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If Wishes Came True
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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384
Dothan, AL 36301

If Wishes Came True
Copyright © 2006 by Cassandra Kane
Cover by Anne Cain
ISBN: 1-59998-137-8
www.samhainpublishing.com

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: September 2006

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Cassandra Kane

Chapter One

“Are you up for it, Langton?”

Maddy Langton looked up from her computer at Michael Franco’s grinning face. The big policeman’s smirk had her eyes narrowing in suspicion. His partner, Rafe West, leaned nonchalantly against the wall by her desk, his blue eyes expressionless as he watched her.

Careful not to betray the sudden quickening of her pulse under Rafe’s steady gaze, Maddy turned to Franco.

“What are you plotting, Franco?” She had the feeling this conversation might take an unexpected turn and saved the report she had been typing on screen.

“*Moi?* You’re a suspicious gal, Langton.” His attention flicked towards his partner. “I thought we’d have a celebratory dinner, just the three of us. We did just catch one of the Most Wanted today. I think that deserves a drink.”

Rafe quirked a smile at Franco, a familiar dimple appearing in his blond-stubbled cheek. The good-looking cop looked the worse for wear after their two-week surveillance operation. The stakeout had culminated that morning in the apprehension of Milos Stanlovic, an Eastern European crime boss operating an illegal prostitution racket out of London’s East End. She’d set the cuffs on Stanlovic herself after West and Franco led the police raid into the converted warehouse he’d used as his headquarters. Stanlovic and two of his aides were currently cooling their heels in the holding cells while eleven prostitutes sobbed their tales of abduction and rape to a police interpreter.

Hell, they all looked the worse for wear. Franco had grown a full beard, Rafe's blond locks were completely untamed, and she needed a session of serious hair removal.

More importantly, Maddy needed time to take stock. Two weeks in close proximity to Rafe had stretched her self-control to the breaking point. She'd already succumbed to his charms once. She couldn't afford to do it again.

Maddy raised an eyebrow. "There's nothing to celebrate. We haven't nailed Stanlovic yet. Let's wait till we get a conviction."

"Who knows how long that could take?" Franco threw Rafe a furtive glance. "Come on, Maddy. Dinner's on us. Choose any fancy restaurant you want."

Maddy eyed him warily. "What are you after, Franco?"

"Christ, talk about stubborn!" His bluff face looked pleading. "It's a serious invitation, Maddy. Meat, two veg and a stiff drink are all I want."

"Forget it, Franco," Rafe drawled coolly. "With that attitude I'm sure we'll have more fun without her."

Maddy bristled. Rafe observed her with a dismissive expression designed to get under her skin, one he'd worn a little too often over the last few weeks. The sensible thing would be to blow them both off. There was more to this than met the eye, she could feel it in her bones. But she was tired and trying to work it out now was just too damn hard. Besides, proving Rafe wrong always took priority.

"You bringing partners?"

Franco grinned in triumph. "Lorna's staying at home with the kids. West here hasn't been laid for the past three months so I'm betting it's a no from him."

"Shut up, Franco," Rafe snarled.

Three months. Maddy did a mental countdown. Three months ago she and Rafe had...The Encounter. Short and brief and all too heady.

She'd been backpedaling as fast as she could ever since. Not that it had seemed to affect Rafe at all. Or had it? What exactly was Franco saying? Her mind skittered away from the possibilities presenting themselves.

"You got a social disease, West?" Attack was always the best defense.

Franco burst out laughing. "Yeah, West, what's up with that?"

Rafe's thickly lashed eyes narrowed as they caught her gaze. Don't go there, his look warned. Maddy's cheeks burned. It *had* been below the belt.

Rafe's voice was cool as he turned to Franco. "All right. Why don't you ask Lorna to set me up with that friend of hers?"

"You mean Sue?" Franco blinked. "She's a nice girl, Rafe. I don't think I could do that to her." He hesitated. "You're not serious, are you?"

Rafe regarded Maddy with a quiet intensity. She tore her gaze from his to tap at her keyboard in what she hoped was a convincing display of disinterest.

"Yeah, I'm serious," Rafe said softly. "It's been a long time since I met a *nice* girl."

Touché. Maddy bent her head, shuffling the forms on her desk to hide her mortification. Dammit, why had she opened her big mouth?

"I'll talk to Lorna and see if she can set it up for next week sometime." Franco sounded dubious. "So...we still on for tonight?"

Both Franco and Rafe waited for her reply. Franco's uncertain frown mirrored his deflated expectations, while Rafe's bored indifference served only to sting her further.

Maddy latched on to her pride and stunned them with a bright smile. "I'm in. I guess I could do with a stiff drink."

* * *

"Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!"

Maddy threw the hairbrush at her reflection in the full-length mirror. She held her breath as she waited for the mirror to shatter, but the hairbrush bounced off it and slid under her dresser. She sank to the floor and breathed out a sigh of relief. The last thing she needed was seven years bad luck.

“Get a grip, Langton.”

She studied herself in the mirror. She looked pathetic in her man-sized bathrobe, so small and insignificant with her short, dark hair plastered wetly to her scalp. All right, so her face wasn't unattractive, but her body was another matter.

Maddy shrugged off the robe and eyed herself critically, running a hand over her flat belly. She'd worked hard to get this body. It was an athlete's body, strong and without any excess fat. That meant no breasts. All right, she had breasts but very small ones. It was a body she'd trained to within an inch of its life—running, swimming, kickboxing. She hadn't wanted her femininity to be a hindrance in her career as a police officer. Well, she got that right at least. She wasn't feminine at all, as far as she was concerned.

Rafe West liked a female body. A tall blonde with big tits and a tiny waist so he could rest his hand on the curving hip. Maddy had met the type of woman he preferred at Christmas parties and nights out with the other officers. Stunning, giggling blondes who draped themselves over his tall, hard body and cooed sweet nothings in his ear. Blondes who turned his colleagues to walking hard-ons and drooling incoherence and set their wives to twittering with jealousy in the ladies room. Invariably the wives would cut the evening short, bribing their husbands home with promises of matrimonial delights, while Rafe sauntered off to have his wicked way with the beautiful bimbo on his arm. Of that Maddy had no doubt.

Gorgeous and dumb, Maddy had thought when she'd met Rafe for the first time. Only he'd turned out to be pretty smart, top in his class at the Academy. So she'd changed her opinion of him to gorgeous and arrogant. Only he had a sense of humor, always ready with the witty comeback and more than happy to bring her down a peg or two when she was at her most intense, and able to make her laugh in the process. There was some skill in that.

So, he was gorgeous and...ah...

Well, he just had bad taste in women. Other than that, he was perfect.

"No." She shook her head at her reflection. No way would she admit she thought Rafe West perfect. It was one step short of believing he was perfect—for her. It was as good as saying she was in love the guy.

In love with Rafe West! The idea was ridiculous.

"I just want to fuck him." There, she could admit that.

She had fantasized about him from the first moment she'd set eyes on him two years before. More than once she had wondered what he did to those blondes when he got them in bed. It had to be good. They wouldn't stop calling him.

Then there had been The Encounter.

Three months ago, another covert surveillance on Stanlovic's white-slaver operations. Three weeks in an abandoned flat across the road from the house suspected to be a holding pen for girls, most of it spent looking through a long-range lens. Maddy's partner, Luke Nelson, had dropped out after ten days due to a back injury and Rafe had been sent in his place.

Maddy had hated that Rafe had been there, distracting her with his good looks. After a week of unmitigated boredom he'd begun to tell her stories to pass the time, stories about his family and incidents from

childhood, stories about busts that had gone well and others that had him convinced he'd never live through them.

Hell, he'd even shown her his scars. Axe wound to the back of his head from an enraged suspect, ten stitches. Knife wound across the ribs from a ten-year-old crack addict, seventeen stitches.

He'd lifted his shirt for her to have a look at the jagged scar across his ribs. She'd stared at his six-pack and the fine cover of blond hair disappearing into the waist of his trousers. Oh, man.

Then he'd teased her into showing him hers.

"I don't have any." She turned bright red. He wasn't seeing that one.

"Come on, Langton, I know you have one."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"How would you know?"

"Cops talk, you know that."

"So who's been blabbing?"

"Luke Nelson's not known for his discretion."

"Luke's a cretin."

"Come on, Langton. I've shown you mine. Fair play."

She hesitated, then shrugged. "Only in the spirit of fair play."

Maddy undid the buttons on her jeans and slid them over her hips. She pointed out the scar on her inner thigh.

"Gunshot wound from a trigger-happy junkie during a raid, twenty-one stitches."

Rafe leaned in for a closer look. "That looks nasty. I heard you almost died."

"It wasn't that bad."

"I hope you plugged the asshole."

"He's doing a ten stretch. He won't pass parole, the guys will make sure."

“If I’d been there I would’ve nailed him.”

“What are you so mad about?”

“Just look what he did to you. The fucking creep.”

Maddy stared at the shiny skin of the scar on her thigh. “It’s not that bad, for God’s sake.” Then, as realization dawned, a burning heat started up the back of her neck. “And you’re only upset because I’m a woman, aren’t you? You’re such a fucking throwback, West.”

