

VENUS PRESS



Flex Appeal

Ann Cory

Mystical Sign Series

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Mystical Signs: Taurus
FLEX APPEAL

BY

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Venus Press LLC

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

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Ann Cory

Dedication:

To my husband, for his patience in helping me get my heart and head in shape.

Chapter One

“Look, Meg. I just want to look like the girls on Fear Factor. Is that too much to ask? They are always buff, have the best hair, and are totally gorgeous.” She rested the phone on her shoulder while she pinched the flesh around her waistline. “If I took off my shirt in front of millions of viewers and that dishy host, Joe Rogan, the show would have the lowest ratings ever. I’d be a laughing stock.”

“You’re such a dramatic.”

“And you’re not looking back at me right now. My reflection is. It doesn’t lie.”

“If you want to do something about it, go workout.”

Lida flopped down at her desk in her bedroom and thumbed through the phonebook. “Are you kidding? I’m not motivated enough to go to a gym. At least not on my own. Plus the ones I’ve been in are filled with snobby people who don’t even look like they need to be in there. Maybe if you’d go with me...”

“No can do. Working forty hours a week and juggling my classes have proven torturous. As a result, my social life is nil. If I’m going to get my psyche degree, I need to spend every spare moment I have studying for tests.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Don’t start on one of your guilt trips, Lida. I’m not in the mood. You know I love you. Go get yourself a personal trainer.”

“Seriously? Don’t they cost a fortune?”

“Nah. Liz has one and she could bench press me if she wanted to. She’s only working part-time and doesn’t seem to have a problem making payments.”

“Where does she go?”

Her friend’s voice faded a moment and then came back. “Hmm, let me think. It’s downtown in the square... Warrior In Training, I think it’s called.”

“Damn.”

“Problem?”

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“That’s a good twenty minute ride or so out of my way.”

“So?”

“Downtown is kinda scary.”

“As scary as you think you’d look without a shirt during an episode of Fear Factor?”

Lida held the phone away from her ear and flipped it off. “Hope you heard that.”

“Heard what?”

“I gave you the middle finger.”

“Nope, sorry. Listening to Gwen Stefani in the background. Couldn’t hear a thing.”

“Well, thanks for your undying support.”

“Get a trainer and get yourself all ripped. Maybe you’ll get lucky and snag some handsome hunk like Liz did.”

“She has a male trainer?”

“Yep. They’re the best. Who but a man knows the way a woman should look.”

“Pressure.”

“Excuses.”

“I’m not looking for a guy.”

“That would be a first. Do you honestly want me to believe that there’s no coincidence to the fact your last boy toy dumped you because he thought you were too fragile. What was it he called you, oh yeah, wimpy.”

Lida jotted down the idiot’s name on a scrap of paper and ripped it into a bunch of tiny pieces. “That so pissed me off. He judged me based on one hiking trip up to Cascade Head with a backpack. Sure I died about ten minutes into it, but he left me stranded there for over two hours waiting for him to get back. I swear he loaded my backpack with weights or something. There was no way I could get up that hill!”

“That’s what you get for lying. You got caught. Again.”

“Not a lie. A half-truth. Besides, I do like to walk.”

“The mall maybe. But a trail?”

“Fine. Why do I tell you everything anyway?”

She could tell her friend was doing her signature Cheshire cat look. “So I can throw it back in your face when it suits me. What other reason would there be?”

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“Again. Thanks for the support.”

“Not a problem. Call the place. The sooner you do, the happier you’ll be.”

“Okay. I’m calling. Good luck with your tests.”

“Fill me in when you get a chance. Chow.”

Lida set the phone on the desk and looked up the number to Warrior In Training. The ad size was impressive, and she was always impressed by size. Her last boyfriend--rebound off a rebound actually--had been toting a nice package. She was fortunate enough to have experienced it firsthand before the hiking incident.

While waiting for someone to pick up on the other end of the phone, she rummaged around for another piece of paper.

“Good morning and thank you for calling WIT, hold please.”

Lida nearly dropped the phone when loud, obnoxious music echoed through the earpiece. Before she had a chance to spout off a list of obscenities, the music stopped and a nasally sounding girl answered.

“Thank you for holding. How may I help you?”

“Hi. I’d like to hire or request a personal trainer. How do I go about doing that?”

“Currently all of our trainers for beginners are booked solid for the next three months. Are you new to exercise and weights?”

Lida wondered what exactly the woman meant by exercise. If she counted running from the shower to the bedroom dripping wet, sure, daily. If she counted carrying heavy stacks of file folders from one desk to another at work lifting weights, then yes. But she had a feeling neither of those would suffice. She wouldn’t lie...she wouldn’t lie...

“Of course, I workout every day. I was hoping for someone who...”

“I’m showing that our advanced trainer, Pierce Wytham, is available starting tomorrow morning. Seven a.m. to eight a.m. Want me to pencil you in?”

Lida hesitated a moment. Workout in the morning? She didn’t have to be to the office until ten. “I--um. Can I call you back on that?”

“Sure sweetie, you do that. Chances are, the next caller will book it. Pierce is one of our best trainers.”

It touched a nerve the way the woman called her sweetie, enough to pump her up and say the horrid words, “The morning will be fine. Pencil me in. Lida Jones.”

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“Great. We open at seven, but if you get here five minutes early, I’ll let you in and set you up with a membership card and locker.”

Earlier? She winced at the words and mumbled a goodbye before hanging up.

Now she’d done it. Advanced workout? In the morning? Who the hell was she kidding? What kept her from admitting the truth? Exercised everyday, what a joke! Lida was starting to worry that pretending had become a normal way of life for her. She didn’t want to lie to people, but it was a bad habit that she couldn’t shake. For all the times it backfired on her, she still hadn’t learned anything.

There was the time she claimed she wasn’t a virgin. That one had been a painful lesson. She’d lied about how much she could drink, and then spent two days in hell or bed, same difference at the time, sicker than a dog. The worst was suggesting to a rocker guy she thought was *it* that she’d been filmed many times while having sex. To this day she hoped he hadn’t made copies before she confiscated the tape. Paris Hilton wannabe, she wasn’t. Her life was out of control every time she opened her mouth.

Lida checked her watch and then slipped into a straight chocolate-colored skirt that hung above her knees, and dressed it up with a cream-colored blouse. A quick glance in the mirror to check her hair and make-up, and she was off to go sit on her ass for eight hours. And her ass had spread like wildfire. The more she thought about it, she realized how sedentary she’d become. Maybe it was time for a few changes. It might even do her some good. But seven a.m.!

The walk to the subway station was pleasant. Blue skies helped cheer her up and erased the doubts she had about the whole personal trainer thing. As long as she didn’t end up with an old army drill sergeant, she figured she could sweet talk herself right out of anything that caused any discomfort.

Her ride to work was uneventful but she’d utilized the time flipping through a magazine someone had left behind. Something about trainers to the stars and all their secrets on how to lose weight fast and tone up quickly. There weren’t too many celebrities she wanted to look like. She didn’t fall for Hollywood’s version of trends or care to look like the stick figure woman with bubbleheads. There was skinny, and then there was malnourished. Hollywood was malnourished, which seemed strange considering how much the bubbleheads made. Maybe they could afford face creams that went for a hundred bucks for a four-ounce tube or have specially made meals brought to

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the door three times a day, but money wasn't a luxury she had. Especially to late-night infomercials, promising the fountain of youth or sculpted six-pack abs in twenty-four hours.

Once she opened the doors to the towering glass building she called her dreaded second home, all her cheeriness disappeared. Time to kiss ass. On the second floor people were buzzing around, phones were ringing off the hooks, faxes were beeping, and her boss was caught up in some heated discussion over the speakerphone. She watched his arms flail all over the place, his face turning several shades of purple. That couldn't be a good sign for how the rest of the day would play out.

At her desk she flipped on the computer and went through the list of demands she'd been left with. Notes upon notes of requests to change one thing and fix another. Memos littered her desk calendar on what to type up, which letters to mail, and business meetings to arrange. Lida knew she had no one to blame but herself. She was the fool who claimed to know all the software programs for filing and pooh-poohed the need to have someone show her how. At first it had sounded like an ingenious plan, especially with the fat little raise that accompanied it. However, it was also the same lie that made her workload far more than anyone else's, and with far less appreciation.

As the day wore on, she found herself restless; a good indication that starting up an exercise routine was the right way to go. Again. She counted on her fingers how many times she'd signed up for a workout, only to dropout by the third or fourth class, and came up with a bigger number than she had fingers. Step aerobics, power walking, spinning class, pilates, yoga, circuit training, jazz dancing, kickboxing, hell, she'd tried just about everything. One entire shelf at home paid respect to a variety of workout instructors ranging from Billy Blanks, Kathy Smith, Jane Fonda, to her favorites, The Firm workouts. Whenever she put one of those babies on, she found herself sitting down with a bowl of popcorn scrutinizing each instructor's flawless body, hoping to catch one with a little cellulite.

It was time to stick to her guns and make a commitment. Maybe with the help of someone else she could reach the goals she'd made years ago. She wanted toned muscles that rippled and flexed when she waved hello to someone or ran up a flight of stairs.

By the time quitting time rolled around she was ready to grab a medium pizza and a liter of soda. She hoped that Mr. Wytham would be lenient with her dietary habits. It was one thing to sacrifice a couple hours of sleep each morning, but junk food? That

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would be asking too much. More than likely he'd give her the big lecture on finding a balance between healthy eating and exercise. Of course it sounded easy, but so far it hadn't happened for her. Two days into eating well and by that evening she was downing anything laced with sugar or salt. If she were going to be asked to watch what she ate, then tonight would be the big finale of all things unhealthy, and the perfect excuse to finish off the pint of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream that she'd bought last week.

She would look at this little venture into fitness as a challenge. Somehow she needed to make it fun or like all the other times, she'd fail. Maybe now she would have someone to show and explain how all the big weight machines worked. Most of them intimidated her, with the big cables and awkward positions. She had nightmares of machines coming alive and forcing her to workout until she died.

The whole thing was starting to feel right. She was going to give it her all and get ripped. It was time to get serious, about herself and about her life. Meg always said that happiness needed to come from within, and she'd been looking for happiness in the form of hot guys and steamy sex. Where had it gotten her but lonely and soft in the middle? The inner warrior in her was ready. Look out Linda Hamilton. This time next year she might even make it up to Cascade Head with a backpack slung over her shoulders, packed full of weights, with some guy eating her dirt.

