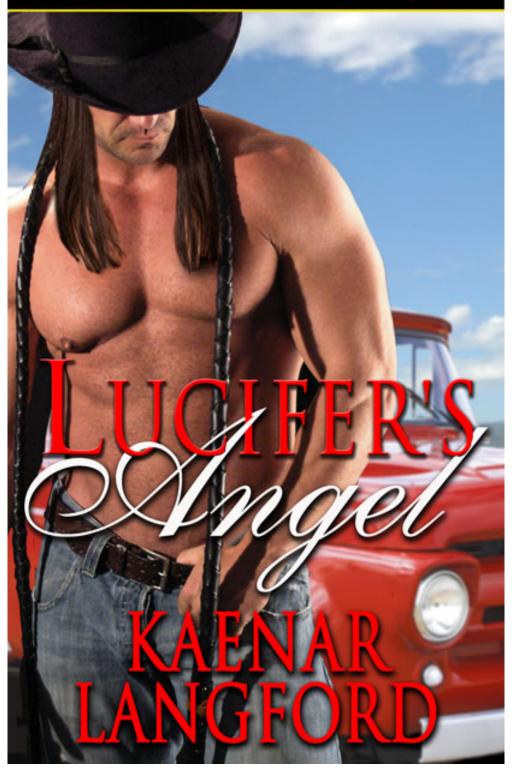
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Lucifer's Angel

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Lucifer's Angel

Kaenar Langford

Dedication

To my husband and my sons – who've been there for me through it all.

To my colleagues who teased me unmercifully—yet believed in me all the way.

To my friend Kate Mann – who always believed without question.

To Brian Henry who asked for the introductory paragraph—and from that paragraph this book was born.

To friends who shared my success – as if anything was possible.

To Helen Woodall my editor – for your faith in Lucifer's Angel and in me.

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Chapter One

He had that look about him—those worn jeans, the white t-shirt stretched across his wide chest, the black boots, the leather jacket. She knew he was trouble as soon as she heard the Harley approach but after waiting hours in the sun next to her broken-down car, she would have welcomed Lucifer himself. As he got off the bike and walked toward her she knew she should have walked home but not in these high-heeled boots. Then he took off his helmet—coal black hair streaming down his back, piercing blue eyes that leisurely swept down her body—and as those eyes met hers she realized it was Lucifer and she was in big trouble!

He knew she was trouble the minute he saw her, the setting sun creating a halo around her red-gold hair. She was petite and curvy and she looked very annoyed. She was wearing a simple black flowing skirt and a little black t-shirt but he couldn't help but grin when he realized she was wearing high lace-up leather boots. Just what he needed, trouble in the shape of a sexy little angel.

Setting his helmet on the seat, he turned and began to walk toward her. As he approached, she backed up a few steps, then gathering her courage she stopped and looked up at him. He understood her nervousness and smiled to reassure her.

What a smile! It was meant to reassure her but it looked like an open invitation to sin. As he smiled, a sudden wind swirled around them and Gabriel reached out to touch her hair as it blew tiny curls loose from her hairclip and around her face. His gentle touch startled her and he dropped his hand, the moment gone.

He didn't need this complication. He needed to get on his bike and keep going. It was the only way to outrun his demons.

He may have looked like Lucifer but he knew he couldn't just leave her there. "Do you need a lift?" he asked. It was a simple enough question but asked in that low, rough voice, it conjured up all kinds of images in her head of the places he could lift her to—onto a bed, onto a table, onto a counter, onto his lap while they were both naked.

Shaking her head to dispel those images, she nodded. She didn't know him, she didn't know where he was going or where he had been but she did know that the devil was calling her and her answer was definitely yes. She shivered in anticipation.

Gabriel saw her shiver, felt her arousal but tried to ignore her reaction. He needed to keep moving if he wanted to keep ahead of his sins. Instead, with a soft sigh, he took off his worn leather jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

Wrapped in the warmth of his body and the smell of his skin, Mariah felt her thighs clench and her nipples pebble as she tried to gain control of her body. She couldn't explain her reaction to this stranger but she felt edgy with unwanted desire. "My car broke down," she said more sharply than she intended. She was feeling prickly from

waiting in the hot sun so long and from her heightened awareness of this man. She didn't want him to see how off balance he made her feel. "I've been waiting hours for someone to drive by. I just want to get home."

"No need to bite my head off. I was just offering to help," he said, putting up his hands defensively. "I'm just as happy to leave you here if you really want to know the truth." He took his jacket from around her shoulders and began to walk back to his bike. Mariah bit her lip as she watched him stride away. He didn't really mean to leave her here, did he? He put on his jacket and reached for his helmet. She wanted to let him go but the die was cast as soon as she laid eyes on him.

"Wait!" she called. He turned back to look at her. "Sorry," she said awkwardly. "I'm not usually so rude."

"Really? How rude are you usually?" he said, trying to bite back a smile.

"What!" she sputtered. Then she began to laugh. "I'm not usually rude at all but you just seem to bring out the worst in me. Could I please get a lift with you?"

"Sure. I couldn't leave you here anyway. Anything you need from the car?"

"I just need to grab my bag," she said and turned toward the car, trying to gain her equilibrium. As she opened the door and bent to retrieve her purse, that devilish wind swirled around her and lifted her skirt above those high lace-up boots showing her thighs encased in black stockings then the little black garter belt and tiny, lacy black thong. Mariah turned toward him, hoping he had missed the revelation but one look at his hungry face and she knew he had seen it all.

All he could think of was bending her over the hood of the car and running his hands up her long legs. She may have been petite but those legs went on forever. He wanted to cover her with his body and pin her hands above her head as he kissed the nape of her neck and traced the curve of her ear with his tongue. He wanted to loosen her hair and let it fall down her back. How long was it? Was it long enough to reach the curve of her butt? He wanted to sift his hands through it and feel its softness against his hands, against his face. He wanted to run his hands down her back, over her cheeks and lift her skirt. He wanted to linger on that soft skin just above her stockings, linger on it first with his hands and then with his tongue and then use his tongue to trace the cleft of her butt. He would gently lap along her crease and move her thong aside with his tongue. He wanted to lick her secret folds and taste her honey. He smiled as he wondered if he could bring her to orgasm with just his tongue.

Mariah wondered what was going through his head. One moment he looked like he wanted to devour her then the next he smiled. He took her purse and put it into one of the saddlebags.

"Let's get going," he said roughly. "Do you have someone you can call to come and get your car?"

"I hate cell phones," she retorted. "I'll call the garage later. I just want to get home."

"How far do we need to go?" he inquired. Mariah couldn't help but laugh as she thought about how far they needed to go. He would peel off that white t-shirt and

reveal his gorgeous chest. Next he would loosen his hair and let it fall around his shoulders and down his back. He would pop the buttons on his jeans and slide them down... She looked up to see him watching her. Could he see what was in her mind? What was it that made her even think like that? She had seen handsome men before but none of them had ever made her feel the things he did.

"I meant how far is it to your house?" he asked, grinning at her. He knew exactly what was going through her head—the same thoughts were going through his. As soon as he had uttered the words, he knew he needed to go all the way with her. He needed to see what else was under those prim clothes. Those prim clothes and the sexy underwear—what a contradiction she was! Was she wearing a little lacy bra that matched her garter belt and that tiny thong? Would it be one of those little bras where her nipples were not quite hidden and he would be able to see them peeking out? Would her nipples be a dusky rose color? Would they be brown? Would they be pink? He'd love to see what she looked like wearing nothing but that sexy underwear along with the black stockings and the lace-up boots. He'd like to peel off her little thong and have her sit down on a chair. He'd kneel in front of her and put her foot in his lap so he could undo those damn boots for her. As he unlaced the boots he could look at her beautiful pink folds and see her desire oozing out. He shook his head as his thoughts returned to the present and realized that just the thought of this woman and what he could do with her were enough to make him as hard as stone.

Mariah blushed at the direction of her thoughts and how easily he was able to read them and mirror them in his gaze. "Just a few miles further and then off to the right." Gabriel looked at her, lost in his erotic thoughts. "We need to go a few miles further then turn off to the right to get to my house." Gabriel strode over to the bike to retrieve his helmet, trying to get his unruly cock to obey him as he turned his back. Mariah stood there waiting. Softening his tone, he held out his helmet and said, "Here. Put this on."

"No. You need it!" she said, shoving it back at him.

"I'll be all right. It's not too far, is it?" he asked, cradling the helmet in the crook of his arm.

"Once we turn off the highway just before Hopeville, it's only another couple of miles."

"How far to Hopeville?"

"About three miles."

"I'll be fine," he said, handing her the helmet and waiting for her to put it on and do it up. Mariah realized it was easier to just put the helmet on than argue with him. Gabriel straddled the bike and motioned for her to get on behind. Mariah threw her leg over the seat and wrapped her arms around him. She could feel the heat from him warming her chest and sending flames through her body. She could feel the delineation of every muscle in his chest and wanted to follow them first with her hands and then with her mouth as she kissed her way down his chest, licking and nibbling each muscle.

She wanted to lift his t-shirt and put her mouth to the soft skin of his back. As he put the bike in motion, his hair blew up around her and gently touched her face as if he were caressing her jaw.

She had heard somewhere that men like to ride a Harley because they get a hard-on from it. She wanted to slide her hands down and cup him. Would he be long and hard and straining the front of his jeans? She would love to trace the outline with her fingers and feel his power beneath her hands. He was a big man. She remembered those hands as they'd reached out to touch her hair, big hands with long, tapered fingers. Was the rest of him big too? She imagined his beautiful cock—long and thick and pulsing with life. With the vibration of the bike, she could imagine that great big cock sliding in and out of her. She could imagine him sliding those hands down her throat, along her collarbone, over her breasts. She could imagine those big hands caressing her stomach then his thumb circling her clit as he leisurely stroked in and out of her.

"How much further?" Gabriel called, drawing her out of her musings. He could barely keep his attention focused on the road. Her small hands were clutched around his waist but all he could think of was having them clutched around his straining cock. He loved the hard-on he got from riding his Harley but coupled with the attention his penis seemed to be paying to his passenger, he was hard almost to the point of pain. He wanted her to slide her hands down and feel what her nearness did to him. He wanted her to feel how long he was, how thick he was and to wonder if she could even take all of him inside her. He could feel her legs against his and imagined her naked sex pressed against his backside. He wondered if it was flushed and liquid—eager for the thrust of him inside her.

"How much further?" he called back to her again. He would need to reposition his cock if this journey took much longer.

"There's an old stand of trees just up ahead on the right. You should be able to see them even though it's getting dark so turn right just after we pass them." Gabriel spotted the old trees silhouetted against the darkening sky and slowed down. As he leaned into the turn, her body slid forward to press more firmly against his. Gabriel nearly groaned aloud as she planted herself against him. He hoped it wasn't much farther since he didn't know how much more of this torture he could endure. They traveled another couple of miles when Mariah patted him on the shoulder.

"Those lights up ahead on the left," she called into his ear. "Turn in there." He drove up a long driveway and pulled to a stop near the house. There was just enough light to make out a barn and some outbuildings as he pulled up in front of an older farmhouse. It had a big, wide front porch with an old-fashioned swing on it.

As he turned off the bike and dismounted, Mariah wondered what she was doing here, miles from the nearest town with a man she didn't even know. She knew what she was doing but she didn't know if she could go through with it. She didn't know this man but she certainly knew what she wanted from him. She got off the bike and turned to look at him. After the constant noise and vibration from the bike, the stillness and

calm were almost eerie. A dog barked in the distance and some night birds called but her house was quiet and still.

"I don't even know your name," she said, taking off the helmet and handing it to him.

"It's Gabriel, Gabriel Blackburn," he replied as he took it from her and set it on the seat. She began to laugh. She had thought he was Lucifer but he carried the archangel Gabriel's name.

"Why is my name so funny?"

"Well. I thought it might be Lucifer or Merlin, the way you came out of nowhere and swept me off." Gabriel threw back his head and laughed then he put his arm behind her knees and lifted her into his arms. "I bet you don't even have enough sense to lock your front door, do you, little girl?"

"I never felt the need. I always figured trouble would get in whether the door was locked or not." Gabriel smirked at her.

"You ain't seen trouble yet." He climbed the steps to her front door with her in his arms then let her slide down his body to open the door for them. She couldn't miss his raging erection. He wanted her to know what trouble felt like, what it smelled like, what it tasted like. As she opened the screen door, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. "Tell me *your* name isn't Angel!" he demanded.

"No," she laughed. "It's not Angel. Is that how you see me, as an angel?"

"I see you in lots of ways," he countered. "On the table, on the floor, on a rug in front of a fireplace and even on a bed, preferably with your wings spread wide open for me."

"My name isn't Angel and I'm no angel. In fact, when I'm around you I feel quite devilish. My name is Mariah Forrester and now that introductions are over let's go inside!"

Chapter Two

She opened the inside door and the screen door slammed shut behind them, the sound echoing in the silence. Gabriel spun Mariah around and pinned her against the wall. He gently drew both hands up over her head and whispered in her ear, "Tell me this isn't what you want and I'll leave right now." He was leaving the final decision up to her but there really was no decision. It had been made the minute she saw him get off the Harley. The minute he'd taken off his helmet and that coal black hair had flowed down his back and he had turned his hawklike gaze on her there really was no decision to be made-she knew this was what she wanted. She brought her hands down and took his hand, leading him down the hall and up the stairs. Their footsteps echoed down the long passage leading to her room. Her bedroom door was open and as they went in Mariah saw Gabriel take in the room, his eyes shining as he realized one corner of her room was dominated by an old four-poster bed placed near the window. The moonlight shone through the lacy curtains, making delicate patterns on the quilt covering her bed. As she went to turn on a lamp, Gabriel stilled her hand. There was more than enough light from the moon as it bathed the room in a silvery light, casting soft shadows across the floor.

She felt like it was a dream as he brought her hand to his mouth, turning it over and gently kissing her palm. He licked it and took each of her fingers, in turn, into his mouth. As Mariah fell against him, her legs no longer able to support her, Gabriel put his arms around her and, with a laugh, lifted her onto the bed. He threw his full weight on top of her so she could feel him, smell him, absorb him. He raised himself onto his elbows and licked her lips. He nibbled on her top lip then gently kissed her eyelids, her cheeks. He took her mouth again and this time, he took possession of it with a hard, demanding kiss. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, licking along the soft inside of his cheek and along his palate and Gabriel began to moan. He drew back and quickly stood up. He put out his hand and pulled her to her feet.

She stepped out of his arms long enough to reach out and turn on the small lamp on her bedside table. At his questioning look, she said, "I have to turn on the lamp. I don't want to miss a single thing." When she turned back to face him, Gabriel smiled and crooked his finger at her. Mariah walked slowly toward him, took his hand and put his finger in her mouth. Gabriel's cock jumped and lengthened as she caressed his finger and sucked on it with her lips and tongue.

Very quietly Gabriel said, "You are a very bad girl!" Mariah gave him a mischievous smile. "This is a whole new me. I was never a bad girl before I met you," she returned.

"I like the new you but I think I would have liked the old you just as much." Even though they had just met, he had the power to lift her, to make her feel.

"You don't have to sweet-talk me, you know," she said with a grin. "I'm going to have my wicked way with you, no matter what."

She watched Gabriel grow serious. When he finally spoke, she knew he wanted her to know what was happening was special that they weren't just words so she would make love with him. "It wasn't sweet talk! You make me feel...different, better than I am. You're wary of me yet you trust me, know that I will be gentle. I'm not a person who others feel they can trust," he said sadly. His eyes looked so distant Mariah wondered what he was keeping inside. She reached up and ran her hand down his jaw. Gabriel turned his head into her hand and smiled down at her. He bent his head and gave her a gentle kiss. "I need to see you," he said softly. Putting his hands at her waist, he slowly lifted her t-shirt up and over her head.

Oh my God! Gabriel thought. It was just as he suspected. She was wearing one of those teeny little bras that didn't quite cover her nipples, her beautiful, dusky rose nipples. They peeked over the top of the lace, set out for him like a succulent banquet. He had only begun to undress her and already his brain was numb, along with another major part of his body. He leaned down and flicked one of her nipples with his tongue while he pinched the other between his thumb and finger. He applied a very gentle pressure but it was enough to make her squirm. Using his thumbs, he peeled down her bra to expose her lush breasts crowned with large, rosy nipples. He rubbed his thumbs over just the tips and they stood at attention. She had such beautiful long nipples and they were as hard as rubies. He applied his mouth to one and then the other and was rewarded with a moan. "I just want to make sure I give them equal attention," he said.

Mariah was sure Gabriel was saying something to her but her body was lost in a sensual haze and she couldn't focus on anything but his heavenly mouth and the pleasure he was giving her. It was as if a silken cord ran from her nipples to her sex. Every time he pulled or pinched, a bolt shot through her body and centered on her clit. She could feel it swelling with every tug and the cream oozed out. Was he going to ignore the rest of her body?

As if he heard her silent plea, Gabriel raised his head then reached back to undo her bra. He caressed her soft skin as he sought the hooks to release her breasts. She rolled her head back at the sensations running through her body and Gabriel nibbled down her neck and took a tiny nip at her pulse. He unhooked her bra and let it fall to the floor. He reached out and cradled her breasts with his big, rough hands. The sensation was divine for both of them—for her, her soft skin caressed by those rough hands, for him, those rough hands caressing those soft breasts. He held the weight of them and pushed them together so he could squeeze and play with them.

It was too much for Mariah. With a gasp, she erupted. Her orgasm went on and on as Gabriel continued to fondle her breasts. She was so responsive he couldn't believe it. He had never brought a woman to orgasm just by fondling her breasts. In fact, he hadn't believed it could be done. He wanted to beat his chest and howl at the moon.

"Well, that was embarrassing!" Mariah said, trying to bring herself back into her body but refusing to look at him. He took hold of her chin so she could see the awe in his gaze.

"Embarrassing? I don't know about you, but that was the most wonderful thing to ever happen to me. Can you imagine how it felt for me? I haven't even been inside you yet but I could feel the heat surging through you. It was like hurtling through space together. To know that I can bring you to orgasm just by touching you, fondling your breasts... You're incredible!"

Mariah couldn't understand why people wouldn't trust this man. He treated her like something precious and instead of being annoyed with her, he felt she had given him a gift.

Gabriel put his hands to her face to draw her mouth to his. He traced her lips with his tongue and nipped at her full lower lip. She opened her mouth to allow entrance to his tongue but he refused to be hurried. He took his time, caressing her mouth like an artist with a precious painting. He kissed his way down the length of her throat, noticing for the first time a tiny row of freckles between her breasts. He made sure he kissed each and every one of them, disappointed that he hadn't noticed them before. He put his tongue on her soft skin and licked his way from one freckle to another.

Mariah giggled at the butterfly sensation. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I always wanted a paint-by-number set when I was a boy but I never got one. I'm just fulfilling a childhood fantasy and I must admit that the adult version is much more satisfying," he said as he continued to paint her with his strong tongue. She shivered as he went to his knees and began to kiss and nip his way down her skin then turned her with her back to him and began to undo her skirt.

He pulled it down over her hips and was rewarded with the enticing view of her gorgeous ass begging to be fondled and kissed. He put his rough hands on her cheeks and drew circles on her skin with his fingertips. She sighed with pleasure in response. He replaced his hands with his mouth and gave her sharp little love bites, leaving tiny red marks that he soothed with his tongue. As she purred with pleasure he put his tongue to the top of her crack and pushed aside her thong with it so he could trail down her crease. His hands on her upper back forced her to bend over slightly, then he used this new position to sneak his tongue under her thong to taste her secret place. She tasted like the ocean, tangy and sweet. He made his tongue go rigid and put it inside her so she would remember what was still to come in this erotic dance. He gently nudged her clitoris yet before he could put his hands around to the front to torture her with his fingers, she came in a shudder so violent that it coursed through his own body.

Mariah felt Gabriel turn her around and forced herself to open her eyes and look down at his face. He smiled up at her, not a smug smile of self-satisfaction but a smile of joy and contentment. She reached out and ran her hands gently along his cheeks, tracing the sharp but delicate bones. Then she put her hands in his hair and loosened it so it fell around his shoulders, down his back. It was like black silk flowing through her fingers. He leaned forward and turned his head so he could rub his rough cheek against

her baby soft belly. He loved the feel of her skin. He loved the smell of it too—sweet but sharp. Sweet from a subtle fragrance but sharp from her heightened state of arousal.

She wondered what he was thinking as he rose abruptly to his feet.

Then he grabbed his t-shirt behind his head, pulling it up and off. "I need to feel you against me," he said. Taking her in his arms, he pulled her tightly to him so he could feel her taut nipples rubbing against him.

Mariah loved the feelings that raced through her as her nipples touched his chest. She couldn't get close enough to him. It was such an erotic, exotic sensation. Stepping back, she reached out and ran her hands through the hair on his chest. It was such a contrast to the man—it was so soft and silky beneath her fingers yet he was all solid muscle, wide in the shoulders, taut abdomen, lean through the waist and hips. She wondered what he did for a living. He seemed like such a hard man but he was so gentle with her. What did he mean when he said that people felt they couldn't trust him?

Her musings were cut short as Gabriel reached to still her hands. "That's a pretty dangerous thing to do. I'm working on a hair-trigger here. Wouldn't want to go off half-cocked, so to speak," he said with a dry laugh. Letting his gaze sweep down her body, his eyes fell on her high lace-up boots. He broke into a smile and began to look around the room for a suitable chair. Spying a hardback one in the corner, Gabriel went and grabbed it as Mariah gave him a questioning look.

"I have an idea I think you might like," he said in answer to her look. "You liked my other ideas, didn't you?"

"I loved your ideas but the pleasure has been kind of one-sided."

"You may have had the orgasms but the pleasure certainly hasn't been one-sided," he assured her. "Just being with you, touching you, feeling you come gives me pleasure too. So would you like to try my next idea?"

"Will I get a chance to try some of my ideas?" Mariah asked, with a naughty look in her eyes.

"I guess turnabout is fair play. So as long as my poor heart can take it, I'm up for just about anything." She reached out and saucily cupped the front of his jeans, gently moving her hand up and down the enormous bulge.

"Yeah. I see you're up for just about anything. Go ahead and let's try another of your ideas. I find I kind of like them." Gabriel looked at her gorgeous underwear and realized he couldn't take off her thong first since she was wearing it under her garter belt. He didn't want to start with the garter belt and stockings as that would spoil his fantasy. What to do, what to do?

Mariah wondered what in heaven's name was going through his head. He seemed so concerned as he looked at her underwear. Finally, reaching a decision, he said seriously, "Can I cut off your thong?"

"What!"

"Can I cut off your thong? I'd love to buy one to replace it. I'll even come and help you pick it out. I'll even watch you try it on, if you like."

Mariah laughed. She had no idea what he was planning but she knew she would enjoy it, no matter what. "Go ahead and cut it off if you need to. I have others."

"That's what I was afraid of," he groaned. Mariah's eyes grew wide as Gabriel reached into his pocket and brought out his knife. He tapped the knife against his upper lip as he tried to decide the best way to remove her thong. She couldn't help but laugh as he looked like he was making a monumental decision. But maybe he was. Once her thong was off and she was exposed to him, she would be giving herself wholly to him and this felt different from being with any other man. Gently turning her with her back to him again, he put one finger behind the single cord of her thong and pulled it away from her body. He flicked the knife open and deftly cut the thin material at each side of her waist. He closed the knife, put it back in his pocket and gently pulled the thong from between her legs, dragging it across her already sensitized clit. Gabriel closed his eyes as he held it up to inhale her tangy scent then dropped it down behind him.

"I'm going to help you take those boots off now," he said as he reached for the chair. Before sitting down, he stepped back to take in the gorgeous view of her wearing nothing but the black garter belt that framed her red-gold curls, those sexy thigh-high stockings and those incredible do-me boots.

"Walk across the room so I can see you from the back." Mariah turned and walked over to the window, pretending to look out. Gabriel's eyes followed her and he could hardly breathe as he watched her heart-shaped little tush wiggle in those boots. From the back, her garter belt made a perfect frame around the globes of her butt, outlining them like the work of art they were. She even had a cute little dimple just above her crack. He was pretty sure that dimple was just the right size for the tip of his tongue.

"Turn around, walk back to me and sit down on this chair," he commanded. She turned from the window and walked back to where he stood.

"You're not going to tie me to the chair, are you?" she asked breathlessly.

"I hadn't thought of that," he mused. "Maybe I'll save that for another time." She didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

"Come sit down," he urged. As she sat down, the chair cold against her bare butt, Gabriel went to his knees in front of her.

"Are you going to beg me for something?" she asked tauntingly.

"Well, someone is going to end up begging and I don't think it will be me," he replied with a devilish light in his beautiful eyes. Mariah looked down at him. He was so incredible with his long black hair flowing down his chest and back. He looked like an ancient warrior with that strong, muscular body. He made her feel so beautiful yet she felt safe too. Gathering her courage, Mariah met his eyes, sat up straight in the chair and opened her legs. Gabriel almost swallowed his tongue.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said playfully. "Wasn't that part of your plan? Oh, that's right. Someone was going to do some begging and you thought it was going to be me." She

went to close her legs but Gabriel put his hands on her inner thighs to keep her legs apart.

"Oh, honey. You are so right! Someone *is* going to do some begging and I think it might be you." He was already leaning forward to put his mouth on her when he remembered he had another plan in mind but maybe going down on her would still end up as part of it. He smiled at the thought. He wanted to savor the time he had with her, to make it last, to draw it out until she screamed or until she begged.

As he leaned toward her, she shut her eyes in anticipation of the lush sensation of his mouth on her. Just thinking about it, she was afraid she was going to come again and she didn't want to come without him being inside her. She felt his warm breath on her and then nothing. Her eyes flew open to see him sitting back on his heels with a big grin on his face. What was he grinning about? Every time he smiled like that she knew she was in big trouble and boy was she going to like it!

He reached down and took hold of one of her feet and set it in his lap. He undid the knot at the top of her boot and slowly began to unlace it. When he got to the bottom, he tugged it off. As he pulled, he lifted her leg a bit and was rewarded with an enticing view of her curls and her glistening, pink flesh. Two can play at this game, Mariah thought. As he brought her foot to rest between his legs again, she pulled it out of his hand and placed it on his chest, running her toes through the hair there. He laughed at the tickling sensation of her stockinged foot on his chest. She pointed her toes and traced a line down his silky hair and came to rest on his burgeoning erection. He was so long and so hard and he must have been in so much pain by now. She had come twice but he hadn't taken his pleasure yet. She ran her big toe up and down his length and said, teasingly, "Well, big boy. You ready to beg yet?"

With a laugh, Gabriel stilled her foot, moved it aside and replaced it with her other foot. He could see her cream beginning to ooze out. She may have been laughing but she was as horny as he was. He quickly untied the knot on her other boot and undid the lace but it was hard to go slowly this time. He couldn't wait to put his mouth on her, to put himself inside her. He pulled off her other boot and spread her legs wide just to look at her. Gabriel looked his fill at her secret place. It was so beautiful with all the pink folds and the little reddish-blonde curls. He reached out and sifted his fingers through her tiny curls. They weren't as soft as her other curls but they were the same lovely shade. He couldn't wait to get inside her but he didn't want to make love to her on a chair. Not the first time, he thought. Maybe the second time or the third time. He took her hand and led her to the bed.

"That chair may be too hard for what I have in mind," he said. Mariah's eyebrows shot up. She was blushing all over. He gently grabbed her shoulders and sat her down on the bed. As he went to his knees in front of her, he spread her legs and put them on his shoulders so she ended up falling back on the bed. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him playfully.

"Is this part of your plan?" she asked inquisitively.

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret," he said thoughtfully.

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"Yes?"
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"I don't really have a plan. I'm just making it up as I go along."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," she returned.

"Yes?"

"I knew you didn't have a plan but I love everything you do to me."

"Well, if you like what I've done so far then this should make you the happiest woman in the world," he quipped. He tugged her legs to bring her bottom to the edge of the bed, bent forward and blew on her curls. She shivered. He chuckled. Using his thumbs to part her folds, he began to lap at her with his tongue. She tried to back her bottom away, unable to stand the fiendish delight that rose up in her. He tightened his hold on her and drew her back to the edge of the bed. He began to nibble down her flesh, nipping, sucking, soothing. He licked back up the outside of her pink folds, moved his head down then licked right up her juicy center with the flat of his tongue.

"Oh, please let me come!" she wailed.

"With pleasure," he replied with that smile. He licked up her center again but when he reached her clitoris, he gently tugged on it with his teeth. He put out his tongue and stabbed her with it and with a harsh scream she came, the force of her orgasm pulsing against his mouth. He could feel her inner muscles clenching and relaxing around his tongue and he was afraid he was going to spill himself. He laid his head against her thigh and tried to breathe. Then he remembered his earlier question to himself and the answer would have to be a resounding yes. He could bring her to orgasm with just his tongue. What was it going to be like when he was inside her? He already knew what those inner muscles felt like contracting and relaxing around his tongue. What would it feel like when his cock was inside her and she came? He would feel those same strong muscles clenching his cock like a fist and he had to grit his teeth not to come then and there.

"Well, I guess you were right on both counts," she said when she could think again.

"What do you mean?"

"I did beg first and you did make me feel like the happiest woman in the world."

"Are you mad because you had to beg first?"

"Are you kidding? I got exactly what I was begging for!" Gabriel rose to his feet. Looking down at her, she bore the look of a woman who had been well loved.

I put that look on her face, he thought. Maybe there was some good in him after all. He was gentle with her and in return she trusted him with her body. Maybe he could face some of the demons he was fleeing. Maybe she could help him face them. His thoughts were brought back to the present as Mariah got to her feet and reached up to undo her hairclip.

"Wait," he pleaded. She looked at him inquiringly. "Could you turn around when you take your hair down?" She turned away from him, looking back over her shoulder as she undid the clip and pulled it from her hair. Gabriel watched mesmerized as a

curtain of long curls tumbled down, past the dimple in the small of her back. He had wondered how long it would be but to see it down her back like a waterfall literally took his breath away. It was like watching one of those women from an old Victorian photograph. You knew the intricate hairstyle hid a wealth of hair but you were never able to see it. Their hair was braided in a complicated way so you couldn't tell how long it was.

No wonder the Victorians were so interested in naughty things. There were so many mysteries like that all around them. The women were completely covered from head to toe by their restrictive clothing but that didn't stop men from fantasizing about them, in fact, it probably encouraged their fantasies, fueled them. A glimpse of an ankle was risqué, naughty, forbidden. Mariah was like one of those Victorian women. She kept her hair pinned up and wore conservative clothing, seeming to be the epitome of a good girl but when you took a closer look you realized that beneath those prim and proper clothes she was wearing those high leather boots and beneath those layers—man, oh man! What a surprise! And that hair! If that wasn't enough to fuel a grown man's fantasies, Gabriel didn't know what was. What would all that hair feel like if she were to ride him while they were making love? It was long enough to reach down her back and spill across his thighs. As she rode him, all that hair would blanket him, caress him. He could feel the sensation across his skin already and his penis started to throb and his balls to tighten in anticipation.

He sat down in the chair and said, "Can you come back here to me?" Mariah came back and stood between his legs. Gabriel made a motion with his hand for her to turn away from him. He reached up and grabbed a handful of her glorious hair and brought it to his face. It was soft, like down and smelled like rain. He took hold of it and moved it aside so he could lean forward and put the tip of his tongue into that little dimple and she began to whimper. Then he lifted her hair and placed it forward over one shoulder so he could undo her garters at the back, slipping them out one at a time. Turning her to face him, he traced his fingers up the ultra-sensitive skin of her inner thigh and ran them up her weeping slit. She moaned and dropped her head back, so responsive to him.

Mariah didn't want him to feel how wet she was but it was too late. She tried to clench her thighs to relieve the ache but he wouldn't let her. Gabriel slipped his fingers into the top of first one stocking then the other, running them over her baby soft skin as he undid the garters at the front. Reaching around to the back, he unhooked her garter belt and let it fall to the floor. Mariah walked a few steps away from him, turned back and put one of her feet in his lap. She was a firm believer in turnabout as fair play and it was definitely time for her to take the lead.

"Do you think you could take that stocking off for me?" she said. Gabriel leaned forward and stroked the soft skin of her inner thigh with his fingertips. Then he leaned forward a little more and brushed his lips over the delicate skin. Mariah felt her control of the situation begin to slip but she didn't mind in the least.

Finally he gently licked her silky skin, nipped at it then licked it again to soothe it. He took the top of her stocking and began to gently roll it down her leg and off. As soon as the stocking had drifted to the floor, Mariah put her other foot in his lap. Gabriel gave it the same careful attention, nipping and licking her other thigh and finally rolling her stocking down. She put her foot on the floor and backed up so he could see her, looking like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* with her long hair tangled around her body and the soft light painting her body. He wanted to stand and look at her all night but he couldn't wait any longer to be inside her.

Mariah needed to see him naked. She loved the way he was looking at her with such desire in his eyes but she was hungry to touch him and love him like he had loved her. She crossed to him and put out her hand to draw him to his feet. As she fanned her hands across his chest, she felt his muscles contract with her touch. She slid her hands down his chest until she reached the buttons on his jeans then began to pop them open one at a time.

As Mariah popped each button, she spread his jeans and Gabriel could feel his cock lengthen as it crept toward her eager hands. Backing him toward the bed, she took him by surprise as she gave him a shove. As Gabriel fell back on the bed, he realized that he liked having her take the lead. Who wouldn't want to submit to a dazzlingly beautiful, naked woman prepared to have her wicked way with you?

Here was this gorgeous man spread out before her and Mariah just didn't know where to begin. He looked so delicious with that long dark hair fanned out around him and those dark eyes staring at her. Well, if she wanted to see him naked then those boots would have to go. She bent over and grabbed his boot at the heel and pulled it off. She set it down and took hold of his other boot. It slid off too then she made quick work of his socks. She stared at his feet. They were long and narrow and sprinkled with dark hair. If that old adage were true about the size of a man's feet being an indicator of the size of his cock then he was going to be generously endowed, to put it mildly.

She put out her hand and with his help, hoisted him to his feet. As she took hold of his jeans and began to pull them down, Gabriel lifted each foot in turn so she could yank them off. Of course he was wearing plain, white underwear—nothing fancy just serviceable. Before she even had a chance to tear them off, Gabriel had stripped off his underwear and stood naked before her.

Even though she thought she knew how he would look naked, nothing could have prepared her for the body that was revealed. It looked like someone had breathed life into Michelangelo's *David*.

Chapter Three

Gabriel had the same strong, beautiful lines as the marble statue but where the statue was cold and lifeless, he was warm and vital. His arms were muscular, even his forearms, as if he were no stranger to hard work. His chest looked rock-hard and she could see the tight cords of his muscles. It was covered with soft, dark, silky hair and she could see his nipples like little brown discs hidden in the hair. His waist was narrow and his hips lean. He didn't have the kind of body that came from a gym. He had the kind of body that came from life. She looked down and saw that his cock was eagerly vying for her attention. It was stretched almost to his navel with a delicate tear of pre-cum on its bulbous tip. Mariah reached out and took hold with one hand. With her other hand, she used her thumb to smooth the drop over the end of his dick. She lightly ran her fingers down his penis then reached between his legs with both hands to cradle the heavy weight of his balls.

"Oh, you're killing me," he gasped. "I don't know how much more I can take." Mariah opened the drawer of her bedside table and brought out a condom. Gabriel looked relieved. Opening the packet, she began to roll it down the length of him. If he had thought her fondling him was too much, this was exquisite torture as she fumbled to put it on. Finally she had them protected and climbed on the bed. Gabriel got up beside her and drew her into his arms. He wanted to give her a gentle kiss but as soon as his lips touched hers, he pressed his mouth hard against hers and deepened the kiss. He wanted to swallow her whole. Mariah broke away and pushed him to his back. She climbed on top of him and began to kiss her way down his chest. He loved the feel of her moist center splayed open on his belly as she traced her way down his body.

"You're playing with fire, missy," he said.

"No wonder I feel like I'm going up in flames," she whispered. Mariah moved down his body until she could feel his cock ready to slip into her. She was so wet that his entry should have been easy but she'd forgotten how big he was. He tried to gently ease his way into her but her body resisted his invasion. He was just too big. Gabriel reached up and started to pull and pinch her nipples and leaned in to take one into his mouth. He sucked gently then in earnest. The sensation was so strong that she forgot her discomfort and let her body relax. Gabriel took advantage and eased himself in past her entrance. Mariah sucked in her breath. He was so big!

He let go of her nipple but used his thumb to trace lazy circles around them to bring them standing to attention. He pushed himself in a little farther and could feel her internal muscles grab his cock to guide him in. He flicked his thumbs over the tips of her nipples and she moaned with delight. Using his fingertips, he traced patterns on her belly that sent shivers of delight through her. With one hand, he put his fingers flat on her pubic hair and teased her clit with his thumb. He could feel it come out of its hood and stiffen under his touch. With his thumb he could feel where they were joined, his cock pulsing and ramrod stiff trying to gain entry. He took hold of her around the waist and lifted her up, almost off his cock, then as he pushed himself up into her, he pushed her down at the same time and, inch by glorious inch, he slid deep inside her.

Now that he was fully inside her, Mariah put her hands flat on his chest and used her knees to raise and lower herself with him embedded in her. It was like a part of her that had yet to be found and now it was there like a jigsaw puzzle missing that last important piece.

Gabriel watched her raise and lower her body on his enormous erection. Her eyes closed in rapture, she got into a slow up-and-down rhythm on his cock. With her muscles clenching him and the slickness of her passage, he thought he might go crazy. He would love to love her without a condom so he could feel her slick inner passage skin to skin. He'd never made love without a condom, had never considered what it might feel like but he wanted to feel her naked without any barriers. He pulled her down flat against him then rolled them over so she was under him. Her eyes shot open but then she smiled up at him. He put his hands down beside her and began to stroke into her—slowly and leisurely at first.

She couldn't keep her legs down but wrapped them around his waist and he started to thrust into her, relentlessly, like a piston. She could feel her orgasm gathering around her and although she wanted to keep it away for another few minutes, her body refused to listen. With a scream, she came and all she saw were red and black behind her eyelids, the feelings so strong she was afraid she was going to faint from the force of it.

Gabriel felt the flutter and knew he would be right behind her. He could feel her quivering inside then as the orgasm hit her, he could feel the full fury of it ripping through her and through him as well. It triggered the answering response in him and he surged into her. He couldn't stop coming. What was the matter with him? He had had orgasms before but they never made him feel like he was leaving his body. He felt like those people who talk about near-death experiences and how they look down and see their body lying there. He really was afraid he might die, the pleasure so intense he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

Suddenly he was back in her bed, a sheen of sweat covering his body. Mariah was lying under him and he could feel her heart racing in tandem with his. What the hell was that? What the hell just happened? He knew about making love. He'd done it lots of times and that wasn't what had just happened between them. Making love didn't make you think about doing it again without a condom. Making love didn't make you think about having a baby and Mariah big with his child growing inside her. Making love didn't make you think this was the part of you that had been missing. Or did it?

Mariah lay there wondering what the heck had just happened. One minute she was riding his gorgeous cock and the next minute she was soaring through space. A soon as she started to come she felt him lose control. His muscles tightened as he jerked hard into her then he came so hard she was afraid he was going to die. She felt the power of

his orgasm surging through her, shocking her with its intensity. She thought she had had orgasms before but nothing in her experience could compare to what had just happened between them. From the first moment she saw him, there was something about him that drew her.

Wrapping his arms around her, Gabriel rolled to his back, cradling Mariah in his arms. He wanted to stay inside her as long as he could, not even sure what to say to her. When he reached down and stroked her hair, she lifted her head and placed a tiny kiss on his chest.

"That was incredible," she said quietly. "I felt like I was leaving my body." Just then she felt his cock slide out of her. She missed the close connection with him. Gabriel carefully lifted her off him and turning, swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Is the bathroom close so I can get rid of this?" he said indicating the condom. Mariah pointed to the door beside the night table and Gabriel went in to dispose of it. When he came back out, Mariah was standing beside the bed watching him. She looked at him so shyly that Gabriel's heart gave a lurch. How could such a passionate, sexy woman look so unsure of herself? So much about her was a contradiction, from the clothes she wore to how she was with him. She could be sweet and innocent one minute then a tempting tigress the next. He never knew what to expect. She was continually catching him off guard and he found he really liked that. He'd never had a woman play with him while making love, teasing him, challenging him. That was what he loved about her. Wait a minute. Where did that L word come from? Let's put it on the back burner for now! Time to think about it later.

Gabriel opened his arms and she eagerly stepped forward, catching him around the waist and hugging him. She turned her head and laid it on his chest where she could hear his heart beating a solid, comforting rhythm. He put his hands on each side of her head and leaned down to draw her into a kiss that was meant to be reassuring. When he touched her lips with his, he knew it was going to be hard to give her just a quick reassuring kiss. That little angel brought out the very devil in him. As he went to kiss her, Mariah went on her tiptoes to meet his mouth with hers and thrust her tongue into his mouth. He couldn't help but smile. There she went again, catching him off guard. He knew she was feeling uncertain about what was happening between them but, like him, she couldn't control the fire that flared between them. He took her tongue and sucked on it.

Mariah's knees threatened to buckle. He used his tongue to duel with hers and when she pulled back he quickly followed and began to trace a line across the sensitive underside of her top lip. What this man could do with his tongue! It should be illegal! she thought.

Mariah ran her hands down his chest, over his stomach and took his cock in her hands. At first it bucked at the feel of her cool hands then it began to respond. She wasn't at all surprised to feel him getting hard again. His body seemed to love whatever she did to bring him pleasure.

"Are you sore?" Gabriel asked. Instead of answering him, she went to her knees in front of him and rubbed her cheek along his penis. The skin was so soft there. She put her nose to his pubic hair and inhaled his scent. He smelled like man and sex and something wild.

He could not believe the sight of this woman, on her knees, paying homage to his body. He loved the feel of her cheek against his cock and he wondered what she could smell on his hair, on his skin. Could she smell herself on him from where they had been joined? Could she smell the wildfire he felt for her as she learned his body.

Mariah put out her tongue and slid it up his hardening cock. As she used her tongue on him, she slid one hand between his legs to cup his balls and play with them. The double sensation was sheer torture for him. He couldn't focus on both, the pleasure was so intense. He groaned at the erotic feelings racing through his body. Most of them seemed to be concentrated in his dick which grew as she licked him. He didn't know what he would do if she decided to take him in her mouth. He didn't have a chance to think about it as Mariah urged him to sit on the bed and as he complied, she put her mouth on the crown of his cock and gently loved it with her tongue. She looked up at him with a tiny smile, took hold of his penis and put her mouth over it. He was so big but she tried to relax and take him in.

He looked down to see this woman caressing him with her tongue. She was making tiny noises to show her enjoyment of loving his body. Gabriel could feel himself getting ready to come and tried to pull away but she wouldn't let him. With a shout, he erupted into her mouth and felt her swallowing greedily.

Wiping her mouth, she smiled at him and said, "After all the pleasure you brought me with your mouth, I thought you might enjoy the same." Gabriel reached down, drew her into his arms and rolled onto the bed with her. "That was unbelievable. I never expected you to want to do that."

"I've never done that before but I loved every minute of it."

Gabriel lay back on the pillow and pulled her against him.

"I don't know about you but I need a little catnap. Something to renew my energy in case you want me again," he said.

"Oh, I'll definitely want you again." That was the problem. She wanted him and she was afraid it wasn't just for a brief fling. She was thinking about sex without a condom and cute little babies with black hair and blue eyes like their dad. What would Gabriel do if knew her thoughts? He'd probably get on his bike and hightail it out of there. For heaven's sake, she'd only just met him. Was there such a thing as love at first sight? She certainly wasn't going to be the one to broach the subject. "Oh, Gabriel, I think I'm in love with you" or "Gabriel, do you believe in love at first sight?" Better to let sleeping dogs lie and speaking of sleeping, she could hear Gabriel's gentle, even breathing signaling that he had fallen asleep. Remembering her long wait in the hot sun and her time with Gabriel made her realize that she was exhausted. The last thing she remembered was running her hand over Gabriel's stomach and kissing his side.

Chapter Four

Gabriel was having such a lovely dream. It seemed to be centered on Mariah and that delicious mouth of hers. Through the fog of sleep he realized the lovely sucking sound and the delightful tugging on his cock were not a dream at all. He lay with his eyes blissfully closed as she leaned over him and tortured his dick. She released his cock from her mouth and climbed on top of him. "I thought that might wake you up," she laughed as she looked down at him.

"I can honestly say I've never been wakened in a more delicious way. I could stand to wake up like that every day."

"I didn't really know if you were awake or not but I woke up and realized we'd been sleeping for a few hours and I needed to make love to you again." She gave him a kiss then said, "Turn over please."

"What?"

"Turn over, roll onto your stomach." She pushed at him but it was like pushing a mountain.

"Why?" He looked at her, unsure of her intent.

"Trust me. You'll like it." Her heart nearly broke at the look on his face when she said *Trust me*. "You can trust me, you know," she said solemnly. She reached over to the night table, rubbing her sex across his stomach as she stretched. She had to smile at his groan. Opening the drawer, she rummaged around and pulled out a small bottle. "Ah, there it is. I didn't think I'd ever get a chance to use it." She crept back on top of Gabriel, making sure she rubbed her hot, moist sex across him again as she got comfortable on top of him.

"What's that?" he asked trying to ignore the feel of her splayed wide open on his stomach.

"Some friends had a birthday party for me and somebody gave me a bottle of massage oil. It was their way of telling me I should be getting laid more often." Gabriel laughed at the crude words "getting laid" coming out of her mouth. "Her words, not mine."

"Would they be girl friends or boy friends?" he queried, curiously anxious to know if they were male or female.

"Definitely girl friends. They're some of the woman I teach with in Hopeville."

"You're a teacher!" he asked incredulously.

"I teach kindergarten there and I love it," she said defensively. Gabriel thought for a moment.

"You know, I can picture you with a classroom of little people. You would be very good with little kids."

"I love my kids but at the end of the day they all go home to their own families and I go home to an empty house. I'm not saying they're all angels and I'd like to take them all home but I'd like to share my life with someone and have kids with them." Mariah had never been so blunt about her need for children. In fact, it was the first time she'd really admitted those feelings, even to herself. Something about this man made her want to trust him, to confide in him.

"So your friends think you're not getting enough, do they?" laughed Gabriel, steering the conversation away from the subject of children and other things he wasn't prepared to think about yet.

"If they could see me now they would be delighted at my level of getting enough," Mariah said coquettishly. "I know I am."

"Well, I'm glad they aren't here now," he said, looking up at her perched on his stomach. "It might cramp my style a bit to have an audience and by the way, I don't think you've had nearly enough yet." Mariah swatted playfully at his chest.

"Stop putting this off and roll onto your stomach. I promise you're going to like it."

"Are you going to give me some sort of a girly massage?" he asked with a shudder.

"Your body is going to love a little massage and there won't be anything girly about it so you can just relax and enjoy it." Mariah went up on her knees and pulled one leg over and off so he could turn over. As soon as he was on his stomach, she straddled him again and moved his long hair out of the way. Opening the bottle, she carefully drizzled a small amount down his back. Gabriel sighed at the delicious combination of oil and the hot, moist sex of a woman on his back. She placed her hands on his shoulders and began to knead his muscles. She flexed her hands on his powerful body, pressing into him with her thumbs. He groaned as she worked the tight muscles of his back then down each arm to his hands. She scooted down his body and off the end of the bed. Before he had a chance to ask, she took hold of one of his feet and, using her thumbs, helped relieve the soreness he didn't even realize he had. Setting his foot back on the bed, she took the other and massaged it deeply with her thumbs. Putting his foot gently back down on the bed, she stood and came around to the side of the bed so he could see her.

"Did that feel like a girly massage?" she asked.

"That felt great," he sighed blissfully, his face hidden against the sheet. Mariah went to wash the oil from her hands and when she got back Gabriel was lying on his back, one arm behind his head and a gentle smile on his face. "Thank you," he said gratefully. Mariah got the feeling it had been a long time since anyone had done something special for this man.

"I'll take any opportunity I can get to put my hands on you." Mariah climbed onto the bed then climbed on top of Gabriel, lying full length down his body. They lay quietly for a few minutes just cuddling, listening to the night sounds coming in the window when he rolled over and pinned her beneath him. He went to his knees, straddling her, then rolling her to her stomach. She may have been listening to the night sounds but he had been thinking, thinking about new ways to please her.

As she felt him lean over and grab the oil, Mariah shivered. What would he want to do to her? What would he do with the oil? Gabriel moved to stand at the foot of the bed. "Can you move to the bottom of the bed and get on your hands and knees?" he asked her. Mariah hesitated as she knew she would be totally open to him in that vulnerable position. "You don't have to do it if it makes you feel uncomfortable," he said "but I thought of something else I wanted to try to give us pleasure." She pushed herself back onto her hands and knees, nibbling her bottom lip in anticipation of the pleasure she knew was yet to come. Setting the bottle down, Gabriel put his hands on her bottom and smoothed them over her cheeks. His hands were rough but he used them gently on her delicate skin. He bent over and kissed her lower back, rubbing his cheek over her soft, smooth skin. He stood up and Mariah could feel his gaze on her. She felt embarrassed being so exposed to him but she found she enjoyed the feel of his eyes and hands exploring her.

"You're so beautiful here, all pinks and violets. It reminds me of the inside of one of those big seashells a friend of mine had when I was a kid. No wonder I liked that shell so much. I used to love running my fingers over its sleek surface and imagining the tangy scent of the ocean was still in it." Running his slick fingers up her slit, Gabriel said, "You have the same beautiful colors as that shell." Coming closer, he said, "You're satiny and shiny like it." Mariah knew what was coming next. Putting out his tongue and licking up her slit, he said, "You smell just like the ocean too." Mariah dropped her head to the mattress allowing him better access and was rewarded by him sending his fingers up to her clit. He gently rubbed at it, the oil making the motion smooth and gentle. He pulled his hand back a bit and was able to enter her with one finger. Finding her pleasure spot, he massaged inside her.

"Oh, Gabriel. Please don't make me come yet. I want you inside me. I need you inside me," she intoned.

"Turn your head and look at me," he said roughly. As Mariah looked back, he took hold of his penis with one hand and she realized the massage oil made it much easier to give himself pleasure. As she watched, he stroked himself with hard strokes and his cock grew longer and thicker in his hand. His eyes drifted shut but he didn't need his eyes open to know she was watching him and enjoying the sight of him stroking himself. She called to him. His eyes opened languidly to see her licking her lips at the pleasure she saw and he was afraid he was going to come.

He knew she was watching him, his face drawn in ecstasy and that she loved the look on his face.

"Gabriel. Gabriel," she called. "Gabriel, I need you inside me." His slippery cock slid back and forth at her opening then very slowly eased inside her, prolonging the agony, keeping her on the edge. Mariah was afraid she was going to faint. The sensation of his cock sliding back and forth across her opening with the picture in her head of him

using his hand to rub the oil all over it was almost too much for her. Then she felt him very gently begin to press his huge cock into her. The oil made it slide in so easily and soon she could feel him buried inside her as deep as he could go. Then he began to move.

He couldn't believe he was inside her without a condom. He had never made love to a woman without a rubber. He had never felt a woman skin to skin as he made love to her and the feeling was extraordinary. He could feel all the muscles inside her as they clutched his cock, without the rubber deadening the sensation. It was heaven.

Oh my God! She realized he was inside without a condom. She hadn't made love to that many men but she always made sure they wore protection. Now she realized what it was like when there was nothing between the two of you to lessen the pleasure. She could feel every stroke Gabriel took, could feel it skin to skin and the feeling was indescribable. She wondered if he would pull out when he came then she realized that secretly she hoped he would be too far gone to remember.

Gabriel could feel it coming down on him. He couldn't hold back any longer. It was so delicious to be inside without a condom that he couldn't stop his orgasm. At the last minute he pulled out and came in a hot, scalding rush on her back.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can tell you that I've been tested recently and I'm safe but I don't know what came over me. I never have unprotected sex but when I got inside you without the rubber, I couldn't pull out. It was absolute heaven."

"I know. I felt you come into me naked but as soon as you began to stroke inside me, I couldn't think about anything but the sensations within me. I've been tested recently too but that still doesn't excuse our lack of judgment. Next time—no glove, no love."

"Next time? So you think you might want to do this again?" he teased.

"I'm very sure."

"Just a minute and I'll clean you up," Gabriel said. He went into the bathroom and turned on the water. When it was warm, he wet a washcloth then turned off the tap. Grabbing a towel, he came back into the bedroom and tenderly wiped his essence off her back and dried her with the towel. Throwing them both over the edge of the bathtub, he got into bed with her. "I don't know about you," he said with a yawn, "but I could do with some sleep." He pulled the covers over them and tucked Mariah in at his side. She put her leg up and over his and nuzzled her face into his side.

"Gabriel?" she asked, hesitation in her voice.

"Yeah?"

"Will you still be here when I wake up?" He could hear the uncertainty in her voice. Putting his arm around her, he pulled her into the shelter of his arms, reassuring her with his nearness.

"Yeah. I won't leave you." And he meant it.

Chapter Five

The birds twittering outside the bedroom window woke Mariah. She opened her eyes just enough to see the beginning rays of the morning sun work their way across the bed. She usually loved the early morning with the sky resplendent in beautiful colors but this morning she really just wanted to sleep. Her tired brain tried to decipher the message that her body was too exhausted to get up and also trying to remember why that was. As she rolled away from the light coming through the window, she winced at the unaccustomed ache in the muscles of her thighs. Slowly, delicious images of the night before began to materialize in her brain and she remembered, with delight, where each of those aches and pains had come from. She reached out to touch the source of those wonderful images but her heart plummeted when she realized that the other side of the bed was empty. She opened her eyes to see that she was alone in the bed and shut them again as tears formed and began to slowly course down her cheeks. No noise came from the bathroom—she really was alone. He was gone.

She knew she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. She could get up and have a cup of tea and get some work done for school. That wasn't really what she had planned for her Sunday for after last night, her plans had hopefully included Gabriel. Now she didn't need to worry about including him in her plans, he was gone. Why did he say "I won't leave you" and then not even say good-bye?

Mariah slowly got out of bed and padded over to her dresser. Opening the top drawer, she got out an old t-shirt then grabbed a pair of panties from the second drawer. She went to the bathroom, gave her face a quick wash and threw on the t-shirt and panties. Dragging a brush through her hair, she quickly put it into a braid to keep it off her face but also to help forget the pleasure Gabriel got from watching her. Spying the towel and washcloth draped over the tub, she remembered how he had taken care of her the night before. She picked them up and threw them in the hamper, unwilling to have such a reminder left out. She walked through the patches of early morning sunlight that crisscrossed the upstairs hall and started down the stairs. The smell of fresh coffee and the sounds of someone moving around in the kitchen met her as she reached the bottom step. She turned toward the back of the house and went down the long hallway that led to the kitchen, the sounds of a deep voice drawing her on. What a voice that man had! He had one of her favorite Bruce Springsteen CDs on and was belting out the lyrics to "Born to Run".

Mariah stood in the doorway and took in the sight of him working in her kitchen. He hadn't left at all. He was busy getting things out of the fridge. Oh my God, a man who can cook! If he cooked half as well as he made love then breakfast was going to be memorable. As he searched through the cupboards he sang along with The Boss. When he had what he needed, he grabbed his cup of coffee and turned to lean back against the

counter, his legs crossed at the ankles. He hadn't shaved yet so his face bore the dark shadow of a beard. All he had on was a pair of jeans with the top button undone, his hair loose and flowing down his chest. He looked like he belonged there and Mariah's heart gave a lurch at the revelation. One moment she thought he was gone and the next she saw him as a perfect fit in her kitchen. Gabriel looked up at that moment and spied her standing in the doorway. His face lit up and he smiled at her, a smile of genuine pleasure. He came over and stood in front of her then cupped her face with his hands and gave her a gentle kiss. Reaching over to turn off the music, he spoke to her in a rough, morning voice.

"Hi. I'm sorry if I woke you. I can never sleep in. I always seem to wake up with the birds." She smiled as he revealed another little bit about himself.

Mariah shook her head. "I couldn't sleep once those birds started making all that racket outside my window. I thought I would come down, maybe make some tea and get some stuff done for school."

"You thought I was gone, didn't you?" Gabriel asked.

"What?" She pretended not to understand what he meant.

"You thought I'd left, didn't you?" he repeated.

"Well, when I woke up and saw that your side of the bed was empty, yeah, I figured you were gone," she confessed.

Gabriel spoke to her tenderly. "I told you last night that I wouldn't leave you and I meant it."

"I guess trust works both ways," said Mariah, smiling shyly. "I'm so glad to see you still here." She put her arms around him just to be able to inhale that delicious smell of bed-rumpled man. Then she said brightly, "What were you planning to make and where's that coffee? It smells delicious."

Gabriel laughed and went to pour her a cup of coffee. "What do you want in it?"

"A tiny bit of milk and just a bit of sugar. I suppose you like yours black?"

"Actually I like it the same as you – just a bit of milk and sugar."

"Did you find everything you need for breakfast?" Mariah said.

"I was thinking I could make omelets or scrambled eggs but what I would really love is a great big feed of pancakes. You any good at making pancakes?"

"That just happens to be one of my specialties and I even have fresh maple syrup my sister sent from Canada," she said with pride.

"You have a sister in Canada? What the heck is she doing up there?" Gabriel inquired.

"She went there to go to a university, met a nice Canadian man and the rest, as they say, is history. Her husband is a doctor in a little town outside Toronto and she stays home with the kids."

"You must miss her. Do you see her very often?" He liked it when she spoke about her family. It was obvious that she was close to her sister.

"A couple of times a year but we email each other all the time. Thank God for email. Our phone bills used to be colossal," Mariah said wistfully.

"Are your parents in Canada too?" Gabriel asked.

"No way! They just live in Houston. My dad got a job there a few years back and we moved there from New York State. What about you? Do your parents live close?" As soon as she asked the question she realized that she didn't even know where he was from.

"My parents died a few years back, my mom first and my dad missed her so much that he followed soon after. I have a brother in California but I haven't seen him for years. We seemed to drift apart after Mom and Dad died and we haven't kept in touch." Gabriel hesitated, looked like he was going to say more, then turned and walked back to the counter.

"What about those pancakes you said you'd make?" he asked. Mariah realized that, for now, that was all he was going to say about himself.

Leaving the eggs on the counter, Gabriel put everything else back into the fridge. "What else do you need from here?" he asked.

"Can you grab the milk and see if you can find the syrup? I think it's right there behind the milk." He poked around until he found the syrup, in a mason jar, tucked in behind some bottles and put it on the counter with the milk. Mariah got out the flour, oatmeal, baking powder and sugar and put them on the counter then got out a big bowl. She opened the freezer and took out a bag of frozen raspberries. Mariah turned around to find Gabriel staring at her. "What's the matter?" she asked him. "Don't you like raspberries?"

Gabriel burst out laughing. "Yeah, I love raspberries."

"Then what's so darn funny?"

"In our house when my mom made pancakes, the first thing she did was open the cupboard door and take out a box of pancake mix and then she would root around in the cupboard again and bring out the bottle of Aunt Jemima's syrup."

Mariah roared with laughter. "Well, prepare to have your culinary experiences turned up a notch. We're going to make them from scratch and have real syrup on them."

"What do you want me to do first?" Gabriel asked.

Mariah pulled out a well-worn recipe book which fell open at the page with the pancake recipe. Gabriel chuckled. "I see you've made these before," he said, pointing to the stained and rumpled pages.

"I love to cook and my mom gave me her old recipe book. Since it's just the two of them now she doesn't cook like she used to so she thought I might like some of her old recipe books. I can find all the things I loved to have her make by looking for the pages with the most stains. This was one of her favorite recipes too." Mariah propped the book up against the toaster and got out the measuring cups and spoons. "Are you really sure you want to help?"

"If I'm going to be eating them I want to help make them. Yes, I really would like to help," he said earnestly.

"Okay. You can measure out the dry ingredients." Gabriel read the recipe and put the ingredients into the bowl while Mariah got out the electric frying pan and plugged it in.

"I've never seen anyone add oatmeal to pancakes," he said.

"I love the flavor in pancakes. I like to think of it as my secret ingredient." Mariah added the milk, eggs and raspberries and let Gabriel stir the batter.

"Okay. The pan is heated. Just put some butter in to melt and add the batter."

She handed Gabriel a big spoon and he used it to make small rounds of batter in the pan. He kept an eye on them and turned them when they began to bubble and was delighted to flip a pan of perfect pancakes onto a plate.

"You look like a real pro at this," Mariah said with a laugh.

"You make it easy. Your kids at school must love you. You have an easygoing way that makes things just work out. Is this how you walk them through stuff?"

"They're not all as eager as you are and none of them are as sexy!"

"So you think I'm sexy?"

"As original sin. Why do you think I thought your name was Lucifer?"

Gabriel backed her up against the counter and took her mouth with his. He started with a sweet kiss but as soon as he touched her he grabbed her head in his hands and deepened the kiss. Mariah ran her hands through his hair and kissed him back with equal desire. She pulled back panting and inquired, "Food first?"

Gabriel tried to slow his breathing. He felt like a racehorse every time he touched her—out of breath, antsy, eager. "Okay," he said. "Food first. But I'm going to make sure we pick up right where we left off—we'll just do it later." He hugged her and placed a chaste kiss on the top of her head and laughed quietly. "We went to all the trouble of making them, let's sit down and eat the damn pancakes."

Drawing herself out of her sensual haze, Mariah took one last look at Gabriel's mouth and turned to face the counter. She rummaged around in a wicker basket sitting on the countertop and, getting out placemats and napkins went to the table by the window and set two places for them. "Can you grab some silverware out of the top drawer right there beside you and get some plates out of the cupboard to the right of the sink?" she called over her shoulder. Gabriel got out some knives and forks, took down a couple of plates and joined her at the table. The table looked very old and Gabriel wondered if it had been handed down in her family. It was placed right in front of a huge window that looked out across the yard to the mountains in the distance. The sun was beginning to bathe the barn in morning light and he could see horses in a corral next to the barn.

"Do you want some more coffee?" Mariah asked.

"I'd love another cup. Why don't you sit down and I'll grab the pot?"

Gabriel got the pot from the coffeemaker and came back and poured a fresh cup for them both. He put the pot back under the coffeemaker, grabbed some spoons and picked up the milk and sugar from the counter where he had left them.

"Do you like to cook?" Gabriel asked as he sat down.

"I love to bake but it's hardly worth it for just one person. I could freeze stuff but it's just not the same as having it fresh so I don't bother much."

"Can you bake chocolate chip cookies?" Gabriel asked longingly. "I can't remember the last time I had homemade chocolate chip cookies. Laura used to make them all the time."

"Laura?"

"She's my partner's wife. Actually my partner died so she's my partner's widow now," Gabriel said cryptically.

Mariah wanted to know so much about him but she didn't know what he was ready to tell her. "Was he sick?"

"No, he wasn't sick," he said, shaking his head. "He got shot."

"Shot! You mean like in a hunting accident or something?"

"No. We were both cops in Chicago and my partner got killed one night after we finished our shift."

"What happened?"

"We were driving back to the station and I stopped to get some cat food."

"You have a cat?" Mariah asked incredulously.

"Yeah, it's a big old guy I found outside the station one night after work. I just kind of took him in and kept him. No big deal."

Mariah suspected that it probably was, in fact, a big deal. He just didn't want people to see that side of him. "What happened?"

