



The 7 Deadly Sins
and Virtues

FORBIDDEN GROUND

Patience



Gabriella
Bradley

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Forbidden Ground

The 7 Deadly Sins and Virtues Series

Copyright © 2006 D. Gabriella Bradley

ISBN: 1-55410-676-1

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya
Publications, 2006

Look for us online at:

www.zumayapublications.com

www.eXtasybooks.com

FORBIDDEN GROUND

SEVEN SINS AND VIRTUES SERIES

PATIENCE

BY

GABRIELLA BRADLEY

To my mother...

PATIENCE...

We could never learn to be brave and be patient if there were only joy in the world...

— Helen Keller

You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance...

— Franklin P. Jones

CHAPTER ONE

Cassandra was aggravated and more than just a little. She had looked forward to this assignment and expected to go to Texas on her own. But at the last minute her boss had ordered Braden Miller to accompany her. Dammit! She was the best investigative reporter on staff. She didn't need a babysitter.

They were on their way to Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle to investigate the ongoing case of a serial killer who had killed twenty-one young women. So far, the police had no leads, no clues at all. The killings had been methodical and well thought out—so well planned that the detectives on the case were stumped. She'd jumped at the chance to take on this challenging assignment. Her recent breakup with long time beau Jason was still tearing at her heartstrings. Sure, she'd noticed Braden flirting with the other women in the office, but she'd been so much in love with Jason that Braden's attempts to flirt with her had only annoyed her. And now she had to put up with him for however long their investigation would take and it could take quite a while. Patience had never been one of her virtues at the best of times, and it was now being tested heavily.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. They had spoken very little since leaving the airport. Once she was seated on the plane she'd been gratified that his seat had been a last minute booking and he sat far away from her. But right now he was far too close to her. So far he'd behaved himself admirably and they had already been driving for more than an hour.

She looked at the scenery flying by. It hardly registered in her mind. As always, Jason crept into her thoughts, crowding everything else out. Their last night of love, which had ended up in a nightmare, played through her mind like a slide show. Blocking out the nightmarish part and her pain, she only concentrated on the love she still felt for him. Her blood started on fire as she pictured Jason's body, felt imaginary fingers between her legs creeping between the elastic of her panties, seeking her clit. Uncomfortably, she shifted on the seat.

"What's wrong?" Braden's voice interrupted her.

"Nothing. I'm just stiff from the plane ride," she retorted briskly and impatiently, annoyed at the interruption of her thoughts.

"Do you want to stop somewhere for a coffee?"

"I could stand a coffee right now. Yes please."

Just a few miles down the road he pulled into a service station with a diner next to it. "This looks like a good place for a bite and a coffee."

"Doesn't matter where. As long as they have fresh coffee." He got out of the car and as she reached behind her to grab her purse he opened the door for her.

"Ma'am," he said, gallantly holding out his hand. But she ignored the hand and pushed him aside. Everything he did annoyed her, and she had no idea why.

"Well, *excuse me!* I was just being a gentleman."

"I know all about your gentlemanly ways, Miller. Save them for your adoring harem."

"Tut tut, you've got a sharp tongue, Cassie."

"Don't call me that," she retorted sharply.

"So what do you suggest I call you? We'll be working in close proximity for quite a while."

"You're just a co worker and a junior to boot. Call me by my last name, like I do you."

"All right, Sanderson. If that's the way you want it."

"Yes, that's the way I want it, so you can stop trying your best to become chummy with me."

"My God! I've been sent on a trip with a hellcat! And a fucking impatient one at that."

"Look, are we going for that coffee or what?" she snapped, glancing at the side mirror of the car. She tucked some stray strands behind her ears. She wore her long black hair tied back in a ponytail braid. Her makeup still looked fine, although her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. The brown eyes that gazed back at her were troubled, as they had been for the last few weeks. As she heard Braden's footsteps, she turned around to follow Braden to the diner.

He sent her a murderous look and strode ahead of her. As she walked behind him, she wiped the perspiration off her forehead with the back of her hand. It was hot, terribly hot, the air heavy with

humidity. She watched Braden's stubborn back, the way he walked showed his anger at her. She didn't care, but she couldn't help but notice his delicious derriere. With each stride, his muscles rippled under the material of his tight jeans that left nothing to the imagination. But it wasn't Braden she saw in those jeans, it was another man who filled them, the one who had smashed her heart to smithereens.

She steeled herself against the knife twisting in her heart, shredding it some more. Summoning up strength, she willed Jason out of her mind and followed Braden into the noisy diner. Braden slid into a booth and she had no choice but to sit with him. It was the only empty booth.

The waitress sidled up to them. She was a sexy blonde, her uniform tight, short, and the two top buttons were undone showing ample cleavage. Cassie watched her flirt openly with Braden.

"Are you ready to order?" she asked, looking only at Braden.

"I'd like a coffee please. Black, no sugar. And maybe a doughnut," Cassie snapped. The pencil flew across the pad, but the waitress didn't verbally acknowledge Cassie's order and continued to bat her eyelashes at Braden.

"Sir?"

"Just a coffee. Black."

With a pronounced swing of the hips, the waitress sidled off to another booth, throwing a backward glance at Braden. Cassie studied him now wondering why women fell all over him. He had black curly long hair that he tied back into a ponytail. His eyes were a

deep blue. She decided he actually had a nicely sculptured face, a strong cleft chin, well-formed lips and very blue eyes, almost close to violet. She'd never looked at him this closely, as the women's gossip about him at the office more than annoyed her, and his flirty way was aggravating. He was the total opposite of clean-cut Jason who had sandy blond hair and soft brown eyes and had always been a real gentleman. At least, until recently, when, after they'd made love she found out there was a different Jason hidden behind that gentlemanly façade.

The waitress returned with their coffee and her doughnut. "Thank you," Cassie said, and absentmindedly stirred the coffee while still dwelling on Jason. That last night with him consumed her thoughts, remained forever engraved in her heart. They'd made love, then after he climaxed and pulled out of her he'd rolled away and told her he needed to tell her something.

"Hon, I've been unfaithful to you."

She'd still been basking in the aftermath of a glorious climax and his words had come as if a bucket of ice hit her in the face. "What did you say?"

"I had sex with another woman and now she's pregnant. But don't worry, I don't love her and have no intention of marrying her. I'll give her money to look after the kid."

"You fucking bastard! Get out of my bed!"

Shock, anger turning into utter fury consumed her as he'd stared at her with a dumb expression on his face.

"She means nothing to me. She was just convenient

at the time. I love you, Cassie, only you."

"Right. You've just made that very clear. Get out of my bed and out of my apartment. Now!" She yanked his cock hard and he yelped, suddenly lashing out at her. He punched her in the face repeatedly until she fell off the bed and lay shaking on the floor, the world spinning around her.

"Bitch! Fucking whore! After everything I've done for you you'd kick me out?"

He got off the bed and kicked her in the ribs hard before he walked to the closet to grab his suitcase. In a haze she'd watched him pack his clothes and other belongings.

And then the door had slammed and she'd passed out.

Jason was gone. Gone for good. And good riddance to the cheating bastard, but the pain, the forever knives stabbing at her heart...

"Okay, where are you?" Braden's voice startled her out of the hurtful memories.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about something."

To her amazement, Braden reached out and placed his hand over her own. "Your eyes were filled with an anguish I've never seen before in anyone's eyes. Do you want to talk about it, Cassie?"

Gone was the playful, boyish, flirty look he usually had on his face, and she saw a different Braden, one whose eyes were filled with honest concern and a serious expression. She felt the warmth of his strong hand on hers and suddenly welcomed the touch. He was genuine. Behind his playboy exterior, he hid a different personality, one who cared about his fellow

human beings. One she never would have expected.

"Thanks, Braden. I'm not ready to talk about it."

"She used my name for a change and it rolled off her lips like honey," he quipped, but the gentle squeeze of his hand belied the playful words and the twinkle in his eyes. "Braden, I..." his name slid off her tongue easily and she wondered now why she'd resented this man so much. Were all the rumors about him really true? "I'm sorry for taking my problems out on you," she continued. "Let's pretend we just met for the first time."

"Sounds good to me. Now how about we discuss the case and share research?"

One more squeeze of his hand, and then he relaxed his fingers and just rested his hand on top of hers. It felt good. Caring. And she didn't pull her hand away this time. More than ever, she needed someone, a friend, someone who cared.

"We don't have a lot to go on. The killer hasn't left one clue and all the women are killed the same way. No rape, no brutality, the victims all look like they died in utter peace. And the murderer doesn't follow the usual pattern of serial killers. It's a known fact that many of them like to be noticed. They leave clues, send notes to the police."

"Forensics haven't found anything either. No trace of poison, nothing in their system. It's a complete mystery. I don't even know why the boss gave us this assignment. What made him think we'll be successful where a score of detectives have failed? I think he's wasting his money, personally."

"Yes, so do I. Well, at least it gives me a chance to

visit a place I've never been to."

Cassie placed her attaché case on the table and opened it. She took out the folder containing the pictures of the murdered women. "Have you seen all these?"

He nodded. "I've done my homework. They were all in their early twenties and all very pretty."

"And all of them had long hair and brown eyes, but none were in the same profession. There's no pattern there."

Braden nodded toward the window. "Look at that storm brewing. Maybe we should stay here for a while until it blows over."

"I don't mind driving in the rain."

"Storms here can be pretty fierce."

"I know. But I just want to get out of this noisy place," Cassie said and after putting the pictures back in the folder and then into her attaché case, got up to leave.

"There's a storm warning out," one of the waitresses said as they walked toward the door.

"Doesn't scare us," Braden said and held the door open for Cassie. As she passed through, she brushed against him. It was as if the distant lightning had just struck her, so intense was the bolt that surged through her body. She shook it off blaming it on her pain, her intense emotions about the break with Jason, and Braden's display of a different personality than what he generally showed. The way she felt, she was ready to fall into any man's arms to help forget the pain for just a little while.

But hadn't Braden just accomplished that in the

restaurant, if even for a few minutes?

The wind whipped against her face. Biting dust stung her cheeks and she could taste it as it entered her nostrils and settled on her lips.

"Quickly, get in the car," Braden urged her and held the car door open for her.

The wind howled now. For some reason it exhilarated her and she felt no fear of the storm. It was so loud she could barely hear the engine when Braden started the car.

"I'm not sure about this, Cassie. I think we should go back to the diner."

"Don't be silly. We'll be fine. Look at that sky. Isn't it magnificent? Nature's anger fully displayed."

"That it is, but I think I'd prefer to look at it from inside a solid structure."

"I wouldn't call the diner that solid."

"You have a point, but it's withstood other storms or it wouldn't be here anymore."

"Right. And if the storm gets any worse, we can pull over to the side of the road and sit it out."

"How about I listen to the radio. Maybe they're broadcasting storm warnings. Don't forget the twisters they get in this area."

"Oh, I'd love to see one. I've only ever seen them on pictures or in movies. I've never been that close to nature's fury."

"Cassie, you don't know what you're wishing for. Only the people who chase twisters have been that close, or the poor souls who are stricken by one. People have lost their lives, their homes."

She sighed. "You're right of course."

Braden turned on the radio and all he got was static. "Too much electricity in the air. Listen to it."

"I hear. Okay, let's get moving." She saw the stubborn set of his chin and knew he was against it. "Wouldn't the people in the diner have known if there was a twister on its way?"

"I suppose. Oh well, I've driven in storms before. I guess this one will be no different," he said as he started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

She could feel the wind tugging at the car. It was as if Thor, the god of thunder, was fighting with them. They had traveled about twenty miles when the downpour began. The wipers could hardly keep up with the sheet of rain slashing against the windshield and it wasn't long before Braden pulled over to the shoulder.

"We'd better sit this out for a bit until it simmers down."

She shivered. "Yes, you can't see the road anymore. No, don't say it," she said as she saw his lips open.

"What? Oh... No, I won't. I was going to offer you the blanket in the back. You're shivering."

It was on the tip of her tongue. He'd told her so, but she didn't want to give him that satisfaction. "I'm not really cold. I don't know why I'm shivering."

"Are you afraid?"

"No, not really. I had a strange premonition. I get those sometimes."

"Come here," he said and placing his arm around her shoulders pulled her against his hard body. She shivered again, this time because of his nearness.

Never in a million years would she have thought Braden to be so caring.

"I wish now..." she started.

"I know. You're just a stubborn woman," he said, but in a kind tone. "We'll be fine."

"I'm anxious to start the investigation. It will take my mind off other things."

"What things, Cassie? I know there is a man in your life. Does it have to do with him?"

For a second she had a sharp retort ready that her personal life was none of his business, but for some reason it didn't come out. Instead, tears started. He pulled her closer against him. She felt his cheek on the top of her head and she welcomed the caring embrace.

"Talk to me, Cassie. Tell me what's bothering you?"

Haltingly she told him what had happened. She needed to talk to someone about it. But to Braden? Would he even understand? "It's still very fresh, Braden."

"I gather that. Though for the life of me I don't know why you're wasting your tears on the loser."

"I loved him. We were very happy these last two years and going to get married." She had to talk loud because the rain pelted on the car so hard, the noise was deafening. It had become very dark.

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be. Obviously he didn't love you the same as you loved him," Braden said, tilting her face, "or he wouldn't have cheated on you like that."

"Braden, you're the biggest flirt in the office. I

never expected you to be hiding such principles," she couldn't help saying.

"You'd be surprised what lurks behind my charm."

It had gotten so dark, she could barely see his face but she knew he was grinning. His face was very close to hers and before she realized, he kissed her. It was a kiss of friendship at first, but she clung to his lips as if they were a lifesaver. And they were in a sense. Because she pressed hard against his lips his opened automatically and he claimed her in a passionate kiss, his tongue exploring. The wild abandonment that coursed through her body was beyond her comprehension. Her thoughts stilled, the noise of the storm dulled as she lost herself in the most passionate kiss she'd ever experienced.

Suddenly he pulled away. "I'm sorry. I forgot myself. I guess the situation, being so close to you..."

A bolt of lightning lit the interior of the car. She saw his eyes darkened with desire for her. It felt good to be wanted, even if she hardly knew Braden. Why not? Her body was on fire, her crotch aching with a longing she didn't know she possessed. The storm and the close proximity of their bodies, his handsome face, all acted as a major aphrodisiac. "It's okay," she whispered and moved closer to him, her lips barely touching his, her tongue licking his lips. He tasted manly. The scent of his cologne drifted into her nostrils and she tried to move closer to him, but the steering wheel prohibited it. He sensed what she wanted and within seconds both seats were down and he swung over to her side pinning her beneath

his body. She felt his cock press against her, the bulge hard, and she ached to explore but they were so cramped, she could barely move.

