

A man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate pose, nearly kissing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are set against a background of a snowy field with a farm, including a silo and barn, in the distance under a clear blue sky. The woman has long blonde hair, and the man has dark hair. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

Loose Id

BEDDING THE BEAST

DOREEN DESALVO

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (anal sex).

Bedding the Beast

Doreen DeSalvo

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Dedication

For Sam --

Love you.

Always have.

Always Will.

Chapter One

February 1881

John looked up from his noontime meal. Had that really been a knock at his door? No one had come to his farmhouse all winter. Usually folks said hello if they saw him in the fields as they passed by, just to be sociable. But no one ever came to the house, and especially not at noon, when there were chores to be done.

The knock came again.

He left his food and crossed the single room of his farmhouse to the door. Damn, the latch was cold. He let go as soon as he could, using the wooden knob to pull the door open.

A young woman stood on his narrow porch, staring up at him with huge blue eyes set in a gaunt face. Her gray wool coat was worn threadbare in spots, and her bonnet was frayed around the brim. Who was she, a beggar? He had nothing to give.

On the narrow track road a couple of acres behind her, a wagon trundled away toward the McNeil's spread. She turned and waved, though the driver was out of sight.

She looked back at him. Her gaze lingered on the hideous scar that marred his cheek for just a few seconds before she met his gaze evenly, not showing any reaction to his ugly face. "Giovanni DiAngelo?"

A name he hadn't heard in years. He nodded once. "Who are you?"

"Good afternoon. My name is Mariana Del Dio Russo," she said, in the Tuscan dialect he'd never thought to hear again.

Del Dio Russo? "You're a relative of Francesca?" Perhaps she'd brought his money in person. She clutched a rough drawstring bag in her hands, satchel-shaped and made of canvas.

"I'm Francesca's sister."

Her teeth chattered a little. She shivered in her thin coat and gazed over his shoulder into the house. He had no time to talk, but he couldn't keep her standing outside in the bitter cold of a Pennsylvania February. He moved to the side, and she walked in quickly.

He closed the door and turned. She'd already walked to the tiny stove, holding her hands out to it for warmth. Her canvas bag sat in a heap on the floor next to the table.

His bowl was still steaming on the table. Might as well finish his meal while they talked. He sat down and lifted a spoonful of stew to his mouth. "Did you bring money for me?"

She looked confused. Ah, he'd spoken in English. Before he could repeat the question in Italian, she spoke.

"My parents received a letter from you," she said in Italian. "You wrote that Francesca had died."

"Six months ago." Might as well speak in Italian, if that was all she understood. "Why are you here?"

She squared her shoulders. "I'm here to take my sister's place."

God, no. He'd asked Francesca's parents to send him some of his money back. She'd died so soon after their marriage, it hardly seemed fair that her parents kept the full amount he'd paid for her. And he needed money. "I don't need another wife."

Her brows went up in surprise. "You have married again?"

He scowled. "No. But I don't want a wife."

"But ... you paid my parents for a wife."

Yes, he had. A wife to help him on the farm, a wife to give him children, a wife to warm his bed. None of those things were worth the price he'd paid -- and not just the price of the *lire* her greedy father had taken. "One wife was enough. I did not ask your parents to send me another."

"But they owe you a wife." Her gaze was fixed on his bowl. Was she merely avoiding looking at his face? He saw her throat move in a swallowing motion. No, she was hungry. And he only had enough stew for his own lunch.

Well, he could share a little with her. She looked thin; she probably wouldn't eat much. He stuck the fork in his half-finished bowl and handed it to her. "Eat."

He grabbed another bowl from the shelves over the sink, then went to the simmering pot on the stove and spooned out more for himself. When he turned to the table again, she was eating her way through the stew like she hadn't had a meal all day. A small moan escaped her, a sound of pure pleasure.

She'd pushed off her coat and tossed it onto the back of her chair. Her shoulders were thin and bony, her neck long and narrow. Too skinny. He'd never cared for skinny women.

John sat across from her and speared a bite of meat with his fork, studying her covertly as he chewed. Her dress was patched and much mended, little more than a rag. Her father had talked of sending his sons to school, of buying an apprenticeship for the oldest boy. He must not have spent any of John's money on his daughters.

Her dress stretched tight across her bosom, as if she'd been wearing it since before she'd fully grown. Her breasts were small. Too small. Probably not even enough to fill his hands.

If he married her, he could cup those small breasts in his hands. Fondle them. Kiss them.

No. There was no place in his life for a wife. When he wanted a woman, he'd spend a few coins on a whore in town. He couldn't afford the money, but at least a whore knew better than to cringe at the sight of a man's face when he covered her. A whore knew to keep her eyes closed, and pretend he pleased her.

Perhaps this girl had family in America. People she could live with. "Who brought you here? The people passing in that wagon?"

She stared at him blankly. Ah, he'd spoken in English. He repeated it in Italian.

"Your neighbor. Kathleen ... McNeil? She passed me on the road, and gave me a ride."

No help there. He couldn't expect a widow with two boys to take in a stranger. "Where have you been staying?"

"I was in New York until two days ago. In that prison place."

"Ellis Island?"

"Yes."

Right off the boat, she had come to him. She'd expected him to let her stay. Too bad for her. "Do you know anyone in America? Anyone other than me?"

"No." She looked up from the bowl, and her chin lifted a notch. "I can find somewhere else to go, if you don't want me."

Which meant she had nowhere else to go. He recognized foolish pride when he saw it. "Do *you* want *me*?" he demanded.

She gave a small start, but didn't look away. Her eyes were a vivid blue, and they gazed at him solemnly, as though she didn't see his scar. "Why do you care what I want?"

He shrugged and ate more, avoiding her gaze. "I don't care."

"I want to honor my father's debt to you."

Not an answer at all. Like most poor girls, she had no choice about her own future.

He deliberately stared at his narrow bed, less than four feet away from her chair. And then he looked back at her and scowled, determined to show her his worst. "Now that you have seen me, you have no fear about being my wife? You have no fear about sharing my bed?"

Her gaze steady, she gave an indifferent shrug. "After the long journey to come to America, and spending a month in that prison, I have little fear left in me."

He could well believe it. Ellis Island had been hell for a strong man like him -- how much worse had it been for a young girl, alone, who barely spoke any English? She couldn't be more than twenty. At twenty-eight, he felt decades older.

She stopped eating for a moment and focused that solemn blue gaze on his eyes. "I will be a good wife to you, Giovanni."

He frowned. "I've told you, I don't need a wife."

His bowl was empty. He rose, but she quickly stood and took it from him. "May I bring you more?"

Why not let her serve him? He nodded.

She turned to the stove, giving him a view of her backside. At least one part of her body wasn't too thin. Her waist was narrow but her hips were generous, her bottom well-rounded. Very well-rounded. As she spooned stew into his bowl, that alluring ass rocked back and forth with the rhythm of her arm. His cock lifted a notch.

If he married her, he could bed her.

Mount her.

Fuck her.

He knew many English words for the sex act. And looking at this skinny woman's ass made him think of all of them.

God, no. Women were trouble. *Wives* were trouble.

Perhaps it would be different this time. Now he knew the dangers. And now he knew how to pleasure a woman. This bony little woman, this small-chested girl with the surprisingly generous ass, could help him practice his hard-won knowledge.

Even a skinny woman could ease a man's needs. That was one chore she could do for him. She looked too weak to do anything else.

She turned back to the table. When she caught his gaze, she stopped abruptly. His lustful thoughts must have shown in his eyes, on his face. But he saw no revulsion in her expression. None at all. She smiled ... a slow, warm smile. An inviting smile. A flirtatious smile.

Hell, other men must have looked at her this way. Even ugly men like him. And she must have encouraged them all with that sultry smile.

What kind of innocent girl looked at a man like that? Like she wanted to climb into his narrow bed with him now, right now, in the light of day? Perhaps she wasn't an innocent. Perhaps her damned father had foisted a ruined daughter off on him.

She dropped her gaze, sat down at the table, and pushed the bowl toward him. With a tiny nod, she went back to eating her own food, as if she hadn't just looked at him like he was a more tempting meal than the beef stew. An innocent woman would never give such a look to an ugly man like him. She was trying to persuade him to let her stay. Working her wiles on him. The few wiles that a scrawny woman like her had available to her.

He grabbed his bowl and ate, glaring down at the food. She'd given him a full portion, and he needed every bite of it. There was a lot of work to be done in the north field today, despite the bitter cold.

"This is delicious," she said.

"Speak English."

One hand fluttered in an apologetic Italian gesture. "My English isn't good," she said in Italian.

"Then go back to Italy," he answered, in English. "There's no place here for someone who doesn't speak the language."

She frowned again, with the concentration that came from translating his words back into her native tongue. "As you wish, Giovanni," she said, in halting English.

"John," he corrected, head bent to his food.

"John?"

He looked up at her. "Yes?"

She looked flustered. "No, I ... why ... why no Giovanni?"

Even though her English was poor, she'd force him into idle conversation. "I'm an American now. John is my American name."

"Oh. Will I have a ... an American name?"

He shrugged and kept eating. "Up to you."

"You would wish?" she asked timidly.

He shrugged again. "Giovanni was difficult for Americans to pronounce."

She looked hopelessly confused.

"Giovanni was hard to say." Maybe she'd understand simpler words.

Her brow cleared. "Will Mariana be ... hard to pronounce?"

Clever girl, catching the new word so quickly. Then again, it was very similar to the Italian word. "I don't know."

She ate for a moment in silence. But only a moment. "The other word you used ... difficult?"

"Yes. It means *difficile*."

"Ah. Do you have ... paper?"

Paper? He could tell her what a senseless luxury that would be on a hardscrabble farm, but she wouldn't understand the words. "Why do you need paper?"

"To write. To remember ... new words."

At least she wanted to learn. He stood and found the small chalkboard he kept in the cupboard, for making lists and such. The chalk was in a drawer. He handed the items to her, and her face lit up.

He froze. By the saints, that happy smile made her look almost pretty. As gaunt as her face was, he hadn't noticed. But her blue eyes were set in a perfect oval, her light brown eyebrows were even and smooth, her lips gracefully curved and pink. He couldn't see her hair under that pathetic bonnet, but with skin so fair, likely it was blonde.

Even skinny as a wraith, in a ragged, ill-fitting dress, she was a comely little thing. And this woman pretended she was willing to marry a hideous man like him? To share his bed?

He sat down, glowered into his bowl, and focused on eating.

Hell. He should keep her. Use her. It would serve her right for looking at him the way she had before.

If she wasn't a virgin, he wouldn't have to be gentle with her. But maybe she hadn't really looked at him in that lusty way. Maybe, in the surprise of feeling his own lust for her, he'd merely imagined that she felt the same.

"Please," she said, motioning with the chalk. "Difficult?"

"Spell the word?"

She nodded.

He spelled it out loud in English, and she wrote it perfectly the first time, to his surprise. She studied the chalkboard, lips moving as she silently mouthed the letters. Watching her mouth made his throat go tight. He pulled his gaze back to his bowl and kept

eating. After a moment, she set the small chalkboard down carefully and picked up her spoon again.

They ate in silence. Her fork scraped off the last few bites as she finished her stew. He didn't look up, didn't want to see that waifish face or those feminine lips.

He'd already given her more food than he'd wanted to. Enough that he'd be hungry again long before supper. But her hand, resting patiently on the table, seemed pathetically thin, her knuckles huge in her slender fingers. He couldn't eat with that scrawny hand in front of him.

He pushed his bowl across to her. "I'm done. Help yourself."

She looked confused again.

God, he'd done more talking with this woman in a few minutes than he'd done altogether in the past six months. "Help yourself. Eat. *Mangia*."

She smiled. "Thank you, John." She ate quickly. Must be as hungry as she looked. At least eating kept her quiet.

He should leave, get back to work in the north field. A fence had broken in three places under the weight of heavy snow. But if he left, he'd have to let her stay. And if she stayed, he'd have to marry her. His neighbors, all God-fearing farmers, would shun him if he lived with an unmarried woman.

"Do you have money?" If she had money, she'd be less of a burden. He'd been wanting to buy some acres from Kathleen to expand his spread.

Her expression fell. "Two dollars."

Next to nothing. "What chores can you do?"

"Chores?"

"Chores. Housework. Farm work."

"Ah. I can cook, and clean, and make preserves."

She didn't seem to notice that she'd used the Italian words for *make preserves*. He didn't bother correcting her. "I like my own cooking. And I don't need much cleaning done. Things just get dirty again fast enough."

She raised her eyebrows with an odd, faintly mocking look on her face, as if he'd said something stupid. But she said nothing. Smart girl. She'd have been smarter to guard her expression, too. Now wasn't a good time to criticize him.

"Can you do anything else?"

She turned suddenly, bent down, and opened her bag. God, everything she owned must be in that tiny bundle. After rummaging in it for a moment, she held up two small books. Translation dictionaries. One for English to Italian, the other for the reverse. "I need this to say in English."

"These," he corrected automatically. "To speak English."

She looked through one book for a few moments, flipping from one page to another. "I can get eggs. Make cheese. Get milk from a goat."

"I have a cow."

"I will get milk from a cow, then."

"Just say, milk the cow."

She nodded, looking earnest. "Milk the cow," she repeated. "Every morning, I will milk the cow, and ... get the eggs."

She already assumed he'd keep her, the little temptress. As if no man had ever denied her. She'd just met the first. "No."

A frown formed on her lips. "But ... I must do things. To be good wife."

He scowled. "I don't want a wife. No wife."

She looked confused. Concerned, maybe. "But ... you paid my father. You said, I will marry daughter."

So now she'd accuse him of breaking the agreement with her rotten father? Her father could go hang. John would gladly pay for the rope. "I married one daughter. Francesca. I didn't say I would marry a second daughter. And I won't."

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window over the sink, strong enough to seep around the frame and blow gently across his face.

Mariana shivered, her eyes wide with fright. She glanced at the bed, then back at him. "Do you want ... a woman?" She took a deep breath. "For the bed?"

Oh, she was a bold one all right. She'd probably stay and share his bed, whether he married her or not. Just to have a home. He couldn't blame her for trying, but if he kept her to warm his bed, he'd have to marry her. Even a solitary man like him needed to trade with his neighbors, to do business in town. If he used her like a whore, no one would speak to him. And he'd want a whore with more meat on her bones, anyway.

"No. I don't need a woman."

She bit her lip. "I understand."

But she made no move to leave. He pushed his own chair back from the table. "I have work to do."

She stood slowly, then slipped on her coat. She kept her head averted, as if hiding her expression. "Thank you for the food, John." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Can I ... today ..." She reached for one of her books.

He braced himself to say no as she thumbed through the book. No. No. Whatever she wanted, the answer was no.

"Can I stay in barn? Only tonight?"

She'd freeze to death in the barn. She'd have to find somewhere warmer than that to sleep. "No."

She turned away, fumbling with the buttons of her coat. One hand brushed across her eyes, but he'd seen no tears.

Trying to make him feel guilty. Damn her. "How will you get back home? Two dollars won't go far, and I have no money to give you." Her greedy parents were the ones who owed him money.

She shook her head. "I not go back."

"Why not?"

She looked surprised by his question. "I was sent to be your wife," she said, speaking in fluid Italian. "To honor my father's debt to you. If I went back, he would be dishonored. No one in the village would trust him again. My family would be outcasts."

He snorted. "You're worried about the honor of a man who would sell his own children?" He spoke in Italian, without thinking.

She looked down at the floor. "He is my father," she said simply. "It is his duty to find me a husband."

She paused for a long moment, as if waiting for him to say something. He didn't.

"And I no have money to go back," she said in English. Then she bent and picked up her pathetic cloth satchel, stuffing the tattered books inside. "Is not a problem," she said with a brisk nod, as if trying to convince herself. "Kathleen McNeil is nice. She will let me stay her house."

Oh, she was a clever little thing. Surely she knew he didn't want her showing up on Kathleen's doorstep, telling the widow how her evil neighbor had thrown out this pathetic girl after she'd come all the way from Italy. After he'd paid her father for a bride. No way in hell would he let her go to Kathleen's place.

She had his hands tied now. But he wasn't letting her off the hook that easily.

"And how will you earn your keep? Kathleen has two strong sons, and she's the best cook in the county." He didn't believe that, but he'd use it to rile her. "She doesn't need anyone to milk the cow, or make preserves, or anything else you could do."

She thought about it for a long time, indecision clouding her eyes. The way she kept biting her lip annoyed him. Kept his gaze fixed on her mouth. "Then I will work for money," she said at last. "I will give to her money."

As if she had any skill that folks would pay for. "You'll work for money? Where?"

She shrugged. "In the town, maybe." She raised her chin. "Is not your problem. Is mine. Mine problem."

"My problem," he said, before he could stop himself.

So, she thought she could work for money. He snorted. A woman, and one who didn't speak good English? No one would ever hire her. She was even too skinny and flat-chested to be a whore. She might be passably pretty when she had a happy look on her face, but no man would pay to bed her.

Although one man already had.

Him.

He might as well take her. Marry her. Bed her. It might be handy to have a woman in his bed every night.

Until she died.

She looked so scrawny, it wouldn't take long. But until then ...

He wouldn't make the same mistakes he'd made with Francesca. No, this time he'd be on his guard. She'd never know how to hurt him. And he'd never let her.

"Stay," he said.

Her mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You heard me."

"You will ... you wish to ... be husband of me?"

God, her English was pathetic. "Marry you." He wouldn't say he wished it. "I will marry you."

She nodded and took her coat off again. This time she crossed to the door and hung it on a peg, next to his own coat. Making herself at home already.

Her dress was so ragged, it was no wonder he'd thought her a beggar. The fabric was nearly worn through over her backside. "Can you sew?"

"So?"

"Sew." He said it again, in Italian.

"Yes."

"Good. I won't have to waste money buying new clothes for you." He pointed to the low, rough-hewn chest against the far wall. "Your sister's clothes are in there. You can make them over to fit you." She was so much leaner and less buxom than Francesca, she'd have plenty of fabric to work with.

She nodded. "I understand."

He couldn't stay here all day, entertaining her. He went to the door and pulled on his overcoat. "I'm going out."

She nodded. "I will ... make chores."

He almost groaned. "*Do* chores."

"I will *do* chores."

"Very well."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"Very well," he said, as clearly as he could. "*Va bene*."

As he put on his hat, he saw her writing on the chalkboard again. *Very well* must be a new phrase for his skinny little bride-to-be.

"When do you return?" she asked.

How long had it been since he'd had someone to come home to? "Maybe four hours. A fence needs mending in several places."

She clearly didn't understand about the fence, but she smiled anyway. "I will ... do chores."

That happy, bright smile had to be fake. No one could be so happy about doing chores.

"Good." He slung a scarf around his neck.

She stood in that quick manner of hers and rushed up behind him. Before he could stop her, she put her hands on his coat and turned his collar up, tucking it under his scarf. Her fingers brushed his hand for an instant. Lord, her skin felt soft against his calloused fingers. As soft as if she'd never done a day's hard work in her life.

"It will help keep out the wind," she said in Italian, then stopped. "How to say in English?"

She was a full head shorter than him, and shockingly skinny next to his bulky frame. But with her head tilted back, her expression so earnest, her blue eyes so vivid, he wanted nothing more than to bend his head and kiss her.

No. He'd never kiss her in the daytime. That was certain. Francesca had taught him that lesson all too well.

"Look it up," he said, turning away and yanking open the door. He left, stepping into the bitter wind and slamming the door behind him.

It seemed he had a new wife. For better, for worse. And after his first marriage, he knew just how much worse things could get. She'd probably come to hate him soon enough. All women did. Starting with his own damned mother, and ending with his first wife.

Francesca had at least been a sturdy, strong woman. But not strong enough. Within a year, a fever had carried her off. How much more quickly would her scrawny sister be gone?

Chapter Two

Mariana wiped her brow with a damp cloth, relishing the coolness against her heated skin. She'd earned a break. She cut a thick slice of bread off the half loaf that rested in the breadbox, spread it with butter, and sank into a chair at the table, just for a moment's rest.

The bread was delicious. If that man had baked this, no wonder he didn't need her to cook for him. She got up and cut another slice. She'd seen more bread in the cold cellar, which was hidden under a small trapdoor. He wouldn't mind if she finished this loaf. She hoped.

The house looked decent now, at least. After hours of cleaning, the floor was swept and scrubbed, every surface had been dusted, and the cobwebs were gone. She'd washed every pot and pan, every dish and piece of silverware. Even the sink was scoured clean.

