



Embracing the Sun

Sable Grey

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

For Sarah, the Sun in my life

Chapter 1

New York Contemporary Art Museum

Aphrodite was a Leo, Joe Anniston thought to himself as the featured artist at the gallery opening finished the fifteen-minute mythology lesson on the Greek goddess of love. Though he wasn't an astrology expert, he'd read enough about the zodiac to know a Leo would definitely require such a long introduction.

Finally, the artist pulled the cloth from the piece and unveiled her sculpture of Aphrodite. Joe frowned with disappointment as he examined the chiseled stonework of a nude woman.

The artist was more interesting than her sculpted interpretation of the goddess, Joe decided quickly. The artist had bright red hair pulled tightly into a knot, except for a few tendrils that hung freely about her face. Large almond eyes fringed with thick lashes and a full mouth promised more than Greek mythology. She was a bronzed beauty, tall, with a lithe grace that Joe noticed as she moved around the sculpture.

She wore a bright turquoise shirt that tucked tightly into a pair of black slacks. Thin waist, slim hips, but she wasn't without form, he observed from the back of the crowd. In fact, every curve seemed perfectly shaped for her body. He stared at her breasts. C-cups. He was certain of that.

She offered a practiced smile as she called for the crowd to follow her to the next covered piece of the set, Hephaestus. As she walked, she began a new lesson about Aphrodite's husband and Joe found his attention drawn to her ass. Now, there was a piece of art.

"And here he is." She slipped the cloth from atop the piece and Joe finally tore his gaze from the woman to glance around the museum. Only a few stragglers had drifted away from the crowd to view some of the other pieces scattered about the gallery. The officer near the door nodded in Joe's direction when he looked at him. Nothing suspicious.

Joe walked casually past the crowd as they were told to feel free to look around, and then turned back when the officer at the opposite door also indicated all was well. Many of those attending the unveiling were now milling about, whispering over the sculptures and paintings as they wandered past them.

A waitress with a tray passed and he lifted one of the long-stemmed flutes, then headed towards the Aphrodite statue. Most of the art patrons were expensive and fashionably dressed. They drank with their pinkies lifted and spoke with their noses in the air. Joe hated pretension.

"The expression on her face is remarkable." A man was speaking with the artist as Joe neared. "So much emotion manipulated from the stone. You continue to impress me, Jules."

"Let's hope someone else here is equally impressed." Juliet Coultier, the exhibiting artist, answered. She was fast becoming one of the most talked about women both in New York's circle of art fanatics and among those who opposed the honest nudity and erotica depicted in most of her work.

Joe had seen the crowd of protesters when he'd first arrived at the museum that morning. Some held up signs, while others had called out to those who entered the

museum. One man had actually approached Joe, but the moment he flashed his badge, the protester focused his attention on someone else.

As he stepped closer to the sculpture, Joe could feel the artist's gaze on him. He studied the face of stone and, taking a sip of his mineral water, he looked down at Aphrodite's hands. They were folded across her body, covering her more intimate areas. This sculpture lacked the attention to detail that its masculine counterpart portrayed. Pity. A bit more detail here and there and he might have been interested in purchasing the piece himself.

"Can't you just feel the passion that embodies her?" The man who'd been speaking with the artist turned and spoke to Joe.

"Actually, she looks bored," Joe answered. "Perhaps if the other sculpture had been one of her lovers, rather than a man she ended up hating and divorcing, she might have more of the passion you are looking for."

"You're jesting." The man laughed.

Joe slanted a glance at him, and then looked past him to another man making his way towards the door. There was something familiar about his short frame that instantly put Joe on guard.

"I do not jest," Joe murmured absently, his gaze narrowing. The man was moving too quickly. Something wasn't right. Joe took a step forward, and then called out to the officer at the door just as the man began to quicken his pace. When the officer moved to intercept him, the man bolted.

"Hell," Joe growled. A moment later, the entire gallery rocked with the explosion. He turned as the goddess of love and her stone husband plunged to the floor and shattered.

* * * *

Juliet screamed with horror and fell to her knees, reaching for the broken pieces. Around her, the hushed crowd broke into a loud frantic race for the door as portions of the ceiling crashed around them.

She bit back her sobs as the man who'd spoken of her work just moments before it was destroyed strode through the settling dust towards her. She stared behind her numbly at the broken pieces of stone as he grabbed her and hauled her out of the gallery.

"Search the premises for other explosives." The man spoke to one of the officers as they passed and her head snapped around so she could stare at him. She tried to jerk her arm away from him but he held on.

"I'm Detective Joe Anniston. I need you to come with me." He didn't even look at her as he spoke. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, though she was sure he didn't see it.

Her exhibition had received the brunt of the damage. The bomb had been meant to destroy her work. Juliet gasped when she saw Brett holding his bleeding arm, but he nodded to her that he was all right. He looked as if he might cry over her ruined artwork. She wanted to go to him, but the detective holding her arm dragged her out the entrance to the gallery.

Anger welled inside of her, pushing her sorrow aside. "You knew there was a possibility of this happening." The realization hit her. She'd seen his silent exchanges

with those guarding the doors of the gallery but had not made the connection. Now it seemed obvious.

"In here, Miss Coultier." The badge opened the door to the security room and waited for her to enter. Joe Anniston, her mind repeated his name. He didn't look like a Joe. He looked like the asshole that had just allowed her statues to be destroyed.

He waited in silence as she entered the small room, and then stepped inside behind her and closed the door.

Juliet glanced at Garret, the museum director, and then at Lloyd, the security guard who sat at the panel of security screens. "You're a cop. You were supposed to be protecting my work," she continued after taking in the apologetic expression on Garret's face.

"I wanted to tell you about the threat, Juliet, but Detective Anniston insisted that the less everyone knew, the better," Garret explained.

"Some detective work."

Joe turned to glance at her, his mouth pressed in a thin line before nodding at the security guard. "Rewind to moments before the bomb went off."

Lloyd obeyed and then pressed "play."

"There." Detective Anniston tapped the monitor with his index finger. Lloyd stopped the tape. "Do you recognize this man, Miss Coultier?"

Juliet leaned in beside him, studying the black and white image. "I remember him from the presentation. He kept looking at me rather than my work. He stood in the back of the crowd."

"Have you seen him before today?"

Juliet shook her head. "No."

"Are you certain?"

"What are you going to do about this, Detective? Thousands of dollars' worth of art have been destroyed because you failed to do your job. I could have postponed the showing. It could have been prevented if I'd known I was a target today."

"His name is Emil Turst. His specialty is compact explosives." Joe met Juliet's gaze evenly. "Believe me, Miss Coultier, if you had been his target, you would not be standing here. You'd be in pieces along with your thousands of dollars' worth of art. Now, are you certain you've never seen him before today?"

Juliet felt like hitting his very square jaw. Instead, she bit the inside of her lip and looked again at the monitor. Lean, narrowed features, and seemingly empty eyes; he reminded her of a serpent.

"I'm certain," she assured him.

"Then today's bombing was a clear message that he was hired. It was a warning of something more to come."

"How can you be sure?" Garret asked.

"Because Emil Turst doesn't stray from his methods and procedures unless he's doing something for money. He's predictable by choice. His targets never live and he always ... always ... meets them before he leaves his bombs within three feet of them." Joe glanced at Juliet. "Today he did not approach Miss Coultier. He placed a device that pales in comparison to his regular work in a location that would do minor damage. He's working for someone else and wants me to know it."

"This is minor?" Juliet shook her head, pointing at the door. "Eight months of my life's work is scattered about the museum. And if this man was hired to ... kill ... me, and he could have succeeded, why didn't he?"

Joe didn't answer, but she could tell when he looked back to the monitor and the line of his lips straightened, that he knew the answer.

"There are many who protest Juliet's work." Garret scratched at his balding head.

"Most of them are harmless religious groups," Juliet argued. "I doubt they would jump from flyers and prayer circles to bombing the museum." She slid a hand to the back of her neck to massage the tension knotting there.

"My friend was hurt. I should go to him," she said after a few uncomfortable moments of silence.

"A minor injury." Joe glanced at Garret. "I want to speak with her alone." Garret nodded and hurried from the room.

"I'm certain that I'm certain I haven't seen him, Detective," Juliet said wearily, facing the handsome detective.

She'd noticed him the moment he'd joined the group. Tall, lean, nice build; but it had been his startling blue eyes that attracted most of her attention. She'd watched his scrutiny of her work. His expression had been thoughtful.

Now, in the small security room, his presence was magnified. She could smell his aftershave despite the dusty smell of the explosion. Standing as close as she was, she could almost feel the heat from his body, no doubt accelerated from the excitement.

"Whoever hired Turst didn't know as much about him as they should have. The only reason someone would hire him to do a job is if they wanted you dead." He gave her a moment to take in his words. "You are in grave danger. You're right. This was no act by protesters. Can you think of anyone who would want to do you harm?"

Juliet shook her head. "If I could, I would've already given you a name. I don't know anyone who would do this to me."

Joe nodded and glanced at the monitor again, sighing heavily. "I'm sorry that your work was destroyed. I didn't see the bastard until the last minute."

Juliet saw the momentary tenderness in his expression, but then it was gone, replaced with a guarded expression as he reached for the door.

"I'll have an officer drive you home," Joe said.

"I can't leave," she argued. "This is part of my life that was destroyed. Part of me. My friend is hurt and I have to see how much of my work was ruined."

"You've suffered a loss and survived a bombing, Miss Coultier. With all due respect, there isn't a damn thing you can do here right now. Go home. Take a bath. And try to relax." Joe waved at one of the officers. "Take her home. Make a sweep of her house and then set up surveillance." The officer nodded and held out his hand, indicating she should come with him. She thought about arguing, and then relented to the sense he spoke and stepped forward.

She rode numbly in the patrol car, speaking only when the officer asked her address. She couldn't believe it. Her statues were gone. She'd worked so hard on them.

"Miss Coultier?"

Juliet looked up to find that the car was stopped in front of her house and the officer was standing next to her door, holding a hand out to help her. She didn't take his hand, noticing the look of pity in his eyes. She didn't want pity. She wanted her statues back.

