



# TAPESTRY

ETERNAL LOVE

AURORA JAMISON

TAPESTRY: ETERNAL LOVE

BY

AURORA JAMISON

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

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

Tapestry – Eternal Love

Copyright © 2006 by Aurora Jamison

ISBN: 1-55410-747-4

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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

Published by eXtasy Books

[www.extasybooks.com](http://www.extasybooks.com)

## CHAPTER ONE

She was being followed.

Deirdre Tyler stopped and looked in a clothing store window, trying to use the reflection to get a glimpse at whoever was creeping her out. Although she could see behind her perfectly, except for a dirty spot in the lower corner of the window that was distorted, she saw no one. Deirdre continued to stare in the window, as if the hideous clothing on display in the closed store was the most important thing in the world for her. She walked slowly from one end of the window to the other, watching a couple cars whiz past in the street and a panhandler on the far side of the street making his way on painful, arthritic legs.

Deirdre swung around and stared at him, her bright blue eyes fixed hard on the shuffling man. He was not the one who made her uneasy. His stare was unfocused and somewhere else. He was not the one who made her as uneasy like she was a bug being studied under a microscope.

But where? Deirdre looked up thinking someone in the building across the street might be perched in a window for a bit of peeping tomfoolery. The windows were all closed. It was an office building, only three stories tall. She turned back to the clothing store window but saw none of the dreary dresses and dun-colored skirts on sorry display. She stared at the reflections again. It was just a little past six o'clock and most of the stores were closed for the day. This was a quiet neighborhood with quiet stores and quiet people.

It might have been nothing more than nerves. She had gone through hell that day and needed to vent. She had called home, but Sam wasn't home yet. A good thing. She was not sure her boyfriend would put up with her whining. That's what he always called it when she had big troubles. *Whining*. When he was broke or got fired, it was a major calamity worthy of being talked about endlessly. When the same thing happened to her, she was a whining bitch if she mentioned it. But she had to tell somebody.

"There!" She spun, pointing to the alley entrance just down the street. For a fleeting instant, she saw shining silver eyes watching her. As she pointed, the eyes vanished. She had the feeling whoever was spying on her simply stepped back into the shadows. Deirdre started to cross the street and confront the man. She had put

up with too much today and was itching for a fight. Halfway across the street, she stopped, then backtracked. This part of Indianapolis was relatively crime-free. Most times. That did not mean robberies never happened or drive-bys did not spray bullets everywhere. It always made the news for a week when those things happened because they were so rare, but they happened.

Retreating to the dubious safety of the far sidewalk, she began walking fast away from the mouth of the alley. Her cell phone popped into her hand and she pressed the speed dial.

“Carfax Abbey Antiques,” came the pleasant voice.

“Oh, thank God, Maurine, you’re still there. I’m on my way to the store.”

“Hi, Deirdre. You sound frazzled.”

“Are you still open? The store?”

“Of course. I don’t close for another half hour. You can never tell if somebody’ll stop by and pick up an armoire on their way home from work. Though seven o’clock is a bit late for that, usually.”

“I know, a dollar’s a dollar,” Deirdre said, looking over her shoulder. She was certain she saw movement now. Fleeting movement, but only as a shadow within shadows. She walked faster, wishing she had longer legs, wishing she wasn’t just five-foot-three, wishing she knew karate or

could run a mile in four minutes flat. Mostly, she wished she had already reached Maurine's antiques store.

"You said it. You also sound like you're out of breath. Is anything wrong?"

"Just don't close. I'm only a couple blocks from the store. I took the bus from the Circle and got off on Goff."

"I've got a crate I'm getting ready to mail. Come on over and we can mail it together. Special big profit item they wanted express mailed."

Deirdre kept walking, but she glanced behind her as she turned the corner. Movement. More like a blur than actual vision. Images of huge birds swooping down gave her stride that extra inch until her skirt cut painfully into her legs with every step. She hiked her ever-so sedate tan skirt up to her thighs and was almost running, trying to keep the cell phone to her ear and look behind to see what was catching up all at the same time.

"Almost there," she panted, turning the corner again and seeing Maurine's brightly lit antiques ahead. The window contrasted completely with the clothing store display she had pretended to be interested in. Colorful patches of cloth dangled from mobiles, catching the rays from overhead track lighting until it boiled over in all colors of the rainbow. A few of Maurine's pet projects were on display. Two quilts, one almost completed, and the other barely started, showed how the craft was

done. Between the two stretches of cloth was a small, neatly lettered sign telling of quilting classes. Displayed on the walls on either side were century-old Amish quilts worth a small fortune.

Deirdre glanced into the store through the window. The interior was cramped, yet homey. Maurine was close to being a packrat, but her tastes were directed toward the colorful. As crowded as the floor-to-ceiling shelves were, they were neat and properly stocked. Maurine could find anything in the inventory in a matter of seconds. Deirdre envied her friend's neatness. She tried to keep her apartment this neat and never quite made it.

She had to snort in disgust when she remembered why that was true. Sam was always leaving glasses on the coffee table and dropping his clothes wherever he wanted. Deirdre did not even want to consider how dirty her apartment was, under the piles of clutter. It made her wince.

She opened the door and jumped as the tinny bell clanged.

"What's wrong?" Maurine came around the counter at the rear of the store and took Deirdre by the arms. "You look a fright. Or have you had a fright? It's that homeless guy, isn't it? He can be really creepy, peering up at you like he's only got one eye. He can see better than you can, believe me. Out of both eyes." She swung Deirdre around

and went to the door before it closed and poked her head out. Maurine looked up and down the street and then came back in. She twisted the deadbolt on the door and turned off the OPEN sign burning in the window display.

"There," she said. "All safe and sound. Are you all right?"

"I . . . I'm fine, thanks," Deirdre leaned against the counter. Her heart hammered, and not just from the exertion. She had intended to get back to the gym for months now, but there had never been time. She had put on weight and gotten out of shape and—

"Deirdre," Maurine said sharply. "Were you mugged?"

"I don't think so," Deirdre got out; she fumbled in her purse and found some tissues to wipe at the sweat on her face. It was late summer and still warm, but it wasn't that warm. The Indiana night promised a chill edging toward the night of the first hard freeze.

She took a couple deep breaths and got her composure back. She was just frightening herself. She had been jumping at shadows. There hadn't been anyone coming after her. Not really.

She kept telling herself that, but she knew she was lying. She had *felt* eyes on her.

She took another deep breath and exhaled hard, feeling better for it. She wished she could be as cool and calm as Maurine O'Connor always

seemed. Her friend's bright red hair was perfectly in place, and her green eyes gleamed with intelligence, though Deirdre thought part of that gleam might be from contact lenses. One thing she was sure of, though, was that Maurine's eyes were that emerald color, as green as the Emerald Isle, her friend always said. She was dressed in a light blue cable knit sweater she had probably made herself and a short dark gray skirt Deirdre knew Maurine had made. Maurine was so handy that Deirdre always felt as if she were wearing heavy work gloves in comparison whenever she tried to duplicate any of Maurine's knitting projects. "I spooked myself," Deirdre said, trying again to convince herself. It still sounded like a lie. "It's been one of those days."

"Do tell." Maurine frowned. "I just finished boxing up the shipment. Give me a hand with it. There's a UPS store around the corner." "I know," Deirdre said. "I mailed boxes there for you a couple months ago."

"I forgot. Come on, heave. This thing is heavy." She caught up the end of the box while Deirdre got her fingers under the other end. Deirdre sagged a little under the weight.

"It's the wrong shape for bowling balls. What's in it?"

"Brace your side against the display counter, will you? I need to get out my keys." Maurine

grabbed a big key ring and her purse, turned off all but one spotlight directly over the safe so that passing police patrols could see anyone trying to get into it, then struggled with the box to get outside. It took her a couple seconds to deftly juggle both box and keys, then they wrestled it into the rear of Maurine's Honda. She tied down the trunk lid and slid into the driver's seat and they were on their way.

Deirdre kept glancing across the street into the lengthening shadows as they drove.

"Somebody's after you," Maurine said firmly. "Is this something to do with Sam?"

"No, not him. Not this time." Her fingers began to tap restlessly on the dashboard. This nervous release let her put her jumbled thoughts into order, almost as neatly as Maurine's store shelves. "I'll tell you all about it when we dump off your crate. It must weigh a ton."

"Closer to fifty pounds." Maurine expertly wheeled into a spot near the front door of the UPS store. They wrestled the box from the trunk, through the door and onto the counter. The bored clerk measured and weighed and finally came up with an exorbitant amount for the express mail.

"That's highway robbery," Deirdre protested.

Maurine only shrugged. "The customer's paying for it. Wanted it pronto, wanted it insured, wanted it, wanted it, wanted it."

"Something from that estate sale we went to the

other day," Deirdre guessed.

"No business talk," Maurine said sternly. "From the start. You woke up this morning and made love to Sam and —"

"And nothing." Deirdre was suddenly bitter. "We haven't made love in a month. We haven't fucked in weeks."

"I knew things were rocky between you two. Are you going to leave the dickhead?"

Deirdre knew Maurine had never liked Sam from the instant they had laid eyes on each other. Sam had never cared for Maurine, either. Part of the constant strain Deirdre felt was balancing her love for Sam and her friendship with Maurine. It had not been easy, and she was not even sure it had worked out all that well. She had ended up getting into arguments with both of them.

"No, we're working on it." Deirdre sat beside her friend as they drove, unconsciously drawing strength from Maurine's quiet determination. The uneasy feeling of being followed was even gone as she concentrated on her real problems.

"Here's where we eat," Maurine said. She skidded to a halt, again finding a parking spot next to the door. She was lucky that way.

"Oh, no, all they have is greasy fries and hamburgers that look and taste like hockey pucks."

"As if you know what a hockey puck tastes

like." Maurine steered her into the corner of the fast food joint and found them a seat away from the three tight rings of giggling, chattering teenagers.

"It must be nice to be young," Deirdre heaved a deep sigh.

"You're young. So am I!"

"That's not what I meant. Thirty's not that old. I mean, living at home, not worrying about anything but school and boys."

"Not worrying about anything but work and boys," Maurine mocked. Then her green eyes went wide. "Oh, Deirdre, no! That layoff. You got canned!"

"RIFed, they call it, not canned. Or fired. Or even laid off. Reduction In Force. It's the same thing." Deirdre tried to sound nonchalant and failed. "I knew it was coming but thought it couldn't hit me. I mean, my god, I was the boss' assistant!"

"Did Claire get fired too?"

Deirdre nodded. A strand of her jet-black hair drooped into her eyes. She pushed it back, only to have it sneak away. She caught her reflection in the window and used that to pat her hair into place. She stiffened when she thought she saw movement across the parking lot. She rubbed clean a patch of glass and tried to make out what was happening. Only a reflection of a headlight off a post. But it had looked so much like a man.

