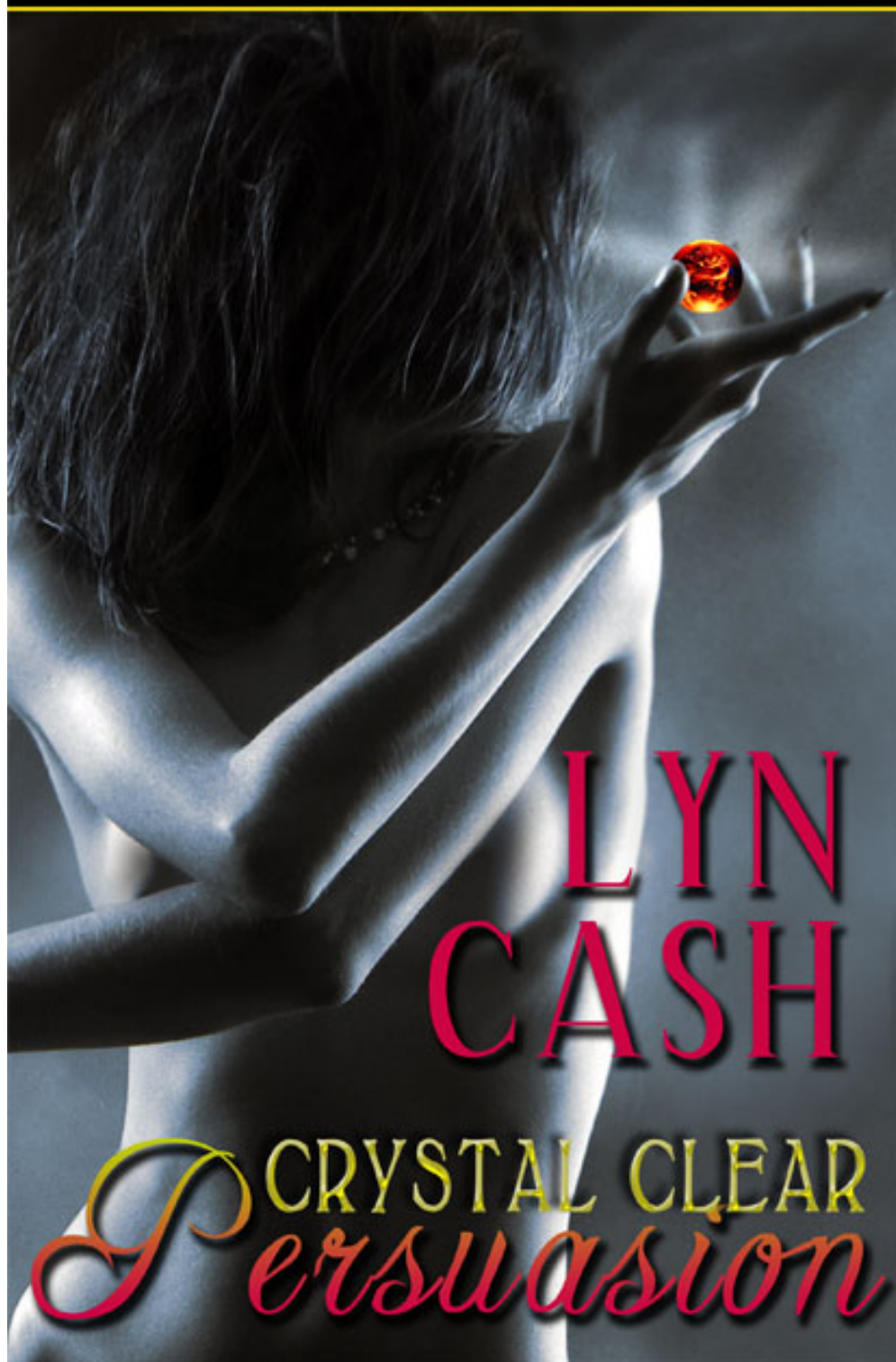


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Crystal Clear Persuasion

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CRYSTAL CLEAR PERSUASION

Lyn Cash

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Chapter One

"It's too large to be a marble and not big enough to be a Ben Wa ball, so what the hell is it?" Shyla Stewart palmed the object her boss's wife had just given her. She rolled it around gently, letting her fingers work it as though the perfectly round rose quartz were some form of putty or dough instead of mineral. The smooth solidness felt strange, foreign, almost alive in her hand, its texture sending a complex wave of sexual energy zipping through her body—hell, it might as well have been a vibrator.

"It's neither—it's a talisman." Beverly Ann White placed her hands on her hips and looked at Shyla sternly. "Harry didn't want to tell you about the trip we've scheduled for you because he knows that I have ulterior motives, so I volunteered."

Of course—the White Agency had been started by Beverly's father over three decades ago, so she had an investment in the advertising and promotions company, not just in her husband. Shyla still didn't understand where the conversation was going though. Didn't Bev realize that it was the end of the month, and there were deals to be finalized?

"I still don't get it—do I shoot it or stuff it?" Shyla tried joking to cover the embarrassment she felt that masked a sudden desire to copulate with the next man who entered her field of vision.

"Goose!" Beverly motioned for Shyla to sit across the large mahogany executive desk from her. "I have something to say to you that you're not going to like, but since we're friends and I feel strongly about this, I want you to do as I ask."

Shit. What now? Shyla did as commanded, still working the ball through her fingers and letting it roll around in her palm. It was pretty, and she rather enjoyed the perverse pleasure of being able to turn herself on even in the company of her boss. What wasn't to like?

She was used to Bev's bossiness. The older woman had taken her from unpolished yet eagerly ambitious fledgling in the business to one of the company's star art directors, so it wasn't like Shyla wasn't accustomed to change and pressure to perform. This time, however, there was a decided authoritarian chill to Beverly's voice, almost as if she were delivering an ultimatum.

"We have a new client, and I'm having Harry pull you off your other projects in order to handle this one." When Shyla opened her mouth to argue, Beverly held up her hands. "Hear me out. You have been working seventy-hour weeks for three months straight. I'm worried about you! You look like shit."

"Bev!"

"When's the last time you were out on a date?"

"What?" Shyla reached for a strand of her hair and twisted it around a finger nervously.

"Look, it's nothing personal. I'm just concerned. You need to get out of this office and away from the city. I don't want that fabulous talent of yours drying up because you've tapped into it too long without replenishing the source. I'm sending you on a mini-vacation, and you'll take it or I'll fire you myself." Shyla's mentor of five years leaned across the desk, palms together, fingers steepling and energetically tapping against one another. "It's only for a week and you'll be taking a working vacation, if that makes you feel any better. I know you, Shyla—you live and breathe your work."

Shyla sighed. She knew by the drumming fingers that Beverly was serious. Some people smoked, as she did, or they paced like Harry, or when they were seriously demented metaphysicians like Bev, they "held their energy inward", as Beverly would often say. Working it over in their brains, shooting it straight out their fingers if not their mouths or eyes, then zapping whoever was with them, shouting *Sha-zam!* Not always effective, but highly entertaining.

"You say Harry knows about this conversation?" Shyla prayed Beverly had simply slipped past him with this one. Harry thought most of his wife's New Age philosophies were ridiculous, but he indulged her nonetheless because it seemed to make her happy.

Bev nodded adamantly. "He's all for it, especially since I told him he's not getting any nookie until you are safely ensconced at the retreat. After twenty years of marriage, I'm not above playing the pussy card to get what I want."

"Beverly!" Shyla was shocked.

"Honey, men are either hungry or horny all the time, so if he doesn't have an erection I fix him a sandwich. And when one or both of those needs aren't met for a man, that's when this woman moves in for the kill. Trust me. You'll be married some day and know exactly what I mean."

God, I hope I won't be that mercenary. Jesus. A retreat. Knowing Bev, there would be chanting or praying, some form of vegan diet and possibly acupuncture or herbs involved. Shyla fucking hated needles and had an aversion to anything that tasted bad.

"Who is the client?" Shyla asked tiredly, already dreading the trip. It was upsetting that she'd have to turn over the dog food commercial and finding the right model for the lingerie ads—she'd worked hard on those projects. She was also pissed off that she hadn't been involved in making the presentation to this new client.

"Custom Communications."

Shyla snorted. "It's not some psychic hotline, is it? I didn't think they advertised in any form other than magazines now."

"Smart ass, they're a holistic wholesale supplier—they distribute everything from astrology charts to tarot cards to talismans. You're holding one." Beverly indicated the pink and white ball of crystal in Shyla's hands.

"Well, what do I do with this thing?" Shyla looked at the stone and blinked.

"You're to hold it...constantly. The owner picked it out for you after I described you."

Now it was Shyla leaning forward. "Hold it?"

"Before you get so snippy about Ben Wa balls, darling, I'll have you know that I had a couple of them." Beverly smiled saucily and fingered the photo Harry kept on the desk of the two of them.

Shyla closed her eyes momentarily against the image and shuddered. "Too much information, Bev." Then she mentally shook herself. "What do you mean you *had* a couple of them? What did you do once they'd done their job, make a donation to charity?"

"Why? You want them? I did not ask you in here to discuss my sex toys."

"Well, you're the one who brought them up!" Shyla folded her arms defensively across her chest. "You have issues."

"And you could do with a little loosening up, but I don't know if they make balls for that." Beverly reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small folder, opening it and spreading its contents on the desk between them.

"Airline tickets." She smacked down an envelope before Shyla, then drew forth another. "Lodge reservations and brochures. The owner is doing a seminar in Missouri."

"Of course." Shyla grimaced. It was bad enough she'd be missing work while Beverly and Harry divvied up her project load, but now she'd be roughing it at some pyramid-style business retreat for bird-watching metaphysicians? She could picture it now – Meat for the Mind, sandwiched by Touching Your Talismans on their pyramid's top level and something like Get In Touch With Your Inner Psychic on bottom. *No thanks*, she mouthed. She shoved the crystal into one of her jacket pockets.

Bev clicked her tongue. "Have you ever been to a real outdoor barbecue? You'll have the opportunity there. I believe there's also a hayride and a dance."

Shyla rolled her eyes. She'd never been to Missouri, but the retreat was beginning to sound like some backwoods hillbilly fest, and she fully expected to hear the theme from *Deliverance* at any moment. "I suppose there will also be banjo pickin', selling kisses for

a dollar, and mud wrestling at this little psychic fair?" She set her jaw, not caring that her sarcasm dripped from every syllable.

One more envelope slid across the desk, and this one held a thousand dollars in cash. "I don't care if they all smoke corncob pipes and wear hillbilly clothing, you're going!"

Shyla shook her head. "You're paying for my lodging and air fare—so what's this?"

"It's not your salary, if that's what has you worried. It's spending money, a gift from me. Pick me up a real cowboy handbag—buy yourself something nice. Use it for fruit juice or a series of massages. Get some new clothes—anything besides your usual black or brown." Bev's stern expression softened. "The firm is picking up the lodging and air fare because it's business. *I'm* picking up the spending money because it's personal. You *need* a break from here."

"I can't go." Shyla shrugged her shoulders and offered a saccharine smile. "I have to take my cat to the vet tomorrow."

"Don't bullshit me. You don't have a cat—you don't have so much as a goldfish or a living plant in your apartment. End of discussion." Beverly stood and sucked in a huge breath through her nostrils, her face a mask of stony finality.

Shyla held out the rose quartz. "What do you mean about my holding it? Is this how they'll recognize me or something? Instead of wearing red or waving a long-stemmed rose or carrying a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, I'll be the idiot holding a rock?"

"All I know is that I was told to give it to you with instructions never to let it out of your hands until you arrive at the lodge, because you'll be tested on it somehow." Beverly smiled brightly. "Relax, rest, enjoy yourself while you're there. Get to know our newest client, and have some fun."

"Yeah, right." Shyla rose to leave, muttering under her breath, "I'd rather have had the Ben Wa ball."

"One more thing." Beverly scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Shyla. "Your new shrink—the client insists that you take a crash course in metaphysics before you arrive, and this is the one he's picked out. She'll help prep you. I've already phoned and set up your appointment. You see Marla at four, board the plane tomorrow at seven, and you'll be in Missouri in time for lunch."

"Now you're shitting me for real, right?" Shyla snatched the piece of paper. *Dr. Marla Garrett, PP, MD, PhD*. "You're sending me to a..." She studied the paper more closely. "What's a PP? And don't get cute."

"She's a parapsychologist who specializes in helping people get in touch with their spiritual and ethereal sides. She also has her MD and a PhD in human behavior. You don't have to see her after this one visit if you don't wish. As I said, she's just there to help you with a few transitions before you meet the client, not to shrink wrap your head."

"And you think *I* don't have a life? When the hell did this woman have time to amass all this education?"

"Just make sure you're on time—Marla hates tardiness."

Shyla couldn't suppress her aggravated groan. "What do I say?"

"That's up to you. I only set it up for you."

"I see." Shyla was near tears, which bugged the shit out of her. She wadded the piece of paper and stuck it in her jacket on top of the rose quartz. "At the request of our new client."

"You got it. And take your talisman to your appointment. She wants to talk to you about it."

Another idea struck Shyla. "My mother will give me hell for missing the *festino*, Bev. Can't this wait?"

Her friend frowned. "What are you talking about?"

“Santa Rosalia—the annual festival in Bensonhurst. My mother is *Italian*.” Shyla leaned forward, eyes bugged intentionally, as if to drive home the Italian mother complex she carried. “I can’t disappoint her.”

“Fucking hell, Shyla, is there anything your family *doesn’t* celebrate?” Beverly frowned. “I thought your parents lived in Dyker Heights.”

“They’re still Bensonhurst people. My family goes to Santa Rosalia every year without fail. If I don’t show up, I’ll hear *Lontano dal cuore* from now until I die—‘Far from the eyes, far from the heart’. She’s afraid I’ll forget her and the family if I break traditions, so you see... I can’t go to the seminar.”