* * * *

An hour and a half later, Juliet sank into the oval bathtub of lavender scented bubbles and inhaled deeply, eyes closed. It had seemed to take the officer forever to do a secure sweep of her house. Finally, he'd left her in peace, and settled into his place across the street in his patrol car.

Now, she lay motionless, listening to the soft popping of the suds that surrounded her. Someone had purposely destroyed the beauty she'd created. Her mind flew through the faces she remembered in the groups of protesters. None had seemed evil enough to do this to her.

She arched and dipped her head back into the bath, then opened her eyes and slid up to rest against the smooth surface of the tub. Detective Anniston. It was his face that stood out in her mind. He had scrutinized her from beneath his dark heavy brow. His face had been a canvas of sharp angles and straight lines, perfectly put together. He'd been clean-shaven, but it was not difficult to imagine a shadow creeping across the plane of his strong jaw and around his thin but defined lips.

Her artist's eye recalled his guarded expression. He'd had a thoughtful look on his face that had allowed only a moment of gentleness. Even his voice had softened when he'd spoken kindly to her. But in an instant, that hard shell closed around the tenderness and pulled it back within him.

He'd seen her Aphrodite as she had intended her to be seen. Brett had seen beauty, but she'd dug deep into the written emotions of aged legend and tried to convey the truth of the beautiful goddess. Joe Anniston had seen that truth. More impressively, he'd spoken it aloud. And then that joyous moment had ended with the bomb that destroyed her masterpiece.

Pain wrenched in her gut and she lifted a fist and brought it down hard into the water, causing the bubbles to shift and spill over the side of the tub. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she finally bowed her head and sobbed.

Why would anyone do something so cruel? And who in hell could want her dead? She had no enemies. She barely had any friends. Her work was her life. Whoever was out to get her had targeted the very thing that would hurt her the most. Pain pounded in her temple. It was too much to think about.

She rose from the tub and dried off, then slipped into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. She checked out the window and made sure the cop was still there. She couldn't help feeling paranoid now.

She looked around for something to do. Nothing offered her any solace. Panic started to build inside her stomach. Someone wanted her dead! Then she glanced through the windows of the French doors to the building past the pool. Her studio. She could still work. When she was working, she was collected and focused. When she was working, there was no room for becoming hysterical. When she was working, she was in control.

Chapter 2

Joe jabbed a finger at the lighted button at the door of Juliet Coultier's traditionally styled, stone country home in East Hampton and waited. Four days had passed since the museum bombing and they still had no leads to Emil Turst's whereabouts. As usual, the man had disappeared as quickly as a fading morning mist.

Joe started to ring the bell again, but his throat closed and his body warmed with arousal as Juliet appeared from behind the door. A white, thigh-length terrycloth robe hung open around a bright yellow bikini that contrasted erotically against Juliet's darkened skin. The last time he had seen her, her hair had been in a tight knot; now, he could not see how she had managed it with the wild mane of red hair that spiraled around her.

"Let me guess," she said warily. "Another security sweep of my house."

"A letter was delivered to the museum this morning; it was a direct threat against you. I'm here to keep an eye on you over the weekend," Joe told her.

For a moment, she stood there staring at him, then turned and headed inside, leaving him to follow and close the door behind him.

Joe observed an open floor plan for the living room and kitchen, as Juliet slipped behind the granite counter and reached for the bottle of tequila. His apartment could probably fit in just those two rooms. There was a dining area but with no table. Instead, it was home to twelve three-foot statues, each representing a sign of the zodiac.

His gaze slid back to her as she punched the button of the blender. Margaritas, and not for just one. She had plans and, from her brightly colored attire, he could tell she and her date would not be dining out for the evening.

"You needn't sleep in a car outside," Juliet said, without looking at him as the blender silenced. "You can use the spare bedroom. There's an extra key in the cactus garden, hanging on the backside of the tallest cactus."

"Thank God you don't keep it under a rock," Joe watched her finally look up at him. "I've not had a chance to check with you since the museum bombing. How are you?"

She shrugged, her hair shimmering under the dim light over the kitchen. "I'm working on staying numb until it's over." She lifted the margarita she had poured and then brought the rim of the glass to her lips. She closed her eyes as she swallowed and his attention dropped to the swell of her breasts and then to her long, shapely legs. The woman was a knockout.

"I'm going to do a sweep of the house and property," he told her when she lowered the glass. He turned away without waiting for her to speak, or to notice the rising temperature, among other things, in the front of his pants.

Juliet's house was massive. Six bedrooms, but only two were not filled with art pieces, her bedroom and the spare. The spare was large enough, with simple and practical décor. But her bedroom was a different story. A red velvet comforter was draped across a king sized bed, and thick matching draperies hung from the large windows; there was an enormous stone fireplace, and fine, brightly colored rugs stretched beneath the furniture.

He spotted the phone on the night table. He needed to check it for bugs. But when he started to reach for it, his hand froze and as he noticed the long object beside it. A dildo,

hot pink and with three different speeds. Interesting. Joe's gaze swept the room, and then lifted to the ceiling at the mirror above the bed.

"Christ." Heat rose in Joe's stomach. He wondered if she lay in bed with her toy and watched herself. His cock jerked in response to the image that found him; red tresses spread out around her, bronzed knees parted as the velvet folded beneath her. He forced his attention back to the phone, lifted it, and then set it down again when he was certain it had not been tapped already. He would remedy that soon enough, but he was satisfied that the house was clean.

He looked at the sex toy again. After several seconds of hesitation, he reached forward and pulled open the drawer of the nightstand. Lubricant, condoms, and to his surprise, a pair of pink furry handcuffs lay atop a stack of books. He took a moment to glance over his shoulder at the open door before moving the cuffs aside with his index finger, just far enough he could read the title of the top book. *101 Great Nights: Positions for the Adventurous Lover*. So, she was an adventurous lover.

Quietly Joe closed the drawer and walked to the vanity across the room. He counted a dozen vials of perfume. He picked up the one that was closest to empty and brought the nozzle to his nose. The scent of lavender mixed with a soft powder filled his senses. Carefully he set the vial back in its place, noticing that the mirror of the vanity was centered with the bed.

He slanted a glance at the closet moments before he opened the door to the walk-in. He surmised that she owned a suit of every imaginable color. And there, at the corner of the closet, hung her unmentionables. Lace, silk, satin, and even latex, more black and red than any other color.

The sound of a man's voice drifted from downstairs so he stepped from the closet, closed the door, and headed from the room. If her date played his cards right, he'd have one hell of a night.

As he descended the stairs, a man turned from the bar, margarita in hand, and lifted a hand in greeting. Joe recognized him as the man who'd spoken to him in the museum. He was of average height, medium build, tan, wealthy, and he knew it. He wore a pair of purple spandex trunks. Joe was surprised he was the kind of man Juliet Coultier would date. He'd expected, because of the toys in her room, that her date would be someone a little less clean cut.

"Everything clear?" Juliet asked.

Joe nodded to her.

"Brett Waters." The man introduced himself and held out his hand as Joe reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Joe Anniston." He shook the man's hand. "How's your arm?"

"Sore but usable," Brett answered. "Jules tells me that you are staying with her this weekend. Don't let her boss you around. She's a tyrant if you let her."

"Shut up." Juliet nudged the man's arm. "Hot tub?"

"On my way." Brett gave Joe a quick nod before following Juliet out the windowed doors to the steaming Jacuzzi. Joe watched her shrug the robe off and he groaned. A thong. He should have guessed. His gaze slid over her ass, an ass that he decided should never be covered up.

"Stop drooling, Joe," he said aloud to himself before turning and heading outside to grab his duffel bag from the car.

* * * *

The next morning, Juliet leaned in the door frame that separated the living room and the downstairs bathroom, lifting the tumbler of orange juice to her lips as Joe walked through the front door. His blue tee shirt was sweat-stained at the collar and around his arms and he held a cell phone to his ear. Juliet's attention dropped to the gray sweat pants that fit nicely around his ass. Not bad.

"Have you got a newspaper handy?" He was speaking into the phone as he lifted the towel he'd draped around his neck to wipe his face. "What's my horoscope for today? Yeah, yeah, don't give me any shit, Frank, just read it to me." She watched him run some water into a glass and lift it to his lips.

"That's it?" He took several more swallows and then set the glass on the counter. "No, I'm staying in the house. Yeah. It's a nice place." Using his free hand, he jerked his shirt over his head and Juliet let her eyes fall to his torso. Dark hair curled thickly over his chest and lightly dusted his stomach. Lean, strong, and incredibly sexy. She licked her lips. She could almost taste the salt in the sweat that glistened on his body.

It had been too long since Juliet had had a good fuck. Wayne had been the last, she remembered, over eight months ago. But he'd been jealous of the time she was spending on her work and had packed his stuff and moved out.

Wayne had been too needy and Juliet hadn't the time or patience for someone who required so much attention. He'd been angry and hurt when he left, but it was for the best. If he'd stayed, she'd only end up hating him as much as he said he hated her.

She still missed him sometimes. But being alone was better. She didn't feel she had to choose between her work and someone else. She was free to work into the long hours of the night and to come and go as she pleased. She didn't hurt anyone when she was alone. And she wasn't burdened by someone demanding too much of her time.

"Met me at the door in a yellow bikini. Nice tits," Joe said, bringing her attention back to his face in time to see the grin pull his lips back from a set of perfect white teeth. "Not for me ... for the yuppie that showed up later."

Juliet nearly laughed aloud. So, the detective had been checking her out. Good.

Joe's expression sobered. "No, nothing at all. I tapped the phones, but only an idiot would call here after leaving that note at the museum. Our best bet is to find Emil. No, he'll talk. He'll do whatever we want if it means dropping a couple of years from the sentence he'll be facing."

He leaned a hip against the counter. "Then I'll start breaking bones. One way or another he'll tell us what we want to know." Juliet shivered. "No, Frank, I don't want to hear what your horoscope says. Goodbye, smart ass." He flipped the phone closed and tossed it to the counter, chuckling. He reached for the glass of water and drained it.