"Claire?" gently prodded Maurine.

"The whole department got the ax," Deirdre said. "I suppose that's better than just a couple of us, but I liked working for her."

"Maybe she's got something lined up and can take you along. She seemed like the kind who always lands on her feet."

"Like you," Deirdre smiled in genuine regard for her friend. "That's one thing I've always admired about you. Always so confident and self-assured."

"But?"

"Claire won't be taking me anywhere as her assistant. She landed a job in England before the end of the day. She used company phone time to make a few calls and got a half dozen offers. Overseas was the best, so she took it."

"You could ask," Maurine said slowly.

"I did and that's why I need to find something pretty quick around here."

"Sorry."

They dropped the subject when the waitress came and they ordered. Deirdre did not feel up to eating much, so Maurine ordered for her.

"I can't eat that! It's so much," Deirdre said.

"Then stare at it, the way you were staring out the window. Did you catch sight of whoever's following you?"

"I was pretty obvious, wasn't I?" Deirdre

grinned weakly. "My nerves are shot. I got two weeks severance and that's it. That'll pay my portion of the rent and food through the end of next month. I don't like cutting it that close."

"Not when Sam's likely to stick you with all the rent. He did last month, didn't he?"

"He's between jobs, too."

"I can't let my best friend starve out on the street. That homeless guy, the one who pretends he's only got one eye, would show you up when you tried rattling a tin cup. Come to work for me. You've got a good eye for value. When we were digging through the Garson estate, you proved that."

"It was fun," Deirdre admitted. They had gone to the estate sale and done nothing but rummage through piles of old clothing, books and trinkets. Deirdre had put aside what she thought was the most valuable of the antique clothing while Maurine concentrated on quilts, paintings and boxes in the basement.

"I already sold the two whalebone corsets you found. They were true antiques, more than a hundred-fifty years old," Maurine said. "From what I made off them, I could pay you for three months."

"Three?"

"Okay, four," Maurine said. "The woman who wanted them really wanted them. I even sold her a windlass gadget to help draw up the drawstrings."

The way she was built, if one of those laces broke, there'd be an explosion so big it might take out every building between here and White River."

"I'm not that good with people," Deirdre admitted, wavering. Working for Maurine would be fun, but she did not want to be a drag. Maurine was outgoing, always cheerful and helpful with customers. Deirdre knew she had a low tolerance for fools.

"The customer's not always right because some are natural born assholes," Maurine said, "but you would do fine. I've heard your stories of office politics. Just pretend the customers are people in other departments and you want favors from them."

"Favors?"

"Their money in exchange for what's on the shelves. Look, I've got the quilting class coming up. I signed up more than a dozen women wanting to learn. I can't teach a class that big and handle the store."

"How long will the class run?"

"Forever, I hope, considering what I'm charging each of them. Really, Deirdre, come help me. Ever since Louise left, I've been working overtime. You can open the store a couple days and let me sleep in. It'd be a real help. It would."

"It sounds like you're trying to convince me. Shouldn't I be the one begging you for a job?"

"You're hired," Maurine said. "Now let's eat. Looks good."

"Looks awful," Deirdre poked at her hamburger. She took a tentative bite and then discovered how hungry she was. The strain of being out of work had passed. She would not make anywhere near what she had been before, but something coming in was better than nothing. If she found she had more of an aptitude for sales than she thought right now, Maurine might even give her a commission on special sales. And what could be bad about a job going to garage sales and checking estates for valuable tidbits like the antique corsets?

Deirdre finished her hamburger and fries, then sneaked one from Maurine's plate. Somehow, it tasted even better because it had come from her friend's dinner.

"You're a life saver," Deirdre said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"That's easy," Maurine grinned. She dabbed a bit of grease from her lips with the paper napkin. "You can work at minimum wage."

"No!"

Maurine laughed. "Had you going, didn't I?" She reached across the table and caught Deirdre's wrist and squeezed gently. "You've had a rough year, haven't you?"

"You mean since I hooked up with Sam."

"When Sam found himself a meal ticket,"

Maurine corrected. "You want a man in your life so bad you'll settle for anything. And that's about what you got. Anything."

"No, no." Deirdre looked out the window when a blur of motion caught her attention, then hunched down a little to peer through the clean spot on the glass. The man halted at the far side of the parking lot where she could see him clearly. He stood with arms crossed over his chest. Deirdre could not tell how tall he was but he looked like he might top six feet. But she was not even able to figure out what he wore, what color his coat or shirt was because she found herself staring straight into his eyes. She recognized him. Almost.

"What is it?"

"There! See him? I thought it was only a trick of the light, but someone's standing out there looking this way. Somebody who followed me to your store."

Maurine pressed her head close to Deirdre's, and they both looked outside.

"I think I see something. In the shadow?"

"Actually, it might be the shadow, though I caught a quick look at his face."

"You sound kinda dreamy," Maurine said. "What's that about?"

"He was sort of cute. But not really." Deirdre closed her eyes for a moment and recreated the

man she had seen. He was thin to the point of emaciation. It might have been the homeless guy, but she didn't think so. The man she saw moved with the easy grace of a natural born dancer. He had vaulted a low wall and looked as if he floated. Gravity meant nothing to him. He had landed like a cat and walked away. Not fast, but steadily and he had disappeared in seconds, swallowed by deep shadows as if he belonged there rather than in the light.

But his face. She tried to figure out if she could call him handsome and then decided that wasn't a word she would ever use. Not that he was ugly. It was just that he was so . . . commanding. It was hard getting past the deep-set dark eyes and the feeling of being sucked into —

"Deirdre. Deirdre!"

Maurine shook her out of her reverie.

"Sorry. I know I've seen him somewhere before. I was trying to remember."

"Like hell. You had the same dreamy look that you did when you first set eyes on Sam. Falling in love with a stalker? That's not like you, Deirdre."

"Oh, shut up." She dismissed her friend's concern. Deirdre waved her hand and shook her head, but she chanced a quick look outside. The spot at the far end of the parking lot was ominously empty now. "How could I fall in love with a man like that?"

"How could anybody fall in love with Sam?"

Never mind. You won't listen to good advice. Be like that." Maurine brushed Deirdre's hand aside as she reached for the check. "None of that. I always buy dinner for my new hires. It makes sure they show up for work."

"You don't have any worry on that account." Deirdre snatched one last french fry off Maurine's plate. "And those fries are awful."

"What's awful is that you got the last one."

They went to the cashier and after Maurine paid, she asked, "You need a ride home?"

Deirdre considered. She had taken the bus to work down on South Meridian, the cost of gasoline as high as it was. Besides, Sam had wanted to borrow the car. His was in the shop. Again. It was almost a half hour on the bus getting home from here.

"Sure, why not? I always make my new boss give me a chauffeured ride on the first day."

"I might expect you to reciprocate," Maurine said as they drove through the quiet streets to Deirdre's apartment building. "The old Honda's on its last legs. Got more than a hundred thousand miles on it, though, so I can't complain. Here's your place." Deirdre bent over and hugged Maurine.

"You're the best."

"That'll be eight dollars, please," Maurine joked. "Don't be late in the morning."

Deirdre slid from the battered 1998 Honda and took a deep breath. There was a single light on in her bedroom window up on the second floor. Sam was home. She went to the doorway to her apartment building, then stopped. Maurine had roared off, leaving behind a choking cloud of white smoke. Deirdre looked around the empty street. Elms grew on either side, except for the one at the far end that had died from some kind of insect infestation earlier in the year. The street was silent, although it was hardly ten o'clock. Deirdre pursed her lips and pressed her back against the cool brick wall and waited. From the corner of her eye she saw movement. She whipped around, heart racing. She stared straight at the spot but saw nothing but shadow.

Or was there more? She squinted as if she peered into bright sunlight. She made out—almost—the silhouette of a man. But as she stared, she became less sure what she was looking at. When she blinked, the shadow was just that. A shadow.

"You're creeping yourself out. There's no need," she told herself. "You might have gotten laid off, but you have a new job already. Not as good paying, but it'll do. It'll be good helping out Maurine, too. She deserves your help."

Mumbling to herself as she got out her key and opened the foyer door, she ducked inside. Deirdre jumped a foot when the door rattled behind her.

She stepped back and stared wide-eyed. But it was only a gust of wind. There had been the scent of moisture in the air, telling her an early autumn storm was building. Safe and dry inside, she had nothing to worry about. Deirdre still took the doorknob and rattled it to be sure the door was locked.

Assuring herself it was, she trudged up the steps to her second floor apartment. She opened the door and went in, tossing her purse and cell phone onto a table by the door and then shucking off her coat. The day had been a long and tiring one. She was glad that Sam had waited up for her and left the light burning in their bedroom.

Deirdre kicked off her shoes and felt the deep pile rug under her toes as she went to the bedroom door. She opened it and turned to stone.

Sam was in bed, but he had not waited for her. He was fucking some woman Deirdre had never seen before.

## CHAPTER TWO

Deirdre Tyler stood in the doorway of her bedroom and stared. She was completely drained of emotion. She knew she ought to be angry, but somehow it wasn't in her. She started to say something. Words would not come, either.

"Wha?"

The woman under Sam saw her and struggled. Sam was too busy pumping away to notice. Deirdre turned and left, grabbing her purse and keys as she went out. She was not even sure if she locked the apartment door behind her. It did not matter anymore. This had been her and Sam's apartment. Now it was no longer hers, even if the lease was in her name and she paid the rent every month.

She walked down the steps to the street with an increasingly steady gait. Resolve hardened within her. She hated to admit it but Maurine had been right all along. How could Sam do a thing like this to her? It had to be premeditated since she was

long overdue coming home from work.

“That’s one hell of a way to greet me,” she said to herself as she walked down the street, hardly noticing the rising wind in the tall elms or the hint of winter bite to the breeze. “It’s one thing to greet me with a hard-on. It’s something else to have it for another woman. To have it *in* her.”

Deirdre turned the corner and went down a darker street, not caring where she went. The cold air cleared her head and dried the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She dabbed a little at them and then let them well and finally run down her cheeks. The release felt good.

Turning this way and that, she walked off her hurt. The day had been one of changes from beginning to end. Getting fired had been a jolt but seeing Sam with another woman—one she did not even know—was the ultimate. Her business and personal life had hit a brick wall, and now it was time for her to bounce away and find a way around that wall.

“I’ll leave that son of a bitch behind me on the other side of the wall,” Deirdre took in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly in an effort to gain control of her rampaging emotions. She had already found a hint of a new life, compliments of Maurine and her offer of a job at the antique store. When Deirdre thought of that and how she had enjoyed going to the estate sale with Maurine to

root around in items left over from bygone days, she perked up even more. She had a knack for figuring out what was valuable and what was not. She could be good at the job. Damned good.