“Do you think I’m enjoying this? I’m worried about you!” Beverly reiterated. “I’m afraid this is one time you’ll have to face your mom’s wrath, because the arrangements have been made—and my plans for you override your Italian mother’s breast-beating guilt trips. I’m a Jewish mother—I outrank her when it comes to those.”

Bev came from around the desk and pulled Shyla from the chair, hugging her tightly then giving her a gentle shake. “You know I love you, therefore I’m *ordering* you to take a vacation—this one. And get laid while you’re down there.”

Shyla winced—there it was again, the implication that some man’s cock could cure all her ills.

“Damn it.” Beverly snapped her fingers. “I keep forgetting to tell you—you need to buy some jeans.”

“As in cowboy or high fashion?” One more thing Shyla would have to hate about this trip. She was more rock ‘n’ roll than country.

“I’d say tough ones.”

“Why?” Shyla was getting suspicious. “For the hayride?”

“For the horseback riding. It’s a dude ranch. That is, it’s a lodge situated on several acres of land, and the whole thing is called a dude ranch. I’m told it’s quite charming.”

“Ack! Bev! I’ve never even seen a horse that wasn’t on a sidewalk with a cop on its back. We live in the concrete jungle, remember?”

Beverly waved her hands frantically. “Will you just trust me? Most of the staff would jump at this opportunity, to work in such a setting.” When Shyla finally relented and nodded, Beverly brightened. “Good—and thank you. Now scoot. You have shopping and packing to do. Take the rest of the day off.”

* * * * *

Shyla was unable to shake the results of her meeting with Bev, and the cabbie who picked her up after work had an intense, knowing expression that threw her off-balance. It was almost as if he knew what was on her mind—that Bev was right. She was an insecure, sexually frustrated female.

Once he’d taken her information and put his foot on the gas, she noted the information listed on the back of the driver’s seat. His name was Peter Murray. He seemed amiable enough as he concentrated on traffic.

“Do you know where we’re headed?” she asked.

“I know.” His voice seemed to hold disapproval.

Shyla silently scolded herself for being paranoid. It didn’t help that Beverly had suggested what she really needed was to get laid.

What the fuck? Shyla couldn’t help but wonder why Beverly would even broach such a topic with her. Sure, they’d been more than just employer and employee to one another, and yes, the doors of communication had always been open. But still. What a load of crap to hit her with on short notice.

What was wrong with her damned clothes, anyway? Beverly glanced over her plain black slacks, simple black shell top and sturdy matching shoes that were made for walking, not preening.

She looked up to find the cabbie quickly averting his gaze.

He didn't say anything for the next few minutes, but she could feel his eyes on her occasionally. She allowed herself the backseat luxury of examining him right back. He looked lanky – well over six feet tall because his knees nearly hit the steering wheel as he drove. He had a heart-shaped face, wide forehead, high brow and a widow's peak, with thinning short-cropped silvery hair that still showed signs of his youthful reddish brown in places. It was an open, honest face that welcomed gossip, but in it Shyla detected a bullshit barometer that could cut her right down to the bone if he so wished.

His hazel eyes met hers again, inciting Shyla to fold her arms in front of her breasts and wish she'd kept her jacket on rather than setting it across her lap. He was kind of attractive in a weird sort of way, but she had neither the time nor the inclination to flirt with him.

"What's bugging you?" He broke their mutual silence, peering at her from the mirror.

Why do you care, she couldn't help but wonder. She hesitated before responding. She'd bet he heard a lot of weird tales from his passengers and by the curiosity in his eyes, she wouldn't be a bit surprised if he enjoyed hearing whatever he was told. *Oh what the hell?* Shyla shifted in the back seat. "I just lied to my boss to keep from doing something for her. I told her I wanted to go to the Santa Rosalia this week."

"She doesn't know the festival is in late summer?" Apparently this Peter Murray was familiar with that part of Brooklyn.

"I suppose she will in about eight or nine weeks when it's mentioned on the news." Shyla stared glumly out the window. "Doesn't matter. She pretty much told me I was full of shit and nixed the idea."

"That why you're seeing a shrink today? Because you lie to your boss?"

She stared openmouthed at him. "How do you know where I'm going?"

"I recognize the address."

The nerve of this guy! "So? What makes you think I'm seeing a shrink?"

"Maybe I'm psychic. You did just say you had a problem with lying. Hey, you don't look like you're nuts, if it makes you feel any better." He shrugged and offered an affable grin. "C'mon – lighten up. What's the worst that can happen?"

"My shrink could tell me what my boss just did – that I need to get laid."

He hesitated thoughtfully before replying, "Do you?"

"Fuck off."

"Sounds like a definite maybe." He honked at another driver and flipped him off. "God, I hate slow-ass people."

"Exactly! Thank you!" Shyla smacked the back of the front seat with both palms, feeling somewhat vindicated. "I have to fly to the Midwest, and I don't want to spend valuable time chanting at some lakeside retreat and working up an ad campaign for a company that isn't doing the speed limit. How could they? They're in Bumfuck, Missouri! How progressive can they be, for godsakes?"

"Hey, I love Missouri – my brother lives there. Beautiful country. Nice people too." He glanced at her again. "This company you're handling? What's their name?"

"Custom Communications."

"Never heard of them."

Shyla smiled for the first time since entering his cab. "Precisely my point."

Peter hummed to himself for a bit then said, "Maybe that's why they need you to work for them. Make them more visible."

Taxi driver philosophy, exactly what she needed. *Not!*

Shyla was already reaching for her cigarettes before she asked if she could smoke in his cab. Peter shook his head. "Company rules, sweetheart. Sorry." But when he glanced at her in the mirror and his eyes met hers, his expression softened and he relented. "Ah, go ahead. Just roll the window down and blow your smoke outside."

"Thanks. I don't think I could do this without reinforcements."

By the time they'd arrived at her new therapist's building, Shyla was self-conscious as hell. She paid the fare, tipped him and stepped out, then waited before walking up to the driver's side and placing her hand by the window. When he rolled it down, she said, "I know this type of familiarity probably isn't the norm for you – for me either, but I gotta know the truth. Do I really come off as a bitch who needs to get laid?"

Peter patted her hand. "You look fine. I like brunettes. They're not as high maintenance as blondes or redheads." He studied her body, cocking his head and looking her up and down. "You've got a booty and nice breasts."

A booty? *Great. Is he saying I'm fat?* Shyla turned to walk away. Not to mention that a cab driver just basically told her he'd sleep with her.

"Hey! What did I say?" Peter leaned out of the cab's window, an arm extended in plea.

"Nothing." Shyla fidgeted. "Thanks for the ride."

"You seem upset."

She placed her hands on her hips. "I never ask anyone how I look. Having someone just say 'You have a booty' wasn't what I was looking for."

"Then ask for what you want, honey. I'm game if you are."

She gave a half-sob, half-chuckle. "I'm not advertising for sex. I just wanted to know what it was about me that would make someone think...I needed to get laid."

"You want the truth?" His face held doubt. Horns honked as cars swerved to pass him.

Shyla nodded.

"Your shoes." He pointed to her loafers. "Definitely not sexy – get some sandals. And that hairdo – my sister is a cosmetologist, and she'd tell you that you've got split ends and that the style is too harsh for your face. You've got curves – flaunt 'em and play them up with something softer." He paused. "That help?"

For the first moment since encountering him, she really looked at him. His face was nice as faces go, weathered and lined by time and experience, his expression open and earnest, but there was a deep, hidden concern in his eyes that unnerved her. Gone was the acerbic, tired-cabbie tone in his voice. Present was an odd compassion and empathy – as if he truly cared how she felt.

Afraid she'd burst into tears, Shyla gave him a quick nod and ran toward the building. Peter made her sound like a frump. She didn't turn around when she heard his last cryptic words before he peeled out.

"Look, I'm sorry – I only meant to help. I've only got one more to go, so I *really* hope you work this shit out!"

A tight ball of fear in her gut gnawed at her as she stepped into the lobby. What if Beverly and the cab driver were right? When had she last gotten down and dirty with someone? There was Geraldo from accounting the year before, but that was only for a month before he lost interest. There'd been that other guy, her mother's neighbor's son, but that was... Nah. It couldn't have been that long ago. Was it?

She stabbed the elevator button angrily. *What the hell did you expect? You asked for honesty – you got it.*

Where had she gone wrong? Hadn't she done the right thing since birth? She'd taken the piano lessons, won the scholarships that put her through college so she could earn her degree, dated the right boys, secured the right apartment, landed the right job. Her days were spent working, her nights...well...working. She visited her parents every weekend and never missed mailing out holiday and birthday cards on time. Wasn't that enough? She was supposed to be sexy as well?

In the elevator, she glanced upward and caught her reflection in the mirrored ceiling. A fresh onslaught of tears battled for release. She knew she wasn't ugly, but...not sexy? All of the women in her family were sexy. Even her mother was sexy – her dad couldn't keep his hands off the woman. Every time she cooked, he grabbed her

ass. When they were on the couch watching television together, he kept one arm about her shoulders or sat holding her hands.

This would never do. Why hadn't her sisters or her parents told her that she'd stopped caring how she looked? When had neat and tidy replaced vivacious and charming? "I used to be cute, damn it!" she barked at the opening elevator door.

The pert pastel princess sitting behind the reception desk didn't put her in any better mood. Shyla couldn't suppress the sigh that escaped when she saw the smaller woman, who only served to make her feel like a moose. Even with their generational gap, the secretary was a reminder that thin was in no matter the decade.

"Hello, I'm Edie. Take a seat, please. Marla will be with you in a moment."

The older woman's high-pitched nasality grated on Shyla's nerves. *Take a hit of antihistamine*, she thought uncharitably.

If there was nothing to read but housekeeping and baby magazines, she was out of there. Shyla parked her butt unceremoniously in a high-backed wing chair and pouted. The place seemed to throb with some form of electrical energy that she tried to ignore. What type of people needed a shrink who dealt in psychic phenomena, and what the devil was *her* connection to all this hoo-ha?

"Shit!" She covered her mouth right after she'd blurted the word. The secretary's mouth thinned to a prim line, and Shyla could practically hear the *Oh dear* generating in the woman's mind.

The crystal talisman—that was what she was supposed to show the therapist. Shyla reached inside the pocket holding the item, her fingers getting that same tingly feeling she'd felt at work when she'd first been handed it.

She studied it, frowning. Why was it that her twat tingled each time she held the silly stone? It was a rock—a fucking rock, for all she knew. Nothing magical about that. As for her physical response... Maybe she was just horny and hadn't realized it until now. If she was supposed to masturbate with the damned thing, there was no way. If

they'd wanted her to have some sort of giddy sex thrill from it, then why wasn't it formed in a phallic shape?

A small buzzing sound alerted her that the secretary had been paged. Looking up, Edie motioned for Shyla to enter the door to her left. Thank God—it was almost over. She'd listen to the woman's mumbo-jumbo, thank her then get the hell out and back home so she could pack.

The flawlessly made-up, middle-aged woman who greeted her warmly was nothing like Shyla had anticipated. Her twenty-six-toothed smile must've wrapped all the way around her face and buttoned in the back, and Shyla had the feeling the tiny woman wearing high heels and an expensive Donna Karan suit could shatter glass with the rich, singsong voice that welcomed her.

"I'm Marla—it's so nice to meet you!" The vivacious strawberry-blonde led her from the entry to a sitting area surrounded by low bookcases filled with medical journals, magazines and alabaster figurines.

Shyla could barely keep her eyes off the woman's ass, which swung like a metronome as she walked confidently across the plush carpet. Talk about a woman who completely owned her body and wasn't afraid to show it.

"I'll bet you think this is really weird, huh?" Marla sat on an overstuffed sofa and indicated the club chair opposite her for Shyla. "I'll tell you up front that the office isn't haunted, nobody here has fangs or cloven hooves and whatever is said in here stays in here."

Whatever sour attitude or self-denigrating thoughts Shyla had prior to their meeting, they were gone now. Shyla was nervous. Was the ball now in her court? What could they possibly discuss?

Marla saved her the trouble. She fluttered her fingers. "Let's see it. Your talisman—you did bring it, right?"

Shyla held it in front of her, but Marla merely studied it from a distance, not even reaching out to touch it.

"That's some rock they gave you. I told Dallas that from your description I'd guess you either needed a quartz or an amethyst—my money was on the amethyst, but now that I've met you, I see he was right. The quartz will bring out the natural blush in your skin. You dark, brooding types need something light."

Shyla wanted to laugh. Her therapist and her new client—Dallas?—had had a discussion via phone about what rock to present her? What next? "So you know my client."

"Know him? Honey, I changed that boy's diapers. He's a scream—you'll love him, even if he is a little 'out there' with some of his hobbies. He's into wine-making now. If only he knew how to cook to have something to go along with the occasional vinegar instead of wine that comes out of those bottles."

Shyla bit her lips, trying to think of an appropriate response to this information. "Dallas is an unusual name."

"You think that one's strange—his middle name is Reno. His parents were on a wild honeymoon starting up their new business when he was conceived, and they didn't know whether he was made in Texas or Nevada that year, so they gave him both names." Marla leaned back into the sofa, obviously relaxing. She narrowed her eyes and squinted. "You're not keen on making this trip, are you?"

"I'm loathing it. Have you ever been to Missouri?"

"I do business there occasionally. How about you? Ever been there?"

Shyla shook her head. "No. I'm just too busy to go, and the place sounds like something out of *Little House on the Prairie*, only it's a lodge instead of a house. I think. Besides, I'm too busy. I shouldn't be leaving right now."

"But your employer wants you to take this trip. I see." Marla pursed her lips and thought a moment. "Since you've really no choice, other than to defy your boss, what say we prepare you? I'll tell you a bit about talismans, and you can work on your affirmations and deep breathing before you get there. Speaking of breathing, you can't smoke there, you know, so the cigarettes will have to go."