Chapter Two

The alarm beeped and Lida slammed her hand on the button to shut it off. Was it possible she'd slept for eight hours? Her body didn't think so. The sheets were warm and conformed to her body like a second skin. Her eyelids begged to close up and remain that way until the usual hour. How was it she got herself all pumped and ecstatic right before she'd gone to bed? As of right now she didn't care about being toned or not. She could resign herself to big housecoats and curlers in her hair. It would be less extensive than bouncing around like...well a warrior in training. The warrior had left the jungle, or in her case, the apartment. There was still time to call and cancel. Of course, she'd never hear the end of it from the woman who she'd spoken to on the phone. Then the snotty words of 'miss nasally voice' assaulted her thoughts of quitting. She dragged her soon-to-be sore ass out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

If there was ever a time her own image scared her, it was now. Goodbye confidence. Beauty sleep was lost on her. She brushed out the tangles from her hair and fixed it into a sleek ponytail. Her face was pasty with raccoon eyes from her lack of sleep all week. The thought of a man seeing her at such an early hour of the morning was intimidating to say the least, but she wasn't going to go crazy. She needed to do more than dress the part. Women at gyms were always plastered in far too much make-up in her opinion, at least the one's she'd seen, and they looked terrible. How could you break out in a sweat and keep your make-up looking nice? She decided to compromise with a light layer of foundation and some powder to even out her skin tone. Lida followed it up with a dab of lip-gloss and cream blush. There was no way to hide the dark circles without going to extremes and she lacked both the time and energy.

In her dresser drawers she found a pair of black cotton pants that went down to her ankles with a thin white strip on either side of her legs. She'd bought them years ago, in case she needed to look like she worked out. Somehow she'd forgotten she'd ever bought them. Pulling them out, she was mortified to see the price tag was still on. She

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dug a little deeper in the drawer and found the matching sports bra. By the time it was on, she'd put herself through a full body workout.

Lida wasn't too bothered by her size seven body. She had a nice shape, though she could stand to lose five pounds. Pizza weight, she called it. Eating starch and next to nothing activity had given her a slight paunch that right now didn't look flattering in the form-fitting outfit. In her closet she found a big white t-shirt and decided it would do the trick. If this personal trainer she was about to see could help her get amazing results, she'd find a way to repay him with more than words.

She walked to the subway station and bought a ticket at the booth. Six-thirty in the morning and there weren't many people waiting. Patiently she waited for #10 to pull up and come to a stop. She waited while a group of people carrying briefcases got off and then found a seat in the back. Six people made up the car she was in, not at all what she'd expected.

Lida relaxed a little and put her bag of work clothes beneath the seat. Off to her side, an elderly woman was busy knitting up a storm. Whatever she was making, the colors were soft blues and grays and looked like it would be cozy in the wintertime. Up in the front sat three burly construction workers wearing hardhats and dirty shirts, and across from them sat a young woman with headphones clamped around her tummy with her eyes closed. Another person got on and sat at one of the side seats. Their eyes met for a moment and she felt a tingling sensation rush through her. She returned a shy smile and gazed out the window where it was safe.

The subway whirred to life and sped along the underground tunnels. It had been a long time since she'd been downtown. Too much chaos for her to feel comfortable. Tired of staring at the gloomy scenery she looked back at the handsome stranger, studying his profile. Strong chin, proportionate cheekbones, and a nicely rounded nose—not too big or too small—with medium-sized lips. He seemed a rugged man, dressed somewhere between casual and classy in faded denim jeans and a thin cashmere sweater in deep blue. She loved a guy in blue. His face and forearms were golden brown and a suede tan jacket was neatly folded over his knees. Lida guessed he was in his early thirties, though she'd been wrong before. His sleek, black hair almost demanded that she come over and run her hands through it.

When he turned his head, she stared into the most amazing blue eyes she'd ever seen. Her face burned at the thought of being caught looking but she couldn't tear herself

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away for fear he was only a mirage. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd stepped right out of a magazine. When he gave her another winning smile, a dimple formed in his right cheek, and she wanted to melt. It was forever before she blinked and broke the gaze. Damn, was he ever a hottie! If she could find a door-size poster of him, it would give her something to masturbate to at night.

Lost in a panty-soaking fantasy, she was only vaguely aware of the subway train coming to a stop. A mix of relief and longing worked its way through her body as she watched him stand and make his way to the exit. The door opened and he disappeared into a crowd of people. Nice ass and all.

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Chapter Three

Right before the doors closed, Lida realized it was her stop too and quickly bolted out. Warrior In Training was only a block away and she still had a few minutes to spare. A coffee sounded too good for words, but she decided against it at the last minute. She stood in front of the door and shielded her eyes to look in. A woman dressed like a walking billboard for sports stores with purple hair came up and unlocked the door.

“Ms. Jones?”

“Yes.”

“Come on in and we’ll get you hooked up.”

Lida followed her in and did a quick sweep of the facility. Clean, spacious, and a ton of high-tech equipment, that looked like a science experiment for jocks.

“I need you to fill out this short form, sign it and then you can pay with cash, credit or a check next week. First three sessions are free.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s the way Pierce likes to do business. Doesn’t want someone to be unhappy. Of course everyone raves about him.”

Lida handed the form over and waited for ‘miss purple hair’ to give her a key.

“This is for locker 2A. It’s your personal locker, though I don’t advertise leaving valuables in it. I’m going to open up now, so feel free to warm up until your personal trainer arrives.”

Lida went into the ladies room and threw her bag in the locker. It smelled like disinfectant and bleach. At least the shower stalls were private with doors. She’d always hated showering with the other girls in high school after dance class. When she came back out to look at the machines, she nearly choked on her own saliva. A handsome man stood in the middle of the room with a clipboard wearing a well-fitting tank top and a pair of shorts that revealed some nice muscle mass. And his legs were chiseled too. Lida

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shook her head. It didn't seem possible, but it was the same guy she made eye contact with on the subway.

He looked up and broke out into a big grin worthy of two dimples. "I can't believe it! Aren't you the same vixen I saw on the way here?"

She lowered her eyes. No one had ever called her a vixen before. "My name's Lida."

"Pierce Wytham. Pleased to meet your acquaintance. Saves me the trouble from trying to stalk you later."

She gave him a quizzical look.

"Just joking. I only meant that you've been on my mind since I saw you and now that I know your name, I don't have to try and find it out the hard way. How's that for luck?"

"Very lucky, I guess."

He clapped his hands once and then rubbed them together fast. Every muscle in his arms peaked, rippling along his golden skin.

"Right. Time to get to work. Let's start with a couple minutes on the stepper, and then do some static stretches. After that we'll shoot for ten minutes on the treadmill. We want to be nice and warmed up before working with weights."

The way his eyes took in every inch of her body was warming her up just fine as it was, but she couldn't forget her earlier oops by suggesting she worked out. Now it was crunch time. Lida shakily started up on the stepper, and found it wasn't half bad. Her lack of coordination was safely hidden. The two minutes were up right away and the stretching actually felt good. Why had she shunned exercise again? The answer came the moment she started on the treadmill.

"I've set up a good amount of resistance and speed for you based on your level of fitness. Working out everyday is smart and you have a nice figure to show for it. Even though this is a warm up, with all the exercise you do, starting too light wouldn't benefit you. It's also got a good incline to get your heart rate pumping. I'll be watching you."

The compliment on her figure was pushed to the side as the first burn in her legs started up. "How long did you want me on here? Five minutes?"

"Ten minimum. Every two minutes it will automatically speed up and you'll need to put more muscle into it."

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She flung him a forced smile and pretended it was a breeze. Mentally she was kicking herself. Were muscles supposed to throb? She was trying to breathe but it sounded more like an asthmatic's wheezing. If she didn't pull it together soon, she was going to give herself away earlier than planned.

"You're doing well. Try and regulate your breathing. Don't pant. Inhale to the count of five, then exhale to the count of five. I promise it will help you keep going."

She nodded her head. When was he going to suggest something for the pain? After another five minutes of cruelty, she was sweating and her throat was dry. This was the exact reason why she hated exercise. It was torture!

"Keep your shoulders back and stand up straight. Good posture is the key. If you lean forward your back is going to feel it and trust me, it will hinder the rest of your performance this week."

Lida gasped as the treadmill sped up another couple of notches. She had to jog at a fairly fast pace to keep up with it. Forget trying to look sexy. At this point she was only thinking survival.

"Excellent! Looks like you're done on here for the time being." Pierce walked to the front of the treadmill and pushed a red button. The track stopped. Damn! Had she known that button controlled her whole destiny she would have pushed it herself.

"Okay, now we want to keep your heart rate up, so step off there and pick up the dumbbells. I'm starting you off with five pounds to see your form and how many repetitions you're capable of. We're going to do squats while lifting the weights straight up and then controlling the movement as we go down. Ready?"

"Sure," she panted.

Lida bent down and picked up the teal colored weights. They weren't bad, but put a noticeable strain on her arms. She stood with her legs apart and did her best to mimic what Pierce did. He made everything look way too easy and she knew his weights were heavier. Up and down she squatted, raising the weights above her head and then bringing them down.

"Don't let the weights go lower than below your ears. Keep both the up and down motions slow and controlled. Works the muscles harder."

"Okay."

"You want to make sure your knees don't extend beyond your toes when you squat, or that will cause some serious damage."

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She wanted to cry. This was madness! Her upper thighs were on fire and her shoulders were screaming. If she didn't know what it felt like to be torn apart into pieces before, now she did.

"In a couple weeks we'll be doing all the exercises I teach you in the opposite order. Do you know why?"

"No. To confuse me?"

His smile showed off a mouthful of pearly whites. Lida wondered if he'd ever done any commercials selling toothpaste.

"Close. More like confuse your muscles. The body gets used to the same set of exercises over time, so your best bet for results is to vary it, and change the order. Adjusting your routine will liven things up. One more thing. Why are you wearing a shirt three sizes too big for you?"

"It's only two."

"Fine. Why are you wearing it?"

"I'm self-conscious. If I liked my body, I wouldn't be here."

"Most people who come to work out in gyms often consider their bodies a temple. They have found a balance that is spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional. Exercise is about more than losing weight or toning up, it's about staying fit for the rest of your life."

Oh great, now she was going to get a lecture. She didn't question his knowledge or expertise, hell he was a fucking god standing next to her. No imperfections to speak of, well...except he was a bit cocky. At the thought of him being cocky, she let her eyes trail down between and rested where she didn't doubt he had one bulked up muscle.

"You understand what I'm getting at, right?"

She'd missed whatever part of the speech he'd said right before that, but she smiled and nodded politely.

"I suppose after we're done you're going to give me a rundown on what I can and can't eat?"

"No, I figure you're a big girl and know what works for you."

"I eat junk food," she said matter of factly. She didn't know why, but it felt good to confess it.

He leaned in close to her. Close enough to identify the musky cologne he wore was Polo Sport. "It may not look like it, but I happen to indulge where food is concerned. Especially when paired with a rare vintage wine."