He kissed her long and hard and shifted off her ever so slightly so he could get his hand under her skirt. She felt his fingers yank at the g-string panties and after he stripped them down to her knees, his thumb rubbed her clit until she squirmed beneath him. Desperate now to feel him against her naked body, she tugged at his t-shirt and managed to pull it over his head. She hadn't even noticed that he'd undone the buttons of her blouse, the front fastening of her bra. Fumbling with his belt, the button of his jeans, she finally managed to grasp that which she longed to feel, to examine. She gasped when she felt his rock hard cock. It was big, so big that her hand didn't even fit around it, and it throbbed in her hand.

She felt him wriggling out of the jeans, kicking them off. Then he pulled the skirt over her head. The panties snapped as she spread her legs to accommodate him. He lifted her slightly to take off the blouse and finally they lay naked in each other's arms. He pressed her hard against his chest for a moment. She felt his cock searching for entry and raised her hips to meet him. He leaned on his hands then and she looked up at the man hovering above her, ready to claim her. She could barely make him out. It had become inky black, the storm still raging around them, the rain pelting down on the car. Another bolt of lightning was followed by loud thunder. It lit the interior and for a moment they could see each other.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he shouted and entered her then. She gasped when he inched in. It felt as if she were still a virgin. Never before had she felt so filled, felt a man so fully within her. Sure, Jason had not been small, but neither had he been big like this. It felt heavenly, it felt like more, she wanted him deeper, all the way inside her. His hands were on her breasts, kneading, tweaking her nipples until they protruded fully from her breasts. She groped for his buttocks and yanked him closer, pulled him inside her more.

He grunted and slammed into her, filling her completely with one stroke. She screamed as she reached an orgasm immediately, her juices lubricating them both. The climax had not satiated her. She wanted more, she wanted to feel him move within her, to climax with him. He leaned down and holding a breast in each hand he squeezed hard until her breasts were like ripe peaches ready to burst. She thrust her body up toward his lips begging for him to suck her nipples.

He sucked each nipple briefly, then his tongue traveled up to her neck, her chin, and finally her lips. His kiss was forceful, yet tender. She explored the maleness of his mouth and thought she’d burst as he sucked her tongue. The world spun around her, faster and faster. His cock stroked the inner walls of her vagina. An intense shudder passed through his body and she knew he was almost ready to come. “My God, Braden, harder, harder,” she screamed. He moved faster, pushed all the way into her, until she felt him deep inside her touching her to the very core.

His cock swelled and within seconds her own desire came to a boiling point. "Yes, yes, yes," she shouted as she came and felt his semen soak them both.

The world continued to spin, they rolled through the car as if glued together, entwined, still breathing heavy from the passion they'd just quenched. Somewhere in the distance she heard some loud bangs, the world rocked as her clit once again began to throb and she groped for his now flaccid cock working it to make it hard again. She wanted more, needed more.

Somehow his face ended up between her legs and she yelled out her longing and grabbed his hair, pushing his head hard between her legs, shoving his face against her crotch. His tongue entered her and she rotated her hips as he licked, sucked, nibbled at her clit. She wanted him again, needed him again to fill that empty void in her chest, the place where her heart had once been. She slid lower, pulled his hair upward towards her face, waiting in anticipation for him to suck the breath from her.

When he took her lips again, she thought the world would never stop spinning. And then all else faded away and she felt herself sinking into a pit of darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

She struggled back from oblivion, searching for the light. For a moment she'd forgotten where she was and about the storm, Braden, but then reality set in and she remembered. When she opened her eyes she noticed the storm has passed over and bright sunlight momentarily blinded her. She felt for Braden's head, his body. The last she remembered was that he kissed her and his cock entering her again and that she was having the best sex of her life.

Startled, she sat up. The car... Where the hell was she? Where was Braden? The car? Wildly she looked around. Her surroundings were nothing like the ones around the service station. She sat in the middle of a dusty road. Ramshackle stores and buildings flanked the road. They looked deserted, terribly neglected. As her mind cleared a little, she realized she was looking at what could be a ghost town.

Cassie scrambled up. She felt dizzy and took a moment to close her eyes and steady herself. When she opened her eyes again and spun around she saw Braden lying on the ground some twenty feet away. "Braden," she called out, but he didn't stir. "Damn,

where the hell are we? Where is the car?" she muttered as she hurried to Braden's prone figure.

Kneeling beside him she shook him by the shoulders. Like her, he was naked. "Okay, this is just a temporary moment of insanity," she said. "Having sex with Braden must have triggered a guilt trip and this is all in my imagination." She closed her eyes tight and sat like that for a minute.

"Cassie? Where are we? What happened?" Braden's voice brought her back to reality and she opened her eyes. Like her, he was struggling awake, the expression in his eyes one of incredulity.

"I don't know, Braden. Last I remembered we were in the car."

"Having great sex, as I recall."

Remembering her nudity she felt a wave of shame and self-consciousness wash over her. Now that the moment of wild abandonment was over and they found themselves in a weird situation, she wondered if she'd been crazy to have sex with a co worker. There was nothing she could do except undo the braid and pull her long hair over her breasts and hide her pubic area with her hands.

Braden stood up and looked down at her. "Bit late to be bashful now, my dear."

"This is different. It was dark in the car and the storm and all added to the height of the moment. We're in bright sunlight now. But where are we and how did we get here?" she said looking up at him. He towered over her and resembled a bronzed god. The object that had satisfied her so well lay dormant on a dark bed of ringlets. Even while flaccid it was a good

size. Thrills coursed through her body at the memory of the sex they'd just had, butterflies creeping up to her throat. She felt like reaching up to touch him, but for now, they had to sort out their situation.

"Frankly I'm stumped," Braden said, slowly turning around to survey their surroundings. "Looks like a ghost town."

"That's my take on it, too. Not a sign of life."

"All we can do is go and investigate. Maybe there are some abandoned clothes in those houses, or some old rags." He held out his hand to her to help her up.

Keeping one hand over her pubic area, she took the offered hand and stood beside him. "Where do we start?"

"I suggest we start with that store over there. It looks like it might have been a general store once upon a time."

"So how did we get here, Braden? And where is the car?"

"My thoughts are that we got hit by a twister and it brought us here."

"Then why aren't we hurt?"

"Good question."

They stepped onto a wooden sidewalk. Many of the planks were rotted and broken so they had to tread carefully. Braden let go of her hand to try and open the door. He had to force it open. The hinges creaked and protested as he put his full weight against the door and shoved it open.

Only a bit of light filtered through the grimy windows. When their eyes became accustomed to the dim interior, they were astounded that the store

seemed fully stocked. Dusty, yes, but all the shelves were filled with groceries, bolts of cloth and clothing. Sacks of flour were stacked against a wall. Bags of beans sat on the floor in front of the dusty counter. An old-fashioned cash register sat on top of the counter, next to it several jars of candies and nuts. Cobwebs were everywhere.

"I'd say help yourself," Braden said and headed for the shelves of clothing.

"Don't you find this a bit strange? It's as if everyone walked out and just left all this. It looks like a store out of an old western movie. Why would all this stuff be still here? Surely looters would have taken it by now?"

"Good question. Right now I don't care. I just want to find a pair of pants to fit me."

Cassie walked to the shelves and noticed that there were mainly dresses, blouses, and skirts for women. No jeans that she could see. A dusty row of ladies shoes stood on the floor below the shelves. She rummaged through the piles and finally settled on a gingham cotton dress. The pale blue color was pretty and it had short puffed sleeves. It looked like it might fit her.

She pulled the dress over her head and fiddled with the tiny buttons. It fit her almost perfectly, as if it had been made for her. She turned around causing the long skirt to swirl around her legs and saw Braden just tucking a gray shirt into a pair of dark blue pants.

"Sexy," she said, grimacing at him.

"Yeah, right. Uncomfortable is more like it. Though

I can return the compliment honestly. You look extraordinarily beautiful. A movie star who stepped off the screen straight out of a western."

She felt a blush creep to her face. Their session of wild sex seemed so far away now. "Braden, about what happened..."

"Nothing happened. Okay?"

It annoyed her that he dismissed the moment in time so easily. Maybe he was just a playboy after all and he'd put on an act just so that she'd fall for it. Even more annoyed at herself she swiveled and walked around the dusty store, here and there picking up an item. His deep voice followed her.

"The lady is insulted. Look, Cassie, it's obvious that you're uncomfortable about us making love. It was wonderful, but if you prefer we forget about it, then nothing happened. I didn't mean it to sound so crude."

She felt mortified at having shown her feelings so openly. "I'm sorry, Braden. It's just that I'm quite confused and want to get out of this godforsaken place."

"As do I. So let's go outside and see if we can find our way back to the highway."

"Okay. Something isn't right though. Why would all these shelves still be stocked after so many years? You'd think everything would have either gone moldy, disintegrated or stolen."

"I had the same thought. Everything is too well preserved. Even that slab of butter hasn't gone rancid." He pointed at a large platter and lifted the cheesecloth that covered the slab of butter. "I tasted it.

It's fine. Freshly churned."

"My God. This is crazy. There have to be people around here somewhere. Maybe it's a movie set," Cassie said and ran out of the open door, Braden on her heels.

"I tend to agree with you," he called out behind her. "But where is everyone? Wouldn't there be equipment around? Vehicles?"

"I'll be damned if I know. They all went to lunch or something or maybe they're shooting out in the desert."

Cassie stood in the middle of the dusty road. She looked north, south, but all she could see was a long stretch of desert and a row of ramshackle buildings flanking the road she stood on. Nothing stirred, not even a fly, a mosquito, a bug. A warm breeze whipped the skirt around her legs. Braden sidled up to her and put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him. "Braden, I don't know where we are or what we're going to do. We have no car, there's not a soul in sight, and the road looks endless."

"I know. I saw. Come here," he said and pulled her closer against him. His arms felt comforting, safe. She closed her eyes thinking that when she opened them they'd be back in the car in the middle of an orgasm. But it didn't happen. When she opened her eyes, they were still in the ghost town.

"Let's explore some of the other buildings," Braden suggested.

"Okay. You lead, I'll follow."

They did and found nothing. All they found were homes decorated with beautiful antique furniture,

photographs of the past displaying families with children, pantries stocked with preserved foods, jars of canning, bags of beans and potatoes. Neatly made beds and closets filled with clothing. Nothing that would help them. The single western bar was deserted, like everything else.

Frowning, Cassie examined the tables. Cards were strewn across several of them. Half filled beer mugs still on the counter and the tables as if the bar had been very suddenly abandoned.

"Braden, this beer is fresh. It's still got fizz in it. Take a look."

Braden picked up a mug and sniffed it. "There have to be people somewhere. They're hiding."

"Why the hell would they hide? And I don't understand any of it because look at all the dust. Yet the cards are clean, the beer mugs recently filled. It just doesn't tally."

"I'll say. Come on. Let's check the town out some more."

Discouraged, they walked down the dusty road hand in hand. "Where do we go from here?" Cassie asked in a wistful tone.

"I don't know, Cassie. Maybe if we keep walking we'll find some sign of life. Maybe the movie crew will come back from wherever they've gone."

"I wonder what time it is." Automatically she glanced at her watch, only to look at a bare wrist. "Where did my watch go?"

"The same place mine did. If you look at the sun, it's close to evening."

They stood at the edge of the town and gazed out

at a deserted desert surrounded by hazy mountains. "What do we do next? We can't very well just start walking. Lord knows where we are," Braden said, looking down at her.

Cassie gazed up at him, at the concerned expression in his blue eyes, again remembering the moments before they'd woken up in the ghost town. She felt the blood creep to her cheeks and wondered how she could have acted so brazenly. It was the storm, her unhappiness, the height of the moment, she argued with herself. "Since it's almost evening, how about we choose one of those houses, find some bedding that's not too dusty, and stay the night? Maybe the crew has gone to the nearest town, their hotel, and when we wake up they'll all be here."

"Sounds like a plan. We can make a fresh start in the morning."

"Look at that mist forming at the base of the mountains."

Braden let go of her hand and took a few steps forward. "It's thickening. Rolling towards us, and fast. Come on. Let's go back."

Grabbing his arm she hurried beside him, every now and then glancing back at the mist rolling toward them like menacing storm clouds. "I've never seen anything like it," she said, her chest heaving from exertion.

"Neither have I, but then again, I've never been in a ghost town before where the butter is fresh, beer is still fizzing and yet there's not a soul around, not even a cat. Neither have I ever seen or heard of this kind of fog in the desert. It could be a sand storm

approaching though."

Before they could enter one of the houses, they found out it was indeed a fog and it had caught up to them. It was suffocating, and so thick they couldn't see an inch before their eyes. Cassie groped for Braden's hand and was glad to feel the comfort of his grasp. Icy fingers danced over Cassie's cheeks, up her legs. The fog wasn't only thick it was also intensely cold. It chilled her to the bone and her teeth started to chatter.

They stumbled onto the wooden sidewalk. Braden pulled her along. "Hurry up, Cassie, we need to get out of this before we end up with pneumonia."

"My legs are shaking so hard I can hardly move."

As suddenly as the fog had appeared, it disappeared. From one second to the next, it was gone, completely gone. They were just about to enter the house and stopped in shock. Sound came from everywhere. Loud piano music from the bar, people crossed the street, horses waited patiently for their masters. A dog barked in the distance and there was light inside the homes and the stores.

Cassie let go of Braden's hand and spun around. "Braden?"

"I'm here, just as shocked as you."

"I suggest we find a bed anyway because I don't think any of this is real. When we wake up we'll be back in the car waiting out the storm."

"And hopefully doing something else. If I recall, I was in the middle of..."

"Hush, Braden. I prefer to forget about that one time incident."

"We have to be realistic here. We can't both have passed out and be in the same dream. That's impossible."

"I *am* being realistic. There is no way on earth we could be here or that this town can be real. There has to be a logical explanation."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"The coffee at the diner was drugged?"

"Cassie, why would complete strangers drug us? And we're both on the same trip hallucinating the same things?"

So far the people passing by had ignored them, but suddenly a tall man dressed in black sidled up to them.

"Greetings, strangers."

They swiveled in unison to face the speaker, almost grateful to hear a friendly voice. "Greetings. We're somewhat lost. Can you tell us where we are?" Braden asked.