"I told Hank I just needed to get some cat food and he said he'd go in since Laura wanted him to bring home ice cream anyway. Laura was pregnant and always calling him at work to bring home crazy stuff she craved. It was a big joke down at the station and everyone teased him about it. Hank didn't mind. He was a good sport about the whole thing. He was so excited about that baby." Gabriel paused and looked out the window. Mariah could tell that he wasn't really looking at anything there. His mind was back in Chicago. "When Hank walked into the store, he walked right into a robbery and the kid shot him before he even had a chance to draw his gun. I ran in as soon as I heard the shots but Hank was already dead. I managed to subdue the kid who was high on something but I couldn't save Hank."

"That's what you mean about not being someone people can trust, isn't it? You think you let Laura down by not protecting Hank. Is that what you're running from?"

Gabriel jumped to his feet and slammed his hands on the table. "It's my fault he got killed!" he shouted. "I should have gone in there not him. I was the one who made him stop. How could I face Laura after what I'd done? She had a little boy soon after Hank's death. She called him Milagro. She said he was her miracle, her link to Hank. I had to leave. I couldn't bear to see her look at me with hatred."

"Oh Gabriel," Mariah said, getting up and putting her arms around him. "It's not your fault. You weren't Hank's protector. He wouldn't want you to live like this blaming yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

"How the hell do you know what Hank would have wanted?" Gabriel yelled. He took hold of her arms and pushed them down away from him. He grabbed his boots and threw them on, snagged a t-shirt from the back of a chair, stormed down the hall and out the front door slamming it behind him. A few seconds later Mariah heard him start the bike and take off.

Well, that didn't go exactly as planned. I was hoping to help him and all I've done is make him mad. I thought if he faced whatever was bothering him, he would feel better but I had no idea that he was carrying around such guilt.

Mariah gathered up the things from the table, her appetite gone. She put everything away, put the pancakes in a bag and threw the bag in the fridge. She walked quietly down the hall and out onto the front porch. The old porch swing beckoned to her so she sat down and started to cry. She didn't know whether she was crying for herself or for Gabriel.

Chapter Six

Mariah wasn't sure how long she sat there rocking in the swing. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. She had things that needed to be done. She needed to phone about her car and have it towed to the garage. She hadn't even thought about her car she'd been so involved with Gabriel. She had horses that needed tending.

Pushing herself slowly to her feet, she shuffled to the front door like an old woman, hoping she would be able to go upstairs and get dressed. Once inside she made her way to the front parlor and curled up on the couch. It was as far as her wobbly legs would carry her, she didn't have the strength to make it up the stairs. She felt so angry with herself for driving him away. He was right. She didn't know Hank. She didn't know what he would have wanted. How presumptuous of her to think that she could heal him with a few banal words! Pulling a blanket over herself, she lay there staring out the window as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She must have fallen asleep for she awoke to the feel of someone stroking her hair. Mariah opened her eyes to see Gabriel on his knees beside the couch, concern for her on his face. He gently touched his lips to her forehead.

"I wasn't mad at you," he said so quietly that she had to strain to hear. "I think I was more mad at myself. I've carried this guilt around for months and I couldn't let it go. I think I felt guilty that it wasn't me. I'm the single guy. Hank had a family—a loving wife and a baby on the way. It should have been me. He had too much to live for."

Mariah's heart ached as tears streamed down Gabriel's face. "Oh Gabriel," she cried. "I'm so glad it wasn't you. I'm sorry for the loss of your friend but I'm so glad that it wasn't you."

"Maybe you are an angel," he mused. "Maybe you're my guardian angel. I never believed in angels before but why were you by the road when I came by? Since I left Chicago, I've just followed the roads where they led. I never had a destination, never had a plan. You were there when I hit rock bottom."

"It wasn't your fault, you know. How could you have known what was happening? Maybe if you had gone in Hank might have followed you anyway and you might have both been shot. You can't tell what might have happened."

Gabriel put his head back and closed his eyes. She could see he was wrestling with his demons. "I went to the funeral, you know," he said, opening his eyes. "I don't remember much about it. I remember thinking that everyone was looking at me and thinking that it should have been me that took the bullet."

"Do you really think that or maybe they were looking at you and wondering how you were going to survive the loss of your partner. How long had you been together?"

"Eight years."

"Eight years! Some marriages don't last eight years!"

"We knew each other pretty well. You know, finishing each other's sentences and stuff."

"After eight years I can imagine how close you were."

"Yeah. We were close. Closer than brothers. Then after the funeral I thought things were changing at work—no one talked to me. That's when I thought they blamed me."

"Maybe they just didn't know what to say to you. You know how it is. People go around like they're walking on eggshells, not wanting to talk for fear of upsetting someone. Did you talk to anyone after Hank's death? Do they have a grief counselor or someone like that for police officers?"

"Yeah, I talked to the staff shrink and told her I was fine."

"You told her you were fine but you weren't, were you?"

"No. I was miserable and eaten alive with guilt but I thought if I just worked harder I'd get over it."

"What happened?"

"There was a problem with the arrest of the kid that killed Hank—something about procedure not properly followed and they had to let him go."

"Oh my God! They let his killer go free on a technicality?"

"I decided I couldn't stay and do my job when we risked our lives every day and the bad guys got to walk."

"So Hank's killer is walking around a free man?"

"Well, not exactly. A few days after he got out, he was killed in some kind of drug deal. I suppose in some ways it was poetic justice. In the eyes of the cops, justice had been served but it didn't bring Hank back. That was when I decided I needed to get away, ask for a leave of absence. I hadn't taken any time off in years and my captain was only too eager to let me go. I thought the guys in my precinct were leery of working with me. I had been pretty much of a loner since Hank's death. I got a friend to look after the cat, packed a few things, got on my bike and drove off. That was about three months ago."

"You've been wandering for three months?"

"Yeah. I headed southeast to where the weather was warmer then I thought I would head west. A few days ago I crossed into Texas and was just heading further west." His tone of voice got softer. "Then I saw this little angel by the side of the road and things started to change."

"Well, what do you want to do now?" Mariah asked.

Gabriel raised one eyebrow and looked at her mischievously.

She laughed and said, "I mean about Laura and the baby."

"I think I'd like to go and visit Laura, see the baby. I don't know if I'm ready to go back to work yet but I think I would like to see Hank's family."

"That seems like a good place to start," Mariah agreed. She wanted him to be able to go and deal with his past but she was afraid if he left she would never see him again. She knew it was silly—she had only just met him but he had come to mean so much to her. She wanted him in her life but she knew his life, his job were in Chicago and that was where he would go.

"Can I use your phone?" Gabriel said. "I think I'll call Laura and see what she says."

Mariah took him to the phone in the kitchen and sat in the living room to give him some privacy. She heard him place the call and waited anxiously to see if it would be answered. Even though she had gone to the living room she was still able to hear some of the conversation, at least Gabriel's side of the conversation. Mariah felt her eyes fill with tears when she heard him say he was the baby's godfather. All this time he thought Laura was angry with him and instead she had probably been worried sick about him. When she heard him hang up, Mariah waited a few minutes before going out to the kitchen. She found him with his hands in his pockets, staring out the window. She threaded her arms through his and laid her head against his back.

"Well. How did it go?"

"She was so glad to hear from me. She'd been worried when I hadn't been in touch with her for so long. I'm going to go and see them, Laura and Milagro, on the weekend. He has my name too, Milagro Gabriel, but she calls him Gabe." He turned to face Mariah. "Will you come with me?"

"Are you sure you want me to go? This is very personal for you."

"I need you to be there with me. I want to share it with you."

"I'd love to go and meet Laura and I'll help you any way I can." Gabriel took her in his arms so he could feel her strength then he looked down at her and said, "I have just one question." Mariah waited anxiously, wondering what the question was.

"Are there any pancakes left? I'm starved."

"Oh you rat!" she laughed. "I thought it was a serious question."

"Hey, it was a serious question. I'm serious about getting something to eat. So are there any pancakes left?"

"Yeah. I threw them in the fridge but we can use one of my mom's old tricks."

"What's that?"

"We'll just put them in the toaster to warm them up." Mariah got the pancakes and syrup out and put two pancakes in the toaster. As she reset the table Gabriel went down the hall to the front door and took off his boots and left them there. When he came back into the kitchen, Mariah was putting the pancakes out on the plates and putting more in the toaster. Gabriel sat down and put butter and syrup on the pancakes and took a bite.

"Wow! These are delicious. Your mother is brilliant."

"Of course she's brilliant. Look at the daughter she raised," she said laughingly. Gabriel reached over and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

"She raised a wonderful daughter and smart too," he said earnestly. They sat in silence for a while, enjoying each other's company. Gabriel gathered up the dishes when they were done and carried them to the counter by the sink. He put water in the sink and started to wash up the dishes.

"I guess I'd better call and get them to tow my car to the garage and see what's wrong with it." She went to the phone and called the garage to make the arrangements. Hanging up, she looked at Gabriel. "They'll pick it up as soon as they can and give me a call tomorrow after they have a chance to look at it. Oh no! How the heck am I going to get to school tomorrow?"

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"I'll take you in."
"On the bike?"
"Sure."
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"I'd love to go to school on the bike. I probably won't be able to sleep tonight thinking about it," she teased although it wasn't far from the truth.

"Oh, I can guarantee you won't be able to sleep tonight but it won't be from thinking about the bike." Gabriel turned from the sink to look at her. Mariah saw the look he gave her. It was hot enough to set the room on fire.

Mariah waltzed over to where Gabriel was finishing the dishes. "Do you need any help with those?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"Ah, no. I think I can manage to finish them off."

"I didn't think a big, strong he-man like you would know how to wash dishes. Maybe I should give you a little help." She went alongside him and put her hands in the water. Gabriel watched her warily, wondering what she was up to. She took both of her wet hands out of the water and put them palm down on his chest, onto his t-shirt. She gave at him with a look of total innocence.

"Oh, oh. It looks like your t-shirt got wet. That must be uncomfortable for you. Maybe you should just take it off."

Gabriel smiled as he saw her plan. He liked her plan—a lot. He took his hands out of the water and, grabbing the hem of his t-shirt, ripped it off.

"There now. Doesn't that feel better?" Mariah dried her hands on a dishtowel then walked to stand behind him. She reached around him and put her hands on his fly and was rewarded with the feel of his massive erection straining the zipper. "Oh my goodness!" she said. "That feels uncomfortable. Those jeans seem very tight. Let me help you." She knew Gabriel would keep his hands to himself for a little longer. She could sense that he was enjoying this game as much as she was. She gently undid the top button of his jeans, then another and another.

"There. Doesn't that feel better?" She slid one hand down into his jeans and was surprised and delighted to discover that he was not wearing any underwear. His long, strong cock pulsed under her hand and Gabriel groaned and sighed in delight.

"I'm never going to get these dishes done if you keep that up," he said, laughing.

"I was really hoping you could keep this up," she said as she caressed his cock.

"I don't seem to have any trouble keeping it up when you're around," he said dryly. It was at that moment that he turned and planted his wet hands on the front of her t-shirt. She shrieked and jumped back.

"Turnabout is fair play. Oh, oh. I see your t-shirt is wet. Maybe you should take it off. I wouldn't want you to catch a cold."

There wasn't much chance she was going to catch a cold. She was burning. Burning with desire, burning with need. Burning for him. Tossing him a naughty look, Mariah reached down, grabbed the bottom of her t-shirt and pulled it over her head. Gabriel looked down at her, her body clad in nothing but a little pair of panties and his face broke into a wide grin. Gabriel looked his fill as he had never seen her naked in the daylight before.

"You looked so beautiful last night in the soft light of the bedroom but here, in the light of day, you are gorgeous," he said reverently. Grabbing a towel, he quickly dried his hands then went to his knees in front of her. Putting his hands on her bottom, he pulled her close to him and gently tugged off her panties. She daintily stepped out of them and Gabriel threw them behind him. He sat back on his haunches so he could just sit and look at her. Mariah looked down at him shyly, not as sure of herself now as she had been last night in the privacy of her bedroom and within the veil of darkness night had provided. Gabriel leaned forward and nipped around her navel. She giggled. He put out his tongue and drew circles around her bellybutton then lapped a line from her pubic hair up to her navel. She shivered. He spread his hands across the tops of her legs and opened her with his thumbs. He gently massaged her clit with one thumb. She moaned. Her clit stiffened under Gabriel's gentle ministrations and she knew if he put his mouth on her, she would explode. Gabriel lowered his thumb to her slit and her cream bathed his thumb. As he rubbed the lubricant over her erect little clit she whimpered. He moved his head toward her and she knew his intent. She was afraid she was going to come even before he touched her.

He could feel her wound up like a top. He had coaxed her clitoris out of its hood and now he was eager to go down on her. He put his mouth on her and she screamed. "Oh, Gabriel. I don't think I can stand it. Make me come, please!"

He sucked her clit into his mouth and forced it against his bottom lip just using the pressure of his top lip. Then he added the pressure of his tongue to arch up into her little hood. He ran the point of his tongue back and forth on the underside of her little hood and she grabbed his head and pulled him closer. "Oh my God, Gabriel. Have mercy! Put me out of my misery!" He stabbed her clit with the stiff point of his tongue

and, giving a shudder, she exploded. Gabriel could taste her juices as she came in his mouth. He licked her as she came and tried to make her orgasm last as long as he could.

Mariah leaned forward so she was resting against Gabriel's forehead and she placed her hands on his shoulders. She was afraid she would melt to the floor if he didn't support her body. "That was magic," Gabriel said. "I love it when you give yourself so freely to me."

Mariah rubbed her hands gently over his shoulders and down onto his back. Gabriel let her caress him for a few moments with her soothing touch then he leaned forward and grabbed her nipple between his teeth and gently bit down. Mariah jumped. As he bit down, her nipple grew longer and he was able to flick the tip of it with his tongue while he held it imprisoned in his mouth. She could feel the pull of his teeth and the flicking of his tongue from her breast down to her sex as if they were joined by a silken cord. Each time Gabriel tugged on her nipple, she felt an answering tug between her legs and she clenched her thighs tightly together to savor the feeling. Gabriel moved his mouth to her other nipple and began to root at it like a baby while he delicately pinched its mate. It was so sensitive from Gabriel's tonguing and nibbling that she didn't know if she was feeling pleasure or pain. He knew just how much pressure to apply to her nipple to make the pleasure border on pain but he also knew that she trusted him not to hurt her. This was for her pleasure and he would never hurt her deliberately. He let go of her nipple and blew a puff of breath on it. It stood at attention as if begging for more.

"Oh Gabriel," she cried. "I don't know how much more I can take. My body feels over-sensitized, like my skin is too tight."

"Oh, baby," he said soothingly, standing up and taking her into his arms. "I just want to give you pleasure."

"That's wonderful but am I going to get a chance to pleasure you?" she asked.

"You can bet on that," he said with that Lucifer smile. "First I want to relieve some of that tension for you. Take the edge off for you. Would that be all right, babe?" Mariah nodded. Gabriel put his hands at her waist, lifted her up and set her on the counter. The marble surface was cold against her bottom but gave some relief to her hot, aching sex. She closed her eyes and began to gently sway back and forth on the counter, pushing her sex down to allow it to kiss the cooling marble. Gabriel watched her pleasuring herself on the cold surface. It turned him on to watch her body hum with need. He put his mouth to her ear and softly whispered, "Keep your eyes closed."

Mariah could hear him padding around the kitchen, opening the fridge, getting something out of the cupboard. Her body was so attuned to him that she could feel his movements without having to watch him. She heard the gentle sound of his jeans hitting the floor and knew that he was naked—naked and hungry for her.

Gabriel watched her sitting so serenely waiting for him but he knew she was anything but serene. She had a hunger that only he could appease. He walked back to stand in front of her and set something on the counter.

Mariah heard the noise of something being set on the counter near her but she couldn't tell exactly what it was. Was it a plate or a saucer? Perhaps it was a bowl? What was he doing? She wanted to open her eyes and see what was in store for her but she knew it would be much more delightful to wait for Gabriel to administer her release. "Open your legs for me," Gabriel said. Mariah complied, shivering in anticipation. "Are you cold?" he teased. "I see you're shivering."

"You know I'm not cold!" she said sharply, her tension making her edgy.

"Let me help you relieve some of that tension," he said soothingly. Suddenly she felt his warm breath on her vulva and she realized that he was crouched down looking at her most secret place. Last night it had been dark and shadowy in the bedroom but now it was the full light of day. She knew he could see everything. "Put your hands back behind you and scoot your bottom forward." As she did so, she knew she would be even more open to his gaze. She heard Gabriel sigh in delight as he watched her move forward. "Don't open your eyes," he said. "No matter what!"

"I will try to keep them closed but you make it hard for me. I want to watch, to see what you are doing."

"You've got that backward," Gabriel chuckled.

"What do you mean?" Mariah said, confused.

"You make it hard. Hard with aching for you."

"Well, I could do something about that if you would just let me pleasure you."

"I know. You'll get your chance soon enough. It'll give you more time to plan. You know how I like a good plan." Mariah laughed. She loved Gabriel's plans. In fact, she couldn't wait to think up a good plan to pleasure him.

While Mariah kept her eyes closed Gabriel stood up and took his wallet out of his pocket to get out a condom. He set the condom on the counter so it would be close at hand. Next he reached into the bowl and picked up an ice cube. The cold water trickled down his hand. "Keep your eyes closed," he commanded.

"I know." Gabriel touched the ice cube to her tummy and drew a line down her belly with it. As he dragged the cube across her skin, tiny streams of water ran down her belly and into her pubic hair. "Oh my God!" she yelped. "Gabriel, what are you doing?"

"Just cooling you off, honey, just cooling you off." He ran the ice cube down through her hair and touched her clit with a corner of the cube. The sensation was indescribable. The cold of the ice cube met the blazing heat of her clit. He ran the cube down and circled her opening with it. The water dripped from his hands. He inserted the ice cube into her just a tiny bit. "Spread your legs a little more." She did. He held the ice cube with his thumb and finger and pushed it inside her a little more. "Don't let that come out," he said. She heard him rip open the condom packet and envisioned him rolling it down that gorgeous cock. He pulled her forward on the counter and began to push his cock inside her. His cock nudged the ice cube farther inside her and she was afraid she was going to faint. He lifted her off the counter so she could put her legs

around his waist and her eyes shot open. He smiled at her and kissed her on the lips. He held her in his arms and let his cock slide up into her. She was so hot inside and the ice was so cold. "Hook your legs behind me," he said and he began to stroke slowly into her. With every stroke into her, the tip of his cock touched the ice cube. Every stroke out gave him her fire.

Gabriel couldn't separate all the sensations bombarding him at the same time. There was the cold from the ice cube and the heat from her snug channel but he couldn't tell which was which, where one ended and the other began. Gabriel felt the flutter inside her and knew she was about to come. He surged up into her and she screamed her release. He could feel the sensation of her inner muscles, hot and vibrant, clenching around his cock mixed with the cold of the ice cube and it nearly drove him out of his mind. When she started to come he was right behind, his orgasm coming down on him like a freight train. The power of it was so strong that he yelled with the force of its release. Neither of them could move. They were frozen as if in a tableau. He kept her legs around his waist as long as he could but when his legs felt like they could no longer support her weight, he let them slide to the floor.

Gabriel kept his arms around Mariah and she was very grateful to him since she didn't think her legs would be able to support her. With her head on Gabriel's chest, she could hear the beating of his heart, slowing from its frenzied pace to a normal strong rhythm. They stood quietly in each other's arms for a few minutes then Mariah looked at him and smiled.

Chapter Seven

Mariah didn't know what to think. Making love with this man was not like making love with anyone else. It was as if everything was magnified, intensified, made stronger by their desire, by their closeness, by their need for each other.

Gabriel shook his head slowly. "It's hard to imagine that something that small could bring so much pleasure. Are you all right?" he asked with a frown.

"It was almost too much to bear," Mariah sighed. "I couldn't seem to catch my breath. One time when I was little, I was jumping on the bed and I fell off and got the wind knocked out of me. It felt like that—like I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. I thought I was dying."

"No wonder the French call it *la petite mort*, the little death," Gabriel mused.

"It certainly felt like the 'little death'. I couldn't hold back. The sensations were so confusing. I could feel the cold of the ice cube but it was being shoved deeper by your burning-hot cock. I couldn't tell if the sensation was fire or ice." Mariah shook her head slowly.

"When I stroked in, the tip of my cock would touch the ice cube then when I slid back out I could feel your inner passage clutching me, scorching my cock with its heat. It was one of the most intense pleasures I've ever had." He looked at her with a wry little smile and said, "What else do you have in the fridge?"

"No way! We need a little time-out."

Gabriel looked down at his penis. "Well, he's already having a time-out, time out of you and I gotta tell you that he doesn't like it one bit."

"Oh, Gabriel!" Mariah said, playfully punching him in the arm. "Just give me a minute to clean up and then I believe you said I'd get my turn." Gabriel swallowed hard wondering what she had in mind, wondering if he could take it.

Mariah wiped up a bit of water on the counter then opened the cupboard door under the sink. She motioned to the garbage can and said, "You can throw the condom in there." Gabriel gingerly rolled the condom off and threw it out. He grabbed a tissue from the counter to clean up. "Those things are so messy. I know they're necessary but I can't help thinking that I would love to make love to you again, skin to skin. I love to feel your muscles grab my cock without the rubber in between. I want to feel you again without a barrier between us but I know for now we need to use a condom."

For now, thought Mariah. Did that mean that he was planning to spend more time with her than just a few days? Her heart turned over as she imagined the joy of having him in her life. She tamped down her eagerness and watched him as he walked to the window. "It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day," he said.

Gabriel turned from the window to see Mariah getting something out of the cupboard. "I'm not really very hungry," he said to Mariah.

"Oh, that's all right because the only thing that's going to get eaten around here is you." She beckoned him over with her finger. "Come back over here, big boy, and take your licks like a man."

"Take my licks," he said, laughing quietly. "I like the sound of that."

He sauntered back to her giving her a delicious frontal view. He was a man comfortable in his own skin and why not? He was built like a god. Patting the counter, Mariah said, "I want you to sit up here on the counter while I get ready." Gabriel pushed his hair back over his shoulders and, standing with his back to the counter, used both hands to lift himself onto it. "Ah! That is so cold!" he yelped.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" she laughed. "I'm sure you'll get used to it. I did."

She kept her back to him so he couldn't see what she was doing. He thought that it was so erotic with a woman wandering around the kitchen naked. "I'm almost ready," she called over her shoulder. "You can shut your eyes now." Gabriel knew she wasn't going to be using something cool on him since he could hear the rattle of a pot on the stove but what was she going to use that was warm? He couldn't wait to find out. He had never played sex games with a woman before but it all came so easily when he was with Mariah. Came so easily — wasn't that the truth. She just had to look at him and he was hard as granite. He chuckled at the thought. "What are you chuckling about?" she asked, as she turned to study his beautiful face, rough with his morning beard. Lord but he was a gorgeous man! With his eyes closed he looked almost angelic, with those dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks, but she knew better.

"Just thinking about stone," Gabriel mused.

"About stone?"

"Yeah, you know. Hard things like stone." She turned and looked at his penis.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I see what you mean. That looks painful. Let me see what I can do about that for you." She turned her back on him again and poured something into a bowl. "Keep those eyes closed, buster. No peeking!" she said sternly. "You may be a big, bad Chicago cop but that doesn't mean anything in this kitchen." Gabriel realized that he had no reaction to her calling him a big, bad cop. Well, his dick had a reaction, a big one, but he found his chest didn't hurt anymore when he thought about being a cop. His healing had begun and the woman responsible for that had him at her mercy. He really hoped she showed no mercy. He hoped she was very naughty with him. Playing as part of sex was so much fun. Maybe he could get her to dress up as a French maid one day or maybe he could be a cowboy. Maybe he could wear nothing but leather chaps and get her to sit on his lap. That was one he would really enjoy. So would she. If he wore leather chaps, she could come at him from the back and caress his buttocks, maybe nip at his butt cheeks. He smiled as he thought of her nibbling his ass—what a turn-on that would be.

As Mariah approached Gabriel, she realized he was smiling. She had been worried that her reference to him being a cop might have angered him but he didn't seem angry at all. In fact, he seemed complacent. Well, that was about to change!

Gabriel heard her soft footsteps approach and she came to stand between his legs. She reached over his thigh to set something on the counter. "I want you to put you hands behind you and lean back a bit." Gabriel complied, eager to find out what she had in store for him. Suddenly he felt her dribble something down his belly. It was warm and tingly on his skin. "Ah, ah, ah. Don't peek," she chastised. "I know you want to watch me lick you off but not yet."

Not yet? he thought. She was going to lick him and he was going to get a chance to watch. He could wait for that. If he didn't expire first from anticipation.

As Mariah dribbled the warm chocolate sauce on him, she thought, What a treat! My two favorite things—Gabriel and chocolate together. It doesn't get much better than this. She bent down and began to lick the chocolate from his skin. The taste of chocolate and man. A heady combination. She used little catlike strokes of her tongue to gently clean his belly of all the chocolate. It was delicious.

Gabriel could feel her tongue moving over his belly and licking off whatever it was. He took a deep breath and smelled...what? Chocolate! *She had put warm chocolate sauce on him and was licking it off.* He would never, ever be able to eat another chocolate sundae without getting a major erection. She had finished licking his belly and was leaning across his thigh for more chocolate. "Now where will I drizzle it this time?" she mused.

On my cock, on my cock, he cried in his head.

"How about right here," she mused.

Where? he silently pleaded.

"Could you move your legs a bit farther apart and scoot forward?" she asked. If she was going to dribble it where he hoped she was going to dribble it, he would do anything she asked. He moved forward and shifted to make more space between his legs and she rewarded him by dribbling the sweet, sticky syrup up his inner thigh. He nearly lifted off the counter when he thought about her licking it off. She would be so close to his rod. Maybe she would take pity on him and lick it as well. He heard her voice as if from a distance. He was having trouble concentrating on words. "You're being a very good boy," she said. "You haven't opened your eyes once. I think I will give you a little reward." And she bent down and began to lick the chocolate syrup from his inner thigh. He moved his hands so he could grip the edge of the counter and knew that his knuckles were probably white he was gripping it so tightly. She got closer and closer to his shaft but she just seemed to be ignoring it. How could she ignore it? It must be waving like a flag in front of her face.

"I better make sure I do everything equally," she said thoughtfully. Sure enough, she dribbled the syrup on his other thigh and began to lap it up too. The sounds of her

licking and sucking on his thigh and the sounds of pleasure she made in her throat were enough to give a dead man a hard-on and he certainly wasn't dead. Far from it!

"Gee. I sure hope I have enough chocolate left for that," she said seriously.

For what? he thought. For my cock?

She must have been able to read his mind for he felt her lean across his thigh for more syrup and then she drizzled it over the head of his cock. He felt it slip and slide down his cock and he tingled with anticipation, waiting for her to put her mouth on him. "That is the most delightful-looking chocolate dessert I have ever seen," she said. "If I opened a restaurant and offered that for dessert, I'd have to beat the women off with a stick. You are the most delicious-looking thing I have ever seen."

"Could you...?" Gabriel begged.

"Could I what?"

"Could you please lick the chocolate off my cock?"

"I'd be delighted to oblige. Would you like to watch?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'd love to watch," he said as opened his eyes and looked down at her and at his cock dripping in chocolate. He couldn't help but laugh as he looked at his major hard-on smothered in chocolate. But the laughter died in his throat as she opened her mouth and began to delicately lick the massive head. She licked the top of it to get all the chocolate then she licked all around the rim as well using the point of her tongue sometimes and sometimes licking with the flat of her tongue. It was torture by chocolate! Then she got down on her knees and licked up his shaft to remove the chocolate that was dripping down it. She had to lick it from different angles to make sure she got it squeaky clean. She even licked his balls.

"Hey! There isn't any chocolate there," he said.

"Wouldn't want to miss any," she retorted. "Besides, I think a little bit ran down here," she said as she gave his balls another swipe with her tongue. "I don't know if I've done a very good job there," she said, pointing to the head of his penis. "I think I could do better."

Better. If she did any better he would die of bliss.

With that, she leaned over and from above began to take the head of his cock right into her mouth. She swirled her tongue all around under the guise of removing any chocolate that was left but Gabriel knew that it was really just for his pleasure. She used her tongue to arouse him then applied suction with her cheeks. The sensation was exquisite and a heady combination mixed with the smell of chocolate in the air.

From her position above, she ran her tongue down his cock, feeling the heavy veins grow more prominent as he grew more aroused. She pulled her mouth away and began to lick the outside of his penis down to his sac. She put her hand around him. He was huge and began to move it up and down as if she were going to jerk him off. She knew he was getting close so she put her mouth on him again and sucked with her cheeks. Gabriel's balls began to tighten and he started to lift off the counter and farther into her

mouth. He moved his hands to grab her head and, shutting his eyes, began to gently move her head to the rhythm he needed. Mariah could feel the strength gathering and, with a groan, he began to come and shot into her mouth and down her throat. She could taste the salty flavor of his cum mixed with the chocolate and it was too much for her. She began to quiver and her body rocked with an unexpected orgasm of its own. Gabriel languidly opened his eyes after this apocalyptical event, looked down at Mariah and began to laugh.

"I've just given you the best sexual experience of your entire life and you're laughing!" she said with a feigned pout.

Gabriel pulled her up to stand between his legs and said, "I can't help it. You have chocolate all around your mouth and you look so cute." He tugged her closer, brought her mouth down to his and began to lick at the chocolate. "You taste so good," he said. "Like chocolate and me. What a delicious combination."

Mariah struggled not to laugh as his rough unshaven face tickled her while he licked at the chocolate. She wanted to pretend she was annoyed with him but she could imagine how she must look, her mouth rimmed with chocolate. He took his time gently using his tongue to lick her lower lip then he drew back and ran his forefinger along her upper lip to remove the chocolate there. "Open your mouth," he said. As she complied, he took his finger and put it in her mouth. She used her tongue to suck off all the chocolate, running it up, down and all around his finger then she flicked her tongue across the tip of it as if it were his penis.

Gabriel couldn't stifle a groan at her boldness.

She used her tongue to push his finger hard against her palate and sucked at it fiercely with her tongue. When she released the pressure, he pulled his finger from her mouth and traced the outline of her lips with it. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to eat another chocolate sundae in my whole life," he said with a smile. "I know I'll never look at chocolate the same way."

"I think I need to have a shower," Mariah said, running her hand down his rough cheek. "Do you want to join me, big fella?"

"That's an invitation I couldn't refuse. My belly is sticky from all that chocolate. Not that I'm complaining." Gabriel bent to retrieve his jeans and t-shirt. "I'm just going to go get my bags so I can get out some clean clothes." He put on his jeans, did up a few of the buttons then went down the hall and out the front door. Mariah grabbed her t-shirt and panties and headed upstairs. She had just reached the bottom step when she heard a commotion outside. She could hear the sound of voices raised in anger and wondered who was out there with Gabriel.

Quickly putting on her panties and t-shirt, she threw open the front door to see what was going on. There was Gabriel standing by the Harley, his hands flexing at his sides facing a tall, muscular man wearing a sheriff's uniform. Even though Gabriel was wearing nothing but his jeans he looked strong and capable of handling anything, even this angry stranger. Mariah groaned and laid her forehead against the screen door.

"I asked you a question," said the man. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?"

"Actually, that's two questions," said Gabriel, refusing to be intimidated.

"Don't smart-mouth me. What I see is a half-dressed man standing out here and I want to know what the hell's going on," he said, advancing on Gabriel.

"I can't see what possible business it would be for the sheriff to know what I'm doing here," Gabriel said, trying to contain his anger.

Mariah pushed open the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. "Well, as the sheriff, it's none of his business, but as my brother, he likes to make it his business," she said with a sigh of resignation.

"This guy's your brother?" Gabriel asked, looking disbelievingly at the tall man before him.

"I'm afraid so. Gabriel, meet my brother Burke. He's the sheriff." Burke ignored Gabriel and turned to look at Mariah.

"Who the hell is this guy and what is he doing out here in just a pair of jeans? And why the hell are you wearing nothing but a t-shirt?"

"Burke, I've told you before. I'm not sixteen anymore and I don't need you to look out for me."

"Good God, Mariah," he said, striding over to the bottom of the steps. "Look at him!" he said, looking up at her then glancing at Gabriel. "This guy has trouble written all over him."

"Burke, what are you doing here? Is this supposed to be a social call?"

"Al Johnson called me and said that he saw your car by the side of the road just west of Hopeville and you were nowhere to be seen. I got worried."

"Why didn't you just call?" she asked. Burke's face got red and he looked away as he mumbled something to her.

"What's that? I didn't hear what you said."

"I said I was worried that something had happened to you and I wanted to see with my own eyes that you were all right. But I can see that you are just fine," he said sarcastically, looking over his shoulder at Gabriel who had come to stand behind him. Mariah walked down the steps and hugged her brother.

"Thank you, Burke, for worrying about me. But you didn't need to worry. My car broke down yesterday and I had to wait for someone to drive by."

"Why can't you get a cell phone like everybody else?" Burke asked, annoyance in his voice.

"I told you before. I don't want a cell phone. Up until yesterday I made out just fine without one."

"Okay. I won't get into another argument with you about the cell phone. Not just now." Burke nodded his head toward Gabriel. "I suppose this is who picked you up.

What were you thinking, Mariah?" he said quietly. "He could be a criminal. He looks dangerous enough to be a criminal." Mariah burst out laughing as Gabriel turned toward her brother. Gabriel stuck out his hand and said, "Gabriel Blackburn, Chicago PD." Burke snorted.

"Yeah right. Chicago PD," he scoffed. Gabriel reached into the pocket of his jeans and drew out his wallet. Opening it, he pulled out his ID and handed it to Burke who scanned it carefully. "Well, maybe he is who he says but that doesn't answer my question about what he's doing out here half-dressed."

"You know what, Burke?" Mariah said, looking him right in the eye.

"What?"

"It's none of your damn business. Now if you will excuse me, I need to do some chores." She started up the steps and then paused and looked back at her brother. "If you would like to come and have dinner on Tuesday night, I'll make lasagna for you."

"Will he be there?" he said, jerking his thumb at Gabriel.

"I don't know," Mariah said, not meeting Gabriel's eye. "You'll have to ask him that yourself." And with that she turned and mounted the steps, disappearing into the house.

"Well. What about it?" said Burke, looking right at Gabriel. "You still gonna be around or will you have hightailed it outta here by then?"

"Oh, you can be sure I'm still gonna be around. In fact, Mariah is going to Chicago with me on Friday."

"Chicago! Why's she going to Chicago with you?"

"We're going to see a friend of mine but if you want to know more, then you'd better talk to Mariah." With that, Gabriel climbed the steps to go in. As he opened the door he looked back at Burke and said, "See you Tuesday."

"Yeah, see you Tuesday and if I hear that everything's not okay with my sister, I'll make sure you regret it." Gabriel disappeared into the house, leaving Burke staring pensively after him.

Chapter Eight

Burke climbed back into the sheriff's Bronco and put through a call to the office. He waited a few minutes for Margaret to get hold of his deputy. "Yeah, Jake. Burke here. I need you to do some digging for me. Find out what you can for me about a Gabriel Blackburn. He's a cop with Chicago PD." He let Jake rant for a minute about interrupting his day off then said, "Look, I wouldn't bother you on your day off but this is personal and keep it on the qt, okay." Burke drove down the driveway, thinking about his sister and wondering what she had gotten herself into this time.

Inside the house, Mariah was wondering what Gabriel had said to Burke to make him look so smug when he came back in the house. "You look smug. What did you say to Burke?"

"He wanted to know if I would still be around when he came for dinner on Tuesday."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said I would definitely be around and that you were going to Chicago with me on Friday." Mariah snorted.

"And how did he take that news?"

"He told me if anything happened to you, he would make me regret it."

"He threatened you!"

"Mariah, it's okay. I'm glad your brother cares so much for you. You're lucky to have him."

"He can be a real pain in the butt but I love him. I just wish he'd give me some breathing space."

"So do you have any other family surprises for me—like a father who's president or another brother who's a Texas Ranger?"

"As a matter of fact..."

"What!"

"I'm just kidding," she said with a laugh. "No more surprises. I have a sister who lives in Canada and a brother who's a sheriff and that's it." Mariah gave him a quick peck on the cheek and started up the stairs.

"Hey, where're you going?" Gabriel asked as he watched Mariah's pert little butt going up the stairs.

"I am now going to have the shower I was planning to have before my brother so rudely interrupted." She walked up the stairs and stopped halfway up. Keeping her back to him, she pulled her t-shirt over her head and threw it back down the stairs. It landed on Gabriel's face. She climbed to the top step, pulled her panties down, wiggled her butt at him and threw them back down the stairs. She called down to him, "You planning on joining me or are you going to stand there all day?" Gabriel gave a whoop of delight and took off after her. "Just wait 'til I catch you," he called as he pounded up the stairs. Mariah raced down the hall, the sound of Gabriel's feet echoing down the corridor as he ran to catch her. She hoped it didn't take him too long. She could hardly wait until he caught her! She ran into the bedroom and raced to the far side of the bed. Gabriel charged into the bedroom right behind her, shucking his jeans as he flew into the room. He hopped on one foot to pull off one pant leg then switched feet so he could pull off the other. From her spot on the far side of the bed, Mariah took in his masculine beauty. Except for the chocolate smeared on his belly, he was just about perfect. Maybe that smear of chocolate was what got Burke's briefs in such a twist. He probably wondered how Gabriel got chocolate smeared all over him. Considering how ornery he'd been, Mariah thought he'd probably already figured it out for himself. Well, she was over sixteen and an independent woman. It was nice that he worried about her but her intimate life was really none of his concern.

Gabriel looked across the room to see Mariah had put the bed between them. "So you think you can escape me?" he said teasingly. He slowly stalked over to the bed and skirted around the bottom to get to the other side. Mariah scurried across the bed on her hands and knees so she was on the opposite side when he got to where she had been. "You're not going to escape me that easily," he said, leering at her. He walked back around the bottom of the bed and as she tried to crawl across the bed again, he reached out and grabbed her ankle. "Gotcha!" He beamed. He pulled her down to the end of the bed while she pretended to struggle to get away from him. He grabbed her other ankle and flipped her over to find her laughing at his ploy. He let his body fall gently to the bed and covered her with his naked form. She wriggled to get closer to him and felt his hands come to her sides so he could push himself up and over her. She reached up to bite at his lower lip. He pushed himself to his feet and pulled her up to stand close to him. "I really need a shower to wash off this chocolate. What if we have more company?" he said jokingly.

They went into the bathroom together and as Mariah got the water running, Gabriel stood behind her and undid her braid. He ran his fingers through her hair then grabbed a hairbrush from the counter and gently drew it through her hair. "Can I wash your hair for you?" he asked. They climbed into the shower together and as soon as Mariah wet her hair, Gabriel put shampoo in it and massaged her scalp. He helped her get all the soap out and then she put in some conditioner. "I'll never be able to get a comb through it if I don't use the conditioner," she explained. Gabriel was delighted to be part of these women's secret rituals. He had never had a woman who enjoyed being with him like this and he found he loved to watch her being a woman. As Mariah turned to face him to rinse the conditioner out of her hair, Gabriel put soap on his hands and rubbed them over her sensitive breasts. It was so easy to pluck at her nipples with his slippery hands. Then he moved them down between her legs and used his thumb and forefinger to nip and tug her clit. Mariah arched her back to allow him better

access. Gabriel brought her to a peak two or three times but kept her balanced on the edge rather than letting her come.

She was feeling feisty, unfulfilled, so she soaped up her hands and grabbed his cock. It felt exquisite to run her hands up and down his length with the added lubrication of the soap. She put her hands between his legs and caressed his balls. He let her fondle him until they were both unable to bear the wait any longer. Gabriel lifted her into his arms and set her down on his slippery cock. He backed her against the wall and, inch by glorious inch, he eased her down onto him, the entry made easy by the soap.

When he had entered her to the hilt, Mariah moaned as he waited a moment to let her feel him without the condom between them. She knew this was risky. He needed to pull out before he spilled inside her. Then he began to move and it was heaven, skin to skin, nothing in between, nothing to dull the pleasure. He plunged up into her, the sound loud in the bathroom.

Mariah loved the feel of him without the condom to mask the naked glory. She could feel everything as if the sensations between her legs were being magnified, intensified for her pleasure, for their pleasure. Gabriel began to groan and she could feel his orgasm begin to bear down on them. He released her legs and she slid them to the floor of the tub. He grabbed her hands and put them back on his cock then he covered them with his own and together they took the rhythm, up and down, up and down. Mariah watched as his face contorted then with a yell he came over their joined hands. It was wonderful to watch his essence pump out and run down their linked fingers. Gabriel slumped against the wall. "Woman, you are going to be the death of me. I'm not a young man anymore, you know."

Mariah laughed. "You could have fooled me," she said. They washed off the remains of their lovemaking and the chocolate and climbed out. Mariah handed Gabriel a towel but instead of drying himself with it, he wrapped her up in it and hugged her close, her back against his chest. "That was very nice," he said quietly in her ear. He unwrapped the towel and used it to gently rub her hair. Mariah stepped away from him and took a hair pick from a little basket on the counter. As Gabriel grabbed another towel and began to dry himself off, Mariah stood naked in front of the mirror and combed the tangles from her hair. It was such an erotic vignette. She could see herself in the mirror, with her long wet hair streaming around her naked body but in the background she could see Gabriel drying himself off. Little rivulets of water ran down his body and his long black hair was plastered to his body. When he raised his arms to rub his hair and dry his face, she could see the tufts of black hair under his arms. Even that hair looked soft and silky and incredibly arousing.

When Mariah was satisfied that all the tangles had been tamed, she put her hair back into a braid. She took a small towel and set it on the toilet. Motioning for him to sit, she said, "If you sit down I'll comb your hair for you." Gabriel was stunned. Not since he was a child had anyone ever combed his hair for him. He sat down and Mariah began to work the hair pick through his hair.

"Next time, you should use that conditioner too," she ordered.

"What! And smell like a girl. I don't think so," he said playfully.

"I'm sure no one would mention it to a big tough guy like you," she retorted, with a snort.

"Hank would have mentioned it," he said. "He never passed up an opportunity to give me the razz about something." Gabriel paused. "You know, I can talk about him now." Mariah smiled. She continued to comb through his long hair, humming as she worked. Gabriel shut his eyes, lulled by her voice and by the motion of her hands in his hair. It was so peaceful and joyous to be with her.

"There. Done. I'm going to get dressed. Would you like me to go out and get your bag for you?" she asked as she put the pick back in the basket.

"That's a great idea. Running around naked outside would probably just be asking for trouble around here." Gabriel followed her out to the bedroom and sat on the bed to watch her get dressed. She put on another little matching bra and thong which drew a groan from him.

"What?" she said.

"I have to spend all day with you knowing you're wearing that under your clothes," he said, indicating her tiny undergarments.

"You can just think about how much fun it'll be to take them off me tonight," she replied with a smirk. Gabriel threw himself back on the bed and with a loud groan covered his eyes with his arm. Smiling to herself, she went to her dresser and got out a tank top and a pair of jeans. She drew the jeans on then tugged the tank top over her head, watching Gabriel as she did so. Slipping her feet into a pair of sandals, Mariah walked out of the bedroom, chuckling to herself. "I'll be right back," she called back to him.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he said, to no one in particular. He lay there listening to the sound of Mariah walking along the hallway and down the stairs. He heard her open the front door and then the slam of that screen door. He was really getting to like the slam of that screen door. It was like the slap of the doorway to adventure. You never knew what was going to happen when you went through that door. Sometimes you went through that door and had a sexual adventure beyond your wildest dreams and sometimes you ended up nose to nose with one really angry sheriff. It was like that old game show where you had to pick—Door Number One, Door Number Two or Door Number Three. You knew there was going to be a surprise behind each door but you were never sure what it was until you went ahead and opened it.

Through the bedroom window Gabriel heard the slam of the door as Mariah came back in. "See what I mean," he said aloud. "In just a few short minutes my heart's delight is going to come walking through that door." He heard her coming up the stairs and broke into a grin as she appeared in the doorway. He was still lying on the bed exactly where she had left him.

Mariah set his saddlebags on the bed. "I remembered my purse was in there so I took it out. I hope you don't mind?" She turned to him and realized he was lying there, smiling foolishly at her. "What are you smiling at? You look mighty pleased with yourself."

"Actually you just proved my point."

"And what point would that be?"

"I was thinking about that screen door."

"You were thinking about the screen door?" she asked, frowning at him. "Are you okay?"

"No, really. I was thinking about how that door is like a doorway to adventure. You never know what will happen when you pass through it. Sometimes you end up making mad passionate love and sometimes you end up meeting one very cantankerous sheriff. I heard the door slam just now and I was thinking that this time that door was sending me up my heart's delight and there you were."

"I'm your heart's delight?" she asked hesitantly.

"Well, actually I thought you were coming back with more chocolate."

Mariah grabbed a pillow off the bed. "Oh, Gabriel," she cried as she hit him full in the face with the pillow. Gabriel grabbed the pillow and threw it to the floor then he took hold of her wrists. He pulled her down to lie on the bed beside him. "I didn't mean it about the chocolate," he said earnestly, looking at her face lying next to his. "I was going to tell you that you are my heart's delight but I was afraid you would think that was a crazy thing to say. We've only just met but I feel complete with you, like I have found the part missing from me." Mariah reached out and stroked his jaw.

"I'm pretty crazy about you too. I know you have a job and a life in Chicago but maybe you can stay until we find out what is happening between us and what we want to do about it."

"I have as long as I need off work so there's nothing I'd rather do than stay with you. My need to travel, to escape, doesn't seem so important to me now. I'm looking forward to going to see Laura and I'm glad you're coming with me. You're still coming with me, aren't you?" he asked in a worried tone.

"I'm going to see if I can take Friday off so we can get away early in the day," Mariah said to reassure him. "Maybe you should phone about tickets for us so I know what our arrangements are."

"I guess I could get dressed and do that," Gabriel said. "If you think you're done having your wicked way with me."

"I'll never be done having my wicked way with you but I need to get some things done." Mariah patted his belly and said, "I'll meet you downstairs. If I stay here any longer, I won't be able to keep my hands off you."

"And that would be bad how?" he said with a sideways look at her. Mariah rolled off the bed and crossed to the door.

"I'm gone," she called from the doorway. "See you downstairs." Mariah went off down the hallway, singing to herself. The room seemed duller, quieter without her there so Gabriel swung his legs over the side of the bed and grabbed his saddlebags. He found a clean t-shirt and jeans but no underwear. He didn't like to wear underwear—it was too restricting—besides, he liked the idea of Mariah unbuttoning his jeans and finding him naked underneath. Maybe he could trick her into doing just that when he got downstairs.

Running his hand across his face, he realized that he needed a shave. Unearthing a razor and shaving cream from his saddlebags, he went back to the bathroom and shaved his face clean. He didn't want his rough beard shadow to abrade Mariah's delicate skin, the skin of her face or the soft skin of her thighs near her secret place.

Leaving his shaving stuff in the bathroom, he grabbed some socks from the bag and padded downstairs to the kitchen. Mariah was tidying the mess left in the kitchen. "Need any help?" Gabriel asked. Mariah turned around with a blush. "No. It's okay. I was just wiping up the leftover chocolate." Looking up at his face, she cried, "Oh you shaved!"

"I don't want to mark your delicate skin," he said running his fingers down her cheek. "You can watch me next time if you want," he whispered.

"I'd like that," she said, smiling at him. "I'd really like that." Putting the pot back into the cupboard, she straightened and said, "Thank goodness Burke didn't come in."

"I'm sure he wouldn't have even realized what the mess was from," Gabriel assured her.

"I'm not talking about him walking in afterwards. I'm talking about him walking in during."

"Ohhh, during. Well, he certainly woulda gotten an eyeful, wouldn't he?" Gabriel said with a huge grin. Mariah looked at him, trying to be serious, then she burst out laughing. "It might have cured him of coming here unannounced." She finished wiping the counter and turned to Gabriel. "Hey, you want to drive to Fort Stockton to have dinner? There's a great little Mexican restaurant there that serves wonderful enchiladas."

"That'd be great but we only have one helmet. I don't want one of us traveling very far without a helmet."

"Burke keeps an old motorcycle in the shed out by the barn and I think he might have left a helmet there too. We can put the horses out in the pasture and then see about the helmet." Mariah grabbed her shoes at the back door and put them on while Gabriel pulled on his socks. "I just need to put on my boots," he said and strode down the hall to get them from their spot by the front door. He put them on at the back door and they went out to the small corral next to the barn. The horses whinnied and came to the fence to see her. They backed up as Gabriel approached the railing but she spoke softly to them.

She gently rubbed their faces and turned to introduce them to Gabriel. "This sucky baby is Ruby. She loves attention and is very gentle. That's her brother Starfire. He's a little more skittish with strangers but loves to get out and run. Molly, the big old sorrel, was given to me by some neighbors. They were moving to town and needed a good home for her and I couldn't say no. She doesn't do much anymore but laze around and eat but she's gentle as a lamb. If she happens to get out when the gate's open, she'll just follow me around like a puppy." Mariah opened the gate to let the horses out in the pasture then stood for a moment to watch them chase each other then gallop through the field.

Gabriel came up behind her and pulled her against him. Mariah leaned back into his long, lean frame. A gentle wind blew through the trees and circled around them. Ruby and Starfire ran around the field, occasionally kicking their back legs into the air, enjoying the pleasure of being free. Molly ambled over to an old tree and was content to find some shade under it and watch the other two. Mariah turned in his arms and looked up at him. "I've never had anyone here to share all this with," she said. "I know you're not staying but even having you here just for a few days is wonderful."

"Didn't you have boyfriends that you brought home?" Gabriel asked her. Outwardly he was talking to her but his head was full of thoughts of staying with her. He had been so sure that he needed to just get away from Chicago long enough to relieve the pain of Hank's death then go back and pick up where he left off. Now he wasn't so sure that was what he wanted. He hadn't been able to face Hank's death and the guilt he felt until he met Mariah and he sure as hell wasn't ready to up and leave the best thing that ever happened to him. He tried to think of what was waiting for him back in Chicago. His apartment, his cat, his job. He could live anywhere, it was just an apartment. His cat—that old codger would love to roam here at the farm catching mice and lying around in a patch of sunshine. His job-now that was tougher. He had friends on the force, close friends, but the stress of the job seemed to build with each passing year. It was a lot harder being a cop now than it had been was when he first started. He would miss his friends but he could be happy here with Mariah too. Maybe there was some sort of job here that he could do. Maybe he could do some sort of investigative job-start some kind of agency. Maybe there was a job with the local sheriff. He certainly had the training to work in law enforcement basically anywhere. Oh, wait a minute. He'd already met the local sheriff and the local sheriff wasn't too fond of him. On second thought, maybe he should see what Mariah thought before making any grand plans, plans that definitely involved her.

"I've been too busy with work to bother with the dating scene," Mariah said, then she noticed the blank look on his face. "You asked me if I had brought boyfriends here. Remember."

"Uh, yeah. I remember," Gabriel said. "Sorry. I was just thinking about something else." I'm thinking that I don't want to leave you. I'm thinking that I want to go to Chicago to see Laura then come back here and stay with you. Mariah gave him a funny look then

continued, "My friends keep trying to fix me up with guys but I'm just not interested in a blind date with someone I don't know."

Gabriel quipped, "It wouldn't be a blind date if you knew the guy, would it?" He laughed then sobered quickly at the thought of Mariah out with someone else. Laughing and talking with someone else. Bringing them back to the house. He realized that what he was feeling was jealousy and a possessiveness he'd never felt with another woman.

"Gabriel, what's wrong? You've got a very funny look on your face. Are you all right?" Mariah asked anxiously.

"I'm fine," he said. "I was just thinking I'm not so sure that I want to go back to Chicago."

"You mean you've changed your mind about going to see Laura and the baby," she asked uncertainly. He had seemed so sure earlier. What had happened to change his mind?

"Oh, no. I'm still going. I mean, I hope we're still going. I meant about going back to Chicago to stay."

"But Chicago is your home. Your job is there."

"My apartment is there and I work there but that doesn't mean that I have to stay there."

"What are you saying, Gabriel?" Mariah asked.

"I'm saying that after we go back to visit Laura, I'm going to have to decide what I want to do with my life. I think it's time to make some changes."

"I thought your job was important to you."

"It is but I'm beginning to realize there are things much more important than a job."

"Such as?"

"Such as being with a woman that I lo...care about." He had just about said *that I love*. He had only just met her. How could he love her? He needed to give them time to see what was happening between them. Didn't he?

Mariah was sure he had been going to say *a woman that I love*. She was elated to see he had the same feelings that she did. She also knew he was confused by the feelings arcing between them. It would probably be good to give him some time to work through it. She'd waited all these years for a special man in her life. She had no problem waiting a little longer because she was sure that Gabriel was that special man. Right now, she'd give him some breathing room.

"Do you want to look for that helmet now?" she asked. Gabriel was glad to focus on something else for a while, something other than these feelings running around in his head, in his heart.

"Sure. Okay."

"I just need to make sure the horses have water first," Mariah said as she moved along the fence to the trough. "Great. It's full. When we go to back to the house, I'll

phone my neighbor, Sam Talbot, and he'll come check on them when we're in Chicago and make sure the water trough's full." Gabriel nodded.

"Why does your brother keep an old bike in your shed?" he asked as they made their way to the barn.

"He moved to an apartment a while ago and didn't have anywhere to keep it so I told him to bring it here. I was sure there'd be somewhere for him to keep it." They went back to the barn and Mariah tried to pull open the old door of the shed. "I don't think it's been opened since Burke put the bike in two or three years ago." She gave the old handle a yank but the door wouldn't budge.

"Here. Let me see if I can get it open," said Gabriel as he gently moved Mariah aside. He grabbed the door handle and gave one great pull. The door tore right off its hinges and came away in Gabriel's hand. Mariah laughed so hard tears came to her eyes. She was doubled over with laughter as Gabriel set the door aside. He walked in and pulled off the dust cloth, curious to see what kind of motorcycle Burke had stored there. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

Mariah straightened up immediately. "What's wrong?"

"You said your brother had an old bike in the shed," he said incredulously.

"Yeah. Oh my goodness! Isn't it there?" Mariah cried. "Burke will kill me if anything's happened to it."

"Oh yeah. It's still there," he said in an odd tone. "But it isn't just a bike."

"What do you mean it isn't just a bike?" Mariah said as she pushed past him. Seeing the bike sitting there in the dusty shed, she said, "What are you talking about? I can see it sitting right there and it sure looks like a bike to me."

"Oh, it's a bike all right but not just any bike," Gabriel said reverently. He walked over and lovingly caressed the machine. "This beauty is a 1960 Duo Glide and I've got to say that your brother has very good taste. This is an incredible machine and I take back all those nasty thoughts I had about him."

"Jeez. Men. It's hard to figure out how you think," said Mariah as she rummaged around on the old shelves and in boxes looking for the helmet. Gabriel took advantage of her search to admire the beautiful bike. It was sleek and so beautifully made. Yeah, kind of like Mariah, he thought. The object of his thoughts was looking through a box under the tiny window of the shed when she straightened triumphantly.

"Aha. Here it is," she said, holding it out for his inspection. "I was pretty sure there was a helmet in here someplace. You know, there's other stuff in here too," she said as she set the helmet down and went back to digging through the box. "A leather jacket, it looks like. Should I get that out too?"

"If we're going to go to Fort Stockton it would be a good idea for you to wear it since it'll be cool when we drive home later." Mariah wondered if he even realized that he'd said when we drive *home*. Already he thought of her place as home and didn't even realize it. She was going to let him figure that out on his own. She knew this was

where he belonged but he needed to figure that out for himself and she would be here for him when he did.

"What else is in there?" Gabriel called over his shoulder. He'd gone back to his perusal of Burke's bike and had his back to Mariah.

"Looks like some leather pants. I don't remember Burke ever wearing these. I can't even picture him wearing them." Mariah pulled them out of the box and held them up in front of her. "That's funny," she said. "They don't look like pants. Where's the rest of them?" She turned them around and looked at the other side of them, a curious expression on her face.

"What do you mean?" he said, turning back toward her and catching sight of the leather chaps she was holding up. "Oh God!" he said under his breath, "the stuff that fantasies are made of."

"What did you say?"

"Eh, nothing."

"What are these?" Mariah said as she ran her hand down the leather. "Oh, they feel so good. How are you supposed to wear them?"

"They're called chaps," Gabriel managed to croak out as he watched her caress the leather. All of a sudden his jeans felt about three sizes too small across the fly.

"Chaps? How do you wear them?" she asked inquisitively.

"You wear them over your jeans to protect your legs when you're on the bike," he managed to growl out.

Mariah was beginning to get the picture and she was really beginning to like the picture she saw. "I'm not sure what you mean," she said to Gabriel. "Could you show me?"

"Show you?" Gabriel said in a strangled voice. "You mean like put them on?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure what you mean," she lied smoothly. Gabriel reluctantly took the chaps from her and undid the buckle at the waist. He put the chaps around his waist and did up the buckle then began to do up the inside zippers. Mariah strode forward and said, "I'll help you with those." She got down on her knees in front of him and did up one zipper then moved to the other leg to do up the other one as well. When she was done she stepped back to survey him. She leisurely looked him over from head to toe and said, "Turn around. I want to see the back." Gabriel turned and it was just as Mariah suspected. The view from the back was luscious. She would love to see him naked wearing nothing but those chaps. Yeehaw! Ride 'em cowboy! Oh, that would be just too perfect. That beautiful body encased in leather chaps. Those beautiful buns framed by leather chaps. She started to feel that old familiar sensation between her thighs, the one she often got around him and the longer she thought about him wearing nothing but those chaps the most certain she was that she was going to come on the spot. She struggled to speak over her desire, "Okay. You can take them off now. I get the picture." Gabriel unbuckled the chaps and went to set them back in the box. "Oh no. Don't put them back in there."

"Why not?" Gabriel asked, but he already knew the answer. Mariah reached down and picked up the helmet then took the chaps from Gabriel and headed toward the house. "Where're you going with those chaps?" he asked.

"I'm just going to put them up in the bedroom so we can play a rousing game of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans later, only it's Roy she's going to ride."

"Well, Trigger was really Roy's horse," he said to her retreating back.

She looked back at him and said, "I think I'll just rewrite television history and ride Roy myself.

"Ya comin', Roy?" she called over her shoulder to Gabriel.

As she walked off she could hear Gabriel muttering, "I'm a dead man. I am so a dead man."

Yeah, but what a way to go, she thought as she went off whistling to herself.

Chapter Nine

Burke was mighty steamed as he rode back to the sheriff's office. Who the hell did that guy think he was? He didn't need any police training to see what was going on with his little sister. And what did that guy have all over his belly? He smelled like chocolate and come to think of it so did his sister. How could two adults get covered in chocolate? Maybe they were making a cake. Yeah, that's it. They were making a cake. Why would he be half naked to make a cake? Maybe he got chocolate all over his t-shirt and he had to take it off. Blake knew they weren't making a cake. He knew exactly what they were making and it was definitely not cake. What did Mariah see in such a dangerous-looking guy? She usually liked the scholarly type. Like that math teacher at her school. What was his name? Andrew, Allan, Archie. That's it, Archie. He seemed like a nice guy. Good dresser, nice manners, a nice safe date. Burke didn't have to worry about guys like Archie. They were nice and safe and dull. I bet they were dull as dishwater. Maybe that was what attracted her to this Gabriel character. He certainly didn't seem nice or dull but despite the threatening aura he gave off, Burke sensed that he was a man to be trusted. He had been in law enforcement long enough to know that he had a pretty good sixth sense about people and his radar said that Gabriel was one of the good guys, no matter what he looked like.

Burke drew his vehicle to a stop in front of the sheriff's office and went in to see if Margaret had heard back from Jake.

"Margaret," he said as he flew in the door, "you hear anything back from Jake yet?" "Well, hello to you too, Sheriff," Margaret said.

"I'm sorry. Good afternoon, Margaret, and how are you this lovely afternoon and did you hear back from Jake yet?" Margaret laughed at Burke's quick rejoinder.

"Yes, I did hear back from Jake."

"Weeell," Burke said, drawing the word out.

"Well, what?"

"What did he say?" Burke said impatiently. He loved Margaret dearly. He suspected she had worked in the sheriff's office since the Truman administration and knew better than anyone how to run the sheriff's office but sometimes, just sometimes, he wished he had someone else at the desk.

"Let me just check the messages here," Margaret said. Blake knew she didn't need to check the messages. She had a mind like a steel trap and she didn't forget anything. And she didn't let him forget anything either. Like that time in Houston with the model he was escorting to a trial. He tried to forget but Margaret liked to drag it out about once a year and dust it off for another go-round.

"Margaret. Just give me the dang message," Blake said, irritation in his voice.

"No need to get testy with me," Margaret said. "Jake said to call him as soon as you got in. He got the information you wanted and a royal dressing-down as well."

"A royal dressing-down? Who gave him a royal dressing-down?"

"I'm sure I'm not party to that information," Margaret said haughtily.

Burke laughed. "You mean Jake wouldn't tell you, don't you?"

"Don't you have a call to make?" Margaret said, turning to some paperwork on her desk. "I'm sure I don't have all day to sit here and talk to you." Burke walked away, chuckling to himself at Margaret's ruffled feathers. He sat down at his desk and reached for the phone. Jake answered on the first ring.

"Yeah, Jake. It's me, Burke. What's up?"

"What's up? Jeez, the next time you want some information about another cop you can make the call yourself."

"What happened?" Burke asked, interest in his voice.

"Well, you asked me to find out about Gabriel Blackburn so I did."

"And how did you do that?" Burke was afraid to ask.

"I phoned the Chicago PD and asked around until I found out what precinct he worked at. Then I phoned there." Burke shuddered as he realized how many people now knew that he was making inquiries about Gabriel. "So what did you find out?" He listened, without comment, as Jake recounted the story of Hank's murder and Gabriel's subsequent leave of absence from work.

"Jeez, he lost his partner." Burke couldn't even imagine what that would be like. To lose someone you had worked with all those years would be tough.

"So who gave you the dressing-down?"

"Ah jeez. Margaret told you about that?" he said sheepishly. "I talked to his captain." Burke's ears perked up at that.

"What'd his captain say?"

"He said that Gabriel Blackburn was one of the finest men he'd ever worked with and if he ever needed somebody at his back, Gabriel would be top of the list." Burke was beginning to feel that he had misjudged Gabriel but considering the circumstances of their meeting that was understandable.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, he said Gabriel had taken his partner's death really hard and was taking some time off to deal with it."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. He said that if anyone down here gave Gabriel any shit, he would come down personally and tie their nuts in a knot and that's a direct quote from the captain."

"Okay," Burke said with a short laugh. "Thanks, Jake, for all that. I'll see you tomorrow." Burke hung up and sat there for a long time. He wondered how long

Gabriel had been on the road, trying to come to grips with his partner's death. Maybe there was a reason that he was the one to stop and help Mariah. He laughed to himself when he thought of those two together—his sister who looked like an angel and Gabriel, dark and brooding like Lucifer himself. His sister was one incredible woman and if there was anyone who could help Gabriel work through all this it would be Mariah. That must be why they were going to Chicago on Friday. It must have something to do with his partner's death.

"Sheriff Forrester?" His thoughts were cut short as he heard Margaret's voice. He looked up to see her standing at the door. "I buzzed but you didn't answer."

"Sorry, Margaret. I was thinking about something. What's up?"

"Mark Coombes is out here. He wants to talk to you."

"Sure. Send him in." Margaret stood aside and ushered in a tall, distinguished-looking gray-haired man. Mark approached the desk and held out his hand. "Good to see you, Burke." Burke stood and shook his hand.

"It's been awhile, Mark." The older man sat down, setting his cowboy hat on the corner of the desk. Burke knew Mark well. He was a local rancher and, as sheriff, Burke had been up to his place a few years ago when he had been having trouble with cattle rustlers. Burke came around to the front of his desk and leaned against it, crossing his legs at the ankles and folding his arms across his chest.