She began to pull up her jeans, struggling when the tight material clung to her skin. Rafe grabbed her wrist to still her furious tugging.

“Come on, Maddy. You expect me to be happy about seeing this? He almost *killed you*. As it is he scarred you for life.”

“Listen, asshole, you expect me to ooh and ahh over your stupid battle scars but when I show you mine you come over all self-righteous.” She slapped at his hand. “I’m not one of your moronic blonde bimbos, all right? I can take care of myself. Now leave me the fuck alone!”

Instead he captured both wrists and hauled her towards him. She stumbled to her knees, struggling as he tried to hold her still. Tears sprang into her eyes and quivered on her eyelashes. Oh, shit, she was *such* a girl!

“I’m sorry, Maddy, all right?” He enveloped her in a bear hug. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Rafe’s unexpected concern sent the tears spilling over her cheeks. Soon she was sobbing into his shoulder, her nose pressed against hard, warm muscles. Luxuriating in the strength of his arms wrapped around her body, Maddy turned her head and rested her lips against the warm pulse beating in the powerful column of his neck. And licked.

He started in surprise, and suddenly his mouth crushed down on hers, his tongue forcing her lips apart. She moaned, her tongue responding avidly to his, circling and chasing and sucking. He pushed her back against the floor, his hard body covering hers. His hands

roamed over her body, touching the exposed flesh of her midriff. He yanked her T-shirt out of the waistband of her jeans while she caressed his stomach, glorying in the taut play of muscles.

Rafe dragged her up and whipped off her T-shirt. Gasping with desire, she clawed at his until he tore it over his head. The clasp of her bra nestled between her breasts broke as he tugged at it. Laughing, she shrugged off the straps of the torn bra and lay back. He brought his head down to her breast, gently licking the underside and circling, circling with his tongue until it scraped at her painfully erect nipple. Arching her back, Maddy moaned as she felt the warm gush of liquid pooling between her legs. Oh God, she had never been this excited in her whole life.

His mouth closed over one taut nub while his thumb circled over her other nipple. She squirmed under him, her fingers raking the strong planes of his back. His tongue left a wet trail between her breasts, running down over her stomach to the edge of her panties. She trembled as he sat back and eased off her jeans and panties. The intensity of his dark blue gaze consumed her, her flesh burning beneath his devouring scrutiny. Watching her, Rafe slowly traced his thumb along the inside of her thigh and rubbed over the shiny skin of her scar. She held her breath as he bent down and replaced his thumb with his lips. Maddy squirmed at the scrape of his rough stubble against her tender flesh. His hot mouth moved between her legs, tracing over her sex, his tongue sliding along the dark crevice. Flicking his tongue over the swollen nub of her clit, Rafe closed his mouth over it and sucked.

Gasping, Maddy let her legs fall open. His tongue delved within the slick folds, thrusting deeper and deeper into the creamy interior. He replaced tongue with fingers and eased two inside her as his mouth returned to suck on her swollen clit. She hooked her legs over his muscled shoulders, allowing his fingers room to thrust deeper, to circle the aching nub of her G-spot. Maddy felt the orgasm begin like a

whirlpool in her core that rose like a tidal wave of pure sensation. The explosion of her orgasm sent her hips bucking, destroying the last of her inhibitions until she sobbed at the sheer pleasure that swept through her body.

As her breathing steadied, Rafe rose. Through the warm glow of her satiety Maddy watched as he undid the buttons to his jeans. She'd never seen jeans come off so fast, quickly followed by his boxer shorts, until he stood naked before her. His hard body was honed to muscular perfection. Fine blond hair traced over his tight abdomen and arched down to a mass of dark curls at his groin. His cock rose, firm and ready. And *big*. Oh, so big. And so beautiful.

Maddy scrambled to her knees and grasped his shaft. The skin was soft, the thick vein pulsing on its underside. She stared up at him as he buried his hands in her hair and nudged the head towards her mouth. Feeling wanton, Maddy licked the tip and swallowed the creamy liquid dripping from the slit. She worked her tongue around the head until Rafe pushed the thick tip urgently between her lips. Maddy took the whole length of him inside her mouth and Rafe's hips moved, thrusting inside with gasping abandon until she steadied him, digging her fingers into the smooth skin of his hard butt. His breathing was labored as he stilled and her tongue began to work on him.

An ear-splitting shriek reverberated throughout the room. Maddy blinked in dazed confusion as Rafe abruptly pulled his cock from her mouth. A burst of rapid-fire gunshots rang from the street outside. Rafe ran to the window.

"Dammit!" He squinted through the long-distance lens trained on the house across the street. "Drive-by shooting. They've gone. I couldn't catch the license plates."

For a heartbeat, Maddy stared at him without understanding. Then her training kicked in. She jumped to her feet and pulled on her jeans.

There was only time for both of them to throw on jeans and T-shirt before Rafe released the safety lock on his gun and she gripped the cool handle of her own.

Their eyes met. Rafe's hot gaze burned into hers, loaded with desire and regret. Then, like a shutter snicking over a camera lens, the cold, hard cop took over.

Maddy was close on Rafe's heels as he raced down the stairs to the street outside. A crowd was already forming around three bodies lying on the sidewalk in front of the house they'd had under surveillance. Game over.

"What the fuck happened?" The chief's spittle flew as he screamed at them the next day. "Where the hell were you? What the fuck were you doing?"

Giving Rafe a blowjob. At the involuntary thought, a rush of hot embarrassment washed over Maddy. She couldn't look at Rafe as he made up a plausible and complex excuse which, nevertheless, rang false. The chief threw them out of his office in disgust.

Mortified, Maddy strode back to her desk. What *had* she been thinking? She'd never felt so useless in her whole life.

"Maddy." Rafe called out behind her. "Maddy, we need to talk."

Resolutely, Maddy turned to face him.

Frustration was etched in the hard line of his jaw as he stared down at her. "Maddy, about what happened—"

Maddy held up her hand to stop him. "There's nothing to talk about. We made a mistake. It won't happen again." And she swung around and stalked away.

She had been weak and Rafe had been—bored. A momentary lapse had cost the lives of an informant and two innocent bystanders. She promised herself it would never happen again and determined to stay as far away from Rafe West as possible.

From that day until now, Maddy had treated Rafe with studied indifference. Naturally, Rafe had responded in kind. And, God help her, he almost seemed to relish it.

She could no longer deny that the strain was driving her crazy. She wanted him. Badly. And now she'd practically goaded him into the arms of another woman. Worse than that, it was a woman who might just turn out to be a serious commitment. She'd met Sue. She was a pretty, intelligent blonde who worked as a schoolteacher. Not the kind who could be easily dropped. Not his usual vapid bimbo.

Just what the hell was Rafe thinking?

Chapter Two

Maddy stood on the sidewalk outside the Trafalgar Hotel. The late evening traffic had eased and now consisted mainly of black cabs and the bright red flash of London buses. Tourists still loitered over Nelson's statue in Trafalgar Square. Facing the hotel on the other side of the square, the spotlit façade of the National Gallery seemed forlorn and a little weary. As weary as she felt.

God knows why she'd chosen the Trafalgar for their dinner. She'd followed a suspect in there once, noted the plush and intimate interior and had thought she'd like to come back under different circumstances. Then again, it was expensive. She knew Franco would balk at the price and West would offer to settle the bill as he didn't have a wife and kids to support.

Maddy wondered despondently why she bothered with these vindictive ruses. She and Rafe had fallen into a pattern of one-upmanship that could only lead to no good.

Maddy scanned the front of the building as she approached the hotel entrance, her cop training checking automatically for alternate exit routes. A doorman in top hat and tails waited expectantly by the glass-and-brass revolving door. To her right, the stone-grey walls of the hotel gave way to a glittering expanse of glass. Behind it, the patrons of the Trafalgar Bar could be seen from the street, elegant people chatting in the bar's velvety warmth.

Her cell phone rang. Franco. She flipped it open and heard his voice crackling with static. “Maddy? I’m sorry but I can’t make it tonight. The baby’s not well. Lorna wants to take her to the hospital and I need to stay here to look after the other kids.”

“Oh.” Her heart sank, and an immediate sensation of panic gripped her. She’d be alone with Rafe.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, he came into view behind the plate-glass window of the bar. He found a free spot at the bar and leaned against it in his usual casual style. Rafe wore a tie and jacket, giving him the appearance of a blond James Bond. He seemed to fit right into the voguish crowd, his lip curling as though bored with the sumptuous surroundings.

“You guys go ahead without me.”

“What?” Distracted, Maddy remembered Franco was still on the line.

“You can tell me all about it tomorrow.”

Maddy gripped the phone. “No, we might as well cancel it—”

“I’ve called Rafe, he tells me he’s already there.”

Damn! Maddy watched Rafe pay the bartender for his drink. Scotch on the rocks, if she wasn’t mistaken. As he brought the glass to his lips, a woman walked up to him and laid carefully manicured fingers on the sleeve of his jacket. Maddy could only see her from behind, but the white-blond hair falling in luxurious waves over her back would draw attention anywhere. Rafe broke into his usual disarming grin. Maddy prayed the woman had said something witty and that Rafe wasn’t grinning because he was lining her up for some extracurricular activity later on that night.