She watched him turn, squirt some dishwashing liquid into the bottom, wash and dry the glassware and return it to the cabinet. At least he wasn't a slob. Most men would have just left the glass on the counter.

"Good morning," she said after a few seconds. He glanced back at her. "You must rise early and be bored senseless if you've already been out for a jog."

"I jog every morning and it's nearly eleven." He draped his shirt over his shoulder as she moved into the room. She saw the quick dip of his gaze to the red satin gown she wore under her opened robe.

"Is Brett still here?"

She slanted him a grin. "If he was, you would find him in your room and not mine, Detective. Brett Waters is gay." His brow raised but he said nothing so she continued, "He's an artist at the museum and as of late, one of my best friends ... well, my only friend and very talented in his own right."

So, she and the pretty boy were not an item. He wasn't sure why that pleased him but it did. As she leaned over the counter, her cleavage caught his attention.

Damn, she was fine.

"What about you? Do you have many friends?"

"A few." He looked at the pool through the French doors. "Do you mind if I use the pool?"

"Make yourself at home." She shrugged. "There're a couple pair of trunks in the cabana."

He headed for the French doors. Ten minutes later, she stood looking out as he readied to dive into the deep end of the pool. The spandex trunks fit him snugly and Juliet took a moment to check him out.

He wasn't overly muscular, but fit. She was pleased to see that he was packing more than a gun. Yum. She opened the door and stepped onto the concrete as he dove into the pool. He glided beneath the surface and she followed him along the side of the pool, waiting for him to surface.

"Do you want breakfast?" she called. He smoothed back his dark hair with one hand and looked at her.

"Too late for breakfast."

"Well, lunch then? I could order out," she suggested, licking her lips when he climbed the steps from the pool and reached for the large towel he'd taken from the cabana.

"Nothing too spicy. My stomach can't handle it," he told her, running the towel over his face.

Her gaze dropped to his stomach, lingered, and then moved lower. When she looked at his face again, she found him watching her. He'd have to be a very poor detective not to see exactly what kind of spiciness she had in mind.

"You should let me paint you. You have a good form and..."

"Absolutely not," he interrupted. "I've seen your work, Miss Coultier, and I've no desire to have my ass exposed for the entire city of New York."

Juliet giggled as he ran the towel over his arms and chest. "Maybe I wouldn't want to put it in the gallery." He bent down and dried his legs. "Maybe I'd rather keep it for myself."

"Are you flirting with me?" He straightened.

"As obviously as I can without jumping on you."

Joe's eyes narrowed as he tossed the towel to one of the lounge chairs. She bit her lip and then boldly allowed her robe to slide over her shoulders and pool at her feet in a puddle of red satin.

"I'm all wet," Joe said.

She grinned coyly. "So am I."

The corner of his lips lifted as he stepped towards her. Her fingertips met his stomach as he closed the distance between them and she smiled when he sucked in his

breath. Reaching forward, he slid his fingers into her hair, curled them, and pulled her forward, tilting her face so he could cover her lips with his own.

The coolness of his damp body and the heat of his lips swirled against her skin, bringing her nipples hard and pressing out against him. A quiver of tension knotted in her stomach with anticipation as his hot tongue slid along her bottom lip before slipping into her mouth. She could faintly taste chlorine on his wet mouth, but that was drowned out by the dark ache that pulled inside of her when she felt his dick harden at her hip.

When he shifted, rubbing it against her, hot excitement rushed down her spine. She brought her hands to his chest and scratched her nails down his skin until she felt him jerk with excitement of his own. So the detective was sensitive on his stomach, she thought with amusement. She circled his navel and felt him shudder moments before his arm snaked around her and his fingers knotted in the back of her gown.

His lips bore upon hers with fierce passion and rough abandon. He ground against her and her pulse accelerated, pumping lust through every part of her body. His hand left her hair and dropped between them to lift and lightly squeeze her left breast. When his thumb ran over the nipple, she arched into his hand, breaking their kiss.

He grasped the front of the gown and with one quick jerk, he snapped the strings that held the gown over her body.

Juliet had never had a man literally rip her clothes from her and she was surprised at how much she liked it. Joe's arm tightened around her and she watched his dark head lower to her breast. She felt the heat of his breath first, tightening the sensitive skin of her nipple before his mouth closed around it. He sucked hard, causing her to cry out at the pleasure that collected beneath his hungry lips.

"Open," Joe's voice vibrated against her nipple as he slid his fingers down to her mound. She opened her stance and then ran her fingers into his thick hair when his palm pushed over her clit and his fingers slipped between the lips of her pussy. She leaned back against his arm, allowing him more access and trusting he would not release her.

As his tongue worked around the tip of her breast, his finger slid forward, his palm caressing her clit causing it to ache for more attention. His teeth dragged across her nipple and sent an erotic shock through her before moving to the other. She bit the inside of her lip when his finger bent inside of her. Slowly he began to massage both the inside and outside of her sex. This man knew what he was doing!

And then he released her despite her moan of protest. Quickly, he swiped the beach towel from the lounge chair, spread it on the cement at their feet and then began to peel his trunks off.

"Get down there," he ordered and the command in his voice sent another shiver of excitement through her.

She dropped to the towel, rolling onto her knees in front of him as he kicked the trunks to the side. Good Lord, he was hung! She licked her lips eagerly as her gaze ran down the length of him and rested on his large balls.

"That's not what I meant." But he didn't move as she slid her fingers around his cock.

*

Joe watched her lean forward and then groaned when she opened her mouth and the head of his dick disappeared between her full lips. Carefully, he pushed her tresses aside so he could watch his cock slide in and out of her mouth. She curled her tongue against

him, and then flattened it before tightening her lips and sucking. His balls tightened. Christ! If he'd known she would be this damned eager, he would have blown up the museum himself.

When she slid one hand up to rake her nails down his stomach, he nearly went to his knees. Sensation rippled up from her fingertips and veined out through his body. She rocked into him, every drag of her lips pulling at that torturous ache that had built inside of him.

He fisted his hand in her hair and brought her mouth over him but she didn't seem to mind. In fact, it seemed to excite her, for she quickened her pace. She muffled a moan of encouragement against him and his cock strained against the pressure of her mouth.

"You're gonna make me come." He spoke through gritted teeth when her hand slipped under and found the spot beneath his balls.

She massaged it firmly and Joe closed his eyes, willing the lust that pumped through his cock to slow. Damn. Damn. Damn. His knees bent in surrender and those lips, those damnable lips, sucked his restraint away. Suddenly her mouth left him and sent sensations of fire and urgency clawing up from his groin.

And she knew exactly what she had done, he realized when he looked down at her. She'd pulled him to the brink and left him teetering on the edge.

"Let's go inside," she murmured huskily. "To bed." Slowly she rose to her feet and turned to walk through the doors into the house.

His gaze dropped hungrily to the two full crescents of her ass. He would have followed her to hell.

Growling under his breath, he strode forward and swept her up, causing laughter to bubble up from her chest. "You are gonna make me hurt you," he warned, heading for the stairs. He took them two at a time and did not slow until he was in her bedroom and tossing her to the bed.

"Spread 'em," he ordered and saw the unmistakable excitement that flickered in her chocolate eyes. He remembered the cuffs in her nightstand. She wasn't just kinky, he realized, smiling suddenly. She might have a fetish for police officers. He leaned over her and ran his hands across her shoulders and down her breasts to her stomach.

"What are you doing?" she giggled, squirming when he ran his fingertips across her sides.

He dipped a hand between her thighs and slid two fingers into her pussy. "Checking for concealed weapons."

Her eyes widened and her mouth parted in a silent "oh," followed by a pleased smile. "But I've done nothing wrong, Detective." She fell into the role eagerly.

Joe grasped her arm and hauled her back to her feet. She didn't protest when he escorted her from the room, across the hall, and into his own room. He'd leave the pink cuffs where they were. He had a feeling she was going to like the real thing a bit better.

He grabbed his cuffs from the nightstand and turned her back to him. "You have the right to remain silent," he leaned close, speaking lowly into her ear as he slipped them around her wrists. He felt her shudder and snapped the cuffs, squeezing them until they fit snugly.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered when he led her back to her bedroom, her arms securely behind her.

“Whatever I want. Haven’t you heard of police brutality?” He grinned when her head snapped around. “Trust me. I don’t hurt women, I protect them,” he added, and saw her visibly breathe out.

He guided her to the foot of the bed and then bent her over the thick round footboard. His cock demanded attention but he dropped to his knees. Soft red hair curled around the glistening crevice of her pussy like the rays of a morning sun. Gently, he pushed her legs wider and then spread her lips. They were soft, pink, and swollen with excitement. He leaned forward and flicked his tongue against her. Her body jerked with response and he heard her sharp intake of breath.

*

Juliet felt his tongue slip into her and moaned with pleasure. The bit of role-playing had warmed her body and now he licked that heat into a scorching fire that made her tremble. Tension knotted, then expanded as he nibbled, sucked, and lapped at her, feeding off her responses. And though he made her body tremble, it wasn’t enough. She wanted to feel his big cock inside of her.

“Fuck me,” she whispered breathlessly and his mouth hovered over her clit, breath causing it to throb, threatening to give in to pleasure.

She waited as he rose, and then glanced over her shoulder when he left the room. Was he leaving? She released her breath when he returned with the key to the cuffs.

Quickly, he freed her from them and stepped back, waiting for her to turn. Before she could protest, he slapped them around her wrists in front of her. He grinned recklessly, tossing the key over his shoulder. Damn, he was sexy. Her gaze dropped to his cock. Very sexy.

“Lie down.” He didn’t wait for her to obey and gave her a little shove that sent her back onto the bed. Using her elbows, she wriggled farther up while he crawled after her. He looked like a wild animal, a predator, with glittering blue eyes. He didn’t stop until he hovered over her. Her gaze followed his hand as he reached towards her nightstand, opened it, and retrieved one of the small square packages. How had he known those were there?

He rose above her on his knees, opened the package, and quickly slid the condom over his cock. At least he was responsible. She smiled when he fell forward and settled between her thighs.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” he murmured as he looked at her face and then at her breasts. Resting his weight on one hand at her side, he used the other to lift her arms over her head. Juliet couldn’t explain the emotion that flooded her in response to his words.