"How's Doris?" Burke couldn't help but wonder what had brought Mark to his office but he knew the man wouldn't be rushed in the telling.

"She's fine but I need your help with another matter." He leaned closer to Burke's desk as if he were about to impart a secret. "You remember that cabin I built way back in the woods behind the house. We had an idea that it might be something I could rent out to crazy city folks who were looking for a wilderness vacation."

"Yeah, I remember it," Burke said, nodding his head. "If you don't mind me saying so, people around here thought you were crazy too. I mean, who would want to spend their holiday here. There's not that much to do." Mark had the grace to blush.

"It was Doris who came up with the idea and I thought it would be good for her to have something to do now that the kids are all grown up and gone. She was looking forward to having people around the place again and she didn't mind having to do the cleaning and stuff and I figured I could do the maintenance." Burke was beginning to get impatient waiting for Mark to get to the point.

"What does all this have to do with me?" he asked. Mark sat back in his chair, folded his arms and considered how to proceed with his story.

"Well. It was our older son Matt who said he would help us set up stuff for the internet so he brought over an old computer and showed Doris how to get it up and running and how to put our place on a website and everything. I got to tell you that Doris just took to that like a duck to water. Now she can email the grandkids whenever she wants and order stuff over the internet, talk to people all over the country and—"

"Mark!" Burke interrupted in exasperation. "Just get to the point! How does this concern me?" Mark looked up, surprised at the interruption. He was used to Doris letting him ramble on.

"You know we haven't had many people come to use the cabin—just a few in the past year then Doris gets a call from a man interested in renting the place. He wants to rent the place but not just for a week or two. He wants to rent it for two months. I thought that was strange since you know there's not really much to do around here but I thought the money would be nice." He looked sharply at Burke's frown. "Well, cattle prices aren't as high as they should be and the extra cash would be nice."

"Yeah. I know. So what do you need me for?" Burke asked.

"Mr. Simms arrived right when he said he would but he didn't have a family with him or even a wife. Seems a strange holiday to me although many people would consider it a real holiday if they didn't have to take their spouse along." Mark chuckled at his little joke then straightened when he saw Burke's look of impatience. "So he says he's going to be bringing business associates with him from time to time to enjoy the area. I know they think because we're farmers we're somehow mentally deficient but it takes brains to run a spread in this day and age and keep your head above water. So I wonder what kind of an operation he's running where he needs to be secluded and can come and go as he wants without anyone taking any notice. That's when I think that maybe I should talk to you and see what you think." Burke rose to his feet and stood over Mark.

"I think the best thing you can do is go home and pretend that everything is fine. Just do what you've been doing and tell Doris to do the same. If there's something going on there you certainly don't want them to focus their attention on you and Doris. Let them go on thinking that you're just a dumb farmer and I'll go check it out." Burke made a motion to indicate that the interview was over. Mark rose to leave but stopped at the door.

"There also seems to be a lotta cars and small trucks coming and going. They have their own road in to the cabin but I'm out checking cattle and fence lines and I see stuff going on there."

"You need to stay away from whatever's going on there," Burke warned. "It could be dangerous! Let me handle it." Mark nodded acquiescence and left. Burke went to the door and summoned Margaret. He needed to know who was available to go with him tonight to check this out. It wasn't a big force and it was a fair distance to call in anybody from another county. When Margaret came in he had her bring him up to date on who was available. Jake was off duty so he would have to call him back in. Jesse's wife had just had a baby so he was off for a few days. No sense calling him in unless he really needed to. Nate was already working the late shift today and since Rob was already on patrol maybe he could get him to work a double shift. He was young and didn't mind the extra hours. The added paperwork would be a nightmare but he'd worry about that later.

This was an area that had relatively few crimes but what Mark was describing didn't sound like a man on holiday. It sounded like a man with something to hide. Burke was thinking about his deputies and that they really didn't have much experience especially with the kind of situation he was expecting to find when he went to Mark's place tonight. He wished he had someone with more experience, this could get ugly.

Wait a minute! He did have someone. He picked up the phone to call and then decided to go and deal with this in person. He might have to eat crow to get his cooperation and that needed to be done in person. He went around behind his desk and took something out of the top drawer. Tucking it safely in his pocket, he grabbed his hat from the coat rack by the door and went out to give instructions to Margaret. He finished with, "Tell them to meet me back here as soon as they can."

As he drove back to Mariah's he suspected Gabriel wouldn't let him off easily when he came to ask for his help. He laughed to himself. He didn't expect anything less. It was exactly what he would do in the same situation.

Chapter Ten

Gabriel snagged the leather jacket and followed Mariah into the house. Hanging it up at the front door, he went to the bottom of the stairs and called up to her, "I want to call about a flight to Chicago on Friday. Can I do that before we go to Fort Stockton?" There was no reply. "Mariah? Mariah?" he called. He could hear her rummaging around upstairs in the bedroom. He went up a few stairs. "Mariah!" he called louder.

"Yeah?"

"What are you doing up there?"

"Just looking for a good place to put the chaps, Roy," she called down, laughter in her voice.

Oh my God! Gabriel thought. She's serious about trying out those chaps. Gabriel wondered if Fort Stockton was big enough to have a store where he could buy chaps for her. He was only thinking about her safety on the bike. That's right. He was thinking about her safety on the bike. So why couldn't he erase the image from his mind of her wearing nothing but a pair of leather chaps, straddling his thighs with him inside her and Mariah riding him hard.

"Gabriel," she called down to him.

"Yeah?"

"Go ahead and call about those tickets. I need to know what to do about work on Friday." His vision of her wearing nothing but the chaps slowly but surely evaporated in front of him and he reluctantly went to call about the tickets. He found the phone book in a small table below the phone and it took no time at all to call and reserve tickets that they could just pick up when they got to the airport in San Antonio. Mariah came down the stairs and into the kitchen just as he was hanging up the phone.

"Any luck?" she asked him. He turned and smiled.

"We're booked to fly out of San Antonio on Friday at 11:53 in the morning, arriving in Chicago that afternoon at 2:31. I booked the return flight for Sunday afternoon at 2:31 and we get back to San Antonio later that afternoon at 5:24."

"That's great. I'll call my principal and tell her that I need to take Friday off to deal with a family matter." A family matter — Gabriel liked the sound of that.

"Gabriel," she said hesitantly, "how many return tickets did you buy?" Gabriel saw the uncertainty in her eyes.

"I'm coming back with you if that's what you're asking," he said. She nodded. "I bought two return tickets, one for you and one for me. I'm definitely coming back if that's all right?" This time she nodded her head vigorously.

"That is definitely all right with me. I just thought you probably had stuff to do there and maybe you'd stay after seeing Laura and the baby."

"I couldn't stay there, Mariah. I'd be leaving something important behind." She looked at him with adoration shining in her eyes. "My bike." As his words sunk in, Mariah's mouth fell open in disbelief. He put his finger under her chin and shut her mouth. "I'm kidding. I could never stay in Chicago with you here. There'd be nothing there for me without you. I'm going to come back with you and make some decisions about what I want to do with my life. I want you to be part of those decisions since they concern both of us. I can look for an apartment or a house somewhere until we decide what we want to do." Mariah looked horrified at that suggestion.

"I don't want you to live somewhere else," she said, distressed at the very thought of being apart from him. "I want you to stay here with me. You will, won't you?"

"Of course I want to stay here with you but I needed to be sure that it was what you wanted. It's your home and your space and I needed to know if there was a place for me in it and in your life."

"There's a huge space in my heart and in my life and it's nicely being filled by you. I want you with me. I need you with me," she said earnestly. Gabriel came to her and drew her into his arms.

"I'm looking forward to making plans with you. A few months ago I couldn't imagine living and now here I am planning a future with..." Gabriel stopped as they heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. "Who do you think it could be this time?" he asked.

"May as well go and see," Mariah said. They walked down the hall and out onto the front porch. They were surprised to see Mariah's brother Burke getting out of the Bronco. As Mariah went down to see what Burke wanted, Gabriel leaned against one of the porch supports.

"Hello, Burke. What brings you back here so soon?" she asked, giving her brother a hug. "I thought we'd seen the last of you for today." She put her arm through his and walked with him up the steps to the front porch. "Burke, you remember Gabriel." Gabriel inclined his head in greeting to Mariah's brother.

"Actually, Mariah, it's Gabriel I need to see," he said seriously. She stepped back, a look of surprise on her face, wondering what had caused her brother to change his mind. The last time he was here he wanted to run Gabriel off the property and now he seemed to have something urgent to discuss with him. It was obvious that it was not something he wanted to discuss in front of her so Mariah made her excuses.

"I have some things I need to do. I'll just go call my principal about Friday, then I'll give Sam a ring and ask him to check on the horses while we're away." Turning to her brother, she said, "I'll see you before you go, Burke." She opened the screen door and disappeared inside the house. She could wait until her brother left and then hopefully Gabriel would let her in on what was going on.

Gabriel waited for Burke to speak. He was curious to know why he wanted to see him but he could wait him out.

"I made some calls about you," Mariah's brother said, looking out across the lawn in front of the house.

"So what did you find out?" Gabriel asked, trying to appear disinterested.

"I know about your partner's death. I'm sorry." Gabriel nodded acknowledgment of Burke's words of condolence. "It must be hard to lose your partner." Gabriel nodded and looked away. "My deputy spoke to your captain." Gabriel laughed. He wondered how the deputy had fared in a conversation with his captain. Captain Jenkins was not a man to pull any punches. He said what he thought but he went to the wall to protect his men. Gabriel had great respect for him.

"That must have been interesting," he said, turning to lean on the railing. "What did he have to say?"

"Actually he said that if anybody gave you any shit he would personally come down here and tie their nuts in a knot," Burke said, turning his head to look at him. Gabriel roared with laughter.

"That certainly sounds like Captain Jenkins."

Burke stepped in front of Gabriel. "He also said that you are one of the finest men he has ever known and if he were in a tight spot there was no one he would rather have at his back." Gabriel looked surprised at his captain's words. Burke went on.

"One of the local farmers came to my office about an hour ago with an interesting story. I thought you might be interested to hear it." He told Gabriel about Mark Coombes' visit and his suspicions about Mr. Simms. Gabriel listened with interest as Burke spoke.

"What do you think is going on there?" he asked.

Burke put his hands in his pockets and spoke. "I'm wondering if it's drugs or illegal aliens. I can't be sure until I've had a closer look."

"How does this concern me?" Gabriel asked.

"I want you to come with me tonight when I go to check it out. I'm sure you have more experience with this kind of law enforcement than I do and I'm sure you have more experience than any of my deputies."

"I'd be glad to help out," said Gabriel, "but aren't you forgetting something important?"

"What's that?" Burke said.

"I'm with Chicago PD. I have no jurisdiction here." As soon as he said that, Burke grinned and reached into his pocket to pull out what he had retrieved from his desk earlier. He opened his hand to show him a shiny, new deputy's badge. "You've thought of everything," Gabriel said with a wry smile.

"We want to make this all legal-like," said Burke. "No way am I offering anybody a loophole to escape through. I've heard of too many cases where scum gets off because

somebody didn't follow procedure. I don't intend to let that happen if we find something tonight that is not on the up-and-up. I'm appointing you acting deputy with the Orono County Sheriff's Office. Welcome to the force, Gabriel Blackburn." Gabriel liked the sound of that—Deputy Blackburn with the Orono County Sheriff's Office. He could get used to that. Maybe his plan for the future was going to be easier to pull together than he thought. "I've asked my deputies to meet at the sheriff's office and I want you to come back with me. Can you get away now?" Burke asked. "I'd like your input."

"We were going to go to Fort Stockton for dinner tonight so I need to let Mariah know there's a change of plans." Gabriel turned to go into the house. He looked back at Burke. "You may as well come on in while I talk to her. Maybe she won't hit me if there are witnesses present," he said with a laugh. He held the screen door so Burke could follow him in.

"Well, did you get rid of my nosy brother?" Mariah called happily as she heard Gabriel coming down the hall. She smiled at him as he came through the doorway to the kitchen. She was looking forward to the ride to Fort Stockton with him. What could be better than riding behind him on the bike, her arms tight around that gorgeous body?

"Well, not exactly," he said.

"What do you mean, not exactly?" she quizzed.

"He means that your nosy brother is still here," Burke said with a laugh, as he came in behind Gabriel. He walked to the counter and leaned back against it.

She walked over and put a hand on his chest. "Sorry, Burke. You weren't supposed to hear that. I thought you'd gone," Mariah said with a soft smile to her brother.

"So is that how you talk about me when I'm not here?" Burke asked, putting his hand over hers and pretending to be hurt.

"Actually, Burke, we don't really spend much time talking about you," she said in total honesty. "We seem to have lots to do without talking about you."

"Ouch. I guess I deserved that and you know, I really don't want to think about what you two do when I'm not here."

Gabriel walked over, put his arms around Mariah and pulled her back against him. She leaned into him, loving the closeness and content to show her brother how she felt about Gabriel.

"So that's the way things are," Burke said, looking from one to the other.

Gabriel looked him straight in the eye and said, "That's definitely the way things are. We're heading to Chicago together on Friday to tend to some personal business and when we get back I'm going to see about getting a job here so we can be together." Gabriel waited for Burke to challenge him but he backed off. He looked to his sister who nodded her head in total agreement with Gabriel's plan. He couldn't remember the last time his sister had looked so at ease, so content. When she was around Gabriel she

was positively glowing. In the back of his mind he envied each of them to have found someone who meant so much to them.

"I don't know what to say," Burke said, shaking his head.

Mariah looked at her brother and said kindly, "You know, Burke, there's no need for you to say anything. It's not really any of your business what we do. You're lucky Gabriel told you anything about his plans because I probably would have chosen to tell you precious little." Gabriel smiled down at Mariah then began to tell her as much about Burke's plans as he felt he could then showed her the badge Burke had given him. Mariah shook her head. "I don't understand, Gabriel. What does this mean?"

Burke butted in. "It means that I don't know what's going on at Mark Coombes' place and I need a man with experience to watch my back and that man is Gabriel. I have no idea what kind of trouble we might run into and he has more police experience than any of my deputies or me for that matter. It seems kind of interesting that he should turn up just when I need a man with experience, don't you think?"

"I don't know what to think. What does this mean, Gabriel?" she said, turning to him. "One minute we're going out to dinner together and the next you're going off somewhere with my brother the sheriff. I don't understand."

Gabriel didn't want to leave until he and Mariah had had a chance to talk about this. He wanted to help Burke out, it was what he was trained to do but he also didn't want to go without her acceptance. He knew that if he didn't have her blessing he did want her to understand that he was good at his job and would be careful. He didn't want to leave her hurt or angry. He turned to Burke and asked, "Could you wait out on the porch for me? I'd need to talk to Mariah."

"No problem. I'll just wait outside." He gave Mariah a quick kiss and strode down the hall.

Mariah turned on him. "What's going on?" she said, in an exasperated voice. "I thought we were going out for dinner and now you're going on some stakeout with Burke."

"We can go out for dinner another time, tomorrow night maybe," Gabriel suggested.

"I'm not worried about dinner, you idiot. I'm worried about you. I've just found you and I don't want to lose you," she cried, tears in her eyes. Gabriel stepped back at the vehemence in her voice. She went to the table and sat down, looking away from him. Gabriel went and knelt beside her. Their relationship was so new that he wasn't quite sure how to deal with the situation. Most women he knew pitched a fit when they were angry. They would yell at him and usually blame him and that was easier to deal with. He'd usually just walk away until they cooled down and then come back for round two but it wasn't the same with Mariah. He wanted her to know that it mattered to him what she thought. He didn't want to go with Burke and leave her feeling angry and disappointed. If they were going to share a life together, they were going to have to figure out how to deal with issues that arose and this was as good a time as any to start.

"Mariah. Mariah, look at me," he said softly. When she turned to look at him he continued, "Your brother made some calls about me."

"Calls about you?" she said. "Why would he make calls about you?"

"After finding us together he had some calls made to Chicago to find out about me. I don't blame him. I would have done the same thing in his place."

"What did he find out to make him change his mind about you? When he left here it was pretty obvious that he didn't trust you. He didn't even like you."

"Believe it or not, my captain spoke very highly of me," he said, feeling a bit embarrassed relating Burke's conversation to her. She reached out and stroked his hair, comforting him without realizing she was touching him. Gabriel loved that about her. She was always touching him with a soothing touch or sometimes with a touch that was anything but soothing but he knew that she didn't even realize she was doing it.

"Captain Jenkins spoke about my sterling qualities," he said, with a grin, "but he also said that in a tight spot there was nobody he'd rather have at his back. I have way more experience than any of Burke's deputies and probably more experience with different types of police work than Burke. I'm not bragging. It's just a fact of life when you're a cop in a big city like Chicago. You see a lot of life that you'd rather not see or that you'd rather forget."

Mariah considered what Gabriel was telling her. She knew that having someone with Gabriel's experience as part of the operation would probably make it safer for everyone and her brother's safety was something she worried about even in a small county like Orono. There was no telling what they were going to come up against when they went to Mark's place but if Gabriel's presence somehow helped her brother then she needed to support him. "What do you need to do to get ready?" she asked, standing and pulling him to his feet.

Gabriel looked at her in surprise. "You don't mind if I go on this assignment?"

"Of course I mind but if we're going to be together then I need to be able to put my selfish feelings behind me and support you however I can," she said, nodding her head once to show her determination.

"Mariah, I don't think you're being selfish at all. I'm glad you're worried about me. I've never had anyone to worry about me when I'm working. Never had anyone to come back to after a tough shift. Usually I come home to an empty apartment. It would be nice to come home and have someone waiting for me. I also really like the idea of wild, crazy sex when I come home. That would be nice too." He looked at Mariah with a smile, searching her face for acceptance.

"Well," she said, pretending to consider the matter from all angles and also to keep him in suspense, "the wild, crazy sex sounds pretty appealing to me." Gabriel stared at her for a second, digesting her words then threw back his head and roared.

"That's what I love about you," he said. "You constantly keep me off balance. I never know what you're going to say to me." He put his arms around her, saying, "I know that I won't be the easiest person to be around but I want to be with you."

"Can I apply for that position of someone to come home to, if it is still available?" she said, laughing up at him.

Gabriel took her hand in his. "That position is definitely reserved for you. I'll be giving the practical part of the interview later tonight," he said with a leer.

"Maybe I'll get the chaps out for the practical part of it, Roy," Mariah said saucily. Before Gabriel had a chance to reply to that, they heard the front door open.

"You guys done yet?" Burke called down the hall. "We gotta get going, Gabriel." Gabriel stood and gave Mariah a hug then he took her face in his hands and gave her a long, deep kiss. It was the kiss of a man claiming his mate. He took her hand and they walked down the hall together. Burke was waiting on the porch, eager to get underway.

"Are you okay with this, Mariah?" Burke asked as the two of them stepped out on the porch. He saw the look of concern on his sister's face and sought to reassure her. He realized that this strong, reserved man was coming to mean a lot to his sister. "I don't know what we'll find when we get there tonight and I won't pretend there won't be any danger to him. That would be foolish to say to you. You know enough about me to know that I would never let my men enter a situation ill-prepared so I can at least promise you that. I will do my best to make sure that we're ready for anything." Mariah held tight to Gabriel's hand, wanting to keep her link to him as long as she could. Her brother had been sheriff for years and she knew he was good at his job but she was now sending off two men that she loved. There, she'd said it. She loved Gabriel and she wanted him to come back to her in one piece. Heck they hadn't even had a chance to play Roy Rogers and Dale Evans with the chaps yet. She dropped Gabriel's hand and stepped back.

"I'd better go find some things to do while I wait for you to get back," she forced herself to say. Turning to her brother, she said, "Take care!" Gabriel gave her a quick kiss and they headed for the Bronco. Mariah watched them climb in and stayed on the porch as the vehicle made its way down the driveway and turned onto the main road. She continued to watch until it was just a speck on the road. "Keep them safe," she murmured, "and please let Gabriel come back to me in one piece." She opened the screen door and walked quietly into the house.

Chapter Eleven

Burke and Gabriel were hardly out of the driveway before they shifted into official mode. It was easy for both of them to put aside their personal lives and focus totally on the job. It was how they survived. "What's your plan for tonight?" Gabriel asked. He turned to study Mariah's brother as he drove, seeing the same strong set of his jaw that she had when she set her mind on something.

Burke spoke, his eyes focused on the road ahead, "When we get to the office I'll get out the county map for that area. I have a good topographical map that should show us just about everything in the vicinity of that cabin of Mark's. I seem to remember an old road going in to Mark's property near where that cabin is. I don't think it's much more than an old dirt track but it should get us in unseen and we can at least get a look at what's going on there. My deputies don't have much experience but they're good men and good under pressure." Gabriel sat in silence for a few miles, letting Burke drive while he looked out at the countryside.

"I'm not going to hurt her, you know? Your sister is special," he finally said.

"Don't I know it!" said her brother. "She's been a caretaker ever since she was little. She can't stand to see anyone or anything in pain."

Gabriel laughed, "Maybe that's why she needed to help me."

"Don't sell yourself short," Burke said. "I jumped to conclusions when I first met you and now I know I was wrong. Your captain really stood behind you and judging by the vehemence of his warning, I've got to trust him and you."

It didn't take long to get to the sheriff's office where the other deputies were waiting for them. Burke introduced Gabriel to them and told them that he would be joining them for the operation that night. Although the men were curious as to how he had come to be part of their team, being a fellow officer, they accepted him as one of their own. They all gathered in the little conference room beside Burke's office where he spread out the map on the scarred table. Burke's men were pleased to see that Gabriel asked questions of everyone, finding out about the property and what to expect when they got there. He offered ideas and listened to what they had to say as well, realizing that they were the experts in this part of the country not him.

"This map shows an old barn or some building right here on this old road where we're going to be so that might provide some cover for our vehicles when we get there," Burke said, pointing to the map. "It's not a very long trek to the cabin from there but far enough away that they won't hear any vehicle noise from us."

"What happens if it turns out to be drugs that they're runnin' through our county?" Jake asked Burke.

"If there are any drugs involved then we'll have to put in a call to the FBI in Houston. You know that drugs are out of our league and we have to call them in. Jake, you and Nate take the unmarked car and we'll grab the Bronco. Rob, I need you to stay here. We need someone here at the office in case anything else comes up. You can radio us if you need anything or call me on my cell phone. I'll set it to vibrate not ring. Jake. Nate. We'll meet you out back!" Turning to Gabriel, he said, "Gabriel, you'll need some kind of weapon. I assume you don't have a gun with you, do you?" Gabriel shook his head. "Follow me and I'll see what we've got here."

He and Gabriel walked into Burke's office where he unlocked a drawer and drew out a Glock pistol, similar to the weapon Gabriel used in Chicago. Burke found a shoulder holster and Gabriel took off his leather jacket to put it on and slide the gun in. It was scary how easy it was to reacquaint his body to the familiar feel of a gun and holster. Being a cop for so many years, it felt like an old friend.

"Let's get this show on the road," Burke said as he and Gabriel went out the back door to meet the deputies. They drove to Mark's place and found the little-used dirt track. The sun had long since set and the moon hadn't yet risen, leaving the countryside in darkness, perfect for their purposes. They drove a few miles down the track and found the old barn indicated on the map. It was dilapidated and some of the roof had caved in but they were able to park close enough to it to hide the two vehicles. As they got out, they gathered around Burke and began talking quietly.

"Let's get in there and see what's going on," Burke said in an undertone. The four men began to walk quietly through the woods, a tiny point of light from the cabin visible through the trees. They made their way stealthily to a stand of trees near the cabin and stood well back in the shadows. There were a couple of expensive cars parked in front but the whole place seemed quiet. Suddenly Gabriel touched Burke's shoulder and pointed to the trees to the left of the house. The glow of a burning cigarette shone like a beacon in the dark. Soon a heavyset man carrying an automatic rifle appeared around the corner of the house and continued to patrol across the front of the house and around the other side. These people were so cocksure of themselves that they had the porch light on and as the guard passed beneath the light, they were able to see his face clearly. The officers could see a Mercedes and a Land Rover parked near the house, symbols of the wealth of their owners. Burke signaled to the other two deputies to separate and check the west and east perimeters of the site and motioned to Gabriel to follow him.

They walked slowly for a short distance then sank to the ground and crawled closer. They were able to get within thirty feet of the house and still remain well hidden in the shelter of the trees. They lay there prone within sight of the house for about twenty minutes, watching the occasional passing of the guard as he made his rounds. Burke scanned the area with night vision binoculars he had brought with him but saw no other security people in evidence. He suspected the guard at the front was the only one. His suspicions were confirmed when Jake and Nate contacted him to give him the all clear from their reconnaissance. He quietly relayed the information to Gabriel who

nodded as they lay there waiting. As the guard made another pass across the front of the house and disappeared around the corner of the house, Burke motioned to Gabriel that he wanted to get a closer look. Gabriel indicated that he would stay and provide cover if needed and Burke slowly rose to his feet.

He began to walk toward the house, moving from tree to tree, using the thick forest for cover when the front door opened. He quietly glided behind a tree and watched as two men appeared on the front porch and stood talking under the light from above the door. They were perfectly cast in the light and Burke and Gabriel were able to see them laughing and talking like old friends. Burke recognized one of them from Mark Coombes' description—it was definitely the mysterious Mr. Simms but the other man was a stranger. Finally they shook hands and Burke could hear snippets of their conversation as Mr. Simms walked his guest to his car. "So I'll see you tomorrow night," Mr. Simms said.

"What time do you think the shipment will arrive?" said the stranger. "I want to pick it up and get out of here as quickly as I can."

"Luis thought that by the time they got across the border and brought it here it would probably be close to midnight," said Mr. Simms. "I'm going to be heading out after the delivery as well. I've been hanging around here too long and I'm afraid people are getting suspicious. Time to move on and find another location."

The stranger gave a quick nod and said, "Until tomorrow night then." He opened the door and slid into the Mercedes and, giving a last nod of acknowledgment to his host, drove carefully down the gravel road that wound through the trees. Mr. Simms took a last look around and, with a deep smile of satisfaction, disappeared into the cabin. Burke nearly jumped out of his skin as Gabriel sidled up to him. "How the hell did you do that without any noise?" he whispered.

"Years of practice," Gabriel said. "Used to drive my partner crazy."

"I can see how that would happen," Burke said in a low voice, shaking his head.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Gabriel said. "I've seen all I need to see." Puzzled by Gabriel's comment, Burke picked his way carefully through the trees. When they were a safe distance away Gabriel said quietly, "Can you call your deputies and tell them to meet us at the old barn? We'll talk when we get there." Burke nodded and communicated in undertones to his men. The two of them walked in silence back to the vehicles where Nate and Jake were already waiting for them.

"Did you see anything, Sheriff?" Jake asked. "There was no one else but that lone guard out front so Nate and I just lay low and kept an eye out until we got the call from you to head back here. Did you guys see anything?" Burke told the deputies about Mr. Simms and the stranger. Then he turned to Gabriel and motioned for him to speak.

"Well, old friends seem to turn up in the strangest places," he said to the men. "I wasn't sure for a moment if it was him or not but Mr. Simms is definitely someone I've seen before."

"Who is he?" Burke demanded. He turned and gave his full attention to Gabriel.

"A few years back we had some people trying to bring in drugs from Columbia and they thought Chicago would make a good distribution center for their operation. They figured it was a city that would hide their operation well. We found out about it and were able to shut it down but the head honcho got away. Someone tipped him off and when we got there, he was long gone," Gabriel said, disgruntled.

"Are you telling me that Mr. Simms is that man?" Burke asked, astonished.

"One and the same, Harvey Simpson aka Mr. Simms in the flesh," Gabriel confirmed. "We've been looking for him for years and he's just fallen into my lap."

"Don't forget that we have to call the FBI," Burke affirmed.

"No problem," Gabriel said. "But I want to be in on the bust. One of my buddies was hurt in the raid in Chicago and I want to make sure this guy gets what's coming to him."

"Hey, this may be backwater Texas but we don't believe in vigilante justice down here," Burke said hotly.

"Neither do I but I want to make sure he doesn't slip away like he did last time," Gabriel said, broaching no argument from the sheriff.

They rode back to the sheriff's office in silence where Burke put in a call to the federal agency that had to be contacted. He sat with his chair tipped back against the wall, listening to the Feds intone about what they did and didn't want him to do. He raised his eyebrows at Gabriel as if to say, "What kind of hick do they think I am?" At one point, despite the annoyed look on his face, he wrote down some information. Finally Burke hung up, looking disgruntled. "I don't know whether I'm relieved or annoyed that they're going to take over but I guess it doesn't matter since I don't have any say in it."

"Are we at least going to take part in their operation?" asked Gabriel. "I have a vested interest in seeing this guy brought down."

Burke gave him a knowing smile, saying, "I was very careful to avoid the topic of your vested interest. You might say that it just slipped my mind. I didn't think that was something they needed to know. I figured it might cramp your style if I told them. So I didn't."

"But are we in or not?" Gabriel asked impatiently. Burke took his time answering, knowing that it would annoy Gabriel and he was beginning to really enjoy annoying him. It looked like Gabriel was going to be around for a while so he figured it was time to break him in. If he wanted to be part of the family he would need a thick skin and a good sense of humor.

"They should be here early tomorrow morning and yes, we're to take a role in this. Whatever role they see fit to throw us. Do you want me to give you a call when they get here or what?"

"I can imagine they'll want to control the whole operation themselves so I'll just take Mariah to work and then come here." Burke nodded assent then turned to get the paperwork done for the evening.

"I'm going to finish off tonight's paperwork so I don't have to tackle it tomorrow. See you in the morning," he said, dismissing Gabriel with a wave of his hand. "I'm sure Mariah is eagerly awaiting your return."

"I think I'll just call and let her know I'm on my way," Gabriel said. "Can I use the phone to make a quick call?"

Burke swept his hand toward the phone and said, "Be my guest. It's a free country." He swung his chair around and got back to his paperwork. He was busy working at his computer when he realized that Gabriel was still standing there. "What wrong?" he asked, turning to look at him.

"Nothing's wrong," Gabriel said. "I need Mariah's phone number. I just realized I don't even know what it is." Burke barked out a laugh and told him the number. As he got back to work Gabriel gave him a little salute. He dialed the number and waited for Mariah to pick up. When he heard her say hello he couldn't speak for a moment. He was so delighted to hear the sound of her voice that he didn't know what to say.

Burke looked over and cocked his eyebrow when he realized that he could hear Mariah saying "hello, hello" and Gabriel wasn't answering. "Gabriel," he called with a laugh, "aren't you going to answer her?"

Gabriel looked at the receiver and realized he was holding it without speaking to her.

"Mariah" was all he was able to say to her.

"Gabriel, Gabriel, is that you?" she called into the phone. She was speaking so loudly that Burke could hear every word that she said. "Are you all right? What's going on? Why aren't you talking to me? Gabriel! Gabriel!"

"I'm fine, Mariah. Nothing happened and I'm heading home right away. I'll talk to you when I get there." Burke couldn't help but laugh at the goofy look on Gabriel's face. Boy, he's got it bad, he thought.

"I'm out of here," Gabriel called to Burke. "See you in the morning." Burke gave him a quick wave then sat back and waited. Sure enough, Gabriel returned almost immediately with a sheepish look on his face. "I was so eager to get back to Mariah that I forgot you brought me here and I don't have any way to get home."

"I wondered when you would catch on," Burke said with a wide grin. "Do you want a lift home or do you just want to take a vehicle?"

"Can you just give me a lift home?" Gabriel asked in exasperation. "I need to see Mariah." Burke laughed at Gabriel's discomfort. He was never going to let a woman tie him in knots like that. Women were great but he didn't need to be tied down to any particular one. Playing the field, that's what he was good at. He didn't need a long-term relationship. Poor guy probably didn't even realize that he'd asked him to take him home. Yep, he'd used the word home. He was hooked. Giving him one last smirk, he grabbed his keys from the desk and took off out the door with Gabriel on his heels.

Chapter Twelve

As soon as Gabriel and Burke left, Mariah turned and walked back into the house. She was worried about her brother but more worried about Gabriel. She wanted him to be safe. She decided to do what she always did when she got upset, she'd clean and cook and fret. She trooped off down the hall to the kitchen to pore through her recipe books. She wanted to make something for Gabriel to eat when he got home as well as a sinful dessert for Roy and Dale to have. Yeehaw, maybe they'd give the chaps a workout tonight—that was if Gabriel was up for it. She started to laugh—oh man, he was always up for it.

Mariah padded into the kitchen and threw open the fridge door. What to make? She wanted to have something ready for Gabriel when he came home. Home—that had a nice sound to it. She had never been the person that someone came home to before. It felt good to be there for someone. It felt good to be there for Gabriel. She looked through the fridge to see what there was and decided that she would make chili for them since it wouldn't matter what time he got home. Chili only got better the longer it cooked.

Mariah dug out onions and garlic and started to chop them. She worked away in the kitchen chopping and sautéing vegetables and adding all kinds of good things to the steaming pot. When the chili was assembled and bubbling on the stove she looked through her chocolate cookbook to see what decadent dessert she could make for them. She decided that hot fudge cake sounded great. The recipe said it was a chocolate cake that made its own hot fudge sauce and was best served with vanilla ice cream. Mariah checked the freezer and there was definitely a tub of vanilla ice cream in there crying out to be used with hot fudge cake. A close friend of hers had once said that a woman could have whatever she wanted if she had a tub of vanilla ice cream and a little black dress. She intended to get what she wanted with or without a black dress and vanilla ice cream but a girl could use all the help she could get when it came to seduction. She quickly assembled the ingredients and put together the cake. She popped it in the oven and, grabbing the timer, set off upstairs for a relaxing bath. That seemed like a good way to pass the time while she waited for Gabriel to come back.

She didn't use the old clawfoot bathtub very often but this situation seemed to call for it. After pouring in some of her favorite bubble bath, she went to her room to grab some pajamas. Pajamas didn't sound very romantic but she had no idea what time Gabriel would be home so she would just curl up with a book and wait for him. Besides, it didn't really matter what she had on when he got home, if everything went according to plan she wouldn't be wearing it long anyway. The only person wearing any clothes would be Gabriel wearing those sexy chaps. Mariah came down the hall to the bathroom, picturing that gorgeous body in nothing but a pair of chaps and yelped

when she realized how full the tub was. She had been daydreaming about Gabriel and those chaps longer than she realized. She slipped off her sandals then tugged down her jeans. She added her tank top, bra and panties to the pile and climbed into the tub. It was glorious, the warmth of the water, the soothing smell and the tub was just so darn comfortable. Mariah put her head back against the tub and shut her eyes.

This would be a great tub for Gabriel, she thought. He would be able to stretch right out in it and there would be plenty of room for both of us. She could picture him coming home from a long day and she would be waiting for him in the big tub. She'd hear him climbing the stairs and coming down the hall to the bathroom. It had the big tub so this is where he would head. He'd step into the bathroom, hot and tired and ready for a long soak and he'd see her lying there waiting for him. His eyes would light up with pleasure and he would flash that big sexy grin of his. He wouldn't say a word, just pull his t-shirt over his head and let her feast her eyes on that gorgeous chest. He'd sit down on the old wooden stool in the corner and watch her watching him as he'd undo his boots and pull them off and then his socks. Not taking his eyes from hers, he'd pop the buttons on his jeans then drag them down his legs. He'd stand there naked at the bottom of the tub and she would be able to see his cock get longer and thicker as she looked at him. He'd untie his hair so it would fall down his back and run his fingers through it to loosen it.

She'd watch him walk to the head of the tub and come around behind her. He'd take the soap from the soap dish and lather his hands with it then, getting down on his knees, he'd lean forward over the end of the tub and run his hands down her beautiful breasts. He'd pay special attention to her nipples, which would be erect, craving his attention. He would hold her breasts in his large hands then run his fingers over her swollen nipples, finally taking hold of them with his thumb and forefinger. The sensation would be so exquisite that it would be hard to bear. She would beg him for mercy but there would be none. He knew how sensitive her breasts were and he would torment her with pleasure. Finally when he knew she was so close, he would take his hands away. She would protest but to no avail.

Gabriel would get to his feet and come to the side of the tub. He would look down at her then climb in and lie at the other end facing her. "Come here," he would say and she would move to straddle him in the tub. She would lean into him and nibble at his lips until he opened his mouth so she could thrust her tongue inside. They would share long, rich kisses until he would gently push her away. He would only push her away so he could run his hands over her breasts. Her nipples would be so taut they would ache. He would have to suck on them, gently at first but then with increasing pressure until he began to use his teeth to tug on them to give her some relief but it wouldn't be enough. Finally he would lift her up and position her over his cock and then ever so slowly, ever so gently lower her until she was fully impaled on his throbbing cock.

She would be able to feel his heartbeat in his cock he would be so far inside her, so tight. She would bend her legs, putting her hands on his chest to give herself the power to raise and lower her body, slowly torturing him with the pace. She would be able to look down at him and see him with his eyes closed, savoring every glide of his cock

within her tight passage. He would open his eyes languidly, relishing her moans of pleasure as she rode him gently then she would increase the rhythm and the pleasure and he would have to reach up to pull her mouth to his so he could devour her with his kisses. She would rear back to take control of the pace again, lifting herself slightly to leave the head of his cock poised just inside her entrance. Using her leg muscles, she could hover there with him so barely inside her then she would let his cock slide inside her just a bit then she'd pull back so it was just the head of his cock inside her. She would slide it in and almost out, each time letting the head of his cock slide over her clit, in and out, in and out, and each movement in and out would rub his cock against her clit until she had to slide all the way down to end the torment, until she could feel him as far inside her as he could go.

Then he would playfully turn her so he was on top and begin to pound into her with strong, rhythmic strokes. The water in the tub would slosh up and over the top as he pounded into her like a jackhammer. The pleasure would be endless, mindless, frantic. Mariah was so caught up in her dream about Gabriel that she began to use her hands on her breasts. She ran her fingers lightly over her nipples to find that they were erect and almost painful. She soaped her hands and ran them over her breasts, tugging and pinching her nipples. Playing with her breasts while thinking about Gabriel was glorious. She ran her hands down her belly and rubbed the soft skin there. Finally she put one hand between her legs and began to rub her clit with her finger. Her clit was swollen and eager for her touch. She rubbed around it with a circular motion, applying just the right amount of pressure and she could feel her orgasm begin to gather. Feeling her body stiffen, she threw back her head and screamed with the force of her orgasm.

She lay there in the tub, stunned by the force of it. She could hardly imagine the pleasure to be had when Gabriel was there with her in the tub. Putting her head back against the high back of the tub, she closed her eyes and savored the last little tremors as they coursed through her body. Mariah languished there in the tub for several minutes, too weak to move after her explosive orgasm. As she lay there thinking about the pleasures to be explored in the big clawfoot tub, the phone rang. Her first instinct was to just lie there and ignore it but then she realized that it might be Gabriel so she climbed out and ran to her bedroom, dripping water everywhere. She grabbed the phone from the bedside table and said hello. Silence. She could sense that it was Gabriel but why wouldn't he say anything? Finally she heard him say her name. "Gabriel, Gabriel, is that you?" she called into the phone. "Are you all right? What's going on? Why aren't you talking to me? Gabriel! Gabriel!"

"I'm fine, Mariah. Nothing happened and I'm heading home right away. I'll talk to you when I get there," he said and with that he hung up. Mariah stood looking at the receiver in her hand and wondering what was wrong with him.

Hopefully Gabriel could wait to eat until after she seduced him. She was pretty sure he wouldn't mind waiting. She opened her dresser drawers to see if she had anything really sexy in there to put on instead of pajamas. She knew Gabriel loved her little bras and panties but she wanted something that would knock his socks off or at least knock his pants off. Hidden in the back of her lingerie drawer, she spotted a little number the girls had bought her for her birthday a few years ago. They must have been planning for her to put it in her trousseau for her wedding night. The outfit consisted of a pair of tiny black panties that tied up on each side with a little lacy bow and a matching demibra that would hold her breasts up for Gabriel's perusal but also expose her nipples. There was a sheer black robe to wear over it that also had little tie-up bows in the front and the little robe only came to mid-thigh. The girls had even included a pair of pointy, open-toed do-me shoes with impossibly high stiletto heels.

At the time she had thought that it would be a great thing to pull out when she was old and gray to remember her goofy friends who gave her such a crazy gift. Instead she was going to meet Gabriel wearing this little bit of nothing. Oh boy! Could it get any better than that? Oh yes, it could! They hadn't even tried out the chaps yet. Mariah padded back to the bathroom and dried herself off with a big, fluffy towel then she put the towels from the bathroom in the hamper and put out some fresh ones. Good idea to be prepared. With this man, you never knew what was going to happen or where you were going to end up. As Mariah went back to the bedroom, the timer went off in the bathroom. It was a good thing she had put that timer on. She had been so busy thinking about seducing Gabriel that the dessert would have been forgotten. Racing to the kitchen, Mariah took it out and put it on the counter to cool. It smelled great and was decadent with hot fudge sauce.

Back to the seduction of one Gabriel Blackburn! Upstairs she put away the pajamas and put on the skimpy bra, tied up the teeny panties then donned the sheer robe and tied up its little bows. She slid her feet into the high heels and took a few tentative steps around the bedroom. She'd be lucky if she didn't fall and break her ankle but when she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror wearing the sexy outfit and the shoes, she decided that the shoes were definitely worth the risk. She walked carefully into the bathroom and arranged her hair so it was piled on top of her head but could be released by just removing the hairclip. She couldn't help but smile at how sexy she looked. Gabriel was going to love it

t was with that thought that she heard a car pull into the driveway and make its way to the house. She hoped that Burke had enough sense not to come in this time and that Gabriel wouldn't ask him to. That would spoil all her plans. She'd have to throw on her old bathrobe and sit around making small talk with her brother while wearing the sexiest thing she owned underneath. Come to think of it, that actually held some appeal. When Burke wasn't looking, she could move her old housecoat to give Gabriel glimpses of what she was wearing underneath. It would drive him absolutely crazy to have to sit there and entertain her brother, knowing that she was dressed for sex and seduction. She went to the bedroom window and watched as Gabriel shot out of the Bronco, giving her brother a cursory wave and taking the porch steps two at a time. Mariah saw her brother give a wave and drive off, laughing his head off. They obviously weren't pulling the wool over his eyes about their relationship. As soon as she heard him cross the porch to the front door, she wobbled down the hall to stand at

the top of the stairs. She heard the inside door open and then the slam of the screen door. He was home! She could see down the stairs but not along the front hall to the door so she couldn't see him as he came in the house. She waited at the top of the stairs, tense with anticipation. Now she knew what he meant when he said that screen door was like the doorway to adventure.

"You never knew what was going to happen to you when you went through that door," he'd said. "Sometimes you went through that door and had a sexual adventure beyond your wildest dreams and sometimes you ended up nose to nose with one really angry sheriff." Mariah knew she wasn't going to come face-to-face with one really angry sheriff as she had just seen him drive off so that just left one wild sexual adventure and she was certainly up for that. And she knew that Gabriel would be up for that too, in more ways than one. In fact, she was pretty sure he would be up the moment he walked through the door.

Gabriel strode through the front door and paused. He couldn't remember the last time he'd come home to the smell of dinner cooking and whatever she had made smelled great. He also couldn't remember the last time he'd come home to someone waiting for him and he realized it was wonderful. His woman was waiting for him. Gabriel knew that sounded chauvinistic and old-fashioned but he was quite happy to have her think of him as her man. He wanted to howl at the moon but instead he called Mariah's name. Where was she? He couldn't wait to take her in his arms. He called again and heard her answer from the top of the stairs. "I'm upstairs," she called down to him. "I thought you might like to take a bath." Well, that was maybe second or third on the list of things he wanted to do but it certainly wasn't hovering there in first place. Wild, pounding sex followed by mellow lovemaking was definitely top of the list. He walked to the bottom of the staircase ready to go to her when he looked up and saw her standing at the top of the stairs.

Holy hell! What was she wearing? It was some tiny little robe-thing that barely covered her and looked like it would be fun to undo with his teeth. Oh, yeah! As he walked up a few stairs and got closer he could see that those little bows were just begging to be undone with his teeth. Then she turned to give him a side view and he got a look at the shoes. Where the hell had she gotten those shoes? Those fuck-me shoes could give a corpse a hard-on. "I hope you can run in those shoes," he said, uttering a few words on each step of the staircase as he moved purposely toward her, "because once I catch you I am going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to move for a week."

Mariah gave a little yelp and turned to run down the hall to her bedroom. She didn't try very hard to escape because she desperately wanted him to catch her.

He took about three strides, scooped her up in his arms then swung her around until she yelled for him to put her down. He ignored her plea and carried her to the bedroom where he gently set her on her feet in front of him. He undid the shoulder holster and put it and the gun in the drawer of the bedside table then turned back to her. "Please tell me that no other man has ever seen you wearing this," he pleaded,

indicating the erotic little outfit she was wearing. "Please tell me that it is for me, just for me."

Putting her hand on his chest, Mariah looked up at him and nodded. "It's for you, just for you," she said. "My girlfriends gave it to me as a joke for my birthday a few years ago and it sat at the back of the drawer ever since. This is the first time I've even had it on. For you, just for you," she reiterated.

Gabriel gazed down at her with a smoldering look in his eyes. "Any man who sees you in that would never think it was a joke. You are every man's wet dream come to life." He cocked his head to one side and peered at the little bows down the front. "What have you got on underneath that little robe?"

"I guess you'll just have to undo it and find out for yourself," she said naughtily, urging him to do just that. With that comment and a look, she dared him to begin to undress her. He rose to the challenge, in all ways! He sat down on the bed and drew her close to him so she could stand between his legs. He leaned forward and grasped the top bow in his teeth and gently tugged. It came undone easily then he moved his mouth to the second little bow and tugged at it until it fell free as well. The third bow met the same fate as did the fourth and final closure. Gabriel sighed as the final bow fell open. Reaching up, he took both sides of the robe in his hands and pulled them apart to let them slide down her arms and the diaphanous garment fluttered to the floor. He gulped when he saw the rest of the outfit. Her breasts were high and firm and held up to his eager gaze and her nipples... Oh my God, that little wisp of nothing didn't even cover them. They were jutting out from the top of her bra, eager for his mouth to be on them. He stared at the little panties and smiled angelically when he saw the little wee bows that held them together. They looked like they were going to be as much fun to remove as the see-through robe had been.

Mariah reached out and ran her hands down the sides of his head then she brought them round to cup his jaw. She ran them over his whisker-roughened jaw, delighting in the prickly texture. He turned his head to rest it within her hand then turned to press a kiss to her palm. Mariah shivered in delight at the feel of his lips on her sensitive palm. Then he gave it a playful lick with his tongue and she was lost.

She pulled his head forward so he could feast on her breasts and he rewarded her by capturing one of her nipples with his lips and flicking it hard with his tongue. He used his thumb to repeat the gesture with her other nipple. Her nipples felt as hard as pebbles and so long. He released her breast then switched to the other one while using his thumb to torment its mate. He knew her breasts were so sensitive, just the slightest pressure made her squirm. He'd love to watch her nurse their child. He could sit with them and watch as she nourished their baby and maybe she would let him suckle there after. He would love to share what she was giving to their son or daughter. "You have such beautiful breasts," he said reverently as he reached behind her and undid her bra. "I would love to watch you nurse our child."

"Gabriel, are you saying you would like to have a child?" she asked, stunned at his admission.

"I've never thought about it before but my whole life seems to be shifting," he said, the truth of the revelation evident in his eyes. "I'm not saying I want you to get pregnant right away or anything but I am saying that if our relationship continues to grow, I would like us to consider having a baby."

Mariah was so surprised by the turn of the conversation. "That's a pretty big step," she said. "We'd need to be sure it's what we both want."

"I've waited all these years without ever thinking about it so I'm sure I can wait awhile longer to be sure it's right. Right now, I want to investigate how I'm going to get those little undies off you," he said, with a grin. He gently pushed her back a bit then slid off the bed onto his knees. He turned her with her side facing him and bent his head so he could grab the side bow of her panties with his teeth. He made sure that he licked her first and then nibbled the soft, sensitive skin above and below the bow before he finally tugged it loose. He turned her with her other side to him and as he turned her he pressed a line of whisper-soft kisses all across her belly 'til he arrived at the other bow. Before he undid the other bow, he licked up her outer thigh then nibbled all the way up to the bow then finally he tugged it open.

Mariah had almost melted into a puddle by this time. What that man could do with his mouth! It oughtta be illegal! Gabriel rose to his feet, turned her and set her down on the bed. He went to his knees in front of her and lifted one of her feet so he could take off her stiletto. Sliding the shoe off, he held up her foot and painted a line down the middle of the sole with his tongue. He knew she loved it, her cream was beginning to slide from her body and she couldn't do a thing to stop it. He continued to paint the bottom of her foot with his tongue, sometimes with the flat of his tongue and sometimes with the rigid tip of it.

He wondered which was harder for her to bear, when he licked her with the flat of his tongue or when he licked a line with the tip of his tongue. He was willing to bet that she hadn't even known her feet were so sensitive. When he was done tormenting that foot, he placed it on the floor and picked up her other foot. He was delighted to see that his delicate torture had started her cream running down her inner thigh.

He could see it and he couldn't wait to lap it up like a greedy cat. A cat like a tiger or a lion. He took off her other shoe and began to lick that foot. Even though she knew what to expect, she couldn't control the moans that passed her lips. Finally he set her foot down and putting his hands between her legs urged her to spread her legs further apart. He turned to the little creamy rivulet on her inner thigh and began to greedily lick it off her leg. He purred with delight at the taste of her pleasure in his mouth. Gabriel wondered if she could hear him purring as he lapped it up.

He licked all the way up her inner thigh until he came to her cunt then he spread her apart and tugged at her labia with his teeth. He put his tongue inside her and licked up her slit until he reached her clit. It was swollen and demanding his attention so he gave it the attention it deserved. He pulled it out of its little hood and pressed up into it with the stiff point of his tongue. That was all it took. He could feel her orgasm rip through her. He could feel the quivers in his mouth as she gave herself over to a massive orgasm. When it had passed, Mariah could do nothing but flop back on the bed, totally wrung out. Gabriel smiled down at Mariah, his Mariah who was too dazed, too sexed to even move. He loved it. She lay on the bed with her legs wide open and he could see her glorious sex spread out for him. He could go down on her again right away but he was going to give her a few minutes to recover.

Mariah lay there spread out before her lover, unable to move. How did he manage to keep doing that to her? They didn't need to have penetration for her to have a screaming orgasm. He just needed to go down on her and she was putty in his hands or in his mouth as the case may be. Gabriel lay down beside her on the bed and pulled her against him. She put her head on his chest and savored the intimate connection.

He couldn't remember the last time he had cuddled with a woman. He didn't think he ever had. It seemed so intimate a gesture and he had never felt that closeness with any other woman except Mariah. He found that he wanted to spend time with her like this after making love or playing. It seemed so right.

The window by the bed was open and a gentle breeze ruffled the curtains and caressed their glistening bodies. They could hear night sounds carried on the breeze, some kind of night bird crying and something howling way in the distance. It was almost surreal in its haunting nocturnal melody.

Chapter Thirteen

They lay quietly for several minutes then Mariah rolled away and stood up, her energy returning. She hadn't had a chance to put her seduction into action and now Gabriel was about to be on the receiving end of that plan. She walked over to her tall dresser and as she moved across the room, Gabriel rose up on his elbows to watch her, a questioning look on his face.

As Mariah bent down to retrieve something from the bottom drawer, Gabriel was treated to a truly delightful view of her luscious butt and her succulent slit. He couldn't help but marvel about what a beautiful ass she had. Just the thought of that marvelous ass was enough to bring a smile to his face. Then Mariah straightened and turned back to him, letting him see what was in her hands. She was holding the chaps and showing him a look of determination. The smile faded from his face to be replaced by a look of contemplation. If she had expected him to be put off by the thought of wearing those chaps for her then she was in for a surprise. He was game for anything with her.

Mariah sauntered over to the bed and held out the chaps to him, the waistband suspended from her outstretched finger. Gabriel shot forward and tried to grab them, sending her into gales of laughter. "I take it you're not adverse to putting on the chaps, Roy," she said, smiling.

"I'm definitely looking forward to a little game of lusty cowboy and unsuspecting cowgirl, Dale," he said, waggling his eyebrows.

"How about lusty cowgirl and buff ranch hand?" she demanded.

"Works for me," Gabriel replied. "In fact, anything works for me as long as it's with you." Mariah began to back up, luring him forward to take the chaps from her finger. Slowly he began to advance on her, getting closer and closer to her hand and to the elusive chaps.

"Come on, lover boy," she taunted, "come and get 'em, you big hunk of buff stud." Gabriel lunged and caught her around the waist. Mariah squealed and tried to get away. He moved to the corner and set her down on the love seat. "If you know what's good for you, you won't move from there until I tell you to," he said, taking the lead. Then he walked to the bed and set the chaps down, Mariah's eyes following his every move. He reached up and pulled his t-shirt over his head, watching her reaction as he did. She tried to sit quietly on the love seat like he said, but couldn't be still, she was so edgy with wanting him. She moved to sit perched on the edge of the little sofa, not wanting to miss a single thing. He popped the buttons on his jeans, opening each one slowly before moving to the next, never taking his eyes off hers then he spread the fly apart so she could see the long, thick bulge of his penis. She began to lift herself off the couch to come to him then sat back down to watch the rest of the show. He sat on the

edge of the bed and tugged off his boots and socks, throwing them in the corner. Standing, he stuck his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and pulled them down. He kept her in suspense by taking forever to peel them down his legs and off. She wanted him to just take them off and stand up so she could see how aroused he was but he made her wait. Finally he pulled them off over his feet and stood so she could see him in all his naked glory. His cock was so thick and pulsing with energy that she could see the thick veins from across the room. He reached for the chaps and put them around his waist and buckled them. As he reached to do up the zippers Mariah went into action. She pushed herself off the couch and came to kneel in front of him.

"I'd be glad to do those zippers up for you," she said, gazing up at his massive erection. She slid the two sections of the zipper together on one leg then gently zipped it up the inside of his leg. She made sure one of her hands brushed his cock as she came to the top of the zipper. Gabriel's breath came out as a hiss. Mariah was very glad that two could play at this teasing game.

Gabriel looked down at her and was struck dumb by the erotic picture she made, kneeling there at his feet with her mouth just a hairsbreadth away from his needy cock. Then she bent her head down and gave her attention to the other zipper, sliding the two halves together and gently doing it up. This time, as the zipper came to the top, she brought her head up as soon as it was level with his penis and as she raised it she put out her tongue and licked the length of his hard-on. He nearly came out of his skin.

Mariah stood and went to sit in the chair in the far corner. It was a high-back old armchair and it cradled her body as she sat and looked at him wearing nothing but the chaps. "You look so good in those," she said to him. His cock was so long and so stiff that it touched the buckle of the chaps. "Walk over to me," she commanded. He took a few steps and she watched his cock bob and wave as he moved. She let him take a few steps then said, "Stop, turn around." He stopped in mid-stride and slowly turned his back to her. His back was so beautifully sculpted and the chaps provided an erotic frame for his firm butt. "Don't move! Don't turn around!" she commanded, taking back control.

Gabriel couldn't believe how turned on he was by her giving him orders. It was so erotic to do her bidding, especially when he knew it would end in mutual pleasure for them both. "I don't want you to move. Do you hear me?"

"I'll stay still no matter what," he replied. He heard her get up off the chair and move to stand behind him but he didn't know what she planned to do. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her move to her knees behind him. Here's the part where I turn into a dead man, he thought. Sure enough, she put her hands on his butt cheeks and ran them gently over the contours. Then she leaned forward and began to nip at his butt then lick to soothe the bites. She even put her tongue in his crease and caressed the puckered flesh there with the point of her tongue. Gabriel didn't know what to do. The sensations were almost too much for him to bear. No one had ever caressed him in that way and he found he loved it. He had no idea he would be so sensitive there or that he would like to be fondled there. He wanted to try it on her when he got a chance.

"Turn around so I can go down on you." She wasn't sure where she was getting the courage to say all these wicked things but he seemed to like it and so did she. Gabriel turned to face her and she stretched up to encircle him with her mouth. She applied a gentle suction with her cheeks and he was a goner. She sensed his balls tighten and knew he couldn't stop his cum from spraying into her mouth to the back of her throat. Mariah loved to feel him let go, it was glorious to take all that power in her mouth. As he finished she gave him a little kiss on the tip of his penis and came to her feet. He looked so dazed that she asked, "Are you all right, Gabriel?"

He answered with a glazed look in his eyes, "I think I just had a religious experience. I certainly went to heaven for a minute there." Mariah laughed then stood and just looked at him. His body was so beautiful, so muscular and so strong and he looked so good in those chaps. She wanted him to wear them around the house all the time. Mariah took his hand and led him to the bed. "Lie down there. I'm not done with you yet, mister."

Gabriel got on the bed and stretched out then she climbed up and got on top of him. She started by kissing his eyelids and licking his sharp cheekbones then she moved to his sensuous mouth, nipping and licking his bottom lip. Gabriel took her tongue into his mouth and ran his tongue along the top of it and then underneath. She pulled hers back a bit and ran it along his teeth and traced inside his cheeks. She withdrew her tongue and began to kiss down his neck, sucking on him until she left her mark then kissed along his collarbone then painted it with the point of her tongue. She ran her hands through the hair on his chest, petting him like a cat. She traced around his bellybutton with her tongue then discovered he was very ticklish when she tried to put her tongue in. She wiggled her body down his and took hold of his penis with one hand. She immediately put her mouth over it and tried to swallow it all. He was so long and hard again already that she could hardly get it all in her mouth. She used her tongue and her cheeks to apply pressure and he began to moan and writhe under her. "I can't take any more. I have to fuck you," he said. She raised herself up and was so wet that he slid in easily. She lowered herself and he could feel her inner muscles taking him in. She could feel the leather chaps rubbing her butt on each downward stroke. It was so soft and supple against her behind and a marked contrast to his coarse pubic hair. She knew she hadn't put a condom on him but he hadn't realized it yet. He was too lost in the ecstasy of the moment.

Gabriel loved the feel of her muscles tugging him further and further into her channel. She was so slick and ready for him. He surged up into her and began to pound a rhythm. She took the rhythm and slammed down on him, pushing him in as far as he could go. He was mindless in his frenzy, slamming up into her and feeling his orgasm meeting hers. They came together in a rush of color and Gabriel couldn't see for a moment, all he could do was feel the waves of her orgasm cresting through her and reverberating through him. He tried to slow his breathing and make his body relax then he let his head sink back into the softness of her pillow. Mariah fell slowly forward and lay prone on his body, unable to move. They lay that way for a few minutes until

Gabriel realized that something warm and wet was running onto the bed. He was startled to realize that it was his cum and his first thought was that the condom had broken. Then he remembered the feel of being inside her and that the heightened sensitivity was from the lack of protection. They hadn't used a condom when they made love.

"Mariah," he called gently to her. She raised herself up on her elbows and smiled at him.

"Hi," she said, with a lopsided grin. "I never knew riding the range could be so much fun."

"Mariah," he said seriously, "we made love without a condom." He looked at her, gauging her reaction to the news.

"I know," she said. "It was wonderful, wasn't it? It was amazing to be skin to skin with you." His mouth fell open.

"That's all you've got to say about it," he asked incredulously. "I forgot to protect you and you think I felt wonderful."

"You didn't forget to protect me. We both forgot to use protection. It's as much my responsibility as yours so don't try to take the blame for it," she said, waggling her finger at him. He reached forward and put his mouth over her finger, licking it with gentle strokes of his tongue. He pulled his mouth away and said, "I'm not trying to say there's blame but we need to be sensible about this. We've both been tested recently so the only thing we have to talk about is the possibility of you being pregnant." Climbing off the bed, he held out his hand to her and led her to the straight back chair where he sat and pulled her onto his lap. She cuddled close to him, putting her head under his chin. "Well," he said. "How do you feel about it?" She pulled back and turned her head to look up at him. Gabriel waited for her reply.

She looked at him with love and trust in her eyes. "You already know that. If I found out I was pregnant with your baby, I would be so happy," she said, in a rush of words. "What about you? How would you feel about it?" she asked. Gabriel considered the question for a long moment before he answered her. They had already discussed having a baby but their actions had made it a real possibility.

He finally spoke, saying, "I would prefer to wait but if we found out you were pregnant I would be absolutely delighted." Mariah let go of the breath she had been holding. Gabriel beamed. Those were the words she wanted to hear from him and Gabriel realized they were true. He would love to see her round with his baby. He would love to see her naked as her body changed with their child.

As Mariah sat there on his lap she realized that they were naked and something needed to be done about that. Actually she realized that she was naked and he was still wearing those sexy chaps and she could feel his cock growing under her, prodding her bottom. She climbed off his lap and went to the bedside table to retrieve a condom. When she came back he had moved to the larger high-back armchair.

"I think it will be easier to make love in this chair," he said. Mariah tore open the packet and rolled the condom down his cock then climbed into the chair. She put one foot on each side of him then lowered herself slowly, never looking away from his eyes, until she was fully impaled. She leaned forward and burrowed in his chest hair to flick his nipples with her tongue. She tormented one flat nipple then moved her mouth to the other. She ran her hands through the hair on his chest then, with one finger, traced the line of soft, downy hair down his belly to his cock. Using her thumb and forefinger, she encircled his cock right where they were joined. She raised her body a bit so there was enough room to keep him inside her and also to squeeze his cock with her thumb and finger and to move them up and down at the same time.

Gabriel groaned with the double onslaught of sensations. His cock was held tightly in her passage and at the same time she was running the circle of thumb and finger along it too. Mariah watched his face change as his orgasm took hold. His face tightened and he closed his eyes as it came down on him. As she quickly released her hold on his cock, he grabbed her shoulders and pushed her down to take all of him. She watched him throw back his head in ecstasy then was caught unawares as it triggered an orgasm for her. Mariah slumped forward to rest in the shelter of his arms and felt him put his arms around her and pull her even closer.

After a few minutes, he gently pulled out of her and, putting one arm under her legs, lifted her into his arms. Mariah put her arms around his neck and let him carry her to the bed where he pulled back the covers and set her down. Gabriel went into the bathroom to dispose of the condom then came back and began to undo the chaps. Mariah watched entranced as he carefully undid each zipper and the buckle at the waist, finally peeling them off. He put them over the back of the chair then climbed in bed with her. He tucked his body around her, spoon-fashion and drew her back against his chest.

"I wonder if Roy and Dale ever had that much fun with a pair of chaps?" he said thoughtfully. Mariah snorted with laughter, finding it hard to envision that picture in her head. They lay for a few minutes then Gabriel said, "You know what? There's no way I can go to sleep. I'm starved. Can we go down and get something to eat? Whatever you were cooking smells really good."

Mariah rolled out of his arms and rose from the bed. She went to the closet and pulled out her robe. Gabriel sighed as she hid her beautiful body under the robe. Oh, well. He knew how easy it would be to get it off her. She came back to the bed and held out his jeans to him.

"Spoilsport," he said, taking them from her and pulling them on. "I was going to eat naked."

"That's what I figured," said Mariah. "And that would mean that we would never get anything to eat." She did notice that he pulled them on but didn't do them all the way up. She could see that sexy line of silky hair leading down his belly to his cock.

"We could always just eat each other," Gabriel said. "You have that lovely old table in the kitchen and I could see you spread out on it like a banquet for a starving man."

Mariah burst out laughing. "You'll just have to settle for chili with hot fudge cake for dessert." She went out the door with Gabriel hot on her heels. They burst into the kitchen, drawn by the delicious smells. He went to the cupboard and got out bowls and glasses while Mariah got out a ladle and some silverware for them. She grabbed the chili pot from the stove and they met at the table where they sat down, laughing. She scooped out some chili for them both then jumped up and went to the fridge.