"Wait. How —"

Marla indicated Shyla's jacket. "I can smell it on your clothing. Besides, you need to quit anyway."

Shyla swelled with indignation. "Then I'm not going."

Her therapist leaned forward and placed a hand on one of Shyla's knees. "You can take your cigarettes and smoke in the woods if no one catches you—you just can't smoke inside the lodge."

At that, Shyla laughed. "Do I have to shit in the woods too? Are there, like, outhouses and well water and all of that crap? Snakes? I can't believe this. Nobody has the right to tell me—"

"Hold on!" Marla sat back, laughing with her. "It won't be that bad. Hey, maybe you'll be too busy to even want a fix."

"I doubt that."

"Why? What are you expecting?" Marla's face held two emotions, curiosity and compassion, and it was the latter that did Shyla in. Close as she was to Bev, her friend's high-handedness was callous, but this Marla showed considerate concern.

She finally burst into tears, angry with herself for the humiliating lack of control. "Damn it. I never cry."

Marla pushed a box of tissue on the coffee table between them toward Shyla. "What makes you want to cry now?"

"I don't want to cry!"

"But you're still in tears, so ask yourself what prompted this. Honey, I don't mean to make you feel trapped, but this is what I'm here for, and you're obviously upset, so let's talk about it."

Sniffing and wiping her eyes and nose, Shyla nodded. "The cab driver...on the way over here...he thinks I have a fat ass."

"What?"

"Oh he didn't say that—he actually indicated he'd sleep with me. Told me I have a *booty* and nice breasts. But I knew what he meant. He pretty much told me I'm not sexy."

"You're upset over something a taxi driver said to you? Report him!" Marla narrowed her eyes. "What did he look like? Tall, obnoxious grin, newsboy cap that has seen better days?"

"Uh...sounds about right."

"I'll bet that was Murray. He's supposed to be helping people, not stirring up more trouble."

Shyla blinked. Marla Garrett was familiar enough with the cab drivers of the entire New York metropolitan area that she could single out Peter Murray? She chewed on her hair. She wasn't sure how much more of all this creepy intuition she could handle. "No, no. I'm not saying this correctly. He was actually quite nice. But before that, my *employer* told me I need to get laid. Then...you know how people sometimes talk to their cabbies like they're..."

Marla nodded and smiled. "Therapists? Yeah, and some cabbies can pull off that shrink persona better than others. Go on."

"So I asked him why someone would say something like that to me. What makes them think I'm sexually frustrated?" By now Shyla's voice was a whimper, most of the anger gone.

"Well...are you?"

"Yes, damn it!" Shyla's fury returned full force. "But I didn't realize it until about two hours ago, and there's not a goddamned thing I can do about it *now*, is there?"

"Ha—well, not in here, you can't." Marla snapped her fingers. "I have an idea though. You and I are going to discuss that crystal some more, but first, my private bathroom is to the left of that bookcase over there." She pointed. "You freshen up and pull yourself together while I phone Bev."

Shyla was mortified. "Oh my God. You *know* my boss?"

"I won't embarrass you, honey. Just let me handle this... Go on."

Shyla could barely move, much less get out of the chair. *Shit*. What had she just done, blurting out that crap to someone she barely knew?

She pushed herself to a standing position, grabbed a couple more tissues and left the room, but she left the door cracked so she could hear the conversation. Which wasn't difficult, considering the resonant timbre of the shrink's voice.

"Bev, I'm telling you, you need to postpone this trip at least one more day. Let me handle it. What you need to do is call the spa and give them your permission to let this girl take care of business using your credit card. She can get her manicures and pedicures and all that crap in Missouri, but before she goes, she needs to feel good about herself!"

Spa? Shyla's spirits perked. *Yes, please give me one more day before I have to do this.* But what the hell were those two women planning for her?

Marla's voice still carried. "Oh fuck the expense. You've got more money than God has minions, so just do it. I really don't feel comfortable being a part of this. I'm giving her the gift I intended to give you if she'll have it. Between the spa and the vibrator, maybe she'll at least release some of this pent-up frustration she's held in check for so long. I'm not sending her down there in her condition."

Vibrator! Did she just say vibrator? Shyla's knees buckled beneath her, and she had to grasp the lavatory to steady herself. Her therapist was giving her a sexual stimulant. That was intended for someone else — *Bev?*

Un-fucking-believable. Shyla ran cool water over her wrists and splashed some of it on her face. This wasn't happening. What the fuck did she say when Marla handed her the "present"?

Marla studied Shyla's face when she reentered the room. "You heard."

"I heard." The muscles in Shyla's throat constricted with anger to the point that she could barely speak. She started twisting her hair again. "Okay, you know Bev. I can handle that."

"I know her well."

"But I can't believe you're attempting to give me a *vibrator*! That you bought *for my boss*. You're not a sex therapist...are you?"

"Look, it hasn't even been out of the box. Sit down. Please."

Shyla could do nothing *but* sit at this point. If she tried to walk farther, she knew she'd collapse.

"You've held the talisman, right?"

"I'm not masturbating with someone else's sex toy."

"I told you – it's brand new, and it's the thought that counts, right?"

Shyla's eyes filled with tears again. Despite her desire not to like this woman, though, these were tears of mirth. Nodding, she bit her lips, but the bubbles of laughter finally burst and she couldn't help herself. In between a giggle and a snort, she said, "So I take it you're pretty well acquainted with my boss – or rather, my boss's wife."

"Oh everyone knows Beverly runs the show there and that Harry does whatever she tells him to do. We all went to college together. My husband and I stood up at Beverly and Harry's wedding."

Sarcasm overrode Shyla's shyness. "And how long have you two bitches been planning this for me?"

Marla didn't seem to take offense. "This trip to Missouri? About a month. She was waiting on the right time to spring this on you."

"And my client? Was that just some kind of plant?"

"Oh he's real, all right, but the owner has been out of town – visiting his mother, poor widowed soul that she is. He has homes both here and in Missouri." Marla's expressive fingers fluttered again, displaying the long, red-lacquered nails. "You'll just

have to trust me. I really think Beverly has your best interests at heart, despite the way she's handled this situation. All of this will work out. First, however, the talisman. Then the spa, which reminds me... I need to phone them and see if Tammy is still there. Better if you get this done tomorrow if she can work you in. She's great, so don't worry."

"Get what done?"

"Your hair. You need to take care of a few things that will make you feel better. You've been twisting your hair ever since you arrived, which tells me you're self-conscious about it for whatever reasons. You said you want to look sexy, right? I've got just the ticket for you."

Marla went into business mode again. "Bev will handle the airline, I'll take care of contacting Tammy. You just worry about shedding some of that hostility you've directed toward yourself. None of us wants to feel like we've failed ourselves. You haven't done that. You've just neglected a few things, but now you're getting back on track." She looked at Shyla's hands. "Where's your talisman?"

"In my pocket, I think." She reached into her pants pocket and felt the stone's heat before she made contact. Deciding she'd be better off not having a spontaneous orgasm in front of her therapist, she withdrew her hand. "I must've put it back in there when I went to the bathroom."

"Well, let's concentrate on that for the next few minutes. I want you to *feel* the power that it holds—that energy is just for you. What does your body experience when you touch your crystal?"

"Horniness." Shyla laughed again, this time a belly laugh. "Ack! I can't believe I'm telling you this crap."

"It's just business, and right now this is extremely important. A talisman is supposed to center you, to be a focal point for your thoughts and feelings, a guide that will help you concentrate on what is most important to you. If that happens to be of a sexual nature, then so be it. Just go with the flow."

Shyla did as requested. She closed her eyes and tried releasing her thoughts, letting whatever was to happen slowly materialize. "I feel...relaxed."

"Good. What else?"

"Energized...in an odd way." Shyla opened her eyes. "And peaceful."

"Then the quartz is doing its job."

"Is this some form of magic?"

Marla shrugged. "Maybe. Don't let it confuse you. Crystals are healing when used properly. They only have the power we give to them. What you're supposed to be learning is how to release the bad and take in the good. I want you to keep that ball in your hands at all times until you are completely comfortable with it and whatever sensations you feel. Got it?"

As Shyla nodded, Marla rose to go to her desk and came back with her cell phone. "Do you have a hair clip in your purse? Pull your hair away from your face and get it off your neck while you're doing this. It'll help if you have no distractions." She smiled. "It'll also keep you from wanting to wrap it around your fingers."

"Okay."

"Keep meditating," she told Shyla once she'd secured the clip in place. "I'll just be a minute with this."

Shyla closed her eyes once more and breathed deeply, loving the thought that she might soon be free of all self-doubts and fears, hoping for the chance to release all the anxiety she felt about her flight from New York to Missouri. Fervently wishing that somehow this trip might, despite her trepidation, help her ease the longing for fulfillment that had long eluded her.

And that that fulfillment would include getting laid.

She heard a small clicking sound and opened her eyes.

"Sorry—almost forgot that I need to take your photo so that your new client can recognize you once you land in...what did you call it? Bumfuck?" Marla cackled.

Shyla blushed. "Geez. Don't tell him I called it that."

"I won't. All I'll say is that you'll be a day late and that I'll phone him again once the travel arrangements have been altered. Cheer up. The spa will make you feel fantastic!"

Chapter Two

Dallas' hands slowly massaged his cock, the need for release filling him with surprise and wonder. He'd been hard almost constantly for the past day, starting when he first saw the photo his mother had sent him via her cell phone.

The lusciously curved brunette in the photo had skin he'd bet would melt in his hands like butter, and he was a sucker for a woman with meat on her bones—something to hold and cuddle. That his mother would inadvertently be the catalyst for his irreverent urges was most disconcerting, and most assuredly something they would never discuss.

He groaned, partly from arousal, partly from the inescapable fact that his work week was about to get more difficult. Damn Marla anyway. She knew before she and her best friend hatched this plan that he'd go along with it, that even though the cost of hiring the White Agency would blow his advertising budget for the quarter, their services would help put his little operation into higher visibility.

Trouble was, he rather liked the low profile he'd kept ever since taking over the business when his dad died. Dallas had given up the corporate jungle for one that had heavy snowfalls, woodland creatures and affable clientele who treasured his services. This brunette, he could tell from his telephone conversations with Beverly and his mother, would push his buttons.

He lay back against his hotel bed's pillows, tried focusing on the image he held in his mind, the soft expression on her face. Her mouth—no lipstick, just pure, pink wholesomeness that he'd love to feel beneath his own lips...not to mention other places.

It was no use. He wasn't going to get off like this, continually wanting to fuck her on the one hand and analyze her on the other. He'd just have to wait until he met her on the plane and pray that when his senses sent him the five-alarm-fuck jolt he didn't scare

the shit out of her. He'd canceled his earlier flight as soon as his mother said to wait. He'd taken in another night of New York cuisine with his mom then later watched a movie alone in his room after they'd said goodbye.

Marla had been nagging him about getting new contact lenses since he hadn't had a checkup in well over a year. She seemed to think his vision had altered to the point that he couldn't see what was right in front of his face. He'd told her he'd take care of the matter as soon as he got home, which had only fueled yet another sticking point with her. She loved that he'd done so well with the business, but she wanted him back in New York with her, complaining that she'd already lost her husband—she didn't want to be so far away from her only son.

Great. Too many stray thoughts assaulting him. Now he couldn't get his rocks off if his life depended upon it. Not while being cooped up in a hotel room with visions of his mother intermingling with those of the delicious female morsel he was destined to meet. He was thankful Marla would be somewhere else when he and Shyla Stewart met face-to-face.

He stood and stretched, yawning and rubbing the stubble on his chin as he thought. It was one thing to daydream about sleeping with a business associate—not that he had any assurance she'd be as attracted to him as he was to her—but was it even kosher to seriously consider such a thing? How about if that person was reluctant to do business with him? Wouldn't that sort of balance the ethics scales?

Dallas had been in a cab ten blocks away from meeting Marla at her office to take her to dinner when she'd phoned and sent the photo of Shyla. The woman he'd bumped into at the elevator was definitely her, but she didn't seem to notice him. She'd held a plain brown paper bag that intrigued the hell out of him, and she'd seemed bent on hiding it from whoever saw her, as though it contained some secret. Dallas knew his mother would never break the doctor-patient privilege, but he was highly aroused nonetheless, his curiosity running rampant when he saw the woman and her secret

stash of sex toys. Or whatever she really had in the bag, though it probably wasn't nearly as exciting.

Shaking his head, he decided to shower, hoping his desire for a woman he had yet to truly meet didn't cause problems in their business relationship.

Once Shyla returned from the spa, it took her two hours to work up the courage to take the brightly colored box out of the brown bag. It was another thirty minutes before she had the nerve to install batteries in the "Ballistic Beaver" vibrator. Even then, she got them in upside down the first time and was almost ready to phone maintenance to see if her building's handyman might have a clue how to operate the sucker.

It seemed the circumstances of the day had been in motion to transform her, to bring her out of the comfort of the shell she'd created to protect her libido. First the zing she'd gotten from that crazy sex stone, then the cab driver telling her all about her "booty", then the therapist whose engaging personality and wacky ideas had brought her out of her comfort zone. Then she'd bumped into that Paul Bunyan-type example of a male as she left the building.

Shyla had never been attracted to redheaded men, but this one blew her mind. His skin had been darkly tanned as if he spent his time entirely outdoors, which only intensified the deep, rich burgundy hair that fell across his brow. Then when he'd pulled down his sunglasses to peer at her with eyes the color of a midnight blue sky, she'd nearly creamed herself. Not her normal response to some guy coming out of an elevator.

He filled her thoughts now as she stared at the vibrator—Lumberjack Paul, she'd call him. *What in hell are you afraid of? You'll never see him again – this could be the best sex of your life for all you know.*

The vibrator was big and enticing with its bumps and ridges, something new and forbidden. She could never have purchased something like this on her own.

