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Scorpio Tattoo

Jude Mason

Mystical Sign Series

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Mystical Signs: Scorpio
THE SCORPIO TATTOO

BY

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THE SCORPIO TATTOO

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Jude Mason

Dedication:

To my mother, who never got a chance to see my success.
You'd like this one, Mom.

THE SCORPIO TATTOO

Chapter One

He sat bolt upright. His heart pounded. Sweat poured down his face. Eyes wide, he stared into the darkness, searching for what had wrenched him from a sound sleep. Then, he remembered the dream.

"Damn!" Jonathan Rorke cursed. Sitting cross-legged in his huge, king-sized bed, he dragged shaking fingers through the wavy, dark shoulder-length hair plastered to his forehead and neck. He shuddered as the cool night air brushed his naked chest.

Visions of the dream tumbled through his mind. An eerie night, a moonlit night, a park surrounded by a forest of evergreens. The woman, the same one he'd seen a dozen times before, lying nearly naked on the grass, her long black hair spread out around her head and shoulders like a halo. Her eyes were closed, her brow furrowed ever so slightly. She was on her side, one arm bent underneath her, the other stretched out before her. Her ankles were crossed, and she lay partially on her stomach. She was naked to her lower back, breasts plump, tipped with dark nipples raised to sharp points by the chill night air.

But what caught his attention, as it did ever time he saw her, wasn't her beauty, although that was indeed eye catching, it was the mark on her lower back. He'd drifted closer to the prone beauty. At first, he couldn't make out what the mark was, other than it was light colored, and seemed somehow foreboding. When he got closer, he saw it for what it was: a tattoo, beautifully done and carefully placed just above the cleft of her ass—a stylized scorpion—no, not quite, rather it was the astrological sign of Scorpio.

The dream faded, but didn't quite disappear. Each time he'd had it, the details became clearer and he saw a little more. At first, he'd seen just the girl. Then, he'd seen the grassy area around her, the small bushes that lay several feet from her legs and then the park bench in the background. This time, he'd seen the entire area, right up to the forest of evergreen trees around the clearing and the trail that led—somewhere. He'd also spotted a sign, 'Rotary Park' at the end of the trail.

He had a name—somewhere to start his search.

Clambering out of bed, he grabbed the dark blue terry robe he'd tossed over the back of the chair and shrugged into it while heading for the kitchen. He kept an

assortment of local maps by the phone, and he wanted to see if he could find this park before the vision faded. The name sounded familiar.

Knotting the robes' belt, he flicked on the lights as he entered the large country kitchen. Blinking, eyes watering, he shielded his eyes to give them time to adjust. The maps were in the cupboard under the phone, and by the time he dragged them out, he could see again.

"South of town. I'm sure I remember a new park going in at the beach, just south of the point," he muttered as he sifted through the pile. "Yes," he hissed and pulled out the newest map of the shoreline. Opening it, he got the oddest feeling that something extraordinary was about to happen. He took the map to the dining room, and spread it out on the large wooden table. A sudden chill raced up his back. An urgency hit. He needed to go somewhere—be somewhere. The feeling was an ache that made his hands tremble.

"Fuck," he muttered. His voice sounded harsh, even to his own sleep-shrouded hearing. And then he was searching the map, desperate to find out where he had to be. The Rapids slid under his finger as he traced the shoreline, Willow Creek next, then a long bay with no name. Finally, he found it. On the other side of the bay, the tiny park sign with the words, Rotary Park, just above. It skirted the ocean, as all the parks did in the area, and it was less than ten miles away.

"That's it." Jonathan hurried back into his bedroom and switched on the light. He dressed in the clothes he'd left on the chair: black boxers, tight jeans, and a baggy cable-knit fisherman's sweater. On the way out, he grabbed his keys and wallet, and slid into the hiking boots by the door.

The Toyota rumbled to life instantly when he turned the key, then he was on his way. A moment later, he sped into the night. The roads were clear, and when he looked at the dash clock, he realized why. It was just after three a.m., and in small town west coast B.C., that meant next to no traffic at all. A myriad of stars filled the sky, and the moon hung above the evergreens like a beacon urging him on as he sped down the highway.

Remembering the map, he kept his eyes open for the right turn off. He was driving too fast and almost missed the sign, and had to back up so he could turn onto the dirt road leading to the park. A mile, two, and he thought he'd made some mistake and cursed vilely for not bringing the map with him. "Dumb, son-of-a-bitch, you got no fucking brains or what?" He hit a bump that jarred his teeth, and had to slow down. Three miles, and he saw a break in the trees.

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His heart hammered in his chest. Had he found the right place? Was she here, or was his vision nothing more than a dream gone crazy? The road got worse, huge potholes filled with water slowed him to a crawl for the next hundred feet or so. When he'd finally bumped over the last of them, he came out into the clearing. He stopped the Toyota and sat for a moment, looking around.

The trees and the large grassy field were right, but where was the picnic table? The single light post gave off just enough illumination to encourage him to get out of the SUV for a closer look. He peered around, and then stood on the front bumper to get a better view.

A tickle in his mind, as if someone had touched the back of his neck with a feather, drew his attention to the left. He walked that way, slowly, cautiously. The night was deathly silent; there were no animals moving or even a breeze to rustle the branches. It was like he was walking through a dream; just the sound of his own feet on the gravel, and when he got to the grass, even that sound was gone.

Then he saw the picnic table. He glanced around. The scene was so close to his dream it was terrifying. Would she be there—just on the other side of the rustic wooden table? With just the light of the moon to guide him, he walked around it. His heart lurched into his throat, and he felt as if he was going to choke.

Just like in the dream, there she was. Young, perhaps twenty-five, with that black mane of hair he'd expected, spread around her head. It was thicker and shone in the moonlight more than he remembered from his dream. Like a satin cape, or veil, it fanned around her shoulders and back. Her brow had a wave of wrinkles across the otherwise smooth flesh, her eyes were closed, but he somehow knew they'd be warm and brown when she opened them. Lying on her side with an arm extended out, the other beneath her and extended behind, a breast lay exposed, as was most of her back. Her skin glowed a faint blue in the moonlight, almost as if she were an apparition. Her dress was torn and lay in tatters around her hips and thighs, but the white mark was there.

Jonathan leaned in and saw that the mark was a tattoo. It looked as though it was only partially completed, as if the artist had started with the outline and planned to finish the rest later. Dropping to his knees, he bent over to get a closer look at her, and the delicate drawing on her back. Her scent folded around him—woman scent and a perfume, so delicate that at first he couldn't tell if it was a smell brought to him on the wind or her.

She moaned, and he held his breath, frozen from a moment. Then, he sprang into action. He knelt behind her and put his fingers against her throat. Her pulse was strong,

but she was cold, clammy to his touch. Quickly, he tore off his sweater and carefully wrapped it around her. He checked her body, being careful not to move her in case she had broken bones or injuries he couldn't see. It was just as it had been in his vision. Her neck and shoulders felt fine, arms and legs moved easily and showed no signs of breaks or sprains. He ran his hands over her hipbones and belly, pressing inward, checking for internal injuries. There was nothing.

Easing her onto her back, he tried to keep his eyes off her breasts, unsuccessfully. Even in the cool air, he felt himself getting warmer, his jeans feeling tighter around the crotch as he ran his hands over her. Ignoring his discomfort, he leaned down and gently slid his hands under her knees and shoulders. Taking a deep breath, he lifted her.

He held her close to his chest, trying to give her as much heat as he could. Hurrying back to his SUV, he staggered and nearly dropped her as a blinding flash of her terror enveloped him. He felt her being held down, the pain of the tattoo needle driving into her spine as she fought uselessly to escape.

He managed to stay on his feet, but by the time he got her into the passengers' seat, he was trembling. Buckling her into the seat, he got an even better look at her. Her hair had fallen across her face, and he carefully pushed it back. She was lovely; smooth complexion, but for a smudge of dirt on her left cheek. She had a pert little nose with wide nostrils and full ripe lips that begged to be kissed. The sweater he'd covered her with had slipped down a little, revealing just a hint of cleavage and that brought back the memory of the full swell of her breasts upon the grass. She moaned, and the frown deepened the creases across her brow.

Jonathan hurried around to the drivers' side and in only a few moments, they bounced and jostled along the dirt road leading out of the park. Driving to the hospital, he couldn't keep his mind on the road. He was lost in her thoughts.

Fragmented images and flashes of pain and fear, but in behind that, he sensed confusion and anger. Twice on the way, she cried out and struggled against the seatbelt. But, when he reached over and soothed her with a soft caress, she calmed instantly.

"Where did you come from?" he asked, more for himself than her. He gently slid his hands through her hair, but didn't try to read her. He knew some people under great stress felt his inner touch and fought against it. He didn't want to take the chance of causing her any more trauma than she'd already experienced. She moaned, and seemed to settle even more deeply into the seat.

Finally, they neared the local hospital. The first street lights illuminated the interior of the SUV and he glanced over to make sure the girl was covered decently. She

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was, but she'd begun twitching again, and the troubled look on her face worried him. He pulled into the emergency entrance, and for half a second debated whether he should get out and find some help or carry her in. His dilemma evaporated when he saw a large blonde orderly open the door and peer at him.

Opening his car door quickly, he called, "Hey, I need some help. Got a girl here, she's unconscious."

The orderly yelled back, "Got it. Wait there. Don't move her. Gurney's on the way." He disappeared for a moment, but before the automatic doors could completely close, they slid back open and a hospital gurney wheeled toward the SUV.

Jonathan climbed out and rushed around the front of the vehicle. He met the orderly at the passenger door and flung it open. The big man looked at his naked upper body for a moment, but didn't say a word. He leaned in and took the girl's vitals while Jonathan stood uneasily behind him.

"Has she been unconscious for long?"

"I don't know." His response sounded suspicious even to his own ears. "My name is Jonathan Rorke. I don't know if you've heard of me, but I've worked with the police as a psychic. I found her. In a park."

The orderly turned and faced Jonathan, eyeing him warily, as if he might be some kind of lunatic. "I've heard about you. Not sure if I believe what I've heard though." He turned back to the girl. Over his shoulder he asked, "How long have you known her?"

"I don't know her. I found her in Rotary Park," replied Jonathan levelly. "I simply picked her up and put my sweater over her, then brought her here. That's it."

"You call the cops?"

"No, I was too busy trying to get her here as fast as I could."

"Okay," he said as he backed out of the car and straightened up. "Gi'me a hand to get her on the gurney."

It took both of them to get her onto the gurney and covered. Not once did she show any signs of returning to consciousness. He followed the big blonde man as he rushed the girl toward the door. A harried-looking, middle-aged doctor met them just inside and immediately went into caregiver mode. Jonathan found himself pushed out of the way and directed to a waiting room, as nurses converged on the patient. The last he saw of her, she was being wheeled into one of the dozen or so curtained off emergency cubicles.

He shivered, and realized that although it was July, it was still chilly, and without his sweater, he was cold. Wandering into the waiting room, he wondered how long it

would take for the police to arrive. He'd just settled into one of the more comfortable looking chairs, when the door swung open and two uniformed officers stormed in.

"Jonathan Rorke?" asked the younger of the two—a rookie by the look of him, his hat squarely on his nearly clean-shaven head and a no-nonsense air about him.

His partner, a few years older and less by the book, had his hat off and his hand extended toward him. "Jonathan. How are you? It's been way too long."

Jonathan stood up and extended his hand toward the cop. "Hi Ken, how's it going?" He smiled and felt a sudden rush of relief. He'd worked with Ken Hanks on a few cases and was glad it was him that'd shown up. He knew that at least he wouldn't have to fight that uphill battle of convincing a cop of his abilities. Ken had been on the force for at least ten years and looked as if he seen too much. Jonathan had never looked deeper into him, never tried to read the man. That would have been an invasion and their friendship, and Ken's trust, meant too much to him.

"Going pretty good," he nodded to his partner, "This is Sam Caloski, rookie, been out with me about two weeks. I think he'll make it if he loosens up a little."

Jonathan turned and extended his hand to the young man, who took it easily and offered a weak grin. "Nice to meet you, Sam."

"Likewise." He stepped back and took up his position at Ken's flank. *He was definitely all business*, thought Jonathan, *but working under Ken, he'd learn how things worked.*

"What can you tell me about the girl? And where's your damn shirt?" Ken asked and took a chair kitty-corner to his. Sitting forward, Ken put his elbows on his knees and glanced up at the rookie. "You can either park it or go stand guard somewhere." The man blushed and hurried to a chair, where he looked just as uncomfortable sitting straight-backed, as if he was afraid to bend his sharply creased pants.

Jonathan hid a smile. When he turned his attention back to Ken, he took a deep breath and began. "I covered the girl with my sweater. She was naked from the waist up when I found her. I can't tell you much. You know how my visions come. Sometimes I get a ton of them; sometimes I get just enough to frustrate the hell out of me. This one is somewhere in between."

"Yeah, but I'll take whatever you can give me. The nurse at the front desk didn't know a thing. All she told me was the girl was still unconscious. The doctors found a nasty bump on the back of her head, but until she comes to, they won't be able to determine if her mind is still intact. Hopefully she'll come out of it soon."

"Did they say anything about the tattoo?"

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"What tattoo?" Ken frowned, curiosity written all over his face.

"She's got a tattoo or the start of one, on her lower back. I saw it in my vision then again when I found her. The one in my vision was finished, hers isn't."

"They never said a word. But it's body art; they're not likely to even look at it."

"I'm not sure why or how, but it's important, threatening, I can feel it."

"Threatening?"

"Yeah, it's got something to do with what happened to her."

"What do you mean?"

Jonathan thought for a moment, then said, "The visions I've had. At first, all I saw was the tattoo, nothing else. Slowly, the picture grew until I saw her."

The older cop leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin. The three men sat in silence for a few moments. Jonathan kept checking the clock on the wall, but the time crept by slowly.

Ken finally broke the silence. "You got anything else from your vision, Jon?"

"Not much. Just that I've had this dream about her for a few weeks, on and off. The tattoo of the Scorpio sign, her in the park, and she's terror-stricken. That's about it. I wake up before I can see what has her frightened."

"Well, it's more than we had."

Before he could say or ask anything else, the door swung open. The doctor who'd taken the girl into the emergency cubicle walked in. Glancing first at Jonathan, he nodded, and then turned to face Ken. "I'm Dr. Cross. The girl is coming out of it now. She's got a really nasty bump on the back of her head, and we're not sure if there's going to be a concussion involved here or possibly something worse, yet. Swelling of the brain isn't out of the question. There's no sign of rape or of her being forced. She's got a slight bruise on one cheek, but I think that came from when she fell."

"May I speak to her?" Ken rose to his feet, followed by the other two men. Jonathan was eager to see her as well, and just hoped he'd be included in the questioning.

"Yes, I'll allow two of you in. Just don't badger her. She's been through something traumatic. Every time anyone asks, she becomes nearly hysterical with fear," replied the doctor, then added, "she asked about the man who brought her in." He faced Jonathan and continued, "That's you, right?"

"Yeah, I found her and brought her here."

"She'd like to see you."

Jonathan's heart raced. "Thanks doc."

"I assume that was your sweater she had on?"

He grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, didn't think I'd need to carry a spare."

"It's in her room." He turned and headed for the door, saying, "We don't have a name for her yet, so if you can find that out, it would help."

"Sure thing, doc," said Ken as he followed the doctor, both Jonathan and the rookie trailing behind. He led them to the cubicle she'd disappeared into such a short time ago. The doctor held the curtain aside allowing both Ken and Jonathan to enter. He and Sam remained outside, the rookie once again at attention at the opening of the curtain.

The girl opened her eyes.

Jonathan's heart skipped. Her dark hair fanned out around her shoulders would indicate brown eyes, or so he'd have thought until he saw them—brilliant gray. That was the only description that came to mind. It was the first time he'd ever seen truly gray eyes. Her gaze flitted from one man to the next, until Ken broke the silence. "Ma'am. I'm Corporal Ken Hanks. That's Constable Sam Caloski standing guard, and the guy with no shirt on, is Jonathan Rorke. I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right?"

Her eyes found his, and stayed there. "I'll answer whatever questions I can," she said.

Jonathan felt as if she was talking to him and not the cops. He was on the verge of asking her name, when Ken's voice interrupted him. "Ma'am. We don't have your name. Could we begin with that?"

Her eyes finally left his, and he felt the loss, as if she'd deserted him. "Jessica, or Jess, Crane." Her voice cracked, as if she hadn't used it for a long time.

Ken went on, very softly asking her, "Jessica, can you tell us what happened?"

It was like he'd asked her to describe terror. Her eyes widened, and her face lost the little color it had. She turned toward Jonathan and opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

He felt her fear as if it were his own. An overwhelming cloud of terror wrapped around him, and for a moment, he couldn't see or breathe, or hear. He wanted to run, to hide from whatever she'd experienced. For an instant, his vision cleared and he saw her in his mind, lying on her stomach and screaming as the tattoo on her back pulsed a glowing, fiery crimson. He blinked and shook himself. Another vision.

"I just moved here. An old house, I found it. I thought it was abandoned, so I went in. Something's there. Something horrible. Something...marking me." The last was almost a sob.

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"Marked you?" Doctor Cross asked.

"Yes," Jess replied, and then blushed. "A tattoo. On my lower back. It, whatever it is in that house, it held me down. I felt it happening—the needle going in and out. It felt as if it was going right into my spine, drawing its design on my back. I couldn't get up or get away from the weight pushing me down. When I looked back, no one was there." She stopped herself then. Her small hand firmly clasped over her mouth to keep the words from escaping. Her eyes wide in terror, she must have known how crazy it sounded.

"Now now, Ms. Crane. A tattoo can't just happen." The doctor's voice grated on Jonathan's nerves and had an even worse affect on the patient.

She sat bolt upright. The thin cotton gown did little to hide the abundant curves of her breasts, and Jonathan wanted to reach out for her, to protect her. But, before he could move, she screamed, "I'm not bloody crazy. It happened. Something—someone—tattooed me. I didn't make it up. I don't want a tattoo."

She was near hysteria and the doctor just stood there, calmly eyeing her. Instantly angry, Jonathan pushed forward, and sat on the edge of the bed. "Jessica." He didn't try to touch her, though God knows he wanted to, he just said her name. When she didn't respond, he tried again, "Jessica, please."

She closed her mouth and turned her face to look at him. Tears welled in her eyes, but she held them back. "I'm not crazy," she whispered. Her face crumbled and she reached for him.

He held her. That's all he did. He knew that was all she needed all she'd accept from him. Jonathan didn't care if the doctor and the cops stood by looking about as uncomfortable as three men could. Tears trickled down his naked chest, and as chilled as he was, he wouldn't have moved for the world. "I know you're not crazy," he whispered, "and neither am I." He stroked her hair and down her back, soothing her as best he could.

Doctor Cross interrupted the silence. "Officer Hanks, Caloski, I think we'd best let her rest for a while. Mr. Rorke, your sweater is over that chair. I'll allow you an extra few minutes, but that's all. She really does need to get some rest."

Jonathan nodded tersely and watched him usher the two cops out of the cubicle. Just as Ken was about to leave, he turned and mouthed, "Call me."