“That mouth.” He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. They were softer than before and she could taste her own salty juices when she licked at his bottom lip. He nudged her with his cock and she inhaled sharply but he didn’t push inside. Dear God, she wanted him inside.

“I wanted to fuck you the minute I saw you.” He spoke against her lips, and then dropped his mouth to her throat.

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

His smile was brilliant. “Your confession.” He nudged at her again.

“Con—confession!” She laughed and lifted her hips but he moved with her, so she could only feel the heat of him and his lips.

“Yes, Miss Coultier, your confession,” he purred against her skin. “Something no one else knows. Something intimate.” He eased lower and bit gently at her nipple. She started to lower her arms, but he caught them and pushed them back firmly over her head and held them there as he circled the peak of her breast with his tongue.

“Start talking.” He pressed his dick against her, grinding his pelvic bone against her clit and causing her to suck in her breath.

“I modeled Hephaestus after my ex-boyfriend,” she blurted when he moved away. His dick pressed and slipped between her lips, but he gave her no more.

“Is that why Aphrodite looked bored?”

She nodded, and pushed a bit farther. She moaned with encouragement.

“Why was she bored?” He pressed her arms down so the cuffs bit slightly when she didn’t answer. “Why?”

“He had no passion. Now fuck me!” She raised her voice slightly and watched the smile curl on his lips.

“Explain that.”

“He was predictable and never took time to...” He drove to the heart of her and fire ripped through her channel, causing her to cry out with pleasure.

“Tell the truth.” He stilled within her.

“He was too gentle, thought too much when we fucked, and never just let go. He was ... small.” She closed her eyes. There it was. The ugly truth and she felt like a bitch for saying it. But Joe had left her no choice. Slowly he dragged his dick from her and then plunged into her again. She arched against him.

“What did you want him to do?”

“To excite me. To fill me. To...” she took a ragged breath as he pulled completely out of her. “To do what you are doing now.” He leaned forward and drove into her. This time he didn’t still, but rocked back.

“I wasn’t upset when the bomb destroyed that statue. It was the destruction of Aphrodite, of me, that made me angry.”

“Open your eyes.” He spoke thickly and her lids flew open. “What did it mean if she was destroyed?”

“That I was destroyed too. That I would never find another to stand with me as he did with her. And all because I couldn’t appreciate what he did offer.”

“Do you still believe that?” He grew still and Juliet stared up at him. He was doing something for her, helping her to heal. Her chest tightened as she shook her head.

“Tell me what you want, Juliet.”

“Stop this game and take what you want,” she whispered, grateful when he lurched forward, lips covering hers, and began pumping in and out of her. She jerked her arms free and slipped them over his head so her fingers could curl in his hair. God, he felt good. She lifted her hips, meeting his every stroke as the fire he’d left burning on her clit flared back to life.

“Look at me,” he ordered when she started to close her eyes. He gazed down at her, his eyes locked with hers. “Come for me.” Her nipples hardened, rubbed against the coarse hair on his chest.

Her stomach quivered and he must have felt it because he drove harder into her, grinding against her clit as he did. She panted, but she did not look away from him, losing herself in the passion behind his eyes. He was watching her to see and feel her pleasure

and that excited her, brought that tension to the surface so that she shook as it threatened to break.

"Come for me," he repeated, growling the words low in his throat. She thrashed as the tiny pins of dark pleasure pricked at her skin. Unable to stand it any longer, she screamed as the explosion of sensation rocked her, but his mouth covered hers so her voice muffled into his kiss.

He plunged into her, his pace quickening, low grunts vibrating into her mouth. His hands slid beneath her and lifted her as he drove deeper and jerked, filling the condom with cum as he tore his mouth from hers and threw back his head.

"Christ." He growled through his clenched teeth and slammed into her again, and then again. She pulled at him, wanting him to ride every wave of pleasure, but his body relaxed and he fell forward, his breathing rushing out heavily across her face.

"Damn, woman," he murmured and then laughed shakily.

Juliet stared at his face. No longer guarded, his edges were softened and there was a gentleness in his eyes that made her heart quicken. She could see his humanity, his tender heart, his soul.

"You should let me paint you."

He laughed again. "Not a chance."

"A portrait ... no nudity."

"Bullshit. I know what you'll do. Pull out all my secrets and expose me." His lips slanted.

"Isn't that what you just did to me?"

"No." He leaned forward and kissed her lips gently. "I freed you from them." Then he pulled out of her and grinned again when she moaned in protest. She stared at him as he got out of bed, swiped the key from the floor and then reached to unlock the cuffs. As she rubbed her wrists, he straightened and glanced up at the mirror.

"Next time, I'll remember to look up."

He headed for the door and Juliet felt a flutter in her stomach. There would be a next time. Minutes later she heard the shower running and reality finally pushed through the haze of sexual satisfaction.

That had been more than just sex. Her heart quickened with panic. He'd used sex to reach into her soul, to pull personal information from her. She'd felt them bond emotionally. She nearly jumped from the bed, and then stared down at it as if those satin sheets were the culprit.

No. No. She repeated in her head more firmly. It could not happen again. Once was a fuck. More than that became a commitment. A commitment meant someone taking time away from her work. She couldn't take a chance on another relationship that might end like the disaster she'd had with Wayne.

Chapter 3

Emil sat in the dark parking lot of the warehouse near the bay on Long Island and watched the car approach. As the vehicle halted and the lights flicked off, he glanced around. This is what he hated most about doing hired work. Meeting in places like this. It was stupid. They would be safer meeting in a public arena. But after seeing too many movies, every moron who wanted something done suddenly turned into the ultimate mastermind and set up meetings in the empty dark.

He climbed out of his truck and started towards the car. The driver's side window rolled down so he veered around to peer into the interior.

"You didn't do what I asked."

"I bombed the north gallery and destroyed the sculptures."

"She's still alive."

"There are no guarantees." Emil shrugged.

"That was our deal."

Emil pursed his lips and glanced around the parking lot but nothing stirred. "Do you have my money?" The bomb he'd left in the museum had been a gesture on Emil's part. He wanted his client to know that he could get to the woman easily.

"I'll agree to half. You'll get the rest when the job is done."

"What about the cop?" Emil crossed his arms. "That's going to make it harder to get to her."

"He wouldn't be a problem if you'd done it right the first time. You'll just have to do him, too."

"He'll cost you extra," Emil warned.

"You son of a bitch!"

Emil took a half step back from the car. He hadn't expected such an angry reaction from his client.

"Don't you try to milk more money from me!" his client warned. "I'll turn you over if you screw with me. They already have your face on camera. They know it was you. It only takes a call and you're finished."

Emil frowned, anger welling within him as he slipped his hand from the pocket of his jacket to show his gun. "He'll cost you extra."

For a moment, there was only silence from the client.

"Three grand extra."

"Five," Emil stated in a low voice.

"Bastard," the client snapped, but there was resignation in his voice.

Emil smiled. That had been easy.

"But you had better get it done this time."

"There's something else."

"What do you mean?"

"They've slept together." Emil almost laughed. The moment he'd seen Joe step out of the house, he'd known. Thumbs up for him because the artist was beautiful, but it complicated things. He knew Joe Anniston would not let her death go unavenged now.

He would be driven and find no peace until Emil was brought in. It left only one ugly solution that Emil did not like.

“What does that have to do with anything? Just do it!”

Emil stepped back as the car started and watched as it sped away. The moron had threatened to turn him in. He’d do the job, but he was going to make him squirm first, remind him of who he was working with.

Walking towards his car, Emil sighed. People were idiots. If this one had any sense, he would know that Detective Joe Anniston was a possessive son of a bitch and that he would protect whatever was his. And the woman was his now, though she may not realize it yet.

He slid into his truck and started the engine. He thought of the redheaded artist. It was time he spoke to Juliet Coultier.

* * * *

Joe kept his breathing steady as he jogged the last stretch of the mile, rounding the block. He saw Juliet standing at the door of her home and, even from that distance, he could see she was pale and shaking. Something was wrong. He bolted forward.

“What is it? I told you to keep inside when I wasn’t here!” He leapt up the steps and towards the door. He grasped her shoulders, shoved her back inside the house, and then saw the phone in her hand. Grabbing it, he brought it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“You sound out of breath, Joe. Jogging again? Do you think it’s wise to leave her alone like that?”

Every muscle in Joe’s body tensed. “Emil.” He turned and looked out the door toward the street, searching for parked cars. But there was no one in sight.

“Pretty, isn’t she, Joe? But then you’ve always had a soft spot for beautiful women.”

Joe’s lips pursed. He glanced back at Juliet. Her color had returned and her breathing was starting to regulate. Already she was calming down. That was good.

“Don’t worry, Joe. This does not count as a meeting. I didn’t expect her to answer the phone. I wanted to speak with you,” Emil continued. “I wanted to give you a bit of information on the prick I’m working for.”

“A name?” Joe reached for the newspaper on the kitchen counter and a pen.

“That’s too easy. Maybe if it were Frank on the case. He isn’t as smart as you. Neither is the man who hired me.” Emil laughed.

“I’m listening.”

“He’s paying me a lot of money, you know. He wants her dead.”

“Why?” Joe asked.

“Five grand for her. And just last night, he agreed to five grand for you too.”

“Look, I’m working on helping you, Emil. I’ve made the connection between the people you’ve killed. I know why you did it.” Silence, so Joe continued. “I can’t say that I blame you. When Annie died, I was a little destructive myself.”

“How are you doing with that, Joe?” There was sadness in Emil’s voice and Joe felt a slight camaraderie with the man. Emil Turst had been a shoe salesman. He’d had a family and a nice house. But he’d gotten mixed up with a bad crowd, a dangerous crowd. And when he tried to set things right, back out of the business he’d gotten himself into, his family had been murdered. Three months later, he had blown up the home of the mob

boss that had killed his family. But he didn't stop there. He had picked off houses across the east coast one by one, and blown them to bits. It had taken Joe nearly six months to realize that each of the homes belonged to someone involved in the Cedetoni family of New York.