“Franco, I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll just call it a day.” Maddy’s voice sounded brittle as her throat tightened on the jealousy twisting inside her.

“You’re there already, aren’t you?” Franco demanded. “Don’t stand him up, Maddy, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Finding it all too painful, Maddy turned away from Rafe and the blonde. She’d seen more than enough.

As she turned, her attention was caught by a flash of orange. The orange belonged to the robes of two Buddhist monks emerging from the revolving doors of the hotel, chatting quietly. They bowed briefly to the doorman, who tipped his hat and scrambled to hail them a taxi. The monks waited on the sidewalk not more than ten yards away. The shorter, older monk had an embroidered bag hanging from his shoulder. A very feminine-looking bag.

“Maddy?” Franco growled in her ear. “I know you’re already there. You’re the most punctual person I know, dammit.”

Maddy sighed. “All right, I’ll have dinner with him as I’m already here. But if there’s any blood drawn I’m setting the blame squarely on you.” Unable to help herself, she glanced back at the lounge window and caught the deliberate flick of the blonde’s hair as she casually edged closer to Rafe.

Franco laughed. “Okay, but I’m not going to—”

Maddy gasped as someone barreled into her and the cell was flung from her hand. The impact threw her off balance, and she instinctively reached out to grab the assailant’s arm to restore her equilibrium. She was shoved brutally aside.

“Thief!” someone shouted behind her. “Stop!”

Maddy staggered back a few steps before regaining her balance. A well of anger bubbled and frothed inside her. The thief ran down the street with the monk’s embroidered bag in his hands. Furious, she gave chase. Robbing a couple of monks and shoving a police officer were sufficient reasons to clobber the guy and vent her frustration. Now this she knew how to handle.

The thief had reached the end of the street. A couple turned the corner and he slammed into them, stumbling to his knees, giving Maddy enough time to throw herself across the last few feet separating them and grab his arm. He jerked himself away and her hold loosened, slipping over his vinyl windcheater and falling on the bag clasped in his hand. Gripping the bag, she pulled. He yanked it back. For a moment they exchanged a fierce tug-of-war. The thief's pale face glistened with sweat, his eyes widening with increasing panic. Then he shoved the bag at her and ran, leaving Maddy sitting on her butt on the sidewalk, clutching the bag to her chest.

The thief disappeared around the corner, and the couple he had bumped into gaped after him, rooted to the spot in shock.

"You all right?" The voice was cheerful and accented by broken English. Maddy stared at the younger of the two Buddhist monks.

Despite the grin splitting his face, there was real concern in his dark, blinking eyes. Maddy nodded. Swallowing her wounded pride, she took his hand and allowed him to help her to her feet.

He held out the pieces of her cell phone.

"Very brave, very brave," he said as she took them. He grinned at her as they walked back towards the entrance to the hotel where the older monk waited anxiously.

"It's my job—" Maddy began, but the young monk loped ahead to join his companion, jabbering excitedly in an incomprehensible language as she limped after him. The older monk, whose shaved head and wizened expression made him look like a sun-ripened raisin, nodded at him. His dark, sunken eyes appraised her as she approached.

"Here's your bag." Maddy held it out to him.

The old monk took the bag and bowed deeply. Maddy shifted her feet, trying to remember the protocol for these occasions. She gave an

awkward bow, her cheeks reddening. That done, she backed away to go inside the hotel.

“Wait please!”

Maddy stopped in surprise. The young monk bent down to listen to his companion’s sedate speech. All the while, the older monk’s dark eyes continued to assess her.

“He say he like to give gift.” The young monk’s white teeth flashed as he grinned. “To say thank you.”

“No.” She leaned down to speak to the old monk so their eyes were level. “It’s not necessary. This is my job—”

“You must take.” The young monk beamed.

The old monk rummaged inside the embroidered bag and held out something that rested in his palm. It was a ring. It appeared to have been carved from a single piece of jade. Complex swirling symbols had been engraved around it.

Maddy stared at the ring’s glowing surface. It was beautiful.

“Oh, no.” Maddy shook her head. “I can’t accept gifts for—”

“Take.” The old monk’s gaze bore into hers, brooking no argument. Maddy hesitated for a beat and took the ring.

“You make wish.” The young monk said in excitement.

“You want me to make a wish?” What a silly thing to say. Yet she could not help turning to look at Rafe behind the plate-glass windows of the hotel bar. The blonde now leaned on his shoulder, whispering into his ear, her lips only inches from his. Jealousy clawed at her gut, and she wished fiercely that she was the blonde, about to have her lips ravished by Rafe’s.

Maddy turned back to see the young monk nodding. “It come true.”

If wishes came true she’d have made Detective Inspector by now, Maddy thought. The two monks were very sweet and very naïve—and maybe running a little scam of their own. She forced herself to harden

her heart towards them. This was real life, not a fairy story. They didn't honestly believe she would swallow that, did they?

"Thanks." Coolly, she closed her hand around the ring. "I'll keep that in mind."

Maddy turned and strode to the hotel entrance. She paused at the revolving door and looked back at them. They got into a black cab, the doorman closed the door after them, and they were whisked into the traffic.

And now, dinner with Rafe. Maddy took a deep breath, steeled herself for the worst, and pushed through the revolving doors into the hotel.

The lobby was carpeted in plush red, and the lighting on the wall threw a muted glow over the interior making it at once welcoming and warm. To her left, a marble staircase with a dark, polished banister swept up to the next floor. At the far end of the lobby stood the reception desk, paneled in dark oak, with two perky receptionists in suits sitting behind it talking on the phone.

A sign indicated that the Trafalgar Bar and Lounge was to be found along the corridor to her right. She strode along it, passing the ladies room on her left. The entrance to the bar lay at the end of the corridor. She paused on the threshold and looked for Rafe.

He was unmistakable, the only man handsome enough to have all female eyes on him. He faced the plate-glass windows overlooking the hotel entrance, exposing the sharp outline of his strong jaw to her captivated gaze. He'd shaved. His new position had forced the blonde away from him. She smiled, touched his arm, and walked away. The instant Rafe could no longer see her, the blonde wiped the smile from her face. A look of cold determination took its place.

Maddy had no desire to brush up against the blonde or, worse, expose herself by throwing her a dirty look. She backed into the corridor, turned and saw the door to the ladies room. She popped inside.

The ladies room consisted of three stalls and a line of washbasins set into a marble counter. Maddy studied herself in the row of mirrors above the washbasins. Her dark slacks, plain blouse and woolen jacket were crumpled. She'd firmly come down on the side of sensible after agonizing over what she would wear that night. The jacket had a rip in the left shoulder, exposing the red lining underneath. There was a dirty smudge across her cheek. Christ, she looked like crap.

The door to the ladies room opened and the blonde walked in. Maddy started in surprise, even as the blonde's expression betrayed shock. As though she'd recognized her, Maddy thought. Although that was silly because she would have remembered *this* woman if they'd met before. She was stunning.

They continued to stare at each other until Maddy caught herself and gave a brief, mock-friendly smile that felt more like a grimace. She turned to grab a paper towel and play at wiping her hands. The blonde's heels clipped over the marble towards the washbasins. She set her black handbag on the counter, took a tube of lipstick from inside, and began to apply it to her lips in thick layers.

Maddy glanced at her surreptitiously as she leaned into the mirror to wipe the smudge from her cheek. The woman was tall, with broad shoulders and full breasts. Her erect nipples, visible beneath the silk of the tiny camisole top that left nothing to the imagination, pointed upwards. Maddy wondered if she'd had a boob job. She'd never seen breasts that pert in that size before.

The blonde wore a tiny leather miniskirt above flawlessly tanned legs. Her pink-tipped toes were wedged in the most amazing shoes Maddy had ever seen. Six-inch heeled mules with diamantes glittering over the criss-cross of leather at the toes and a pink satin ribbon that tied around her slender ankles all the way up her long, supple calves.

The blonde had noticed her staring, and she flashed a sudden smile, revealing perfect white, even teeth. Maddy couldn't help but notice the coldness behind the thickly lashed blue eyes, and her spine stiffened at the faux-friendliness. She didn't want to make pleasant conversation with the blonde. There would be too much artifice involved and, frankly, she wasn't up to it.

This woman was after Rafe, and there was no way in hell Maddy could compete with her. Even the idea of trying to compete with this blonde amazon was laughable.

Maddy returned a polite smile and backed into one of the stalls, closing the door behind her. She sat on the toilet seat and waited for the woman to leave.

She heard the blonde go into the next stall, flush the toilet, and come out again. Her heels clipped back to the mirror.

Maddy played with the ring in her hand as she waited. The jade glowed as though covered in a light green glaze. The inscriptions were intricately designed—she was sure they were inscriptions—and must have been carved with the finest of tools. She wondered what language they were in. Sanskrit? She wasn't a scholar but she'd taken a course in ancient history at college and the inscriptions seemed familiar.

Wondering if the woman had left, Maddy suddenly noticed the blonde's perfectly painted toes under the short door to her stall. She must have approached while Maddy was studying the ring. To Maddy it seemed as if she was deciding whether to open the door.

