thank you, sweetheart, I don't know what I'd do without you." Melody scribbled the suggestions on her to-do pad. She returned her attention to the computer screen and typed a couple more sentences before she realized that Alex was still standing behind her.

"I should probably tell you something," said Alex. "I'm leaving you."

She stopped in the middle of the word *entrails*. "What?"

"I'm moving out. Right now."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's over between us."

"Alex, wait a minute, you can't just throw something like that at me. We need to discuss this. As soon as I finish this page we'll go out and—"

"I've made up my mind." Alex's expression was resolved. "This relationship just isn't working. I'm tired of taking a distant second place to eyeball puncturing."

Melody saved her file, and then pushed back her chair and stood up. "Sweetie, wait! You can't make a decision like this without even talking to me!"

"I've tried. Every time I bring up the subject you change it to something about your books. Last week I told you that I thought you took me for granted,

and you immediately rushed to the computer and typed for three hours because it sparked an idea for *Kill Loudly and Carry a Big Chainsaw*."

"My writing is very important to me. You knew that from the beginning."

"I understand that. But I could leave town for a month and you'd only notice if you needed to ask me how far I thought a six-year-old girl could throw a severed head! I don't get the sense that our relationship is about anything but sex. I feel like I'm just your boy-toy."

Melody couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Alex, you're fucking *nineteen years old*! You're supposed to *want* to be a boy-toy! It's *supposed* to be all about sex at your age!"

"Not for me."

"That's just plain demented!"

"Look, the sex is great, I won't lie to you, but I need to be more than just a cock to you."

"You *are* more than just a cock." *You're also a tongue*, Melody thought to herself, and immediately felt horrible for doing so.

"You're completely inattentive unless you're horny."

"That's not true."

"I've been home since five. It's nine now. In these four hours not only have I packed up everything I own and loaded it my car, but I came in here to ask where the packing tape and my green suitcase were."

A tear trickled down Melody's cheek. "I'm sorry. I get so wrapped up in what I'm doing I just...I don't realize... Let's talk about this, okay?"

"I've made my decision. I refuse to be less important than your crappy books."

Melody sucked in a deep breath. Alex flinched as if struck. A very definite 'oh, shit,' expression appeared across his features. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean crappy, I just meant—"

"Get out."

Alex stood there for a long moment, and then nodded and left the room. Melody listened as he walked down the stairs and left through the front door. She slumped over her keyboard, buried her face in her hands, and began sobbing.

How dare he attack her books like that? No, she wasn't William Shakespeare or James Joyce or Erma Bombeck, but she was good at what she wrote. Maybe the critics didn't care for her stuff, and maybe her mother always answered the question "What did you think of it?" with a thirty-second silence, but this was what Melody wanted to do. She wanted to write horror novels. Yeah, she still had to work a part-time administrative assistant job to make ends meet, but she

was happy with the way things were going. Why, only last month...well, no, two, no, three months ago...she'd gotten a great fan letter.

But that wasn't really the issue. Alex didn't dump her because of a lack of respect for her writing prowess; he dumped her because she ignored him. She hadn't even realized it, but, yeah, looking back, as deeply as she'd cared for him (okay, as deeply as she'd lusted for him), she *had* kept him in the background much of the time.

Kept him in the background? Hell, she'd been completely self-centered. She'd only devoted attention to their relationship when *she* felt like it, which was only when she was in the mood to get laid.

There's nothing quite like that special moment of realization that one has been a total cretin.

Well, it wasn't going to happen again. If she ever met another guy who wasn't completely repulsed by her, she was going to give him one hundred percent. He was going to be spoiled beyond belief. She'd take such good care of him that he'd never, ever leave.

Until she met him, though, she was going to wipe away her tears and finish chapter eight.

CHAPTER TWO

SATURDAY

Though the pigs-in-a-blanket on the hors d'oeuvre table were some of the most delicious processed meat products he'd ever consumed, Tim Neffster still wasn't enjoying himself. Sure, he was getting to see all of his old co-workers, but the whole affair was depressing.

"See that?" Frank Moyen thrust his driver's license about three-eighths of a millimeter from Tim's face. "Is that impressive or what? Now *that* is a driver's license photo. I've had seventeen of these things, and I have *never* had such a good picture. I mean, look at it! Usually I've got some kind of fakey mongoloid smile, or one of my eyes is closed, or my hair's sticking up the way it does when I sleep on my face. But see? Nice, pleasant smile, both eyes open, hair in place. I wouldn't go out and have it framed or anything, but, damn, just *look* at it!"

"It's a good one, no doubt about that." Tim wondered what the chances were that a loose power cable might drop from the ceiling and electrocute Frank. It would be an awkward way to end this conversation, but it would be worth the time spent explaining to the coroner what had happened. "If my own picture ever turned out that nice, who knows where I'd be today?"

"God made winners and He made losers." Frank took a sip of his champagne-sprinkled water, then looked around the room. "Guess I'd better mingle some more. If I don't get back to you, thanks for coming."

"My pleasure," Tim lied. "And congratulations."

After Frank left, Tim decided to return to the hors d'oeuvre table before the pigs-in-a-blanket vanished. As he weaved his way around a really drunk woman who was trying to balance a dachshund on her nose, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around.

If he remembered correctly, her name was Karen. She had the face of a model, vaguely cat-like (without the fur), and flowing auburn hair that seemed to be the envy of every single female in the entire world. She was also more than six feet tall, had muscles like a professional weightlifter, and carried herself in a way that scared the hell out of him.

"Hello there," she said in her deep, almost manly voice. "Remember me?"

"Sure. You're Karen, right? How're things going?"

"Tolerable, but not overwhelmingly consequential." She gave him a sympathetic smile. "I saw you scrutinizing Frank's license. You'd think he'd have something more substantial to discuss at his own wedding reception."

Tim shrugged. "I don't know — look who he married. If I were him, I'd want to talk about something else, too."

They both peered across the room at the new Mrs. Moyen. Her wedding gown was nearly transparent, allowing for a good view of her hot pink nylons. Tim had never much liked her, not just because she'd married Frank for his money, but because she was too clueless to realize that he didn't have any.

Karen smiled. "So, you're the proprietor of a café now, right?"

Tim nodded. He wasn't positive, but he suspected that this was the first time he'd ever heard the word "proprietor" spoken aloud in real life. "Yeah, with my brother. It's called Dual Streams. A little food, a little live entertainment, nothing fancy. We finally got the gas leak taken care of and the lawsuit was dropped, so we're doing fine. How's the psychiatry business treating you?"

Karen rolled her eyes. "I always believed *I* was a little off-center, but there's no competition!"

Tim smiled, but the smile was sucked right off his face as he looked across the room and saw...*her*. "Aw, great. It's my ex-mother-in-law. Maybe she hasn't...nope, she's seen me. Maybe she won't...nope, she's coming over."

"Hello, Timothy." Sylvia was a short little woman in her fifties with a sweet voice and plump body. Tim was continually surprised that Satan had chosen such an innocuous person to use as his Servant of Evil.

"Hi." Dreading the conversation to follow, Tim was noticeably lackluster in his response. Talking to Sylvia was going to make his conversation with Frank seem like talking dirty to a voluptuous woman giving him a warm oil massage.

"You're looking well," Sylvia noted. "Diane is looking quite well, too. The three-month world-tour honeymoon with her new millionaire husband was very good for her. They're so happy together that it makes me want to cry whenever I think about it. The wedding was absolutely lovely."

Tim nodded. "I know. You sent me the video."

"You'd be so thrilled for her. Since your divorce she's lost forty pounds and her sex drive has tripled. Oh, and you'd be amazed what living with astounding wealth has done for her complexion."

"I can only imagine."

"And their new home, oh, it's simply to die for!" Sylvia proclaimed. "Did you get the photos?"

"I got the photos. All three sets, plus the poster." The damn thing had even been framed. "Listen, ex-Mom, I really wish you'd quit sending me stuff. Especially those photocopies of their monthly bank statements...do they even know you're doing that?"

"I just thought you'd be interested in seeing how Diane is doing, since you *did* promise to love and cherish her forever, if I remember correctly from that expensive wedding ceremony my departed husband and I paid for."

Tim pointed across the room. "My, my, look at that. A really boring person who wants to share meaningless anecdotes for a couple hours. Guess I'll go join him." He nodded at Karen. "Wanna come?"

"Unequivocally."

They walked away from Sylvia. Tim was pleased to note out of the corner of his eye that she was immediately accosted by Frank and his License of the Gods.

"Hey, Tim," said Michael, another one of his old co-workers. "I just had the last pig-in-a-blanket. Best I've ever tasted. Did you get a chance to try them?"

Tim just shook his head and turned away before he could break any of the state, local, and federal laws prohibiting homicide.

Karen didn't seem to notice his frustration. "So, Tim, are you dating anybody at this current juncture?"

"Nah."

Karen smiled. "How about dinner and a movie?"

Tim blinked. "Excuse me?"

"On Tuesday the Clayzell Theatre is projecting *Threads of the Noose*. It will be subtitled and won't make any sense to those unfamiliar with French literature from the late 1700s, but it will be a unique experience."

"Oh...uh...okay...what time?"

"I believe the film starts at eight. What's today, Saturday? I'll be visiting my mother for a pair of days, but I'll telephone you when I get back and we'll set something up. Sound good?"

Karen cracked her knuckles. Tim knew deep within his soul that it wasn't meant to be an intimidating gesture, but that knowledge didn't stop his blood from running cold.

"Um, okay."

"Spectacular! I can't wait! You're not intending to cancel on me as soon as my back is turned, are you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Spectacular!"

* * * * *

Melody had been sitting at the keyboard for over an hour and hadn't even finished a paragraph. This wasn't like her. For Melody Talaway not to be able to concentrate on a graphic scene of brutal horror was unheard of. She'd been dumped because she only cared about her writing, and now she couldn't write.

Irony sucked.

Okay, here was the solution. She was going to fill herself with alcohol straight down to the bone marrow, act like a drunken idiot in public, and thoroughly embarrass herself.

Or maybe not.

Maybe she'd just start smoking again. She dialed in the combination of the padlock on her bottom desk drawer, removed it and set it aside, and then slid open the drawer and took out one of her forty-two packs of emergency cigarettes. She found a lighter, tore the nicotine patch from her neck, and lit up.

Ahhhhhh...

After she finished, she threw away the cigarette butt and applied a new patch. The cigarette (her first in nearly a day) had been wonderful, but she didn't feel much better.

It was time to call her mother.

"Hi, honey." Agatha answered her cellular phone on the third ring. "How is everything?"

Melody frowned. Was that the sound of semiautomatic weapons in the background? "Where are you?"

There was an explosion that Melody suspected was grenade-derived. "A campground in Michigan," Agatha explained, talking loudly over the noise. "Your father and I and the rest of the group found an old junker automobile, so we're blowing the shit out of it."

"You always were into the arts."

"I had to sit down after a couple of clips. Your mother's not as young as she used to be. Hold on a moment, dear." There was a pause as her mother shouted at one of the campers. "Dammit, Harry, be careful! That shrapnel almost hit me!"

Maybe joining her parents for a weekend of destructive mayhem was the answer to her problems.

"Sorry about that, dear. So how are you?"

"Alex dumped me last night, but I'm handling it just super."

And then the tears started again.

She unloaded on her mother for a solid ten minutes, applying a second nicotine patch halfway through. "I was a terrible person, Mom! I ignored him! All he wanted was a little attention, and I never gave it to him! I'm *evil*!"

"That's ridiculous, dear. Hitler was evil. You're merely selfish and inconsiderate. You'll get over this quickly enough. You just need to go out and have some fun."

"I don't feel like leaving the house."

"Tough shit. Go on, treat yourself to a nice dinner. Forget all about that kid. Listen, dear, I have to go now...your father is breaking out the blowtorch. Love and kisses!"

"Bye, Mom," Melody hung up the phone. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe she just needed to get out of the house, have some fun for a change. Go out to dinner, someplace she'd never been to before. There was that one place, Dual Streams, that sounded good. At least she'd overheard a couple of people at work raving about it. They had live entertainment, so it wouldn't be too uncomfortable going by herself.

That was it. She'd put on her Happy Sweater, go out, treat herself to a burger and some music, come home, take a bubble bath with that slimy mango-scented gook her mother had given her three Christmases ago, then go to bed.

And hopefully not dream about dying a lonely, decrepit, miserable old maid.

However, a dream sequence like that one might work in her book. She jotted the idea down in her notepad. Good, she was getting her muse back. Everything was going to turn out fine.

CHAPTER THREE

For about forty-eight seconds, Melody allowed herself to believe that everything was going to turn out fine. On the forty-ninth second, she discovered that her Happy Sweater had fallen on the closet floor and been trampled with dirty shoes. Alex must've accidentally knocked it off the hanger when he was gathering up his clothes. It *had* to have been an accident. No matter how bitter he was, Alex would never purposely sully her Happy Sweater.

Okay, it wasn't a big deal. Her Happy Sweater—an orange sweater covered with goofy red lines that looked like smiling mouths—was getting a bit faded anyway. She selected a simple black blouse to go with her jeans, got dressed, washed her face, headed for the door, and came to the realization that she had no idea where in this or any other world her car keys were.

They were supposed to be hanging on the little stone key hook shaped like a mutant octopus tentacle that was by the front door. That's why she'd bought the thing. *You know, I lose my keys a lot*, she'd thought to herself while she was browsing the aisles at Really Weird Things. *Perhaps if I were to purchase this mutant tentacle key hook, I wouldn't lose them anymore*. It was sound thinking, flawed only by the assumption she would actually *use* the hook if she bought it. She'd used it a couple of times, but once the novelty wore off she'd returned to her old method of simply flinging the keys in whatever direction was most handy when she walked in the front door.

Melody stood there for a moment, hoping that maybe the Key Fairy would show up and give them to her. But the Key Fairy, being an unreliable bitch, was nowhere to be found.

Okay, the keys were probably on the kitchen table.

Nope.

Maybe she'd set them on her desk.

Nope.

Maybe they were stuck under the cushions of the love seat.

Nope.

The bed stand?

Nope.

Her pocket?

Nope.

The microwave? Nope, she'd learned her lesson last time.

Twenty minutes later she found them in the bathtub. She didn't know how they got there and didn't care.

She went outside, got in her red truck, shut the door, fastened her seat belt, put the key in the ignition, started the motor, put the truck into reverse, backed out of the driveway, said “fuck,” applied the brake, put the truck into drive, pulled forward into the driveway, put the truck into park, shut off the motor, took the key out of the ignition, removed her seat belt, opened the door, got out of the truck, and went back inside the house to grab her purse, which contained the money that made it so convenient to purchase edibles at restaurants.

After returning to the truck and backing out of her driveway again, she picked up her Happy Tape, *Songs to Bring Cheer to a Miserable World*, and popped it into the cassette player. She drummed her fingers along the steering wheel as the upbeat tune began.

“When things are looking bad.

There's no reason to be sad.

It's best just to be glad.

'Cause glad, it ain't no fad.

And if you're feeling blue.

Here's just what you should doouuurrrrrrrwwwwwww..."

The cassette player spat up about six inches of the Happy Tape before Melody could shut it off. She quickly ejected the cassette, trying to be careful not to break the dangling tape. Since she was being careful not to break the tape, she was being less careful regarding the act of driving. This fact was hammered home as her truck bashed into the rear of a shiny new Mercedes that radiated waves of costliness.

The tape broke.

* * * * *

Tim wandered into the back area of the café, where his younger brother Peter, who co-owned and managed the place with him, stood rolling some dough.

“How was the wedding, bro?” asked Peter. “Any garter accidents I should hear about?”

“Nothing that exciting. But do you remember Karen, the maid of honor from Frank’s third wedding?”

Peter concentrated for a moment. "I think so. Tiny little person? Cute as a button? Cover material for the magazine *Women You Can Never Have*?"

"No. Tall woman. Many muscles."

"Oh, yeah, I remember her. By the way, does anyone really consider a button cute? I can't honestly say that I've ever been attracted to a button, or any clothing-related item. Okay, that's not true; there was that pair of stiletto heels, but—"

"Anyway," Tim interrupted before Peter could get carried away with his musings, "we've got a date Tuesday."

"Really? Is she gonna take you to the gym and bench press you?"

"The movies. It won't be that bad. She seems like a very nice person, with occasional moments where she's terrifying. Maybe going out like this is what I need. I mean, it's been forever since I've found somebody I'm attracted to, so it's time to start socializing with people I'm not."

Peter nodded. "In the game of love, you've got to set your sights low. Just tell yourself 'At least she doesn't spray me with Raid while I sleep' and you'll always be happy."

"Disturbing advice, as usual." Tim sat down at a small table and picked up a stack of order forms.

"Who knows?" said Peter. "Your perfect woman may be on her way right now, a smile on her face and glowing love in her heart."

* * * * *

Dealing with the pissed-off Mercedes owner had not been the most pleasant experience of Melody's life, certainly less pleasant than having her brains fucked out by Alex. As Melody stepped through the doors of Dual Streams, she had nothing resembling a smile on her face nor glowing love in her heart. But at least she'd made it here without the world coming to an end.

She was going to have a good time tonight, dammit! Nothing was going to stop her!

Nothing!

She took a seat and began to peruse the menu as a waiter approached her table. "Good evening, ma'am. Are you by yourself tonight?"

Melody barely stifled a sudden sob. She nodded.

"A fine choice. That way you don't have to listen to people chew." The waiter obviously realized he was treading on dangerous territory. "Would you care to order a drink?"

"Yes. What do you recommend?"

"The strawberry daiquiri. Just between you and me, sometimes after I'm done for the night I'll suck down six or seven of them."

A strawberry daiquiri. Alex had almost ordered a strawberry daiquiri on their first date, but changed his mind at the last second to a piña colada. Melody felt a tear trickle down her cheek at the memory.

The waiter glanced uncomfortably at his shoes. "Do you need a few minutes?"

Melody shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I'll just have a glass of water, please."

"Would you like alcohol in it?"

"No, thank you."

The waiter left. Melody glanced around the café. Decent, upbeat atmosphere. Nice smell. No peanut shells on the floor. Moderately tacky paintings on the wall. A small stage and microphone, vacant at the moment.

She did have a copy of *Meet Johnny Chops-A-Lot* in her purse, and was tempted to go up and read an excerpt. Maybe these people would like her writing. But with her luck tonight would be Snobby Critic Night at Dual Streams, and in her current mental state a negative reaction might just send her over the edge.

Unappreciated Horror Writer Kills 14 Diners, Self.

"It was pretty cool," says annoying local poet.

She was still debating whether or not to read when the waiter returned with her water. "Are you ready to order?" he asked.

"Yes. I'd like the Dual Streams Deluxe, no tomato."

"An excellent choice. Would you like fries or potato salad with that?"

Melody had to stifle another sob. Oh, how Alex had loved French fries with his hamburgers! The tears were starting again, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

The waiter looked very uncomfortable. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Melody sobbed. "I'm having a good time."

"Glad to hear it. Ummm...I'll go give the kitchen your order and...I guess I'll be back...sometime...to check on you."

Melody desperately tried to get herself back under control as the waiter left, but it wasn't working. *I should have stayed home and microwaved some tater tots.* She rested her head on the table and cried.

"What a night." Larry walked into the back area to grab the tray with the fake sample desserts. There was still the huge dent in the cheesecake from where he'd dropped it a couple of weeks ago.

"Having problems?" Tim slammed his pen against the desk. He had to do that every few moments to keep the ink flowing. Somebody kept taking his good pens.

"Oh, the usual stuff. My grandmother's out there showing everyone my naked baby pictures. This guy at table twelve has sent back his fries three

different times, saying they don't taste potatoey enough. And this lady, she's out there crying for no reason."

"Not potatoey enough? This isn't another repeat of the turnip fries incident, is it?"

"Nah, it's mental illness. Would I get fired if I mixed some dandruff into his ketchup?"

Tim sighed. "I'll go talk to him. We're still at a point where even our deranged customers are valuable business."

* * * * *

"I don't mean to be a pest," explained the middle-aged gentleman with the bow-tie, "but when I order French-fried potatoes, I expect genuine potato flavor."

"Of course you do." Tim tried not to wince at the gentleman's voice. It was quite possibly the whiniest voice he had ever heard in his entire life, and in the restaurant business Tim heard whiny voices galore. He considered suggesting a good vocal surgeon, but decided against it.

"I mean, why would I order a potato product if I don't want genuine potato flavor?" asked the gentleman. "You wouldn't order asparagus that didn't taste like asparagus, would you? I know I wouldn't."

"You're absolutely right."

The gentleman continued whining, but suddenly his words faded out of hearing range as Tim gazed upon a woman so beautiful, so stunning, so radiant, that it was all he could do not to rush over to her table, drop to his knees, and promise to worship at her feet for all eternity.

The weird thing was, she wasn't even all that attractive at the moment! Her face was red and blotchy from crying, and she was using the corner of the tablecloth to wipe her nose. Not to mention her seriously bad hair day. He could rattle off a good five or six dozen actresses who were more physically attractive right off the top of his head (though he didn't), and yet he was absolutely one-hundred-percent enamored.

"...you can do that for me, right?"

Tim nodded at the gentleman. "Absolutely." He began to approach the woman's table as if drawn to it by some supernatural force.

Whoa. Hold on, Mr. Neffster. This is inappropriate behavior. Go back to the kitchen and take care of the potato freak.