That man -- John -- mustn't have cleaned a thing in months. She'd even had to hunt for the soap, which he'd stored down in the cold cellar, for some odd reason. And such fancy soap -- two kinds, hard and soft, and store bought, with a printed label from Philadelphia on the tin of soft soap. What luxury. He even had a pump in the house. She wouldn't miss lugging water in from the well, like she'd done at home.

No. Not *at home*. Italy wasn't her home anymore. This was her home now. Hers, and John's.

Such a scary-looking man, with that terrible, jagged white scar. With those rough features, the dark, shaggy hair, and that forbidding glower, he'd been frightening indeed. And big. Tall and strong, and incredibly broad-shouldered. When she'd stood next to him, he'd made her feel so very small. And just a little frightened.

Leave.

She jumped and clutched a hand to her chest. The word was unmistakable. Earlier, with John, and now again. The same eerie woman's voice, the same word lingering in her ears. She glanced around. Yes, she was alone. The house was only one room -- there was no place for someone to hide.

The second sight, her grandmother called it. Intuition. But this seemed different. This voice was ... outside of her.

"Ridiculous." When it had happened before, John hadn't seemed to hear anything. No, this must be her intuition. Nothing more.

The window over the sink rattled. *Leave.*

Coincidence. Her second sight couldn't make the wind blow. "Where will I go?"

Away.

That must have been her imagination, not her intuition. Wishful thinking. His face might be scary, but John was her only hope.

She knew better than to judge a man by his looks. But his demeanor had been frightening as well. Cold and hostile. Why had he decided to marry her after all his refusals? Maybe he didn't want Kathleen, his neighbor, to know he wouldn't take her in. That seemed to be the argument that had worked.

What if he changed his mind again? He didn't want her at all. Not as a wife, not as a woman.

Or so he'd said. But he'd given her a *look*, just once, the kind of look that she'd seen from other men. The kind of look her mother and brothers had warned her about. The kind of look that stripped her naked and pushed her down on her back and spread her legs.

Her brother Pietro had told her that, had told her what happened between men and women, hoping to shock her, hoping to scare her into not trusting men who looked at her that way.

But John would be her husband, and then he'd do those things to her. John, with the scowling face and bushy black eyebrows and disturbing scar. He'd strip her naked, he'd lay her down on the narrow bed right over there, he'd spread ...

She shivered, and her stomach felt fluttery, the way it had when John had given her that look. She'd have to let him do those things to her. But only after they were married. Her mother had warned her not to let him lie between her legs until they were married.

But if she pushed him away completely, he might send her away. No, she had to make sure he kept looking at her that way ... kept wanting her ... but she couldn't let him take her virginity. She couldn't risk him throwing her out, unwed and ruined.

Perhaps she could convince him to marry her tomorrow. Then she would have nothing to fear. Nothing to fear? Ha. Nothing but having him lie between her legs and push his male part up inside her. She knew it would hurt the first time. Her mother had warned her. Why did some women do it willingly, with men they weren't even married to?

No sense in worrying about it now. First she'd prove that she could be a good wife.

Not good enough.

"*Basta*. Stop." Never before had her private voices been so cruel. She stood. Best to busy herself. When her hands were busy, her second sight stayed dormant.

The more work she got done before he came back, the more he'd want to marry her. She'd done a wonderful job cleaning his house -- a job he'd said was unnecessary. Now she'd wash his clothes and the dirty sheets on his bed. *Their* bed.

She brushed the crumbs from her bread into one hand and dumped them into the sink, then went outside to check on the laundry water. Earlier, she'd found two huge tin tubs in the barn and rolled them outside. Now the tubs sat across a large iron fire grate, and the fire she'd lit underneath had the water boiling in both.

The wind made her shiver, out here in the cold without a coat. With the heat from the fire and boiling water, plus the strain of hefting the sopping wet clothes, she'd be sweating before long.

She dropped a scoop of soft soap into the first tub and swirled it around with a long pole until it dissolved. Then she tossed in some of the dirty clothes and pushed them under the boiling water, adding more laundry until the tub was half full.

She stirred the clothes slowly, saving her strength. As much as stirring the sodden clothes hurt, wringing them out would be harder still. *Difficult*. That was the English word.

She'd learn English. He thought she was stupid, but she'd prove him wrong. She'd learn English, and she'd learn how to milk his cow, and she'd learn how to do everything Francesca had done for him.

Everything.

You could never do enough.

She gasped. The words had been as clear as a bell, in a woman's voice -- and definitely not from her own conscience. "Francesca?" But why would her sister say such cruel things?

No answer, no sound but the creaking wood burning under the grate. She crossed herself reflexively, then grinned. Evil spirits weren't real. The voice must be her imagination. The strain of meeting a man who didn't want her, coupled with homesickness and grief over her sister's death.

Poor Francesca. Why were some taken, and others spared? On the boat, wretchedly ill, terrified of what the future held, she'd wanted to die. Others had. But she'd survived. Only God knew why.

And now she'd make the most of the precious life she had left. Even if it wasn't the life she'd once dreamed of.

A year ago, she'd dreamed of love. A year ago, on St. Valentine's Day, no less than five men had given her hothouse flowers -- and three had kissed her. She'd hoped to fall in love with one of them, to marry one of them. Now Valentine's Day was less than a week away, but there would be no flowers for her this year.

Enough. She had no reason to feel sorry for herself. On the boat, she'd promised to look to her future. Not to the past. And no suspicious voices were going to stop her from making a home for herself.

The breeze shifted, blowing smoke and heat from the fire into her face. She turned her head away. A tiny, desolate garden sat between the house and the barn, nothing but dried-up perennials that seemed to shiver in the wind as they poked out from a thin blanket of snow. On the other side of the house, a dozen chickens clucked and fluttered in a small coop. She could take care of the chickens, feed them, gather the eggs. She knew how to do that.

The farm was set among rolling hills, rather like the village back home in Tuscany. Pietro had told her it rained a lot here in Pennsylvania. Those hills must be a beautiful green when they weren't covered in snow.

Time to rinse the clothes. She used the long pole to lift the heavy, soaking wet clothes from the tub of soapy water and slish them into the tub of clear water. Her jaw clenched with the strain. When she was done, she leaned on the long pole, panting. Her arms ached and her dress was soaked with sweat.

After she caught her breath, she put the rest of the dirty clothes into the soapy water and swished them around. Thank goodness he didn't have much in the way of clothes or linens. She'd only have to do two tubs' worth of laundry.

There was even room for her sweaty dress. Her sore arms trembled when she lifted her hands to undo the buttons. She stepped out of the garment and dunked it in the soapy water.

She should be freezing, with only her shift and drawers on, but the fires kept her hot. And at least her brothers weren't here to tease her about her state of undress.

No one would see.

* * * * *

John hefted the wooden beam into place, bending over to balance it on his back. He reached awkwardly for the sack of nails at his feet, barely managing to get a couple pounded in from this strange angle. He turned carefully, using one hand to keep the beam steady across his back. If the wood fell off his back and crashed to the ground, ripping out the nails, he'd have to start over again. He pounded nails in the other side. Cautiously, he backed out from under the crossbeam. It held.

His back gave a twinge as he straightened. He leaned into the new crossbeam, and it wobbled a bit. He pounded more nails in, fixing the new piece to the broken ends of the old.

There. The last break was fixed. He swept his forearm across his brow, wiping the sweat off on his coat sleeve. Even in the cold, mending a fence alone was hot, hard work. Next time he'd see if that useless girl could help him. At least she could hand him the nails.

"Hello," a woman's voice called.

He turned, squinting into the winter sun, and saw Kathleen and her eldest son walking toward him from their side of the fence. She must have come out to check on the boy, who'd been chopping at a rotten oak tree earlier. John had planned to give him a hand after his fence was mended.

He walked down the fence to meet them. They all leaned along the top crossbeam, and John nodded at young Bill. The boy was nearing seventeen, and almost full-grown.

"How's Mariana?" Bill asked.

Why did the lad care? "She's fine, I suppose." His breath came out like a small cloud in the chilly air.

Bill didn't meet his gaze. "She walked a long way from town before we took her up this morning. I hope she didn't catch cold."

There didn't seem to be any answer to that. As thin as she was, she'd likely catch something worse in no time. "Thank you for taking her up."

"Oh, we were happy to give her a ride," Kathleen answered. "Weren't we, Billy?"

A red flush rose in her son's face. He mustn't like the childish nickname. He'd long ago asked John to call him Bill, and he'd obliged, knowing the boy wanted to be treated like a man.

"Billy spent some time chatting with her in the wagon," Kathleen went on. "Improving her English."

"It needs improving," John admitted.

"She's smarter than she looks," Bill said, then went beet red. "I mean ... she's real smart."

Kathleen nodded at him. "Yes, I'm sure she's one clever gal. Billy, you'd best get that tree down before sunset."

The boy nodded, then glanced at John. "Will you tell Mariana I said hello?"

"Why, sure."

He watched the lad walk back toward the tree he'd been chopping at. When he was a good distance away, Kathleen spoke. "I'm afraid Billy's a mite sweet on your Mariana."

Kathleen must be kidding him. Still, the boy had seemed real flustered. "Sweet on Mariana?" he repeated stupidly.

She nodded and grinned at him. "You'd best get used to it, John. I expect half the men in this county will be mooning over that young woman once they get a look at her. And with Valentine's Day coming next week, some fella may try to romance her away from you."

Valentine's Day. He snorted. Why women thought that was a special day, he'd never know. And no man was ever going to come after skinny little Mariana. "Now don't go ribbing me, Kathleen."

She tried to school her grin, the way she always did when she ribbed him. "It's been a right long time since we've had such a pretty gal in these parts. They'll be writing poems about her eyelashes before long."

What a silly idea. The girl was downright scrawny. But when she smiled ... well, then she looked all right. He shrugged. "I expect she's pretty enough, in her way."

Kathleen tipped her head back and laughed. "Pretty enough? There's no need to spare my feelings, young man. I have eyes in my head, you know. The girl's a flat-out beauty, and that's a fact."

A beauty. Mariana, a beauty? Her eyes were nice, but he'd seen plenty of blue eyes before. "Her looks are pretty common back in Tuscany."

Kathleen laughed again. "Why on earth did you ever leave, then? You must be blind."

He smiled back at her. Kathleen always teased him, as if she was his older sister. The older sister he'd never had. The older sister he could sort of talk to. "You got to admit she's kind of skinny."

"What's skinny to an Italian man is dainty and slender to any other man." Then Kathleen sobered. "But yes, she's a mite thin. Didn't she tell you? She was awful sick on the boat. Some kind of fever. They quarantined her at Ellis Island for four weeks after they docked. Poor thing." She made a little tsk noise with her tongue. "I heard that hundreds of immigrants died in the past two months. She was lucky."

Damn right, she'd been lucky. He'd seen whole families die from fever.

Francesca had died from a fever.

Kathleen smiled again. "With some good food, she'll fill out right and proper. Then all the men'll be howling around her like wolves at the moon." She chuckled. "Excepting you, Mr. Blind Man."

Hell, he wasn't blind. He just wasn't one to exaggerate a woman's looks. He straightened. "Don't want to keep you standing still in this cold. I'd best get back to work."

Her smile widened into a grin. "You do that. And tell Mariana I said hello, too."

He nodded farewell, then headed back to pick up his tools. It was a little early still, but the fence was done. He'd head back out later, see if young Bill needed any help clearing that tree. Once his tools were safely stowed in the barn, maybe he'd check on Mariana. See what kind of chores she'd been up to.

This late in the winter the crops were all in, so he cut straight across the fields toward the back of the barn, his boots crunching over the patches of snow that dappled the ground. His spread was small, barely four acres. Small enough that he could walk around the outer border of it in less than half an hour.

And now that he wasn't getting any money from Francesca's parents, he'd never be able to enlarge it. He'd planned to ask Kathleen to sell him a few acres of her farm. She had too much land for her and the boys to work, and she didn't cotton to hiring hands.

He'd never have the money to buy that land from her now.

No, now he had a new wife instead.

He rounded the corner of the barn and saw Mariana -- a nearly naked Mariana -- viciously twisting a white garment around the pole he'd staked for wringing out laundry. A fire was smoldering under two tubs, almost burned out. She must be nearly finished.

She'd taken her bonnet off -- her bonnet and most of her clothes. Her hair was blonde, a deep, rich yellow blonde, but he didn't dwell on it for long. Not with everything else he could see.

Her shift was even more threadbare than her dress had been. Soaked with sweat and steam, the transparent white fabric clung to her body. Yes, she was thin, and her breasts were small, but firm and round. Dark nipples peaked and tented the cloth. Tempting him. A pity she hadn't removed her drawers -- he'd pay dearly to see more of her legs. Her long, slender legs.

She leaned further away from the pole, pulling the fabric taut, and groaned. A groan of agony, but it sounded the same as a moan of pleasure.

God, he was a wicked man. And how wicked was she, outside with no clothes on in the freezing cold, showing her body for everyone to see? It'd be a wonder if she didn't catch her death. "What are you doing, out here half-naked?"

She jumped a little, but didn't say a thing. With dark shadows under her eyes and wisps of straggly hair falling over her forehead, she looked too weary to talk.

She unwound the cloth, staggering a little as she stood upright. Wincing, she tossed the fabric she'd been twisting into the larger tub. It looked like a sheet.

"Too hot," she said. "Too hot for clothes."

She leaned against the tub, too weak to even stand on her own. He'd have to help her wring the laundry. But when he looked into the tubs, he found them full of damp, wrung clothes.

"I just finished the last of it," she said, in Italian. Then she blinked and tried in English. "I have ... done."

"I *am* done."

She looked exhausted, with her face flushed and her hair curling in damp waves from the heat. "I am done. *I'm* done."

So she knew about contractions. Bill was right -- she was smarter than she looked. At least when it came to English. He picked up one of the laundry tubs and headed for the house. "Bring the rest."

"I can't." She sounded ready to weep.

He stopped and turned. She was standing there, simply standing. When his gaze raked over her chest, she whimpered and blushed, but didn't cover herself.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

She looked down at her hands. "My arms ..."

Her arms were trembling; he could see that even from this distance.

"I can't move my arms," she said in Italian.

She sounded terrified. He dropped the tub and went to her, trying to ignore the pert breasts peeking up at him. Her nipples were thick, the thickest he'd ever seen. How would they feel in his mouth, against his tongue? His cock stirred and lifted against his pants.

He reached out and grasped her upper arms. God, his hands more than circled her skinny biceps. The muscles spasmed under his fingers. The damned girl had worked too hard. No wonder her arms were rebelling. And who the hell had asked her to do the laundry? He'd told her he didn't have any use for someone to clean up after him.

He sighed and let her go. "Go inside." The words came out in Italian.

She looked up at him. "What about the clothes?"

His jaw clenched. Did she think she could do anything to help? She couldn't even lift her hands to cover her breasts and hide herself from his gaze. He took another look at those thick dark nipples, just because he could. "Don't be stubborn, girl. Just do as I say. Get inside and sit down."

He tossed all of the wet laundry into the larger of the two tubs and carried it inside. She never could have lifted this tub. Why had she started a chore she didn't have the strength to finish?

When he came in, she was sitting at the table with her head bowed. The bed was stripped bare, the blankets neatly folded on top of the chest that held Francesca's clothes. His

pile of dirty clothes was missing from the corner. She'd washed all the laundry in sight. No wonder her arms were aching.

And the house ... the house was clean, too. The dresser, the table, even the chairs, had all been dusted and polished. His boots didn't stick to the floor anymore. Damn her. He didn't need her to clean his place, to make him feel like a good-for-nothing sloth. But now that she was here, well ... maybe she could do two chores. She could clean, and she could warm his bed. She didn't need strong arms to do either of those chores.

He built up the fire in the stove. She'd kept all of the pots simmering with water on the stovetop, no doubt in case she needed more hot water for the laundry. Even the outsides of the pots were scrubbed clean.

"I'm not all the time weak," she said, in English.

Could have fooled him. "Don't start a chore you're too weak to finish."

He threaded a thin rope around a few nails pounded into the walls, forming an indoor clothesline. Then he took a wet sheet from the tub, shook it out, and hung it over the rope.

"I want help you," she said.

"Just sit there." Rest was the only thing that would heal her strained muscles. Rest and heat. When he finished with the clothes, he'd fill a tub for her to soak in. And he'd still make it back out into the field to help Bill with that tree.

"Too cold to hang clothes outside. I wondered how to hang inside."

He could think of no response to that. All he wanted to do was drop the damned clothes, pick her up, and throw her onto the bare bed ... and feel those thick, taut nipples against his naked chest.

Even if she wasn't a virgin, he'd try to be gentle when he took her the first time. He'd treat her better than he'd treated his first wife.

And he'd never bed her in the daytime. He'd never bed her when she could see his face. When he could see her cringe. Or watch her sob.

The memory made him scowl.

"Was there a man?" he asked. It sounded like a shout in the silence of the room.

"What?"

"In Italy," he said, lowering his voice. "Was there a special man, a man who cared for you? Back in Tuscany?"

"No," she said softly. She sounded sad. Too sad to be telling the truth.

With that flirty smile of hers, she'd probably had hordes of men. All writing poetry about her eyelashes, like Kathleen had said. He snorted and hung more clothes. "A woman like you had no one courting her?"

She glanced up at him and smiled sunnily. He almost dropped the wet undershirt he was holding. "Thank you," she said.

What on earth was she thanking him for? Oh, she must have thought he meant she was pretty. Hell.

"There was men -- there *were* men courting me," she went on. "But there was no special man."

Perhaps she lied. Francesca had. He'd found the letters after she'd died, letters from the man she'd hoped to marry, the man too poor to meet her father's price. But what choice did they have, either of these poor girls? First they were at the mercy of their greedy father, then at the mercy of the man who'd bought them. He couldn't blame them for lying.

He hung the last garment -- her worn, pathetic dress. "Take off your shift."

She gasped. "What?"

Would she always make him waste his breath? He carried the empty tub to the stove and set it down nearby. "You heard me."

He lifted a pot of simmering water from the stove and poured it into the tub. By the time he'd emptied them all, the tub was half full. He added a pot of cold water, just enough to lower the temperature from scalding to merely hot.

And still she sat there in her wet shift and drawers.

Would everything be an argument with her? At least Francesca had taken orders with good grace. "Your arms will feel better after the heat of a bath. Now take off your clothes."

Even though he wanted to watch, he turned his back to her and faced the window. The gray light of winter was rapidly fading. Soon it would be dark.

And he would bed her in the dark. A mixed blessing. She wouldn't be able to see his ugly face, and he wouldn't be able to see her body. For a skinny woman, she had quite an arousing body.

"I can bathe with them on."

As if he hadn't seen plenty of her already. Good thing he never had visitors. Anyone could have happened along and seen her like that. Young Bill could have seen her like that. His hand clenched into a fist. "If I hang your things now, they'll dry by morning."

"Very well."

She'd learned the phrase already.

When she gasped, he looked over his shoulder. She was struggling out of the shift, no doubt hurting her sore arms. At least she was facing away from him, so she didn't see him watch as the damp shift fell to the floor.

Her shoulders were broader than he'd expected, her skin pale and pink in the fading sun, but her back and shoulder blades were far too bony. Even if she filled out some, she'd still be thin. Thinner than he liked a woman to be.

But when she bent to tug off her drawers, his breath caught. Mother of God, her backside was perfect. Her narrow waist, so slender, emphasized the flare of her hips, the wonderful, round curves of the pale globes of her ass. His mouth went dry and his cock twitched.

Someday, if she allowed it, if she liked bed sport, if ... someday, if he was the luckiest man alive, he'd take her from behind. He'd put her on her hands and knees, yes, and kneel

behind her. Somehow there would be enough light to see ... and he'd hold onto those wide hips and look down at that glorious ass as he fucked her. Her yellow blonde hair would stream down her slender back and over her shoulders as she moved with him ... and she'd bury her face in the mattress, trying to muffle her cries of pleasure --

She moved slightly, shifting to one side, and he quickly turned his head away so she wouldn't see him looking at her. Did other men think such lustful thoughts about their own wives? He'd never know. Even if he had friends to ask, he could never raise such a personal subject. He'd heard men brag about their conquests, but never about their wives.

She gasped and drew short, panting breaths. She must be sliding into the hot water, but he imagined her making those sounds beneath him.

Enough. He turned and saw only her head over the edge of the tub. Somehow she'd managed to twist up her hair and tuck her knees under her chin. Her shoulders were underwater. Good. The heat would soothe her sore muscles.