Deirdre realized she had walked out her anger enough to slow and look around. She was not sure where she was. Not exactly. It couldn't be more than a mile from her apartment, but she was not familiar with these streets. Some distance away she caught sight of a street light, but along this quiet residential street the only illumination came from the individual houses.

She turned and looked behind her. Moving with a liquid grace was something in the deep shadows. From behind one car it came, going to a large tree in a front yard and then approaching, using an SUV to block her direct view.

"Who's there?" She got off the sidewalk and went into the middle of the street to get a better look. "What do you want?"

Deirdre tried to penetrate the deep shadows and could not. But she saw some formless *thing* moving, barely seen, fluttering like a sheet of ebony newspaper in the wind.

Deirdre fumbled in her purse hunting for her cell phone. She could not find it. Deirdre dumped out the contents to the street, frantically looking for it. Her eyes went wide with panic when she realized she had left it back in the apartment. Looking around, she wondered which of the

nearby houses would be most likely to answer her frantic pleas for help.

The blackness floated closer, surging like some devouring black fog.

She turned to run and crashed into a man. His arms circled her and held her easily. She struggled, but he was too strong for her to break free.

“Let me go!”

“Are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help?”

His voice was calm, soothing her fear. Deirdre relaxed a little and put her hands flat against his chest. She felt the thick slabs of muscle there. She looked up and saw a handsome, worried face studying her. His eyes were colorless in the night, maybe gray if she saw them in daylight. He had blond hair cut close to his skull. He might have been a Marine on leave, but his clothing was anything but a government issued uniform. He wore a wine-red, shiny shirt of what appeared to be a medieval design, with tight cuffs, billowy sleeves and high collared neck. The front buttoned at an angle and the shirt had to be made of fine silk. She knew because her palms pressed against it. As she drew her fingers along the slick material, a thrill passed through her. It was almost as if she traced over his bare skin.

“I’m okay. Let me go.” She was ready to push

hard against his chest to get free, but she doubted it would be that easy if he did not let her go. He was too strong. His shirt bulged in all the right places. His biceps left little slack in his upper shirt sleeves, in spite of the flaring cloth there.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," she said, but Deirdre had to look over her shoulder in the direction of the flowing blackness that had been coming to envelope her. She shivered. Enshroud her? Why did that seem more likely?

He silently released her. She took a half step back and got a better look at her rescuer. From the top of his close-cropped blond head to his toes he was easily six feet tall. There did not seem to be an ounce of fat anywhere, under the silk shirt or in the tight fitting jeans. She was certain the bulge at the crotch was not fat. Deirdre swallowed, irrationally wondering what it would be like fully erect. He must have a cock the size of —

"You look pale," he said.

"What? Oh, sorry. I was being foolish. Jumping at shadows."

"Were you going somewhere? I can give you a lift, if you were. My car's just down the street." He pointed in the general direction of the far end of the street.

"I couldn't trouble you. I was out for a walk and got turned around. Thinking."

"Thinking heavy thoughts?" A slight smile

came to his lips. She thought there was a hint of cynicism, too.

“Oh? Like a woman can’t have heavy thoughts?”

“I didn’t mean that,” he said easily. Nothing rattled him. “If you need to call someone else—” He reached into a hip pocket and pulled out his cell phone for her. Deirdre wildly thought how lucky the cell phone had been snuggled into that tight pocket and how she would not mind helping him return the phone to its carrying position.

“I . . .” She stared at the phone, then shook her head. “I don’t have anybody to call.”

“That’s a shame. You’re a lovely woman. There must be someone who is worried about you wandering around in the night, thinking heavy thoughts.”

She had to laugh at that. He put it in just the right tone. Then she gave him more than a quick once over. Her mind raced. It was not a worthy thought what came to her, but she was going to do it anyway. She did not know this guy, but she wished she did.

“I’ve just been foolish.”

“Not necessarily.” He looked past her, directly at the spot where she had last seen the fluttering darkness. “There is always danger after dark, even in quiet neighborhoods like this one.”

“Do you live around here?”

"I was just visiting."

"Oh." Deirdre tried to summon enough courage to use him. He was a good Samaritan who had come to a stranger's aid, and she felt bad about what she wanted to do. Memory of Sam fucking his slut burned away any trace of nice from Deirdre's morals.

"Yes? You started to ask something?" He still held the cell phone in front of him, as if this were what she wanted.

"Could I have you drive me home? It's silly, I know, but you're right. Even nice neighborhoods can be dangerous. It was foolish of me to go out at night like I did."

He slipped the cell phone back into his pocket, and again Deirdre envied the phone all snuggled up against his firm butt.

"I'd be happy to," he said. "There are dangers out tonight which you cannot understand."

"What do you mean by that?" Before he could answer, Deirdre shook her head and smiled weakly. She was still confused over everything that had happened to her. "Sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm Deirdre Tyler."

She held out her hand for him to shake it. When he took it, she wondered if he was going to bow and kiss it. But the lingering touch as his huge hand engulfed hers sent a shiver through her. He might have held on a fraction of a second longer than was polite. Or she might have. Deirdre could

not tell which it was.

"I'm Quince."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Quince."

"Just Quince."

She started to ask if this was a first or last name, but his hand snaked around her waist and steered her down the street. Her relief at going away from the spot where she had seen the black cloud made her forget what she was going to ask. The sight of his compact car, a nondescript dark-colored Ford was like an oasis in the desert. He opened the passenger side for her and she slid in, aware at how he watched her every move. Deirdre was not sure if she wished her skirt wasn't as short as it was or if it had been shorter to show off her legs. Her legs were her best feature, she thought.

He got into the car, bending and moving like a gymnast. Quince keyed the car to life and then turned to her, saying nothing.

It finally came to her that she had not told him where to go. Deirdre almost reconsidered her scheme, then remembered how she had found Sam. In *flagrante delicto* was the ever-so polite phrase. Fucking his slut in Deirdre's bed. The bed she and Sam had made love in for almost two years.

"I'm not really sure. Can you get back to Locust and then let me take a look around?"

"Not a problem," he said in a low voice. Quince

snapped on the headlights and drove slowly past the SUV where she had last seen whatever it was following her. The headlights raked the side of the parked vehicle and showed nothing unusual. Nothing at all. She relaxed even more as they gathered speed and wheeled out of the neighborhood.

"You sure you don't want to call the police?" Quince asked.

"There's no reason," Deirdre said. "Everything's just fine now." And it was. She leaned back in the uncomfortable seat and actually felt her tense muscles relaxing. She glanced over at Quince. He studiously watched the road, but she had the feeling he was checking her out every time he had to make a right turn. He glanced in that direction a fraction of a second longer than he did when he made a left turn. He definitely was checking her out.

Deirdre liked that, but it made her feel even guiltier.

"Were you just out walking or had you come from a friend's house?"

"I was working off some surplus energy."

"It worked," he said. "You look like you've honed yourself down into great shape."

Deirdre stiffened. Was he mocking her? She was ten pounds overweight. Maybe more. She had not summoned the courage to look at the scales in over a week.

"Great shape?"

"Are you a model, Deirdre? You have a model's grace."

"But not a model's form," she said, a tinge of anger coming to her voice now.

"Certainly not a model's shape."

"How –" She started to protest this insult. She might be overweight but to have a complete stranger tell her so was outrageous.

"Models all look like they've got one foot in the grave, all starvation victims. Your figure's about perfect."

"Perfect?" The word hardly sounded over the noise of the tires humming against the road.

"Perfect," Quince said firmly. "What? You tired of hearing that? It's not a come-on. I mean it."

"I'm out of shape," Deirdre wondered why Quince embarrassed her. She was not that good looking, much less possessed a shape better than runway models. Or maybe she was. She unconsciously ran her hands down over her thighs. Maybe she should have worn a shorter skirt, but she had not known she was going to lose a boyfriend and come on to some guy wandering around a darkened neighborhood when she dressed that morning.

"My heart wouldn't be able to take it if you were in shape, then," Quince said.

"Friends?"

"What's that?" Quince looked at her. The light from the dashboard gave his eyes a different color, slightly golden. It was as if they changed every time she looked into them.

"You were seeing friends back there?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, but Deirdre tensed. For the first time Quince sounded as if he forced the answer and that there was something wrong about it. A lie? Or merely a reluctance for a stranger to poke around in private matters?

In spite of herself, she found herself looking at things like his ring finger—no wedding ring. No pale band showing he had slipped one off, either. That did not mean too much, she knew. Only about half of the married men wore rings. And the half that did probably took them off whenever an attractive woman came onto their radar screen. She closed her eyes and tried to quiet the suspicions. What did it matter that Quince was married or wasn't? The last thing in the world she wanted right now was to get involved with another man.

"Penny for your thoughts," Quince said.

"Oh, nothing," Deirdre said, though she realized a wicked smile had come to her lips. She knew Sam well enough that he wouldn't send his whore on her way. If anything, having her come in while he was in the middle of his fuck-fest would only make him hornier. He had delighted in things that had bothered her just talking.

“Park over there.” Deirdre thought this was her night. A parking space. Close.

“Is this your apartment?” Quince pulled to a halt at the curb. “Nice place.” He craned his neck around, looking out. She saw that he was not looking up as much as he was up and down the street. She did the same, sure that she would never see the black fog again. That had been a figment of her imagination. She had been angry and upset over too many things and had imagined the fluttering, billowy cloud coming after her as if it were alive. “Why don’t you come up? For a nightcap?”

“I shouldn’t,” he said, but she heard the “I will” in his tone.

“Do, please. It’s the least I can do to thank you for being such a knight in shining armor riding to my rescue.”

“Not much of a rescue, giving you a ride home,” Quince said. Then he flashed her a bright, toothy white grin. “Sure, why not?”

“Why not,” she agreed, beginning to hate herself. She found her door keys and got into the small foyer. She strained to hear anything upstairs. How she hoped Sam was still there. Although it was not treating Quince right, it would drive a stake through Sam’s heart seeing her come home with such a handsome stud within an hour of him banging another woman in their bed.

"Go on in," Deirdre said, swinging the apartment door open. "Make yourself at home," she said loudly, looking toward the bedroom, hoping Sam would come running out stark naked and spoiling for a fight with her. *That'd show him!*

"Nice place," Quince said, stopping just inside to make a slow circuit of the room. From the way he stood, she wondered if he had his hand on a pistol hidden under his shirt. But that was ridiculous. She could see the ripple of his muscles through the torso of that tight silk shirt.

For the first time she got a decent look at him. And he was gorgeous. The sleeves billowed on his red silk shirt as he turned, pressing against his impressive muscles. His black jeans were everything Deirdre could have hoped—or what filled them was! He had thick legs like a weight lifter, but he moved lightly, gracefully, like a cat. He half turned, and she caught his profile. Classic straight Roman nose, firm chin, a face that would put to shame a Greek god's statue.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Deirdre?" Quince glanced in her direction, then turned to face a furious Sam. He had stormed from the bedroom. Deirdre had hoped he would be naked, but he had slipped on his pants. She could not help comparing his beer gut and flabby muscles with Quince. It was like a before and after ad. Sam was definitely the before.