Tim forced himself to walk the other way. God, what a woman! What *was* it about her? Maybe she was one of those mythical siren creatures who attracted sailors and lured them to their deaths. What a great way to die, if necessary!

He returned to the back room where Lyle the dishwasher stood cutting some vegetables. Tim borrowed his knife, cut a raw potato into quarters, and arranged the pieces on a plate in an attractive fashion. Without a word, he picked up the plate and left the kitchen.

"Here you go, sir." Tim delivered the plate to the whiny-voiced gentleman. The gentleman probably responded, but Tim didn't hear it because before he knew it he found himself walking over to the gorgeous woman's table.

"Good evening, ma'am. How are you doing tonight?"

Tim immediately regretted asking something that stupid. Her puffy eyes and blotched face indicated that she wasn't preparing to do the Snoopy Dance of Joy anytime soon.

"My life sucks," she informed him, accompanied by an impressively loud snuffle.

"Well," said Tim, "I'd hate for your life to suck while you're here with us. Is there anything I can do to make your visit more pleasant?"

"You could give me a personality transplant to keep me from being such a selfish bitch."

Tim considered that. "How about a complimentary drink?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm terrible. I'm rotten. In the grand hotel of life, I'm just a warm spot in the kiddie pool."

"Mind if I sit down?"

The woman shrugged. Tim sat down across from her and extended his hand. "I'm Tim Neffster, owner of this establishment."

She shook it. "I'm Melody Talaway, writer with no talent, social life, or chance of fulfilling my hopes and dreams."

"You're a writer? What do you write?"

"Crap."

"What variety of crap?"

"Horror novels."

Tim leaned forward, excited. "Really? What have you written? Maybe I've read it."

"You haven't."

"I might have. I try to make up for not reading traffic signs by reading books."

"Have you read Meet Johnny Chops-a-Lot?"

"No."

"Blood Sundae?"

"No."

"Splat Goes the Weasel?"

"No."

"Whose Heart is in My Popcorn?"

"The movie-hating grandmother with the electric carving knife?"

Melody's eyes widened. "Yes! Yes! That's it!"

"Yeah, I read that last year!" Tim exclaimed. "I swear, I'll never forget that part where they put those maggots in the blender then liquefy them and mix them in the soft drink syrup! That was so cool!"

Tim glanced over at a couple of nearby patrons who looked slightly grossed out. "Sorry, but it was."

"I'm thrilled that you've read it!" Now Melody had a huge grin. There was suddenly no trace of the distraught woman from before.

Tim returned her grin. "I'm thrilled to meet the person who wrote it."

All right, he'd done his duty; now it was time to get back to work. His only responsibility was to make her visit to his café a more pleasant experience. If she needed extra napkins, he was supposed to provide them with a wink and a smile. Maybe not the wink, that would be flirting, but his job here was to ensure customer satisfaction, not console the poor woman. He had stuff to do, as well as that scary date with Karen. He needed to tell her that he hoped things worked out, and then leave.

"I realize that we've just met," he said, "but if you want to talk about what's wrong, I'd be more than happy to listen."

Mouth 1, Brain 0.

"You must be pretty desperate for tips around this place," Melody remarked.

"No, no, I just like to think of Dual Streams as a full-service dining establishment. We help you work through your problems and offer a delicious selection of affordably priced entrees."

All right, now he was getting out of hand. It was time to go. He pushed back his chair. "I apologize. I shouldn't be out here bothering the customers. I hope you enjoy your meal, and please let me know if everything isn't to your complete satisfaction."

Melody gestured for him to sit back down. "No, really, I'd like to talk, but don't you have...you know, restaurant-running things to be doing?"

"Sort of, but nah."

"You don't have to give the dishwashers their hourly poke with the cattle prod or anything?"

"My brother handles the behind-the-scenes sadism. So, what's bothering you?"

"My boyfriend moved out on me yesterday."

Cool. No, not cool! What's the matter with you? That's tragic! Don't think about hitting on the customers! Bad café owner! Bad!

"What a creep," he said. "Let me guess, he fed you some line about needing his space, right?"

"No, he left me because I ignored him for the two months that we lived together."

"Oh. Guess that makes him less of a creep then."

"I didn't even see it coming. I was so obsessed with my writing that I took him completely for granted except when I wanted...uh, attention."

"I know what you're saying," said Tim. "If I hadn't neglected my ex-wife, maybe I'd still be married and I wouldn't have a dizzy spell whenever I see a bulldozer."

"I feel so stupid."

"We suck."

"Yes, we certainly do." Melody took a sip of her water. "Here's a question. What was the craziest, most outrageous thing you ever did for your wife?"

"Don't tell anyone," said Tim, lowering his voice and leaning forward confidentially, "but one time I let her have the remote control for an entire commercial break."

"No, I'm serious."

Tim closed his eyes and thought for a moment.

A long moment.

A disconcertingly long moment.

"Well, before we were married, I did serenade her once."

"Outside her bedroom window?" asked Melody.

"No, no, God, no, not where anybody else could see. In her kitchen, actually."

"What did you sing?"

"Ummm... 'Does Your Chewing Gum Lose its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?' It was pretty lame. I guess that doesn't count. Let me think of something else."

"Probably the wildest thing I ever did for Alex was name a character after him in one of my books. The character got an ice pick through the forehead, but it was meant to be funny."

"I did something else...I'm sure of it..."

"How did you propose to her?"

"In a swimming pool."

"Any special reason?"

"No," Tim admitted. "We just happened to be swimming at the time. I didn't even get down on one knee, or I would have, you know, drowned. My original plan was to put the engagement ring in a glass of champagne, but I had these horrible visions of having to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on her afterward."

Melody smiled. She had a beautiful smile, which brought out a tiny wrinkle on the left side of her mouth that was so adorable Tim wanted to poke it with his finger and giggle. He restrained himself.

A girl who looked about eighteen or nineteen walked up to the microphone with a guitar.

"Here's a little song I wrote last night," she announced. "It's called 'To Champion, My Faithful Gerbil, I'm Sorry I Let the Couch Fall on You'."

Tim rolled his eyes. "You know, the food, service, and atmosphere here are overrated anyway. How would you like me to cancel your order and take you someplace nicer?"

"I'd like that a lot."

CHAPTER FOUR

This was really weird.

Melody didn't believe in love at first sight, and it wasn't applicable here. But love within the first five to six minutes following initial eye contact, well, that was entirely possible. She'd never felt this comfortable around a man so quickly. Usually each new relationship began with a couple of weeks of paranoia. Even with Alex she'd been nervous at first, wondering if he turned off the lights before they had sex just so he wouldn't have to look at her.

And now here she was, sitting in the passenger seat of Tim's car, a man she'd just met, headed for an unknown destination, and yet her stomach wasn't twisting itself into complicated balloon animal shapes. She was completely at ease. She wasn't planning the wedding yet (though she'd always wanted glowing red eyes on the miniature bride and groom that rested on top of the cake), but Melody sensed definite possibilities here. Call it chemistry. Call it fate. Call it toxins in the air. Whatever it was, she'd never felt anything like it before, not even the time in college she'd inhaled nine helium balloons in a row.

If Mr. Tim Neffster didn't turn out to be an incredible jerk or a serial killer or a puppy-kicker, she wasn't going to screw this up.

"We're almost there," Tim told her. "One of the best selections in town, a casual atmosphere, *and* a chance to see the Amazing Boll Weevil Boy for fifty cents."

A moment later, the bright lights of the carnival came into view.

As they walked along the sawdust and chewing gum covered path, Tim reflected upon how much he'd loved carnivals as a kid. Even as an adult he got a giddy sensation the moment he paid his admission and walked through the gate.

Carnivals were also romantic. He could walk around with Melody, buy her some cotton candy, and maybe even win her a stuffed monkey that went "Eee! Eee! Eee!" when she squeezed it. He'd have to avoid caramel apples, since he was unable to eat one without coating the entire lower half of his face, and he'd probably avoid comments like "Hey, why don't you let this guy guess your weight?" but aside from that, the carnival was the perfect place to bring her.

He was going to be romantic, damn it! He was going to put stars in her eyes. He was going to get her to walk around with an IQ-deficient grin on her face if it killed him. He was going to be Super Lover Man, Reaper of Romance!

Melody took Tim's hand as they approached the House of *FEAR!!!* "Oooh, I love haunted houses! We have to go in."

"Is it safe to go in one of these with a horror writer?"

"I doubt it."

"Cool."

The side of the House of *FEAR!!!* was decorated with an enormous picture of what looked like Dracula with smeared makeup and crossed eyes. They walked up to the booth, where a teenage girl in zombie makeup sat reading a fashion magazine.

Tim took out his wallet. "Two, please."

"Are you free from heart conditions?" asked the girl without looking up.

"Absolutely."

"Are you free from claustrophobia, epilepsy, pregnancy, or any other condition that might be aggravated by this attraction?"

"I believe so."

"Are you aware that there are no refunds?"

"Sure."

"That'll be six bucks."

Tim paid the girl, and they got into the small car. "These are always fun," Melody remarked as they slowly whirled through the darkened doorway.

They rounded a corner and found themselves moving down a dimly lit corridor. Badly drawn cardboard cutouts of skeletons, witches, and mummies hung from strings on the ceiling. The walls were decorated with phrases like "Boo!" and "Oh no!" and "Help me!"

Melody pushed one of the witches out of her face. "Well, I'm glad I let *you* pay for this."

A werewolf howled. After a couple of seconds the recording began to skip. Ahead of them, one of the strings broke, dropping an unevenly cut mummy to the floor.

That could be a book. Beware the Falling Mummy. People in a sleepy New England town are in shock when mummies start falling from the sky, wreaking havoc wherever they land...

Melody gave herself a mental slap.

They rounded the next corner and went down another corridor, this one decorated with a degree of lameness identical to the first. A guy in a Frankenstein mask lumbered toward them, arms outstretched. He walked up to the car.

"Y'think I could bum a cigarette off you?"

"Oh, sure." Melody pulled one of her four emergency packs out of her purse. "Here, take two. I've quit."

The whirr died and the car stopped. Tim and Melody looked expectantly at Frankenstein.

"Happens every once in a while. I'll give you a push."

Frankenstein walked up behind them and shoved at the car until it began moving on its own. They rounded another corner and moved through total darkness...for about two seconds, until the car stopped.

"Uh, Frankenstein, we need you again," Tim called out.

"Gimme a minute, dude. I'm going on break."

Melody smiled to herself. Here she was, stuck in complete darkness with a man she barely knew but who was like a Happy Sweater for her mind. She wondered what Tim was thinking right now. She hoped he wasn't just trying to figure out a way to get his hand(s) down her pants.

Not that she would have minded having his hand(s) there, but she wanted there to be more on his mind at the moment.

She would give anything for him not to turn out to be a jerk. World peace, food for the hungry, a best-selling novel...okay, maybe not the novel. Okay, definitely not the novel. Maybe not world peace, either, since that was important. And food for the hungry should probably come before Tim not being a jerk, too, just because it was the morally decent way to prioritize her hopes. But she'd rather Tim not be a jerk than have a sweet little boy get the Captain Hocker action figure (with super spitting action) he always wanted for Christmas, and she didn't care if that made her a bad person.

Damn damn damn damn damn damn damn.

Here it was, the perfect opportunity for something sweet and romantic. What could be nicer than having their first kiss in a stalled car in a haunted house? But the timing was all screwed up. Tim couldn't just lean over and plant one on her lips; she might beat the living shit out of him and yell for carnival security. And it wasn't like he could ask her permission without sounding like a doofus ("Say, Melody, just out of curiosity, would you be inclined to beat the living shit out of me and yell for carnival security if I were to kiss you right now?").

But what would she think if he *didn't* seize this perfect opportunity? Considering their pasts, she might think he was so caught up in his own selfish little world that the idea of kissing her didn't even occur to him.

No, that was stupid.

And just why was he sitting here like a frightened prepubescent debating whether or not to do the Ol' Yawn And Stretch And, Well, As Long As The Ol' Arm Is In The General Vicinity Already, Might As Well Put It Around The Ol'

Shoulder? He'd been married and he'd dated a halfway decent number of women, so why was he sweating over a stint in the dark with Melody?

Because he didn't want to mess this up. There was a massive attraction here, and he was almost positive that it was mutual. He'd seen it in her eyes. A spark was there. She hadn't eaten yet, so it couldn't be food poisoning.

"Break's over." The glow of Frankenstein's cigarette was visible as he walked around the corner. Actually, if you wanted to get technical, he was dressed as Frankenstein's Monster, not Frankenstein, but Tim hadn't wanted to seem like Mr. Anal by saying earlier, "Uh, Frankenstein's Monster, we need you again."

But maybe Melody, being a horror aficionado as well, thought he was some ignorant twit for calling the guy Frankenstein when he should have known darn well that Frankenstein was actually Victor Frankenstein, the scientist.

And if she *was* thinking that, did he really want to be involved with somebody who got all bent out of shape over stuff like that?

Sometimes Tim wished his brain had an "off" switch.

"Here you go," said Frankenstein's Monster as he gave them a shove. The car moved forward, tires squealing, rounded another corner, and then emerged from the haunted house. Melody took Tim's hand and they exited the dark realm of unending fright.

"Thank you, enjoy the rest of your evening, come back soon," said the zombie girl, still engrossed in her magazine.

"How about we get something to eat?" asked Tim, as they returned to the sawdust path. "Which carnival food group are you in the mood for, grease or sugar?"

"Let's start with grease."

They walked over to a booth that promised "The Best Pizza in Town!" but was probably exaggerating. Melody touched Tim's shoulder. "I want to thank you for taking me out tonight. I probably would have flipped out completely if you hadn't showed up to calm me down."

"My pleasure. Any time you're close to flipping out in the future, you know who to call."

"I do want you to know that I'm really not like this all the time. I mean, the way I was earlier—you know, the whole boo-hoo-my-life-sucks-I'm-a-bad-person thing. I've been like that before, I'll admit, but it was a long time ago and not part of some regulated schedule of unstable behavior. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes. You were having a bad night."

"Bad night. Exactly. But I'm mostly better now, thanks to you. I just wanted to say that."

There was a long pause.

"I'm glad you feel better," said Tim.

"I'm glad I do, too."

The woman at the pizza booth handed them their slices of pizza goo on paper plates. They thanked her and continued walking past another booth where for fifty cents they could see a really big hog.

"What next?" asked Melody.

"What else? The Ferris wheel."

They were about halfway up in the air, moving a little bit at a time as more riders boarded. Tim took Melody's hand as they stared out at the lights of the carnival. It was absolutely beautiful.

"You know, I had my first kiss at the top of a Ferris wheel," he said.

"Did you really?"

"Yeah." Tim considered what he'd said. It had seemed like a perfectly innocent comment, but now with a few seconds of reflection it seemed like a setup for "Yo! Wanna smooch? C'mon, let's pucker up and suck face! C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

"Tell me about it."

"I was ten. She was forty-seven and *hot*."

"No, really."

"Her name was Amber Taylor. I had this incredible crush on her. So I was with a group of my friends at a carnival, kind of like this one except with better pizza, and through some kind of superhuman strength I worked up the courage to ask her to ride the Ferris wheel with me."

Melody rocked the seat. "You brave knight, you."

"Anyway, we were stopped at the top, and my heart was beating like this —" Tim tapped the safety bar a few times in rapid succession "— and I knew that this could be my only chance to kiss her. She looked at me. I looked at her. I was so nervous that I practically dove at her. She turned her head at the last second and I ended up with a mouthful of her beautiful long blonde hair. Which I started to choke on. When the Ferris wheel started to move again, the sudden drop combined with my anxiety combined with the hair choking me caused me to..." he mimed throwing up, "...make the whole moment all the less romantic."

"And she let you kiss her after that?" Melody was incredulous.

"No. She hit me a few times and told me to go to hell, though."

"Well, as a professional writer, I can tell you that a legitimate first kiss story requires actual lip contact. Now let me hear the story of your *real* first kiss."

They were just about at the top. Tim squeezed Melody's hand. "Okay, that would be Janet Pierson. Sixth grade. On the tire swing at recess. She told all her friends I slobbered too much."

"Did you?"

"Probably. I thought that was standard procedure." They went over the top and began the downward arc. "Your turn."

"Oh, jeez... I'm not even sure. All through elementary school I'd spend most of my recesses chasing boys with my friend Samantha. She'd catch them and pin them down while I'd plaster their faces with kisses. I think she went on to become a professional Dominatrix. It wasn't until high school that writing took over my life."

"So what got you into writing?"

"My tenth grade English teacher, Mrs. Heisen."

"She encouraged you?"

"No, she hated me. One assignment was to write a five-page short story about anything we wanted. So I wrote about a haunted house with skeletons and werewolves and vampire bats and everything else horrific you can think of. I poured my heart into that story. And when she returned the papers, I got a C-minus! Not just a C, that wench gave me a C-minus!" Melody glanced down at her lap. "I'm sorry, am I hurting your hand?"

"No, no, that's okay. Bones heal. Let it all out."

"Anyway, I turned in four or five more stories, and she gave me lousy grades on all of them, saying that my work was poorly written and uninteresting. So I decided that I was going to become a writer just to piss off Mrs. Heisen. I know that isn't the best reason to make a career choice, but that's the way I felt."

"Oh, that's a perfectly legitimate reason. People make career choices to piss off others all the time. So why horror?"

"I just love it. Always have."

"Me too."

"One of my fondest memories as a kid is sneaking out of bed to watch *Ghoul Theater* on Saturday nights. This guy, The Ghoul, hosted these really campy horror flicks, and they were wonderful! Even as a kid you could never take them too seriously, but it was so much fun to sit by myself in the darkened living room watching these movies. And that love for the macabre stuck with me, so now I'm a truly demented old lady."

"Demented old ladies are the best kind."

Melody nodded. Tim noticed her taking a deep breath, as if she was preparing to say something really important.

"I know I'm kind of wrecking the spontaneity of the moment," she admitted, "but here we are on the Ferris wheel, we've talked about our first kisses, and if we pass up this opportunity to have our own first kiss we're going to ruin a perfectly good first kiss story. Will you kiss me?"

Tim didn't want to ruin the spontaneity of the moment any more by saying "Yes, ma'am!" so without a word he put his arm around Melody's shoulder, pulled her toward him, and kissed her.

It was tender, lingering. He heard Melody's soft moan as she slipped her arm around his waist. Oh, yeah, Ferris wheel kisses were *so* much better when he wasn't choking on somebody's hair.

That does it. I'm sunk. It's all over. Love is gnawing on me like a school of ravenous piranha.

Melody deepened the kiss. Tim responded in equal measure. She hadn't been kissed by many men in her life, but she felt she had a decent basis for comparison, and it had *never* been like this. This was just...it was...it was *wow*!

And it wasn't just that Tim was a man who knew how to kiss. It was something deeper. Probably had to do with that chemistry/fate/toxins-in-the-air thing again. Whatever it was, Melody Talaway had already fallen for this guy, no doubt about it, and she'd be superglued to a pair of stampeding epileptic buffalo before she'd let Tim get away from her.

CHAPTER FIVE

They burst into Tim's apartment. The "your place or mine?" question had been easily resolved, since Tim's place was three minutes closer. Arms wrapped around each other, lips locked together, feet trying not to stumble as they moved into the living room, Melody and Tim clawed at each other with a ferocity usually reserved for various species of large carnivorous felines. Their kisses were rapid, frantic, intense.

Melody opened her eyes, looking over Tim's firm, muscular shoulder into the disapproving gaze of an elderly woman coming out of her own apartment across the hall. "Heathens," the woman muttered as she walked out of sight.

"I think you should close the door," Melody whispered, barely able to catch her breath.

Tim nodded and pulled away from her, making her ache with need for him. But these few seconds of non-contact would be good for her. They'd make her strong. *Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. Don't lose yourself completely. You only met him this evening.*

That was right! She'd only met him three hours ago! She couldn't sleep with him already...she couldn't turn herself into some one-night stand! Melody had vowed not to do anything to mess up this relationship, and going to bed (or the couch, or the floor, or against the dishwasher) with the man this soon would cost her several points in the "respect" category. She couldn't do another "just sex" relationship. Shit!

Tim shut the door. Actually, he slammed it, nearly knocking a picture off the wall. "Sorry. I guess I'm a little worked up."

He strode toward her, a man with a passionate cause. God, he looked good! She didn't have to interrupt the kissing right at this very moment by saying "Oh, just so you'd know, I've decided that being a slut tonight would adversely affect our future relationship." That could wait. She opened her arms and he stepped into them hastily, embracing her and kissing her deeply.

She ran her tongue over his lower lip and could feel the tremor it sent through his entire body. She dug her fingers into his hair, twisting it around them as they kissed and kissed and kissed.

Riiiiing.

They both simultaneously cursed under their breath.

Riiiiing.

"Hold on just a second." Tim released her and walked over to the kitchen counter. "Taffy knocked the answering machine on the floor again." He bent over and plugged it in as the phone rang a third time.

Click. "Hi, this is Tim, I'm not home right now, but if you leave a message at the tone I'll get back to you as soon as possible." Melody was sure Tim was a man of many talents, but recording creative answering machine messages wasn't one of them.

Beep. "Hey, bro, it's Peter. I've been trying to get a hold of you. That Karen Finch, or Rench, or something called at work wanting to confirm your —"

Tim grabbed the phone. "Peter? What's up?"