He picked up her discarded clothes and hung them on a spare end of the clothesline. He had to get out of here. Outside. The cold air would settle his cock. He'd go find Bill, help him with that rotten tree. And hear more about how smart and desirable Bill found his wife-to-be. Damn. Well, at least she'd be decently clothed when he got back. She'd better be.

He shrugged into his coat. When he opened the door, she called his name softly. He closed it again. "Yes?"

"Please, will you give me soap?"

Her English wasn't terrible at all. With simple sentences, she did just fine.

He kept his gaze on her face as he brought her the tin of soap and a washcloth. Lord, her face was as red as boiled beets. Maybe she was a virgin after all.

Or maybe it was the sight of him that made her blush. The thought of an ugly man like him seeing her naked.

She reached out for the soap and winced.

"Don't use your arms."

He shrugged out of his coat, then dragged a chair over and sat behind the tub, so he could stare down at her bosom without her seeing. "I'll wash you."

She looked up at him, mouth agape, and covered her breasts with crossed arms. "You can't."

"You're no use to me crippled. I'll help you now, so you can work tomorrow." *And so I can fuck you tonight.*

He saw skepticism in her eyes, but she didn't voice it. Perhaps she didn't have the English words. God help him when she caught up -- she already chattered away like a magpie, at least compared to him.

He dipped the washcloth into the tub, careful not to touch her yet. "If you keep using those sore arms, they'll only take longer to get better."

She turned away from him and dropped her head. With her hair piled up in a loose knot, the curve of her tender neck was exposed. Her blush covered even the back of her neck. How high would she jump if he planted a kiss there?

He leaned close enough to stir the fine hairs on the back of her neck with his breath. "Don't be embarrassed."

She ducked her face even further forward, resting it against her folded arms. "I can't help this."

He grinned. "Would it help if I took off my clothes as well?"

That brought her head up. "No."

Her neck was even redder now. He shouldn't rib her. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry to be ... to cause ... I wanted to do more chores today."

"You're not strong enough to do much." Maybe she never would be. "But ... you worked hard." He bit his tongue to keep from adding, *and now you'll be useless for days.*

But he merely rubbed some soap on the cloth, worked it into a lather, and gently washed her neck and upper back. She relaxed a little, leaning forward, giving him a little more space between her body and the edge of the tub.

Now he'd get to wash her fine ass. "Stand up," he said hoarsely. No doubt she'd argue about it.

But she stood obediently, to his surprise, putting her wet, wonderful ass on a level with his face. His first urge was to kiss, to lick, to nip that generous flesh. He ground his teeth. No, he couldn't. He couldn't startle her like that. He washed her magnificent bottom instead, careful not to let his calloused hand touch her peachy skin, and shifted in the chair, adjusting his stiff cock into a more comfortable position in his trousers. *Soon*, he promised his aching friend.

He reached around her to wash her stomach, then moved higher, swirling the cloth around her breasts, over her collarbones, up her neck. He didn't dare fondle her breasts the way he wanted; she'd bolt like a rabbit if he touched her too intimately. But he could dimly sense them through the cloth, soft mounds of feminine flesh that seemed to rise and fall with her shallow breaths. That was enough. Almost enough.

Hell, it wasn't nearly enough.

He lowered the wash rag down her belly to her thighs, brushing back and forth across her bush. The cloth dragged a little on her private hair. A braver man than he would take her now. Turn on the light and carry her to the bed, look his fill of her naked body before climbing between her legs and --

A roaring sound crashed through his head, and he took a deep breath. God, he hadn't been breathing. He was more nervous tonight than he'd been with his first woman.

Back then, he hadn't been smart enough to be nervous. Back then, he hadn't known the ways a man could hurt a woman. The ways a woman could hurt a man like him.

Enough of this torture. He washed her arms quickly, then pressed the cloth into her hand. "Do the rest," he said, his voice rough.

Without looking at her, he rinsed his hand off at the pump and walked away. Just away, away to the window, away where he couldn't see her. He didn't need to see her lift those long legs out of the tub, to watch her glide the soapy cloth up the inside of her thigh and wish it was his own hand.

But he couldn't just stand here all night. Ah. Supper. Food would calm him.

The bread box was empty. She must have been hungry after lunch. She must be hungry now. She'd eaten less than him, and he was starving.

He pulled open the trap door and went into the tiny cold cellar, careful to keep his head bent in the narrow, low space. They'd have to make do with simple food for supper. He wasn't going anywhere near that stove -- the tub was right in front of it.

He grabbed a chunk of ham, a quarter wheel of cheese, and a loaf of bread from the shelves. His winter supplies were thinning. Good thing spring was on the way.

And there was only one loaf of bread left. Maybe she could bake. Well, she certainly wouldn't be kneading bread anytime soon. Not with those pathetic arms. *Please, Lord, let her be capable of doing just one useful chore. One besides driving me insane with lust.*

He climbed back up the narrow ladder and dumped the food on the table. She was still soaking in the tub, but the washcloth and tin of soap were sitting next to it on the floor.

He brought a knife to the table and quickly made her a sandwich, then brought it to her with a small dry cloth. "Here."

She looked up in surprise, then smiled when she saw what he held. "Thank you, John." She dried one hand, then took the sandwich. Her first bite was generous. If she kept eating like this, she'd put some meat on her bones.

He ate his own sandwich at the table, slowly, staring at the back of her head while the sun set and the weak light of a winter moon crept into the room. The cover of darkness.

When she finished her sandwich, she dried her face with the small cloth he'd handed her. "Can I ... will you give me a towel?"

She used the Italian word for *towel*, so he wrote the English word on her chalkboard. "I keep them over here." He opened the drawer and brought one to her.

She reached out for it, but he shook his head and held it before him. "Stand up."

She hesitated. "Please, can you ... no look?"

He closed his eyes. In a moment, he heard water dripping off her body. The towel was pulled from his hand. He counted to ten once. Then again. When he opened his eyes, she had the towel wrapped around her. One slender hand held it closed at the throat while the other brushed the hem over her raised knee, drying it.

Let me dry you. He couldn't bear to say the words, couldn't bear to hear her refuse him. So he moved behind her again, where she couldn't see him, where he couldn't see the revulsion on her face, and reached around her, rubbing the towel cautiously over her belly.

His breath quickened. She might be skinny, but she was still a woman, with a woman's curves, a woman's shape. A woman's scent. Better -- her scent was clean and fresh, not harsh with perfume like a whore. He hadn't been this close to a woman in a long time. And never to one who smelled so sweet.

She pulled away. God, no. Not yet. He wanted to hold her tighter, but he'd never force her. He let her go. She stepped out of the tub, then stood passively with her back to him, waiting.

Waiting for him.

His hands trembled as they came around her, wandering over her belly, across her thighs, then up to cup her breasts. He could barely feel her shape through the damned towel.

But even so, was there anything more wonderful than feeling the body of a woman? Holding her slender form against his larger one? Imagining that she wanted him? No, nothing more wonderful had ever happened to him.

Then she lowered the towel to her waist.

And his hands touched her damp, silken skin.

Chapter Three

Mariana leaned back into the solid heat of John's chest as his hands smoothed magic over her body. She'd never imagined a man's touch could make her feel so warm. His big hands were rough, calloused, but gentle. So gentle. How strange, that such gentle stroking could make her feel this yearning, this ache, that wasn't gentle at all. She wanted to groan, and whine, and stamp her foot with frustration. And yet she didn't want him to stop. She never wanted him to stop.

His lips found her neck, kissing and ... Oh! He bit her, but it didn't hurt, not at all. His licked the spot, and she shuddered when his breath heated her wet skin. His hands caressed her bosom, stroking her over and over again, as if he'd never touched anything as pleasing.

Other men had touched her, through her clothing. Nothing had ever felt remotely like this. His rough skin caught on her nipples, and she felt a rush of heat deep inside, between her thighs. She felt empty ... achy ... needy.

And she knew, she suddenly understood, why a woman would give her body to a man she hadn't married. Why a woman would willingly lie back and let a man spread her legs. Now she knew how much a man could make a woman ache. How much *John* could make her ache. John, with his wicked-looking scar and gruff voice and calloused, gentle,

tormenting hands. She wanted John to press her down on that narrow bed, spread her legs, cover her with his huge body ... and go up inside her.

Yes.

The towel slipped from her nervous fingers, pooling over her feet. She felt the rough canvas of his pants against her bare bottom, felt the hard bulge of his male member against the small of her back. The part of him that would go inside her. That would take her virginity forever.

His hand squeezed her breast carefully, his thumb grazing the nipple with tantalizing heat. And his other hand, his other wicked, wicked hand, drifted over her ribs, over her stomach, lower ... lower ... ah, would he touch her *there*? And then would he put her on her back, put her on her back and spread her legs? Take her innocence?

Let him.

Of all the times to hear her second sight! She wanted to listen, to give herself to pleasure. She wanted John more than she'd ever thought possible. But ... if he took her virginity and didn't marry her, she'd be ruined.

Forever.

She caught that wandering hand in hers. "Stop."

No!

"Stop?" His hot breath tickled her neck.

She swallowed. Only in Italian would her words make sense. He could teach her the English later. If he cared to. "If ...When you are my husband, I will never deny you. But tonight ... tonight you are not my husband. Not yet."

His thumb stroked her nipple again. She squeezed her eyes closed, denying the pleasure.

"I will be your husband soon enough," he murmured in Italian. His mouth found that sensitive spot on her neck, below her ear, nibbling gently. "For tonight, Mariana, for this one night, can I not be your lover?"

Her knees quivered, made her lean back against him. Oh, he knew exactly how to make this difficult for her. Exactly how to weaken her resolve. But as much as she wanted him, as much as she feared rousing his anger, she could not lie with him out of wedlock. He already thought she was worthless, especially now that she'd failed at doing the laundry. What if he sent her away? After taking her innocence? No man would have her then.

John will.

She froze. That same ethereal female voice. It wasn't her conscience, nor her second sight. It must be ... it must be a spirit.

Francesca.

It didn't sound quite like Francesca's voice, but who else would speak to her from the other side? And in Italian? She shivered a little, despite the warmth of John's surrounding arms. Francesca wanted her to give John pleasure. The man she could no longer love on the Earthly plane.

But why tell her to leave before, and now tell her to bed him? The voice was not to be trusted.

"When can we be married? Tomorrow?" Perhaps he wouldn't mind waiting one day. Just one more day.

He teased her nipple again, and then he moved his hand to her stomach. Her breast felt chilled at the loss of his heat.

"Not until Sunday," he answered. "The preacher won't be back in town until Sunday."

Half a week away. "Sunday? But ... that's St. Valentine's Day."

He grunted, as though he didn't care. "Is it?"

What a wonderful coincidence. She'd been thinking of last Valentine's Day, of how happy she'd been, and now she'd be married one year later. Married on the day that celebrated love. Surely that would bring good luck to their marriage. She smiled. "How perfect, to be married on Valentine's Day."

He pulled his hands away and moved back, until he wasn't touching her at all. Was he angry? Would he send her away now, if she didn't let him take her tonight?

"Don't you think that will be a perfect wedding day?" she asked hopefully. "A good omen?"

"You wish to wait?"

She turned her head. In the shadows, with the moonlit window behind him, she couldn't see his face at all. "Yes."

He turned his face to the window, away from her. "Until Valentine's Day, then." His voice sounded rough. Rougher than usual.

She bent and picked up the forgotten towel, wrapping it around her. A bit late for modesty, but she was cold without his heat surrounding her. "Until our wedding," she corrected.

He was closer to the window now, and she saw his forbidding scowl. "Until Valentine's Day," he said. "Until Sunday. You had best pray it doesn't snow, or there will be no wedding."

But there would still be a bedding. His meaning was clear. He looked angry and fierce. Had he looked so when he'd been touching her? She hadn't seen his face.

Without his hands on her, without his body pressing against her back, she felt bereft and alone. Was she foolish to insist on this? Her body still hummed from his touch. Still ached deep inside, between her legs. Where he would put himself, if she let him.

He seemed like an honest man. She'd asked him to stop, and he had stopped right away. Surely he wouldn't abandon her after he took her virginity. If he took her, he'd be

obligated to marry her. And if that mysterious voice was Francesca's spirit speaking to her from beyond, surely she knew her widowed husband. Her own sister wanted her to lie with him.

Was this how women convinced themselves to lie with men who weren't their husbands? How they happily agreed to ruin themselves? She didn't care. She didn't care at all.

"John ... if you don't want to wait ..."

"Yes?" He sounded harsh, growling the English word after all that smooth-sounding Italian.

How to tell him she'd changed her mind? He'd think her foolish. Fickle. A silly, stupid woman. "If you don't wish to wait ..." She struggled to find the right words, even in Italian. "I don't have the strength to fight you."

He stepped back as though she had struck him. "I will *never* force you. Never."

She reached out, but he scowled at her. "I only meant ... when we are married, it will be your right ... and we will be married soon."

"I will never force you," he repeated. "Not even when I have the right. Not even when you are my wife."

He grabbed his coat and stomped to the door. "Put some clothes on," he growled. He slammed outside, letting in a rush of cold air, leaving her standing naked and alone next to the cooling tub of water.

Leaving her before she could tell him that he hadn't understood.

She hadn't meant to say that she didn't have the physical strength to fight him. She'd meant that she didn't want to fight him at all.

* * * * *

His pitiful farm was small, but he walked the perimeter for over an hour, cooling his hot blood.

This was exactly why he didn't need a wife. He hadn't thought of bedding a woman in days, and then *she* showed up. Now he could think of nothing else. And he'd be thinking about it for the next four days. Four long, agonizing days. And nights.

He could still feel her warm, soft skin ... still taste her dewy flesh on his tongue. When she'd dropped that towel, he'd wanted to weep in relief. He'd wanted to turn her, kiss her with his tongue, and take her right there on the floor.

And she'd wanted him, too. She'd trembled in his arms. But had she trembled with eagerness? Or with fear?

Valentine's Day. Only a hopeless romantic would want to be married on Valentine's Day. From the breathy wonder in her voice when she'd told him that Sunday was Valentine's Day, Mariana was clearly the worst sort of hopeless romantic.

No doubt men had been making fools of themselves over her for years. She'd probably expect flowers -- in the middle of winter -- and a hand-made card, and poetry. Poetry about her eyelashes.

He snorted. Not from him. He'd marry her, and he'd bed her -- he'd even be gentle about it, as gentle as he could be after waiting through four long nights -- but he wasn't going to wrap it up in romantic nonsense.

She acted as though this was a fairytale marriage. As though he'd *courted* her. Hell, he'd paid her parents for a woman to help him work this hardscrabble farm ... for a woman to warm his bed. They'd been more than happy to turn over a daughter -- two daughters -- in exchange for his *lire*.

Mariana had determination, at least. Weak as she was, she must have been in agony long before she'd wrung the last of the laundry. If she could stand that much pain, maybe she could stand the pain of lying with him.

But he wouldn't cause her pain. Not too much, at least. Hell, if she wasn't a virgin, he wouldn't hurt her at all.

He stumbled a little on the uneven ground. Maybe he should wish that she wasn't. That some other man would have the memory of seeing her weep with pain from an act that gave him selfish pleasure.

And if she *was* a virgin, well, he'd do his best not to hurt her badly. That last whore, the one he'd paid to show him what a woman liked, had told him it always hurt a woman the first time. He hadn't known that when he'd taken his first wife to bed. But now he knew how to make it hurt less. And now he knew how to pleasure a woman.

As he'd been pleasuring Mariana tonight.

Enough. If he kept thinking about bedding his almost-wife, he'd never lose this cockstand. Would he sleep at all, with her lying next to him in that narrow bed?

He headed toward the farmhouse. The window cast a soft yellow glow in the cold, frosty night. She must have lit the lamp.

He stomped up the porch, making enough noise to warn her he was coming. God knew he didn't want to surprise her half-naked. Not since he'd made that damned promise.

When he stepped into the warmth and shut the door, he didn't see her at all. She wasn't in bed, but the bed was made, the blankets back in place. The laundry was all still hanging, so she must have found the spare set of linens. Where the hell was she?

He took off his coat and hung it, then came further into the room. God damn it. She was lying on the floor between the tub and the stove, wrapped in a single blanket.

"What the hell are you doing?" he all but shouted.

She turned and looked up at him with frightened blue eyes. "Sleeping?"

His jaw clenched. "Get in the damned bed."

"I wish to sleep here." Her chin was high, but her voice wavered.

"Like hell." He strode across the room and bent, gathering her up. She squeaked like a mouse when he stood. Lord, she weighed less than a sack of potatoes. He dropped her on the bed.

"*I will sleep on the floor,*" he said. That tone would have gotten no argument from Francesca, but certainly her stubborn sister would give him one.

"But ... this is your house."

Yes, he'd known she'd argue. "You need rest."

"So do you, John."

"Sleeping on the floor will stiffen your arms. With useless arms, you're no use to me."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked rapidly. "Please don't be angry." She said it in Italian.

He must be scaring the hell out of her. By the cross, he hadn't meant to frighten her. The bed frame creaked as he sat next to her on the mattress. "Did you think that if I found you in bed, I would break my promise?"

She shook her head. But why else would she be on the floor? He knew, from bitter experience, that few people were willing to trust a man who looked as hideous as he did. It was human nature to mistrust the ugly, and to think the best of beautiful people. She'd have to learn to trust him. He'd given her little reason to trust him so far.

He stroked her hair back with one hand. She wiped her eyes, but didn't flinch away from his touch.

"A few nights on the floor won't hurt me, Mariana."

"But --"

"No arguments," he said, talking over whatever she added. "And tomorrow you'll rest your arms. You shouldn't have made the bed."

"Made the bed," she repeated. Then she smiled. "What a strange way to say. I didn't *make* the bed. I put linens on the bed."

When she smiled like that, his thoughts scattered. He just stared, wishing he could unwrap that blanket and look at her body through whatever threadbare garment she had on. "Get under the covers." He stood up. "I need that blanket."

She unwrapped the blanket, revealing a voluminous gray flannel nightgown that had been Francesca's. Nothing could have cooled his blood faster than seeing her in one of Francesca's nightgowns.

"We will share the bed," she declared.

Had he heard her right? Yes, he was sure of it.

She stood up suddenly and rushed to the table, then picked up one of her dictionaries. She held it up to the light as she flitted from page to page.

He spread her cocoon blanket across the bed while she searched for words.

"Which side?" she said at last, triumphantly. "Which side do you want?"

The side you're on. With you underneath me. And out of that nightgown. "I don't care."

She set down the book and walked to the bed, standing so close to him, he could see a tiny freckle on her forehead. "Which side?" she asked again.

Stubborn girl. "Take this side." It would put her closer to the warmth of the stove, farthest from the drafty door.

She slid into the bed, and he blew out the lamp so she wouldn't see him strip down to his long johns.

He got into bed and settled on his side, as close to the edge as possible. God help him if she curled up against his back in her sleep.

"John?"

He'd never get to sleep if she kept chattering. He grunted in response.

"Thank you for promise," she said softly.

Well, what else did she expect? She'd pulled away from him. She'd asked for that promise. And like legions of men before him, he'd been unable to deny a woman. "We'll be married soon enough," he answered.

And then she wouldn't refuse him. If she did, he'd go mad.

* * * * *

He dreamed of her, of course. He dreamed that she turned to him in her sleep, pressed herself against him, and lifted her lips to his. His fingers tangled in her hair. So silky, so fine.

He kissed her like he'd kiss a whore, licking deep within her mouth, feeling the sharp edges of her teeth, the raspy glide of her own tongue. His hand cupped the back of her head, holding her still while his mouth ravaged hers. She made a tiny noise, a noise he couldn't interpret. Protest? Surrender? Desire? Hell, it was *his* dream. Of course she desired him in his dreams.

Gasping for air, he broke the kiss. Felt her pulling away, and wrapped an arm around her, crushing her close. He rubbed his face in her tangled hair, uncovering her ear, and nipped the lobe, licked along the edge.

In the darkness, with no sight, only touch and sound existed. The weight of the blankets, the heat of her body, the smoothness of her skin, the little sighs and drawn breaths she made as he kissed and nipped along her neck.

He rolled to his side, facing her, and his hand slid down her back, feeling the delicate bones of her spine. He reached lower and cupped her beautiful ass with his greedy hand, dragging her closer. His aching cock pressed against her belly. He shunted his hips, driving himself as though he was deep inside her. Hell, this was a dream. He could fuck her in his dreams.

Her slim little fingers stroked down his arm, took his hand and dragged it away from her ass. He pulled against her, resisting, but she tugged his hand away, brought it between them ... and then he found his hand on her breast.