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She squinted her eyes at him through her sweat-drenched bangs. This didn't seem like the kind of thing a personal trainer admitted to. Usually they were health nuts. "Are you trying to make me feel better or something?"

"Not at all. When you exercise and stick to a mostly healthy eating style, you can afford to splurge on things. One of the biggest reasons I got into this business was so I could make my lifestyle fit my tastes."

"I can't say the same for myself."

"Why then are you here? In my advanced session."

Lida cringed. She didn't have a good reason for being in an advanced class except for the fact that she always tried to rise above and be more than she really was. There wasn't any rationale to it. In the end she always came out the fool. Same game, different guy. She was certain she'd decided the course of her life before she'd even gotten started.

"To, improve myself, of course."

The look he gave her left her feeling exposed and weak.

Chapter Four

Pierce wasn't about to take that as her only answer. She had a very good body and was sure she was a regular head turner when she walked down the street. "No other reasons for wanting to shape up?"

"Well, I really want to look as good as the women who end up on Fear Factor. That's my ultimate goal."

He pressed his lips tight together to keep from laughing.

The look on her face was priceless.

"Oh, go ahead and laugh at me. I don't care. Some women want to look like supermodels or a certain actress. I want to be a Fear Factor babe, and a major contender. I know I'll never get as buff or ripped like most of those women. They're addicts. But I'd like to come close enough to look decent on television. I want a shot at prizes, money, and not be afraid to bare my body on air."

"It sounds like you have a put a lot of thought into this ambition of yours. I can get you into a lean, mean beauty queen, but you'll have to do all the work. It will be a hefty commitment."

"I know."

"Okay. Too much talk. Let's get back to work. Now we're going to work on bicep curls while doing forward lunges. I'll demonstrate first and then we'll do a few together."

Pierce had no idea why a woman would suggest she worked out regularly and then go through hell in an advanced session when it was obvious she hadn't lifted weights in at least the last ten years. She was a determined woman, and he liked that. He would be more than happy to mold her body into what she wanted. That would be the fun part. First he'd have to find out if she was up to the challenge. It was going to take perseverance on her part, probably more than she even thought she had. He hadn't gotten where he was by kissing ass or playing by the rules. Stubborn to a fault, and proud of it, he could appreciate her willful behavior.

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He eyed her form and tried to keep up her confidence. Women were the harshest critics of their bodies, and often saw things that others didn't. He was interested to see what her shape was beneath the long, bulky t-shirt. It was hiding all the crucial parts. Well, not all. She was a beautiful woman. Porcelain skin, jade green eyes, long black lashes that curled suggestively. Right away when he'd stepped into the subway, she'd caught his attention. When he saw something beautiful, he wanted it. Badly. He had to obtain it and make it his. One way or another, he was going to snare her. Even if it meant pulling out all the stops. He loved the fine art of seduction, and she was the kind of masterpiece worth fawning over.

Noticeably, she hadn't lifted weights before. She held them awkwardly and gripped them too tight. "Not bad, we need to work on a couple things. First, relax your grip or your wrists are going to hurt. Second, try and think smooth, graceful, flowing. Your movements are jerky and will lead to injury."

She looked like she was going to hurl a weight at him, so he backed off and watched her continue to do it wrong.

It was very entertaining. With her face all pinched up like it was, he had to bite the sides of his cheeks to keep from laughing. The bags under her eyes didn't hide the fact that she wasn't a morning person. Even looking like that she was still incredibly gorgeous. Long, ashy blonde hair that he was certain would blow him away if she wore it down, high cheekbones, and sultry pink lips. Kissable lips. He could all ready imagine the way she would feel against his skin.

"Okay, I think you are ready to move on to the more strenuous stuff."

She blinked a few times, making her look even more adorable. "More strenuous?"

"Yes. It's obvious by your level of strength that this is all too easy for you. We're going to do circuits. We'll start back with the squats for twenty, pushups for twenty, another set of squats for twenty, and lunges ten per side. Then, two minutes on a hard incline of the treadmill, followed by two minutes on the stepper. Then we'll start all over again."

"Are you kidding me?"

He shrugged. "Why would I do that? Ask anyone here, I have a great reputation for getting people the results they need."

"I don't question that. How many times did you want me to do the circuit?"

"Let's keep it simple for today since we're just starting out and say, ten times."

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If her jaw had dropped even farther, it would have hit the floor. “Ten times?”

“I’m going too easy on you, aren’t I? My apologies. Okay, let’s shoot for fifteen times. I don’t mind compromising.”

“But…”

“I can tell by your sleek, streamlined look that you are highly advanced. I don’t want to offend you by assuming you can do less when you can do more.”

“No--no offense taken. Umm...I’m not as energetic this morning. I wouldn’t mind going a little easier.”

He liked toying with her, it was far too much fun.

“Fifteen times should do it.”

The look on her face suggested she could argue it for days, but wouldn’t dare. She was playing right into his game. He liked harmless games, especially when the reward was something to revel in.

“Now, I’m going to jump in every now and then, but mostly I’m using today to watch how you hold yourself. Let’s go right into squats to keep those legs working. Keep those legs wide and toes out to the side. Again, watch how far your knees extend. You want to go low enough that you feel the pull in your butt and inner thighs without sacrificing your form. Hold that stomach in. Are you feeling it?”

Lida grimaced every time she squatted. Through clenched teeth he heard her say “yes” and then blew her bangs up off her forehead. The woman wasn’t about to give up and would struggle through any test he put before her. Today was his lucky day. He decided it was time for a little one on one contact to check out the goods she thought weren’t good enough to be seen. His imagination could only run so far. He strode up close behind her, resting his hands on her hips, and pressed his body in, easing her along, up and down through the squats.

“This will help you keep your back straight. You want to memorize this feeling, let it burn in your memory.”

It was certainly burning in his pants.

Pierce casually inched her shirt up an inch to check out the curve of her ass. It was just as he thought. Lovely. God how he wanted to know what it felt like to take her from behind.

“That’s right. Slowly sink into it. Feel those thighs working?”

“Uh huh.”

Ann Cory

Yeah. He could feel them and imagined them wrapped around his waist. She finished her squats and moved on to pushups. After only one her arms were visibly shaking.

“Come on,” he clapped his hands together in encouragement, “let’s not lose momentum now. Nineteen more. You can do it. Work those triceps.”

He had to hand it to her, she was a trooper. A woman who didn’t give up too easily was downright sexy.

“That’s it. One more. Okay, now back up and do another twenty squats. This time I want you to raise your arms and do what are known as military lifts. They will help sculpt some nice muscle tone.”

Again he stood behind her, helping her hold her arms in the correct position as she did the lifts. When he started to get too excited, he backed off.

Pierce watched as she went through the rest of the exercises with a deep frown, panting and wheezing along. Yep, she was going to need a lot of work. Fortunately, there were other ways to get in good shape. Tomorrow the training was going to get a little more personal.

Lida dragged her sweaty, sore bum all the way to the women’s locker room and plopped on the bench. The idea of going through it all again the next morning sent waves of panic throughout her aching body. It was only the first day and here she was, ready to give up, but she couldn’t do that. She hurried into the shower and let the warm water help soothe away some of the tenderness. From her bag she pulled out her makeup and added some subtle color. She dressed in a navy blue skirt and white blouse, and slipped into a pair of pumps. Whether her boss liked it or not, she would be running late. He’d probably hold it against her, but she couldn’t please everyone.

She smiled as she brushed her hair out and secured it with a barrette. Pierce was a nice man, but a total slave driver. Granted, it was what he got paid for and she did let on—okay, lied—that she was advanced. So yeah, as usual, it all backfired. If he hadn’t noticed that she was barely a beginner yet, he’d definitely find out tomorrow. She shivered. The feeling of his body pressed against her, the way his fingers clamped her waist, damn if she hadn’t gotten fully aroused. He was the perfect distraction. In fact, she could tell he’d enjoyed it as well. Either that or she’d mistaken the prodding from behind as wishful thinking. It had taken sheer will to not grind her hips against him.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

On her way out the door, she caught a glimpse of Pierce talking to a woman dressed in a sexy hot-pink spandex number showing off a dynamite figure complete with chiseled abs and a dark tan. Long flowing, honey-blond hair that framed her pretty face with mass makeup on and big eyes that were playing him. Confidence exuded all around her, like an aura.

Lida wasn't sure why it bothered her so much, but it did. Who was she fooling? Of course she knew why. The woman was her competition. She was the epitome of all the things she wished she looked like. Pierce was obviously interested in her from the way he touched her shoulder a lot and laughed along with her. If that was how he liked his clients to look, then she could do it too. Tomorrow she would lose the big shirt and show him who the warrior princess was. She swung the bag over her shoulder and hurried to the subway station.

At work she tried to busy herself between organizing client folders and adding entries to the database. Every once in awhile Pierce's face flashed through her mind. She'd expected a gruff middle-aged man wearing mismatched clothes, prickly stubble outlining his chin, and a silver whistle around his neck. Instead she got a powerhouse with a tempting physique and a down-to-earth personality she could really get used to. Even when she knew that she looked like wimp he didn't ridicule her or poke fun. Somehow she'd gotten lucky and scored the most dashing personal trainer in the place. She was pretty sure all his other female clients thought the same thing.

Everywhere his hands had touched her, still blazed with a trail of heat. The close contact had motivated her to keep going. Yes, her personal trainer was a total stud. That blonde floozy in pink she'd seen was going to be a thorn in her side. Bimbo. The thought of Pierce pressing his body against another woman shouldn't make her stomach churn, but it did. Time to step it up a notch. No matter how much pain she was in, she wasn't going to let him down. For once she'd see through her lies and end the dreaded backfires.

Right after work she made a detour and stopped at a sports apparel shop. The clearance rack caught her attention and she found a baby blue ultra-light shimmer spaghetti strap top and a matching pair of athletic shorts. She tried them on and they fit perfectly. The top stopped just above her bellybutton and gave her breasts some added shape. Now she'd give blondie a run for her money.

Ann Cory

Chapter Five

Pierce was impressed by Lida's attitude the second day of training. Clearly she was in pain from all the squats he'd had her do, and he felt guilty for having put her through such a rigorous amount the first day, but she'd shown up and that deserved recognition. Not to mention how gorgeous she looked with her hair in a loose ponytail, and without the big shirt. She had a healthy figure, a touch soft around the middle, but he liked soft on a woman. Her breasts were larger than he'd imagined, and rested snugly in the sexy top she had on. Bonus. It would be a challenge to keep his eyes from sneaking peeks at them, especially as she jogged along on the treadmill. The shorts she wore showed off her legs, but really displayed her ass. Overall, she was a hot little number that under his supervision would smolder.