Melody took this opportunity to survey the apartment. A shrine to horror movies, classic and modern. She scanned his bookshelf, and yes, on the second shelf from the bottom, there was a worn paperback copy of *Whose Heart is in My Popcorn?* She'd have to autograph it for him. Perhaps with lipstick.

"Okay..." Tim said into the receiver. "Yeah, right here with me... Shut up, Peter... I will... No, really, shut up... Okay, bye." He hung up.

"Problem at the restaurant?"

"Huh? Oh, no, everything's fine. He needed to confirm a delivery, that's all."

"Good. Kiss me some more."

He kissed her some more. She ran her fingernails down the back of his shirt. The effect would have been better if her nails weren't so short, but long nails lowered her typing speed.

They stood in place for about a minute, letting their lips connect and their hands roam. Tim's hand slid over her right breast and cupped it firmly. She shivered with pleasure.

No shivering with pleasure! I can't let this go too far tonight! In a while, a very short while, we can go at it like savage predators, but right now is just too soon!

She broke the kiss. "Tim...?"

"Yes?"

"We can't do this."

"Physically or morally?"

"Morally. We have to quit. I'm really attracted to you and I don't want this to be some cheap fling. If we keep going at it like this I'll get permanent pelvic twitches."

"I guess things *are* moving kind of quickly," Tim admitted, his voice squeaking like he was going through a second puberty.

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's fine. We don't want to carry this too far too fast."

"It's not that I don't want to..."

"You don't have to justify it. I agree with you. We need to slow things down."

"Yes, we do." Melody closed her eyes, took a deep breath, counted to ten, and exhaled. "Tim?"

"Yes?"

"If we're going to slow things down, you'll have to remove your hand from my breast."

"Oh, right. Sorry." He pulled his hand away and scratched his ear with it.

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"Of course not," Tim insisted. "Getting carried away would have been a bad idea."

"Yes, it would have." However, Melody had forgotten why all of a sudden. She guessed she could have his clothes off in under eight seconds if she really put forth the effort, and probably her own off in another fourteen if she didn't worry about damaging the buttons on her blouse, which were easily replaceable and—

Behave, Melody. Think clean thoughts.

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, located off the southeast coast of India, has rice, tea, and coconuts as its primary crops. Its labor force is comprised of approximately 46% workers in the agricultural fields, 27% in commerce and industry, and 26% in service-oriented occupations. It sometimes gets hot there.

Good girl.

She wondered if Tim had a big cock.

Okay, this wasn't going to work. She was so horny, so wet, that she'd be straddling his face within three minutes if she didn't get out of here. She wanted to fuck him so badly that it was making her dizzy, but no, she wasn't going to cave in. The relationship had to be about more than sex.

She'd go home, wear out the batteries in her vibrator, and then see Tim tomorrow.

Of course, if she fucked him into another dimension tomorrow, would it be that much different from doing it tonight? If she was really looking for respect, she'd have to hold off on the sex for a couple of weeks, right?

Not gonna happen.

"I changed my mind." Melody unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop to the floor.

Tim knew it wasn't polite to stare, but he couldn't help himself. She wore a black lace bra that was clearly working overtime to keep her breasts contained. As he stood there, enamored by the sight, Melody reached behind her back. Tim

heard a couple of clicks that made it obvious that his evening was going to take a major turn for the better, and then her bra fell away, completely exposing her breasts.

Her *fantastic* breasts.

They were large and full, the nipples erect, and though Tim wasn't an expert on such things it seemed pretty clear that they were the original breasts given to Melody upon her birth...well, her ascent into adulthood, anyway.

He stared at them, taking them in, as Melody bit her lip nervously.

What should he say? "Nice tits?" "Those are some ample bosoms?" "The creamy white surface of your gorgeous womanly breasts is bringing out a tingling sensation in my nether regions?"

"Wow," he said.

Melody smiled. "Thanks."

Tim pulled his own shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

Apparently working in the restaurant business was a good way to keep in shape. Tim's body was lean and firm, like the body of a swimmer. He had broad shoulders and just the right amount of chest hair (she wasn't into those unnaturally smooth chests, but neither did she care for a shag rug).

There was also an unmistakable bulge in his pants. Showing him her breasts didn't seem to have been a turn-off.

She really, really liked the way he was looking at her.

Melody stepped forward, and Tim stepped over to meet her. They put their arms around each other and kissed. Tim's hand found its way back to her now-bare breast and caressed it as their tongues met. His free hand slid over to her other breast, gently brushing against the hard nipple and almost making her squirm.

God, he could kiss.

If he could fuck as well as he could kiss, Melody was going to be *extremely* well laid this evening. She certainly didn't expect him to have the stamina, the size, or even the raw exuberance of Alex, but there was a spark here, an emotional connection that was missing from her previous relationship.

Holy shit, her previous relationship had just ended yesterday morning. She was going to fuck Tim the day *after* she'd fucked Alex. Granted, it was the evening now, and she'd had sex with Alex yesterday morning, but still, what a tramp!

Oh well. There were worse things to be.

They stood there kissing, their hands roaming everywhere above the waist. He ever so gently pinched her nipple and this time she *did* squirm. Finally they broke the kiss and gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment.

"Do you want to show me to your bedroom?" she asked.

Tim nodded and took her by the hand. He led her through the living room and then stopped. "I wasn't really expecting company," he admitted. "How about you give me five minutes to tidy things up a bit and put on fresh sheets?"

"I'll give you seven, so you can put on a good CD. Which way to the bathroom?"

"It's right across from the bedroom." He led her into a small hallway and opened the door for her. She gave him a quick kiss, entered the bathroom, and shut the door behind her.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Yep, definitely the image of an incredibly horny woman. She removed the rest of her clothes, draping them over the side of the bathtub, and then ran some water, wet her fingers, and did some quick touch-ups to her hair. It still looked like crap, but, hey, that was her curse.

It felt surprisingly good to be standing completely naked in a strange bathroom. Again, at any other time in her life she would have felt embarrassed and self-conscious, even with nobody watching her, and yet now she could expose her breasts to a man she'd only met that evening and love it.

Wow, that made her sound like a slut.

She wasn't showing her boobs to just any man. It was *the* man.

She hoped.

A bottle of Scope rested on the sink. Would using Tim's mouthwash be a *faux pas*? She wasn't sure of the etiquette in these situations. Going through his medicine cabinet would unquestionably be a no-no, but the Scope was right out in the open.

She decided to be daring and swished a mouthful for thirty seconds. But she didn't gargle.

Melody emerged from the bathroom to find Tim lighting some candles on the bedroom dresser. "These were actually meant for emergency lighting, so they aren't scented or anything, but they should help set the mood."

He winced and dropped the match that had burned his fingers while he was entranced by Melody's complete nakedness.

Ethereal music played over the stereo. "Is that 'Dead Can Dance'?" Melody asked.

"Yep. Do you like them?"

"Love 'em! Perfect sex music!"

She helped Tim make the bed, which took twice as long as it should have because he was still distracted by her complete nakedness.

"How about some wine?" he asked.

"How about you do me?" she responded.

"Don't answer a question with a question." Tim grinned.

Melody sat down on the bed and beckoned with wicked intent. "C'mere, you."

"Is this going to hurt?" Tim asked.

"Only in the fifth hour."

Tim walked around to the other side of the bed. He leaned down to kiss Melody, but she gently blocked him with her fingers to his chin. Instead, she turned her attention to unbuttoning and unzipping his slacks.

They put up no struggle though she had to slide off the bed and crouch down to tug them down to his ankles. Tim stepped out of them, and Melody took a moment to admire the nice bulge straining against the front of his white briefs. "Holy shit, how much padding is in there?" She grabbed the sides of his briefs and carefully slid them down to his knees.

There was no padding. Tim didn't wield a porno-star monstrosity, or even an Alex-sized one, but it was quite a bit bigger than she would have expected from his build. *Much* thicker than she would have expected.

She ran her fingers along the side of his cock. "Very, very nice. I approve."

"I'm glad."

Melody kissed the tip of the penis that had gained her approval. Then she stood up and gave Tim a quick kiss on the lips. "Lie on your back."

"You first."

"Don't fuck around with me, Mr. Neffster. On your back or it's dungeon time for your ass."

Tim sat down on the bed and then lay on his back. He scooted back until his head was at the upper right corner of the mattress, giving Melody plenty of room to climb up and straddle him.

She crouched on her hands and knees, her breasts pressed against his upper legs, and took his cock in her hand. She teasingly ran her tongue along the underside and Tim moaned with pleasure.

Melody darted her tongue all over the shaft, giving it quick licks. His penis was hot and smooth and seemed to be getting even harder if such a thing was possible.

She progressed from quick licks to lingering ones, sliding her tongue all the way from the tip down to his pubic hair. She did all of this while unable to get the smile off her face.

She began to lick his balls, running her tongue in circles all over them. Tim moaned even louder as she did this and squirmed. She wondered if this was a new sensation for him.

She stayed there for a few minutes because he was enjoying it so much, and then licked her way back up to the tip of his cock.

"That feels *so* good," Tim whispered.

"Mmmmmm," Melody replied, taking the head of his penis into her mouth. She lovingly sucked on it as she swirled her tongue all over it, and slowly began to work down, taking in more and more of his length.

She wasn't able to take his entire cock into her mouth, but she got a more than adequate percentage before she slid back up again. She began to suck him rapidly, head bobbing up and down, using her fingers to stroke the portion that her lips didn't touch.

She sucked him for several more minutes and then pulled her mouth away. She gave his cock a noisy kiss before laying down on her back and spreading her legs.

"Okay, *now* it's my turn."

Tim didn't hesitate. He rolled over and began to kiss her all over. Her shoulders, her neck, her arms, her belly. Each kiss made Melody's skin tingle and her body feel alive.

When he finally settled on her breast, gently sucking the nipple, she thought she was going to come right then and there.

When he switched to her other breast, she did.

Her whole body tensed up and she cried out with pleasure, eyes squeezed shut. She clenched her fists together so tightly that it hurt as the wave of ecstasy rushed through her entire body.

She lay there for a moment, breathing hard, and then opened her eyes. Tim was staring at her.

"Did you just...?"

"Uh-huh," she gasped.

"Just from...?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can you always...?"

She shook her head. "Uh-uh."

"Cool."

"Uh-huh."

Melody had experienced many orgasms over the past couple of months, but never in her life had she come *close* to climaxing from just from a mouth on her breast. Of course, she was also pretty sure she'd never been this wet this quickly.

Tim went back to licking her breast while she ran her hand through his hair.

He worked his way down past her belly and began to kiss her inner thighs. He looked at her shaved pussy, which she knew had to be glistening, and smiled.

She smiled back.

"Are you comfy?" he asked.

"Very much so."

"Good."

He lowered his face between her legs and gently kissed her vagina. She wrapped her legs around his back and raised herself, trying to convey the message that perhaps gentle kisses were not what she was seeking at this juncture.

He got the point and began licking her, back and forth across the surface.

"Oh that's good that's real good don't stop," she blurted out.

Tim licked her pussy all over, moaning softly as he did it. He kneaded her thighs for a while, and then used his fingers to part her further, his tongue probing more deeply.

Melody sucked in a deep breath.

She closed her eyes and let Tim give her his full attention with his glorious, generous tongue. Though he didn't strike her as the kind of guy who had a great deal of experience, he seemed to know exactly what he was doing. She just lay there, loving every sensation he was bringing to her.

Then she started to get hungry for his cock again.

Melody was pretty sure she knew a way to take care of that little problem.

"Lie on your back," she told him.

Tim did so without protest. She crawled on top of him, head facing his extremely firm cock, and took him into her mouth as she settled her pussy on his face. His tongue resumed its exuberant motion as she sucked on him.

Ah, yes. Best of both worlds, even if it was a bit difficult to maintain full concentration.

Tim's hands roamed to her buttocks, squeezing them.

She sucked him rapidly, almost frantically.

As his tongue moved to her clitoris, she nearly screamed. Melody tried to sustain the blowjob, but she needed to keep her mouth free for the necessary gasping and moaning.

She pushed against him more firmly, and his hands tightened on her buttocks. His tongue moved vigorously over her clitoris, sending shivers through her and paving the way for another really sensational...

"Oh, God, I'm gonna come..."

And she did. Hard. She pressed her face into Tim's legs and howled. He kept licking as she coasted through her entire orgasm.

Finally she rolled off of him. She tried to think of something romantic, something deeply special to say to him.

"Let's fuck."

"Okay."

"Where do you keep your condoms?"

Oh, shit, what if he didn't have condoms? That's something he would have mentioned on the way back to his apartment, right? They'd passed a few convenience stores. Surely he didn't expect her to —

"In the top drawer of the bed stand on your side."

Moments later he was covered, and she mounted him. She was so incredibly wet that she took him all the way in without any resistance, gasping with pleasure. She fucked him slowly and deeply, eyes closed, his hands on her breasts.

"You feel so good," he moaned.

"Likewise."

She refused to pick up the pace for several minutes, just loving the feel of him so deep inside of her. Her whole body was covered with perspiration. When she opened her eyes, he was looking at their joined bodies, watching her pussy slide up and down on his cock.

"Nice view, huh?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah."

She picked up the pace.

Tim moved his right hand away from her breast and used his thumb to stroke her clitoris as she bounced.

She *really* picked up the pace.

Before too long they were fucking madly, the bedsprings creaking, the headboard bouncing against the wall. His neighbors were either going to be seriously pissed or thank him for the free entertainment.

His thumb moved more rapidly, and Melody cupped her breasts and worked the nipples herself. That did it. She fucked him even harder as the wonderful rush began to build up yet again.

She covered her mouth with her palm to keep from letting out an eviction-causing scream as she came. Tim followed her seconds later, thrusting into her with amazing force. Melody fell on top of him as they both shuddered and moaned in unrestrained sexual bliss.

They lay that way for a long moment, and then Tim retreated to the bathroom to get rid of the condom. He returned quickly, and they lay in each other's arms, saying nothing.

Fifteen minutes later, they were ready for another round, and Melody found herself lying on her back, legs spread wide, as Tim thrust into her missionary-style. They shifted to doggy style, and finally came together doing it in a spooning position.

Fifteen minutes after that, he bent her over the side of the bed and fucked her from behind, thrusting so hard that she nearly shoved the mattress off the bed. Then they went back to the spooning position, which had been rather nice.

Fifteen minutes after *that*, they fell asleep, with Melody's face cradled in his shoulder.

CHAPTER SIX

SUNDAY

Alex Dalant yawned sleepily, rolled over, and smacked his face against the wall. It kind of hurt. After two months of sharing Melody's king-sized bed, going back to this single bed was going to require a period of adjustment.

He sat up, yawned again, and wondered for the eight hundred and seventy-third time since Friday if he'd done the right thing by leaving her.

Sure he had.

Possibly.

No, definitely.

No, not definitely, but probably.

Maybe.

Definitely maybe.

There was a knock at his door. "Sweetie? Are you up?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"Would you like some eggs and bacon? We have ketchup."

"Yeah, I'll be right down."

Alex swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat there for a moment, trying to shake the depressed feeling. He wasn't sure where it was coming from. It couldn't be because he was back in his old room, because he had one hell of a cool room. He hadn't stayed here for more than a night at a time since graduating from high school, and had forgotten just how much cool stuff he'd left here. The electronic baseball game. The karaoke machine. The complete set of Captain Hocker action figures. Very, very cool stuff.

But he missed Melody, and not just because she was the second-best fuck of his life. He couldn't quite figure out how he could miss somebody who never paid him much attention, but it was the truth. Maybe he should never have left.

No, he definitely should have left. He wasn't going to be some starved-for-attention puppy dog. He wasn't going to try and get her to take him back. He didn't *want* her to take him back. He'd find somebody else to give him the attention he deserved. There were other women out there who'd give him sex *and* affection.

"Sweetie! Your eggs are almost done!"

"I'll be right there, Mom!"

What he needed to do was just go crazy for a while. Hit the clubs. Become a stud machine gun. Live life to its fullest. Of course, he'd need a new bed, but he'd worry about that later. He'd make up for everything he was lacking during his time with Melody.

But his first priority was to bring Melody back into his life, as a friend. He still cared about her, and it made him sick to his stomach to think that things had ended on such an ugly note. He wasn't going to throw himself at her feet and grovel, but he'd put forth a nice apology and see what happened.

Moving out had been the right choice.

Probably.

* * * * *

Melody found herself unable to write. She sat in front of her computer and tried her best to make the words flow, but it wasn't happening. She kept replaying last night's events over and over in her mind. Not just the sex, but the kisses, from the one where their lips barely touched to that one where his tongue did that quick little spiral on her lower lip. The quick little spiral one was probably her favorite. She replayed it once more. Yep, that was her favorite, all right. Of course, there was also the one where they kissed so passionately that she expected a suction cup sound when their lips parted...

She didn't even need her Happy Tape any more. She was a woman in love.

Love, love, love.

Let's hear it for love!

Three cheers for love!

Okay, she needed to do something super-special for Tim before she saw him again. Make sure he knew exactly how much she'd enjoyed last night. Let him know that to be with her was to be showered with affection like never before in his life.

Hmmmmmm...

She could break into his apartment and decorate it with heart-shaped balloons and other romantic stuff. The downside to this plan was the risk that she might get caught and spend the night in jail. But she could frame the mug shot and give it to him as a memento of her adoration of him.

No, no, no, no.

If she decorated his apartment, he might think she was some kind of obsessive lunatic. She'd scare him away. Men were very sensitive to that kind of thing, what with all the psycho-bitch-from-hell movies out there. She didn't want him thinking he had to propose before Monday morning to avoid having her burn his photograph in an attic lit by hundreds of candles while chanting voodoo curses.

She needed to do something simple.
Simple yet creative.
Hmmmmmm...

* * * * *

"Flowers?"

"No, too generic."

"Crotchless panties?"

Tim glared at Peter. "I'm being serious, you know."

"So am I. It's not like I said to go out and buy her a pair of crotchless *edible* panties. *That* would be tacky."

"You're absolutely no help. And you're burning that chicken."

Peter looked down and hurriedly moved the chicken breast off the open flame. "I snapped at Carl last night for doing the same thing. You're making me look bad, bro."

"Sorry. I just don't know what I should get her. I would get her chocolates, but I'm not sure if she's on a diet. Aren't most women on diets? I don't want to mess with that."

"How about low-fat chocolates?"

Tim thought about that for a moment. "Maybe."

There was a sudden sharp pain as Peter slapped him upside the head. "*Never* give a woman low-fat chocolates! That's a good way to get yourself *killed*, bro!"

"Got it." Tim barely resisted the urge to slap him back.

"What have you bought other women after your first dates?"

"Nothing. That's the whole point. I want to make up for past errors. I want to be more romantic this time."

"Romantic, huh? Maybe she'd like a nice pet tarantula to help inspire her writing. They're not that expensive."

"I'm not getting her a tarantula."

"Fine. Be an unromantic iceberg." Peter turned another piece of chicken over on the grill and sprinkled some seasoning on it.

"I don't know why I even talk to you."

"I don't know either. I guess you're practicing for when your real brother shows up."

Tim sighed and walked into the back room. Those order forms from last night were never filled out, so he sat down at the table and picked up his pen.

Maybe flowers weren't such a bad idea, if he thought of an original way to deliver them. There were plenty of options.

Via carrier pigeon?

No, no, he was thinking in Peter-idiot mode now. This was serious business. What could he do to show Melody how much she meant to him?

Take out a huge personal ad in the newspaper?

No. Lame.

Order a singing telegram?

No. Lamer.

Perform a singing telegram himself?

No. Frightening.

A skywriter?

Maybe.

"Do you think skywriters charge a flat fee or is it on a per-letter basis?" he called out to Peter.

"I think a skywriter is a bit excessive for a first date," Peter responded from the kitchen. "You don't want to scare her off."

"I don't think that will happen." Tim realized that no fewer than three members of his staff were trying to pretend they weren't listening for crucial details regarding his love life, so he abandoned his desk and walked back into the kitchen. "She doesn't scare easily," he told Peter. "And we really, really hit it off well. Well enough that I think a skywriter might be appropriate. What should I have it say?"

Peter shook his head. "Listen, bro, you don't want to get carried away."

"I'm serious, Peter, the sparks were flying like you wouldn't believe! It was incredible! I've never even come close to feeling this way about somebody so quickly. I need to show her what she did to me."

Peter leaned forward. "Okay, let me ask you a question. One year from now do you want her asking 'Honey, sweetums, how come you never hire skywriters for me anymore?' Don't start something you can't sustain."

"Do you want a suggestion?" asked Lyle. The twenty-year-old dishwasher stood at the cutting table, slicing some green peppers.

Tim looked over at him. "Oh, hi, Lyle. I didn't even notice you were over there."

"I know," said Lyle in his low monotone. "Most people don't. With some assistance I'm gradually dealing with it."

"What's your suggestion?"

Lyle looked thoughtful. "A few years ago, back when I was in high school and not working sixty-five hours a week at three jobs to earn enough money to go to some crappy community college, I sat behind this girl in American History. Her name was Sue, and she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Eyes like

sapphire ice. Smooth, unblemished skin. Wonderful hair that went from blonde to red in alternating months. And a smile that could rock the earth, sink ships, start wars, and end famine. She was simply amazing."

Lyle paused to sigh wistfully. "Like everyone else, she barely knew I existed. The only time she ever acknowledged me was on those rare occasions when the teacher counted out enough copies of a quiz to pass down the row that she had to turn around and give me one. For the most part I just sat behind her unnoticed, fantasizing about the back of her head."