An icy wave of fear washed over Maddy as the hairs rose on the back of her neck. Instinctively, she drew out the knife she kept inside her boot. She slipped the ring over the middle finger of her left hand, allowing her to handle the knife with ease, all the while watching the blonde's feet beneath the stall door, waiting for her to make her move.

A wrenching pain punched her in the gut. Maddy keeled over and was swallowed by blackness.

Chapter Three

Maddy woke with a groan, lying on the cold marble of the bathroom floor. She shook the grogginess from her head as she staggered to her feet. What the hell had happened? She caught herself on the edge of one of the washbasins, and then realized she was naked.

She whirled around and stared at herself in the mirror. The blonde looked back at her. Gasping, Maddy took a step backwards. So did the woman in the mirror. Maddy gawked at her.

The woman's naked body was displayed in all its splendor. Large breasts falling to a tiny waist, the flare of hips and the flame of hair, carefully trimmed, at her groin. Maddy raised her hands to her breasts, brushed her fingers across the nipples, and watched as the blonde in the mirror did the same. The nubs tightened and Maddy looked down to see the fullness of her own breasts with long, erect nipples. These tits were definitely not hers. *This wasn't her body.*

She wondered if she was hallucinating. Perhaps she was more tired than she had thought. But she didn't feel tired. She felt alert, aware. Maddy touched the wall to feel the cool tile beneath her hand. That was real enough. Hesitantly, she leaned into the mirror and touched her reflection. *The blonde's reflection.* The mirror felt just as real as the wall had. If this was a dream, it was a damn realistic one.

Shivering in confusion, Maddy's gaze fell on the pile of clothes heaped on the floor. She scooped them up, held up the skimpy camisole top in wonder, and pulled it over her head. The material slithered silkily over

her body. She stepped into the tiny leather miniskirt. God, her legs were so long. And there didn't seem to be a pair of panties anywhere in sight. She slipped her feet into the high-heeled mules and wrapped the straps around her calves, criss-crossing them and tying the ends in a little bow. She'd never tried walking on shoes this high, but she took a couple of steps and found she had no problem.

Maddy examined her reflection. She was the blonde. Whatever had happened, it seemed to be real. She remembered the ring and glanced down at her hand. The ring was no longer there. She wondered what she was supposed to do now. Find her real body? The concept was just too surreal.

The door to the ladies room opened and an elderly woman with carefully coiffed hair entered. She threw Maddy a brief smile. Maddy responded with a nervous twitching of her lips.

She couldn't stay here forever, that was certain. Maddy gave herself a final look to make sure she wasn't dreaming and strode to the door.

"Excuse me, you left this," the elderly woman called behind her. She held up the blonde's handbag.

Maddy hesitated, then took the bag with a polite smile. If she was the blonde, the bag was hers. She'd give it back to the blonde when— When, exactly? When their bodies switched back? When someone told her this was a hallucination and she was actually in a straitjacket sitting in a padded cell? Now that would make sense. But if she wasn't, she had to find herself—and wasn't that a funny twist on the timeless quest for self-discovery. If she only felt like laughing.

Out in the corridor leading to the lounge, Maddy paused. Where to search first? The lounge? Or perhaps the receptionists knew who she was—

The door to the men's room opposite opened and Rafe came out.

Rafe stopped and stared at her. She stared right back as her stomach plummeted in surprise. His gaze raked over her body, lingering on her breasts and hips. His lips curved into a slow smile.

“So you’re here.” He sounded pleased.

Maddy gulped and nodded. Then she realized he thought he was talking to the blonde.

“Let’s go and get that drink then.” He took her elbow and steered her into the Trafalgar Bar and Lounge.

They settled on barstools at the counter. Rafe ordered their drinks. A scotch on the rocks for him, a gin and tonic for her. It seemed the blonde had the same taste in booze, which was convenient.

As she waited for the bartender to pour their drinks, Maddy caught sight of herself in the mirror behind the bar, sitting next to Rafe as he swapped a joke with the bartender.

And then it hit her. *She was now the blonde with Rafe.* She was what she’d always wanted to be. The girl who got to put her hand on his arm and lean seductively into his chest. The girl who got to nibble on those firm, well-defined lips and have his hand rest on the curve of her hip. The girl without the “I’m a cop and we’re colleagues” hang-up that had kept her in agony for the last three months since The Encounter.

Just for now, she wasn’t a cop. She was a beautiful blonde on a date with the gorgeous guy she’d lusted after for years. Maddy let the realization sink into her being and felt a giddy sense of relief wash over her.

“So.” Rafe turned to face her as he tipped his glass to hers.

“So.” Maddy raised her glass, took a sip of her gin and tonic, and crossed her legs.

Rafe’s gaze wandered over them, then he flicked the strap at her ankle. “Pretty shoes.”

“Are you sure it’s the shoes you like?”

Maddy was amazed at her new boldness. She was not Maddy Langton anymore and she could do as she liked. Rafe seemed to like it too. His expression registered a moment of surprise before his lips twitched into a smile.

"I like the whole package." He let his finger run up the length of her leg and nestle in the soft spot at the back of her knee. "You know that."

Maddy wondered whether Rafe had known the blonde before tonight. If not, their short encounter had been disarmingly direct. For a moment, jealousy stung her at the thought of Rafe seducing another woman only ten minutes before. Yet, now, *she* was that woman.

Relax, Maddy, she told herself, firmly quashing her misgivings. *Just enjoy the moment. Don't expect anything more.*

Maddy shook her blonde hair and the last of her uneasiness aside. She was a new woman, and to prove it she had to act like one. No more worrying about whether she was doing the right thing, no more second-guessing her own or Rafe's actions and reactions, no more holding on to her inhibitions. Tonight, all bets were off.

She touched the back of his hand that rested on her leg. His thumb was running gentle circles around the inside of her knee. Her legs tingled as though he had exposed a nerve, and a slow heat started at her groin. The dampness between her thighs bore witness to the fact she wasn't wearing any underwear. The soft silk of the camisole heightened the sensation of her nipples, and the leather of the skirt cupped her hips. Even the straps wrapped around her legs served only to draw attention to the sensation there, where Rafe's hands were working miracles.

"Are you sure you're enjoying this?" His warm breath brushed across her lips, tinged with the scent of good scotch.

She nodded and bit her lip. Then she trailed her fingers up his arm to his shoulder. His tie was done up in a perfect knot. A little too perfect.

She slowly loosened the tie and opened the top button on his shirt, smiling as he looked at her quizzically.

“I like my men a little rough and ready.” She glanced at him from under her lashes. “Perfection is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Rafe caught her wrists and drew her to his chest. “I guess you’ve got the right guy then.” His lips swooped down to capture hers.

His lips were firm and warm, and hers parted as his tongue gently probed inside her mouth. She melted against him, savoring the sensation of his ravishing mouth. He cupped the back of her neck and his thumbs stroked the pulse at her throat. She sighed and relaxed against him in surrender. His kiss deepened and became more demanding as his tongue played with hers. She sucked at his bottom lip and heard his breath catch as he plunged deeper into her mouth.

A timeless moment later, he came up for air and gazed at her with unabashed hunger. She quivered, burning with desire for his lean body, longing only to experience fully what she had almost experienced during The Encounter.

“Dinner?” His hands rested on either side of her neck, thumbs still stroking languorously. Her lipstick had smeared across his mouth.

“You have lipstick on your face.” She opened her handbag to look for a tissue, praying the blonde kept some in her bag. She pushed the make-up and perfume bottle aside and reached for the small packet of tissues she spotted on the bottom. Then she saw the key. Maddy turned the square of plastic over in her hand. A Trafalgar Hotel key. Someone had scrawled “Room 307” in black marker along the top, the writing smudging under her thumb. So the blonde had taken a room for the night, and wasn’t even bright enough to remember her own room number.

Maddy smiled. There was no use fighting destiny. She turned and showed Rafe the key, dangling the small card between her fingers. His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

He laughed. "So I guess it's room service." He grabbed her hand and dragged her from the barstool. Laughing, Maddy just had time to snatch up the handbag from the counter before he pulled her into the hotel lobby.

Rafe punched buttons to call for the elevator and turned to ravish her lips. Maddy melted into his arms. She heard giggling, and from the corner of her eye saw the two receptionists watching them. They turned to hide their smirks when they met her gaze.

Maddy whispered, "We're making a spectacle of ourselves." Her lipstick was still smudged over his lips and she was sure none remained on her own.

"Let's give them something to talk about." Rafe pulled her towards him again. She wriggled away and pressed the tissue into his hand. Rafe sighed and wiped the lipstick from his mouth. That done, he turned and nodded at the receptionists. They giggled. The elevator doors pinged open behind them. Rafe very formally escorted Maddy inside, pushed the button for the third floor. They stood solemnly side by side as the door slowly slid shut.

Quick as a fox, Rafe turned and pinned her back against the elevator wall, his tongue plunging deep into her mouth. He slid the straps of the camisole over her shoulders as his lips brushed over her jaw to kiss and nibble at her neck. Scorching a trail over her shoulders, he pulled the camisole top down, exposing her breasts. His warm, wet mouth latched over her nipple, the tongue laving the tender bud. She moaned and dug her fingers into his thick hair, gripping hard as hot surges of pleasure coursed through her body.