“And I can’t bring myself to use it now,” she muttered. She turned on her heels and went back to the bathroom to stare at her reflection. She couldn’t help herself—ever since her morning at The Red Door, where she’d been pampered with skin treatments and a haircut and style—not to mention the subtle gold and red highlights the stylist had recommended—Shyla hadn’t been able to pass a mirror without marveling at the transformation. The swinging cut that framed her face rather than blocking it like some dark wooden frame made her look dreamy, sweet, even pretty. The exfoliation made her skin glow with a softness that gave her a vulnerability she felt but didn’t want anyone else to see. Well, now it was there for all and sundry, because she looked like a wide-eyed teenager ripe for sex.

She glanced back toward the bedroom. She *did* want sex. With a *him*. Not an *it*. But she was an artist, right? She had an imagination, so why not use it?

Shyla giggled as she reached for the box of wet tissues she kept on a bathroom shelf then walked hesitantly back to her bed. The vibrator was hardly the boyfriend she could introduce to her folks. *Here, Dad, meet...Paul. Have a beer with him, watch the game. This is as close to a son-in-law as you’re gonna get from me for a while.*

She collapsed on her bed, tossing the tissues beside the vibrator and howling with laughter over the realization of what she was about to do. It had been so long since she’d touched herself intimately that she didn’t know where to begin. Did she court herself, imagining that she was at the dance Beverly had mentioned? Or had she and her partner been walking in the moonlight, looking at stars shimmering over the lake?

The rose quartz ball sat cushioned on her bedside table and Shyla palmed it, still marveling at the erotic buzz it contained.

Correction, she told herself. You *give the object the energy it holds—there is nothing particularly magical here.*

Shyla set aside the crystal and reached for the box of tissues, administering one to the vibrator. She cleaned it slowly, rubbing the material around the shaft, over the head, back down. Her breathing became labored and her throat went dry. It hadn’t been so

long since she'd touched a cock that she knew her new toy was fairly realistic. Realistic enough, anyway, for her to imagine it belonging to Lumberjack Paul. She'd bet his cock was hard and big and that it would fill her completely, that his hands would be calloused but not too rough, fine hairs just beyond them on wrists and arms that could hold her and make her feel completely safe and sure of herself.

Just stroking the cock in her hands sent shivers of anticipation throughout her body and she lay back against the pillows, quivering. Soon she was manipulating not only her new playmate but herself, parting the lips of her pussy and rubbing her clit. *Yes*. She needed this – she needed him, and he would be with her in one form if not another.

She inhaled deeply, the quick gust of his scent still clinging to her senses, teasing, inviting, invading. The hard tip of the cock nudged closer, opening her wider, preparing her. God, it felt good, and she wanted more! She felt sexy, desirable and deliciously naughty.

Blissfully, she allowed the fantasy to completely overtake her as the pulsating cock inside her pussy took on a life of its own, thrusting, withdrawing, thrusting, vibrating against her clit and driving her wild with need.

She was vaguely aware of the muscles in her stomach contracting along with those of her pussy, hugging the hardness within, riding the wave of sensation that made her quake. That scent...still there, as if he leaned toward her, his chest rubbing against her breasts, his face hovering over hers, his lips ready to capture the cry of release as her desire peaked.

Shyla opened her mouth in surprise as her cunt clenched, pushing her over the edge of reason.

As the orgasm overtook her whole body, a bizarre spectacle overtook her room. A bright light bounced around the walls, glowing soft pink then fuchsia, like someone had beamed a flashlight from her bed. Shyla sat up and clutched a pillow for protection and looked for the light's source. The crystal that had sat rather complacently against its cushion on the table looked like it was on fire.

She knew she couldn't possibly see what her eyes were telling her brain was there. The damned thing shone like a hot coal, and she didn't know whether to touch it or douse it with water. But something, some force that came from the core of her being, told her to touch it. She put her finders on the orb and felt its electric charge. It was warm and inviting, full of energy but harmless.

Then it happened. One rocketing orgasm after another, spasms so deep she fell back, releasing the pillow, her back bowing, pussy trembling with unleashed power. Shyla gasped for air, shudders of delight slamming through her.

Several minutes later when she could catch her breath, she wrapped the covers about her and studied both the crystal and the vibrator.

One thing was certain — the mysterious crystal *and* this little gift from her therapist were traveling to Missouri with her. Maybe once she'd returned from her trip she might find the courage to see Marla on a regular basis until she got a handle on the confusion and frustration she'd been feeling. Marla seemed like a decent sort, someone whose creative energy could help Shyla unlock whatever was blocking her freedom of expression. Come to think of it, her art would probably get a boost from an injection of therapy now and then as well. And hell, an injection now and then of whatever she'd just experienced couldn't hurt either. Could it?

* * * * *

She was staring out the window of the plane from her first-class accommodation and didn't see him sit down next to her, but she felt his presence and smelled the heady masculine scent that made her pulse quicken. Shyla pretended to continue her observation of the other side of the glass, but her gaze was turned inward. *Nah, it's not possible! What are the odds?* Many men probably used that same cologne.

She squirmed in her seat, feeling the moisture pool between her thighs at just the thought of her fantasy man. She pushed her huge, retro-chic sunglasses farther up the bridge of her nose and resisted twirling her hair around her fingers. This wasn't the

time to fall back on old habits. She was reborn, new, even wearing makeup and clothing she'd purchased but not so much as tried on until now. The cream-colored shell and caramel linen jacket were standbys, but the diaphanous floral-print skirt had never been worn. It had been a gift from her mother the previous summer and still had the tags on it when Shyla pulled it out of the closet to wear on her trip.

The sandals were still new — she'd purchased them the year before, never dreaming she'd actually wear them. They were a butter-soft leather that matched her jacket and handbag, and the awareness that her legs were showing made her feel half-dressed. But Peter, the cabbie with attitude, had had a point—the loafers weren't sexy. And today, what with the new hairstyle, highlights and feminine clothing she was wearing, Shyla wanted to feel sexy, if only for herself.

Her neighbor stretched out, the muscles in his long legs rippling beneath the tight denim. Shyla was suddenly conscious of her own exposed limbs and crossed her legs, tugging at the hem of the skirt.

This is ridiculous. He won't be looking at your legs when there are stewardesses passing by whose bodies will be rubbing up against him.

Shyla tried to suppress the butterflies in her stomach that kept her on edge all through takeoff. She'd never enjoyed air travel. Today was no exception.

"Need anything before we take off?" The male voice to her right was deep and rich.

When she turned to look at him, he kept his eyes on the newspaper in his lap. "Pardon me?"

"Chewing gum, barf bag, therapy?" He gave her a quick sidelong glance and grinned.

Shyla responded in kind, glad for the opportunity to talk to someone. "I don't chew gum and I've already had therapy this week, so I guess I'll opt for the bag if it comes to that."

He reached across her and indicated the pouch attached to the seat directly in front of her. "There should be one in there."

"I refuse to embarrass myself or make you a witness to my fear." She looked at the paper items in the airline's container and chuckled.

Strong fingers suddenly closed over her hand that gripped the armrest between them. She refrained from looking into their owner's face, but his soothing baritone near her ear made her pulse race.

"Think of something other than the fact that we'll be thousands of feet above the earth. Think of what you'd most like to be doing right now."

That did it. What would she rather be doing? Straddling that redheaded lumberjack stud until they both collapsed.

Shyla dared meet his gaze, and she knew her lips parted in surprise. "I-I..."

Lumberjack Paul.

He seemed to be watching her lips with fascination. She couldn't be sure considering he too was wearing shades, but something about the slight tilt of his head told her he was indeed assessing her—and liking what he saw, from the subtle relaxing of his facial muscles and slight smile.

"I've seen those lips before." His voice was a whisper, a caress.

Shyla panicked as his hand left hers and he placed a finger against her mouth. "These lips?" She heard her own voice and barely recognized the huskiness. Better that than a Minnie Mouse squeak.

The finger against her mouth moved slowly across her bottom lip and he leaned toward her. Shyla met him halfway, as if in a foggy dream, realizing that she was behaving in a completely opposite manner than she would ordinarily, but unable to stop herself.

The kiss was soft and sweet, completely unexpected, and for a moment she thought she'd dreamed it, that she was still lying on her bedroom back in Brooklyn with that vibrator.

He lifted his face from hers and smiled. "At least you're not worried about the plane now, huh?"

Slowly, she shook her head. She inhaled deeply through her nostrils and held her breath a moment, letting the air fill her lungs and help clear her head before blowing it out gently, slowly through her lips.

The realization he'd probably not see him again once they landed rumbled through her brain, exciting her. She could flirt and be as naughty as she liked. He didn't know the old her, the Shyla who wore nothing but straitlaced pantsuits and worked a slave's hours back in New York. For all this man knew, she was the vixen she felt she was today, so she shocked herself and kissed him back, allowing herself the luxury of touching his hair, just as she'd longed to do back on ground.

This time their kiss wasn't brief. Tongues flicked invitingly, faces pressed together more closely, breaths mingled, and both of them seemed to give involuntary jerks as they suckled one another. Shyla felt a freedom she'd never experienced, a naughty, deliciously decadent wantonness that begged expression.

When it was over, she returned to her view and caught her breath, calming her jangled nerves and quieting the laugh that threatened to erupt. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him unfold his newspaper and open it, but instead of holding it in front of his face, he laid it on his lap – and hers.

Shyla wet her lips and kept as still and silent as possible when she felt those strong fingers once more, this time against her calves as he maneuvered her skirt's hemline higher, the back of his hand brushing against her inner thigh as his ministrations urged her to spread her legs a bit.

With more daring than she knew she had in her, she let her hand closest to his body slip beneath the newspaper and creep quietly toward his cock, which wasn't difficult to find considering its steely resolve that pushed against his inseam.

Oh...my...God! Her fingers worked his zipper down and she slid her way into his briefs, thrilling at the velvety smooth head on his enormous cock, barely able to keep

from gasping when her fingers traced the equally impressive shaft, which seemed to burst forth into her hand.

She was thankful she'd kept her sunglasses on, grateful that he couldn't see that she was absolutely terrified, excited, awash with desire to continue their covert acquaintance with one another's bodies.

A low rumble from his throat reached her ears as his cock tensed in her hand. "Stewardesses, twelve o'clock." He withdrew his hand as she withdrew hers, and she pulled off her jacket and laid it across her lap to hide the evidence that her skirt was now dangerously close to exposing her panties.

A twinge of regret slammed into her. She'd wanted to step out of her self-imposed celibacy, to boldly do the unthinkable, but now that she'd done it she questioned her sanity. Was she that much in denial about her needs that she more or less exploited herself given the first opportunity for a guilty pleasure?

After the airline staff completed their mission of dispensing beverages and nuts, Shyla's partner in perversion resumed his onslaught, this time quickly reaching his destination, not bothering to so much as knock at the door before entering.

She jumped, juggling to maintain control over both her drink and her emotions as his thumb and forefinger sandwiched her throbbing clit, pressing it and rolling it between them relentlessly. She choked back an involuntary cry when he didn't stop. There was nowhere to turn, no escape from the oncoming orgasm that crept upon her, stealing her ability to regulate her body's responses. It wasn't fair that he had such control over her in such a tight enclosure, with her unable to do a damned thing but submit.

Her pussy convulsed, her nipples ached and Shyla felt as though she would explode. Heat from her body consumed her, and she pressed her face against the cool glass separating her from the sky as all of her senses shot toward the sun then spiraled toward earth in one shattering moment.

* * * * *

Dallas felt Shyla's pussy muscles tighten around his fingers and held them in place until the flight attendants returned. God, what a woman—he hoped once they landed that he could see her again. He had to see what other possibilities were in store with someone as free-spirited and exciting.

He'd barely seen her face for the satiny curtain of hair and sunglasses, but those lips had been tasty and tormenting, reminding him of... She looked.

He looked. Did a double take, squinting as he peered through his dark prescription sunglasses. *Fuck me. Oh fuck me.*

He closed his eyes and lowered his head. What the hell had he been thinking, seducing some random woman before she even knew who he was? He should have thought past a peek at her ring finger—and her lips. Once they landed in St. Louis, there was no way he could avoid explaining to her what might blow their entire working relationship for the week.

Idiot. Twenty-four hours of blue balls is no fucking excuse for this.

Swallowing hard, Dallas slowly withdrew his hand from beneath Shyla Stewart's skirt and helped smooth her clothing, careful not to meet her gaze in case she was watching him. After a few moments she rose and climbed past him to head to the restroom at the back of the plane.

Stunned, he reflected on what had just happened and how he'd been set up. His mother had handled the plane reservations, so of course she'd had them seated next to one another. Whether Marla had known his poor eyesight would have come into play, well, the jury was out on that one. Whatever the case may be, though, he couldn't imagine it had been in her plan for him and his client to join the Mile High Club together.

With Shyla out of earshot, Dallas groaned, loudly enough that the passing flight attendant asked if he might be ill. Dallas waved aside the man's concern and was soon deep in thought. He could simply tell her the truth—that he'd been thinking of her since

the day he'd brushed against her after her therapy appointment, that he hadn't realized what with the different hair and makeup and clothes that she was the same person. That he wasn't such a man-whore that he made a habit of seducing his seatmates during takeoffs. Or he could stall for time. But how?

He snapped his fingers, his mind zipping into overdrive. One of the staff was meeting her at the airport. He'd call the lodge and have them dispatch to the limo driver that the plans had changed. They'd tell her there'd been a plumbing problem at the lodge and that they'd put her up in a hotel in St. Louis for a couple of days until the repairs were done. The seminar didn't actually start until day after tomorrow—they'd just asked that the White Agency's representative show up early, before things got too busy. After all, part of the plan was that Shyla could see the psychic fair and develop a knowledge base and feel for their operation before she began constructing her ad campaign for them.