"Healing ... slowly," Joe answered.

"I'll bet that redhead's helping." Emil chuckled lowly, and then sighed heavily. "I have to finish it, Joe."

"You could turn yourself in. Good chance you could plea temporary insanity," Joe argued.

"It's been a year." Emil laughed again. "I think I screwed the temporary part. It doesn't matter. I've gotten pretty good at what I'm doing now."

"And what is that?"

"Revenge."

Joe glanced at Juliet and reached out to brush a finger over her cheek. She had color in her face now. She'd just been caught off guard. Now, she stood watching his face.

"Whose revenge?"

"Mine ... and some others," Emil answered. "Mostly mine, but I have to pay the bills, you know."

"Cut the crap, Emil. Give me a name."

"I do that and you don't have a job anymore. You'll get soft and fat like Frank."

Emil's voice was lighter again. "No more jogging. And I'm pretty sure no more redheads."

Joe almost smiled. "You must be close by to know so much about what's going on over here."

"Not as close as you might think. I just know you, Joe," Emil said. "No name, but he's not your usual type. He's an angry fuck, but I think he could hide it pretty well if he wanted. His shoes are expensive."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Size ten."

"That's not much to go on."

"He knows her, Joe. I'd bet my last dime. He's got too much rage in him not to."

Emil paused. "He's not very bright."

"He threatened you."

"Morons often do. This one in particular is driven by jealousy."

"Anything else?" Joe held his breath.

"Maybe later. Take care of yourself, Joe. Have a little fun with your artist. I promise I won't blow you up while you're in the sack." The line went dead. Joe hit the disconnect button and set the phone down.

"That was him..." Juliet bit her lip.

"What did he say to you?"

"That it was a pity he had to destroy something beautiful." Juliet touched his arm. "It sounded like you were friends."

"We're more alike than we're different." Joe glanced down at the paper where he'd scribbled a few notes. "He gave me some information on the man who hired him."

"Why would he do that?"

“Because we’re more alike than we are different.” Joe looked at her. “He didn’t mean to scare you. He said he expected me to answer.”

“That doesn’t really make me feel okay about all this. What are you going to do?”

Joe picked up the phone and dialed Frank’s cell number. “Hey. It’s me. Guess who just gave me a call ... You got it in one.”

Juliet watched Joe as he leaned against the counter. He didn’t seem surprised or upset that the bomber had contacted him. She didn’t know what to think of that.

“No. No name but he wants me to find who hired him. Probably pissed him off.” Joe bounced the end of the pen against the counter. “Looks like I’m a mark now also, but I think he gave me enough that we might be able to find the prick before Emil makes a move.”

Juliet frowned as he continued. “Said it was someone who knew her, not someone with a record. He mentioned revenge.” Her frown deepened when Joe glanced at her. She shook her head, silently telling him she couldn’t imagine who it could be.

“Someone who doesn’t have to sweat to pay him,” Joe added. “No, I read it today.” His lips twitched slightly and Juliet waited while he stood there in silence.

“Unless you cooked greasy meatloaf last night, I don’t think you’ve gotta worry about any unexpected turn of events. You sit on your ass too much for fate to fool with you.” Joe laughed then, easily, and Juliet studied his softened expression. “Not much. I need to feed Lewis. No, I’m not letting her out of my sight. I’ll just take her with me.”

“No, but she’s standing right here. You can ask her if you like.” He laughed again. “Fuck you too.” He hung up.

“Well?” Juliet spoke as he set the phone aside. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on or not? You said he doesn’t kill anyone until he meets them. He spoke to me on the phone.”

“Doesn’t count since he wasn’t expecting you to answer. I need a shower. Then I’ve got to run by my place. Then we’ll talk.” He stepped past her, tugging his shirt over his head. He draped it over his shoulder.

“Who’s Annie?” Juliet asked and watched his back stiffen as he reached the stairs.

“My wife.”

* * * *

It was evening when Juliet sat in silence as Joe drove them across New York City. He’d taken her to a nice Italian restaurant and was now driving them through a neighborhood that Juliet would never be caught alone in. Hookers on the corner. Men with guns, the butts visible at the top of their pants.

“You live here?”

Joe cut his eyes at her as he parked in front of a tall brick building. He got out, waving to a group of men leaning against the outside wall. When he opened her door, she blushed at the whistles and shouts the men directed at them.

“Take it easy.” Joe shot a grin at them.

“They have guns,” Juliet whispered as they stepped into the building. Joe grunted and led her up the stairs. She kept close to him, pressing herself against the wall when they passed anyone.

“Relax,” Joe said in a low voice as they stepped into a hallway. “I know these people.”

Juliet nodded, but nervousness still knotted in her chest.

“Bang! Bang!” A boy jumped into their path. He was only about six years old, his clothes filthy, and his tongue looked green from some candy he’d eaten.

“Are you shooting at me, Drew?” Joe ran a hand over the boy’s head.

“No. I’m shootin’ at the man that was in your apartment.”

Joe halted and he shoved Juliet into an open door. She cried out and looked at the woman standing there. In an instant he’d drawn his gun. His face was harder than any stone she’d ever sculpted and for a few seconds she could only stand and stare at him.

“What man? Frank?” Joe asked the boy. The kid shook his head. “Get inside, Drew. Now!”

He neared the door of his apartment and Juliet forced her limbs to move, starting forward after him. She didn’t want to be left alone in a stranger’s apartment.

At the moment, he seemed invincible, but she didn’t want to leave him to whoever might be in his apartment. What if something happened to him?

“Stay!” His voice vibrated command.

“He gone now,” Drew called.

“Did you see him leave?” Joe stood facing the door.

“Yep.”

When Juliet didn’t move, he glared at her. He reached out and tried the knob of the door. Juliet glanced behind her to find the woman standing in the doorway, Drew at her side. When she looked forward again, Joe had disappeared into the apartment. A moment later, he reappeared.

“It’s clear.” He tucked his gun back in the holster inside his jacket, and then pulled out his wallet. He unfolded a five and held it out to the boy.

“Thanks for keeping an eye out for me, partner.” Drew’s face lit up and he took the bill. “You’ll make a good cop someday.”

The woman smiled at Joe before ushering her son back into the apartment and closing the door.

When Joe faced Juliet, however, his smile was gone. “If I tell you to stay put, I mean it.” She rolled her eyes and stepped past him into the apartment, then stopped. Behind her, Joe followed and closed the door.

The apartment was not as she expected. It was spotless and well kept. Nothing out of place, not a speck of dust anywhere. The furniture was leather and without flaw; the floors were carpeted. He was a neat freak. She almost laughed.

He walked to the kitchenette where a huge yellow cat rubbed against his legs. “It was Emil. He was here.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he fed Lewis and he left two quarters by the phone,” Joe said over his shoulder as he opened the cabinet doors and closed them again, one by one. Then he slid his hand under the bar. She watched him open the door to a small bathroom and reach beneath the sink and then kneel beside the toilet. She realized he was looking for something.

“I don’t understand.” Juliet looked at the quarters quizzically, wondering of their significance.

“He called you from here.” Joe walked past her, checking the cushions of the furniture. Then he stepped to the only other door and disappeared behind it. As he returned, the phone rang.

Joe picked it up. “You were here.” He paused. “Some guard cat I have.” Another long silence and then he hung up.

“No bombs,” he breathed.

“He’s toying with us.” Juliet crossed her arms, feeling afraid and wishing she understood more about this madman. “Do you think he just called from my house?”

“No. He takes his time. And he was just fucking with me.” Joe reached down and scooped up the cat that rubbed against his legs. “Hey there, Lewis.”

She watched him walk to the kitchenette. The space was small, but seemed bigger by the way the furniture was placed. A small television sat in one corner. A love seat was pushed against the wall, and a recliner sat directly in front of the TV. A bookcase stretched across the widest part of the wall and, as Juliet looked closer, she realized that the books were alphabetized by author. A desk was pushed against the opposite wall and next to the door was a smaller desk, home to a vise, bobbin and threads, needle-point scissors, hackle pliers, hooks, and numerous materials like feathers, yarns, and tinsels. A few paintings, some of which were original pieces, graced the walls.

“This is nice,” she said, finally turning to face him, and smiled when she found him watching her. “You like to fish?” She indicated the small desk for tying flies.

“No.” He set the cat down. “Do you want something? I have beer and milk.”

“No, thank you.” She glanced back at the desk. “If you don’t like to fish, then why all this?”

Joe retrieved a can of beer from the fridge and pulled the tab back. As he drank, he walked towards her.

“Annie and I were planning to go on a vacation, do a little fly fishing. I took up tying flies. It’s a hobby; gives me something to do.” He looked down at the table. “We did a lot of things together that I still do.”

“Like what?”

“Read our horoscopes together every morning.” He shrugged.

“What happened to her?” Juliet thought of the sadness she’d seen in his face when he’d spoken of her death to Emil.

“Cancer.” He took several long swallows from the can.

“I’m sorry,” Juliet said when she could think of nothing else. He met her gaze momentarily, then looked away.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything?”

“One of us will need to drive,” she said, watching him as he drank heavily, draining the can of its contents.

“Good point.” He dropped the can in the trash as he went to the fridge for another. “Unless you want to stay here tonight.” He popped the top as he let the refrigerator door swing closed.

“A little presumptuous aren’t you, to think that I would.” She glanced down at the small desk again before moving to sit on the love seat. Soft leather and comfortable.

He stepped around the counter that divided the kitchenette and the living area and leaned back against it, crossing his legs at the ankles.

"I need to know of anyone who might be angry at you," he said abruptly. "Don't say nobody because somebody wants you dead ... and me, for that matter. Emil didn't go through with it on purpose. Perhaps he likes you, I dunno."

"Maybe it was because you were there." Juliet watched him think about that. "Why is that? Why did he call you and give you information? And why in hell haven't you caught him yet if he's killed before?"

Joe looked down at the can he held. "I'm gonna need more beer if you expect me to answer all your questions." He walked to the door and leaned out to call to someone.

"Tom, wanna make a couple bucks?" Joe yelled down the hall at an unseen neighbor.

"Whatcha need, Joe?"