"You're in Lucifer's Nest," the man said, and took off his hat.

"Never heard of it," Cassie said looking up at the man. Braden was tall, but this dark stranger towered over Braden. His face was swarthy and handsome. He looked to be in his mid thirties. Long straight dark hair was drawn back into a ponytail. It was his eyes that caused chills down her back. They were a very pale icy blue and seemed soulless. His clothing was that of a gentleman in the mid eighteen sixties, much like the clothing they'd found in the store except his were fancier.

Braden cleared his throat. "Uh, I've never heard of

it either. Can you tell us how far it is to the nearest city and where we can rent a car?"

The man frowned. "Let me introduce myself. I am the mayor of Lucifer's Nest. My name is Doran Madder. And you are?"

"Braden Miller, and this is my wife Cassandra."

Cassie was startled when he introduced her as his wife, but she didn't say anything. She presumed that Braden didn't trust the man and had done it on purpose.

"From where are you?"

"We're from Seattle. We were on our way to..."

"I have never heard of such a place."

Cassie nudged Braden. "It's not really important, Mr. Madder. We just need to rent a vehicle or find transportation to the nearest big city."

The man twirled his hat and put it back on his head. "No one leaves Lucifer's Nest."

When Braden stepped forward, Cassie sensed his sudden frustration and grabbed him by the arm. "Braden, don't... Sir, maybe you can direct us to a hotel?"

"I am afraid our small town does not have a hotel, but I am always happy to offer my humble home to guests. I have some business to take care of first. If you wait here, I will send my coach to fetch you."

Just as fast as he had appeared, he disappeared. Cassie turned to Braden who had a look of incredulity in his eyes. "Okay, this is getting weirder by the minute."

"Yes. Lucifer's Nest? I doubt it's even on the map and the name indicates it's not real. Anyway, one

minute it's a ghost town, and the next teeming with life?"

"Night life."

"Yes. Let's go to the bar and look inside."

"We're hardly dressed appropriately. Look at us. You know, maybe this *is* really a movie set."

"And suddenly a fog appears, people and horses come out of nowhere, and we're part of the cast? Yeah, right... The mayor said to wait here for his coach."

"Do we really want to go to his house?"

"Do you have any other suggestions? You wait here for the coach. I want to check inside that bar."

"Braden, don't leave me here alone," Cassie said, but noticed he was already crossing the street. Another chill ran down her spine as she watched him push open the door and enter. Laughter drifted toward her and for a moment the piano music was louder, until the door closed behind him. Crossing her arms, she warded off the chill and leaned against the wall. Braden seemed to take a long time, but he had probably only been gone minutes when she heard the sound of wheels and horses approaching. She peered into the distance and saw the vague outline of a coach drawn by two horses. Hitching up the long skirt, she sprinted across the street to fetch Braden.

Cassie pushed open the door and looked inside. The dusty bar was now gleaming, squeaky clean. Smoke wafted toward her and the strong scent of ale and spirits. In the far corner a man sat behind the piano pounding the keys—the same piano that had

been covered with a thick layer of dust just an hour before. Several women in rather risqué dresses, showing ample cleavage, were either hanging over a man's shoulder or sitting on his lap. Just such a woman was hanging around Braden's neck. Cassie felt a pang of jealousy but when she looked at Braden's face, that flirty look he perpetually wore at the office was there and the jealousy was replaced by anger.

Resolutely, she opened the door completely and strode inside toward Braden. "That coach is on its way. It's almost here," she shouted to make herself heard above the din.

Braden set down his mug of Ale on a table and disengaged the woman's arms from around his neck. "Cassie, you shouldn't be in here," he said. "It's not a place for ladies."

"So I notice. Glad you learned your lines so fast. Are you coming?"

He joined her and together they left the bar, but when he tried to take her hand, she shook it off. "Don't. I saw enough in there. You just played with me last night."

"Didn't you yourself say it was just a one time thing? The heat of the moment?"

He was right. Her anger simmered down a bit. "Did you find out anything in there?" she asked, her impatience once again flaring its ugly head.

"Not really. I had just started asking the woman some questions when you showed up. Friendly bunch. I got a beer shoved into my hand soon as I entered."

"A friendly bunch that suddenly appeared out of the blue in a bar that's now spotlessly clean."

"There's the coach. So what do we do?"

"Overpower the driver and use the coach to get the hell out of here."

"And go where?"

Before she had a chance to answer, the door of the coach opened and Madder stepped out.

"Braden, I don't think we should..." but it fell on deaf ears. He climbed into the coach and she had no choice but to follow him or be left alone in the town. If Madder accompanied them, then how could Braden put his plan into action to overpower the driver?

Once inside, he placed an arm around her and with his other hand covered hers lying demurely on her lap. "My wife is very hungry and tired. We appreciate your hospitality," he told Madder.

Cassie felt his nearness, his hand on hers sending thrills up her arms to the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the horse's hooves. Just hours ago Braden's head was between her legs and she'd been on fire for him. Hours? It seemed like days now. But the memory of that interlude caused her clit to throb. For a moment she thought she heard Jason's voice whisper her name. "Cassie, Cassie, come back to me." But it was her imagination playing overtime. She throbbed for Braden, not for Jason. He was just a bad memory and Braden had helped to place him in a dark corner of her heart.

"Here we are," Madder said and she felt the coach come to a halt and opened her eyes. Peering out of the

little window she saw a large gothic style mansion. It stood alone. Like the rest of the scenery, it was surrounded by barren ground and it loomed dark and mysterious against the twilight of evening. She shivered.

“Are you cold, my dear?” Madder asked.

“No. Not really,” she said declining the blanket he was about to drape around her shoulders.

She was the last to leave the couch and gratefully took Braden’s offered arm as they walked toward the steps.

CHAPTER THREE

Her thighs rubbed against each other as she walked and she felt the wetness between them. She wished for a shower, a bath and a comfortable bed.

"Welcome to Lucifer's Nest," Madder said as he opened the huge oak doors and threw them open wide. "Mammy, where are you?"

His voice boomed through the house and Cassie expected to see a stout black lady approach them, but instead she saw a beautiful black young woman approach.

"We have more guests. Please show them to their rooms and make them comfortable?" He turned to Braden and Cassie. "You'll find everything you need in your room. Fresh clothing, washing facilities, and Mammy will bring you an aperitif to tide you over until dinner. I'll await you in the dining room in two hours."

Cassie gazed at the beautiful interior of the hall and wondered what the rest of the house looked like. The stairs were of solid oak and gleamed as if recently polished. As they followed the young woman up the stairs she saw the paintings adorning the wall beside

it. Huge oil paintings of what she presumed were all Madder's ancestors. Dim light lit the interior of the house and in a flash she remembered seeing no electrical poles anywhere. Where did their electricity come from?

Without a word, the young woman opened a door and motioned them inside. A crackling fire greeted them. The room was huge. A large four-poster bed with a canopy stood against the far wall. Near the fireplace were two deep armchairs and a small table with a large ancient book on top of it. Cassie let go of Braden's arm and wandered around the room. "A bathroom would be nice," she murmured.

"I think this is it," Braden said. She turned around and saw him point to a sideboard with two large bowls and pitchers on top and some towels.

"Oh great. And if I look under the bed I'll find a commode." While she spoke she pulled up the bedspread and to her consternation found exactly that item. "My God, we're supposed to use this?"

"I guess, since there's no visible plumbing."

"They have electricity. Surely they've got an outhouse?"

They hadn't heard Mammy leave and return again until she spoke. "I'll place your wine and cheese here. Will there be anything else?"

"Thank you. That is fine," Cassie said and waited for the woman to leave the room. The crystal decanter sparkled, the ruby liquid within beckoning invitingly. Cassie turned to the sideboard and opened drawer after drawer to find pantaloons made of the finest cotton, corsets, chemises, gloves and other ladies'

apparel. The bottom drawer contained socks, neatly folded shirts and flannel long johns for a man. She burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Braden asked.

"I can picture you in these," she said while holding up the long johns.

"Well, I'll nicely go without, thank you. I do want to wash though."

"So do I, but there's no privacy. What's in here?" she said while opening the doors of a large mahogany cupboard. A row of dresses hung inside. She gasped. It was like looking at a rack in a costume shop, except these dresses looked exquisite. She went for her favorite color and took out an emerald green dress. It was trimmed with fine cream lace around the neck and ruffles cascaded from the three-quarter length sleeves. The skirt was very full and embroidered with a deeper emerald green thread. Tiny green stones sparkled up at her. At the bottom of the dress was a flounce of the same cream lace of about a foot's width.

"This is absolutely gorgeous," Cassie said holding the dress in front of her and twirling with it.

"It is. While we're in this dream together, we might as well make the most of it. Let's wash up and get dressed."

Before, in their car, it had been different. It was dark inside the car and her nakedness had not bothered her. But now she felt shame at taking off her clothes in front of him. "Okay. If you promise not to look."

"My, we're bashful suddenly," Braden said, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"Braden, quit it. I'm mortified enough as it is," she said impatiently.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'll turn around, but hurry up."

She waited until he turned around and was annoyed at the grimace on his face. Just because she'd had a weak moment and they had sex, didn't mean it would ever happen again or that she wanted him to watch her wash. Never mind that they had been thrown together in strange circumstances. Soon, they'd wake up and be happily driving along. Quickly, she stripped off the gown and poured water into the bowl. It was lukewarm. The cloth provided was cotton and not the softest, and the soap looked and smelled home made. Nevertheless, it was a means of cleansing oneself and so she proceeded, wondering how she could wash her hair or even *if* she could wash her hair somehow. But not tonight. She'd worry about that tomorrow.

After she washed the top half of her body, she continued on to the most important part, the lower half. The cloth felt rough on her pussy and as she soaped her cleft, it felt tender, and instantly her body was in flames when she remembered the size of his cock. She half turned to steal a glance at Braden who was brazenly watching her. When he noticed her turning, he quickly turned away. She didn't say anything, the thought of him watching her turning her on. Spreading her legs, she used her fingers to cleanse the cleft at the same time inserting a finger inside her vagina and rubbing her clit with her thumb. Oh, she needed release and she hated to admit

it, but she wanted that cock inside her again. Her juices spilled and she hastily cleaned off the creamy liquid with the wet cloth. Somewhat simmered down now, she washed her legs and feet.

After donning pantaloons and a chemise, she turned to Braden. "I'm done. Your turn." He didn't ask her to turn around. Demurely, she pretended to, but after a minute she looked behind her and watched the muscles ripple under his skin as he soaped his body. Oh, how she wanted to stride over to him and cup that cock within her hands, his tight balls. She wondered if he had a hard one and if he was turned on at the thought of her standing there watching, just like he'd been watching her. Again, her body was on fire as she looked at him, his strong back, his tight glutes. "I'll get dressed while you wash," she said, hearing the quiver in her own voice.

"Okay. I won't be long," and as he spoke, he turned to face her, quite unabashed. She drew in her breath. He didn't have an erection, not completely, but as her eyes focused on the object of her desire, it grew and within seconds throbbed lazily against his abdomen.

"Now look what you've done," he said and turned away from her.

"I didn't do a thing."

"Your eyes. They did it."

"Well, sorry for my eyes." Her face felt hot and she was sure she was red as a beet. She took a petticoat out of the cupboard and stepped into it. Then she stepped into the gown and pulled it up. It was a perfect fit, almost as if it had been made for her. The

neckline was low, so low that it barely covered her nipples. She had to tuck the chemise in or it would show. There was no way she could do up the back of the gown. She'd have to wait for Braden to finish. While she waited, she pulled the stockings on and the garters and grimaced at them. In the cupboard she found a pair of dainty black shoes with a row of buttons on the sides.

Braden was finally finished and looked very handsome in his striped pants, his ruffled shirt and embroidered vest.

"You look like you've stepped off the screen out of *Gone With the Wind*," he complimented her.

"And you look every bit as dashing as Rhett. I love that movie."

"I like the classics."

"Unusual for a man to watch such a love story."

"Why is it so unusual?"

"I don't know. It just is. Usually men like action movies. Can you do up the back of this dress?"

"Sure." His fingers were on the tiny hooks, fumbled with them. She could feel the warmth of his hands through the thin material of the chemise scalding her skin and all she wanted was for him to take her in his arms. But she controlled herself and waited impatiently while he did up the hooks.

"How about a glass of wine before we go down?" he asked when he was done.

"Sounds good. Maybe it'll calm my nerves a bit."

"That's what I was thinking. I still think we're in some kind of a dream, or a time overlap."

"You think we've traveled back in time? But how?"

she asked as she sank into one of the chairs and accepted the glass of wine. She sipped it slowly and waited for his explanation.

"I don't know exactly. Maybe there really was a twister. We got caught in it and it's somehow thrown us into a time warp."

"That's stuff for science fiction movies. It doesn't happen in real life."

"Cassie, how do we know? Has anyone ever come back to talk about it?"

"True. Only through hypnotism, regressions, but I've never heard of anyone actually experiencing it in real life."

"There you go."

"If what you say is true, then how do we get back to our own time?"

"That's a very good question. We may find the answers right here, either in this house or in this town."

"But it still doesn't make sense that when we arrived the town was dead, everything was covered in dust and cobwebs and now suddenly that's all gone."

"Maybe we're still moving backward through time?"

"Some of what you say could be an explanation, but other things don't quite fit."

There was a knock on the door. Time had passed before they realized. "Come in," Cassie called out. It was Mammy.

"The Master awaits you in the dining room," she said.

"Thank you. We'll be there shortly." Mammy left the room again, closing the door softly behind her.

There was a beautiful ivory brush and comb on the dresser and she quickly brushed her hair and waited while Braden brushed his.

"Well, except for our hair, we look very much like we stepped off the pages of a history book," Cassie said.

Braden nodded. "Shall we?" he offered her his arm but she walked away from him to the door. He had caused a turmoil in her heart she didn't need, didn't want. She had liked it better before when everything he did was an annoyance and she hadn't known the other side of him. She was far from ready for another serious relationship and Braden stirred emotions within her that troubled her. Not only emotions, he had opened up a can of worms when they'd made love—caused her to discover passions she had no idea existed.

Resolutely she opened the door and started down the hallway wondering what the evening would bring them. Answers? "Braden, let's try and get Madder to help us get out of here. Maybe if we talk to him, he'll understand that we need to get back to civilization."