Dallas abhorred subterfuge, but there was no other way out of this dilemma. She already knew that he had a photo of her, sent by his mother, so she might not believe him when he admitted that he didn't recognize her.

He hoped Shyla would forgive him once she discovered his true identity, but he worried that she'd feel as though he'd taken advantage of her—or at the very least that she'd be too embarrassed to work with him. Neither of those scenarios would do.

Even worse, he harbored an irrational, gut-clenching fear that she'd tell his mother.

Chapter Three

There weren't that many people mingling in the Lambert-St. Louis Airport once they landed. Lumberjack Paul had helped her remove her luggage from the overhead rack before giving her a final farewell kiss that sent shivers from sandals to sunglasses. Then he'd walked ahead of her, as if he had little time to get to his next destination. While she wasn't surprised, she was unsettled to see him go. Her one and only in-flight finger fucking, and she didn't even know his name.

Once she'd claimed her baggage, she headed for the entrance to the airport, already dreading her upcoming meeting with her Ozark client. *Dude ranch, my ass. Like they'll get me on a horse. Not fucking likely.*

Just as she left the building, she noticed a familiar set of shoulders and that thick, boyish hair, and it was even sexier in bright sunlight than it was inside the plane. She spotted the white limo a few feet to his left before she saw the bouquet of wildflowers and yellow roses in his hands.

Her heart sank. He was meeting someone special—he had to be. That little tryst in the clouds was merely a diversion for him. Well, hell. He was too gorgeous for words, so it was highly unlikely that he wasn't already taken by someone a lot smarter and sexier than she was.

But when she gathered the courage to walk past him without speaking to him, he turned and called out to her. "Hey!"

Now what do I do? She took a deep breath and swallowed to calm her jittery nerves, trying to remain nonchalant. "Oh hello again."

He grinned impishly and handed her the flowers, a slight tinge of pink coloring his cheeks, his eyes sparkling. "Just wanted to say thanks for making the flight so enjoyable for me."

Stunned, Shyla accepted the flowers, noting that all her resolve to remain aloof vanished immediately. "I don't understand. When did you have time to get these? I didn't see a florist's shop inside."

"Oh there's one in there. I ordered them while we were taxiing—you were busy making your own phone call." He pointed toward the limo with a whistle. "Somebody's got a nice ride waiting for them."

Shyla squinted to read the sign: *Service for Stewart from New York*. "Wow. I...guess it's me. Excuse me." She waved to the limo driver, who came to collect her bags.

"I'm Shyla Stewart." She extended a hand for the driver to shake.

"Right on schedule." He smiled and opened a door for her then turned to put the luggage in the trunk.

"Wait," she called to the driver, "that is, go ahead, I'll only be a moment. Hey!" she shouted at Lumberjack Paul, who by now was about twenty feet away. When she caught up to him, she asked, "Are you waiting on someone? Can we offer you a lift?"

"I've been stood up. I just got off the phone with them—my hotel overbooked." He peered up at the sky. "I could use the lift, though, if you're going downtown. I can catch a cab from there and hunt for a place to sleep tonight."

"Oh I'm sorry, I—"

"Actually, we will be driving there," said the driver, who now stood only a few feet away. "I'm sorry, miss, but there's been a plumbing emergency at the ranch, so I have instructions to take you to the Adam's Mark Hotel for at least two nights. I hope that meets with your approval."

She didn't know what to say. "Two nights?"

"Yes, ma'am. But the Adam's Mark is really nice. Mr. G—"

Shyla's companion coughed and cleared his throat and the driver stopped. Shyla frowned, but the driver went on, "One of our guests at the ranch has stayed there many times and he says the shrimp and lobster dinners are superb. Your meals will be

comped, of course, courtesy of the ranch." He stood by the door, ready to close it after her. "I was instructed to tell you that someone from the ranch will phone you tomorrow after you've rested."

Shyla turned to her most recent lover. "You say your hotel had no room for you?"

"Yeah."

He looked like he was trying hard to maintain a sad face, but Shyla caught the mischievous gleam when he lowered his dark glasses so she could see his eyes. He was thinking the same thing that she was. "You can be my guest," she whispered huskily.

She turned to the driver once more. "Would it be okay to offer this gentleman a ride?"

"Certainly." The driver offered to take Lumberjack Paul's bags, but the taller man waved him aside.

"I can handle it." He raised a quizzical eyebrow at Shyla. "You sure?"

"Get in before I come to my senses." She dove into the car, wanting to shriek. Beverly would kill her if she ever found out—she also wouldn't believe it, that her protégé was capable of picking up a perfect stranger. And perfect was the operative word.

He climbed in after her and gave her legs an appreciative glance when Shyla's skirt fluttered upward during the gust of wind from the closing car door. Glancing at the closed partition between them and their driver, he asked, "Want to be even naughtier than we've already been?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Let's not trade names and information just yet. You pick out a name for me, I'll pick out one for you and that's what we'll go by for the next two days."

Shyla was already wet. He intended to stay with her for two whole days?

"All right. You're Paul." She held out a hand for him to shake.

“And you’re Alysia...captivating.” He shook her hand then kissed it, as if she truly were some Grecian goddess with the power to entrance him.

* * * * *

The hotel was only a short ride from the airport—not enough time for doing everything she wanted to do to her new friend. And anyway Shyla didn’t want to walk into the hotel looking like she’d just tumbled from bed. So she took the few minutes they were pushing through traffic to absorb the history of her temporary home’s surroundings. Sure beat battling her body’s responses to her new companion. Just having him hold her hand and stroke the inside of her wrist was driving her nuts.

She’d seen the magnificent Gateway Arch and the mighty, rolling Mississippi River from the air, but she hadn’t realized how busy the highways were, how dense the population of the city until they were on ground and winging their way west. She was delighted to find that her hotel was directly across the street from the Arch.

“I’ll bet you’ve never been on a cruise around the city,” Paul said as they stood in front of the hotel facing the Arch, with a steamboat and two paddleboats only a few yards away.

“Huh-uh.” Shyla was enchanted with the riverfront and hoped their hotel room faced this direction. She could almost hear Dixieland jazz and feel the perennial Mardi Gras ambiance. Even though St. Louis was a bustling modern metropolis, there was an Old World feel to it that more than hinted of ancient excursions and the laughter of dance hall girls and gamblers.

“Then we’ll do that tonight or tomorrow.” He winked. “Depending upon how tired we are.”

He led her inside, following the porter who claimed their bags. From her body’s reaction, his hand on her arm may as well have been a palm on her ass or lips on her breasts. She still couldn’t believe she was doing this.

Check-in took mere minutes, and their porter was barely out of their room before she and Paul began ripping their clothes off, kissing, fondling and falling to the bed laughing.

He sighed luxuriously, spreading her legs and burying his face between her thighs, licking and nipping his way to their vertex. "I've wanted to do this for the longest time."

Shyla arched her back, willingly opening herself to him. She finally was able to thread her fingers through his hair, to run her hands over his shoulders, to feel his tongue caressing her creamy folds.

"I've seen you before the plane," she confessed.

"You have?" he murmured around her clit.

"Mmhm. In New York. You wouldn't remember me."

He propped himself on his elbows and stared at her, grinning. "You were wearing solid black—pants, blouse, jacket and shoes. You looked like some movie star who didn't want anyone to recognize you."

She blinked in surprise. "You saw me?"

"I never miss seeing a beautiful woman. Your hair was pulled up out of your face too." He rose and positioned himself on top of her, his knees widening his access to her pussy.

Suddenly he stopped and groaned, then fell over onto his back beside her, staring at the ceiling. "I don't suppose you have any condoms with you, do you?"

Shyla almost shrieked. "Oh no!"

New dilemma. Wasn't a question of whether or not to fuck him—now came the problem of not having any form of protection. Gorgeous as he was, did she dare do the unthinkable and have sex with a stranger without making sure they were both safe, even if she was on the Pill?

"I don't suppose it would make any difference to tell you that I get TANNed every few months?" he asked.

"You tan?" She didn't see how this would help their situation.

"TAN is Tested And Negative." He jumped from the bed, reaching for her hand to help pull her up. "Put your clothes back on and come with me?"

"Sure." She couldn't refrain from giggling. The adventure was still ongoing and despite her reluctance to leave the comfort of his arms, she knew he was right. She didn't know him, he didn't know her. Their romp had started with both of them feeling no pain and plenty of pleasure and she wanted it to end the same way.

He looked down at the bed where he'd been lying and picked something up. "I thought I felt a hard lump. Is this yours?" He held out the rose quartz ball.

Shyla blushed furiously and reached for her discarded jacket, to place the item back inside the pocket. "Yes." Remembering what had happened the last time she'd held the object, fear mingled with anticipation made her shake, and she was afraid to even look at the thing in his hand.

"What is it?" His voice held amusement, but his eyes seemed to bore into hers.

"It's a sex stone." She laughed inwardly at her own terminology for the quartz.

Paul chuckled. "A what?"

"It's a *fucking rock*, Paul. I'm supposed to rub it and hold it to keep from feeling frustrated...or to incite frustration. Of the sexual kind. Anyway, I haven't quite figured it out myself." She nodded toward the bed. "Put it down—I can't explain... Just put it down, please."

This seemed to amuse him further. "Okay if I ask—"

"No, but I can tell you that right now I'm hungry enough to eat the damn thing." She tried blowing off the incident with a joke, hoping he'd take the hint and change the subject. She didn't want to think of why she'd made the trip in the first place. Their

conversation might lead to all manner of questions, few of which she felt like answering just now.

“We may as well have lunch while we’re searching for a pharmacy. What sounds appetizing?” He flushed slightly after he said it, as if reading her thoughts. “Okay, besides each other?”

She tugged on a strand of her hair. “Well, I *am* half Italian and half Irish. Any good ethnic restaurants in St. Louis?”

He chuckled. “Just come with me. First, let’s put your flowers in water.”

While he took care of the bouquet, she pocketed the quartz. Nothing jumped out and bit her and her pussy didn’t explode, so she shook off her irrational fear, hoping the damn thing didn’t burn a hole in her pocket.

* * * * *

Within minutes they’d cleared the hotel and were walking a cobblestone path that led them through Laclede’s Landing, a riverfront property east of the Adam’s Mark that seemed to house dozens of different restaurants and quaint shops.

Paul led her to a rough brick and mortar building with the thump of loud jazz emanating from inside. The sign on the front read *Morgan Street Brewery*.

Inside, Shyla found a warm interior with exposed brick and burnished wood. The restaurant’s charm radiated from the various cozy nooks and less private seating arrangements. Smells of Cajun spices and rising pizza dough filled her nostrils, making her even hungrier.

Once they were seated, Paul asked her if she’d like to try a seasonal brew and hot beer-baked pretzel while they decided on their entrées. She wholeheartedly agreed.

For the first time in years, she felt totally alive, her senses singing to new sights, smells and sounds. It occurred to her that she didn’t need to get laid so much as to get lively, step outside her comfort zone and try new things.

Paul asked about her job, her interests and her relationships with her family. She could tell by his questions what meant the most to him, but when she asked him the same things, he laughingly avoided giving her direct answers to some and gave a running discourse on others.

He loved his work, which was running a business his father and mother had begun quite literally on their honeymoon. They were both perpetual students, hopping from one line of spiritual belief to the next, uncovering artifacts from around the world, from masks and pottery to crystals and hand-woven blankets.

"Think '60s hippies." He shook his head as he spoke, as if even he couldn't believe how they lived. "I'm talking the glass beads for curtains, tons of books—none of which were housed on bookshelves, just scattered throughout the place." His hands mimed the size of the posters and charts he described. "Astrology charts on everyone they knew, various posters about rallies for disarmament or legal rights. They even had special tables and chairs set up for séances and tarot readings."

His personal interests lay with horseback riding, traveling, reading and wine-making.

"You mean you actually make your own?" she asked.

"I'm not very good yet, but my apple and blackberry wines seem to be a hit with my friends." He smiled engagingly. "Maybe I can have you over some night for a glass. Of course, if you want to eat, you'll have to prepare the meal—I suck at cooking."

Wine-making. That sounded interesting—hadn't she just been talking to someone about that a few days ago? Anyway, Shyla rather doubted they'd have the opportunity to meet outside of their St. Louis rendezvous, but she nodded her head in hopeful agreement when he mentioned them seeing one another after this week.

"How about your family?" she asked. "Are you close to either of your parents?"

"I have lunch with my mother every couple of weeks, depending upon whether I'm in New York or not."

Aha, he was in town visiting his mother. Then another realization hit Shyla. He had to have been in the same building as she had for one of two reasons—business, or someone he knew worked there. She was curious to know which but didn't have the nerve to ask just yet.

He hadn't asked, but what would she tell him if he wanted to know why she was at that particular address in New York? She didn't want him to know she was seeing a shrink—but wait, she'd already told him she'd just had therapy that week.

She inwardly shrugged. So what? Many people saw therapists. Two of her sisters, one of her uncles and at least three cousins that she could count—all were in therapy of one form or another.

Granted, none of them were being treated for anything so bizarre as how to get in touch with an inanimate object.

She reached into her jacket pocket, continuing to look into Paul's eyes as she did so. She wanted to know if, while she was totally awake and completely in her right mind, if she'd still feel that unmistakable jolt from the quartz. Her fingers wrapped around the stone and the same strange vibrations filled her—stronger this time. She jumped and quickly crossed her legs.

Well, there's your answer. Even when she'd been reticent and closed-minded, she'd felt that energetic connection with the stone. Now that she was more aware, the bond was even stronger and she still didn't understand why. But she was slowly beginning to understand something else.

She tried remembering the previous day's events and their connection to the present. Marla Garrett's office in New York...then the plane to St. Louis... They'd been in the same location twice.