"Hey, come back and eat," Gabriel called.

Mariah peeked at him from around the fridge door and said, "Just need to get some grated cheese to put on the chili. I think there's some in here from a couple of days ago. Aha! Here it is," she said, brandishing the container. She brought it to the table and opening it, set it down.

"Do you have any hot sauce to go on this?" Gabriel inquired. Mariah rummaged around in the cupboard and produced a bottle of Red Hot sauce which she gingerly handed to him. He opened it and began to sprinkle it liberally over his chili.

"Good heavens, Gabriel," she said, astounded. "Are you trying to burn your mouth off?"

"I love spicy food," he said, with a disarming grin. "This chili smells absolutely delicious," Gabriel said, taking a deep breath of the aromatic dish.

"Do you want some cheese to put on top?" Mariah asked.

"No way. I like it hot, spicy and unadorned. Kind of like you," he said to Mariah, with a wink. He took a big spoonful of the chili and nodded his approval. Mariah sprinkled some cheese on top and took a bite.

"It really is good, isn't it?" she said, digging in to her bowl. When they were done, Gabriel got up and set the bowls on the counter. Mariah went to the freezer to get the vanilla ice cream and lifted the fudge cake off the counter. "Can you get some bowls and spoons for the dessert?" she called to him. When she brought over the ice cream and cake, he reached out and grabbed her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "What are you doing?" she asked, with a laugh.

"I thought I'd like a double dessert. Hot fudge cake and you," he replied. Mariah reached over and scooped out two helpings of the rich, decadent cake, flipping it into the bowls so the creamy chocolate sauce was on top. She dug into the ice cream tub and put some onto the two servings of cake. She remembered what her friend had said about the little black dress and a tub of vanilla ice cream. She figured Gabriel wouldn't mind if it were a robe instead of a little black dress especially when she was naked under the robe. Gabriel put his spoon into the rich cake and ice cream concoction and held the spoon to Mariah. She opened her mouth and Gabriel fed her the succulent dessert. Mariah moaned in awe. It was so good. She filled her spoon and Gabriel opened his mouth to receive the offering. Mariah made sure she got chocolate sauce on his mouth so she could lean down and lick it off. Gabriel loved it. He put the spoon into the bowl and this time just took some ice cream. As he brought the spoon to her mouth, he lowered it and dropped the sticky, cold treat just above the lapels of her robe.

"Uh-oh," he said, seriously. "I wouldn't want that to get on your robe." And with that he pulled the robe apart and licked the ice cream as it melted down her breast.

Two can play at this game, thought Mariah. She spooned out some ice cream, leaned back and ran the spoon along his shoulder. She bent forward and lapped it off then continued to lick her way up the side of his neck. He shivered from the cold and from the catlike cleansing of her tongue. They continued to feed each other dessert, occasionally indulging in the naughty foreplay. When the bowls were empty, Gabriel stood with her in his arms and set her on the table. He sat back down and spread her legs wide. "You look as yummy as that chocolate dessert," he said, staring at her secret place. "Nice and creamy. I wonder if you taste as good?"

"I guess you'll just have to judge for yourself," she said as she leaned back, spreading her hands on the table. He leaned forward and sniffed her. Her woman's scent was so erotic to him. He put out his tongue and gently touched her with it. She groaned. He lapped up her slit with the flat of his tongue then prodded her clit with the point of it. He drew it into his mouth and suckled at it. Rearing back, he could see her own rich cream begin to flood her slit and he put his tongue in to savor it. It really was like the richest cream. Looking up at her, he said, "You taste absolutely delicious." And he licked his lips. He reached forward with one finger and put it inside her. He brought it out and held it up to her where she could see it glistening with her own juices. "Open your mouth," he commanded and when she complied, he put his finger in and let her lick herself off.

"See. I told you it was delicious, didn't I?" he whispered. She nodded and watched, mesmerized, as he stood and peeled off his jeans, reaching into his pocket for a condom before dropping them on the floor. He rolled it onto his enormous erection and pulled her forward to the edge of the table. The muscles in his forearms and shoulders bulged as he lifted her right off the table and set her down on his cock. With her creamy lubricant, his penis slid in. She could feel her body swallowing him bit by bit, until he was as far inside her as he could go. He didn't move. He just sat there with her riding him and flexed inside her, an answering flutter tickling him from her inner muscles. Then he took her around the waist and lifted her up then let her ease down. He kept this slow and easy pace, letting his cock stimulate her clit on each downstroke. Mariah needed to move so she put her hands on his shoulders for leverage and began to move more quickly. She could look right in his face and see the change come over him as he got closer and closer to his release. He shut his eyes, his face tightened then he yelled with the force. Mariah followed right behind him and fell forward on his chest, howling in his ear as the shivers went on forever. She couldn't move and was afraid she was going to faint from the force of her orgasm. Each time they made love, it was more powerful than the last. Gabriel reached forward and took her face in his hands. He placed a gentle kiss on her lips then drew her back into the shelter of his arms.

"How did you enjoy the meal?" she asked against his chest. She could hear the rumble as Gabriel began to laugh.

"I can't remember when I've enjoyed a meal so much," he said, with a chuckle. "I don't think I ever gotten to eat a meal and then gotten to eat the cook as well."

"You see my friend was right," Mariah mused.

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking at her for clarification.

"Well, my friend said that with a little black dress and a tub of vanilla ice cream, a woman could have whatever she wants. So I guess it holds true for a robe, a little black dress, whatever. I had you eating out of my hand in no time flat."

Gabriel looked at her with a wry little smile. "Well, if I remember correctly, it wasn't your hand I was eating out of but it was delicious anyway." Mariah blushed bright red as she remembered exactly where he had been eating and how much she had enjoyed it.

He lifted her gently back onto the table then went to dispose of the condom. He came back to the table, pulled the two parts of her robe together, tightened the sash and lifted her into his arms. He stopped at the kitchen doorway so she could turn out the lights and carried her upstairs. Dropping her, he fell to the bed alongside her. He pulled her into his arms and she curled up against him. Within minutes he heard her breathing change to the deep rhythm of sleep. He realized that he hadn't even told her what happened with her brother but he could tell her in the morning. It was getting late and she had to get up for school in the morning. He would drop her off then head to the sheriff's office to see about the operation at Mark's. He felt Mariah reaching down and claiming him with her hand. Too bad his body was too tired to respond!

Chapter Fourteen

Mariah opened her eyes to see her hand spread out across her lover, nestled in the hair on his chest. She flexed her fingers to work them through the soft fur and was rewarded with a moan from Gabriel. She moved her hand down until she encountered his impressive erection. Thank God for morning wood! she thought. He must have had the same thought for he reached his hand back under the pillow and took a condom from the stash he had put there in the night. Tearing the wrapper with his teeth, he sheathed himself then turned her away from him so he could slide in from behind. The penetration was so deep from this angle that Mariah was startled by the feeling of being so totally taken by him. He slid in and out with a slow easy rhythm, enjoying the feeling of waking up next to her but as her muscles began to grab his cock he sped up and slapped into her from behind. He grabbed her around the waist to pull her to him with each stroke he made up into her. Soon Mariah felt the telltale sensation and knew that she was so close. Gabriel called out with his release but continued to pump into her until she followed him into oblivion.

Mariah felt his laugh next to her ear. "I could wake up like that every day," he said. Mariah snuggled back against him, reveling in the comfort of his body. She was well aware of how easy it would be to get used to waking up with him every morning. She also knew she had to look at the clock and see what time it was. It would be easier going to work knowing that he would be waiting for her at the end of the day. She lifted her head from his and peered at the clock. She needed to get up almost immediately but she was loath to escape the cocoon they had made. "I need to get up soon and start getting ready for school," she said. "Do you mind giving me a ride?" She turned to lie flat on her back while Gabriel shifted so he could lie with one arm across her belly and his leg over hers. He drew lazy circles around her bellybutton while he listened then jokingly said, "Another one? I thought I'd just done that."

"A ride to school," she said, swatting his arm. "I'd love to ride you all day but I think my principal would definitely mind. She's great but might not understand my need for a Sex Day." She shook her head at him. "I'm taking Friday off so I don't want to miss any other time."

"I just thought I'd ask," he said. "I'll drop you off at school then I need to check in with Burke."

"You never did tell me what happened last night," she said, turning to look at him. Gabriel hesitated. He wanted to tell her about what had happened but he knew that only certain information could be shared with civilians.

Mariah could see him deciding what to tell her but she didn't mind that he couldn't share everything. She wanted him to know that she was there for him and if he wanted

to talk that was fine. Gabriel gave her a brief description of what had happened out at the farm. Mariah was astounded. "This guy is wanted for shooting a police officer in Chicago and he turns up here, in the middle of nowhere. It seems so bizarre."

"That's why he's here. It's the middle of nowhere and secluded so he feels safe doing his deal. It was sheer luck that brought Mark to talk to your brother." Gabriel got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. He paused at the door and looked back at her, "Burke called the FBI so we have to meet with them today and see what they have planned." He went on into the bathroom and Mariah could hear him in there. Gabriel was so at ease with her that he didn't even bother to shut the door. Mariah had to laugh. In the span of a few short days she had gone from being a woman who lived alone to a woman with a lover who was comfortable in his own skin and so comfortable with her that he didn't even bother to shut the bathroom door. It felt really good. Gabriel poked his head around the corner, saying, "I think I'll just jump in the shower. Want to join me?"

"I'd love to join you but if I do I know I'll never get to school on time."

Gabriel raised his eyebrows at her. "Well, I guess I'll just have to jump your bones as soon as we get home tonight."

"I can't wait," she said honestly. Gabriel turned and a few minutes later she could hear the shower running. She lay there listening to the sound of the water then she began to think of him naked in the shower. She could picture his beautiful body with the water running down his chest, over his delicious cock and down his long legs to his big feet. He would soap his hands then wash his face then his arms. She could picture him rubbing the soap through the tufts of hair under his arms then his belly. He would get more soap and use one hand then two to wash his cock. His hands would be so slippery that he would begin to apply more pressure on his cock. He would grab it with both hands and begin to slide them up and down, harder and harder. Maybe he would be thinking about her, about putting that great big cock inside her so he would begin to move his hands more quickly, more roughly until he found his release. Mariah could conjure up the picture in her head, watching him masturbate until he came but then she began to wonder if that was what he was doing now. She wanted to watch him bring himself to completion and know that she was watching.

She slid out of bed and went into the bathroom. Gabriel's outline was visible through the opaque shower doors and she could see him washing his face and arms just like in her daydream. She watched him rub soap on his belly and then she could see his hands move lower. When he took hold of his cock and began to wash it she could feel a difference in the atmosphere in the room. It became charged as if he knew she was there and knew she was watching him. She smiled as he turned, putting his back to the water. She opened the shower door at the bottom end of the bathtub. She knew he heard her open the door but he kept his eyes closed pretending otherwise. He was lost in a state of bliss, using his soapy hands to caress his cock and his balls. His motions became rougher and Mariah knew he was ready to come so she got in the shower and went to

her knees at his feet. She reached up and pushed his hands away, letting the water wash him clean.

Gabriel's eyes slowly opened to watch her take him in her hand then in her mouth. His eyes drifted shut and he focused solely on her mouth and the pleasure it gave him. She sucked and tugged and licked and in no time at all, he came like a geyser. Opening his eyes, he looked down at her to see her cheeks flushed and her breath coming in pants. Bending, he pulled her up and into his arms. She was so close to coming that Gabriel could feel her trembling as he held her. With one arm he held her at the waist so she couldn't melt to the floor of the tub and the other hand he snaked down her front to tug at her delicate little clit. Gabriel inserted two fingers inside her and began a rhythm to mimic what his cock would do inside her and with one violent shiver, she fell apart with a scream. He stood stock still, letting the water sluice down his back, waiting until he was able to put two words together again. "How did you know that I was fantasizing about you coming in and watching me?"

"I was lying in bed listening to the water running," she said breathlessly, "and then I began to dream about what you were doing. I pictured you holding your cock and I wanted to watch you make yourself come. I loved to watch you but then I just couldn't resist taking you into my mouth. You taste so good," she said shyly.

"I loved it," he said. "Knowing you were watching me was such a turn-on." Mariah kissed him then began to soap his body to remove the remnants of their lovemaking. She spent a long time making sure his chest was squeaky clean then his back but before she could give special attention to his penis, he grabbed the soap from her and lathered his hands with the delicate soap. He massaged it into her breasts then took great delight in soaping between her legs. "I need to make sure you're clean all over," he said.

"Thank you for the attention to detail," she said.

"Happy to be of service, my lady," he replied.

"I think I'd better get ready for work. Making love twice in the morning before work plays havoc with my ability to get there on time." At Gabriel's feigned pout, she laughed and said, "I'm not complaining, just stating a fact. Usually I just get up, shower and go. Morning love-play adds a challenge to my timing but I love it." Gabriel got out, grabbed a towel then held out his hand to help her from the tub. He wrapped her in the fluffy towel then dried himself with another. He disappeared into the adjoining bedroom and left her to finish drying off.

When she went back out to the bedroom, Gabriel was lying down on the bed, the pillows propped up behind him, one arm behind his head. She could see the hair under his arm and caught herself staring at it, still unable to explain why that was such a turn-on for her.

"I want to watch you get dressed," he said, mistaking her questioning look. Mariah tried to focus on getting dressed but it was difficult with this gorgeous man following her every move with his eyes. She walked to the dresser and got out a bra and panties then looked through the closet until she found one of her favorite sundresses. She set

them on the bed, shimmied into the skimpy panties then put her arms into the bra and did it up at the little butterfly front closure. Gabriel was watching her like a hawk. "I think this could easily become my favorite part of the day," he said. "I love to watch you dress. I like to be the only person who knows what's under those prim and proper clothes, to know that if I put my hand under your dress I would be able to touch your bare butt under those teeny, little panties. I like to know that a little tug at the front of your bra would expose those beautiful little nipples and I could put my mouth on them and suck them until you come."

"Gabriel!" Mariah said, with mock indignation. "You say the most outrageous things to me."

"Yes but I think you like it," he said to her back as she went into the bathroom. He followed her to the door, not wanting to miss a minute of her morning routine. He leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed and legs crossed at the ankles. She gave him a questioning look to which he replied, "I want to watch you get ready. Is that all right?" At Mariah's shy nod he explained, "I've never been in a relationship where it was so free and personal and I just want to see you do your 'woman thing'."

"I'm a little nervous about you watching me but as long as I get equal time watching you do your 'man thing', then there should be no problem," she said shyly.

"Considering you just got to watch me jack off, I'd say you couldn't get to watch a more 'man thing' than that," he said with a laugh. She blushed scarlet as she remembered watching him. "Gabriel! I meant 'man things' like shaving and things like that," Mariah said, with mock indignation. "By the way, are you going to let me watch you shave this morning?"

"I thought you were in a hurry," he said, smiling and coming to stand in front of the sink.

"Not in too much of a hurry for that. I've never seen anyone shave but my dad and I think I'll like this a whole lot more," she said, surveying his gloriously naked body in the mirror. She watched as he filled the sink with warm water and grabbed the tube of shaving cream. Taking the lid off, he squeezed a dollop of cream into his hand, letting her put the lid back on. She watched, fascinated, as he rubbed his hands together, covered his whiskers with the lather then scraped them off. Splashing water from the sink onto his face, he removed all traces of hair then patted his skin dry with a towel. Letting the water drain away, he rinsed the sink and turned to her.

"I've never had anyone watch me shave before. I like it."

"I like watching you do your 'man thing'."

As soon as she said that Gabriel sank to his knees in front of her saying, "I think you'll really like this 'man thing'." He began to kiss her warm belly then turned his head to the side so he could rub his freshly shaven cheek across her delicate skin just like a big cat.

"I'm never going to get ready for work if you keep this up." Looking down at his burgeoning erection, Gabriel laughed and said, "Unless you go to work I won't be able to do anything except keep this up."

"You are such a dirty old man," she said, shaking her head. "Is that all you ever think about?"

"Seems so. When I'm around you I seem to have a one-track mind." Stepping away from him, she forced her attention back to her morning routine. She tried to pretend he wasn't there as she put on deodorant, rubbed some cream on her face and brushed her hair ready to pull it back into a braid.

He had moved to sit on the toilet lid and while she brushed her hair he watched her intently while she worked it into an intricate braid. He was fascinated by the deft movement of her fingers as they tamed her long hair into a tidy French braid. It was like her, all kept in neat and tidy order but really just waiting for the opportunity to spring free and take flight. He watched as she grabbed something from a basket on the counter and came toward him.

"Turn around," she said to him and he swiveled sideways on the toilet seat so she could stand behind him. Using a hair pick, she gently brushed the tangles out of his long black hair. Gabriel shut his eyes and reveled in the feeling of her brushing so gently through his hair. He couldn't remember anyone ever doing this for him except her and he loved it. Mariah grabbed an elastic band from the counter and pulled his hair back into a ponytail. Placing a soft kiss on his shoulder, she said, "There you are. All done."

Gabriel took her hand and placed a kiss on her palm. "Thank you," he said. Mariah realized how much these small things meant to him. He definitely needed some gentleness in his life.

"I need to get dressed," she said, stroking his face. She went into the bedroom to see how she was doing for time. Going over to the bed, she picked up the sundress and pulled it carefully over her head and grabbed a pair of sandals from under the bed. There was no sense putting them on yet as she needed better footwear on the motorcycle, so she tucked them under her arm along with a pair of socks and went downstairs to get breakfast going. Gabriel followed her out of the bedroom at a more leisurely pace and fished a t-shirt and a pair of socks out of his bag. Pulling the t-shirt over his head while heading out the bedroom door, he tucked it into his jeans then headed downstairs to help. Mariah was busy getting out bowls and cereal when he came into the kitchen. He sat down at the table to put on his socks, watching her bustle around the kitchen as he sat.

"Want me to get the coffee going?" he asked. Mariah shook her head.

"I usually have tea in the morning but I figured you'd prefer coffee." At Gabriel's nod, she got out a paper filter, put it in the plastic filter then put fresh ground coffee in and set the whole thing on a mug. When the water boiled she poured a small amount onto the coffee and let it drip through into the mug. Gabriel watched, fascinated. As the

coffee dripped through she put a tea bag in the teapot and added boiling water. She put more boiling water into the coffee filter and let it drip through then she put the filter contraption in the sink and handed the mug to Gabriel.

"Where did you learn to make coffee like that?" he asked.

"A friend of mine at college always made it that way and she got me hooked on it." Gabriel added a bit of milk and sugar and pronounced it delicious. Mariah poured a cup of tea for herself then put out cereal and milk for the two of them. "I don't usually make much for breakfast," she said awkwardly.

"Cereal is fine," he said. "I usually don't even bother with breakfast." Mariah shook her head.

"I wouldn't be able to make it to lunchtime without having something for breakfast," she said emphatically.

"Anything you need done today?" Gabriel asked.

"I don't think so."

"I'll try to make something for supper so you won't have to bother when you get home." Mariah couldn't imagine anything better than coming home to dinner cooked by someone else. Well, there was one thing better to come home to and that would be Gabriel, naked, waiting at the door to carry her upstairs to make mad, passionate love to her. That would be better than a home-cooked meal and a lot less fattening, she thought with a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Gabriel asked.

"Well, you know how your mind jumps around from one thought to another and you can't stop it." Gabriel nodded. "I was thinking there's nothing better than coming home from work to a home-cooked meal but then I thought of something that would be way better."

"And that would be...?" he asked, curiously. At her reluctance to answer he asked again, making a circular motion with his hand to draw her out, "And that would be...?"

"And that would be to come home from work and find you waiting for me at the door," she said, all in one breath.

"I can wait for you at the door, if you like," he said with a beatific smile.

"Just a minute, I wasn't finished. I wanted to come home to find you waiting for me at the door and you would be naked," she said, blushing.

"Naked, eh," he said with a gigantic grin.

"Yes, naked and then you'd carry me upstairs and fuck my brains out."

"I'd be more than happy to meet you at the door and carry you upstairs and fuck you 'til you couldn't stand but I'm afraid I won't be able to do that today." Mariah's face fell. "Why not?" she asked, curiously.

"I'll be bringing you home on the bike unless your car is fixed." Her face broke out in a big smile. "Oh right. We'll be coming home together," she said happily.

"Let's just see what happens when we get home," he said.

"Okay," she said. She got up and carried her dishes to the sink. "I'll just go finish getting ready and then we can go." She went upstairs and brushed her teeth then moved over to make room for Gabriel as he came in to do likewise. It was so intimate to stand beside him at the sink and brush her teeth at the same time as he did. She couldn't help but think about how funny that was. She'd just had his penis in her mouth yet she thought it was intimate brushing their teeth at the same time. Go figure. Gabriel stopped long enough in the bedroom to grab the holster and Glock from the bedside table. Mariah watched in silence as he put them on then they headed downstairs together.

Gabriel snagged the extra leather jacket off the hook by the door and handed it to Mariah. She put it on then gathered her books and put them in her backpack along with her sandals. He pulled on his boots, threw on his own jacket and grabbed the two helmets from the table by the front door while Mariah donned her socks and a pair of boots. Gabriel pulled open the front door, pushed the screen door and ushered Mariah out ahead of him. He shook his head as he realized she wasn't going to lock the door behind them. Living in the country was going to take some getting used to.

"Is the school near the sheriff's office?" he asked, handing her Burke's helmet. She began to fasten it and put her arms through the straps of her backpack.

"It's right on Main Street," she said, looking at Gabriel. At his nod, she continued, "We pass the sheriff's office and the school's just there past the park."

"Sounds easy enough to find," he said. "You can show me where you want me to meet you after school today. Do you need me to phone about your car or will you have time to do that during the day?" Mariah had forgotten all about her car. She would never have met Gabriel if it hadn't been for her car breaking down. Maybe she should have it bronzed as a tribute to her good fortune.

"Since my mechanic won't have a clue who you are, I'll phone him during lunch then I'll call and let you know what he says."

"No problem. Unless I hear differently from you, I'll come and pick you up after school. What time should I be there?" Mariah tried to figure out what she would need to do to get ready for the next day and how long that would take.

"Come for me about four-thirty and I should be ready." Gabriel nodded and put on his helmet. He climbed on the bike, started it and Mariah got on behind him, putting her hands around his waist. With her arms around him and her legs touching his, Mariah wished they were going on a real road trip. Unfortunately, in no time they had covered the few miles and pulled up in front of Hopeville School. She got off to head in to work, removed the helmet and started to walk past him. As she passed Gabriel he reached out his hand and snagged her wrist. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked wryly. Mariah looked at him quizzically.

"What did I forget?" she said.

"This!" And he drew her into his arms and gave her a long, luxurious kiss then sent her on her way. Mariah walked up the steps to the front door of the school, a dazed expression on her face. Gabriel put the bike in gear and set off for the sheriff's office. Mariah stood on the steps and watched until he was out of sight. As soon as she stepped in the front door, she put on her school manner and tried to think about things other than Gabriel. She went to her classroom and made sure she was ready for the day. The bell rang and as her children filed in, she put her thoughts of Gabriel to one side. She was able to not think about him for about three minutes then he started to creep in and she found herself wondering what he was doing. The children began to laugh and chatter as they filed in for the day and she got caught up in her routine of welcoming them and getting them ready for the day. And Gabriel was relegated to the back of her mind, for the time being at least.

Chapter Fifteen

Gabriel rode the short distance to the sheriff's office and was disappointed to see Burke's vehicle in the spot that very specifically said "Sheriff." He was feeling so good today, he had wanted to yank Burke's chain by parking the bike there. He hoped today's meeting would continue to keep him in high spirits but he doubted it. He knew from past experience that once the FBI stepped in on a case then local law enforcement officers took a back seat.

Margaret looked up as he came in. She stuck out her hand and as he took it said, "Hello, I'm Margaret. I didn't even get an introduction to the new kid yesterday. I gave that young whippersnapper Burke a piece of my mind after you left yesterday." Gabriel couldn't help but smile. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had referred to him as a kid and he got a kick out of her calling Burke "that young whippersnapper".

"I'm Gabriel," he said. "Gabriel Blackburn and I hope you scorched his ears off."

Margaret burst out laughing, saying, "I think I'm going to like you, son. I hear Mariah already does." He knew that in a small town nothing was sacred and everything was news no matter how small.

"Don't mind me," Margaret said, with a broad smile. "I like to tease." Then she got all businesslike and said, "The boss is waiting for you in the conference room. The Feds will be here at oh-nine-hundred so go on in." He knew Margaret must watch too many police shows—"The Feds" were coming at oh-nine-hundred. She sounded like an old TV show. He found he really liked her.

Burke was sitting at the empty conference room table. He looked up to see who had come in and broke out in a wide grin when he saw him. "I guess Margaret told you the Feds would be here at oh-nine-hundred," he said, laughing.

"She certainly did," Gabriel replied, with a grin. "I think she's watched too many *Hill Street Blues* reruns. She really seems to be enjoying the excitement."

"Well, that makes one of us," Burke quipped. "I figure they'll just pull the case right out from under me which is fine considering who this character is but I was hoping you'd get your chance at him seeing as you have a more vested interest in, shall I say, his welfare than I do." Gabriel scowled, thinking about how the Feds might rob him of his chance to bring Simpson back to Chicago to stand trial. He knew that the federal drug charges would take precedence over any state charges. At precisely nine a.m. Margaret buzzed Burke. "The Feds are here, boss," she said in a conspiratorial whisper, as if the agents in the outer office wouldn't be able to hear her even though they were standing right beside her.

"For God's sake, Margaret, just show them in," he said, exasperation in his voice.

"Okay, okay. No need to get touchy," she growled back. The door to the conference room opened and Margaret stood aside to let the two agents pass. "Here's the Feds," she said haughtily to Burke. "I'll just get back to my work." And with that she went out, closing the door behind her.

Burke put out his hand to the tall, dark-haired man who stepped forward. He gave off an air of confidence and Burke knew instinctively that this was a man who always got the job done no matter what. A quiet, sullen man stood behind him, searching the room with his eyes. Burke thought he was tall but this guy must have been six-three or four and he was built like a wall. "Burke Forrester," he said to the dark-haired man. "I'm the sheriff here in Orono County." The way he said it showed the FBI agent that no matter what went down, this was still his county and it was his job to protect its citizens.

"Simon Lang out of the Houston office," the dark-haired man said as he took Burke's hand with a strong grip and shook it. "This is my partner, Taryn Linwood." Linwood inclined his head toward the sheriff but said nothing.

Yeah, quiet but deadly, thought Burke. That's one scary bastard.

"This is one of my deputies..." Burke began to say, as Gabriel stepped from the shadows. Simon turned to offer his hand then shot around to Burke.

"Holy shit, Sheriff!" he said, disbelief in his voice. "What the hell is this renegade doing here?" Burke looked from one to the other, unsure what to say.

"When they said they were sending an FBI agent here I thought it would be a real agent not some desk jockey on vacation," Gabriel said, with a dry laugh. Burke couldn't figure out what had come over Gabriel. He was really going to piss off this agent and there would be hell to pay with superiors. Instead of getting angry, Simon threw back his head and roared with laughter. Now Burke was really confused. Gabriel strode over to the FBI agent and threw his arms around him and began to slap him on the back.

"Simon, how the hell are you?" he said. Simon smacked him back hard enough to make a normal man fall to his knees.

"I'm great but what are you doing here?" Simon asked, disbelief written on his face.

"I take it you two know each other?" Burke asked laconically.

"We go way back," Gabriel said, with a smile. He looked at Simon and grinned. Simon couldn't get over seeing his old friend here in the middle of nowhere. "Simon was with the FBI in Chicago and we worked together on a few cases. How's that little redhead?" he said, turning back to Simon. "What was her name? Bambi, Mandy...something like that?"

"Ah, her name was Candi and I don't know what she's up to. I haven't seen her in years," Simon said uncomfortably. "What the hell are you doin' here, Blackburn?" Simon asked, to divert attention from uncomfortable questions about his love life. "I thought I'd left your sorry ass back in Chicago."

"I'm on vacation and was doin' some traveling," Gabriel answered cryptically.

"I was real sorry to hear about your partner," Simon said. "He was one of the good guys."

"Yeah, he was," said Gabriel and the tone he used was enough to allow Simon to figure out that his vacation wasn't really a vacation but a chance to deal with the loss of his partner. "So what are you doing here? Last I heard you were in Boston or somewhere out East."

"I was in Boston for a while but then a job came up here in the Houston office and I thought I'd go for it. I really like it here."

"I hate to break up this touching reunion," said Taryn, "but we need to make plans for tonight." His voice was deep and rough like an aged whisky and he spoke with such authority that people generally sat up and took notice. He was also continually being pursued by woman who seemed to like the strong, silent type and you couldn't get much stronger or more silent than this FBI agent. The four men sat down at the table and Burke brought out his notes from the night before.

"You sure it's Simpson?" asked Simon.

"Yeah, Gabriel positively ID'd him last night when we went to check it out," Burke said, nodding his head.

"You know this guy?" Simon said, turning to Gabriel.

"He was in Chicago for a while and came to our attention, shall we say," Gabriel said.

"No room for personal feelings on the job. We need a clean collar that will hold up in court," Simon said.

"Listen. I know how to do my job. You just need to do yours and we'll get the bastard," Gabriel said angrily, rising to his feet.

"Just making sure you know the rules before we go in," said Simon, not responding to Gabriel's anger. "Sit down and let's get this sorted out." Gabriel sat down and they began to talk about the night ahead. "Don't forget this is a federal operation," Simon said to Burke and Gabriel.

"As long as we catch this slimy bastard and you guys put him away then I guess I'll have to be content. I just wish he had to pay for the shooting in Chicago."

"I'm sure he'll be put away for a long time with the charges we'll have against him," Simon insisted. Taryn nodded. He hadn't said a word during the entire briefing but Gabriel had the feeling that nothing got by him. He was quiet and scary but he looked like he knew his job.

"You guys need to lie low for the day," Burke said to Simon and Taryn. "It's a small town and strangers are obvious. It wouldn't do for someone to see you and wonder who you were and what you were doing here. News, good or bad, travels fast in a small town."

"So where do you suggest we hole up for the day?" Simon quizzed. "Is there a motel or somewhere around here where we can spend the day? I thought I saw one when we came into town."

"Oh, yeah, the Viceroy," said Burke. "If you were to stay there, we may as well take out an ad in the local paper. Mrs. Burns loves to talk and takes a very personal interest in all her guests. That would be a really bad idea."

"Well, you got any good ideas?" Simon asked, with a laugh. Burke thought for a few minutes.

"My sister has lots of space at her place," he suggested, "and it's way out of town."

"No way!" Gabriel all but shouted. When the others looked at him curiously. "I'm only thinking about her safety. No sense involving her in any danger if we don't have to." No way did he want two Feds at Mariah's house when he brought her home from work.

"I can't imagine that two federal agents spending the day at her house would compromise her safety," Burke said then he glanced at the look on Gabriel's face. "Well, maybe that is a bit chancy," he said to Gabriel's quick nod of approval. "Why don't I give you the keys to my apartment and you can spend the day there. My landlady is addicted to her TV and never bothers me. It's a perfect setup." Gabriel heaved a sigh of relief. Simon watched Gabriel's reaction and knew there was more to what just happened. For some reason Gabriel didn't want the two of them at the sister's house. He was very curious to know why. In fact, he couldn't wait to meet the sheriff's sister. Maybe Gabriel had finally met "his woman". It was about time. He knew Gabriel hadn't had an easy life and his partner's death must have been hard for him. It would be good for him to have someone to share with. Burke drew him out of his reverie by saying, "I'll just take you over there now. It's a bit out of town so no one will notice anyone coming and going."

After arranging to meet later that evening at the office, he left with the two officers and Gabriel went home. He really was beginning to think of it as home although the place would be too damn quiet and lonely with Mariah at work. Gabriel pulled the bike into the long driveway and felt some kind of weird sensation in his chest. It took him a minute to identify it but it seemed to be a feeling of coming home, a feeling of belonging. He got off the bike and stood for a long time, looking at the house and then around it at all the things Mariah had done to make it a home. He went over to the huge tree on the front lawn and spotted a branch that would be perfect to hang a swing from. He could picture a little redheaded girl being pushed in the swing and laughing with glee, the laughter sounding just like Mariah's. He looked at the old porch swing and saw Mariah gently rocking there, watching them, nursing a little baby with black hair. He couldn't stop smiling at the pictures that raced through his head. What had seemed like a silly pipe dream a few days ago was beginning to seem like a real possibility. There was no reason he couldn't stay.

His thoughts full of his lover, he went in the house. He hated to pass through the screen door whenever she wasn't there to share a fantasy with him. It was a waste of a

good adventure. He hung up his leather jacket by the front door and left his boots there too. The whole house smelled of her even when she wasn't there. It wasn't strong and overpowering like some cheap perfume instead it was subtle and fleeting. Before he started cooking, he went upstairs and removed his shoulder holster and gun and put them away. He made his way back down to the kitchen to see about making something for dinner. He wanted to see her face when they walked in tonight and dinner was ready without her having to lift a finger. It was a good idea but he also knew that dinner may again be preempted by wild, passionate sex. They seemed to do that a lot. Loving seemed to take precedence over everything else, even eating. Gabriel couldn't think of a damn thing wrong with that scenario.

He went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, trying to decide what to make. He opened the crisper and pulled out all kinds of vegetables and spread them out on the counter. Looks like all I need for spaghetti sauce, he thought and began chopping mushrooms, onions and garlic. He set them frying in a large saucepan with olive oil and moved on to the red and green peppers, zucchini, carrots and celery. The kitchen was redolent with the wonderful aroma of the sautéing vegetables. He added some basil and oregano then he spied a basket of fresh tomatoes on the floor by the back door so he chopped a bunch of them and added them when the vegetables had sautéed long enough. He turned down the heat, put on the lid and turned to the task of making dessert. He noticed a bowl of fresh peaches on the counter and that gave him a wonderful idea. He put a pot of water on to boil so he could peel them and gave silent thanks to one of his girlfriends who had been such a good cook. The relationship hadn't lasted long but she sure had taught him how to find his way around a kitchen and for that he was eternally grateful. He had to laugh. Mariah certainly had shown him the way around the kitchen as long as the way led to the counter or the table or the floor or any other flat surface where it was possible to make love. He'd never in his entire life made love so many times in the kitchen. He didn't know if he could even eat a meal in here without thinking about having sex with Mariah.

Gabriel poured cold water in another bowl then plunged a few peaches at a time in the hot water then put them immediately in the cold water to peel them. As he peeled, the peach juice ran over his hands, covering them with their essence. All he could think of was the luscious taste of Mariah when he went down on her and licked her juicy slit. She had the sweetest taste and the downy hair on her sweet little ass was just like peach fuzz. He'd never met anyone who could resist peach crisp and maybe that was the real reason why. Finally the crisp was ready and while he waited for the oven to heat, he washed the dishes, knowing Mariah would be much more impressed with his culinary skills if she didn't have to clean up after him. Besides, they wouldn't be able to make love on the counter if it were covered with dirty dishes. It paid to plan ahead! When the oven was heated, he put the peach crisp in to bake and set the timer. Hunger was beginning to gnaw at him so he grabbed some bread and made himself a quick sandwich.

He still had hours before he had to go pick Mariah up so he thought the horses might appreciate a visit. Throwing his boots on, he went out to the pasture by the barn. Being from the city, he had never spent much time around them but he liked their quiet camaraderie. They were very curious about him at first but after a while they drifted away to nibble on the grass, occasionally looking his way to see if he was still there. Gabriel leaned on the fence for a long time, his arms along the top rail, just watching the horses as they quietly grazed, sometimes raising their head to whinny to each other or moving to stand side by side but head to tail so they could nibble each other's itchy spots. He called a quiet good-bye to them then turned to go back to the house.

Walking back, he noticed a lawn mower just inside the barn so he got it out and checked to see if it had any gas in it. He wasn't surprised to see how organized Mariah was. It was full so he pushed it around to the front of the house ready to start cutting as soon as he'd checked the dessert. He made it to the kitchen with about three minutes left on the timer so he took out the crisp and set it to cool. It smelled delicious and he knew Mariah was going to love it and maybe even give a silent thank you to the girlfriend who had taught him to cook. With supper mostly ready, he took his t-shirt off and went back outside to cut the grass. It felt so good to be doing manual labor. His apartment in Chicago didn't have a yard so he never had yard work to do. He cleaned off the machine when he was finished and hauled it back to the barn where he had found it.

By now he was hot and sweaty and in desperate need of a shower. He poured himself a tall glass of cold water as he passed through the kitchen and made his way up to the bathroom. He'd never had a chance to look around upstairs since he seemed to spend all his upstairs time in Mariah's bedroom or in the bathroom taking a shower with her so he decided it was time to have a little reconnaissance. He didn't think Mariah would mind. There were four other rooms upstairs and two of them had been made into bedrooms while a third had her computer and desk in it and was definitely her work space. The two bedrooms both had a nice homey feel to them. Maybe Laura and the baby could come and visit them or maybe he could call his brother and see if he would like to come and stay. It had been a long time since he'd seen his brother and if he wanted to see him, he'd have to take the first step and do the inviting. He'd have to think of an occasion to force himself to make that call.

Gabriel swung open the door to the fourth room and found himself in a huge bathroom which was dominated by a magnificent clawfoot bathtub. The tub was placed in the middle of the room like a decadent shrine to the fine art of bathing. The whole bathroom was like stepping into the last century with the beautiful pedestal sink and the lovely old-fashioned mirror hanging above it. A wooden rack was perched in one corner and had soft, fluffy towels hanging on it. There was a brightly colored rug on the floor and a long pink robe hung on a hook on the back of the door. As Gabriel approached he could smell Mariah's scent on it. He took hold of it with both hands and brought it to his face and inhaled her unique, exotic scent. He got so hard just from the

smell of her that he couldn't imagine what would happen if she were actually in this lovely room with him.

Going over to the tub, he put in the stopper and turned on the water. He may as well enjoy the tub, it looked more than long enough to accommodate him. He popped the buttons on his jeans, took them off and climbed into the tub. It was like heaven on earth. The curved back hugged his back and he could lie against it, close his eyes and just relax as the tub filled. Most bathtubs were far too short to allow him the luxury of reclining and enjoying. Once the tub was full, he took some shampoo from a metal soap dish that hung over the lip of the tub and put his head back into the water to wet it. He lathered the shampoo then rinsed it out with a fancy little sprayer she had attached to the faucet. He put on a small amount of conditioner too. Now she had him worrying about taking care of his hair. Sheesh! He rinsed out the conditioner then just lay there wallowing in the hot water, his thoughts turning to Mariah.

He wondered what she was doing right now. He remembered the tiny bra and panties she had donned that morning and how she had taunted him as she put them on. He wished she was here right now so he could lie back in the tub and watch her taking them off. First she'd put her hands down to the hem of that cute little sundress she'd had on that morning. She'd take hold of the hem and peel it up and over her head. He'd see her thighs and then the little triangle of her thong as she pulled the dress higher and higher. She would be trapped inside the dress as it came up along her body then she would reveal her bellybutton then her beautiful breasts hardly restrained by that sexy little bra that held them up and barely covered her pouty, rose-colored nipples. She would grab a hairclip and, looking in the antique mirror, would pin up her hair but wisps of it would escape and lie against her neck waiting for him to move them aside and nuzzle her neck. Her back to him, she would flick the catch of her bra and reveal her breasts. She would let it slide down her arms and fall to the floor. Her whisper of a thong would quickly follow suit. She would turn from the mirror and he would see her naked and ready for him. She'd walk to the tub and lift her leg to climb in and in doing so, her secret place would be revealed to him so he would put out his hand and trace her slit with one long finger.

Gabriel looked down at his cock and realized that he had a huge erection just thinking about Mariah. She didn't need to be in the room for him to get a giant hard-on. He took the soap and lathered his hands with it. Taking his swollen cock in both hands, he began to squeeze and tug his cock while dreaming that it was Mariah here with him. He squeezed harder and doubled the rhythm until, with a hoarse cry, he came like a racehorse. He lay back and let his heart resume its normal rhythm then decided he needed to go get Mariah. Enough having sex with his hand. He'd much rather be putting his swollen cock inside her and giving her the pleasure too, not just him.

Chapter Sixteen

Mariah looked at the clock on the wall for the third time in the last five minutes. This morning she had been absolutely positive the clock had stopped or was, at the very least, moving at half the speed it usually did but lunchtime finally came and with it the afternoon and its inevitable crawl toward the end of the school day. Normally she was so interested in the children and what she had to share with them but today just couldn't go fast enough to suit her.

"Miss Forrester, Miss Forrester," Ellen said, tugging on her sleeve. Ellen's strident voice brought Mariah up short and she looked down at the young child as if seeing her for the first time.

"Yes, Ellen. What is it?" she asked kindly, giving the little girl her full attention.

"While you were daydreaming Adam dumped a whole bunch of red paint on the floor," Ellen announced. Mariah was mortified. Not only had she been woolgathering but the children had noticed. "Are you feeling okay, Miss Forrester? You usually notice when Adam gets out the paint without asking," she explained.

"I'm fine, Ellen, and thank you for letting me know about the paint. I'll help Adam clean up his mess," Mariah said, smiling at her. The same thing happened at lunchtime when she was eating lunch with her colleagues. Her best friend Shannon called her name three times before she answered. "Are you okay?" her friend had asked, concern in her voice. "I've been talking away to you and you haven't heard a thing I said."

"I'm fine. My mind was somewhere else," she had explained. "I had a busy weekend and I'm just tired." Shannon had smiled knowingly at her explanation.

"You need to get out more, Mariah. You can't stay home and work all the time," Shannon had said. Mariah had just smiled and nodded. If only Shannon knew her weekend involved nonstop lovemaking with a gorgeous, handsome, funny man. Mariah had let her think that her weariness was work-related. She hadn't wanted to start explaining her relationship with Gabriel. Not yet, at least.

Finally the bell went at the end of the day and Mariah made sure all her students were safely on their way. After bidding good-bye to the last one, she sat down at her desk and got her lesson plans and work ready for the next day. She didn't know what she and Gabriel would be doing once he picked her up but she did know that she didn't want to spoil their time together having to work. Suddenly she realized that she hadn't even called the garage to find out about her car. She secretly hoped it wasn't ready for there was nothing better than riding behind Gabriel on his motorcycle. She loved the feel of his muscles moving as he shifted gears and riding behind him, gripping that tight body was heaven. She made her way to the staff room and, crossing her fingers, placed the call to the local garage. Hallelujah! They had to order a part and the car

wouldn't be ready until at least Wednesday. Could life get any better? Two more days of riding behind that gorgeous man and gripping that scrumptious body. She'd suffer if she had to. She accepted the profuse apologies of her mechanic when she really wanted to do a victory dance around the staff room. She convinced him that the delay was fine and yes, she had alternate transportation. Boy did she have alternate transportation! Checking her watch, she realized that there were only a few minutes left until Gabriel was due to pick her up and after waiting all day to see him, she didn't want to wait an extra minute. Donning the leather jacket, she took the helmet from under her desk and grabbed her backpack as she left the classroom. A door down the hall opened and out stepped Shannon so they walked together.

"Hey, Mariah," she said, turning to look at her as they walked, "I don't remember seeing that jacket before. Don't you think it's a just a bit too hot for a leather jacket?" Thankfully before she even had a chance to answer, Shannon continued, "I didn't see your car in the parking lot this morning." Shannon usually arrived at the last minute so the lot was most often full by the time she got there.

"I had car trouble on the weekend so somebody dropped me off today," she explained.

"Oh, was it your brother Burke?" she asked, with great interest. Shannon made no secret of the fact that she would like to get to know Mariah's brother a whole lot better.

Hoping she wouldn't ask who it was, Mariah said, "No, it was someone else, somebody you don't know." Shannon pushed open the front door and the two women walked down the wide front steps and out into the afternoon heat. Shannon wasn't done with the interrogation yet.

"So who gave you a..." she began but never finished her sentence. Mariah turned to see why she had stopped but found that instead of talking, Shannon was just standing stock still, staring at the parking spaces in front of the school. Mariah turned to see what she was looking at and her heart did a funny little flip. Gabriel was standing there, casually leaning against his bike, looking very pleased to see her. His face was wreathed in a smile and his eyes lit up as they met hers. As they walked toward him, he straightened up and watched them approach, delight on his face.

"Oh my God," said Shannon. "Who do you think that is and what do you think he's doing here?" As they got closer, Mariah watched Gabriel put his hands in his front pockets and lean nonchalantly to one side. "He is so gorgeous," said Shannon. "Who do you think he is?"

"Well, Shannon," Mariah said as they walked toward him, "he's my boyfriend."

"Oh, good one, Mariah," her friend said.

"No, really. He's my boyfriend and he's waiting for me," Mariah repeated to her disbelieving friend.

"Oh, yeah, right," Shannon said with a laugh until she realized that they were heading straight for this gorgeous creature and he was putting his arms out to enfold Mariah. She walked straight into them and kissed him with all the pent-up longing

she'd been feeling all day. Gabriel was apparently so glad to see her that he hadn't cared who was watching either so he had kissed her back.

"Uh, Mariah. Perhaps you'd like to introduce us?" Shannon asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Shannon Winstock, this is Gabriel Blackburn. Gabriel, Shannon Winstock."

Gabriel took Shannon's outstretched hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Pleased to meet you," Shannon said. "I'd like to say I've heard so much about you but that wouldn't be true," she said, frowning at Mariah. Gabriel climbed on the bike and held out his hand to Mariah. She took it and swung on behind him, attaching her helmet before he took off. She gave a quick wave to Shannon then did what she'd been waiting to do all day—she put her arms around her man and squeezed him tight.

"I thought that went well," he called back to her. Mariah roared with laughter.

"I'm sure if we turned around right now," she called into his ear, "we'd find her still standing there trying to figure out what just happened." They rode the rest of the way home in silence, content just to be together. Gabriel signaled then turned the bike into the long driveway and headed for home. As soon as the bike stopped, Mariah got off and started toward the house. When she realized that Gabriel wasn't right behind her, she turned to see what was keeping him and found him standing there staring at the big old tree in the front yard. "Gabriel," she called, "what are you doing?" He came to stand beside her and continued to stare at the tree.

"I was thinking earlier that tree would be a great tree for a swing. See that big branch there," he said, pointing, "it would be plenty strong enough for one."

Mariah looked at him, perplexed. "I already have a nice, old swing on the front porch and I really like it," she said. He turned and looked right at her before he spoke.

"I wasn't thinking about the swing for you. I was planning it for our little girl. She would have lovely reddish-blonde hair like you and would love to laugh, especially when I push her on the swing. I'd like to keep the porch swing though. It would be a good place for you to sit so you could nurse the baby and watch us at the same time," he said seriously. Mariah was totally taken aback. She didn't know what to say.

"What made you think about a swing in the old tree?" she asked.

"I was cutting the grass today and noticed how much it felt like home then that tree just seemed to call to me to hang a swing from it."

"The grass looks great and the swing sounds fine but let's talk about the baby a bit more before you go ahead and build it."

"Okay," he said. "I can wait. I've waited all these years. I'm sure I can wait a bit longer." He took off into the house with Mariah on his heels.

"Oh my God. What smells so divine?" she asked. She pulled off her boots and socks, hung up her coat and headed down the hall to the kitchen. Gabriel followed suit and hurried to catch up with her but by the time he got there she was already lifting the lid on the pot to peek inside.

"This smells divine. What is it and where the heck did you learn to cook like this?" she demanded, turning on him. Gabriel laughed at her questions.

"It's spaghetti sauce and there's peach crisp for dessert and I learned how to cook from one of my former girlfriends who was great in the kitchen," he said, running all the words together, hoping she wouldn't be angry with him for talking about his previous girlfriends.

"Where does she live? I want her phone number right now," she said forcefully.

"Why?" Gabriel asked cautiously.

"To phone and thank her, silly. I come home from work and you've made a delicious supper and I don't have to do anything. That woman deserves my eternal gratitude," Mariah said, nodding her head slowly.

"I'm glad you approve," Gabriel said. "And might I add that you are great in the kitchen too. Great on the counter, on the table, on the floor. Just about anywhere at all in the kitchen, you are great...and you're a pretty good cook too."

Mariah laughed. "You're on that same theme."

"I've begun to look on the kitchen as a place to make love first and to eat second. Maybe we should just put a bed in here, one that looks out at the mountains so we could make love all the time and just get up whenever we're hungry."

"I don't know about a bed in here but I've often pictured having a couch in here and now I know why. It was all just in preparation for meeting you," she said, with a saucy smile. "I'll think I'll just go set the table," she said as she walked behind him, giving his butt a swat as she passed.

Gabriel lunged for her but she evaded his grasp and ran to the cupboard to get out the bowls, plates and cutlery. Gabriel came up behind her and gave her a hug then turned her in his arms so he could give her a long, deep kiss. He pulled away first and left her standing. As he put on water for the pasta he looked at her out of the corner of his eye and could see how flustered she was from the kiss. Good. He liked to push her off balance once in a while. She was always doing it to him.

Mariah set the table as they waited for the water to boil. When it began to bubble, he dropped in the pasta and set the timer. As they waited Mariah talked about her day at school, careful to avoid telling him how she couldn't stop thinking about him all day.

When the timer went off, Gabriel drained the pasta and put some out on each plate. Mariah spooned the fragrant sauce onto the piping-hot noodles. "Oh, yeah. I phoned about my car but it won't be ready for another day or two. I hope you don't mind having to take me to work again tomorrow?" she asked. Gabriel loved the idea of her riding behind him grasping his legs with hers.

"No. That's not a problem at all," he said. "I'll pick you up too."

"What happened with your meeting this morning?" she asked.

"It was strange."

"What do you mean?" she said curiously.

"Well, the agent in charge is someone that I used to know in Chicago. We worked on a few cases together and were good friends. He transferred and we lost touch but it turns out that he's working out of the Houston office now. We're meeting at Burke's office tonight then heading to Coombes' place. I need to be there by eight." Mariah got up and took the plates away. Gabriel could see that she was worried so he followed her.

"Mariah, this is my job," he said, coming to stand behind her at the sink. He put his arms around her and rested his chin on her head. "This is my job and I'm good at it," he said, reassuringly, "and I don't take unnecessary risks. Ever." He placed a kiss on the top of her head. "Now with you in my life, I have even more reason to want to come home in one piece. I promise I'll be careful."

"I know you'll be careful, but that doesn't mean I won't still worry. Now how about some of that peach crisp?" she said, to change the subject. Gabriel put the crisp on the table and Mariah got the vanilla ice cream out of the freezer.

"Do the same rules hold true for a little sundress and vanilla ice cream?" he asked as he scooped out the peach crisp for them. "I know it's not a little black dress but I'm more than still willing to bend the rules and give you whatever you want." he said, waggling his eyebrows at her.

"Okay, but you'll have to wait 'til I finish dessert to find out what's in store for you."

"Ooo," he said. "I'm all aquiver." And to his everlasting delight he was. Just thinking about what she might do to him, do with him really did have him all aquiver and he couldn't wait. Her imagination knew no bounds. They quickly finished the crisp, which Mariah pronounced was orgasmic, then she coyly said she was going upstairs to take off her work clothes. Gabriel gave her about a three-minute head start then went up the stairs after her. Mariah listened to him coming up the stairs then timed it so that as he entered the bedroom she had her back to him and was just lifting her dress up her legs and over her butt. He stood in the door and when she heard him, she froze.

"No, don't stop," he pleaded. She slowly raised the dress up, over her butt, up her back and then over her head and off. "Turn around to me," he said. Slowly she complied. "Unhook your bra and take it off," he commanded. She reached up, undid the front clasp and pulled her bra apart, exposing her breasts. She took it off and threw it to him. He caught it and held it to his face to breathe in her delicate scent. "Take down your hair for me," he said brusquely. He knew he was losing it just watching her but he couldn't help it. She reached up and took the elastic from the end of the braid then sifted her fingers through to release it. It separated from the braid and fell down her back, touching her cleft, right where he wanted to put his mouth. She stood before him like a warrior goddess wearing nothing but the teeny panties and as she hooked her thumbs in them to pull them down, he called, "Wait," and strode over and got to his knees in front of her. He began to rain tiny kisses all over her belly and let his hands snake up to fondle her breasts. He could feel her melting at the double assault and put her hands on his shoulders to keep her from dropping at his feet.

"You have a very naughty mouth," she gasped at him.

"Thank you," he said. "I try." And try he did, try to drive her out of her ever-lovin' mind. He continued to gently kiss and nip at her belly while he used his rough hands to torture her breasts. He used the flat of his hands to rub over the tips of her nipples, the rough palms sending myriad sensations through her sensitive breasts, then he gripped them with his thumb and middle finger and plucked at them with his forefinger. "Tell me how much you like what I'm doing to you," he crooned.

"I don't like it at all," she said through clenched teeth. His head shot up to look at her face.

"You don't like it," he said incredulously.

"No, I don't like it," she repeated. "I love it and when I leave this earth, this scene and a few others will get extra play in my head." Gabriel beamed and went back to work. He grasped the front of her little panties with his teeth and began to peel them down. Once he had them down to the tops of her legs he used them to pinion her legs and without moving his head, he put out his tongue and stabbed her clitoris. Mariah shuddered. Putting his hands on her butt cheeks, he urged her to push her cunt out to him and he slid his talented tongue up her sweet slit. He parted her folds with his tongue and gave each one special attention, licking and sucking on them. Her labia were plump and fleshy and he loved the feel of them in his mouth as he turned his head sideways, feasting on their plumpness, drawing them into his mouth and savoring them, like peaches, with his lips and tongue. It was a most erotic banquet.

"Wait, wait!" she cried. He pulled back his head and looked up at her. She quickly reached down and tore off her panties. "I need to spread my legs," she explained. She spread her feet apart and Gabriel used his fingers to part her pouty little folds. He watched as a little silvery drop appeared at her center so he put out his tongue and lapped it up.

"I love how you taste, succulent and sweet like a juicy peach," he said and pulled her to her knees in front of him so she could share her taste on his tongue. He licked along her upper lip then when she opened her mouth to him, he let his tongue dart inside to play with hers. Mariah could taste herself on his tongue and it made her want to taste his essence as well. She pushed him and forced him to lie on his back, his legs out in front of him.

"Hey!" he said. She put her fingers over his lips and demanded he keep silent. She popped the buttons on his jeans then went on her hands and knees at his feet and pulled off his boots and socks then his jeans. She crawled up over him, along his legs and onto his belly where she sat down, wiggling so he could feel her slick slit as it came to rest on him. She nuzzled her nose up through his chest hair, tweaking his nipple with her strong white teeth then gently bit her way up the side of his neck like a little vampire until she came to his pulse point. She gave him a tiny nip there, right on the pulse point and his body lifted off the floor—he just couldn't help it. It was late in the day, his chin scratchy with late-day shadow so she rubbed her nose along it as well, savoring his maleness.

He shut his eyes to enjoy the bombardment of sensations and she kissed his eyelids and licked a line across his forehead. She planted tiny kisses along his high cheekbones and down across his upper lip where she traced the outline of his lips before thrusting her tongue inside. Her tongue dueled with his, the two tongues darting in and out of his mouth into hers then she reared back and splayed her hands through his chest hair. She patted him, running her hands through his soft hair and to the sides then she used her hands on his chest to push her body down, over his penis and onto his upper legs.

She eyed his penis greedily. It was huge and swollen with desire and she just had to have it. Leaning forward, she placed a chaste kiss on the tip and watched as a drop of pre-cum slid from the slit in the tip. It was like a tiny tear and she bent to lick it up. The head of his cock was so big she wasn't sure if she would be able to get her mouth around it. She grabbed it with both hands and put her mouth over it, relaxing her throat so she could take him all in. He was so long and thick that she almost gagged but she remembered to relax and, to their delight, it slid down her throat. She applied a delicate pressure with her lips and tongue and Gabriel's eyes nearly rolled back in his head. She suckled his cock by sucking in her cheeks tightly then running her tongue roughly along its length.

He couldn't believe how she mimicked the feeling of being inside her tight inner channel but she was doing it with her mouth not her inner muscles. He clenched his hands into fists and put them at his side but each suck of her mouth made him lift his body off the floor so he could force his cock deeper into her mouth. He didn't know how she was able to take so much of him as he felt bigger than he'd ever felt in his life. He raised himself onto his elbows so he could watch and was bowled over by the erotic scene unfolding. Her hair cascaded down over his legs and partly shielded her from his gaze. He could feel her sucking his cock but the curtain of hair kept him from seeing clearly. Suddenly she brought her head up a bit and began to move it up and down so his cock went in and out with each movement and coupled with the sucking motion he knew he was going to come in her mouth.

"Mariah, wait," he pleaded. She stopped and looked up at him, loath to relax her hold on his lovely cock. "I want to come when I'm inside you. Don't make me come just yet! I want to feel you come when I do." She reluctantly pulled her mouth away and grabbed for his jeans.

"Do you have a condom in here because I refuse to move from this spot?" she said. Gabriel pulled his wallet out of the back pocket and snagged a condom.

"Since I met you," he said, "I make sure I always have one handy. I never know when we're going to need one." Mariah grabbed the foil packet from him and ripped it open. She tried to hurry to put it on but he stilled her hands. "Take it easy, honey. We don't want that thing to go off prematurely and hurt somebody." Mariah giggled and relaxed a bit. She didn't want to hurt him only pleasure him so she rolled it on gently which seemed to be harder for him to bear.

As he groaned she said, "You don't like it if I roll it on quickly and you don't like it if I roll it on slowly. What do you like?" she quizzed.

He seized her around the waist, lifted her and surged up into her, filling her to the hilt. "That's what I like," he said, "being so deep inside you that I can't tell where one of us begins and the other ends." With those words he began to move, drawing her up and then letting her glide back down. Mariah took the rhythm and putting her feet on each side of his legs, lifted up so just his tip was inside her then she tortuously slid down until their pubic hair came together. When his cock was in as far as it could go, he could see his black curly hair intermingled with her reddish-blonde hair then when she raised her body he could see her creamy little slit with his enormous cock, shiny with her essence, sliding in and out of her. He gently rolled over to put her on the bottom. He needed to thrust inside her. He pushed so hard that he could feel her sliding along the hardwood floor beneath him. She put her hands down at her side to try to anchor herself then Gabriel stepped up the power of his thrusts, certain he was touching her womb with each in stroke.

Mariah shivered with the force of his attack, loving every stroke in and out, in and out. Then she felt him tense and knew he was close to completion. She thrust her hips in the air and their bodies slapped together with the force of his thrusts and her answering movements. She could feel her orgasm beginning with its rising volcanic force. It felt like her blood was bubbling through her veins then the sensation rushed through her body and she was lost, screaming her release. Gabriel followed immediately, slamming up into her like a jackhammer and releasing his essence in a hot, liquid torrent. Unable to catch his breath, he slumped down on top of her, breathing like a marathon runner. Mariah reached up and smoothed back his hair, gently running her hand down the side of his face.

"I'm far too heavy for you," he said as he rolled to his back, taking her with him and managing to keep his cock snug inside her. "That was another near-death experience," he reiterated, when he was finally able to string words together in some semblance of order.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I just had a glimpse of heaven," Mariah said dreamily. They would have been content to lie there forever but Gabriel started to feel the cold of the floor seep into his bones. He also realized, unhappily, that idyllic though this was, he had to meet Burke and the federal agents in a short time.

"Well, it certainly was heaven but you know this floor is freezing cold on my poor, old butt," he said, with a shiver. She pushed off him and climbed to her feet then Gabriel rose and stood at her side. Taking her by the hand, he pulled her into the bathroom where he turned on the shower. As the water warmed up he kissed her senseless then dragged her under the warm water and washed every inch of her delicate body. She luxuriated in the feel of his big hands as they followed the curves and dips of her body, giving comfort with his closeness but also arousing her beyond belief. He stood behind her ran his soapy hands over her back then reached around and massaged her breasts until her nipples were hard like little berries. As Gabriel stroked her aching breasts, Mariah writhed in his arms until she had to take matters into her own hands. She reached down and, with her middle finger, touched herself. It felt so

good to touch herself as he was fondling her breasts. She circled her clit, spreading the protective hood, then moved her finger down past her sensitive vulva and used it like a little cock gently moving it in and out of her vagina.

Gabriel wondered what she was doing as she pressed her butt back against him then he could tell what she was up to as she brought her hand between her legs. He reached down and placed his hand on top of hers then relaxed it so all it did was sit on top of hers as she moved her finger in and out of her cunt. He could feel her as she pleasured herself and the sensation was incredible. He lifted her hand out of the way and replaced it with his own, letting his long middle finger pleasure her. It took only a few strokes for her to come, his finger caught by the tremors of her inner passage.

"I have to get ready to go and meet Burke," he said reluctantly.

"You might want to put some clothes on first," she said sassily, looking back over her shoulder at him. With a grin, he reached past her and turned off the water. Climbing out, he wrapped a towel around his waist then handed her one. Drying off as he went, he padded to the bedroom and pulled on underwear and jeans. "Glad to see you're putting on underwear," she called from the bathroom door, one towel wrapped around her body and another wrapped around her head like a turban.

"Thought it was a good idea since I don't know these guys nearly as well as I know you," he said with a smirk, looking down as he put on his socks.

Mariah walked over, put the tip her forefinger to his chest and, tapping it against him, announced, "If you are a very good boy, when you come home tonight I might let you be my harem slave."

Gabriel took her outstretched finger, put it in his mouth and sucked on it. Then releasing it from its sensual prison, he said, "I can't promise to be a very good boy but I can promise to be a very bad boy." Mariah's knees went weak at his words. She knew just how bad he could be and how much she loved it.

"I will hold you to that promise, slave, so until we meet again you may think of ways to please me," she said in her best royal voice.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to think of ways to please you," he said, "but right now I guess I'd better get ready to go."

He rooted around in his bag and found his last clean t-shirt. "Is it okay if I do some laundry tomorrow?" he asked. At Mariah's nod he said, "I need to get out and buy a few things too. Where should I go to get them?"

"Fort Stockton is big enough to have whatever you need if it's clothes you're thinking about," she replied.

"I just want to get another pair of jeans and a couple of t-shirts. My wardrobe was limited to whatever would fit in my saddlebags but I'd like to get a few things so I can at least do laundry without having to stand around buck naked while I wait."

"And that would be bad how?" she asked teasingly. "I'm sure I could sell tickets to that."

"Your friend Shannon would probably buy a ticket," he said, teasing her back. She didn't like the feelings that came when she thought of Shannon seeing Gabriel naked. She was a friend but no one was going to see him naked except for her.

"Forget about the tickets. I'm the only one going to see you naked, buster!"

"That's more than fine by me," he said, drawing her to him and kissing her. She didn't even realize he had undone the towel from around her body until he stepped away holding it in his hand. She grabbed it from him and walked back into the bathroom, giving a glorious view of her luscious ass. Hanging up the two towels, she came back and grabbed a t-shirt and panties from her dresser drawer and pulled them on as he drew a t-shirt over his head. He took the gun and holster from the drawer and put them on, taking comfort from them being with him. Mariah walked him to the front door where he put on his boots and leather jacket.

"You be careful tonight," she admonished. "I want you to come back to me in one piece."

"You'd better believe that I'll do everything in my power to come back to you all in one piece," he said as he grabbed her in a fierce embrace. He took his helmet from the table then he was gone and she heard the roar of the bike as he took off into the night.