Braden caught up to her and grabbed her hand. "We need answers to our questions. We need to know how we got here, why we're here and what happened to us. And I have an idea this Madder guy can enlighten us."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mammy waited for them at the bottom of the stairwell. She looked beautiful in her crimson gown trimmed with black lace, a matching bandana wound around her head. The woman reminded Cassie of someone, but she couldn't quite place the face. Mammy motioned them to follow her and Cassie noted the grace with which she walked. It was as if she were a dancer instead of a servant.

A dancer...

Suddenly she knew where she'd seen this woman. Mammy was a dead ringer of one of the murder victims whose name was Nicolette Hofman. "Nicole," she said, loud enough for the woman to hear. But Mammy didn't react.

Braden said, "What did you say?"

"Braden, didn't you feel you'd met this woman before?" she whispered.

"No, not that I can say. Why, do you think I should have? Do you think you know her?"

"Yes. Remember the photos of the murdered women?"

"Yes."

"Well, think about the one of the black girl. The dancer."

"Your imagination is playing overtime. How the hell could a dead woman be here? I'll take a good look at her during dinner."

"Okay, but you'll see the strong resemblance. Look at her face—just concentrate on her features and think the setting and the clothes away."

"Sssh," he hissed as they stopped before double oak doors. Mammy opened them and they followed her inside. There were candles everywhere and two large gold candelabras decorated a long dining table. The flickering flames sent eerie shadows to the walls.

Cassie squeezed Braden's hand as she looked at the lavish spread. The delicious aroma of freshly baked bread entered her nostrils, mixed with the aroma of roasted fowl. Steaming silver tureens of soup, potatoes, vegetables and crystal dishes filled with fruit—enough food to feed an army, certainly too much for the four of them.

Madder sat at the head of the table. As they approached, he stood and lifted his wine glass. "A toast to a lovely couple."

"Thank you. Where do we sit? I see the table has been set for quite a few people."

"Our other guests will arrive soon. I needed some time alone with you."

"The food will get cold," Cassie murmured, her stomach suddenly growling.

"What I have to say won't take long. Please, sit beside me," Madder said indicating the chairs to the left of him.

Braden pulled out a chair for her and she had difficulty sitting down, the dress getting in the way. Finally she managed without the dress ending up above her head somewhere. The hooped petticoat was really a nuisance.

After Braden was seated and Madder poured them a glass of wine, he cleared his throat. "Okay, now don't be frightened by this. You really shouldn't be here. We don't allow uninvited visitors in Lucifer's Nest."

"Then tell us how to leave if we're not welcome," Braden retorted.

"Just hear me out. There has to be a reason why you arrived here so suddenly. I need to know why."

"If we don't know ourselves, then how can we tell you?"

"Until I find out why you're here, I can't send you back to where you came from."

"You know how to send us back?"

"Perhaps. It depends on many things."

"Like what?"

"Lucifer's Nest is *my* town. I created it and everyone who lives within it and on the outskirts has been brought here by me personally. No strangers ever cross the boundaries of my territory. You arrived here as if from nowhere. Why are you here?"

"Sir, for the hundredth time, we don't want to be here. We were driving to Amarillo in a storm. It got really bad and we pulled over to the shoulder of the road. We...eh... We sat and talked for a while and suddenly we were in your town. That's all I can tell you."

"Where are your horses? Your coach?"

"We were in a car," Cassie said and saw Madder's eyes widen. He didn't comment and she had the feeling that he knew more than he was letting on.

"Why were you going to this town...eh...what was it called?"

"Amarillo. We were going there to investigate murders. A serial killer has murdered a lot of young women in and around Amarillo. Cassie and I are investigative reporters and..."

He cut her off abruptly. "Mammie, the other guests have arrived. Please show them in? We will continue this conversation some other time," he told Braden and Cassie.

"But..."

There was no chance to argue with him. But Cassie had seen his eyes flash when she mentioned Amarillo and she felt sure that the man knew more than he was letting on. And how could he not allow them to leave? What was stopping them from just walking out of the town into the desert and taking their chances?

"You wouldn't get very far."

Cassie startled at his softly spoken words heard only by her. The man was too creepy for words because he'd answered her thoughts. A mind reader. What would be next? Before she could answer him, the door opened and a number of people filed into the room. Madder stood up to greet his guests and introduced them to Braden and Cassie. The names didn't register as Cassie looked at the women in shocked silence, barely nodding to acknowledge the introduction. The young men accompanying the

women were strangers to her, but each of the women bore a remarked resemblance to several of the murder victims.

She glanced at Braden to see if he had noticed. He'd told her that her imagination was playing overtime when she'd mentioned Mammy's resemblance to the dancer. Surely now he could see now that it wasn't her imagination? Braden looked unperturbed and started conversation with one of the men.

Cassie stared at the blonde opposite her. She'd been introduced as Elizabeth, but she could have been Sherry Blundale's twin, the young nurse who was the last victim. There were eight guests, four women and four men. Cassie scrutinized each woman's face. The redhead was a double for Christine Cook, the legal secretary. Madder had introduced her as Mary. The brunette resembled Valerie Black the actress strongly and was now called Jane, and the fourth, a petite Chinese woman looked like Brenda Chen, owner of a Chinese grocery store. Madder had introduced her as Ruby. The men's names she couldn't remember. She startled when Madder rang a small silver bell.

"My dear guests, the food is cooling. Please, let us eat," he said in a loud voice.

The soup Braden ladled into her bowl smelled delicious, but she'd lost her appetite. The conversations resumed while everyone ate accompanied by the clicking of the spoons against the porcelain dishes.

"Good soup," Braden said. "How come you're not eating?"

"Braden, I've lost my appetite. I'm surprised you haven't noticed anything about the guests," she said softly so only he could hear.

"I have, but we'll talk about it later," he whispered, pretending to brush a stray lock away from her face. She glanced at Madder and noticed his eyes riveted on her. Had he heard what she said to Braden?

Somehow she managed to get through dinner. Fortunately, no one except Braden noticed that she just picked at her food and how quiet she was. Was it sheer coincidence that the women all resembled the murder victims? Did she have those girls so much on her mind that her imagination was playing overtime some more?

Vaguely, she heard Braden converse with the guests. She was glad when Madder finally spoke up and announced that dinner was over and asked his guests to follow him for the service. This shocked her back to reality. Service? What was he talking about?

"I'm very tired. I'd really prefer to go back to our room, if you don't mind," she told him.

"Oh, but my dear, you can't. We don't retire until daybreak."

"I don't think I'll last that long. It's been a long emotional day and I want to go to bed soon."

"Have some wine, my dear lady. It will revive your spirits."

She was about to retort sharply but Braden intervened. "I'll take my wife for a breath of fresh air," he told Madder, who nodded.

"We will wait for you in the parlor. Please don't be long."

Braden pulled the chair out for her so she could get up and offered her his arm. Lifting the skirts, she walked down the steps holding on to his arm for dear life. "Braden, wasn't this desert when we arrived? Look at it now."

Where there was dry cracked ground before, was now a lavish garden with verdant trees, shrubs, a fountain and flowerbeds. They walked to the fountain and Cassie ran her fingers through the crystalline water. "Maybe your theory of a time warp is correct."

"There's no logical explanation for any of it, so we'll call it that for now."

"Braden, did you notice those women? Did you really take a good look at them?"

"Yes. They all resemble the murder victims. It has to be coincidence though. These people don't come across as ghosts. I shook their hands. They feel very much flesh and blood."

"And what is this service he's talking about?"

"Lord knows. I guess we'd best play along. We'll find the answers. It may take some time, but we're not investigative reporters for nothing. When Maddie goes to bed, I think we should investigate the house. Maybe we'll find the answers somewhere in there."

"I'm so tired. All I want to do is go to bed."

"I know. It'll be hard for you to stay up all night, but he's very insistent that we do. Do we even know what time it is?"

"You know something? I didn't see a clock anywhere in that house."

"Good point. I wish we had pen and paper so we could take notes."

"Our memories will have to do." Cassie shivered. "It's cool out here."

"Are you scared, Cassie?" Braden asked and within seconds had pulled her into his arms. She drank from his warmth, from his strength and leaned into his embrace.

"No, not scared. I just keep getting these horrible chills as if evil is crawling down my spine."

"We need to make sure that we're always together. Under no circumstances must we be separated," Braden said while tilting her face up. He placed a kiss on her forehead and hugged her tightly for a moment. "We'd better go back in before they start looking for us."

"I don't think Madder is too worried. He told me we can never leave this place."

"At daybreak, what will stop us from leaving?"

"My thoughts exactly. I'd rather take my chances in the desert. But the weird part is, he read my thoughts and told me we wouldn't get very far."

"Though everything here is as strange as it can get, I think we should put thoughts of escape out of our minds for now. We need to investigate this whole thing, Madder, the girls..."

"I suppose. What if we're dead and these are all ghosts? Wouldn't be much use doing an investigation."

"My good God, girl. Dead? Us? I'm as alive as can be and I'll prove it to you when we go to bed."

"In your wildest dreams maybe."

"Ah, that's my girl. I want to see and hear that grit of yours."

"Ah, there you are. Do you feel better now, my dear?" Madder asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. Then let us proceed to the chapel."

"Chapel? Church service?" Cassie whispered to Braden who shrugged his shoulders.

They followed the group through the mansion, down long hallways, until Madder opened a door to a stairwell going downstairs. He stood beside the door and handed each guest a long black candle and lit it for them.

"This is creeping me out, Braden. Black candles?" Cassie whispered.

"Well, let's play along and see what's down there."

"It smells of evil. I don't think..." she stopped as they were next to receive their candles. Cassie was first. Gingerly she held the candle and started down the stairs. The other guests apparently knew where they were going so when they got to the bottom of the stairs and there were several passageways, she followed them.

They walked through a dark narrow passage at the end of which was yet another door opening up to more stairs. It felt as if she were descending to the center of the earth. They entered another passage, this one hewn out of rock. It widened and she could see an entrance to what looked like a large cavern. A dim glow emanated from the opening. Next to the opening hooks had been set into the rock wall. A number of black garments hung from the hooks. Each guest took one and after taking off their clothes, threw it over their heads, pulling the hoods up. Cassie

watched horrified as the people disrobed and displayed their nudity openly. She glanced up at Braden and saw his eyes feasting on the nudity of the young women. Well, he was a man after all. What man could resist looking if women so brazenly displayed their wares? Braden stopped. Madder took two robes off the hooks and held them out.

"Please remove your clothes and put these on."

"Do we have to?" Cassie asked.

"Yes. You cannot enter the chapel wearing your clothes or without the robes. Please be sure to pull up the hood."

Braden nudged her and after wrestling out of his clothes, pulled his robe over his head. Reluctantly, Cassie waited for Braden to undo the hooks on the dress and let it slide off. After the underclothes were off, she quickly yanked the robe out of Madder's hands, but not until she'd seen his pale eyes feast on her pussy. For some strange reason, it excited her that her body turned the man on and she let the robe slide over her head slowly, purposely straightening her back so that her breasts stood out more and the automatically hardened nipples. She felt an ache begin between her nether lips and a need, a need that she wanted filled. She could almost feel the man's eyes still gazing at her pussy and just before she let the gown slide down her body, she spread her legs a little. A trickle of moisture ran down one thigh. She wondered if the man had noticed as the gown touched her bare feet. She pulled the hood up over her head. Madder's eyes riveted on her face, looked into her own with a piercing gaze. He knew exactly

what he'd done to her without laying a finger on her. She felt hypnotized.

"Please follow me," Madder said and motioned for them to follow him. The other guests had already disappeared.

There were dozens of flaming torches on the walls sending dancing light throughout the cave. As they descended down a fairly steep rock path, Cassie noticed a lot more people down below. They all stood in neat rows and swayed as if in a trance. On the back wall of the cave she saw an etching of a pentacle, the point downward. Just below it stood a cauldron, a fire burning within, the flames licking, reaching up. Long chains hung from the ceiling of the cave, at their ends censers. It explained the sickly odor drifting toward her.

They followed Madder down the aisle to the front of the cave. He motioned them to stand in the first row. Silently he approached the wall with the pentagram on it and raised his arms, his back toward them. The chanting continued, became louder. It grated on Cassie's nerves, her soul. Incense wafted toward her, its scent so overpowering, she felt dizzy for a moment and groped for Braden's hand. Feeling the firm grasp of his fingers, his hand encasing hers, calmed her somewhat.

When Madder turned to face his followers, the chanting stopped. He closed his eyes and his deep voice echoed through the cavern as he started to chant in a strange language. The people surrounding Cassie and Braden continued to sway.

Before their eyes, Madder started to fade. Cassie

gripped Braden's hand harder and moved closer to him. "My God, he's gone," she hissed softly under her breath.

As soon as the man disappeared, the crowd started to hum a strange melody. Louder, louder still, until Cassie felt like screaming. Lack of sleep was starting to get to her and her mind spun suddenly causing her to sway and lean heavily against Braden.

"Whoa, hang in there, girl. You can't pass out on me now," Braden said softly, but pitched so that she could hear. His hand encased her elbow and supported her. The momentary dizziness passed, but she had trouble keeping her eyes open as sleep threatened to overwhelm her.

The chanting people started to move and formed a large circle, dragging Braden and Cassie with them. Somehow they got separated. Cassie scanned the circle, but the hoods shaded the faces and she couldn't see who was who. Not for long. Mammy appeared as if from nowhere, in the center of the circle. She was naked, except for gold rings through her nipples and Cassie thought she saw a hint of gold among the black bush at the V of her thighs. Music came from somewhere. Cassie followed the sound and saw someone playing a harp in an obscure corner of the cave.

Mammy started to dance. Her long hair now undone, it swayed to the movement of her body. Spreading her legs, she danced suggestively, her hips arching forward so that her opened clit was partially displayed. She continued to dance, her eyes closed, lips parted. For some strange reason, Cassie had the

urge to touch her. The girl was so beautiful, so sensuously gorgeous, that Cassie felt completely turned on. She'd not noticed someone passing silver goblets around. Suddenly, one was shoved into her hands and Mammy danced over to the side of the circle and held out her hand. She moved back to the center and held the goblet up high. Still with her eyes closed, she chanted to the sound of the music, "To the Master. We drink of his blood that does sustain us."

Cassie watched as Mammy gulped whatever was in the cup down in one go. *My God, blood? I have to drink that man's blood?*

"You must drink," a male voice hissed close to her. "You have to drink."

What would happen if she didn't?

"If you don't drink, you'll be chosen as the next sacrifice."