"You're doing fantastic. We won't go crazy with lunges or squats today. Chances are your legs feel three times heavier than normal."

"Exactly. Like they're tree trunks or something."

"That's common. If you do a lot of stretching before you leave today, that might help some."

"I'll try that."

"I was sorry to not see you on the subway this morning. You really improve the scenery."

"Thank you. I was running a little late this morning. Legs wouldn't keep up with me."

Pierce couldn't help but chuckle. He remembered those days.

"Maybe we'll catch each other again."

"I hope so."

He liked to watch her move. Her calves were nicely shaped and her legs...he wanted to feel what it was like to be between them.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Okay, go ahead and step off the treadmill. To give your legs a break, I thought we’d concentrate on strengthening your abs and back. With a tight core, you will be able to perform all exercises better. Now lie down on your back and bend your knees, keeping your back pressed to the floor, your hips tilted slightly. When you come up, keep your elbows back, don’t let them help you swing up. Instead I want you to concentrate on tightening your tummy and making your stomach work for you.”

He circled her belly with his finger and she started to laugh.

“I’m very ticklish.”

Did those words ever stir his cock!

“Let’s start with two counts up and two counts down. Say, twenty for starters.”

Up her breasts went. Down her breasts went. Oh, to lick those sweet beauties. A light film of sweat started on his forehead.

Pierce watched her intently, ignoring the longing to lie on top of her, spread her legs, and get busy. It was crazy such thoughts were even going on in his mind. What was his problem? He’d been a personal trainer for over six years and had seen many female clients. Some even graced the covers of Playboy and other adult publications. Lida was somehow different. Maybe it was because she didn’t have an ego and had realistic goals set for herself. Whatever it was, it worked for her, and him.

“How am I doing?”

“Excellent. I’m going to demonstrate some variations. Each one is geared to work different muscles to give you an overall proportioned look.”

When he’d finished showing Lida the different moves, he knelt beside her, his hand firmly planted on her lower abdomen to stress where she needed to place the bulk of the work.

“There you go. We can finish off with some relaxing stretches for the back and some for the legs as well.”

She rolled over and stretched up into a cobra position.

“Feel the way it lengthens the muscles you just worked.”

“Mmm. It hurts, but in a good way.”

“Yeah.”

Again his cock stirred at the thought of taking her. It did hurt in a good way. God he wanted her. He didn’t know what she thought about him, but he planned to find out.

“I wondered if I could ask you a question.”

Ann Cory

She sat up and put her legs out to stretch. "Sure. Go ahead."

"Would you like to grab something to eat? Dinner maybe?"

Her green eyes searched his. Luminous. Cat-like.

"You want to take me to dinner? Why? That probably isn't a good idea."

His eye twitched. He couldn't remember the last time a woman turned him down.

This was classic.

"I thought it would be a nice gesture. We could talk about stuff and get to know one another."

She peered at him through squinted eyes. "Why would we do that?"

Okay. His ego had been officially deflated. The nerve! Granted she was hot and he wanted her. And he liked to get what he wanted. He always got what he wanted, or close to it. But she was killing him here. He wasn't about to beg. Pierce Wytham didn't beg for anything.

"A simple no would be fine. Keeps a guy's dignity intact. Never mind." He held his hand out to help her up. "You go shower and stuff and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Now hang on. I didn't say yes or no. I was just--I guess--oh I don't know. It was an unexpected invitation. Sure, I'd like to have dinner with you. I don't get off work until six, so it's always a late one for me."

"That works. I leave here around seven. There's an incredible steakhouse a block down. I don't suppose you'd be interested in taking the subway back here and we could walk over together?"

Her brows slanted together. "I've never ridden the subway at night."

"I'll be riding home with you. I promise the weird people don't come out until much later. Please. I'd like to get to know you outside of the gym."

"Why?"

"Maybe I like you. It's hard to talk here without everyone else listening in."

"Okay. Is it a dressy place?"

"No. I'll be wearing nice jeans."

"Good to know. I guess I'll see you later."

Pierce nodded. "See you."

He watched her fine backside walk away and wished he had time to take a cold shower.

Chapter Six

Lida had an added skip in her step as she headed off to catch the subway. She must have done something right for Pierce to ask her out. A voice in her head—the one that was always getting in the way of things—said it was probably the kind of thing he did with all his female clients.

Still, she would bask in the spotlight for now. Even if he did take other women out, what was it to her? She didn't own him. She'd known him for two whole days. Granted she'd known guys for less time and charmed them into bed, but they were all becoming distant memories. Sex itself wasn't enough anymore, though it was a necessity in her life. She wanted more out of a relationship. The last thing she wanted was to repeat mistakes she'd seen others make.

Before she'd had a chance to sit down at her desk, her boss strode over, his bushy eyebrows looking like distorted caterpillars.

“Ms. Jones. I specifically asked for you to deliver the files on Chris Peterson to my desk and I still have yet to find them. Are you incompetent?”

Her mouth hung open. She thought about thanking him for completely ruining her day, but decided against it. Paychecks were important.

“Sir, I can assure you that I put them there last night before I left for the day.”

“I've searched my desk and they aren't anywhere to be found. If they were, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you, now would I?”

Her inner warrior begged her to pick up the desk and throw it out the window, but she took a deep breath and remained calm. “Do you mind if I have a look myself?”

“Pardon me?” His eyes got wide.

“I know they are there. Maybe the files got mixed in with the other things I dropped of. It would help if I could look myself. I'm very efficient with my work and don't care to be scolded when I've done nothing wrong.”

Ann Cory

She stood up and pushed her chair back. Waves of empowerment coursed in her veins.

“My client is in there right now as we speak and it would look unprofessional of you to poke around my desk in front of him.”

Lida ignored him and walked toward his office. She opened the door and gasped. Sitting in a chair with a smug expression sat a man she had hoped to never see again.

“Christopher!”

“Oh wow! If it isn’t Lida Jones.”

After recognizing the guy that she’d deflowered herself for on a dare, she felt her inner warrior run for the hills. Talk about embarrassing! The room was closing in and she couldn’t breathe. She turned to leave when Janice, the sweet little fetch-it lady, walked through the doorway with a cup filled with coffee. Lida screamed as the hot liquid splashed all over her front. Immediately she tore her blouse off and used a handful of tissues to wipe at her chest. Was it possible for things to get any worse? It took two minutes for her to realize she was standing in front of her boss, Janice, and Chris in her bra.

“Ms. Jones! What is the meaning of this! If I lose my client because of your behavior, it will be your head!”

Lida wanted to cry. Instead she got mad. “Well it isn’t as if your client has never seen my breasts before.”

She wasn’t about to stick around long enough to find out if Chris would bail her out. Humiliated, she tore out of the office, grabbed a poncho she stored in the bottom drawer of her desk in case of an emergency and kept running until she made it to the ladies room. In the mirror she saw a woman who looked like a mess. Streaks of mascara ran down her cheeks. Red splotches flared on her chest. The strands of her hair were wet from the coffee. She was sure to be fired. There was nothing to do but go home, take a long, hot shower, and see what she could do with some aloe vera. The dress she’d planned to wear to dinner with Pierce wouldn’t work now. Burned cleavage. Somehow that didn’t give off the affect she wanted. She ignored the strange stares on the way home and stared out the window.

After she’d successfully washed out the smell of fresh roasted coffee beans from her hair, Lida wrapped herself up in her favorite fluffy robe to nurse her broken spirit and sat on the couch flipping channels with the remote. In three hours she’d be back on her

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

way to having dinner with mister muscles and pretend nothing happened. She did a mental picture of her closet and decided on a short black skirt with a silk and cotton white shirt. She'd go light on jewelry, maybe a strand of pearls to dress it up, and take her time applying makeup. Tonight she'd wear her hair down and curled under. With time to spare, she flipped on Fear Factor and ogled the women.

Pierce spent the rest of the day pumping iron next to some of the pickiest clients he'd ever had. Where did they come from? He found working with women easier and less competitive. When he worked with a male, all of a sudden it became a duel to see who could do the most sets, lift the heaviest weights, and go the extra distance. He blamed testosterone. All day he found himself distracted and instead of blaming testosterone, he blamed Lida Jones. She was a lady who made an impression. It wouldn't be long before he was sitting across from her and hopefully talking about things other than health and fitness. He would make it clear his interest was in getting to know her as a woman, not as a client.

He was thrilled to be getting his way. Ladies didn't often turn him down, though most of the time he should have turned them down. No guy in his right mind would dare let a gem like Lida get away. Maybe she didn't see it in herself, but if he could help her feel better about herself, it would make him feel good.

His five-thirty appointment came in, a somewhat pretty brunette wearing enough makeup for two people and a disturbing leopard print exercise ensemble. He rolled his eyes. While the women were indeed easier to work with, some of them came in with the wrong intentions of a personal trainer. Right away she gave the appearance that she was desperate and only hired him so she could flirt and tell her friends.

“Hi, I'm Kelly.”

Her voice was bubbly, and he didn't do bubbly.

“Pierce Wytham. Care to get started with a warm up?”

She took a big step and nudged against him with her large breasts that hardly fit inside her top.

“I'm feeling warm all ready.”

He caught a whiff of her perfume and almost gagged. This would be a long hour.

“Great. Then hop on the treadmill and we can get started.”

With a sigh, he watched the clock. Yes, a very long hour.

Ann Cory

Chapter Seven

Despite the red splotches on her chest, Lida felt better than she had earlier. Tonight she would forget about her work issues and enjoy Pierce's company. The trip on the subway hadn't been as scary as she'd imagined. Going downtown was scary enough, but at night it made her extra cautious.

She was fifteen minutes early, but didn't think Pierce would mind too much. Lida pushed the door open of Warriors In Training and immediately caught sight of a whorish looking brunette practically throwing herself all over *her* personal trainer! The blonde had been bad enough, all gorgeous with perky breasts and a come hither look, but this brunette was ridiculous! What woman in her right mind wore leopard print workout wear? Quietly she pretended to be inspecting a machine so she could eavesdrop on their conversation.

"I think you did a good job today. You are very strong and could probably try eight-pound weights by next week. We'll continue working on your breathing while you lift and lower weights tomorrow."

She watched the woman walk her fingertips up Pierce's shoulder and gave her a sultry look.

"I'm so sorry, it's just that being around you makes me breathless."

Lida groaned and wanted to vomit. If he fell for that tawdry line she was going to make him wish he'd stop breathing.

"Look, Kelly, I'm afraid you are looking to be disappointed. I'm your personal trainer and that is how it will remain."

"But, I..."

"You aren't the first woman to come in here looking for something else, but I am committed to someone else. If you're still interested in getting your body into shape, then I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

She could see the woman seething beneath her layers of paint. Part of her wanted to jump up and down right there and cheer.