Shyla's brain jackknifed. He hadn't mentioned his father—Marla's husband was deceased. And wine-making! Marla had said *her son* was into wine-making...

Alarm bells went off in her brain as she recalled her therapist's words regarding the White Agency's new client—*Know him? Honey, I changed that boy's diapers. He's a scream – you'll love him.*

Ack!

"Anything wrong?" His eyes held concern.

"I just need to go freshen up." She was so shaky that she could barely stand and push her chair back from their table. *He probably thinks I have the weakest bladder on the planet.*

All the way to the restroom she fumed, fighting back tears. No wonder he wanted them to go by names they'd devised for themselves—he already knew who she was! He knew that his mother had counseled her!

Hell, *he* was the one who'd sent her the goddamned sex stone! According to Marla, *he* had chosen it for her!

Shyla raced into one of the stalls and shut the door, leaning against it. *Oh my God...* And his mother had given her a vibrator. It was a fucking conspiracy. Bev, Marla, Paul—no, *Dallas...* They all thought she needed to get laid, and probably with his mother's and her best friend's urging, Dallas had martyred himself on the altar of Shyla's last year of celibacy.

She pounded her fists against the door. There probably was no plumbing leak at the ranch, if there even was a ranch. This was all a ruse to *loosen her up*, as Beverly had suggested.

The sex stone—now *that* she couldn't explain. But the rest of it? She was sure she was right. Her own boss's wife had pimped her out, and Shyla had not only complied but had divulged a most embarrassing fact to Marla, that she indeed was a tightly wound, sexually frustrated mess.

And now Dallas probably knew, despite Marla's statement that what went on during their meetings stayed there.

Shyla took a deep breath. No, Marla had told her the truth. Marla was a professional and would never tell even her son what had gone on in that therapy session.

So now what? Did she play along and act like she knew nothing, or did she blast them all for deceiving her?

She reached for the quartz and palmed it, willing herself to relax. It wasn't in her nature to deliberately hurt anyone, but she wasn't above having some fun while she was already in the precarious position of teetering into a full-blown sex-fest with Dallas Garrett.

She'd accept his flowers, enjoy his smiles, blow him until he couldn't think and fuck him 'til he couldn't walk. When it was over, she'd pick up her panties, pack her sex stone, vibrator, clothes and whatever souvenirs she collected and she'd go back to New York ready to look for a new job. Hell, she'd have to—no way was she facing Beverly after this week.

Or Marla. *Good lord.* And she'd really liked her new therapist. The woman had forced a confession or two from her within a matter of minutes. She'd made Shyla feel things she'd buried for months. Maybe even years.

The quartz became warmer and Shyla stuffed it back into her pocket. "Oh no you don't—not here!"

She came out of the stall and looked at herself in the vanity mirror. She liked what she saw, a transformation that was both subtle and dramatic. The woman staring back at her with the spooked realization in her dark brown eyes wasn't the same one who had left New York hours earlier. This girl's sexuality switch had been flipped from off to on and was throbbing for attention.

Question was, how far was she willing to go in order to take care of her own needs? And what exactly did she want from Dallas Garrett, a fling or a relationship? Could she explore the possibilities without sacrificing her pride or dignity?

Shyla's hand slipped back into her pocket and worked the quartz, holding it steadfastly and giving herself time to regenerate before going back to the table. She willed herself to control the stone rather than the other way around. With an intense force of mental telepathy, she commanded her talisman to energize her, to calm her, to give her strength just now, not multiple orgasms. Dignity be damned. She would have *fun*. The more she held the stone, the easier it became to feel the power of her own convictions. Maybe she was figuring out the purpose of the mineral's healing potential. Perhaps the silly rock wasn't so ridiculous after all.

The pink talisman hummed in her hand and Shyla considered its role in her transformation. Marla had been right—a talisman was personal, a touchstone, a simple grounding mechanism. All it did was reinforce her innermost desires. Nothing weird about that unless she was adamantly avoiding herself, which she had been up until now.

That settled the matter. She would keep a level head and an open mind, and she'd foster all those latent bohemian traits she'd feared before making this trip. Those who had set her up could fix a bowl of popcorn and sit back and watch the show, because Shyla Stewart was about to blow their minds with her upcoming performance.

She had a momentary twitch of habit when her nervous hands reached inside her bag for the pack of cigarettes and lighter. She didn't have a lighter. She'd had to discard it before entering airport security before flying.

Then it hit her—something was definitely different. She hadn't had a cigarette since leaving New York! Maybe she could keep it that way awhile longer. She'd considered quitting months ago but hadn't done anything about it. The old urges were there, but somehow the rose quartz kept her smoker's hand busy. Wow. Now *that* was spooky.

Chapter Four

The Honey Wheat, Morgan Street Brewery's light, straw-colored lager, helped relax the muscles that had bunched in Shyla's shoulders. The grilled portabella mushroom salad gave her stomach something to work on besides her worries. But the bites of blue crab cakes, lobster ravioli and sautéed gulf shrimp they took turns feeding one another were what strengthened her resolve and fueled the sexual tension between the two of them.

Dallas saucily licked her fingers if she offered him a bite of her shrimp, his eyes locked with hers, stirring long-denied desires. When she pulled away, his fingers gently but firmly latched onto her wrist and drew her back for more of the same.

She gave as well as she received, deliberately dribbling a bit of sauce on his chin then leaning over to let her tongue cleanse the spot on the corner of his mouth. She felt him jerk involuntarily each time. All it would take to cause the man to rise from the table and drag her caveman style from the restaurant would be for her to slip out of one of her sandals and use her toes to tease his cock beneath the table.

The beer was delicious and sent subtle waves of warmth over her with each sip. She released the top two buttons on her shirt then took a cube of ice from her glass and discreetly let it melt against her breasts, knowingly giving Dallas a delectable view of cleavage. She smiled sweetly, as if she had no clue what was going on when his tongue flicked out to moisten his lips, but she knew what he was thinking. He'd rather be licking her breasts, taking her nipples into his mouth and sucking. The blue of his eyes darkened each time she drew the ice across the mounds of flesh popping out of the blouse's neckline.

She was certain her eyes reflected a simple *I am enjoying myself*, but the deeper message was *I want you to watch while I seduce you and I want you ready to fuck me right here at this table if I push you too far*.

Passages from St. Louis author Glenn Savan's *White Palace* flitted across her mind. Then she remembered scenes from the movie adaptation starring Susan Sarandon and James Spader. By the time they'd finished their meal, Shyla was ready to lie back on the table and have Dallas crawl on top of her just as James had taken Susan, knocking off salt and pepper shakers and kissing her senseless, much to the amusement and delight of onlookers in the restaurant.

"I don't know how much more of this I can stand," Dallas finally admitted shakily. "You ready to go?"

Shyla merely nodded, keeping her face a serene mask, offering only a flirtatious Mona Lisa smile.

He held her hand on the way back to the hotel, neither of them talking during this trip, their body heat enough to ignite sparks from the cobblestones. When they were a few yards from the Gateway Arch, he stopped and suddenly took her in his arms, kissing her with a passion that shocked her.

She wasn't prepared for the emotional impact of the kiss. She'd wanted to flirt, to lure him, to teach him a lesson, not get sucked into an abyss from which there was no escape. For whatever his reasons, he'd willingly deceived her — of that she was sure. He couldn't possibly feel as she did, unwilling to settle for just a few hours of fucking when they were obviously suited for so much more.

Hadn't they laughed and talked and shared things with one another like two people knitting intimacy? Didn't they both enjoy their repartee and the few times they'd touched? Then why was she drifting rapidly into something that seemed more than a romantic interlude in her week? How could she possibly, on such short notice, be falling for this man, especially since she suspected him of helping her boss and her therapist get her to drop her defenses?

It's just a kiss, she told herself.

Now if only she could get herself to believe that.

* * * * *

Dallas lifted his lips from hers reluctantly, every cell in his body protesting.

Shyla's eyes had been closed and now she cocked one open. "Everything okay?"

"Uh-huh." How did he tell her that somewhere between the Arch and the crab cakes his heart had done a U-turn and completely flip-flopped on him?

She slipped her hands inside his back pants pockets and cupped his ass. "What just happened?"

"I'm not sure."

"Is this like a viral horniness, something that comes and goes?"

He kissed her again, hard, in order to convince her that he still wanted her. But he didn't understand his own reaction to their melding—certainly not well enough to explain it to her. He had to taste those lips again, even though he couldn't do much more than kiss her at the moment. When he was done, he studied her again. "When's the last time you...uh?"

She flinched slightly. "About a year ago."

"Works for me." He tugged on her arm and dragged her toward the hotel.

"Wait a second." She held back. "What are you thinking, that we'll skip the condoms? What if I'm lying?"

"Are you?"

She grinned. "No. But I'm still not having unprotected sex with you."

"Nuff said." They rushed forward together, ignoring the *Do Not Walk* sign at the traffic light.

With a giggling woman in tow, Dallas weaved in and out of traffic, through the hotel's entrance, past the gigantic golden equestrian statues in the main lobby and

toward the gift shop. While Shyla nearly convulsed with laughter in the magazine section, he located and paid for the box of condoms then hurriedly grabbed her hand once more and headed for the elevators.

She sighed dramatically as he punched in their number. “Beer and pretzels, mushrooms and latex. All we need is chocolate to make this the most romantic tryst of my life.”

When they landed on the sixth floor, his eyes darted about until they spied the ice and vending machines. Shyla ran to retrieve the ice bucket from her room. Dallas watched her race down the hall, glad she seemed to be enjoying herself—that she could laugh not only at him but with him. She wanted sex and chocolate? Then she would have just that.

He tore into his pants pockets for dollar bills and spare change and counted out quarters and dimes. As Shyla filled the ice bucket, he jabbed at buttons until his hands and arms were full of various types of candy bars and several cans of soda. “Is there anything else I can get for you? A magazine to read afterward maybe?” By then they were both laughing so hard they looked like a couple of stumbling drunks.

Seconds later, they were inside Shyla’s—*their*—room, setting aside ice and tossing candy on the dresser, clumsily tearing off each other’s clothing. Dallas had the box of condoms in his teeth, ripping at the plastic covering with a vengeance that surprised even him.

His cock was on fire for her. Everything that had led up to the moment converged like a montage of events he didn’t even realize he’d been tracking subconsciously, but he saw them all—Shyla running from his mother’s office building, Shyla sitting beside him in the airplane and accepting flowers he’d ordered on the ground, playfully preparing for their first bedroom sexual encounter.

No matter what happened afterward, the vision of her right now—half-dressed, her eyes shining with tears of laughter while he shredded the box of condoms, would live

in his mind forever. He'd never met anyone so full of life, and he had to sample more of her. He tore off his pants.

"Don't you need a little...uh...foreplay or something to get you prepared?" She was still teasing him, but he chuckled as he yanked off his briefs.

Shyla's eyes went to his engorged cock as it sprang forward. "Sweet Mary!" She stumbled backward, the backs of her knees hitting the bed.

Dallas flew in her direction like the superhero he felt himself to be, tossing her onto the bed with his body on top of hers. "Does it feel like I need preparation?"

He parted her legs, insinuating himself between them, propping himself with one hand and thrusting the fingers of the other into her pussy. She was wet—*Thank God!* He growled, almost shrieked, in torment. He wanted to fuck her, but first he had to finish what he'd started earlier.

Before she could resist, he slid down her body and buried his face into her musky mound, eagerly inhaling her scent, piercing her with his tongue to get to the honey he was after.

Shyla's body stiffened in surprise then crashed limply against the bed. He grabbed her ass with both hands and pulled her to meet his searching mouth. Each time she groaned his cock flamed. When her tense fingers clutched his hair and raked down his back, it was if she'd injected him with adrenaline. He ate her with a lusty appetite that knew no boundaries, sucking, laving, spooning her onto his tongue and swallowing every delectable morsel.

"Oh God!" she cried from above him on the bed, her voice a whimper.

Dallas pulled her hands from the nape of his neck and laced his fingers through hers, continuing his feast, growling his pleasure into her thrashing body. When she came, he was aware of her pleas of pleasurable pain, but he couldn't stop—all he wanted was to lap at her until she was completely mindless and then slip her sweet pussy around his cock like a blanket and stay there until neither of them could think or breathe.

He crawled toward her, his breathing labored as he noted the flush from her cheeks down her throat, all the way to her luscious breasts. Dipping his head, he took first one and then another nipple into his mouth and tugged gently, inhaling her perfume and smiling. He loved the raw, sensual smells women exhibited, and she was definitely a man's woman—just one who enjoyed the girly traits of pampering herself. She couldn't possibly have had any clue when she woke up that morning, taking such care to make sure that she felt, smelled and tasted so good, that she'd have an encounter with him, so she'd done this on her own...for herself. He hated it when women went through beauty routines just to please a man—what the hell was genuine about that? "*You are Alysia,*" he breathed.

Her eyes darkened, her lips parted and Dallas took advantage of her vulnerability to run a hand across her belly and between her legs in preparation for their next shared adventure.

* * * * *

Alysia. He thinks I'm a goddess. Shyla tried to shake the misgivings rising within her. Wait a minute! Who seduced whom here? She'd had every intention of being the seducer, the one in control, but ever since that kiss before the Gateway Arch, she'd felt anything but in charge.

Now he was doing it again, taking control of her mind and body. First with his tongue, now with his cock, that magnificent, velvety rod of hardness and heat that now threatened to completely overwhelm her. God he was huge—or she was simply inexperienced.

Oh what the fuck, Shyla – this is what you've wanted for over twenty-four hours. Him. Any way you could get him.

He didn't tease her with it—he delivered it in full with one smooth thrust, and once inside he didn't waste time making himself at home. His body glistened with sweat, as did hers, and his breathing was as labored as her own. He really wanted her—this was

not for show, and there was no way this sort of passion could be induced by anything other than sheer desire.