All too soon, the elevator doors pinged open again. Maddy was lucky no one waited in the corridor outside because she had no time to cover her breasts before Rafe took her hand and pulled her along the hall to room 307. Rafe held out his hand for the key and, breathlessly excited, she dropped it into his palm. He swooped down to kiss one of her exposed nipples before swiping the key through the lock on the door and pushing her inside.

Room 307 turned out to be Suite 307. The bathroom opened from a door to the right and a plush sofa covered in cushions sat to her left between tall windows overlooking Trafalgar Square. The décor was dark oak and red velvet. Floor lamps standing in each corner gave the room a warm, cozy glow.

Dominating the center of the suite was the largest bed Maddy had ever seen. She touched the velvety fabric of the bedspread. No luxury had been spared. The cop in her experienced a twinge of guilt. Strictly speaking, this room didn't belong to her. It was the blonde woman's room.

But I'm that woman, another part of her insisted. It was the voice of the Maddy who was tired of being on a leash and wasn't about to relinquish her adventure for anything in the world. That Maddy quashed the guilt until the controlling-cop Maddy faded as though she had never existed.

Rafe's body spooned hers, his strong hands cupping her breasts. She leaned back against his shoulder and surrendered to the sensation of his tongue on her neck and his thumbs circling her sensitive nipples. Her fingers loosened involuntarily and the handbag fell to the floor, spilling its contents over the carpet.

Rafe nudged her towards the bed. A shiver of excitement coursed through her body as he curved himself over her, bending her over the foot of the bed. She rested her weight on her hands as he pulled away,

and glanced back to see him pulling off his jacket and tie. A huge bulge strained at his trousers. Maddy quivered at the memory of the taste of his cock in her mouth.

Rafe knelt behind her and ran his hands along her thighs. He pushed her legs wide apart and worked the leather skirt over her hips. Maddy heard his intake of breath as he caught sight of her exposed sex.

“No underwear. Aren’t you a naughty girl.” His voice was a low growl that sent an arrow of desire straight to her core until she gushed wetly with excitement.

Rafe ran his fingers over the silky folds of her cunt, rubbing fingertips lightly across her clit before his thumb dipped into her wet flesh. She gasped, opening her legs wider, as his thumbs spread open her sex and he buried his face between her legs.

Rafe’s tongue probed inside her, lapping at the creamy wetness between her thighs. His thumbs circled her swollen clit, sending waves of pleasure rolling over her. She arched her back as his long, clever tongue plunged deeper into her warmth. Her legs trembled as he replaced his tongue with fingers, burying them in her dripping hole. When she thought she could bear it no more and would come, he nimbly removed his fingers and stroked one hand over the smooth skin of her buttocks. Her fevered excitement steadied at his caresses—before he inserted one slick finger into her anus.

She stiffened. No one had ever done *that* to her before.

“Just relax,” Rafe said, holding her still. He worked a finger into her ass, gentle but insistent, while his thumb began to rub over her engorged clit. Maddy cried out as the orgasm crashed and rocked through her body. She toppled onto the bed as her elbows caved.

Rafe’s body covered hers, pressing her into the bed. His tongue slid along the edge of her ear, hot and sweet.

“Did you like that?” he whispered.

Unable to speak, Maddy nodded. She closed her eyes and savored his lips nuzzling her neck. He lifted himself off her and hauled her up by the hips. Maddy rested on her elbows for support and peeked back at him. Rafe had pulled his trousers down and loosened his cock from the folds of his boxer shorts. His dark gaze held hers with unnerving intensity. She caught her breath, unable to look away.

Rafe held the hard length of his staff in his hands and nudged it over her pussy. When he rubbed it across the swollen nub of her clitoris she had to bite her lip not to cry out. In a hard thrust, he pushed the smooth round head inside. She moaned as he worked the rest of his cock into her dripping tightness, inch by careful inch. The nerves in her vagina, raw from her recent orgasm, felt every inch of his rock-hard penis along her vaginal passage.

When Rafe's tight balls were snug against her cunt, he began to move, thrusting with deep, insistent strokes. Maddy rocked her hips back to meet his plunging cock, savoring the slapping of his balls against her sex.

The heat of her orgasm began to unfurl at her core. Rafe pumped into her, increasing his rhythm until he pistoned inside her. She abandoned herself to the ecstasy of being taken and rode the crest of her second orgasm as he plunged deeply again and again. He came to a juddering halt.

"Maddy," he cried as he surrendered to his release.

Chapter Four

Maddy toppled onto the bed for the second time as Rafe lowered his body over hers, his weight pressing her into the softness of the bed. Her heart beat in an erratic tattoo, so loud she thought he would hear it. He rested his head in the curve of her shoulder, his lips against her skin. Her body felt languorously exhausted, yet her mind worked overtime.

Did he just cry out her name at the moment of climax? Had she heard him correctly, or was her mind playing wish-fulfillment again?

Rafe fell onto his back beside her on the bed. Maddy turned to gaze at him. His eyes were closed, his long lashes brushing his skin. Unable to help herself, she ran a finger lightly over his forehead, smoothed over the well-defined eyebrows and flitted down the bridge of his straight nose to press on the cushiony flesh at the middle of his bottom lip. He caught her finger in his mouth and sucked at the tip. She giggled and he cocked one eye open to look at her.

“You ready for more?” he growled. Maddy surveyed his lean length, lingering at his jutting cock. God, the man was insatiable! As was she. Maddy forgot about what she *thought* he had said and pulled his head to hers.

His lips met hers gently. She savored the soft brush of his lips as her pulse quickened. This time he was taking it slow. He stood and peeled off her camisole top and the leather skirt, running his hands over her thighs.

"I like the shoes, let's keep them." He gave a wolfish grin and she laughed.

She watched as he undressed, throwing his clothes into a pile on the floor. His body was slicked with sweat. She held her breath as her gaze ran over his sculpted torso, the scar over his ribs, his well-defined six-pack with the fine sprinkling of hair, the lean length of his legs. Oh, he was beautiful.

Maddy parted her legs and he climbed between them. His cock slid effortlessly inside her. He lay still for a moment, his body hard against hers, cupping her face between his hands. Their eyes met and held for a long time. She drowned in the deep blue of them. As though it was the most natural thing in the world, she realized that she loved him. She'd always wanted more than his body—she'd wanted *him*. And the way he was looking at her, that couldn't be faked. He was in love with her too.

Only he wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the blonde woman. Maddy felt her head spin, her thoughts careening between what was true and what was a figment of her imagination. It was too distressing to deal with when Rafe looked at her that way. Right now, she could hold on to the fact that she loved him. And that tonight, at least, he was completely hers.

Rafe lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her. His rough hands brushed her breasts, cupping them. He began to move, his cock sliding in a slow measured way inside her. Maddy locked her hands across the back of his neck, sighing with pleasure as he caressed her breasts. The rhythm of his strokes increased. He paused, lifted her legs and threw them over his shoulders. He crouched over her and with a hard thrust buried his cock deep inside her. Maddy felt her eyes roll back in her head as his cock stroked the fleshy disk of her G-spot. When she came this time, she was shaken to her core. Hot tears sprang to her eyes and slid down her cheeks. Rafe groaned as he came after a series of short, hard

thrusts. He fell over her and she gloried in the feel of his erratically beating heart against her chest. Because of her.

When he lifted his head, he stroked the tears from her face.

“Baby.” He kissed her gently.

Wrapped in each other’s arms, they fell asleep.

* * *

Maddy woke near dawn. Rafe’s arms enfolded her body and he breathed deeply, solidly asleep. She lifted the arm resting over her waist and extricated herself from his hold. Standing beside the bed, she caught the edge of the cover and pulled it over him. She held her breath as he murmured and rolled onto his back, arms outstretched.

Maddy padded to the bathroom and ran the shower. As she turned to search for the hotel toiletry supplies, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. She saw just herself. No strange blonde staring back at her, just Maddy. She blinked. And the blonde again stared back at her.

“What the hell?” Maddy raised her fingers to her face. What was going on? Her features felt the same as they always did. What exactly did people see when they looked at her?

More importantly, what did Rafe see when he looked at her?

As she waited for the water to heat up, Maddy tiptoed into the bedroom and scooped up the handbag from the floor. She shoved the spilled contents inside. Back in the bathroom, she tipped the bag upside down over the marble top.

Make-up, perfume, tissues, a stick of gum, a small hairbrush. Nothing that could identify the woman. Maddy looked in the inside pocket of the purse, saw the edge of a card and drew it out. It was a business card.

Dorian Escort Service the card read. So the blonde had been a paid escort. Had Rafe known?

Maddy's thoughts skittered over that one, reeling at the implications of a cop being caught using the services of an escort. A cop who had just cracked open one of the largest illegal prostitution rings in the country.

The address on the business card placed the agency somewhere in Soho. Nothing strange about that. A lot of escort agencies operated in the West End. Milos Stanlovic, the crime boss they'd apprehended the day before, had also operated a few escort agencies from Soho. The legal side of the business.

As the steam filled the room, Maddy dropped the card on the counter and stepped into the shower. Something about the Dorian Escort Service rang a bell. Wasn't Stanlovic's middle name Dorian? Was there any connection?

Maddy had begun to shampoo her hair when the shower screen was suddenly pulled back. She whipped around in surprise.