“Excuse me, but there’s nothing wrong with my body to begin with!”

“I didn’t mean you weren’t in shape.”

The brunette stormed out the door, leaving a trail of smoke behind her. Lida stepped out from behind the machine clapping her hands together.

“Bravo! Bravo! Way to go Romeo.”

Pierce turned around with a half-wounded look and then flashed her a radiant smile.

“Hey! You’re here. Great!”

“Wow, you sure know how to handle yourself around the ladies.”

“She’s been flirting with me for an hour and it was starting to irritate me.”

“You’re just lucky I overheard what was being said or you would have been in trouble.”

“For what?”

“Flirting, of course.”

“But I didn’t…”

“Let me finish. It was clear to me what was going on. I’m just giving you a bad time. You’re totally cute.”

“Careful or I’m going to think you’re flirting with me.”

She put her hand up and waved at him. “Fat chance of that happening.”

“So, you all ready to go?”

“I’m starving.”

He walked a couple steps toward the back of the gym. “Same here. Worked up an appetite fending off that she-cat. Let me go get Todd from the break room, he’s closing tonight. Then I’m going to do a quick shower and change thing. Don’t go anywhere, beautiful.”

“Okay. I just want to know one thing.”

He looked back at her over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Who the hell is this woman you’re committed to?”

His face flushed. “Um. You heard that part, hey? I’m not really committed committed, just slightly committed.”

She shook her head. “What does that mean?”

Ann Cory

“I don’t know. It means my interest lies with one woman and right now, that is you.”

Lida planted her hands on her hips and gave him an attitude-laced look. “Right now? What am I, your girl Friday?”

“No, no. I only meant. Ah, forget it. You women make a man’s head spin. I meant nothing bad by it. I’ll be right back.”

She giggled and walked around the gym while waiting. The night was going to be interesting.

The restaurant was fancy with a jazz band playing in the far corner. Her foot bobbed along with the rhythm and she let the mood guide her.

“How is your steak?”

“Probably the best I’ve ever had.”

“Good! I love this place. It’s a keeper.”

“You’re telling me.”

She cut into her steak and chewed it slow to savor its flavor.

“This place is fantastic. I love jazz.”

“I kind of think the company is fantastic. You look lovely.”

Lida had a feeling her cheeks were as red as the wine in her glass.

“Do compliments make you uncomfortable?”

“Men in general make me uncomfortable.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They make me feel inadequate and worthless.”

Whoa! Somebody bring her some duct tape, her mouth had a mind of its own. This was a date, not a confessional.

Pierce leaned forward and put his hand on hers.

“Are you always so hard on yourself?”

Where was a bridge to jump off of when you needed it? “Oh no. Usually I’m much worse. You caught me on a good day.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“No. I’m trying to forget for the moment. Maybe I’ll tell you later.”

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

She toyed with her potatoes, sneaking glances at him. He'd changed into a pair of nice jeans and a deep blue sweater that brought out the color of his eyes. Even casual he still looked dressy.

“Where do you think your discomfort for men came from?”

“My father. He walked out on my mom and I. Bastard.”

Pierce stopped his glass midway to his lips and put it back down. “Maybe we should talk about something else. The last thing I want to do is rehash events in your life that have hurt you.”

“You're sweet. It's not something I get upset about anymore, contrary to how I sounded. My apologies. I'm a grown woman and have come to understand certain things. I've just never forgiven him.”

“It sucks to be a kid in that situation.”

“Are you speaking out of experience?”

“No, just empathy.”

She took a large gulp of wine and ate another bite of steak. “What about you? I take it you have a close family?”

“We're like the Cleavers. I have a brother; he's a football coach for the university. My parents are a real supportive bunch. I still call them every week and go over for the holidays. They moved up to Washington. Don't know why. More rain there than here.”

“Have you always been an Oregonian?”

“Born and raised. You?”

“Same. Love it here, though I'd rather live on the coast. Maybe someday. How come you don't drive a car?”

His face got real serious and she was afraid it was her turn to stick her foot in her mouth.

“I haven't driven for about a year now. Lost a friend in a drunk driving accident. He sort of borrowed my car without asking, totaled it and lost his life in the process.”

The steak wasn't going down so well right then. “Oh, Pierce. I'm so sorry.”

He shrugged but she could see it still hurt him. “The guy was out of control. I thought a week or two with me and I could fix him or something. You know us guys, we like to try and fix things. He had an alcohol problem and well...I shouldn't have meddled I guess. He'd probably still be around today.”

“You don't know that.”

Ann Cory

“No, but I’ll never get the chance to find out.”

“Gosh. I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

“Why? I wanted to take you out so we could talk openly. Can’t do that in a gym. So what’s your story? Why don’t you drive?”

She set her fork down and folded her hands. “Ugh. My last car sapped me of all my money and it still died on me. I’m saving up to get a new one. I miss driving. I don’t go very far, but I like the freedom. I can’t say that I’m too sorry about it right now. I may never have met you.”

His smile alone stimulated her nipples.

“Tell me where you would go if you could go anywhere.”

She thought about it for a few minutes and blurted out, “Hawaii. I think.”

“Why there?”

“Whenever I see brochures or commercials, it always looks beautiful. Plus I love the sand and ocean. Course, I’d have to look good in a bathing suit if I went there.”

“You are too critical of yourself. You’re an attractive woman and contrary to your belief, you have a fine body. I like flesh on a woman.”

“Well, I have plenty of flesh on me. Where would you go?”

He sat up tall in the chair and put his finger to his chin.

“Hmm. I’m torn. Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Australia, and now that you mentioned it, Hawaii. I couldn’t possibly pick. They’re all beautiful. In case you didn’t know, I have a weakness for beautiful things.”

Lida shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Do you.”

“Yeah. A true beauty sits right across from me.”

“You embarrass me.”

“One day you’ll see it. But I won’t keep you in the spotlight. Wouldn’t want you to run away from me. I like to indulge in the fancier things in life. I want to go to art galleries and visit the beautiful structures of the world.”

“So why don’t you?”

“I’ve never wanted to go alone. A sunset is always more enchanting when you share it with someone.”

So Prince Charming did exist in the modern world. “You could sweep a girl right off the arm of a guy if you wanted, did you know that?”

“Wow. I never thought to ask if you were seeing someone. I feel like a real ass.”

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“If I did have a boyfriend, I’ve completely forgotten about him.”

He laughed and motioned to their server for the bill. “This has been a treat for me.”

“It’s been surprisingly pleasant.”

While he paid for the bill she used the ladies room and made sure there wasn’t anything in her teeth. She’d always had a complex about that. He was looking through a complimentary newspaper when she came out.

“All dolled up again?”

“Yeah, sure.” Being with a true gentleman was going to spoil her for life.

Pierce took her hand and they headed outside to the subway station. “Are you cold?”

“Nope. Warm and content.”

“Good.”

“I can’t believe how delicious the food was, thank you so much. Great pick for a restaurant.”

“I eat there all the time.”

“I’m sure you do.”

He stopped and stuck out his lower lip. “Excuse me. I will have you know that I have never once taken a client there. Ever.”

“Really?”

“Never wanted to. Until now.”

She liked the way he made her feel. It had been nice to spend time with him away from the gym. They went down the steps and waited for the train to stop.

Ann Cory

Chapter Eight

Lida followed him on, getting lost in his eye-pleasing buns of steel. He took a seat in the back aisle and motioned for her to hurry. His charismatic smile made her dizzy with each step. A new rush of endorphins swam in her body, the kind that turned into butterflies that beat their wings hard against her stomach.

“Are you going to scoot over?”

“I thought you’d prefer the window seat.”

He tucked his feet beneath the seat to let her get by. Her intention was to gracefully slide past him, but she never got that far. His hands wrapped around her hips and gently pulled her onto his lap. She gasped at the touch.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, but she wasn’t so sure he was.

Lida turned to look at him in time to catch his playful, yet sexy grin. She felt awkward with the skirt she was wearing. It made it difficult to move her legs about freely. If no one else could hear the bass drum inside her chest, she’d be surprised.

The soft denim of his jeans against the back of her legs sent shivers running up and down her back. She waited for the voice inside her head to warn her that it wasn’t right. But everything told her it was exactly where she wanted to be.

His cologne was intoxicating and made everything hazy. He released his hands from her and she wasn’t sure what to do. If it was his way of letting her know she was free to move around at any time, she had other ideas now. She would meet his challenge. Lida set her bag on the seat by the window and smiled coyly. Immediately she could feel the hardness of him start to grow beneath her. Blood rushed through every part of her body. Warm and wet. Sex was such a wonderful and beautiful thing between two people, and she hoped to rock his world.

She was distracted for a moment by the sound of coughing. From under her fringe of bangs she looked around, but no one was watching. The other passengers sat staring off into space.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Worried we’ll get caught?”

She shook her head and sank her body into him. His hands squeezed her hips and a rush of contentment oozed throughout her body. Softly his fingers traveled through her hair and smoothed the ends down around her shoulders. It was better than a massage. Her body relaxed from the sensual touch. Gently, he brushed her hair to one side. His warm breath on the nape of her neck made her so wet between her thighs, she worried there’d be a stain.

She held her breath, not daring to look back at him. If she did, she would chicken out. Soft, warm kisses broke the silence as they traveled around her lower neck and shoulders. His lips tickled against her skin, but at the same time aroused her senses. She quivered, her nipples hardening through the confinement of her bra.

A movement ahead shifted her attention and again she was reminded of other people. The intense feelings and new emotions this man was opening her up to, had left her oblivious to everything and everyone around her. It was a concern that was unwarranted, since no one bothered to acknowledge them. Part of her didn’t care. The thought of someone watching aroused her. Her confidence was increasing. Well, that and the fact she was horribly horny now.

His lips grazed her ear and her nipples tightened up even more. “Comfortable?”

“Yes,” she answered weakly.

Lida slid back further into him, giving him the green light to do whatever he wanted. Chances were it was the same as what she wanted him to do. He raised her skirt up, his fingertips raking lightly over her thighs.

She was wet with desire and lifted up from his lap enough to show she wanted more. Pierce reached for her silk panties and slid them down, letting them entrap her by the ankles. The vulnerable state she was in nearly had her convulsing. “Oh god,” she whispered.

“Do you want me?”

She whimpered, nodding her head yes, afraid she’d cry out. Her heart pounded in her chest and her lungs tensed, making it difficult to catch a full breath. The contact of his fingers against her skin was magic. Each movement was slow and lucid, driving her further to a state of unimaginable bliss. Currents of high-voltage powering through her body at top speed. He was unlike any man she’d ever been with in the way he handled her. Attentive and focused on seduction.

Ann Cory

“How bad do you want me?”

Lida leaned her body back against him, the side of her head against his chin.

“I want you like I’ve never wanted anyone.”