He groaned and stroked her through the thick, soft flannel of her nightgown. Damned flannel. If only she was in that threadbare shift, he could feel her better. Or naked. Yes, naked. He wished the flannel away, but his dream didn't cooperate.

He tugged at the neckline of her gown, frantic to get to that silky skin, to take that rock-hard nipple in his mouth.

She grabbed at his hand. "John. John. *Basta. Basta.* Stop."

Her voice penetrated the haze of sleep. Good Lord, she was grappling with him. He really was pulling at her nightgown, trying to tear it off of her.

He yanked his hand back and rolled away. The room was still pitch black, but a solitary bird singing outside told him it must be close to dawn.

God, he was no better than an animal. Tearing at her clothes, pawing her ... He'd nearly ravished her in his sleep, and here he lay panting to catch his breath like a demented man. He'd apologize. And then he'd finish the night on the floor. The floor wouldn't be nearly as hard as his aching cock.

Her little hand fumbled over his chest, his shoulder, down his arm, until she found his hand. Her fingers clasped his with more strength than he'd thought she possessed.

"Is not problem, John," she whispered. Forgiving him before he asked. "You were asleep. We both were asleep."

Then she lifted his hand, and pressed a kiss to his forefinger. God help him, he wanted to drag her against him, feel those lips against his mouth again.

Silky skin stroked the back of his hand -- her cheek, no doubt. She brought their joined hands to her chest, and he felt her fumbling, fumbling with ... was she undoing her buttons? And then his palm was against her naked breast, feeling a hard nipple under his rough fingers.

God, did she ... did she want this? Hell, she'd put his own hand on her naked flesh. But idiot that he was, he had to question his great good fortune.

"I won't take you," he muttered. "I swear I won't take you. Just let me ... just let me touch you."

Chapter Four

To John, it seemed an age before she answered. An age of feeling nothing but the inviting swell of her breast under his immobile hand, of hearing nothing but his panting breath and the distant bird song outside.

"Very well," she whispered. And she arched a little, pressing her small breast more firmly into his hand.

Very well, indeed. He squeezed and fondled, reveling in the texture of her silky skin. Then he leaned even closer, until his mouth brushed her silky hair. He kissed his way over her cheekbone, down her face, and found her mouth, kissing her softly, restraining himself.

He could be gentle. And for all her apparent willingness, one wrong move could send her running, could frighten her into pulling away.

He'd sooner die. He knew enough to go slowly. How long before he could thrust his tongue into her mouth? Before he could suck at her breasts? Before he could press his cock against her thigh? He didn't want to frighten her by moving too quickly.

And this was heaven in itself, just kissing her, kissing her over and over again, while his hand learned the shape, the texture, of her breasts. His fingers strummed a taut, urgent nipple.

Her tongue licked at his lips, teasing him, then flitted into his own mouth with rapid little thrusts. She had some experience with kissing, it would seem. Of course she did. God only knew how many men had kissed her. Or fondled this firm little breast. How many other hands had she lifted to her bare bosom?

He pulled his mouth away from her eager lips. "Are you a virgin?"

Damn. He hadn't meant to ask.

She gasped. "Of course I'm a virgin. How dare you?" she said, in rapid Italian. "What kind of woman do you think I am? Just because I allow the man I'm going to marry to --"

He put his hand over her mouth to stop her. "I meant no disrespect."

Lord, what a stupid thing to say. Nothing was more disrespectful than questioning the virginity of an unmarried girl. How could he salvage this?

He took his hand from her mouth and cupped her breast again. "You seem to enjoy this."

"Should I not?" She still sounded angry. Angry and challenging.

"Oh, I'm very glad that you do," he said truthfully. "But I was surprised."

He grazed her nipple with his thumb. Still taut, still firm. Still lusciously suckable.

She made no protest. He'd assume he was forgiven. And his lips had better uses than talking.

He bent his head, searching. His mouth touched her collarbone, slid lower, and she seemed to hold her breath, waiting. He licked over the curve of her breast, and finally, finally, his tongue laved her nipple.

She gasped and held his head tight, her fingers tugging at his hair. He suckled on her deeply, trying to take the whole of her breast into his mouth.

She squirmed impatiently, lifting her hips against him, setting fire to his blood. Little cries came from her throat, shameless, urgent noises. He knew what she needed, and soon he'd give it to her. But first he'd torment her just a little bit more.

He moved to her other little breast and licked ... just licked ... finding the nipple already peaked, loving how she lifted against him, seeking more, loving how she made a frustrated little sound. She wanted him. She truly wanted him. Praise the saints for the darkness. In the light, she'd look at him in horror. In the dark, there was only the touch of his hands, his mouth.

He nipped the slope of her breast, and she squeaked in surprise. He smiled and gave in, took her in his mouth fully, sucking until he felt the hard nub of her nipple against the roof of his mouth. She whimpered again.

Her hands left his hair and skimmed his neck, sliding under his collar. Then he felt her unbuttoning the top of his long johns, and finally her hands brushed over his chest. Her fingers combed through his chest hair. "You're warm," she said. "And ... so much hair."

Even in bed, she would chatter. He dragged his mouth from her tender breasts and kissed her, filling her with his tongue, and she kissed him back, thrusting her own tongue against his. The kiss of a woman who wanted.

As he wanted.

He stroked over her back again, found the slope of her behind, and let his hand fondle her ass. She made no protest, not even when he wandered over her hip, when he slipped the hem of her nightgown up to her thighs ... not even when he felt the wiry curls of her pussy. She was well-furred, very well-furred. If only he could see the color of this wild bush. Imagination filled in the gaps left by the darkness. Perhaps a light chestnut brown, like her eyebrows. Yes.

But when he pressed his fingers down, down between her legs, she stiffened.

He dragged his mouth from her breasts and nuzzled against her neck. "Let me touch you," he pleaded. "I won't take you. I swear it."

Her thighs trembled, he felt that against his hand, but then they relaxed a bit. Enough that he could dip just a little lower, low enough to rub light circles over her hidden bud. Her

clit. He knew the English word. But he wouldn't go deeper, wouldn't touch it directly, not yet, not until --

She moaned. Yes, she moaned. So he spread his fingers apart, opening her, delving deeper, until his fingertips were right on top of her tiny bud, stroking it in slow, easy circles. Her hips lifted a little, and she moved, showing him the rhythm she liked, the pressure she needed.

Even a rough, calloused hand like his could feel the silky skin of her cunt, could feel the sensitive bud of her clit, could feel the wet warmth oozing from her flesh. Thank God he knew how to pleasure her.

Thank God she was willing to let him. She even spread her legs a little, giving him more access to her pussy. Trusting him.

He slipped low with just one finger, found her virgin opening, and pressed inside, a little bit inside, only up to his first knuckle -- ah, she was wet, flowing. He spread the slippery fluid over her bud.

"I'm wet," she gasped, surprised. "Why am I so wet?"

Was there ever a time this woman was silent? All he could think of was the slick wet heat of her cunt, and how tight she'd feel around his poor cock, and she asked questions. He had to clear his throat to speak. "Your body is preparing to join with mine." *Preparing with a vengeance.*

She stiffened. "You promised --"

"Hush. Your body may be prepared, but I know *you* aren't." He kept stroking her in slow, easy circles.

Her thighs relaxed then. "Thank you."

"When you're ready --" He stopped. No, he wouldn't give her a chance to delay him even more. "On Sunday ... on Valentine's Day, when I take you fully, this wetness will ease the joining."

Impossible to resist, with temptation so close. He slid his finger deep inside her passage, and nearly lost control when she squeezed down on him.

He clenched his teeth. This was her night for pleasure, and he'd pleasure her properly. Patience now would reward him later. By Sunday, she'd be eager for him to fuck her. So he withdrew and kept circling, just a little harder, just a little faster.

Her breath came in quick gasps now, her hips moving in tandem with his fingers. He nuzzled against her chest, found a breast, and suckled. She moaned and writhed under him, pressing her clit harder against his fingers.

And suddenly her hips froze, her breath caught, but he kept rubbing, stroking, rubbing, stroking. She gave a sharp little cry, then her body convulsed under his hand. Even his lips, against her breast, felt her shake with her release.

He'd have given anything, anything, to see her face in that moment. But if he'd been able to see her face, she'd have been able to see his. And then she'd never have allowed him to touch her sweet pussy like this.

When she stilled, he stopped rubbing her and cupped her mound in his hand. She turned her face into his chest, nuzzling against him. He felt her sigh, felt her fingers curl into a little fist against his chest.

He took his hand from her pussy and brought it to his face, inhaling deeply. In the dark, she couldn't see what he did. With his forearm behind her head, she'd think he was simply holding her. He licked his fingers, tasting her musky juice. Wonderful, musky juice.

Someday he'd tongue her pussy. She was a passionate little thing. She'd like it.

He'd love it.

God, his cock was aching hard. With his other hand, he furtively stroked himself through his clothes. When she fell asleep, he'd see to his own ease.

She stirred a little against his chest. "What -- what is the word for what you do to me?"

She couldn't mean the fondling of her sweet parts. She must mean the climax. "You came."

"What?"

"You came."

"Like ... I came on the boat? I came from Italy?"

"Yes. The same words can mean different things."

"I understand." He felt her words, her breath, against his chest. "Can you ... can I touch you and ... can *you* come?"

Praise be to whatever saint had blessed him tonight. He took her slender hand from his chest and pressed it against his cock, showed her how to rub him through his underclothes. And he lifted his hips against her untutored movements, just as she'd lifted hers against his hand moments ago.

She kissed his neck, then his chin. Her hair caught on his whiskers as she moved higher and kissed his mouth. He could barely breathe from the wonder of her stroking hand, but he kissed her deeply, breaking away only when she took her hand off his cock.

He groaned. But then he felt her pulling at his clothes, tugging at buttons, and suddenly her hand was against his hot, hard skin. He reached down and wrapped her slender hand around his cock, teaching her how hard to grasp, how quickly to pump.

His free arm pulled her closer, and his hand stroked over her ass. If only he was inside her, deep inside her, pumping away as he cupped this soft round ass in his hands ...

He groaned and forced her hand tighter, faster ... and his hips left the bed as he came, gushing hot seed onto his belly.

After he caught his breath, he took her hand away and kissed her fingers. He should thank her, tell her how much she'd pleased him, but ... he couldn't bring himself to voice the words. She was the talkative one. He just wanted to pull her skinny body tight against him and relish the bliss of release. And sleep for another hour or two.

But first he had to wipe off his seed. Somehow her arms and legs were holding onto him as tightly as he was holding her. He untangled himself and left the bed, carefully feeling his way to the sink. He wiped his stomach dry with a cloth rag, tossed it to the floor, then went back to the bed and slid under the covers.

"What do you do?" she asked.

Of course she'd want to know. She was such a curious girl. "I'm wiping away my seed."

"Seed? That's the English word?"

He pulled her against him. "Yes."

"Seed. Like a plant."

"Yes."

She rearranged herself, scooting up the bed, no doubt so her head could rest on her pillow. "I understand. It's called seed because a man's seed grows a baby."

He felt down along her stomach and lightly stroked her wiry bush. "Only if it is planted where it can take root."

"Is it not a sin, to spill your seed where it can't take root?"

He'd never get back to sleep, with all these questions. "Yes. But it would be a greater sin to take you against your will."

She yawned. "Is it proper, that I ask the English words for ... for mating things?"

"Yes. But don't write these words on your chalkboard," he teased. "They are only proper between husband and wife."

"Or between ... lovers." She used the Italian word.

Yet they weren't really lovers. Not until Valentine's Day. He could think of no response.

"What is the English word for my ... privates?" she asked, again substituting the Italian.

He listed all the words in his head, words too crude or ridiculous to share with a woman. "Your pussy," he said at last.

She started a little. "Like a cat?"

He yawned. "Yes."

"Strange. I wonder why ... that word?"

He smiled at her hesitation to say the word. A completely innocent word, except now she knew its other meaning. He'd never have dared to reply in the daylight. In the darkness, he'd dare anything. "Perhaps because both kinds of pussy are so nice to pet."

She gasped, then giggled. "You're a wicked man."

She had no idea. Not yet.

"And will you tell me the word for your ... for *your* privates?"

He knew only one word in English. "My cock. Like a rooster," he answered, before she could ask. "I have no idea why."

"A rooster is also called a cock?"

"Yes."

He felt her shake her head. "Crazy language."

All languages were. "In Italian, we say *al fresco*, and it could mean either outside or in prison. Opposite meanings."

"That's true." She curled up next to him with a yawn.

Francesca had never relaxed against him like this. By the cross, he'd not make the same mistakes with Mariana. He'd take her gently, gently. He'd make her wet with her own fluid, with moisture from his mouth ... he'd open her with his fingers, carefully stretching her virgin flesh ... and when his cock breached her, she would be ready. She'd feel no pain from fucking him.

And if he kept thinking like this, he'd be hard again in a matter of moments. He kissed the top of her head. "It's almost dawn. Get some sleep."

She nodded and yawned again. "It did feel very nice when you ... pet me."

Nice? He'd have to teach her more English. Words like *wonderful. Incredible. Blissful.*

"*Domani, si vuoi --*" He stopped, and switched to English. "Tomorrow night, if you wish, I will pet your pussy again."

"I wish." She shifted a little, and he felt her move closer. Her slender hand came to rest on his hip. "And I will pet your cock. And we will ... come."

His cock twitched at the words. She sounded drowsy, sated with sexual pleasure. If she'd been more awake, he'd have taken her hand to his cock right then.

Yes, this skinny, innocent young woman could warm his bed very well indeed. Even if she never had the strength to manage the laundry. Mariana would do this one thing well; Francesca had done everything else well, everything save this. But it had been his fault, not hers.

Mariana had settled down at last. Her breath was slow and steady. Perhaps she slept. How much time before dawn? Only an hour, two at most. He yawned, drifting toward sleep.

"I feel so much different when *you* touch me," she murmured.

His brain was half asleep, and it took him a long, long moment to recognize the implication of her words. He sat straight up, wide awake. "Who else has touched you?" he demanded.

No answer. Her breathing was deep, even; she slept.

He tossed the blanket off and slid out of bed. Might as well get up. He'd have no more sleep this night, picturing another man's hand between Mariana's legs.

Chapter Four

Mariana woke up in a cocoon of warmth. How long had it been since she'd woken up to warmth? To soft, clean sheets?

She stretched, reaching out across the bed with one arm, hoping to find John there. Nothing. Nothing but emptiness, and the slight stiffness in her arms, reminding her of the reason the sheets were so clean. John must be up already.

John. Her lover. Her *lover*.

She felt heat rise in her face and grinned. Her lips felt bruised, a delicious soreness. His kisses had been so exciting. Rough and lusty. But his hands ... For such a gruff, scary-looking man, he had surprisingly gentle hands. *Amazing* hands. Hands that knew her body better than she did, even in the dark.

And when he'd taken her hand in his, and shown her how to touch him, how to make him tremble and groan, and spill his seed -- how to make him *come*, oh, that had been even better. He'd been happy with her then. For the first time, she'd managed to please him.

She couldn't wait for Valentine's Day. They'd be married. And then he'd lie on top of her and press his *cock* inside her. Just like his finger had. Only better. Bigger. Much bigger, from what she'd felt last night. And she'd be so wet, it wouldn't hurt at all.

She squirmed, pressing her thighs together to ease the tension. What a wanton woman she'd become. If he were in bed with her now, she'd be tempted to let him take her, wedding ring or not. Where was he?

She rolled over and opened her eyes. Bright sunlight streamed through the window. The laundry was down, and John sat at the table, drinking from a steaming, heavy cup. He looked tired, his great bushy brows drawn together in a frown.

She sat up and smiled at him. "Good morning."

He didn't look up, but he nodded once. His chair scraped against the floor as he stood. With his back to her, he walked to the stove and put the skillet over an open burner.

Butter sizzled in the pan, and she heard the crack of an egg, the popping noise of rapid frying. As the scent of melted butter filled the air, her mouth watered.

She slid her stockinged feet onto the cold floor. He'd made coffee, folded the laundry, emptied the tub and moved it to a far corner of the room, all without waking her. She walked up behind him and peered around his side. "I want to make the breakfast."

He cracked more eggs into the pan. "I like my own cooking fine."

He'd said that yesterday, too. Didn't he want her to be useful? "My arms are good. I can make the milk ... I mean, I can milk the cow, and get the eggs. And feed the chickens."

He tossed some chopped ham into the skillet. "I've done all that already."

Of course he had. There was a basket of eggs sitting next to his elbow. But why wouldn't he look at her? Was he disappointed in her again? For not being awake sooner? Maybe he was just crabby in the morning.

She got plates and forks and set the table, then added the remaining loaf of bread and the butter keeper. With his back to her, uninviting, he obviously wanted no help with the cooking. He didn't seem interested in her at all. Where was the tender lover of last night? The man who'd held her close? She'd expected a good morning kiss. At least.

"Today, I will make ... *I'll* make bread."

He glanced at her, then looked back at the eggs he was stirring. "No. Rest your arms today."

His voice sounded harsh. Annoyed. Maybe he was still angry that she hadn't been able to finish the laundry. Well, she could do nothing about that now. "Very well. I will rest. I will ... make again my sister's clothes."

"You mean sew," he said, his voice a little sharp.

"Yes." She'd look up the word later, make sure she could use it correctly.

"Good. Your own clothes are awful."

Another word she didn't know. But she didn't need to look it up -- the scorn in his voice told her what he thought.

With a rag wrapped around the handle of the iron skillet, he brought the eggs to the table. He stood close to her, tilting the pan and using her fork to shovel eggs and ham onto her plate. She wanted to reach out, to rest her arm across his lower back, to lean her head against his side. Just to touch him, in some small way. But she didn't dare, not with him acting so cold. As cold as he had when she'd first arrived.

Maybe what they'd done in the night hadn't been enough to keep him wanting her. Maybe her hand wasn't enough to satisfy him.

Maybe he still didn't want her as a wife.

He wants you.

The words made her jump. John said nothing. He didn't look up, merely went around the table to his own place. Obviously he didn't hear anything.

She looked down. Why, he'd put nearly half of the scrambled eggs onto her plate. "I can't eat so much."

He ignored her and started eating. Right out of the skillet, as if she hadn't set a plate down for him.

Fine. She could ignore him, too. The eggs were delicious, fluffy and warm, and the ham added just enough saltiness. He really didn't need her to cook for him at all. But she wouldn't compliment him. No doubt he'd be rude if she did.

He rose, got the coffeepot, and poured more coffee into his cup. She caught his gaze as he finished.

"Want some?" he asked grudgingly.

She shook her head. He needn't do her any favors. And despite what the spirit said, he obviously didn't want her. He wouldn't act so cold if he did. As soon as he sat down again, she stood and got water from the pump, filling a mug for herself.

They ate in silence. He didn't look at her, not once. Even though she was hungry, she had to force the food past her tight throat. What had she done? What had she failed to do?

She cut a slice of bread, buttered it, and offered him none. He saw the bread; he could get it himself. She took a vicious bite, scattering crumbs over the edge of her plate.

His chair scraped across the floor as he stood. She didn't look at him, but in a room this small, she couldn't help but see him go to the door and take down his coat.

He was leaving. Without a word. Without a kiss. Without even touching her.

And she couldn't bear to see him go away. "Where do you go?"

"To town." His tone invited no further questions.

She ate three more bites of eggs before she could stand it no longer. "When did you return?" Oh, she'd said that wrong. Now he'd correct her, in that superior way of his.

"Not until supper time."

He hadn't bothered to correct her. Maybe he thought it no longer mattered. That she wouldn't be here long enough to need to learn English.

He must intend to eat the noon meal in town. Goodness, he planned to leave her alone all day. With nothing to do but make over her clothes. To *sew* -- and to be haunted by a spirit who spoke nonsense.

"Don't go in the barn," he said suddenly.

She looked up. "Why no?" No, that was wrong. "Why *not*?"

He looked annoyed, frowning at her. "The horse has colic. If you startle her, she might get worse."

"Colic?"

"The horse is sick." He sounded brusque, impatient. He pulled on a hat. "I'm going to get medicine for the horse."

Medicine. She wouldn't ask him to spell it. "Can I help?"

He scowled at her. "What could you do? Just stay inside and rest your arms."

He slung his scarf around his neck. She wouldn't help him bundle up today. He could freeze for all she cared.

But ... "How will you go to town? Is long walk, to town and back again. Longer than one day --"

"I'll borrow one of Kathleen's horses."

He left in a gust of cold wind, before she could even say goodbye.

The big, stupid man. She slammed the dirty skillet into the sink. He didn't even have the decency to eat from a plate. And how dare he order her to rest, then leave with all these dirty dishes on the table? Did he think she could wash them without using her arms?