Chapter Seventeen

Mariah walked slowly back upstairs, the house eerily quiet without Gabriel. She realized that it wasn't just his body that filled the house, goodness knows it was big enough to do that, it was his scent, his spirit, his whole being. He'd been with her long enough for her to feel him as she went through the silent house. She traipsed back upstairs and went into the bathroom to comb out her hair. As she got the hair pick out of the basket and pulled it through her hair, she couldn't help but think about the last time she had done this with him sitting there watching her every move. He'd been so entranced watching her doing something as mundane as brushing her hair and he'd loved it when she'd brushed his hair for him. Mariah wondered what his life had been like. She wondered if his parents had loved him and spent time with him the way her parents had with her. He had a brother but he hadn't seen him for years. What had happened to push them apart like that?

She brushed her teeth and climbed into bed, turning on the bedside light and piling the pillows up behind her so she could read. Grabbing the latest romance she'd been reading, she started back into it but found that all she could think of was Gabriel. She hoped that everything went okay and that no one got hurt. After reading a chapter of her book, she found that it couldn't hold her interest. She didn't need a romantic hero from a book, she had a flesh and blood one of her own. Soon her eyes closed and she fell sound asleep dreaming a kaleidoscope dream about motorcycles and peach crisp and horses and evil villains. As Gabriel rescued her, he put out her arms and she walked right into them. "Gabriel, oh Gabriel," she called and he took her mouth in a long sweet kiss, claiming her as his own. The kiss went on and on until Mariah realized that she was in her own bed and someone was passionately kissing her. Her eyes shot open and there was Gabriel kissing her like she was a condemned man's last meal.

"You called my name," he said, "so I thought you were awake and calling me but you weren't awake at all, were you?" Mariah shook her head. "That must have been some dream," he said.

"It was. I dreamed that someone kidnapped me but you rescued me."

"You know I would always rescue you, no matter where you were, don't you?" he said, looking into her eyes. Mariah sat up and hugged him, his words sweet in her ear.

"What are you doing back already?" she asked.

"Mariah, it's four in the morning. You've been asleep for hours." She ran her hands up his arms and down his chest. "What are you doing?" he asked, perplexed.

"Just making sure that you're all in one piece."

"We're all fine, sort of. It went off without a hitch. Almost. Mr. Simms' friend turned up just like he was supposed to, right on time, with the drugs and they had no

idea we were even there. It was almost funny to see the looks on their faces when Simon called out 'federal agents'."

"You said you were all fine, sort of. What does 'sort of' mean?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"Remember how I told you about the FBI agent who never spoke."

"Yeah. His name was Travis or something like that."

"Taryn. His name is Taryn and he finally spoke. When Simon called out 'FBI', Mr. Simms and his buddies didn't want to go down without a fight so they opened fire on us."

"Oh my God. So Taryn was shot," she said horrified.

"Well, not exactly," Gabriel said evasively.

"What happened, Gabriel?" she said, out of patience with him.

"We were well hidden in the trees so none of the bullets really found their mark but one of them ricocheted off something and hit Taryn in the leg. He never even said a word until we were back at the jail processing Simms and his cronies. One minute he was standing there waiting for the paperwork, the next he was flat on the floor. We couldn't figure out what happened so I tried to pick him up. That's when he finally said something."

"What did he say?" Mariah demanded.

"He said, 'I think I've been shot' and we started to laugh until we looked down and saw the blood on the floor then all hell broke loose. Burke called for an ambulance which arrived in minutes and they took him to the hospital here but as soon as the doc saw the wound he had them take him to Midland Memorial, it's a bigger hospital especially if they have to do any fancy surgery. Burke and Simon stayed to do the paperwork and I rode in the ambulance with Taryn."

"I didn't think anyone else could ride in an ambulance," Mariah said.

"Simon flashed his FBI badge and that was the end of the discussion," he said.

"So what happened at the hospital?" she asked.

"First they took X-rays then I hung around while he was in surgery. He was so cantankerous but I think he met his match in the doctor in Emerg."

"What was he like?"

"He was a she and the sparks were flying as he tried to tell her what to do. She finally told him that she was the doctor and he should just shut up and let her do her job. He didn't say another word and it was odd how he never talked before but with this doctor he couldn't shut up."

"Ahhh," said Mariah.

"Ahhh what?" he asked.

"Just wondering why he was different with this woman, that's all."

Gabriel continued, "After the surgery, they brought him up to a room and I stayed

to make sure he was okay. I wanted to wait until he woke up so there'd be somebody there when he came to. That would have been horrible, to wake up and be alone so I just made myself comfortable while I waited. A bunch of guys from the Bureau tried to get in to see him but the doctor wouldn't let them in. The doc came to check on him as soon as he woke up and he was just as ornery as before. I just can't figure it out."

Mariah thought she had it all figured out.

"Wait a minute," she said. "How'd you get back to Hopeville?"

Gabriel laughed. "I managed to persuade one of the suits to drive me."

"Are you going to see Taryn tomorrow?" she asked.

"I was going to Fort Stockton anyway so I'll go to Midland instead to see him. I'll check if he needs anything since I don't know if he has family close by."

"You're a good person, Gabriel," Mariah said.

"It's nothing to do with being a good person," he said gruffly. "It has to do with the unspoken brotherhood. We may not work for the same people but we're on the same side and that means everything." Gabriel took off his clothes, put the gun and holster in the night table and crawled in next to Mariah. He pulled her back against him, tucked her head under his chin and promptly fell asleep.

The next thing he knew someone was climbing on top of him and taking his cock in their mouth. Oh man, what a way to wake up. It was like Christmas every day when you woke up with Mariah. She sucked him very gently as if coaxing him awake but he discovered that his cock was very much awake and already standing at attention. She reached over to the drawer to dig out a condom, sheathed him then slid him inside her hot channel. She was so ready for him. Gabriel didn't even open his eyes. He relished each luscious glide she made up and down his engorged penis until, with a shout, he exploded inside her. Mariah took three or four more strokes and followed him into oblivion.

"Good morning," she said, smiling down at him.

"It is now," he said, with a wolfish grin. Mariah climbed off him and let him get up and go into the bathroom to get rid of the condom. Through the open door, she could hear him lifting the lid of the toilet, a pause then flushing. Yes sirree, he felt right at home.

He came back and climbed under the covers with her. "Your feet are freezing!" she howled as he put them on her leg.

"Of course they are," he said. "I was hoping you'd warm them up for me." She skittered away from him trying to escape his icy cold feet but he pulled her back to him and held her tightly around the waist. Brushing her hair back off her face, he gave her tiny kisses down the side of her neck and along her shoulder. He turned her so she fell to her back then raised her right arm straight above her head, back on the pillow. Starting at her wrist, he gently brushed his fingers along the sensitive inner skin of her forearm, brushing them slowly up and down, up and down. Then he brushed the flat of his fingers along her upper arm, back and forth with a gentle hypnotic stroke. Mariah

knew her inner thighs were sensitive but she had no idea how it would feel to have him run his fingers along the skin of her arm. He moved his hand to her breast and ran his fingers across the responsive little peak, finally removing his hand and replacing it with his mouth. He bit down enough to cause her to jump then licked the hurt. Mariah felt like she was floating she was so attuned to the tug and bite of his mouth. She felt bereft when he pushed the covers down and swung his legs over to stand at the side of the bed facing her. She followed him with her eyes, wondering what he was up to.

"Come and kneel here at the edge of the bed," he said softly. Mariah crawled to the side of the bed and went to her knees in front of him. His rampant erection was right in front of her, beginning to weep in its excitement to be inside her. "Move right to the edge of the bed," he said to her. Using her knees she moved forward, closer to him. "Perfect. Now put your hands under your breasts and hold them up for me," he uttered quietly. With some trepidation, she did as he asked. "Oh, they are so beautiful. Look how they are just begging me to touch them," he said. "But I'm not going to touch them with my hands or my mouth. Now push them together for me," he commanded gently. Again she did as he asked and this time he took his distended penis and slid it between her breasts and put his hands on her shoulders. She looked down and could see his penis captured between her breasts but it was so long that part of it was above the cradle they formed. She could see the huge head right below her so she leaned down and licked the tip, taking the drop of pre-cum in her mouth. She teased the little slit with the point of her tongue and Gabriel nearly dropped to his knees. "I've never done this before with anyone," he groaned. "Is it too much for you? Do you want me to stop?"

"I don't want you to stop," she cried. "I love having this power over you." She squeezed her breasts more tightly together and he began to move his cock up and down between them. The friction created by her breasts was unbelievable and Mariah could feel the changes in his cock as he got ready to come. She quickly let go of her breasts and grabbed him, putting her mouth on him just as he erupted. Wave after wave spewed into her as she took his essence into her mouth. She let go of his cock and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "That was pretty intense," she said, flinging her legs out in front of her and flopping back on the bed.

Gabriel fell beside her, unable to speak. He had heard of men doing things like that with women but he had never thought about trying it. The sensation of having his shaft imprisoned between her breasts was indescribable and when she had leaned down to lick the tip and put her tongue in the slit, well, good-bye, that's all she wrote.

"Gabriel, are you all right?" she asked worriedly, turning to look at him.

"I'm fine. Just another one of those near-death experiences I seem to keep having when I'm making love to you."

"That was amazing. I really loved it. What made you think of doing that?" she asked curiously.

"I remember one of the young cops I used to work with, bragging one time about doing that with his girlfriend and I thought he was such a jerk for telling people about their private sex life. It seemed so personal to be telling other people about what you and your partner do together but I guess I should be grateful to him, shouldn't I?"

"Oh yes. You should definitely be grateful. That's one I'd like to try again." Gabriel groaned. He didn't know if his heart could take it. Mariah chanced a look at the clock and winced. "Time for me to get ready for work." She got off the bed and went in to turn on the shower but this time she pinned up her hair first, hoping to keep it dry. Gabriel lay there, unable to move, listening to her singing in the shower. She never failed to surprise him. He had been afraid that she would be repulsed by what he wanted them to do but instead she had embraced it and made it pleasurable for them both. She reappeared, wearing just a towel and said, "It's your turn. I'll just get dressed then I'll go start the coffee."

Gabriel propped up the pillows and lay there watching her as she pulled things from the drawer and out of the closet. He watched her like a hawk as she put on another scandalous bra and panty set followed by a long flowing sundress that buttoned all the way down the front. She looked good enough to eat and if she didn't hurry and get downstairs, that was exactly what he was going to do to her. She disappeared into the bathroom and Gabriel got up and went to the doorway to see if she was braiding her hair. Yep and he'd almost missed it. Didn't she know that was one of the highlights of his day? Probably not, so he'd have to tell her. He grabbed a towel, set it on the cold counter then sat down so he could watch her from in front this time rather than from behind. She looked at him quizzically, giving a quick look at his rising erection He was so comfortable with her that he could sit there buck naked and not be bothered. She liked that. "Whatcha lookin' at?" she asked.

"I love to watch you do that morning thing with your hair. All that hair disappears back into that neat, tidy braid but I know that later on you'll be taking it out just for me. I love to run my hands through your hair and put my face in it. It's so soft and it smells so good." Mariah worked away separating the strands until it was all back in a tidy French braid then motioned for him to sit sideways on the toilet like he'd done the day before. He grabbed his towel first. Walking around naked did have its drawbacks especially when all the bathroom fixtures were freezing cold. He knew she was going to brush his hair for him and he could feel his heart speed up in anticipation of her hands on him and of the brush being stroked through his hair.

She took out the elastic band then gently brushed through his long hair, careful to separate any tangles. His hair was so luxuriant, like an animal's pelt and so dark that the light made it look almost blue. Today she put it into a braid that hung most of the way down his back. She clenched her thighs, already anticipating the end of the day when she could take it out and brush his hair for him. She reached forward and placed a delicate kiss on his bare shoulder then set off out the door, leaving him to get ready.

His cock was so engorged, he knew he would have trouble doing up his jeans if he didn't take matters into his own hands when he was in the shower. Perhaps he should only watch her getting ready on the weekends when they'd have more time to make

love but he knew he was willing to suffer a bit of discomfort every day just to be with her.

As Mariah put the kettle on to boil, she could hear the water running in the shower upstairs and she knew Gabriel had finally roused himself enough to get in the shower. She thought that "roused himself" was perhaps not a good choice of words as just thinking about him being aroused caused a tingle between her legs and she really did need to get ready for school. She caught sight of the calendar on the wall and realized that it was Tuesday and her brother was supposed to come for dinner. She'd completely forgotten with all that had been happening but Burke wouldn't forget, she was sure of that. He never forgot a dinner invitation since he hated to cook for himself. She would talk to Gabriel and see if he'd have time to throw something together. If he was going to cook dinner then she could certainly make something good for breakfast so Mariah got out eggs, milk and nutmeg and threw together the mixture for French toast. When Gabriel appeared a few minutes later he was greeted by the delicious smell of the bread cooking.

"Oh God!" he said. "What smells so good?"

Without turning around, she said, "I just threw together some French toast for breakfast. It really doesn't take any time at all." Putting the toast on a plate, she swung around to face him. "Oh, you shaved again!" she said, disappointed that she had missed it.

"You're just going to have to face the fact that I'll be doing some of my 'man things' when you aren't around," he said, taking hold of her chin and giving her a light kiss.

She blushed as she thought of some of the "man things" she'd already had a chance to witness and they certainly didn't involve shaving!

"You have some very naughty thoughts," he said as he caught her blush.

"They're all your fault you know," Mariah laughed.

"Thank you," he said with a smile. "Glad to be of service." He held out a chair for her and as she sat down, she ran her hand along his smooth chin and blew him a cheeky kiss. Laughing, he sat down and snagged a piece of toast from the plate. As they ate, Mariah mentioned that Burke was coming for dinner. Before she even had a chance to ask him about making dinner for them, he asked her what he should make.

"You don't have time to cook," he said. "Besides, you'll be tired after work. I'm going to Midland anyway to pick up some stuff and to see how Taryn's doing so I'll make sure I get something for supper. Seems to me you promised your brother lasagna for dinner so when I'm there I'll just pick up what I need to throw it together."

"You know how to make lasagna?" she asked delightedly.

"I love lasagna so I got my friend to show me how to make it and it really is easy. I'll get some bread and stuff for a salad." Mariah couldn't believe her luck. Gabriel was so good-looking, so strong, so smart and on top of all that, he could cook—a dynamite combination in her book. They got ready to go and grabbed their gear.

"What time should I pick you up tonight?" he asked as they strapped on the helmets.

"Four-thirty, same as last night. I'll be ready when you get there. I'll phone the garage too and see what's happening with my car." They climbed on the bike and Gabriel drove to the school. When they pulled up, Mariah saw her friend Shannon coming out of the parking lot. "Oh, there's Shannon," she said. "I may as well go in with her." She walked a few steps away then turned and came back to him.

"Forget something?" he asked.

"You know I did," she said then she grabbed his face and planted a great big kiss right on his lips. "Wouldn't want you to forget about me during the day," she said, laughing.

"No fear of that," he called as he pulled away.

"That's one fine-lookin' man," Shannon said as she came up alongside Mariah and the two of them stood and watched him ride away.

"He certainly is," Mariah said. "He certainly is." And turned to walk up the path to the front door.

Gabriel made his way to the sheriff's office to check in with Burke before heading to Midland. It turned out that the Feds had already taken Simpson aka Simms to Houston and were bickering over where to take him to stand trial. It seemed like a lot of law enforcement agencies wanted a piece of him for various crimes so Simon said he'd get in touch with Burke to let him know the final outcome.

"Where you headed?" Burke asked as he sat with his feet crossed on his desk. Gabriel knew that even though Burke came across like a backwoods sheriff, he was anything but. He was smart and well trained. He just didn't have the kind of experience you'd get working in a big city.

"I'm off to Midland to get a few things and I thought I'd drop in and see how that FBI guy's doing."

"Unbelievable, eh. He gets shot in the leg but doesn't say a word until everything's all cleared up. I can't figure out if he's incredibly brave or incredibly stupid." Gabriel nodded in agreement.

"I think he didn't want to throw off the operation so he just waited for an opportune time to tell us he'd been shot."

"I didn't think there was an opportune time to tell people you'd been shot," Burke said with a laugh then he cleared his throat. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that badge I gave you," he said, looking sideways at Gabriel.

"I don't have it with me but I can bring it back later today when I get Mariah after work," Gabriel said reluctantly. For some reason he wasn't ready to give it back to Burke.

"That's what I wanted to talk about," Burke said, "giving it back, I mean." Gabriel looked confused.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I'll spell it out for you," Burke said. "I like working with you. You're smart, you're well trained and, for some strange reason, my little sister likes you. I don't want you to give it back to me. Not yet. Not until you've decided that it's what you really want to do. If you decide you're going back to Chicago then that's fine with me but if you decide to stay here then the job is yours." Gabriel didn't know what to say. He'd assumed that the deputy's job was just to help out. He hadn't realized that Burke wanted him to stay on.

"I need to talk to Mariah about it. If I'm going to stay here I want to be sure that it's okay with her to have two lawmen in the family."

Burke's face broke out in a great big smile. "You're staying around?" he asked.

"If she'll have me," he said. Burke was glad to have someone like Gabriel with his sister. She would ride roughshod over some milquetoast and drive him crazy but Gabriel was made of stronger stuff.

"I'll talk to you later in the week about this," Gabriel said. "I have to get to Midland and back to pick Mariah up at four-thirty."

"What's happening about her car?" Burke asked.

"It should be ready any day but I like taking her to work and picking her up every day. To tell you the truth I'll be disappointed when that car is fixed," he said regretfully. "Well, I'd better get going." He turned to leave then swung back. "Don't forget you're supposed to be coming for dinner tonight."

Burke laughed. "Didn't Mariah tell you that I never forget a dinner invitation? I get tired of my own cooking and there's only so many places to eat in town. How many chicken-fried steaks can one man eat?" Burke said with a shudder. "I'll be there after work, probably around seven." As Gabriel headed out the door, Burke called to him. "Here," he said, throwing him a set of keys. "Take my truck. You'll need it if you're going to get stuff in Midland."

Gabriel set the keys to his bike and his helmet on the desk, "Just bring my bike when you come for dinner." He paused. "And thanks."

As soon as Gabriel was gone, Burke buzzed Margaret, saying, "Margaret, can you get ahold of Carl over at Jansen's Garage?"

"Okay, Sheriff," Margaret said. "I'll put that on my list of important things to do today."

"Margaret!" She could be so irreverent but Burke didn't know what he'd do without her.

"Just kidding, Sheriff. Don't get your knickers in a twist. I'll call him right away," and she disconnected to make the call for him. Burke sat back in the chair, a smug little smile on his face.

Chapter Eighteen

Gabriel arrived in Midland an hour or so later and made the hospital his first stop. Visiting hours had just started so he was able to go up to Taryn's room right away. The first thing he noticed when he pushed open the door was the lack of flowers or cards and he wondered about this man. Who was he and why was he such a loner? Gabriel thought about himself and the lonely path his life had taken but hope had come in the guise of a feisty little woman and she had dragged him, kicking and screaming, back to the land of the living. Maybe Taryn needed a boot in the ass as well but maybe he had some soul-searching and healing to do first too. He plastered a smile on his face to counteract the grim set of Taryn's face. He didn't seem that pleased to see him. Not much of a surprise there really. He didn't seem to know how to act around others but Gabriel put his reaction down to pain not lack of social graces. This was a hospital, after all, not a debutante ball.

"What are you doin' here?" Taryn asked in a rough voice, obviously surprised and annoyed to see him.

"Look," Gabriel said, trying to keep his anger in check, "I don't need to be your pal but as one lawman to another, I wanted to make sure you're all right."

"Oh yeah, I'm just great. Shut up here, not able to get out of bed and constantly bothered by that damn doctor. Oh, yeah. I'm just fine," Taryn said rudely.

"I'm going to go get some stuff. Is there anything I can get you?" Gabriel asked.

"How about a new leg or maybe a new doctor, one with a gentle bedside manner, not Attila the Hun," he said caustically. Gabriel had met the doctor the night before and was impressed with her competence and her composure. Taryn had been uncooperative but she just took it in her stride. As if conjured up by his words, the door opened and the doctor breezed in. She smiled at Gabriel and nodded to her patient. Taryn remained mute, not really acknowledging her presence. Gabriel could sense some kind of undercurrent running between the two of them but it was obvious that they weren't dealing with it. He wondered if she was brusque with Taryn to hide her reaction to him. If he were reading the signs correctly it looked like both of them were battling an inconvenient attraction. Maybe he would get a chance to help them along. He also realized that a doctor from the emergency room didn't normally visit patients afterwards so maybe there was more here than met the eye.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Roberts," she said, shaking Gabriel's hand.

"Gabriel Blackburn," he said, taking her hand.

"I recognize you from last night when they brought in your friend," she added as she took Taryn's chart from the bottom of the bed to check his vitals.

"He's not my friend," Gabriel and Taryn said simultaneously. Dr. Roberts looked from one to the other, unsure what to say.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were friends," she said.

"We're more like business acquaintances," Gabriel said and Taryn nodded.

"Business acquaintances don't usually get shot, not in my experience," she said with a laugh.

"Okay, we're both in law enforcement," Gabriel said.

"I figured that out from the number of suits that descended on the place when they brought you in. It looked like an FBI convention." Taryn didn't know what she was talking about. "They wanted to come into the damned operating room but I had to draw the line somewhere. I let your friend stay close by, at least he seemed like a friend he was so worried about you, but I made the suits go to the waiting area." Taryn had no idea that other agents had been there the night before. He was such a reputation for being a loner that he didn't think anyone would care.

"Things look good," she said to Taryn, hanging up his chart. "You should be able to go home in a couple of days." She turned to Gabriel and said, "Can I speak to you for a moment?" He followed her into the hall and stood quietly as she spoke.

"He'll be able to go home in a few days but he needs to stay off that leg. From what I gather, he lives alone and probably won't follow my instructions. He really needs to stay off that leg and then he'll have to undergo physiotherapy to regain mobility. Any ideas?"

"I'll talk to the sheriff in Orano County. That's where Taryn was working when he got shot and he's a friend of mine. I'll see if we can come up with something and I'll get back to you tomorrow." As the two of them stood talking, the elevator doors slid open and a great big flower arrangement stepped out, carried in the arms of Simon Lang.

"Hey, Gabriel," he said. "I didn't want to wait for them to deliver this so I thought I'd bring it myself. How's he doin' today?" Gabriel had to laugh. It was an enormous arrangement of flowers, more suited to a bridal table but Simon's heart was definitely in the right place.

"This is Dr. Roberts," Gabriel said. "She took care of Taryn last night." Simon juggled the flowers so he could shake the doctor's hand.

Interesting, thought Gabriel. She doesn't have any reaction to Simon yet women always fall at his feet.

"Thanks for taking care of my partner. How's he doing?" Simon asked.

"He's going to be fine but I regret to say there's no pill for cranky. Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, he just rubs me the wrong way," she said with a sigh. "He should be able to leave in a few days but I'll let Mr. Blackburn fill you in on our conversation. I'm heading home. I've been on duty all night and I need to get some sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Gabriel." She dashed into an elevator that just arrived and the doors flew shut.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, Gabriel," Simon mimicked in a high feminine voice. "What was that about?"

"Oh, she's not interested in me. I think she's interested in Taryn," Gabriel said. "She wants to make sure that he goes somewhere where he can be taken care of. She's worried he won't stay off his leg which is what will happen if he goes home to his place. He lives alone, doesn't he? I'm assuming he doesn't have any family living close so I told her I'd see what we could do for him."

"He's a real loner but he's a good guy. He'd back you 'til the end."

"I need to go get some stuff. I thought I'd get him a book or something, maybe a spy thriller. Either that or a mushy romance novel."

Simon hooted with laughter. "I think I'd stick with the spy thriller if I were you. He's not going to be stuck in bed forever and he might look for payback if you buy him a romance novel."

"It might be incentive to heal quickly," Gabriel mused. Simon pushed open the door to Taryn's room.

"What the hell are you guys laughing at out there and who's getting married," Gabriel heard Taryn bark when he saw the flowers. Maybe he'd look at some romance novels after all. The comedy value could be priceless. Maybe he could find a medical romance. One about a feisty doctor and her crusty patient. He went off down the hall, looking forward to his book-buying mission.

* * * * *

Mariah was pleased that no one tried to paint the classroom red today while she was thinking about Gabriel but she still kept part of her mind on him all day. She wondered how he was making out at the hospital with the FBI agent. She ate a quick sandwich then worked in her classroom over lunch so she would be ready when he came to pick her up. She found she was looking forward to getting home to tell him about her day. Well, that wasn't the only thing she was looking forward to. As she gathered the children on the carpet to read them a story, she wished that Gabriel could come in and visit. She knew that he would enjoy spending time with them and that they would get a kick out of him too. She could hear the comments and questions. Why do you have long hair? Are you a girl? Only girls have long hair, you know. How come you're so tall? Is that your motorcycle? Can I ride it? Could you read to me? I don't have a daddy. Do you like Miss Forrester? She's pretty, isn't she?

Children had such genuine ways about them and such curiosity. She knew Gabriel would just take it all in stride.

* * * * *

Gabriel had no idea there were so many romance novels in the world. There were novels about pirates and vampires, Scotsmen and princes, sheiks and rich businessmen.

There were ones about powerful women that men couldn't live without. That topic seemed familiar.

"May I help you?" the sales clerk asked.

"Do you have any medical romance?" Gabriel asked.

"Is there a particular author you're interested in?" she asked, wondering if this big, handsome man liked to read romance novels.

"No, it doesn't really matter. A friend of mine is in the hospital and I wanted to get one as a joke. I want one about a feisty doctor and a crusty patient."

The woman raised her eyebrows.

"I see," she said, but she didn't really see. "If you look in this section I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for," she said indicating a long shelf full of paperbacks.

"I'm also looking for spy thrillers," he added.

"They'll be over there," the clerk said, indicating a row of shelves on the other side of the store. Gabriel looked through the medical romances and found the perfect one for Taryn then he picked up a copy of the latest hot spy thriller and got them gift-wrapped. As he walked back to the truck, he passed a store specializing in western wear so he went in to see if they had what he wanted. He reappeared half an hour later with a large gift box in his hands and an even larger smile on his face. He couldn't wait to see her face when she opened the box.

On the way back to the hospital he passed a mall so he braced himself and took a quick trip inside to get the t-shirts he wanted and a couple of pairs of jeans. He was always surprised by the service he got in stores. Women fawned over him. He had a mirror so he knew what he looked like but he couldn't see what they got so excited about. One had even tried to give him her phone number but he had graciously declined. He had all the woman he needed waiting for him back in Hopeville. Gabriel put the box for Mariah behind the seat of the pickup and made his way back to the hospital where he asked a nurse to deliver the present for Taryn whenever she had time. No way did he want to be around when he opened it.

He was almost out of town before he remembered about dinner. Pulling into another mall, Gabriel made straight for the huge grocery store and began his mission. In no time flat, he was at the checkout with salad ingredients, a loaf of crusty bread and a great big frozen lasagna. What the heck. He just didn't feel like cooking when he got back. Besides, it was getting late and he didn't want to keep Mariah waiting. He needed to stop at the house first. He didn't want her to see the box until he was ready to give it to her and he especially didn't want her to open it while her brother was there.

He spent the journey home thinking about tonight's adventure when Mariah would open the package and see what was inside. It was so easy to play it in his head like a movie. She would open the box, look confused then memories of past experiences would bubble up and he would start his seduction. He liked her brother but he really hoped he wouldn't stay too late. Gabriel realized that his musings had lasted most of the way home. He was pulling onto Mariah's road and hadn't even realized that he was

almost home. Pulling the truck up beside the house, he unloaded his groceries, his new clothes and the gift. He left the lasagna on the counter and went upstairs to hide the big box at the back of the closet. He certainly didn't want her coming upstairs and seeing the box just before Burke arrived or worse still, discovering it while he was there and wanting to open it then. Smiling to himself, he threw his purchases on the bed and pushed past the clothing in the closet to set the box at the back, out of sight. As he tucked it safely away, Gabriel glanced at the bedside clock and was surprised to find that it was almost time to get Mariah. He wondered what she had found out about her car. He hoped it never got fixed but knew that was just a pipe dream. He made it to the school just as Mariah came out the door with her friend Shannon.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said as he climbed out of the truck to meet them. He took Mariah in a fierce hug, glad to see her after just a day apart. He wanted to get her home so they could be alone but then he was disappointed to remember that Burke was due to come over anyway. So much for getting her alone to have his wicked way with her.

"See you tomorrow, Shannon," Mariah called as she climbed up into the truck.

"Have fun, sugar," Shannon called as she walked away, then added. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"That probably gives us a lot of leeway," Gabriel said to Mariah with a sexy smile. Mariah's answering look promised all the naughty he could handle. "How was your day? Burke gave me his truck to go to Midland," he rambled on as they pulled away, hoping to distract himself from thinking about his hardening cock. One minute in the truck with her, one suggestive look from her and he could pound nails with his rod. Did she have any idea of what she did to him?

As he pulled away from the curb, Mariah shifted in her seat. One minute in the truck with him, one naughty smile from him and her panties were wet and she was aching. Did he have any idea what he did to her?

Gabriel looked over and noticed her squirming. Maybe she was as affected as he was.

"You okay?" he asked teasingly. She shifted position again and he knew she felt the same as he did.

"Oh, yeah. I'm just fine," she said as she moved again. She was too sensitive too quickly to be able to sit much longer. Her labia felt swollen with desire.

"I can take care of that for you when we get home," he said to her, giving her a knowing look. She knew exactly what he was talking about. Mariah looked down and noticed the huge bulge in his jeans. He caught her looking at his swollen cock and said, "That's all for you, little girl."

She laughed and threw his words back at him saying, "And I can take care of that for you when we get home too." Gabriel nearly drove off the road, blind with lust.

"You hold that thought 'til we get home. I don't want to have an accident before I can get you home and make you come in my mouth." She started squirming again.

Gabriel tried to keep under the speed limit. He certainly didn't want to get stopped for speeding when he needed her so badly. Finally he turned into the driveway and raced up to the house but instead of parking at the front he drove around the back. He strode around the back of the truck and threw open her door. Reaching inside, he grabbed her around the waist and hauled her into his arms. Walking to the front of the truck, he set her on the hood and began to undo the buttons on her dress starting at the top until they were undone all the way to the bottom. He spread the dress apart and undid the front clasp of her bra, exposing her breasts so she looked like some kind of sex banquet perched on the hood of the truck.

"Put you feet on my shoulders and lift your butt," he said and she complied. As she lifted up, he put his hands at her waist and pulled off her panties, tucking them in his pocket. "Now all you have to do is lie back." She lay back on the hood and let him work his magic. He looked at her in the beautiful sunlight, her legs open for him while the warm breeze blew around them. He could see how close she was already so when he put his mouth on her she let out a high keening cry of anguish.

"Oh, Gabriel. Don't torture me! Just make me come!" she pleaded. He sucked her swollen clit and that was it, she saw fireworks. She lay in the warm sun, catching her breath then got up on her elbows and said, "Okay, boy. Now it's your turn." With Gabriel's help she slid down the hood and motioned for him to climb up. The truck had a big front bumper so he was able to sit on the hood and rest his feet on it so he wouldn't slide off. She looked so sexy standing there, her dress undone all the way and practically naked underneath, her face still flushed from her orgasm.

"You comfy there?" she asked him.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Pop the buttons on those jeans," she ordered. "Now pull them apart." His cock tented his briefs, begging for relief. She carefully pulled down his briefs and his cock sprang up into the sunshine. He looked like some Greek god, his massive cock uplifted, waiting for her mouth. She reached out and took hold of him with both hands. She moved them up and down his cock, applying a gentle pressure as she went. A tiny tear appeared on the tip and she lapped it away.

"You're killin' me," he said, in a strangled voice. "Put me out of my misery," he pleaded. She gobbled him up and let her bare breasts rub against his jeans as she went down on him. He put his hands down and captured her breasts and played with her nipples as she swallowed him. She opened her throat and took more of him than he would have believed possible then he could feel his balls tightening and knew he was a goner. He roared as it came down on him, seeing stars with the force of it. He opened his eyes to see her wiping her mouth with her fingers then putting them in her mouth so she could lick his essence off them.

"Don't want to waste any," she said, with a smile like the Cheshire Cat. He groaned then slid off the hood and buttoned his jeans. He drew her to him and began to button her dress for her. As each inch of skin disappeared, he placed a reluctant kiss there then did up the button. Finally they were all done up again and he put his arms around her to hug her close.

"That was mighty fine," he said, sated for the moment. He left her there and went to open the passenger door, grabbing her backpack and the bike helmet. As they passed through the back door into the kitchen, Gabriel turned on the oven to preheat it for the lasagna.

"I ran out of time so I just bought a frozen lasagna," he explained when she caught sight of it on the counter. "I'll make my own special lasagna another time."

"I don't care what we have for supper as long as I don't have to make it. I'll go change then make a salad when I come back down," Mariah said. As she moved down the hall she could hear Gabriel working away in the kitchen behind her. She didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved when he didn't come upstairs after her. She wanted to make love with him but not with her brother on the way. It would be awkward for everyone. She was so busy with her thoughts that she hadn't heard Gabriel come up the stairs to stand at the door. She felt someone watching her and turned to find him leaning against the doorframe.

"There's not much to be done for supper so I thought I'd come up and watch you get undressed. I just want to see how reality compares to my vision of stripping you naked that I've had in my head all day." He went and sat in the comfy chair by the window as she pulled her dress off, leaving her in nothing but a tiny bra. Gabriel gulped as he realized her minuscule panties were currently residing in his pocket. She looked over at him and saw slashes of red along his cheekbones. He got so turned on watching her strip and she loved it. While he looked on, she undid her bra, pulled it down her arms and threw it on the bed. She passed in front of him again to get to the closet and pulled a little sundress off a hanger. The parcel from Gabriel was tucked way at the back so he knew she would never see it. Laying the dress on the bed, she put her arms into the bottom of it and let it slip over her head and down her body. She poked around in the closet until she found a pair of sandals that went perfectly with the dress.

"Well, I'm going to head down to fix the salad," she said. Gabriel looked dazed.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Mariah?" he said in a strangled voice.

"Oh, of course," she said, "how silly of me." Then she came over, sat on his lap and gave him a long, wet kiss slowly licking around his mouth then flicking her tongue inside. She stood and bent over so he could see down her dress while she kissed him on the forehead. Her breasts swung free beneath the dress and her nipples were pulled tight in arousal.

"I meant that you forgot to put on underwear," he said hoarsely. How could he possibly spend the evening with her, knowing she was naked under that dress?

"It's too hot to wear any and Burke will be busy with the lasagna," she said, gently running her hand down his cheek.

"He might not notice but I sure as hell will," Gabriel cried. She was already out the door, pretending not to hear him. If he could have seen her face he would have seen that it bore a great big mischievous smile. He took off after her.

"Wait, Mariah. I won't be able to concentrate on anything. I'll only be able to think about you being buck naked under that dress."

"I'm sorry, Gabriel. No time to change. Burke will be here soon," she called over her shoulder.

Gabriel looked down to see his hands were shaking. He wasn't even in the same room with her and his hands were shaking just thinking about her being naked under that dress. He knew how soft the skin was on the cheeks of her butt. He'd had his hands there, his tongue there. He'd brushed his lips there and knew it was as soft as the velvety petals of a rose. He wanted to stand behind her and lift up her dress, cradling her butt in his hands, to go down on his knees and tease her with his fingers and tongue. Instead he turned around and strode into the bedroom, tearing his t-shirt over his head in frustration as he walked. He could do this. He could control his libido. Maybe. He pulled off his boots, his socks, tore off his jeans and underwear in one motion and strode into the bathroom to have a very cold shower. As long as he didn't think about that woman, completely bare under that dress, he just might be able to keep his unruly member under control. Not likely!

As soon as she heard the water running in the shower, Mariah sagged against the counter. Thank God he hadn't followed her downstairs. She wouldn't have been able to resist and she didn't relish the idea of being spread out, naked, on the table when her brother arrived. Being spread out naked on the table for Gabriel would have been just fine but not with the imminent arrival of her brother. It had been difficult to feign indifference as she'd gotten dressed. Shunning the underclothing had been a challenge but seeing Gabriel's reaction had made it worthwhile. She knew how hard it would be for him while Burke was there and she knew how hard his rod would be for her when Burke left. She loved it when he teetered on the edge.

Throwing the lasagna in the oven, she poked around in the fridge looking for salad ingredients when she heard the shower shut off. Setting the salad stuff down, she stood with her hands against the edge of the counter and pictured him getting out and drying himself off, starting with his hair and face then moving over his wide shoulders and down his chest to his gorgeous phallus. She wished she was upstairs to take it in her mouth when he was fresh from the shower. It would still have tiny droplets of water coursing down it and she would be able to follow them with her tongue and lick them off one by one. She would show him no quarter, licking the length and popping the head into her eager mouth where she would swirl her tongue around it and swallow his warm salty cum as he shouted his release. He would be pulling his jeans on now, no briefs underneath since he never wore them around the house, making his penis so deliciously accessible for her. She wondered if he had bought a black t-shirt when he was in Midland. She would love to see that sculpted chest encased in a tight black t-shirt and tucked into his worn jeans. That would be a feast for the eyes that she would

cherish. As she stood at the counter pretending to prepare the salad, Mariah felt a trickle of cream running down her inner thigh. She was so turned on just thinking about him that she was wet with arousal. She heard him come into the kitchen and wondered how he had gotten down the stairs undetected. She looked down to see his long bare feet on each side of her own. That sneaky devil, no wonder she hadn't heard him. Pinning her body against the counter with his own, he put his hands between her legs and swept them up toward the juncture of her thighs. As soon as he felt the rivulet of arousal trickling down her leg, he crooned, "Oh, honey, do you need me to help you?" Mariah nodded through her sensual haze.

"What happened, baby?" he asked soothingly. "You were down here all by yourself. How'd you get so wet?"

"Heard the shower," she blurted out. "Heard you in the shower." He smiled in comprehension.

"What were you thinking about when you heard the shower running?" he coaxed gently. She shook her head, shy to reveal her erotic thoughts.

"You can tell me," he whispered in her ear. "I want to know."

"I pictured you getting out and drying off. You started to dry your hair and your face then down your beautiful chest to your cock." Gabriel swallowed. "Your cock still had little droplets of water running down it so I wanted to get them off for you."

"How did you do that?" he asked hoarsely.

"I used my tongue to lick them off," she said. Gabriel's cock pushed against the stiff fabric of his jeans, looking for entry in her warm, moist slit. He looked down, expecting to see the tip of it poking out of the waistband of his jeans it felt so long and urgent but all he saw was the bulge in his jeans.

"You're so wet. Would you like to give you some relief?" he said, licking her ear.

"Oh, yes. Please," she intoned. She felt bereft as his hands left her but then she felt them behind her digging in the pocket of his jeans. The next minute she heard the telltale rip of a condom package and felt the delicious joy of him sliding in from behind. He bent her forward slightly to allow deeper access, taking his time, letting her feel the contours of his dick as he pumped into her. She was gripping the counter so tightly her knuckles were white.

"Does that feel good?" he asked, nipping the tendon of her neck.

"You know it does," she said, biting her bottom lip as she waited for an upstroke of his cock to press down on him. He thought the top of his head was going to lift off. Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, the pleasure intensified. He quickened the rhythm and pushed her up against the counter with the force of his strokes. He felt the orgasm coming so he grabbed her around the waist to push her down harder on each upstroke, then he lost it. Mariah sagged against him, glad he was holding her up.

"Now aren't you glad I'm not wearing any underwear?" she asked weakly.

"If we were alone I'd love it but how can I keep my hands off you when your brother's here?" he asked.

"I'm sure a big tough guy like you won't have any trouble," Mariah sighed as he gently pulled out of her.

"I never had any trouble with control," he said, "until I met you. Around you my self-control is nonexistent but I'm learning to enjoy that too." Mariah opened the door under the sink so he could dispose of the condom in the garbage then watched jealously as he tucked his cock back in his jeans. She hated to see it disappear. Gabriel watched, disappointed, as she pulled her dress back down. He hated to see that cute little ass get covered up. He would have to wait 'til Burke left to give her his present. As if on cue, he heard the roar of a motorcycle coming up the driveway. They had cut that pretty close. Gabriel took her hand to go meet Burke.

"Now you just keep your hands to yourself," Mariah admonished as they walked to the door to greet her brother. She realized that her plan was backfiring as Gabriel put his hand up under her dress to stroke the smooth skin of her butt cheek.

"Just copping one last feel," he said with a smile, "and when your brother's not looking I'm going to slide my finger inside your little cunt from the front and work your sensitive little clit too. Maybe next time you'll decide not to throw out a challenge to me since I'm likely to take you up on it." The conversation was cut short as they heard the roar of the engine stop. Mariah opened the door and they went out on the porch to welcome her brother. If he knew what they had been doing five minutes before his arrival, Mariah was sure he wouldn't be sporting such a big grin. She was afraid she was going to burst out laughing and then Burke would really wonder what was up. Gabriel looked at her quizzically as she coughed into her hand.

"You okay?" he asked, concern in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking what would have happened if Burke had arrived five minute earlier," she whispered.

"Then I guess he would have gotten an eyeful, wouldn't he?" Gabriel whispered back. Burke climbed the porch steps and gave his sister a big hug. He handed Gabriel the keys, saying, "That bike is a work of art. She positively purrs. You'll have to share some of your secrets with me. I've been thinking about getting my bike back on the road. Maybe you'd help me?"

"You mean that little beauty in the shed," Gabriel asked, practically drooling at the thought. Burke nodded. "Oh, I'd love to get in on that," Gabriel insisted.

"Maybe when you guys get back from Chicago we could get started. How about next week?"

"I don't see why not. I'll talk to you when we get back."

"I didn't know you were even thinking about putting that bike back on the road," Mariah asked.

"When I rode that one of his," he said, nodding at Gabriel, "I realized how much I missed it."

"Why don't you guys come in and talk about this while I get the lasagna out of the oven and make the salad," Mariah said.

"I can do that," Gabriel said. "You've been working all day."

"I don't think I'm too tired to get supper on the table," Mariah said, laughing. In the kitchen, Gabriel handed Burke placemats and cutlery, saying, "Here, you can help set the table. What do you want to drink?"

"Got any cold beer?" Burke asked. At Mariah's nod he said, "I'd love a cold beer." As Gabriel got the beer out of the fridge then took down plates and bowls from the cupboard Mariah quickly assembled a salad for them. When she turned to take the lasagna out of the oven, she saw that Gabriel had beaten her to it and it was already setting it on a folded tea towel on the table. He headed back and grabbed the plates and bowls.

"Here, Burke. You sit at the head of the table and Mariah and I will sit here," Gabriel said as he set out the plates and bowls, leaving Mariah to wonder why he was so insistent that Burke sit at the head of the table with the two of them sitting opposite each other. The mystery was solved shortly after the lasagna and salad had been served. As Mariah put a bite of lasagna in her mouth, she felt Gabriel's foot working its way along her inner thigh. She had trouble swallowing as he pointed his foot and touched her slit with his toe. She was afraid she was going to lift out of her chair as he gently traced her slit.

"I'll just go get some salad dressing," she said, all but leaping up from the table. Burke followed her with his eyes, his face wreathed in concern.

"You okay?" he said as she sat back down.

"I'm just fine," she said, glaring at Gabriel. Burke could feel the air charged between the two of them and thought maybe he'd have to make a quicker-than-planned exit.

"The truck run fine?" he asked Gabriel, trying to defuse the situation.

"I'm surprised he let you borrow it," Mariah piped up. "He's so protective of it, like it was a baby or something. He's always washing it and polishing it."

"I was very careful with it, in fact, Mariah and I were polishing it when we got home today," Gabriel said. She doubted that Burke would consider Gabriel going down on her on the hood of the truck as polishing it. She just hoped there were no traces of what they had been doing.

"Is that why the truck is parked at the back, so you could polish it?" Burke asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, something like that," Gabriel said noncommittally.

"Could you pass the bread, Burke?" Mariah asked, refusing to meet her brother's eye. The three of them continued to eat as swirls of electricity arced around them. Burke had no idea that the connection between his sister and this Chicago cop was so strong but he could feel it in the very air around them. It was in the way they looked at each other, the way they communicated with each other without ever speaking. He realized

that he was a bit jealous. He wanted to have what they had but no woman he had ever met made this kind of connection with him. He wondered where she was—the woman who would switch on the current between them. Little did he know that when she came into his life she would create a whirlwind and turn everything upside down. He couldn't imagine the turmoil that would ensue. Gabriel kept looking at Mariah and thinking about the box in the closet. Mariah kept looking at him and wondering when would be a good time to ask her brother to leave.

"I haven't heard anything from Simon yet," Burke said, startling the two of them as they turned to look at him. He made a disgusted sound as he realized they had forgotten he was even there. Pushing his chair back, he rose to his feet.

"I'm supposed to meet Jake at Lonnie's for a few beers and a game of pool. He beat the hell out of me last week so this time I'm out for revenge," he said, heading for the back door.

"Do you have to go right now?" Mariah asked.

"Oh, yeah," he said, "the quicker I get out of here the better. Gabriel, don't forget to get back to me about the deputy's job. I'd love to have you on the force."

Mariah looked at Gabriel who just smiled at her. He handed the truck keys to Burke, saying, "I'm serious about helping with that bike. I'll let you know what's happening when we get back from Chicago."

Chapter Nineteen

Mariah and Gabriel stood on the back porch watching Burke turn the truck around and, with a wave, he was gone. Mariah swatted his arm.

"Hey! What's that for?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, Burke," she said mimicking him. "Mariah and I were polishing the truck today. I don't think what we were doing had much to do with polishing."

"I'm sure it put a nice sheen on the hood of that truck," he replied straight-faced.

"You, Gabriel Blackburn, are incorrigible," she said as she walked in ahead of him. As he put his hand up under her dress she spun around and said, "See what I mean."

"Guilty as charged," he said with a laugh. Mariah started gathering up the dishes from the hurried supper. "We certainly gave Burke the bum's rush, didn't we?" she said. Gabriel put his hand on her arm and stopped her.

"I think he knew we needed to be together and he was right. Come upstairs with me," he said, a naughty gleam in his eyes. "I got you something today and I've been waiting to give it to you."

"You got something for me?" she asked excitedly.

"Well, actually, it's for both of us," he said mysteriously.

As she preceded him down the hall she said, "What did Burke mean about the deputy's job?"

Her heart did a little flip-flop when he replied, "He's asked me to take the deputy's job permanently. I thought it was just for that one case but he wants me to join the force." Mariah stopped and turned to face him.

"What did you tell him?" she asked with bated breath.

"I told him I had to talk it over with you to see how you feel about having two lawmen in the family." Mariah was overjoyed at his answer and glad that he would include her in his decision.

"I think you need to decide what you really want to do," she said hesitantly. Part of her wanted him to stay but part of her wanted him to be sure it was what he wanted.

"I know what I want to do. I want us to go to Chicago to see Laura and the baby. I'm done with my life there but there are things I need to do to be able to come back here to you." He looked down to see Mariah's face alight with joy. "I'm not ready to accept Burke's offer." Mariah looked up, startled. "No," he said, brushing her cheek with his hand, "I'm staying but I'm not sure if I want to be a deputy. I don't even know if I want to stay in law enforcement. I've been thinking about opening a private security company or doing private investigation."

"Would you be able to do that kind of work from a small place like Hopeville?" she asked.

"It's the kind of work you could do anywhere. You'd be traveling to clients rather than them coming to you anyway. I have a friend I worked with in Chicago, a security expert. He flies all over the country setting up security and surveillance equipment for companies and private citizens. We used his services a few times and I've consulted with him fairly often on cases. He just needs to be close to an airport and internet access so he can set up shop anywhere. I was going to call him to see if we could get together this weekend when we're in Chicago then I could see what he thought about setting up something here with me." He stopped and looked at Mariah.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well, I'm making all these plans and I haven't even asked you something as simple as—would it be okay for me to use a room here for an office?"

Mariah took him through the kitchen and opened a door to the left of the big stone fireplace. She moved aside to let him go ahead of her and the first thing he saw was the golden rays of the setting sun coming in the sliding doors, bathing the room in a soft, warm light. The room was sparsely furnished and obviously little used. "How would this do for an office? The house is big enough that the room is hardly ever used."

Gabriel looked around and envisioned it with a desk and computer and realized that it was perfect. "Are you sure you don't need the space for anything?" he asked.

"I never use this room, I can't remember the last time I even came in here," Mariah said. "It would be a great space to set up your office. We could go to Midland and get furniture and I already have internet access upstairs, we'd just need to get it down here for you." Gabriel was delighted.

"I wanted to talk about all this stuff with you but I also wanted to give you the present I got you. Can we go upstairs now and continue this discussion later?" Mariah took off out the door and Gabriel ran laughing after her. He overtook her in the hall and swept her up into his arms.

"I'll just carry you up, my lady," he said. In the bedroom, he dumped her playfully on the bed and stepped back. As she fell, her dress flew up treating him to a delightful view of her luscious slit. He had forgotten she was naked under the dress. As he stepped toward her, she put her hands out in front of her to stop him.

"No way! Don't even think about it!" she said, pulling the dress back down. "Where's my present?" Mariah said, looking around the room but seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"You're a greedy little thing, aren't you?" he said, laughter in his voice. "I had to hide it. Didn't want you coming home from work and opening it before Burke got here. I wanted you to open it when we'd have time to enjoy it." Mariah's curiosity was piqued. What had he bought for her? Gabriel sauntered over to the closet and bent down, giving her a marvelous view of his beautiful butt encased in the tight jeans. He stood up, carrying the box which he dropped on the bed beside her. "I hope you like

them. I know I do," he said mysteriously. Mariah had no idea what was in the box. It was heavy but bore no markings to give her a clue as to its contents.

"Go on! Open it!" Gabriel urged. She tore the ribbon and pulled off the lid. Inside, the gift was wrapped in delicate tissue paper so she carefully pulled it aside to reveal what was beneath. She was speechless as she drew out a beautiful pair of skintight, buttery-soft leather chaps. They were a gorgeous, rich brown color and so supple in her hands. She lay them carefully down on the bed beside her.

"Well, what do you think, Dale?" he asked. Mariah ran her hand down the soft leather, relishing the feel of it beneath her hand.

"I don't know what to say, Roy," she said, gazing from the chaps to him. "They are so beautiful. Can I try them on? They look like they might be too tight." Gabriel knew they were going to be tight. He had picked them like that on purpose. He didn't plan on her wearing them for riding horses but for riding him.

"I'll just get on jeans and a t-shirt," she said, "so I can see if they fit." Gabriel struggled to speak.

"No jeans," he said. "No t-shirt. I want you to wear them naked." Mariah finally understood.

"Oh, I get it. This is vengeance for making you wear the chaps from the box in the shed," she said, nodding her head slowly. Gabriel cupped her chin in his hand and gently raised her head up to look straight at him.

"This is not about vengeance," he said. "Vengeance is the furthest thing from my mind. This is about pleasure, mutual pleasure." He looked at her questioningly. In answer, Mariah reached down, grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it up and over her head.

"Would you like me to wear anything else or just the chaps?" she asked.

"Just the chaps, ma'am, just the chaps," he said.

"I'm not exactly sure how to put them on," she said, furrowing her brow.

"I'd be more than happy to offer my assistance," he said gallantly.

"I'm just sure you would." Mariah took the chaps and undid the back buckle. Holding them against her, she began to attach the front buckle. "Can you hold the back together until I get the front done up?" she asked, studying the front attachment intently.

"I'd be delighted," he said as he touched her rump to hold the back together.

"Okay. You can do up the back buckle now," she instructed. Gabriel did it up gently, not wanting to draw it too tight or hurt her.

"There. How does that feel?" he asked.

"Odd."

"Need some help with those zippers?" he inquired.

"That would be great then I won't have to try to bend down to do them up." Gabriel gently put the bottom of the zipper together and pulled it up her inner leg. He was delighted to find that when he reached the top of the zipper, his face was level with her beautiful cunt. Resisting temptation, he carefully put the other zipper together and pulled it up as well. This time he threw caution to the wind and licked her delicate slit and nipped her clitoris with his teeth. Mariah stepped away and Gabriel watched, mesmerized, as she danced away from his grasp, the amazing chaps hugging her like a second skin. In the store he had imagined what she would look like wearing them but his heart went into double time as he looked up at her wearing nothing but the chaps. They really were skintight and her thatch of hair was a beautiful contrast in color against the dark brown of the leather. She did a slow pirouette for him so he could see the back. Now he knew why she had been so turned on when he wore them the other night, her little butt was beautifully outlined by the chaps.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked. "Do they fit okay?"

"I couldn't have imagined how well they would fit you," he whispered, the words stuck in his throat. She could feel his gaze up and down her body as if it were a hand stroking her, so intense was the look. Gabriel reached between his legs and began to rub his hands over the enormous bulge in his jeans. He was massive and aching for her. "Look what you do to me!" he said. Mariah strode over and stood right in front of him. He could see she was beginning to enjoy the role that wearing the chaps had given her. She had a determined glint in her eye and he knew that spelled no good for him—rather, it spelled very good for him. She could be so imaginative that he wasn't quite sure what to expect.

As she stood over him she spoke sharply to him. "Put your hands behind your back and keep them there."

"As you wish," he said, showing compliance.

"It will be definitely as I wish," she said haughtily to him. Moving forward, she thrust her pelvis forward, right to his mouth.

"You may put your mouth on me and pleasure me now," she commanded. Gabriel was delighted to obey. Being careful to keep his hands behind his back as she asked, he leaned forward and traced her succulent slit with his tongue.

"Oh, Gabriel, what you do to me!" she sighed. It was so hard to be tough when he made her melt with his first touch.

He rubbed his nose through her hair, taking in her unique scent and delighting in the crisp feel of her hair. He ran his tongue up and down her slit, pausing to torment her clit by taking it into his mouth and sucking on it, first gently then with fervor. He couldn't get over how she tasted and how much he loved the feel of her, here, in his mouth. The skin here had a unique taste and texture and he loved it. He could tug it into his mouth and pull on it with his lips or his tongue or even his teeth or he could just suck on it and feel its delicate contours and thickness. He wondered if she felt the same when she sucked his cock. Did she enjoy the smell of him? Did she enjoy the

unique texture of his skin there, so different from the rest of his body? Did she even enjoy the feel of his pubic hair against her cheek, the way it was rough and coarse? Suddenly, he had to know.

"Mariah?" he called to her. She slowly opened her eyes at his questioning tone and looked down at him. "What do you feel when you take my cock in your mouth?" he asked, curiously. "Do you like the taste of me? Do you like the feel, the smell?"

"When I take you in my mouth, I feel like I have your very essence in my mouth. I love the feel of your hair there against my face. It's so rough while the rest of your hair is so smooth and sleek. I love the smell of your cock, a smell like wild sex. When we make love your cock is so hard and I can feel your blood pulsing through it. When it's in my mouth it's like I can feel your life force there and I know that soon that force will flow through me. Sometimes I crave the feeling of it gushing into my mouth and down my throat and sometimes I need to have you deep inside me." She paused. "And how do you taste?" She gave him a wicked smile. "I don't know if I can put words to that. Sometimes when I first put my mouth on you, I think you taste almost salty-sweet like candy. The taste changes as you get more aroused then you start to smell wild and wicked and musky and I want to have you inside me, spreading my legs far apart and pounding into me. That's how you taste. Does that answer your question?"

"Oh yeah. That answers my question. And by the way..."
"Yes?"

"Just in case you wanted to know, you taste absolutely delicious." With that statement, he went back to work. He licked up her slit, touching her deep inside with his tongue and lapping up the little drop of cream that slipped out. "Can I use my hands yet?" he asked. Not bothering to wait for her reply, he slid his hands down the backs of her legs and shivered with the sensation of heat radiating from her. The leather was soft and supple but the heat he could feel was the heat of her body. It was such an odd sensation, to eat at her and feel her own soft skin yet run his hands down her legs and feel the soft leather. It was an odd contrast, two different sensations from touching the same woman. He took his mouth off her and reached up to play with her nipples. Deciding to torment her with her command to keep his hands behind his back, he stopped sucking her juicy slit and asked, "May I use my hands to play with your nipples?"

"Anything! Do anything you want," she sobbed. "Just stop this ache I have inside me!" Gabriel pulled on her nipples and each pull sent a flash of pleasure to her center where he tugged her clit with his teeth. She felt like little bolts of electricity were passing through her body. Each tug made the muscles in her vagina clench then relax and she knew he would be able to feel the lightning passing through her.

Gabriel pulled and rolled her nipples, keeping her on the edge of pain but not hurting her. He knew she wouldn't be able to separate the feelings—was it pleasure, was it pain? Each pull of his fingers on her nipples coupled with the tug of his teeth on her clit would border on pain then as he rolled her nipples and used his tongue to suck her clit, she would sink into delirious pleasure, praying for him to give her release.

Releasing her nipples, he put his long middle finger inside her and massaged her secret spot. That catapulted her over. It was just too much, the suction on her clit, the stimulation of her spot and she screamed, unable to catch her breath. Gabriel continued to massage and nibble until her internal flutterings ceased then he sat back on his haunches and looked up at her. Her face and neck still bore the soft flush of orgasm and her gaze seemed distant as if her body hadn't yet returned from that plane of pleasure to which he had hurtled her.

He looked around the bedroom, searching for a low chair. He spied a stool in the corner and knew it would be perfect for what he had in mind. Taking hold of Mariah's shoulders, he pushed her gently down to sit on the bed then strode over and grabbed the stool. Setting it near the bed, he stood and stripped off his t-shirt. Mariah's eyes lit up as he began to undress. As he pulled down his jeans she could see that he had shunned underwear just as she suspected.

Grabbing a condom from his pocket, he sheathed himself then held out his hand to her. Mariah walked over and took his outstretched hand letting him position her so she straddled him as he sat on the stool. He wanted her to be low enough to the ground so she could put her feet down and use her legs to pump herself up and down his cock. Mariah reached down and placed his cock right at the opening to her body and held her breath as the enormous head slid in. It was so big that it was always difficult to put it inside her, but it felt so good as she swallowed him. That huge head opened her wide as it sought entry then pushed against her inner walls as she slid down. Mariah sat, not moving, for a few minutes, resting her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Then slowly she used her legs to push herself up and realized why he chose the stool. It was shorter than a regular chair and she was able to control the rhythm.

Gabriel couldn't believe the sensations as she raised herself, using her legs to slide up his cock. As she rose up, the leather of the chaps stroked his thighs, which was exactly why he had chosen the stool. He knew that each stroke of her body would rub the supple, soft leather against his thighs and he wanted to know what that would feel like. The leather was soft but it was also warm from her body and he loved the feel of it gliding over his thighs. The dual sensation of her cunt clutching his cock like a fist and the soft leather abrading his thighs was almost unbearable. Talk about pleasure-pain, this was torture. He stood up, his cock deep inside her and walked over to the bed, her legs around his waist. To Mariah's dismay, as they reached the bed he lifted her up off his cock. Walking her backward, he gave her a gentle push and she sat down abruptly. He asked her to lie back then spread her legs and entered with a powerful thrust. Using his muscular thighs, he pinned her legs together so his cock was trapped, like in a vise so as he plowed in and out of her it was the inside of his thighs that felt the leather chaps and their seductive massage. As he thrust and parried, the buttery-soft leather caressed his thighs and nearly drove him mad. When buying the chaps, he had expected their lovemaking to be frenzied but this was almost madness...this need to possess her. He yelled with his release and fell on top of her, her screams echoing in his

ears. He didn't know if he would ever be able to move again but eventually he got on his elbows and looked down into her eyes.

She smiled up at him and wearily said, "Yeehaw, ride 'em cowboy."

He laughed and said, "That was some wild ride. I don't know how often my heart can take playing with the chaps." He rolled to his back, keeping her tucked close to his heart. A night owl could be heard off in the distance along with the sound of a few cars passing. Gabriel couldn't remember the last time he had felt so at peace. His job in Chicago was fraught with danger and even when he was at home, the neighborhood was full of sounds and lights that continued through the night. Here you could go out and listen to the night sounds or lie on your back and look up at the stars. He put one arm behind his head and let out a sigh of utter contentment.

"What's wrong?" Mariah asked, hearing his heartfelt sigh.

"Absolutely nothing. I'm lying here with you in my arms, unable to move a muscle after a bout of mind-blowing sex. There's a warm breeze blowing across my sweaty body and you're wearing nothing but a pair of sexy chaps. It doesn't get much better than that," he said thoughtfully.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for your gift. They are beautiful. Where did they come from?"

"I stopped in a store that sold western wear when I was in Midland today," he said. Mariah ran her hand through the hair on his chest and, at the same time, rubbed her leg along his so he could feel the chaps against his skin.

"I love how they feel against me," he said. "They're so warm from your body and so smooth." Gabriel let her rub against him then gently pushed her off him saying, "I need to get rid of this condom." She moved her arm to let him get up and he disappeared into the bathroom. When he returned, Mariah was standing by the bed, struggling with the leg zippers.

"Here, let me help you," he said and gently pulled down the two inside zippers and unhooked them at the bottom. Mariah undid the front buckle and pulled the chaps away from her body. Carefully laying them across the back of the armchair, she climbed into bed, curled up against him and said, "They are so beautiful. I also really enjoyed the mind-blowing sex," she said teasingly. Gabriel was delighted she enjoyed his gift and delighted also with the adventure it conjured up. It was another of those adventures that would get extra playtime when he was old and gray and bidding farewell to these earthly ties.

"Did you see Taryn when you were in Midland?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Yeah. He was much better than last night but the doctor's worried that he's going to go home and ignore her advice to stay off his feet. It's funny to see those two go at it. I think there might be something waiting to explode between them. I stopped in at a bookstore and got some books for him, the latest spy thriller and a nice medical romance."

"A medical romance!" Mariah asked, lifting her head to look at him.

"I wanted to shake him up. That's the kind of thing you'd do to a friend, buy him something like that to tease him. I think he needs that."

"What did he say when you gave them to him?" she asked, laughing against his chest.

"I was too chicken to leave them in his room," he admitted. "So I asked the nurse to give them to him when she had a chance. I figure by tomorrow he'll see the funny side of it."

"You hope!" Mariah added. "Do you want me to ask around at school and see if I can come up with somewhere for him to stay?"

"That'd be great. I'll try to talk to him about it, let him know that he doesn't really have much choice. He's coming back here and that's it."

"I'll try to do that tomorrow," Mariah said. "Hey, I had a funny call from my mechanic today."

"What do you mean? What did he say?"

"Well, he had originally said that he would have the parts in and the car fixed in a couple of days but he called today and said that there was a problem and the car wouldn't be ready 'til sometime next week. I guess you'll have to drop me off again tomorrow, if that's okay?" Gabriel was delighted that the car wasn't fixed. It meant more time with Mariah pressed up against him on the back of the bike. Maybe he'd phone the mechanic and thank him.

"I'm going to see Taryn tomorrow so I'll drop you off first then head over to Midland. Does that sound all right?" There was no reply. "Mariah." Soft snore. "Mariah." The last thing he thought of before sleep claimed him was that he even liked her breathy little snore.

Chapter Twenty

Mariah snuggled closer to Gabriel, loving the smell of him, the texture of his skin. She wished she didn't have to go to work but could just spend all day in bed with him. She had a few ideas she wanted to try out with the chaps and most of them would take a good part of the day to enact. That was the problem with an active imagination, it was hard to slow it down or turn it off. It always seemed to be on, inventing new scenarios for pleasure. Gently running her hand down his chest, she smoothed it over his belly in search of his cock. Gently petting it, she knew how she would find it, hard and full, ready for her. Throwing her arm back, Mariah quietly pulled open the drawer of the night table and rummaged around for a condom. It would be a shame to waste a gorgeous hard-on like that. Mariah ripped the package open with her teeth and delicately rolled it down the length of his huge erection.