"Twelve pack, light."

"Five minutes."

Joe left the door open as he walked back to the counter. "A year and a half ago, Emil's family was murdered. Six months before that, Annie..." he paused, and when he continued, his voice softened. "She died. I tracked him down, arrested him, but the man wasn't the hardcore killer I'd thought he was going to be. He was sad, mourning because he'd lost his whole family, and hell, I liked him." He lifted the beer to his lips.

"You had something in common," Juliet said softly, her heart reaching out to him.

"So he got away ... well, maybe I let him go." Joe grunted. "I don't know for sure. That's when he began bombing the houses of those responsible for his wife's death. He's a clever fellow and he's gotten good at what he does. The people he killed, they were the ones responsible for his family's death."

"They weren't convicted?"

Joe shook his head. "Powerful people can get out of tight situations."

"Those are the only people he's killed?" Juliet asked.

"No, there have been others. Most of them have been murders in situations like the one with his own family. He always meets the victims first, face to face."

"Why?"

"Thinks it's chickenshit not to." Joe sucked down a few more swallows. "Killing a man you don't know is easier than killing one you do."

"He makes it hard on himself?"

"Something like that." Joe nodded, looking up when a man appeared in his doorway. "Just in time." The man grinned as Joe pulled out his wallet. He handed him a twenty.

"Don't spend that on anything that will make me bust you up over," Joe warned as he took the beer from him. Tom nodded and ducked from view. Joe closed the door and carried the beer to the fridge.

"Maybe I will have one of those," Juliet told him and stood as he opened a cabinet above his head. She smiled when he poured a beer into a glass and set it on the counter in front of her. Then he took one of the cans for himself, tossing the empty one in the trash.

Juliet's attention moved to a picture of a brunette, smiling into the camera. "Is this her?" She picked up the picture.

"Yes."

She studied the woman's green eyes, her apple cheeks. "She was very pretty."

"Beautiful." He nodded and reached for the picture. "She didn't even look sick." He set the frame back in its place, and walked around the counter and set his beer on the table next to the recliner. She watched him take off his jacket and then hang it on the

hook next to the door. Her lids dropped as he removed the leather strap, gun, and holster and set them on the table.

"Why did you become a detective?" She decided not to ask him any more about his wife, reaching for her glass of beer. She didn't want to bring any more sadness to his expression. She would save her questions for another time.

"Joe Friday." He grinned as he sat down in the chair. "Dragnet."

"You're kidding." Juliet laughed, returning to the love seat. She slipped off her tennis shoes and tucked her feet beneath her.

"Nope."

"What about your parents?"

Joe shrugged. "Dad was proud. Mom was worried. She still worries." He smiled when Lewis leapt into his lap and curled up.

Juliet watched his fingers as he stroked the cat gently.

"You are a nice guy, Joe," she said after a minute.

He laughed. "No, I'm not. I'm an asshole."

Juliet rolled her eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"It's true."

"I don't believe you." Juliet snorted lightly.

"You'll change your mind if you don't come up with someone who might be angry at you." Joe drank from his can.

Juliet sighed. "I've never had many people close enough to be angry at me." She leaned her head back against the leather of the love seat.

"Any jilted lovers?" Joe asked.

She laughed and shook her head. "They usually leave me."

"Idiots," Joe said, without missing a beat.

"It's my work. I spend a lot of time painting, sculpting, or working on other projects. It's hard to have a relationship with a six-foot statue standing between you." She sighed. "Once I sculpted a nude of Ricky. He was a little angry about that until someone bought it for four thousand dollars."

Joe whistled. "Not bad. Who's Ricky?"

"Old boyfriend." She tilted her head. "You should let me do one of you."

"Forget about it," he answered quickly. "What about Hephaestus?"

"Heph ... oh, Wayne." Juliet looked down at her beer. "He wasn't happy with me, but he's not the kind that would do anything violent."

"Neither was Emil," Joe argued.

"Wayne was a sweet guy," Juliet insisted.

"Well, think on it. There's someone out there who hired Emil Turst to kill you, someone who knows you and who's angry as hell." Joe drained the last of his beer.

"Need another?" he asked as he set the cat on the floor and rose.

"No." She shook her head, watching him while he got another beer for himself. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Joe flashed a brilliant smile as he sat down. "A little late to be asking, don't you think?"

She laughed. "Maybe, but I'm still asking."

"No. No women."

“When was your last one?” He just ignored her. “Don’t do that. I know there have been some. Men don’t fuck like that unless they’ve had some practice.”

He laughed aloud. “I’ve practiced a little.” He opened the beer and took a drink. “You don’t seem quite an amateur yourself.”

“You can thank my very first boyfriend for that.” She grinned.

“I doubt it. A woman who knows 101 positions is not a woman who learned them from some boy in high school.” Joe smirked.

“College, and what’s this 101...” Her eyes widened. Of course. He’d known where the condoms were. He’d snooped through her nightstand. “You snooped through my things.”

“It’s what I get paid to do.”

Juliet pressed her lips together. “You don’t get paid to look through women’s private things.”

His smile slanted. “I was looking for bugs.”

“You were looking for a hard on,” Juliet snapped.

“No, the yellow bikini took care of that.” Joe’s smile widened when she felt the heat rise to her cheeks. He’d liked the bikini. She remembered he’d said so on the phone the next day.

“I’ve got a pink one just like it.” She met his gaze. “Maybe I’ll let you see it sometime.”

Why had she said that? She knew why. Because she wanted more of what they’d already shared. But that would also mean more emotion that bound them together. They’d already shared so much more than she was really comfortable with. There was something about Joe that made her want to know more about him, to know him.

She watched as he drank several long swallows of beer and then set it aside. Juliet’s stomach clenched when he stood and stepped toward her. She didn’t move as he settled beside her, slipped an arm behind her, and lowered his mouth to hover above hers.

“When?” he asked, too softly.

“Well, I don’t have it on right now.” She bit her lip as he slid a hand over her knee. For a moment, she was certain he would kiss her, but then he leaned away. Why was she feeling such disappointment? *No, Juliet. No. No. No.* But it was already happening, and she knew it. Joe was too perfect. He was too much like the kind of man she could see herself spending the rest of her life with.

“What’s wrong? Can’t fuck without a bikini?” She laughed, hating herself for wanting his attention so desperately.

“I’ve been drinking.”

“So?”

“I don’t drink unless I’m angry.”

“So?” she repeated.

“So, angry drinking equals angry fucking and you don’t deserve that.” He started to rise.

Juliet saw the pain behind his eyes and reached for his arm, pulling him back down next to her. Maybe a little angry fucking was just what she needed. Maybe it could help her sever any feelings she had for Joe.

“Come back here. What kind of man invites a woman to stay in his apartment, gives her beer, then makes her sleep on the sofa?” She began unbuttoning his shirt.

"I told you I was an asshole." He took her glass from her hand and took a drink from it. "Juliet..."

"You aren't angry, Joe." She spoke as she freed the buttons one at a time. "You're hurting. Sometimes sex makes it better."

"No." He took another drink, hesitated, and then drained her glass. "I'm angry. Trust me."

"Because your wife died." Juliet ran a hand inside his shirt, sliding her palm over his chest.

"Among other things." He stared at her as she leaned forward and kissed his shoulder. "I don't want to use you."

Use me, Joe! she thought, but she said, "You aren't using me."

Joe set the glass aside and took her by her shoulders, pushing her gently away from him. "I would be. As tempting as you are, I'd only feel guilty for it tomorrow. Emil won't do anything tonight. You'll be safe here."

"How do you know he won't?"

"Because I mentioned Annie. And he's most likely drinking heavily as well."

Juliet watched him reach for his beer. "Okay, but tomorrow you owe me."

"You can take the bed. I usually sleep here anyway," he told her. He was dismissing her and she was surprised at the hurt she felt because of it. Without a word, she rose, and headed for the door that led to his bedroom. When she glanced back, he'd brought the can to his lips.

Once the door was closed, she stood there and closed her eyes. She couldn't keep denying what she felt for him. It hurt her to think of him sitting alone and suffering. It touched her that he would try to spare her his pain. That didn't come from just fucking a man.

Chapter 4

Joe groaned and opened his eyes sleepily. He looked down at the wild red hair that bobbed over his dick. A pair of full lips squeezed down the length of him and he groaned. Juliet. That mouth belonged to Juliet.

“What are you doing, woman? What time is it?” he mumbled but she pulled him deeper into her mouth and he closed his eyes again. Solid lust formed a knot inside his belly and lifted his hips to meet her rhythm. She quickened her pace, driving him deeper. Then rocked back so that her tongue flattened against the head. He reached forward, lazily, and pushed her hair aside, watching that pink tongue swirl around him.

“Christ.”

She looked up at him as those lips closed over him, tightened, and slid down his cock. He lifted again and she moaned encouragement as she drew back and then rocked forward again.

“Juliet...” he groaned and she hummed softly against him. His balls tightened. She moved like she was starving to death. He groaned again when her hand wrapped around the base of his cock, and followed her lips up and down the length of him.

He released her hair, digging his fingers into the arms of his chair as he closed his eyes. Heat coursed through him, pulsed at his temples. His muscles stiffened and she must have felt it for she bore down on him, hurried, her moans of permission vibrating through him. His hips jerked forward as dark pleasure built into an almost painful tension.

“Juliet,” he warned through gritted teeth but she did not slow, drawing her lips back so she could suck the head of his cock firmly while her hand continued to pump his cock rapidly. Her eyes glittered up at him when he looked down at her. He tilted his head back and murmured a curse as the tension gave and he released, filling her mouth with his cum.

He felt her swallow ... could have kissed her for it if she'd given him the chance, but her lips slid over him again and then once more, as if sucking any last drops he might have to give her. Her mouth left him and he collapsed back against the chair, his breath labored.

He opened his eyes when her lips fluttered against his. Then she turned, and headed back to the bedroom. He watched her close the door, a clear message that he wasn't to follow. Christ Almighty. He blew out his breath and then chuckled lowly.

* * * *

Juliet awoke to the smell of bacon frying. Her stomach rumbled loudly as her eyes opened. From the other room, she could hear a radio playing classic rock softly and Joe's low voice singing along. She smiled.