"Oh, don't worry, Quince. He was just leaving.

For good."

"You whore! You're not gone ten minutes and already you have a new boyfriend!"

"It's my apartment. You can come back in the morning and get your things. They'll be piled on the curb outside."

"You—" Sam took two quick steps on his bare feet, fist cocked back to punch her. Before Deirdre could react, Quince moved like lightning. She did not see what he did, but he caught Sam's arm in some kind of judo hold and threw him flat onto his back.

"Never threaten her," Quince said in a low, level voice that carried more menace than if he had screamed. "You heard the lady. Get out. And if you've got a key to this place, leave it on the table."

"Yeah, you'll be wanting it, you—" Sam gasped. Quince still held his wrist. All he did was move a few inches until Sam's arm bent in unnatural directions.

"Be nice. And be out of here," Quince said.

He released Sam. Sam came to his feet, went into the bedroom and returned a few seconds later with a couple changes of clothes draped over his arm. He threw his key down on the floor, then stormed out. The door vibrated for a couple seconds he slammed it so hard.

"I'm sorry," Deirdre said. "I should never have

put you in this position."

"Your boyfriend?"

"My former boyfriend," she said. She stared at Quince. He took this remarkably well. "Does this happen to you a lot? Coming up to a stranger's apartment and finding her boyfriend there?"

"Can't say that it does, but you have to be ready for anything that comes your way." His eyes, now like chips of polar ice, bored into her blue ones. She felt staggered by the intensity of his gaze.

"I appreciate all you've done. I really do."

"But you want me to go." He closed the distance between them until he was only inches away. Deirdre fought to find the right words. The heat from his body warmed her from head to toe. Or was it the heat from his body? She was all flushed and feeling strange being so close to him. She reached out and put her hand on his upper arm. She was not surprised that her hand was shaking and that Quince felt steady as a rock.

"I should thank you." She looked into those eyes. But they were no longer fierce. They were . . . different. She could not tell exactly how, but they beckoned to her in a way no other man's ever had.

She kissed him. Or did he kiss her? Deirdre could not tell, and it did not matter. Their lips brushed lightly. As if an electric current ran through her, she sizzled inside. Her pussy began to tense and churn. Wetness leaked from within until she was sure she was embarrassing herself.

How could a single kiss cause such a reaction?

Deirdre was not sure which of them had kissed the other before. This time she knew. He kissed her. Hard. Her lips crushed against his as his arms circled her and pulled her in tightly. Her heart hammered fiercely and she thought she felt his accelerating with passion. Hands working up and down his broad back, Deirdre pulled herself in even closer. Her breasts flattened against his thickly muscled chest, and she took a half step to the side so she could wrap her leg around his. This pulled his thigh in tightly against her pussy. The pressure sent new surges of desire pulsing into her.

When her lips parted slightly, his tongue invaded her mouth. Deirdre usually did not like this. With Quince it was different. It was exciting. Exhilarating. Arousing. He did not thrust forward like a battering ram. Instead, the tip of his tongue flicked out, more like a snake's touch, darting here and there. Every oral caress gave her new reason to want him. The day had been shitty so far. Losing her job. Finding Sam in bed with another woman. Being scared witless by shadows.

Then along came Quince. It was almost too good to be true.

Almost.

She was gasping for breath when he moved from her lips to her throat. His teasing tongue left

tiny wet spots as he moved. His hot breath dried those spots and gave new meaning to the word inflamed. She leaned back and clutched at him to support herself. Somehow, the buttons of her blouse were coming undone, one by one. How she wished she had not worn her bra! She wanted to be naked for him, to have him naked and pressing intimately against her. She wanted him fucking her like Sam had fucked his woman.

“What’s wrong?”

Deirdre pushed Quince back and fell against her closed apartment door. She was flushed and her breath came in short, quick pants. Her heart tried to run away with her and her pussy overflowed.

“Sam,” she croaked out. The image of Sam and the other woman naked in *her* bed felt like a cold shower had been turned on over her head.

“He won’t be back. I know the type,” Quince said.

“I can’t. Really, I can’t. Not tonight. I’m sorry. It looks like I was using you to get back at him—and I was!—but this wasn’t part of my plan and I meant it. Mean it. You taste so good! And I want to do this, but not now. Not tonight. Oh, I’m babbling.”

“Yeah, you are,” Quince said, stepping away from her. There was a darkness in him she had not seen before, and it frightened her. For the barest instant infinite cruelty shone in those

indescribable eyes of his and then vanished, making her wonder if it had ever been there.

"I apologize," Deirdre said, trying to button her blouse and not doing a good job of it. She pushed past him, to face away so she did not have to look him in the eyes. "Nothing has gone right today. Nothing."

"I understand."

Deirdre did not turn. She was on the verge of crying. "Do you?"

"Of course I do."

She turned and let her blouse fall open, exposing the warm white flesh of her upper breasts. Her mind was still churning like a hurricane-tossed ocean, but she wanted Quince. She wanted him now and to hell with Sam and anything he had done in the bedroom. She would have Quince here on the entry floor.

"I'll go," he said.

"You –"

He opened the door and looked at her. He asked, "Where's the tapestry?"

Deirdre gaped at him, her confusion complete now.

## CHAPTER THREE

Deirdre stared at Quince. Her mind rolled round and round like a wheel bouncing downhill. She had the sensation of great speed without getting anywhere.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't give me that," Quince said, an edge to his voice now. "The tapestry. Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's not here. I looked around. Do you have it hidden?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Deirdre said more forcefully. "Get out of here. Now."

"If you don't let me have it, you'll find yourself in more trouble than you can imagine. He won't be nice about asking."

"Out!" Deirdre took a step toward Quince before remembering how easily he had thrown Sam to the floor. He knew some kind of martial art. All she had to protect herself was a paring

knife in the kitchen—and her full anger. She had been through hell and let it all come flowing out.

Deirdre grabbed Quince's arm and spun him around. She was startled by how easy it felt to move him. He was obviously taken by surprise, too. He went through the door and almost stumbled at the head of the stairs. She glared at him, but this time he was the one who backed down, averting his strangely changing eyes. Deirdre watched as Quince retreated, slowly at first and then faster. Only when she heard the downstairs door close did she slam the door to her apartment, lock it and then collapse back against it.

Deirdre held out her hands. They shook uncontrollably.

"What the hell is going on?" Deirdre tried to remember even reading about anyone having a day like this and could not. Fired, boyfriend cheating, getting a new job with a good friend, wandering around and then meeting Quince. It was all too much for a single twenty-four hours.

"And there was something else," she said, forcing herself to calm down. "What did he mean about a tapestry? And who does Quince think is going to give me any more trouble than he did? Sam? He wouldn't dare, not after tonight."

She shook her head. After making sure the deadbolt was securely in place, she went to the

kitchen and opened drawers, peered into the refrigerator and tried to concentrate on what she was doing. Deirdre remembered thinking she ought to eat something, but hunger was not what bothered her most. Keeping her eyelids from sagging was almost more than she could achieve. She had run on adrenaline too long and now was paying the price physically. Deirdre flopped into the chair facing the TV and picked up the remote where Sam had dropped it.

"Sam," she said softly. "Burn in hell." She fingered the remote, then tossed it onto the messy coffee table. Sam had never straightened it. Now that he was gone she saw his debris everywhere and wondered why he had never learned to pick up after himself.

"Because I did it for him. I did everything for him," she said with increasing anger. "And then he would fuck me. That's all I was for him. A fuck-toy. He never loved me."

Tears unabashedly spilled down her cheeks. Deirdre sat facing the grim unlit tube of the television set and cried her heart out. When the worst of it had passed, she felt better. A little. But her first instincts had been right. She was not hungry. She was exhausted both physically and emotionally. While sleep might be hard, she needed to lie down and rest.

Deirdre got to her feet and went to the door into her bedroom. *Her* bedroom, not hers and Sam's.

She stopped and stared at the rumpled bed. He had not bothered to make it after his tryst with his new girlfriend. Or his mistress. Whatever she was.

Deirdre took a deep breath and almost gagged. The musky odor of sex lingered in the room. She went to the bed and ripped off the bedclothes, letting the sheets and blanket lay in a pile on the floor. Somehow, this simple act had drained her of all emotion and all strength. She lacked the will to go to the linen closet and replace the sheets. Deirdre opened the bedroom window and let in a cold breeze. Autumn was definitely in the air and the chill made her shiver.

“It’ll air out the room,” she said, backing off to close the bedroom door. She knew it would never get rid of the smell entirely and certainly not the memories. Those would linger for a long, long time.

Deirdre closed the door and looked around the small living room. It had been cozy before, even sharing it with Sam. Now it felt like a tomb crushing in on her. Deirdre kicked off her shoes, then stripped off her blouse. She unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it. Carefully folding them, she placed them over the back of the easy chair. Dressed only in bra and panties, she flopped onto the sofa and lay back. The throw pillow under her head was lumpy, and she felt increasingly cold. Pulling the folded quilt at the end of the sofa over

her helped. She snuggled down and saw she had left the lights on. Too tired to get up and turn them off, Deirdre closed her eyes thinking only to rest them for a moment.

Before she realized it, all warm and comfortable on her sofa, she fell asleep. Sometime in the night she rolled over, the thick, padded quilt slipping off her shoulder and leaving a cold spot. She murmured and reached out sleepily to pull it back over her bare flesh. But she was lying on the quilt and it wouldn't budge. Grumbling, she sat up and tried to straighten it. This is what she got for foolishly not sleeping in bed, no matter what Sam had done there.

As she pulled the heavy quilt around her, Deirdre froze. She heard movement in the apartment. Sitting up, she let the quilt drop. Peering into the gloomy darkness, she saw nothing. She had gone to sleep with the lights on, and they were definitely turned off now. In the kitchen her clock tick-tocked rhythmically. Sam had always chided her about the silly plastic clock in the shape of a black cat. Its tail swung to and fro as its eyes moved in the opposite direction and it was battery powered. But it never stopped when the power went off. Somehow, that knowledge and the steady ticking noise soothed her.

Now the ticking was overlaid by sounds in her bedroom. Deirdre stood and worked her way around the sofa in the dark to find a flashlight in a

kitchen drawer. She ought to flip on the flashlight but wanted to be more dramatic than that. Sam had returned for his stuff. She would throw open the bedroom door, turn on the bright light and blind him and yell in triumph for him to get the hell out.

It all made perfect sense to her until she threw open the door, turned on the flashlight and saw the man dressed all in black spotlighted. He stood in the center of the room, as if he had come from the window.