She scrubbed the pan roughly, making her biceps sore. At least the work relieved some of her frustration. What did he want from her? It wasn't her fault Francesca was gone.

Wants you.

She shook her head.

Yes.

As if it mattered what a ghost said. She slammed the dishes into the sink and washed them roughly, but nothing broke. Just as well. John had told her she wasn't worth spending money on. If she broke his dishes, he'd behave even worse.

Awful man. She had done nothing, nothing, to make him angry. She had done nothing but try to please him. She'd cleaned for him. She'd done the laundry -- mostly. She'd let him touch her body, let him touch her in ways that no other man had dared. She'd let him touch her in ways that only a husband should.

And she'd touched him. She'd made *him* come, too. But still he didn't want her. Maybe he wanted more than her hand. Maybe he was angry that she wouldn't let him go up between her legs. Not until they were married. But he should understand why she insisted. He should be pleased that she'd let him fondle her, and touched him in return.

Would she ever be able to please him? To even make him smile?

She didn't care if he smiled, the big dumb ox. All she wanted was a home. She would make a home here, with him. And she would be happy. He could be angry if he wished.

She built up the fire a little, then quickly changed into her day dress in the still-chilly morning air. Taking in Francesca's huge nightgown would have to wait. She folded it and tucked it under a pillow on the bed.

Francesca. Was it really her sister's spirit that had spoken to her? She looked around the small room, but nothing stirred. "Francesca?"

Nothing. Oh, how silly she was, talking to thin air! And the voice had made no sense, first telling her to leave, then to let John touch her ... and now trying to convince her that John wanted her, when he acted the opposite.

Kneeling in front of the chest that held her sister's clothes, she slowly opened the lid. The contents reminded her so much of Francesca. The dresses were in dark, somber colors that would have suited Francesca's complexion quite well. They'd make her own pale skin

look sickly. But they were all in good condition, and the dark colors wouldn't show dirt easily. Francesca had always been practical that way.

She pulled out the lightest-colored dress, a burgundy cotton twill with a high neckline and long sleeves, and carried it to the small mirror that hung next to the sink. Yes, she looked pale in this color, but it was the best of the lot, suitable for winter. She'd need to work fast to have a respectable dress to be married in.

At least the dress was almost red. A good color for a Valentine's Day wedding. The color of love. She turned from the mirror. No sense in fooling herself. There would be no love for her this year. No love, only bed play.

She dragged a chair to the window, where the light was strongest, and sat down with the dress and Francesca's sewing box. No -- *her* sewing box.

Altering a dress of her older sister's to fit herself was nothing new. She'd have to dart the bodice, take in the width of the skirt along the side seams, and lower the hem as much as she could. Then she'd try to alter the height of the waist to suit her own short-waisted proportions. Making a new dress from whole cloth would be a lot easier, but she'd never had the luxury of making new clothes for herself.

A gentle breeze stirred the hair over her ear, curiously warm in the chilly room. Must be a draft from the fire. The sensation was oddly comforting, like the brush of her mother's hand when she was ill.

She turned the dress inside out and started sewing tiny stitches along the sides of the bodice, darting the fabric to fit her own smaller bosom. She'd trim away the excess cloth after the new seams were in. She had nowhere near the bosom that Francesca had, and lumps of extra fabric under the seam would cause unnecessary wear.

No, she never could have filled out Francesca's bodice. And maybe she could never fill the hole Francesca had left in John's life. Perhaps he resented her for trying? For being alive, with him, while Francesca was dead? If he still loved her sister ... and an unwanted woman

tried to take her place ... that would make any man angry. Perhaps when he'd touched Mariana in the night, he'd wanted Francesca instead.

But he'd been so ... eager. Maybe now, in the light of day, he felt guilty for wanting another woman. She'd have to be brave and ask him. Ask him why he was angry. She would never be able to guess. She'd look up the English words and ask him properly.

They would be married until death. If she wanted him to be a good husband to her, she must be a good wife to him. She would do whatever she could to please him.

Perhaps she could never take Francesca's place in John's life. Or in his heart. But she would try. She would try.

* * * * *

The hour was late, the sun near set, when John rode into the barn. He checked on the sick horse as soon as he dismounted. Her belly was still distended, but she didn't try to bite him when he touched her. Getting better. Maybe it wasn't colic after all. But he dosed her water anyway, just in case, and left her fresh hay. Then he curried Kathleen's horse and set to cleaning the tack.

It was cold work, handling the freezing iron bits and saddle buckles, and he couldn't wear gloves while he did it. Kathleen had told him to borrow the animal for a few days, until his own horse was set to rights. The least he could do was take proper care of her tack.

He'd stayed in town longer than he'd wanted, making sure the preacher would be back on Sunday, leaving word that he'd have a wedding to perform after the service. Would Mariana mind that they didn't have a Roman Catholic priest? Hell, he didn't care. It'd be a legal marriage, and that was all that mattered. Once they were married, she'd have no reason not to let him fuck her.

His jaw clenched. How could she smile at him so brightly this morning, all innocent and flushed from sleep, as if she'd never had another man's hands up her drawers? Another

man she may have loved. Hell. Maybe that was why she didn't want to rut with him before they were married. Before she *had* to.

He hung the tack and headed for the house. No sense in staying out any longer. This was *his* house, and no skinny little flirt of a girl was going to make him feel uncomfortable in it.

The last thing he expected to hear when he stepped onto his porch was laughter. Hers. And a man's.

He pushed open the door and burst in.

She sat at the table across from young Bill McNeil, the lamp lit between them, a dark reddish-brown dress spread on her lap, needle and thread in her hand. Their laughter startled into silence, and they looked up at him.

Bill stood and reached out one hand. "Hello, John. My ma sent me 'round with some fresh-baked bread and peach preserves."

No doubt it had been the boy's idea. An excuse to come see Mariana. He shook his hand, then turned away to hang up his coat. "You tell your ma I said thank you."

"Sure will. It's no bother, though. She always bakes too much bread, and you know I'm not overly fond of peaches."

Mariana's head came up from the dress she'd been sewing. "Over what?"

Bill chuckled like an old friend comfortable with ribbing her about her English. "Overly fond." He reached under the table and came up with the chipped chalkboard, then wrote the words on it. "It means you like something a lot."

John would swear the kid had winked at Mariana. As if to say he was overly fond of *her*. His hands clenched into fists.

The knot between her eyebrows grew. "You meant you were happy to give the peaches away. But you like them? You are overly fond of them?"

"I said 'not' first. I'm *not* overly fond. That means I *don't* like them very much."

She smiled again. "Ah. Thank you for explaining."

Bill was close to her own age -- probably just a couple of years younger than her. No doubt she'd rather be marrying someone like the boy. Handsome and young, able to talk and flirt with her easily. A man she'd want to fuck in the light.

The hell she would. He'd kill the boy first. With his bare hands.

By the saints, what was wrong with him, thinking of strangling this kid just because he'd been laughing with Mariana? And she'd probably been the one who'd started the ribbing. No wonder Bill was sweet on her. He couldn't blame the kid that Mariana was such a flirt.

The room was silent again except for a slow drip from the pump. His presence had disturbed their happy little chat.

Good.

He went to the sink and jiggled the pump handle until it stopped dripping, just for something to do. A covered pot simmered on the stove, and he smelled cooked onions. He'd told the little fool to rest. Did she ever listen to a word he said?

"I'd best be going," Bill said at last. "It's getting dark."

Dark. Tonight, in the dark, he could teach Mariana more bed tricks. Tricks with his mouth and tongue. Tricks that an innocent young girl could never imagine, tricks that would drive her wild, make her moan and scream. Tricks that would leave her a virgin in fact, if not in spirit.

Maybe she knew them already.

Bill was standing, collecting his coat.

"Good night, Bill," John said.

"I am glad you came," Mariana added.

John caught her gaze and raised an eyebrow. Her face went beet red. That's what happened with dirty words. Now she couldn't even use them in an innocent way.

"Have a good night," Bill said, closing the door behind him.

John almost snorted. His idea of a good night would be stripping his wife -- his almost-wife -- bare naked and finding out just how experienced she was. He'd wasted the whole day in town, mulling things over, and he was no closer to knowing what to do. He could ask her outright -- How many men? What favors did you give them? But could he believe her answers? She'd probably lie to keep him from throwing her out.

She stood and folded the dress she'd been sewing on, then laid it on the chest of Francesca's clothes. Her gaze skipped over him as she came into the kitchen, got a bowl, and spooned out some of that savory-smelling food.

She sat and started to eat. After a few minutes, she got up and sliced some bread for herself, as if he wasn't standing right there glowering down at her. She sat back down without a word.

Ah ... So now she was ignoring him. Fine with him. If they didn't talk, he didn't have to worry about what the hell to say to her.

The food smelled good, and he was hungry. He stirred the soupy concoction in the pot. Looked like beans, cabbage, and a ham hock, with some barley mixed in for thickening. He got a bowlful and sat across from her.

He took a cautious bite. Not bad. Not bad at all. At least she was a decent cook. But she shouldn't have done it today. Hell, she was probably still weak from the fever she'd had on the boat. "I told you to rest today. You won't be able to do a lick of work around here if you wear yourself down."

Her chin went up in that stubborn tilt of hers, already so familiar. An argument was brewing. "I say to you this morning, my arms are better. And cooking is easy chore."

"Not easy enough. You couldn't even hang the laundry last night."

Last night. He shouldn't have mentioned last night. Her bath, her naked body against his, her tongue fluttering in his mouth. Her cunt dripping on his fingers. Her hand wrapped around his cock. Just last night.

"Is this why you're angry?" she asked.

What? Oh, she wanted to know if he was angry because of the laundry. Her tone told him she'd pick a fight with him if he said yes. "I'm not angry."

She finished her supper in silence, eating her way through two bowls of stew and three slices of bread. With an appetite like that, how could she be so skinny?

When she finished, she sat there waiting, still as stone, for him to finish his. He got another bowlful, then another, scraping the last out of the pot. He even took two slices of bread, just to make her wait a little longer. He knew the look of a woman spoiling for an argument.

And he was hungry besides. He'd had lunch in the saloon, and the food was terrible there. He ate the last of his stew and pushed the bowl away.

No sense in putting it off any longer. He looked straight at her across the table. And caught her looking at him with an odd, sad expression on her face. Wishing he was another man?

She dropped her gaze, stood up, and carried the bowls to the sink. He heard her pump fresh water, scrub the dishes and pot, and rinse them. He sat there through it all, with nothing to say.

"John."

She spoke from behind him. He didn't turn around.

"Why are you angry at me?" she asked, calmly.

"I'm not angry."

He heard her sigh softly. "If we are to be married, we must be ... honest."

That was the problem -- he wasn't at all sure he wanted honesty from her. He wanted to think he was the only man who'd ever touched her. Even though he knew it wasn't the truth.

But he couldn't go on brooding like this. It'd be easier to say it with her behind him, where she couldn't see his face. "I'm angry because you let another man touch you."

"What?"

Did she not understand his English? "You let another man touch your pussy. Make you come."

She gasped. "I do not!"

He jumped up and turned to face her. "Don't lie to me, Mariana. You're the one going on about honesty."

She blushed, bright spots of color in her pale cheeks. Her gaze went to the left, the right, the floor. Anywhere but him. "No one but you has ... done that."

"Don't lie to me!" He wanted to grab her arms, but he might shake her if he did. He raked a hand through his hair instead. "You told me, last night, that it felt different when *I* touched you. Different than what? Different than whose God damned hand?"

A horse whinnied in the barn. Mother of God, he'd nearly shouted the roof down.

Her face turned crimson. She brought her hands up, covering her eyes, her blushing face. "Different ... different than *my* hand," she muttered from behind her fingers.

Ah, she'd fondled herself. No man but him had felt that tender pussy. No man but him would ever fuck her. "Good," he said fiercely.

She took her hands down from her face, wringing them in front of her waist. "You no think I'm bad?"

He shook his head and tried to smile at her. But the thought of her touching herself with those long, slim fingers had his cock lifting in his pants.

She gave him a small smile in return. "John, you are ... are you ..." She darted around him, found her books on a narrow shelf, and looked up a word. "Are you *jealous*?"

Lucky for her she was across the room. "No. I was angry. It's natural for a man to want an innocent wife."

She frowned. "I am no innocent now. After last night."

Oh, no. She couldn't expect him to sleep on the floor. Not after having her in his bed. He'd go insane. "You're going to be my wife. Whatever we do together, so close to our wedding, is all right."

She blew out a gust of air, as if she'd been holding her breath. "Then you still wish to ... marry?"

After she'd spent last night alone with him, and the McNeils and everyone in town knew it, he had no choice. "Yes."

"Not angry? You're not anymore angry?"

She looked worried. Didn't she know he'd only been angry about another man touching her? "No."

She gave him a little half-smile. "When I make you angry ... say me why."

"*Tell* me why," he corrected. No sense in answering her. What she asked would never happen. When he got mad, nothing of sense came out of his mouth. Silence was better.

She took a step toward him, her hand out as if to touch him, and he retreated, turning his back on her. He couldn't touch her with the lamp lit. And he didn't want to blow it out just yet. He wanted ... he wanted to see her, see her body, without her being able to look at him. Like he had last night when she'd bathed.

"Show me," he said. "Show me how you touch yourself."

Chapter Six

"What?" She sounded shocked, not confused. She'd understood him.

He reached for the lamp and turned it down, just enough so that she wouldn't be able to see him clearly. Then he turned to face her. The problem with dimming the lamp, of course, was that now he couldn't see her clearly either. "Show me. I want to see you touch yourself."

He might not be able to see her clearly, but he could hear her, breathing hard. "I will be ... I will feel ..." She stepped to the table and reached for her dictionary.

She'd have to turn up the damned lamp to read it. "Just say it in Italian."

"I'll be too embarrassed."

She looked embarrassed already, her gaze somewhere around his stomach, avoiding his eyes.

"Pretend I'm not here."

"Pretend you're not here?" She shook her head. "That will be difficult." She said the second half in English, showing how much she'd learned already.

If she wouldn't do this for him, he couldn't blame her. It was such a personal thing. But he wanted to see it. Wanted desperately to see it. "Pretend you're alone, in your bed, with privacy, and nothing but time. Time to pleasure yourself."

In the dim light, he could barely see her bite her lip. "It would please you?"

If she knew how hard his cock was already, she wouldn't bother to ask. "Yes."

She sat down at the table, bent over, and unbuttoned her shoes. Slowly. She left them lying under the table, stood up, and went to the bed. With her back to him, she stripped off her dress and shift, folding them neatly and setting them on top of the chest that held her sister's clothes.

Turn. Turn. She didn't. Would she lie on the bed like this, in just her drawers? Reach into the slit between her legs to get to her pussy? He wanted her naked. But she slipped that huge, ugly gray nightgown over her head, and took her drawers down underneath the bulky flannel, not even giving him a glimpse of her ankles when she pulled off her stockings.

She should have a nightgown that fit her. A soft little virginal white nightgown made of fine cotton, with a long row of buttons down the front ... buttons that he could undo to get at her bosom. Something pretty for him to strip off of her on their wedding night. Not this horrid flannel bag that Francesca had worn.

She didn't look at him before she lay down, facing away from him.

He walked silently to the other side of the bed so he could see. Her eyes were closed, her hands stroking her breasts through her nightdress. Her mouth opened as her breathing quickened. What was she thinking of? The things they'd done in the night?

She rolled onto her stomach, tucked her hands underneath her hips, and pulled the nightgown up to her thighs. Her rear lifted, making room for her hands.

He walked to the foot of the bed, watching her ass move in a quick rhythm. Her long, lean legs were bared up to the thigh, but the hem of the damned nightgown was caught at the bottom of her rear. He couldn't see her pussy, couldn't see her wriggling fingers.

His gaze locked on that swaying ass. He pictured himself under her, fucking her, with her ass moving on top of him in this same rhythm. No -- he pictured himself behind her, kneeling between those thin legs, lifting that concealing flannel, and running his hand over the soft skin of her bottom. He pictured himself kissing her ass, spreading her cheeks wide, licking and pressing his tongue to her bottom hole. His cock tingled at the perverse thought.

He was on the bed before he knew it, kneeling between her legs and grabbing the hem of her gown. She jerked with a surprised start, but didn't protest.

"Don't stop," he said.

He pulled up her nightdress, uncovering her beautiful ass. Her skin glowed creamy and pink in the dim light from the lamp. He could barely see the tips of her fingers, flashing between her legs, rubbing quickly, much more quickly than he'd rubbed her last night.

Her rocking bottom seemed the most tempting thing he'd ever seen. He'd wanted her ass from the moment she'd first turned her back to him. So close to him now ... Nothing could have stopped him. He pressed his mouth to the side of her ass in an open-mouthed kiss. She gasped, but kept rubbing her little clit. God, her skin was softer than anything he'd ever felt against his lips.

His hand ran over her hips, down to her thighs, feeling every little jerk as she pleased herself. He licked again, licked and nipped and kissed, finding his way to her crease. She didn't falter, didn't slow down. So he slid his tongue along that tempting cleft, licking down to her pussy and back again. Delicious. Better than he'd imagined.

Temptation was mere inches from his mouth. It would take a saint to resist, and God knew he was no saint. He pressed the tip of his tongue to her puckered knot, thrusting against the tight muscles, squirming to get inside.

She squealed, pushing back against his face, and her whole body rocked and shook as she came. He rode the waves with her, reaming her sweet ass with his tongue through every convulsion as she cried out and jerked beneath his mouth.

When she grew still he held her for a long, long moment, his cock achingly hard, his mouth pressed to one round cheek of her ass. Did she know what he'd done was wicked? She'd liked it, that much was clear. No one must have told her the act was dirty or sinful. Thank God.

When she started to turn, he got up and blew out the light. Much as he'd enjoy seeing her blush, he didn't want her to see his face. The moon wasn't bright tonight, but he'd make sure he stayed behind her anyway.

"John? What do you do?"

"What are you doing," he corrected automatically, stripping off his shirt. "I'm getting undressed."

"Oh."

He'd love to hold her naked body against his as he came. "Why don't you get undressed, too?"

She didn't answer. Perhaps she was still too nervous with him. He stripped off his clothes, including his long johns. At least he could feel her nightgown-clad body against his bare skin.

When he got back to the bed, he found the covers turned down. Reaching out a hand, he felt her bare shoulder. Ah, God bless her. He slid under the covers and pulled her against him, her back to his front.

She drew in a sharp breath.

He loosened his arm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I like this ... skin on skin."

So did he. She felt cool against him, but he'd warm her soon enough. He kissed the back of her head. Her hair was still down, loose and long. Maybe she never put it up before bed.

"Do you like ... watch me?" she asked.

Couldn't she tell? His cock was throbbing and hard against her bare ass. He nudged her with it a little. "Yes."

His raging cock settled into the crease of her ass. The ass he'd licked. At the memory, he thrust gently against her. She was still wet with his saliva. His cock slid easily along her slippery skin.

He reached up and cupped her breast, stroked her nipple. Such big nipples for such little breasts. Big and already peaked. From desire, or from cold? He gently pinched one of those big nipples, and she gave a soft little moan. Ah. Hard from desire.

He thrust again and again, setting a rhythm as though he was buried inside her. Her flesh dragged at his cock, heady friction. He rubbed his face against her hair, moving it aside, and bit her neck.

She jerked a little. "Do you want ..." Her words sounded raspy, and she cleared her throat. "Do you want me touch your cock?"

Hearing dirty words from her innocent mouth almost made him come right then. "No," he gasped. "No, I'll come like this, pretending I'm inside you."

Although ... He stopped moving, struck by another perverted desire. He knew a way to take her without giving her a child. A way that would leave her maidenhead intact. "There is a way, Mariana. A way I can go inside you but leave you a virgin."

"Will it hurt?"

"I don't know. Tell me if it does."

He held his cock in one hand, seeking along her crack, and nudged her back opening with the tip.

She gasped. "There?"

He'd never dared to try this before. But now, with Mariana's firm round ass at his mercy, with his cock nudging against her rear hole, wet from his own mouth ... by the saints,

he wanted nothing more. "Yes, here." But he couldn't take her this way if she didn't want it. "All right?"

"You ... you want?"

His hand moved to her hip and pulled her back against him, pressing his cock just a fraction of an inch into her heat. "Yes. But only if you wa --" Hell. There was no way she could want this.

He'd make her want it. He withdrew a little, rubbing his cockhead against her hole in a slow tease. His cock leaked fluid against her, making her ass even more slippery. And more tempting. "You liked it when I kissed you there. Didn't you?"