He nodded again, and then was left alone with the sobbing girl. The three men hadn't gone far though and he heard one of them say, "To me it sounds like she's lost it. She's nuts."

He knew she'd heard it too by the way she tensed in his arms. *Idiots*, he thought, but simply continued to hold her while she sobbed. He became aware of how soft she felt against him, noticed that one of her breasts was pressed against him so hard he felt the nipple through the flimsy gown. His hand moved a little lower on her back, encountering the tie that held the gown together. The temptation was there, to just pluck it free, but he didn't.

He was careful to keep his talent shielded. He couldn't chance seeing something when he was so close or he'd surely scare her even more than she was already. Eventually, her sobbing slowed, and her shuddering eased until she simply rested in his arms. Her head on his chest, her hands stroked his sides. She began to speak, and he listened. "I'm really not crazy you know. Whatever this *thing* is, it's dangerous. It says it loves me. It says I won't get away *this time*." She stopped and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"I know you're not crazy." Jonathan shifted. He'd been in the same awkward position for too long and one thigh had gone to sleep.

"I'm so sorry," Jessica pulled away, and looked into his eyes as if she were searching for something.

Fascinating, he thought as he gazed down at her. "You don't have anything to be sorry about. Honestly." He slipped his fingers under her chin and smiled at her. "I really do need to go. The doctor is right; you need to get some rest. I'm sure Ken will have an officer posted nearby, so you're safe here." He reluctantly pulled his fingers away from her face, and got to his feet. "I've got a bookstore to open in the morning." He dreaded leaving her, but he knew she'd be safe, for now. "I'll come and see you before I open. Can I bring you some clothes? I'm pretty sure they won't want to keep you here a full day. They're just hanging onto you tonight to make sure that bump isn't going to be anything serious."

"Tomorrow." The one word stopped her. "Clothes. Yes, I'll need clothes. I—I...my keys, my purse, it's all in the house."

Jonathan heard the panic in her voice again and quickly jumped in to rescue her. "I'll tell you what. I've got a jogging outfit I'm sure you'll look simply amazing in. It'll at least cover you. How's that?"

She blinked up at him. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you. Jonathan?"

"Yes, Jonathan Rorke. And you don't have to thank me. I just happened to be in the right place...or something."

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"A jogging outfit sounds perfect. You've been so kind." Her eyes dropped, and she yawned. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. He could see her exhaustion in the sudden sag of her shoulders.

"Hey, it's the middle of the night, no need to be sorry. You sleep, and I'll see you in the morning. Is there anyone I can call, or get in touch with for you?"

"No, no one. I just got here from back east. I haven't even had time to find a job yet."

"Well, we don't have to worry about an irate boss then." He rose from the bed and eased her back onto the cushion. Pulling the covers up around her neck, he said, "Tomorrow we'll talk and get you to somewhere safe."

The door opened and a nurse walked in carrying a tray with an assortment of pill cups and glasses of water. Her face brightened when she saw Jonathan, and he quickly reached for his sweater. Pulling it on, he watched the woman place the tray on the table at the foot of the bed, and read the chart. She deftly picked up one of the tiny pill cups and said, "These will help you get a good night's sleep."

Jonathan stepped aside and watched Jessica down the pill and the water, then lay back down. When the nurse left, he returned to her side and said, "I'll see you first thing in the morning."

"Okay." Her voice sounded very small, a little frightened still, but the smile she gave him was enough.

On his way out, he yawned. The clock over the nurse's station read four a.m. He might get a couple of hour's sleep, if he was lucky.

Chapter Two

He almost made it to the parking lot. He'd just gone through the sliding glass door and was hauling out his keys when Ken's voice came at him from his right. "Hey, how come you get all the pretty ones?"

Jonathan spun around and laughed when he saw Ken leaning against the side of the squad car. His partner was nowhere in sight. "Because I'm better looking, ya ole' geezer," he countered and both men laughed.

"Cute."

"The girl's not crazy you know. Something really did happen to her."

"Yeah, I know," Ken said, and his face got real serious. "Rookie got sent back to the station because of a couple of really stupid comments he made within her hearing."

"So that was him I heard? I just caught one, but he should know better. Christ!"

"That was him." Ken scratched his head. "You know she's not the first, don't you?"

"There have been others?"

"Two. Both dead."

Flash!

As soon as Ken said those words, Jonathan became lost in a vision. First, he saw a girl naked from the waist up, lying still on a white-sheeted table, while a tattoo gun worked on her lower back. He felt the woman's terror—felt her heart pounding against her ribs and her breath catching in her throat at each indrawn breath—while the design on her back grew.

A voice continually echoed, "I love you Elizabeth. I'm sorry. I know you'll remember soon. I know you love me." The words rang in his mind as he watched and experienced the girl's panic rising higher and higher, but she couldn't move. Her belly churned, her bowels loosened and she knew that if she'd had anything inside, she'd have soiled herself. Shame, agony, and horror at her inability to scream or beg, or cry out that she wasn't the woman he was looking for, tore at her. Her fear had nowhere to go. All she could do was endure and pray that whatever force held her, would relent.

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The girl turned her face toward him, and he gasped. It was Jessica. He couldn't breathe for a moment. The eyes, the mouth, even the up-tilted nose were hers. No—when he focused more closely, he noticed the mouth was a little too wide; the eyes had an upward slant that Jessica's didn't have. But the woman could have been her twin.

He inhaled, and was instantly looking at the same scenario, but with another woman. Again, she lay on her stomach on a white-sheeted table. Her face hurt, and one eye was swollen shut. Like the first, her upper body was naked; her lower covered with the remains of a skirt. The insidious humming of the tattoo gun drew his attention to the design that slowly formed on her back.

Just above the cleft in her bottom, the outline of the zodiac sign of Scorpio had already been inked into her flesh. The device lifted, dipped into the air beside the girl, and then returned to add a slash of brilliant white to the drawing. The girl's terror rose, but it was different from the first woman. He sensed her thoughts—it was someone she knew. Confusion, hope—the wrong feelings for the scene or so he thought. Jonathan heard her mind screaming, 'End it for me, please, make it all stop!'

Suddenly, the vision changed again. His heart ached when he saw the lifeless bodies. Still half nude, each was on her stomach, and the completed tattoo lay exposed. The artwork was beautiful, the colors magnificent. Shades of silver and blazing white drew and held his eyes.

Ken's voice dragged him back to his present. "Hey, are you okay? Jon!" A hand on his arm shook him back and forth.

He blinked and focused on his friend. "Yeah, I'm okay. Both girls looked just like Jessica, didn't they? They could all have been sisters, triplets?"

Ken's mouth sagged open. He nodded, then asked, "You saw?"

"Yeah, just now." He shuddered, remembering the girl with the battered face and blinded eye. "What caused their deaths?"

"Both of them were scared to death, officially called heart failure, but I saw their faces. I know how that sounds, but the coroner couldn't find a mark on either of them that would have caused death: no drugs, no puncture wounds, nothing." He turned away, but not before Jonathan saw the look of frustration on his face.

"Your cases?"

"Yeah, and it's going nowhere. Whoever's taking these girls is leaving us nothing."

He was about to ask another question, when Ken suddenly yawned. He realized how late it was and how tired he was.

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When he managed to get his mouth shut, he said, "Sorry about that, I've been on duty for sixteen hours. I'm too old for these double shifts."

"Hey, we can get to the rest of this tomorrow? I promised Jessica I'd be here first thing in the morning with some clothes, and I need to get at least a couple of hours sleep."

Ken rubbed the back of his neck, and said, "Sure."

Jonathan headed toward the SUV and Ken followed. "Are you working on this one now?"

"I was just going to ask you if I could."

"You bet. I can use the help."

Jonathan climbed into the driver's seat and slid the key into the ignition, "I'll call you tomorrow; as soon as I get her settled somewhere."

"Sounds good."

Putting the SUV into gear, he pulled out of the lot and headed home.

Searching his closet, Jonathan looked for his smallest jogging outfit, something that wouldn't fall off Jessica. In the back, he felt something soft and pulled it out, and beamed. "Yes, this is perfect." His nephew had spent time with him last summer and left a few things when he'd returned home, a deep green jogging outfit being one of them.

Undergarments, she'd have to either make do with what she'd been wearing when admitted to the hospital or go without. He smiled, contemplating that for a moment. She certainly was a beautiful woman, and he hoped that after all this was over he'd have a chance to get to know her better. He eyed a pair of slippers on the way out, but decided she'd be better off wearing her own shoes. Heels or no, she'd likely break her neck in anything of his.

The drive to the hospital seemed shorter, but when he pulled into the parking lot, he wasn't sure he'd even find a spot. After two circuits, he pulled into one just vacated, and with the bundle of clothing under his arm he headed for the door.

Stopping at the front desk, he was a little surprised to find she'd been moved to a room. He trudged up the stairs to the second floor, grumbling about doctors and hospitals in general. Room 210 was at the end of the wing and when he walked in, his mood brightened.

She was resting, more asleep than awake by the look of her. The terror he'd seen the night before was gone. "Ahem," he cleared his throat. When she opened her eyes, there was the merest shadow of fear before she smiled.

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"Good morning," she murmured and scooted up so she was sitting. "It's early. I wasn't sure what time you'd come."

"Told you I'd be here early," he replied, grinning. "Always keep my promise to a pretty lady." He tossed the jogging outfit on the bed beside her, adding, "It's not glamorous, but it'll keep you decent."

"Jonathan, who exactly are you?" She looked at him levelly.

"I'm Jonathan Rorke. I own and run a bookstore on the main street in town called 'Secret's Revealed'. I work with the police sometimes."

She eyed him suspiciously. "That doesn't explain why you were in the park and how you knew where to find me."

He took a step back. He didn't know if she'd understand. So few people did and he didn't want to lose her trust. Reluctantly, he decided he had to tell her everything. "I have this gift. I see things that help with some of their cases."

"You see things?" Jessica asked, wide-eyed, but he could see that she was curious, not afraid like so many others were. "What kind of things?"

"Clues, sometimes I see the victim before the police do. I've been able to help them find out where crimes took place or where the criminal is hiding. But, sometimes it's not enough. Or I see too late." A memory of a long past case flashed through his mind; a man dead, the murderer found, but too late to save another victim.

"And you saw me?" Her voice shook.

He looked at her closely. Not fear, but something was there. "I've been dreaming about you—what happened to you—for weeks. Not—"

"Weeks—and you didn't stop it!" she exploded. She clambered out of the bed, and for an instant, Jonathan thought she was going to attack.

Holding his hands up, as if to ward her off, he explained, "Wait. I didn't see it all. Hang on, let me explain."

She settled down, but he could still see confusion in her eyes.

"Okay, it's like this, I get these visions but I can't order them to come or direct them, I just experience them. At first, all I saw was a small piece of things—the tattoo, and then I saw more. But it could have been anywhere." He perched on the edge of the bed and looked through the window. "Hell, at first, it was a bit of grass. It could have been the lawn out there. The next time the vision came, I saw a little more. Then I saw all of you, but there wasn't enough of anything else for me to place you anywhere. You could have been lying in your backyard. It wasn't until last night that I saw enough to do something."

"You saw." Jessica's eyes had closed and as he watched, a tear emerged and rolled down her cheek. "It had me for days. I didn't know that until this morning when the nurse came to check on me, she told me what day it was. Two full days. I was terrified. I thought I was going to die. I've never been so scared in my life. And you saw." Her body shuddered then. She wrapped her arms around herself and quietly sobbed.

"It's over now." Jonathan pulled her into his arms. She came without any hesitation, and soon he was stroking her hair and the curve of her back. She was warm and he suddenly wanted her—wanted to lift her lips to his and slip his hands more firmly around to cup the breasts that pressed against him. Her smell took his breath, and for an instant he was lost—a vision, the two of them, together and naked. Then it was gone as quickly as it had come, but it was enough to make his heart race and his cock swell. He shifted, trying to hide the bulge that would be obvious in a matter of moments.

"You didn't see what did this to me?"

Her question caught him off guard, and it took him a couple of seconds to re-focus. "No, I didn't see anything. Not then."

Jessica took a deep breath and pulled away from him enough to look up into his eyes. "Not then? But, you saw something?"

Gazing down at her, he said, "I did later. Not until after I got you here." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Hey, why don't we get you out of here and I'll try to explain it all to you."

She looked down at herself, and as if for the first time, realized she was still in the backless hospital gown. She blushed. "Good idea. I think." She lowered her head then added, "I don't want to go back to my apartment, not yet."

"Just get yourself dressed and we'll work it all out." He got up from the bed and headed out the door, saying over his shoulder, "I'll wait in the hall, give me a shout when you're ready."

"Okay."

Jonathan leaned back against the dingy yellow wall and breathed a sigh of relief. His arousal was obvious. The front of his jeans was tight and his erection lay at an awkward angle. Reaching into his pocket, he surreptitiously eased it into a more comfortable, less obvious position. *Luckily, the hospital was quiet at this time of the morning*, he thought and chuckled.

He was just beginning to calm down a little when the door to Jessica's room opened a few inches and she poked her head out. "There you are. I'm decent and ready

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to get out of here." Pulling the door wide, she stepped aside to let him enter. Amazingly, the green jogging outfit wasn't huge on her, she had curves that would guarantee she'd never be a fashion model, and Jonathan was very glad of that—although, with her heels on, she might have been tall enough. "Can we just leave? I mean won't that cop want to talk to me?"

"He will. I'm going to give him a call before we go. He'll want to question you, but as long as he knows you're with me, there won't be a problem," he smiled, "he knows I'm safe, and that I won't let anything bad happen to you."

"I can't go home," she said vehemently, and he recognized a hint of fear in her voice.

"I know; it's all right. You don't have to. I have a huge house, lots of spare room, if you're okay with staying with me. If you'd rather not, we can see what Ken can do about finding a safe house. Not as pleasant, but you won't have to go home." He took her by the arm and guided her through the door. "How about we sign you out and we'll go for some breakfast and that talk I promised you?"

He felt her body relax against his hand. "Yes, I'd like that." She turned and looked at him and said, "Jonathan Rorke, you're a very nice man."

Smiling, he put the back of his hand to his forehead and in mock angst replied, "Oh no, not you too. The story of my life—Nice!"

Jessica chuckled and so did he.

Sitting across from him, drinking coffee out of an oversized black mug, Jessica looked as if nothing was wrong. Her body language was relaxed, and when he told a slightly off-color joke, her laughter filled the small restaurant.

"Tell me, Jess, why did you move here?" His own cup was empty and he raised it as he spotted a waitress.

"I've always loved the country. I was in a pretty rough relationship for a while and finally left him just over a year ago. When the job I had came to an abrupt end two months ago, I decided to make a change. I actually visited here a couple of summers back and loved it. So, here I am: jobless and pretty much on my own."

He held silent until his cup was filled and the young waitress had disappeared into the kitchen. "So, you're planning on staying?"

"Yes," she said. There was a note of uncertainty to her voice. "But...I can't go back to my apartment. I just can't."

"Jess, before you go on, would you mind if I taped this. It'll save you going over it all again for the cops. Ken's good, and he'll listen to it before he questions you."

"All right, I guess it'd be okay."

She waited while he dug the tiny tape recorder out of his pocket and set it up between them on the table. Flicking it on, he checked his watch before saying, "This is Jonathan Rorke, and it's seven forty-five on June fifteenth, oh-five. Okay, Jessica, any time you're ready."

"Uh," she looked nervously down at the tape recorder, but after only a moment, she began talking, "It all began last Saturday night. I'd had a tough day, unpacking some books and a job interview that fell flat. I decided to go for a walk, do a little exploring." She stopped while their breakfast was placed on the table, and the waitress again retreated to the kitchen. "I remember seeing this old house, it looked like it was about ready to fall down. I thought I'd just take a look. I have no idea what time it was, but suddenly I woke up. I don't remember falling asleep, so waking up was terrifying. And, I wasn't where I remembered being." The longer she went on, the more tremulous her voice became. She glanced around, as if afraid she was being watched, judged.

Jonathan reached across the table and took hold of her hand. She was trembling. "Take it easy. You're here now; you're safe. Take a deep breath and try again."

She looked at him. Her eyes filled with gratitude, she took a deep breath. "I didn't know where I was. And whatever it was that had me wouldn't let me move. I was frozen. I could still feel everything and hear everything, but I just couldn't move." She stopped and closed her eyes for a moment before going on.

He squeezed her hand and gave her an encouraging smile. "You don't remember going somewhere, noises when you being taken, anything like that?"

"No, nothing. It was like I'd been zapped from one place to another."

"Okay."

"I was on some kind of bed. It was hard though, not like a real bed. Then there was a voice—a man's voice saying stuff like, I love you, and you love me Elizabeth. I know you love me. I'll make everything right, you'll see." Her voice rose and her eyes were wide. "That's when I felt the needles. The tattoo thing. I was terrified. Then the tattooing began. Up till then, I hadn't even realized I was naked from the waist up, but when whatever it was began with the needles, I was cold and in pain."

"It's okay, Jess. Take a breath."

She looked at him, and ran her tongue over her lips. "I got away, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you must have. Do you remember how?"

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"No, I just remember running and then I was in that park where you found me. Then it was like someone hit me on the back of my head with a baseball bat or something, and that's it. I don't remember anything else until I woke up in the hospital."

Jonathan switched off the tape recorder. "Okay, enough for now. You need to eat and take a breather. That's quite a story."

She looked at him, a flash of anger in her eyes.

"No, I don't think you're crazy."

She lowered her eyes, and he caught a smile. "Thank you."

They ate their meals in silence, his: a stack of flapjacks, five high, with sausage and eggs, and hers: two slices of toast with bacon and eggs. He kept glancing up at her. He was drawn to her. He thought one of the nurses must have loaned her a brush because her black hair hung in a long sheet of soft waves. Occasionally, it would fall forward over her shoulder and she'd flip it back. He'd never seen hair that long before; it almost reached her waist. Long lashes veiled her steel gray eyes. She caught him looking at her and smiled at him before diving back into her meal.

Once her plate was empty, she pushed it away and reached for her cup. "That was wonderful. I can't remember enjoying a meal so much. Thank you, Jonathan."

He'd finished his before her, and sat drinking his coffee. "You're more than welcome." He took a final sip and put his cup on the table. Reaching for her hand, he said, "Now, I've got some information to share with you. It's about what happened to you, kind of. Are you up for it?"

Sliding her hand into his, she took a deep breath and said, "Yes, go on."

"Okay. You're not the first. There have been two other women who've been tattooed like you."

"Two? So, why haven't the police caught whoever's doing it?"

"Hang on. You're going to have to let me finish."

Sheepishly she looked at him and nodded.

"As I was saying, there have been two other women. Both of them are dead. The coroner said they both died of heart failure. One was beaten; the other seemed to just die. No marks, no drugs, or anything."

"My God!" Her face was ashen.

"You're still okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"But, two dead. Dying of heart failure so young. I thought that only happened in the movies or something."

"I know, it's horrible. If you think you've heard enough, we can get to the rest later."

With haunted eyes, she gazed at him. "Tell me. I need to know it all."

"Okay, when I left you last night, I stopped and talked to Ken outside the hospital. Damn, I didn't phone him yet," he cursed and reached for his cell phone. "Can you give me just a minute? I promised I'd call him first thing. He's going to have my hide."