Her thighs clenched at the thought of passing it through her tiny opening with its head the size of a plum. She put her hand between her legs and used her middle finger to spread her lubricant to make his entry easier. Just the thought of having him between her legs made her so sensitive there. The motion of her finger shot waves of pleasure through her body, waves that would be magnified a thousandfold with the thrust of his heavy cock inside her. Straddling his thighs, she grabbed his penis and found the angle that would give her the most pleasure as she took him into her body. She held it in place and moved her own body to stroke her clit with his cock, gently at first then more forcefully until she was almost weeping with the pleasure.

Gabriel had first wakened when he felt her stirring but feigned sleep to see what she would do. His patience was rewarded as she snuggled against him then he felt her hand roving down his body searching for his morning erection. He had to grit his teeth at the length of time it was taking her to reach her destination but finally he felt her small hand patting along his cock like you'd stroke a cat, slow and easy. Then she took her hand away and he almost cried out until he heard the drawer open and the sound of the condom being found. The telltale rip of foil and he knew his salvation was at hand, so to speak and it came in the form of the ceremonial rolling-on of the rubber.

But then her hand was gone again. Where was it? What was she doing? Then he could feel the revealing motion of her fingers against his leg and knew that she was pleasuring herself, making sure she was ready to take him. He knew it was always hard for her to take him initially. He was so big and she was so small but when he entered her it felt like being clenched by a fist and it was wonderful. Finally he felt her leave his side and straddle his legs. He thought relief was imminent until she began, instead, to rub the head of his dick up and down her rigid little clit. He couldn't believe how she kept him in suspense, rubbing gently then more strongly. He couldn't wait any longer. Grabbing her around the waist, he lifted her up off his legs, saying "Take me inside

you." Mariah looked down, not really surprised that he wasn't sleeping, holding his eyes as she pressed her body down, allowing the head of his cock through her narrow opening and into her passage. Gabriel gritted his teeth as his cock forced its way in, her slick inner walls expanding to allow him entry. He felt it, inch by inch, as her body accepted his invasion, cuffing him like a warm fist.

Mariah held her breath as she lowered herself onto him, feeling her inner muscles accede to the passage of his cock. Sensitive from all the lovemaking of the night before, she felt like time was moving in slow motion, her pace subdued to allow her delicate tissues time to adjust to his invasion.

Gabriel thought he would go mad with the muted pace Mariah had assumed but he knew she must be sore from the workout he gave her body the night before. He needed to let her set the pace, knowing she would eventually let him begin to thrust up into her to drive her beyond the bounds of pleasure.

He watched as Mariah closed her eyes as she ever so slowly lifted up and up until the head of his cock was only barely caught inside her. As soon as he tried to pull his cock from her body, she sank down again, lost in the bliss.

Gabriel tried to be patient but he needed to come. "Mariah, take pity on me," he cried.

He knew she'd heard his plea as she stepped up the rhythm eventually slamming her body down against his legs as he thrust up into her. She knew it was coming down and felt her whole body tighten in anticipation as waves of pleasure roared through her, setting off the same storm in him. Wave after wave of undeniable pleasure surged through her, gradually diminishing in intensity until it was merely a quivering in her vagina that kissed his cock.

He felt her body tighten and knew she was oh-so close then he felt the surges that blasted through her and into him using his cock as a conduit. The aftershocks were so sweet as her orgasm lost its intensity moving from a fist-like, pulsing grasp to just a delicate squeeze on his cock. He put out his hands and ran his fingertips softly, soothingly down the sides of her neck, along her collarbone and down her arms. He gently caught hold of her and pulled her forward to lie flush against him. He tenderly rubbed her back, hoping that his entry hadn't been too violent and that he hadn't hurt her.

"I hope I didn't hurt you," he said, his voice rumbling against her ear. He had been so eager to be inside her but he also knew she had been highly aroused and very wet for him. He knew he was a big man and he was always very careful with his partners but Mariah made him lose his head—both of them, in fact. He had been with other woman but it had never been like this. He thanked whatever higher being had brought them together, saving him from a life without ever knowing her love, her kindness.

"I'm so glad you're in my life," he said. "I thank whatever being threw us together, knowing you would be my saving grace." Mariah rose to her elbows and looked down at him.

"You're making too much of my part in all this. I'm sure you would have traveled for a while yet, made your way back to Chicago and sorted it all out yourself," she said confidently.

Gabriel took her cherished face in his hands and said earnestly, "I may have done all that but then I would have missed meeting you. Now I can't imagine what my life would be like if you weren't in it. You're the best thing to ever happen to me and when we get back from Chicago I want us to talk seriously about our future together. This afternoon, I'm going to try to set up an appointment with Alex Randall, the security expert I worked with back in Chicago, and see what he says about working together."

He ran his hand along the line of her jaw then continued to talk as he stroked her face. "With the way the world of communication is today, I suppose we could even work together with me in Hopeville and him in Chicago. There are lots of permutations so I'll just see if he's even interested in discussing some kind of partnership." Mariah reared back, grabbing his finger as she moved.

"I like to hear you talk about what you're going to do when we get back. I like to hear you that you will be coming back," she said, pulling his finger into her mouth and sucking on it.

"You are very naughty," he said, pulling it back out and touching it to the tip of her nose. "You know I'll have to go back to Chicago. I have no choice. I need to get back to deal with my apartment, my cat and mostly my job. I have friends I want to see so they know what's happening. I don't want to leave like a thief in the night. I want to be able to call on the guys that I worked with if this security business gets off the ground and I have some close friends that I want to keep in touch with too."

"I know you need to do all that. It'll be hard to see you go back but when you come back here you'll be here free and clear. Do you have any people there, you know, friends or colleagues that might consider coming here to work with you?"

Gabriel considered her question. "That's an idea," he said thoughtfully. "I never even thought about that. I was only figuring on talking to Alex but there are some people I know who would probably jump at the chance to get away, especially if it meant starting over with a clean slate." Mariah couldn't help but wonder who some of these people were and how Gabriel was connected to them. He saw the look on her face and smiled.

"You meet a lot of people being a cop and not all of them are fine upstanding citizens but some of them have had a raw deal and some of them have helped me out with information on cases and some of them have, shall I say, skills that could be very useful in a security business. Some of their abilities have come from working the wrong side of the law but in the security business those talents are an asset since it gives you an edge on what people will need protecting from and if these people can infiltrate security systems then those systems aren't worth installing in the first place. Yes, some of them could come in very handy." Mariah was thinking how wonderful it was lying in bed talking until she glanced over at the bedside clock.

"Oh my God!" she yelped, jumping off the bed and hitting the floor on the run.

"What's wrong?" Gabriel said, wondering what had upset her.

"I'm going to be late if I don't leave in the next ten minutes," she said, frustration in her voice. "I'd rather stay here and spend the day with you but I can't be late for work. I have to be there when the kids come in."

"What can I do to help?" he asked, climbing out of bed and padding to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he came back he began to pull on some clothes. He was so disappointed that he wasn't going to be able to leisurely watch her get ready this morning. He had really begun to like that daily routine.

"Could you put in some toast so I can have something before I go?" she asked.

"What'll you do for lunch?" he quizzed.

"I can just grab something in the cafeteria today and that'll be fine."

"Would you like me to try to get back from Midland in time to take you out for lunch? I might be able to manage that," he said, trying to figure out the timing in his head.

"That's sweet of you," she said, "but I would rather grab a quick bite, work over the lunch hour so I can be ready when you get here." SWEET! She thought he was sweet. Gabriel couldn't remember the last time anyone had thought he was sweet, in fact, he didn't think it had happened, in living memory. Hank would have gotten such a kick out of that, Mariah thought he was sweet. Gabriel realized that was the first time he had thought about Hank and hadn't felt a fist around his heart. It actually felt good to think about him, remembering the crazy things they had done together. Thank God for Mariah!

"Mariah, take it easy," he said. "You don't need to race around. We'll get there on time."

"How do you know?" she asked. "We only have ten minutes before we need to leave."

Gabriel looked contrite. "I have a confession to make," he said. "When I got up in the night, I changed the clock so it was ten minutes fast. I was afraid that one morning we might have this problem. I thought the extra ten minutes might come in handy, like now." Mariah threw herself into his arms and planted kisses all over his face.

"You're brilliant, Gabriel. Thank you so much. That ten minutes will make a difference but I still need to get moving," she said, grabbing some clothes from the dresser, flying past him into the bathroom to get ready. "If you put in some toast, I'll have a quick shower and be down as soon as I can," she called out to him. He never even heard her for he was already halfway down the stairs, trying to help her get out on time. He was pretty sure any other woman would have thrown a fit about him touching their clock but Mariah took it as the godsend that it was—ten extra minutes. When she flew into the kitchen, he was just buttering the toast for her. She looked so cute wearing a little t-shirt and a short leather skirt. Gabriel thought she looked good enough to eat but that would just have to wait.

"Sorry I don't have a car," he apologized. "You could eat your breakfast on the run then."

"No problem," Mariah said. "I'll eat it on my way upstairs, brush my teeth and we can go." Gabriel joined her at the sink to enjoy the simple morning ritual of brushing their teeth together. As they stood side by side, his attention was divided between watching her in the mirror, she looked so cute with her mouth full of toothpaste and figuring out what all he needed to get done today. He figured he'd just drop her off then head back to the house before going to see Taryn. Maybe he'd give Burke a call to see what was happening with Simpson and maybe call Alex Randall too. He wanted to be sure that Alex could clear some time to meet with him on the weekend. They made it to school with a few minutes to spare and Mariah none the worse for wear. They made arrangements for him to pick her up a bit earlier since she would work through lunch. He'd only just dropped her off and already he was looking forward to picking her up and taking her home. In fact, he hoped her car never got fixed so he could feel her legs squeezing him every single day as she rode behind him on the bike. He'd never get anything done but he couldn't believe that was a bad thing.

Mariah flew into her classroom about five minutes before the children filed in. In future, she'd have to remember to set the alarm if they were going to continue to engage in lovemaking that was basically going to render her unconscious afterwards. She smiled just thinking about last night's episode with the lovely leather chaps then her mind went into fast-forward to replay this morning's bout of lovemaking. She remembered the feeling of his cock pressing through her tiny opening to push its way along her tight channel. He was so big that it never seemed like she would be able to adjust her body to take him but he always made sure she was ready for him then he would slide in and the mind-blowing pleasure would begin. What a man! What a body he had!

"Miss Forrester? Miss Forrester!" called a small voice from beside her. She looked down to see Hayley Winston looking up at her, concern on her face. "Are you okay, Miss Forrester? You had a funny, kind of dreamy look on your face. Where were you?"

Mariah reached out and put her hand on the little girl's head. "I'm fine, Hayley. I was just thinking about something." But Hayley was not put off by her teacher's brief reply and continued her inquiry.

"Was it something you really like 'cause you had a really big smile on your face? Were you thinking about eating chocolate? My mom gets that look on her face whenever she treats herself to chocolate when she thinks no one's looking," Hayley said knowingly. Mariah felt herself blush. She hadn't been thinking about eating chocolate but a few more minutes into that daydream and she definitely would have been thinking about eating Gabriel. He was better than chocolate and much more addictive. As soon as all the children had hung up their backpacks and stowed away their lunch bags, Mariah called them to the carpet to begin the morning routine. When they were

all sitting with her, their eager faces turned to her, she forgot everything else and began to do what she loved, filling them with knowledge.

Gabriel went straight home to have a shower and grab some breakfast before setting off to see Taryn. Throwing his clothes on the bathroom floor, he set the water temperature and climbed under the spray. He wondered what Mariah was doing. He remembered how she looked, striding up the walk to the front door of the school. He knew she was good at her job, really, really good. He could tell by the way she talked about the kids. Then his thoughts drifted to how she looked without her clothes on and how she could be really, really bad too and before he knew it his hands were on his cock while thoughts of her propelled them up and down, in a firm grasp. He remembered this morning when she thought he was asleep and used that advantage to explore his body. He thought he was going to crawl out of his skin when she had run her hands down his chest, down his belly until she had finally seized his turgid cock. Then she hadn't mounted him right away instead she had tortured him, running his staff along her clit until it was erect too. Then she began that slow-motion thing, just putting the head of his cock inside her. It had taken forever for her to swallow his dick into her snug little channel but that tight little fist had grabbed him and held on. That languid movement up and down his swollen cock had brought him out in a sweat then she had let him thrust up into her and they were gone.

Just like now, he thought, looking down to see a stream of cum shooting from his cock. She could even make him come long-distance. What a gift! he thought, with a ragged chuckle. Grabbing the soap, he slowly summoned the energy to wash himself, enjoying the last vestiges of his orgasm. Stepping out of the shower, he quickly dried off, shaved and threw on clean clothes. He spent a few minutes over breakfast then got on the bike to make the trip to Midland.

After his little present of the day before, he wasn't sure what kind of reception he would get when he walked in, so taking a deep breath, he shoved the door open. There was Taryn sitting up in bed, laughing with the doctor. At the sound of the door opening, the two of them turned at the same time, both looking very guilty.

"Good morning," Gabriel said.

"Good morning, Gabriel," Dr. Roberts said, getting up from the chair beside the bed. "I better get back to work. I'll check in on you later," she said, with a backward glance at Taryn. "Nice to see you, Gabriel. I'll let Taryn bring you up to date on things." Gabriel followed her with his eyes as she left the room then turned to find Taryn staring after her.

"She just wanted to make sure I was okay," he said defensively.

"Looks like you're doing fine to me," Gabriel said, looking pointedly at the tent in the bedclothes. He realized that he enjoyed bugging him. Taryn needed this guy stuff where you were irreverent with each other. "Nice flowers," he said, indicating a great big bunch in a vase by the window.

"They're from the guys at work," Taryn said. "To tell you the truth, I was surprised to get them. I don't know the other agents very well. Except for my partner, Simon. He's a good guy. You worked with him, didn't you?" he asked.

"We collaborated a few times but those kinds of partnerships don't always work too well. We were lucky, we trusted each other." Gabriel noticed the spy thriller on the table by the bed but the romance novel was nowhere to be seen.

"How's the reading coming?" he asked with a smirk. Taryn refused to rise to the bait and just smiled back.

"I'm enjoying the spy thriller but I got so tired of being razzed by everybody about my taste in literature when they saw the medical romance that I ended up putting it away in the drawer. It certainly gave everyone some comic relief. Even Dr. Roberts got a kick out of it."

"What does she say about getting out of here?" Gabriel asked.

"I can go home tomorrow but the doctor doesn't want me going home to an empty house and trying to do everything for myself. A week ago I would have ignored her and gone home and looked after myself but now I think I need some help. Got any ideas?" he asked Gabriel, who was astounded that Taryn had capitulated so easily. He wondered if the doc had an influence on his decision.

"When I dropped Mariah off at work today, she was going to see about somewhere for you to go so I'll come pick you up tomorrow and take you back to Hopeville with me. That is if you want me to."

"I'd appreciate the help," Taryn said, glad to have the matter taken care of. "I can leave anytime after nine in the morning so I'll just wait 'til you get here. After all, where am I going to go, I don't even have a car here."

"We'll sort all that stuff out once you start feeling better." They talked for a little while longer but Gabriel could see that it was tiring him so he left, promising to pick him up in the morning. He'd better ask Burke if he could borrow his truck since he couldn't see transporting Taryn and his stuff on the back of the bike. He made a note in his head to phone him when he got home.

Back at the house, Gabriel grabbed some lunch then put a call through to the sheriff. Burke said the Houston office still had custody of Simms and was planning to hold him over for trial. Gabriel wasn't going to get a piece of him but it had been a clean collar so the charges should stick and he would stand trial. Texas judges didn't look very kindly on anybody using their territory for drug deals so he hoped Simpson would get a lengthy sentence. When Gabriel told him about Taryn, Burke told him to come and get his truck in the morning so he could bring back Taryn and his stuff. He mentioned that Mariah was trying to find someone to look after Taryn and wondered if Burke had any ideas. Burke said he would give Margaret the task. "If anyone can find a place for him it'll be Margaret," he said.

Gabriel hoped he could persuade Mariah to ride to Fort Stockton and have dinner there. It wasn't very far but at least he'd have a chance to have her arms around him and her legs hugging him tight all the way there. Throwing the lunch dishes in the sink, he made his way back to the school. The secretary wasn't sure what to make of him. He was obviously not from around here and he wanted to see their Miss Forrester. She called the principal, Mrs. Marsden, out of her office and she had to give him the third degree as well. Finally Gabriel said gently, "If you call Sheriff Forrester, he can vouch for me." The secretary heaved a sigh of relief at this simple solution and made the requisite call. It turned out that the sheriff was more than happy to vouch for the visitor and he wanted them to know that Gabriel was a police officer from Chicago. The women's initial trepidation turned to downright curiosity at the unusual turn of events. Who was this man coming to spend the afternoon with Miss Forrester's class?

"Are you here to talk to the children about being a police officer?" Mrs. Marsden asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm here to be a volunteer in the classroom," Gabriel answered. Now the two of them were hanging over the counter with curiosity.

"Does she know you're coming?" the principal quizzed.

"I usually pick her up at the end of the day but I thought I'd come by and help out today," Gabriel volunteered. The secretary was astounded. This gorgeous hunk of man came every day and picked up their Miss Forrester. Since when?

Gabriel got such a kick out of their reaction. He knew that Mariah's coworkers didn't know about him but he was planning on staying in Hopeville so there was no reason to keep their relationship a secret.

"Can I go on down to her classroom?" he asked them.

"I'll just buzz down and let her know she has a visitor," the secretary said, pulling herself together. After getting directions to the classroom, Gabriel strode down the hall to Mariah's room.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mariah had no idea who the visitor was. She wasn't expecting anyone. Hearing footsteps in the hall, she looked up from her spot on the carpet where she was reading a story to the children and saw Gabriel appear in the doorway. Her heart began to race as soon as she saw him. She wondered if she would ever be able to look at him without that surge.

"Miss Forrester! Miss Forrester! There's someone at the door," several children called. Trust children to state the blatantly obvious.

"Yes, I can see that. Thank you," Mariah said as she made her way to the door.

"Gabriel, what are you doing here?" she asked anxiously. "Has something happened to Burke?"

"Everything's fine. I came back early from visiting Taryn plus I'm taking you out to dinner so with the extra time my hands, I came to see if I could help out here."

Mariah looked uncertain. "You're here to help out?" she repeated. He touched her face but dropped his hand when the children began to giggle.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you," he said softly. "You'll probably get the third degree from your principal and the secretary too. I met them both already."

"Oh, they're probably chomping at the bit to find out what's going on. Not much happens around here so everything's newsworthy," Mariah laughed.

"Can I come in and help or I could just go on home if you want?" Gabriel said.

"No, no! Come in. I'd love to have you come in and help. I just have to figure out what to have you do. I'll introduce you to the children first." Mariah took him by the hand and led him to the carpet area where he sat gingerly among the curious little faces. Gabriel hoped she would ease him into it but that was not to be. The afternoon passed in a blur as he helped out wherever he was needed, reading to a small group, helping out with snacks, finding lost shoes. Occasionally he would make eye contact with Mariah, offering a silent plea for deliverance but she would just smile. The day wound down with the children tidying up and sitting on the carpet as Mariah began their end-of-the-day ritual. They did the same thing every day, sang the same song, said the same things but the children couldn't leave without it. As they went to gather their things, Gabriel noticed that many of them couldn't leave without giving Mariah a hug. He knew just how they felt.

As soon as they were all gone and the room was empty, he was going to do the same thing. In fact, he could hardly wait to enfold her in his arms and hold her close to his heart. He was so glad he had a chance to spend some time with her and the children. When the end-of-the-day bell rang, Mariah gave some children into the care of older

students who came to take them to the school buses then he watched as she went out in the hall with the remaining children to greet the parents who had come to pick them up. He could see her laughing and smiling with them, recounting tales of their children's activities during the day. Again, some little ones couldn't leave without a final hug then at last it was just the two of them.

"Come here," Gabriel called as Mariah walked back into the room and he took her into his arms and hugged her tight.

"Did you enjoy your time with the kids?" she asked from the warmth of his embrace.

"I loved being with them," he said honestly. "Some of them ask pretty personal questions but I guess you're used to that."

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm used to it but I can say that I have had the experience," she said. chuckling. Gabriel began to walk around the room, picking up paper that the children had missed, putting chairs up on the tables and straightening baskets and buckets on the shelves. "What're you doing?" Mariah asked.

"I figured if I checked around to see what needed tidying then you could get your stuff ready for tomorrow and we could leave all the sooner. Is that all right?" he asked, leaning one arm on the back of a tiny chair he had just put up on a table. Mariah smiled at the discrepancy in size. He was so huge next to all the tiny furniture spread around the room but he still seemed to fit right in, as if he belonged there. "What?" he said, wondering about the little smile she wore.

"I was thinking you look so big next to all the little furniture, kind of like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians yet you fit right in with the children and I've never seen them so at ease with a visitor before."

"Maybe they were just able to pick up on what you were thinking," he said thoughtfully. Mariah's face went beet red and Gabriel laughed.

"I certainly hope not!" she said emphatically.

"And just what were you thinking, Miss Forrester?" he asked mischievously.

"Well..." Mariah hedged.

"Yes?" Gabriel encouraged.

"When you first walked in all I could think of was how glad I was to see you."

"And then?" he prompted.

"And then I just wanted to jump your bones and make love to you on the teeny, tiny furniture." Gabriel's eyes darkened with lust at her disclosure.

"And then?" he asked drawing her out.

"And then I was so glad that you were here and the children would get a chance to meet you and spend time with you. I wouldn't have minded them reading my mind then but it would have been a bit too X-rated before that," she admitted. Gabriel stepped away from the little table and came toward her. Mariah put up her hands to

stop him. "You just stay right there, buster," she commanded. "I'll never get anything done if you come over here."

"I'll get back to work but you know you're only putting off the inevitable," Gabriel said, setting his hand on the front of his jeans and looking down. Mariah followed his gaze to see the enormous bulge in his jeans. "You can't talk about jumping my bones and not expect my friend to react. He just has to think about getting lucky and off he goes."

"If I get my way," Mariah said, "he's not just going to get lucky tonight he's going to hit the jackpot." Mariah could see Gabriel swallowing at that comment.

"I like it when he hits the jackpot," he said. Then he grew serious, saying, "We'll make it good for you too."

"I know you will," she replied, "you always do." Then she got back to work getting ready for the next day. Gabriel enjoyed puttering about the classroom putting things to right. From time to time he stole a glance at Mariah as she worked, lost in her preparations for the next day. Gabriel was down picking up a few puzzle pieces that had fallen when he felt her hand on his shoulder. "I'm ready," she said.

"Okay," said Gabriel as he stood, putting his hands at her waist and setting her on the little table. Grabbing her t-shirt at the bottom, he began to pull it up over her head but Mariah put her hands down to stop him.

"Gabriel, what are you doing?" she asked, surprised at how much she wanted to forget where they were and just make love right there.

Running his hand down her cheek he smiled and said, "You said you were ready. I thought you meant you were ready to make love." He put a finger over her lips and laughing said, "I was just teasing you. I would never compromise your position by doing something so stupid. I just wanted you to know that I had the same thoughts when I first walked into the room." Taking her by the hand, he pulled her off the table, kissed her soundly then said, "Let's go home."

"I just need to get my bag and the helmet and I'll be ready." On the way down the hall they bumped into Mrs. Marsden who was just locking up her office. Her face lit up when she saw Mariah.

"How was your afternoon with the children, Mr. Blackburn?" she asked with a smile. "Are you worn out? I know they wear me out."

"Please call me Gabriel," he replied. "I don't know if I'd have the energy to do it every day. They really keep you hopping but I enjoyed my time with them."

Mrs. Marsden reached down to pick up her briefcase from beside the door and walked out with them. As Mariah and Gabriel reached the Harley, Mrs. Marsden stood and admired the bike. "I wish I were twenty years younger," she said enviously.

"You're welcome to take a spin with me anytime," Gabriel promised.

"I might just take you up on that, young man," she said, walking away chuckling.

"Well, you certainly seem to have garnered Mrs. Marsden's seal of approval," Mariah said incredulously as they watched her stride away. "Do you know how long it took for me to get that? Months!"

"What can I say? I'm easy to love," Gabriel crowed. Mariah whispered to herself, "You certainly are."

On the back of the bike, roaring out of town along the road to home, the warm breeze brushed against her skin and she could feel the tight bunching of his muscles beneath her hands as he shifted gears. Oh, how she loved this man! Seeing him with the children had opened her eyes to facets of him he kept hidden from others and probably even from himself. She opened her hands and moved them up his chest, wanting to absorb his essence, to crawl inside his skin.

Gabriel felt her opening her hands flat on his chest and wondered what she was up to. It was almost as if he could feel a power emanating from her, flowing into him. Mariah brought her hands down to his waist, tugging his t-shirt loose from his jeans. She slid her hands up under the hem of his t-shirt and relished the feel of his bare skin against her palms. He was so hard, like marble, but so warm, like the sun. As she slid her hands into the hair on his chest, playing with his flat, tight nipples, she was rewarded with a shudder from deep in his chest. She drew her hands down and pulled them around each side to put them flat together to glide them up his back. He was so muscular that she could feel every line, every sinew in his sculpted back. Mariah could feel his breathing speed up and put her hand around to cup him. She smiled to feel the nice hard bulge at the front of his worn jeans. It felt so naughty to tease him when he couldn't do a thing except grin and bear it.

Gabriel roared up the driveway as if the very hounds of hell were on his tail and tore around to the back of the house. Mariah felt herself go wet between the legs, remembering what happened the last time they parked at the back of the house. They'd had Burke's truck and despite what Gabriel told Burke, they were not polishing it. Gabriel pulled the bike to a halt and turning off the ignition, drew out the key then just sat there. Mariah waited for him to move but he sat still as a statue as if listening, waiting for something.

"Are you okay?" she asked, setting her hand on his shoulder. She felt him stiffen beneath her touch.

"I don't know if I can get off the bike and stand up," he admitted.

"Oh my God," she cried, "what's wrong?"

"You gave me such a hard-on with your little bike massage that I can hardly move. I'm not saying I didn't like having your hands on me, 'cause I did, but lifting my leg over the bike may not be an option." Mariah climbed off and stood in front of the bike. Gabriel watched her like a cat, wondering what she was up to. With her back to him, she pulled off her helmet, spread her legs and bent over to set it on the ground. Keeping her legs straight, her tight leather skirt rode up, presenting her beautiful little ass with

the skinny shoelace of her thong dividing her cheeks. "You don't play fair," he complained.

"I'm just giving you incentive to get off the bike," she called over her shoulder. Gabriel swung the bike back onto the stand but at the sound, Mariah straightened and was already running for the house. She threw open the back door and ran down the hall laughing, Gabriel hot on her heels. But instead of heading for the stairs as he expected, she turned into the parlor and stood in the middle of the room. "I had a little fantasy about this room the other night," she said in a smoky voice. Gabriel drew up short, caught by the timbre of her voice.

"Tell me more," he encouraged, advancing on her step by step, eager to get his hands on her.

"I was thinking about this little love seat here," she indicated, "and how it would be a perfect height for me to lean over from the back so you could slide into me."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean," he said, feigning ignorance. "Perhaps you could show me."

"I'd be delighted," she said, as if she didn't know he was pretending. Mariah walked over and lay over the back of the couch, resting her hands on the cushions below. With her butt stuck up in the air, Gabriel could definitely see the possibilities of this arrangement. Mariah straightened up, asking, "Well, what do you think?" Then she looked at his face. His eyes were dark with lust and desire, his nostrils flared, his breathing labored. Oh yes, he definitely liked her fantasy.

Gabriel was on her in a flash and had her bent back over the love seat with him on his knees behind her. Pushing her skirt up, he began to nuzzle her cheek. He turned his head so he could rub his whisker-roughened face against her delicate skin and she shivered in response. Putting his hands on her back, he pushed her upper body further over the love seat so her butt was forced up toward his mouth.

As a thin trickle of cream appeared on her inner thigh, he wondered if it was because she wasn't sure what he was going to do next. She was bent over the loveseat with nothing between him and her lovely cunt except a minuscule thong. He sat back on his haunches, surveying her beautiful little butt. Leaning forward, he flicked out his tongue and licked up her thin line of warm juice. He had planned to savor the view for a few minutes and give her delicious ass some special attention but with that little appetizer, he surged to his feet grabbing a condom from his pocket. Popping the buttons on his jeans and pulling aside her thong, he was right on top of her, pressing her down onto the little couch until, with one hard stroke, he felt her take him inside. He was so hard and so eager for her that he knew he would never last but he held on long enough to feel her start to grab his cock with her little inner fist then he knew they were going to come at the same time. He surged up into her, pounding her against the couch, trying to crawl inside her. The angle of penetration was perfect to allow him to fill her completely with each stroke hammering into her. He could feel the quivering as her orgasm began, could feel it building inside her, getting stronger and stronger like a tidal wave. Then it caught him and he was swept away as she lay beneath him.

Gabriel lay on top of her, unable to breathe. This woman was going to be the death of him. Each time they made love, it was stronger than the last and this time he had been afraid he was going to black out. It was like his circuits couldn't take the power surge and just went into overload. Finally Gabriel began to feel Mariah moving beneath him and realized that he had her pinned to the couch. Straightening up, he pulled out of her, Mariah bemoaning the loss of that delicious rod inside her.

"Woman, you are going to be the death of me," he groaned.

"It was great, wasn't it," Mariah answered, lowering her feet to the floor. Turning to look at him, she laughed, "You never even took your clothes off," she cried, spying his condom-covered penis hanging out the front of his jeans.

"There was no way I could wait," he admitted. "Not after your little show out back. I could have pounded nails with my cock it was so hard. I'm surprised we even made it into the house. I was hoping to last a bit longer but once I saw your delicious little ass bent over the back of the couch, I was a goner."

"You are such a sweet talker," Mariah pronounced, shaking her head at him.

"You think that was sweet talk, wait until I get you upstairs and strip you naked. I'll really show you sweet talk," he promised.

"You could show me some sweet talk now," she said, moving to stand in front of him.

"Not unless you pay a forfeit," he announced, stepping forward so they were standing toe to toe.

"A forfeit. What kind of forfeit?" she asked in a sultry voice, reaching out to delicately run her finger along his cock, removing the condom. It was right there in front of her, making its presence known in a large way. Wagging his finger at her, he moved her hand away.

"No fair trying to distract me, touching my privates. You got us to enact a fantasy of yours so I'd like to have the same opportunity. It's only fair."

"You want us to act out a fantasy of yours," she said quietly, her eyes wide. She could hardly wait.

"Well, it's not so much a fantasy as a place where I'd like to make love," he explained, bending down to gently kiss her. "Want to try?"

"Okay," she agreed.

"Don't you even want to know what it is before you say yes?"

"I don't need to. I trust you," Mariah stated, her eyes showing her faith in him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go to the stairs and wait for me at the bottom." Mariah scrunched her eyebrows together wondering what he was up to but she complied, making her way to the stairs. As she made her way to the staircase, Gabriel got out his wallet and removed a condom. At this rate he was going to have to keep a fair-sized stash of them in his pocket. He always wanted to make love with her and he wanted to be prepared. Maybe

he could stash a bunch of them in every room in the house then he would never have to worry about it, they'd always be available no matter what the time of day or location. When he entered the front hall, Mariah was waiting, a look of expectation on her face. She knew that whatever he dreamed up for them would be for their mutual pleasure and he was humbled that she trusted him so implicitly.

"I want you to climb up a few stairs then lie down so the leg nearest me is actually on the step above the other leg." He was very specific about what he wanted so Mariah struggled to place herself as he wanted.

"Is this what you had in mind?" she asked, looking back at him. He nodded slowly.

"That's exactly what I had in mind," he said, his eyes darkening. "Is it going to be too uncomfortable for you?" he asked, concerned.

"Well, it's not as comfortable as a bed but I think we can make it work."

"Now put your head down on the step there. Put your arm out and you can just rest your head on it like you were going to have a little nap," he said, his voice hoarse as he saw how absolutely delectable she looked in repose on the staircase. What she hadn't yet realized was that in this position her silky slit was exposed to his avid gaze and all he needed to do was move the thin string of her thong and she would be readily accessible to his hands, tongue and penis. His cock began to throb in earnest as he imagined the feel of it sliding in and out of her as she lay on the stairs.

"Gabriel?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't really feel like taking a nap," Mariah purred.

"What do you feel like, baby?" he inquired, running his hand up her velvety soft leg as he spoke. She couldn't speak for a moment as his hand continued its teasing journey up her leg, past her knee, his finger tips whisper-soft along her inner thigh. "What's wrong, baby? Cat got your tongue?" he said, as if soothing an upset child. As Mariah began to speak, he put one finger on her mound and dragged it back, following the path of the teeny, little string of her thong. She wanted to tell him to stop! She could feel his fingers gliding along her slit but where she needed him the most was covered by the tiny strip of material and all she could feel was a gentle caress along her swollen labia but not on her bare cunt flesh. She reached down to move the thong aside so he could give her some relief but he grabbed her hand and gave it a light tap. "Uh, uh, uh," he chastised. "This is my fantasy and you need to keep those little hands away until I tell you otherwise."

Mariah groaned. Couldn't he see how badly she needed him to touch her? He was killing her with his almost touches—almost touching her clit, almost touching her cunt, almost touching her little opening, but not quite! Just when she was ready to give up hope, he pulled her thong to one side and ran his finger along her slit. It was drenched, she was so eager for his touch. Using his broad, flat thumb, he spread her cream along her slit, then tucked his thumb into her opening to make his entry easier then gently massaged a little cream into her clit. Her clit was stiff and eager for his ministrations

and reached for his thumb like an orchid seeking the sun. Mariah could feel her clit growing as he soothed it in a circular motion.

"Mariah, look at me!" he commanded, drawing her out of her erotic haze. As she forced her head to turn, she looked over her shoulder at him and saw him place his thumb in his mouth and suck it. "Mmm, you taste so good!" he pronounced. "I need to put my mouth on you, you are so rich and creamy like the richest dessert." Getting down on his knees, Gabriel kept the thong to one side with one hand then leaned in so he could smell her rich, womanly scent.

"What are you doing, Gabriel?" she cried as she heard him inhaling deeply.

"I want to taste you but whenever I get close to your cunt, your scent comes to me like the ocean, like exotic flowers and I can't resist just smelling you." Mariah began to close her legs, embarrassed that he would want to smell her. She knew that her arousal would make her scent rich and tangy for him but she was shy that he would notice.

Gabriel felt her beginning to move her leg to block his pleasure but gently put his hand out and moved it back in place. "Don't be embarrassed," he said. "I can't remember ever noticing the wonderful smell of a woman until I met you and now all I have to do is close my eyes and I can conjure up your scent even when you're not here. Now that you are here, I'm not going to deny myself the pleasure of enjoying everything about you, even the smell of your cunt."

He ran the back of his hand down her inner thigh, tickling her with his soft touch then, bending forward, he replaced his hand with his mouth, licking the sensitive skin near her knee then back up tracing a line all along the inside of her thigh. Mariah clenched her bottom together to try to alleviate the sensations bombarding her but she couldn't keep them at bay, they just propelled themselves forward, spurred on by his talented tongue. He was so patient with his mind-numbing torture, licking a leisurely path up and up, closer to her aching center but never arriving. Finally he put out his tongue and lapped at her weeping crease. She was so close that he could taste her imminent climax on his tongue. He knew that a few strokes of his tongue and she would be gone and he was right. He sucked her clit roughly then moved his tongue inside her passage and prodded her like a little penis...too much. She lifted right off the stairs, struggling to breathe as her orgasm burst over her.

Gabriel watched her tight little opening give a tiny yawn as she reached her climax then a bubble of cream gave witness to her pleasure. This time he pulled off his jeans before donning the condom, going down on one knee to place his cock at her juicy opening and easing himself inside, his way always difficult with the combination of his large size and her snug passage. Every time felt like the first, she was so small and tight around him. He entered her in tiny increments, allowing her to feel each movement of his cock as it forced its way past her entry and along. Finally he was in all the way and paused, allowing her to adjust to the invasion. As soon as he felt her relax he began the outward journey and pulled out at the same leisurely, maddening pace. She might have thought that he wasn't affected by the firm grip of her muscles so slow and easy was the rhythm but that was not the case at all. It took every ounce of his will to prolong the

ebb and flow of movement until he began to speed up the pace, enlarging his cock even more.

Mariah couldn't figure out how that massive cock could fit inside her in the first place so when she felt him grow even larger, she felt completely filled. All she could feel was the rhythm of that huge organ swinging in and out, filling her, leaving her, filling, leaving. She had thought that making love on the stairs would be uncomfortable but it put their bodies at an incredible angle for penetration, his every stroke licking at her clitoris as his cock made its way in and back out. She kept her head on her arm to protect herself as he surged into her, slamming her against the step, relentless in his fucking. Gabriel put his arms around her waist so he could slam her back against him as he thrust into her. Mariah felt an urge to giggle, afraid that he was going to make them tumble down the stairs. That would be hard to explain to whoever found them at the bottom of the stairs, still joined together.

She let him set the pace, slamming into her and yanking her back in tandem, the rhythm hard and furious. Then the urge was replaced by a firestorm starting inside her, growing and growing until it burst into flames and she yelled her release.

Gabriel was right behind her, pumping into her then freezing in place as her tremors shook him to his very core then started his own. On and on they went as he let loose a gush of cum that surged relentlessly from him. He fell against her on the stairs unable to command his body to move. They lay like spoons for a few minutes then

Mariah began to wiggle beneath him and his cock unceremoniously slid out. Mariah could feel the edge of the stairs biting into her back and legs, the discomfort heightened by the added weight of Gabriel's body. She could also feel his soft penis lying quiescent against her and marveled how it could go so quickly from a battering ram slamming at her to a gentle, innocuous organ lying gently in repose.

Finally summoning the energy to push himself to his feet, Gabriel took a moment to regain his balance, the blood having long since stopped flowing anywhere but to his cock. As soon as he was able, Gabriel put his arms around Mariah and lifted her, gently setting her on her feet, keeping hold around her waist until she could stand unaided.

It took her a few minutes to find her balance but lordy, it sure had been worth it, she decided. When that man had a fantasy he pulled out all the stops! Her legs would probably take two or three days to recover but she couldn't wait for him to ambush her on the stairs again. Gabriel plonked himself down on the stairs and hauled her into his lap, not even bothering to remove the used condom. That would just have to wait.

"You okay?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

"Well, it wouldn't have been my first choice of location for mad, passionate sex but it was incredible. I'll probably have stair burns on my arm and permanent marks from the edge of the steps imprinted on my butt but it was worth it."

"Yeah, it sure was fun, wasn't it?"

"It was unbelievable. When you were pounding into me and slamming me back against you at the same time, I was having trouble catching my breath it was so intense."

"It was so erotic just to look at you. The angle of your legs left your crease exposed so I could see everything, your little opening with the cream gently trailing out in a thin line, your little clit, swollen and stiff and your luscious pink lips just begging for me to take them in my mouth and nibble on them. You have the most beautiful labia—they're plump and luscious." Mariah sat on his lap and hid her head against his chest, their conversation so intimate yet so erotic and enticing.

"What do they feel like when you have them in your mouth?" she asked shyly. Gabriel's breath blew across her hair as he answered her.

"They're warm and sweet and very succulent as I put my lips on them and apply pressure with only my lips. I like to use my tongue to press them against my palate to taste them. They're plump, you know and that really turns me on. Sometimes I like to put just one in my mouth or sometimes I like to suckle both of them at the same time. I like to have you at an angle where I can suck them across the width of my mouth, there's so much more to put in my mouth at once. I'm always afraid my circuits might go into sexual overload when I play with them. They also hide your little pleasure opening so when I use my lips and tongue on them, I can also have access to your sexy hole where I can probe you with my tongue and lick your secret places."

Mariah was beginning to squirm on his lap, the erotic bent of the conversation beginning to arouse her. Gabriel smiled to himself, knowing full well from her wiggling what was happening to her, so he continued. "I also love the way your plump labia come together at the top to try to hide your clit from me. It likes to make me seek it out with my tongue so I search around and feel it hidden in its protective hood, trying to stay hidden but as soon as it feels my tongue it begins to blossom and stiffen, eager to have me search it out. It's such a tiny little thing, your clit, but I can feel it stiffen just like a teeny penis and when I use my lips to suck it and flatten it, it goes wild...and so do you."

Mariah was fidgeting like crazy on his lap. "Do you want me to help you, baby?" he asked soothingly, removing her thong. She could only nod so he stood and slid her to her feet. "Why don't you sit there on the stairs and let me have a look at you?" Mariah sat on the third step from the bottom, prim and proper, with her hands in her lap and her legs together. Gabriel looked down at her, a warm smile on his face.

"You're going to have to open your legs for me so I can see what's wrong." She opened her legs a bit. "You're going to have to open them way wider than that to let me fix it for you." Mariah swung them open as wide as she could and Gabriel got down on his knees in front of her. "Just let me know when I touch the area that seems to be giving you trouble," he said as he leaned into her cunt. Putting out his tongue, he traced up one plump lip and down the other with the very stiff tip of his tongue. He drew back on his haunches and looked at her glazed-over eyes.

"Does that seem to be where the problem is?" She shook her head. "I'll guess I'll just have to keep trying." She shivered in anticipation. He licked up her slit, ending at her swollen clit which he took into his mouth and ravaged with his tongue. Pulling back again, he was pleased to see her looking totally aroused, warm and flushed from his talented mouth. "Does that seem to be where the problem is?" She shook her head again. "This is a very perplexing situation," he said. "I see I'm going to have to do some in-depth research." And with that he bent forward and stuck his tongue right into her tiny portal and flicked it inside her, licking right at her opening then plunging his tongue inside. "Am I getting closer?" he quizzed, his lips shiny with her essence. This time she nodded her head, her vision almost nil from lust and desire. "A good scientist never leaves an experiment incomplete. I need to do just a bit more research to see wherein lies the problem."

Reaching down, Gabriel peeled off the used condom and dropped it onto his jeans that were lying there and slid on a fresh one from the stash in his pocket. Switching places with her, he sat down on the stair and pulled her on top of him, jamming his penis inside her. That was what she needed, this man filling her, every moment of every day, *just like this*! This time Mariah set the rhythm, anchoring her feet on the step and using her legs to raise herself up then slam down on his legs. She had discovered how to solve her problem, put that great big cock inside her and let it work its magic. Ten, nine, eight, seven...blastoff. Anchoring her feet firmly on the stair, she pushed down on his cock so she could feel every nuance of his release and it was apocalyptic in its force, a veritable eight on the Richter scale. As she felt his last surge, she felt it trigger her own release and off she went like a skyrocket! Mariah slumped forward, resting her head against his chest, listening to his solid heartbeat as it resumed its normal rhythm.

"I think I'm better now," she said wryly.

"That's great. Glad I could help."

"I'm better but I don't think I can move...ever again."

"I know what you mean. Maybe we should have these stairs bronzed, you know, like a trophy. A monument to our sexual stamina."

"Maybe as a monument to your sexual prowess. You're a veritable powerhouse when it comes to making love."

"Why, thank you. I'll take that as a compliment, Miss Forrester."

"Take it any way you want as long as you keep solving my problems like that. I'll never need to see a psychiatrist as long as you solve my problems."

"Glad to be of service," Gabriel said with a smile. "But I can only solve problems for you when we're at home. I don't think other people would be as understanding or accepting of my technique."

"Who knows? It might catch on," she said with a laugh then she grew serious. "But you can only solve my problems, no one else's."

"I would never want to touch anyone the way I touch you," Gabriel said all levity aside. Right on cue, the telephone rang as it always does at inopportune moments in

everyone's life. Gabriel and Mariah looked at each other, wondering if it was worth the effort to answer the damn thing. It rang again and still neither of them moved.

"It might be important," Mariah said, still impaled on his cock, therefore without much interest in getting up to answer it.

"Yeah and it might be someone wanting to sell us a vacuum cleaner too," Gabriel added dryly, more interested in keeping his cock lodged inside her than answering the phone. It rang again and this time the ring seemed more insistent, somehow demanding that it be answered. Mariah sighed deeply and using her legs to lift herself free of his cock, got up to answer the infernal instrument of interruption. Gabriel flopped back on the stairs, his head resting on the step above, listening to the hum of conversation from the kitchen. He couldn't make out any of the words but enjoyed listening to Mariah's voice as she spoke to the mystery caller. He heard her hang up the phone and lay there stretched out on the stairs, eyes closed, awaiting her return. He heard her coming back down the hall and knew she was standing there watching him.

"Do you have any idea how cute you are, lying there so relaxed with your penis hanging out wearing that little raincoat?" she said with a guffaw. Gabriel looked down and began to laugh. There was his erection hanging out, wearing the requisite condom, looking forlorn without Mariah perched atop him. "I think he misses you. Look at the sad look on his little face."

"It's hard to see his little face under the raincoat plus I'm not even sure which side is his face," she said peering intently at his rod.

Gabriel peeled the condom off, threw it on top of the other one, saying, "Perhaps you just need to take a closer look." Mariah didn't need another invitation to inspect him at closer range. Of course as she bent down to scrutinize him to find the little face, it responded in typical male fashion, getting bigger, longer and much thicker.

"He really seems to like it when you look at his little face," Gabriel said seriously.

"I can see that. He tried to poke my eye out," she replied cryptically. Gabriel roared with laughter.

"Maybe he'd like it if I licked his face."

"I don't know about him but I would love it," Gabriel said eagerly. Mariah got down and pushed his legs apart so there was enough room for her to get between them. Leaning forward, she licked all along the underside of his penis.

"Scoot forward so you are closer to the edge. I want to get at your balls."

She watched as Gabriel slid his butt out so his balls hung free at the front of the stair. She suspected that no guy liked to have his balls so exposed, they were too sensitive for much rough handling, so as soon as he looked like he was comfortable, or as comfortable as he was going to get, Mariah leaned forward and swallowed his cock as deeply as she could using both hands to play with his balls at the same time. They felt so odd—so hard, so soft—like his cock. A man mystery. She could just imagine the big smile his cock must be sporting now, deep inside her mouth. Then with a howl, he thrust up into her mouth and a volcanic stream of cum shot down her throat.

Mariah knew it was coming down on him, she felt the change in his balls and was ready for him. It was a heady feeling to take that power from him as it shot into her mouth and down her throat. She kept her mouth over him until there was nothing left then she pulled back, kissed the tip and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Looking from Gabriel's sated visage to his spent cock, Mariah quipped, "Well, he sure seems to be wearing a big smile now."

Staring down, Gabriel looked at his cock, still glistening from her mouth and could think of nothing to say but, "Thank you. I loved it as much as he did." Then he lay back, shutting his eyes again. He lay for a moment then his eyes shot open as he asked, "Who was on the phone? I forgot to ask."

"Oh yeah. I got so carried away with the one-eyed trouser snake that I forgot to give you your message."

"One eyed-trouser snake?" Gabriel asked, raising one eyebrow in a scornful manner.

"Didn't you ever see *Monty Python*? They had a great penis song and that was one of the penis words."

"I did see it and never saw the humor...until now," he returned, giving her a naughty wink. "So who was on the phone?"

"It was Burke telling you he had a call from Taryn who said not to bother coming to get him tomorrow."

"Oh shit. He didn't decide to go home by himself, did he?"

"No, it seems that his doctor has taken an unexpected week off work and is taking him home to nurse him back to health."

"Ahhhh."

"That's exactly what Burke said."

"Well, that's great. That woman has spunk. It was easy to see there were sparks flying between them when I was there so instead of ignoring them, she's decided to see what happens. Good for her. Good for Taryn." Gabriel took a breath then continued on. "Now I don't need to go to Midland tomorrow so I can get stuff ready for going to Chicago on Friday. I want to make a list of people I need to see or phone when I'm there. I need to see about giving up my apartment but I really need to make a list of what I want to talk to Alex about. I need to have a clear, workable plan when I talk to him."

"Gabriel?"

"It would be easier to take you more seriously if you weren't lying on the stairs half-naked." At her comment, he stood and peeled his t-shirt off over his head. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"You said it would be easier to take me more seriously if I wasn't half-naked so I thought I'd see if you would take me more seriously if I were completely naked." She swatted his naked chest.

"What?"

"You are so funny." He bent over to retrieve his jeans and the used condoms. Mariah stood at the end of the hall and watched his beautiful rear end as he sauntered to the kitchen. Knowing her eyes were on his behind, he gave his ass a little wiggle before disappearing into the kitchen. He was rewarded by hearing a burst of laughter from the hallway as Mariah expressed her appreciation for his naked butt. "I know you were staring at my naked butt," he called from the kitchen. "How could I not when you were flaunting it like that?" she retorted. She could hear him in the kitchen opening cupboard doors and disposing of the condoms.

"Do you want something to eat?" he called.

"I'm going to go run a bath but I'd love a sandwich. Anything is fine really." Mariah paused. "Hey, I thought we were going out for dinner. What happened about that?" Gabriel appeared in the doorway, carrying a jar of mayonnaise and not wearing a stitch of clothing on his magnificent frame. Mariah swallowed. He was so beautiful. She didn't think she ever get used to it. As he stood in the doorway, he could see her begin the telltale fidget she got when she was aroused. She'd shift from foot to foot and begin to get flushed and he knew a small touch from him would be enough to set her off. He pretended nonchalance.

"I didn't forget. I got sidetracked. Would you still like to go out or we could stay here." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively at her, knowing which option she would pick.

"I'll go get the bath ready and you bring the sandwiches up with you. You owe me one dinner out and I'll hold you to that." Gabriel nodded then headed for the kitchen. He stopped and turned as a thought occurred to him. Mariah thought he looked almost as yummy in profile as he did from the back. Even in repose his penis was formidable and all she could think of was how it felt to have all that inside her, filling her. She shook just thinking about it.

"Are you going to run water in the big bathtub?"

"Yeah."

"Great, 'cause it's big enough for two." He watched the flush of arousal darken her face and neck. Even thinking about being in the tub with him was enough to get her going, He waited 'til he heard her heading up then came quietly to the bottom of the stairs so he could watch her as she climbed, her pert little bum wiggling as she made her way upstairs. He sighed. What a woman!

Mariah put in the plug, turned on the water and watched the tub as it began to fill. Hastily adding some bubble bath, she went to the bedroom to grab something to wear. If the evening continued in the same vein, it was probably redundant to put on clothes as she was going to be taking them off pretty quickly.

Gabriel threw together two sandwiches and pulled some drinks from the fridge. He found a tray and loaded the makeshift supper on it. When he got upstairs Mariah was ensconced in the huge tub, the water gently lapping at her breasts. He could see her

dusky nipples just below the water and her reddish-blonde curls made an appearance whenever the bubbles shifted, providing him with a naughty, old-fashioned peep show. Pulling the little stool close to the tub, he set the tray on it then climbed in the tub, resting his back against the opposite end of the tub. Closing his eyes, he slowly sank down, letting the water soothe his tired body. Making love sprawled on the stairs was hard on the body—exciting but hard on the body.

"Gabriel!" His eyes shot open to see the water perched at the top ready to overflow. He brought his upper body out of the water until Mariah was able to let out some of the water.

His arms began to tire of supporting his upper body so he surged to his feet to wait for the tub to drain a bit more.

"You look like Poseidon," Mariah said staring at him hungrily. He was like the god of the sea come to life, Mariah thought and couldn't help but stare at him, with the water running down his body, his limbs long and lean, his chest muscular and toned. Gabriel realized that she was staring at his cock and he also realized that she was going to let all the water drain away if he didn't get her attention.

"Mariah!" She just continued to stare at him. "Mariah, put the plug back in." She shook her head, bringing herself out of her trance and jammed the plug back in.

"You look like a god standing there with the water streaming down your body. I used to watch all those old Jason and the Argonauts movies when I was a kid and those guys always looked like that."

"Hey, those guys used to wear funny tunics and stuff."

"Yeah, I really got off on that. Feel like a toga party?"

"No toga party but I definitely like the part where you think I look like a god. A guy can never get enough compliments like that," he said, preening outrageously for her.

"You are so vain," Mariah said as she watched him sink down into the water, hiding his delicious body until too much of it, to her way of thinking, was hidden underwater. Mariah let him lie there for a few moments then very subtly snaked out her foot and began to run it up the length of his leg and over his shaft.

He watched her face as that talented foot made its erotic journey along his shin, over his knee, up his thigh to come to rest on his cock. Her eyes were half closed as she enjoyed the change in texture of his skin along the length of his leg. His cock was so soft and pliable when she began to fondle it but in no time flat it began to grow along the bottom of her foot. Gabriel reached for her foot and drew it into his lap, pressing his thumbs into the bottom of it to help relieve her tiredness. She closed her eyes to enjoy the foot massage when he gave a yank and pulled her under the water. She came up sputtering and blowing water everywhere.

"You wretch!" she barked, pushing the wet hair out of her eyes.

"Wretch?"

"Yes, wretch."

"That word makes me feel very Victorian. Very Victorian and very naughty," Gabriel said, with a sly smile. "Maybe we could play Victorian courtesan and the disobedient duke one night." Mariah gave him a look that said "in your dreams, buddy". "Remember how much fun we had playing Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. I bet we could find some outfits that would suit this fantasy too." Mariah hated to admit how much that appealed to her. She could see herself playing the role of a courtesan, seducing him in a dimly lit boudoir, him dressed in those skintight breeches they wore that hugged every curve and the tall leather boots. What were they called? Oh yes, Hessians. And her in a low-cut dress with a tightly cinched corset, displaying her breasts for his approval. She could get him to help lace up the corset and think how much fun it would be to have him loosen it again.

"Mariah, what are you thinking? I was really only teasing you." Mariah looked across at him.

"I think it's a great idea. I'd love to dress in one of those tight corsets and wear a low-necked dress so I can seduce you in my boudoir. You could tie up the laces at the back of the corset and help me get into the dress. They also wore stockings and garters. I'm sure you'd love to see me in those, wouldn't you?" All he could picture was the first day he had seen her, bent over the car with the wind blowing her skirt up revealing the stockings and garters underneath. The idea of her wearing something like that along with a tightly cinched corset had his manhood standing up and taking notice.

"Where could we get something like that?" he croaked. "Certainly not here in Hopeville." Mariah laughed at that idea. Imagine first of all finding a store in Hopeville that would even sell stuff like that and secondly buying it but not having everyone in town know that you were.

"I have no idea but we would have to buy you those skintight breeches like the men wore back then and high boots," she continued. A funny look came over her face.

"What?" he said. Not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"I can picture you galloping across the field wearing nothing but the skintight breeches and the leather boots."

"Oh no. No way!"

"Just think. You could gallop across the field and waiting for you would be the scantily clad courtesan. You could bend down from the saddle and sweep me up in front of you on the horse. Providing the corset didn't cause me to faint. I bet they have stores in Chicago that sell clothing like that. I just might have a look when we're there on the weekend." Gabriel had forgotten that they were going to Chicago on Friday. He didn't know if he would be able to do all the business things he had to do in Chicago knowing that she was buying stuff like that at the same time. Maybe it would make him finish all the faster knowing what was in store for him when they got home.

Mariah took the sponge from the metal dish hanging over the tub and squirted some gel onto it. Raising her leg to give him a better view, she soaped first one leg then the other. She washed her arms then her neck, taking her time and making Gabriel salivate watching her. "Would you like to borrow my sponge?" she asked innocently.

"Sure," he said, taking it from her and slowly rising out of the water to stand at the end of the tub. "I think it needs a bit more soap on it," he mused, looking down at the sponge. Mariah watched open-mouthed as he spread his legs and leaned forward to reach the gel. His cock was already standing at attention and as he bent forward, she could see his balls hanging between his legs. He looked good enough to eat or at least suck on.

Grabbing the gel, Gabriel added a bit more on the sponge then straightened to wash himself. Mariah stared as he ran the sponge along one arm, feigning indifference to her hungry stare. He casually raised his arm and washed his underarm, the hair there soft and silky-looking. On the way to his other arm, he gave his chest a cursory swipe with the soapy sponge then switched the sponge to his other hand. He repeated the motion on the other arm, taking his time washing it as if it were really dirty not just an exercise in driving her crazy. He raised his arm, exposing the soft silky tuft of hair and nonchalantly rubbed at it with the sponge. He used it next on his face and neck then turned around so she could watch the play of muscles in his back as he struggled to reach.

She wanted to volunteer to help him but her voice seemed unable to comply. He rubbed the sponge over first one butt cheek and then the other, making her wish that for one brief shining moment she too could be a sponge and be rubbed all over his body.

Then he turned to face her and she knew what was coming. Throwing the sponge down, he grabbed his erection then he put out his hand and said in a tight voice, "Squirt some gel into my hand." Mariah grabbed the bottle and did as he asked, hoping against hope that he did what she prayed he was going to do. Not taking his eyes from her face, he grabbed himself with both soapy hands and pulled them up the length of his rod but very gently. She knew her prayers had been answered. Mariah watched as he closed his eyes and she wondered what he was feeling, knowing she was watching him pleasure himself. She could see him changing the pressure of his hands, holding himself more firmly and stepping up the pace. He looked so strong, so virile, so sure of himself, able to pleasure himself while she watched. She could see his balls drawing up tighter and was caught in the rhythm of his hands, up, down, up, down, tighter, tighter. She didn't even realize that her own hand had worked its way between her legs, looking for her delicate clit. As soon as she touched it, she gasped. It was so sensitive, as if it knew where his hands were and what they were doing. At her gasp, Gabriel opened her eyes to see her hand rubbing gently between her legs.

"Open your eyes," he called to her. He watched with satisfaction as her eyes flickered open then focused on him. "I want you to watch me watching you," he said seductively. "Look at my hands," he commanded even though he needn't have bothered since her eyes were glued there anyway. "Watch my hands!" he barked. "Do you like me to do it gently?" He followed his question with the corresponding action,

gently caressing his cock and his balls. "Or do you like me to be hard," and he followed this question by seizing his member and roughly moving his hands up and down.

Mariah whimpered at each question, luxuriating in the feel of her fingers pleasuring herself until, with a keening cry, she went over, water sloshing all up and over the sides of the tub. "Watch me!" he cried and so saying gave a few final strokes and came like a racehorse. Mariah watched through her haze as he came until, with a sigh, he sank back down into the water.

"That was pretty intense," Mariah said. "Whatever happened to old-fashioned fucking?"

"Such language and from a schoolteacher, no less," Gabriel laughed. "I really got off on it. I love to watch you."

"You know I love to watch you, to know you can't hold back and to know you're watching the pleasure you give me." Mariah grabbed a small towel from the side of the tub and wiped her hands. "I don't know about you but I'm starving and I'm going to eat before I do anything else." Mariah reached out and grabbed a sandwich from the tray beside the tub. Gabriel soaped his hands, dried them on the same towel and took the sandwich right out of her hand.

"Hey, give that back to me," she cried but he just held it over his head out of her reach.

"Thanks for the sandwich," he said, blowing her a kiss. She grabbed the other sandwich from the tray but when she sat down, she made sure her foot went out and landed gently on top of his penis. He was so startled he nearly dropped the sandwich in the tub.

"Oops, sorry. My foot must have slipped," she said, hiding a big, wide grin behind her sandwich as she bit into it.

"Well, since we seem to be eating in tonight what do you want to do?" he asked her.

"Besides eating you?" she said, laughing. "You know what I'd really like to do?" Gabriel shook his head. "I'd love to veg out in front of the TV and watch a movie."

"I didn't even know you had a TV," Gabriel said, finishing off his sandwich.

"There's one in the back bedroom. It's sort of a guest bedroom but I have a television spot in there for me. I could pop some popcorn and we could snuggle up on the couch and watch a movie."

"I'd love to curl up with you. Maybe I'll get a chance to cop a feel while we snuggle." Mariah splashed water at him and laughed.

"I'll do better than that. I'll sit on your lap if you're a very good boy."

"Judging by the screaming orgasm you just had, I'd say I am a very good boy." Chuckling at his joke, Mariah gripped the sides of the tub to pull herself to her feet then climbed out and began to dry off. Gabriel lay back, enjoying the view as she rubbed her arms, her legs, her butt then he surged to his feet and climbed out as well. Mariah took

a dry towel and began to dry his back and his tight butt. She got down on her knees and dried up and down each leg, placing a little peck of a kiss right on the head of his cock. "Hey, don't be getting him all excited again. He's looking forward to watching a movie and spending some quality time with you."

Handing him the towel, she said, "I'm just going to get dressed then I'll poke through the movies to see if there's anything we both might like."

As she went out the door and down the hall to her bedroom, Gabriel called after her, "You don't have to get dressed on my account, you know." He heard her answering snort as he finished drying himself off. He couldn't believe how much he was looking forward to just hanging out with her, curled up on the couch, eating popcorn and watching a movie. His buddies back in Chicago would have said he was getting soft but if this was getting soft then he liked it. He glanced at himself in the mirror, at his lean, muscular frame and decided that he didn't look soft at all.

When Mariah came back in to let the water away and tidy up he was disappointed to see that she was already dressed, wearing a pair of baggy boxer shorts and a tank top. She looked great, but much too overdressed for his liking although they did look like they would be easy to remove when the moment presented itself. As she straightened up from pulling the plug, he quizzed her. "Do I look soft to you?" he wondered.

"Yeah, you're a regular marshmallow. Especially here," she said as she tried to grab hold of his belly. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on him. His body was beautifully toned and sleek. "Actually I only see one part of you that is soft," she said, shooting a pointed glance at his shaft, "but I'll take care of that little problem later." Gabriel used the towel to try to flick her butt as she went out past him but she was too fast for him, sneaking out the door before he could connect with her bottom. "You'll have to do better than that, hotshot," she called as she fled down the hall to the guest bedroom. A few minutes later she heard him padding down the hall to her bedroom. She peeked out the door to watch his glorious backside as he made his way to the bedroom. Boy! That man sure does have a great ass! When Gabriel joined her, she was down on her hands and knees peering sideways at the titles on the boxes.

Standing right behind her, he said quietly, "See anything good?" She jumped a mile.

"Jeez. You keep sneaking up on me!"

"Comes from years of being a cop."

"Very funny," she said sarcastically, placing her hand over her heart for emphasis. "But you really do have this innate ability to move around without making a sound. Sometimes it's disconcerting how easily you do it." Gabriel didn't know what to say to her because she was right. People he worked with often remarked on how such a big man could be almost invisible. It had come in very handy a few times in his job, in fact, it had saved his life a couple of times but the truth was that he wasn't doing it consciously, it was just how he was.

"I'll try not to sneak up on you but I thought you knew I was there."

"I guess I was so busy looking through the movies that I didn't hear you come in. You'd make a great cat burglar."

"Maybe in my next life. I've got other plans for this one." He got down and sat cross-legged on the floor beside her, asking, "So what are our choices?"

"It runs a pretty wide gamut," Mariah said, running her finger along the spines of the boxes. "We've got romantic chick flicks." He made a face at that suggestion. "There are a few spy thrillers." His face perked up so Mariah pulled them out and started to make a pile of "possibles".

"Anything else?" Mariah continued to read the titles, calling out the choices to him.

"Some old comedies like Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers." She checked to gauge his reaction. He shook his head. "Someone gave me the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* but I haven't even cracked it open. Does that appeal to you?"

"I don't think I want to watch anything that intense. Maybe something that doesn't require much thinking, that way I could sit and eat popcorn and neck without worrying about missing vital information." Mariah laughed at his simple requirements then motioned for him to come and check out the selection.

"Why don't you look and see? I could rattle them off but it makes more sense for you to look for yourself."

"Here. How 'bout this one, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*? I've seen it before which ups the necking factor considerably. I can pretend to watch it and suck on your neck at the same time."

"Works for me. I love Michael Caine and the movie's not half bad. Do you want to set it up and I'll go get the popcorn ready?" Gabriel traipsed after her, wanting to take part in something as mundane as making popcorn. When he got to the kitchen, Mariah was wrestling a box out of a bottom cupboard.