Her breath caught in her throat and tears sprang to her eyes. This gorgeous Titan god wanted her, and from the way her body involuntarily bucked beneath him she was certainly not immune to him. The size of him had nearly made her eyes cross when he first entered her, but now she felt like she could never get enough of him.

"Fuck me harder!" Every cell in her body craved him, screamed and begged for more, as much as she could get.

"Any way you want it, baby." He pumped his cock into her furiously and bent to kiss her, sucking her tongue into his mouth.

Their lovemaking made yet another turn, from intensely hot and needy to a scorching, much deeper level, one that scared the hell out of Shyla. When had *this* happened?

Dallas Garrett belonged on the cover of some mountaineer magazine, demonstrating wilderness survival techniques, not as boy toy to a bashful artist.

Oh God, here I go again! Shyla had tried what she could to steer her thoughts from the inevitable, not because she didn't want to claim the orgasm waiting for her but because this was supposed to be *her* seduction, not his! She was the one to lead this sexual onslaught of the senses, not Dallas.

Freakin' pink rock. Ever since handling it, she'd been thrown out of her normal routines and left in unfamiliar territory. Now that she'd been transported by whatever magical powers it possessed, she liked it—a lot more than she'd imagined possible. There was nothing for her to do but succumb to the powerful spasms of delight Dallas gave her.

She clutched him fiercely, feeling the tension mount and dissipate in his broad shoulders and neck, his back, his beautifully sculpted ass.

He whispered something against her neck as he bucked once more, spilling his seed into her.

She was lost. And found. If only he wasn't such a shit for deceiving her.

Chapter Five

After several relaxing moments of cuddling and kissing, it was Shyla who broke rank and ended their reverie when she rose to go to the bathroom to freshen up.

Shakily, she did something she never thought she'd do—she stood totally naked in front of a gorgeous stranger and unabashedly, unashamedly paraded herself the distance between the bed and the bathroom without trying to cover up. She knew he watched, yet it didn't matter—she felt comfortable wearing only her Very Sexy perfume from Victoria's Secret and nothing else but a confused grin.

Despite whatever hang-ups she'd had about her body and her life in general before boarding for Missouri, something had dramatically changed, and Shyla had to give credit where it was due. Beverly had been right—Shyla needed the pampering and a break from routine, both necessary to pull her out of the emotional slump into which she'd driven herself. Marla was equally correct—she needed to get in touch with her sexuality, her core, unleash basic instincts that were already in place before Dallas even showed up in her life.

As for Dallas, he'd been the key that unlocked her reserve. Beverly and Marla had merely helped set the stage, but what played out had been private between her and the man lying naked on her hotel bed.

Unless he'd downloaded the same one, the cell phone ring tone coming from the bedroom was hers. She guessed it was Bev, checking on her. Before Shyla could grab a towel for covering, Dallas knocked on the bathroom door. When she opened it he held her purse and an article of clothing.

"I didn't know if you were shy after sex so thought you might want this." He offered the black chenille robe.

Gratefully, she took both, but before she could thank him, another cell phone rang. He shot her an apologetic glance.

Dallas managed to get to his phone about the time Shyla clicked in to receive Bev's call. They perched on opposite sides of the bed with their backs to each other.

She looked around. He'd tossed the candy and cans of soda in the middle of the bed and by the looks of things had been in the middle of preparing two plastic cups of ice when the phones started ringing. Shyla rose and finished what he'd started as she listened to Bev's questions.

"I'm okay—no—I didn't spend the night at the ranch. I know I should have phoned." Shyla handed Dallas the first cup of ice she'd filled then worked on her own.

He had tucked his legs beneath him and was talking in hushed tones, but his words were unmistakable. "Mom, I'll explain it later. I can't talk right now. No, everything is fine—I'm...we're...you'll just have to trust me. I'll call you back. *What?* It's none of your business, Mother—this has nothing to do with you. Do I grill you like this about your private life?"

So Marla hadn't been aware that they'd ventured off the charted! Shyla breathed more easily suddenly. They hadn't set her up. This had been entirely Dallas' idea.

She sat on her side of the bed, smothering a laugh. "Bev, I'm not lying to you. Nobody is holding me hostage—far from it." She glanced over her shoulder and winked at Dallas.

When she turned back to face their room's expansive windows, leaving Dallas the view of the bathroom, he nudged her from behind and handed her a soft drink—he'd even popped the top for her.

Both of them scooted back so their backs were against the now very crumpled pillows, and when it appeared that neither Beverly nor Marla were letting them go just yet, they each opened a candy bar and sat munching chocolate and drinking soda like two naughty, bathrobed kids with a secret. Occasionally they'd glance at one another and what started out as apologetic smiles soon bloomed into stifled laughter.

Neither of them had confessed who was on the other end of their phone conversations, but now Shyla suspected they both knew.

Now what? Shyla wondered if she should say something or let Dallas be the first to broach what lay between them. They'd have to leave the hotel at some point. Not like he could keep his identity a secret once they were at the ranch, with people who worked for him milling about, calling him by name. The proverbial ball was really in Dallas' court, not hers. Should she prolong his anxiety or let him off, make it easier on him?

Once they'd both hung up on the two parties who had intruded on their sexcapade, neither spoke for a moment. Then Dallas pointed to Shyla's open luggage where he'd found her robe. "Is that...a vibrator?"

She nodded nonchalantly. "Mmhmm. My therapist gave it to me before I left New York."

It was all she could do to keep from bursting into peals of laughter when he choked on his soft drink.

Blinking innocently, she peered at him from beneath her lashes. "Want to use it on me?"

"Uh—no."

"But I thought guys liked that sort of thing." *Did he just shudder? Oh this could be fun.* "Come on, you might like it—I know I would."

"Shyla!"

She nearly fainted at the sound of her name. "What? Would that be too Oedipal?" She couldn't refrain from a bit of sarcasm.

"It would be—" He glared. "*Oedipal?* What... How long have you known?"

"Unthinkable, huh?" Shyla couldn't resist prodding him a bit longer. "I thought I was Alysia, your captivator."

"And who is Paul? An old boyfriend?"

She giggled, disarmed. "Paul Bunyan. That's who you reminded me of when I passed you as I left your mother's office. A lumberjack." She eyed his brawny arms and shoulders. "It was a compliment...Dallas."

He shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. "When did you know?" he demanded again.

"You first, Mr. Seducer."

"On the plane."

"Before or after?" She held her breath. *Before* meant that he'd have known who she was and seduced her anyway. *After* meant he'd been attracted to her without any prompting.

"After—I swear—after!" He turned to face her. "My mother doesn't confide anything about her clients to me."

"She doesn't have to when you work together, does she?" The old resentment surfaced, and Shyla couldn't help but feel a little defensive.

"All I did was choose the crystal for you and mail it to Bev," Dallas said. "Whatever happened during your therapy session with my mother was none of my business."

"She still sent you a photo of me."

"So I could recognize you—that's all! She had no idea I was attracted to you, and no, I didn't know who you were when I seduced you on the plane until afterward. You changed your hair, you had on makeup and you weren't dressed all in black." He licked chocolate from his fingers and brought his face in direct line with hers, matching the question she was sure was in her eyes with sincere, profound concern in his own. "Shyla, I swear to you, I never told her what was on *my* mind, even if you did."

She flushed in frustration.

"Are you going to tell me when you knew who I was, or do I need to fuck it out of you?"

She collapsed, this time unable to recover from her giggles. "In the restaurant, okay? I nearly had a heart attack when I remembered something my *therapist* had told me about my new *client*—that she'd changed his diapers. She also mentioned your proliferation for producing vinegar occasionally instead of blackberry wine."

That seemed to satisfy him. Dallas leaned back, giving her more room to convulse. "What I'd really like to do right now is fuck you senseless. You could have told me."

"You should have told *me* at the airport!"

"You're right!"

Shyla was geared up for a bit more battle than that, and here he stole her thunder. They looked at one another with his last shouted exclamation hanging between them and started laughing.

"Well, how in hell am I supposed to work with you under these circumstances?" she finally asked.

"You tell me. We're each booked for a single room and these people know me and my every move. I have an assistant who will be up my ass night and day once we're there."

"Then Beverly needs to send someone else who'll be more objective."

He took her drink from her hands and set it on the night table on her side of the bed then climbed back on top of her. "Like hell!"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Dallas, when you chose the quartz for me, what criteria did you use?"

"What?"

"Why me, why that particular stone, if you didn't know me?"

"Let me think."

"Who asked whom to do business? Did Beverly contact you or did you call her?"

"Mom set it up."

Shyla pushed him off her. "What? Your mother set this up?"

"She's been hounding me for months about letting the pros handle the advertising because I've been unable to find time for myself. Her best friend owns an ad agency, so...you do the math."

Shyla's suspicions rose. "Have you ever met Beverly and Harry?"

"Many times."

She chuckled. "So those two old hens are responsible for this after all. The crystal still mystifies me though. What did Bev tell you about me that made you choose that particular stone?"

"She said you were quiet, shy, reserved." He grinned. "I don't think she knows you very well. She said you were dedicated to the business, one of their top art directors, and that you were like a daughter to her. She also said you were really hard on yourself, demanding nothing less than perfection." He shrugged. "The rose quartz is one of the most healing minerals on the planet, not that you appeared to need healing, just —"

"Loosening up?" she interrupted. "Honey, you have no idea what that thing has done to me."

"Yeah. I suppose I figured you needed loosening up. Does it matter?"

Shyla studied his face. "You really believe in what you do, don't you?"

"Yes. My parents may have started the business, but it has its place in society and I offer a service that doesn't come with strings like addiction or ulterior motives. Chakra cleansing using crystals has done as much for healing as modern medicine in some instances. Meditation using various stones has proven for centuries that metaphysics taps into streams of consciousness and has as much, if not more, power to transform than do synthetic drugs. Herbs have been used for the betterment of health by cultures all over the planet since time began."

She nodded. "I'll keep an open mind."

"But how you could still not be convinced?"

Shyla leaned over and kissed him. "Oh I'm convinced, all right, believe me. But Dallas, this is new for me—as are you. All I know for certain is that my life has been changed for the better since meeting you and your mother. Give me time to work this out for myself."

"And as for us?"

"I believe I was invited to a wine-tasting party at your place. You're not weaseling out of that."

He grinned, seeming to relax. "Good. There for a moment or two I thought I'd lost you to bureaucratic bullshit." He clasped her hands. "I'm willing to slow down a little if you like, get to know each other better. Just don't bail on me with the ad campaign. Now that we've met, I don't want to work with anyone but you on it."

Shyla sighed. She could do that, but only if he gave her some space, some time to pull herself together. Theirs had been a whirlwind courtship, if "courtship" was even a term that could be assigned to their relationship.

"Stay away from my pussy for the next twenty-four hours, Dallas. I mean it."

"You drive a hard bargain. This time tomorrow we'll be at the ranch."

"We'll be there this evening." She sucked in a deep, cleansing breath, letting the air escape slowly.

"Okay. You sure? We have another night paid for here, so why the desire to leave?"

"Because I'm not sure I can do my job if all I can concentrate on is you, and my boss and your mother and your company expect results other than the two of us having jungle sex in a hotel room."

He grinned slyly. "You sure about that?"

Shyla punched him lightly on the arm. "I'm having a difficult enough time keeping your mother from our pillow talk, considering she's responsible for the first orgasms I've had in a month of Sundays."

That seemed to do it for him as well. He stood, laughing. "Don't even go there. You have no idea what you did to me when you told me where you got that vibrator. Don't use it ever again, okay? I'll volunteer any time you feel the urge. Just don't tell me if you decide to use...Paul...instead of me next time you need to get off."

Shyla shrieked at his uncanny use of her nickname for the toy that paled in comparison to him. Paul would find himself left on the dresser when they checked out of their room, and whatever housekeeping decided to do with him was just fine with her.

Chapter Six

Dallas spent the next few hours watching his companion with a sense of fear mingled with excitement. Surely the rose quartz was the right choice—Shyla was blossoming now that there were no secrets between them.

She'd never been to St. Louis and wanted to shop at Union Station, the city's huge marketplace that had once been one of the largest and busiest rail terminals in the world. He enjoyed watching Shyla's face as she took in the barrel-vaulted ceiling in the Grand Hall and whipped out a sketch pad from her handbag to capture the site.

"I've seen this architecture before." Her charcoal flew across the page as she spoke.

"Probably. The guy who drew the plans designed it after Carcassone, a walled, medieval city in southern France."

He couldn't help but wonder how Shyla saw him and his business. What would she draw to illustrate his products, his personal vision?

She'd said at the hotel that her mission in visiting the center was to shop, but every few yards something would capture her artist's eye and she'd take a few seconds to record what she saw.

"I don't own a pair of boots," she explained as they stopped at a leather goods store. "I hear you have a thing for horses."

"You don't have to ride if you don't want to though. I know some people are afraid of horses, especially New Yorkers."

"You're looking at one of them," she admitted. "But I'm buying some jeans and boots nonetheless, and want to go on a trail ride. I may fall off and kill myself, so before that happens you have my permission to tell your mother and Beverly that I had a really good time trying to break my own mold and step out of my comfort zone."

They had so much between them, so much ground to cover in getting to know one another, he realized. What if she hated the outdoors, horses and eventually him? What if all they had going for them was a sexual connection?

He pushed the thought from his mind, unwilling to give up this early in the game. His first inclination upon meeting her was to fuck her, to simply bury himself inside her soft, feminine folds and forget everything around them save that one special place he knew they'd create if given the opportunity.