Peter turned his attention back to the chicken now burning on the grill. "I've got food to cook, so I'm gonna get back to work. Let me know what idea you decide on, Tim."

Lyle looked at Tim. "Should we pretend that I meant for my story to end there?"

"No, no, please continue."

"I'd continue better if you let me have a beer on the job."

"I don't think so."

"It relaxes me. It's not like I'm driving or anything. What kind of damage could I do by getting a little buzz?" Lyle sliced another piece of the green pepper and became aware that he was holding an extremely sharp knife. "I mean, to others?"

"I have a lot of important thinking to do, so if you're not going to share your affection suggestion, I need to—"

"Okay, okay, so Sue was ignoring me. For a whole year I sat back there, wanting nothing more than to be able to talk to her, to say 'Psst, what did you get for question #6?' or 'Did you notice that Mrs. Denkle spits whenever she says the letter P?' But it wasn't happening. I might as well have been her trigonometry book for all the attention she paid me."

"Then, all of a sudden, I'd had enough. It was the week before graduation, so I figured the most humiliation I'd have to suffer was five days plus a few hours at reunions. And I knew exactly what I was going to do. I was going to write her a poem."

"A poem." Tim tried but failed to work up much enthusiasm for the concept.

"That's right." Lyle reached into his pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. "This poem."

"You have it with you?"

"Yeah. It's not the original—it doesn't have Sue's name on it or anything. I usually go clubbing after work, so I keep it with me just in case."

"That's..." Tim spent a few seconds searching for the proper word, "...grotesque."

"Let me read it to you." Lyle unfolded the paper. "You can't use it word-for-word, but maybe it'll inspire you to write something close."

"This really isn't necessary."

"Yes it is. I want you to be happy. Then you'll know how I'll feel when I'm allowed to drink beer at work." He cleared his throat and began to read. "'Oh, Sue,'...though it doesn't really say 'Sue' on here, you'd just put in the name of the person you're dedicating it to. What's your girlfriend's name?"

"Melody."

"Damn, three syllables. Well, we can work around that. 'Oh Melody, your heart is my heart. Your skin is my skin. Your bones are my bones. I see through your eyes. I hear through your ears. I touch with your fingers —"

"You know, that's just creepy." Tim shivered. "I'll come up with my own ideas, but thanks."

"Fine, whatever." Lyle stuffed the poem back into his pocket. "You can make fun of me all you want, but I gave this poem to Sue, and on graduation night my fantasy came true. I boned her."

"Really?"

"That's right. Yeah, she was totally plastered and thought I was somebody else, but I'll always have her panties to remind me of that wonderful night." Lyle went back to cutting vegetables.

Somehow Tim didn't feel inspired.

Maybe Peter was right. Something simple. Chocolates. There was nothing wrong with following tradition. He'd buy her some chocolates and invite her out to a really late lunch. Perfect!

* * * * *

Melody was looking positively luminous as Tim entered the Italian restaurant, a heart-shaped box of chocolates under his arm. He sat across from her in the booth and slid the box toward her.

"Hi, gorgeous, these are for you. They're maximum fat."

"Thank you."

Melody appeared uncomfortable. Tim was about to ask her what was wrong, and then he noticed a large gift sack, brightly colored with a ribbon attached to the front, resting on the table. "Is that for me?"

"Yeah, actually," she said, pushing it in his direction. Tim reached inside and removed a heart-shaped box of chocolates. It was at least twice the size of the one he'd given her. His stomach sank.

"Wow, that's...ample chocolate."

"I just had it lying around the house."

"With my name monogrammed on the box?"

"It was no big deal. The 'm' actually looks more like an 'n.'"

"No, it's great. Thank you." He stared at the sorry-looking box of chocolates he'd given her. "Of course, that's only the first part of your gift."

"Really? What's the second part?"

"It's a secret," Tim whispered, hoping she wouldn't suspect that he didn't have the faintest glimmer of a clue himself.

Their second date and he'd already screwed up. Shit.

* * * * *

"Okay, I've got one," said Tim. "*Cannibal Campout.*"

"Fake."

"Real."

"No way."

Tim nodded. "Yep. 1988, shot on video, directed by Jon McBride. He also did *Woodchipper Massacre.*"

"Here's one. Fertilize the Blaspheming Bombshell."

"Real. 1990. Directed by Jeff Hathcock."

"How the hell did you know that?" Melody demanded.

"It has Bo Hopkins in it."

"Oh."

"Maniac Nurses Find Ecstasy II."

"That's gotta be real."

"Fake. They never made a sequel."

Melody chuckled. "Okay, fourteen to six. I graciously accept defeat. I just can't compete with your vast knowledge of all things horrific."

"And as the winner, I pay for lunch...which was the second part of your gift, anyway." Tim knew that was lame, truly lame, amazingly lame, outrageously lame, but he'd been unable to come up with anything else.

"How sweet."

"Would you like to meet for dinner tonight?" he asked.

"Of course."

Tim leaned over the table and kissed her. He was going to impress her with his romantic abilities at dinner. No matter what.

* * * * *

Tim sat at the desk, eighteen crumpled-up pieces of paper on the floor next to him. He wasn't getting a whole lot of business-related work done, but Melody's poem was turning out pretty well. Of course, he was using the definition of "pretty well" that meant "sucky to the core."

How did these poets do it? How did they create such beautiful, romantic images? How did they find words that rhymed with "Melody?" The only thing he could come up with was "felony," which in addition to being a non-beautiful, non-romantic word, wasn't even a real rhyme.

He wasn't going to give up, though! By the end of his working day, he would have a love poem for her, and it would be good!

"Tim?" Peter pulled up a chair. "Could I talk to you?"

"You're disrupting my concentration."

"I realize that."

"At least help me out, then. What are some words that rhyme with heart?"

"Tart, fart, K-Mart..."

"You're not helping."

"I know. And you desperately need help, bro. What I see before me is a thirty-five-year-old man who is neglecting his managerial duties to write a love poem to a woman he met only last night. This is a frightening thing for me to witness. This is not the Tim I know. This is Tim Neffster...Mid-Life Crisis Man!"

"It's *not* a mid-life crisis," Tim insisted. "It's love. I know how whacked-out it sounds, but I'm in love with her."

"Okay, look, I'm not even going to get into that. You're in love with her. I'm happy for you. Name a couple of the kids after me. My real concern here is that you're sitting back here writing a love poem during really busy work hours, and everybody knows it! It's bad for keeping the troops in line!"

"So I should go home?"

"To be completely honest, I was thinking something more along the lines of dumping the poem idea and doing some actual work, but if that's not gonna happen, then yes! Get the hell out of here!"

There was no denying it, this was about the most unprofessional Tim had ever acted in his adult life. What was he thinking? It was okay to get all goofy over a woman, but he couldn't let it intrude on business. He needed to go home.

Of course, if he went home, then he would obviously want to give Melody a call and encourage them to get together. Which meant that his poem wouldn't be done. Which meant that he wouldn't have anything to prove his everlasting love. Which meant he should stay at work and write the poem.

He furrowed his brow. Somewhere this line of logic was getting freaky.

"I've got to do this. I mean, that's why Diane left me. I'm not romantic enough. I buy wimpy candy. I've got to outdo her. I've got to be extravagant and creative...but not seem like I'm trying to show off."

"May I read your poem?" asked Peter.

"No. It's not suitable for human eyes yet."

"I didn't think so. Here's a suggestion. You inherited the Neffster Family Screech, so a serenade is out of the question, but why not hire some professionals to give a mini-concert? The guys who played here last night, they were good, and I think they did a couple of love songs."

"That's a fantastic idea!" It was absolutely perfect. He'd call the band, get them set up outside Melody's door, and then put on a musical performance in her honor when she stepped outside! Yes!

He crumpled his latest draft of the poem and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. His problems were solved!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rebecca took another terrified step backward as she screamed with a terror reserved for sin-laden souls being carried down the River Styx. The Bay Area Butcher, the glint of death in his eyes, stepped forward, caressing the serrated stainless-steel blade of his hunting knife. Glancing over her shoulder, Rebecca saw that she had less than five feet of space left before the edge of the cliff. If she fell over the side, she would meet her eternal doom at the hands of a three-hundred-foot plummet onto some large, pointy rocks. Her chances of survival were minimal.

The Butcher grinned, revealing rotten, blackened, mildly slimy teeth. "You shouldn't never have wore pearls," he snarled. "My mother wore pearls the night she tried to drown me!"

With a shriek of primeval rage, the Butcher raised his knife and rushed at her. Rebecca knew she had less than three seconds to live.

Two...

One...

Suddenly a figure leapt from a nearby tree, landing on the madman and bringing him to his knees with a loud "ooooomph!" It was an unholy "ooooomph," one that reflected his wretched breech birth, his vile bratty childhood, his appalling gawky teenage years, and ultimately his grotesque serial-killing adulthood. Rebecca stopped counting the seconds until her untimely death in order to gaze upon her benefactor.

He was strikingly handsome, more handsome than any man she'd ever seen, the kind of handsome that made her want to run her hands over his face to check for hidden plastic surgery scars. Muscular, shirtless, chest oiled...he was a hunk of man for the ages.

"My name is Tim Neffster, café owner," he said in his manly voice, standing up and dusting himself off. "Are you okay?"

But before Rebecca could answer, the Butcher leapt to his feet, the knife still clutched in his bloodstained hand. "You will die as have so many others who share the first name of my dearly departed father," he howled.

"Oh, I don't think so," Tim replied, again using his manly voice.

With another shriek, this one even more primeval-rage-filled than the last, the Butcher slashed at Tim with the knife. Tim knocked the knife out of his hand, punched the Butcher ninety-seven times in the face in rapid succession, and then

picked him up with his awesomely muscular arms and flung him over the side of the cliff.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" said the Butcher.

"What a hero you are!" exclaimed Rebecca, throwing her arms around him. "I shall be true to you forever!"

"That's a good reason to kiss," said Tim.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" the Butcher continued to say.

They kissed, passionately.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" the Butcher repeated, until his scream was cut off by a thump as he hit the rocks and more or less died.

Rebecca and Tim continued kissing, and all was right with the world.

Melody stretched and yawned as she printed out the story. She only had about fifteen minutes before Tim was supposed to arrive, so she had to hurry with the last-minute touch-ups to get ready for her big evening. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he read the story. She was going to give it to him under the pretense of wanting his opinion on her latest chapter. But when he reached his surprise cameo appearance...it was going to be *great*!

* * * * *

Tim sat in the parking lot, tapping his fingertips against the steering wheel, checking his watch approximately every half-second. Where were they? The band was supposed to have been here forty-five minutes ago. They weren't going to have any time to prepare.

Oh well. They were only going to perform one song, and it wasn't like they'd be setting up any complicated equipment. Their road manager (who was also their publicity department and drummer) assured him that they could do a minimalist setup in two minutes, so there was no reason to get too worried. The worst they could do was completely suck.

Finally a white van pulled up alongside him. Tim got out of his car as the driver, a longhaired folk singer type, rolled down his window.

"Hi, you guys ready?"

"Yep," said the driver.

"Okay, just follow me to her house. I'll ask for a quick tour, and while I'm inside you guys get set up as fast as you can. Start singing as soon as we come back out. Got it?"

"Got it."

Tim started to turn back toward his car, and then thought of something important. "Can I hear the song?"

"Oh, sure," nodded the driver. "You wanted 'Gumdrops and Lollipops,' right?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

The driver put his head back and began to wail in something bearing only the faintest similarity to a singing voice.

"When you came into this world

There was a glorious event

A shower of gumdrops and lollipops

Fell to earth, heaven sent."

"Oh, dear God," whimpered Tim, amazed that his ears hadn't jumped off his head in a suicide attempt. "Please tell me that you're not the lead singer."

"Naw, man. Bass."

"That's good. Please never sing again. All right, let's get moving."

* * * * *

Melody answered the door, looking unsurprisingly gorgeous, and gave Tim a quick kiss. "*Death Weasels With Gonorrhea*."

"Fake."

"Correct, though it may be my next book. Shall we head off?"

"Could I have a quick tour?" asked Tim. "I've always wanted to see how a horror writer lives."

"If we take time for sex, we'll miss our reservation."

"No, no, I just want to see your house," Tim insisted.

Melody took him from room to room, with Tim oohing and aahing and eehing in all the right places, until they reached her office. "Wow," exclaimed Tim, looking at all the framed book covers. "Are these all the novels you've published?"

"All but one." Melody picked up some pages off her printer. "My first publisher sent me a cover proof that underwent a molecular breakdown upon contact with sunlight. It was a vampire book, but I'm pretty sure that was a coincidence."

"These are great! Seriously. Do you have any copies of your books I could borrow?"

Melody opened the door to a large closet that was filled to ninety-eight percent capacity with hundreds of copies of her books. "Help yourself."

Suddenly there was a loud crash from outside sounding suspiciously like a pair of cymbals being dropped by a very stupid band member. Melody set the pages down and peeked out the window.

"What on earth—?"

She hurried downstairs to the front door. Tim followed her, hoping they'd be ready. They *had* to be ready. He really needed to impress her.

Melody threw open the front door. The four band members waved enthusiastically.

"Happy serenade, Melody!" shouted the extremely hairy lead singer.

Melody gave Tim a look of surprise. He grinned at her, and she returned her attention to the band, thrilled.

"When you came into this world

There was a glorious event

A shower of gumdrops and lollipops

Fell to earth, heaven-sent."

His voice wasn't sensational, but it was more than good enough. Melody put her arm around Tim and squeezed him tightly.

"Gumdrops and lollipops! Gumdrops and lollipops!" sang the rest of the band.

"The candy dropped from the skies

Sugar sweetness here and there

Children shouted their delight

As happiness reigned everywhere."

Now Tim was getting worried. This song was a little cornier than he'd expected. What if Melody thought he was some sappy, maudlin loser?

"A gumdrop struck Father Tom

He cried out in massive pain

A lollipop hit Betty Sue

And ripped right through her brain.

Gumdrops and lollipops! Blood-soaked gumdrops and lollipops!

The treats fell, dealing death

Leaving corpses in their wake

This nightmare made it very clear

Your birth was a mistake."

"*Bitch!*" added the rest of the band.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" shouted Tim, rushing toward the band. He grabbed the lead singer's guitar before he could play another note. "What the hell was that?"

"Gumdrops and Lollipops,' dude."

"I didn't know it was a bloodbath ballad! I mean, that's fine, she's a horror writer and all, but you weren't supposed to be saying her birth was a mistake!"

"Oh, you mean you *like* her?" asked the lead singer.

"Yes!"

"Bummer. I'd start groveling if I were you, dude."

"Just pack up and go!"

"We'll knock a couple bucks off the bill for the misunderstanding," the lead singer informed him. A simultaneous snort of laughter from the other members indicated that no such thing would happen.

Tim returned to the doorway. He gave Melody a sheepish smile. "Uh, obviously that wasn't quite the song I expected."

Melody nodded her understanding. "I was enjoying it until the backup singers called me a bitch."

"I'm really sorry." Then a wild, crazy idea occurred to him. "You know what, though, maybe this serenade can be salvaged."

He stepped out onto the lawn and took a deep breath. He raised his arms toward Melody, and concentrated on feeling the music deep within his soul.

Then he exhaled and walked back to her.

"Bad idea. Let's go get food."

* * * * *

The meal had been absolutely delicious, and afterward they'd gone to a park. They sat on the grass, staring up at the stars on this beautiful moonlit night.

"Everything looks just perfect," said Melody, quietly so as not to disturb the tranquil mood.

"Yes, it does."

They rolled onto their sides and gazed into each other's eyes.

"I know we've just met, but I feel like I can tell you anything. You're so wonderful."

"You're the wonderful one," Tim corrected.

They leaned toward each other and kissed tenderly.

Melody gave him a mischievous grin. "I don't think anybody is around."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

"That gives me a naughty idea. How about we...oh, wait, here comes some guy walking his dog."

They got up and walked around the park for a few minutes, seeking a location with sufficient privacy, and finally found a spot behind some thick bushes. Melody took Tim's hand and pulled him to the ground.

They made out like horny teenagers for a while, her legs wrapped around him. Some leaves occasionally rustled and Melody let out a few unintentional moans, but she was pretty sure that nobody heard them. Getting busted for public sexual activity would be extremely embarrassing, although the publicity might very well boost her writing career.

Tim unbuttoned her blouse and she pulled her bra down, exposing her breasts. Melody had never had sex outdoors, or in any kind of public area if you excluded a brief fondling in a movie theatre, and her entire body tingled with the excitement of being ever so bad. Tim raised his mouth to her breasts and sucked each nipple in turn. She hovered over him for a few moments, letting him pleasure her, and then slid down to unzip his pants.

The sound of the zipper seemed to echo throughout the park as if to say, "Hey, there are people getting ready to fuck over here!"

She unbuttoned his pants and gently tugged them down just below crotch level. Then she reached into the easy-access slit in his boxer shorts and took out his already-erect penis. She slid down a bit further and gave the head of his cock a very generous kiss. "It likes the fresh air."

Melody allowed his cock a moment to enjoy the fresh air, and then engulfed it in her mouth. So now if they got busted, at least nobody would be able to see her face. Tim let out a soft moan like...well, like somebody receiving a blowjob.

She couldn't believe she was doing this. She'd gone from fucking nineteen-year-olds to giving oral satisfaction in a public park. Clearly there'd been a hellcat inside her waiting to claw its way out all of these years.

Tim reached down and ran his hand through her hair. "You do that so great..."

Melody didn't acknowledge his compliment since her mouth was full.

She kept sucking on him, counting on Tim to be alert enough to their surroundings to warn her if any potential spectators arrived. The way he was moaning, she suspected that he might not be devoting all of his attention to his watchman duties, but she'd just have to deal with it.

Tim's moans were growing a bit too loud for comfort, so she pulled away, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and unbuttoned her jeans. "My turn, sweetie."

Unfortunately, her anatomy wasn't as easily exposed as Tim's, so she had to tug and wiggle until she could pull her jeans and panties all the way down to her ankles. She lay on the ground, spread her legs, and hoped that no ants crawled on her butt.

Tim buried his face between her thighs, reaching up with both hands to hold her bare breasts. He gently, slowly made love to her with his tongue, licking all the way up and then all the way down.

Melody realized that watching for potential spectators was much more difficult than she'd thought.

Don't make noise...don't make noise...don't make noise...

She whimpered.

You're making noise!

Tim licked and licked, and Melody quickly figured out that there was no way in hell she was going to be silent through this. When his tongue flicked over her clitoris, she had to slap her hand over her mouth.

Of course, this hand thing was working pretty well. She kept her hand over her mouth and let the good man lick away. And lick he did...his tongue slowly moving all over her pussy. Melody wanted to wrap her legs around him but couldn't while her jeans were still caught around her ankles, so she settled for spreading her legs as wide as she could.

He slid a finger into her with ease, quickly following it with a second as he continued licking. If he kept this up, Melody was pretty damn sure that she was going to come.

He kept it up.

Melody came so hard she thought she was going to bite right through her palm. Her entire body shook, probably frightening the nearby wildlife, and she worried that her muffled scream alerted the entire six-mile area to their presence. But since she didn't hear any police sirens approaching, she didn't protest as Tim lowered his pants some more and dug out a condom.

Within a few seconds he'd torn open the wrapper and rolled it over his cock while Melody kicked her jeans off one ankle. Within a few more seconds he was on top of her, thrusting deep inside of her. She was certain that her butt was getting really dirty from being on the ground, but at least she didn't feel any bugs on it yet.

While the licking had been slow, the fucking was hard and fast. Tim pounded into her, gasping with each thrust. Her soaked pussy put up no resistance, and she noted with some satisfaction that since they were fucking outside, nobody would have to sleep in the wet spot.

Melody pressed her lips tightly together to keep from screaming in pleasure.

Oh, jeez, I could be on the six o'clock news tomorrow and I don't even care.

Well, she cared a little, but not enough to ask Tim to stop fucking her.

They went at it for another few minutes, the thrusts getting harder and harder. Just when Melody decided that it was getting a wee bit out of control,

Tim pressed his hand against his own mouth to muffle himself as he cried out in his orgasm.

After he pulled out of her, they lay there for a moment, just enjoying being together. Then they simultaneously realized that they were lying naked in a park, and quickly got up and got back into their clothes.

Before they made it out of the park, they decided that they needed an encore, so they rushed back to the hidden spot behind the bushes and fucked some more.

The middle-aged woman who happened upon them just giggled, but it was still rather embarrassing.

They went back to Tim's apartment and made love until the wee hours of the night.

* * * * *

He's going to dump me, Melody thought to herself as she sat at her desk, typing. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to bring along the story. At least now it was in her purse for next time. Sure, she'd been distracted by the insulting serenade, but still, she should have remembered. She wasn't trying hard enough. She was going to destroy this relationship just like she'd destroyed her relationship with Alex.

She's gonna leave me if I don't start taking this relationship seriously, Tim decided. The sex was fantastic, but he had to be more affectionate. He had to be more creative. He had to take things to the next level before it was too late.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MONDAY

One hour before she had to leave for work, Melody looked with satisfaction upon the large corkboard attached to her office wall. She'd divided it into five columns: Gifts, Things to Say, Things to Do (Small Scale), Things To Do (Large Scale), and Sexual Techniques. Each column contained several color-coordinated index cards with ideas neatly written on them.