She nodded.

He teased her earlobe with the tip of his tongue, reminding her. "Maybe you'll like this, too."

"You promise ... I will still be virgin?"

"I promise."

She drew a deep breath. "Very well."

Bless her. He took his cock in one hand, wrapping his fingers around all but the head, to keep himself from thrusting into her tight hole too deeply. He pressed in, just a little, just putting the head of his cock in her, and felt her tense those sensitive muscles. She clamped down on his cockhead so hard that he winced and felt sweat on his brow. Damn, her ass was tight.

She wriggled a little, but didn't move away. "Oh, it feels so ... so strange."

It felt unbelievably good to him. Hot, forbidden, daring. "Bad? Am I hurting you?"

"No ... no."

He stroked her hip with his hand, gentling her. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

She put one hand over his. "Tell me ... how to make you come."

God. Here he was, half buried in her luscious virgin ass, and all she could think of was pleasing him. "Relax."

"What does it mean?"

"Just let go." He whispered the words in Italian so she'd understand. "Trust me."

Her back eased, relaxing against him, but when he nudged forward she made a tiny noise. Not quite a whimper.

"Push out."

She nodded, hair tickling his nose as her head moved. Then she bore down, opening around the head of his cock, and he slid in another inch. Her fingers squeezed his hand, but she made no protest. He took his other hand off his cock and pressed full inside her.

She gasped. He groaned.

Ah, God. She was tight, so tight, and fiery hot. He rested against her, not thrusting, letting her get used to him. To having him inside her.

He tugged his hand away from hers and played with her breasts again, teasing her nipples to hardness. His mouth found her earlobe and licked. When he blew his breath in her ear, she pushed back against him, snuggling her ass against his balls.

He couldn't wait anymore. He rocked against her with gentle, shallow thrusts, strumming her breast as he eased himself in and out. Her ass gripped his cock like a snug, deep fist. He could have come in a minute, but she deserved some small portion of the pleasure he felt.

He smoothed his hand over her stomach to touch her clit, but her own fingers were there before him. She snatched her hand away with an embarrassed little cry.

"Don't stop," he gasped. "Show me what you need."

She put trembling fingers over his and pressed down, showing him the quick strokes she liked. His hips quickened to match her pace, moved with the same rhythm, forcing his cock deeper into her snug little hole. Feeling her pleasure herself while he fucked her ass was

too much for him. Never, not in his wildest dreams, had he imagined a woman would let a man like him do this to her. And enjoy it herself.

He heard her breath catch, felt her fingers still, and knew she was close, very close. He thrust a little harder, a little faster, kept his fingers moving, and when she shuddered and cried out, he let go, exploding inside her magnificent ass, moaning like a wild animal.

When his breath was even, he nuzzled against her neck through the curtain of her hair. She reached back and stroked his cheek. His scarred cheek. Thank God she couldn't see it. He pulled her closer, jostling her a little higher in the process. His limp, happy cock slid out of the hot depths of her body.

She took her hand back. "What do you call ... what we did?"

"I don't know." And he certainly couldn't ask anyone.

"After we marry, you will go inside my pussy."

After they were married, nothing would stop him. "Yes."

"Will it feel ... same?"

She sounded a little disappointed. Or maybe he was the disappointed one. As much as he'd loved being deep inside her back hole, he wanted her pussy a thousand times more. Her pussy would be wetter, softer, and more giving. And he would be able to thrust into her pussy with abandon. But not the first time -- the first time, he'd be gentle.

"No. It will feel better."

And it would. He'd been thrilled to take her this way, but it had been a substitute for what he really wanted. He wanted to fuck her. To ride her face-to-face -- even though he wouldn't see her face in the dark. To plant his seed in her womb, to have children.

If she was strong enough to bear them.

* * * * *

Mariana woke to the sounds of splashing water in a dimly lit room. She rolled over and saw John next to the stove, emptying a pail into the sink.

"John? What do you do?" No, that wasn't right. "What are you doing?"

He looked up. The lamp was so low, she couldn't see his face at all. But she could see he was naked. "Emptying the tub."

She squinted, but the light was too dim to see his cock. "You washed yourself?"

"Yes."

The sky was pitch black outside the window. She must have slept for only an hour or so. When she sat up, a twinge in her bottom made her give a small cry of pain. She felt sore, and stretched, back *there*.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She could never explain why she was smarting. Not in any language. "Nothing."

"Your arms still hurt?"

She wanted to say yes, if only to avoid the embarrassment. But she'd asked for honesty from him. She wouldn't repay him with a lie. "Not my arms, no."

He said nothing for a long moment. "Sorry," he muttered.

"I do not hurt bad. I ... I wanted."

And she still wanted him, even if she was too sore to take him in her backside right now. He made her feel so good, even when he hurt her a little. She'd loved feeling his big cock moving in her, loved hearing him grunt and groan, loved the way he held her so tightly against his broad, warm chest. Loved feeling like he wanted her, needed her.

And when he came inside her, and made her come, too, she'd felt so very special. Like he couldn't be thinking of any other woman. Like he couldn't be thinking of her sister.

He wasn't.

Oh, no. Not now, not when she felt vulnerable and unsure. Although the voice was reassuring for once. Still, it unnerved her. "John?"

"Yes?"

She didn't have the words in English. "Did you hear that?"

He stood still for a long moment, listening. It was so cold outside, even the animals were quiet. "Hear what?"

She swallowed. Would he think her crazy? "I thought I heard a voice."

"I didn't hear anything."

At least he'd answered her in Italian, without correcting her in that impatient way of his. "I must have imagined it."

He blew out the lamp and came to the bed. She felt the mattress dip as he settled next to her. "I'll teach you the English words tomorrow."

Maybe *he* was the mind reader. She smiled in the darkness, and moved close so she could rest her arm over his massive chest.

When his hand wandered across her stomach, she tensed up a little. She didn't want to push him away. How could she tell him she was too sore to take his cock inside again?

"Maybe ... tomorrow ..." she began.

"Hush." He pulled her hip until she was lying on her back next to him.

His mouth came down on hers, open and wet, and she arched up to press her lips against his more firmly. She loved the way he kissed, the way he sucked at her lips as though he wanted to take her into his own mouth, the way his tongue thrust inside and rasped against the inner flesh of her mouth. He smelled clean, like the store-bought soap, and he'd shaved his whiskers.

When he pulled down the blanket, baring her bosom, she tried to pull it back up. Even though she loved his kisses, she wasn't ready for more.

"It won't hurt, Mariana. I promise. It won't hurt at all."

He'd given her no reason not to trust him. So she relaxed. He kissed her again, and his hand found her breasts, his rough hand that felt so unbearably gentle. He could bruise her with this big strong hand, but he handled her so carefully, his fingers rubbing across her nipple as if he wanted to memorize the feel of it. His kiss, his touch, had her tingling between her legs, making her squirm.

Then his mouth opened over her breast, and he sucked her inside, deep inside. She moaned and clutched at his head. His thick, shaggy wet hair tangled around her fingers, but she didn't care, she just had to make sure he stayed there, kept licking, and sucking, and -- oh -- he bit her nipple! A soft bite, just enough to let her feel the sharp edge of his teeth. His tongue lapped at her, soothing the tiny hurt.

But she needed more, so much more. "Please," she whispered.

"Please, what?" His deep voice rumbled against her sensitive breast.

"Touch," she said, panting. "Touch me."

His hand stroked from her hip to her bosom. "Where?"

Oh, would he make her wait forever? "You know."

"Say it, Mariana."

"Pussy."

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I'll touch your pussy."

His fingers were between her legs then, playing, stroking, rubbing, spreading her wetness all over, while his mouth sucked at her nipples. He moved lower and kissed her stomach. Wet heat filled her bellybutton -- his tongue. And then he pulled away from her, pulled his head out of her hands, and moved all the way off the bed. He grabbed her thighs and dragged her down, down, until her knees bent, her feet were on the floor and her bottom was at the edge of the mattress.

She had a bare instant to wonder what he was doing before his head swooped between her legs, his mouth hot on her privates, licking, licking, licking, until her pussy buzzed with urgent need. Her thighs shook with every teasing stroke of his tongue. Nothing existed but her panting breath, his slurping tongue, and the crisis building in her trembling body.

His tongue went inside her, deep inside, wriggling. Oh, so good. But he took it out, and before she could draw breath to protest, a big hot finger was there, thrusting into her over and over again. And his mouth found a wondrous spot, the most sensitive spot, and suckled. She clutched at the blankets as she moaned, and gasped, and came hard, hard, against his sucking mouth.

Before she'd caught her breath, before she even remembered where she was, he lifted her up onto the bed again and wrapped his arms around her, settling on his back with her front draped over him. Her head ended up on his chest. She rubbed her cheek against that thick pelt of hair and gasped for breath.

"I told you," he whispered, sounding as out of breath as she was. "I told you it wouldn't hurt at all."

* * * * *

She nuzzled her face against his chest, and he felt little puffs of warm air on his skin as she struggled to catch her breath. "Oh, John ... John ..."

No woman had ever said his name that way. Breathy and tender, full of sensual satisfaction. He'd pleased her, all right.

She wasn't finished. "I never ... that was ... you ..."

He grinned and tightened his arm around her slender back. "Yes," he said, as if her random words had made any sense. He pulled the tangled covers over her trembling body, unwilling to release her to straighten the blankets.

One long, slim hand rested on his collarbone. Delicate fingers curved around his neck and stroked his throat. "Can I touch you? Your cock?"

What had he ever done to deserve such a generous, passionate woman? He took her hand, kissed her palm. "Yes."

Her hand wandered over his chest. "You can go inside me like before. If you wish."

Unbelievably generous. Even though he'd hurt her, even though she was still sore in her tender ass, she'd take him there again.

Tempting, so tempting. But she wasn't some hardened whore to be ridden roughshod. Fucking her in the ass again would pain her, and might make her reluctant for more bed sport tomorrow. "Just touch me. Make me come with your hand."

Her hand roamed his chest again, down to his stomach. "You are ... so much hair."

"Hairy."

"Like a bear," she said, rubbing her hand against his furry chest.

Her silky hair tickled his stomach as she moved lower, lower. And then her fingertips brushed his cock, and he felt the wet warmth of her tongue, licking his shaft.

His eyes rolled back, and he gripped the bed sheets to keep from grabbing her head and pushing her mouth against him.

"Is good?" she asked.

"Suck me."

"What?"

He groaned. How could she expect him to think at a time like this? "Take it in your mouth, and suck ... oh, hell." He couldn't think clearly enough to explain it, not even in Italian.

He reached down, grabbed one of her hands, and pulled her up so he could suck one of her fingers into his mouth. "Like this," he said, sucking, releasing, sucking again.

Hair tickled his chest again, a slim hand found his cock, and then he felt her mouth open over him, sucking him inside. Ah, heaven.

She sucked lightly, too lightly, but her tongue moved against his cock like a rasp of velvet. He touched her hair, gently grasped her head, and showed her how to move, how to pull him into her mouth and out again. She sucked him eagerly, and the brush of her hair across his stomach teased him to a fever pitch.

His back arched, his brain shut down, his breath turned to harsh gasps. Rough groans left his throat. Before he could tell her to stop, to pull away, he came deep, deep inside the sucking heat of her mouth.

He expected her to gag, to spit, to leap away from him. But she held him in her mouth, held him until the last wave of pleasure had passed. And when she released his cock, she gave his limp shaft a soft kiss before coming to lie beside him.

One of her fingers twined in the mat of hair on his chest. "Was good?"

She had to ask? "*L'ultimo. Meraviglioso. Magnifico.*"

She laughed. God, he'd made her laugh. "In English?"

"The best. Wonderful. Superb."

"Mmm."

He'd take that for agreement.

"Tomorrow," she said, "you will spell these words. So I will learn -- *I'll* learn," she corrected herself. She bent her lips to his ear. "I'll learn what to say when next you make me come," she whispered.

He was so tired he couldn't answer her. He just pulled her closer and sighed against the top of her head.

Chapter Seven

The chickens fluttered around the coop and clucked wildly, racing for the feed. Two of the birds flew over the heads of the rest, landed in the middle of the feed tray, and showered seed over the ground. Mariana laughed. Silly chickens.

This morning, anything could make her laugh. She'd woken before John, dressed in the dark, and slipped outside to gather the eggs and milk the cow. Today he'd see that she could be useful outside the bed.

She stepped quietly onto the porch and opened the door carefully. John was still in bed, the covers pulled over his head. She set down the milk pail and egg basket softly so he wouldn't wake.

She put water on to boil for coffee, then sat at the table and threaded her needle. The dress was half done. She might even finish today, unless John kept her busy.

She grinned. Oh, she hoped he kept her *very* busy.

Maybe they'd spend the whole day together. Talking, laughing, kissing. More than kissing. Maybe he'd take her to bed during the day ... when he could see her. If he saw her face, her body, he wouldn't be able to think of anyone else.

Maybe Francesca would leave her in peace then. Much as she loved her sister, she didn't want her ghost haunting her marriage.

She stood up and added coffee to the boiling water. Noise from the bed drew her attention. John had thrown the blankets partway off and rolled onto his back, but hadn't woken. He lay with his chest bare, his mouth open, breathing deeply. The wild, bushy hair on his head stood up in all directions, making her smile, but the sight of his naked chest made her smile fade. He had more hair on his broad torso than she'd imagined, a thick black pelt that grew in great whorls around his flat nipples and arrowed down his taut stomach in a wide swathe, disappearing under the sheet.

He looked so strong, masculine, utterly different from any man she'd ever seen. She remembered exactly how that solid, hairy chest felt against her naked back. How would it feel against her breasts, above her, when he lay on top of her to take her virginity? Her mouth went dry, and she had to lean against the sink.

A bolder woman than she would join him in that bed and wake him with kisses. She would be bold, if she thought he really wanted her. He lusted after her body in the dark of night, but did he really want her, Mariana? Or was she just a poor, small-chested substitute for the woman he really wanted?

She sighed and sat back down, taking the dress in her lap. It was too soon for him to forget Francesca. Only six months ago, he had shared that bed with Francesca. Done those wonderful things with Francesca.

No wonder her spirit lingered around him.

But life was for the living, as her mother always said, and her duty was to be here with John. She put a narrow row of stitches around the bottom of one sleeve, raising the hem, and tied off the thread. This was her dress now. And John would be her husband.

"Good morning."

His deep voice made her jump. She looked up and saw him pull his long johns up over his shoulders, then button them closed over his big hairy chest.

Even though he wasn't looking at her, she gave him a big smile. "Good morning. You want coffee?"

"Yes."

She stood and poured a mug, bringing it to him as he shrugged into his shirt. He took a sip and set the mug on the dresser.

And she couldn't resist. She leaned closer to him and brought her face up for a kiss.

He stepped back quickly, looking at her warily.

He didn't even want to kiss her. After everything they'd done in the night. Her chest burned with the pain of his rejection. Shocked, dazed, she turned and walked away before he could see the tears smarting her eyes. She went to the sink, and with shaking hands, cracked a half dozen eggs into a bowl.

"I'm ... not real sociable in the morning," he said.

He lied. His voice sounded careful, guarded, as if he was hiding the truth. She had enough younger brothers to recognize that tone.

She could lie, too. She nodded without looking at him. "Is not a problem." She set a skillet over a burner and started frying some of the thick sausage she'd found in the cold cellar. "What will you do today?"

"I have to go into town."

She looked at him then. "Again? The horse is more sick?"

His pants were on, and he sat on the edge of the bed, lacing up one of his boots. "The horse is better." He started on his second boot. "But I ... forgot some things."

Again he lied. She turned the sausage. In a minute, she could start the eggs. The sausage took much longer, and she wanted everything to be finished at the same time. Then he'd see that she could cook, too.

"I'll have to bring Kathleen's horse back to her when I get home," he said. "Probably won't make it back here until supper."

So he would be gone all day, again. Well, she would find something to keep her busy. She'd finish the dress -- her wedding dress -- and maybe clean the cold storage cellar. And she'd be careful not to hurt her arms. She'd show him she wasn't a weak woman.

He knows.

She jumped, lost hold of the fork, and it clattered to the wooden floor.

The bed creaked as John stood. "You all right?"

She nodded. Obviously she was the only one hearing Francesca's spirit. At least she had nothing to fear. Intuition, spirits, the second sight -- none of them could harm her. She took a clean fork and slid the eggs into the hot pan, stirring them around the sizzling sausages.

He sat at the table. "The sausage smells good."

"Yes."

"I'm thinking of getting some hogs. Selling the extra meat to get a little cash. But I'm not sure I could turn a profit."

"Feeding hogs is ..." She didn't know the English word, and if she took the time to look it up, the sausage would burn. "Much money," she improvised.

"Expensive. Yeah, it is." He sighed. "I really want to grow some extra crops, but ..."

"No money?"

He didn't answer. When she glanced at him, he was staring at her oddly. Maybe she shouldn't have said that. Her father had always gotten angry when a woman talked to him about money.

"Not enough land," he said, before she could apologize. "I was going to buy a few acres from Kathleen, but ... now I don't have the money."

He didn't seem angry that she'd mentioned money. Not at all. "Maybe you can ... how do you say it?" She stirred the eggs, then set down the fork and rushed to get one of her dictionaries, hurrying back to the stove to keep an eye on the food. With one hand, she flipped through the pages. "*Rent* the land."

He shook his head. "I've thought about that. But if the crop goes bad, I'll still have to pay the rent. I'd lose money. And if we had two bad seasons in a row ..."

"You could ..." She hesitated. Did he really not mind getting ideas from a woman? "You could give Kathleen some money from ... from the crops. When crop is good, both make money. When crop is bad, no money for both. You give a ... part?"

"A percentage."

She brought plates and a fork to the table, then served him from the pan. Today he would eat off of a plate.

She sat across from him and served herself.

"A percentage," he repeated, digging into his food. "That's a good idea."

Never, in the whole of her life, had a man told her she had a good idea. That she was beautiful, yes. That she was funny. That she was good with a needle. But never had she been ... smart.

Francesca had been lucky to have a man like this. A man who would listen to a woman. A man who would share his decisions with her. A man who would please her in bed. She knew, from listening to married women, that many men cared only for their own pleasure.

He'd given her so much pleasure. When she thought about the way he'd taken her from behind, her heart pounded. There had been pain, yes, but pleasure as well. Surprising, unusual pleasure that she'd never imagined. She'd had to touch her own privates to relieve the ache.

How much better would it be, to have him take her fully? To have that big, hairy chest on top of hers? To have his cock moving in her pussy? John said that would be even better. It hardly seemed possible.

She set her fork down and took a gulp of water. If what he'd given her so far was only the beginning, she was a fool to wait for Valentine's Day.

* * * * *

John got home less than an hour past sunset, trudging through bitter wind the whole way from Kathleen's place, thinking of nothing but Mariana.

He'd thought of little else all day. Seeing her flit around the kitchen that morning, fixing him breakfast, talking with him -- it seemed right, somehow. Like she belonged there. With him. And when she'd mentioned money, the thought had struck him, like a bolt from the blue, that he wouldn't send her back for all the *lire* in Italy.

It made no sense. No sense at all. But somehow she'd wormed her way into his life, into his bed. Just remembering how her warm body felt next to his was enough to bring him to a full cockstand. Yes, she was thin. Too thin to suit him.

His cock didn't seem to care.

She'd wanted to kiss him that morning. She'd actually wanted to kiss his ugly face in the light of day. And he'd been so shocked, so surprised, he'd jumped like a scared rabbit.

Not tonight. Tonight, maybe ... maybe he'd see if she still wanted to kiss him in the light. Just the thought of looking at her naked body while he touched her set his imagination reeling. He'd worship every inch of her flesh with his hands ... spread her legs wide and study every nook and cranny of her pussy ... watch her face grow tight with desire as he thrust each finger inside her, one at a time, until she begged him to make her come. Then he'd tongue her slit, making her scream with pleasure ...

He'd sit naked in a chair while she knelt at his feet, smiling up at him sweetly for a moment before she tipped her face into his lap ... licking his cock first, the little tease, then sucking him deep, blonde hair swaying. She'd tuck her hands between her thighs, rubbing her clit and moaning around his cock ...

Oh, yes. Then he'd put her face down on the bed and lick her bottom hole until she squealed with pleasure ... and he'd lift her to her knees and fuck her in the ass, watching as his cock moved in and out of the dark, forbidden recesses of her body. His balls would smack against her hot, wet cunt with every thrust ... and she'd moan into the pillows, crying out his name, begging him for more.