"Sure, it'll give me a minute to digest this."

"Thanks." Getting up, he wandered over to the window and dialed. The sun was just rising over the mountains and promised another beautiful day. He stood daydreaming about where he'd like to take Jessica in those mountains when he heard a gruff, "Hanks, it's your dime."

"Ken? It's Jonathan. Sorry I didn't call earlier."

"Well you finally decided to let me know you'd sprung our little bird." Ken's tone changed. From a gruff cop in a hurry, to I've got all the time in the world, in a heartbeat. "How's she doing? Get anything from her or is she too shook up?"

"She's opening up. So far, there's not much to tell. An old abandoned house, somewhere fairly close to where she lives, and a name: Elizabeth."

"Hmm, not much is for sure. She doesn't remember who did the tattooing?"

"No, she's sticking with her story from last night. There was no one there. Just the tattoo gun buzzing away."

"That just doesn't fly." Silence for a moment, then he asked, "You taking her home?"

"Not sure yet. What's the safe house situation like?"

"Not good, but what else is new. We can set her up in a motel for a couple of nights, if that's what she wants. The budget won't go more than two nights though."

"Okay, thanks." Two nights wasn't enough, Jonathan knew it. Whatever was after these women wasn't going to be found in just two nights. "I'll run it by her. I may see if she'll stay with me. I've got that huge house. Whatever we decide, I'll let you know."

Ken chuckled and said, "Yeah, I know, and she's a very pretty lady."

"You know that's not why," he snapped, and was sorry the instant he said it.

"Hey, cool it. I know. Just joshin' with you." Both men were silent for a moment then Ken added, "It's a good idea. No one'd find her with you, and you could keep an eye on her."

"I'll let you know. And Ken, I knew you were joking. Sorry I jumped on you."

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"It's cool." In the background, voices got loud and Ken urgently said, "I gotta go; some idiot junky's trying to kick the shit out of Caloski."

The line went dead before Jonathan could respond. He pictured Ken leaping into the fray though, and smiled. Turning back to the table where his charge sat, he continued smiling when he saw her sipping her coffee. The smile lasted until he sat down and remembered he had more to tell her.

"Does Officer Hanks want to see me?" she asked, putting her cup down.

"No, I told him what you'd told me and he didn't mention taking you in. I asked about the safe house, and it seems the department can only afford to put you up for two nights in a motel."

"Only two?" she shot back. "But what happens if they don't catch him?"

He reached for her hand. "You can stay with me for as long as it takes. No strings, honest. The spare room has a lock, if you feel safer, use it."

Jessica sat back and seemed to consider it for a moment. Sipping her coffee, if her hand hadn't shook, it would have looked like they were simply a couple out together. She looked at him, as if trying to judge him, gauge his sincerity. She took a deep breath; slowly let it out, finally saying, "Yes."

"Good. I'm glad. I know it's a tough decision. I really do understand. You've been through so much."

"What about my apartment? I mean I don't have any clothes. I don't even have a key at the moment. I have no idea where that went."

"Before we go any further, I'd like to finish telling you all that I know so far, about what I saw in my vision."

"All right," she said, and he sensed a touch of apprehension.

"Okay, you know there's been two others. Both of them had the tattoo at the base of their spines. I think I saw the room, or at least the bed, where it happened. Kind of like a hospital bed, only an old style thing. The room was like an empty warehouse or maybe a loft: lots of windows up high, cement floor. Everything seemed kind of gray." He looked into her eyes, saw the fear grow. Squeezing her hand, he asked, "Ring any bells?"

Jessica nodded, and he saw her swallow.

"Okay, we'll get to that in awhile. This next bit is going to be tough to hear. Both of the other women looked almost exactly like you. You could have been triplets."

Her jaw dropped. Then, she shuddered and said, "They all looked like me?"

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"Yeah, at least in my vision they did: black hair, same age, same body type, and the tattoo. One huge difference is, for some reason, your tattoo didn't get finished."

"My God, this is insane."

"It, or whoever is doing this, certainly isn't in touch with reality on a regular basis, but—you're safe now."

She looked around nervously, and Jonathan gave her hand another reassuring squeeze. When her eyes returned to him, she asked timidly, "Can we go now? I just want to go somewhere I feel safe."

Sliding out of his seat, Jonathan drew her to him and into his arms. She came willingly enough and for a brief moment, he held her close. "Let me pay the bill and we'll get out of here. I know you're going to love my house. It's been in the family forever."

She pulled away; just enough so she could look up into his eyes, and with a tentative smile, said, "I trust you. God knows why, but I do."

Once the bill was paid, he put his arm around her and escorted her out into the sunshine. Her hair shone like onyx in the bright daylight. Jonathan couldn't stop his hand from suddenly reaching up, his fingers sliding through the lustrous mane. The jade green jogging outfit camouflaged the lovely curves he knew lay hidden beneath. He watched her breasts jiggle as she walked, the heels accentuating her every move. Braless, he mused and felt the familiar stirrings in his jeans.

He opened her door, then went to the passenger's side and climbed in.

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Chapter Three

Jonathan pulled the SUV into the driveway and slowed down. He wanted to see her face when she saw his house. It was old, as he'd told her, but what captured most people's attention, was how he'd kept it in such pristine shape. Two stories, with a wrap-around porch he often sat out on during long summer evenings. All in all, it was an impressive sight.

He wasn't disappointed. Her eyes widened, her mouth gaped and when she finally blinked, he couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled up. She looked over at him, and for a moment, he thought she was going to cry. Instantly his laughter died and he reached for her, taking her into his arms. "God, I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing at you, honest," he murmured into her hair. She smelled of soap and woman, and he would have dearly loved to take it further, but not yet.

"I know," she sniffed, "it's just—so much has happened. I think it's catching up to me."

"Totally understandable. I was being childish. I like to see people's reaction to the house. I shouldn't have, not this time." He soothed her hair and thought to kiss the long tresses. He wanted her, knew it had been growing since he'd first seen her in his vision, but he pushed his desires down. "Come on, let's go inside."

"It's very grand, isn't it?" she whispered and gazed up at the top story.

"Yeah, it is. Come on, I'll show you around." He pulled into the garage and parked. With a wink at her, he hopped out and went around to her side of the SUV. "I'll try to restrain my pleasure when you see the inside, how's that?"

She laughed, a timid sound at first, but then it matured and grew until she was actually laughing out loud. "Yes, you do that."

Jonathan took her by the hand, leading her out of the garage and through an arbor, which led to the back door—old cobblestones paved their way. Once inside, he didn't let her stop, but dragged her through the whitewashed mudroom and into the great-room. It was huge. Kitchen and dining room were separated from the living area by a massive stone fireplace, which had been built using local river stones, decades ago. To his right

was a staircase that curved up to the second floor, where the three bedrooms and his den lay.

"It's beautiful, Jonathan," she said in a breathy whisper. She spun slowly, taking it all in. When she turned to face him again, her smile was radiant. "Yes, it's beautiful. More please."

He took her hand again, and led her to the stairway. "This is new. I had to have the old one removed when it got too dangerous. More expensive to try to fix than build new, so I chose new. I kept the design though." He rambled on as they made their way up the steps.

At the top landing, a short hallway stretched out before them. Doors stood ajar on all but the end room, and Jonathan urged Jessica to enter the first one on the right. It was a bedroom, as she'd obviously expected, but unlike any she'd ever seen before, he was sure. One wall featured a fireplace with two overstuffed chairs facing it, a small table between them. Another wall was taken up by a large bay window with a window seat, and lush plants both sat on the floor and hung from hooks in the high ceiling. The bed, with its four posts, took up another wall, and faced the fireplace. The décor was simple, yet elegant, in rich tones of dark wood and amber.

"Wow!" She scanned the room, and then went to the huge king sized bed with its mound of pillows and white chenille bedspread. He watched as she ran her hand over the bedding, and looked up at him. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

"It's yours if you like it." He was ecstatic she was so taken with this, his first choice of rooms for her.

"Like it? I love it," she beamed.

"And, as promised, there's a lock on the door if you want to use it," he said, secretly hoping she wouldn't.

She looked that way, and nodded. "If you'd wanted to hurt me or molest me, you had ample opportunity last night at the park. I don't think I'll need a locked door."

Feeling suddenly warm, Jonathan turned to the bay window, and said, "You've got a great view of the gardens from here. I'm afraid I've let them go a little over the past few years, but they're still beautiful."

"Really," Jessica said, and rushed to join him at the window. "Lovely, but they do need tending. You'll start losing some of those bushes if you don't get in there and prune them soon."

"The deer do a lot of that for me," he chuckled and turned to her.

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She turned at the same moment, and for an infinity of time, they stood gazing into each other's eyes. Hers, the silver-gray he found amazing. Another moment and they were in each other's arms. Leaning down was automatic, as was the gentle pressure of his lips against her cheek. But when his lips found hers their growing passion let loose. He pulled her close, his body molding hers against his taut, muscular frame. Their breath intermingled. He slid his tongue across her lips and tasted her for the first time. A virgin's touch; soft, tentatively needy, he pressed gently. His heart raced. An instant of pressure, uncertainty, and her lips parted.

When his tongue found hers, his temperature rose. Soft, silky, wet, her mouth engulfed his tongue, her lips pressed gently around it and then suckled. He slid his hands down her back until he reached the slope of her ass. Should he control the fiery urge that had his blood roaring in his ears? The world closed in around them. Her breath washed his cheek in a warm breeze.

Her hands moved across his back, his shoulders and down his spine. He shivered and groaned into her mouth. Nothing mattered but the tiny world of sensation and exploration her hands created. His hands wandered as if they had a will of their own. Each cheek filled a hand, and he pressed her to himself. His cock rose, engorged with hot blood, trapped between them, a hungry snake ready for a chance to perform.

For an instant, he thought she might pull away. Was he going too fast? The experience of the past days must have shaken her trust in men. Would she balk? Would he remind her of whoever had taken her? Instead, her grip on him tightened, her breathing grew harsh and raspy as she ground her pelvis into his.

He finally had to pull back and take a deep breath. Jessica continued kissing his chest and neck, while he gave a shuddering sigh. In a lust deepened voice, he said, "We should think about this. I don't want to rush you into something that you might regret later."

When she looked up into his eyes, he was surprised to see how dark hers had become. "I thought about it enough for the both of us. You're not rushing me. If anything, I'm the one doing the rushing. You saved me. You could have left me there to die, or to be found again by whatever or whoever it was." She shuddered and closed her eyes, after a moment, she took a deep breath and opened them again. "But, you didn't. You're my knight in shining armor, and I want you." She looked away from him, over her shoulder toward the bed and the fireplace. "Can you light the fire? And, when was the last time you tried out that bed?"

Happily surprised by her response, he chuckled softly. "Yes, I can light the fireplace. As for how long it's been since I tried out this bed, months."

Her eyes were filled with mischief when she said, "Well, you go light the fire, please, and I'll turn down the bed."

Releasing her, he went to the fireplace and found the wooden matches on the mantle. Pulling the screen away, he bent, struck a match, and held it to the mound of paper nearly hidden under the small pile of wood he'd left ready for guests. It flared, and he tossed the match in. Returning the screen, he was just in time to see her slide out of her shoes. She'd turned the bed down and stood beside it, a smile on her face and her arms open.

"Take off your shirt," she said mischievously. "And your shoes and socks."

Jonathan smiled, and bent to unfasten his shoes. His fingers trembled with excitement as he fought the knots and then slid his shoes off. Socks followed. Rising, he unfastened his shirt and let it slide off his shoulders and down his arms. Goosebumps raced across his chest, puckered his nipples as the shirt slid to the floor. It felt odd to have a woman watch him strip, and when he'd let the shirt go, he couldn't just stand there. Three steps and he was in front of her again. An instant later, he had her in his arms.

"You're a great tease, you know that?"

"Yeah," she murmured before her lips found his. The kiss was more urgent this time, as if both of them were desperate to excite the other. Jonathan slid his hands around her and found the hem of her top. Deftly, he slid beneath it, and found warm flesh. She sighed into his mouth, which encouraged him to continue, but ever so carefully.

Pulling his lips from hers, he eased back a little, just enough to slip her top up and over her head. He had the chance then to watch her breasts bounce as he pulled the top past her face and up her arms. Her nipples tensed in the sudden chill, and his mouth watered. The extra jiggle she gave, added to his lust. When her hands dropped to his shoulders, his mouth dropped to her chest. Crinkled, hot, he was in heaven as his lips gripped and tugged at the taut nub. Her sigh encouraged him. The arching of her back pressed her breast more firmly into his mouth.

Her hands forced themselves between them and found his belt. When that was unbuckled and set aside, the button and fly were next. A zip and the pressure of his jeans against his hard-on lessened. A tug and they slid downward. Goosebumps raced up his back.

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With just the gentlest of nudges, he had the back of her knees against the bed. It took next to no effort to lower them both onto the white cotton sheet. Her pants came off in a rush. His joined them, as did the gray boxers. His skin tingled. Her touch soothed the infuriating itch as she stroked him: his back, his sides and finally his ass, which she gripped firmly and pulled him hard against her.

He grasped her hips, rolling them, so she lay on top of him. He wanted access, and by the smile she gave him, she wanted control. Sitting up, she posed. Saucily, deliciously wanton, she arched her back and thrust her breasts toward him.

"Cheeky woman," he murmured as his hands closed over her luscious mounds. He weighed each breast then thrummed her nipples with his thumbs. She was too much to take in all at once, curvaceous, lusciously soft, and delectably unfashionable, but perfect for his likes. A narrow waist, but her tummy had the most adorable swell and her hips were more than delectable, an abundance of padding spoke of enjoyable rides to come. The tiny thatch of black fur between her thighs had been trimmed and he longed to bury his face in its center.

"Hungry woman," she countered and wriggled her hips. Her dampness wetted his loins. His cock lurched.

So close, he felt the soft folds of her, the wet center anointing his length. The more she squirmed on him, the more he wanted to plunge deep inside. Amazingly, he felt her clit ride along his shaft—a hard knot, dragging down his cock.

He dropped one hand and reached for their joining. The familiar hardness of his cock, the newfound excitement of her softness, the mingling of hair, hers manicured to perfection, his as well kept and trimmed, met his search. He delved and toyed with her, sliding a finger along his shaft, bumping the turgid knot of flesh with each down-stroke.

She gasped each time he did it. Suddenly, her moisture gushed, soaking his entire crotch and upper thighs. She was flushed and panting. Sweat on her brow and upper lips.

Carefully, Jonathan slipped his fingers along his shaft and inside her. The heat amazed him. When she tightened her muscles, it was his turn to gasp. She held his two fingers still, and when he concentrated, he felt her milking them. It was one of the most difficult things he'd ever done, but he ignored her talented muscles and slid his fingers along the tiny shaft of her clit. Her wetness smoothed the stroke, and he was careful to caress the bud whenever his fingers came in contact.

The control she'd sought seemed lost and she humped against him. But, when she reached down and took hold of his cock, pumping it languidly, he felt himself sweat.

They bumped hands and smiled at each other, working hard to drive each other mad with lust. In Jonathan's case, it worked. His cock oozed pre-come onto his belly, and the wicked woman riding him scooped it up and licked her fingers clean. Then, when he could scarcely breathe for fear of coming, she slid her fingertips around his glans, and asked, "You want me to get on?"

Her voice was husky, and the words fired him. "Yes," he hissed and moved his hands back to her hips. She rose, and with a firm grasp on his shaft, rubbed the tip along her silken groove. He felt her opening, and lunged.

Breath whooshed out of her. She closed her eyes and her head fell back. He heard her groan as she slowly sank onto him. Soft wetness gripped him, sucked at him, and drove him soaring into bliss. He gritted his teeth, and prayed for the stamina that threatened to desert him. It had been too long, and he ached to climax—longed to feel his balls churning with come—feel the head of his cock swell that instant before the inevitable clenching explosion.

She settled on him. Her pubic hair entwined his, her labia squashed against his pubes. Her sigh echoed his, and she looked at him again, smiling. "Are you going to make it?"

He chuckled, and flexed his cock, "Maybe. It's been awhile, but I'll do my best."

"Oh and you're best feels wonderful," she murmured and clenched around him.

Together they began the dance. Gentle thrusting, his cock buried deep, her pussy trembling around him as they tested the waters of each other's pleasure. Their dance quickened, bodies slapping at each downward stroke. His fingers dug into her soft fleshy hips, guiding her, helping her lift and settle into a rhythm that had him silently begging for release. He'd never been so hard, so in need, and so wanting to hold off his release until her climax took hold.

Her body tensed and her groans became grunts of pleasure. She leaned forward, and with her hands on his shoulders, quickened her pace. Slamming down on him, her cunt clenched and relaxed, as her breathing caught. A keening cry came from deep within her and her body went rigid.

With a groan of triumph, Jonathan stiffened his arms, lifting the luscious woman a couple of inches off his middle. He then slammed into her, his own orgasm crashing through his loins. His testicles pulled in tight, and his cock swelled as he lunged high and deep into the welcoming heat of her cunt. He shuddered and thrust again, reaching for that pinnacle of release he knew was a heartbeat away.

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The first stream of his seed shot out like white-hot lava, coating her insides. His next, held him in its grip, breathless, blind to the world around him as it spewed. A guttural sob followed, and then another blast of release sent his hips high again.

When he managed to gulp in a lung-full of air, he became aware of her, collapsed on his chest. Hot, covered in sweat, their flesh felt as if it could meld into one, they were so close.

"You okay?" he gasped and slid his hands up her back. He grazed the bandage that covered the tattoo, and for a moment wondered if he'd hurt her in his passion. The final pulsing of his cock made him shudder.

"Yeah, I'm more than okay." She kissed his chest and squirmed. "I think I needed that. Sorry, I almost raped you."

He chuckled. "Fraid you can't rape the willing. Glad I could be of service, Ma'am," he joked.

Sitting up, she poked him in the stomach. "And you call me cheeky."

She looked amazing: hair wild, her face and neck flushed with the afterglow of their play. He wanted to hold her, protect her from whatever dangers were after her. "Yeah, I know," with his grin still plastered on his face, he slapped her gently on the butt, and said, "Very cheeky and such lovely cheeks."

That broke her up, and he quickly joined her in a round of laughter that ended up with them both lying on their sides, facing each other. When she'd calmed down, a yawn stretched her mouth wide. "I'm so sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night," she said.

"Tell you what, I've got to get down to the bookstore and at least open it for part of the day. Why don't you crash? I'll make sure the doors are locked. The store isn't far, half a mile," he pointed over her head, "that-a-way. And, I'll leave the number so you can call me if you need anything or just want me to come home."

"You own the bookstore?"

"Yeah, it's all mine." He rolled onto his back and slid his arm under her, pulling her closer. When he had her snuggled against his side, he went on, "I've got a pretty steady clientele in the area, and have just opened an online store that's proving to be very lucrative. I'm having trouble keeping up with it all though and might have to hire some help soon."

"Really? What kind of help?"

"Someone who knows about the Internet, for starters. So far, I've hired a web designer, someone to do the software for the store part of the site, and I'm a little lost as to how to promote the thing."