Rafe grinned at her. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Maddy paused. The idea had been to slip away before Rafe woke. Perhaps she shouldn't have taken the time to shower here if she'd really meant to avoid him. Deep down she suspected she hadn't wanted that, had longed to put off tomorrow. Now here he was, looking pleased with himself. Her resolve weakened.

Still grinning, he took the bar of soap and worked it into a lather between his hands. Instead of applying to himself, he rubbed his hands vigorously over her body, spreading the suds over her neck and shoulders, over her breasts and waist. She stood still, enjoying the sensation as he scrubbed the soap between her legs, his fingers brushing across her exposed slit. He turned her roughly around and worked more soap across her back, over her buttocks, until he slid his slippery fingers into her puckered asshole.

She whimpered in surprise, then relaxed into the unexpected invasion. He worked two fingers in, rotating them slowly until her muscles loosened. He slipped in one more finger, stretching the skin. She parted her legs and lifted her head to let the water wash over her face. As she did, Rafe pushed her up against the tiled walls, his chest leaning on her shoulder blades. Maddy glanced down and saw him soap the head of his cock. She wriggled uncertainly for a moment as he pressed it against her anus. She held back a sob of pleasure as the purple head edged its way into her, stretching the hole as he worked most of his thick rod inside. She'd never felt such a wonderful fullness before and shook at the bolts of pleasure shooting through her body.

Maddy couldn't help but finger her clit as Rafe began to move gently inside her ass. His lips brushed against the side of her neck and lingered on the smooth skin as he murmured something. Whatever he said was washed away by the sound of the water. She luxuriated in the feel of his wet skin against hers, at the small nibbles he trailed over the back of her neck.

His hands slid across the front of her body to cup her breasts. She arched back against him, moaning as his thumbs flickered over her hardened nipples. She tilted her back to look at him and Rafe's lips crushed hers, his tongue probing her mouth, delving so deep it felt as though he wanted to swallow her whole. Rafe's lips left hers and Maddy pressed her cheek against the wet bathroom tiles to steady herself. Sliding his hands over her hips, he gripped her hard as he pistoned his cock solidly into her. He groaned as his cock spasmed, shooting his load of semen deep into her body. Maddy shook at the strong contractions of her own orgasm.

Rafe rested his cheek against hers. She felt his thundering heartbeat steadying as the weight of his body pressing her up against the wall. When she made a small movement, he kissed the side of her neck and

drew away. They continued their shower in companionable silence, smiling goofily at each other as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Maddy was the first to step out, taking one of the hotel's fluffy towels and drying herself whilst savoring the sight of Rafe's buff body. He turned off the water and raised a questioning eyebrow when he caught her stare. Grinning, he grabbed the edges of her towel and pulled her close to him. Maddy rested her cheek against his wet chest and closed her eyes. She wished this would never end.

"I'm starving." Rafe planted a kiss on top of her head. "How about that room service?"

"In a minute," she murmured, watching as he rubbed himself down with another towel. His mouth quirked into a smile when he noticed her appreciative appraisal. He caught her to him and planted a kiss firmly on her mouth.

Maddy sighed as his arms wrapped around her. She burrowed her face into the crook of his neck, wondering if this would be their last embrace.

Suddenly, Rafe pulled back and held her at arm's length, staring at her with a frown. "This isn't going to end, is it?"

He might have been reading her mind. She was shocked to see the vulnerability in his expression. "I don't—"

"Maddy, I love you. Don't you know that?"

Maddy felt her world spinning out of control.

"You called me Maddy." Her voice was a croak. "How long have you— How do you know it's..."

She whirled around to study her reflection in the mirror. Maddy stared back at herself. The normal Maddy, not the blonde woman. Not the paid escort.

Rafe frowned, puzzled. "Maddy, what's wrong?"

I'm going crazy. She spun away from him and ran into the bedroom.

Rafe followed her. "What are you doing?"

"I have to go." Maddy's hands trembled as she scooped up her clothes. *The escort's clothes.* Oh, Jesus, what was happening? What *had* happened? She was so confused.

Rafe caught her arm and dragged her around to face him. "Are you running away again?" he snarled, his expression hardening.

Maddy wrenched her arm free and staggered back. "It's not what you think, Rafe. I'm just not sure—"

"You just wanted to finish what we started, is that it?" Rafe swore and turned to pace the room. "Get your rocks off properly then go back to work as if nothing's happened. That's it, isn't it?"

"No!" Maddy caught his arm, but he brushed her off.

"Rafe, I love—"

The door splintered open. Maddy gaped as she saw herself running towards them with a gun in her hand. For a moment the image of herself flickered and Maddy saw the blonde woman in her place. She held the gun with arm outstretched and finger steady on the trigger, but it was the expression of self-possessed coldness that made her think of a professional.

She wasn't an escort, Maddy thought suddenly. She was a hired killer. And there was only one person who wanted them both dead. Milos Stanlovic.

The woman stopped in the middle of the room and glared at her in cold fury. She was still wearing her clothes, Maddy realized. The trousers, blouse and ripped jacket looked as awful now as they had the night before.

The assassin aimed her gun full on Maddy's chest. "Give me my body back!"

Rafe thrust Maddy behind him and stepped forward. Without hesitating, the assassin aimed and pulled the trigger. Maddy screamed as Rafe slumped back against her. Struggling under his weight, she lowered him to the floor. Her jaw clenched in fear as she saw the bloom of red at his shoulder. His eyes were closed and she couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. Oh God, was he breathing?

"Now give me my body back."

Maddy heard the satisfaction in the woman's voice and an unreasoning fury washed over her. Rafe couldn't go like this. Not without knowing how much he meant to her. How much he'd always meant to her. And not without at least making the bitch pay.

Maddy clenched her fists as she staggered to her feet. Wondering how to tackle her, Maddy noticed that the woman was left-handed. Should she approach her from the right after feinting to the left? Or would she get shot down before then?

There was something odd about the hand holding the gun. It took a few seconds for her to register that the assassin was wearing the jade ring on the middle finger.

And then it all fell into place.

"The ring," Maddy said. "You stole the ring."

The assassin flicked the gun as she gave a hard, contemptuous laugh. "So what? Finders keepers."

"You don't understand." Maddy stared at her coldly. "If you want your body back, take off the ring."

The assassin shook her head and narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"Think back to what happened," Maddy snapped. "Wasn't it when you put on the ring?"

The woman's hard expression flickered with a range of emotion. She frowned down at the ring at the moment of dawning realization.

“Stay there or I’ll kill you,” the assassin said coldly. She brought the gun to her chest and pulled at the ring. It wouldn’t budge. She pulled again, then began to twist it from side to side. Maddy saw it loosen around the finger. The assassin’s gun lowered as she struggled to take off the ring.

Maddy took her chance. She threw herself across the room and tackled the woman. The assassin screamed in surprised fury as they both fell to the floor, the impact knocking the gun from her hands to slide across the carpet. As they grappled, Maddy received several closed-fisted blows to the side of the head. In a quick move, Maddy twisted and pinned the assassin to the floor, hooking a knee over her waist as leverage until she sat astride her. Maddy clamped the back of her forearm across the woman’s neck, pressing down on her windpipe to keep her still. The assassin gasped and choked, her eyes bulging as she plucked uselessly at Maddy’s rigid arm.

Maddy stared down into her own eyes for a moment, then she brought her fist down solidly into the woman’s face. The bone crunched beneath her knuckles and the woman slumped back, unconscious.

Eyes blurred with the pain of the blows to her head, Maddy took the woman’s hand and twisted off the ring. She slid it over her finger.

Then she felt the wrenching pain in her gut and slipped blissfully into unconsciousness.

Chapter Five

Maddy opened her eyes and looked straight into Detective Sergeant Michael Franco's concerned face. "You okay, Maddy?"

She was lying in a hospital bed, with no idea how she'd managed to get there. Struggling to sit, she paused as her head spun and then settled.

"They said you're all right," Franco said, frowning. "But maybe you should stay in bed a bit longer—"

"Where's Rafe? Is he all right?" she demanded.

"Right as rain. They got the bullet out so he'll live. He's right next door."

"I want to see him." She pulled back the bedcovers and saw her hospital gown.

Sighing, Franco dropped a pile of her clothes on the bed. "Figured you'd need these. Don't blame me if they don't match, I grabbed the first thing I saw."

Maddy brought a black sweater to her nose and sniffed. "Well, at least you didn't get it from the laundry basket. It's clean."

"C'mon, I'm not that bad." He winked. "I see you're back to your old self."

Grinning, Maddy pointed to the door. "Get out and let me get dressed."

* * *

Maddy paused outside the door to Rafe's room. Through the glass she could see that Rafe was awake and had a visitor. The chief.

The chief saw her and gestured for her to come in. Maddy opened the door, her gaze going straight to Rafe. A thick bandage was wrapped around his chest and shoulder. He looked tired, his hair tousled, stubble lining his cheek. A guarded expression fell over his face, his eyes hooded as he watched her come in.

Maddy's heart sank.

"I was just congratulating West," the chief said. "I was just about to go see you too, Langton. Guess I can tell you together what a good job you did."

"Thanks, Chief," Maddy murmured. She approached Rafe's bed. He turned his face away.