"Here, let me help you." Gabriel took the box from her and set it on the counter. Mariah turned to thank him but the words stuck in her throat. He had dressed after the bath and was wearing a black t-shirt tucked into a pair of well-worn butt-hugging jeans. The t-shirt accented his pecs and his powerful arms and Mariah was afraid she was going to drool right then and there. He looked like a cover model for *GQ* with that physique and such amazing hair. She wondered if he had shunned underwear again, knowing he only seemed to wear it when he went out somewhere. A girl could hope!

Gabriel noticed the funny look on her face and wondered what was wrong. "Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Oh Gabriel, you're beautiful!" He didn't know what to say. She was always saying such outrageous things to him. *Change the subject*!

"Aren't you going to just stick one of those bags in the microwave for a couple of minutes?" he said as he watched her set up the popcorn popper.

"I don't even own a microwave. Think of it like being a pioneer," she said with a laugh.

"Okay, I'm game. What can I do to help?"

"Can you grab a big bowl out of the cupboard by the stove and see if you can find the butter in the door of the fridge? Once you find the butter, cut a hunk into a little saucepan and melt it and I'll see if I can find the popcorn." Mariah rooted around in the cupboard, shifting stuff around until she held up a jar. "Aha, here it is. We're in business." Gabriel brought the bowl over and set it down for her. Mariah poured some kernels into the top of the popper and positioned the bowl right under the chute. "I learned how to use this thing the hard way. Never plug it in until you're ready since it comes on as soon as you plug it in. Make sure the bowl is right under the chute or the popcorn flies all over the place. This is the voice of experience talking. I had to pick up a lot of popcorn until I got it right."

Gabriel chuckled as he put the little saucepan on to melt the butter to the accompaniment of the sound of the first few kernels hitting the bowl.

"Oh God! Nothing smells better than fresh, hot popcorn," he said, gently stirring the golden, melted butter. They worked side by side, the delicious aroma of popcorn filling the kitchen. Turning to Mariah, he said, "I forgot to ask if you found a place for Taryn to stay because if you did, you need to phone and let them know he's not coming to Hopeville after all."

"I'm glad you reminded me. One of the teachers at school said her mother was a retired nurse and he could stay there for a few days. I'll just give Angela a quick call and let her know that Taryn won't be coming."

"Angela? Do I detect a little matchmaking going on here?"

"Angela is happily married with three small kids so no, no matchmaking. Just a place to go."

Gabriel pulled the pan off the burner and turned off the stove as Mariah made her call. He could hear her thanking Angela and making arrangements for Angela to phone her mom and let her know about the change in plans.

"Make sure she knows how much I appreciate her offer of help," he heard her say. "Don't forget I won't be there on Friday so I won't be going for lunch with you guys. Bye."

"You usually go out for lunch on Fridays?"

"A few of us like to get away and get some lunch in town. It's a nice change when you have to cart your lunch to school every day."

"You could come home for lunch."

"You mean for a nooner?" she said, wiggling her eyebrows at him. Gabriel hooted with laughter.

"No, I mean I could make lunch for you." He watched Mariah blush at her jump to conclusions. "Although the idea of a nooner really appeals to me. It could be a morning, noon or nighter. Any time of the day would be perfect for making love with you."

"That would be great but I doubt if I would ever get back to school. You know how we are."

"I know exactly how we are and I'm getting hard just listening to you talk about it." Mariah took the little saucepan and a rubber spatula and poured the butter in the bowl, mixing it until the popcorn was slathered in it. She added a bit of salt then hoisted the bowl into her arms.

"Can you grab some napkins and something to drink and we're good to go."

Gabriel followed her along the hallway and up to the guest room. Mariah pushed the movie in and they sat back together on the couch. Within minutes, he began to laugh. It had taken them half an hour to agree on a movie and get the popcorn ready and exactly five minutes for Mariah to fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Mariah opened her eyes, her lover was lying there watching, a beatific smile on his face. While he had been lying watching her sleep, Gabriel had come to a decision. Now he had a major purchase to make when they were in Chicago. He was going to shop by himself and hope she liked what he picked out for her.

"Good morning," he said quietly, running a finger down the side of her face. "I wondered when you were going to wake up. I've been lying here watching you for quite a while." He cupped her face with his hand, running his thumb under her chin. Mariah closed her eyes and leaned into his hand, feeling his warm, quiet strength until he spoke!

"Judging by the amount of snoring coming from you, you must have been pretty tired," he said with a smirk.

"Snoring! I don't snore," Mariah snapped. Then she paused. "Do I?"

"I'm just teasing you. You never made a sound." Mariah looked relieved. Pulling the blanket aside, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Turning over her shoulder to look at him she said, "I think I'll have a quick shower."

He put out his hands to grab her but Mariah evaded him and went into the bathroom laughing. Gabriel could hear her puttering around. She was singing as the shower came on then the sound was muffled as she stepped into the tub and slid the door closed. He lay for a while watching the breeze ruffle the curtains and the sunlight creep across the floor then slipped from beneath the covers, pausing long enough to grab a condom from the drawer. He relieved himself then slid open the door so he could join her. Mariah jumped.

"You did it again! You scared the life out of me!" she cried, giving him a swat on the arm.

"It's not my fault this time. I was making plenty of noise, you just couldn't hear anything with the water running in here."

"I'll forgive you if you wash my back for me."

"I'm ready to do penance," he said joyfully, taking the sponge from her hand and squirting gel on it. She gave him her back and he marveled at how graceful the lines of it were. He brushed his knuckles down her back then up her spine, tracing the outline of each and every vertebra with one finger. He bent down and kissed the little dimple at the base of her spine, inserting his tongue into her crease. He gently smoothed the soapy sponge in lazy circles around her back then turned her so he could wash her front. Her nipples were so hard he thought they must be causing her pain. Swiveling his hand, he put the heel of it against her mound, inserting his long, middle finger between

her slippery lips. She was so primed that she exploded as soon as he touched her, arching into his hand, letting him pet her inside. Gabriel kept his hand there, feeling her muscles pulse with release, watching her face as she went into free fall. He opened the door just wide enough to snatch the condom from the counter then rolled it on, turned her around and slammed into her, his strokes frantic. Watching her achieve her release was enough to put him on the edge as well so a few well-placed strokes, some grabbing with her inner muscles and he erupted.

Mariah could feel his cock get hard and tight and she knew he was gone. Waves of release washed over them both, leaving them standing, panting, like long-distance runners. Gabriel's body was wrapped around her, one arm around her waist keeping her upright. Every inch of her body was in contact with his, as the water continued to pour over them. Mariah spoke, her words coming almost in gasps, "I have to try to get ready for work and all I want to do is curl up in bed with you and make love all day."

"Works for me," Gabriel panted into her ear. He gently withdrew, not wanting to cause her discomfort.

"I have to go to work today to get ready for tomorrow since I won't be there." Gabriel continued to rub her back with his hand, a gentle, comforting motion. He wanted her to spend the day with him but he knew that was impossible.

Opening the shower door, he climbed out, got rid of the condom and began to dry off. He'd wait 'til she left before he shaved. She'd made it very clear how she felt about missing his "man thing". "I'll go get breakfast while you get ready."

Mariah washed off the last of the soap and turning off the water, crawled out of the shower. Gabriel had left a fresh towel for her so she wrapped up in it and went to find something to wear. Another sundress and some underwear would suffice and she was ready to head down for breakfast. Gabriel was busy buttering toast when she walked into the kitchen. "I'll save my culinary skills for dinner tonight," he promised. "I've got some calls to make today but I'll pick you up after school." It was interesting to see how quickly they had fallen into such an easy morning routine. Mariah got out plates and glasses for juice while Gabriel retrieved the toast, butter and jam.

They ate at the big window watching the horses at the fence nearby. Seeing the horses reminded Mariah of their conversation about the Victorian costumes for the courtesan and the gentleman. She figured there must be at least one store in Chicago that catered to those kinds of accounterments, it would just be a matter of finding it. She could look in the yellow pages when they got there or maybe look on the internet before they left. She'd have to do that at home and figure out a way to do it without Gabriel finding out.

As Gabriel looked out the window, he was trying to figure out how to go shopping without Mariah when they were in Chicago. He needed to see Alex Randall so maybe he could go then. He'd never done anything like this before and he wanted it to be perfect.

"I need to do some errands..."

"I have some things to get..." They laughed as they spoke at the same time.

"You go first," Gabriel said.

"I've never been to Chicago before so I might want to do a bit of shopping while we're there. I'm sure I can get around by myself," she added, horrified that he might want to come and that would spoil the surprise.

He quickly picked up on the opportunity to shop without her, saying, "I need to see Alex Randall so I can drop you where you'd like to go or it might be easier to just take a cab."

"We can figure it out when we get there. I don't even know where I want to go."

"Maybe you could ask Laura to help you?" Mariah nearly choked on her toast. She couldn't imagine asking a woman she'd just met for the first time for ideas on where to buy costumes for sex play.

"Yeah, that's a great idea," she said, turning her head so Gabriel couldn't see the look on her face. You'd have to be pretty comfortable to ask another woman, "Oh, by the way, do you know where I can buy a courtesan costume and a corset?" But she was serious about the clothes. Her mind found it very easy to picture him wearing the tight buckskin pants, the boots and nothing else, galloping across the fields as she pretended to run away to avoid being kidnapped. He could catch her up in front of him then ride away with her perched on his lap. She hoped he was a good rider. He was going to need to be for this fantasy. Her thoughts were cut short as Gabriel began to tidy away the dishes. They finished off in the kitchen and went upstairs to get ready. They brushed their teeth together, grabbed the helmets and headed out.

After dropping Mariah off, he went to the sheriff's office to see Burke and brought him up to date on his plans. Burke was disappointed that being a deputy was not part of them but as Gabriel suspected, he promised him a list of prospective clients for his fledgling business. Gabriel was pleased to see that Burke seemed to accept his relationship with Mariah as a done deal. That was definitely his intent and he was planning on making it official when they came back from Chicago. Burke also offered to drop them off at the airport the next day since he already had the day off and Gabriel got the feeling that he was glad of something to do. He seemed like the type who was happiest when he was working or keeping busy. Knowing that it wasn't practical to try to haul their stuff to the airport on the bike, Gabriel was glad to take him up on his offer. Burke said he'd be over early since he'd rather be waiting at the airport than stuck along the road or in traffic somewhere and have them miss the flight.

At home, Gabriel called Alex Randall and confirmed arrangements to meet on Saturday. Alex had already made some calls of his own and was eager to get together and begin to draw up plans for their business venture. Gabriel knew that the melding of their arsenal of skills would make for a formidable team, especially with the contacts that Alex already had. Gabriel couldn't remember the last time something work-related had spurred him on. His job in Chicago had lost that ability long ago although he knew he had still poured everything he had into it. Maybe that's why it had so little appeal

for him now. It was time to move on. He sat at the kitchen table making a list of what he would need to set up an office for himself and Alex, planning to share it on Saturday, so they could see what they already had and what he would need to purchase. Alex had been in business long enough that Gabriel knew he would probably have a lot of equipment already but he wanted to make sure that he pulled his own weight in their endeavor.

His next call was to Benjamin, another of his contacts in Chicago. Benjamin and Gabriel had met under less than ideal circumstances—Benjamin was in the process of stealing his car when Gabriel caught him. He took one look at the skinny little kid who was stupid enough to steal a police officer's car and instead of turning him in, took him in. Ben's parents had written him off long ago as Gabriel found out when he contacted them.

"Do what you like with him," his father had said. "He's dead to us anyway." Turned out he came from a wealthy Chicago family but they had cut him loose when it was evident he wasn't worth grooming to take over the family business. It was obvious to Gabriel that much of Benjamin's behavior stemmed from a cry to his parents to pay attention to him and not to the business. His parents spent a great deal of time wining and dining friends from their own social strata or attending events at the country club. His mother was the perfect socialite wife, on just the correct number of boards and committees, a great fund-raiser. His father was a great golfer, a shrewd businessman who kept a smart, savvy mistress. Benjamin didn't fit in with that lifestyle. He was no longer a cute toddler, perfect for photo opportunities or a young boy eager to be photographed with his parents at yet another social function and he certainly couldn't condone his father's casual approach to his marriage vows. He had turned into a young man with a mind of his own who wasn't interested in all the social hoopla. In fact, he spoke out against many issues that were dear to their hearts and as a result his parents were satisfied to cast off their changeling son rather than try to understand him.

Gabriel remembered vividly the look on Ben's face when he felt Gabriel's hand on his shoulder and realized he'd been caught. He didn't try to bluff his way out of it instead he looked resigned to the consequences. When Gabriel finally wormed his name out of him and said he was going to call his parents, he was astounded when Ben began to laugh. It was a bitter laugh, a laugh that spoke volumes to Gabriel and sure enough when he spoke to the parents, he knew the laugh was warranted, there was no help coming from that quarter. He hung up the phone and Ben's life changed in that instant. Seeing the defeat and resignation in those young eyes, Gabriel knew he had to do something so he took him under his large wing. It wasn't easy for either of them, Ben fought every step of the way, it was all he knew, but when he graduated from high school it wasn't his parents in the front row cheering, it was Gabriel. Gabriel liked to think that his parents would be very proud to see the young man he had become. Heck, he had started his own computer software company. It was still small but he was making his own way and the company was growing by leaps and bounds.

He realized that Ben was a part of his life that he kept fairly private. His friends knew about him since he was glad to pick their brains for their advice and to share Ben's successes with them but he didn't want people thinking he was some kind of dogooder so he kept a fairly low profile when it came to Ben. Mariah would probably take him under her wing. That was, as soon as he told her about him. He was at college now as well as running his software company so he wasn't a teenager anymore but she had a soft spot in her heart for everyone, young and old, and Ben would be no different. He called and left a message asking if he could pick them up at the airport the next day. They could always take a cab if they needed but Gabriel knew Ben would be annoyed if he didn't get in touch with him first.

Then he started on the list of what he would need to do to move himself lock, stock and barrel to Hopeville. The list started to expand rapidly, give notice on his apartment and pay next month's rent, talk to his captain and hand in his badge—that would be a tough one he knew—go to the bank and transfer his accounts. If he didn't get everything done then he would go back for a day or two to tidy up any loose ends then he would be free to come back and start fresh with Mariah. He called Laura and made arrangements for them to pop over Friday night to see her and the baby. They were top on his list of people to see and he was finally going to get a chance to meet baby Gabe. He could hardly wait. Checking the clock, he saw that he just had time for a quick shower and a shave and it would be time to pick up Mariah. He had one last call to make and that was to the garage that was supposed to be repairing Mariah's car. The owner was so evasive about finishing the job that Gabriel couldn't figure out what was going on until something clicked in his brain. He remembered talking to Burke about the car repair and the funny look he had on his face.

"Did the sheriff make a call to you?" he asked.

"Well, maybe he did and maybe he didn't," the owner said evasively.

"Well, you can go ahead and fix the car. I'm staying so you don't need the excuse to push us together anymore."

"Thank God for that. I was getting tired of making excuses to Mariah about the damn car. Glad to hear you're staying. The sheriff said good things about you and our Mariah is well respected around here so we'll expect you to take good care of her." Gabriel wondered if he'd ever get used to living in a fish bowl which was what it was going to be like living here but he knew the closeness of the community would mean a lot as they put down their roots together. He wondered if Mariah had any inkling that her brother was involved in this plan to keep them riding the bike together. Probably not. She almost certainly believed that her brother had never had a devious thought in his whole life. He was kind of surprised himself. He had obviously passed muster with Burke and could continue his romancing of said sister. In some ways he liked the idea that Burke approved of him but on the other hand it really wouldn't have mattered. He'd already set his sights on having her and her brother's approval was nice but not necessary. A quick look at the clock and he knew he needed to get ready to go pick up

Mariah. He couldn't wait to see her. As he pulled up, she was just coming out the front door looking unhappy. He set the bike on the stand and walked to meet her.

"What's the matter?" he asked, hoping nothing had happened. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. I just got a call from my mechanic right at the end of the day telling me that my car is miraculously ready. Seems strange to me. He had no idea when it would be ready then out of the blue, it's fixed and I can come and pick it up," Gabriel couldn't contain his laughter which annoyed her even more.

"What! I'll admit it. I love the fact that you had to take me back and forth to school every day. I love riding behind you on the bike and feeling the movement of your body as you shift gears and bank into turns. It really turns me on and I'm happy to admit it." Gabriel pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his body which reacted predictably to her closeness.

Feeling him, thick and long between their bodies, she said, "Feels like someone's happy to see me." Gabriel ran his hand gently along her hair, so delighted to see her and have her in his arms.

"I've been glad of the excuse to have you behind me every day but we really have your brother Burke to thank for the prolonged enjoyment." Mariah pulled back and looked up at him.

"What would he have to do with getting my car fixed, or not fixed as the case may be?" She definitely had no idea that her brother had been helping their relationship.

"I think he was throwing us together to push our relationship along." Comprehension dawned.

"Well, looks like you've got the Burke Forrester seal of approval."

"It's nice to know he approves of me pursuing you?" Mariah made a face at his choice of verbs.

"Seducing you?" She laughed at that one.

"Romancing you?" She smiled at that one.

"Courting you?" She nodded, loving the Victorian overtones in that one. It was perfect. If this was courting then she loved it.

"Why don't I take you to the garage to pick up your car and I'll meet you at home?" Mariah climbed on behind him, gave him directions and since Hopeville was so small they were there in no time. The mechanic came out of the shop just in time to see him kissing her good-bye. Gabriel figured it probably wouldn't make much difference since he was pretty sure everyone in town knew that Miss Forrester had herself a new beau. He quite liked being Miss Forrester's new beau. He particularly liked the fringe benefits that came with being Miss Forrester's beau like mad, passionate sex in the bedroom, mad passionate sex in the kitchen, mad passionate sex in the front hall and mad passionate sex in the bathroom. He also just liked to be with her even when they

weren't making love. Hell, he'd like to be with her all the time if he could. He was really looking forward to tying up his affairs in Chicago and starting his life with her.

When Mariah turned into the driveway and drove up to the house, Gabriel was sitting on the front steps waiting for her. Before the car had even come to a stop, he was off the steps and striding over. Mariah rolled down the window and waited for him, watching his lithe, easy stride like a jungle cat on the prowl. She could envision him taking her from behind, putting his teeth to her neck like a panther as he slid into her. She could almost hear that deep purr he would have as he pinned her with his body and swung in and out of her like a piston. She came out of her reverie to find Gabriel leaning down with his elbows at the open window, calling her name. She had no idea how long he had been standing there but judging by the smile on his face, he knew what she had been thinking. He leaned right into the car to give her a deep kiss, sucking her tongue into his mouth and savoring it before he released it.

"Cat got your tongue?" he queried. Mariah couldn't help but laugh at the accuracy of his statement. How the heck did he know she'd been daydreaming about big cats, big cats that would pursue her relentlessly then mount her from behind, driving into her with grace and power?

"I was just daydreaming as I watched you walk over. Do you know you move like a big cat? I could feel the hair on the back of my neck rise in anticipation."

"I was going to ask you if you wanted to go to Fort Stockton for dinner tonight but I need to have you as soon as possible."

"Why don't you come around and get in the car?" she asked as she began to undo the buttons of her top. Gabriel watched as each button undone revealed a little more of her creamy skin. As the last button passed through the buttonhole, Mariah pulled her top apart to reveal the mounds of her breasts pushed up for his perusal by her fancy bra. He was afraid he was going to drool all over the car just from looking at her. Mariah fanned herself with her hand then pulled her skirt up to the tops of her legs, saying, "My goodness, it certainly is warm, isn't it. I wonder if this is a good time to tell you that I went into the washroom at the garage and took off my panties. It's such a hot day and they were making me so hot too." Gabriel slid his gaze down and, sure enough, he could see the little curls of her reddish-blonde pubic hair and peeking out, her pouty, pink lips. He ran around the front of the car, threw open the passenger door and practically fell onto the seat. Mariah had to laugh, he certainly could move when he saw something he wanted, feline grace be damned, but she grew serious when she saw the look of open hunger on his face.

"Please tell me you have a condom handy?" she begged. He kept them on him at all times now since he always wanted to be ready to make love to her, so reaching into his pocket, he dug one out and threw it on the console between them. Mariah reached under her seat and pulled the lever that slid it back. She was going to need some room to maneuver if she wanted to get at him. She was thankful that she was small enough to crawl over to him and plop down, straddling his legs. As she popped the buttons on his

jeans, his cock sprang up eager for her to make use of him. Mariah was delighted to see that he wasn't wearing underwear—it made things so much easier.

Gabriel protected them then lifted Mariah and set her on the tip of his cock. She used her knees to remain poised there, tormenting him as she took hold of him and slid his engorged penis up and down, up and down the length of her slit. Gabriel was ready to scream from the agony of waiting until she guided him inside and her cunt swallowed him whole. She placed her hands on his shoulders for leverage and lifted up so he was kept inside her only by the head of his phallus then she glided back down until she could feel his coarse pubic hair tangling with hers. Each push up and glide down made a soft sucking sound, amplified in the silence of the car. The sound of their breathing was like horses at the finish line, the race almost run. Mariah tightened her muscles on him then relaxed them, not moving anything but those strong muscles in the wall of her womb. Gabriel could feel her grabbing him, massaging him with those muscles. She must have known it would drive him crazy. Then he felt those walls begin to flutter and knew she was close and sure enough, she threw her head back, gritted her teeth and grabbed him like a vise. It went on and on until he felt the answering reaction in his balls and cock. Tight, tight, tight then release, blessed release! This time, he put his head forward and rested it against her breast where he could hear her heart striving to return to a normal rhythm.

Gabriel lay there for a long time before his ability to think returned. This woman had the ability to turn him completely inside out and he loved it. Throwing himself back against the seat, he put his head back and closed his eyes until he felt her hand on his jaw as she traced along his bristly shadow.

Mariah watched as he languidly opened his eyes to the stroking of his jaw. His beautiful dark eyes still flamed with desire for her, indicating that this lovemaking was just a respite until they found themselves somewhere more comfortable. This bout had barely taken the edge off their need to have each other but just as Gabriel reached for her, her stomach let out a loud rumble. He looked at her with a questioning look—part smile, part frown.

"So what were you saying about going out for dinner?" she asked, her breath still coming in broken pants. "Sorry, but I skipped lunch to get everything ready for tomorrow and I'm starved."

"I wanted to take you to Fort Stockton for dinner. There must be somewhere there to eat." Before she had a chance to reply, Gabriel had framed her face with his hands and pulled her mouth down to meet his. He couldn't get enough of her delicious mouth and tugged her upper lip with his teeth, biting just hard enough to make her jump. He traced the outline of her lips with his tongue then slid it inside to duel with hers. Mariah let him pleasure her mouth then broke away, much to his dismay.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel," she said, "but I really am famished. I need to eat."

"We just have to figure out how to get apart then we can get going." Mariah solved the dilemma by using her legs to lift off him but decided she hated the feel of him sliding out of her. She wanted to keep him hard inside her forever to pleasure her whenever she wanted but she knew she had to be practical so she grabbed a tissue from her purse and handed it to him.

"Here, you can put the condom in there." Gabriel disposed of it then got out of the car so he could do up his jeans. "Too hot for underwear for you too?" she said, with a wry smile as he tucked his cock in and did up the buttons. He just smiled that smile, that smile that was the promise of things to come.

"Do you need to do anything before we go?" Gabriel opened the screen door for her and she pushed open the inside door. Throwing her stuff onto the hall table, Mariah called to him as she hurried up the stairs.

"I wanted to wear something nice for our date. Can we take the car instead of the bike?"

"Not a problem for me. I'll just get rid of this rubber and wait for you on the porch." Gabriel sat down on the porch swing, figuring he'd have a long wait but Mariah was back down within ten minutes. The door opened and she stepped out, wearing a short clingy red dress. The dress had tiny spaghetti straps and a handkerchief hem so it swirled around her body as she walked. On her feet were a pair of impossibly high matching red fuck-me shoes and Gabriel nearly swallowed his tongue. She had taken her hair out of the customary braid so it hung down her back to the tops of her legs. He had forgotten how long it was when not in the braid.

"Ready to go?" she called to him.

"More like ready to come," he said. "That dress oughta be outlawed." She looked down, disappointed for it was one she had bought on a whim but never worn until now and she loved it.

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"Like it? I'd like to rip it off you and fuck you where you stand!" he growled at her, pushing to his feet and stalking toward her.

"Don't you dare rip this dress," she yelled, putting up her hands to ward him off but instead of tearing the dress off, he put his arm behind her knees and swept her up in his arms. To her delight, he swung around in circles, her hair swirling out around them, until they were both dizzy, collapsing on the swing, Gabriel still holding her in his arms.

"You look so beautiful that I may just peel that dress off you whenever I get a chance." He set her on her feet then, taking her hand in his, led her to the car. It was such a clingy dress that he was very curious to know if she had opted for no underwear. He could hardly wait to find out. He opened the door for her and watched as she sat down then swung her legs in. He was hoping to get a look as she sat but the car was too low and he walked around to the driver's door, disappointed. Mariah handed him the keys and he started the car, taking one last sideways glance at her just in case he could take a surreptitious peek at her underwear.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gabriel lay in bed, replaying the evening in his head. He couldn't recall the last time he had so much fun with a woman, in fact, he couldn't recall the last time he'd had that much fun, period. They drove to Fort Stockton but Mariah made him stop as soon as they got to town so she could take his picture next to Paisano Pete, the world's largest roadrunner. He hated having his picture taken but she wouldn't take no for an answer. "I'll make it worth your while," she said and sure enough as she turned to walk back to the car, she flipped up her dress to show him what she had on underneath—nothing.

Then she took him to her favorite Mexican restaurant and expected him to calmly walk inside and eat knowing all she had on was that wisp of a dress. He managed it but he'd been afraid his hard-on wouldn't fit under the table. She kept leaning forward to talk to him and he finally figured out that was why he hadn't been able to talk her into sitting next to him. She'd been adamant about sitting across from him and then leaned over constantly as she talked to him. She knew darn well he could peer down her dress and see those gorgeous breasts just begging for his mouth on them. He could even see how her nipples pebbled every time he looked at her. If he wasn't looking down her dress then he was looking at the front of her dress where her nipples poked against the clingy fabric. He was afraid his cock was going to end up lifting the table right off the floor. She was such a little tease. He tried to think pure thoughts, pure thoughts like how nice she looked in that red dress and how much he wanted to tear it off her, with his teeth. Pure thoughts, pure thoughts!

Once his massive erection was under some semblance of control, he looked around at the little restaurant Mariah had chosen. From the outside it didn't look like much but when they got inside, the place was jumping. There was music playing from somewhere, people laughing and singing and the most wonderful aroma filled the air. They laughed and talked and ate lots of spicy food, washing it down with Dos Equis. The food was incredible and the beer, icy cold. He managed to wait until they got all the way home before he stripped that red dress off her gorgeous body where he was absolutely delighted to discover that it was just as he suspected...she was buck naked underneath. Granted they didn't make it all the way upstairs first but they were really getting the hang of making love on the stairs. This time, he didn't feel like a pretzel after they got up. His idea of keeping condoms stashed throughout the house was beginning to look better and better because the before-bed snack led to another close encounter in the kitchen and he barely had time to find a condom in his pocket before she was on him and he was surging into her. Maybe they could keep candy dishes all around the house but instead of filling them with bonbons, they could fill them with condoms. It would take the guesswork out of being prepared although it might set company to wondering.

As Mariah made a little snort in her sleep, he looked down at her where she lay sleeping in his arms. Without waking, she reached up to push her hair off her face and snuggled closer to him, burrowing her hand into the hair on his chest. No wonder she was sleeping so soundly after their frenzied lovemaking. He was feeling a bit tender himself in quite a few places especially those spots where she liked to nip him.

He lay for a time, thinking about fate and how it played such a strong hand in the direction his life had taken. How was it that Mariah just happened to break down on that stretch of highway when he hadn't really planned on taking that road? He had only decided earlier that day that he would take the less traveled route, the one that put them on a collision course. Someone could have come along before he did and rescued her so that when he passed by, she was long gone. Whatever the Fates had in mind that day, he wanted to get down on his knees and thank them for their generosity and sense of humor in throwing the two of them together. He couldn't imagine a more perfect partner with her sense of humor, her sense of fair play and her sense of sexual adventure. He knew he wasn't much of a catch but he would certainly try to be a good partner and keep her happy.

The next thing he knew, the sun wasn't even up yet and Mariah was straddling his thighs, sheathing him in a condom. What a great way to be wakened up, to look into the face of the woman you love as she takes you into her body. He loved the feel of her swallowing him, her body tenderly adjusting to his girth. Smiling down at him, she set a leisurely morning-wake-up pace that let him rouse slowly and languidly. It was as if he could feel the blood picking up its pace as it coursed through his body, pumping like Poe's telltale heart in his cock. This time Mariah leaned back, resting her hands on his thighs so the angle of penetration seemed sharper, deeper. She used her hands to move her body up and down his swollen cock while he thrust his body up to meet her. Suddenly she lifted right up and off him, moving down out of his reach but before he had time to question her, she had turned her back to him and was sliding down on him from a totally different angle. Gabriel couldn't believe how her change of position had intensified the sensations. It was as if his whole being was centered in his penis and the gentle sway of her body as she milked him.

For a time Gabriel let her pleasure them with her slow seductive rhythm then, with a shove, he pushed her forward and got to his knees, mounting her from behind. From this position, he could bite at her back as he slammed into her. He grabbed the tendon in her neck with his teeth and nipped along it, following the delicate line of her neck then her shoulder. This position made it so easy to drive into her, increasing the enjoyment for him but he could tell from her moans and cries of pleasure that it was equally enjoyable for her. He felt like a stallion covering a mare and her screams made his shaft feel like it was the size of a stallion's. He knew this time he wasn't going to be able to wait for her unless he fainted, which seemed like a distinct possibility. With a roar like a lion, he poured into her, grabbing her shoulders and pounding his cock into her as hard as he could. Luckily he heard her answering scream and felt her surrender seconds later. He collapsed on top of her and, for what seemed like eons, she held the

two of them up. Finally Gabriel rolled to his side, taking her with him and they lay cocooned together as the warm breeze wafted through the window, caressing them where they lay.

"I don't have to go to work today," she whispered, excitedly.

"We're doing a road trip, honey," he said, grabbing her around the waist and tickling her. She struggled halfheartedly to break free, not really wanting to leave the warmth of his arms so she grabbed his hands and pinned them against her.

"What time do we need to leave?" She was hoping to snuggle in bed as long as possible.

"We don't need to leave quite as early as I thought since we don't have to borrow Burke's car. We could just take your car and leave it at the Park and Fly unless you want me to go get his truck?"

"It makes more sense to take my car and leave it at the airport. Hopefully it will still be there when we come back on Sunday," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'll give him a quick call when we're on the road. No sense waking him up this early in the morning." Gabriel hugged her to him, trying to prolong their last bit of time together before they had to get up and start getting ready. He wanted to keep the world at bay a little longer and pretend there was no one but them.

Mariah spooned herself against him, marveling at how they fit so perfectly together as he sheltered her slender form with his powerful one, the hairs on his chest tickling her back as he wiggled against her. She could feel the answering reaction in his cock as it began to harden and creep up her crease. It felt like an iron bar that had been heated in a forge. She knew if she reached back and caressed him with her hand, the skin would be warm and supple but right now it felt anything but supple, hard as steel was what it felt like. Grabbing a tissue from the night table, she took the used condom off him and wrapped it up then, sheathing him with a fresh one, let him slide into her from the back. It was exquisite torture as he took all the time in the world to put his throbbing member into her sheath. Her passage felt so tender from their recent bouts of lovemaking yet she felt it stretch to accommodate his length and incredible thickness.

Placing his leg over hers, he pinned her to the bed and let their bodies take on a slow and easy rhythm but with her leg pinned beneath his, every stroke seemed to take him deeper and deeper until he felt her body begin to soften and become slicker with each stroke. He could feel her breathing coming in gasps then that telltale clutch that signified she was ready for takeoff and take off she did, taking him to the stars with her. He changed the rhythm so he could pound into her and yelled in her ear as he followed right behind. Then there was utter silence, broken only by the sound of the two lovers trying to find their way down, the rough breathing, the gentle kisses, the morning breeze fanning their sweaty bodies.

They lay for a time, lost in their own thoughts until Mariah looked at the bedside clock and realized that unfortunately it was time to get up and get going. They really needed to get ready as she'd rather be waiting at the airport than rushing to get there at

the last minute. Gabriel struggled to hold on to her as Mariah pulled away and climbed out of bed. She stood at the edge of the bed and looked down at him. She had to smile at the picture he made, such a blend of cute and supremely sexy with his hair tousled from sleep and that dark morning shadow highlighting his strong jaw. "I need to get ready and pack a few things," she said, feeling bereft without the warmth of his body. "I'll go shower while you get your stuff packed up." She put up her hands as he started to get out of bed. "No. You just stay there for a minute. I'd better just shower quickly by myself or I'll never be able to be ready on time." Gabriel gave her a poor, sad puppy look when she said about showering alone but he knew she was right. One minute in the shower with her, seeing all that beautiful soft skin and fondling those beautiful breasts and he'd be looking for another condom, tout de suite.

Making an x over his heart and raising two fingers to seal his promise, he said in a monotone as if repeating an oath, "I promise to be a good boy and get ready while you're in the shower." Then he added, "Much as it goes against my basest desires." Mariah couldn't help but laugh at his promise, knowing how strong his basest desires were. She'd happily been on the receiving end of them multiple times and could bear witness to how good his basest desires were. She turned and scampered to the bathroom, giving him an enticing view of her rear as she did so. Gabriel put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling as he listened to the sound of the water coming on then the sliding of the shower door. He knew she was climbing in now and squeezing gel onto her hands to soap her body clean. He really wanted to be the one behind those hands, caressing her with every stroke. With a loud groan, he pulled himself to his feet and attempted to block out the sounds coming from the bathroom. He even went so far as to shut the door but it didn't really matter. Even when he couldn't hear her he could still picture the events in his head and knew that she was soaping her breasts, her belly, between her legs. He could feel his soapy hands between her legs, tugging on her generous labia, massaging them, squeezing them.

Bag. Gotta find a bag, he thought, dragging his mind from the shower images. Pulling open a drawer, he rooted around and grabbed a pair of clean jeans, a few t-shirts, some socks and even a couple of pairs of underwear. Throwing them into a bag he found in the closet, he walked soundlessly to the bathroom door and silently opened it. He could see her body through the frosted glass of the door and see that she was washing her legs and feet, could make out the outline of her shapely butt as she bent over.

"I know you're out there," she called to him. He began to laugh.

"How the heck did you know I was out here? I didn't make a sound."

"This time you didn't have to. I think my sixth sense has finally kicked in," she said.

"Are you packed yet?" Mariah asked as she stepped from the shower.

"I put some clothes in a bag that I found in the closet. I hope that's all right." Gabriel took a towel from the pile on the shelf and wrapped it around her. As she took hold of it, he reached under it and pulled her hair out and began to gently dry it with another towel.

"I meant to get a bag out for you before I got in the shower but you made me forget."

He grinned wickedly. "I do have that effect on women," he said sarcastically. Mariah knew he was kidding because she was well aware that he had no idea of the effect he had on women. She had seen it firsthand in the restaurant in Fort Stockton. You'd think they'd never seen a good-looking man before, the way they stared at him when he passed. She might have been invisible for all the attention the waitress had paid to her but she couldn't do enough for Gabriel. Taking a quick look at him, she knew what it was. He was so strong and powerful yet he had a quiet edge to him. It didn't help that he was drop-dead gorgeous and that hair. My God, that hair was the stuff of a woman's fantasy. When they made love and his hair flowed around them, flowed over her, it was like a lover's touch so soft and gentle, so seductive.

Gabriel watched her looking at him but knew she wasn't staring at him, rather she was thinking about something. She wore a devilish little smile and he wondered what was going through her mind.

"What are you thinking about?" he quizzed. Mariah focused on his face, realizing that he was talking to her. "What are you thinking about?" he repeated.

"That you don't have any idea how gorgeous you are. That you don't realize women are throwing themselves at you trying to get your attention and that I wanted to tear the waitress into tiny pieces for the way she kept looking at you at the restaurant," she all but yelled at him, her voice getting louder and louder. Gabriel was stunned by her words. He really had no idea that women looked at him like that. He knew that he wasn't ugly but he didn't think he was a movie star. He was delighted to know that Mariah had been jealous. Maybe she felt the same way about him as he did about her. Good! He wasn't sure what her answer would be when he showed her his present but he was hopeful.

"I need to get dressed and pack," she said, waltzing past him, a bit chagrined with what she had revealed to him. She wasn't sure what he felt for her but hoped it was something that could grow into love. She hadn't intended to bare her heart to him but he just had that effect on her. He was right. He really did have that effect on women!

Gabriel followed her and sat down on the bed, saying, "I'll just sit here and watch." Mariah gave him a withering stare but he just sat and smiled angelically while she moved around the room. "Don't forget to pack some of that sexy underwear," he said. "On second thought, maybe don't pack any at all. I like that idea better." A lacy bra came flying across the room and landed on his face, followed by Mariah who ran across the room, launching herself at him. They fell back on the bed together laughing. He hugged her tightly and planted kisses all over her face, telling her with his actions, how much she meant to him.

"Gabriel?" she said quietly. He looked up into her beautiful face. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," he said and he knew it was true. He had never said it to another woman because he had never felt about another woman the way he felt about her. Mariah pushed herself to her feet and Gabriel followed, pulling her into his arms. "I don't want to wait to celebrate this occasion. It's not every day that the woman I love tells me she loves me. Why don't we stop for breakfast on the way to the airport?" he asked solemnly.

"I'd love to have breakfast with you especially if it means we won't have to bother making something before we go. There's a neat little café the other side of Del Rio, we could stop there."

"That sounds great. We can drive for a while then take a break and have some breakfast." Mariah continued to putter around the room, grabbing stuff she might need and setting it on the bed to pack. She moved into the bathroom and he heard her brushing her teeth then assembling the creams and lotions and potions she'd need in Chicago. With a start, Gabriel jumped up and grabbed the box of condoms from the night table. No sense having to worry about protection, he thought. Chances were pretty good that they were going to be making love while in Chicago and he didn't want to have to worry about having to run out and buy them. In fact, it was just as well they had bought such a big box. Mariah appeared in the doorway of the bathroom with her toiletry bag in her arms. Going directly to the night table, she opened the drawer but appeared momentarily confused when she found the box of condoms gone.

"Gabriel..." she began.

"Already packed," he said, anticipating her question. She smiled at him then dropped her bag next to the pile of clothes on the bed. "Are you going to need all those clothes? It's just for the weekend, you know."

"I don't know what we'll be doing so I want to take enough stuff to cover all eventualities. It'll all fit in one small bag. You'll see," she said confidently. Gabriel was astounded to see that it did all fit in one bag and she didn't have to crush everything beyond recognition or sit on it to do up the zipper. As she finished zipping the bag, Mariah wiped her hands together and gave him a resounding smile of triumph. "I did have my doubts," she confessed good-naturedly.

After grabbing a quick shower and shaving before Mariah had a chance to notice, Gabriel brushed his teeth, threw his few bathroom necessities in his bag and figured they were good to go. Taking hold of the two bags, he went down the stairs and left them right by the front door. When he turned to speak to Mariah, he realized that she hadn't come downstairs with him.

"Are you coming? It's time to go." He walked to the bottom of the stairs and stood waiting for her. "What're you doing?" he called up to her.

"Looking for the key."

"What?" he yelled incredulously. "How come you suddenly need the key?" Mariah appeared at the top of the stairs, brandishing a key.

"I try to remember to lock the door whenever I go away. I thought it would make you feel better if I did," she said as she descended the stairs.

"I do think it's a good idea," he said, as he fished in the pocket of his leather jacket, looking for the keys to the bike. "I'm going to move the bike to the back of the house and then we can go." He gave her a quick kiss on the mouth then headed out the door. Mariah heard the sound of the bike's powerful engine then the roar diminished as Gabriel drove around to the back of the house. When he came back around the corner of the house, she had the two bags on the porch and was locking the door. He watched, astounded, as she hid the key under a flowerpot on the windowsill. It was so like her to hide the key somewhere where a baby could find it.

"Mariah, why are you hiding the key in such as obvious place?" he asked, mystified.

"I've been hiding it there for years. If I changed my hiding place, I wouldn't remember where it was." Gabriel shook his head, not quite sure how logical her answer was. He was about to suggest that they take the key with them when he realized that it didn't really matter. This wasn't the big city and the chances of someone breaking into the place while they were gone were slim. He felt almost lighthearted when he realized that it didn't matter whether they locked the house or not. It would still be safe but he was pleased she wanted to set his mind at ease by locking it.

They loaded the bags into the trunk and set off. It was a wonderful time of day for driving. The early morning had a quietness and coolness about it that would dissipate with the rising sun. They rode in silence for almost half an hour, so long that Gabriel assumed Mariah was asleep. He jumped when she spoke, her voice breaking the stillness.

"Who's meeting us at the airport?" she queried. "I remember you telling me but that seems like weeks ago." She turned to look at Gabriel, loving how the early morning light bathed him in gold. He was such a good-looking man, her man and she loved him. Gabriel realized that he hadn't told her much about Ben so he took a breath and recounted the story of their meeting and how Ben was like a son to him.

"Don't get all mushy on me," he said when he heard her sniffling.

"I can't help it. You are such a good man. I can't wait to meet him." Gabriel went on to tell her about what Ben was up to now and what he wanted to do with his life.

"A software company seems like it could be risky," she said.

"It can be pretty risky but he's careful," he said proudly. "I just wish his parents had enough sense to realize what they're missing but I guess that's their loss and my gain." Mariah sat for a few minutes, thinking about Ben.

"It seems such a shame that his parents have cut him off like that. They don't know how lucky they are. Many people would trade places with them in an instant." Gabriel smiled at his little fireball. She cared so deeply about injustice.

As they passed through Del Rio, Mariah gave him directions to the little café and soon they were sitting enjoying homemade waffles with hot coffee and freshly squeezed

orange juice. They toasted to love, tipped the waitress outrageously and got back on the road.

"I phoned Burke while you paid the bill," Mariah said when they were underway. "Don't forget, the next bill is mine. I don't want you paying for everything." Gabriel wasn't really interested in discussing it. She was there because he asked her so he would be footing the bill but he said okay to keep the peace, for now.

"I completely forgot about phoning him." He turned at the sound of her laughter.

"He sounded pretty sheepish when I mentioned my car was fixed and we wouldn't need his truck. I told him you were staying no matter what so he could stop trying to fix us up. He laughed and told me to have a good time in Chicago."

When they arrived at the outskirts of San Antonio, they were quickly swept into the heavy traffic making its way into the city. It was nerve-racking after the intimate drive from Hopeville and Mariah found it downright scary with vehicles whizzing by. Coming from Chicago, Gabriel took it in stride and drove with quiet confidence.

"I looked on the internet yesterday to get instructions for how to get to the airport," Mariah said as she took the paper out of her purse.

"That was absolutely brilliant!" Gabriel said, beaming at her. "That oughtta make it a lot easier if we have at least a rough idea how to get there."

"We've got lots of time before we need to check in so even if we get lost, we should be fine. Don't worry!" Mariah kept her eye out for the signs while Gabriel drove and they reached the parking lot without a hitch. As soon as the car came to a stop in the assigned spot, he leaned over and gave her a mouth-numbing kiss. "Great job navigating," he said, reluctant to pull back from the kiss. The shuttle bus took them to the terminal where they checked in, leaving them time to walk around the airport unencumbered by their bags. Hand in hand, they strolled along, poking into stores and kiosks. Gabriel bought a stuffed toy for baby Gabe while Mariah picked out something nice for Laura and before they knew it they were through the metal detectors and into the departure lounge.

When their flight was called they boarded the plane with everyone else and settled into their seats. Mariah realized that she was so excited she could hardly sit still. Gabriel was tickled to see how excited she was about the whole adventure. He was looking forward to seeing Ben when they got to Chicago and wondered if he'd be able to join them for supper. He had a few favorite restaurants in the city and hoped Mariah wasn't too tired to go out for dinner. His reverie was broken by the feeling of Mariah's hand searching for his as they readied for takeoff. She had a grip of iron as they taxied down the runway and lifted off. He turned to look at her, smiling to see that she had her eyes tightly shut and was muttering something that might have been a prayer. The seat belt light went off and activity resumed on the flight. The flight passed quickly, despite the fact that Gabriel couldn't convince her that she needed to join the mile-high club. She looked at him like he was crazy.

"There's hardly room in there to swing a cat. I can't imagine trying sexual gymnastics in a space that size," she told him but her look said she was intrigued. Maybe he'd be able to convince her to try it on the return flight, tell her they'd just have to be creative. He'd have a couple of days to work on it. He'd never tried it himself but he had to admit that the idea was interesting. Maybe it would feel different at a high altitude. It certainly couldn't feel better, that would be impossible.

The disembodied voice came on to tell everyone to put on their seat belts and return their seats to an upright position as they would be landing in Chicago right on time at 14:31. Mariah watched the landscape appear out the little porthole then change as they approached the Windy City. The touchdown was so gentle that she wanted to cheer but turned to smile at Gabriel instead.

He knew she was glad to be on *terra firma* again. The wait for their luggage seemed to take longer than the flight but eventually they were out the sliding doors, looking for Ben. Gabriel's height allowed him to tower over everyone so it was easy for him to scan the crowd searching for him but to no avail. They walked down the roped-off walkway looking left and right but Gabriel was unable to spot him. Suddenly the crowd in front of them parted and standing at the end was a small woman with a little baby in a baby-carrier on her front. She was searching the passengers earnestly, scrutinizing each one as they came down the human tunnel. It took a few seconds for his brain to register what he was seeing and when he did he was afraid he was going to burst into tears. Grabbing Mariah's hand, he dragged her with him, the woman finally turning to see them coming toward her. Her face lit up and she ran and threw herself into his arms, the baby snuggled between them. Mariah was at a loss as to what was happening. Who was this tiny woman with the baby?

"Oh, Gabriel," the woman cried, tears streaming down her face. She reached up to put her hands on each side of his face as if to make sure he was real. Gabriel drew her tighter into his arms, turning his head so he could rest the two of them under his chin. Grabbing Mariah, he pulled her into his arms so they were all included in the hug. The disgorging crowd swirled around them but the tiny group was oblivious to anything but themselves.

"Let's get out of everyone's way," Gabriel said around the lump in his throat as he steered the little group down the walkway and off to the side.

"Mariah, this is Laura," he said putting his arm around the petite woman, "and I assume this little bundle is Gabe."

Laura her hand out for Mariah to shake but instead of taking her hand, Mariah put her arms around her and whispered, "Thank you so much for inviting us. You have no idea how much this means to Gabriel."

Laura pulled back and smiled into Mariah's face, "I'm so glad you were able to come too. I was so curious to meet you after Gabriel and I spoke on the phone. I'd been so worried about him then when he phoned he sounded like he'd found home. I wanted to meet the woman who gave him that place." Mariah felt herself blushing at Laura's words and motioned to the sleeping baby to hide her embarrassment.

"Is this Milagro?" she asked.

"His name is Milagro Gabriel Hunter but we call him Gabe. He's named after my husband's best friend." Laura took Gabriel's hand and held it as if she couldn't believe that he was really there. Mariah reached out to the baby and touched his soft hair with one finger, marveling at the softness.

"He's so beautiful," she sighed. She felt that mounting desire to experience the closeness with a child of her own, to grow round with a baby and surround it with the love of a mother and a father. Gabriel must have sensed what she was thinking for he put his arm around her and drew her close, letting his warmth and love flow into her. Suddenly the little group realized that the crowd had dispersed and they were alone at the arrival gate.

"Maybe we should get going?" Laura suggested with a laugh. "Is there anything else we need to do here?" Gabriel and Mariah both shook their heads so they grabbed their bags and Laura led the way to the elevators. They came out near the parking garage and followed Laura to her car. After the bags were stowed in the trunk, Laura buckled the baby in the baby seat in the back beside Mariah while Gabriel climbed in the front with Laura. Gabriel waited until Laura had navigated her way out of the airport complex and was headed into the city before he spoke.

"So how come you're here instead of Ben?" Gabriel asked. "Not that we're not delighted," he added. Laura drove carefully but Mariah could see she was completely at ease driving in a big city like Chicago.

"Ben was going to come and pick you up but I told him I couldn't wait to see you. We argued, I won and here we are, baby Gabe and me. Ben said he'd see you tomorrow afternoon." Mariah liked this woman's sense of humor and hoped they got to spend some time together while she and Gabriel were in town.

"So how have things been?" Gabriel asked, turning to watch her as she drove. He hadn't meant to ask so soon but he really wanted to make sure she was okay.

"Things were pretty rough right after Hank died but I had Gabe to focus on and that made me keep going even when I didn't want to. Some days I found it hard to get out of bed but I'd look at Gabe and realize that a part of Hank would always be with me." Laura wiped her eyes as she talked about her husband, the pain still fresh. "Hank's buddies from work have been so good to me but they have their own families and sometimes it hurts too much to be included because Hank isn't there. I don't know whether I want to be part of the old life I had or whether I want to start fresh somewhere else. I know there will be insurance money coming eventually. I don't like to think about that but it's a fact and it'll give Gabe and me some options. I know there will be money if we want to go somewhere else."

They drove in silence for a few minutes as everyone thought about Hank. Gabriel was so glad to see Laura yet it brought home the fact that Hank was gone. He was gone and the ache was still there but he found he could handle it. He had Mariah to thank for that.

Mariah wondered what Gabriel was feeling, being here with Laura and knowing that Hank was gone. When they were in Hopeville it had been easier to talk about Hank's death but now they were in Chicago and things were so immediate. She hoped he was okay.

As if he could read her mind, Gabriel spoke, "I thought I was going to be wandering forever trying to forget what happened, trying to outrun the guilt I felt and the blame that I thought I deserved." He looked back at Mariah as if to gather strength from her presence and continued, "I ran into Mariah out in the middle of nowhere, her car broken down and I thought she was an angel standing by the side of the road." Mariah laughed at his take on their meeting.

"He took off his helmet and I thought it was Lucifer come to take me," she remembered. She also remembered the lust she felt the moment their eyes met and how she knew it was inevitable they were going to go back to her house and make love. She could see by the look on Laura's face that she was enjoying listening to the recounting of that first meeting.

"Enough said that she helped me deal with Hank's death and encouraged me to get in touch with you. Now I want to talk about something else if that's all right with you two." Laura and Mariah both nodded. The baby began to fuss in his sleep and Mariah watched as his tiny rosebud mouth moved as if he were nursing. She reached over and gently took his hand, noticing that for such a little guy he had a tight grip. She looked up as Laura spoke.

"I didn't know if you would want to come over for dinner tonight. I thought I would leave that up to you two. I'll drop you off at your house, Gabriel and Ben has your car ready if you want to use it."

"We never really talked about what we were going to do when we got here but we certainly want to spend time with you and Gabe. Maybe we'll drop our stuff off, take a bit of a breather and come over in a while. I don't want to put you to any trouble," Gabriel said. Laura had seen the way these two looked at each other so she figured that taking a breather probably involved getting naked. She winced as she realized that was something she really missed since Hank's death, that intimacy with a man. Even while she was pregnant, she and Hank had still enjoyed making love. They enjoyed finding new positions as she got bigger and bigger. She missed him so much and hoped someday she'd find another special man who would love her and Gabe.

"I wouldn't mind just sitting down for a minute and catching my breath before we venture out," Mariah said. "We were up early and it's a long drive to the airport so I'd love to sit and put my feet up for a minute. That is if no one minds."

"I made lasagna so I'll just start it cooking and we can eat whenever you get there." Laura slowed the car to a stop in front of a nice old brownstone and turned off the engine. "Here we are." Laura popped the trunk and Gabriel and Mariah got out. Gabriel grabbed the bags from the trunk then leaned in the open passenger door to say good-bye and let her know they would be over in a couple of hours. Taking the two bags, Gabriel led Mariah up the steps to his apartment building. He set the bags down

and slid the key into the lock, opening the door and ushering her in ahead of him. The tiny elevator took them up to the third floor where Gabriel unlocked the door to his apartment. He put out his foot expecting to trap his cat who loved to sneak out when the door was open then remembered that Ben had taken the scruffy old guy when Gabriel had left on his wanderings. Laura was absolutely right. Mariah hardly had time to see the living room to marvel at how tidy everything was before Gabriel had her in the bedroom and was stripping off her clothes.

"I've never made love to you in Chicago before," he explained. That certainly seemed a good enough reason to Mariah. He was so tender with her, gently pulling off her t-shirt and skirt.

"You cheated," he said, wagging his finger at her. "You wore underwear. I thought you weren't going to bring any with you."

"That was your hope," Mariah said, laughing. "I need to be practical and wearing underwear is definitely practical." Gabriel seemed delighted to peel the underwear off, with his teeth, then she teased him by taking her own sweet time to divest him of his clothes. As they sank to the bed together, Gabriel said, "I'm so glad you came with me so I could share this with you. I love you, you know."

Their lovemaking started out slowly and tenderly with long, hot kisses and gentle caresses. As they lay across the bed facing each other, Gabriel shivered as Mariah ran her hand down his arm, tracing her fingertips along his hip. He watched her bring her hand around to the front to trace his hipbone then draw a line through his belly button to trail along the other hipbone. He loved it how she kept her touch light as if he was precious and fragile, tantalizing him with a hint of things to come. His poor penis bobbed in front of her, begging for attention but she ignored it and continued to trace down one leg to the knee then up the inside of his leg.

Gabriel had to grit his teeth to keep from howling when she moved her finger up his inner thigh. The sensations were so mixed—it tickled, it tantalized, it tormented, it teased. His skin felt too tight and he was having trouble catching his breath.

He breathed a sigh of relief as she pushed him to his back and took him in hand. He hissed as she swirled her tongue around the top, tracing a line down his cock with the very tip of her tongue. With one hand she gently massaged his balls and ran her finger down the tight little crease from his balls to his puckered hole.

It was such a pronounced little line and he loved to feel her tracing it. Then she stopped.

"Gabriel, could we try something different?" she asked hesitantly.

"I suppose so. What do you want to do?" he said, curious to know what was going through her head.

"Could you go on your hands and knees on the bed for me?" Mariah wasn't sure if he would be comfortable doing that for her but hey, she hadn't had any trouble doing it for him. Gabriel looked at her for a long time, trying to decide on his comfort level. Mariah was almost ready to tell him to forget it when he pulled away from her and went on all fours in front of her. Mariah couldn't believe how beautiful he was from this angle. The tops of his legs were so muscular and hairy. His butt was so tight that she couldn't resist running her hands across his cheeks. She felt his body shiver in response. Sitting back on her haunches, she spread his legs a bit farther apart and was rewarded with a spectacular view of his balls and massively erect penis hanging down between his legs. She knew some people would have thought it rude and ugly but she wished she were an artist so she could paint all the colors and textures that made up his body, even here in this secret place. The line up his crease was so prominent here that she put out her finger and traced it.

Gabriel wanted to tense his muscles and roll to his side. He wasn't quite sure how he felt about this but Mariah had been so free and giving with her body that he tried to relax and let her explore. He felt her trace his tiny line and shivered with the intimate feeling it brought. He knew she was beautiful from this view with all her colors and secret folds but he couldn't imagine that his big hairy body would hold the same fascination for her.

"You are so beautiful from this point of view," she said reverently. Guess that answered that question. She didn't think his butt was ugly at all. Before he had a chance to answer, she came up over him, rubbing her breasts against his butt cheeks. The skin of her breasts was so soft but her nipples were so tight they were like little pointers rubbing against him. Then she came right up over his back and ran her hands all over his back, biting the skin low down then moving back to nibble his butt cheeks. He had no idea he was so sensitive there. Every touch made his cock harden and twitch. He nearly lifted off the bed when she reached around and seized his penis in her hot little hand.

She loved the feel of his cock from this angle. She could hold him the way he would hold himself then squeeze him gently, running her hand up and down like he would do to pleasure himself.

Gabriel couldn't believe what she was doing to him. The way she was using her hand on him was so like the way he would jack off but she was doing it for him. He had to put his head down on the bed and clench his teeth. It was almost too much to endure yet he wanted to beg her not to stop, ever. He felt her hands fall away and, with a cry of anguish, looked over his shoulder at her.

"Oh my God," he pleaded. "Don't leave me like this. I need to come." Mariah patted his butt to comfort him and rummaged in her purse for a condom. Raising her hand in triumph, she showed him the condom. As soon as it was in place, he moved his legs from around her and rolled to his back, inviting her to climb on him, which she did.

"That was incredible," he said quietly. He put out his hands and set them to rest on her legs, letting her set the pace and just watching her face as she took the lead. Mariah put her hands on his chest and petted him.

"I hope that wasn't too weird for you. You like to explore my body and I've never felt comfortable enough with a man before to ease my own curiosity about his body. I love to feel the different textures of your skin and see all the hues of color. I love to touch your cock and feel it harden in my hand. It makes me feel so powerful to know that I do that to you, that I can push you to the brink of madness." She leaned down and took his mouth in a hard, driving kiss and that was enough to move the energy up. Gabriel flipped them over and, bracing himself on his arms, swung into her like a pendulum, touching her as deeply as he could go. Over and over he hammered into her, wanting to crawl into her, to become part of her until he realized that he wasn't going to be able to wait for her to come. She was just going to have to do it on her own, which she did by grinding herself against his cock until she flew off right after. Not wanting to hurt her, he rolled to his back, pulling her on top of him. As Mariah lay there trying to catch her breath, she felt the beginning rumblings of laughter bubble in Gabriel's chest.

"What's so funny?" she asked, irate. Raising herself up on her elbows, she looked down into his face, wondering how he could laugh at such a moment. Gabriel put his hands behind his head, the picture of relaxation except she could feel the rapid beat of his heart and see the flush of arousal that clung to him. She wasn't fooled by the casual pose. He may be laughing but he had been just as turned on as she was.

"I'm laughing because you wanted to know if that was too weird for me. It wasn't weird at all. Turns out it was every man's dream. He just won't know it until it happens to him, just like me."

"You liked what I did to you? I know you weren't very comfortable with it at first. I could feel you trying to keep your legs relaxed."

"I never thought of it as a particularly nice view of my body but you seemed to like it just fine and it was so erotic to have your hands coming at me from where my hands would usually be, not that I spend a lot of time practicing safe sex by myself. But come to think of it, since I met you I've been doing it a lot of that since any thought of you makes me hard as granite." Mariah liked the way he enjoyed whatever they did together in bed. He was so free with his body whenever she wanted to explore it or try out new methods of pleasuring him. Anything she wanted to investigate, he always managed to turn into pleasure for both of them. He would let her have her way with him but he always made sure she was taken care of too.

"Mariah, I think Laura might be wondering what happened to us if we don't get over there soon. We did tell her we'd be over in a couple of hours and I'd really like to see the baby. Is that okay with you?" He gently rolled Mariah to his side to let her get up.

"I had lost track of everything but what was happening right here. I really am looking forward to spending time with Laura and Gabe. I like her a lot. Do you think she would come visit us if we asked?"

"We could see what she says. Sounds like she's not sure if she wants to stay here. Who knows, maybe she'd come to see us and decide to stay."

Mariah and Gabriel got ready quickly, eager to spend time with Laura and the baby. Rather than bother with Gabriel's car, they called a cab since it made more sense than wrestling with driving through the city. Laura's house was in a quiet, older neighborhood where people still sat on the porch in the evening and spoke to their neighbors. Minivans and bicycles spilled out of the driveways and large shade trees sheltered the houses. Mariah figured if you had to live in a big city this would be the kind of neighborhood to live in. Laura was waiting for them, pretending she didn't know what had taken them so long to get there. Baby Gabe was still awake and alert and even he seemed to sense that something special was happening, with his ready smiles and baby noises. Despite Laura's protests, Mariah helped make the salad and set the table. Working with children, Mariah knew that Laura didn't have much time to herself and probably didn't get to spend time with other adults plus she genuinely wanted to spend time with her to get to know her better. She also figured that if there was anything she wanted to know about Gabriel then Laura would be the one who might spill the beans. Mariah couldn't remember the last time she had just hung around in the kitchen with another woman. Growing up, some of her best memories were of times spent with girlfriends or relatives gathered in the kitchen doing dishes or getting food ready and laughing until her sides ached. It felt good to be sharing with Laura especially when they could hear Gabriel out in the living room entertaining Gabe.

At one point they peeked out the door to see what the two of them were up to and found Gabriel lying on his back with the baby sitting on his chest while Gabriel talked to him about his dad. He told Gabe that his dad was a great guy. "Sometimes he could be a pain in the butt," Gabriel explained to the enraptured child, "but there was nobody I'd rather have protecting my back than your dad. When you get a bit older, I'll show you some pictures I have of him when he was young. He loved to fish and, don't tell your mom this, but he loved to race motorcycles. Your mom doesn't know that. She thinks your dad was a real straight arrow but he liked to let loose sometimes too." Mariah turned to Laura and, seeing the tears streaming down her face, put out her arm and pulled her close. They watched Gabriel gently bouncing the baby on his chest as he talked to him in a quiet voice. The little guy kept opening up with big huge grins and a little line of drool worked its way down his chin. Laura pulled out of Mariah's arms and looked up at her, smiling when she saw that Mariah was weeping too. "That guy is definitely a keeper," she said through her tears.

Mariah's face broke out in a dreamy smile as she replied, "Yeah, he sure is a cute little baby." Then she started to laugh. Laura gave her a swat on the arm for her little joke.

"I meant Gabriel. He's definitely a keeper but you already knew that, didn't you?" Laura shook her head slowly and stared at Mariah. "You're definitely planning to keep him, aren't you?" When Mariah nodded, Laura shrieked and threw herself into Mariah's arms. The two women hugged each other and hopped around in a circle.

"Everything okay out there?" Gabriel called, concern in his voice.

"Oh, yeah," Laura called back. "Everything is absolutely fine," she said, a great big smile of satisfaction on her face. "Everything is just perfect."

"I've waited years for this moment," Laura said to Mariah, still holding her close. "I knew that eventually he would meet his soul mate and everything would fall into place for him. He's here to tidy up all the pieces of his life in Chicago, isn't he?" The women moved to the table so they could sit down and talk. Laura poured two cups of coffee and sat down, indicating to Mariah to continue.

"He has a whole list of things he wants to do. He's going to see his captain at work to let him know he's moving to Hopeville. My brother has offered him a deputy's position with him, he's the local sheriff, but Gabriel is planning to open a private security firm so he can work from the house. He figures he has enough experience to get the company off the ground and he's also going to talk to Alex Randall about working with him. Do you know Alex? Gabriel didn't say much about him."

"Oh, yeah, I know Alex. He's another stallion in the stable of dark horses that make up Gabriel's friends." Mariah burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry," she said, giggling, "but the word stallion brings up quite a different picture than the word dark horse does. Which is he, a stallion or a dark horse?"

Laura didn't laugh. Mariah could see from the expression on her face that she was very serious. "You obviously haven't met him or you'd know that he is definitely both." Mariah couldn't wait to meet him.

"If he's moving to Hopeville the women in town are going to go crazy. He's absolutely gorgeous and he's aloof, two traits that women can't seem to resist. They always want to be the one to change him, to make him acceptable but he has yet to meet his soul mate."

"Well, the town of Hopeville could stand a little shaking up. You know how small towns can be, same old same old. It'll do it good to be shaken up." Mariah thought that the bent of this conversation might make a good entry point for asking Laura about a shop that would sell the kind of costumes she wanted to buy for her and Gabriel. So she hesitantly broached the subject, not quite sure of Laura's reaction. She was startled when Laura shot up out of her chair and sped to the phone. "Who are you calling?" she asked, perplexed.