Jude Mason

Another yawn stopped her reply, and before she could answer, he said, "We'll talk later. You need some rest and I really do need to open up. I'll have a line of angry customers waiting for me." He carefully slid out of bed, kissing her softly on the lips. Drawing the covers up, he stroked her hair, and said, "I won't be gone long. A few hours. The phone is right here on the table, and I'll leave my card, its got the number for the store on it."

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you."

"Nonsense. It's not often I have such a lovely guest in my house."

Jonathan picked up his clothes and slid into them while he watched her fight to stay awake. She must have been exhausted, because by the time he was dressed, she'd lost the battle. Her eyes were closed and her breathing had deepened.

Before he left, Jonathan placed one of his business cards on the bedside table beside the phone. Bending, he kissed her softly on the temple. A rush of caring caught him by surprise, but it felt right.

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Chapter Four

Secrets Revealed was a small shop, but to Jonathan it held the world's treasures. He'd owned the bookstore for over ten years and at first, business had been almost non-existent. It had taken months of hard work and exhausting promotions to get it off the ground, but when the locals had realized how he did business, and how he managed to find those rare books they seemed to want, it had boomed. Now, every day, there was always a steady line of traffic ambling through the rows of over-filled shelves. Today wasn't any different, and although he didn't show up until nearly noon, there were four locals standing patiently waiting for him to let them in.

"Morning Jonathan," said a middle-aged woman dressed in a cotton print shift, who he'd often seen browsing. Margaret something, a good customer, but he'd gotten so used to calling her Margaret; he'd forgotten her last name.

"Morning Margaret," he replied as he unlocked the door. He stepped inside, then turned and shut off the alarm. Next, he held the door for the small band of customers filing in. "And how are you this fine day?"

"Just fine, thank you," she answered as she trundled past him. Margaret was terribly overweight, and he figured that her sojourn to the bookstore was about all the exercise she got.

He went to the back and settled behind the counter. His answering machine beeped at him, and he saw that he had four messages. Flicking on the lights first, he then pushed the button.

The first message was from a supplier. They gave him a confirmation number for a shipment of books; the second was a customer wanting to make an order. He jotted down the number and went to the next. It was Ken.

"Hey, Jonathan," came the gruff voice which meant he'd probably called from the office. "Give me a call when you get in, would you?"

The last message was a blank, so he cleared the machine. Whoever that was would either phone back or not. He picked up the receiver and dialed Ken's number.

"Officer Ken Hanks," came the familiar voice.

"Hey, Ken. It's Jonathan. I just got in, what's up?" He leaned back and stretched, feeling good about the world.

"Nothing huge. I just wanted to check in and see how that girl, Jessica, is doing. We did a search of the park, fingerprinted the picnic table, and even got the dogs out. Nothing."

"She's okay. A little jumpy. She isn't ready to go home yet. And before you ask, she's at my place. I left her resting."

"I'm going to her apartment to check out the place. You want me to get some things for her?"

"I thought I'd save that for tomorrow. I really don't know how long she's going to want to stay, and she might feel weirded-out if she knew you were searching around her personal stuff." Jonathan's heart raced with apprehension then.

"It's got to happen. I'll contact her landlord and get him to let me and a crew in to have a look around. I want to see if there's evidence of an old lover or boyfriend who might be the kind who'd go off the deep end."

"Makes sense. I'll let Jessica know when I see her later."

"Has she remembered anything about her attacker?"

"No, not a thing." A customer came to the counter with a hardcover in her hand, and plopped it on his desk. He held up a finger to indicate he'd be with her in just a moment. In a soft voice, he asked, "Do you want me to bring her in to see you?"

"Nah, how about you invite me over for a beer and we'll talk?"

He chuckled. "Ken, you weasel. Okay, you're invited over this evening for a beer."

"I'll be there at about eight, if that's all right."

"Yeah, eight will be fine. See you then."

"Have a good one." The phone went dead and Jonathan replaced the receiver.

Looking up, he said, "Is this all for you, Carol, isn't it?"

The skeletally-thin old woman beamed at him. "Yes, I'm Carol Finlayson, and I'd like to buy this one." She indicated the book she'd placed on his desk. "I've been waiting months for it to come out."

He picked up the hardcover and smiled, "Yeah, these 'Best of' books are always in demand. I'm sure you'll enjoy it." He took the book and scanned the barcode, then asked her if it was going to be charge, check, or cash. The transaction took but a few minutes, and all the while his mind kept returning to Jessica.

"Thank you," he said absentmindedly, bagging the book and handing it over.

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She left, the tiny bell ringing as the door opened and closed. Business was brisk for the rest of the afternoon. He didn't leave the shop until nearly six. Even then, he had to rush the last couple out with the promise that the store would be open first thing in the morning.

He arrived home shortly after, and when he put the key in the lock, a chill ran up his spine. Something was wrong. He pushed the heavy old oak door open, and entered. The air was cooler than it should have been. The house was quiet, but something had happened, he could feel it.

Jonathan searched the lower floor, which took only a few minutes, as other than the great room, there was only a large pantry and the main bathroom. His unease grew, but he couldn't put his finger on why. The hair rose on the back of his neck when he approached the stairs leading up to the second floor.

He slipped out of his shoes and crept up the stairs, as quietly as he could. At the top landing, he paused for a moment and listened. Still nothing. He allowed his mind to open, hoping to sense whatever, or whoever, was causing his discomfort.

A scream tore through the silence.

Jonathan rushed headlong into the first room, Jessica's room. She was still in bed, but not in the restful sleep he'd left her in. She lay prone on her belly, the bedclothes drawn back to cover the lower part of her buttocks and legs. Her upper body was bare, as was her lower back.

Again, she screamed in anguish, but only in his head.

His mind was still open and her fear slammed into him, stopping him dead in his tracks. The tattoo, which he'd seen the night before, and which had been little more than an outline, was half-finished. The interior of the design was partially filled with white, with a little silver highlighting it, but then it stopped. As if something or someone had interrupted the tattoo artist mid-stroke.

He felt Jessica, or her thoughts: wild, terror-filled, as she lay on the bed. He sensed her straining to move, to stop the agony of the needle jabbing into her back, but all she could do was scream, and pray that someone would come.

"Jessica," he cried, when his voice returned. For an instant longer, he too remained frozen. But finally, he got his legs moving and he rushed to her side. His mind was still filled with visions of her writhing in agony as a tattoo gun hummed at its task. He felt her pain, the stabbing needle tearing into his lower back. It was all he could do to keep from groaning with her. Clamping his teeth together, he let his senses gather

whatever information they could; smells, sight, the texture of things, anything that might help him locate the torturer.

Reaching for Jessica, his hands touched her and her trembling ran up his arms. Her body was stiff. She was still being held. It was as if some weird stasis gripped her, while the invisible tattooist worked.

He shook her. "Jessica," he said softly, hoping his voice would somehow penetrate the overwhelming fear that held her mind in a steel grip. "Jessica, please listen. It's Jonathan; I'm here now. Whatever it was, it's gone."

He slid his hands across her shoulders and down her back, being careful to stay away from the new wound of the tattoo. But, he couldn't keep his eyes off it: how smooth the outline was—how white and perfect. The color set off the deep tan of her skin. For an instant, he felt the fanatic lust of the tattooist, and cringed away from it.

Shaking his head to clear it of the hunger and desire he'd encountered, he tried to gently turn her over. At first, she resisted, or she was held. He no longer sensed her thoughts or those of whatever had visited her.

She turned, stiffly, her eyes unfocused as she looked past him. "Please, no more," she sobbed.

His heart went out to her. If he knew who to kill to stop her torture, he'd have done it in an instant. "It's all right, Jessica. It's me, Jonathan. I'm here now."

"Jonathan?" Her body relaxed a little, enough to allow him to turn her over. She winced when she rolled onto her back.

"Yeah, it's me." He pulled her up toward himself, until she was in his arms. A surge of emotion took his breath. Tears streamed down her face, but she was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever known. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

She sobbed against his chest, squeezed, and pulled him closer. Her naked breasts flattened between them, but he felt her, felt the nipples like pearls against his chest. He stroked her back and her hair, and felt about as low as a snake's belly for having left her alone.

Whatever, or whoever had attacked her the first time, had found her again. But, what was it? How could someone, something, have snuck into his house? How could it have found her?

He held her until her sobbing calmed into nothing more than an occasional shuddering snuffle. He ran his hands over her, telling himself that he was checking to make sure she wasn't injured. When he was sure there weren't any other injuries, he

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put his hands on her shoulders and eased her away. "I'm going to check the house. Do you want to come with me or stay here? You can lock the door behind me."

"I'm coming with you. Please, don't leave me here alone!"

"Just give me a sec and I'll get you a robe to throw on," he said, and after giving her a soft kiss, he rushed to his room. His robe was huge, and would hinder Jessica's movements more than anything. A quick decision led him to his dresser and the bottom drawer, where he dug out a pajama shirt that would be more than ample to cover her. Hurrying back to her room, he came to an abrupt halt when he saw her standing beside the bed.

She looked at him, and said, "What?"

Blinking to rid his mind of the sudden vision of her riding him, he cleared his throat and then said, "Nothing. I...uh...you're amazing that's all."

"What?" Her eyes had opened wide and she shook her head as if to better understand what he was talking about.

"Here." He took a step closer to her, and held up the pale blue shirt for her. The sleeves were too long, but with a little rolling, it'd work. "Let's go see what we can find." He tried to keep his tone light, although inside he was anything but calm. He'd felt something when he'd come in the house. Something horrible and dark, and so unfamiliar, it unnerved him. He took her hand, and said, "Stay close, and do exactly what I say."

She closed the distance between them and nodded.

"First, I want to get to the bathroom. I want to take a closer look at that tattoo and cover it." He wanted to make sure it was clean and no infection or danger of germs got to it. Opening the bedroom door, he peered into the hallway, but the feeling of foreboding was gone. The air felt warm. Light and warmth streamed in through the large window above the landing. Nevertheless, he cautiously crept across the hall and into the bathroom. Only pale tan walls greeted them. Around the huge walk-in shower/bath, the white/brown streaked tile made the room look brighter. Large mirrors and fluffy towels, bathmats and wicker baskets all added to the warmth and ambiance of the room.

"Come here, Hon," he said, in a hushed voice. He'd crossed the room to a wicker shelf unit and sorted through the top drawer. He pulled out a large sterile pad and ripped it open. "Spin round so I can see your back." He stopped, and said, "Hey, you want to see this?"

"I thought no one would ever ask me," she replied. "Yes, I want to see it."

"Hang on." He searched again, and pulled out a small handheld mirror and gave it to her.

She turned her back to the full-length mirror that ran almost the full length of the wall adjacent to the shower. Jonathan followed her, and waited close by to see the tattoo. She tried to hold the back of the shirt up and hold the mirror so she could see, but it was too difficult a maneuver.

He stepped close, and smiled at her. "May I?" He reached around her, and hefted the shirt.

"Thanks," she said, and then gasped when she saw the brilliant white and silver artwork. She twisted a little toward him, and stared. "My God, it's beautiful."

Her words didn't exactly shock him, it was a lovely marking, but they did surprise him a little. She'd been marked against her will. That had to mean something.

"Damn," she muttered and that time he heard anger in her voice. "How dare...Damn!" She spun around and glared at him, and he saw tears glistening in her eyes.

"Easy, Jess." He pulled her close. "We'll figure it all out. Take a couple of deep breaths and we'll see if we can't find this guy."

"There's no guy!" she growled. "I was sleeping when it happened, at least at the beginning. But, I woke up. I felt it all. I know there wasn't anyone there. I couldn't hear any breathing. There wasn't any pressure from a hand on my back. No knees on the bed. No body that I could see."

"Jess—"

"Never mind, I'm not crazy!" She spun out of his arms and ran out of the room.

He grabbed the sterile gauze and followed her. Reaching out with his senses, he felt her rage. He caught up to her in her room. "Jessica, I don't think you're crazy. I know there's something really weird going on here. I can feel it."

She turned and looked at him, as if gauging him. "I know how it must sound. Some mysterious presence terrifying women to death by tattoo gun. Christ, it sounds crazy to me."

Holding out the gauze bandage, he said, "Can I put this over that tattoo? I don't want to chance any infection."

She stood still a moment longer, but then turned and lifted the back of his shirt. Her ass looked delectable, round, supple fleshed, a dimple on either side of the newly drawn tattoo. But, he dared not let his gaze linger. Already, the temptation was causing a stirring in his jeans.

He knelt behind her, and it took every ounce of his willpower not to lean forward and kiss her buttocks. Stripping the sterile covering off the bandage, he placed it

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carefully over the half-finished tattoo, and then pulled the protective covers off the sticky sides.

"There, done," he muttered and smoothed the gauze. His hand strayed, but just for an instant, then he was on his feet and ready to go looking. "You ready to go hunting?"

"Yeah, let's see if this, whatever it is, leaves any clues."

He took her hand and together they left the room. He led her to the next bedroom, smaller than the one she occupied but tidy and well-decorated in shades of green and brown. The next room was his, which she seemed very impressed with. Large, with a fireplace taking up one complete wall, bookshelves along another, and a large bay window with a seating area that dwarfed the one in her room. In the back was an en-suite that boasted both a shower and a deep soaker tub.

She circled his massive bed. A good friend of his great grandfather's had milled the beams from trees cleared from the property, and he'd built the bed itself. Bronze and green were the dominant colors, and as they searched for any signs of intruders, he noticed Jessica's eyes drifting toward the bed more than once.

"There's nothing up here," he finally said. "Weird. I can't feel or sense anything unusual at all."

"Let's check downstairs." She looked at him, and he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms again—to show her up close and personal, the bed she kept looking at.

"Before we do, I haven't had time to tell you. Ken, Officer Hanks, is going to be here about eight."

She looked around, trying to find a clock. Finally, she spotted the one on his bedside table. It read seven-fifteen.

"Why's he coming here?" she asked, glancing around nervously. "I want to check downstairs. Please."

Jonathan didn't answer her question. Instead, he took her hand and together they made their way down the stairs. He felt nothing, no chill or unease. Whatever had been there—terrorizing her—was gone. The great room was dark, and he flicked on the lights as they went. The pantry was as it should be, shelves filled, drawers closed, and the herbs hanging from the dozen or so hooks in the ceiling beam. He took her into the downstairs bathroom, smaller than the one upstairs, but the Jacuzzi bath got her to smile.

The last room was his den, or the library, as he liked to call it. It was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. He'd always thought the desk with its computer

seemed out of place. But, in the opposite corner, he'd placed an overstuffed chair and a reading light for those long nights of being alone.

"I love this room," she said, as she did a slow turn.

A rush of pride filled him. The den was where he spent the majority of his free time. "I do too." He smiled as she went to the nearest bookshelf. It had taken him years to gather the collection of books that lined the shelves, some were first editions, most weren't, but he loved them all. Even the paperbacks, shelves of them, in genres that some might say were pornographic, while the more tolerant would refer to as erotica, or romance in many cases.

"Jess, are you all right now?" He was amazed how quickly she seemed to have returned to normal.

"My back hurts, where the tattoo is," she said, as she ran a finger along one row of hardcovers. "I'm scared. I want this to stop. I'd like my life to return to normal." She turned to face him, determination written all over her—her defiant stance, the firm set of her jaw, her hard eyes. "But I won't let this destroy me."

He smiled. "Good. But, I think we better find you something to wear. If Ken shows up and you're in my pajama shirt, I'm sure his imagination, as dull as it is, will kick into gear."

"I'd like to use your shower first, if that's okay."

"Sure is. My shower is your shower," he said, and escorted her to the upstairs shower.

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Chapter Five

Following her up the stairs, Jonathan watched her hips sway seductively. The pajama shirt she had on was just long enough to cover her bottom. The sides were slit to her waist and as she moved, he caught glimpses of her fleshy hips. He clenched his fists to keep from reaching up and grabbing her. By the time they reached the top step, his attention was fixed on where her thighs disappeared under the shirttail, and his jeans had become incredibly tight.

"I guess I'll have to wear that green jogging outfit again." She headed for her room, with him trailing her like a love-struck puppy.

"I'll have a look in my closet. I might be able to find something else left by Brad. He's the nephew who so kindly supplied the jogging outfit."

"Jonathan," she began then went quiet. Blushing, she added, "Will you stay in the bathroom with me, please? I know that sounds dumb."

"Not dumb at all," he reassured her, trying to control his eagerness. There was nothing he'd like better. "Of course I'll stay with you. I'll search my closet when you're done."

"Thank you." She went into the bathroom and he again trailed her. He liked the view. His pajama shirt had never looked so good. He sat on the toilet seat and turned away, giving her as much privacy as possible.

"The towels are in the cabinet above the toilet," he said.

"You don't have to turn away. You've pretty much seen all of me there is to see."

He glanced back. His heart was in his throat when he saw her bend over to adjust the water. His cock throbbed, insistently. Her lush round ass faced him; those plump, round cheeks with the dimples he wanted to kiss and nibble. He fought that temptation, the lust-filled urge to take her in his arms. His palms itched and he had trouble catching his breath.

He must have made some strangled noise because she turned and looked at him over her shoulder. Her long black hair had parted and hung like a veil over her shoulders

and across a portion of her face. He couldn't see if she was smiling, or perhaps angry at his attention.

"You like?" she teased, answering his question.

"Yes, I like very much." He checked his watch, and groaned. Half-passed; there was no time for what he had in mind. By the mischievous look on her face, she had much the same thoughts. "In you get before I take advantage," he urged.

"I'd like you to. But not with the cops showing up, I don't want to feel rushed." She winked at him, and then reached for one of the towels. Leaning forward, she twisted her long hair into a knot and then wrapped the towel around it. Straightening, she tucked the ends in and stepped into the shower.

Jonathan sat watching her through the frosted glass shower doors, his mind going from lecherous fantasies of dragging her out and making wild passionate love, to the events of the evening. What was stalking her, tattooing her, without being seen and leaving no trace? Absentmindedly, he rubbed his crotch, and groaned again. His erection pulsed, and he knew he had to relax, somehow. He didn't want to meet Ken at the door with a raging hard-on. That'd be a sure fire way to let him know he was interested in Jessica in more than a professional way.

But he couldn't stop staring at her as she slid the soap-filled sponge over her shoulders down to the plump softness of her breasts and over her belly. Blood roared in his ears when he saw her hand disappear between her thighs. The white patch covering the tattoo was like a beacon, and he wanted—ached to touch her.

Suddenly, the shower stopped, the door opened and Jessica stepped out. She reached for a towel and a moment later, she was covered from under her arms to just below her bottom. He rose then, and went to help dry her. Rubbing his hands over the towel gently then more briskly when she made a soft purring noise, he dried her upper back and sides, and then carefully down over the curve of her ass. It didn't help diminish his state of arousal, but he loved every second of it. He got another towel, returned to his seat on the toilet, and motioned her closer. He bent and dried her calves and knees, and then her thighs. She lifted a foot and placed it on his lap, giving him a glimpse of her damp pubic hair and the treasure hidden beneath.

When he was done, and able to catch his breath, he rose and dropped the towel into the wicker hamper. Then, taking her hand, he said, "Let's see what I can find for you to wear now."