And next, oh, next he'd turn her over and fuck her proper. She'd cling to him, fingers tangled in his hair, and wrap those long, slender legs around his hips, holding him close.

The images came too fast for him to catalog. He pictured her in a hundred different naughty positions, and had to stop in the barn to adjust his stiff cock under his trousers.

He dropped the bundle he carried in an empty stall behind a pile of hay bales, where she wasn't likely to find it. Then he strode onto the porch and through the door. She sat at the table, sewing on that dark dress of her sister's. He gave her a brief nod and took off his coat.

"Your hair," she said. "It's ..."

"Shorter." He ran a hand through it self-consciously. "I figured I should get a decent haircut before we get married."

She pushed her chair back. "You want food? Supper?"

She looked so open, so eager to please him. He wanted nothing more than to please her in return. With the lamp blazing away, shining off that silky blonde hair. "Later."

For once she said nothing. She just leaned forward to blow out the lamp. Damn it. But then she came to him in the darkness, came straight into his arms, and reached up to kiss him.

He didn't have the nerve to re-light the lamp, didn't want to know if she could stand to see his beastly face. It didn't matter. All that mattered was this, her lips soft on his, her body warm against him, her hands running through his hair.

He pulled at her clothes as they kissed, and she pulled at his, dragging off his shirt, his pants, his long johns. His arms tangled with hers as he yanked off her threadbare dress, her shift and drawers. She leaned on him as she kicked off her shoes.

He bent to kiss her neck, biting gently, and she pressed her firm little breasts against his chest. Hungry. As hungry as he was.

"I missed you," she said.

Missed *him*? Or missed this, the passion she felt, the pleasure he gave her? Hell, he didn't care. He was here, she was naked in his arms, and all he wanted to do was revel in her sweet-smelling body.

He pulled her to the bed, pushed her down, and knelt over her to suckle at her breasts. His greedy hand couldn't wait, reaching between her thighs, feeling her slippery cunt, her wet slit. She moaned, the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, and wriggled her hips.

He slowed the rhythm of his fingers to a teasing touch. She whimpered.

"What?" he asked, wanting to hear her beg. Wanting to hear her admit she needed him. "What do you need?"

"More," she whispered. "Fast."

He stroked over her clit, and she gasped. "I like your hand," she said.

His vanity grew. His vanity, and his cock. "Good."

"I like your mouth, too."

He smothered a chuckle. By the saints, she was a demanding little piece. But he was more than happy to oblige.

He knelt between her legs and stroked his fingers through her thick bush, parting the wiry hair, combing a path to her inner flesh. His hands slid under her ass, holding her still as

he bent his head. His tongue separated her thick folds, licking, tasting her tangy juice, toying with her clit.

She whimpered, a frustrated little plea, and he kissed her pussy hard, sucked her little bud between his lips and mouthed it, the way he'd learned she liked it just last night. Her thighs tightened against his head as she came, so quickly, with little jerks of her hips, jogging her splendid ass on his palms.

After she was still, he moved up the bed, wiped his mouth on the sheet, and lay beside her. Maybe she'd return the favor, take him in her hot little mouth. Maybe he'd flat out ask her to. She sure hadn't been shy about asking him for what she needed.

"John ... I want ..." Her voice faded away.

She could have read his mind. "What? What do you want?" Whatever it was, he'd do it. Gladly.

"Your cock," she said. "In my pussy."

His breath caught. Could she really mean it? "What about Valentine's Day?"

"You will marry me on St. Valentine's Day, yes? Even if I'm not ... virgin?"

Had that been her concern all along? Her only reason for making him wait? "Of course I will."

"Then no wait," she said. "Now."

He wouldn't ask her again, wouldn't give her another chance to change her mind. But he could at least give her part of her silly romantic dream.

He brought her hand to his mouth, kissed her fingers. "I take you as my lawful wedded wife. To have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. 'Til death us do part."

"To love and to cherish," she added, in Italian.

He knew he'd forgotten something. But he didn't repeat it. Love? That was one vow he couldn't keep.

He fumbled blindly for the dresser next to the bed, opened the top drawer, and found the small box he'd buried there six months ago. He opened it and pulled out Francesca's wedding band.

It slipped easily onto Mariana's thin finger. "With this ring, I thee wed."

She kissed him before he had a chance to kiss her first, her fingers holding fast to his shoulders. "Thank you, John."

She said his name like an invitation, and he took it, rolling on top of her, nudging her legs apart with his knees. She willingly spread her thighs, making a cradle for his hips. He braced most of his weight on his forearms, his hands cupping her head.

"With my body, I thee worship," he said, his voice thick with need.

He found her lips with his, and kissed her gently. Her mouth trembled. Or maybe it was his.

He rubbed his cock against her thigh, letting her get used to having him on top of her. She felt so tiny beneath him. Tiny and vulnerable.

And he'd nearly forgotten to make it easier for her. *Selfish beast*. His head jerked back. No. No, he wouldn't think of Francesca tonight. Tonight Mariana was all that mattered. Generous, skinny little Mariana, who'd willingly given him every part of her body.

He lifted his hips to one side and reached between her legs, pressing two fingers deep inside her. She clamped down on them so hard, he almost pulled them out and thrust his cock into her right then.

But no, he'd wait. Just a few seconds more, a few seconds to get her ready for his cock. He spread his fingers wide, inside her, stretching them as far apart as he could. Stretching her open so she could take his cock.

Little gasping breaths came into his ear. She would never be any wetter than this. She would never be more ready.

He pulled his hand away and settled his hips over hers again. His cock found home, sliding through her wet folds, the tip nudging her virgin opening. He'd be inside her with one thrust.

One quick thrust.

One quick, selfish thrust that could make her despise him. Forever.

Oh, God. What if he hurt her? Hurt her unforgivably?

"John."

She might hate him when he was done. Hate him, barely speak to him, skitter away whenever he was close enough to touch her. Just like her sister had.

She stroked the hair on the back of his head. "Giovanni."

His name, his real name. She'd been speaking to him. "What?"

Her breath felt hot against his neck. "Just go in. Go in fast. The wait is far more terrifying to me." She spoke in Italian, her voice soft and calm. "Women have been surviving this since the beginning of time. I will survive, too."

Of course she would survive. But he might kill any chance they had for a warm, caring marriage. Still, it must be done. And whether it was done tonight or on Valentine's Day, the result would be the same. His greedy cock ruled his head. He could wait no longer to breach her.

"Forgive me," he breathed. Then he pushed inside her, all at once, breaking through the fragile barrier and plowing forward until the whole of his cock was buried deep inside her. She felt like heaven -- warm and wet, soft and welcoming.

He stopped, fully lodged, panting. Her fingers were clutching at his biceps, her nails stinging. A tiny, insignificant pain compared to what she must feel.

"Hurt?" He felt such pleasure, such anxiety, all confused together, that he couldn't seem to think, let alone speak. "Hurt bad?"

"No bad," she said. "Not bad."

God, her voice sounded like a whimper.

He couldn't do this. He'd taken her virginity, but he didn't have to hurt her anymore. He'd use her hand, his own hand, to ease himself tonight. In a few days she'd be healed, and then he wouldn't hurt her at all. He'd wait a few days more to fuck her the way he longed to.

He pulled back slowly, slowly withdrawing from the warm depths of her cunt. "I'll stop."

Her fingers tightened on his arms. "No."

She thrust her hips up, and his body resisted the wishes of his brain, sinking back into her.

He groaned. "Let me stop. I'm hurting you."

"No. No stop." She bit his neck, gently, a sharp nip that made him press his hips down, drove his cock just a little deeper.

He nuzzled his cheek against hers and felt no wetness. At least she wasn't crying. But he knew she was in pain. He could feel her shuddering breath against his ear.

"John, please. Give me ... give me your seed." She licked his earlobe, then thrust her pointed tongue into his ear. "You come inside my pussy," she whispered.

He nearly came just from hearing the filthy words whispered in his wet ear, whispered in her soft voice.

She lifted her hips against his again, nudging his cock deeper, and he was lost. He pulled back and thrust. And thrust again. Over and over again, hard and deep, mindless, grunting and swearing, *oh God, God damn it, God help me*, and suddenly he came with a great wrenching burst and one final, tremendous thrust that moved her hips up the bed nearly a foot. He held still, deep against her womb, shaking and spasming and shooting his seed, while a thundering roar echoed away. His own cry? And finally, spent and sweating, he collapsed on top of her like a felled oak.

Damn it. God damn it. He'd sworn to be gentle with her. And instead he'd taken her like the worst sort of savage.

He stirred and shifted some of his weight to his forearms, ready to withdraw, to move away. Bracing himself for her to sob hysterically and berate him and slap him until his face stung.

Instead he felt slender arms slip around his back and hold him close. Her hands pressed down, keeping him inside her. "Was good?"

He'd hurt her, caring for nothing but his own pleasure, and her only concern was that he *enjoyed* himself? His throat closed around a painful lump that felt the size of an apple. He could do nothing but nod, with his cheek pressed against hers.

She sighed beneath him. "Good."

"Next time --" His voice croaked. He had to clear his throat. "Next time, you will feel good, too."

"Yes."

She didn't sound sure of that. He'd work hard to please her next time. She'd never be disappointed in his bed. He should have added that to the impulsive marriage vows he'd made.

The brush of her fingers on his cheek startled him. She smoothed them lightly over his forehead, his eyebrows, down his nose.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am wishing to see you."

He felt frozen, like a deer startled by a hunter. His cock was limp inside her, he'd just taken her virginity with no thought to her comfort, and she wanted to see his face. A face she damn well knew was uglier than sin. And if she wanted to see him so damned much, she wouldn't have blown out the light the minute he'd come home.

He reached up and took that curious hand in his, moved it to the safer territory of his shoulder. "You know what I look like. You don't need to see."

"Yes, but ... are you happy? Are you smiling?"

No, he suddenly felt like crying. But he could never admit such a thing. "The way you speak half in English and half in Italian makes me smile. Smile ... *sorridere*."

He touched one corner of her mouth with his forefinger, and found her lips curved upward.

"You make *me* smile," she confirmed, using the English word he'd just taught her. "I'm glad you are ... I'm glad you're my husband now."

And I'm glad you're my wife. His throat went tight again, closing off the words. Why couldn't he say it? It wasn't a lie. But to acknowledge such a thing openly gave her too much power. The power to hurt him.

He pulled away and settled next to her. She came into his arms as if they'd lain together a thousand times, pillowing her head on his shoulder and resting one hand on his stomach.

Could she truly be content in his arms? Generous and trusting, brave and passionate ... and pretty, in her own skinny way. So very pretty. He knew it even in the dark of night, when he couldn't see her at all. Her father could have had a king's ransom for this woman.

Her head stirred, shifting so she could speak. "Do you think we ... planted a baby?"

After one time? Not likely. "Babies come when they come."

"But you would be happy?"

He could never tell her how much having children, a family, would mean to him. Better to let her think he was nothing but practical about it. "Sons could help me in the fields."

"All men wish for sons."

She sounded a bit wistful. Had she been anything more to her own father than a mouth to feed? A body to sell? He would do better by their own daughters. "If we should have a daughter, I will never give her to a man who cares nothing for her."

She didn't answer. Suddenly he felt dampness on his skin, and her head left his shoulder.

Now she cried, after the pain was over. He should have known he wouldn't be spared the tears. "I'm sorry it hurt. Next time it won't."

She took a deep, shaky breath. "Not hurt bad."

He could hear miserable tears in her voice. Should he hold her? Or leave her alone? She rolled away from him, making the decision for him. At least she didn't sob. She made no noise at all, lying still as a grave.

But he knew she cried. He knew it. And he lay there, clenching his fists, grinding his teeth. Trying to keep his own eyes from filling.

* * * * *

If only the mirror were bigger. Mariana couldn't see much below her shoulders in this tiny mirror, not even after she took it off the wall. She leaned the glass against a pillow on the bed and surveyed herself critically. The dress was a bit loose across her shoulders, but at least the fabric curved neatly around her bosom, with a little room to spare. Between the fever on the boat and her incarceration at Ellis Island, she'd lost some weight. When she gained it back, she wanted this dress to fit.

Her wedding dress. She'd barely finished it in time -- just this morning, the day before Valentine's Day. It fit better than any of the worn dresses she'd brought with her from Italy, so she may as well wear it today. And every day, until she had another altered.

Did Francesca mind her wearing her old clothes? No disquieting words had popped into her head this morning, no breezes had stirred the curtains. Maybe her sister's soul was

finally at peace. She hoped so. Bad enough that John didn't want her around; she certainly didn't need a spirit complicating matters.

She looked through Francesca's chest again, setting the dresses aside. Nothing but undergarments and a cotton nightgown. A shift would be easy to alter, and practical. Hers were about to fall apart. She lifted one out of the chest and brought it to the table, then got one of her worn shifts out of her own cloth sack. The old shift would help her keep the measurements straight.

She took the scissors from the sewing box and started picking apart the seams of Francesca's shift. Like the dresses, her under things were in good shape. John must have bought all these clothes for Francesca, brand new. Yet he'd told Mariana he would spend nothing on new clothes for her. His unwanted second wife.

When she'd woken up he was gone, leaving only a few scattered breadcrumbs on the table to show that he'd eaten something for breakfast. She'd gathered the eggs, milked the cow, and fed the chickens, but there'd been no sign of him outside. The horse was stabled in the barn. He must be off in the fields somewhere.

The scissors slipped, and she nicked her finger with the sharp point. She sucked it into her mouth to keep from getting blood on the shift. At least hurting her finger gave her an excuse to have tears well up in her eyes.

She wiped them away with her free hand. How silly could she be? Of course he didn't care for her -- not yet. Francesca had been gone for only six months. And her mother always said that men took longer than women to sort out their feelings.

But even knowing how silly she was, expecting him to care for her so soon, she'd cried to hear him say -- so bluntly -- that he didn't care for her at all. That he wouldn't let their daughter end up like her, with *a man who cares nothing for her*.

A warm draft touched her forehead, just like the other day. *He cares.*

Oh, no. She glared at Francesca's clothes chest. "He doesn't care. He doesn't need me. He doesn't want me."

Or if he did, it was only her body he wanted. And only in the dark of night, when he couldn't see her.

She pointed at the chest with her scissors. "And why do you speak only of *his* feelings? What about me?"

No answer. "Aha. You care more about John than you do about me. Your own sister."

Not sister.

Not her sister? Then who was this? What other woman would be speaking to her from beyond the grave? "Who ... who are you?"

Mother.

Mother? Surely ... surely her mother was still alive back in Tuscany. One of her brothers would have sent word if ... But how long would it take for a letter to reach her? Would they want to spend the money? "Mama?"

The window rattled. *No.*

A chill ran up her spine. Whoever this spirit was, she dare not trust it. "Enough. Leave me alone." She threw the scissors into the basket and slammed the lid shut.

She'd been cooped up inside for too long. A walk would make her feel better, even though it was cold outside. She'd get away from this strange haunting woman. Maybe she'd see John.

She put the clothes back in Francesca's chest -- *her* chest now -- and put on her coat and bonnet.

The wind hit her in the face as soon as she opened the door. Cold wind, but not freezing. She could barely see her breath. The snow was slowly melting, fading away in wet, muddy patches.

Outside, she hurried off the narrow porch and onto the front path. With every step away from the house, her mood grew lighter. The narrow track that led to the road was muddy, so she walked to the side, where dried grass kept the worst of the mud from caking on her thin boots.

She'd need new boots soon. Would John be angry to spend the money? Maybe she could find a way to make extra money. Taking in sewing, perhaps? She would ask John if he thought anyone would pay for that.

Noise came from the west end of the road -- a horse and creaking wood. John? No, she'd seen the horse in the barn earlier. Wherever he'd gone, he was on foot.

The horse approached, pulling a narrow wagon. Ah, Kathleen was driving. Mariana smiled at her, but the woman's expression looked taut. Anxious.

Kathleen pulled back on the reins, and the wagon came to a stop. "I'm heading to town to fetch the doctor," she said, without any greeting. "The boys are powerful sick."

"Can I help?"

"Aren't you a dear. Could you sit with them until I get back? They were sleeping when I left, but I'd feel easier knowing someone was there."

She nodded. "I'll go now. Where ... where is ..." Oh, speaking English was so hard at times.

"Where's my house?"

"Yes."

"Follow the road three miles. My place is off to the left, right after a stand of willow trees. There's a sign that says McNeil at the edge of the road. You can't miss it."

Mariana nodded and turned to go back to the house. She heard the reins snap and the wagon trundle down the road.

"Thank you, Mariana," Kathleen called.

Mariana turned to wave, but Kathleen had already moved along.

She rushed into the house and grabbed her dictionaries, stuffing them into her worn cloth bag. What else would she need? Oh, she could bring the shifts. If Kathleen's sons were sleeping, Mariana could get some sewing done.

As she hurried to the door, her gaze fell on the chalkboard. Maybe she should leave a message for John.

No. No, he hadn't told her where *he* was going, or when *he* would be back. Why should she do him that favor? Let him wonder. If he cared at all.

He cares.

"Be gone. I won't listen to you." She waved a hand over her ear to clear the air, as if swatting at an insect. Then she left as though the hounds of hell were after her.

Chapter Eight

Mariana trudged up the lane toward the house, breathing hard in the crisp night air. The sun had set hours ago. Surely John would be home by now. Maybe he had even wondered where she was.

She opened the door quietly. He was sitting at the table, and he seemed surprised to see her. Odd. The room was chilly, so she left her coat on and sat down on the bed. He said nothing, so she said nothing.

"Where were you?" he asked at last.

His voice was harsh. As if he expected her to sit at home waiting for him whenever he decided to disappear for an entire day. "You are out all day, too."

His brows lowered in a forbidding scowl. "I was home well before dark. Now give me an answer. Where were you?"

She wanted to ask where *he* had been. But he looked so angry, she didn't dare. Maybe he'd be happy that she'd done something useful. "I go to Kathleen's house."

He glowered. "Why?"

He sounded suspicious. Mad. Why would he be angry that she went to Kathleen's? "Her sons are sick. She went for doctor. I watch her sons. I *watched* her sons," she corrected.

"Sick?"

She nodded.

"Sick with what?"

Why couldn't she remember the word? She rolled her hand in small circles, thinking. "Hot," she said at last. "Very hot."

"A fever?"

That was the word. She nodded. "Yes, a fever. Bad fever. Kathleen is afraid. The doctor --"

He got to his feet so quickly, his chair fell over behind him with a crash. "You knew the boys had a fever? And still you went?"

She helped a neighbor, and he would yell at her for it? "Kathleen is nice woman. Of course I went."

He came to the bed and glared down at her, his face dark and scarier than ever. "You little fool."

She shrank back from him, but he leaned closer. "Are you trying to kill yourself on purpose? Is living with me so horrible that you'd rather die?"

Why was he saying these things? Why was he yelling at her? She swallowed and shook her head.

He put one hand on either side of her head, leaning so close, she could barely focus on his eyes. "Did you ever stop to think what would happen if you died? Maybe your parents would send your little sister to be my next wife. She's what, all of thirteen years old? Would you like her to go through Ellis Island alone?"

He was so close, and so angry, she could say nothing. She just lay there trembling.

He took a breath ... to yell again. "Your greedy father probably doesn't give a damn about her, either. He'd send her to me in a minute. Or maybe he'd finally blow the dust off his God damned wallet and send me my money back."

She lay in shock, eyes smarting with hot tears, and stared at him. She didn't understand every word he said. But she understood enough. "You want the money," she whispered. "Only the money. That's why you are so angry, first day I ... first day I'm here."

He straightened and turned away from her. As if he couldn't stand to look at her. His hands were clenched into fists. "Of course I wanted the money. Do you think I wanted another wife? A wife so stupid that she'd go out and try to catch a fever?"

Enough. She'd heard more than enough. She brushed her tears away and stood up. He still couldn't bear to look at her.

She grabbed her old dresses from Francesca's chest and stuffed them into her bag, then pulled the drawstring tight. Everything she owned was in her bag again. Just like when she'd arrived.

Stay.

She ignored the voice. Stupid woman. What did she know? She didn't want what was best for Mariana. Only for John.

My son. Needs you.

Her son? She knew nothing of John's mother. And she didn't want to know. She clasped both hands to her ears, shaking her head. "I don't care."

John didn't turn. "I don't blame you."

She wouldn't spend another night with this awful man, this man who called her names, this man she could never please. This man who cared nothing for her. Who didn't want her.

She left without even looking at him again.

* * * * *

The slam of the door sounded like a gunshot, cutting across the quiet of the night with a sharp burst and then fading away, taking John's anger with it.