Okay, now that everything was carefully arranged, it was time to make the selections. It was too early for the "I love you" card under Things to Say, so she removed it and set it on her desk for later reference.

She stared at the board. "Tim's Story" was her current ace in the hole, but now she was having second thoughts, wondering if it might be a little too much. Perhaps she should hold off for a couple more dates. She removed that card, and turned her attention to gifts.

Should she go with a level one gift, level two, level three, level four, or level five? Definitely not five, and definitely not one. Either a three or a four. Probably a four. Yes, definitely a four. She removed the third card under level four and grinned wickedly.

* * * * *

Tim had spent all morning on the phone, but it was worth it. He'd finally been able to track down the name and address of a Mr. Edward Klacken.

He pulled into the driveway of a small house in the suburbs. After double-checking the address, he walked up onto the porch and rang the doorbell.

A moment later the door opened, revealing a short, stick-thin man in his seventies with a ridiculously full head of black hair. He peered suspiciously at Tim. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Klacken?"

"Yeah?"

"Hi. You don't know me, but I really need to talk to you. You're The Ghoul, right? You used to host *Ghoul Theatre*?"

"So?"

"So I'm here on behalf of my friend, Melody Talaway."

"She's not my daughter!" snapped Klacken. "You want a blood test, I'll get a frickin' blood test! I have no money left; what do you parasites want to harass an old man for?"

"I'm not saying she's your daughter." Tim took a wary step back. "She's a big fan of yours."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

"Is she hot?"

"Uh, yeah."

"She a blonde? How much does she weigh?"

"Do you think I could come in?" asked Tim, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, yeah, all right."

Klacken led Tim inside the house. The living room was completely decorated with a bunny rabbit motif. There was bunny wallpaper, bunny pictures, and stuffed bunnies in every corner. Tim looked around in awe.

"Lot of bunnies," he noted.

Klacken shrugged. "Yeah, the girl I was living with liked 'em. Bunny was her stage name. She left me for her dermatologist."

"Ah."

"She can call all she wants, but these fuckin' bunnies are mine now."

"I guess I'll get to the point." Tim wanted to have a seat on the couch but was unable to locate a non-bunny-occupied section. "Melody told me how much she loved your show when she was growing up, and I thought it would be really cool if you could show up when we got together for dinner tonight. You know, in your Ghoul makeup and costume or whatever you wore on TV. It'd be a great surprise."

Klacken chuckled. "You don't want that. She sees me in my Ghoul costume, next thing you know she's screaming my name when you're in bed."

"I think it'll be okay."

"Can't do it tonight. Shark documentary on The Discovery Channel. Can't do it tomorrow, either. Tuesday night sitcom lineup. How about Wednesday?"

"Wednesday's fine," said Tim. A little later than he would like, but he'd take what he could get.

"You know," said Klacken, thoughtfully, "I've got a special costume they wouldn't let me wear on the air."

"No, no, just your regular costume. Do you still have it?"

"Yeah. By the way, I charge five thousand for personal appearances."

"I'll give you two hundred."

"Two-ten."

"Done."

* * * * *

Her mother's phone rang. As Karen walked over to answer it, she tried to recall her sister Sally's instructions. If it were Ron, Jason, Tyler, Bobby, or Louis, she was supposed to tell the truth, that Sally was out getting her hair done. If it was Fred, she was supposed to make him jealous by saying that Sally was at the movies with a strange guy. If it was William calling to apologize, she was supposed to tell him to drop dead. If it was William calling about returning the books Sally had lent him, she was supposed to tell him to drop them off at Tyler's apartment and she'd pick them up later. If it was Thomas, she was supposed to tell him that Sally had moved. If it was Michael, she was supposed to tell him that Sally needed to borrow his car next Thursday while hers was at the shop.

If it was for their mother, Karen was supposed to encourage her to get off the phone quickly, since their mother couldn't figure out how call waiting worked, and Sally didn't want to miss any important calls.

It was none of them. The telemarketer offered her a low, low interest rate on a credit card. She panted into the phone and asked him what he was wearing. He hung up.

She looked up Tim's number, dialed, then hoisted a barbell in her free hand as she waited for him to answer.

* * * * *

"Hi, Tim, it's Karen."

Tim grimaced. He'd completely forgotten about his date with Karen! He hoped she took it well when he called it off.

"Karen...good to hear from you..."

"We're still scheduled for tomorrow, correct? I wouldn't want to have to shatter your legs."

She was joking. He knew she was joking. She'd even chuckled to accentuate the joke. She was in no way even remotely serious. Physical harm would be non-existent if he were to tell her right now that he was going to cancel their date.

The fact that his legs had gone numb meant nothing.

"Actually...ummm..."

Do it! Be a man!

"...it's all I've been thinking about."

You chickenshit sissy!

"I'm exalted. Would you like to procure me at six? We can masticate at Hansen's."

Masticate? Didn't that just mean "to chew?" What, they were going to chew their food and spit it back out onto the plate? If he weren't such a complete and total wuss, he'd call her on that one.

"That sounds good, sure." Tim cursed his status as a complete and total wuss. "What's your address?"

"You don't require it. I've been spending my days parked outside your residence, ensuring that you aren't cheating on me."

Tim was pretty sure he'd entered the first stage of cardiac arrest. "I see," he managed to say.

"That was a witticism, Tim."

"I know," he informed her through a mouthful of bile.

* * * * *

Tim and Melody walked along the beach, hand in hand. It was another perfect night.

"Watch your step." Tim gestured to the sand. "Hypodermic needle. Stuck in a jellyfish."

"Can I ask you a serious question?" asked Melody.

"Of course."

"Do you think I ignore you?"

Tim couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No! Not at all!" Melody looked a bit reassured, but then Tim became uncomfortable. Was she hinting at something? "Why? Do you think I'm ignoring you?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm totally sure."

"Good. I'm sure, too."

They continued walking. Melody certainly didn't *look* sure.

After their walk, they returned to Melody's truck. She led him to the back and gestured dramatically toward a blanket-covered form.

"I've got a present for you, but you have to promise me that you're genuinely a sicko horror fan."

Tim held up his fingers, indicating Scout's Honor. "I am, believe me."

"I don't want you wiggling out when you see this. It's kind of extreme."

"I can handle it."

Melody pulled off the blanket with a flourish. Underneath was an artificial female cadaver, dressed in a red evening gown that was tattered and covered with cobwebs.

"Wow," Tim gasped. "You've killed for me."

"Do you like it?"

"I, uh, really don't know what to say."

Melody picked up a bulb that was attached to the cadaver by a clear tube. When she squeezed it, a fake hand raised out of the cadaver's chest, holding a heart. Written upon the hand were the words "You've stolen my heart, Tim."

"Okay, *now* I definitely like it." Tim gave her a hug and a gentle kiss.

"So what's on the agenda for tomorrow?" asked Melody.

"I need to be at the café at least until Peter gets there at five. You're going to write for a while after work, right?"

"For a little bit, yeah. Should we meet for dinner again? I know this eating out is getting kind of expensive, so I could make us something."

Tim began to fidget nervously. "I sort of forgot. I have a prior commitment. Nothing major, just dinner with a...a friend."

"A friend?"

"Not even a friend, really. An acquaintance. Maybe not even that. An individual. This guy I went to high school with. We thought we'd go out to dinner, then hang out and talk about old times. I hope that's okay."

"Sure it's okay," Melody smiled. "We don't have to spend every waking moment together. We'll do something on Wednesday. No big deal."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Now kiss me some more."

Tim kissed her some more.

* * * * *

Melody lay in the hot bath with relaxing music playing in the background. The bubble bath her mother had bought her floated on the surface of the water like an oil slick, but it smelled nice.

She was doing everything she could not to become paranoid, but it was a challenge. Was Tim really seeing an old friend tomorrow? He'd seemed just a bit too nervous about the whole situation.

He couldn't be seeing someone else, could he? Not after the way they'd hit it off.

Not after all that awesome sex.

No, she trusted him. If he said he was going out with an old friend then that's what he was doing.

It damn fucking well *better* be what he was doing.

The phone rang, so she hurriedly got out of the bathtub, wrapped a towel around herself, and ran down the hallway into her office. "Hello?" she answered.

"Hi." Tim's voice was an apologetic whisper.

"Hi, you. You know, I'm standing here completely naked, dripping wet from a hot bath. I don't know that I'll be able to completely dry myself."

"I'll be right over!"

Melody's eyes widened. It wasn't Tim, it was Alex! "Whoops, whoa, I'm sorry. I've had a dose of Nyquil tonight; I don't know what I'm babbling about."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes, definitely, I'm totally wasted, stay home."

"Okay." Alex sounded disappointed. "I've been trying to reach you for two days."

"I have voicemail."

"Yeah, I know, but I figured you wouldn't call me back. Look, Melody, I want to apologize. I should have been nicer when I was dumping you."

"Mmm-hmm."

"I'd like it if you'd let me tell you I'm sorry in person."

"I don't think so. I apologize for wasting two months of your life, but we need to leave this in the past."

"I'm not trying to win you back," Alex insisted. "Just let me take you out for coffee and doughnuts tomorrow morning."

"No."

"Okay, just coffee. Decaf."

"Alex, no, I think..."

A horrible, evil, childish idea came to her. She tried to blink it out of her head, but it persisted. She could have dinner with Alex at the same place Tim was having dinner with his friend. Just to keep an eye on him.

If he caught her, well, she could explain her presence away without a problem—that's what writing skills were for. He'd probably be flattered. And if he was with another woman, she could *get* him.

Her jaw dropped. Was she seriously contemplating such a pathetic, grade-schoolish, *insane* idea? What had Tim done to her?

Okay, she at least needed to use a smidgen of intelligence in this matter. Wait until tomorrow to decide anything. "...I think I need to sleep on it," she said. "But I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thank you. My mom's number is in the Rolodex by the refrigerator."

"I'm not taking you back, Alex. I want you to realize that. If we do get together, it's just as friends."

"I know."

"Because you sounded pretty hot-to-trot when I said I was wet and naked."

"It would probably help if you didn't say things like that," Alex admitted.

"It's a deal. I'll call you tomorrow."

She hung up. She was an awful person. Not only was she going to spy on Tim, but she was also going to pull an innocent bystander into it.

No, she wasn't. She'd go to bed and when she woke up in the morning, the whole idea would seem completely absurd. She'd chuckle at her sorry state of mind, and then return to life as a mature, responsible adult.

* * * * *

She rolled over sleepily as the alarm went off. The plan sounded better than ever.

CHAPTER NINE

TUESDAY

Charles William Stearning gazed through the telescope, waiting for his goddess to emerge. The holy hour of nine-thirty was the part of his day that made life worth living.

His pulse quickened as he checked his watch. Nine twenty-eight. His goddess had about a ten-minute window of opportunity for revealing herself, so true bliss was at hand any moment now.

Oh, sweet Melody! Writer of the words that spoke to him, that brought him peace. His floor was littered with multiple copies of each of her tomes, falling apart from constant reference, the pages marked with yellow highlighter and notes written in pencil that nearly exceeded the word count of the books themselves.

She was his world. His reason for existence. Someday soon he would kill for her, take the life of another human being just as her books begged him, pleaded with him to do. And she would smile, and she would know he was hers, and their embrace would be exquisite.

He'd almost killed for her already. Two years ago, he'd found the house of worship, the house across the street from her own temple. The house where he could witness her beauty. He would have killed to gain possession of his home, but the owners had been perfectly happy to take cash for it. His inheritance wasn't even close to running out, giving him all day, every day, to reflect upon the words of his goddess. To learn from them. To become one with them.

She stepped outside, and peace settled over his body like a warm blanket. She was alone now. She'd been living with a man for sixty-two days, but he was gone now. Charles had never been jealous. Jealousy was unnecessary. When the time was right, Melody, sweet Melody, would know who her true servant was.

She got into her truck and drove away. He smiled. He could feel a change in the air's vibrations. The time was coming. Soon he would sacrifice one of his own kind for her. And Melody would be pleased.

* * * * *

Her boss would be in the meeting for another twenty minutes, so Melody picked up the phone and dialed the number for Dual Streams. It didn't open until eleven, and waiting this long had been almost unbearable.

"Lyle here, yeah, we're open," answered a surly-voiced person on the other end.

"Hey, how ya doin'?" asked Melody, speaking in what she hoped was a Boston-type accent. "I'm callin' foah Tim Neffstah."

"He's not here yet. He's allowed to come and go as he pleases, since he's not paying for a useless education."

"Ya wouldn't happen to know weah he's goin' to dinner tonight, would ya?"

"Nobody tells me anything. I'm lucky they open the door for me on the bus."

"Tell me somethin', Lyle, would ya like to make fifty bucks?"

* * * * *

Tim walked into the kitchen, feeling queasy. He'd slept terribly last night, but at least the nightmare would be over soon. He'd go out with Karen, be an excruciatingly boring companion, and she'd never bother him again.

Of course, if you had any guts, you would've just told her the truth in the first place, said a little voice inside his head. He told the voice to shut the fuck up and mind its own business. The voice said okay.

Somebody else's voice said something. "Excuse me?" he asked.

"I said, how's it going?" repeated Lyle.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't even see you. It's going fine. How about with you?"

Lyle shrugged. "I can't complain. Nobody would listen, anyway. Hey, I was thinking, we never hang out. If you wanted to tag along, we could go clubbing and I could show you how my poem works."

"You know what, that sounds fascinating, but I already have plans."

"Aw, c'mon, what could be better than the two of us gathering chicks?"

"Nothing in the world could top that. But I'm already going out for dinner and a movie."

"Not me, I'm gonna eat the free food I get here; that way I don't have to get a fourth job to stay alive. Going anyplace good?"

"A place called Hansen's. I've never been there before."

"Well, I'm working until seven. If you let me out early, we'll hit a couple of clubs before your date."

"It's not a date, it's dinner with a friend. And no, you can't leave early."

"C'mon, just an hour! It'll bring us closer together."

"I'm supposed to be there at six."

"Three hours, then."

"Lyle? Work."

* * * * *

"Hansen's at six," Lyle told her.

Melody wrote that down. "Ya didn't mention why ya wanted ta know, right?"

"Of course not. Not that it would matter...I'm sure the whole conversation has already faded from his memory. Story of my life."

She thanked him and got his home address to send the cash. Then she had yet another moment of doubt where she wondered what on earth she thought she was trying to do. Then she got over it and called Alex.

* * * * *

Melody opened the closet door and tried to figure out what to wear. She didn't want to look like a slob, but it had to be something simple. It couldn't be something that made it seem like she was trying to impress Alex, but if she ended up having to make a scene in front of Tim, she wanted to be sure he knew what he was losing.

Decisions, decisions...

* * * * *

Karen stood in front of her bedroom closet. The red blouse was a little too dressy for a movie date. The greenish one was a possibility, but it kind of made her shoulders look pointy. The blue-and-white one needed to be thrown away, quickly, before she actually decided that it might look good on her or any other human being.

The black one was maybe a little too revealing. She didn't want to send off the wrong message.

Well, no, on second thought, the black one was okay. It was definitely the best of what she had to select from, and Tim was a nice guy. She didn't have to worry about him thrusting his face between her breasts and making motorboat noises during the meal.

Yep, the black one it was.

* * * * *

Tim didn't want to be too obvious in his attempts to turn off Karen, so he wore a decent dress shirt but didn't iron it. And he selected the scuffed-up shoes. He considered mismatched socks, but that was a little much.

He checked himself in the mirror. Unappealing. Perfect.

* * * * *

Alex picked his blue T-shirt up off the floor and gave it a quick sniff. Yeah, this one would be okay.

* * * * *

"Wow," said Alex, as Melody walked into the restaurant and toward the corner booth where he was sitting. "You look great!"

"Thanks," Melody said, sitting down across from him.

"No, I mean it, you look really, really great. You're, like, radiant. You're almost glowing." Alex couldn't believe it. He'd never seen her looking so attractive, and it wasn't the clothes or makeup. She'd acquired some sort of aura.

Melody smiled politely at him and then picked up the menu. "What's good here?"

"I've never been here. You picked it."

"That's right. What are you going to have?" Melody glanced around the restaurant, obviously afraid to meet his gaze. She had to be embarrassed about the way she'd treated him.

"Probably the trout."

"Oh, that sounds good. I'll have that too."

"But you hate fish. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm feeling fine," Melody assured him, her body language making it clear that she was extremely uncomfortable. Somehow Alex knew that if he were to take her back right now, all the problems of neglect would be over. She'd learned her lesson. Everything would be wonderful. They could finally be happy, the way they were meant to be.

He'd make this whole evening easy for her.

"I have a confession," he said. "I miss you a lot. And just looking at you, I can see how much love you have stored inside you, how much you're willing to give now. I think we've both changed, and can work through our problems."

"Mmm-hmm," said Melody, barely acting as if she heard him.

Alex reached across the table and took her hand. "Melody, I have something very important that I want to say to you."

Suddenly Melody perked up as she appeared to notice something across the room. Even for somebody in the undesirable position of begging an ex-lover to take her back, she was acting weird.

"Melody...?"

"Hmmm?"

"I need to tell you something."

"Can it wait for a second? I've got to hit the ladies room. Be right back. Watch my purse." She scooted out of the booth and walked slowly toward the back of the restaurant.

Alex grinned. As soon as she returned, he'd put her out of her misery.

Oh this is so pathetic you are so pathetic what's wrong with you you pathetic pathetic pathetic individual?

Melody glimpsed Tim as he vanished from sight, hidden in his booth behind the random junk that was placed all over the restaurant to serve as decor. She couldn't believe that she was marching over to his table, even though the only possible result could be him thinking she was an obsessed stalker.

This was nuts. This was insane. This was ridiculous. She couldn't do this. She needed to regain full control of her brain before she did something stupid that she'd regret forever. Now.

"May I help you with something?" The waiter was a Chinese man who bore no trace of a Chinese accent. Melody realized she'd been standing in place. How very uncool.

She shook her head at the waiter, and then noticed Alex staring at her. Okay, well, this was certainly embarrassing. Time to move forward. Don't trip. Slapstick would not be a good thing right now.

Melody walked quickly—too quickly—past Tim's booth and over to the restrooms. She pushed the door open, stepped inside, and took a deep breath to regain her composure.

Her composure was lost again as she realized that the other occupant of the restroom was a rather large, burly man standing in front of a urinal of the type generally found in the category of restrooms where she was not invited.

"I'm so sorry," said Melody.

The man glanced over at her, shrugged, and returned to his endeavor. "Doesn't bother me."

Melody started to leave, but then hesitated. "I have a question. Have you ever been so much in love that you acted like a complete childish fool?"

"Couple months ago I let some of my drinking buddies run me over with a wheelbarrow to impress a cocktail waitress."

"So it's not just me? Because a man I met just days ago is here, and I let my ex-boyfriend meet me here just so we could be in the same restaurant because I wasn't sure the man was telling me the truth about eating here with an old friend. You're a guy—very much so—do you think that's psychotic?"

"Yeah, a little," the man admitted.

"I'm going to scare him away, aren't I?"

"I dunno. Some men like psychotic women."

"God, I hope so. Listen, it was nice talking to you. I'm going to get out of here so you can shake off or whatever you need to do. Thanks."

Melody turned around and pushed open the door, praying to every deity ever worshipped by any culture in the history of civilization that Tim hadn't watched her walk into the men's room. She really didn't need that.

She stepped out of the restroom and found herself staring at a woman who was seated in Tim's booth and, despite her imposing physique, was by no means male enough to be the person Tim was talking about. Melody had worked herself up for this moment, planned out exactly what she was going to say, but she couldn't speak. Tears welled up in her eyes as she returned to her table.

Karen let out a snort of laughter. "Some woman just fortuitously entered the men's lavatory."

"It happens," said Tim, unhappy to be reminded of an unfortunate indiscretion during his youth.

"I really am favorable that you agreed to our date," Karen told him. "It's been an interminable duration since I've socialized like this."

"Really? I wouldn't think you'd have any trouble forcing—I mean, convincing men to take you out."

"That's generous of you, but the truth is that I intimidate a large percentage of men."

"Ah, they're just cowards."

Melody sat down at the table and did her best to keep her composure. Maybe the woman was Tim's sister, and he'd just gotten confused as to whom he was having dinner with. Or maybe he was a cheating lying piece-of-shit bastard. Probably the latter.

"What was that all about?" Alex asked.

"What?"

"Walking into the men's room."

"I was hoping to glimpse a penis. Do you have a problem with that?"

Alex looked at her very closely, as if checking out the dilation of her pupils. "I haven't driven you to recreational drugs, have I?"

"No."

"So is it okay if I tell you something?"

"Sure. No, wait. I changed my mind about something. I need to do this. I'll be right back." Melody slid out of the booth again.

Tim Neffster was dead meat.

Approximately six quarts of cold sweat cascaded down Tim's sides as he saw Melody walk up to his table. He was *so* deeply screwed. Maybe Karen would protect him.

"Well, *hello!*" exclaimed Melody, her voice tinged with acid. "Do you remember me?"

She hadn't stabbed him with a steak knife yet, so maybe this would work out okay. "Of course I do! The Adams' dinner party, right?" He gave her a pleading look, hoping his message of "Please play along until I can explain everything" got through. That was a tough message to get across with a single pleading look, but they'd made a connection, so maybe it would work.