Pulling herself up, she didn't bother trying to dress and planted her bare feet on the floor. She looked at the clock to find it was only nine. Too early. Still she forced herself to stand.

When she opened the door, Joe was in the kitchenette and he looked up at her before a grin flashed over his face. His eyes darted to the left and she followed his gaze to find another man seated there. The man stared at her with an expression of shock.

“Good morning,” Joe called. Juliet nearly screamed as she leapt back into the bedroom and slammed the door closed. She shouldn’t be so embarrassed, but she was as she pressed her back to the door, listening for their reaction.

“That’s her?” The man asked after Joe resumed his singing. “My God, Joe. She’s a ... a...”

“Goddess?” Joe supplied, causing Juliet’s cheeks to burn. “She certainly is. You’ve no idea.”

“How in hell did a bastard like you get something like that to sleep in your bed?”

“Not a thing. She did it all herself,” Joe answered and Juliet imagined him puffed up with pride.

“Bullshit.”

“Jealous, Frank?”

So that was Frank. Big as an ox and tall as an oak. She’d pictured him roly-poly and bald. He was neither.

“Hell, yeah, I’m jealous. Lucky bastard,” Frank answered.

Joe continued to sing.

Juliet reached for her clothes. She’d have to face them sometime. As she dressed, she thought about her little service to Joe during the night. That was something she didn’t normally do. But Joe had helped her, she reasoned. She’d wanted to help him too.

Once she was dressed, she took a deep breath and pushed open the door again. Frank looked up and stared as she walked towards the kitchenette, nearly causing her to smile. She kissed Joe on the cheek and started to lean away, but he caught her around the waist and kissed her soundly on the mouth before releasing her again.

“How do you like your eggs?”

His affection surprised her and maybe scared her a little. “Over easy. You’re cooking.” She tried to still her trembling as she opened the refrigerator door and smiled at the carton of orange juice.

“Trying to.”

“And you bought me orange juice.” She grasped the carton and moved to pour herself a glass.

“She’s easy to please,” Joe directed at Frank, who still sat staring at her.

“Hello, Frank,” Juliet said as she placed the top back on the carton and returned it to the fridge. “I’m Juliet, though it seems a little late for introductions.”

“Stop drooling, Frank, and say hello,” Joe said, chuckling.

“Fuck you, Joe.” Frank finally blinked and shifted his large frame. “Good to meet you, Miss Coultier.”

“Juliet,” she corrected. “You’ve seen me naked, I think it’s safe for you to call me by my first name.”

Frank cleared his throat, glancing at Joe. “Another threat arrived at the museum last night.”

“Last night?” Juliet repeated, her head snapping around so she could stare at Joe. “I thought you said Emil wouldn’t do anything last night.”

“Threat letters aren’t his style.” Joe cracked an egg into a skillet. “The letters are most likely from the man who hired him.”

“And we still don’t know who that could be,” Frank added, and then looked at Juliet’s handbag that began playing a tune at him.

“That thing has been ringing all night,” Joe told Juliet as she hurried from the kitchenette into the living room. “It’s your artist friend’s number.” She dug out the phone and answered it.

“Where the hell have you been?” Brett’s voice vibrated on the line. “I’ve been sitting outside your house since ten last night! You’ve not answered your phone.” His voice cracked.

“Oh God, Brett, I’m sorry.” Juliet winced as she sat down next to Frank on the love seat. “I should have called you.”

“You’re damned right! You got someone sending threatening letters to the museum and then you just disappear!”

“I’m with Joe.”

“Joe?”

“Detective Anniston.” Juliet heard him blow out his breath. “I’m so sorry, Brett. Truly I am. I should have called.”

“As long as you’re safe.” He sounded like he was going to cry.

“I am.”

“Don’t do that to me again.”

“I promise.” Juliet shook her head. “It was thoughtless and I feel like shit for it.” Brett was the closest thing to a friend she had. He understood her passion for her work and accepted it.

“Good.” He released another breath. “So you’re with the detective? All night? Is he any good?”

Juliet glanced at Joe and grinned. “You bet your ass.”

“Is it serious?”

Juliet bit her lip. She’d never lied to Brett before, even when she tried to lie to herself. She valued the honesty of their relationship. She couldn’t fuck that up over feelings she had for a man.

“Your silence makes me think the answer is a yes.” He chuckled into her ear. “I should have made a pass at him.”

Juliet laughed, grateful he’d let her off the hook. “I don’t think he’s your type.” Joe looked up and his eyes narrowed on her.

“Keep him for yourself then. Selfish bitch.” Brett chuckled again.

“I’m planning on it. Do you want me to meet you somewhere tonight?”

“Just call me if you come home. I’ll come here. I have to get to the museum. Garret is freaking out. You know how he is.” There was a long pause. “Wayne drove by here around five this morning, Jules.”

“Wayne?”

“He didn’t see me,” Brett said quickly.

“Did he get out of the car?” Juliet looked at Joe as he took the skillet off the burner and set it aside. He strode forward and held out his hand.

“No.”

Joe took the phone from her before she could ask any more questions. "What happened?" He listened in silence. "Are you sure it was him?" Another pause. "Did you get a license plate? We need to make sure it was Wayne before we do anything." Joe waved his hand at Frank and his partner handed him a pen and pad. "Good deal. Yeah, I'll tell her. 'Bye.'" He pressed the disconnect button and handed the phone back to her and then jotted the plate numbers down.

"Looks like you were wrong about Hephaestus," Joe told her, handing the pad back to Frank. "Call that in. Put out an APB on him." Frank nodded, already making the call on his own cell.

"Wayne?" Juliet shook her head.

"He's casing your place after another letter is delivered to the museum. Did he know about your unveiling?" Joe walked back towards the kitchenette.

"Well, yes, but..."

"And you said he was jealous of the time you spent on the statues," Joe pointed out. "It would make sense that he's jealous of you and me. That would explain why he wants Emil to kill me too."

"But he's just Wayne," Juliet laughed.

"No one ever expects someone to snap," Joe said.

"Wayne wouldn't do this," Juliet repeated firmly. "I know him. He just wouldn't do something to hurt me like this. He certainly isn't the kind to want to kill someone."

"We'll see." Joe slid two eggs onto a plate and dropped a couple of pieces of bacon beside them. "Here, sit down and eat. We can't do anything until he's brought in anyway. Hungry, Frank?"

"Always."

* * * *

"What is the meaning of this?" Wayne Kessler stood in the small room at the precinct station yelling at the one-way glass window. Joe stood on the other side watching him. He was tall, the jock type, with blond hair and a tan. He was the model of wealth and privilege. And Joe didn't like him.

"Want me to go in there alone?" Frank asked

Joe shook his head. "No, I've got this one." He headed into the hallway and then through the door of the small holding room. Frank followed and closed the door behind them.

"Who are you?" Wayne asked in a voice filled with uncertainty and nervousness.

"Detectives Burke and Anniston," Frank answered and set his coffee on the table. He indicated the empty chair as he eased his large frame into the one across from it. Joe leaned against the door and folded his arms.

Wayne glanced at Joe and then at Frank before sitting down. "What's all this about?"

"We are not interrogating you. You are in no trouble. We just need you to answer a few questions to help us out," Frank told him while Joe kept quiet. They'd done this a thousand times. Frank softened them up, then Joe tore them down.

"You were seen outside Juliet Coultier's house in East Hampton last night. What were you doing there?" Frank asked.

"I ... I heard that the gallery was bombed. I drove by to check on her." Wayne leaned forward. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine." Frank even smiled. "Safe and sound."

"She's done pretty well for herself, hasn't she?" Joe asked, causing Wayne to look at him.

"Yes, she has."

"Nice house, lots of money. Since you two split up, you've been living at your parents' home, haven't you?" Joe watched Wayne's face closely.

"So?"

"I saw her statues. The one looked a little like you."

"I modeled for it."

"She didn't do you any favors, did she?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Wayne met Joe's gaze.

"When you went to check on her, did you see her?" Frank asked and Wayne looked happy to talk to him again rather than to Joe.

"No."

"Did you stop?" Frank pushed.

"No. Her car was there and all the lights were out."

"Why didn't you stop? I mean to make sure she was okay?" Frank reached for his coffee.

"Like I said, her car was there."

"So if she was home, everything must be all right?" Frank peered over the rim of the mug as he sipped.

"Look, I just wanted to make sure she hadn't been hurt. If she was at home, then she wasn't at a hospital."

"How was your sex life with Miss Coultier?" Joe asked, and Wayne's eyes widened.

"That is none of your..."

"She's a pretty woman," Frank interrupted.

Wayne glared at them a moment. "Yes, she is."

"So how is she? In bed?" Frank pushed.

"What does this have to do with anything?" Wayne's hands fisted.

"See, what I'm thinking is," Joe straightened and walked towards the table. "She might be a little too intimidating. Mirrors over her bed, fat bank account, hot piece of ass, and then there is you, Wayne. You don't have much going for you except your parents' money. The only way you could really contribute to a relationship is in the bedroom."

"I left her." Wayne's voice vibrated with vehemence.

Joe nodded. "Yes, I know. I know a lot more about you than that, Wayne." He placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "You're the jealous type. Jealous of the time she spent with her work rather than you. Might be jealous of who she's fucking now. I imagine you think about that a lot, don't you?"

Wayne's expression told Joe he'd hit a nerve. "Lie in your bed, wondering who those bronzed legs are wrapped around. Whose name she screams."

"Don't talk about her like that," Wayne warned.

"We aren't talking about her; we're talking about you," Frank pointed out. "About what you do. Your father is a powerful man, isn't he? Knows a lot of people. People who might not be in the right crowd of associates."

"People who know a little about making bombs," Joe added. Wayne's eyes slowly widened.

"I didn't set off that bomb!"

"Of course not." Frank set his coffee aside. "We know who set off the bomb. But he was paid to do it by someone who could afford to lose a couple thousand dollars."

"I want to talk to my lawyer," Wayne snapped. Joe could tell he had him on the edge.