They could read her thoughts? Gingerly, she put the goblet to her lips. *Come on, girl. Drink it like the medicine you used to take when you were a little girl.* She quickly gulped the liquid down, only afterward realizing by the aftertaste that it tasted like wine, not blood.

Mammy danced again. Her body swayed, twisted, her hands stroking the ample breasts, the dusky dark nipples. Cassie had never seen nipples quite that large and she imagined what it would be like to suck on them. Slowly, Mammy's body descended to the floor until she lay flat on her back. Rolling slightly from side to side, she slowly opened her legs wide, lifting her buttocks off the floor, until her vagina was open to the eyes of all. Cassie heard soft sighs, murmured

groans, then all removed their robes.

She didn't want to take hers off, yet she did want to. Never in her life had she felt such excitement, such wanton abandonment. She gazed at the naked men, their cocks jutting out from their bodies, all of them young, incredibly handsome, and so well built it put any male model in the sex magazines to shame. They all had hardons, their cocks throbbing, almost as if to the sound of the music.

Slowly, she removed the robe. She looked for Braden and saw him just a few people down from her. He was in between a beautiful blonde and a redhead. Everyone joined hands and as Mammy continued her sensual dance, they all swayed. Cassie could see precum on the heads of the cocks. Never in her life could she have imagined so many gorgeously engorged male members. She felt like sucking each one of them.

The music got louder. A drum roll sounded and the two men she was in between let go of her hands. The man on her left grasped her by the waist and turned her to face the man on her right. There they were, in a circle, doggie posture, all holding each other's waists.

Suddenly they were all joined together. She felt the man's cock behind her piercing her with one thrust. His hands moved from her waist to her breasts. He squeezed them hard and held his hands there. She couldn't help but stroke the man's back in front of her. He was so beautiful, his buttocks so hard. She glanced around the circle and watched the other women open up the crack facing them. A wicked

thrill coursed through her body as she straightened just a little and followed their example. She pulled the man's buttocks apart to display his rosy anal passage.

She ran her tongue up and down the crack, then spit on the tight hole and circled it with her tongue. She felt his buttocks push against her face and she knew what he wanted. She pushed hard into the tight hole with her tongue and moved it back and forth. At the same time she felt the man behind her moving within her, slowly, very, very slowly. She wanted to come, she wanted him to fuck her hard. This was such a crazy turn-on that she could hardly stand it anymore.

Mammy continued to dance. Cassie noticed her from the corner of her eyes, and then the beautiful black woman danced toward her. Lifting Cassie's face away from the man's anus, she kissed her, her tongue dancing a tango with Cassie's, then moving swiftly back and forth within her mouth as if she were tongue fucking her mouth. Cassie groaned. Oh my God... I want more of this, I want to be able to touch Mammy. She reached out to touch the large shiny black breasts and held one briefly, but Mammy danced away to the next woman in the ring.

Cassie continued her assault on the man in front of her, on his anus. She glanced at the other women and saw them finger fucking the guys in front of them. She followed their example and pushed her ass harder against the man behind her. His cock withdrew suddenly and she swore softly under her breath. Impatiently, she ground her pussy against him, but she need not have worried. A finger entered

her and his tongue was between the crack of her buttocks. She felt him spit on her bum hole, felt his tongue enter it, a passage that had never been invaded before. It felt good, it felt better than good. It caused new sensations within her that she'd never experienced. Especially when his finger entered and then another, and then another, causing pain, but it was exquisite pain, pain that turned her on more than ever. At the same time his cock was back in her vagina, pushing hard, so hard that she could feel it touching all her inner organs. He started to fuck her then, fuck her really, really hard, and she felt his fingers bum fuck her at the same time, felt them acting in unison with his cock. His balls slapped against her pussy.

She was so engrossed and horny that she'd forgotten about the man in front of her until she felt his bum pushing against her. Quickly, she inserted her fingers inside his anus. One finger, two fingers, three fingers, until it stretched so tight around her fingers, she thought it would tear. She moved them back and forth and cupped his balls with her other hand, squeezing them.

She came then, saw the pearly liquid drip to the stone floor, felt the man behind her withdraw and his face between her legs drinking the rest of the cum. But she'd not felt him come. Not that she minded. Even though she came, she was still horny as hell and wanted more.

The circle broke up. Each man withdrew from the woman in front of him and walked to the center, forming a circle. Their cocks were still all hard, even

Braden's. She wondered what was in the liquid they'd been made to drink. Some kind of aphrodisiac? The women approached the men. Again, Cassie followed their example and she ended up with a tall, black man. His skin glistened with a sheen of perspiration, his body muscular, gorgeous. Like the other women, she knelt before him and took his massive cock into her mouth. As he thrust forward, for a moment she gagged, but then she allowed her throat muscles to relax and sucked him into her further. He started to move within her mouth.

But that's not where she wanted to be fucked. She wanted to be fucked in other places, wanted lips on her lips, tongues caressing her. Her body felt empty. She need not have worried. Apparently there were more women. She had no idea where they came from, but suddenly she felt the soft flesh of a woman against her back, female hands cupping her breasts, playing with her nipples, and another pair of hands pushing her thighs apart. There was a black woman behind the man's legs. His were parted and she sat between his legs. Cassie opened her legs wider to the woman's gaze, her face, her hands and tongue. Within seconds, she had a head between her legs, a tongue within her vagina and fingers inside her ass and hands on her breasts. She was being made love to by two women while she gave this gorgeous hunk a blow job.

He started to move faster within her throat. Carefully, she breathed through her nose, while enjoying the experience, especially with fingers fucking her and hands caressing her. She felt his cum

run down her gullet. The hot liquid burned a path down to her stomach. But he didn't go soft. He stayed hard. Within seconds, he withdrew and grasping her beneath the armpits, he hauled her upright, then lowered her to the stone floor and turned her on her side. This time, not only did she have the two girls stroking her body, but another man joined them. Cassie sighed, her body absolutely on fire, the blood coursing through her veins, her head throbbing. She was wild with desire, wild with wanton lust, beastly lust.

The black man lay in front of her and shoved his cock deep into her. He was so big, she felt as if her vagina was again virginal. Then she felt her buttocks parted and a cock push against her anus. One of the girls pushed her legs up into fetal position, opening her up to the man behind her. He shoved in. Like the fingers, at first it hurt, then the pleasant sensation overcame the pain and she squirmed as both cocks started to fuck her. The two women were stroking her breasts, sucking her nipples. Cassie pushed her breasts against their mouths, wanting more. She gasped as the black man rammed into her, and just as her mouth opened, a third man came and rammed his cock down her throat. For a moment it took her completely by surprise. Then she relaxed her muscles and sucked, breathing carefully through her nose. She was being fucked from all sides, everywhere, her complete body being set on fire by the hands loving it, stroking it. She was surrounded by raw lust, felt raw primal lust. She couldn't get enough.

When the cocks withdrew and she noticed them

move onto other women, she almost screamed. She wanted more, and more, and more. But she need not have worried. Several women surrounded her. Before she realized, she had a pussy sitting on her face, a warm moist clit and it was her turn to make love to whoever it was. The women all took turns in loving each other. Never was a bum hole empty, a vagina empty, or a mouth empty, or breasts lonely.

The whole night passed in a haze, until a trumpet sounded and everyone broke away from whoever they were with. A robed individual handed out robes. Still dazed, she pulled it over her head, felt it slide down her body. Had all this really happened? she wondered as she joined Braden and stood next to him. She hardly dared look up at him, fear of disgust in his eyes.

A loud cheer echoed through the cave as Madder suddenly appeared, by his side a young woman who looked around with a scared expression. She was a pale blonde, her hair hung in a silk curtain to her buttocks. Blue eyes gazed out at the people and they were filled with wonder and fear. The woman was naked. Cassie felt desire fill her as she drank in the woman's milky white beauty, the rosy nipples and rosy aureole. Where had Madder found this woman? Where had she come from so suddenly? Questions started to replace the wanton lust within her.

She watched as Madder took off his robe and stood naked before them. The intense chanting began again. Two men and two women moved forward and made the girl lie down on the altar. They opened her legs showing the congregation her open vagina. It was

very pink, inviting, and looked quite virginal. Even the girl's pubic hair was a light blonde. The two men held the woman's arms. Madder positioned himself between the woman's legs and in one thrust shoved inside her. The woman uttered one piercing scream, then became quiet as Madder rammed his cock into her. He didn't come inside the woman. When he was ready to come, he quickly withdrew. One of the men grabbed a silver goblet and held it under Madder's cock and his cum spurted out. Then he walked over to the girl, pinched her nose shut until she opened her mouth. Another robed figure stood behind the girl, holding her head tight so she couldn't move. The man poured Madder's cum into the girl's mouth and waited until she swallowed. As soon as the pearly liquid was inside the girl, everyone stepped back.

Without any fear now, her eyes looking adoringly at Madder, the girl fell on her knees before him, taking his cock in her small hands and stroking it lovingly.

Madder patted her on the head as if petting a dog, then nodded to two men. They took the girl away between them.

In a strange guttural language, Madder uttered some words, raised his hands, then turned around, donned his robe and disappeared.

They all started to file out of the cavern and Cassie and Braden followed. Miraculously, Mammy was already dressed and looked as if the whole orgy in the cavern had never happened, she looked so neat and tidy.

"I'll take you back to your room," she said, and

waited while Braden and Cassie put on their clothing.

"You need to sleep now," the black woman said before she closed the door.

Cassie stood like a statue in the middle of the room staring at Braden. "Did all that really happen? Or was it all part of a weird dream? I remember feeling faint from lack of sleep..."

"It really happened. You, I, we were fucked and were fucking people we've never met in our lives. We just took part in an orgy."

"My God. I can't believe I did all that. What was in that wine?"

"I don't know if it was the wine. Maybe it was just the whole thing, the chanting, the atmosphere, the weirdness of it all. Anyway, we need to get at least an hour's rest before we start to explore this place. When they're all sleeping, we can figure out what to do, get the carriage, the horses, and leave."

"Okay." Cassie stepped out of the dress, which she'd not even bothered hooking up before going back to their room. Leaving the chemise and pantaloons on, she fell on the bed. There was no water left in the pitchers so she couldn't wash. Right now, she longed for a hot bath to wash off the smell of the cum on her body. "One problem. What if we sleep too long? I don't know about you, but I'm beat. We don't have an alarm."

"You're right. I think I can stay awake for a bit while you rest. Then I'll wake you and you can wake me after I rest for a bit."

"Good idea," she said stifling a yawn. Once under the covers, she took off the chemise and pantaloons

and cuddled deep under the blankets. She felt cold suddenly. Still thinking about everything they'd experienced since their arrival in this strange town, she felt herself drifting off.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cassie woke up with a start. What a wicked dream, she thought, before opening her eyes. Then, as she struggled to open her eyelids, and it was a struggle as it felt as if she had a pound of sand in her eyes, as if she hadn't slept for days, she sat up with a shock. She lay on a dusty bed among a heap of tattered blankets and sheets. A cloud of dust caused her to sneeze. To her dismay, she was stark naked. Next to the bed, stretched out on a chair, Braden snored softly. He, too, was naked. Before she decided to wake him up, she had to fight the urge to touch his beautiful body, to touch that flaccid piece of flesh now resting on its nest of curls.

"Braden, wake up," Cassie snapped, impatient now to get going and find a way out of this hellhole place.

Braden, like her, struggled to wake up. "Cassie, it wasn't a dream," he said dazedly.

"I guess not, but I suspect everything else was."

"Like what?"

She felt the blood rush to her cheeks. "Never mind."

"You mean the orgy?"

"Good Lord. We had the same dream again?"

"I guess so."

"That's fucked."

"And that we were, from all sides."

"Braden, shut the fuck up. I don't even want to think about it."

"Okay. We need to find a way out of here. Let's get some clothes on and see if we can find that horse and carriage."

"I need a bath."

"Yeah, well, good luck trying to find some water."

"And get your eyes off me."

Braden grinned from ear to ear. "Well, you're sitting there brazen as hell, your clit staring me in the face, what do you expect?"

She hadn't realized she was sitting spread legged on the side of the bed. Quickly she drew her legs together, but his words had caused a surge of libido to start in the pit of her groin.

"Now is *not* the time. Let's get going." She walked to the cupboard. Its doors were now hanging off their hinges and a bunch of tattered dresses hung inside.

"Okay, I can't wear any of these. Now what?"

"I guess we go back to that store and find you another dress."

"What happened to the one I had on yesterday?"

"Good question."

Cassie pulled one of the dusty, moth eaten sheets off the bed and wrapped it around her body.

"I don't know why you're doing that. Who is going to see you?"

"Those people..."

"I bet none of them will be here right now."

"If you say so, but I'm not taking chances."

"After last night's orgy, I'm surprised at your bashfulness."

"Shut up. Come on, let's go."

After checking out some of the decaying rooms and seeing no one, they made their way gingerly down rickety stairs, stairs that felt they'd collapse under their weight if they weren't careful.

Once outside, they looked around. There wasn't a soul to be seen anywhere. Behind the house, they found the carriage, broken, a wheel missing. The once upon a time barn lay in a heap of wooden, rotting planks, on the dusty, cracked ground.

"So much for a carriage. Wonder where the town is, how far."

Cassie shaded her eyes and looked to the horizon. "I don't see it anywhere. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. We might have no choice but to stay here until help arrives."

"And that could take forever. In the meantime we have no food, no water..."

Braden glanced up at the sun. "It looks to be about midday. When we got here yesterday, it was evening. If this is some kind of crazy time warp that's sending us back and forth, maybe it'll warp again tonight."

"And what do we do meanwhile?"

"Go back to bed I guess."

"Go back to that pile of dust?"

"We could try and clean it up a bit. Shake the dust out at least. I'm still beat."

"So am I. Let's explore the house some more."

Cassie followed Braden back into the house. They explored room for room, the kitchen, then finally they decided to check out the cavern down below. They found the entrance easily but had to be really careful when walking down the steps.

When they got to the entrance to the cavern, the robes all hung neatly on hooks on the wall. As Cassie touched one, it fell to the floor, also tattered and dusted with cobwebs. She clutched the tattered sheet to her breasts. Her backside was bare, as each time she moved too fast, pieces of the sheet fell off.

"Okay, so this was all real. It wasn't a dream," Cassie said as she approached the altar. Gingerly, she picked up the flask sitting on the altar. "This feels full." After pulling the stopper off, she sniffed it. "It's wine."

"Well, at least that will wet the whistle," Braden said, chuckling at her.

"On an empty stomach?"

"Hey, it's better than nothing."