Her blue eyes darted in that direction. She had left the window open to air out the room. A burglar had come in and did not even have to break the lock. It was as if she had invited him in.

And what a burglar he was. Tall, almost a head taller than she stood barefooted, he was darkly handsome with a face like the edge of a razor. Thin, straight nose, cruel lips that looked like a knife slash more than a mouth, high cheek bones, jet black hair that came down in a widow's peak — she took it all in with a single glance. He was dressed in form-fitting black, what form there was to fit. He was emaciated to the point of being little more than a walking skeleton. But it was his eyes that froze her to the spot.

Cold. Infinitely cold. And ancient. She had the impression of him being older than dirt, in spite of looking like he was in his thirties. His eyes gave

her that contradiction.

All this came in a flash. Then she remembered she was dressed only in her bra and panties and he was a burglar and she had to call the police.

Deirdre let out a wordless cry, slammed the bedroom door and ran for the table beside the hall door where her cell phone lay. She picked it up and —

“You are quite lovely,” he said in a deeply resonant voice that boomed in her ears and rattled about inside her skull. “So few today are as lovely or desirable as you.”

Deirdre turned and stared at him. This time their eyes locked, and she was pulled into the depths. The infinitely deep, cold depths of his ebony eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I am the best thing that has happened to you in many years,” he said, moving closer. He moved in a fluid motion that belied bones in his body. Although upright, his movement was more snakelike than human. He glided until he was only a foot from her. She looked up into those eyes and wondered at the pain she read there, the pain and triumph.

“You remind me of someone,” she said.

“No, I do not,” he contradicted. “I am unique. At least in your limited experience, I am unique.”

“I’m not inexperienced,” she said, a flutter coming to her heart.

"You are not a virgin," he said. His hand moved slowly toward her and cupped her left breast. "There are many other ways in which you are a virgin, however."

"I never liked it when Sam wanted to take me up the behind."

"I do not mean ass fucking, my dear one," he said. His hand tightened on her breast. Deirdre tried to step back but could not. She closed her eyes and let the delicious sensation seep into her bones and body and brain. Somewhere in a far distant recess of her being, Deirdre knew this was wrong. Why was she letting this stranger—a burglar—feel her up?

Pleasure overwhelmed any concern she might have. She sighed and thrust her chest out so her breast crushed into the man's palm. He squeezed tighter and gave her even more pleasure.

"I like that," she said in a choked voice.

"I know," he answered. His other hand worked around her back, slid to her waist and pulled her closer. The bony hand was cool against her bare skin, but it excited her unlike any other lover's caress. Her lips parted slightly. He accepted. His lips pressed into her, lightly brushing across them at first and then sampling with more passion. Deirdre felt her pulse racing as he held her close to his body. She felt every movement of his body—and the slow rise between his legs as his limp

penis became a hard cock.

"I want this," she said urgently. She reached down and pressed her hand against the bulge of his erection.

"I know you do, but not yet. Prove you are worthy of receiving it."

"I . . . I'm wet. My pussy is wet."

"Yes, it is," he said in a husky whisper, "but that is not enough."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get naked for me."

Deirdre didn't want to move away from his body. She wanted it to press against her always. But there was nothing she could do. She had to obey. She stepped back. His hand slowly slid across her bare side, his fingertips lightly pressing into her belly. She reached behind and slipped the hooks free on her bra. The material slid forward over her breasts. A quick shrug got the straps off her arms. She tossed aside the unwanted garment.

Why was she doing this? The man was a stranger! But she wanted him more than she had ever wanted a man before. That he wanted her was obviously from the huge bulge in his tight pants. She reached out to run the zipper down on his fly and let out the raging hard-on imprisoned there.

He caught her wrist.

"Not yet. You are still overdressed." His fingers worked down her hips and caught at the wispy

red satin panties she wore. "You don't wear a thong," he said, whispering in her ear.

"Should I?"

"A thong . . . or nothing at all," he said. His tongue flicked out and touched her earlobe. The wetness cooled quickly. She gasped when he caught the dangling flesh between his teeth and lightly bit. She heard his quick intake of breath. "Blood," he said.

Deirdre went weak in the knees when he began sucking on her earlobe. She knew he had pricked it, but she did not care. The feel of his mouth, his lips, his darting tongue, all sent pulses of divine desire throughout her body. Her pussy had leaked before. Now it positively gushed.

His hands worked under the waistband of her panties and pushed them down slowly over the flare of her hips. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her ass cheeks, dipping for a brief instant between the meaty slabs. Then he pushed faster and got the unwanted panties down to her thighs where gravity took over. The damp panties dropped around her ankles. Deirdre quickly stepped free and kicked them away. She stood totally naked before this man.

Why? A tiny voice deep within questioned but her body answered differently. Why did it matter? She wanted him above all others. The way he sucked at her ear, stroked over her sleek skin,

moved his hand between them down over her slightly domed belly, down, down lower. To her pussy!

She gasped in joy as his finger slid into her moist, wet center. His other hand moved behind and cupped her butt. He pulled her closer. One finger surged deep into her core as the other probed for her anus. When his questing finger slid into her asshole, Deirdre arched her back.

"No, not there, oh, yes, oh!"

He began working his fingers in and out of her until she quivered like a raw nerve.

"You will do," he said. "You achieve great pleasure like this, don't you?"

"Yes." She hissed the word. Her eyes were clamped shut as desire washed over her like the waves of an ocean against the shoreline. She reached out again, groping for his cock. This time he did not stop her as she found the fly and ran down the zipper with a metallic hiss.

"Suck on it. Suck on my cock," he said in a voice that held as much excitement as she felt.

He wanted her! He wanted her mouth moving all over his hardness. Deirdre slipped to the floor, balanced on her knees and moved her face forward to his crotch. The thick, long hard-on pressed into her lips.

"Suck," he ordered.

She parted her lips and accepted the thickness in her mouth. Eyes still closed, she began tonguing

him, drawing her lips over his most sensitive flesh, finding spots that made his cock jerk and quiver with need. Most of all she applied suction. She sucked. The harder she sucked the more he encouraged her with his fingers laced through her dark hair. He pulled her inward until she almost choked on his length thrust down her throat. But she sucked. How she gave him mouth love!

When she felt the quiver and jerk that preceded a man coming, she drew back. Her quick tongue snared a bitter drop of pre-cum at the tip of his erection.

"You can cum in my mouth," she said, her voice tiny and weak. The words shocked her. She did not like a man's cum in her mouth, but now she was begging for it. She wanted to take every drop of the white-hot seed in her mouth so she could swallow it.

"No," he said. "Your mouth is good. However, I want to spend myself elsewhere."

She groaned as he reached down and cupped her breasts. His fingers caught at her nipples and tweaked them. He twisted and turned and tugged on them until her breasts became inflamed with need.

"Suck on them," she sighed. "I want to feel your mouth all over them."

"Of course you do, my dear," he said.

Deirdre was not sure if she stood or if he sank

down to join her on the floor. All she knew was the heat that touched first her left nipple and then her right. His lips were so different from his hands. His fingers were ice, his lips were fire. He pulled her right nip into his mouth and bit hard. She gasped and almost experienced an orgasm. She knew a drop of blood formed where he bit her. And she knew he avidly sucked at the blood dribbling from her breast.

It excited her. She slowly stretched out on the floor, her legs parting for him as he followed her. He was between her legs, her raised legs, her wantonly parted legs.

"Take me now," she said. "I want to feel your cock moving inside me."

"Soon, very soon. You are deserving."

"I want you so much."

Deirdre was shocked at her words, and yet she *did* want him. The feel of his mouth all over her sensitive breasts, his tongue lapping up the droplets of blood that oozed forth—she wanted that and more. Her knees rose on either side of his body, hoping he would accept her invitation.

He did.

His hand moved across her belly and stroked over her pussy lips. He pressed his thumb into her clit and caused her to lift her buttocks off the floor. This positioned him precisely for the liquid smooth thrust forward. His length penetrated her and then stopped, fully buried within her clinging

pussy.

Deirdre needed lots of stimulation from a man. It hardly seemed an instant since she had seen him standing in the bedroom caught in the beam of the flashlight and now she was poised on the brink of orgasm. His mouth continued to move over her nipples, his tongue laving her. He slid down the steep slope of her breasts to the valley between and worked there. She lifted her legs even more and grasped her knees with her hands until she was almost curled into a ball.

She tensed her inner muscles around him and produced a grunt of pleasure from him. This spurred her on. She began rocking slowly, trying to keep his cock deeply within her, no matter how he moved.

When he withdrew, she felt a horrible void inside, but he quickly raced back. The heat of his fucking set her on fire. The blaze spread from her loins throughout her body and then exploded inside like a bomb. She cried out in release and ground her crotch down hard into his groin. She did not want a single inch of his erection to leave.

He kept a smooth rhythm that drove her to the brink once more. Deirdre was not sure but thought she might have climaxed again.

“Oh, so, so good,” she sighed. She opened her eyes and cried out in surprise. She was staring at her front door. In her hand she held her cell

phone. Memory flooded back. She had seen an intruder in her bedroom and had rushed out to pick up the phone.

"Be there in less than a minute," she heard a voice saying from the cell phone.

"What?" She held it up and saw she had dialed nine-one-one. She didn't remember doing it. From outside she heard the pounding of feet on the stairs, then a sharp knock on her door.

"Ms Tyler, you in there? Open up. Police."

In a daze she opened the door and stepped back. Two officers crowded past her.

"In the bedroom?"

"There," she said, pointing vaguely. She was confused and had no idea what was going on. She remembered things, but only in pieces, like the quilt draped over her sofa. She tried to get it all together but could not.

"Were you raped?"

"What?"

"Were you raped? Did the burglar rape you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Lady, you don't have a stitch of clothing on."

She looked down and saw the officer was right. She was naked. Her bra lay some distance away and her panties were bunched up a couple feet away where she had kicked them. After he took them off.

Who was "he?" She did not know.

"No, not raped."

"No sign of forced entry. Her window's open, though. Somebody might have climbed in. I couldn't tell looking out, though."

"Quite gawking, Mendelson," the office in front of her snapped. He grabbed the quilt from the sofa and slung it around her shoulders. Deirdre pulled it close. It felt so coarse after the feel of his shirt.

His?

"You been drinking? Blow a little dope?"

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. Why couldn't she remember anything. "I don't do drugs."

"Don't see any evidence, Sarge," the other officer said. "Not even an open liquor bottle."

"You sure you weren't raped? We can get you to a hospital and run a kit on you."

"I'm all right," Deirdre said. Some of the shock was wearing off, but memories refused to come. She felt incredible. She felt better than she had in years.

"Get some sleep and you'll be okay in the morning," the police sergeant said. He motioned to his partner to leave. The officer gave her a long, lingering look that she considered downright obscene, but she said nothing. Deirdre felt too good to really complain.