Jessica padded after him, towel clutched firmly in place. Once in his room, he released her hand and went in search of something for her. First, he searched his

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underwear drawer, discarding boxers and briefs; until he came across a bikini he'd been given as a joke a couple of Christmas' ago. They were too small, and the pale blue paisley pattern made him cringe, the tiny bikini was perfect. He tossed them to her, and went to his sweater drawer. Anything from there would go on, but all of them would be more like a dress to her.

Smiling, he remembered a deep plum colored, lightweight V-neck sweater that was long on him, and dug around until he found it. "Here, try this. It'll be really long on you, but it might just work as a sweater dress kind of."

She stood beside the bed, underwear in one hand, sweater in the other, and said, "You know, I'd almost think you've done this before—dressed a woman in your clothes, I mean."

"Fraid not. You're the first."

She pulled on the bikinis, wriggling a little extra to get them on, but he enjoyed the effort tremendously. She dragged the towel off her hair and dropped the one covering her. Unselfconsciously, she slipped the sweater over her head. It was huge on her. The sleeves hung way past her fingertips and the bottom of it ended halfway between her hips and her knees.

Jonathan smiled, and stepped in front of her. He rolled up the sleeves and pushed them up to her elbows. "With a belt, this'll look pretty damn good if I do say so myself." He bent down and kissed her on the end of the nose, and asked, "How you doing?"

"I'm okay."

"Good. Let's see what I have for a belt." He went to his closet and scanned his belts hanging from the hooks on the door. The shortest belt would have to do. Braided black leather, it might even look good.

She'd followed him to the closet, so when he turned, she was right there. He wrapped the belt around her, snugged it fairly tight, and buckled it. He stepped back and looked at her. "Hmm, you need something on your feet or you'll look like you've been raiding my closet," he grinned, "I know," he said and rushed to his drawers again. A few moments of digging through the second drawer down, he produced a pair of black wool socks. "Try these."

Jessica sat on the bed and pulled the heavy wool socks on, and let them slouch around her ankles.

He went to her, and pulled her up, then spun her slowly around so he could get a good look. He was right; she looked amazing. "Perfect," he muttered and took her in his arms. "Now then, I bet you haven't eaten since this morning, have you?"

"Well no, I was sleeping for most of it." A haunted look flashed in her eyes.

Before she could focus on the fear, he added, "How about we raid the fridge?"

"Got a brush I can borrow first?" she asked and gave her hair a shake.

"Sure, on the counter in the bathroom, help yourself." When she headed into the bathroom, he took the opportunity to rearrange the persistent lump in his jeans to a more comfortable, less obvious, position. Just in time, he pulled his hand out of his jeans.

She came out of the bathroom and again he gaped. With her hair brushed and hanging in long waves of glossy black, and the sweater clinging to her in just the right way, he couldn't take his eyes off her. The V-neck reached just deep enough to show some cleavage, but not enough to be indecent. Her long, shapely legs disappeared into oversized socks, but made her look at ease, comfortable.

"Ready to see what a bachelor's refrigerator looks like?"

"Yes, I'm starving. I didn't think that was possible." She reached for his hand, and together they left the room. Jonathan kept his senses wide open; trying to get a hint of what was terrorizing her. Still nothing, but he hoped that would change.

In the kitchen, he led her to the fridge and said, "Don't expect too much, I really don't cook for myself all that much." He opened the door and peered inside, hoping he'd be able to finagle something that would be easy to fix. He spotted the eggs and some cheese. "How about an omelet?" He pulled out the eggs and stood expectantly, reaching for the cheese.

"Perfect," she said. Looking over his shoulder, she asked, "Got any veggies in there? Carrots, lettuce, tomatoes—anything?"

"Yeah, there's a bag of salad stuff in the bottom," he replied, and took the cheese and eggs to the stove. "You get us some salad put together and I'll fix the omelets—or scrambled eggs—depending on how it all goes."

She chuckled. "My kind of man, flexible." She winked at him when he turned to see if she was making fun of him or flirting. "You've got some sad looking tomatoes in here too, mind if I use those?"

"Uh, help yourself," he managed. *She was quite a lady*, he thought as he broke eggs into a bowl and whisked them with a fork. A little olive oil in the fry pan, and the heat turned to high, he waited for it to heat up. That gave him a chance to watch her again. He'd begun to love watching her move, see the economical way she had of doing things.

"A bowl?" she asked, scanning the kitchen. She'd washed and drained the salad greens and tomatoes.

THE SCORPIO TATTOO

"To your left, eye level," Jonathan said and went back to his omelet. It felt comforting to have her there. It had been a long time since he'd allowed anyone to get that close to him. She'd done it without him even being aware of it. Maybe that was the clue. Just let it happen.

He poured the egg mixture into the frying pan and watched it sizzle while he grated a handful of cheese. It wound up scrambled as soon as he tried to flip the egg. Adding the cheese, he stirred it slowly.

Jessica rummaged in the fridge, no longer needing to ask him where things were, just searching as if she belonged. He liked that too. A bottle of salad dressing in one hand, the salad in the other, she took them to the dining table. She found plates and smaller bowls, knives and forks, and set the table.

Jonathan gave a final stir and then brought the fry pan over to the table where he scooped a portion of the cheesy eggs onto each plate. Soft mounds of egg streaked with cheese steamed and sent a lovely aroma into the air. Jessica smiled and inhaled, then licked her lips.

"Sit down, Hon, and dig in," he urged and put the fry pan back on the stove to cool before washing. Heading back to the table, he stopped at the wine cabinet and grabbed a small bottle of dry white and two glasses. "Want a glass?" he asked and poured when she nodded.

"Mm, this is lovely. You do eggs good, mister," she said after swallowing a mouthful.

"Glad you approve of my blunder." He settled into his seat. They ate in silence, with the odd moan of appreciation punctuating the meal. When they'd finished the last of the salad, a knock at the door interrupted any thought of conversation. It had to be Ken.

"Scuse me, be back in a flash," he said, and got to his feet. With his glass in hand, he went to the door and opened it to a smiling, casually dressed Ken. Blue jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt made him look more like a hick than any cop.

"Jonathan." He stepped inside and whispered, "How's she doing?"

"She's fine, or as fine as she can be under the circumstances." He looked into the dining room, hoping she hadn't heard Ken's question. Holding his finger to his lips, he said, "There's been another incident. She was here this afternoon, alone while I was at the bookstore for a few hours. When I got home, it felt weird in here. When I went upstairs, something was holding her down, and the tattoo was almost half finished." Jonathan glanced around to check the dining room. "After I got her calmed down, we searched the house and couldn't find a blessed thing."

"More of your mysterious tattooist." Ken shook his head, and Jonathan knew his friend was having a great deal of trouble believing him. "Tattoos don't just happen. There has to be some reasonable explanation."

Jonathan scowled. Ken sounded so thickheaded. "Listen, I was there. I saw her, touched her, while she was struggling to get loose from whatever held her. The tattoo is filled in more than it was in the hospital. There was no one here."

"Did you search outside the house?" Ken's voice held an accusing note.

Jonathan bristled. "No, I didn't search outside. I didn't think it would be a good idea to drag a half-naked, terrified woman around outside, or leave her alone inside where she'd just been assaulted," he replied in a hard tone.

Ken eyed him, and then raised his hands. "Okay, I got it. What do your senses say?"

"Let me buy you a beer first," Jonathan said. "We're in the dining room; we'll talk there, if that's all right? We just had dinner."

Ken shrugged and followed him into the dining room.

"Jessica," he said when they got to the table and she'd turned toward them. "You remember Ken. He's the officer who talked to you in the hospital."

Ken stepped forward and extended his hand. "Hello, Jessica. How are you? Jonathan told me there's been another attack."

"Yes. Today. This afternoon. I'm okay. Angry and frustrated, but okay." She took a breath and looked from one man to the other. "What bothers me is, why me? Why is this...this...whatever it is, coming after me?"

"Jessica," said Ken, "I wish I knew."

"Sit down, Ken," Jonathan said and went into the kitchen. Ken's preferred poison was beer. Returning a moment later, with an ice-cold bottle in hand, he offered it to the cop. "Were you able to find any similarities with the other cases? People they all knew? Places they visited? Anything?"

"Afraid not," he said and took a swallow of beer. "Ah, that really hits the spot. Thanks Jon. The only thing that's striking about these cases is that all the women look alike."

"Yes, you said that before." Jonathan returned to his seat and took a sip of his wine. "I also saw them in my visions. You sure there's nothing else?"

"We can't find anything, and believe me, we've searched. Small towns like this don't get multiple murders; at least we never have before."

THE SCORPIO TATTOO

"Officer Hanks, would it be all right if Jonathan took me to my apartment so I can pick up a few things?" Jessica asked.

"You're planning on staying here for a few days, then?" he asked her cordially.

"Yes, Jonathan's been kind enough to offer me a room for a while. I just need to collect some clothing and such."

"We did a search of your apartment earlier today. We—"

Sitting up, she glared at him. Incredulous, she asked, "You what?"

He held up his hands, as if to defend himself. "Hang on, we had to make sure that whoever, or whatever is doing this, wasn't parked there waiting for you."

Jessica settled back down and a flush spread across her cheeks. "Okay, I understand. I guess you had to check me out too?"

"Yes, we did, but we didn't find anything to worry about though, so I don't see any reason why you can't go get some things."

"Thank you, Officer."

"For crying out loud, call me Ken, will you. I'm not on duty."

"Thank you, Ken," she corrected and smiled. "I'm not under suspicion or anything, am I?"

Ken smiled. "No, ma'am, not at all. But, we had to check you out. I hope you understand."

"Yes, I do, I guess."

Ken took a long swallow of his beer. "Oh, and before I forget, I remember you saying you didn't have a key. I talked to your landlord and explained a little bit of what happened and asked if he had a spare." Digging into his pocket, his hand came out with a single key. "He said he'd change the locks on your door if you wanted."

"Thank you." She took the key and looked at it. "I'm not sure how much help changing the lock would be, but I did lose one, so maybe it's a good idea."

"Jessica, can you think of anyone who might want to do you harm?"

Jonathan watched her eyes cloud over. He sent his senses out and felt her pain. "Not here. No one knows I'm here. I left a bad relationship back east, but that was over a year ago. He doesn't have a clue where I am now, and I can't imagine he'd care. The last I saw of him, he had a new woman on his string."

"The relationship, I knew about. You had him charged with battery once, but he got off. Sounds like a real bastard. Glad you got free of him."

"Me too. It took me bloody long enough to see what kind of man he was."

"We'll check him out, just to be on the safe side. Though quietly."

Jude Mason

"I don't see how it could have anything to do with him."

"Probably doesn't, but we have to check all leads." He raised his bottle and downed the last of his beer. "And on that note, I'll be heading home. My wife is beginning to look at the mailman with that special gleam in her eye. I believe she's missing a man's company. Maybe she'll remember me."

Chuckling, Jonathan said, "I'm sure she will. Maybe I should phone her and warn her you're on your way. Give her time to shuffle him out."

"Smart ass." Ken rose, and after a slight nod to Jessica, said, "You take care. Listen to Jonathan; he's been right about these odd cases before. I'll be checking in with you, and if you need anything, at any time, please feel free to call me." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a business card. Handing it to her he added, "Home number is on the back."

Jessica pushed her chair back and accepted his card; she looked at the number and said, "Thank you. You've been wonderful."

"Right then, I'm outta here."

A few moments later, the front door closed behind the cop.

THE SCORPIO TATTOO

Chapter Six

Jonathan returned to the dining room and together they cleared up the table, loading the dishes into his rarely used dishwasher. When he noticed her yawn, he said, "You're tired. You missed a night's sleep and today's wasn't exactly restful. Tomorrow is early enough to worry about getting some clothes for you. How about we call it a night?"

Apprehensively, she said, "I'm not sure I want to go to bed. It...it... Whatever this thing is, well, it comes for me when I'm asleep."

"But, you were alone when it happened before. I'll be here," he said. He went to her, and felt a rush of passion as he held his arms wide. There was no hesitation. She entered his arms and draped hers around his neck. Burying her face in his neck, she sighed and the tension seemed to drain from her. He felt the muscles along her back loosen, and her shoulders sag.

"I know I'm not alone." Her muffled words barely reached him. "I think that's the only thing keeping me sane."

He held her close, her breath warming his chest. His heart raced. He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled her scent. "Come on, let's get you to bed. I won't let anything happen. I'll be right here."

"All right," she said, and with her hand in his, she followed him out of the kitchen.

He flicked off lights as they headed to the stairs and made sure both doors were locked before they headed up. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. "I know you told Ken you were all right, and you've been putting on one hell of a brave front for me, but tell me honestly, how are you?"

She looked up at him, and for an instant, the brave shield she'd put up wavered. A corner of her mouth trembled and he thought he saw tears rimming her eyes. She blinked and ran a hand over her face. "I'm not going to lie to you. I'm scared out of my wits. I thought it was over. I thought being here—that whatever it was, wouldn't be able to find me here. I guess I was wrong. I'm not safe anywhere, am I?"

They'd reached the top of the stairs and he spun her to face him. With his hands on her shoulders, he looked down at her and said, "Listen, Jess, I've dealt with some pretty weird cases. Nothing exactly like this, but I'm sure I can get to the bottom of what's happening to you. You'll just have to trust me."

Jessica lowered her head, and nodded. "I do." When she looked at him again, there was a haunted, pained look in her eyes that made his heart ache. "You've only heard a little about why I moved here. Ken mentioned a battery charge against my ex that went nowhere."

"Yes, but—"

She pressed a finger to his lips silencing him. "Listen to me, please." She removed her finger and stroked his face. "You saved me from... Hell, I don't even know what you saved me from. I do trust you. Remember, you're my knight in shining armor. The trouble is, my mind tells me to run and keep running until I can't run anymore. But I know that's not going to stop this...thing, is it?"

He shook his head, no. He wanted to pull her close again, but stopped himself. She needed to say whatever this was and he wanted to understand her. His feelings for her were growing, and he wanted to know everything about her.

"The man I was with, he liked to make me scream. He was a sadist. By the time I figured out that he was never going to change, didn't want to change, he'd pretty much taken over my life. I had lost all my friends, my family was at the other end of the country, and I was alone."

Jonathan couldn't help himself. He pulled her into his arms and held her close while she continued to talk. His heart ached so much it felt as if it was going to burst.

"I was with him for almost a year. At first, I thought I could learn to accept his ways. Learn to like what he did." She took a deep breath and let it out in a long ragged sigh. "When I realized that just wasn't going to happen, I'd lost so much self-esteem. It took me awhile before I got up the courage to call the cops. Even that took some outside influence. He'd found another woman who liked what he did in just the right way. I found them—"

"Jessica," he whispered. "You don't have to tell me all this."

Pulling back just enough to look up into his face, she said, "I know, but I want you to understand what trusting you means to me."

"Take a breather," he encouraged and added, "let me get you to bed, then you can talk all you want. I'll light a fire."

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She nodded and he took her hand. Looking deeply into her eyes, he raised her hand and very gently turned it so the palm was up. He pressed his lips to her palm. Then, before she could say or do anything, he guided her toward her room.

She stopped at the door.

Jonathan reached out with his senses, trying to feel if there was anything for her to be concerned about. Warmth, quiet, nothing unusual, but he could sense the memory was with her.

"Your room, please," she whispered.

He turned and without a word, took her to his room. A flick of the switch bathed the room in a bright wash of light. "I'll find you something to wear, just a sec," he said and went to his dresser. He rummaged around for a moment, and came up with a white cotton tank he figured would be long enough. Holding it up, he said, "Instant nightgown. What do you think?"

A smile played at the corners of her mouth and she reached out for the makeshift gown. "Bit short don't you think," she said, holding it up against herself. The hem came to just below her crotch.

"Uh, yeah, but it's all I could come up with on short notice," he countered playfully. "I like it, if that counts."

She managed a soft chuckle. "Yeah, it does."

His smile broadened. "You get into that and I'll light a fire. Sound fair?"

"Yes, please. I've always dreamed of having a fireplace in my bedroom." She turned away and he watched her fumbling at her chest, unfastening buttons no doubt, and he moved to the fireplace.

"You can thank the ancestor who designed this place. Although, back then, these fireplaces were the only heat this place had, no such thing as central heating or furnaces." He kept a supply of wood ready in the woodbin beside the fireplace. He dug around until he found enough kindling to ensure it'd start smoothly, crumpled up a couple of pages of last week's newspaper and set it in the wood cradle. He laced the cedar kindling across the paper, and then added a few small pieces of well-dried maple. All the while, he kept hearing the rustle of her undressing and getting into the tank top he'd found. He was determined not to turn around, not to watch her, but the lust built and he was ready to chew nails by the time he'd put a match to the paper.

"Mmm, nice."

Her voice came from right behind him. He let his senses run free and felt her there. He shuddered when he encountered a knot of excitement in her. Deep in her belly,

another fire kindled much like the one he'd just set alight. She was aware of it, yet was unable to let it flare up—afraid perhaps that she was moving too fast. He felt her need to slow things down and he was determined to give her the time she needed.

"Why thank you, ma'am," he joked and turned around. His breath caught. She looked incredible. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Clearing his throat, he tried again, "Y--you're beautiful."

She blushed. The tank top fit her like a second skin; its low-cut U-neck barely covered her nipples. It didn't matter though, because they were clearly visible through the material, as puckered and erect as they had been when they'd made love. The hem of the shirt was just long enough to keep her decent, but he was below her. There was no escaping the sight of those few tendrils of black curls. Nor would he have wished there to be.

A stirring in his jeans, and the sudden moan he hadn't realized was coming, was sure to let her know how he felt.

"Thank you," she said, and crossed her arms under her breasts.

"You cold?" he asked, rising to retrieve his robe.

"No, the fire will get going soon. I'm fine."

"Why don't you climb into bed? I'll crawl in and lay with you."

"Okay," she murmured and turned her back on him.

The rear view was as good as the frontal. Soft, lush curves and long, shapely legs were a major weakness of his, and she had them in abundance. Her shoulders were a little wider than most women's, making her waist appear even slimmer. Her flared hips were perfectly wide and her ass taut. And, from memory, he knew it was soft and she loved to have it stroked.

He was so lost in thought, that at first he didn't realize she'd climbed onto the bed and was sitting watching him. It wasn't until he sensed her passion rise that he focused on her. He was sure he blushed then.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said, and smiled.

He thought, *what the hell*, and asked, "You sure you want to know?"

Cocking her head to the side, she looked at him as if judging what might happen. "Yeah, I want to know."

"I was just remembering how your ass felt in my hands. Thinking about how sexy you are. Wishing you were in my bedroom under different circumstances, so I could ravish you." He held his breath. Had he said too much? He'd never opened up so fast with a woman, and she was so fragile at the moment.

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When she didn't respond right away, he cursed himself for a fool. How could she possibly care for him? She was still terrified from the attacks. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I shouldn't have said that." He rose and headed toward the bed. He was angry with himself for his behavior, frustrated because he was falling for the woman and couldn't say so—not yet, not until she was safe again.

"Jonathan," she said, then in a quiet, timid voice added, "thank you."

He gaped at her. "What?" he managed.