She had to agree, but she knew what wine would do to her if she drank it with no food in her stomach. She drank a few mouthfuls and handed the flask to Braden. He, too, drank from it. Cassie had been right. Within a minute of drinking the wine, she felt giddy.

"Let's go back to bed," she muttered as she made her way back to the entrance.

Braden quickly caught up to her, still carrying the flask. She was very aware of his naked presence right behind her as she went up the stairs. By the time she got to the top, she'd lost the last tattered remains of

the sheet.

She didn't care anymore about her nakedness. Her mind was spinning, she presumed from the wine they'd consumed on an empty stomach. Soon as she got to the room, she didn't even care about the tattered blankets and sheets, or the dust. She just crawled back onto the bed, closed her eyes and drifted off right away.

When she woke up, the room was lit by the oil lamp. Somewhere along the line, someone had put it in their room. Its flame sent eerie shadows on the walls. Again, she felt disoriented, especially when she felt the weight of a body against her and the arm flung across her waist. Braden had decided to sleep on the bed rather than the uncomfortable chair. She couldn't blame him really. Groggily, she sat up and sure enough, the room was the same as it had been the evening before. Gone were the tattered sheets and blankets, gone was all the dust. Everything sparkled and shone as if it had all just been dusted, waxed and cleaned.

She shook her head as if trying to shake away the cobwebs that had accumulated in her brain. That's what her mind felt like. Foggy, strange, spongy. She shook Braden awake. "It's evening. Do we want a repetition of last night?"

"Eh, no, I don't think so."

"I know I don't. But one way or another we need to get out of here, out of this time warp, or whatever it is we're experiencing. How? I bet you Madder has all

the answers for us."

"I agree. He seems to like you, hon. Maybe you should suck up to him a little and see if you can't get that stuff out of him."

"That means probably letting him fuck me."

"And you wouldn't like that?"

"Gimme a break. The man's a fucking creep."

"You wouldn't do anything to get out of this place? If I could fuck him to get information, I would."

"Yeah, right."

"Honey..."

"Since when have I become your *honey*!" she napped.

"Sorry. What I was going to say—if we're patient, if you're patient, maybe we can find the solution to our problem."

"Fuck you. I'm not sleeping with that ghoulish man."

"He's not that bad."

"In your eyes maybe."

"Whatever. I guess we'll be stuck in this time forever then and have orgies every night."

When he mentioned the orgy, she felt a thrill course through her body right down to her clit. Through all the arguing, she hadn't looked at his cock, but now she did and liked what she saw. It was fully engorged. Yeah, he hadn't gone pee yet. Neither had she, but what the hell... She wanted that cock inside her. Now.

"Okay, I'll suck up to the man. On one condition."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck me now."

He didn't need to be told twice. Within seconds his arms were around her pulling her to him, beneath him. He suckled her nipples until they were rock hard, then licked his way up to her lips and traced the shape of her lips with his tongue. "You've got beautiful lips," he murmured against them, "lips made for kissing."

Before she had a chance to say anything, he claimed her lips and his tongue delved deep into her mouth. Thrill upon thrill attacked her as his tongue explored, then sucked her tongue into his mouth. His hands stroked her breasts, her body, then down to her clit. His thumb worked her clit until she spread her legs wide and urged him to enter her. She arched her hips, pushed against his cock, but all he did was slide his cock up and down her slit.

She pulled away from his mouth, those delicious lips. "For God's sake, fuck me. I'm bursting..." she hissed, her breath coming in short ragged bursts.

"Impatient woman," he told her as he licked his way down to her pussy. His teeth nibbled at her clit, then he licked her from top to bottom and back again. His tongue entered her and his lips circled her vagina. He sucked hard. It felt as if her very soul was being sucked into his body, as if they'd nearly become one. She yanked his hair, which had become undone, until he moved on top of her and entered her with one thrust.

"Fuck me, Braden, fuck me like I've never been fucked," she yelled. He slammed into her, again and again. She begged for more even though she'd already come several times. Deep down she knew he

was having trouble coming because of his full bladder, but that was good. That kept him going for a while. When his body finally started to shudder, she placed her hands on his chest and stroked the curly hair on it. "Braden..." she whispered, "Braden, what's happening to us?"

Braden was too intent on releasing his cum into her to answer. With one big shudder, he came. She felt him fill her, felt the creamy cum between her legs, and she sighed, completely content. He lay in her arms for a while and she stroked his hair. What was wrong with her? She'd vowed never to love again. Could she really allow herself to love this man? Would he be faithful to her?

"We need to get up and you have to go charm Madder, seduce him," Braden whispered.

"I can do this all night. Do we have to get up?"

"Yes, you do," a voice spoke from the far corner of the room.

Both Braden and Cassie jumped up. Madder was in the room. How long had he been there? Had he watched them? Had he heard what Braden had told her to do?

"Your questions will be answered in due time," the man said, obviously reading her thoughts again. "I doubt if I can help you get back, but there might be a way."

"And that is?" Cassie asked, while hiding behind Braden's broad back.

"Let me join with you, the way I did with the new woman last night."

I have to drink his cum? No fucking way...

"Yes, that's part of the process. Once you become part of me, I'll be able to take you back to where you belong. But only you, Cassie. Only you."

"You can't do that. Braden needs to go home as well."

"I'm sorry. It will only work for you. Not for Braden."

"Cassie, just do it," Braden hissed. "At least it will or might help you." He turned to Maddie. "Can you guarantee this?"

"I can't guarantee anything."

"How do we know you don't just want her for your own pleasure?"

"You'll have to take that risk."

"Braden, I can't leave you behind."

"Sounds like there isn't much of a choice. Guess I'll be indulging in orgies the rest of my life."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, this is all fucked," she said, and snuggled closer to him.

"That it is, but what can we do?"

"Right now, I'd like you to make love to Cassie again. I thoroughly enjoyed watching your last episode."

He *had* been watching them. Cassie shuddered. "No, I need to use the commode and I'd really like to bathe."

"As you wish. I'll have Mammy bring you towels and water. I'll see you in the dining room in an hour. Oh, and, Cassie, I'd like you to wear this gown." Reaching into the cupboard, he pulled out a magnificent white gown. Its jewels sparkled in the dim light, its lace a frothy white.

He left the room and then Cassie couldn't hold her tears back any longer. She buried her face against Braden's back and sobbed.

Braden turned around and gathered her into his arms. "Don't cry, honey. At least you'll have a fighting chance of getting back."

"I don't want to leave you."

"Does that mean you've grown to care for me? Just a little bit?"

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "I don't want to."

"Forget about Jason. Not all men are like that. I've waited until I found the right woman to commit to a serious relationship. Now I've found her. Cassie, will you marry me?"

"Isn't that a little soon?"

"We've known each other for quite a while through the office. It's not as if we're strangers, hon."

"I know, but..."

"Do I get an answer? Maybe Maddie will throw us the wedding we'll never forget."

"Yeah, right. I'd almost forgotten about him. I can say yes... but if you get left behind, what's the use?"

"Let's just pretend for a little while. Now how about getting washed up and dressed. I'm starving. Hopefully, he's got a nice spread laid out, like last night."

"When do you think he'll want to do the ceremony that will make me part of him? I dread the thought though."

"I don't know. He didn't say. Once again, we need to exercise patience."

"Not one of my virtues."

"You're wrong."

"Braden, you really don't know me."

"I've watched you for quite a while at the office, and before your unfortunate breakup with your ex, you exercised quite a lot of patience, especially with new staff members."

"Maybe I've changed."

"I don't think so. You've just harbored a lot of pain. Your way of retaliation was to slash back at the whole world around you, forgetting that Jason wasn't the only fish in the sea. Cliché, I know, but it's true."

Without knocking on the door, Mammy entered the room carrying two fresh pitchers filled with water and fresh towels tucked under her arm. She put them on the cupboard and removing the used ones, took them with her. Not saying a word, or even glancing at them, she left the room again.

This time Cassie wasn't bashful about being naked in front of Braden. Matter of fact, she rather enjoyed his gaze on her body and when he suggested he wash her back, she readily agreed. Except he didn't stop at her back. The sponge continued, down the crack between her buttocks, then between her legs. She drew her breath in sharply as his fingers continued the soapy massage. When his fingers stole into her vagina, she let her breath out and tried to turn around.

"Just stay as you are and enjoy," Braden whispered against her neck. His breath was warm on her neck, his lips nibbling. He pushed her forward and made her bend over, then spread her legs with his knee. She

heard him grab the bowl and pitcher and soon saw it between her legs. Water spilled down her crack, her slit, washing the soap off. It felt soooo good. And he didn't stop there. Once he'd rinsed her off, his cock entered her in one swift thrust. His hands were now on her hips pulling her tightly against his groin as he slammed into her.

She was thankful that this was a century where cameras were non existent or she'd be afraid that Madder was watching them on some screen somewhere. That suddenly caused her to have a frightening thought. What if this was all some sort of virtual sex game? Nah, that couldn't be. They had been after all on their way to Amarillo. Or was that also part of it all? Was anything even real? Would she wake up soon in her own bed and as usual, get ready to go to work?

Her mind didn't dwell on the thought for very long as Braden continued to fuck her. She felt his balls slapping against her, causing her to come. It didn't take long for him to come as well. She felt the shuddering of his body and held her breath, then let it out when she felt his seed spill inside. "Ooooooh, Braden," she yelled.

"Ssssh, we don't want Madder here demanding another performance, do we?"

"Eh, no..."

"Stay there and I'll wash you off."

Again he lathered her with soap and washed her gently. She just loved his hands on her body, his gentle fingers, and was sorry when he finally took the bowl away.

“There, all clean and smelling fresh now. We’d best get dressed and get ready for dinner.”

She didn’t want to get dressed. She just wanted to stay there with him all night and make love. But she knew they had to. She had a task ahead of her, a task she didn’t relish.

CHAPTER SIX

Just like the night before, they were the first ones to enter the dining room. Madder was already there waiting, drinking a glass of ruby red wine from a sparkling crystal glass.

"Cassie, my dear, you look breathtaking," he drooled. "Let me pour you some of our own wine."

"Your own?"

"Made from our own grapes."

"Interesting."

"I'll have to take you to our vineyard some time in the near future."

A vineyard here in Texas? Cassie thought it highly unlikely. Then again, the man was full of surprises. Maybe he had holdings in California.

She wore the dress he'd picked out for her when he'd visited their room. After she'd put on the gown, she'd looked in the mirror and felt like a princess in a fairy tale. A nervous blush painted her cheeks a deep rose and her eyes glittered. Even though she wore no makeup, it didn't matter. She looked beautiful. She felt beautiful. Braden told her that she took his breath away, that she looked like a bride.

Yeah...right. Bride? As if she wanted to look like a bride for Madder. Because of the dress, she suspected that he wanted to do the ceremony that night. It scared her, caused her heart to speed up to a crescendo until she could hear her heartbeat in her ears.

Dinner sped by in a total haze. She could barely eat and picked at the food on her plate. To calm her nerves, she gulped down the wine and didn't protest when Madder replenished her goblet. She drank that one fast, too, and then a third, until she felt the calming effect of the alcohol.

"Guests, I'd like to toast our special guest of this evening. To Cassie..." Madder took her hand and urged her to stand. "And now, let us proceed to the special ceremony of this evening."

Cassie glanced at Braden who gave her a look of encouragement. She knew what he was saying without saying it. "Seduce the man, Cassie. See if he can indeed release you from this warp in time." She nodded and sent him a smile.

The night was a complete repetition from the night before, except this time, Madder didn't disappear. Instead, two robed men led her to join Madder. They removed her robe and helped her onto the altar. The wine had dulled her senses, but she still couldn't help but shudder inwardly. To lie spread eagled before all those eyes, to have them gaze at her pussy, her vagina, this invasion of her privacy was just a bit much. But, anything to get out of this place, so she endured their hands parting her legs and spreading them as wide as possible. Two others stood at the

head and held her wrists and a fifth stood behind the altar, behind her head.

Just like he'd done to the girl the previous night, Madder dropped his robe and came toward her with his huge erection. His cock paused for a moment before he entered her. His eyes held her gaze and seemed to almost hypnotize her. He thrust into her with one big thrust, never touching her with his hands. Only his cock moved inside her steadily, stretching her. It had to be the biggest tool she'd ever seen or felt. She closed her eyes and imagined this to be Braden. Braden's cock deep inside her, Braden slamming into her. Madder withdrew and she knew what would come next.

Two hands held her head steady and someone pinched her nose so she'd open her mouth. The goblet hovered over her mouth. She couldn't help but open her eyes and look. The liquid slowly dripped from the goblet into her mouth, slid down her throat. Drop by drop until she had swallowed it all.

Released now, Madder lifted her from the altar. Holding her in the small of her back and between her crotch, he lifted her very high above his head. Cassie felt scared. What was he going to do? Smash her on the rock floor below? "What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Sssh, I am claiming you as my bride," he said in a soft tone, then started to chant in a foreign tongue while he slowly spun around.

She felt dizzy, very dizzy. But suddenly he stopped and set her on the floor. "And now, my love, you shall join me as we recruit yet another for our town."

"What do you mean?"

"You shall see."

Still holding her hand, he started to chant again. Louder and louder. The congregation chimed in. The chants were pounding inside her head until she felt like covering her ears and running away screaming.

Then suddenly they were somewhere else completely. Away from the cavern, away from the chanting crowd. Dazed, Cassie looked around. She saw cars, modern cars, driven by people. A town. They were in a modern day town. Realizing that she was naked, she covered herself, waiting for people to stare at her. But people didn't stare. They walked right past her.

Madder laughed. "They can't see you, my dear. Don't worry about your lack of attire."

Okay. So she was in the modern world and no one could see her. What the hell good would that do? How could she get help this way? "You said you'd help me return," she yelled at him.

"I said I'd try. I never promised anything, or don't you remember?"

She did remember. "What did you do to me? Did you suck the soul from my body so I'd live with you forever?"

Again that satanic laugh. "You are mine now. You'll do my bidding. Come, we have work to do."

Like hell, buddy. But she followed him. They seemed to glide, rather than walk. From what she read on signs, they were in Amarillo, the town Braden and she had headed for. What was Madder up to? How could he travel back and forth in time like this

without anyone seeing him? How had he made her invisible?

The questions plagued her mind until she had a major headache. Madder led her to a park. Several young women were sitting on the grass, laughing and chattering. They looked to be on their lunch break.

"See that one with the red hair? She's the one I want."

"And how do you aim to do that?"