"Wait, Officer," she said as the sergeant started to close her door.

"He asked me something."

"What? Who?"

"The man who was in my bedroom." Deirdre remembered more now. "He asked me where it was."

"It?" The officer glared at her as if she was completely insane.

"The tapestry," she said in a choked voice. "He asked what I had done with the tapestry."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Deirdre skipped breakfast, other than a cup of black coffee that was so bitter she made a face as she pushed the door shut behind her. She hesitated, key in hand. From the number of people passing through her apartment in the last twenty-four hours, she was not sure why she bothered to lock up. She was sure that Sam had a spare key, too. Still, a quick twist of the key sent the bolt snicking solidly and gave her a little sense of security. Even false security was better than none at all.

She gulped at her coffee as she dashed downstairs and around the apartment building to the covered parking. Juggling coffee and keys, she got her car started and roared off. As always, Sam had left the tank almost empty, but she had enough to get to work. Deirdre could not help but glance in the mirror several times as she drove, expecting to see a black cloud following her. When

she got to Maurine's store, she had pretty well figured no one was trailing her. A small lot behind the store for employees afforded her enough space to edge in. Squeezing out of her door, she managed to get past the wall and into the antique store just as Maurine turned on the sign announcing to the world that Carfax Abbey Antiques was open for another day of buying junk and selling antiques.

"Made it with seconds to spare," Deirdre said. She looked for a place to put her almost empty coffee cup and settled on a spot under the counter holding the cash register. "Didn't want to be late on my first day."

"There's no hurry," Maurine said. "I usually won't see a customer for an hour yet. Then they'll all come in, just like they got off a tour bus. It always works that way on Saturdays." The redhead came back and looked closely at her new employee. "You look frazzled. You need more coffee? Or is the caffeine what's made you look like this?"

Deirdre panicked. She had thought she looked all right.

"My hair? I didn't have time to do it."

"Hair, clothes, everything. You look like you slept in your clothes."

"Oh, believe me, I didn't do that," Deirdre said. Snippets of memory flashed through her mind. Her mouth around the tall, thin man's cock. His

hands on her back, pushing down her panties. The sudden nip on her earlobe and the way he licked off the blood with such gusto. She reached up and pressed a hand into her left tit and winced.

“What have you been up to?”

“I . . . I don’t know. Not exactly,” Deirdre said. “It’s all blurry. You know how it is when you’re hung over? You might remember parts of the evening but not everything?”

“You got drunk after I let you out?”

“I don’t even know where to start,” Deirdre said, her thoughts all jumbled up and tumbling inside like clothes in a dryer.

“I hired you. We ate dinner. I dropped you off.”

“Then I found Sam fucking his brains out with another woman. In my bed.”

“Shit,” Maurine said, shocked. “That was a hell of a day. You threw him out, of course?”

“Yeah,” Deirdre said. “And that wasn’t even the most amazing thing that happened.” She saw Maurine staring at her, green eyes glowing. She silently urged Deirdre to keep talking as she poured herself a cup of coffee from a small pot behind the counter.

“I was furious and went for a walk,” Deirdre said. She got a dreamy look in her eyes as she remembered both the fear she had of being followed and how Quince had rescued her. “I had the feeling it was the same thing after me I had

following me before, but I couldn't be sure. I turned to run and there he was."

"Him? Who 'he?' Come on, girl, spill." Maurine pulled up a wicker chair and sat, looking like a high school girl in her bulky sweater and pleated gray skirt. She leaned forward, attentive. "This has got to be good, so don't disappoint me."

"You'd think it was the only reason you hired me," Deirdre said, not sure she wanted to tell her friend anything. It was all too crazy.

"Yeah, yeah, that other reason, too. So?"

"His name was Quince. Really cute, too. He was visiting friends in the neighborhood where I got lost and was chased by that black cloud."

"You thought somebody was after you earlier. Could it be the same person?"

"Person? It could be," Deirdre said. More of her encounter in her apartment clicked into focus now. "It must have been. Anyway, I did something really awful. I thought I'd make Sam jealous by showing off Quince."

"Juicy," Maurine said.

"It worked, more or less. I felt bad about just shoving Quince out, so —"

"So it got hot with him? You said he was cute."

"It got hotter," Deirdre admitted, "but I called it off." Her hand went to her ear and felt the tiny bite there. It might have been from an insect. "The strangest thing happened when he was leaving, though."

“He mooned you.”

“He asked me where the tapestry was. I didn’t have any idea what he meant.”

“Tapestry?” Maurine sat up straighter. “The one we mailed?”

“Was that what was in the crate? I didn’t know. But how could Quince have known? And why did he think I knew anything at all?”

Maurine shrugged. “That’s sure strange. Maybe you should call the cops, but I don’t know what you would tell them.”

“I did call the police, but that was afterward.”

“After Quince left?”

“After the man in black came into my apartment and made love to me.”

Maurine stared at her a second, then broke out laughing. “You had me going there for a minute, Deirdre. You ought to be a writer.”

“I’m not kidding. I couldn’t sleep in the same bed where Sam, where he—”

“Where he fucked his brains out with that bimbo,” Maurine said with passion.

“Yes, that,” Deirdre said weakly. More memory flooded back. “I took off my clothes and curled up on the sofa to sleep, but I heard sounds in the room. I opened the door, thinking Sam had snuck back to grab his things. But it wasn’t Sam. I’m not sure who it was.”

“The guy who followed you earlier?”

"It must have been. He didn't move like a normal guy. He sort of *floated*."

"Floated?"

"He moved without seeming to. It's hard to describe," Deirdre said. "He was dressed all in black, so it could have been the guy hiding in shadows earlier. He was tall, taller than Quince, and he had a thin face. Quince is built like an athlete. This guy was almost a skeleton. And pale. I didn't remember that before. When I looked into his eyes, I—" Deirdre could not go on for a moment. She took a quick gulp of her coffee and almost choked.

"Here, have some more," Maurine said, pouring from the pot. "You looked into his eyes and what?"

Deirdre nodded. "Yes, that. I picked up the cell phone and started to call nine-one-one, then I was taking off my underwear and begging him to take me. I wanted him to do things to me." Deirdre swallowed hard, then licked her lips. "I wanted to suck him off. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to taste him, like he tasted me."

"He ate your pussy?"

"No, he bit my ear until it bled. Then he licked the blood away. It was so sensuous." Deirdre shivered at the memory. "Then he—" Her hand moved to her breast.

"What did he do?" urged Maurine.

"He bit my nipple until it bled. Then he lapped

up the blood there, too." Deirdre pulled down her scoop-neck blouse until she exposed the very top of her breast. She saw the tiny bite mark there. Just looking at it gave her cold shivers that quickly became more. Her pussy started to tense as it had the night before.

"He licked the blood off my tit, then he said he wanted me."

"You were fighting him off, right?"

"I wanted it. More than he did," Deirdre said. "I can't explain it. I can't! I'm not like that. I wanted to get back at Sam, but this wasn't the way to do it since he'd never know. But then it got strange."

"Got strange? Girl, if I looked up strange in the dictionary your picture would be there. How much stranger could it get?"

"I was holding my cell phone and had dialed nine-one-one. The police were already at my door and I was naked. They thought I was stoned, but since they couldn't find anything, they just left."

"I should hope so. Bailing you out in the middle of the night isn't something I want to do."

"There's something else," Deirdre said. "After all this, giving in to him, wanting to take him in my mouth, in spite of it all, there's one thing I remember most." Deirdre looked squarely at Maurine and said, "He asked where the tapestry was, too."

"He fucked you and then asked you about the

tapestry? I don't believe this."

"I couldn't tell him anything," Deirdre said, "because I didn't know about any tapestry. But I wanted to. I wanted to tell him everything, anything, just as much as I wanted him sexually."

"You've got an imagination. Maybe the strain . . ."

Deirdre pulled her blouse down a bit farther to show Maurine the bite mark. "That's not a hickey. He bit me until I bled. And my ear, too."

"Bugs. No telling what vile bugs Sam carried around with him. You're lucky if you don't have crabs."

Deirdre knew it had all happened. It was as if she viewed it through a diaphanous curtain, but it was still there. All of it. She was not imagining a single second of it. There might be parts she was hazy about, but overall this had happened the way she had related.

"Why do they keep asking about a tapestry? It can't be a coincidence that both Quince and the man in black mentioned it."

"I found a tapestry in that estate sale. That was what you helped me mail, and now that I think about it, there were a couple queries about it, but I said I didn't have one since it had already been sold." Maurine frowned as she concentrated, then asked, "What does your Quince look like?"

"He's not my Quince," Deirdre said somewhat hotly. She was not sure why this bothered her. Quince looked like a great guy, but he had put her

off asking about the tapestry after kissing her. It was as if he was willing to use sex to get what he wanted.

Like the man in black.

"Was he about six feet tall, crew cut blond hair?"

"Yes," Deirdre said weakly.

"He's the one! He asked about the tapestry right after I got it all packed up. If I hadn't sealed the crate, I might have admitted having it and let him take a peek."

"He would have stolen it," Deirdre said with some certainty.

"You think? He was the only one who asked, though. No mysterious man dressed like Johnny Cash."

"He didn't look anything like Johnny Cash. Or Goth. He was in black, but it wasn't playing at Goth like the kids."

"Not playing? You mean he really was Goth?"

Deirdre nodded. The more she sorted out, the less sense any of it made. She wished she could talk to Quince again and straighten everything out. He had warned her, but had it been about the man who had come to her apartment? Somehow, Deirdre had trouble thinking of him as raping her when she had done everything but beg the man for his cock. It was too bad she hadn't let Quince stay. The late night visitation might never have

occurred then.

Or would it? Maybe Quince and the shadowy man were working together.

"Did he leave a card? Or a phone number if you did get another tapestry in?" Deirdre asked suddenly.

"I don't remember him doing that. I have to admit, I thought he was pretty hot. I should have asked but I wasn't thinking straight. Quite a presence."

Maurine got up and rummaged about in a box filled with cards and errant slips of paper. After a minute of searching, she gave up and shook her head. She had failed to find Quince's address or phone number in the haphazard filing box.

"I've got to get this in order some day," Maurine said. "Might have you do it when the store's not crowded."

"Like now?"

"Don't bother, Deirdre," said Maurine. "I remember him like he was in here right now. He didn't leave any contact info."

"What about the estate? All I saw were the knickknacks. I don't even remember the estate owner's name. I was just along for the fun."

"It was the Garson estate, if that really matters," Maurine said. "You made me a few dollars picking the items you did, that's for certain. But the tapestry was in storage down in the basement when I found it. I knew right away there'd be a

market for it, and I was right. I had hardly brought it back when a buyer contacted me."

"A regular?"