The chief coughed. "Look," he began gruffly. "I'm not even going to ask what the two of you were doing in that hotel room. That's your business. Officially, Rafe's not with the department anymore so I don't have to answer any awkward questions. As far as I'm concerned, Stanlovic's going away for a very long time and so is that hired killer he sent after you. And that's good enough for me."

Maddy flushed, nodded. She didn't even want to know who found them in the hotel room. But people knew about them now. Cops talked.

"That's all I've got to say." The chief coughed again. "Langton, I'll see you back at the station bright and early tomorrow."

"Sure, Chief." Maddy waited for the chief to leave before turning to Rafe.

"What did he mean about you not being with the department anymore?"

"I've transferred out." Rafe was still looking at the wall, his voice cold. "The papers came through a few weeks ago. Stanlovic was my last case."

“So, you knew you were leaving.” Maddy thought about it. “Is that what we were celebrating yesterday?”

Rafe turned to face her, his expression hard. “And I was angling for a goodbye fuck from you. Seems to have worked out fine.”

“Oh, Rafe.” Maddy sighed. “You’re so stupid. Can’t you tell how much I love you?”

“Sure, so you won’t have to work with me any—” He stopped, stared at her. “What?”

“You heard me.” She shifted on her feet.

“You love me.” He seemed to savor that for a while. “You love me.”

“Well, do you think I’d let just anyone have me in the shower?” she snapped.

His mouth twitched as though itching to smile. “I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Well, you do now.” She sat on the edge of his bed. “So, tell me again how much you love me.”

“You first.” Rafe grinned and reached out to clasp her hand. She gave his a little squeeze.

“I love you more than my job,” she said cheekily.

Rafe laughed. “That much, huh?” He dragged her towards him and kissed her.

“And now you.” Her cheeks glowed with color.

“I love you enough to get a transfer out of the department so I can be with you. Enough to let Franco con you into coming to that dinner with me.”

“You mean, you and Franco *planned* that? That was all an act?” Maddy stared at him. “Why, of all the nerve—”

Rafe laughed. Then he sobered. “Do you know what it’s been like working with you, Maddy? Wanting you all the time? It’s been hell.”

Maddy heard the unmistakable yearning in his voice and the rest of her doubts melted away. "It's been hell for me too." She glared at him. "You're such an idiot. Why didn't you say something?"

"I can't talk to Detective Sergeant Langton, she won't listen." Rafe's eyes twinkled. "But Maddy now, she's a real goer."

"Fool." Maddy leaned over to kiss him.

"By the way," Rafe asked after a while, as Maddy snuggled beside him on the bed. "What did that woman mean when she said she wanted her body back? I've been trying to figure it out all day."

"I have no idea."

Some things, Maddy decided, were best left unexplained.

* * *

When Rafe fell asleep, Maddy wandered down to the hospital cafeteria to find something to eat. It was late and a line of vending machines proved to be the only option. She looked at the wrinkled sandwiches on display and tried to decide how hungry she really was.

"Miss! We meet again."

Maddy spun around. Two robed figures sat in a darkened corner of the room, steaming cups of tea on the table before them. Their shaven heads shone dimly in the reflected light of the vending machines. The younger one flashed his white teeth in a huge smile.

Delighted, Maddy went to greet them, bowing to each of them when she reached their table. They inclined their heads in response.

She dug out the ring from the pocket of her jeans. "I suppose you came to get the ring back. Here it is." She set it on the table between the cups of tea.

"We come visit sick friend. Good coincidence." The young monk beamed.

“Well, thanks for your gift but I don’t think I need it anymore.”

“You get wish?”

Maddy nodded. “I’d like to ask a question, if I may. I don’t understand how—”

The old monk began to speak to her in his language, looking solemn. Maddy listened intently. When he had finished, she turned to the young monk for a translation.

“He say love never bother with illusion. Love see reality and love anyway.”

Maddy nodded as she thought of Rafe and of what fools they’d been. Then it occurred to her that the monk had known what she was going to ask.

“But how did he know what my wish was?”

The young monk grinned. “Wishes always about love or money. He know which you choose.”

Cassandra Kane

Cassandra Kane grew up in Australia and now resides in the UK. A graduate of the University of Sydney, Cassandra divides her time between the day job and her writing. She enjoys good food, interesting conversation and exotic travel, not necessarily in that order.

To learn more about Cassandra Kane, please visit www.cassandrakane.com. Send an email to Cassandra at <mailto:cassandra@cassandrakane.com> or subscribe to her newsletter at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cassandrakane-news> to receive the latest news.

Will this Elven warlord be conquered by lust?

Lords of Ch'i
(c) 2006 Ciar Cullen

Available Now at Samhain Publishing.

Cast out by an usurper to her clan's throne, warrior Silver SanMartin throws herself at the mercy of her compelling enemy, Jet Atraud. The sexy warlord rules his Elven clan with an iron fist, but Silver finds she lords some power of her own. Jet can't keep his eyes—or his hands—off his lovely captive.

In a battle to gain self-control and maintain his ten-year oath of celibacy, Jet tries to focus on the task at hand—conquering the enemy clans. Despite his strong will and best intentions, Jet cannot ignore his growing love for Silver. But can a sworn enemy be trusted?

Enjoy this excerpt:

Silver looked up again, and a shock of electricity ran through her at Jet's intense stare. He looked from her eyes to her lips, and let his gaze wander to her breasts, pushed high by her gown. His eyes burned as she he assaulted her senses.

"You're rather strong-willed, Silver. I don't buy your apology for a second. And I think I rather fancy that about you. You'll make a good bodyguard. What do you think of the gown? It's been in my family for many generations."

"Lord?"

"Yes?" He continued his sexual appraisal of her and her breathing quickened in longing. She let her gaze wander down his smooth stomach to his rigid cock, straining against the black silk wrap. *Surely he can hear my heart, it's so loud.*

"Do you like what you see, Silver? You can't seem to pull your gaze away for long. Do you know the whole time we've spoken, the whole time you've cried over the conflict and your brother, you've filled the room with your lust. You've stared at my mouth and my chest, my stomach, wondering how it would feel, how it would be between us. Am I wrong?"

"You are quite wrong, Lord."

He laughed a little and motioned her to come closer. "I'd like a closer look at you in my ancestor's garb. You must admit, it suits your figure, which is..." Jetre took in a quick breath. "Adequate."

"Adequate? My figure is adequate? Why are we discussing my body? Your oath, your..."

"Have I broken my oath, Silver?" He worked his fingertips from her collarbone across the swell of her breasts. His touch blazed a fiery trail across her skin and his energy seeped into her veins. *Which burns, she*

wondered—*the touch of an elf or the touch of a lord?* He slowly unfastened the clasps of her dress until he exposed her breasts. His calloused fingers and palms brushed across her skin like a kiss as he cupped one breast in each hand. His moan stirred her to quivering. He caressed her as if he'd found a priceless treasure he'd sought for a lifetime. Silver fought the sensations he evoked, but surrendered and cried out when he rubbed his thumbs on her nipples.

“Jetre.”

“Yes?” He continued his slow circles. “You find this unpleasant? Should I stop?” Jetre looked at her from beneath his dark lashes as he leaned in to suckle on one breast. His hot mouth assaulted her senses, his tongue darting across her nipple, his lips pulling and pinching. A low groaning sound came from far away, and Silver realized in shock it was her moan, her lust filling the air. She laced her hands in an errant strand of his luxurious hair and pulled it towards her face, smelling his scent—dark spices and male magic. When he moved to her other breast, the new pleasure sent her to the brink of orgasm, and he kept her hovered there for minutes. He broke away suddenly and looked into her eyes.

Silver panted, aching, throbbing, ready to push him to the ground and assault him. “You’re no virgin.”

“How dare you. Do you understand how you insult me, Warrior?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you what I think right now if my life depended upon it.”

Jetre arched a brow. “It will come to you.”

Silver’s hands shook at the conflicting, overwhelming emotions consuming her. This man, this gorgeous man, her sworn enemy, now her master—was he seducing her? No, simply playing with his prisoner. No more, certainly. A tiny dagger of regret pierced her heart. Silver

shuddered, the memory of his mouth on her still making her tingle, still making her throb and moist and ready.

What I wouldn't give to lay with him, to feel him inside me... She cursed to herself. Too late, he heard it.

"Tell me, let me hear what you want." His voice grew low and languid, his eyes nearly hidden beneath his black lashes. "Tell me what kind of lover you imagine me? What draws you? My look? My manner? Or my power?"

All of those. None of those. Don't let him hear any more. Thoughts poured out, desire and longing overwhelming her, betraying her.

You're the most beautiful creature. Take me now or leave me be. I don't want to feel this way.

"Yes you do." His voice was such a low whisper Silver thought she might have imagined hearing him speak.

Jet sat up straight, eyes now wide, spell broken. "I'm not one to take advantage of my position with a woman, with anyone. You aren't required to placate me in a sexual way." Jetre snorted. "Perhaps that's only my ego. I couldn't stand the thought of forcing myself on a woman. I've always assumed no woman would reject me, which is quite disturbing. Perhaps you don't want me?"