"Just watch and learn, my dear. Feel honored. You're the only one I've ever taken on one of these adventures."

From the other side of the park a sheriff approached the girls. "Howdy, Flo. Gloria, Debbie, how's things?"

"Hi Sheriff," the girls said in unison. They looked to be in their early twenties.

The Sheriff walked away again, waving happily at the girls.

Madder followed him, so Cassie did the same. "What do you want with the sheriff?"

"He's one of my followers. Just wait and see. Don't be so impatient. He'll be off duty soon."

Sure enough, the sheriff's day was over and he headed for home. Madder and Cassie followed him into an urban style house. Just a normal house like any other house on the street. Cassie had no idea what they were doing there, or why Madder was following the sheriff around. All she could do was wait and see.

The sheriff's name was Bob, Madder told her. Bob took his uniform off and after fetching a beer from the

fridge, went to the bathroom. Cassie wasn't really interested in watching a man on the toilet reading a newspaper and drinking a beer, so she wandered around the house. Like the outside of it, the inside was just as ordinary. Typical bachelor style furniture, no frills, no pictures, she found the house quite bare.

"Don't you want to watch him shower?" Madder's voice sounded behind her.

"No thanks."

"I think you should. That's where you will learn why we're here."

Against her better judgment, she followed him into the bathroom. Bob was already under the shower. Madder grinned.

"Watch."

She did and within seconds, Madder seemed to turn into a puff of smoke that funneled into the man's mouth. *He's taken possession of Bob's body...*

Bob turned the shower off and looked at her. "There, Cassie, now you know how it's done."

"Madder..."

"Yes, it's me. Bob is asleep for now."

"What is the purpose of all this?"

"Come with me."

She followed him and watched him get dressed, then out to the car. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He drove to a bar. She heard the music as they pulled up and watched as some drunk people left the bar. "What are you going to do in a bar?"

"I'm not going into the bar. I'm going to wait for one of the young ladies to leave the bar."

"Oh, what fun this is. Sitting outside a bar waiting."

"Sleep if you like."

"I'm not tired right now."

"Then do whatever you want. Just as long as you stay close to me."

More than anything, Cassie wanted to escape, to find the nearest bus, get on it and go home. But since no one could see her, what was the use? She needed to find out how Madder controlled this time travel. He had to have some kind of machine somewhere, a computer, a time machine. Maybe the altar had something to do with it?

She spent most of the time they waited, thinking. Patience, Braden had told her. It was hard to be patient when one's whole life was turned upside down. But she had no choice.

Finally the bar started to empty of people. Taxis drove up to pick up the drunks. Cassie found it strange that no one greeted Bob the sheriff.

"I made the car invisible, my dear."

"Oh... you can do that?"

"I can do anything I want."

Finally, a girl came out of the bar. She leaned heavily on a young man's arm. It was the one called Gloria, the lovely redhead.

"Ah, there she is." Madder got out of the car and walked toward the couple. They couldn't see him of course. Cassie held her breath as Madder boldly walked up to them, placed his hand on the young man's forehead causing him to fall to the ground, passed out. Or at least, Cassie thought he'd passed

out.

"Paul, get up you crazy idiot! Fuck, now what am I gonna do? Fuck you," Gloria shouted and turned around. This time she could see Madder.

"Bob, how nice to see you. Would you be a sweetie and give me a ride?"

"Sure, honey," Madder drawled.

"Oh, you're such a sweetheart. No wonder everyone adores you," Gloria purred.

Madder opened the front door of the car. Cassie glanced around. There wasn't a soul in sight. Madder seemed to know exactly what he was doing. She quickly climbed over the back of the seat into the back. "Madder, how often do you do this?"

"Oh, on a regular basis," he whispered.

"What did you say, hon?" Gloria asked.

"How lovely you look tonight."

"Oh, how sweet. I should reward you for that."

The car purred to life and they pulled away from the curb. Cassie saw Gloria mover over to sit close to Madder, then she heard the zipper of his pants and she knew what the girl was up to.

"Gloria, how about we go back to my place for a bit. I have beer in the fridge."

"Oh yeah, sheriff. Sounds great. Let me play with you and get you going while you drive," she said, drool dribbling down her chin.

What did Madder see in this woman? Admittedly, she was quite pretty when sober, but right now she was just a drunk who didn't know what the hell she was doing.

Pulling into Bob's garage, Madder helped Gloria

out of the car and into the house. Cassie followed. Once inside the house, Madder quickly started to tear at the woman's clothing. Gloria didn't care. She was far too drunk to care. When she kept begging for a beer, Madder cursed, but got her one from the fridge. Gloria stood naked, but Madder only held her at arm's length.

"What's the matter, baby? Let me get that cock of yours going. Take your pants off," Gloria sulked.

A bright light shone from the man's eyes, so bright that Cassie had to step back. Now what was Madder doing? Then, a wreathlike puff of smoke curled from his mouth and straight into Gloria's mouth. The woman's eyes closed slowly, her skin turned a waxen white and she crumpled to the floor.

Within seconds, Madder had left Bob's body and stood beside her. "Good. Now we have to get rid of her body. She can't stay here or I'll never be able to use Bob again."

"How did he become one of your disciples?"

"Oh, I didn't show you. Quickly, come with me." He led her down some stairs to a basement. To her astonishment, the basement had been turned into a coven. A pentagram had been etched into the floor. An altar stood at the far end. Black candles were everywhere. Black curtains covered the walls. Bob, the sheriff, had summoned Madder, she realized, and that's how Madder could take possession of Bob's body so easily. The man was a Satan worshipper.

Madder grinned from ear to ear at what must have been a horrified expression on her face. Suddenly she realized how all those girls had been murdered. She'd

solved the case, but had no way of telling anyone.

"Wouldn't you just love to phone your newspaper with this tidbit? You see, besides the women I take, there are many more bodies buried in the desert. I found Bob one night when he was calling my name. The stupid old fool was in the process of sacrificing a virgin. That's when I decided he could be very useful to me."

Now he'd never let her and Braden return. If they even could. This was no time travel, no time warp. Only the devil himself could turn into a wisp of smoke and enter another's body. Only Satan could appear and disappear at will.

Madder picked up Gloria as if she weighed nothing. He blinked and within seconds they were outside the town out in the desert. Unceremoniously, he dumped Gloria's body on the ground. Placing his hand on the unconscious woman's forehead, he chanted. Within seconds, a form appeared to rise from Gloria's body. It took a few minutes for it to solidify, but then Gloria stood before them, quite naked, quite beautiful, and completely docile. Without blinking an eyelid she glanced down at the dead woman on the ground. It didn't seem to bother her at all that she was now dead and in the power of the devil himself.

"Come, children, let us return. My congregation awaits us impatiently."

Before Cassie realized, they stood before the people and Gloria lay on the altar. Cassie knew what Madder would do and she closed her eyes. To make Gloria completely his, she had to go through the ceremony.

But the girl didn't seem to care at all.

Cassie looked for Braden and finally spotted him in the third row. For a moment jealousy entered her as she knew that Braden must have participated in an orgy while they were gone. But then, she'd allowed Madder to fuck her to see if she could find the solution to them returning home. And all she'd done was finally solved the murders.

And there was no one to tell, except Braden.

It was finally over. Yanking the robe over her head, she went to join Braden, but Madder stopped her. "No, my love, you are now mine and you shall rest beside me."

Oh, my God, now what do I do? She had little choice. His hand was on her arm and felt like an iron band. He led her to another part of the mansion, into a room that was decorated completely in black and red. Black candles burned softly, their flickering flames dancing shadows throughout the room.

"Come, Cassie, let us rest. It will soon be dawn."

He almost forced her down on the big bed. Reluctantly she lay down and wondered if she'd have to suffer his body again. But she was wrong. Apparently dawn had set in. Madder lay beside her and within seconds disappeared. Slowly, the room turned into a decaying mess, just like the other rooms.

Without waiting any longer, Cassie jumped off the bed and ran from the room. She had to search to find the room she and Braden occupied, and finally found it. She almost burst into the room and ran directly to

the bed, to Braden's arms.

"Cassie, honey, I was so worried about you."

"Braden, I think we're dead," she said in between sobs.

"What makes you think that?"

"Madder is the devil himself. He's the killer. Or at least, the sheriff is the killer, and..."

"Honey, calm down. You're not making any sense. Tell me everything that's happened," Braden said in a soothing voice, stroking her hair as if she were a little girl.

She told him everything in between tears and choked back sobs. "So that means we're dead as well. Otherwise, how could we be here?"

Braden frowned down at her. "If we're dead and ended up in this pit of hell, then there has to be a way to get out. Maybe we've done something wrong in our lives that caused us to end up here. We'll have to think hard and repent for any wrongdoings we did during our lifetime. I can't think of any other solution."

"First we have to get out of this place. During the day they're not here. We can start walking, even if it's a desert. After all, we can't die anymore."

"So Madder disappeared soon as daylight came?"

"Yes."

"Then how come we don't disappear?"

She hadn't thought about that. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore except that I think we're going crazy or something."

"Don't be silly. Here, come and let me dry your tears."

"I feel so dirty. I wish I could have a bath, a wash, anything."

"I know, honey. So do I. But we'd have to wait until tonight for pitchers of water. Do you really want to start walking into the desert?"

"Yes. Anything to get away from this place."

"Okay. But let me hold you a while first."

Still shaking, she lay in his arms until finally she felt safe again. Braden kissed her gently, lovingly. "If we're going to do this, we should start now," he said softly against her lips.

She nodded. "Okay, let's go then."

They got up off the bed and carefully made their way out of the decaying house. The sun felt hot on Cassie's skin, but she didn't care. After all, ghosts couldn't get sunburned could they? Placing her hand in Braden's, she pulled him toward the rusty gates.

Once outside the gates, they faced the endless desert. It seemed hopeless to even contemplate it, but it was better than going through another night inside Madder's home. And maybe they'd find the ghost town again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed as if they'd walked for hours. Cassie's feet were sore, but when she looked at them she saw no dirt, no blisters. "Braden, I need to sit for a while."

He stopped and nodded. "We've covered quite a bit of ground. I see some rocks over there. We can sit on those."

She followed him to the rocks and when they got there, found them too hot for their bare skin to handle. Everything was too hot. The sand below their feet, the rocks, the very air they breathed.

"Braden, I don't know if this is any use. Why don't we just give up?"

"Never. Come here, let me hold you."

She crept into the circle of his arms and gladly received his lips. His kiss deepened, but it was the kiss of love, not of desire. A tear trickled down her cheek. Braden licked it off, then kissed her eyes. "Cassie, I love you," he said softly.

"And I love you, Braden."

"Strange how we had to find each other this way."

"Yes. Kiss me again? I feel very strange suddenly."

Braden claimed her lips again and she closed her

mind to all thought except his kiss. Somewhere vaguely in the distance she heard him suddenly calling her name.

"Cassie...don't leave me. Cassie... Cassie..."

Cassie struggled awake. Man alive, she hurt all over. It felt as if she'd been run over by a train. The sun, the forever hot sun. Quickly she closed her eyes, then tried to open them again. "Braden, did I faint?"

"Cassie, oh, my dear Cassie, I'm so glad you're coming out of it."

What the fuck was that? Jason's voice? That couldn't be. "Get out," she mumbled.

Finally she managed to open her eyes completely. "Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital."

"The hospital? But I'm dead."

"No, you're not dead. Let me get the nurse," Jason said.

Jason. What the hell was Jason doing in this nightmare? How did he enter into it all? The hospital? Maybe this was another stop on her way to a better place. Did they have hospitals in the hereafter?

A nurse approached her bed. "Good afternoon, Miss Sanderson. You've finally returned to the real world."

"Huh?"

"I've already called the doctor. He'll be in to see you shortly and he'll explain."

"Braden?"

"Braden Miller, your companion is still in a coma.

We hope he'll return to us soon as well. Oh, here is Doctor Short. I'll leave you in his capable hands."

"Miss Sanderson, nice to meet you."

"Hello. The name is Cassie. How did I get here?"

"You and Braden Miller were caught in a twister. It mangled your car. Miraculously, the two of you survived, but not without some broken bones and other injuries."

"But we were in a ghost town, and later..."

"No, my dear. You were found and brought to the hospital soon as the twister moved north. No ghost towns."

Cassie frowned. It was still all too vivid in her mind. So she wasn't dead... Braden wasn't dead. Both of them were very much alive. Then everything she had experienced, they had experienced was really a dream? "What town is this?"

"You're in Amarillo."

"How long?"

"You've been unconscious three days. Mr. Miller's injuries were a bit more severe. He's still in a coma, but it's a light coma. We're hoping he'll come out of it soon."

For the first time she noticed the cast on her arm. "I broke an arm?"

"And a few ribs. Be careful laughing, coughing, and moving. Broken ribs are quite painful, but unfortunately, there's nothing much we can do for them except tell the patient to take it easy and let them heal."

"I need to talk to a policeman."

"Really? Why don't you wait until you're feeling

better."

"No, I need to talk to someone now."

"I'll call the sheriff."

"No. Not him. Actually, did you find my purse at all?"

"Yes, your purse was in the wreck of the car, along with your and Mr. Miller's belongings. We've put them all in storage for you."

"In my purse is a card. I need to call the FBI."

"Now is not a good time. You need to rest and heal."

"It's very important. It has to do with the murders that have been happening in this area. Braden Miller and I were coming here to investigate them."

"Cassie, you've hardly been able to investigate anything. You arrived in Amarillo in an ambulance. So why would you want to talk to the feds now?"

"There's something I do know and have to tell them as soon as possible. Please, I need my purse. I need that card, and I need a phone. Would you cooperate with me? Or would you like to see another young woman die?"

The doctor hesitated, but then nodded. "I'll have the nurse fetch your purse for you. But please, you do need to take it easy for at least a few more days."

"How long before my arm heals?"

"It was a bad break. It needs to stay in the cast for at least six weeks."

"How badly is Braden hurt?"

"Mr. Miller suffered a broken leg, and the skull fracture, and multiple abrasions and cuts. He's in worse shape than you."

"I'd like to see him."

"Maybe tomorrow. Patience, Cassie. Braden Miller isn't going to run away any time soon."

Patience... hadn't Braden told her that over and over again? Would the FBI laugh at her if she told them who she thought the killer was? She could hardly tell them about Madder, about the ghost town, the house, the orgies... At that thought her face grew hot. God, she had to be sex starved or something to dream such things. Then again, it had all been so very real. The sheriff of all people. Of course they couldn't find a killer. Who would suspect the sheriff?