It'd been a long time since Dallas had given himself to anyone emotionally. Physically, sure, but nothing deeper than sexual gratification. Now he found himself in a dilemma as he watched her. She hadn't fallen apart when she realized who he was. Just the opposite—the witch had wanted to turn the tables on him. Not that he didn't have it coming. Yet when everything was out in the open, she'd stayed and hadn't taken the road of either martyr or saint. She'd simply adjusted, rolled with it, embraced their circumstances. She'd had that one moment of doubt, when she feared she wouldn't be able to do the job objectively, but she hadn't argued when he'd asked her to stay on, to work with him.

Dallas didn't give a damn what any of his staff had to say about their relationship, should Shyla relent and sleep with him in his quarters at the ranch, but it seemed important to her that they maintain a professional relationship while there. Only problem was that he didn't know if he could keep his hands off her long enough to last the next few days.

* * * * *

Shyla surveyed her day's purchases once they reached the ranch—clothes and cosmetics from Union Station, candles from the downstairs lobby when Dallas left to check them in and register her for the conference. She'd insisted on a private room and Dallas hadn't argued, but she could tell he wanted her to stay with him.

She'd never been interested in clothing other than as covering for her body, so the items she'd purchased intrigued her—not as individual items but what they represented. Jeans and boots for tackling horseback riding, a sexy peach-colored chemise and another in sapphire blue, a package of panties with French-cut legs. So what if she wasn't a size ten? She had nice-looking legs, and Dallas didn't seem to mind.

That was when everything changed for her. She'd realized she was shopping to enhance what was already there. Just as the rose quartz had affected her senses, now it was opening a portal even further into her subconscious. For whatever reasons, she was exactly where she was supposed to be. Whatever happened after that, whether she and Dallas remained close and became even more intimate or not, she knew who she was at that very moment—a woman who had found herself.

It's all good. She chuckled as she considered the first affirmation she'd made in years.

There was a barbecue to attend, a hayride, numerous seminars—and she wanted to sit in on the astrology and tarot lessons that were offered. Her schedule come tomorrow would be filled with necessary meetings and classes that would give her insight into Dallas and his business operation, but tonight was wide open. Shyla intended to make the most of her time with him.

Once she'd lit the candles, placing them strategically around her room and the private bath, their aromas helped set the stage. She stripped and ran steaming water into the garden tub, emptying the contents of the complimentary bubble bath beneath the running faucet.

Wrapping a towel about her torso, she phoned the hotel lobby and left word for Dallas to meet her. While she waited for him, she read the company's brochure and connected the laptop she'd lugged on the trip to the in-house internet. She hadn't taken the time to research crystals prior to leaving New York, so now was the perfect time.

Rose quartz, it appeared, was also called the love stone. Had Dallas had that in mind when he selected it for her? According to what she read, the rose quartz represented unconditional love and opened the heart chakra, welcoming everything from self-love to all other forms, including romantic love. Well, the little gem had certainly earned its name so far as she was concerned.

She read aloud from the pamphlet. "Emotionally, rose quartz brings gentleness, forgiveness, kindness, compassion and tolerance." *Right on target*, she thought. "It raises self-esteem. Hmm." Then she did a double take. "It helps in overcoming addictions."

She'd left not only her vibrator but her *cigarettes* at the hotel in St. Louis. Wow.

The knock at her door made her giddy. She was so excited at the prospect of seeing him and telling him what she'd learned that she failed to use the peephole and check who was there. When she threw open the door and saw the unfamiliar man bearing a big bouquet of roses and the girl beside him holding a tray of food, she screamed. They screamed back. Dishes on the housekeeper's tray clattered dangerously, and it took Shyla a couple of seconds to recover.

"Fuck!" She hurriedly wrapped the towel she'd been holding around herself.

She heard Dallas calling out her name from down the hall.

"I'm fine!" She started laughing, holding the towel with one hand and motioning for the hotel staff to enter with the other. "I'm so sorry! Please, do what you need to do."

By the time Dallas entered and realized what was happening, it was all Shyla could do to maintain a sober expression. Tears of laughter cascaded down her cheeks.

"Why, why, why?" she asked once the other man and woman had gone. "Why is it that every time I try to seduce you, something throws me off track?"

He snatched the towel away and grabbed her in a bear hug, kissing her cheeks, lips and eyes. "Maybe you're not supposed to be the seducer. You ever think of that?"

"But I want to!"

Dallas looked about the candlelit room and nodded. "I'd say you're off to a good start." He peered over her shoulder toward the bathroom. "What have you been doing?"

"Guess. The candles have probably melted and the bubbles all dissipated, but I had good intentions. At least I didn't burn the place down."

He tugged on his pants zipper and pulled at his shirttail. "Let me help."

Before long, Shyla had him precisely where she wanted him, between her legs, in bubbly warm water, with his back to her breasts. She hugged him and dropped kisses along his shoulders and neck. "Have I told you how much our time in St. Louis meant to me?"

He leaned back for a kiss on the lips. "Not in so many words."

"Well, I had a ball." When he laughed, she giggled. "Not that kind, although that worked well too. Be serious for a minute. I'm trying to open up, and it's not easy for me."

"I'm listening." His hands caressed her legs that encased him. "You have beautiful skin. I love your legs."

"Thank you. They love you too." She slipped her hands beneath his arms and across his midsection, her fingers gravitating toward his cock. He was already hard and she wanted to stroke him and enjoy his responses. "Do you plan on telling your mother what has happened since we met?"

He seemed panicky. "No! Do you?"

"That would be a little weird, although I really had hoped to see her again. That okay?"

"Hey, she's your therapist. I only listen to her bitch and change her light bulbs occasionally. Are you telling Bev?"

"I don't think so. I figure we go back, act like nothing has happened and take it from there. If, some day, I wind up being invited to Thanksgiving dinner at your mom's or something, we'll deal with it then."

"Shyla, I don't see us not seeing one another once we're back in New York."

She stopped stroking him. "What do you see us doing?"

Dallas turned in her arms. "What do you think? I'm thirty years old, I've never been married and I'm falling in love with you."

She felt her lips trembling, forming a response, but nothing happened. *He stole my line.*

"Question is," he continued, "what are we going to do about it?"

Shyla thought a second. "Thanksgiving is in about six months. We have plenty of time before the possibility of sharing drumsticks and cranberry sauce with your mother."

"Does this mean I can visit your pussy any time soon?"

"Any time you wish." She opened her arms as he turned in the tub to kiss her full on the lips. Once she could breathe and talk, she continued. "Does this mean I can still visit your mother?"

"That's your call—just don't talk about me, please." He nibbled her neck and positioned himself on top of her. "You could just move in here with me."

She shook her head. "I have a job."

"So make me your only client."

Shyla laughed. "You have two homes, right? One in New York, one here?"

"Shyla, I can't see you only every other week or so, not if we're to make this work. I'll just have to move back to New York and let someone else handle things at this end except during special seminars."

"You'd do that?"

He slipped slightly and gripped the sides of the tub for support. "Yes." Then he looked down. "My knees won't hold in this tub, you know. We'll both sink to the bottom if we try anything."

She hooked a finger under his chin, forcing him to look at her. "I'll take my chances." She bent to take his cock in her mouth, driving her lips down to the hilt.

Dallas growled in appreciation. "Woman, I will fuck you until you beg for mercy. You'll be lucky to walk tomorrow." She slowly eased back to the tip, swirling her tongue around his shaft and drawing more growls from his throat.

"Scratch that—I'll fuck you *into* tomorrow."

Shyla threw back her head and laughed, free at last.

Epilogue

Peter Murray stared into space. He'd been summoned by his former colleagues and had no idea why. He assumed it was some final kiss-off, that it had something to do with the severance package months earlier. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he hadn't placed any money in his 401K in a long time. Perhaps they required his presence because they actually gave a shit. He could grudgingly give them that one, that they might care how he was since they'd fired him.

Marla's suite was still a girly mix of pastels and roses, everything but a cute puppy or a cat to complete the *Better Homes & Gardens* atmosphere. Maybe it worked for her, put her patients at ease. He hadn't given much thought to his own office when he'd worked alongside her as a parapsychologist.

He stood as she entered the room, closing the door behind her.

"What are you thinking?" Her voice was calm, her eyes soft and dreamy as if she'd just awakened and found a ladybug crawling along her windowsill, not the man who had irritated the crap out of her on a daily basis for over a decade.

He cleared his throat. "I was thinking that you have a nice office, that I'll bet it makes your patients more relaxed."

"More relaxed than what?"

Peter sighed, thinking *Oh fuck it*, and continued. "It's nicer than mine was. I couldn't even tell you what was on my bookshelves. I remember the color of the walls though."

Marla motioned for him to sit back down. "Blue latex paint with white molding and trim. I wanted you to have the laminated mural replaced with something more stylish." She set her jaw. "I was wrong. Your patients liked your '60s modernism. They said it

made them feel like they were in their favorite pub or restaurant with figures from the past staring down at them as they talked to you.”

His head snapped up. “Who said that?”

“Several people. Peter, your old patients miss you—they tell us all the time how they enjoyed their time with you. Your coffeepot was always on...” She laughed. “You never had anything but Styrofoam cups and you never cleaned your coffeepot, but some people like that muddy crap.”

Goddamn it, what is she getting at? Did she call me back here only to rub it in my face that I'm nothing but a memory? He took a deep breath through his nostrils and squared off with her. “Let’s have it, Marla. Why am I here? What do you want?”

“Okay.” She was still standing before him. She reached out to clasp one of his hands, pulling him back up. “Follow me.”

Peter wondered where the other shrinks were. Probably with patients. Edie, their receptionist, was parked in her usual trench, screening the men and women who entered their doors waiting to do battle with monsters of the mind. She hadn’t given him more than a cursory hello when he’d first entered. Now she seemed to be blushing. What the hell was going on?

Marla opened the door to his old office, ushering him inside.

Peter’s throat constricted with unspent emotion at the sight. The place had been cleaned. Someone had placed a large bouquet of fresh flowers in a vase behind the big mahogany desk. The coffeepot was new, and a selection of what looked like new mugs clung to a wooden cup tree beside it. He blinked. “I see the new guy has made a few changes.”

Marla closed the door and leaned against it then folded her arms. “Look around.”

“I see it. This is cruel, Marla—why bring me in here? You want to gloat, to...” He was stopped mid-sentence when she propelled herself from the door and into his arms.

“Shut up, fool.” She kissed him hard on the lips, pressing her body into his.

Peter's first reaction was shock, then terror, then wonder. He'd kept his feelings for her under wraps for years, long before her husband had died. He didn't dare hope that Marla Garrett returned the affection he felt for her. Then the softness of her lips seeped into his consciousness, the citrus smell of her perfume, the feel of her smooth hands holding his face as she kissed him.

He looked down the length of his own nose at the woman who seemed bent on destroying him, one way or the other. When it appeared she had no intentions of letting him go until he kissed her back, he dropped his defenses, wrapped his arms about her and gave as good as he got.

"I don't understand," he whispered when she broke the kiss.

"I've missed you."

"Uh-huh. Tweak my other nut now."

Marla laughed and backed away, waving her hands toward his desk, bookshelves and filing cabinets. "What do you see?"

He looked. "I see that somebody else has a really nice office and that they haven't given in to your desire to paint the entire place into some garden club scene."

"Look again." She indicated the ebony and chrome coffeepot. On it was a note.

Peter walked toward the cozy nook near the office's one bay window and picked up the note card. The outside simply said *Peter*. Inside, the signatures of his coworkers—both old and new—stared back at him beneath two simple words that made his heart soar.

Welcome back.

His breath came in short waves, almost making him hyperventilate. He blinked. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes." She shrugged. "Like I said, your patients have missed you. The firm misses you." Marla squared the shoulders of her tiny frame. "I miss you. Of course, if working with me again will be a problem—"

"No, no!" He dropped the note and walked toward her. "I just don't understand."

"You did it—you turned at least three lives around that we know of, and there's no telling how many others you've touched during the past few months. I mean, unless you want to continue driving a cab, we see no reason why you shouldn't resume your practice."

He cocked his head. "Really?"

She touched his lapels. "You've obviously had a change of heart about what we do here, what you do—your place in the scheme of things. People like us have gifts, Peter. It's not right that we take them for granted."

He nodded and drew her into a tender embrace. "You're right, and I've missed this." He kissed her on the lips. "I've missed *you*. I just had no idea...I mean, you might have given me a clue!"

"You were too wrapped up in your own misery, feeling guilty over Susannah to the point that you were neglecting your other patients." She gave a wry smile. "I didn't know how big a part of my own life you were until you were gone. I just couldn't watch you self-destruct. So I let you go."

"And now?" He looked at her hopefully.

Marla quirked an eyebrow and smiled mischievously. "Peter, you and I are gonna make up for lost time. My new daughter-in-law tells me—"

"Dallas got married? Wow!"

She stroked his cheeks again. "Thanks to you. Remember that frumpy but nice Italian girl from last spring? The one you told to buy new shoes and do something with her hair?"

Peter's mouth formed a perfect O. "The one wearing all black, like some gothic rocker?"

She nodded. "That's the one. You pretty much told her she needed to get laid."

"No way." He blinked again. "Shit."

“No! This was a good thing. She got in touch with her inner slut, flew to Missouri, met Dallas on the way and...you’re largely responsible.” Then she grinned again. “Anyway, I’m inviting you for dinner tonight at my place, but first I need to stop off at a specialty shop—there’s this new vibrator she claims is fantastic called the Ballistic Beaver, and I want you to...”

Peter collapsed into uncontrollable laughter. As he hugged Marla, he surveyed the office. He was finally home.

About the Author

Lyn Cash has published over 50 short stories and confessions and has presently contracted or published 8 novels and novellas. A Midwesterner, she loves to travel, sketch, delve into mysteries and true crimes, and putter about with herbs and flowers when she isn't chained to her computer. She's happiest when petting her rescued canines or chatting with her son, her biggest supporter, and when she's eyebrow deep in writing or meeting fans. Her homes on the web can be found at <http://authorlyncash.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.thebelfrycollective.com/>.

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