Melody appeared to soften just a bit. "That's right. That party where we had dinner with the Adams'. I was walking around to use the lovely restroom facilities here, and I thought I recognized you, but it wasn't until I went back to my table that I realized that yes, it really was you. How are you?"

"Great, great. And yourself?"

"Oh, I'm simply super. I'm so very surprised to see you here, having such a wonderful time."

"Uh, yeah, I'm surprised to see you too."

Still no steak knife, though the look Melody was giving him was almost as deadly. But it appeared that she was at least giving him the benefit of the doubt. If he played things right, he could get out of this without a major commotion and/or his personal demise.

"Hey, why don't you join us?" he asked. He turned to Karen. "Is that all right with you?"

Karen seemed a bit taken aback. "I suppose so. I mean, if that's what you desire, certainly."

"I'm here with a friend," said Melody. "But if you'd like to join us at our table, you'd be more than welcome."

"Yeah, let's do that. It'll be fun."

Tim stood up, and he and Karen followed Melody toward her table. A guy sat there, looking less than pleased to see Melody bringing company over.

"Alex, this is Tim Neffster and his female friend. Is it all right if they eat with us?"

Alex looked unsure. "Okay."

Melody scooted in next to Alex, while Tim and Karen sat on the opposite side, Karen closest to the wall. Tim extended his hand toward Alex. "Pleased to meet you."

Alex shook it. "Pleasure's all mine. So, where do you know Melody from?"

"A dinner party," said Melody. "The Adams' dinner party. You don't know them. I quit going to their dinner parties after the salmonella incident."

"That was a very nasty incident," Tim added.

"Oh, it was horrible. And they'd just put in that beautiful new carpet."

"You liked the carpet? I thought it was a little too white."

"Well, from a whiteness point of view I guess you could criticize it, but it did have a wonderful texture. Did you get to walk barefoot across it?"

"Only once."

That man may very well be the most attractive piece of maleness I have ever laid eyes on in my entire life, thought Karen as she stared at Alex. He was gorgeous! And she wasn't even into younger men!

Karen was not somebody to judge people on the basis of physical attractiveness. A firm, muscular body meant nothing to her without an ample brain to go along with it. Personality was everything, looks were nothing.

Until now.

As far as she knew, Alex's reading habits could be limited to *Fuzzy Slipper Digest* ("Coming in May: Periwinkle!"). She thought she could detect a definite spark of intelligence in his eyes, but that certainly wasn't enough to explain the way she was feeling.

Was this love at first sight?

She didn't know. What she did know was that she was having very selfish, thoughtless feelings right now about how she could ditch Tim to be with Alex, and that scared her.

She's really creeping me out looking at me like that, thought Alex. She was staring at him like he was a sixty-pound block of milk chocolate. Magic milk chocolate, without calories. He really wished she'd just go away and take her boyfriend with her.

Melody was the only woman for him; he knew that now. It was really adorable how nervous she was. So nervous that she brought these people she barely knew over to the table to help relieve her tension.

Well, these people were going to bear witness to the most special moment in Melody's life.

CHAPTER TEN

Alex cleared his throat and placed his hand on Melody's. When he turned to face her, there was a serious look in his eyes that she really, really didn't like.

"Melody," he began, "I'm sorry to have to say this in front of strangers, but it can't wait. I love you. I love you more than you can imagine."

"This isn't a good time..."

"Of course it is. It's the perfect time. We got together tonight to discuss our relationship, and that's exactly what I'm doing. I want our relationship to continue. I was wrong to leave you. I miss you, and I know that we can work out our problems. Would you mind letting me out of the booth?"

Melody was so shocked she didn't protest. She slid out of the seat, observing Tim's look of severe confusion and Karen's surprising distress.

Alex got out of the booth and immediately dropped down on one knee. He spoke in a loud, steady voice. "Melody Talaway, will you marry me?"

Everyone in the restaurant turned to look. Melody glanced around at the smiles and anticipatory expressions, and spoke before she could stop herself. "Oh, *shit!*"

Alex furrowed his brow. "Excuse me?"

"Alex, this was our Just Be Friends meal! You can't ask somebody to marry you at a Just Be Friends meal! It's against the rules!"

"I know, but I love you, and I want to be with you forever! You're the most important thing in my life, Melody. I realize that now, and I don't think I can live without you!"

"Of course you can! Millions of people live every day without me! Get back in the booth, please!"

Alex shook his head. "I'm not getting up off this floor until you say you'll marry me. I need you! You're everything I've ever wanted!"

"I am not! I'm an inconsiderate, unaffectionate, bad girlfriend!"

"But you've changed! I can see it in your eyes! Everything about you is different! Marry me, Melody! I'm begging you!"

Melody thought for a second that he was going to grab her feet and start sobbing into her shoes. This had gone just a smidgen differently than planned. "Please, get up off the floor. You're making a scene."

"We have something special, Melody. We were made for each other! If you won't marry me, at least take me back into your life as a lover! I'll be good to you! I swear!"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because..." The stars aren't in alignment. I've killed somebody and have to leave the country. I'm in love with Tim.

I'm in love with Tim.

She thought for a long moment. Could she forgive Tim? Did he even want her anymore?

"Because...I've become a lesbian."

Alex's knees nearly slipped out from under him. "You've *what*?"

"I've become a lesbian. I'd been toying with it for a few months now, and you leaving me clinched it. I haven't gone out and done anything lesbian-related yet, but I will as soon as I get a chance." She looked around at all the restaurant patrons who were staring at her. "None of you have a problem with that, do you? I'd hate to think I was in a restaurant full of homophobes."

"You have *not* become a lesbian," said Alex.

"No, really, I've crossed over." Melody nodded at a blonde in the adjacent booth. "Nice tits. Are they real?"

Very good, Ms. Talaway. You have now embarrassed yourself beyond all reasonable comprehension. What you need to do now, aside from finding a nice cave where you can shield yourself from humanity for the rest of your life, is get out of this restaurant before you disgrace yourself to the point of no return. Say good-bye to the nice gawkers and leave.

"I'm leaving now before I humiliate myself any further." Melody turned to go. She crashed into their waiter and knocked their drinks to the floor.

Summoning as much dignity as she could manage, which wasn't a hell of a lot, she proceeded to walk out the door without looking back.

"That was rather quaint," Karen remarked.

"Yes, it was," Tim agreed. He wanted nothing more than to get up and rush out of the restaurant after Melody, but that would probably cause more problems. Best to just give her a call later tonight.

Alex remained motionless, still on his knees, staring at the door in shock. "She's...not here anymore..." he whimpered.

The other diners returned to their meals, whispering amongst themselves. The blonde with nice tits appeared to have lost her appetite.

"She's gone..." said Alex. "She went right out the door...that door...the one over there..."

"That is correct," said Karen.

Reluctantly, Alex got up off the floor and scooted into the booth. "I can't believe it. Do you think it went so badly because I didn't have a ring?"

"That probably wasn't it," said Tim.

"Oh."

Alex sat there for a moment.

"Oh," he repeated.

"Are you going to be okay?" asked Karen.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Peachy, actually. Hunky-dory to the eighth power. Mr. Grin—that's me." Alex leaned forward and looked Tim in the eye. "Have you ever loved somebody so deeply you thought you might burst, and then lost her because of your own stupidity?"

Tim nodded.

"She was absolutely wonderful. Well, that's not true, but she had the *potential* to be absolutely wonderful, and now she *is* that wonderful! I could tell just by looking at her tonight that she'd changed. It's one of those horrible catch-22's—I had to leave her for her to change, but now that she's changed she won't take me back because I left her."

"You're right," said Tim, "but sometimes it's enough to know that you *had* loved somebody, even if they're not with you anymore."

"Yeah, right," Alex muttered.

"No, it's the truth," Karen insisted. "It's best to put the past behind you, forget about old loves and make room for new ones. If she walked out on you after you offered your hand in marriage, she isn't worth having."

Tim looked at her, a bit concerned. What happened to her pretentious word choices?

"But I need her!" said Alex. "I have to have her in my life! At least she'll be back, though; she forgot her purse."

"Do you really want to be with someone who can't keep track of their own possessions?" asked Karen.

"I think I need to start smoking." Alex reached into Melody's purse. He took out a pack of cigarettes, along with some folded pieces of paper that were on top. He opened them and looked them over. "Look, she's writing a new story. If I hadn't been so jealous about all the time she spent writing, my life wouldn't be in shreds right now. But maybe if I tell her how wonderful this story is, she'll take me back." He glanced at the first page and frowned. His frown grew as he continued reading.

"See? She needs me. She completely loses her writing ability without me around. I mean, I'm just skimming it and it's so bad it's almost a parody. It's the stupidest thing I've ever..."

He trailed off and continued reading.

"Obviously there's going to be a mourning period," said Tim. "But once she gets over the initial loneliness, her writing will probably be better than ever."

"And your life will probably be better than ever," added Karen.

Alex continued reading, looking more and more distraught.

"Something wrong?" asked Karen.

"Huh? Oh, no, everything's fine." He favored Tim with a glance that Tim couldn't help but find a little bit hostile. "I'm sorry, I've forgotten your last name. Niffster, Naffster...?"

"Neffster."

"Neffster, that's right. Tim Neffster. So, Tim Neffster, what do you do for a living?"

"I own a café. Dual Streams. Have you ever eaten there?"

Alex checked something in the story, and then shook his head. "No, but a café is sure a nice thing to own. I mean, we're sitting in a restaurant right now, which is just a variation on a café. I bet the food at yours is just yummy."

"Is everything all right?" asked Tim. "I mean, excluding everything that wasn't all right before?"

"Everything's fine. Hey, would you like to hear a secret?"

Tim was starting to grow concerned about Alex's mental condition. Nevertheless he nodded. "Okay."

"I don't want to say it out loud. Lean forward."

Tim leaned forward. "What's the secret?"

The secret was preceded by a violent punch to the face that knocked Tim out of the booth and onto the floor. "She was mine first!" Alex shouted.

* * * * *

Melody hadn't even *tried* to convince herself that her night couldn't possibly get worse. And shortly after she drove away from the restaurant, she realized that this had been sound thinking.

No purse.

The concept of "no purse" was bad enough in general, but "no purse with the story written for Tim, which Alex, being eternally nosy, could very well look at" increased the level of badness by several notches.

Yeah, it would be embarrassing to walk back into the restaurant, but she had to deal with it. Basically all it meant was that instead of losing gobs and gobs and

gobs of dignity, she'd lose gobs and gobs and gobs and *gobs* of dignity. Not a big deal. She'd recover in a few decades.

She made a U-turn and headed back.

* * * * *

"And if you ever come back, I'm calling the police!" shouted the waiter as Tim, Alex, and Karen were ushered out into the parking lot. Tim's cheek stung and his lip was bleeding where it had connected with his teeth. Alex may have been a major loser, but he had one doozy of a right hook.

"I can't believe you!" Alex gave Tim a violent shove. "Sitting there right in front of me, pretending that you didn't know her! How long have you been sleeping with her? Three months? Four?"

"It's not like that!" Tim insisted.

"Don't lie to me! I saw the story she wrote for you! No wonder she acted the way she did...she had somebody else on the side!"

Karen looked confused. "I thought she was a lesbian."

"Look, I don't know what story you're talking about," Tim insisted, "but I promise you that—"

Tim was cut off by another punch to the face, which knocked him against a rusty green truck. "Shut up!" shouted Alex. "You're not going to get her. I promise you that!"

Karen stepped between the two men. "Stop it! You'll kill him!"

Tim moved away from the truck and frowned. Kill him? Karen thought Alex would kill him? It wasn't like he was some scrawny little twerp who couldn't defend himself. *He* was her date for the evening...where was her faith?

"Get out of my way," Alex demanded.

Karen shook her head. "There's no reason to hurt him any more."

"He didn't hurt me," said Tim.

"As soon as she gets out of my way I will." Alex pointed a threatening finger at Tim. "And how dare you take this poor girl out when you're sleeping with somebody else?"

"Oh, it wasn't a real date or anything," said Karen. "We're just friends. I'm not involved with anyone at the moment."

"Listen to me, here's the truth," said Tim. "I met Melody Saturday night, after you dumped her. She was not cheating on you with me. We didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, so we didn't say anything to either of you. That's all."

"That's fine," said Karen. "He's being honest, we can all still be friends, nobody has to get beaten up, and now Tim can go chase after his lady love and

win back her heart. That does leave me needing a ride home, but I'm sure something can be arranged."

Tim frowned. "He wasn't going to beat me up. I can fight."

"Of course you can," said Karen.

"I'm serious! And he punched me before I was ready!"

"Are you ready now?" Alex demanded.

"You bet I'm ready."

"Alex, don't!" said Karen. "Hurting him won't make you feel better!"

"What about me hurting *him*?" asked Tim. "What the hell *is* this? There's just as much of a chance of me beating him up as there is of him beating me up!"

"Yeah?" snarled Alex. "Prove it?"

"I will."

They both raised their fists, and then simultaneously threw a powerful punch at each other. Their fists collided. Hard. Both opponents staggered away from each other, cradling their hands in terrible pain.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow," Tim whimpered.

"Oh, *fuck* that stings!" Alex winced.

Tim pointed to Alex with his non-hurting hand. "See, Karen? He's in pain too!"

Suddenly the fight was forgotten as they all turned toward the horrible screech coming from the street.

* * * * *

"I love you," whispered Diane Harcourt, snuggling closer against Walter. He'd been a wonderful husband in the four months they'd been married, and it wasn't just because he was incredibly, astoundingly, drool-producingly wealthy. She'd love him just as much if his total worth was only in the upper six figures.

Despite the pressures of owning an amazingly successful business, Walter was able to devote a great deal of his time to lavishing attention upon her. And he hadn't stopped now that the honeymoon was over (well, technically over, though last week they had made a quick trip back to Paris to catch some of the stuff they missed because so much time was spent in the hotel room).

Of course, her marriage to Tim had been fantastic at first, too. But she didn't have to worry—Walter wouldn't fizzle out the way her ex-husband had. She wouldn't let him. She envisioned herself being with him forever, especially because she'd signed that prenuptial agreement.

Walter smiled, but didn't take his eyes off the road as they traveled down the street. He was an extremely careful driver, which wasn't surprising considering that each of the Rolls Royces in his collection had just been completely restored.

He kept a chauffeur on staff, but basically paid the guy to sit around since Walter could never bring himself to let anyone else drive one of his automobiles.

"I love you as well," he said in his usual I'm-giving-careful-consideration-to-each-and-every-word-that-comes-out-of-my-mouth voice. "More than you can imagine."

"You know, I was thinking, maybe after dinner we could drive over to the beach and...oh my God..."

"We're going to do something at the beach which merits an 'Oh my God?' I can hardly wait."

"No, no, that restaurant we just passed. I think that was my ex-husband getting punched out in the parking lot. Loop around the block and drive past it again."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I want to see for sure if it's him. I think that was his car—you can tell because it has the dent in the front where he hit the school. Make a left here."

Walter sighed. "Sweetheart, we have reservations. What difference does it make if it *was* him getting punched out? Do you want to referee? What purpose does going back serve?"

"Because I'm curious. If that was Tim getting hit, I'm interested in seeing who's hitting him and why. And we could, you know, park our car right next to his, to accentuate the differences."

"That's very petty."

"I haven't been rich long enough to stop being petty. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Absolutely not. I have nothing against your ex-husband, and have no desire to delay my filet mignon to engage in a game of 'nanny nanny boo boo.'"

"What if he needs our help?"

"I have no attachments to him, either. Why should I want to help him?"

"Do it because you're madly in love with me and would do anything in the world, including sacrifice your own life, to make me happy."

"Did I say I'd sacrifice my own life? That sounds like something I'd remember."

"You implied it that one time."

"Oh. Very well, I'll turn around."

* * * * *

Melody took her eyes off the road as she realized that Tim, Alex, and Karen were all standing in the parking lot of the restaurant. Their topic of conversation did not appear to be something like how adorable kittens looked when they meowed and played with yarn. Something about the way Alex was shaking his

fist and shouting indicated that things had not progressed smoothly after she'd left.

She returned her eyes to the road and realized that she'd drifted halfway into the opposite lane. She also realized that another vehicle, a Rolls Royce that looked even more expensive than the Mercedes she'd hit a few days ago, was drifting into her lane. Though a ten-to-twenty year coma may have just been the solution to all of her problems, she nevertheless jerked the steering wheel sharply to the right and tried to swerve in time.

* * * * *

"It is him! I can't believe it!" exclaimed Diane.

"Is he still getting hit?" Walter craned his neck to see.

"No, he's just standing there while this guy...honey, I don't think this is the lane you want to be in..."

Walter looked back at the road, gasped, and slammed on the brakes. A little too late.

Upon impact, Diane, who had decided to stop buckling her safety belt after marrying Walter (since any fines the police might slap on her were a mere pittance to somebody with her wealth), rocketed forward, bashing her forehead against the dashboard with severe force. She slumped backward and was still.

* * * * *

Tim, Alex, and Karen watched in horror as Melody's truck smashed into the Rolls Royce, causing it to bounce up onto the curb and into the parking lot, its entire front end destroyed.

They rushed over to the totaled vehicle. Melody's truck was also severely damaged, but she looked reasonably unharmed as she got out and staggered in the direction of the other car.

"Oh my God...oh my God...are they okay?"

I've killed somebody! That car is going to be filled with research material for one of my books and I'll be too wracked with guilt to appreciate it!

Tim made a strange noise, like a cross between a whimper and choking to death on a gigantic chicken bone. Karen rushed around to the other side of the car and tried to assist the driver, who looked shaken up but not injured.

"What's wrong?" asked Melody, totally panicked and trying not to hyperventilate. "Is she dead?"

"It's my ex-wife!" Tim shrieked. "My ex-wife, right here! I've died and gone to hell!"

Melody placed her hand on his shoulder. "Tim, calm down!"

“Calm down? I’ve just had my ex-wife dropped in my lap! There’s no way this is a coincidence! This is punishment for some big-ass sins!”

Several people were rushing out of the restaurant toward the wreck. Alex took Melody by the arm and glared at her. “After we find out if she’s alive or not, you’ve got some serious explaining to do.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Yes, Tim was officially in Hell, local temperature 2700 degrees Fahrenheit. There was no other explanation for his ex-wife suddenly dropping in on the festivities, albeit in an unusually silent condition.

Everyone sat in the waiting room of the hospital...well, waiting. Tim wanted to make sure Diane was okay, so he'd followed the ambulance. Melody had insisted upon coming along, and Alex had insisted upon coming along with her, and Karen had insisted upon coming along with him, so they were all here. Alex stood against the far wall, staring at a particularly interesting patch of air, and Karen looked like she was unsuccessfully trying to cheer him up. Tim, Melody, and Walter sat on a couch, waiting for an update from the doctor. Diane was alive but still unconscious, and the extent of her injuries had yet to be determined.

Unfortunately, the next person to enter the room was not the doctor, nor any member of the medical profession. The temperature in Hell rose a few hundred degrees as Sylvia walked in and made a beeline for the couch.

"Oh, my poor little girl! My poor sweetheart!" she wailed. "How is she? How is my precious daughter?"

"We don't know yet." Walter's voice was soft and dejected. "Nothing's broken, but she hit her head pretty hard."

"Oh, this is horrible! My poor angel!" Sylvia glared at Tim. "This is all your fault!"

Tim sat up straight. "My fault? How could it be my fault? I wasn't in either car!"

"If you hadn't divorced my daughter, she never would have been in that car. And obviously you have some feelings of guilt about the whole situation or you wouldn't be here right now."

"I'm concerned about her! I just want to know if she's okay."

"A likely story. You're probably hanging around just so you can be present if the doctor tells us that she's dead!"

Walter let out an agonized sob and buried his face in his hands.

"See what you're making him go through?" asked Sylvia. "Now move out of the way so I can comfort my *new* son-in-law."

"I'm not sure I dislike the guy enough to leave him alone with you," Tim remarked.

"Move. You're disrupting a family moment."

Though about seven hundred and thirty-eight negative things to say about Sylvia crossed his mind at once, Tim exerted his self-control and stood up without saying any of them. He took Melody by the hand and walked to another area of the waiting room.

"What was her name?" asked Melody.

"Sylvia."

"Thanks. Next book, a character named Sylvia gets a gumball machine shoved through her face."

Tim forced a smile. "I guess we, uh, have some matters to discuss."

Melody sighed. "I shouldn't have left the house today. How often do you get to lose every shred of your dignity then seriously injure an innocent person in one night?"

"Not often." Tim cleared his throat, preparing himself for some big-time groveling. "I'm really sorry I didn't tell you about Karen. I know this sounds like the ultimate in wimpism, but she scares the hell out of me physically and intellectually. I knew deep inside that she wouldn't really hurt me if I cancelled our date, but I couldn't shake this vivid image of gonad destruction! I just couldn't do it! And I didn't want to tell you because, well, this degree of cowardice is tough to confess. I'm sorry."

"I guess in a few years we'll look back on this night and only scream at thirty-five decibels instead of forty."

"So, if I may ask, how did you happen to be at the same restaurant?"

Melody hesitated. "You know what, maybe we should just wipe this night off the map. It never happened. We'll just pretend that I gave you the fake corpse, we went to bed, and forgot to wake up today. Sound good?"

"I don't know, I've gotta admit, I really am very curious about how you wound up at Hansen's."

Before Melody could respond, they both turned their attention to the doctor as he entered the waiting room. He was a young, handsome guy who looked more like a movie star playing a doctor than an actual doctor. He walked over to the couch and smiled at Walter with his perfect, pearly-white teeth.