Gingerly, she moved her legs. They felt kind of sore, but otherwise fine. With her good hand she threw the blankets back and leaned on an elbow to examine her legs. Scratches and abrasions, but otherwise they were good. Her right arm was good, too. Fortunately it was her left arm that was broken. As she moved again, a sharp pain shot through her side. The broken ribs. She had to be careful how she moved around.

The nurse returned with her purse. "We really need to keep your purse in our safe, Miss. You shouldn't have your wallet and valuables here."

"That's fine. You can take it back to the safe as soon as I get out of it what I want. I'd like a telephone, and I'd like to sit up please."

She dug in her purse for her card wallet. It was a miracle that their belongings survived the twister and had stayed in the trunk of the car. "I've got what I need. Thank you very much. You can take the purse back to the safe now."

"I'll bring you a telephone after the doctor tells me it's okay. And sitting up will hurt your ribs more."

"I've suffered a broken rib before, so that's okay, I know how to deal with it and know it's painful. I'll live. I'm just thankful I survived the twister. That's a miracle in itself."

"You were both very lucky to have been flung out of the car and clear of the path of the twister. The car was carried quite a ways down."

"I wonder how soon I'll be allowed out of bed. I forgot to ask the doctor."

"You've just woken up from a three day sleep. He'll want you to rest for a day or so."

"I really want to see Mr. Miller. Could you put me in a wheel chair and take me to him? Oh, and I'm dying of thirst."

"I'm so sorry, Miss. I'll get you some water right away and I'll ask the doctor about taking you to see Mr. Miller."

"Tell him I'll get out of this bed on my own so I can go and see him."

"I don't think the doctor will take kindly to that, Miss."

"Okay, then don't tell him."

"Miss, you need to heal. Be patient."

Dammit, how many more people were going to tell her that. She needed to go and see the man she loved.

Loved?

Okay, how did that happen?

All through a dream?

Cassie, you're losing it, girl. She'd never had the patience to lie in a bed, not even with the worst flu.

She'd curl up on the couch, yes, with her laptop, but an actual bed? Hell, people die in beds.

Slowly, it came back to her. The diner, Braden and she making love in the car. Is that what had led to the dreams? Then what about the sheriff? What if she told the FBI about Bob's basement and there was nothing there? She'd look like an utter fool. Then again, she wasn't in any shape to do investigations herself and she didn't want another woman killed. She had to confide in someone. Had to tell someone.

The local newspaper. Maybe they had an investigative reporter on the case. She was sure they had to have once. Maybe he or she would help her. She would share the glory of the story. Oh hell, Braden was part of it, too. He'd get part of the glory as well.

She rang for the nurse. "How about that telephone? And could you get me a local telephone book please?"

Maybe she'd had a psychic experience. So many people didn't believe in psychic phenomena. It would be just her luck to have a reporter who was a total unbeliever. Although the story she had to tell *was* going to sound totally unbelievable.

The nurse returned with a telephone and a phone book. "The doctor said it was okay but he really doesn't want you to exert yourself. I'll fetch you some water now. Or would you prefer apple juice?"

"Water will do fine. Thank you. Oh, and I'd like to get that TV hooked up." Cassie pointed to the little TV hanging above her head.

"I can arrange that for you. They need an upfront deposit though."

"That's fine. I have money in my purse."

An hour later she had a reporter coming to see her. Her TV was hooked up, and she could call her paper if she needed to with her story. Her laptop. Dammit, it probably hadn't survived the twister.

The reporter's name was Harry Coleman. A pleasant man in his mid forties, he greeted her. "Miss Sanderson? Pleased to meet you." He shook her hand so hard, she had to wince.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a believer in a firm handshake. I can't stand people with sloppy handshakes."

"Call me Cassie. Harry, before I tell you my story, I have to ask you. Do you believe in the supernatural? Psychic phenomena?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because if you don't, it's no use me telling you my story."

"Matter of fact I do. I believe in ghosts, UFO's, everything."

"Good. Then I can get started. Oh, and do you have a laptop I can borrow in case we break this story wide open?"

"Yes, I have a spare at the office I could lend you."

"Fantastic. Okay, let's get started, and please don't laugh."

"I promise I won't."

She told him the whole story. Well, almost the whole story. She left out the part of the orgies."

"My God. Our sheriff? Bob? It seems unbelievable."

"Can you investigate it? You'd need to get into his house and look in his basement. If that part is true, so

is the rest.”

“I’ll get right on it. I’ll do anything to help break this case wide open and put the killer behind bars.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next day Harry returned. He entered the room a big grin on his face. "You were right. He's got some kind of worshipping room down there. Looks like satanic stuff. Exactly as you described it."

"So now we can call the FBI. It might take a few days, a week, before they can actually prove anything, but hopefully they'll put him behind bars in time before another woman is killed." She promptly picked up the phone and dialed the number on the card. Within minutes she had the FBI's attention as she told them her story and that Harry had checked out Bob's basement. They thanked her and told her they'd be in touch.

She knew the FBI. They were always very cautious, but she knew they'd be back in Amarillo within a very short time and right on the case. Bob's days were numbered. They *had* to be numbered.

"Harry, as soon as the FBI cracks this case we need to get this story in the papers before anyone else. Did you bring me the laptop?"

"Yes ma'am. You'll have difficulty typing with one hand, though. How about if you dictate to me and I'll

type for you? We could share the same story you know."

"Yes, that we could. And don't forget. My partner in crime, Braden Miller, is part of this, too."

"Okay, how about if I come back this afternoon? I'll let you rest for a while."

Could she trust this man? She looked at his kindly face, the honest blue eyes, and she knew she could. "Sounds good."

After Harry left, she carefully swung one leg out of bed, then the other. Groaning at the aches throughout her body, she managed to get onto the floor. Just then the nurse walked into the room.

"Miss Sanderson, what are you doing?"

"Getting out of bed. I hate lying in bed. That's where people die. And I want to go and see Mr. Miller."

The nurse sighed, obviously frustrated with her. "I'll go and get you a wheelchair. You shouldn't be walking around yet."

"Thank you." She did feel kind of wobbly on her legs. Six weeks to heal...damn. Oh well, Braden was in worse shape. At least she could walk.

The nurse returned with the wheelchair. "I'll take you to his room, but you can't stay very long."

"That's okay. As long as I get to see him."

Braden's room wasn't far from hers. She noted the number on the door. Three eleven. The nurse wheeled her close to the bed and her heart somersaulted when she saw his pale face against the white of the pillows, his hair spread out, his lips slightly parted. "Would you leave me alone with him please?"

The nurse nodded. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

Cassie took Braden's hand between hers and held it tight. She kissed each finger. This man had stirred her heart, even if it was in a dream. No, he'd made fantastic love to her in the car... Man, she was confused. Her heart felt love at the sight of him, touching his hand, and she wanted to kiss him. Placing his hand on the bed, she carefully stood up. Even though it hurt her ribs like hell, she bent over the bed and kissed him on the lips. "Braden Miller, it's time you woke up. Dammit, I can't write this story alone. I need your help."

What was she thinking? Even though she had the psychic experience, doesn't mean he had it as well. For a moment she rested her cheek against his. His stubbly beard pricked her skin. "You need to shave, Miller. Fancy coming to work this way."

A soft groan came from his throat. Or did she imagine it. Yanking her head away from his face, she gazed down at him. "Braden, wake up. It's me. Cassie."

His eyelids fluttered. Yes... they opened and he stared at her. "Cassie?"

"Yes," she said, "You silly fool."

"Fool? Where am I?"

"The hospital."

"Hospital? What..."

"We were caught in a twister and thrown clear of the car. We're kinda broken up and scratched, but we'll survive."

"Cassie, what about Madder?"

Damn, he really *did* share the dream with her. How

was that possible? "Madder needs to be stopped. I have a local reporter helping me to investigate."

"Good. Cassie, I love you..." and then his eyelids closed and he slept again.

Cassie rang for the nurse who came rushing in. "Mr. Miller opened his eyes and spoke to me," she told her.

The nurse looked at her disbelievingly. "You're imagining things."

"No, it's true."

The nurse moved to the other side of the bed and lifted Braden's eyelid. "Mm, his pupils are back to normal."

"Don't..." Braden murmured and tried to turn around, but of course the broken leg inhibited him.

"See, I told you," Cassie told the nurse triumphantly.

After the nurse helped Cassie back to her room and on the bed, she pondered. Stop Madder? Was it even possible? Was Madder really Lucifer? The Devil? If so, nothing could stop him. The only thing that could be done was if the FBI arrested Bob and put him away for good. No one would believe his fantastic tale anyway... The Devil made me do it...

Well, indeed the Devil made him do it. She could testify to that, so could Braden, but again, no one would believe them.

* * * *

A week later, the FBI had arrested Bob who confessed the ritual killings. Of course he remembered nothing

of the other girls because he'd been possessed by Madder. But the fact that the man would be behind bars was good enough for Cassie and Braden.

Harry and Braden worked together to get the story to the papers while she dictated.

"Harry, since you're into psychic phenomena, do you have an explanation for our mutual dreams?"

"Yes, I do. And don't laugh about this."

"Fess up."

"Since you were both in a light coma, I think you left your bodies. So basically, it was your spirits wandering around in the desert, the ghost town and dealing with the Madder demon. It might seem like a dream, but what you experienced was very real. For both of you."

"That sounds like a better explanation than sharing the same dream," Braden said. "Cassie, I do vividly recall asking you to marry me, and I never got an answer from you."

She started to laugh. "How about we both get better first and then you can ask me again in the real world..."

EPilogue

Yes, my answer is yes, now get up,” Cassie shouted at Braden who was on his knee in front of her in the middle of the office. Their coworkers cheered loudly as he got up and took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. He dug in his pocket and produced a beautiful ring, an emerald set in diamonds.

“How did you know my favorite stone is the emerald?”

“I did my homework,” he said with a wicked grin. “Now how about a wedding date?”

“Tomorrow?”

He laughed. “Honey, I want you to have the wedding of your life. Let’s go home and we can discuss this further.”

“I have to finish that story that...”

“No way in hell. I can think of better things to do. Come on, let’s go and celebrate.”

How he had managed it, she had no idea. When she opened the door to her apartment, there were candles everywhere, white candles. They’d been lit. Her bedroom, too, was filled with burning candles.

Everywhere she looked she saw carnations. Gorgeous arrangements, vases filled with carnations in all colors. Real ones, not the fake colored ones they sold in the stores now, which she hated. Pretty pinks, reds, white. How the hell did he know? "You could have burned the place down," she said softly.

"No, hon. I had the super come in to light the candles. While you were getting your stuff at the office, I quickly called him."

"Sneaky. It's beautiful, Braden. Almost like a wedding night."

"Oh, forgot to tell you. I invited some friends over to celebrate with us. Thought we'd have an orgy or two."

She hit him then. "Fuck you, Braden Miller. I'm trying to forget about that stuff."

"Hell yeah, we need to. Tell me, hon, is there anything we learned from all this?"

She thought for a moment, but not for long. "I learned to love again and I think I've learned to be more patient."

"That's a fact. And I learned that not all women are total flirts and only after a man for his looks."

"Hey, but looks do help," she said jokingly.

"You never even noticed them until we traveled to ghost city."

"Lucifer's Nest. I'll never forget that name, and yes, I did notice your pretty face, but wouldn't give in to your flirtatious side."

"It took us to tread on forbidden ground to find each other. That's quite something."

He took her in his arms then and started fiddling

with her jacket. "How about a glass of champagne?"

"Let me shower first and get comfortable."

"Sounds like a plan."

Never in her life had she thought Braden, the total flirt, could be so romantic, so loving and thoughtful. She took her clothes off and put them in the wash basket, then went to the bathroom and turned the shower on. Stepping under the warm water, she allowed her mind to dwell for just a bit on everything that had happened. It had been seven weeks now since their trip to Amarillo. Both of them had healed, and during their convalescence, they had grown even closer and their love had deepened. Briefly, Madder entered her mind. Bob was gone, nicely put away in a locked cell. He was no longer a host for the demon. But Madder still roamed the Earth and he had the power to go back and forth through time. What if he found another devil worshipping fool? Quickly, she shook the morbid thought out of her head and poured shampoo on her hair.

"Would you like me to do that for you?" Braden's deep voice murmured near her ear. His fingers were on her head and within seconds he was massaging her scalp.

"Oooh, you can keep that up for a while," she said softly.

"But I have other things in mind I'd like to massage. First...here, have a sip of this."

He reached beyond the shower curtain and produced a glass of champagne.

"Mmm, that's good." She took a few more sips, then shook her head.

Braden put the glass back, then grabbed the soap and soaped her body. When he got to her pussy, he took extra care soaping in between all the folds, and then her crack. By this time she was so on fire, she wanted him, needed him. It had been too long since the last time they'd had sex. Braden's and her casts had only come off a week ago. Her ribs finally felt normal again... and Braden's headaches had disappeared. They were ready. More than ready.

She knelt on the shower floor and tenderly licked his cock. He was hard, he was ready for her, she knew, but she wanted to taste him first. Taste that first drop of precum, suck the velvety head and tease him with her tongue. She took him into her mouth and sucked while stroking the skin back and forth, but that's not what Braden wanted. He wanted her in his arms and made it clear by pulling her up. "We can do this later, sweetheart. Now, I want you in my arms, to make love to you tenderly, I want you to feel all the love I carry for you in my heart."

Reaching behind her he turned the shower off, then opened the curtain and yanked the towels off the rack. After toweling her dry, and himself, he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She noticed the rose petals strewn over the sheets. "I never knew you were such a romantic."

"You made me so. I didn't know either," he said, but before she could say anything, he claimed her lips and lowered her to the bed. Holding her tightly in his arms, his tongue danced with hers, then as he sucked her tongue into his mouth, his knee separated her legs and his cock found its home. He dove into her, not

urgently, but sweetly, lovingly. His strokes were sure, slow, so slow that she thought she'd surely die. She tried to urge him on, but he wouldn't have it. Each time she tried, he'd withdraw a little. When he leaned on his hands and hovered over her, looking down at her body, she tried to arch up. She could see his cock moving in and out of her, could feel as he rubbed it against her clit. It throbbed, oh it throbbed so hard. His wonderful head descended to her breasts and she screamed as he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. "Oh God, Braden, harder, fuck me harder...like before...please... fuck me, fuck me..."

"Patience, honey, patience...this is but the first day of the rest of our lives."