"No need, we aren't accusing you of anything, Wayne," Frank said.

"She's a fine woman. She's got an ass that makes you want to slap it." Joe whistled lowly. "All that red hair. I'd bet she was a minx in the bedroom. Tell me, Wayne, when was the last time you made her do that little thing she does. You know the one, that little half-moan, half-whimper thing she does when you just get inside her?"

Wayne's eyes widened and he shot to his feet. "What the hell is this?"

"C'mon, Wayne. You mean to tell me you've never heard that sound? If I were you, I'd be crazed thinking about her doing that with somebody else." Joe smiled when Wayne swung at him. He stepped back and caught his arm. A moment later, he had Wayne pinned to the table, his arm pulled high on his back.

"I'd be willing to kill the bitch." Joe pushed, glaring down at him.

Frank leaned close to Wayne's face. "Is that it, Wayne? Did you want to kill her?"

"Get off of me!" Wayne yelled.

"Did you want her dead?" Frank pushed.

"Yes! Yes, I wanted to strangle her!" Wayne shouted back at Frank. "Of course I did! But I was hurting, God damn it!" Joe nodded for Frank to continue.

"And that's when you decided to hire someone to do it for you?"

"No! I stayed away from her. I didn't trust myself to be able to talk to her without getting angry. Damn it, I love her! Why would I want to hurt her?" Wayne quit struggling, and relaxed against the table. Joe peered around to find the man was crying. He released him.

"He might be telling the truth." Frank leaned back in his chair. Wayne covered his face with his hands.

Joe frowned when his cell phone rang, but answered it. "Yes?"

"How's the questioning going?" Emil's voice slid into his ear. "I imagine not as well as you expected. You didn't listen to me, did you? That's what I love and hate about you, Joe. You are so confident. You just know it's Wayne Kessler, so much that you would leave your girlfriend alone even when she's in danger."

"I'm close to a confession," Joe told him.

"That's interesting." Emil's laugh made Joe nervous.

"Joe?" Frank asked. Joe held up his hand, and then placed it over the phone, turning to Wayne. His eyes dropped to the man's shoes. Sneakers.

"What size shoe do you wear?" Joe directed at him, feeling a sudden sick feeling in his stomach. Wayne lifted his face and looked at Joe as if he'd lost his mind. Joe repeated the question.

"Nine."

"Emil!" Joe turned his head back to the phone and then jumped as the sound of an explosion vibrated through the receiver. Juliet! He kept the phone to his ear as he jerked open the door and ran down the hall.

"You thought the woman was the connection." Emil's voice was low. "You weren't that far off. Her studio is now destroyed. All that is left is the woman ... and she's not

alone. If you hurry, Joe, you can save her.” The line went dead and Joe threw the phone aside.

“Joe!” Frank called from behind him but he didn’t slow, slamming out the doors of the police station and into the street. He had to get to Juliet!

Chapter 5

Juliet screamed as her entire house shook and the window panes rattled. She jumped up from the sofa where she'd been watching television and stared out through the glass doors. What was left of her studio was floating to the ground in a fine gray mist. What the hell? She ran towards the door, her fingers pressed against the panes. Her work!

Her hands shook as she started to open the doors but a hand wrapped around her arm, jerking her backwards. She turned and faced the pointed features she recognized from the monitor when the museum had been bombed. Her throat tightened. Black eyes looked directly into hers. Emil Turst.

She looked back to her shattered studio and a knot rose in her throat. Her work. Nearly everything she'd been working on was gone! When she faced Emil again, fury pumped through her. She raised her fists and screamed as she beat them against his lean but firm frame. He didn't try to stop her; rather, he seemed amused by her reaction, which fueled her anger even more.

"You fucking asshole! Why?" she screamed, finally giving up her assault to sink to her knees. He released her arm as she slid to the floor.

"It's a shame, yes." Emil drawled in his too soft voice. "But I do what I'm paid to do."

Juliet looked up at him, tears streaming down her face. "You're a monster," she whispered. "A crazed lunatic!" He just stood there looking at her. He was going to kill her, she felt like screaming. Her mind searched for an escape but could find nothing.

"What are you waiting for?" she spat at him.

"We are waiting on Joe. He should be along shortly." Emil answered in a calm voice. "If my suspicions about how he feels about you are correct, he will waste no time coming to your rescue."

Juliet's stomach dropped. Joe!

She shook her head as she jumped to her feet. "No. I won't let you kill him. How could you anyway? He's your friend!" She struck at him, but he easily dodged out of the way, pulling a long knife from his coat pocket. Her arms fell at her sides as defeat veined through her.

"You care what happens to him? I thought his infatuation was only one-sided."

Emil's voice tilted with amusement. "Does this mean you care for him too?"

"Of course I care what happens to him, you sick fuck!"

Emil shook his head. "But do you love him?"

Frantic hope speared through Juliet. Perhaps she could save Joe, convince Emil to only kill her. "Yes. I love him."

"How much?" Emil asked softly.

"Kill me. Just me. Please," she pleaded and suddenly realized that she meant the words she was saying. "Let him live. He is a good man. I'm the one you want, anyway."

"Interesting. It's been so long since Joe allowed anyone to truly love him." Emil frowned. "But it's not my decision."

"No, it's mine."

Juliet's eyes widened and she turned, eyes resting on the man who stood in her living room. He reached down and poked the button on the remote, plunging the television into silence. No!

"You." She lifted a hand to her mouth.

"Yes, Jules, me."

* * * *

Joe kicked open the door of Juliet's house with the heel of his shoe and rushed inside, his weapon drawn. His mind whirled with every piece of information Emil had given him. Wealthy man, jealous, who wanted revenge. Revenge for what? For her success? Through the French doors, he could see past the pool at the rubble that used to be her studio. He could hear the sound of approaching sirens. He looked around the room and then froze when he saw the figure standing near the zodiac statues.

"Emil."

"You made good time, Joe." Emil jerked Juliet to her feet. She was gagged, her wrists bound behind her. Tears squeezed from her chocolate eyes and Joe's stomach dropped. Emil's fingers wrapped around the gun pressed to her throat. Christ!

"Don't do this, Emil. Don't. This isn't like the others. She's done nothing wrong." Joe kept his eyes on Juliet.

"I told you, Joe. I was hired to kill both of you. Now here you both are." Emil shook his head. "I hate this. I really do." Joe's stare locked with Juliet's and he saw when she flicked her eyes over his right shoulder in a frantic signal. He heard the gun cock behind him.

Emil lowered his gun; his dark eyes were no longer trained on Joe. "You are a stupid man. The world is full of people like you." He lifted the gun again. "I won't feel very bad about ridding it of you." As the blast of the gun sounded, Joe dropped, rolled, and fired at the man who stood behind him with the gun. His bullet ripped through Brett's chest only a half second after Emil's left a small round hole slightly off center in his forehead.

Joe looked back at Emil as he released Juliet and lowered his gun. Emil shook his head. "Pity. I could have used the money."

"Joe!" Frank's voice bellowed from outside. Joe rose as Frank burst into the house with no more grace than a wild bull, his gun lifted. Joe glanced again at Juliet to find Emil was no longer there. His eyes darted to the French doors, left ajar.

"It was Brett Waters," Joe murmured, rushing to Juliet's side. He removed the gag and quickly untied her hands. The moment she was free, she wrapped her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder.

"The yuppie?" Frank stared down at Brett Waters' lifeless body.

"He was jealous of her success." Joe held Juliet tightly. "Emil gave me all the clues; I just didn't put them together." He kissed her temple and whispered an apology. He looked down at Brett's shoes. Polo Ralph Laurens. As if reading Joe's mind, Frank bent down, removed one and looked inside.

"Size ten."

* * * *

Four months later

Joe stood at the back of the crowd, watching Juliet unveil the “Twelve Disciples,” her zodiac statues. He grinned as the crowd of art lovers oohed and ahed over the three-foot statues of the zodiac figures. They kept their distance, waiting for Juliet to finish her presentation speech. Juliet met his gaze from across the room and he smiled as his phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Have you read your horoscope for today?”

“Hello, Emil.” Joe grunted. “No.” He heard a paper rustling on the other end and waited.

““Today the virgin Virgo should embrace the sun and bask in her rays. She smiles kindly upon him, a sign that means there are brighter days ahead for healing and forgiveness.”” Emil paused. “That sounds promising.”

“You can never tell.” Joe watched Juliet as she came toward him, allowing the crowd to rush forward and examine the twelve newest additions to the museum.

“It’s an odd match, you know,” Emil said.

“What do you mean?” Joe asked.

“You hate the color orange.” Emil chuckled.

Joe’s looked down to Juliet’s bright orange skirt. He glanced around the gallery.

“Enjoy your sun, Joe.” The line went dead as Joe stared at the newspaper folded on the table behind him. The horoscope section was turned up with his horoscope circled in red. A smile pulled at his lips as he gave the gallery one last sweep. Emil was gone. He turned to Juliet.

“It looks like you were a success today, Mrs. Anniston.” He slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“We aren’t married yet.” She smiled up at him as he leaned down to kiss her lips.

“What’s another month between lovers?” he murmured against her mouth before slipping his tongue between her lips. Then he straightened and lifted his gaze back to the statues.

“So which one are you?”

“The Lioness in the middle. August fourteenth,” Juliet answered and Joe laughed abruptly. “What’s so funny?”

“My Aphrodite is a Leo.” He looked at her. “And I will bask in her sun as long as she’ll have me.” She smiled at him quizzically before he kissed her. He pulled her against him and groaned when she seductively rolled her hips forward. His cock hardened against her and she ran a hand across his stomach.

“There’s an empty room in the east gallery,” she suggested softly when Joe released her mouth. “Want to go make a little art?”

“Lead the way, Aphrodite.”

The End

About the Author:

With favorite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no wonder Sable Gray writes erotic romances with darker tones to them. From historical to contemporary suspense, Sable weaves stories of sex, love, and adventure.

A storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well into her twenties that she realized that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction filled with gratifying and passionate relationships. For her, erotica and romance are one and the same, stories written to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul. Sable is proud that Liquid Silver Books has given her the chance to do just that.

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