"Semi-regular. I'd dealt some Pre-Raphaelite items to him before, so he had a history. It surprised me that he knew about the tapestry so fast. It was almost as if I had posted it on the Internet and gotten a million offers."

"Did he say how he knew you had that particular tapestry or did he just ask if you had one? What was it like? The tapestry?"

"I never got a good look at it. I knew it was valuable and got it for a song and a dance" – Maurine stood and pirouetted – "but intended to examine it once I got it back to the store. I never bothered. The price was too good, so I crated it up and you helped me ship it off."

"How could Quince think I knew about the tapestry, then? Or . . . the other guy?"

"You got me, Deirdre," the redhead said. "You think there might be something more in the junk I got from that estate? It's all in the back room. I've got about forty-five minutes before the quilting class comes in. Why don't you poke through it and see if there's anything that might be useful as bait for your Quince."

"He's not mine," Deirdre said, peeved. Then she had to laugh. Maurine was kidding. "Tell you what. I'll find the bait, and we can share him after

we've landed him."

"Oh, kinky. I bet he'd like to have two women all over him at the same time. Do you mind sharing him?"

"Let's sink the hook first," Deirdre said.

Maurine unlocked the storeroom for her and turned on the overhead light. The room was crowded, with only a few narrow paths through the stacks of boxes.

"Back there by the side door's where I piled everything from that sale. I'd intended to sort through it and put it in proper order but haven't had time yet."

Deirdre saw the door opening onto the alley had a locking bar across it. Otherwise, there was not a lock. She looked at her friend.

"Too many times thieves have tried to get in. I can't keep a decent lock on the door, so I just bar it. That's worked better than the best key lock."

"And it just opens into the alley?"

"Makes for easy loading and unloading. Knock yourself out," Maurine said. "I'll be in the front if you need me."

Deirdre took a deep breath, sneezed from the dust in the air and then studied the huge mountain of goods Maurine had accumulated. The items from the Garson estate sale all carried orange tags. She began going through the stacks, looking at the tags and then the trinkets. Some small statues, mostly brass and worthless, a few

art deco knock off Tiffany lamps that she would not mind having in her own apartment, plus boxes of costume jewelry that probably was not worth the money it would take having a professional appraisal done. Mostly the articles were low-end. Only when she reached the boxes closest to the door did she sit down and spread out the contents around her.

Deirdre was fascinated by the old daggers. A sword blade had a reddish discoloration that might have been blood—or rust. She could not tell. The sheathed dagger had jewels embedded in the hilt that might be real. If so, they were worth a small fortune. She put the weapons in an array around her, but there were too few to make Maurine more than a few hundred dollars.

The lamps and fancy lace curtains were more likely to appeal to the customers at her store. Deirdre wondered if Maurine could sell the daggers and sword on the Internet and make more money than hunting for a local weapons dealer to take them off her hands. It might be that Maurine had no idea the weapons were even in the lot she had bought.

As Deirdre held up a lace curtain and studied the clever work trying to decide if it might be Irish linen, she heard a scratching at the barred door. At first she ignored it, but the scratching became more insistent.

She tried to look out a small window beside the door, but it was not only filthy but had a heavy wire mesh that obscured the alley.

"Let me in," she heard. Or she thought she did. Deirdre put down the lace and went to the door. Pressing her ear against the cold metal, she listened hard. It was as if a whisper intended only for her ears slipped into her brain.

She recognized the words, the tone, the man who spoke.

As if she were in a trance, she backed away from the door and put her fingers under the locking bar. She tugged, trying to get the heavy wooden bar off its metal holders but the wood was jammed. She strained as she tried to push up the bar.

"Hurry. I must see you again."

"I'm trying," she gasped out. The words drove into her brain like one of the daggers on the floor behind her. She knew who spoke. She had wanted him the night before. She wanted him even more now.

"Hurry."

She bent low and tried to get her shoulder under the bar. As she braced herself, her feet slid out from under her on the dusty floor. Deirdre painfully scraped her shoulder on the rough metal door and landed hard on hands and knees.

She tried to remember why she had wanted to open the door and couldn't.

"Go to the window."

"What?"

"The window beside the door. Go to it and look outside."

More curious than driven now, Deirdre obeyed. She picked up a filthy rag and scrubbed at the caked dirt to get a peephole through the dirt. She pressed her eye to the clean spot and gasped.

Outside in the alley stood the man in black. He was as she remembered him. Tall, thin to the point of starvation, a sneer on his thin lips and an arrogance that knew no bounds. He wanted her to open the door and *knew* she would because he desired it.

"Open the door. Now."

Deirdre tried to figure out if the words came to her through the thick door or if she read his lips. She stared in fascination at him. He was so handsome. There was nothing she would not do to be with him again. He stepped out of her line of sight back into shadow.

She craned around to follow him but he stood immediately in front of the door where she could only catch occasional glimpses of his black coat.

"Open the door."

"I tried," Deirdre said weakly.

"Try harder. I would be with you again. I desire you."

"And I want you!"

Deirdre pushed away from the tiny window and hurried back to the door. She knew she was not strong enough to get the bar lifted on her own. She grabbed a long pry bar Maurine used to open wood crates and thrust the steel blade under the end of the bar. Using the metal brace on the wall as a lever point, she heaved. The wood bar slid upward. She had to repeat the trick at the other end of the bar but got it off the braces. Deirdre sagged under its weight, lowering it to the floor.

"I'm ready," she said. "I want you."

"I must examine everything from the estate sale. I must know who bought the tapestry."

"If I find out . . ."

"If you find out and tell me, we can fuck again."

Deirdre was almost frantic in her haste. She dropped the bar to the floor and then dragged it away from the door. She grasped the door handle and pulled hard. The door was still stuck. She heaved harder.

"What're you doing, Deirdre?"

"I must—" Deirdre stopped, hand on the cold metal handle. She glanced over her shoulder as Maurine came into the storeroom. What was she doing? Deirdre struggled to remember why it had been so important that she open the door into the alley.

"You need some air in here? It's a bit dusty, I know," Maurine said. "Let me help you."

Maurine grabbed the handle and gave a powerful jerk. The door creaked open and let in a gust of fresh air.

“There,” Maurine said. “Is that better?”

Deirdre stared into the alley. It was empty. Nothing moved in the sunlight and nothing moved in the shadows.

She felt a curious combination of loss and, at the same time, incredible relief.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"I'll be back in an hour," Maurine said.

Deirdre looked hesitantly over her shoulder at the door leading to the storeroom. It had been three days since she had been in that room and had opened the door leading to the alley and— and what? She shuddered. She knew who, if not what, lurked out there.

"Deirdre?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I'll be back in an hour, and you'll be fine here by yourself. You know the ropes by now, especially after dealing with that woman yesterday."

"She simply couldn't be pleased," Deirdre said. The woman had bustled into the store as if she owned it. For a price, she could have since it was Maurine's stated policy anything within the four walls was for sale—for a price. Nevertheless, she had wanted this and that thrown in for free and then had left after making a scene when she could

not find just the right lamp for her end table. Fifteen minutes of putting up with her and Deirdre had wanted to give her a lamp. Right over the head.

“If you can deal with her, you can deal with anything. Later.” Maurine was out the door, whistling happily.

Deirdre envied her friend. Maurine was always so happy. Nothing bothered her. Nasty customers, lousy weather, poor business, nothing.

Deirdre got up from the stool behind the counter and went to the storeroom door and put her hand on the knob. She had not finished going through the estate sale merchandise and had promised Maurine she would catalog it as soon as possible so they could put the best pieces on display in the store. Just thinking about going into the room frightened her after experiencing the strange compulsion to open the door and—and what? Had she wanted to open the door at all? Maurine thought she wanted fresh air, and Deirdre had agreed to that rather than explain. After the door had opened, no one waited outside. That had shaken her as much as anything else. She was positive someone had been there, tapping at the door, begging her to open up.

Deirdre closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the door. All she had to do was open the door and go into the storeroom. She had work to

do there she had put off because she was scared. Of what? She had no idea, but it had something to do with the man in black.

The bell jangled on the front door. With relief, she turned, a ready-made excuse for not going into the storeroom. Her elation at being able to put off that work died when she saw Quince.

"What are you doing here?" Deirdre demanded. She was mad at him and did not know why. He was the last solid thing in her world. After he had left her apartment, the world had spun out of control. Or had it begun to go crazy when he asked about the tapestry?

"That's not much of a greeting for a customer," Quince said, but the smile on his lips took away any disparagement. He let the door shut itself on its pneumatic closer. Deirdre had to admit he looked mighty good. He wore a pale blue cotton shirt with his black jeans. As he stepped into the store, there was a slight squeaking. He wore new Reeboks, the black ones with the rubber flap up over the toes to prevent scuffing. But what he wore was less interesting to her than the man wearing the clothes.

He was about the most handsome man she had ever seen and yet he appeared unconcerned about it. None of the vanity she saw in meat markets passing themselves off as bars, no self-consciousness, no preening although he walked past two full length mirrors to come to the

counter. Deirdre moved to put the counter between them.

"I'm sorry. I never expected to see you again."

"Because you threw me out of your apartment for making a pass at you?"

"That wasn't it. I didn't know what to think."

"You don't now, either." Quince turned more somber. "You still pretending not to know about the tapestry?"

"What's it to you? Maurine sold it. If it is even the one you want. Can you describe it?"

"Would that do any good? You said you never saw it."

Deirdre damned him for his logic. She had hoped to get some idea what it was that brought him back into her life like this. Although he looked at her like a man looks at a woman, he only lit up when talking about the tapestry. A roll of cloth was more interesting to him than she was.

"What can I do for you?" she asked coldly.

"You do a lot for me." Quince flashed her more of his bright smile. She melted. A little. "Who bought the tapestry?"

"I don't know. Maurine handled all that. I was just a gofer."

"Could you look it up for me? There must be a shipping invoice or a sales receipt in the files."

"Why should I?"

"I'll buy you lunch. At a nice, sunny, sidewalk

café. We can take an hour or two and have lunch, talk, get to know each other better."

"Why should that appeal to me?" Deirdre hoped she kept the lie out of her voice.

"You're a fine looking woman. We got off to a bad start."

"You rescuing me?"

"That wasn't the bad part. I'm glad I was able to be there for you."

Logic then clicked in and Deirdre said, "Why were you in that neighborhood? You weren't visiting friends. You were following me."

"What makes you think that?" From the way Quince turned wary, Deirdre knew she had hit a bull's-eye.

"Because," she said, lording it over him that she had figured this out, "you asked about the tapestry. Who in that neighborhood would have known? Nobody."

"Unless someone there was the buyer," he pointed out.

"I'm not buying that. We sent the tapestry express. If Maurine had wanted it in the hands of a buyer only a few miles away, she would have driven it over herself. You followed me to find out about the tapestry."

"I admit that's true," Quince said. "That doesn't take away from me rescuing you from a very real danger. And that you are a very pretty woman."