“Good. Because I’m going to take you right here, right now. I don’t give a damn about the other people here.”

Effortlessly he slid her forward and unzipped his jeans. The very sound hung in the air, magnified, and made her feel naughty. He lifted her up and pushed the tip of his head through her moistened folds. She heard him moan as he shifted himself up inside her, filling her completely. The combined scent of his cologne, sweat, and their sex invoked a surge of heat within her very core.

As the subway came to a stop she looked up in time to notice several people disembarking. A small flood of panic rushed through her while another part was almost willing them to turn their heads. She almost craved the need to see the surprised look across their faces to catch them in the act of pure unadulterated sex. To think how they might look at them with envy or disgust. Either would have been an absolute turn on.

But no one saw and the subway started up again. With his hard cock throbbing inside her, she rode him up and down, the heels of her shoes grinding into the floor of the train. Lida gripped the top of the seat in front of her, easing herself up to his tip and then slamming herself back down. Her inner muscles tightly seized his slick shaft. She could feel every inch of him, burning his path deep within. His hands reached around and worked their way underneath her sweater and bra, caressing her breasts. Leisurely he traced her nipples with his fingertips, making them hard and prominent. She wouldn’t wish to be anywhere but with him, right there. Whether from lust or love, her body craved his.

“You’re driving me wild.”

“I plan to.”

His husky voice low and whispering against her ear was foreplay all on its own.

“Please,” she begged. “I’m not as fragile as you think.”

His fingers tightened around her nipples and gave them a sharp pinch. Instinctively she rotated her hips and ground hard into him.

“Don’t stop.”

Lida could barely contain herself. She was in complete ecstasy.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Come on, beautiful, let me feel you douse my cock with your honey.” His words were dirty sweet, furthering her excitement.

Every sensation in her body responded to each touch, move, word, and thrust as if he controlled her. His hand roamed down farther until he reached her clit. Her labored breath intensified and perspiration beaded above her brow. The blood in her body raced while sounds were drowned out by the unconsciousness that was trying to take over. She felt like she was being sucked into a vortex, hardly able to keep herself from its power. As if draining the very life out of her, but she wanted it...oh how she wanted it. Everything of herself she gave to him without his asking.

Lida moved against him harder, her womb raw but begging for more, like an itch she couldn't scratch, taking all of him in. She begged him to move quicker as she neared the point her body would explode. It took everything in her to keep from crying out. In that moment she didn't want anyone to see, or for the moment to be spoiled.

He circled his thumb faster, thrusting into her fiercely, their bodies spilling into one another. She couldn't hold back. An amazing liberation washed over her and she spilled her honey, over his thick rod. More jolts followed, her body jerking above him. He held her tight until her body stopped trembling.

The subway came to another halt and all but one person left. She glanced out the window and noticed the people standing around, staring at their watches or reading a paper, lost in their own lives. The subway started up again and she tried to regain her composure. Lida lifted herself from his lap and pulled her skirt over her slick thighs. She turned and knelt in front of him, batting her eyelashes.

“You won't mind if I do a little teasing of my own, will you?”

She looked at him, marveling at his beautiful steel blue eyes. A miniscule scar arched above his right eyebrow. Her imagination worked overtime as she wondered what dangers he had faced in his life to get that. Maybe he led a very exciting life. Scars were sexy.

Pierce gave her a wicked smile when she playfully licked his shaft up and down, painting him with the tip of her tongue.

“Damn, you do that well.”

Just knowing it had been inside her, conjuring up an orgasm that topped the charts, made her all the more hungry to have it in her mouth. Without hesitation she swallowed him up, breathing out slow in order to take him far. He tasted delicious and

Ann Cory

even more exciting was watching him watch her. Between tight lips she slid his cock, teasing all the way up to the head, seeking out the tasty drizzle of his loins. She engulfed him again and skimmed her mouth up and down, caressing and tracing his balls with her fingertips. His face flushed as he moaned in pleasure. Even his scar started to glow a deep crimson. Oh how she longed to kiss it. Watching him writhe turned her on, empowering her, and she ached to have him inside her again.

She needed to feel the release again. While she suckled and stroked him, she stuck her fingers inside herself and massaged along the same path he had taken. Her fingers, mouth, tongue and lips were one entity, bringing him to a point that had him sweating profusely and growling as quiet as he could manage. His head swung back and he moaned. His cock was rock hard, and she knew how ready he was to let go at any moment. Intensely she stroked him harder and sucked the tip of his slick cock, fumbling him in and out of her mouth. Violently the release barreled through her, but she refused to slow down her momentum.

She shook until he tensed up and then spewed his sweet sugar into her mouth. Lida greedily drank in every last drop.

“God...I never...”

She beamed at him. The connection they’d had, getting completely lost during a train ride of lust.

He stroked her hair and helped her up onto his lap while he continued to tremble. Streaks of sweat stained the sides of his face.

“Let me help you with these.” He reached down to her ankles and helped pull up her panties. “Don’t go anywhere just yet.” Pierce held her tightly for the remainder of the ride. She liked how his chest rose and fell, his heartbeat pounding along with hers.

“Once we get to the station, how about I walk you home?”

“That’s fine. It’s not far at all.”

Lida walked on shaky legs as they arrived at their destination. They climbed the steps and walked along the sidewalk hand in hand. A gentle wind was in the air, making her cold between her legs against her damp panties. She shuddered, images in flashbacks going steadily through her mind. Pierce was definitely the kind of lover any woman would be lucky to have. She just wished it could be her.

“That’s my place, right up there.” She pointed to an apartment building with two big cherry trees surrounding the front entrance.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Should I walk you up?”

“That’s sweet, but no thank you.”

He leaned forward to give her a kiss. “I think I’m doing things backwards here.”

She put her hand to her mouth and giggled. “I don’t mind, honest.”

Pierce gently moved her hand away. “The only thing I want covering those lips, are mine.”

“Yes, sir.”

His lips were gentle and moist. Their tongues sampling in a spirited dance. She pulled away gingerly. A bliss-induced glaze coated her eyes and made her feel light-headed.

“Goodbye for now, my little vixen. I look forward to seeing you again in the morning.”

“Never thought I’d turn into a morning person. But, I guess it’s because now I have something worthwhile to get up for.”

“You certainly know how to get me up.”

She felt a familiar heat on her face and turned to the door. “Goodnight.”

Lida walked up to her apartment and closed the door. It took her a minute to come down from the high she’d been on. She had fallen for him hard, too hard, and she knew it wasn’t going to last. Especially since they’d just had sex. Tomorrow things would be awkward and he probably wouldn’t want anything more to do with her. They had shared an incredible moment and he’d taken her somewhere she’d never been with the way he touched her. But the damage was done and it was all her fault.

Ann Cory

Chapter Nine

Lida paced around her bedroom, overcome with a feeling of doubt. It was only ten thirty, but her head was spinning with questions. She picked up the phone and dialed Meg's number, hoping to hear a voice of reason.

On the second ring her friend answered, "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me. I suppose I'm interrupting study time."

"Yep. But it wouldn't matter what time you called...I'd still be studying. I could use a break. Give me a sec so I can grab a soda and I'll be at your disposal."

She tapped her fingers against her desk and sorted through her bills. She wondered if she still had a job to pay them off.

There was a lot of noise before Meg was back on the line. "K. What's up?"

"Crisis."

"How is that possible? Oh wait. Never mind. I almost forgot who I was talking to."

"Hah hah. Very funny."

"You know I'm kidding. So what's the scoop?"

"Well I took your advice and got myself a personal trainer."

"Wow! You actually listened to me. I'm so proud of you."

Lida let out a deep, long sigh. "Don't get too proud. I blew it before it ever began and now I'm waiting for the big fallout."

"Wait. What happened? I thought you wanted to get yourself all toned up. I'm confused."

"Did I mention my personal trainer is hot with a succulent ass and knows exactly how to touch a woman?"

"No, you left all that out. Thought we were best friends?"

"We are. Seriously though, he is unimaginably sexy. We did it on the subway."

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Did it? Oh, *it*. Get out of here! I ride that thing everyday and no one has even tried to look under my skirt.”

“This was tonight.”
“You’re talking to me just after you two have had sex? Sounds like high school.”

“Don’t go there. I ran into the guy I gave up my virginity to at work today.” She could still feel the sting of humiliation.

“Girl, your life has more twists and turns than a soap opera!”

“I’d be happy to go on hiatus for awhile. But I don’t want to talk about him, what a nightmare.”

“What’s the hunk’s name?”

“Pierce. I really like him. I mean really, *really* with a capital R, with all my heart. Almost love kind of like him.”

“Usually that’s a good thing. Where’s the crisis?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. It’s getting complicated.”

“Sex will do that.”

Lida rubbed her forehead. “I never learn anything. There’s no way it’s going to work out. I need to bail.”

She moved the phone from her ear while her friend laughed. “Geez woman. And you want to be a contestant on Fear Factor? You won’t even face up to your greatest fear of all.”

“What’s that?”

“Commitment.”

“I am not the one afraid of commitment. It’s the guys I date.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m your best friend. Your shit does stink with me,” snorted Meg.

“Hey!”

“Stop for a second and listen to me. I’m not taking all these psychology classes for nothing, you know. I guarantee if you keep on the way you are, not only will you be my top patient, but you’ll be helping me afford the most luxurious houses all over the world.”

“I’m waiting for you to explain your statement.”

Ann Cory

“You are the one who sabotages the relationships, hon. I hate to be the one to tell you that, but I say it because I care. Right off the bat you taint it. Before things every get anywhere.”

“No I don’t. I’m the one who always gets dumped.”

“No, sweetie, you’ve gotten real good at playing the martyr, almost too good. I can see past all your issues that you haven’t even started dealing with.”

“Am I being charged for this?” Lida had no doubt her friend would be successful in her field.

“I’ll let you know at the end of the session. Now, may I continue?”

“I guess.”

“As I was saying, you are the one who sends the guy running away with his tail between his legs. Before you’ve even given the guy a chance to get to know the wonderful woman you are, you’ve started the relationship out with a lie. What good comes out of a relationship built on lies?”

“Ah. You want Dr. Phil’s job.”

“His money. Not his show. I’ll work behind the scenes. You’re trying to get me to shut up, I can tell.”

“Only because I don’t think you’re right at all.”

“Of course you don’t. That would be saying the same as you are wrong.”

“I’m not wrong. I just find the wrong guys.”

She listened to her friend guzzle her pop and then swallow. “You mislead them.”

“I did mislead Geoff with the whole love of the outdoors and hiking thing.”

“Mmmhmm. As well as Jason and the skiing thing.”

“Nearly broke my damn leg.”

“Mike and the total love of car racing. Which I have to add, you were quite a trooper, putting up with his races every weekend for a month.”