Jessica smiled, one of those tiny smiles women have that mystifies men, and said, "Thank you. You don't have any idea how long it's been since a man has said something like that to me. I'd begun to think I wasn't sexy enough to find someone."

He blinked, shocked. "You? Not sexy?" He was flabbergasted. How could she think that? "My God, woman, you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen."

She smiled, and then laughed very softly. He sat beside her, and curled an arm around her waist. She turned to face him, and a moment later, he said, "You really are sexy you know?"

"You make me feel that way. Another reason to thank you."

"Get into bed. I can feel you shivering." She smiled at him before turning over, and on hands and knees, made her way to the top of his bed. His eyes remained fixed on her ass, and he knew she was aware of it. She took her time, giving her bottom a little extra sway, as she crawled away from him. He gave her luscious ass a light slap. She yelped, and wiggled an extra time or two, tormenting him.

He took a deep breath before getting up to turn out the lights. He was glad he'd be walking away from her; his cock was hard enough to drill a hole through his jeans. Unashamed of his condition, he still didn't want to shock Jessica or frighten her in any way.

Flipping off the light, the room was instantly shrouded in soft shadows, as the fire became the only light. It hadn't had time to flare up into a blaze, so when he walked back to his bed, he was pretty sure his condition wouldn't be threateningly prominent.

"Come into the bed with me," she said when he was near.

He picked up the sweater she'd worn and tossed it over the back of the nearest chair, then without any ceremony, took off his shirt and jeans. He left his under shorts on, but tossed his socks in the hamper just inside the bathroom door. This time, there was no way he could hide his erection when he approached the bed and he didn't try. He shivered, but not with any chill, as the tip of his cock pressed into the pre-come soaked

front of his shorts. Without looking down, he knew the spot must show through and could only hope the dim lighting hid it from her.

"You're sure?" he asked, praying she would be. He didn't want to push her, the morning's tryst had been natural and both had just let it happen. This evening, however, might be different. She'd suffered another attack and he feared she might be feeling more vulnerable.

"Yes, I'm sure. I want to finish telling you about myself," she said, and then looking him in the eye, added, "We'll see what happens after that."

"Fair enough," he replied as he climbed onto the foot of the bed. With what he hoped was a seductive smile, he crawled toward her, flexing his shoulder muscles and straining to play the tease, just as she had done. He nestled in beside her, and after fluffing his pillow and hers; he pulled the covers over them both. His arm went around her easily, and he pulled her close.

She snuggled in closer; head on his shoulder, and rested a hand on his belly. "Frank Thompson, that was his name, only he liked me to call him Sir Frank. That should have been enough warning for me, but no, I had to let him nearly kill me, and then cheat on me before I clued in. Talk about stupid."

"I can't see you being stupid, naive maybe."

"Well, I felt stupid. After being told I was no good and no decent man would ever want a whore like me, I got so I believed it."

She shuddered against him and he tightened his arm. He wanted to protect her, and was afraid he couldn't. "Believe me when I say, he must have been the stupid one. You've already got one man who wants you."

"He was awful. When I caught him with the other woman, he beat me until I was unconscious. When I came to, that's when I knew I was in trouble and I called the cops. They took him in, but later said there wasn't enough evidence to hold him. What the hell else did they need? They had pictures of me with all the bruises he'd left. He knocked a tooth out and both eyes were swollen shut." She pulled in tight to Jonathan and shuddered. "I was sure he'd kill me when he came home."

"Whoa, take a breath," Jonathan said, as her words spilled out. It was like she was rushing to get it all out, needing to rid herself of the memory of what that monster had done. Every word was like a knife twisting in his gut. "You're here now; he won't ever touch you again." Of that, he was sure.

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"I know—it's like a cesspool inside me, even after all this time. I let him get away with the abuse, and then when I finally had the courage to charge him, he gets off. I know why, and it stinks. His baby brother's a cop and got him off."

"Shit!" Jonathan muttered. He'd heard of incidents where that happened, but had never been close to anyone who'd been burned like she had. He made a mental note to mention it to Ken. Maybe the cop could look into it and do something.

"But, it gave me the push I needed to get out. And that's a good thing." Her voice grew stronger as she continued talking, and he felt her body stiffen when she said it. "I'll get through this, somehow, and make a life here. I'm determined to succeed, no matter what that loser, Sir Frank Thompson used to tell me," she spat out his name and the mock title he'd given himself. She snuggled in closer and kissed his chest. "I guess I really needed someone who'd listen, huh?"

Jonathan smiled at her courage and again his heart went out to her. He was falling hard for her. "Yeah, you'll make it. I'll say one thing, you've got guts and I'll do everything I can to help you."

She pushed away from him, and for a moment, he thought he'd said something wrong. But, when she turned and looked into his eyes, there wasn't any anger there. "Make love to me. I need you."

Jonathan chuckled softly, "I need you to, but I didn't want to push. I've been hoping to find a way all evening."

The most attractive blush colored her cheeks then traveled down her neck and chest; her shoulders turned a lovely shade of pink.

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead, and then moved down to her shoulder. Brushing her warm flesh with his nose, he inhaled and instantly became intoxicated by her scent. Scooting around in front of her, he pushed the covers to the foot of the bed and knelt, looking up at her. In a husky voice, he said, "Lay back, and let me make love to you."

"Take off your shorts," she murmured gazing down at the bulge he'd tried to ignore.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied playfully. He rose up onto his knees and hooked his fingers into the waistband, pushing them slowly down. The elastic slid down his belly, and his erection pushed out even more, but when he slid them down farther, he ended up forcing his cock down as well. A little further, and his cock sprang free, and he sighed with relief at the freedom. He sat and pulled the underpants off, then resumed his kneeling posture. "Now, please lie back. I want to enjoy you this time around."

Her blush deepened but she did as he asked. The firelight made the white tank top seem even whiter and her skin had a glow that beckoned him. He took hold of her ankles, and eased them apart, placing one foot on each side of him. Her sex lay bare and enticing. It took his last iota of strength to keep from simply diving in and devouring her. That would come soon enough, he mused.

Slow and easy, he reminded himself as he raised one of her feet to his mouth. He looked into her eyes, and kissed her instep. She blinked but didn't pull away as he kissed and licked his way around her ankle, then slowly up her calf. When he reached her knee, she was writhing and the smell of her excitement was driving him crazy.

He lowered her foot to the bed and took the other in hand. She shivered, and watched him as his mouth and tongue worked their magic. Her inner thigh muscles quivered while he licked and nibbled around her knee. And, when he slid his fingers behind her leg, she groaned.

With her legs splayed around him, he had access, but didn't want to scare her by being too abrupt. So, when he returned her foot to the bed, he carefully slipped his hands along her thighs to the hem of his tank. Leaned forward as he was, her pussy lay tantalizingly close. When her fingers threaded into his hair and gripped firmly, he at first thought she was going to hold him at bay. But an instant later, she'd pulled his mouth to her sex.

He fought her direction; wanting to take his time, linger over a meal best dined on slowly. But, she would have none of it. When he slid his tongue along the soft, wet folds of her cunt, she went rigid. For a few seconds, she stayed completely still. He was sure she didn't even take a breath. Suddenly, her hips shot upward. His mouth drove into her, his teeth ground into the hood of her clit and she screamed.

Instantly, he pulled away, afraid he'd hurt her, or scared her. Her hands reached out, searching for him, and he nuzzled one. "Jessica, put your hands behind your head and relax, if you can," he murmured.

She whimpered, but a moment later, her hands were no longer a problem and he resumed his slow, torturous teasing. He kissed her inner thighs and brushed the coal black tendrils of her pussy fur, before he kissed her there. But, he didn't linger, instead dragged himself up so he could pamper her breasts. He didn't even remove the tank top, just bit and suckled and nipped away at the tasty buds until Jessica's continual moans told him he'd better move on or she was liable to strangle him. He nipped at the underside of each breast, rubbing his face over each abundant mound before moving on.

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Reaching down, he took the hem of the tank top and eased it up, baring her belly. Her navel was his next target. With wetted tongue, he circled the indented knot then he plunged in.

"Damn you," she cried, and pushed down on the top of his head. Her voice was rough, her meaning clear.

Jonathan relented and slid down to her pussy. Yet, he still didn't just dive in, but instead used the flat of his tongue to lap at her. From the bottom of her hole to the knot of her clit, he reveled in the taste and texture of her. He took her labia into his mouth, and suckled. He found her clit with ease and flicked its tiny head with the tip of his tongue. When her hips vibrated, he pushed a finger inside and stirred her. The squishy sound his finger made inside her made his mouth water.

He slid forward on his belly and groaned as his cock dragged across the sheet. Until that moment, he hadn't been aware of how turned on he'd become. He was able to ignore his hunger, while he pleased her. For a moment, he had to stop and grit his teeth to keep from coming. Intense pleasure mounted and brimmed near the surface of his willpower.

Finally, he could move. Her pussy was there, succulent and wet, just waiting for him. He licked the inside of her thighs, brushing her clit with his nose and smiling when she groaned. Then he took the tiny nubbin between his lips and flicked his tongue across its tip. Her body went into spasms. He wound his arms under her thighs and over her belly, and held her in place. Her juices gushed against his chin, and his neck was suddenly wet with it. A keening cry of pleasure filled the room as her climax flowed over her. She shuddered and shook, then drove her cunt against his mouth.

He rubbed his face in her, sucking and licking as much of her as he could while she thrashed beneath him. He'd never experienced a woman who let loose as she did, and he loved every second of her release.

Finally, she fell back on the bed, panting. A moment later, peering down at him, she gasped, "My God, what did you do to me?"

When he lifted his face from her pussy, the wetness covering his face felt suddenly cool. He smiled with what he hoped was an innocent face, and said, "Enjoying you. That's what I wanted to do."

She shook her head, and said, "I want to feel you inside me."

He kissed her just above her clit and smiled when she shivered. Then, he rose up on his hands and knees and crawled up her body. His cock swung beneath him, but only

for a few seconds. When he straddled her legs, the tip brushed her inner thigh and he couldn't stop a soft groan.

The smile she gave him did little to ease his torment. In fact, knowing how much she was enjoying his discomfort only added to it.

"I could drive you crazy now, couldn't I?" Her voice had taken on a deep sultry tone. She writhed her hips and lifted one knee, which brushed her thigh against his erection.

"You already are," he groaned huskily, and pressed himself against her warm flesh.

"Good, then I won't have to hold off any longer," she chuckled and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Fuck me now."

She eased her legs apart even more, offering the warm wetness between her legs to him. The tip of his cock brushed her curls, then nestled itself between her sopping folds. His heart thumped so hard against his chest it hurt. He shifted his hips, and felt her labia wrap around his glans. The sweet torture was exquisite and he ached to lunge forward. His legs trembled, which sent tiny jolts of pleasure through his cock as it moved between her velvet smooth lips. "Ask for it," he groaned and raised himself onto his hands. With his arms rigid, he gained a modicum of control over himself, but he knew it wouldn't—couldn't—last.

"I want you to slide your cock into me and fuck me senseless," she growled.

That was all he could take. With a groan of pleasure, he sank into her silken glove. She tightened her inner muscles around him, making his entrance a breathtaking journey. Their first lovemaking had been fast and furious; this time it was enough to curl his toes. When he hit bottom, he sighed and held still, basking in the warm wetness that was her. She had a way of milking him that wouldn't let him relax. He was constantly fighting to hold his climax at bay, and felt as if he was losing the internal war with every breath.

"Fuck me senseless," she purred in his ear.

"I'm the one who's senseless," he breathed, but with his last ounce of determination, he pulled out. Just the tip of his cock remained nestled inside her. And she tormented it, and him, with the fluttering play of her labia on him. A deep breathe for courage, and he lunged ahead.

Both of them groaned, and he took hope that he'd be able to last long enough to take her with him. Making fists, he dug his nails into his palms, allowing the slight pain

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to distract him from her teasing pussy torture. It worked, and he didn't waste any time reveling in it.

His balls churned. He was close. Too close to hold off much longer. But, from the way she held him, and her guttural sobs, he was sure she was with him. She frantically grabbed at his sides, scratching his ass when he slowed his thrusts. He refused to speed up, knowing that if he did, he'd shoot within a couple of strokes. Finally, when he'd regained a tiny morsel of control, he pounded into her with an ever-increasing speed. His pelvis slapped hers, and he had a passing concern that she'd bear bruises from the force. Soon enough even that thought was gone as his control slipped. He hammered at her, his cock nudging her cervix with each battering-ram lunge. She'd wrapped her sleek legs around him, and when he felt them tense, he went wild.

"Yes," she screamed and he watched her eyes roll up into her head as her orgasm ripped through her. Her cunt gripped and pulsed around his aching shaft. Her nails dug into his upper arms, and that sensation was what finally took him too far. Blood roared in his ears, and the pressure built inside him, until there was nothing left but the ecstasy of its release. He cried out, wordlessly, and exploded. His cock shot out a stream of come, paralyzing him for that much too brief instant in time. He reveled in the sheer bliss of climax—but only for a moment, and then he had to withdraw and plunge into her again. Four, five, six hard thrusts and he was spent, and could think again, and see that she was relaxed and watching him.

He collapsed onto her, unable to do anything but pant and twitch. His prick continued to pulse, and tiny jolts of pleasure made him shiver.

"Mister, you can fuck me senseless any time you want." She tightened her arms and legs around him, holding him against her. "Thank you."

When his breath returned, he rose onto his elbows and looked down at her. He pushed a lock of hair off her face and kissed the tip of her nose. "Jessica, you definitely don't have to thank me." He kissed her again, and moved down to her lips. Softly, he ran his tongue over her mouth, the taste of her still strong on him. "You're amazing." His voice wasn't even a whisper, and he didn't know if she'd heard, but it didn't matter.

He eased off her and lay beside her, basking in the after-glow of release. He slid his arm under her, and pulled her close. "I want you to get some sleep now." He kissed her again. "I'm going to get a glass of orange juice and sit up for awhile."

She tensed, and asked, "You're not leaving are you?"

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"Just long enough to get a glass of juice," he assured her. "Less than two minutes, I'll leave the door open so you'll be able to hear me, and I'll hear you, and I'll be right back. I'm not leaving you alone tonight."

"Okay." She smiled at him, and for a moment snuggled against him. She kissed his chest, and whispered barely loud enough for him to hear, "You're pretty amazing too."

He slid his finger under her chin and lifted her face. "We're a team then, aren't we?" He kissed her softly on the lips. "I'll be back before you know it." He pulled his arm free and with a sigh, he got up and went for his robe.

On his way out, he turned and smiled, blew her a kiss, and then hurried to the kitchen. He filled a large mug with orange juice and headed back upstairs. It'd been a long time since he'd cared for someone. Cared as deeply as he was beginning to for Jessica, and those thoughts filled his mind when he entered the room. She was sitting up, an apprehensive look on her face. That faded as soon as he walked in.

He went to the small seating area by the fireplace and put his glass down. Then he approached the bed. "I'm here sweetness, you just settle down and I promise I won't go anywhere. I'm just going to sit up and read for a little while." He pulled the covers back and urged her to slip down. When she did, he covered her up to the chin. Bending over, he kissed her, and rubbed his nose against hers. "I'll come to bed soon."

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Chapter Seven

Jonathan sat in his favorite chair by the fire and looked into its brilliant depths. He felt drained, but alive and knew he wouldn't sleep if he didn't unwind a little. He wanted to read, but his thoughts were too jumbled to concentrate. The feeling he'd had when he came home earlier had been like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Raw, rough, cold, and angry, but what was it? Still the big question was: how could he stop whatever was tattooing her from reaching Jessica again?

He drank his orange juice and allowed his senses to reach out, blanketing the bedroom with inquisitive feelers for the next hour or so. The fire roared, then slowly waned as his thoughts went first in one direction and then another. What did the three women have in common, besides looks? That couldn't be all that connected them—or could it?

Behind him, he heard Jessica moan and roll over in her sleep. He watched her for a few moments, his mind going in yet another direction. He'd never grown so fond of a woman so quickly before. Yet, he couldn't find a reason in the world to want to stop it. She was everything he'd been looking for, and more. Smart, able to adapt to what was happening around her, and she didn't seem to find his mental abilities too weird. She accepted him for what he was and what he could do. That in itself was something he'd longed to find.

He closed his eyes for just a moment.

Some time later, he woke with a start and realized he'd dozed. The fire hissed, its flame dimmed but still cast light and warmth toward him. Yet, a chill reached out to him.

He glanced toward the bed and saw Jessica sleeping soundly, sprawled on her belly. She'd stuffed her arms under the pillow, cradling her head, and the covers had slipped down to reveal the white bandage covering the half-finished tattoo at the base of her spine. A tender longing filled him. Did she feel the same for him? Could he expect someone like her to care for him? She'd been through so much.

The blanket stirred, fluttered.

Shocked, he rose and took a step toward the bed. A wall of frigid air that took his breath slammed into him with a fury that gripped his heart with fear. He reached out with his senses. Heart-wrenching pain gripped him, then came a longing that brought tears to his eyes, and finally, an all-consuming rage at a loss that was too much to be borne. Whatever had entered the room was alone and longed for the love that had escaped it somehow, somewhere, ages ago, leaving only an anger-filled solitude.

Jonathan turned his chair to face the bed. Settling back down, he forced himself to relax. If he could just contain the fear and excitement racing through him, and calm his mind, he might just be able to feel more.

Behind him, Jessica stirred, but he was sure she was still asleep. He'd feel her if she woke, of that he was certain.

"Elizabeth, my Elizabeth," a raspy male voice whispered. "You waited for me. I knew you would."

A shape took form, translucent, shimmering, but it was obviously a man. Tall and dark, his hair was unkempt and hung in straggly waves to his shoulders. The jacket he wore was black and matched his slacks, but the style was ancient. Ruffles peeked out from his cuffs and when the apparition turned, Jonathan saw more framing his throat.

A look of agony fixed on him. Eyes sunken into a face that, although may have once been thought of as handsome, were now gaunt with pain-filled sorrow, peered toward him. "She's mine," the unsubstantial visitor growled. His voice was deep and guttural, as if he hadn't used it for too long.

"She's her own woman," countered Jonathan, and he was again awash in a chill.

"What manner of man are you that you see me?"

The apparition turned from Jessica and floated toward Jonathan. That's when he saw the device in the man's right hand, an archaic tattoo gun. "I have a sensing ability that others don't." He settled in his chair, steeping his fingers, and waited until the apparition came close. *Calm*, he cried to himself; *don't let your emotions go*. "I saw Jessica in a dream. That's her name, by the way, not Elizabeth."

A low, anguished moan came from the shadowy man in front of him. It seemed the longer he was present the more easily Jonathan could see him. He became more solid, or perhaps more in tune with the present.

"But, she's exactly like my Elizabeth," he wept. His shoulders sagged and the tattoo gun hung from a limp hand. "My Elizabeth, I loved her." His voice shook and had taken on a distant tone, as if he was lost in memories.

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"Jessica isn't the first one you thought was your Elizabeth. You beat one woman, and scared her and another to death," Jonathan accused.

The man gazed at him, eyes wide and mouth agape, dumbfounded for a moment. "I never beat her. She came to me beaten by another. I could never lay a violent hand to Elizabeth, never."