"She's awake now. I can't have everyone going in there to see her, but she asked for you."

"Oh, thank God." Walter stood up.

"Make sure you tell my baby that her mother is out here giving all her love," said Sylvia. "It's important that she knows I'm here for her. Don't forget to tell her, Walter."

The doctor blinked. "Walter? Aren't you the husband?"

"Yes."

"She asked for somebody named Tim."

Tim stepped forward, hopelessly baffled. "That, uh, would be me, I guess."

"Why would she ask to see him?" Walter demanded.

"I don't know," admitted the doctor. "All she said was 'I want to see my husband. I want to see Tim.'"

"How would she even know I was here?" asked Tim.

"All right, both of you come with me," said the doctor, leading Tim and Walter through a door. They walked down a short hallway and into Diane's private room. She was sitting up, propped against a pillow.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "Come here...I need a kiss really bad."

As Walter began to move toward the bed, Diane held up her palm as if to ward him off. "Who are you?"

"I'm Walter, your husband."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Tim is the only man in my life." She beckoned to Tim. "Come here, Timmy," she cooed. "I need you."

Tim stared at her, gape-mouthed. He could feel a heart attack coming on, but at least this was the most convenient place for it. Once he was finally able to speak, he said, "I'm not your husband anymore, Diane."

"Oh, stop that. Don't tease me. Now where's my kiss?"

"Medicate her," Tim told the doctor. "Medicate her right now, before it's too late!"

"Calm down, sir."

"No! Give her a pill, some gas, an injection, shock therapy, anything!" Tim grabbed Walter by the shoulder and thrust him closer to Diane. "This is your husband. This is the man you love. He's really rich! Take him!"

"I mean it, calm down." The doctor crouched down next to the bed. "Diane, you've been in an accident, and you hit your head pretty hard. Can you tell me your full name?"

"Diane Lynne Neffster."

Walter slapped his hand over his mouth and his gaze darted around the room, presumably looking for a good location to regurgitate. He rushed into the hallway.

"Harcourt!" said Tim. "Your last name is Harcourt! *Har-court!* Say it with me. *Har-court!*"

"Please don't speak any more." The doctor shot Tim a quelling look before turning back to Diane. "Diane, can you tell me what happened to you tonight?"

"It's kind of embarrassing."

"That's okay, I'm a doctor."

Walter returned to the room, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "You may want to call a janitor," he gasped.

The doctor ignored him. "Go ahead, Diane, tell me what you remember."

"My husband and I were in the car, listening to romantic music over the CD player and heading toward Makeout Point to...you know...neck and stuff."

"We were not," said Tim. "My car doesn't have a CD player, and I've never even heard of Makeout Point!"

"I'm not going to tell you again," the doctor said. "One more comment from you and you're waiting outside."

"Don't speak to my Timmy that way," said Diane.

"I'm the one who takes you to Makeout Point!" Walter insisted. "I have the CD player in my car!"

"I know what you're up to," said Diane. "You're trying to squirm your way into getting some of my money. People like you are all over. I know who I'm married to and his name is Tim Neffster."

Tim didn't say anything. He just shook his head in disbelief.

"And what happened to you on the way to Makeout Point?" asked the doctor.

Diane bit her lip, trying to suppress a grin. "I really shouldn't tell you this. We were driving, and my dear Tim was whispering sweet nothings to me, like he always does, and the moment just seemed perfect to...you know...make him happy."

"In a mouth-related way?" the doctor inquired.

Diane nodded.

"That was me!" said Walter. "I'm the one you make happy in a mouth-related way!"

"Really?" asked Tim.

"Yes, really."

"While you were driving?"

"Yes. Not tonight while I was driving, but frequently while I'm driving, yes."

"She never did that to me when I was driving. She said she was scared we'd get into an accident, or that we'd hit a bump and she'd bite me."

"My car runs very smoothly," said Walter. "At least it did. You can barely feel potholes."

"Yeah, but still! I asked for that a bunch of times, and it was always 'No, honey, it's too dangerous! No, honey, somebody will see! No, honey, the Novocain still hasn't worn off!' What's the deal?"

"Maybe it's the way you asked."

"How did *you* ask?"

"I didn't. She lunged for me."

The doctor sighed. "I'm going to have to ask both of you to wait out in the hallway."

"No!" said Diane. "I need my Timmy here with me!"

"Your Timmy will be right back." The doctor glared over his shoulder at Tim and Walter, and they both stepped out into the hallway.

"So, what, she just one day leaned over and —"

"Let's drop it."

"For what it's worth, I'm sure everything will be okay," said Tim. "Do you want me to hang around?"

"No. I'm going to have her flown to a hospital in New York where they can fix her right up."

"Sounds good. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"There won't be."

Tim started to walk away, but his curiosity was just too great and he turned back around. "Did she ever make this gagging sound...?"

"Leave me alone."

Tim went back to the waiting room. Melody and Alex were standing in the corner, talking softly, while Karen sat on the couch trying to soothe Sylvia.

He was such a failure. If he lost Melody forever because of his lack of guts, he deserved it. But there wasn't much to do now except go home and hope tomorrow was a better day.

Klacken burst into the waiting room, in white makeup, fake vampire teeth, and a black cape. Even without the half-empty bottle of booze in his hand, it was obvious that The Ghoul was completely plastered.

"Rrrrrrraaaaaahhhhhh! I am The Ghoul! Fear me!" he cried out, as everyone in the waiting room turned to look.

Tim rushed over to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Fear me! Beware The Ghoul!" Klacken shouted, for the benefit of everyone in the room. "Muahahahahahaha!"

"I asked you a question!"

"Hi, Tim. I called your rest'rant, and they said you were at this other rest'rant so I called that rest'rant and they said they threw you out but that there was a car wreck and you went to the hospital, so I called the hospital and they said they didn't know who I was talking about but I figured I'd risk it and show up anyway." He raised his arms and growled at everyone in the waiting room.

"This is really bad timing," said Tim. "And you said you couldn't make it tonight!"

"I need money, man, at least two-fifty. Bunny, she hired these guys, and they're gonna break my thumbs." His voice cracked, and he appeared ready to burst into tears.

At this point, Tim was at a complete loss on how to handle the situation, so he waved at Melody. "Look who's here, Melody! Your childhood hero, The Ghoul!"

Melody walked over, looking amazed. "You're the real Ghoul? I thought you were in prison."

"Not for the past three months, babe. Rrraaarr!"

He took her hand, kissed it, and then pretended to gnaw on it like a wild animal. Melody politely withdrew her hand and gave a questioning look to Tim.

"Uh...surprise!" Tim said.

Klacken gazed into Melody's eyes. At least he tried—in his drunken condition his eyes were having trouble staying in one place. "Let me just say that you are the sexiest bitch in heat I have ever laid eyes on. Wanna ditch these losers and get a motel?"

"I'd rather be a vampire getting a holy water enema."

Klacken ran his tongue over his lips and growled as if that were the most enticing comment he'd ever heard. Tim ushered him away from Melody.

"Okay, thank you very much, that was just what I wanted, good night."

"She wants me," Klacken informed him.

"I'm sure she does. Now why don't you go home and sleep it off, all right?"

Klacken's lip trembled. "Bunny's guys, I think they've got the place surrounded. Could I stay with you?"

Tim started to say "No, absolutely not, I have no intention whatsoever of allowing a vulgar drunken sot such as yourself to stay with me," but it really wasn't worth the trouble to argue. "Sure, whatever."

He walked to Melody. "I'm going home. I just want the madness to end."

"Me too," said Melody.

"Do you need a ride?"

"No, I'll take a cab."

"Okay."

Tim thought about moving in for a kiss, but then decided against it and went to talk to Karen. She stood up, muscles bulging through her blouse.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry, too."

"You didn't do anything."

"I will now." She slapped him across the face, making his teeth rattle. It wasn't as bad as he might have expected; his head didn't feel like it was going to detach or anything, but it still stung.

"I deserved that."

Karen shook her head. "What you warrant is much more immoderate. If you lacked desire to socialize with me, you should have communicated something. I'm a big girl. You don't have to engage in kiddie games with me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Now, I'm going to strike you again, but I'll allow you time to prepare yourself first. Are you ready?"

Tim tensed up his face, then nodded. She smacked him again.

"That was for necessitating that I miss *Threads of the Moose*. I spent all week anticipating a subtitled French movie and something like that takes a while to coast down from. Fortunately for you, I ended up with a worthwhile backup plan."

"So is Alex going to give you a ride home?"

"I expect that I'll be able to persuade him."

"All right, then, I'll be seeing you."

Tim shook her hand, collected Klacken, and left the hospital.

* * * * *

"Where's my Timmy?" demanded Diane, slamming her fist against one of the pillows. "I need my Timmy!"

"He did something to her," Sylvia told Walter. "He injected her with one of those experimental love drugs I've read about. He'll pay for this. I'll destroy him."

"It's not a drug," said Walter. "People act peculiar when their heads bash against solid objects."

"You know, I *am* here," Diane pointed out. "You could talk about me in second person."

Sylvia looked over at her. "I'm sorry, darling. It's just that the doctor suggested we not directly confront you with your delusions, that's all."

"If you don't bring my husband back to me, I'm walking right out of this place and finding him. I mean it."

Walter went over and put his face about six inches from Diane's. "Look me in the eye. Don't you recognize me? I'm your husband. I'm Walter Harcourt. You're Diane Harcourt. We got married on a cruise ship. We ate escargot in France and you nearly choked on a piece of the shell. How can you not remember this?"

“Security!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tim really needed someone to talk to. Unfortunately, the only person currently available was Klacken, who was asleep on his couch, head dangling over the side. His mouth was open, his tongue lolling and swinging in the fan-produced breeze.

Oh well. Better than nobody.

"Hey, Klacken." Tim gave him a gentle nudge.

The Ghoul jolted awake and raised his fists. "Don't come near me! I've got a circular saw out back and I'm not afraid to use it!"

Tim waited calmly for Klacken to realize where he was. As his surroundings sunk in, Klacken gave him an apologetic shrug. "Sorry. The eighties were bad to me."

"What do you think?" asked Tim. "Worst night ever?"

"Hey, as far as I'm concerned, if it doesn't end with you being gang-raped in a Mexican prison, it was a good night."

Tim considered that piece of wisdom as he sat down on his recliner. "You know what's scary? That actually makes me feel better."

"Glad to help. So, you really like this chick, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I don't blame you. Man, I bet she could suck year-old Kool-Aid stains out of a sofa."

"Don't make me kick you out of here," Tim warned.

Klacken looked panicked. "No! Don't make me face the world! I'm sorry. I'll be respectful."

Tim let out a wistful sigh. Then he wondered if that was the first time in his life he'd actually let out a wistful sigh. He'd sighed numerous times, of course, but this could very well have been the first one to be legitimately considered wistful. Love did weird things to people. "I wonder if she'll ever want to see me again?"

Klacken nodded. "Of course she will. She had a chance at me and chose you. That's proof positive that your love can survive anything."

"That's not quite as comforting as the Mexican prison gang-rape image."

"Everything will work out fine," Klacken assured him. "You just need to show her how serious you are about her."

"I've been trying. Now I've got to show her how serious I am *and* make up for tonight's fiasco at the same time." Tim smacked his fist against the armrest. "What am I going to do?"

"Just relax and listen to me. Your buddy Klacken will make everything all right."

* * * * *

"It was a disaster, Mom!" Melody, stretched out on her bed, was recounting her tale of woe. "I know I should be furious with him, but I just want him back! And I made such a fool out of myself that I'm not sure it's fixable!"

"Of course it's fixable, honey. You just need to make up for it with something huge. Something spectacular." Her mom yawned.

"Then I'll just end up with another huge, spectacular disaster! Maybe I should just wait and see if he calls."

"Nonsense. If you want this man, you have to pursue him relentlessly. I pursued your father without mercy. I refused to give up. He's lucky to be alive."

She heard her father's sleepy voice in the background. "Sometimes I question that."

"Oh, hush. Since you're up, go find the detonator like you were supposed to earlier. Anyway, Melody, the key is to never give up. Never."

* * * * *

Tim shook his head angrily. "No, nothing like that. And I swear I'll hand you over to Bunny's goons if you talk that way again."

"I'm sorry, man," said Klacken. "You know that part of your brain that says 'Hey, don't make that comment about his daughter!' and 'Hey, don't take your pants off in the library!' Mine's broken."

"Regardless, behave yourself."

"I will. So...what does Melody like?"

"She likes horror stuff, just like me. That's why I hired you."

Klacken wiped some hardened drool from the side of his mouth. "Well, jeez, I've got all kinds of horror props back at my place. Why don't you make her some kind of romantic horrific gift?"

Tim brightened at that suggestion, until he remembered his corpse. "She already did that for me. I'd have to top it."

"That's easy! You could decorate her front yard with all sorts of monsters and mangled bodies and stuff! But the monsters would all have heart-shaped balloons and flowers and boxes of candy! It would be romantic and really sick!"

Tim stared at him for a moment. Then his face broke into a wide grin. "YES!!!"

* * * * *

Melody sat up, excited by the idea that just occurred to her. "YES!!! I've got just the thing! Mom, what's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of 'huge' and 'spectacular?'"

Her mother was silent for a moment. "How about we jump straight to the second thing?"

"An elephant!"

"I beg your pardon?"

Melody got off the couch and began pacing. "Elephants are huge! Elephants are spectacular! How much more perfect can you get?"

There was another long moment of silence on her mother's end. "Okay, perhaps we should go back to the first thing."

"Don't you see? I'll decorate an elephant with a banner that says '*You're the greatest, Tim!*' and ride it up to his apartment complex!" Melody realized that her hand was shaking with excitement.

"And where exactly would you get an elephant? Especially at this time of night?"

"I've got a savings account and people who owe me favors. How hard can it be to rent an elephant for a half hour or so? C'mon, Mom, how would you have reacted if Dad rode up to you on a decorated elephant?"

"You probably would never have been brought into the world."

"I think it's a great idea," said Melody. "I'm going to arrange it right now! I'll call you and let you know how it goes."

"That's okay. I'm sure I'll read about it."

Melody hung up, and then danced around her living room, absolutely thrilled with her new plan. An elephant. Why hadn't she thought of that in the first place?

* * * * *

Alex snuggled more deeply into the pillow, which was much softer than he remembered. And the blankets were not only more comfortable, they smelled nicer. His mother must have used a different brand of laundry detergent.

He rolled over on his side, his right hand landing on a heavily muscled arm. Every once in a while, he'd sleep in an awkward position, and he'd wake up with his arm so numb that it had absolutely no feeling, and to touch it was like touching the arm of somebody else. This theory was a long shot, but he didn't

remember last night very well, and if he'd gotten drunk and wound up at a gym with a personal trainer, there was a slim chance that he was in fact touching his own newly pumped numb arm.

He opened his eyes and looked into the eyes of Karen.

"Hi," she said with a grin.

Alex sat up. Unfortunately, there was a reading light attached to the headboard in the direct line of his head's upward path, and he returned to a lying position with a blast of pain.

"Are you okay?" Karen reached for his injured head.

"Fine! I'm fine!" he insisted, scooting away from her and falling to the floor. Not only was it a hard floor, but it was also a hard floor containing three sets of barbells that weren't designed for being landed upon. "Less fine now," he corrected.

Karen peered over the side of the bed at him. He instinctively covered his most masculine region and realized that he was fully clothed. As Karen got out of bed, he saw that she too was non-naked.

"What happened?" he asked. "Were we so frantic that we did it without taking our clothes off?"

"We didn't do anything." Karen reached down and pulled him to his feet. "How's your back? Broken?"

Alex swiveled at the hip a couple of times. "I don't think so."

"Good. That would make it uncomfortable when I chain you to the bed and make you my sex slave."

"Ha ha," said Alex without enthusiasm.

"Wow, you realized that I was joking! That never happens!" Karen was now looking at him the way she had at the restaurant last night, and he felt a chill run down his unbroken spine.

"So what exactly kind of nothing did we do last night?"

"You babbled incoherently a lot. I didn't think you should be alone, so I took your car keys and drove us here. You babbled incoherently some more and passed out on my exercise bicycle, so I carried you to bed."

"Oh. Well, I have to get going."

"It's only two in the morning. Don't you want to get some more sleep?"

"I have to go see Melody."

"You know, she has someone else now," said Karen. "Sometimes you just have to give up."

"I can't. I love her."

"I know you do, but you should move on with your life. Find somebody better. Somebody stronger."

Alex shook his head. "There has to be a way. I'll just follow her everywhere, watch her every move. Eventually there'll be an opening, and I'll pounce on it."

"So you're going to stalk your way into bliss?"

"If that's what it takes."

"Can I help?"

"Sure."

* * * * *

The currents had shifted. Charles could feel it.

He peered through the telescope again. His goddess had left the curtains open, which was unlike her. And her expression was downright maniacal as she paced around the living room like a woman possessed.

The time of sacrifice was at hand.

He would kill tonight.

Charles walked down the hallway into his altar, which was filled with hundreds of drawings he had made of sweet Melody. He kissed several of them, and then picked up the holy tome from where it rested on the brass pedestal.

Splat Goes the Weasel. Her purest work.

He opened the book to page 180 and read aloud. "You must kill for me, and bring me his head, and I shall look into his dead eyes." It was the passage meant for him. He knew this, because sweet Melody had left a clue for those who followed her path when she spelled the word "dead" without the letter "a."

And the character that spoke these words was named Chuck.

Yes, oh yes, the time was right. He would kill for her. And when he brought her the crimson trophy, all would be good.

* * * * *

"Harry, it's an emergency," said Melody into the telephone. "You can dream about them tomorrow. Yes, I know how crazed I sound. I don't care."

Harry did odd jobs all over the city and was very well connected. He also was an aspiring writer, and after meeting Melody at a book signing he'd given her a copy of his manuscript to find out what she thought. She thought it was total garbage, but she'd made some nice comments about his spelling and he'd been utterly grateful. If anyone could get her an elephant on such short notice, he could.

* * * * *

After staking out The Ghoul's home for a while making sure that there were no thugs on the premises, Tim and Klacken carried various horror props from

the garage into the small moving van. It wasn't easy to get a moving van in the middle of the night, but a generous bribe worked. It also worked with the flower delivery service, which was supposed to be on its way.

The quality and quantity of stuff in Klacken's garage was incredible. There were creative tombstones, life-size zombies, a guillotine, an electric chair...more great stuff than Tim had ever seen in one place. Melody would *have* to forgive him once she saw all this stuff on her front lawn!

* * * * *

Alex sat in his car, waiting. Karen played with her hair and wondered yet again why she was sitting here, parked across the street from Melody's house, watching Alex stare at her front door.

"Isn't this kind of illegal?" she asked.

"Shhhh."

"She's probably in bed asleep. Are you just going to sit here and watch all night?"

"Possibly."

"Why don't you just go knock on her door?"

"You don't understand anything, do you?"

"Actually, I'm a psychiatrist. What you're exhibiting now is a type of behavior that we like to call 'going utterly loony.'"

"She'll be mine again," Alex vowed. "No matter what."

* * * * *

Charles sharpened the blade of his butcher knife. He wasn't quite sure it was big enough to cut off somebody's head, but he'd work through that problem when it came up. It wasn't like he'd be graded on tidiness.

Once he was satisfied with his chosen instrument, he peeked through his front window again and frowned. There was a car parked in front of his house. Could it be one of sweet Melody's oppressors, here to prevent Charles from granting her eternal happiness?

He watched for a few minutes. The people in the car didn't seem to be here for him; they seemed to be watching the house of his goddess. But why? She wasn't even home...she'd left fifteen minutes ago. Charles didn't know where she'd gone, but he was certain that if he *did* know she'd be even more attractive to him, for her cause was certainly righteous.

Then the one in the driver's seat turned his head, allowing Charles to make out his features. It was the one who'd lived with sweet Melody until this past week.

It was a sign.

His sacrifice had come to him.

* * * * *

Tim's arms were aching, but they'd finally packed the moving van just as the flower delivery truck pulled up alongside them. He cackled with joy as he took out his wallet—this was costing him a fortune, but it was going to be worth every penny.

"Can we take a break?" asked Klacken, out of breath.

"Of course not!" Couldn't the old fool see that time was short? "We have an appointment with romance!"

* * * * *

Melody walked slowly through the quiet, shadowy parking garage, her footsteps echoing through the night.

"Hello?" she asked, tentatively.

About thirty feet away, a sinister-looking man stepped out from behind a truck. Harry. He stood there, regarding her.

"You got the elephant?" she asked.

"In due time," said Harry. "You got the money?"

"My checkbook's in my purse."

Harry's face fell. "What fun is it to meet you in a menacing parking garage if you're gonna pay by check? You could at least have put the check in a briefcase. You're such a mood-breaker."

* * * * *

"Is this gonna be great or what?" asked Tim, as they drove the moving van toward Melody's house.

"You're drooling on the steering wheel," Klacken pointed out.

"Romantic, romantic, romantic! I rule!"

* * * * *

Karen jumped with a start as she heard a rapping on the window. A really creepy guy with an unshaven face, uncombed hair, and unwashed clothes stood there. He smiled, revealing unbrushed teeth.

"You are watching her," he said. Karen was thankful that her window was only open about an inch. The breath involved was probably semi-fatal.

Karen locked the door. "I'm sorry, we shouldn't be parked in front of your house. We'll move."