Now that she'd left, he felt calm. Strangely calm. He wouldn't miss her. Not at all. Oh, he'd miss having her in his bed. But he'd never really wanted her for anything else.

She'd probably head to the McNeil's place. Kathleen would see her settled. If she got sick, if she came down with whatever the boys had, Kathleen would take care of her. No need to worry about her.

He went to the window and saw her walking away in the light of the full moon. And suddenly he was five years old, standing at another, more grimy window, watching his mother walk away. Wondering when she'd come back for him.

She never had.

And Mariana would never come back if he let her walk away from him now. Best to let her go. She'd find another man. A better man. A man she cared for. He'd never wanted her, and she'd never wanted him. How could she? An ugly brute of a man, who'd done nothing but hurt her, yell at her. Bed her.

Love her.

As best he could.

By the saints, he *loved* her. And she was leaving him. Already he could barely see her in the moonlight.

Panic seized him. He ran out the door, gasping in the cold air, and chased after her. He stumbled in the dark, nearly falling on his face. She looked over her shoulder, saw him, and kept going. A better man, the man she deserved, would let her go.

He caught up with her at the edge of the road and grabbed her arm. Gulping for breath, shivering without his coat, he pulled her around to face him. She wouldn't look at him. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "I'm so sorry."

She tried to pull away. "No."

He clutched both of her arms. They felt so thin under his beefy hands. So vulnerable. How could he have yelled at her? "I know I'm just a stupid oaf of a man. But I'm sorry."

She still wouldn't look at him. "Yes. You are stupid oaf. Now I go."

As long as he held her arms, she couldn't leave. And he wouldn't let go until he convinced her to stay. But why should she? He couldn't think of one single reason. "Stay. You must stay."

She tried to shake off his hands. "Why can you yell at me, call me stupid, and then say me stay?"

God. Had he really said that? "You're not stupid. I'm the stupid one."

"Yes," she agreed, with heat. "Stupid ... oaf." She tried to pull away again.

He gripped her arms. "You can't leave me. You're my wife, damn it. I said wedding vows to you before God."

Her hands clutched at his forearms, trying to pull him away. "Let me go. Those vows are ... not real."

"They're damned real vows to me." Ah hell, he hadn't meant to shout at her.

"Stop, John." Her eyes were teary. At least she felt something for him. "Why do you fight now? Let me go."

"I can't," he said, helplessly.

"You want money. You don't want me."

"Don't want you?" Did she really believe that? Hell, what else did he expect her to believe? He'd shouted it in her face not five minutes ago.

He'd never find the words to explain how much he wanted her, needed her. He pulled her close. How had he ever thought her too skinny? Her slim, delicate figure was irresistible. Perfect. Perfectly designed to set his blood on fire.

And oh, he burned. He wrapped his arms around her back, desperately, and rubbed his burgeoning cock against her stomach. "Please," he said against her neck. "I'm sorry. Please. Let me ..."

He groaned, and kissed her neck. She was pliant in his arms. Willing?

His mouth nuzzled the edge of her bonnet up, exposing her little ear. "I want you, Mariana," he whispered. "So much ... want you so much ..."

He kissed her, and her lips answered. She didn't fight him at all. He cupped her cheek, kissing her deeply, dragging her up against his body with his other arm.

"I want, too," she murmured against his mouth.

She was his, only his, and he would never let her go. He lifted her in his arms, his slender, beautiful, perfect wife, and headed back into the house. With one foot, he kicked the door shut behind them.

When he set her on her feet, she looked up at him with those huge blue eyes. Huge blue frightened eyes.

"Are you sore?" he asked. "From last night?"

"Sore?"

"Do you hurt? In your pussy?"

She blushed. "Not so much."

Thank God. His hand trembled as he untied her bonnet and let it drop behind her. He brushed her hair back from her forehead. "I can be gentle." He prayed he could. "Let me show you."

She nodded and tilted her face up. With the lamp shining bright, he could see every detail -- the little freckle on her forehead, the downy fuzz on her cheeks, the yearning in her eyes. Yearning. She was so close, she had to see his own face clearly. And still she wanted him.

He closed his eyes and kissed her. Gently, gently. No need to rush.

But she pressed against him, wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close, and suddenly his tongue was deep within her mouth, dueling with hers, and his hands were

pulling at her coat, her dress, her shift. God, he'd nearly lost her. He couldn't go slowly. He needed her too much.

When her bosom was bare, he bent his knees and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off the floor to bring her breasts level with his mouth. He suckled, and she moaned, and his hands clutched her ass.

He laid her on the bed in a tangle of clothes, her dress and shift pulled open to bare her breasts, her skirts rucked up to her knees. Her nipples glistened with wetness from his mouth.

Ah, what a vision. His woman, his wife, half-naked and waiting for him. She gazed at him with a hunger he'd never before seen in a woman's eyes. Hunger for *him*.

He stood and stripped off his shirt. Before it hit the floor, she was struggling out of her own clothes.

She finished before him, and he stopped to drink in the sight of her naked body. She was kneeling on the bed facing him, and her slender waist, her thin legs, made the generous flare of her hips all the more stunning. And her pussy hair, oh, her pussy hair was a tawny light brown, exactly as he'd imagined.

While he stared, she lifted her hands and stroked over her breasts, making heat rush to his cock. Her gaze moved down his body, and her eyes widened. Ah, she'd never seen *him* before, either. "Oh," she whispered. "I never ... oh." Her tongue came out and licked her lips.

His cock lifted, as though that tongue had touched it. A blush spread from her face all the way down to her breasts. The breasts her hands fondled.

He had to touch her. Right now. He started for the bed, and the tangle of pants around his ankles tripped him. But he fell next to her on the soft mattress, then kicked off his pants and long johns impatiently, his gaze never leaving her. She didn't shy away from looking at his face. She looked eager and wanton, kneeling there tweaking those big wet nipples.

He couldn't wait another minute. He swung around, lifted her hips, and slid his head under her kneeling body, lying on his back with his head between her thighs. In an instant, his mouth reached up to taste her juicy cunt. His tongue licked, thrust inside her, flicked against her clit, and she moaned, cried out, shunted her hips over his face.

She fell forward over him, onto her hands and knees. His thighs shivered from the brush of her hair. Her hand stroked his cock, and then the wet heat of her mouth sucked him in. She mimicked the motions of fucking, and he thrust his tongue deep into her cunt, matching her strokes.

She sucked. He moaned.

He licked. She whimpered. The vibrations from her wordless little noises of need tingled on his cock, made him shudder.

He cupped her ass in his hands, molding her cheeks, holding her still over his mouth. He ate her fiercely, starving for her, forcing his pleasure on her. And her eager mouth did the same to him.

Suddenly she pulled away and sat next to him, breathing hard. "Inside me," she gasped. "What is the word for when you go inside me?"

If she said it, he might come before he even got inside her. "It's called fucking."

"How do I ask for this?"

He swallowed. "You'd say, *fuck me*."

"Fuck me," she repeated. And then she reached out a hand to him.

He took her hand, but when she pulled him toward her, he resisted. He'd pound into her savagely if he got on top of her again. She was still sore, tender. And this time, by the cross, he'd be gentle with her.

He tugged her over to him instead, and pulled her down until she sprawled on top of his own body.

She put one hand on his chest, pushed herself up, and gazed down at him. Her lovely eyes looked confused. "No?"

"Like this," he said, lifting his knees so that her legs spread open on either side of him. "Take me inside. Take as much as you want. As slow as you want. Stop whenever you want."

She nodded and shifted her hips, rubbing his cock with the wet heat of her pussy, tormenting him. Finally he felt her hand grip his cock, holding it still while she sank down on him.

She cried out.

He reached up and pushed the sweep of her hair behind one ear. "Does it hurt?"

"No. Feels good."

So good.

Her hips shifted a little, taking him deeper. Then she lifted up, until his cock almost slid out, and sank back down in a long, slow glide.

So good. Torture.

She kept her gaze locked on his as she moved, writhing on him slowly ... slowly ... God, she'd drive him insane at this pace.

Her hands pressed against his chest, pushing as she thrust. He gripped her ass, helping her move. He held back, clenching his teeth, but the sight of her riding him, *fucking* him, the sight of her looking down at him with such passion on her beautiful face, drove him to the edge.

She ground herself against him with each downward thrust, and he gave up his hold on her luscious ass to slip one hand between them, to nudge against her clit with his thumb. Her eyes closed then, her teeth bit down on her lower lip, and he let go, let himself thrust up into her, and she convulsed around his cock just an instant before he exploded inside her.

Her willowy body collapsed onto his, and he held her close, feeling her chest rise and fall as she struggled for breath.

"You looked to me," she said.

"Yes, I looked at you." And she'd looked at him. Unbelievable.

"Before ... in dark ... I think you don't want to look at me."

So while he'd been hiding in the dark, she'd been thinking he didn't want to see her. "I like looking at you. A lot."

She planted her hands on his chest and lifted herself up to look into his face. Her expression was troubled. "Before this. Before bed. Why are ... why *were* you angry at me?"

He didn't look away, hard as it was to expose himself. She deserved an explanation for putting up with so much from him. "When I came home today, and you weren't here ... I thought you'd left me." He'd hurt her last night, driven her to tears, and then he'd come home to an empty house, seen that her drawstring bag was gone ...

Her brows knit in confusion. "But I came home after. So you knew ... I not left."

He swallowed. "Yes, but then you told me that you went to Kathleen's, even though you knew the boys were sick. You risked catching a fever. And I ... I just went crazy. Crazy with worry."

"Worry?"

"Fear. I was afraid." His arms tightened around her hips. "Your sister died of a fever. The thought of *you* dying ..." His throat closed, and he forced a deep breath into his chest. Forced himself to speak. "If anything happened to you, Mariana, I wouldn't be able to go on."

She cocked her head to the side, her expression disbelieving. "You would go on. You went on after Francesca died."

How could she even compare the two? Losing Mariana would rip him to pieces. "The way I feel about you is *nothing* like the way I felt about Francesca."

She put her fingers against his lips. "I know. You no need say it."

She knew? How could she know, when he barely knew it himself?

Before he could stop her, she lifted off of him and lay next to him on her side. He pulled the covers over them both and rolled to face her. Her hand came up to stroke his cheek.

Her expression never showed revulsion when she looked at him. Never. "It doesn't bother you? My face?"

She traced the line of his scar with one finger, tickling him. "It bothers me only that you were hurt."

She meant his scar, not the rest of him.

"How does it happen?" she asked.

"How *did* it happen." Francesca had never cared to ask. She'd just avoided looking at him. "A knife fight when I was twelve or so. Nothing important."

She ran her fingers over the scar again, then laid her hand on his chest. She said nothing.

He looked deep into her eyes. God, she was beautiful. How could she stand to look at a beast like him? "It's not only the scar that's ugly. I know it."

She shrugged and gave a little smile. "You may not be the most handsome man in the world, Giovanni," she said in Italian, "but you are *my* man."

Her expression held such possessiveness, such *affection*, that embarrassing moisture formed in his eyes. He closed them, hiding from her.

He felt her hand leave his chest. "John, don't be sad. I know you miss Francesca, but she would want you be happy."

Surprise dried his eyes. "You think I miss Francesca?"

"I ... yes." She looked sad, so sad. "You don't want me to be wife, in her place. You don't want to look at me in the bed, when is her you want. I understand."

How could she ever think he preferred her sister? "I want you. Only you."

She managed to smile and still look sad. "You don't need lie to make me feel good."

Stubborn, pigheaded girl. "I don't want Francesca. I don't miss Francesca. And wherever she may be, she doesn't miss me. She hated me."

She frowned. "Why?"

He couldn't confess while looking into her trusting face. He turned his gaze to the ceiling. "I didn't treat your sister well. I had only been with --"

No, he couldn't tell her that. He couldn't tell her that the women he'd been with, whores one and all, would let a man bounce up and down on them and profess great enjoyment. "I had no experience with decent women. I ... I hurt her."

And then he'd gone to another whore, and paid her to teach him how to please a woman. But it had been too late. Francesca had never let him near her again.

Mariana put her hand on his shoulder. "I forgive you."

He brought her hand to his lips for a kiss, then held it against his chest. "Your sister never did."

Her fingers tightened on his. "I'm sorry for you, and for her. But *I* forgive you."

He stroked her hand with his thumb. "I don't deserve you, Mariana. But I'm too selfish to let you go."

She smiled wide. "Is not a problem. I like my selfish man."

Like? Hell, it was a start.

He caught sight of her discarded dress, lying on the bed next to her. The dress that had once been Francesca's. That reminded him. "I have a surprise for you."

He slid out of bed and found his tangled long johns on the floor.

"What is it?"

"You'll see." He buttoned up his long johns, tossed on his coat, and pulled on his boots, leaving them unlaced. "Stay here."

He went to the barn, found the package he'd hidden there yesterday, and brought it inside. She was sitting up in bed with her shift on, and the fire crackled in the stove. She must have built it up.

He pulled off his coat, kicked off his boots, and sat next to the package on the bed. He kept his gaze on her face as he untied the string and pulled the paper apart. Her eyes went wide, and she gasped. "What is it?"

He pulled out the swath of blue fabric that was on top. With a flourish, he draped it over her shoulders. Yes, it matched her eyes nicely. He'd hoped it would. "I think it's your wedding dress."

She gasped again and held the dress out. "But ... how?"

"When I went to town yesterday, I stopped by the seamstress's. Told her I needed a wedding dress by Valentine's Day, and she was happy to oblige." And she'd charged him a small fortune, even though she'd had a dress ready-made, close to Mariana's size. But this happy look on her face made it worth it.

She smoothed the dress against her front. "So beautiful," she murmured.

Yes, she was. So beautiful that looking at her made his chest ache. He handed her the next garment. His favorite.

"More?" She held it up over the dress. The white nightgown was close to his fantasy one, with a low neckline, small buttons, and a lacy ruffle at the bottom. Tiny red hearts were embroidered around the neck and cuffs. She'd look like a little virginal bride in it for sure. A little virginal bride who whispered filthy words in his ear. He could hardly wait.

She reached out and drew the rest of the fabric toward her, looking at the yards of blue and yellow and red. He'd had no idea what colors she'd want. "I could only get one ready-made dress. The fabric's for you ... to make some yourself."

Her eyes looked up at him, still round with wonder. "All this? For me?"

He nodded.

"But you say, no money for clothes."

What a fool he'd been. "They're a gift. A Valentine's Day gift."

She touched the blue dress with one finger, as if she didn't believe it was there. "I never have any clothes new. Never." She scooted closer and gave him a hug. "Thank you. Thank you, John."

Such a little thing to make her so happy. He cupped her chin in his hand. "You deserve a new dress for our wedding. You deserve clothes made of silk, and a better house than this one-room shack, and ... so much more than I can give you."

She shook her head, smiling, and he was lost. Words tumbled from his mouth. "I'm sorry about earlier. About yelling at you. I swear I'll try to be ... to make you ... Ah, hell, I can't think straight anymore. And it's you, it's your fault. Mariana, I've fallen hopelessly in love with you."

She just stared at him, faintly puzzled. God, she hadn't understood him. He hadn't even meant to say that. And now he'd have to say it again.

He pulled her tight, hiding his face against her neck. Even though he wasn't looking at her, his stomach clenched. "*Ti amo*," he muttered.

She went still. "What?"

He'd never repeat it. Saying it once had made his gut turn over. "You heard me."

She moved back, enough to look into his face, and gave him an impossibly beautiful smile. And then she laughed.

She *laughed* at him.

God, he was a fool. He pulled away, or tried to.

She held his arms tight. "Oh, John. You look so *sick*."

No wonder, considering the riot in his stomach.

Her laughter stilled, and she lifted a hand to cup his cheek. His scarred cheek. "*Anch'io ti amo*," she said, her voice soft and sure.

He couldn't breathe. "Truly?"

"You heard me," she replied, trying for a surly tone and sounding thoroughly adorable.

They laughed. Together.

"I love you, too," he said. Just to tell her how to say it in English. This time his stomach didn't hurt at all.

Her eyes were teary, and she couldn't seem to stop stroking his cheek. "But how? No, I mean ...why?"

He shook his head vaguely. "I don't know. I only know that I felt ... dead inside. Then you came, and made me feel --"

"Angry?"

He smiled. "Not just angry. Alive. You gave me ... yourself. So generously." He brushed her hair back so he could see her eyes clearly. "And ... you look at me, and you don't see the man I am. You see a better man. The man I want to be, for you."

"I see the man you are. A good man. A good man you are."

No, he wasn't.

"You are," she insisted, as if he'd spoken. "You look at me, and you don't see a silly, pretty girl. You make me feel ... like woman. And when I have ideas, you listen. You let me talk."

He smiled. "It would be difficult to stop you from talking."

She smiled with him. "Is true."

"But you're wrong about one thing, Mariana. When I look at you, I see a *very* pretty woman." *A beautiful woman. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen.* He felt too awkward to say it.

"Thank you."

He touched the delicate nightgown that rested in her lap. "Why don't you put this on, pretty woman?"

"Why? I can see, it will fit."

He grinned. "If you put it on, I can take it off you."

She blushed and swatted his hand lightly. "We should wait maybe *one thing* for our wedding night, John."

He took her hand and toyed with her wedding ring. *Their* wedding ring. "But we're already married."

Her chin went up in that stubborn tilt. "Then we will save the nightgown for Valentine's Day. For tomorrow. It is a Valentine's gift, yes?"

The first of many. "Yes."

She started a little. "Oh, John ... you gave me all these gifts, and I have nothing for you."

Silly girl. He didn't want anything but her. "Just marry me. Marry me and give me your love. No one else ever has."

How on earth had *that* come out? He looked away, embarrassed.

"You're nice man. But you no say truth. Your parents must have --"

"I never knew my father," he said, cutting her off. "And my mother ... my mother left me in an orphanage when I was small."

He set his jaw. *Don't offer me pity. Anything but that.*

She waited for a long moment, then gave a decisive nod. "Your mother loved you," she said, in Italian.

He snorted. "I'm not a child anymore. Don't try to coddle me."

"She was sick." Mariana stopped again, her head tilted as though listening to someone. "Dying. There was no one to take care of you."

"How ..." He could hardly think. His mother *had* been coughing a lot when she abandoned him. "Why do you say that?"

Her gaze fell to his lap. "Ever since I came here, I've heard a woman's voice. Speaking to me."

He looked around, but the room seemed the same. No eerie noises, no creeping shadows. "A ghost?" No. Impossible.

"Is true."

Maybe. Or maybe Mariana was so tenderhearted, she couldn't imagine a mother not loving her son.

"Why would she speak to you, and not to me?"

She shrugged. "Maybe you can't hear her. But I ... I have the second sight." She looked up at him a little warily.

A warm draft from the stove blew across his face. *Believe*. A bare whisper of sound.

He must have imagined it. Or had he?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was Mariana, looking at him like she feared his reaction to her confession. He gave her a soft kiss on the forehead, still amazed when she didn't recoil from him in horror. "If she's speaking to you and not to me, I guess that means she approves of you."

Mariana's brows furrowed. He repeated himself in Italian for her.

She grinned. "Not at first, no. She tried to make me leave. She thought I would hurt you."

Like her sister had. He never would have wished Francesca ill, but thank heaven her greedy father had sent Mariana to him. "We'll be good to our children, Mariana. They'll never have cause to doubt."

Her fingers laced through his, brought his hand to lay flat against her belly. "Before next year Valentine's Day, maybe we have a child of ours."

She wanted children. *His* children. By the cross, she must truly love him. But ... "You're so slim. I worry that you won't be able ..."

No. He wouldn't even say it. Not for anything in the world would he frighten her.

She squeezed his hand. "Don't be afraid, John. My mother is same as me, and she have seven healthy children." She gave him that flirty smile of hers. "We work hard, yes? To have baby by next year Valentine's Day?"

Her smile was irresistible. He couldn't help but smile back. "Yes. But even if we don't have that baby, Mariana, I'll still have you. The first Valentine's Day present I ever got." He kissed her softly. "And the best I ever will get."

 THE END 

Doreen DeSalvo

A lifelong daydreamer, Doreen DeSalvo sold her first short story at the age of eight. Her payment was a candy bar. Over thirty years later, her passion for writing -- and chocolate -- remain. Her work has received the National Association of Independent Publishers' *Fallot Literary Award* and the Doubleday Venus Book Club's *Best Book of the Year* award. She currently lives in a Victorian house in San Francisco with her husband of over 20 years, and considers herself fortunate to be writing stories that always have happy endings.

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