It was Jonathan's turn to be surprised. The cops had apparently not looked into that possibility. "Who are you?" he asked, not sure if he'd get an answer or lose contact with the specter.

"I'm Nathaniel Williamson." He puffed his chest out and a faint smile turned the corners of his mouth up. The name had obviously meant something at one time, but to Jonathan, it was just a name. "And she," nodding toward the sleeping Jessica, "is my Elizabeth." He sounded determined to believe what he'd said.

"Two women died after you thought they were Elizabeth. What happened?" Jonathan repeated, trying to get the apparition to open up. The chill air around him grew colder.

Nathaniel sank into the other chair, just as naturally as if he'd lived there forever. It made Jonathan a little uncomfortable to have him that close, especially with the tattoo gun still in his hand. He faced Jessica; the specter gazed into the fire.

"What year is it now?"

"It's 2006, spring time."

Again, he got that far-away look and a tormented smile tugged at his mouth. "A hundred years has passed since I saw my Elizabeth." He looked squarely at Jonathan, "Since she died."

"Tell me what happened," Jonathan urged, knowing it might be the only way he could get to the bottom of what had been happening. It would also keep Nathaniel away from Jess.

"What happened?" He shuddered, and seemed to solidify a little more. "What happened?" The air warmed as Nathaniel crossed his legs and began, "Elizabeth. I met her in an asylum not far from here." He looked back at the fire, "Yes, I was in an asylum. I was told I was insane because I wouldn't cooperate with my families, or rather my father's wishes. He had money, and I was the only heir. He'd chosen a wife for me, and I'd refused to marry her. His solution, threaten me with disinheritance and the asylum." He looked deep into the fire and shivered. The memories must have been horrid.

"But, that's where I met Elizabeth. She was lovely, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her raven hair always piled on top of her head. Her neck bare and the dress she

wore was scandalous. Bright red it was, and with a bodice cut so low, her bosom threatened to pop right out. She even had the audacity to show her legs off when she danced, and dance she did. All the time to some secret music no one else could hear, and with whoever asked her. I asked her a lot. I wanted her from the moment I first saw her." He got quiet then, lost in his own world of memories while Jonathan sat quietly, watching him. *What a sad and lonely afterlife the man must have led.*

Nathanial began to speak again, as if in a dream, "In that hell-hole of a prison, Elizabeth and I loved each other. She was well-schooled in the art of lovemaking. No shy virgin, that's for sure. That's what brought her to that dreaded place. Women were supposed to be averse to the pleasures of the flesh. Yet, she roused feelings in me I never knew existed." Again, he stopped and seemed lost in thought. "That first night, I saw her tattoo and each night after. It was like a magnet drawing me to her. Always hungering for her, I couldn't concentrate on anything but seeing her, and touching her. I'd close my eyes sometime and see that ghostly white tattoo on her back, and—" His voice trailed off. He had a dazed look on his face, and was obviously lost in memories of pleasures past.

When he went on, there was bitterness in his voice, and an added chilled breeze curled around them both. "They didn't seem to care that men and women roomed together. There was no treatment, other than the occasional beating or series of tortures. Those perverted doctors called it therapy, but no one was ever healed. In fact, it made anyone who went through it worse.

"Elizabeth and I were lucky—for a while." He slumped down the chair, shoulders curling around his chest. He seemed to shrivel into a tight ball of anger. He glared at Jonathan, and it was then that he saw the apparition's eyes for the first time. Deep-set, his brows like black wings across his forehead. A fire shone from those eyes, bright and fearsome, and aimed toward him. "They waited until we were asleep in each others arms. We'd taken to sleeping in my room; if you can call a six-by-six curtained off area a room. A group of thugs, the orderlies they were called, they dragged her off me and out of the room before I could do anything but scramble out of bed after her. It didn't matter; they just beat me into submission. She screamed, and screamed, dear God she screamed and—" His hands went to the sides of his head, over his ears, as if he was still trying to shut out the sounds of her screams. "I couldn't—"

Such anguish surrounded Jonathan that he honestly didn't know what or if he should say something or let the poor wretch wallow in his grief. He reached out his hand, but hastily drew it back, realizing there was nothing to touch.

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Jessica stirred. He felt her dreams becoming dark, troublesome, as if in some way what Nathaniel was telling had reached her. He wanted to go to her, soothe her into a less troubled slumber. But, he didn't dare move or draw attention to her. He watched her; she twitched a few times and moaned very softly, only to become quiet again.

Beside him, Nathaniel shook himself, and after a quick look at both Jessica and himself, he said, "They had her all that day and long into the next night. I tried to get to her, to rescue her from those bastards and their torturous methods. All that day, I lurked in the shadows, trying to get close to the door where I knew they'd taken her. Twice, they beat me unconscious. When I came to the second time, I was strapped to my bed—our bed." He was quiet then.

Jonathan thought he'd have to urge him on, but suddenly he realized the apparition was sobbing. His shoulders shook, and a soft mewling sound reached him. His senses reeled. Grief, deeper than any he'd ever experienced before, tore at his heart. He thought that Nathaniel wouldn't speak again, but suddenly, he roared and sprang to his feet.

The flames in the fireplace billowed as cold air blew around the room. "They brought her back near dawn. She was nearly unrecognizable. They'd done unspeakable things, and her mind was truly gone. She gibbered and drooled when the two great lummoxes dropped her on the bed. Her eyes were swollen nearly shut from the beatings. Bruises covered her body, and her lovely black mane of hair was straggly, and big patches had had been torn out." Another sob took his speech and for a moment, all he could do was let the grief shake him.

Jonathan had never felt so helpless, so useless. The man had lost everything he loved. But, why was he still here? That question nagged at him, and wouldn't let go.

"They let me loose for breakfast. Elizabeth had fallen unconscious. I nursed her. Fed her and cleaned her wounds—she had so many wounds. They must have used some kind of branding rods; she was covered in deep burns. When she regained her senses, or what was left of them, she...she—" He sat forward, his elbows on his knees. He'd become solid, or looked it as he spoke, so Jonathan could almost believe he was there. He glared into the fire and then at Jonathan, and roared, "She called me crazy for caring about what happened—an idiot for caring about her. Said she was a whore who was better off dead, and anyone who'd care about her was as useless as she was."

Jumping to his feet, he strode purposely toward the bed, the tattoo gun still in his hand. "She's Elizabeth. My Elizabeth. Not the whore or the witch who drove me to—"

He spun his head and glowered at Jonathan. His face was twisted with hatred. "Oh, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

Jonathan was caught totally off-guard. Nathaniel had gone from soft-spoken and docile to raving, in a heartbeat. Desperately, he searched for a way to calm the irate specter, and came up with, "All I want is to help Jessica."

It worked. The chill that had suddenly wrapped around him in the man's rage lost its bite. Nathaniel moaned. His head dropped back, and Jonathan saw his torment. He wanted her, had searched and waited for her for generations. "Elizabeth," he breathed.

He looked at the slumbering figure, and began speaking again, "Her change drove me mad with pain when she'd been returned to me. Something inside her had broken, and she'd become hateful, not only to me, but also to anyone who tried to get close to her. She cursed me, vilely, and—"

Jonathan left him in silence, but his curiosity was making him crazy. What had happened to drive the poor man to this? He'd been through such a hard life, but something had driven him even into his death and afterlife. Again, he wanted to comfort the man. His hands itched to touch the tormented soul.

"She started going willingly with the thugs that had dragged her off. And she made horrible remarks when she'd go. I began to doubt my manhood, and then I lost hope. One night, unable to sleep as she'd gone off with one of her men, I realized that without her, I had nothing to live for. My family had disowned me, sentencing me to a life of misery. I had no hope of ever getting out of that hellhole. The noise, the stench, and the constant torment from Elizabeth, did me in. There were blankets and sheets. I tore them into long strips. That night, I found the courage. The railing around the stairs was sturdy and my knots were good." He turned and faced Jonathan full on, and in a dead voice said, "Hanging isn't the worst way to die."

Shocked, Jonathan whispered, "My God. You must have loved her greatly."

Nathaniel cocked his head, and said, "She was everything. My life had meaning with her. I swore I'd find Elizabeth again, somewhere, somehow."

"And you think Jessica is her, or a reincarnation of her."

He looked at the woman on the bed, who at that moment stirred as if in a dream. "But of course. She's exactly as Elizabeth was. The other two, well they seemed to be, but Jessica, Elizabeth, she's... The only thing missing is the tattoo."

"But the two women who died, you can't just ignore what you did."

"The one who came to me beaten, I should have known she wasn't Elizabeth. She begged me to end it. She'd had all she could take of her life. Her man was a beast and

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should have been the one exterminated." His voice was hard with distaste. "When she died, she smiled at me. I felt her go, and she was at peace, and happy for the first time in a very long time. I don't regret what I did."

"I had no idea," said Jonathan. "And the other?"

"I pray for that one." He turned away and his shoulders hunched. In an anguished voice he went on, "When I first spotted her, she was dancing in an establishment that reminded me very much of the sporting clubs men frequented in my time. She was sought after by the men, and often went with them. She found that she'd contracted some horrible disease that would end her life soon, and spent much of her time frozen with terror at the prospect of dying. In some ways, I think I may have saved her from a long, lingering death. But she was so terrified, yet I had to try, had to have her." He turned and looked into Jonathan's eyes. Tears ran down the apparition's face. The chill in the air dissipated, and was replaced by the warm glow from the fire. "She died quickly. At least, I gave her that."

"And now you think you've found your Elizabeth, in Jessica?" Jonathan asked gently.

Nathanial glanced at the bed, and with all the longing of a hundred-year wait, he replied, "Yes, she's my Elizabeth."

"But, she's Jessica Crane now."

"Crane, that was—" Nathanial stopped and glanced toward the bed, then said, "She's awake." In an instant, he vanished.

Jonathan looked her way, or so he thought, only to see an empty bed. He spun in search of her, and found her slinking toward the door. He extended his senses and found himself lost in a sea of terror. She'd been listening it seemed to them for some time, and had let her fear overwhelm her.

"Jess," he called softly and rose to go to her. He reached her just as she got to the bathroom door. What she thought she could do in there, he had no idea, and he doubted she did either. All he sensed was terror and her desire to get away.

He took hold of her arm and drew her close. She was trembling. "Jess, sweetheart," he whispered, his face against her hair. "It's all right, I promise you. I'm not crazy either." He wondered if she'd seen Nathanial or just heard him talking and listening to nothing.

For a moment, she fought him, her fear urging her to get out. But his softly spoken words and the gentle way he held her, got through. Finally, she looked up at him,

and in a throaty whisper, asked, "Something's here, isn't there? I can feel something; it's cold, then hot, and then cold. What's going on? Who's Elizabeth?"

He kissed her on the tip of her nose, and sensed her fear ease. He wanted to smile, but instead said, "Yes, there is. It's a *someone*, not a *something*."

He sensed her fear rush back in, and she twisted in his arms trying to see who may be lurking in the room. "Who's there, where?" she cried.

As he expected, she saw no one, and he urged her back into his arms. "Jess, trust me just a little longer. Then I'm sure I can explain what this has all been about." Her trembling calmed, but only a little. She'd been through so much and he marveled at her courage.

"I'll try," she whispered, burying herself deeper into his arms. "Just don't let me go, please."

"I promise, I'll hold you for as long as you want." And that's exactly what they did for a few moments. They stood by the door, his arms around her while she grew calmer and he grew to appreciate her bravery. "Can I take us back to the bed, or to the fireplace? You're not dressed and I don't want you to get cold."

"It did get cold, didn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, it got cold. Let's get you settled by the fire first. I'll explain as much as I can."

"Okay." She twisted around, but reached up and held his arms around her chest.

The few steps to the fireplace and the two chairs took but a moment. Once there, he sat down first and she settled into his lap. His tank top had done little to keep her warm, and he was sure some of her shivering was due to the chill in the air. He unfastened the tie around his robe and pulled her inside with him. Her cold flesh against his, at first made him grit his teeth. That passed quickly, and the excitement of their earlier tryst reared its head. His heartbeat quickened.

"Your senses, you found something, or have seen something. Am I right?" Her voice seemed very small; her fear was held at bay, but he could tell it was very near the surface.

"Yes, I used my senses to find him," he replied as he ran his hand up and down her terry-covered back. "Just relax and I'll tell you what he told me. His name was, is, Nathaniel Williamson."

"You talked to him?" she asked, surprise in her voice.

"Actually, I did more listening than talking. He's been looking for his lady, Elizabeth, for about a hundred years."

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She sat up the, pulling free of his robe, and baring him to the waist. "A hundred years?" Glancing around the room, she asked, "Is he here now?"

"Not at the moment. You're waking up scared him." He smiled when she blinked and her mouth fell open. "Come here again, cuddle with me and let me explain. I'm sure he'll come back when he feels safe again."

She was nervous, he saw that, but he sensed that she wanted to know everything. She was that kind of woman. As soon as she'd settled against him and he'd wrapped his robe around them both again, he began, "It seems as if Nathaniel fell in love with a woman he met in an institution, an asylum. He'd been placed there by his father for not going along with his plans for him to marry. Disowned, he was slated to remain in the asylum for the rest of his life. Sad.

"Anyhow, he fell in love with a woman named, Elizabeth." Jonathan thought for a moment, then added, "He never told me her last name, just that she'd been sent to the asylum because she was a prostitute. They fell in love. The situation was pretty horrendous. The only privacy they had was a curtain around the bed they shared. They were happy though, or I sensed that from him. He—"

"But, he killed those two women?" Jessica interrupted.

"Yes, he did, but from what he said, it wasn't exactly how the police thought." He stroked her back and felt a little more of her tension leave. "The first woman, the one who'd been beaten, he didn't do that to her. The woman had been living with a man who got off on abusing her. She begged him to end her pain. That's why she looked peaceful. She was glad her suffering was over."

"And the other one?" she asked. She'd definitely lost a lot of the fear she'd had when she'd first wakened.

"The second one, she was sick. She'd caught some disease and I can only assume it was AIDS. She was going to die in some horrible way, and she was terrified. Nathaniel took her, just a little early, and made it a quick, merciful death rather than a lingering, pain-filled one.

"I believe him. Everything he said I sensed was true." He leaned down and kissed the top of her head, letting her take in all that he'd said.

"But, what about me?" Jessica asked.

"We were discussing that when you woke up, or when he saw you heading for the door."

"And?"

"He's sure you're her, Elizabeth. Or at least her reincarnation." He said it but even to his own ears, it sounded outlandish.

She squirmed, and said, "You know, I had a great, great, great grandmother who was a prostitute, and died in an asylum around the turn of the last century."

Jonathan's heart leaped. Beyond her, very close to the fireplace, he saw Nathaniel materialize. He was a faint outline at first, a darker patch against the stone. As Nathaniel listened to Jessica's tale, he solidified into the specter he'd been a half hour earlier.

"Her last name was Haralson, but her daughter married a Crane."

"Did you ever see a picture of her?" Jonathan asked. He couldn't take his eyes off Nathaniel. The man's face was rapt, his attention so focused that he possibly didn't realize he was moving closer to them.

"When I was a child there was a locket with a picture of her. But, it was so small and nondescript, all I remember was a pretty lady with black hair piled on top of her head."

"That's how Nathaniel described her. Her hair I mean—piled on her head."

"I also remember tales my aunt used to tell. There was supposed to have been a lover—in the asylum. He died, tragically."

Jonathan's breath caught. Could she be the descendent of the original Elizabeth? Was that why Nathaniel thought she looked so much like her? He dragged in a breath of air, and said, "Died. Do you know how?"

"No, I don't remember Auntie saying anything except it was tragic."

Behind her, Nathaniel moaned, a sound so full of pain and sorrow that Jonathan couldn't help but look up at him. Jessica also must have heard, or sensed something because she tensed against him. The warm breath she'd been exhaling on his chest and neck, stopped.

He managed to say, "It's all right, Jess. Nathaniel is here, but he's not going to do anything."

She twisted around and peered toward the fireplace. "Where is he? I heard a groan or something from the fireplace."

"Yes, that's where he is now."

"How can you be so sure he won't hurt me? He's responsible for two deaths."

"True, but Jess, sweetheart, with my senses, I feel what he feels. I know he won't hurt you—or me. He's incredibly lonely. And, he's in love with you."

Nathaniel took a step closer, and for a moment, nothing happened. He just stood looking down at the couple. Jonathan gazed back at him, and Jessica peered around

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trying to see him. Suddenly, she gasped and huddled even more against him. "He's there. Tall, dark-haired, his clothes look like they came out of a museum."

"I love you, Elizabeth—Jessica. I wouldn't hurt you for the world." His voice was hoarse. Jonathan decided it must be from his internal pain as well as being overwhelmed by what was happening.

"Oh my God!" She cringed against him, trembling.

He tightened his hold on her, stroking her hair, caressing her, and trying to project a calm reassurance. "It's all right. Take a deep breath or two."

"Jessica, you are so much like her. You could be her—my Elizabeth." Nathaniel knelt to Jonathan's side where she was facing. "I thought you were. I wished you were."

For a moment, Jess sat silent. It was as if she were trying to make sense of what was happening. He sensed her fear fading, and again he was amazed at her strength.

Suddenly, she said, "I'm not Elizabeth, but don't go."

Her words shocked him. Jonathan opened his mouth to ask her what she was talking about, but no sound came out. Dumbfounded, he waited, while he continued to stroke and caress her.

Nathaniel seemed to be as staggered by her remark as he was. He gazed up at her, his deep-set eyes wide with surprise.

"When I was a girl, I dreamed about you." Her voice was soft, dream-like.

"Me? You dreamed about me?" It was the apparition's turn to stand in wonderment as the woman in Jonathan's arms spoke.

"Yes, you and a woman with coal black hair. I'd forgotten about it until tonight." All the tension fell away from her then. She continued speaking as if in a dream. "I was so young; I don't remember exactly how young, but I remember the dreams. It was as if I was there, with you and...it must have been Elizabeth."

Jonathan was rapt by her tale. He'd never heard anything like it before, but he could sense that she was remembering as she told them both of her memories. The excitement he felt flooded through him. He felt a swelling in his groin, and hoped she wouldn't notice.

"How you must have loved each other. I envied you. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to find that kind of love. I think I was wrong." She glanced up at Jonathan and smiled. "I also remember loving you too, Nathaniel. You were so kind to her, so eager to please her, even in that wicked, horrible place."

She stopped talking and collapsed. Jonathan sensed her exhaustion.

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"Nathanial," he spoke softly to the man kneeling beside him. "She's tired; will you let her sleep in peace? She's not going anywhere."

"Yes, tonight and all the nights ahead, if that's what she wishes. I'll be close by, but not to worry, I'll not touch her until she wishes it." His eyes shone with unshed tears. "Do you think she meant it when she said she loved me?"

"Yes, I do." He slid a hand under her knees, the other around her and under her arm then he rose, taking her with him. Cradling her against his chest, he walked to the bed. "Yes, she most certainly did." He turned to say something to him, but the room was empty but for Jessica and himself.

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Chapter Eight

It was the morning sunlight filtering through the curtains that woke him the next morning. He lay there, at peace with everything, enjoying the feel of the warm blankets. A movement beside him, Jessica, brought the memories of last night flooding back.