“Well, he gave me front row tickets and...okay fine, you’re right. It’s what you want to hear. I am to blame for some of the break ups. But not all of them.”

“That’s what you think.”

“Now you’re being mean.”

“The correct word is honest. I am being honest with you. As your friend, who loves you and can’t stand it when you get hurt. I’m also objective and see it from the other side. This stems from your dad walking out on you and your mom. Then you found

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

out he cheated on her with a whole bunch of women and your mom turned around and started bringing different guys home to stave off her depression.”

“Wow. I’m a textbook case, aren’t I,” she said dryly.

“Oh hon. Don’t say that. I’m not trying to be insensitive here. You want so badly to not be like your parents that you’re acting irrational when it comes to sex and love. To you sex means they will be gone in the morning. Love means getting hurt. You need to separate yourself from that way of thinking.”

She felt like crying. “Then you’ve basically helped me figure out what I have to do.”

“That would be?”

“To dump him.”

“I don’t believe I was going that route at all. Is that what you want to do?”

“Not really, but I can’t wait around for him to do the dumping. I need to take responsibility for my actions. I lied about how much I workout and how well I take care of my body. I made myself out to be someone I’m not. Like you said, can’t have a relationship built on lies.”

“Wait now...it’s not a big lie. He probably figured out that you stretched the truth, so if you come clean with him, and tell him the truth, there is a chance you’ll be able to redeem yourself. Don’t count that out. I’m not telling you to dump him. Just stop the routine you started a long time ago.”

“I don’t know. I think I have to end it. That way he doesn’t dump me. I’m not ready for all this serious stuff to tell you the truth. The sex was incredible and he was so easy to talk to. After what we shared tonight, I don’t think I could handle him refusing me.”

“Maybe he doesn’t plan to let you go.”

“Why give him the chance?”

Her friend sighed loudly. “Do what you think is best.”

“I don’t know what that is. I’ll talk to you later in the week.”

“Okay. Chin up. Things will be okay.”

The tears finally got their way. She curled up on her bed and cried herself to sleep.

Ann Cory

Chapter Ten

Pierce finished putting the money in the register and checked his watch. Five to seven. It was almost time to open. Purposefully he'd unlocked the door for her in case she came in early. He couldn't wait for her to walk through the doors and feel her in his arms. The night had replayed itself over and over in his mind, and made for a restless sleep.

It was hard to imagine that a woman could ever have such a strong hold on him the way Lida did. She made him want to give her everything, share the world with her, and treat her right. There was a pain in her eyes that he wanted to help heal her of, if he could. They both had their share of demons and traumas. He'd learned that he couldn't make all the bad stuff go away for someone, but his intentions were good. His friend had taught him that the hard way.

What he did know was that if he could help her in some way then he would. That was part of being a partner. Sharing the load. She was the kind of woman he could spend the rest of his life getting to know and still find surprises.

The door opened and his heart started to pound louder.

"Hey beautiful, long time no see."

He was surprised to see her dressed in a pair of blue jeans instead of her workout gear, but she was every bit a knockout.

"Hi."

"I slept terrible last night. Tossing and turning. Know why?"

She clasped her hands behind her back. "I can't imagine."

"I couldn't get you out of my mind. I had the smell of you all over me and I didn't even want to shower. You've left quite an impression on me, if you know what I mean."

Pierce knew something was up. Her voice was emotionless and she didn't even crack a smile. He got concerned that something was wrong. "You okay? You don't seem very happy."

"No. I'm not. I had a rough night myself."

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Do you want to go somewhere after our session and talk about it? I know a cozy little café.”

“Thanks, but I can’t stick around for my session today.”

“Did I...hurt you somehow last night?”

“No, nothing like that. Last night was wonderful. I have to find out if I still have a job. Kind of blew things yesterday with the boss and his client and well, I don’t know where things stand. It’s probably a good thing if I’m fired, though.”

“Oh no. Why do you say that?”

“Because I lied to get the job.”

He walked over and tried to put his arm around her but she moved away.

“I lied and said I was more qualified than I was to get a big pay raise. I have a bad habit of stretching the truth to get people to like me more or to pretend I’m someone that I’m not. I’m not real proud of that. I lied to you.”

“Ah. I knew you weren’t advanced right off the bat, but I didn’t want to say anything.”

She looked at him curiously. “You knew right away?”

“Yep. It was obvious.”

“Oh.” She hung her head dejectedly and immediately he felt bad.

“It was fine, really. I put you through extra exercises to try and teach you a lesson. I hate to admit it, but I had fun. You surprised me when you showed up the next day. I don’t often come across women as stubborn as I am.”

“You don’t get it. I lie. A lot. I’ve been doing it since I can remember. I haven’t had a successful relationship because I’m always telling a guy that I like things when I don’t and then getting caught. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been real with myself or anyone else for that matter.”

“You’re very hard on yourself. You must hold a lot of blame on those sexy shoulders. I’m not mad, if that’s what you’re worried about. Seems like a small thing to me and you’re making it out to be something bigger.”

He wanted to cradle her in his arms and stroke away her unhappiness.

“It’s one of the smaller lies I’ve told, that’s true. But it’s a lie nonetheless. We started things out with me not being honest. Why would you want to be with someone who does that? I know I wouldn’t.”

Ann Cory

“Actually, I’d like to think it was love at first sight that brought us together. I was taken with you when I first saw you on the subway. I had every intention of finding out more about you.”

She nodded her head solemnly. “I’m not girlfriend material. I make poor choices in my life and I’m compulsive. There’s nothing beautiful about a person who can’t even accept who she is.”

Didn’t she understand that her brutal honesty made her even more attractive? “I’m a big boy. Why don’t you let me decide if you’re girlfriend material?”

“Because I need to make changes and I’m starting with this one, right now. I’m taking back some control in my life.”

“Sounds healthy. I’m all for you doing that and want to help any way I can.”

“I don’t want to use you that way. I need to end this before we both get hurt.”

Now he was getting mad. He wanted her and she was pushing him away. “So you’re deciding that there’s no future for us whatsoever. It doesn’t matter what I think, how I feel, or what I’m looking for, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Explain it to me, because last night I thought we were fitting just fine. Ten minutes ago I was contemplating our future together and hoped you wanted to be a part of it. What happened between last night when I kissed you goodnight and this morning?”

“Nothing. Everything. You don’t want to get involved with me. I’m a mess and I fuck things up. I’m not worth it.”

He threw his hands up in the air in frustration. “What don’t you get? All these things you’re talking about aren’t enough to make me want to walk away from you. So you have issues, who doesn’t? We’re people and we make mistakes. The neat thing is, sooner or later we learn from them and grow.”

“I’ve been making mistakes left and right. Some of them are the same ones.”

“Then you’re suggesting I’m also a mistake. Well that makes me feel so much better. What kind of guy do you take me for? I assure you I don’t play games with people’s emotions.”

Her face burned red. “Damn you. I wasn’t looking to fall for you. I didn’t want to get involved with another guy. I’m too confused in my own headspace to worry about someone else.”

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

“Well, I wasn’t looking for a blow and go, thank you very much. You may not realize this about me, but I’m the kind of guy who prefers commitment. One woman to one man, and all that romantic bullshit you women think some of us are beyond. I don’t want to share you or be one of your fans admiring you from afar.”

“You’re going too far.”

“Listen. I don’t give ultimatums. It’s not my style. When I go for something, it’s because I see what is worthwhile on the other side. I look deep for the beauty that resides inside and outside of a person. I saw an amazing light in you that has taken me by surprise and thrown me for a loop. It’s been a ride I’m not ready to get off from.”

“I’ve seen the way other women look at you. There’s no shortage of beauty in your future.”

Pierce was so angry he thought he’d explode. She was wrenching his heart right out from his chest! “I’ve never gotten involved with a woman I’ve trained before, and I’m not about to do it again after this. Hear me now, because what I’m about to say is very important. If you want out of this, then you go ahead and walk away, but don’t you dare say goodbye. I won’t beg for you and I won’t pine away for you. If you are looking for illusions, lies, and a false sense of identity, I don’t do that. When you’ve figured out how to be real, let me know, because what I’m offering is very real.”

Her lower lip trembled and a pang of sadness chipped away some of his anger. He couldn’t stand to see her so miserable. Whatever was really going on was affecting her at a very core level.

“This was all too soon for me.”

“Save the excuses. If you want to go, then go. You’ll hear nothing more from me again.”

She stared at him with her tear-streaked eyes. “You’re being stubborn and unreasonable.”

“I’m being practical. What is it that you want? I tell you I want you in my life and you tell me that you aren’t ready. I tell you I’ll help you anyway I can and you keep pushing me away. I will respect your wishes. I don’t however have to agree or like it.”

“I don’t know what else to do. I don’t want to stop seeing you, but I don’t know how I can possibly make this work right now. God! My head is such a mess right now.”

Ann Cory

“Then maybe you need to ask for more time to think things through instead of telling me that my feelings were wasted on you. There’s a big difference between needing time and ending things.”

She came at him, her tears glistening beneath the fluorescent lights. God how he wanted to hold her and comfort her, but the numbness was setting in. He put his hands out and stepped away.

“Like I said, if you want to go, then go. Don’t tell me goodbye, don’t tell me how sorry you are because it won’t make either of us feel better. You need to make a decision and act on it.”

“I’m hurting here and I want you to hold me.”

“I can’t do that right now.” His heart ached. He wasn’t prepared for this. Not after the night they shared.”

“Then, I have to go.”

She took off running out the door and as far as he knew, out of his life. Pierce stalked behind the counter and rested his hands on the counter, shaking his head. Well, now he was back to square one. Women were complicated and he was at his wits end on trying to figure them out. He was torn in two. He couldn’t go after her. This was a time when he needed to respect her wishes. Too much, too soon. She was exactly what he wanted. And always would be.

Chapter Eleven

Lida was sick to her stomach the whole ride to work. How was she supposed to know what she wanted when her everything around her was so out of whack? There were no real answers to anything. Life was all a series of questions. Maybe she was like her dad after all. Incapable of loving one person. Take what you can from one person and then move on to another and another. No closure, no goodbyes, no commitment. She cringed. It had really bothered her when Meg brought that subject up. All these years and she still couldn't get over what her father did. Men dumped the women and the women got hurt. Wasn't that how it went? None of it made sense.

She walked into work and was met with a sea of faces that were a mixture of pity and curiosity. Her boss motioned for her to come into his office and she knew it was bad news. She poked her head in and summoned up a smile. He sat in his big leather chair, twiddling his thumbs.

“Uh, you wanted to see me.”

“Have a seat, Ms. Jones. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Okay.”

The seat felt more like an electric chair right then.

“Yesterday you did some things that, how shall I explain, surprised me.”