Silver groaned. "Don't mock me, Lord, you read my thoughts clearly enough. It's bad enough that I've betrayed my kind. Don't make me betray myself."

Jetre ignored her words and stood, pulling the cord from his hair.

That's his way? Play with me for a moment, send my world reeling, and dismiss me like a scrap of garbage.

"You'll help me dress now, and we will eat and drink with the soldiers and their families. I intend to speak to the crowd of your presence here.

Some of it will annoy you, badly, especially when I speak of your brother. Try to show restraint. Understood?”

“Yes, Lord.”

He turned and nodded. “Silver, in private, you may call me Jet. I’m a little less formal than most of the lords.” He held out a finger. “In private, mind you.”

She nodded. “Jet.” She tested the nickname on her tongue.

“One thing.” Jetre turned away again. His voice was quiet and Silver struggled to hear him. “Was it right? Did it feel right, what I did? When I kissed your breasts?”

It was the last question she expected from him, the most amazing thing. The great Lord Jetre, wondering if he had given her any pleasure. *How to answer him?*

“Because my ten years end in a matter of days.” He pushed his hand through his hair and laughed at himself. “I don’t want it said the oath made the lord incapable. How embarrassing. Is this your nature—to bring out the inner truths of a person?”

“How will I protect you from the women who will storm your quarters when your oath is complete? They’ll be more dangerous than Fire and Metal combined against you.” *And how will I bear to watch it?*

Jet laughed. “As appealing as that picture might be, I must pick only one. The second part of the deal.” He shrugged.

“I see.” A small knife poked at her heart unexpectedly. No doubt the woman would be Wood and was probably already betrothed to the lord. An elf, of course.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Jet toweled down and Silver turned away. From the corner of her eye she saw him step into his dark leather pants and pull on a thin, collarless, long-sleeved, black shirt. He went to

the dresser and placed a kohl stick against each eye, blinking and wiping the excess from his cheeks.

“The woman will be quite fortunate, Jet. I hope that satisfies your ego.”

He inclined his head and smiled very subtly. “It does. Might I practice on you again some time?”

Silver closed her eyes. The pain came in very faintly, like the smell of a coming summer rain shower on the breeze. She wanted her sworn enemy, and she meant nothing to him. A plaything, a practice toy. *Well, there are worse fates than being the whore of such a man.*

He pointed to his tall boots and Silver brought them to him, helped him push into them.

“You did something terrible to me when you branded me, Jet. I know you did. You say you wouldn’t force a woman, but you charmed me in some way.”

Jet looked up at her, puzzled. “Nonsense.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Jet pointed to the dresser and his heavy, white-gold pendant, the Wu Xing symbol of his clan, the symbol of the Way of Ch’i. Silver brought it to him and fastened it around his neck. She bit back thoughts of Kilé and how she had fastened his pendant many times.

“Not many call me a liar without punishment. If Jaine or Art were here, you’d already be bleeding.”

“Yes, my lord. Based on my brief encounter with your formidable sister, I believe you.”

“Now my hair.”

“What about it?”

“Brush it.” He rolled his eyes at her.

“This is fucking awful, Lord.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Silver went to the dresser, grabbed a brush, and pulled a cushion behind Jetre’s. She brushed his beautiful hair, wishing she could bury her face in it.

He turned suddenly and grabbed her by the neck. “I heard that.”

She cried out softly, even though he didn’t hurt her.

“They’ll have to wait a few minutes more.”

*An alternate dimension...demons...a dangerous game
...will fiery passion be their only defense?*

Lord Night
(c) 2006 Jessie Verino

Available Now at Samhain Publishing.

Temp agency owner Shannon Miller likes to play video games, but she never expected to find herself *in* one, let alone with a sexy scientist who makes her body melt with desire.

Physicist Damien Richards is blind—and not only in matters that concern his sight. Despite the accomplishments he’s achieved in creating an alternate dimension, he still believes he is unwhole due to his physical impairment.

When a lab accident propels the two into an experimental, alternate dimension, they find themselves playing a dangerous game, unable to return, fighting demons as well as a passion that could consume them both. Will they be able to face their personal fears and win the game of love?

Enjoy this excerpt:

“Allow me to satisfy all your hungers this evening.”

He led her inside, closing the doors behind him. She settled on the plush rug, leaning provocatively against silk pillows before the warmth of the fire. The little gold clasp of her robe winked at him, inviting him to explore the secrets it hid. But he wanted to go slow and savor the rest of the evening. Enjoy Shannon. He backed away from her before he acted on carnal impulse, and turned his attention to the champagne.

The loud pop brought an explosion of bubbles over the lip of the bottle and sprayed his chest with the cold liquid, helping him maintain control.

After he placed the two flutes filled with the sparkling wine on a silver platter, he added a little taste of everything, and two personal fondue bowls brimming with warm melted chocolate.

The mirror above the mantle reflected his nude image bearing the large tray. Rather like a male slave of ancient Greece servicing his mistress. He smiled at the thought of playing the meek role before turning the tables and dominating the unsuspecting mistress with his dark passions. The thought had him hard and throbbing.

He placed the tray beside her on the floor. “Mistress, my humble offering.”

He watched her gaze move from the tray to his rigid cock. Her tongue moistened her lips. “Not so humble a feast at all.”

“Champagne?” he offered.

She took the flute and held it high, never looking away from his midsection. “To feasts. May they always be...bountiful.”

He held the other glass to hers and answered. “May you always have your fill.”

She bit on her lower lip. "Everything looks delicious. I don't know where to start."

He settled on his knees next to the tray. "Allow me," he said and reached for a plump strawberry. He bit into the succulent fruit, releasing the sweet red juice. He traced the fleshy morsel over her parted lips, tempting her, before allowing her to take it into her mouth.

Sweetness burst on her tongue when she sank her teeth into the berry.

She watched in anticipation as his fingers hovered above the tray, but he didn't choose another strawberry. Instead, he produced a small red mask from the tray. "I have a few surprises myself. This will make the experience more...tantalizing, more daring."

Her stomach quivered at the thought, and a delicious shiver ran from her hardened nipples to her swollen labia, releasing a scintilla of moisture. She leaned back into the pillows when he moved to straddle her, and she stretched languidly, rubbing her legs together, trying to increase the sensation.

He placed the mask over her eyes. "Turn over," he commanded.

She felt the tug of the mask as he tied it into place. When she rolled onto her back, she opened her eyes, testing it, but couldn't see even a speck of light through the thick red silk.

Even sensing his movements, she still gasped in surprise when the next strawberry touched her lips. Warm, creamy chocolate coated the fruit and it spread over her tongue as she ate. Oh yeah, she could get used to this.

"I need another sip of champagne."

The brush of his fingers against her bare skin tickled, but the light caress didn't linger. He grasped the amethyst and pulled gently on the chain. "You didn't say please."

She arched her back and lifted herself to her elbows, careful not to let the slight tension lessen. "Please?" The word escaped her in a breathless supplication.

The cool rim of the flute coaxed her mouth open, and he allowed her one sip of the sparkling liquid before denying her another.

Her frustration mounted as he played with her this way. Each time she felt the tug of the chain or the taste of sweetness on her lips, she begged him to satisfy her, or end the torment. He refused to do either.

He sucked her firm nipples, holding them taut with the chain, until she cried out from the agonizing pleasure of it, only to be rewarded by the caress of his breath across the wet buds and nothing more. She squirmed beneath him, trapped between his strong thighs and the chain, helpless to do anything but whimper in pleasure.

When he finally unfastened the gold clasp of her gown, it fell away, exposing her fully to his gaze. The head of his shaft played against the skin above her mound. The little droplets of moisture he left behind only heightened her fervor.

"Do not move," he commanded. The weight of the chain lessened and he placed the amethyst between her breasts.

She had begged for relief from the sweet torment earlier, but now the loss of it made her crave it all the more. The heat of his breath caressed her bare stomach when he crouched low over her, like a predator stalking her scent.

She fisted her hands in the plush rug underneath to keep from moving and held tight when he nipped the sensitive flesh below her navel. The sensation of his love bite stayed even as he backed away until she couldn't feel any part of him touching her.

"Spread your legs for me."

The skirt of her gown feathered over her legs when she opened for him. She held her breath in anticipation, fully aware of his gaze on her. She felt his triumphant smile when her juices surged and flowed over her swollen labia.

He nestled between her legs, and she clenched her hands in an effort to keep from raking them through his hair and pulling him closer. An eternity passed, but she lay motionless as he had instructed, refusing to beg him. Every muscle in her body trembled, taut with expectation.

She squirmed beneath him, exposing more of herself to his mouth. The moist warmth of his tongue penetrated her swollen flesh, sending waves of ecstasy through her. He kissed her opening, plunging into its hot depths. Her muscles tightened around him.

He pulled out before she came. "You have a greedy little pussy, Shannon. Fortunately, I'm a generous man."

Suffering from lack of completion, a low cry of frustration escaped.

"I'm going to kiss you again. Sample your sweet nectar until I'm drunk from it. Don't come until I allow you."

Her breasts swelled and ached. She moved her hands to massage them, but he caught them and placed them back at her sides. "Every part of you is *my* pleasure." His strong fingers found her nipples and squeezed as his tongue delved deep inside her once again.

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