"I watch her, too."

"That's very nice. I wish you continued success." She violently elbowed Alex in the side. "Start the engine, let's go!"

Alex turned the key in the ignition. The car made a faint groaning noise, followed by a slightly louder grinding sound. Neither indicated that the engine was about to start.

"What the hell?" Alex asked. "I just had a tune-up!"

"You must come with me," intoned the man. "You must come into my home, and I will show you wonderful sights."

Karen put on her most frantic expression. "Alex? Please? Car? Motion?"

"I'm trying!" Alex insisted. "I don't know what's going on! I haven't had any problems with this car in three years!"

"It is your destiny," said the man. "Please, come with me into my home."

"No, thanks," Karen told him. "I've made it a personal guideline not to visit with people who have the mark of evil in their eyes. I'm sure you'll understand."

"But you must."

"No, really."

The man smiled, and then lifted his hand, revealing a large butcher knife. He ran his finger along the edge of the blade. "Perhaps I can change your mind."

"Are these windows knife-proof?" Karen asked Alex.

Alex turned the key again, but the car still refused to start. He whimpered.

The man raised the knife above his head. "The time is now."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It had been a long, miserable night for Walter, but he'd always been an optimist, and he knew things would turn out okay. He'd get Diane some expensive medical attention and her memory would be just fine.

The doctor entered the waiting room. Both Walter and Sylvia leaned forward, expectantly. "Any news?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harcourt, but I'm afraid we've lost her."

His world instantly came crashing down. "She's...she's dead?"

The doctor blinked, surprised, and then gasped with realization. "Whoops, I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I meant we literally lost her. The nurse gave her a shot, she was there; I went in to check on her, she was gone. Her hospital gown was on the bed, and her street clothes are missing."

"You mean she just got up and *left*?" Walter couldn't believe what he was hearing. "This is a hospital, for God's sake! How does a patient just waltz out of here without being seen?"

"It has the rest of us baffled, too. A lot of times in movies they hide in the laundry cart, but the laundry cart hasn't gone by recently so I'm at a loss. I'm not even supposed to be here tonight. Don't worry, we're searching the building, and as soon as you finish chewing me out I'm going to call the police."

* * * * *

Melody sat in the passenger seat, smoking a cigarette, while Harry drove the large truck. The elephant in the back was sensational. She'd written her message to Tim on her best set of bed sheets to drape over the animal. His expression was going to be a sight to behold.

"Where did you get this elephant again?" she asked.

"I told you, I'm not telling you," said Harry. "And I'm serious, once we get there you have ten minutes with the elephant, and not a second more."

"That's all I need."

* * * * *

Charles lunged as if he were going to smash the butcher knife through the window, but then turned toward Melody's house. He wanted to intimidate his victims, and figured that if the knife struck the window with a feeble little *plink* sound they wouldn't take him seriously.

"If you won't join me, I will take the life of she who we both watch." He started across the street. He had no intention of hurting his goddess, of course, but it would probably get them out of the car.

* * * * *

"He's going to kill Melody!" Alex shouted.

"Do you have a cell phone?" asked Karen. "We've got to call the police!"

"No, I don't have one, and the police wouldn't get here in time anyway! This is great!"

Karen looked at him, aghast. "Are you kidding me?"

"Not at all! Melody has a knife-wielding maniac heading toward her house! If I can stop him, she'll be forever grateful!" Alex threw open his door.

"You'll get yourself killed!"

Alex got out of the car. "All right, you!" he shouted at the man. "Stop right there! Nobody is going to murder Melody Talaway while I'm here to protect her!"

The man turned, raised the knife again, and rushed at Alex. Alex said the word "shit" very loudly and tried to get back in the car, but there wasn't time. Instead he rushed around to the trunk, while the man scraped the knife against the front hood.

"This is your destiny. Though you will give your life, you give it to bring Melody the purest joy she will ever know."

"Go away! Back, psycho, back!"

The man fainted to the right, and Alex moved to the left, even though an entire car separated him from harm. Then Alex tripped and fell to the ground.

He never tripped. Tripping just wasn't something that happened to him, not since he'd gained control of his body after puberty. There wasn't even anything for him to trip *on*, for crying out loud! And yet he found himself lying on the pavement, face scraped up, listening to footsteps running toward him.

* * * * *

Harry pulled the truck into the parking lot outside of Tim's apartment building. As he stopped the engine, Melody wrung her hands together in uncontrollable glee. "I'll go wake him up, you get the elephant ready." She got out of the truck and rushed toward Tim's apartment.

* * * * *

Karen pulled up on the lock, and then threw open the door, smashing it into the lunatic. His eyes bugged out and the knife fell to the pavement. She smashed the door into him a second time, and he fell to his knees.

She got out of the car and kicked the knife onto the front lawn. The man looked quite unhappy to have a very tall, very muscular, very angry woman standing over him.

"I have to apologize for my behavior," he began.

Karen grabbed him by the back of the collar, yanked him to his feet, and then twisted his arm up behind his back.

Alex got up, wiping gravel off his face. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell Melody that I was the one to subdue him, would you?"

"Shut up, Alex. Let's get him inside and call the police."

* * * * *

Melody sat in the truck, two cigarettes in her mouth, eyes closed as she reflected upon what a terrible life she had.

"It just seems to me that you'd make sure he was going to actually be *home* before going to all this trouble," said Harry.

"Don't make me hurt you. Just take me home. Right now."

* * * * *

Tim pulled the moving van up alongside Melody's house. He didn't really have a cover story ready if she happened to see him and Klacken setting up everything, but he was sure that in his adrenaline-pumped state he could think of something without much trouble. She'd probably be fast asleep anyway.

They got out of the van, he opened up the back, and he and Klacken got to work.

* * * * *

Walter watched helplessly through the window as Sylvia drove him around the area surrounding the hospital. No sign of Diane.

"Did she have any money with her?" asked Sylvia.

"Not much. A few thousand in her pants pocket, I think." He sniffled. "Where could she have gone?"

* * * * *

Charles usually maintained a very positive self-outlook, but he did have to admit that he probably could have come up with a better strategy than just

rushing at the guy with a butcher knife. Now he was having his arm hurt by the muscle woman, and Alex was going through his things.

"This is just flat-out disturbing," said Alex, as they looked around the living room. "What kind of sick obsession is this?"

"She is the goddess," said Charles. "She writes the words that speak to those who understand."

The look Alex gave him indicated that his comment probably hadn't sufficiently explained his point of view. He tried to break free of the muscle woman's grasp, but a quick twist of his arm made him stop.

"Where's your phone?" the muscle woman asked.

"I don't have one."

"What do you mean, you don't have one?"

"If I had a phone, I would find myself unable to stop calling my goddess to hear her sweet voice. If they traced my line, I'd be discovered before I was able to kill for her and win her love."

"Oh. Good reason." Alex returned to paging through one of the marked-up books. He frowned. "You know, I always thought her novels were nothing but superficial entertainment, but some of these insights...no, what am I saying? You're a sick freak!"

"Alex, if you're done looking through the literature, I'd appreciate it if you'd go next door and call the police."

"Yeah, sure, in a second." He glanced out the front window. "What the hell is going on over there?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a moving van in her yard. Tim and that old guy from the hospital are...it looks like they're carrying out a coffin."

"A *coffin*?" The muscle woman dragged Charles over to the window. "Are you sure?"

"Look for yourself!"

"You're right," said the muscle woman. "What is going on in this neighborhood?"

Charles wasn't quite sure himself, but it seemed like a good opportunity for a distraction. "They are the others! They are those who have come to complete the ritual!"

"What ritual?" demanded Alex.

"The ritual of bloodshed! The ritual of transformation! Tonight is the night of reckoning for all! Tim and the old guy from the hospital are only the beginning! Observe as they remove that guillotine from the van! Oh, yes, the blood will flow freely on this night! All will die, their souls cursed to everlasting agony, and the

neighborhood will fall under the rule of Melody! All who leave their dwellings will be shot with silver bullets! This time has been prophesized for the past two centuries, and the time is at last at hand! Tremble in fear, my friends, for your demise is imminent!"

"Let's hear that one more time without the psychosis," Karen suggested.

"Look at that, they're taking out some kind of alien stand-up." Alex ran a hand through his hair. "This is some strange behavior. I'm not entirely certain we should go outside."

"How well did you know Melody?" asked Karen. "Was she into any kind of...you know, ritual stuff like he just said?"

"Not that I ever knew anything about, but to be completely honest at this point I'd rather not risk it. I don't need to get shot tonight."

* * * * *

The ghoulish props were now all over her front lawn, making it look like the Yard Sale of the Damned. Now all they had to do was decorate the props with the flowers and balloons, and Melody's surprise would be ready.

"Tim? Problem." Klacken pointed toward the police car that was pulling up alongside the yard.

A very large officer got out of the car. He wore a pair of sunglasses, apparently oblivious to both the fact that it was dark outside and that the price tag was still dangling from them. He adjusted his sunglasses and frowned. "We've had a couple of neighbors call in complaints. Mind if I ask what is going on here?"

"Uh, I know this looks odd," Tim admitted, "but it's easy to explain. I'm trying to impress my girlfriend."

"Oh, obviously."

"I know this doesn't seem like the usual route one would take to impress one's girlfriend, but she's a horror novelist. Melody Talaway."

The officer removed his sunglasses, impressed. "Author of *Blood Sundae*?"

"That's her."

"Well, shit, come on, let's get her surprise ready!"

* * * * *

"Oh my God, the police are in on it!" gasped Alex.

"Don't be ridiculous! This is all a misunderstanding! Let's just go out there and find out what's going on."

"Most dark rituals look like misunderstandings to the unaware observer," Charles offered helpfully.

Alex leaned closer to the window. "The cop is tying a heart-shaped balloon to the alien! What kind of ritual *is* this?"

"You're right, let's stay inside," said Karen.

* * * * *

After the police left, Tim admired his work with an amount of pride he would only have reserved for his children, if he had any. His problems were over. Once Melody saw what he'd done to her yard, they'd live happily ever after.

As he walked over to ring the doorbell, a large truck pulled up behind the moving van. The passenger door opened, and Melody hurried out.

"Tim! I can't believe this! Harry was just dropping me off and I..." She looked at her yard.

"I did this for you," Tim said.

"It's...it's just..." She turned around and pounded on the window of the truck. "Harry! Elephant! Now!"

A guy got out of the truck and ran around to the back. Melody walked toward her yard, staggering just a bit. "This is...this is...this is great! You went to all this trouble for me?"

"It wasn't any trouble."

Klacken stared at him in exhausted shock. "Say the hell *what?*"

"Quiet." Tim looked into Melody's eyes and knew that he had done the right thing. He'd proven his love. He'd been the affectionate man he needed to be.

Then his jaw dropped as the guy from the truck came back into view, leading an elephant. A large white sheet over its back was painted with the words *You're the greatest, Tim!*

He was speechless. Nobody had ever decorated an elephant for him. This was incredible. He looked back at Melody and felt more love than he ever dreamed possible flood over him.

And then he realized something special. He didn't care that her elephant probably outdid his lawn decorations. All that mattered was that she loved him. And he loved her.

Alex and Karen ran across the street, with Karen dragging some scary-looking guy against his will. "I'm sorry," said Alex, "we were going to stay out of this, but I've gotta know what the deal is with the elephant!"

"This is just amazing!" said Tim.

Melody gestured to her lawn. "No, *this* is just amazing!"

"You are the most affectionate, creative woman I have ever known." Tim threw his arms around her.

"And you are the most affectionate, creative man I have ever known."

They kissed.

Klacken poked the side of the elephant with his finger. "It looks kind of sick."

Harry glared at him. "It's an elephant. It's gray. What do you know?"

"Sick elephant or not, it's the most wonderful surprise ever!" Tim kissed Melody again. And again.

Karen looked at the lawn with unease. "Okay, I'm sorry, but I'm not getting the whole affection vibe from this."

Tim and Melody smiled at each other. Not everyone could be expected to understand their love. All that mattered was that it was there, and it was never going to fade.

As they kissed again, the elephant let out a loud elephant-variety moan and promptly fell over on its side.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. "Okay, it was sick," Harry admitted. "But she'll be fine. She's just a little under the weather. A nice little nap and she'll be good as new."

"It doesn't matter," said Tim. "It was still the best thing anyone has ever done for me!" Then his expression changed as he glanced around the area. "Where's Klacken?"

The others began to look around. There was no sign of the former horror show host. It took a while for awareness to sink in to all present, but gradually his location became readily apparent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Oh my God!" shrieked Tim, bending down and trying to squeeze his fingers underneath the elephant. "*Lift! Everybody lift!*"

Melody immediately began to hyperventilate. Alex glanced at his watch. "Karen... I think maybe we need to be going now..."

Karen clamped a hand over her mouth and turned away from the grisly sight. Finding herself looking at the equally grisly sights on the lawn, she closed her eyes and tried to block out everything.

Tim gave up trying to lift the elephant and got back to his feet. "So..." he said.

"So..." Melody said.

"So..." Tim repeated.

Everyone continued to stare at the elephant.

"Maybe things got a little bit out of hand," Melody remarked.

"Yeah, I think perhaps you're right," Tim agreed. Their romantic endeavors didn't have quite the same joyful feeling when people perished. He bit his lip and tried to put a positive spin on the situation. "I think he would've wanted to go this way."

Then Tim felt an arm wrap around his waist and a butcher knife press against his throat. "Don't move," somebody whispered into his ear.

Everybody turned their attention from the elephant to Tim's current predicament. "Melody, sweet Melody," said the man. "I have watched you for six hundred and eighty-two days, and now is the time for me to prove my servitude!"

"What the *hell* is going on here?" Tim whined. "Why is there a guy behind me with a fucking butcher knife? How much more confusing can this night get?"

"Silence!" shouted the man. "Melody, as your humble servant, I ask that you come forward and claim your gift."

"Don't kill him, please." Melody pushed past Harry. "I don't know who you are, but I don't need any gifts. I've got a whole yard full of presents; I'm covered for the moment."

"Oh no, my love. Blood must be spilled. You have written the words, and I will obey."

A crowd of neighbors was starting to gather. Tim assumed that somebody had called 911, but the butcher knife blade felt pretty darn sharp and it was

unlikely that his skin would put up enough resistance to keep him healthy until the police showed up again.

"I don't understand," said Melody.

"You asked for the sacrifice. I got your message. And now, this man shall die, and you will take me as your lover."

Including himself in the number, Tim figured that half the stalker population of the world was in Melody's yard right now. "I'm not taking you as my lover," Melody said. "It's just not going to happen."

"Your words don't lie."

"Dude, you're gonna go to *prison*!"

"Of course. You didn't think I meant we'd be lovers in *this* life, did you? How ridiculous."

Tim winced as the blade pressed more tightly against his neck. *Be manly*, he told himself. *Die with dignity. Keep that bladder functioning.*

Melody stepped forward. "But all of my books were ghostwritten."

Tim felt the man's grip on the knife relax. "I beg your pardon?"

"I couldn't write if my life depended on it. Each of my books was written by a different hack. Sorry to disappoint you."

"But that's not possible! Their words spoke to me!"

"I don't know what to tell you. It's my picture on the back cover, yeah, but I didn't write a word."

"Well, that's kind of...annoying." The man removed the butcher knife from Tim's throat. "You know, now that I really think about it, they did seem like hackwork a lot of the time."

Melody tensed visibly. "I beg your pardon?"

"It makes sense now. Most of what I assumed were secret messages were actually just bad writing. Wow, don't I feel like a jerk."

"What do you mean, bad writing?"

"You know, awkward structure, poorly developed characters that I just assumed were supposed to represent a poorly developed society, weak endings that I always thought meant that we'll all have our own weak ending someday...stuff like that."

Melody clenched her hands into a fist. "You son of a bitch!"

The knife returned to Tim's throat, making him wonder why he didn't leave after it was removed the first time. "Melody!"

"I'm sorry...I just meant..."

"Her sister was one of the ghostwriters," Alex explained. "She conquered dyslexia in her quest to become a novelist, and you have no business insulting her work."

The knife was lowered again. This time Tim stepped away. "I have dyslexia," the man said. "Tell her she's in my thoughts."

"I'll do that," Melody promised.

"Sorry about this whole misunderstanding," said the man. "I guess I'll go home now."

He turned and walked back toward his house.

"Shouldn't somebody catch him?" Karen gestured toward the retreating figure.

"I'm not going after him." Tim felt his neck for blood. "The police will be here soon. Again."

"That's right." Harry pulled out a cellular phone. "I've got to make a few dozen phone calls. Damn, every time I steal an elephant somebody has to die. At least I'll get my money's worth out of all those officials I bribed."

"As outrageous as this has all been, at least there's nothing else that could possibly...happen..." Melody's voice trailed away as everybody turned to glare at her. They waited for the inevitable something to happen.

And waited.

And waited.

Then a car sped down the street, tires screeching. It pulled up behind the moving van and large truck, and Peter hurried out, wearing only a bathrobe. "Tim! I'm so glad you're here!"

"What's going on?"

"I got a call from... May I ask why there's an elephant passed out on the lawn?"

"You probably shouldn't."

"Okay, I won't. I got a call from Sylvia and Walter. They say to get to our café as soon as possible! It's an emergency!"

"Why?"

"I think it has something to do with Diane. Hurry!"

* * * * *

Tim sat next to Peter while Melody, Karen, and Alex squeezed into the back seat. Harry had offered to handle the pachyderm and mentally disturbed neighbor situation until they got back. "How'd you know where I was?" Tim asked.

"You weren't at your apartment, so I figured the next most logical choice would be Melody's place." He looked at Melody in the rear-view mirror. "I'm kind of surprised a famous writer like you has a listing in the phone book. Aren't you worried about stalkers or something?"

* * * * *

Walter, Sylvia, and a few police officers were standing about twenty feet back from Dual Streams when they arrived. Diane stood at the front door, a long fuse in her hand. As she saw Tim get out of the car, she lit it.

"Diane, what are you doing?" he called out.

"I want you to know how much I love you! I want everyone to know how much I love you!"

"To repeat, Diane, what are you doing?"

"I've been working on your surprise ever since I made the doctor happy in a mouth-related way so he'd help me escape from the hospital! You need to know how much you mean to me! I want the whole world to know!"

As the fuse burned down to its source, Diane walked away from the café. An immense, genuinely impressive display of fireworks began to go off, covering the front of the café in multi-colored sparks. Huge crackling letters read I LOVE YOU!

"Oooooooh," said Alex.

"She never did anything like that for *me*," said Walter.

Everyone watched, transfixed. Even considering the current situation, Tim had to admit that it was a touching display of affection. Too bad Melody was standing right here, or he could have stolen the idea to use on her.

The fireworks continued for another ten seconds, and then came to an end. Diane folded her arms proudly in front of her chest.

"Timmy, I love you so much!"

Then the entire café exploded.

It blew apart like a bomb hit it, with a deafening blast that sprayed flame and debris everywhere. A board of wood struck Diane in the head, knocking her to the ground, as everyone else dove for cover. A chunk of burning something-or-other landed dangerously close to Tim's face.

After the debris stopped falling from the sky, Tim managed to shakily stand up. Dual Streams was nothing but a burning, smoking pile of rubble.

Peter stared at the wreckage. "I'd called the technician again about that gas leak. Guess I'll call him back and cancel."

"Our place..." Tim whimpered.

Melody touched his arm. "What can I say to make this better?"

"How about 'Tim, you'll wake up any second'?"

"You know," said Peter, "if we give the fires time to burn out a little it might not look so bad. Weren't all the appliances still under warranty?"

Sylvia and Walter rushed over to Diane. As Walter helped her to her feet, she appeared disoriented but reasonably unharmed. She looked at the demolished restaurant with a great deal of curiosity. "Did somebody just blow up something?"

"Are you all right?" asked Walter.

"Yes, honey, I'm fine."

Alex was lying on his back, with Karen lying facedown on top of him. She got up and brushed some soot off the front of her shirt.

"You were willing to be hit by burning restaurant fragments for me!" Alex declared.

"Yes, I was."

"I've never known anyone willing to be hit by burning restaurant fragments for me before!"

"Me either," said Karen. "Your turn next."

She kissed him. He responded with equal passion.

As Melody put her arm around him, Tim pulled away and turned to face her. "Okay, this whole thing has gotten out of hand! Do you understand? I don't know if the stars are in some funky alignment, or if there's something in the drinking water, or if some gypsy has cursed the beejesus out of us, but we all need to just *knock it off*! There's nothing wrong with showering a loved one with affection, but this...this is *drenching* them with it! We need a nice, normal, *boring* relationship!"

"I couldn't agree more," said Melody.

"I'll be inattentive, you'll be inattentive, no cafés get blown up, nobody gets squished by sick elephants, and everyone's happy! That's the kind of relationship we were meant for, Melody. Will you join me in one?"

"Of course I will." She raised her hand in an imaginary toast. "Here's to boredom."

"To boredom."

"And lots of great sex."

"That too."

They kissed, and it was the purest, deepest kiss either of them had ever known.

As fire trucks arrived, Walter took Diane in his hands and kissed her. Karen kissed Alex. Peter fidgeted a bit but didn't try to kiss Sylvia.

"Do you think you can get a book out of this?" asked Tim.

Melody shook her head. "Too scary for me."

The lovers kissed for what seemed like an eternity, destined to live happily ever after as the wreckage burned and smoke billowed into the night air.

Chris Tanglen

- The End -

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