“Myself as well, sir.”

“I don't doubt that. What I do doubt is your ability to continue working in your current position. Not to say I haven't appreciated all that you've done, but I run a tight ship here and I find you...unstable. I require a certain level of professionalism and I'm afraid you came up short.”

He wasn't the only one who thought she was losing her mind.

“I understand, sir. I'd like to say it won't ever happen again, but that would be lying.”

Ann Cory

“It isn’t my intention to hold one rather large incident against you, so I’m prepared to offer you an option. If you would like to stay on in this company, I can start you in a slightly lower position in a different department. The pay and benefits would change, of course. Or you can hand in your resignation and finish up your two weeks by properly training someone to fill your position.”

“I’ll take the two weeks, sir.”

“You’re quick to answer that. Hate me that much do you?”

She shook her head so hard her neck cracked. “No, sir. I don’t think I’m cut out to be here. I’m not really sure where I belong, but maybe I should take the time to figure it out.”

“You sound like a smart woman. Why don’t you take the next few days off and start fresh on Monday. By then I should have found a replacement for you to train.”

Lida stood up and held out her trembling hand. His grip was firm, but not unfriendly.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your honesty. I’ll see you Monday morning.”

She walked out of the office and headed for home. There were other jobs out there and she would find one. Her head was too screwed up to care or react. At home she hid herself away in the bedroom and went through one tissue after another. She threw a movie in the DVD player, disgusted with herself that it was a sappy love story, but watched it anyways. Misery loves company and she was miserable.

She slipped in and out of consciousness and had some weird dreams that felt a little too real. The majority of them were about Pierce. One dream was solely about his tight butt in a pair of acid washed jeans. Another was about his friend and the car accident. She liked the one where he sent her a bouquet of roses and got on his knees to beg her to come back to him. But when the blonde floozy and the leopard skinned brunette morphed together into one sexy Amazonian woman with special powers to try and kill her, she woke right up and decided a bath was in order.

The water was hot, almost scalding, but felt good as she lowered herself in. Things always made more sense to her in the bathtub where she was forced to be alone with her thoughts. She’d been dumped too many times to count. Never had it left her broken-hearted. Pissed off, yes. Miffed, most definitely. Upset, not generally. By not getting to know any one guy for long, she hadn’t formed any attachment to them. It lessened the pain. She took them more as a personal affront than a tragedy.

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

This time, all she could feel was the pain. She didn't know if it was because for the first time she was the one in control and she'd never dumped anyone before, or if it was because it was Pierce. He was different from the other guys and had left the biggest impression. The attraction was there from the beginning. It took her until now to remember the tingling sensation that rushed through her when they had first looked at each other. She'd fought it at the time because she was trying to keep from getting involved again. Love had knocked on her door and she answered it, but with the chain still attached. Somehow he'd eluded her and slipped right into her heart.

Everything Meg had said was true. Issues from her past had been left unresolved and as a result she was going through the motions and thinking that meant she was moving on with her life. In fact, she had been stuck for years. She was the only one who could change the way things were going. Pierce was worth whatever humiliation she put herself through. He was one of those guys in the movies where you scream and beg the woman to take him back, knowing he's the right one and she'd be a fool to let him go. What was she thinking? He made it clear he wouldn't come after her and she believed him. Pierce was a stubborn man, bull-headed even. He was also kind, a true gentleman, undeniably handsome, and had a big cock. So if she wanted to win him back, it was going to take something extraordinary or he wouldn't think she was being genuine. This time there was something to lose, and she didn't want it to be him.

Ann Cory

Chapter Twelve

Lida hadn't slept all night. Her mind wouldn't shut down long enough for her to even try to rest. It was the start of a new day and time for her to get real. She dressed in a short denim skirt with a red button down shirt, and comfortable loafers. Underneath she made sure to wear her sexy black lace bra and panties, in case she needed to pull out all the stops. Her stomach grumbled but she was too nervous to eat.

She ran all the way to the subway hoping to catch the train before the one Pierce took. She had a surprise in store and wanted to catch him off-guard at the gym. There were no doubts when it came to the way she felt about him. Their love was real.

The ride to Warrior In Training took forever. She was nearly climbing out of her skin when it finally got her there. Now all she had to do was wait for him and then flex her stuff in a way that would appeal to him. Lida watched from behind the coffee cart and waited as he unlocked the gym and went inside.

She took a deep breath and knocked on the door, hoping to get his attention. He walked up, a pained expression on his face. He glanced at his watch and pointed to the hours of operation sign. Reluctantly, he unlocked the door and opened it partway.

"I know what time you open. Please, I need to speak to you. This is important."

Pierce stepped back and held the door for her, locking it behind them. "I don't think it's going to work for me to be your personal trainer anymore, so I've asked Stephen if he can squeeze you in. Your three days with me are up anyways so you didn't waste any money."

"You weren't even going to ask me first? Maybe I don't want this Stephen guy checking my form and telling me what to do."

"I'm making a business decision. I'd say we more than crossed the boundaries of our relationship."

"Do you even care about what I want?"

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

He thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned up against the counter. “You should know better than that. I told you though. I won’t give you an ultimatum. I’m looking for one partner to share my life with, and it has to be mutual. I want stability.”

“You are a stubborn one. Things have to be your way and damn what everyone else wants, right?”

“No, that isn’t right. I know what I want but I can’t have it. You don’t know what you want so I’m trying to accommodate your needs. As to Stephen, you’ll like him. He’s a good guy. He won’t be in until later. There’s really nothing left for us to talk about. I think you made your feelings very clear yesterday.”

“I didn’t make anything clear yesterday because I was too emotionally overwhelmed to know any better.” She wrung her hands together and started pacing. “I thought I was doing you a favor by calling it quits. I really need to deal with some things from my past, and I plan to, but at the same time, I need to start making my own choices. I can’t let the actions of my parents dictate how I live my life or the way I view relationships. I’ve done it for too long and all it does is make me feel empty inside.”

“Understandable. I’m sorry you had such a rough family life. You learned early on that you couldn’t trust those closest to you.”

She stopped pacing and looked over at him. “Yes, I did. And I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to start a new pattern. One that is positive and makes sense to me. Love doesn’t have to hurt and sex doesn’t have to mean it’s over. I’ve conditioned myself to associate those feelings with not making attachments with people and putting up a wall. You found a way over, under, around, and through that wall and it confused me. I didn’t understand how you could get to me so easily.”

“I wasn’t going to give up without a fight.”

“No. I did.”

“Then what’s done is done. I don’t want to break down walls you have up to protect you. I want you to feel good about your choices. You need to be able to trust freely.”

“You aren’t going to make this easy for me, are you.”

She ran over to the trampoline in the middle of the room and started jumping on it.

Pierce gave her a strange look. “What are you doing?”

“I was thinking early this morning that life and fitness have a lot in common.”

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“You women and your need to comparison shop.”

Lida laughed. “You men and your need to be difficult.”

She unfastened her shirt one button at a time and slipped it off, letting it fall to the floor. The way his eyes zeroed in on her breasts peeking out of her lacy black bra was exactly what she had hoped for. She ran her hands over her nipples and watched his eyes widen.

“You know how you were saying that if you do the same things repetitively, the body gets conditioned to them and then it doesn’t benefit you anymore?”

He cocked his head to the side. “More or less.”

“Well, it’s the same way with life. Sometimes you have to break up the monotonous routines and liven things up. So as of today, I’m shaking things up and conditioning myself to better accept love when it finds me.”

She reached back and unzipped her skirt, letting it fall around her feet. With a flick of her right foot, she sent it spiraling into his hands.

“I’d say that is a healthy goal.”

She skimmed her fingers beneath the sides of her panties and slid them down along her legs.

“I don’t want to wear a shirt, two or three sizes too big because it helps hide the things I’m ashamed of. When I do that, I lose myself and you won’t know how to handle me. I like to be handled.”

Even from a distance she could tell he was turned on. The bulge in his shorts grew and strained against the material.

“I like handling you.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing last night. I was thinking of you before myself. I was willing to sacrifice what made me happy in order to save you from being sorry. My head was all messed up. I don’t want to lose you.”

He walked out from behind the counter and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Lida refused to give up. All she could offer was herself. The real part of her. Swiftly she removed her bra and a rush of liberation soared through her. Her breasts bounced as she jumped about, her eyes refusing to look away from his. “Is there nothing I can do to make you want me again?”

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

Pierce shook his head. “No. I meant I don’t know because it’s hard to think when I’m distracted. I’ve never had a woman strip for me before. On a trampoline no less. You’re ruthless.”

She jumped off and ran to him, a burst of adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“If you want me to beg, I will. I love you and your sweet ass, Pierce Wytham. No man has ever made me feel as loved and beautiful as you. I don’t feel as worthless as before. I came looking to get my body in shape and found out that I need to get my head in shape, too. I don’t want anyone else to help me get there but you.”

He ran his hands along her body, igniting her passion with a single touch. “I can’t refuse something I want. And I do want you. From the moment you caught my eye that day, I wanted you like nothing else.”

She threw her arms around him and battered him with kisses.

“Mmm, you’re a wonderful man and I love you.”

“You should put some clothes on or people are going to think we’re running a peep show.”

“Really? And here I thought people usually came here to get buff.”

Pierce roared with laughter. “I guess we should be used to public displays of affection.”

“Speaking of public displays, you’ll never guess what else I did last night.”

“I may very well be too afraid to ask.”

“I filled out an online application and put you down as my partner.”

His brows furrowed. “You lost me. Partner for what?”

“Fear Factor, silly. They are doing a couples only segment and we fit the age bracket they’re looking for.”

“Were you that sure I’d take you back?”

“I had hoped so. I was prepared to do anything.”

“You’re a hard woman to resist.”

She traced her fingers around his muscles, admiring the smoothness of his skin. “I plan on staying that way for a very long time. So, be honest with me here, in case the producers accept us for the show, do you think I will be ready in three to four months?”

“If you don’t mind some rigorous and strenuous hard work.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m looking forward to the grueling hours of sweating with your body pressed tight against mine.”

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He kissed her full on the lips, his hands resting on the small of her back. “I was talking about the gym, but you’re getting me all worked up.”

She pulled off his shirt and ran her nipples along his chest.

“Do you have time for some one on one personal training this morning?” Easily she slid his shorts down, followed by his briefs. “I’m in need of an extended session.”

A growl escaped his lips as he picked her up and carried her toward the backroom. “Since you signed up for the advanced session, I can’t be easy on you.”

“Good. I like it hard.”

Mystical Signs: Taurus–FLEX APPEAL

About the Author

Erotic romance author Ann Cory invites you to sample her literary offerings in the hopes of leaving you with an acquired taste for sophisticated reading.

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