They'd talked, but only for a few minutes after climbing into bed. She'd been emotionally drained by her ordeal, and had literally fallen asleep, mid-sentence. She'd told him a little bit more about her dreams, how she'd at first been confused by them but had later come to love the strangely dressed man who loved a woman named Elizabeth. It had never clicked that Elizabeth was an ancestor, until last night.

"Good morning, sexy," came her morning-husky voice from beside him.

Jonathan rolled over and faced her. Instantly, his heart raced. Her tangled hair and sleepy smile were exactly how he'd pictured her. "You're beautiful," he said in his own sleep-rough voice. His morning erection throbbed when her grin got bigger. Her whole face lit up.

"You're crazy. But, thank you." She rolled onto her back and her arms came out of hiding as she stretched them high over her head. The morning stretch grew into one of those back arching, groaning moments of pleasure. Her breasts pushed high, and his mouth watered. Her eyes had closed and when she moaned, he had to clench his jaws to keep from doing the same.

The only thing that stopped him from reaching for her was his full bladder. So, when she looked at him again, he murmured, "Hold that thought, whatever you were thinking. I'm about to burst. You?"

"Yes," she grinned and flung the covers off them both.

Before he had time to do more than clamp his hands over his genitals, she was on her feet and running for the closest bathroom, his. "Hey!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet. Laughing, he took a few running steps after her, managing to give her luscious round ass a playful swat just as she disappeared into the bathroom. She squealed and the door swung closed.

He turned and wandered out of the room, willing his cock to behave. By the time he got to the other bathroom, his erection had subsided enough to allow him to do his business. He brushed his teeth with the spare brush he kept for emergencies, and then splashed water on his face to complete the waking up process. Of course, as soon as he'd finished, his cock reared up again, acting like a pointer. He padded down the stairs to the kitchen, and flicked on the coffee pot before returning to his room. He still beat her into the bed, and he was glad of that. She'd seen him naked, but he wasn't sure what she'd say about him traipsing around with his pecker on alert. He'd just covered up and put his arms behind his head, when she came out humming a song.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, sheepishly. "I used your toothbrush."

Holding out his arms, he said, "Don't mind at all. Now come here, you sexy girl."

Her smile widened as she slowly walked toward him. An exaggerated sway to her hips, and the arching of her back was just enough to present her bust in a very sensual way, made her dozen or so steps an event to drool over. Her nipples puckered into tight knots that poked into little mounds, aimed his way. At the foot of the bed, she raised one knee, and the hem of the tank top slid up her thigh. A dark thatch of pussy hair peeked from between her legs. He sensed her pleasure. She knew she was exciting him, and it added immensely to his excitement.

"We need to talk," he managed.

She laughed and crawled toward him. "Yes, we do. And before we make love again."

He pulled back the covers for her, but was careful to keep himself hidden. "You're about the worst or best tease I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing. You're going to drive me crazy, but you knew that didn't you?"

Her laughter grew, and for a few moments, she didn't even try to speak. Finally, she said, "Yes, I knew it. I also know you like it."

"Hussy!" he laughed.

She climbed under the covers and moved in close to him. Lying on her side, she rested her head on his chest. She kissed him on the nipple and made him shiver. A few moments later, she said, "Last night, I'm not sure what happened. Nathaniel, he was really here, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was really here. And, he was the one who put the tattoo on you."

She tensed. "Why?"

"His lady, Elizabeth, had the tattoo and you didn't. I think it was his way of bringing her back."

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"He died because of her, and has spent the last hundred years trying to find her again. An asylum, what a place to meet the one you love. How they must have suffered there. When they took her and tortured her, it must have been too much for him. She came back broken. She treated him horribly afterwards and he took his own life."

"My God," she breathed. "How he must have suffered." Snuggling a little closer, she ran her hand over his chest and down to his belly. He shivered, and he heard her sigh. "I wonder if they would lay in bed like we are now?"

"I would think so," he replied and slid his hand up her arm. Gently stroking her, he was again amazed at the depth of his feelings for her. The weeks of seeing her in his dreams had not prepared him for the rollercoaster ride his emotions were undergoing. He took a deep breathe and after a moment of contemplating, he said, "From what Nathaniel said, they had almost no privacy except the tiny curtained off area in the ward." Visions of the two biting back their cries of passion caused his to surge into prominence.

"Yes, we used to hold each other, very much like you are now," came a soft voice from one of the chairs facing the fireplace.

It was Nathaniel. The shocking thing was, Jessica reacted—she'd heard him. The way she jerked against his side told Jonathan that. But, her tone when she spoke, told him more. "Nathaniel," she whispered. Then she asked, just a little louder in a shaking voice, "Nathaniel, can you show yourself to me?"

There was a darkening above the chair. It moved toward the bed, and Jonathan opened his mind, hoping to catch everything. There was apprehension, from both Jessica and Nathaniel. But, there was something more as well. Curiosity, a warm caring that the specter tried to harness. "Elizabeth," he murmured. Taking a few steps closer, his form took shape, the antique clothing, and the slightly scruffy looking hair. As he got closer, the look in his eyes became softer. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and spread across his face. "Elizabeth...Jessica, you are your, twice great grandmother, reincarnated." He held out his hand. "How I've missed you. How I've longed to feel your love again, even after those men had used you so horribly."

Jessica lay as if frozen. Jonathan sensed her fear, but it was nothing like it had been. It was tinged with a desire that seemed somehow odd to him. She wanted this man, this specter.

Then he got it. When she'd dreamt of him in her younger days, he'd been that mysterious man who would take her away from the ho-hum life she dreaded growing into. This was him. Jonathan was another 'him', but safer. She clung to him, yet yearned for the unusual that Nathaniel would be.

The standing man lowered his hand and looked at her. Then, he raised them both to his jacket and unfastened the buttons deliberately, slowly, the smile slowly leaving his face. "You'll remember me naked, won't you? I loved seeing you naked too; the welts and sores didn't matter. Dear God, what they did to you."

"Jess," Jonathan whispered.

The man before them eased out of his jacket, which vanished as it fell to the floor. The shirt with its ruffles and frills followed a few moments later.

"Jess," he repeated, spellbound by the apparition before him, but concerned for her. He'd seen naked men, but had never felt any eroticism before. His erection throbbed and his hands grew damp with sweat. "Tell me you're all right, Jess."

She was silent for a moment, then shuddered and glanced his way. He felt her lust and more. Was she somehow picking up the lustful yearning and love from Nathaniel, or from himself? He sensed he may never know. "I'm okay. Touch me." She blushed. Lowering her eyes, she said, "Please," very softly.

Her eyes flashed back to the half-naked man as Jonathan slipped his hand up her arm, and down over her breast. The tank was soft and warm, but he wanted to touch her that time. He leaned forward, grabbed a handful of hem, and pulled it up.

"Oh," she moaned and squirmed, helping him slide the tank top out from under her, and then off.

When her belly and breasts came into view, his eyes became riveted there. She had the kind of breasts you just had to look at for a while. Large and round, the soft, white flesh stretched taut over the plump globes. Her nipples were larger than he'd at first thought, and when puckered, as they were now, were like the rubber tips of a pencil. She moved, and they rolled, saucily across her chest.

From his vantage point, Jonathan had a perfect view of Jessica, and when he tilted his head, he saw Nathaniel. The man was naked by the time he tore his eyes off Jess' breasts. His flesh was white, his chest wide and flat. Nipples the size of dimes puckered. His belly was flat. Muscles rippled when he moved. Narrow hips gave way to long, slim legs sprinkled with dark hair. His pubic hair was sparse and left his testicles nearly bare. His erection was impressive and swayed toward them. A thin treasure trail of hair led from the base of his cock up to his navel.

"You know me now, don't you Elizabeth, Jessica?" he murmured and reached for his erection. "You used to like to watch me do this." He stroked himself, luxuriating in the pleasure of both watching her, and masturbating.

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"I remember you. I used to blush, thinking of you." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Jonathan moved then. Slipping from the bed, he went and stood beside Nathaniel. Taking up the same pose, he too, ran his hand along the length of his cock, mirroring the pale apparition as best as he could.

At first, Jessica seemed unsure of what to do. She knelt on the bed, her knees pressed tightly together as the two men put on a show for her. Her eyes gleamed with passion. She licked her lips, and Nathaniel ran the ball of his thumb across his glans. The pleasure made him tremble, and beside him, Jonathan moaned as he did the same.

Jonathan pushed his senses out, encompassing the lovers, the one beside and the other before him. Their emotions added to his, their feelings of joy and lust, of caring and need, all combined with his. Assailed by their pleasure, he was hard-pressed to keep control of the building lust inside himself. But, he ached to pleasure her. It didn't matter if it was simply his own desires or if Nathaniel's were added to his, it was for her that he strained to control the mounting need to come.

Finally, Jessica pushed herself to her hands and knees, and approached him. A hungry look in her eyes and a hot puff of her breath was the only warning he got before her tongue replaced his thumb. Flicking and twirling it around his glans, she forced him onto his toes. Wet warmth sucked at his prick and he wanted desperately to lunge ahead. The urge to thrust his hips forward and fill her mouth with his shaft became almost more than he could bear. Closing his eyes, he pictured her mouth stretched wide by his cock. His balls churned.

"Yes," he groaned as she cupped his balls. Sucking in, she took his entire length and swirled her tongue around him. His knees trembled.

"My girl, my love," Nathaniel sighed.

Jonathan glanced his way. The man still gripped his cock, and the desperation on face was something to behold.

Jessica chose that instant to pull her mouth off him. The sudden chill air on his cock took his breath. He shuddered in frustration, but a moment later, sensed her teeth scrape his glans. Looking down, he saw she'd moved. Knelt and eager-faced, she nipped at the tip of Nathaniel's cock.

Both men groaned.

Jonathan was enthralled. To experience the pleasure of another man was something he'd never dreamed was possible. Her mouth and lips, teasing and tantalizing, were on him, but not. He felt each nip of her pursed lips and each scrape of her teeth as

she nibbled on the other man's cock. He gripped the shaft of his own cock and squeezed, desperately trying to hold off the climax that threatened.

Nathanial lunged ahead—his cock sinking into the soft wetness of her mouth. Jonathan sobbed with the sensation of her sucking. Side by side, yet much more, the two men reveled in the woman's teasing wiles.

Again, she withdrew, moved over, and took Jonathan's cock into her mouth. She sucked him deeply, thoroughly, but only for a moment, before returning to her other lover. She went from one to the other, sucking for a moment, then nibbling on the other, each twitching and groaning for more. Jonathan felt it all. And from the way Nathanial sobbed and groaned beside him, so did the apparition.

It was Nathanial who first put his arm around Jonathan. A warm presence that felt so natural and caring, he didn't at first realize what it was. When he did, Jonathan slid his arm around the slender waist of the surprisingly solid specter.

Jessica stopped her teasing and sat back on her heels to look at them both. Her smile was radiant, her lips shiny with saliva. The flush of sexual excitement bathed her cheeks and down her neck, covering her chest and the tops of each plump breast. Her nipples were tight little buds of need. And, as if his counterpart had read his mind, they both reached for one at the same time. Pinched and pulled, they sent shockwaves of pleasure through her, and Jonathan felt it all.

She looked deeply into his eyes, and smiled. Then, she turned to gaze into Nathanial's. "I want you." Looking back at him, she added, "I want you both."

"Lay back, sweetheart," Jonathan whispered.

Nathanial was with him, beside him, behind him, inside his flesh, as he knelt between her widespread thighs. The tip of his cock tapped against his belly as he eased his knees apart. Almost with a life of its own, it nudged at her moistness seeking entrance. Suddenly, a hand took hold of him, held the shaft in that oh so familiar way, and guided him in.

'Push,' came the silent instruction, and he eagerly complied.

Her arms went around him, pulling him closer. Her eyes found his and he saw amazement there as he eased deeper. Yet, Nathanial was there, with them both—his cock entering her beside his, his breath on the back of Jonathan's neck, his arm still around the psychic's waist. The joining of three—he didn't know if it was his powers that made it possible, and as he slowly worked himself in and out of Jessica's heat, he didn't care as long as it continued. His balls churned with a sensation that was familiar in so many ways, yet not quite the same, signaling the imminent climax he craved, yet tried valiantly

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to hold at bay. His hands, or Nathaniel's, clenched. Their mouth took possession of hers. Pleasure like none he'd ever experienced raced through him, and over him, as every muscle in his body, their body, tensed. He shared her breath, and sucked the warmth of her tongue into his mouth, as her hands frantically gripped his ass. He'd wanted to see and feel her come, but involuntarily his eyes closed as his first spasm took hold.

The euphoric jolt of pleasure tore through him as the first stream of come shot. Stars exploded somewhere, and a grunt came from deep within him, them. Nathaniel was there, he sensed him. The slimmer hip pressing against his, the cock that wasn't his, delving deep into his Jessica, slid along the length of his own. A grunt of release, not his, whispered into his ear.

"Yes, harder," she cried, as her own climax joined theirs. She thrashed under him, lifting her hips to meet each of his thrusts.

Two bodies, joined by the third, danced the dance of release. Gasping together, grunting the joy of each spasm of bliss that fired between them, they rejoiced in their completion. Another thrust took him higher, the sensation of pleasure more than he'd imagined possible. His mind blanked out, it was simply feeling his own and another's aching release.

When he could think again, he thrust softly into her, bringing her down slowly. She'd dug her fingers into his arms, and he felt where her nails marked him.

Beneath him, she sobbed, and clung to him. "My God, I've never—"

"Shh," he whispered, sensing she was as awestruck as he was. "It's all right." He reached out, searching for Nathaniel. Nothing. Leaning down, he kissed her on the forehead. "It's just you and I now. Shh."

"That was amazing," she said in a husky voice.

"It was definitely that," he admitted, concerned now, not just for the woman, but also for the apparition who had shared their lovemaking. He eased out of her, and collapsed at her side. Unwilling to lose contact, he pulled her close again. They were quiet for several minutes, each deep in their own thoughts. When he couldn't stand it any longer, Jonathan asked, "Are you all right? You know he was here, it wasn't just you and I?"

For a moment, she didn't answer, finally, she said, "Yes, I know. He's gone now though, isn't he?"

"Yes, at least for now. I would imagine this was as much a shock to him as it was to us."

"He has to come back," her voice was stronger, more determined.

"I hope so."

"No, I mean it, he has to come back. I need to tell him some things, about Elizabeth."

A cold shiver ran up Jonathan's back. "What things?"

From one of the chairs in front of the fireplace a familiar voice asked, "Yes, what things?"

Jonathan jerked his head toward the voice, searching for Nathaniel. The dim outline appeared, dressed and seated, facing the fireplace.

Jessica freed herself from his embrace and sat up. The covers dropped around her waist. Breasts still flushed, lay bared for both men. "I remember more. You said Elizabeth had sores and had changed when she came back from whatever treatment they did to her. She was ill. They gave her an illness."

Nathaniel suddenly appeared at the foot of the bed, his face a mask of agony. His shoulders were slumped. "They tortured her," he whispered in that defeated voice that tore at Jonathan's heart.

"It was more than just torture," she whispered, and suddenly Jonathan knew. The horror of her life, and what she'd been through hit him like a blow to the gut.

Nathaniel looked up. "What do you mean?"

Slipping from the bed, Jessica went to put her arms around him. Jonathan joined her and together they held the bereaved man. "I remember my grandmother saying Elizabeth had a social disease.

"Oh, I'm saying this so badly." She groaned and looked at Jonathan. He nodded, he knew, but she was the one who had to say it. She began again, "Before she was sent to the...asylum, before she even knew you, she gave birth to her only child. That child was raised by her parents. You never knew about the child did you?"

Rather than try to speak, Nathaniel shook his head.

"She loved you. That you must know. But, the treatment and afterwards...God, there's no easy way to say it. They gave her syphilis. That's why she wouldn't allow you near her."

In his arms, Jonathan felt the man shudder, and then sobs shook him. Silent, pain-filled sobs of such loss that it didn't take a psychic to realize the anguish the man felt. Tightening his grip, Jonathan tried to take some of that pain.

"That's why she killed herself very shortly after her love died. From what I can remember, it was less than a week later that she took her own life."

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The howl of agony that came from the bereaved apparition filled the house. Both Jonathan and Jessica held him, tried to comfort him, while he mourned the knowledge of what had happened to his love. She had loved him so much that she couldn't bear to be without him, even after she'd tortured him.

Jonathan leaned down and whispered into Nathaniel's ear, "She loved you, my friend. She loved you more than life itself." He shuffled them all toward the bed, where he got them seated, Nathaniel in the middle.

On the other side of the weeping man, he heard Jessica say, "I love you. You have to stay." Surprisingly, he remained with them and allowed them to console him.

"Ow, careful," Jessica griped as a bit more color was added to the tattoo on her lower back.

Nathaniel was nude, as were both Jessica and Jonathan. The three of them spent a lot of time that way. She'd moved in with Jonathan, right after the police had questioned her. She'd told them all she could remember about the incident, but had kept any mention of Nathaniel to herself. Ken had come back twice, to see if she could add anything, but each time she told him the same story. The investigation had gone on for a while longer. The man who had abused the second woman was arrested and held, but even he'd been released after nothing substantial could be proved. The case had eventually gone cold. No new information, no new victims, and no time to waste on a case going nowhere. It would remain open, they were told.

Jessica went to work in the bookstore. Nathaniel was there too, a very important part of their strange and deep love for each other.

"Sorry my sweet, but it's almost done," Nathaniel sighed and sat back on his haunches to look at this artwork. "Jonathan, have a look will you?"

They were on the bed in the spare room; Jonathan sprawled across the pillows and her with her head on his belly, while Nathaniel worked on the tattoo. It had become a labor of love for them all. He seemed to need it finished, to put an end to the nightmare he knew his Elizabeth had been through. Jessica wanted to please him, and had grown to adore the artwork he'd begun out of love. And Jonathan, he just couldn't get over how his life had changed, for the better. He'd thought he'd never find someone who'd love him for who he was and not be afraid of his gift, but it seemed there was destined to be one. His senses picked it all up, and he basked in them.

Twisting around, he looked at her lower back and admired Nathaniel's work. The brilliant white, with its hint of silver, marked her beautifully. Nathaniel, perched behind

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her, leaned forward and added more of the white. The gentle hum of the tattoo gun drew them together. The colors shone against her flesh.

Jonathan leaned down and kissed her on the shoulder, while Nathaniel pressed his lips to her right buttock. "I love you," they both whispered.

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About the Author

Jude's imagination frequently leads her astray, and she eagerly follows while trying to keep out of trouble. For those of you who know her, you'll know that's not always easy. A picture, a smell, an unexpected glimpse of flesh, or a load of soil in the back of a pick-up, are all fodder for her writing. If you'd like to keep up to date with her publishing successes, visit her website.

Jude's short story, "And There Were Beasts", recipient of #10 Best Short Story Romance at the Predators & Editors 2005 Poll.

And There Were Beasts

Freeing the Beast Within (Sequel to And There Were Beasts)

'The Deal' 1: The Deal

'The Deal' 2: Another Deal

Playtime Friday Night

Pink Ribbon

An Acquired Taste