"My sister. I want to see if she can keep Gabe tomorrow morning. No way am I going to miss out on a shopping expedition like that. I have expressed milk in the freezer so he can take a bottle, that way I don't need to worry about nursing him but I can't go too long without nursing or I might explode." Mariah caught Laura's look and started to laugh. "I'm not kidding. You really can't wait too long or it's painful and hard to nurse but I think the morning should be fine." Mariah sat quietly while Laura spoke to her sister.

"She said she would love to have him for the morning. I think she was glad to see me getting out of the house and doing something plus she has two kids herself and they love to see Gabe. Now we just need to figure out where to go for what you need." When Gabriel came into the kitchen a few minutes later, toting a very sleepy baby, he found the two women pouring over the yellow pages of the phone book. They had their heads together and were giggling wildly at whatever it was they were reading. As usual no one heard his approach.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously, trying to look over their shoulders. Both women jumped and gave him a guilty look. Mariah quickly closed the book.

"Nothing," they said in unison.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me," Gabriel said, trying to get a peek at the page they were perusing but they had flipped the book shut before he could get a good look.

"We're going shopping tomorrow and we were looking for..." Mariah turned to Laura for help when she couldn't think of anything.

Put on the spot, Laura blurted out the first thing that came into her head. "Restaurants. We were looking for somewhere to have lunch," she said, her face flushed as she struggled for an answer. They should have been better prepared to answer him but he was just so darn quiet he was able to sneak up on them unawares, leaving them floundering.

Gabriel knew darn well they hadn't been looking at listings of restaurants otherwise they wouldn't have had to shut the book so quickly therefore he was mighty curious to know just what they had been looking at. He could bide his time. They'd crumble eventually.

As he rocked the baby, Gabriel said, "You two are going out tomorrow? That's great. What are you doing with this little guy?"

"My sister keeps bugging me to leave Gabe with her but I always have some excuse so when I called to ask her to keep him tomorrow, she was delighted. She has two kids and they love to make a fuss of him so he'll lap up all the attention." Gabriel kept looking between the two women to see if he could figure out just what they were hiding but it was obvious that they were not going to be forthcoming so he decided on a different tack.

"So what are you two going to do tomorrow?" he asked innocently. Mariah wasn't the least bit fooled by his casual air. She could see he was so eager to know what they were up to but there was no way she was spoiling the surprise by telling him. At Gabriel's question, Laura jumped up and took the baby from him.

"I'll just change him and put him to bed," she said, leaving Mariah to fend for herself. As Laura passed, Mariah stuck out her tongue and whispered, "Chicken." Laura went out the door, laughing to herself.

"Care to tell me what's going on?" Gabriel inquired. "You two seem as thick as thieves. And twice as guilty," he added, with a laugh. Mariah folded her arms in front of her and looked him right in the eye.

"We're going shopping tomorrow while Laura's sister looks after Gabe then after we go for lunch we'll come home so she can feed the baby. I do have an ulterior motive for my shopping trip but I don't want to tell you."

"Is it something for the two of us to enjoy?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh most definitely," Mariah said, nodding her head.

"Great!"

"Don't you want to know more?" she asked, perplexed at his change of heart.

"Just knowing it will bring us both pleasure is more than enough for me," he said, drawing her into his arms. "If you want to shop for something to enhance our pleasure then I'm all for it." Placing his hands on both sides of her face, he bent down and touched his lips to hers. The kiss was sweet and gentle but with the promise of fire and heat.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," Laura said from the door. "Next time I'll knock or something so you'll know I'm coming in." Gabriel and Mariah laughed then drew apart. Laura was delighted to see Gabriel so happy. She'd feared he'd never be like his old self but his spark was back and this woman was the cause.

"I'm starved," Laura said. "Why don't we sit down and eat?" As they sat in the dining room and ate, Gabriel realized that Laura was one of those people where, no matter how long it had been since you last saw them, it felt like it was only yesterday. The conversation was free and easy and although Hank wasn't there in person, it was as if he was there in spirit. Laura and Mariah talked and laughed like old friends and he couldn't help but think how lucky he was to have these two special women in his life. They lingered over coffee and dessert, enjoying the time together. Laura refused their offer to help clear off the table, telling them to sit and relax instead. As Gabriel leaned over to kiss Mariah, Laura came back into the dining room. She couldn't help smiling to herself when she saw how these two were together. She was so happy for Gabriel.

"I didn't realize I was so tired," she said, suppressing a yawn. "Gabe was up early today and the trip to the airport was a lot for the two of us. I'm going to be rude and kick the two of you out so I can get some sleep. Besides, I need to get a good rest if we're going to spend the morning shopping." She winked at Mariah.

"I've already called a cab and it'll be here in a minute. I'm sure the two of you can find something to do to pass the time when you get back to Gabriel's." Gabriel and Mariah knew this was just a ploy to give them more time together but they played along.

"I don't think that will be any problem," Gabriel said as he ushered Mariah out of the kitchen to the front door. The two women hugged, enjoying the warmth of their new friendship.

"I may as well come to your place in the morning and we can start out from there," Laura said as she gave him a hug. "I'll drop Gabe off at my sister's on the way then we can get started. I'll even look up the names of some restaurants before I meet you." Mariah snorted when Laura mentioned restaurants. She knew Laura was going to be looking for places to go for the courtesan costume and they were going to have a ball shopping when they got there. After a last hug, they left Laura to get some rest and stepped out to see the cab waiting for them.

"Do you really think she was tired?" Gabriel asked as the cab sped along.

"I don't think she was tired at all but I'm certainly not going to complain about her arranging for us to spend time together," Mariah said with a smirk.

Gabriel put his arm around her and pulled her close. "May as well take advantage of having a driver," he said, putting his hand under her chin and turning her face toward him. He stared into her eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers but instead of kissing her he took her bottom lip between his teeth and worried at it. He tugged at it then gently bit down, making her jump. He took her lip and sucked it until it began to pulse with feeling, seeming to swell under his ministrations. As she opened her mouth to moan in agony, he took advantage by sliding his tongue into her velvet cavity. She playfully sought his tongue and chased it, following it as he swept around her mouth, tracing inside her cheeks and along her teeth. It was like a child's game of tag as she followed him, trying to touch him, knowing they'd both win the game. The game of love.

"Here we are," the driver called. Mariah pulled away, trying to focus on what the driver was saying. For a moment she had vanished, lost in the magic of Gabriel's touch and it was difficult to let go. Gabriel leaned forward and paid the driver. He opened the door and got out, reaching his hand back to Mariah to help her out. Keeping hold of her hand, he led her up the stone steps to the front door. Reluctantly he dropped her hand to find his key and unlock the door for them but as soon as they were in, he seized it and held tight.

"I don't want to let you go...ever," he said fervently, drawing her into the old elevator behind him. "I've waited my whole life to find you and I'm never going to let you go." Glancing at the control panel, he stabbed the number of his floor then backed Mariah up against the wall of the elevator and drew her leg up to his waist. Holding her leg in place with one hand, he reached under her skirt and began to stroke her through her panties.

"You are so wet for me." He was amazed at how quickly she responded to him, her body readying itself for his entry. He could feel the outline of her plump lips through the damp material but he needed to touch her skin so he gently tucked his finger under the elastic. Mariah bowed her head and rested it on his chest, enjoying the sensation of his marauding finger plundering her while they shared the tiny elevator. They both knew that at any moment the elevator could stop and the doors slide open but it just didn't seem to matter. Gabriel knew that most of the residents of his building would be safely tucked in their apartments at this time of night so he didn't expect to be interrupted.

"Gabriel, I have to have you inside me now. I can't wait." Gabriel blindly slammed his hand down on the emergency button and the elevator stopped. He knew they'd have only a few minutes before the alarm began to go off.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a condom. Thank God he had the foresight to replenish the stash he kept in his jeans. At the rate they were using them, he could buy shares in the company. Or look for a better, more permanent solution. Now if she

were to get pregnant they wouldn't have to worry about birth control. He'd love to have a baby with Mariah so maybe they could talk about that, perhaps at another time when they weren't poised on the razor's edge yet again. Using one hand, he pulled the buttons apart on his jeans and somehow Mariah managed to roll the condom on him. Taking her other leg, he pinned her hard to the wall with both her legs around his waist, moving the crotch of her panties aside so he could slide on home. She was so slick that he slid in nice and easy and back out nice and easy too but it wasn't enough. He wanted to keep it soft and gentle but there was no way that was going to happen when all he could feel was that velvet glove clutching his cock.

"How do you want it?" he murmured between gritted teeth. "Nice and gentle like this or deep and hard like this." And he pushed hard into her, sliding her up the wall in his eagerness to be tight inside her.

Then the alarm began to buzz but they ignored it.

Mariah arched her back and as he entered her then slammed down against him, driving him even deeper. He was a goner, just like that and before he even had time to lead her over the edge, she was gone, howling in the tiny space. They stood for a moment with Mariah backed against the wall, her legs at his waist when they heard the ping of the elevator being insistently called to another floor. Somehow Gabriel managed to get the elevator going, so when the door opened a few moments later, they were standing together, looking a little the worse for wear. The elderly couple waiting stepped back to allow them to pass and Mariah overheard the woman remark, "My goodness, she certainly looks well loved, doesn't she?" Mariah never heard the answer for the elevator door closed behind them and whisked the couple away. Unlocking the apartment door, Gabriel threw it open and pulled Mariah inside. He took only enough time to pitch his keys onto the hall table with one hand while keeping her close to his side with the other before he had her backed up against the door, her hands pinned above her.

"You are, you know," he whispered into her ear. His warm breath lightly brushed her neck, sending shivers down her spine. He was so close, pressing his big hard body against her so she could feel every inch of his desire. She knew he was talking to her but the red haze of want made it difficult to understand.

"I'm what?" she asked confused. What had they been talking about? How could she concentrate with all that man-flesh prodding her?

"You are well loved." He made the pronouncement then licked a line from her ear down the side of her neck. He placed the tip of his tongue on her pulse so he could feel it changing from slow and steady to wild and fiery. "I'm going to let go of your hands but I don't want you to put them down. Can you do that for me? Can you keep them up?" He put a finger under her chin and tipped her head up so she was looking at him. He knew she was having trouble breaking through her desire.

She nodded, not sure what she was answering yes to but it didn't really matter. She trusted him. Reaching up and putting his hands over hers, Gabriel ran them down her arms. He dragged them down her inner arm, lingering on her forearms which he knew

were especially sensitive. She wanted to wiggle out of her skin. It was just too much. When he brought them forward and ran them over her breasts, Mariah started to giggle.

"This doesn't feel like proper police procedure," she noted. "Are you sure this is how you're supposed to frisk me?" Instead of answering, he reached down and pulled her tight little t-shirt up over her head, letting his gaze rest on the plump mounds pushed up by her bra. He touched his tongue to the deep valley between and licked over the top of first one crescent then the other. Drawing back, he outlined the length of her torso with his hands then slid them down her hips, along her thighs and down her legs. "You are a very naughty policeman," she taunted. Her legs began to feel too weak to hold her up especially when he changed tack and began the return journey up the inside of her legs. "I'll tell you anything you want to know," she said breathlessly, trying to bring her legs together to stop the torment but he was much too strong for her.

"Just tell me that you love me," he whispered and as she repeated the words he needed to hear, Gabriel continued to tantalize her. He made repeated butterfly strokes up and down the inside of her legs then when she was already off balance, slowly, slowly crept up her inner thighs. She couldn't differentiate between the pleasure and the almost-pain, whether she wanted him to stop or to never stop. Before she had a chance to make up her mind, Gabriel scooped her up in his arms and carried her down the tiny hall to the bedroom.

"I want to make love to you here in the bedroom not up against a door. I want to make love to the woman I love right here in this bed." Setting her down, Gabriel stepped away from Mariah and said with a laugh, "But first I need to get rid of this other condom." As he went into the little adjoining bathroom, Mariah chuckled.

"I wondered what you'd done with it," she called after him.

"Everything happened so fast when the elevator began to move that I just did up my jeans and hoped for the best," he said as he rejoined her.

Gabriel sat down on the bed and pulled her between his legs. He reached forward and nuzzled the soft skin of her belly with his rough cheek. He knew it must feel like a soft brush rasping her skin and he felt her shiver with the contradictory sensation. He turned his head, letting her feel the moist heat of his tongue as he first licked from her navel to her breastbone then followed the shiny line with nibbles, like the tiny bites you take when something is too sweet and rich to devour in a hurry. Like rich, dark chocolate that needs to be enjoyed to the fullest, devoured slowly not gobbled up.

Mariah was like that, needing to be enjoyed inch by inch to appreciate all the flavors, all the richness of her skin. Gabriel loosened the front closure of her bra and cupped her breasts with his hands. He could almost feel them getting heavier from such gentle fondling, the nipples growing tighter and longer. He rolled them with thumb and forefinger, tugging gently at the same time.

He felt her place her hands on his shoulders. He figured her knees were beginning to feel like they could no longer hold up her melting body.

"I need you inside me," she intoned, clutching his shoulders for support. Releasing her nipple, he shoved his hand in his front pocket and retrieved a condom which Mariah quickly rolled on him. Hurriedly pulling off her panties and skirt and kicking off her shoes, she stepped forward, placing her knees on each side of his legs and lowered herself onto him. Gabriel took hold of his cock and kept his hand there so he could feel her body as it took him inside. It was such a glorious feeling to feel his cock disappear bit by bit inside her until he moved his hand and she dropped right onto him, not moving. He could feel the blood pound in his cock, amplified by the constriction of the walls of her passage. She was gripping him so tightly that every beat of his heart was echoed by the beat pulsing in his erection.

Mariah stared into his beautiful blue eyes as she raised herself up, able to watch the blue become darker like a stormy sky. While Mariah leaned forward to brace herself on his shoulders, Gabriel leaned forward to tease her breasts with his very talented mouth. Applying strong pressure, he took more of her nipple and breast into his mouth, flicking the nipple while he sucked. Mariah pushed down on his shoulders to allow her to lift herself up then slammed down, trapping him inside her.

Gabriel let her set the rhythm then he joined in, pushing up to answer her downstroke until he felt himself tumbling end over end into that sensual vortex reserved for lovers. Luckily the sound of Mariah's release followed his, the scream in his ear followed by the endless milking of his organ, drawing out every last drop that he had to offer. Mariah slumped forward resting her head on his shoulder, letting her muscles relax to release him.

Gabriel stood and carried her down the hall to the bathroom. Setting her on the counter, he started the shower then quickly divested himself of his t-shirt and jeans. He dropped the used condom into the trash, started the shower then helped her strip off her clothes, quickly divesting himself of his t-shirt and jeans as well. He pulled her into the shower with him and soaped her sated body then his own. She was like putty in his hands, tired from the traveling and from the lovemaking. They climbed out and dried off then padded back to the bedroom to crawl into bed, spooning their bodies together under the blanket.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gabriel was having such an interesting dream. He and Mariah were back in the elevator in his building and he was splayed out naked on the floor while she stood over him wearing a skintight police uniform that included a teeny, tiny skirt worn with thigh-high black leather boots. It was a great dream, incorporating so many of his favorite things and they sure weren't raindrops on roses or whiskers on kittens. Her skirt was short enough that, from her position right over him, he could look up and see that she was naked underneath that scrap of material. *Oh boy!* She had a billy club in her hand that she slapped against her palm while chastising him for being such a bad boy. She was in the middle of telling him what she was going to do to him with her handcuffs when the bell went off to call the elevator to another floor. He tried so hard to focus on the billy club and the shiny handcuffs dangling from her fingers but he kept hearing that damn bell ringing. He was going to kill whoever kept pressing that bell for the elevator. Couldn't they just take the stairs?

With a start, he awoke realizing that the bell from his dream was actually the buzzer from the downstairs door to the building and he wasn't really lying naked in the elevator with Officer No Mercy. Too bad! Stumbling to his front door, he pressed the intercom button. "Hello," he growled.

"Good morning, Gabriel," Laura chirped. "I hope I didn't wake you." She didn't sound like she hoped that at all. She sounded like she hoped she was interrupting something. In fact, she sounded downright smug.

"No, you didn't wake me," he lied, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

"Good," she laughed, "then maybe you could buzz and let me in since I've been standing here for five minutes trying to get your attention."

"Oh my God! What time is it?" he groaned. "I had no idea you'd be here at the crack of dawn."

"I doubt if anybody would call eight o'clock in the morning the crack of dawn," Laura noted, laughter in her voice. "Don't bother to buzz me in. I'll go to that little corner bakery you like and grab some pastries for breakfast while you get the coffee on and wake Mariah." Gabriel heard a click, indicating Laura had gone, then he turned and headed for the kitchen to make coffee. Letting Mariah sleep a few minutes longer seemed only fair since he had kept her awake, off and on, most of the night. He found that he preferred her on rather than off especially if she was on him, grinding down on him until he exploded and saw a pinwheel of colors in his head as he came yet again. He stood naked, leaning against the end of the counter, watching the coffee drip through. Although she made no sound, he knew the exact moment Mariah entered the

kitchen. It was that shift in the air again, letting him know that she was there. He was at a loss to explain it, it just was.

She came up behind him, put her arms around him and lay her head on his back, enjoying the warmth of his body, the smell of his skin, the hardness of the muscles of his abdomen. She tried to pinch at his six-pack to tease him but there was nothing to grab, it was too taut. He really was ripped. Placing his hands over hers, he held her to him.

"I thought you were still asleep," he said. "I was going to wake you in a couple of minutes." Mariah turned her head so she could run her tongue along the indentation of his spine, tracing each vertebra as she made her way up his back. His taste was warm and musky, a definite turn-on first thing in the morning.

"You were gone so I thought I'd come looking for you to persuade you to come back to bed." Tugging one hand free from his, her method of persuasion became obvious as her roving hand made its way down the line of soft hair below his navel with a clear destination in mind. He caught hold of her hand just as it reached its target and brought it to his mouth. Turning it, he placed a kiss in her palm then told her that Laura had already been waiting for them and was now on her way back from the bakery, expecting coffee when she got back.

With a yelp Mariah took off for the bathroom and after a quick shower, rummaged through her bag for something to put on. She straightened, a smile on her face, as she remembered Laura's mission from the night before and wondered if she had been successful in her quest. When Gabriel came in with a cup of coffee for her, Mariah was already dressed and brushing her hair, putting it into one of those intricate braids he just loved to undo. Laura returned, the women embraced like old friends, coffee and pastries were polished off quickly so the whole morning could be devoted to shopping and with a last few good-byes the door shut and silence reigned.

Gabriel flopped down in a big stuffed armchair, feeling like he'd been caught in a whirlwind with the power of those two women. When the two of them were together they chatted and laughed like old friends although they had only just met. He wondered about the sly little glances that kept passing between them. He knew they were cooking up something but he had no idea what. He was also pretty sure he was going to be caught right in the middle of whatever it was they had planned but he found he didn't mind at all. If the two people he loved most in the world were hatching some sort of plan then he could be sure it would be a good one and that he was going to enjoy it immensely.

He smiled to himself as he thought about the little surprise he had planned. It made him a bit nervous since he wasn't sure what her answer was going to be. It was unusual for him to be nervous about anything. In his job as a cop there was no room for error so he'd always kept a tight rein on his nerves and on his feelings but Mariah had swooped into his life and changed all that. Now he could see the effect she was having on Laura, drawing her out of her shell, making her want to get out and experience life again, something he knew she hadn't been able to do since Hank's death. The empty space

that had formed around his heart after Hank's death was rapidly being filled through the unconscious actions of Mariah, the way she and Laura hit it off right away, the way she had helped him face Hank's death, the way she made love to him. She had that effect on everyone and didn't even realize it.

Gabriel sat there for a long time, unwilling to move, thinking about how glad he was to see Laura and Gabe and how much he missed her in his life. She was always there for him whenever he and Hank had a particularly rough case. She never pushed but quietly helped them regain their equilibrium and their reality away from the often sordid world they worked in. He realized he'd love to have Laura come and visit them. Maybe she'd like it enough to stay. It would be wonderful to have Gabe close enough to see him all the time and getting out of Chicago would be good for her. He'd have to talk to Mariah and see what she thought. The way the two women had hit it off, it could only be a good thing to have them closer. Gabriel glanced at the clock and realized that he'd been daydreaming for almost twenty minutes when he had appointments to keep, the first being at his precinct to see the captain. Alex Randall was due to come by at eleven and he needed to be at the art gallery at two to see his friend Katherine and pick up the ring she had designed and made for him. He had only spoken to her a few days ago but when she heard his request she said she was putting all her other projects on hold to get his ready.

He and Katherine went way back. She had been married to a friend of his but it turned out his friend liked to beat up on his wife. Katherine had a ready excuse for the bumps and bruises but Gabriel always suspected there was more. One night she phoned him, screaming for him to come and help her but by the time he got there his friend had a knife to her throat and was threatening to kill her. Katherine had been planning to leave him when he came home and caught her. Her cases ready at the door, he had taken one look and knew what that meant. With a bellow of rage, he had gone after her. He went berserk, smashing open the door of the bedroom where she was cowering to escape his murderous rage. She had been able to phone Gabriel before he broke through the door but hadn't been able to protect herself from the punishing blows he had rained on her before Gabriel arrived.

When Gabriel saw the blood streaming from her nose and the awkward angle of her arm, his vision became clouded with a red haze of anger. How anyone could hurt someone weaker than themselves he couldn't fathom but all he wanted to do was pummel his friend into unconsciousness. At least then his friend would have to deal with someone his own size. Nothing Gabriel liked better than a fair fight. He had managed to talk him into dropping the knife and letting her go but when he tried to pound him to a pulp, Katherine had intervened saying he wasn't worth going to jail for. With Gabriel's help, Katherine's husband was put in a special program so he could get help and Katherine had begun a new life. Her husband had to do time but his involvement in a rehabilitation program had helped reduce his sentence. Katherine had seen him since his release and though he showed true remorse for what he put her through, she had no interest in picking up their life together.

It was Gabriel who arranged for her to take her work to a local art gallery. He'd seen some pieces of jewelry she'd made when she was in art school. During her disastrous marriage, her husband had belittled her attempts at making jewelry, saying no one would be interested in crap like that but Gabriel saw a true spark of genius in her designs and so did the gallery owner. Not only did he want to exhibit and sell her jewelry but he also offered her a job. With Gabriel's encouragement, she took the job and began to get her life back together. When Gabriel phoned and told her what he wanted, Katherine had been happy for the chance to do something to thank him for all he had done for her. She was intrigued by his request for a silver band with amethysts inset all around and knew it would be interesting to come up with the design. Whatever she fashioned, he knew he would love it and hoped Mariah would too. He was looking forward to seeing Katherine and discovering what she had designed for Mariah's ring.

Rising from the big armchair, he made his way to the bathroom to shower and shave. He missed Mariah as his went about his "man thing". Without her, it was just a routine, something that needed to be done. The shower was quick and uneventful and the shave ordinary, without her there to watch him. He was amazed at how much faster he was able to accomplish all these things when she wasn't there. It may have been quicker but not nearly as much fun. Even getting dressed was mundane when she wasn't there to see how hard he got when he thought about her, how long and thick with desire he became as he pictured her there with him, her eyes on his body, on his cock. Drawing his mind back to the present, he prepared himself to meet Captain Jenkins and tell him his decision.

Taking the Red Line, he was able to arrive at the station in plenty of time to meet with the captain. What he hadn't counted on were all the other cops who were glad to see him and wanted to talk to him. He ran the gantlet for about fifteen minutes then excused himself to meet with Captain Jenkins. The reaction of his fellow officers came as a shock. He had envisioned a totally different scenario where he was ushered into the captain's office followed by cold stares from his former friends and colleagues but that was not the case at all. Some of those big guys had come right up to him and given him a bear hug and a giant slap on the back they were so glad to see him. The comments flew at him from all angles, "You look great." "Where the hell have you been?" "Glad to see you back." "We've kept your desk just the way you left it, a mess." Nobody seemed to be blaming him for what had happened to Hank. Mariah was right. They knew it was just fate that had put Hank in the wrong place at the wrong time. Captain Jenkins looked up as he came in then put out his hand and Gabriel shook it. The captain motioned to him to sit down while he sat back behind his desk, resting his arms on the battered surface.

"Glad to see you back in one piece but you're not here to stay, are you? I can see it in your face. You're heading to Texas, aren't you?" At Gabriel's nod he continued, smacking his fist on his palm, his face wreathed in a great big smile. "I win the pot. I told those guys something was going on but I just didn't know what her name was. There is a woman involved, isn't there?"

"Yeah, it's a woman I met when I was crossing Texas on my way to nowhere. She brought me back to life and I want to stay with her. That is, if she'll have me," he said with a laugh. Captain Jenkins beamed at Gabriel.

"I'm happy for you, son. You deserve this after the hell you've been through these past few months. So tell me, what's your plan?" he asked Gabriel.

"I'm hoping to open a private security firm with Alex Randall. I figure I can operate it from anywhere. Burke, the sheriff you spoke to, wants me to sign on as a deputy but I'm ready to leave law enforcement behind, for now at least."

"That Alex Randall, he's one sharp guy. Got lots of connections too. That's a smart move on your part but how does he feel about leaving Chicago?"

"He told me he was glad to move but I'll find out more when I meet him at eleven." Gabriel paused, having difficulty finding his voice. "You've got my shield and my gun already but I had to come and tell you my decision. I took a lot of stuff home when I took my leave of absence so I'll just see what's left to clean out."

Captain Jenkins came out from behind the desk and put his hand on Gabriel's arm.

"You're one of the best, Gabriel," he said, patting his shoulder. "I know your business is going to do well. You're lucky you're getting a chance at something you really want to do. I wish you well. If you want to see what needs to be packed up we could take care of sending it to you."

"I was thinking that I could get Ben to pick up the stuff and keep it for now."

"That sounds like a great idea. By the way, how's Ben doing?" Gabriel brightened immediately.

"He's doing well at school. I'm supposed to see him this afternoon so I'll check with him about picking up my stuff. I need to get going so I can meet Alex at eleven."

"Don't forget to see Breanne on your way out. She'll take care of forwarding your vacation pay and anything else you're eligible for." The two men stood looking at each other. Gabriel found it hard to speak and the captain looked suspiciously watery-eyed himself. Finally Gabriel gave the captain one last handshake then took off through the squad room. He was hoping to make it out the front door without anyone noticing but that was not to be. Everyone seemed to be at their desk and, as one, they looked up the moment Captain Jenkins' door opened. David Sinclair, another detective that Gabriel had worked with, came over.

"So is it true? Did you resign?" Gabriel nodded. "We're really going to miss you. What the hell are you going to do if you're not going to be a cop?" Gabriel told him how he was going to stay in Hopeville and set up a private security firm. "Hey, some of the guys still get together on Saturday nights at Clancey's. Maybe you could stop in for a while tonight and bring Mariah. We'd love to meet the woman who brought Gabriel Blackburn to his knees," he said with a hearty laugh. "We never thought any woman would be able to catch you and pin you down."

Well, she certainly has brought me to my knees, Gabriel thought, and on numerous occasions, much to my eternal delight. And I really love it when she pins me down! He kept a straight face with Dave but he couldn't help it if his mind chose to wander.

"We'll try to make it over. I need to talk to Breanne but I hope to see you guys later." Gabriel filled out the necessary paperwork, gave Breanne a forwarding address and headed to his desk. Someone had left a box for him and as soon as it was packed, Dave came and took it, saying, "We'll make sure this gets to you," and Gabriel rushed out of the station. It was harder than he thought to leave it all behind.

Arriving home with just a few minutes to spare, he got out the paperwork he had prepared to show Alex. He hoped he wanted in on this venture. Gabriel needed his experience and expertise to really get the business on its feet. Alex arrived right on time, impeccably dressed as usual. From his head to his toes, he was the picture of a GQ model, with his long mahogany-colored hair and arresting green eyes. Wherever he went women's eyes always followed and so did the pieces of paper with their phone numbers. Alex just shrugged it off and went on about his business. He worked with multimillionaires, rock stars, tycoons, you name it, so appearance was everything in his line of business. Gabriel knew that when he was at home, he went around in torn jeans and t-shirts faded from many washings. He was very glad to see him. Alex sat down at the table, opened his laptop and proceeded to show Gabriel what he had worked on so far. Gabriel was open-mouthed. Alex had a prospective client list, a business plan, a list of equipment he already had plus a list of equipment he'd love to have. The changes in technology, he'd explained, were so rapid that there was always some new gadget or gizmo he wanted. Gabriel threw back his head and roared with laughter while Alex stared at him.

"What? You don't like what you see?" he asked, confused. To answer him, Gabriel pulled out the list he'd been working on, showing him how the two of them were on the same wavelength. The things that Gabriel couldn't supply, Alex could but he still wasn't sure that Alex was up for a move. He knew they could run the company without them living in the same city but that wasn't the way Gabriel wanted to do business. Alex had a great feel for the private security business but Gabriel didn't want a long-distance partner. He wanted someone who would be right there when needed for support and ideas. If Alex wasn't willing to move then he would just have to bite the bullet and look for someone else.

"This looks great!" Gabriel said finally, "but..." Alex looked up from the paperwork, searching Gabriel's face for a clue as to what he was going to say.

"But what?"

"I don't want a long-distance partner. I've seen how you operate and I'd trust you with my life so I'm not interested in setting up shop with someone else but I don't want to try to run a company with the two of us in separate cities, hell, in separate states." After his little speech, Gabriel looked at Alex to see him grinning back. "What?"

"I need a month to tidy up loose ends, close my office, vacate my apartment and finish any current obligations. Is that soon enough to suit you?" Alex said with a smile.

"Just like that. You're going to close up shop here in Chicago and move to Hopeville, sight unseen," Gabriel said, torn between disbelief and relief.

"Yeah!" Alex said, finality in his voice. Gabriel's face took on the same look.

"Great." Gabriel's smile was ear to ear. "I'll have the office set up and ready for you to become part of Randall and Blackburn Security. I guess I'll have to find someone to act as secretary/receptionist. Maybe Mariah knows somebody who can do that. I'll check with her later."

"Why don't I ask Helena if she wants to come to Hopeville as well," Alex said thoughtfully. Gabriel had met Alex's office manager. She was a female Alex with her movie-star looks but he knew she was what kept his business running smoothly. She was discreet, she was efficient, she was gorgeous and she and Alex had a volatile relationship which he assumed was because neither wanted to admit they were attracted to the other. He had been in Alex's office when Miss Helena had let fly at him about putting himself in unnecessary danger or getting too close to some movie star bimbo he was protecting. He couldn't see the ravishing Miss Helena wanting to pick up and move to Hopeville but stranger things had happened. If she had to choose between staying in Chicago without Alex or moving to Hopeville to be with him, Gabriel was pretty sure she would make the move. But she would most certainly make Alex's life a living hell in retaliation, for a while at least. He chuckled to himself just thinking about it. Alex was like him, he needed to be shaken up and see what was right under his nose. Gabriel certainly hoped he was around to catch the fireworks.

"Sure, you go ahead and ask Helena. I'd be interested to see what she says." At Gabriel's tone of voice, Alex whirled to look at him. "What? Go ahead and ask."

Alex realized that he wasn't able to leave Helena behind. What the hell was that about? He knew she'd make him suffer for making her move but he was kind of looking forward to it. "I'll ask her," he said, straightening his spine.

Alex handed him his business card. "Here's my email address so you can keep me updated on what's happening. I'll let you know if I can get away any earlier than the end of the month but I have contracts to honor."

"I'll try to do as much as I can before you get there but you're going to have to give me some guidance."

"Call me if you need to. I want to set this up right. We don't open for business until everything's in place. In this line of work you can't afford any clusterfucks or you're down the tubes."

"You gonna drive down or fly?"

"I think I'll ship whatever I need then drive down. Can you find somewhere for me to live, even if it's temporary? I don't care what it is. I figure we'll be spending most of our time setting up and then at least one of us will be on the road working."

"You still got that lovely red Porsche?"

"Oh yeah!"

"That oughtta cause a few heads to turn in downtown Hopeville," Gabriel said, picturing that hot car tooling down the main street of Hopeville. If Helena came too, she'd set the town on end. Alex and Gabriel went over last minute details then Alex packed up his computer and left.

Gabriel put a call through to Ben before he left to see Katherine. Just as he figured, he ended up having to leave a message for him to call him back so they could see about getting together. He was surprised that Ben hadn't called yet. It wasn't like him to not phone when he knew Gabriel was around. He hoped nothing was wrong then put those thoughts on the back burner as he left to pick up the ring.

He knew Katherine had exquisite taste but nothing had prepared him for the beauty of the ring she had fashioned for Mariah. It was an intricate design of silver and amethysts, the amethysts somehow seeming to be woven into the very heart of the silver. It was breathtaking, like the woman it was destined for. Katherine was ecstatic with his reaction. She wanted it to be extraordinary to show him how grateful she was for all he had done. Katherine refused to let him pay for it, saying it was her wedding present to him.

"You're jumping the gun on that one," he said but Katherine was confident that this was *the one*. She could tell by the way he spoke of her and by the way he'd changed. He was so much happier in his own skin, not dragging around the guilt of Hank's death. *Welcome back to the land of the living, Gabriel Blackburn*. After promising to invite her to the wedding, Gabriel headed back to the apartment to see if Mariah had returned and to try to get hold of Ben.

Chapter Twenty-Five

He found her horizontal on the couch, eyes shut, surrounded by a pile of bags and boxes whose logos he didn't recognize. Laura had been and gone, probably rushing to get back to Gabe. Traces of her light perfume still in the air, he knew he had just missed her. Moving toward the couch, his heart began to pound in his chest as he watched his lover lying there amid the pile of clutter. He felt like a Neanderthal. *This is my woman and I need to claim her*. He felt the box in his pocket and knew that very soon he was going to make her his. Mariah's eyes fluttered open and she smiled a shy smile of welcome when she saw him. Gabriel sank to his knees and let Mariah envelop him in her tender embrace. It felt like days since he last saw her—that must be what love felt like. It certainly felt like coming home.

"You go first." Gabriel sat back on his haunches so he could see her while he talked to her, finding the words to tell her about his meeting with Captain Jenkins. Mariah could see how hard it was for him to talk about it, leaving behind a career that was so important to him. She knew he was taking a huge gamble leaving Chicago to set up in Hopeville but she would be there every step of the way to support him however she could.

"I'm not scared about this, you know," he said softly. "I spoke to Alex and we're definitely on the same page. He's taking a month to close down his Chicago office then he'll head to Hopeville and we'll open up shop there."

"You're really looking forward to this, aren't you?" Mariah asked.

"Now that I'm no longer with the police, yes, I want to move on and get the business up and running. I need to talk to my landlord this afternoon then I still need to see Ben." He was worried about not hearing from him. Why hadn't he called to let him know what he was up to? It was so unlike Ben to be out of touch with him. Where the hell was he? He was distracted from his thoughts of Ben by Mariah taking hold of his chin and rubbing her hand along his hair-roughened jaw.

"Want to see what I got today at Victoria's Secret? I've never even been in a store like that before but once Laura and I got in there, I couldn't resist." She didn't tell him about her sojourn to Leather and Lace and then to The Victorian Secret that catered to period costumes from the Victorian era. She and Laura had way too much fun there trying on the clothing and footwear. Gabriel was in for a big surprise when they got home. The corset she purchased was red and black and paired with the thigh-high black stockings she was worried he might have a heart attack when she modeled them for him. The courtesan's dress was cut low in front so that her breasts were pushed up with her nipples barely hidden. The corset enhanced the effect of the bodice of the dress,

making her cleavage deep and her bosom ample. Gabriel was going to love it. He was already on his feet as soon as she mentioned Victoria's Secret and was guiding her down the hall to his bedroom for his own private showing.

"What color would you like me to model first? I bought black, scarlet, lavender and teal." Since he wasn't really sure what teal was, he decided that he'd start with black. The first time he met her that fickle wind had blown her skirt up showing off her tiny black lingerie hence the soft spot in his heart for black.

"I'll take black for five hundred dollars, please," he said. Mariah laughed then began to gently sift her way through the contents of one of the bags.

"How would you like me to do this? I can change here in front of you or I can change somewhere else and return each time to show you what I bought." She stood patiently waiting for his answer. He thought and thought about it, the reply taking as much time as a business decision. What a tough choice! Each option had its own merits. Did he want her to strip in front of him so he could watch her body revealed, inch by luscious inch, while he stood on and watched or did he want her to leave the room while he fantasized about what she was doing? Instead of watching her strip, he could close his eyes and envision her disrobing, taking her time, tantalizing him with her slow striptease. Mariah stood patiently, a small smile on her face as Gabriel tried to come to a decision.

"I have an idea," she said, interrupting his thoughts. "I could open the closet door and stand behind it. That way you'll be able to hear everything I do but you won't be able to see me. Would you like that?" Gabriel nodded his head like a puppy. If he had possessed a tail he would have wagged it too. Well, he didn't have a tail but he could sure feel something awaggin' down there.

Mariah grabbed a bag from the bed and, leaving the closet door open at an angle, went behind it. Gabriel could hear the sound of the bag being dropped to the floor then the rustle of paper as Mariah poked through it looking for something black to try on. Just the sound of the rustle of paper, coupled with the vivid pictures his brain was conjuring up, was enough to make his balls draw up and tighten to counterbalance his cock which was making a tent behind the fly of his jeans. He watched as her hand came out from behind the door to drop her t-shirt on the floor. His cock twitched. Then the hand appeared again to drop the little skirt she had been wearing. His cock lengthened. Then her bra appeared and was added to the pile. Much more of this and he'd have to undo his fly so there was enough room for his cock. Finally, a little wisp of material that he supposed was a minuscule pair of panties made its appearance, hanging from one finger. He watched, open-mouthed, as the little scrap of material slid off the end of her finger to float down onto the rest of the discarded clothing. He knew she was standing naked behind the door and he had to dig his fingers into the bedspread to keep from leaping to his feet to race to the door.

Mariah was making the little behind-the-door striptease last as long as she could. Judging by the sound of Gabriel's breathing, he was enjoying her show so she wanted to make it last. She was tempted to peek out to see how aroused he was but she was

getting more pleasure from closing her eyes and imagining that great big cock of his stretched out, long and hard and too wide for her to encompass with her fingers, behind the fly of those soft, worn jeans. She could swear she heard him groan when the teeny panties appeared then floated down onto the pile. She took the delicate black lingerie from the top of the bag where she had nestled them on top of the scarlet-colored paper and slipped them on.

"Oh darn!" Gabriel heard her say.

"What's the matter? Do you need some help?"

"No, I'm fine. This is the stuff from Leather and Lace not from Victoria's Secret," she said, sounding a bit miffed.

"Is that bad?" Gabriel asked.

"Not bad. Just different." Mariah appeared from behind the door and he had to tell his brain to make himself breathe. She was wearing a bra and panties that looked like they were from some man's fantasy. They were beautiful and lacy with red flowers dotting the material. The bra was low-cut and uplifting so her breasts were set out like a sumptuous banquet for a hungry man. The panties were tiny and high-cut on the side, covered with the same delicate flowers as the bra. It was so sexy, he wanted to jump up and wrestle her to the bed where he could beat his chest and howl like a wild man. He noticed she was tsking as she looked down at the outfit. He couldn't imagine what could possibly be wrong with it or how it could even be improved. It looked absolutely perfect on her.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked. "It looks absolutely perfect to me."

"I didn't get this one for everyday wear. It actually has some special features. Special features I thought you might like." Gabriel was afraid he was going to start to drool. The outfit was so sexy, he couldn't imagine what kind of special features it could have that would make it better.

"Ahhh, what kind of special features does it have?" he asked hesitantly. Mariah went and sat down on his desk, gently moving things out of the way to make room for her. As soon as she was comfortable, she crooked her finger to call him over. He was there in a heartbeat.

"See these pretty red flowers," she said, motioning to the ones adorning the bra. Gabriel nodded. "Well, some of them are not sewn right on." He puckered his brow, indicating he wasn't sure what she meant.

"Watch." She took the two larger red flowers which were right over her nipples and lifted them to the side to show him how her nipples could be exposed as they poked out of the hole the flowers bared. Now the bra had a hole in the center through which her very hard and very erect nipples were poking. Gabriel moved forward to take a plump nipple in his mouth when Mariah pushed him back. "Go down on your knees," she commanded, "and I'll show you the other feature." He would have walked across hot coals to see the other feature so he quickly sank to his knees in front of her. Mariah waited until he was settled then she slowly opened her legs. Gabriel couldn't tear his

eyes away from the wicked bra so Mariah had to tell him, "Look between my legs." His gaze fell to between her legs and he got a generous smile as he realized that the crotch of the little panties was nothing more than a slit, exposing her creamy slit.

"Oh, they are so beautiful," he crooned, his eyes on her delicate tissue exposed by the naughty panties. She was so wet that he had no choice but to lean forward and lick up the cream with his tongue. He didn't even need to part the panties, they were made to allow easy access and he was definitely going to take advantage of that. Using his finger, he traced her slit, drenching the tip of his finger in her creamy juice. While Mariah looked down at him, Gabriel took his finger, put it in his mouth and licked her cream from it. Her legs fell open even further at that erotic sight.

"You taste so delicious," he said softly, "like peaches and cream. Yum." Putting his head back between her thighs, he proceeded to show her how much he loved her taste. In fact, he couldn't get enough of it, nipping and sucking and thrusting his tongue inside. All of this made so easy and accessible by the heavenly slit in the panties. Mariah watched, mesmerized, as he ate her like the sweetest treat, delighting in every lick, every nibble, every thrust of his tongue. With his tongue deep inside her, Gabriel felt her body go rigid, the harbinger of an imminent orgasm. He could feel her thighs tighten, pinning him in between and felt her lean back as she tightened in anticipation, lifting her vulva right up to his greedy mouth. With a violent shudder she exploded into his mouth, her delicious cream bathing his tongue. Like a jungle cat, he licked her clean, almost purring as he did so. Reaching into his pocket for a condom, Gabriel didn't let her have time to recover before he pulled open the buttons on his jeans, sheathed his cock then lifted her off the desk and lowered her onto him. His cock slid through the slit in the panties and into her. It was so erotic with her wearing the panties, for each time he slid his cock in and out, the edges of the slit in the panties grabbed him too. It was like a double caress, once by the silky slit of the panties and then by her own juicy slit. She fit so tightly around him, her passage made easy by her heavy arousal.

"I love that little slit," he whispered to her as he licked the shell of her ear.

"Which one?" she replied, turning her head to bite his shoulder. She was rewarded by feeling him shudder in response. Soothing the bite with a swipe of her tongue, she moved her mouth down and bit his pectoral muscle this time. She ran her tongue across and took a nibble of the companion pectoral.

"Which what?" he asked, from the depths of a haze of arousal.

"Which little slit do you love?" she asked, as she bit down on his nipple. He jumped, sending his cock deep inside her.

"I love them both but I'm not sure if I want you to wear these panties anywhere but at home. They are far too much of a temptation to be worn anywhere else. Imagine what would happen if we were out and I remembered you had that beautiful little slit covering your beautiful slit. I could back you up against the wall anywhere and stick my rock-hard cock into you. Anywhere. Anytime. It would only take a few thrusts for us to come. Would you like that?"

Mariah couldn't figure out how he always managed to turn the tables on her like that. Just when she thought she was the one doing the tempting, he would turn the conversation around on her until she was aching for him. Like now! Wrapping her legs around his waist, she rocked up and down on him, driving him high into her body. Gabriel put his hands under her butt to support her and helped her move. He was so right. It only took a few thrusts and they came together in a rush of lightning, Gabriel afraid his legs were going to give out and topple them to the floor.

"So I guess that's a definite yes to the new lingerie," she laughed, holding her arms tightly around his neck. From that position she was able to look down at his face, still flushed from his arousal. Gabriel sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I got so carried away with the slit in those panties that I never had a chance to play with your nipples. Next time I'll start with them and not let myself be distracted," he vowed earnestly. "Did you buy anything else like this?"

"I bought some lovely conventional underwear from Victoria's Secret," she said evasively.

"And...?"

"And yes, I bought more from Leather and Lace but I'm not going to show them to you right now because they all have their own special features that you'll get to discover for yourself." Gabriel felt a bit like Christopher Columbus or Captain Kirk perhaps who always got to "boldly go where no man has gone before". He decided that he loved the idea of being an explorer especially when this new underwear was involved and he was the one who got to "boldly go where no man had gone before".

"Tell me. Do they all have slits?" he pleaded.

"I'm not going to tell you. You'll just have to find out for yourself. Think of it as onthe-job training."

"My on-the-job training was nothing like this, sweetheart. I love on-the-job training with you." Gabriel slowly lifted her up and set her feet on the floor, both of them groaning at the exquisite feel of him sliding out of her one last time. Taking off the condom, he threw it in the garbage beside the bed. Buttoning his jeans, he sat down on the bed and pulled Mariah onto his lap.

"Speaking of on-the-job training," he said, "some of the guys I worked with at the Ninth Precinct are going for a few beers tonight at Clancey's and they asked me to come and bring you with me. They want to meet the woman who brought me to my knees." Mariah began to think about his latest episode on his knees in front of the slit in her panties and started to laugh. Gabriel knew exactly what she was thinking. "I don't think they knew how quickly you were going to bring me to my knees. I think it was just a figure of speech but it's definitely one of my favorites."

"I'd love to go and meet your friends. Are you sure that you're all right with all of this? You've lived in Chicago most of your life and been a cop here for a lot of years. Are you ready to give it all up?" She waited with bated breath for his reply. It was a chance for him to back out now if he needed to.

"I felt odd handing in my resignation. Being a cop is the only thing I know but I don't have the slightest doubt that I'm doing the right thing. After talking to Alex, I know we are going to get the business off the ground and it is going to be a success. Besides, I want to be with you and I sure as hell can't do some kind of long-distance romance. I want to be with you in Hopeville."

Mariah got up and picked up another bag, this time the one with the Victoria's Secret logo and drew out a different set of delicate black lingerie. This time it was a black teddy with garters and a matching black thong. This set had tiny white rosettes down the front of the teddy. From the same bag she took out a pair of black thigh-high stockings which she slowly pulled out of the package. Looking at the bag, Gabriel said in a hoarse voice, "You're going to tell me that's the conventional lingerie, aren't you?" She nodded. "Oh, man. I can't wait to see the rest of the stuff from Leather and Lace if this stuff is conventional." Mariah was so happy she and Laura had spent so much time checking out the lingerie before they looked for the courtesan accouterments. All the trying-on and giggling were certainly worth the effort, judging by his reaction. As he looked on, Mariah reached back and unhooked her bra then shimmied out of her panties with the slit. Gabriel lay back on his elbows to enjoy the show. She put on the tiny black thong first then the black teddy, hooking it up the front, the closures hidden under the white rosettes. She slid the black stockings from the package and taking one in hand, rolled it down so she could pull it on her foot. As soon as her foot was in, she placed it on the bed beside Gabriel so he could watch close up as she gently slid the stocking up her leg and attached it with the garters.

In his whole life Gabriel didn't think he'd ever seen a woman put on stockings and if he had, he'd never seen anyone put on stockings quite like that. He looked down at his unruly cock, pushing against the material of his jeans and wondered if he could last while she put on the other stocking.

Mariah could see his cock thrusting against his fly. Taking the other stocking in her hands, she began to pull it on, placing her foot on the bed to pull it up her leg. She cast a sideways glance at his crotch and smiled to see his cock lengthening as he watched. Slowly, seductively she drew the stocking up her leg, over her knee to her thigh where she tried to attach it with the garter. This time she pretended to have trouble attaching it. Ever the gallant hero, Gabriel offered to help. He attached the outer one first which sent pleasurable sensations coursing through her but when he put his hands to the inside of her thigh to attach the inner garter, she knew the joke was on her. Running his hand down her inner thigh, he tucked his fingers under the top of the stocking so he could get the garter in behind. His rough fingers tickled her sensitive skin, sending shivers down her spine. Finally he had it done up but he let his fingers linger, gently stroking her soft, smooth skin. Leaning forward, he placed gentle, butterfly kisses there as she reached out and stroked his hair. Putting out her hand, Mariah drew him to his feet then sat down on the bed, pulling him between her legs.

His jeans were tented with his rampant arousal so she knew he would love her plan. Grabbing his jeans, she pulled the buttons apart, letting his dick thrust out at her eagerly awaiting mouth. This time it was Gabriel who looked down to watch Mariah pleasure him with her mouth and pleasure him she did. Under his avid gaze, she drew him fully into her mouth, drawing him in until he touched the back of her throat then she applied tender suction with her cheeks. As she drew back, she was able to give attention to the gently weeping tip, licking his tears of pre-cum away then tracing under the head and down then back into her mouth so she could increase the pressure of tongue and cheeks. This time she felt his body stiffen, all over and knew he was on the verge of letting go. Putting her hands on his buttocks, she pulled him even closer then took him in her hand to set the rhythm, tugging and squeezing to entice him to completion. When she knew he was right on the edge, she took him in her mouth again and let his liquid fire surge down her throat.

On and on he released an endless torrent of hot liquid until he felt totally drained of his very essence. Mariah drew back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and giving him a joyous smile. He managed to summon enough energy to smile back although what he really wanted to do was fall to his knees. Fall to his knees in exhaustion but also fall to his knees in supplication to this goddess who made him feel so damn good. He gingerly took hold of his penis, tucking it back in his jeans and doing up the buttons of the fly. Mariah watched, making no attempt to hide her interest as he tucked his spent penis away. As soon as he had all the buttons in place, he pulled her to her feet and hugged her tight.

"I love you," he said, "more than you could ever know." Mariah rested her head on his chest, taking warmth and comfort from him.

"I love you too," she said.

"We need to get ready if we're going to meet the guys at Clancey's. Do you still want to go?" He didn't want to drag her to a bar to spend the evening with his old police buddies unless she really wanted to. Mariah knew it was important to him to see his friends so she said she just needed enough time to finish getting dressed and she'd be ready to go. Gabriel left the bedroom and went elsewhere. He knew if he stayed, she'd never get dressed, he'd make sure of that, so he left her in peace. She joined him a few minutes later wearing a tank top and flowing skirt. She had left her hair loose to hang down her back to her butt.

"Would you like me to brush your hair for you?" she asked, brush in hand.

"I'd love that," he said, sitting down on the arm of the couch so she could reach. Mariah took out the elastic then began to gently pull the brush through his hair. The rhythm was almost hypnotic as she brushed down his beautiful, long hair.

"How did you manage to keep your hair like that for work?" she asked.

"It made for a good disguise. Who would expect a cop to have hair like this? I could go places a regular-looking cop couldn't venture." He sat immobile, enjoying the feel of the brush stroking through his hair and her hand on his head as she made sure she

didn't pull and hurt him. Finally he felt her putting the elastic in and knew she was finished. He didn't want it to be over.

"There. You look very presentable."

"Would you like me to brush yours?" he asked. Although she had already brushed her hair, she could tell by the tone of his voice that he wanted to do it for her so she said yes. Turning on the arm of the couch, he drew her back between his legs and began to draw the brush down through her hair. Her hair was so long and so soft and silky. He brushed for a few strokes then drew it to his nose so he could smell it. Whatever shampoo she used had a faint citrus smell that he loved. Dropping her hair against her back, he continued to gently brush all the tangles he imagined were there.

"Done." Mariah took the brush from him.

"I just need to put the brush back and I'll be ready to go." She joined him a moment later and they left to hail a cab to go to Clancey's. Gabriel's friends took one look at Mariah and knew immediately why he was moving to Hopeville. Once they began to talk to her they knew she was the one for him. They chuckled to see how protective he was of her, even though he didn't need to be. She only had eyes for him. They were thrilled to see that she was intelligent and that she took no guff from him but also how supportive she was of him.

"I really like your friends," she said, nestled in his arms in the backseat of the cab. They had said good-bye to his friends amid shouts to keep in touch and orders to take care of her since she was a real find.

"I'm glad you got to meet them. They really liked you too. I hope they know they can come to Hopeville anytime they want."

"I think that was pretty obvious from the number of times you made the offer," she said, laughing.

"Some of those guys would be a real asset in the new security business but I'll let them wait to see how things go for Alex and me." The cab dropped them off right at Gabriel's door, just in time for him to meet his landlord putting out the trash. Gabriel had intended to talk to Mr. Walker in the morning but now seemed as good a time as ever. After shooting the breeze with him for a few minutes, Gabriel told him about his decision to move to Texas.

"That little gal behind you wouldn't happen to be part of the reason for that?" he said with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Mariah Forrester," she said, holding out her hand to him. Mr. Walker was delighted to meet her and delighted for Gabriel. He deserved some joy in his life and this little lady looked like she was plenty capable of giving it to him. Gabriel told him about meeting her during his travels and how he really liked Hopeville. He told him briefly about the security firm he planned to set up there. Mr. Walker listened intently as Gabriel rambled on.

"I'll be happy to pay you for another month's rent," Gabriel said finally.

"You already paid me first and last month's rent," Mr. Walker reminded him. "In fact, my sister's kid needs a place to stay. He's going to go to school here so he can move in at the end of the month and I'll even give you back next month's rent. It wouldn't be right for me to take the money twice for the same month. Don't worry about it." Since the apartment was furnished when Gabriel rented it, he made arrangements with Mr. Walker to come back before the end of the month to pack up his stuff and take it. Mr. Walker said how sorry he was to see him go.

"It's great to have a cop living in your building," he told Mariah. "Everybody feels a lot safer. Even if he's not there all the time it's just the idea of a cop on the premises. I'm going to miss you," he said, taking Gabriel's arm, "because you're a good person not because you're a cop."

"I'll see you when I come to pick up my stuff," Gabriel assured him, patting Mr. Walker's arm. Walking hand in hand up to Gabriel's apartment, he unlocked the door and ushered her inside.

"Thanks for coming with me," Gabriel said as he led her to the bedroom. Once in the bedroom he began to undress her, eager to see her sexy underwear. She struggled to undress him at the same time and they eventually fell, laughing, to the bed in a tangle of arms and legs. Much later they lay snuggled together under the covers, quietly talking about what they were going to do the next day. The quiet was broken by the shrill ring of the phone. Gabriel reached across Mariah to grab the receiver and was glad to hear Ben's voice.

"I hope I'm not calling too late," he said. Gabriel was so glad to hear from him he wouldn't have cared what time it was.

"No problem," Gabriel said, trying to focus on what Ben was saying as Mariah trailed her hand down his belly, heading for his eager penis.

"Stop that!" he mouthed to her but she ignored him, pretending not to understand. Turns out Ben had a new girlfriend that he was staying with. He'd completely forgotten about everything else in his zeal to be with her. Gabriel could certainly identify with that problem. Ben promised to come and pick them up the next day to take them to the airport. At least that way he'd get to meet Mariah and spend some time with them before their flight left. As Gabriel reached across to hang up, she reached down and took hold of him.

"You're tempting fate, missy!" he said darkly.

"I certainly hope so," she said, stroking him.

"You know what we do with naughty girls who can't keep their hands to themselves, don't you?" he said, grinning like a pirate.

"No. But I hope you're going to show me." And show her he did. In fact, they were both exhausted when he finished showing her what happened to those naughty girls.

"I certainly hope you've learned your lesson," he said, slapping her naked butt.

"I'm not sure. You may have to teach me a lesson some other time. Right now I don't think I can stay awake any longer." The next minute Gabriel heard her deep, even breathing as she drifted off to sleep, her arms curled around him.

They woke in plenty of time to be ready when Ben called for them the next morning. Gabriel prowled around the apartment trying to get a handle on how much stuff he would need to pack and how much stuff he would just get rid of. He would return in a few weeks to sort it out then his ties would be severed and his new life would begin. Mariah called Laura to thank her for all her help and to get her promise to come and visit them. When Laura asked if Gabriel liked all the sexy underwear she bought, Mariah said, "Let's just say he rose to the occasion." That set the two of them off into gales of laughter.

"I hope he likes the period costume you bought."

"I think he'll love it."

When Gabriel got on to thank her for picking them up and for the dinner, Mariah went into the bedroom.

"Gabriel, do you have a bag I can use for all this stuff I bought?" Mariah called as he hung up the phone. Gabriel's breath caught in his throat as he walked into the bedroom and saw all the lingerie laid out on the bed. It was like the ultimate wet dream only real. As he advanced on her with that look on his face, Mariah held up her hands and said, "We don't have much time before Ben gets here." Gabriel took a few steps toward her. "I need to pack up this stuff," she said recognizing that hungry look. He kept walking toward her, intent clear in his eyes. She started to laugh as he got closer and closer. As he reached her he put his hand under the bed and drew out a small bag.

"I was just getting a bag for you," he said mischievously. Mariah swatted his arm then took the bag from him. Gabriel tried to watch as she carefully folded everything but she sent him from the room telling him she didn't want to spoil the surprise.

When she was done they went out for an early lunch at a neighborhood café and found Ben on the steps waiting for them when they returned. Gabriel felt his heart constrict as he introduced them. As he expected within a few minutes, Ben and Mariah were talking and laughing like old friends. They had little left to pack so they were off to the airport within the hour. They checked their two bags but Mariah refused to relinquish the bag with the lingerie. She would keep it as carry-on luggage. There was no way she wanted to lose it. Ben sat with them in an out-of-the-way part of the airport and told them about his girlfriend. He had met her through some work she did for his company and the relationship had blossomed into something serious. Gabriel brought him up to speed on what was happening with the private security firm he was developing. All the time he was talking, his eyes kept drifting to Mariah and Ben could see this was serious. When Mariah excused herself to go to the bathroom, Ben broached the subject.

"You're really serious about this woman, aren't you?"

"Serious enough to have a ring in my pocket for her and a lifetime to promise her."

"Wow. I never thought I'd see the day but I gotta say I really like her."

"Maybe you could come and see us and spend some time with us in Hopeville."

"I'll definitely be there for the wedding," Ben said.

"Yeah. If she'll have me," Gabriel said, uncertainty in his voice.

"She's crazy for you. Of course she'll say yes. When are you going to pop the question?"

"I don't know. I'll have to pick some romantic moment. You know how women are about that kind of thing." Ben didn't tell him that he knew about that kind of thing because he was really serious about his girlfriend and was considering popping the big question to her too. He didn't want to tell Gabriel yet. This was Gabriel's moment and he didn't want to spoil it. He needed more time to consider before he asked Alena to marry him. He wanted her to be sure when he asked her. When Mariah returned, they talked for a few minutes more then said their good-byes with Gabriel promising to see him in a few weeks when he returned to get his stuff from the apartment and his cat. As Ben hugged Mariah, he whispered in her ear how good she was for Gabriel and to take care of him. Mariah had no trouble making that promise.

They passed through the metal detectors, waving to Ben one last time then went down the hallway to the departure lounge to wait for their flight to be called. Finally American Airlines flight 1707 to San Antonio was announced so they joined the line with everyone else. Since they only had the one small carry-on bag, they stowed it above their heads but for some reason Mariah couldn't get him to put his jacket in the compartment. He was adamant about keeping it with him then they began to argue about who got the aisle seat this time. Gabriel claimed he needed it so he had a place to stretch his legs alongside the seat in front of him. Mariah argued that he had the aisle seat on the way there so it was her turn to have it now. Gabriel could see she wasn't going to back down so he gave in graciously, hoping he could persuade her to switch places mid-flight once his poor legs went to sleep from lack of circulation. Commercial airplanes were not made for people his size. Mariah gripped his hand again on takeoff and refused to relinquish her hold until the seat belt light went off and they were safely in the air. Finally she was able to relax and look around. Gabriel couldn't relax. He didn't want to stow his jacket up above because the ring was in it and he didn't want to let it out of his sight. He knew he should be picking a more romantic time and place but with her sitting so close he just had to tell her how he felt. Putting his hand into his pocket to feel the box for the hundredth time, he turned as best he could within the confines of the seat and spoke.

"Mariah?"

"Yes, Gabriel."

"I know we've only known each other a short time and I don't have much to offer you but I think we should get married." He looked at her, knowing he had blown it in the romance department.

Whatever she had been expecting him to say, that certainly wasn't it. "You sure know how to sweet-talk a woman, don't you? You, ah, think we should get married. Gee, I don't know what to say to such a romantic proposal." Yeah, he had blown it in the romance department. He could tell by the way she was looking at him with that incredulous look on her face.

"Is that a flat-out no?" he asked, unsure how to proceed.

"Well, it's not the proposal of a woman's dreams. I think we should get married." He hoped he hadn't totally blown it. Hey, he was a former cop, he should be able to figure out a way to turn this around.

"Excuse me," he said, standing up. "Can I get out past you?" he said to Mariah. She wondered where in heaven's name he was going after popping a question like that. The plane didn't have that many places to escape to. She turned her legs to the side to let him pass then watched his great butt pass by right at eye level. Despite the lackluster proposal she still wanted to bite his butt as he passed. Gabriel knew the next part needed to be handled delicately. After September 11, he didn't want to alarm any passengers or cause trouble. Standing in the aisle, he raised his hands and said, "Excuse me everyone. I'm Gabriel Blackburn, a Chicago cop." He hoped in the grand scheme of things that little lie would be forgiven. People looked up, not knowing what to expect. After September 11, nothing was the same. People were unsure about things but it seemed Gabriel meant no harm. Mariah grabbed his arm.

"Gabriel. What are you doing?" He just smiled at her and patted her hand.

"I just proposed to my girlfriend here but she won't say yes." Everyone started to laugh now they saw what was going on. Mariah blushed and tried to get him to sit down.

"I didn't really ask her to marry me. I just said we should get married which isn't the same thing, hoping she'd say yes and now I'm not sure what to do."

A little old lady in the aisle seat behind them said loudly, "A little groveling might help." Everyone laughed.

"Would that help?" he asked Mariah. She was too embarrassed to speak.

"You need to get down on one knee and ask her proper-like," another elderly lady said. "That's what my Horace did fifty-seven years ago and I couldn't say no." She gently patted the hand of the elderly man beside her who beamed at her, the love still there after fifty-seven years. Gabriel went down on one knee in the aisle and took Mariah's hand. Everyone held their breath and there wasn't a sound as he looked into her eyes.

"Mariah Forrester. I love you with all my heart. I couldn't imagine my life without you. I want to have kids with you. I want to make love to you day and night anywhere I want, anywhere you want. I want to care for you and cherish you and I want to grow old with you so that the last thing I see on this earth is your beautiful face. Would you please marry me and make me the happiest man on earth?"

"Yes, Gabriel. I'll marry you." Gabriel threw his arms around her and hugged her close.

"What'd she say?" someone yelled from the back.

"She said yes," yelled Horace's beaming wife as Gabriel pulled Mariah up into the aisle and kissed her in front of everyone. Gabriel took the box out of his pocket and opened it.

"Oh, Gabriel. It's so beautiful."

"My friend Katherine designed it just for you. I love you with all my heart, Mariah Forrester," he swore as he placed the ring on her finger and kissed her soundly to the roar of the passengers.

"I love you too, Gabriel Blackburn, and I can't wait to get home and show you what else I bought in Chicago."

"Oh, no!" he said. "I'm a dead man." The cabin erupted in cheers.

About the Author

Although born in Ireland, Kaenar Langford lives north of Toronto in rural Ontario but that doesn't stop her from traveling the world in her mind and in her books. The love of romance and the exotic as well as a sense of humor are all entwined to produce stories that will seduce you and make you laugh.

Her husband and two sons have grown used to seeing only the back of her head as she is transported to wherever the writing takes her. She has become immune to the teasing of her colleagues who are delighted with her publication of Lucifer's Angel, her first novel.

Kaenar enjoys playing music and reading and has taken up the Scottish small pipes in the last few years. Of course, Irish music is what she loves to play. Being asked to publish with Ellora's Cave ranks right up there with the best things to ever happen to her.

Kaenar welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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