Deirdre had no reason to give in to Quince's

flattery, but she did. She pulled out the large box where Maurine tossed all her receipts and shoved them across the counter toward Quince.

“There. Somewhere. I’m not sure how it would have been listed.”

“Thank you.” Quince dived into the box and began sorting the receipts. Deirdre smiled a little. He was doing her job for her, putting the invoices together chronologically. She watched as he worked. He was a cute guy. More. He was outright handsome, especially when he had that intense look on his face. Small furrows crossed his broad forehead as he squinted just a little. Was he nearsighted or did he concentrate so hard that he peered closer at the slips of paper? Deirdre tried to figure out something about his background, where he came from, what he really wanted the tapestry for.

From his suntan he spent a fair amount of time in the sun, and it was not necessarily the Indiana sun from the depth of the tan. He had strong hands and dexterous fingers. But the work kept him from once looking up at her. Deirdre sighed. He thought more of the tapestry than he did of her. That had been apparent from the moment in her apartment throughout his time in the antique store.

“I can’t tell,” Quince said. “All of the invoices are listed as ‘merchandise’ with no real detail on

what that means. What is this place? A front for money laundering? Does your boss ship drugs and list it all just as ‘merchandise?’”

“Are you a cop?” Deirdre stepped back a half pace. She had never considered that Quince might be a police officer. He did not carry a gun, or if he did he hid it better than she could tell. His shirt was looser than the wine-red silk shirt he had worn the night she had met him, but there was hardly a bulge she could not account for. His tight jeans left no room for a bulging gun. Deirdre caught her breath as she peered down at another bulge. She suspected she knew the source of this one since it was at his crotch. He was really packing – and this gun was likely flesh and blood.

But if he were an undercover officer, he had left his pistol at home.

This triggered another thought. Home? Where did Quince call home? From his suntan it was not anywhere local. The sun burned all of Indiana every year, but this tan looked like the result of being outside in the tropics.

He looked directly into her eyes. She tried to figure out what color they were and gave up. It was as if they shifted with his mood or the light or the way she thought about him. Pale or gray – that was the best Deirdre could say.

“I’m not a cop. Not like you mean.”

“What are you, then?”

“Concerned about the destination on that

tapestry." He saw that she was not satisfied with the answer he had given. "Think of me as a bounty hunter, a very well paid one."

"So you know your way around relics?"

"Oh, yes, that I do," he said, giving Deirdre the feeling he answered a question she had never asked. She could not even guess what the proper question should have been.

"Other than the lunch in the burning hot sun you offered, why should I help you?"

"You'll have to come up with your own reasons," he said. "But I'm not the enemy. You don't ever want to know who the enemy is."

"The tapestry has something to do with this 'enemy' that's got you all hot and bothered?"

Quince grinned. "You're the one that's got me hot and bothered. The tapestry is only a way of stopping something from happening that the enemy finds very desirable."

"What's that?"

"I don't know," Quince admitted, and she believed him. There was an exasperation, a frustration to his answer that carried the ring of truth. "He wants the tapestry badly. That's enough for me to try and get it first."

"Is it a map or something like that?"

"I doubt it," Quince said. "This is an old tapestry, dating back more than a thousand years. What it might represent is a mystery. But if I got

the tapestry first, I might negotiate a truce."

"A truce? There's a war going on?"

"In a sense," Quince said earnestly. "I want to put an end to the war and have nothing to use as a weapon."

"Other than offering me lunch in the noon sun," Deirdre said. This brought a smile back to Quince. She tried to figure out how old he was. When he was scowling, he looked older, maybe in his forties, but smiling, he could be younger than she was. Maybe even mid-twenties.

"I like the sun. I just came here from Miami Beach."

"That explains your tan. Is it nice there?"

Quince hesitated, then nodded. She got the feeling that he did not trust himself to answer with a lie. Whatever happened in Florida was not pleasant, but it allowed him to spend plenty of time lounging in the sun.

"Would it help if you looked through the rest of the estate merchandise?" Deirdre asked. She was not sure why she offered, other than to keep Quince around a little longer. He irritated her and certainly dropped compliments only to keep her interested, when all he wanted was information about the tapestry, but somehow Deirdre could overlook that. For a while.

"Certainly," he said with more than a hint of eagerness. "Anything I can find has to help me."

"In the storeroom." She pointed. She repressed

a shiver. Something had happened in there and she was having trouble remembering what it was. Quince being back there might help get rid of the feelings she had.

“Is it unlocked?”

Her heart leaped into her throat, then she realized he meant this door, the one from the store. There was no way he could know about the door leading into the alley. Even if he did, why ask if it were locked?

“Sure,” she said, trying to appear calm and collected. Deirdre turned the knob and pushed the door open to reveal the cluttered storeroom. She had left the light on all this time. Or had she? She could not remember when she had left if she had flipped the switch beside the door. Or maybe Maurine had been in there. It was her store, and she worked longer hours.

“That’s got to be it,” she said aloud.

“Looks like it is,” Quince said, looking at her strangely. “Didn’t you know?”

“I . . . I meant something else,” Deirdre said lamely. “Go on. Everything’s in the back. The pile with the orange tags. I’ve looked through some of it but didn’t remove anything.”

“No other tapestries?”

“Only a few daggers caught my eye. And a long sword. I don’t know anything about medieval weapons, or even if they are that old. If you see

anything you want, let me know. I'll be happy to sell it to you."

Quince was already pawing through the piles of merchandise from the estate sale. Deirdre stared at him and felt a curious anxiety. It might have been outright fear for him. Her eyes darted to the small window where she had cleared off a patch. She remembered looking outside but could not recollect why. Something in the alley had drawn her attention.

"Th-the door has to stay barred," she said.

"No problem," he said, paying her no attention.

Deirdre stepped back into the store but left the door ajar. She went to the counter and ran her fingers over the slick top, drawing circles and figure eights and finally could not stand it any longer. She went back to the storeroom door and watched Quince as he moved items from one pile to the other.

"Finding anything?" she called out. He looked up. His eyes had taken on a golden hue now.

"Nothing worth mentioning. I found the address where all this came from. Do you think I could find out more about the tapestry from someone there? From one of the Garson heirs?"

"I doubt it," she said, going into the storeroom and moving slowly toward Quince. She was uneasy, but his presence gave her a feeling of security. He had saved her once from some unseen danger. He could do it again. "The heirs auctioned

it all off because they live out of state. One is out in California and the other lives in Montana. They wanted the money and to be done with everything. They hadn't lived in the house for more than thirty years."

"Do you think the tapestry was bought after they moved out?"

"Probably," she said. "The old man who owned the tapestry looked like he traveled around a lot and bought and sold almost as much."

"Damn," Quince said.

"Is anything wrong?" Deirdre stiffened and looked at the barred door. She almost remembered why she was afraid of what was outside in the alley. Almost.

"Yeah," Quince said. "There's nothing here I can use as a clue to where the tapestry came from. Are you sure you don't know who bought it?"

"Maurine knows, but I don't know if she would tell you. Confidential client and all."

"I can make it worth her while," Quince said. He brushed off his hands and then made his way through the clutter. His hips swiveled from side to side as he avoided boxes lithely. Deirdre felt a small thrill watching him move like that.

"She values her longtime clients more than a few quick bucks," Deirdre said.

"I can make it *very* worthwhile." Quince stopped a foot away from Deirdre. She started to

make way so he could leave the storeroom but she heard something at the alley door. "What's wrong?"

"Something's scratching at the door again," she said, her voice flat. She felt as if all energy had drained from her. She pointed. "The other day I heard him out there. I started to let him in."

"Him? Who are you talking about?" Quince grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. It did nothing to break the spell holding her.

"He came to me in my apartment, after you left. He wanted me." Deirdre's mouth was cottony and dry. "I wanted him."

"Is he here? Now?" Quince shook her again.

"I opened the door to let him in, but he wasn't there. I know he was knocking but Maurine opened the door and he was gone."

"Damn!" Quince shoved her away hard. She crashed into the wall. The jolt brought her back to her senses.

"What's wrong?" she cried.

Quince went to the alley door and yanked back the locking bar. He opened the door, but the alley was as empty now as it had been before.

"Who are you talking about?"

"He fucked you?" Quince demanded harshly.

"I . . . that's none of your business," Deirdre said, trying to summon outrage at the question. Her emotions were still shorted out.

"He fucked you," Quince stated flatly. "He

asked about the tapestry, didn't he? What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I didn't know—I *don't* know."

"Thank the powers for that," Quince said. He stepped into the alley and looked both directions before returning to the storeroom and replacing the locking bar. Deirdre jumped when it fell into place with a loud snap.

"He can't get through that, but he wouldn't exert himself. He'd have you open the door for him, now that he's fucked you."

"Quit saying that, damn you," raged Deirdre. "And who are you talking about?"

"Broderick," Quince said as if the name burned his tongue.

"Broderick," Deirdre repeated. Her breath whistled from her lungs as an image formed. A tall, thin man, with eyes like black fire burning at the bottom of infinite pits.

She knew him, and she was suddenly very afraid.

## CHAPTER SIX

“So you do know him,” Quince said, staring hard at her.

Deirdre shook her head but knew the lie was obvious in every line on her face. She had felt as if the temperature in the shop had dropped by fifty degrees and she stood naked in the middle of the Arctic. Worse than the uncontrollable shudder that seized her, she could not shake the image of the dark eyes staring into her soul.

“He’s the one who was after me,” she said, things falling into place. She did not like the picture, either. The almost-seen black cloud had been Broderick. How? She did not know, but it had been him and she had been unable to focus on his body. All she had seen was the vague, flowing evil mist.

“He’s the one who fucked you,” Quince said bitterly. “Why did you let him into your apartment? That’s where he took you, wasn’t it? In your apartment?”

Deirdre was almost unable to answer. The enormity of everything rushing into her brain made her dizzy. When Quince shook her out of her trance with his questions, she looked at him in horror.

“Yes,” she said in a choked voice. “I was asleep in the living room and he . . . he came in through my bedroom. I’d left the window open. But I’m on the second floor!”

She tried to remember how Broderick had overpowered her. It had to be rape. But she remembered her joy at having him pressing down on top of her naked body, entering her and taking her as she writhed in ecstasy. Ecstasy. She had wanted him. She had done more than want him, she had aggressively made love to him. She had wanted to suck him off. She had wanted him fucking her. She had wanted anything and everything. If anything, she had raped him.

“I don’t know him. I tried to call the police.”

Deirdre stared at her empty hand as if she still held the cell phone.

“I dialed but I didn’t.”

“You mean you don’t remember.” There was even more bitterness in Quince’s tone now. He released her. The sudden removal of his hands from her upper arms was as much a shock to her as when he had shaken her. Her mouth opened, and she felt like a fish out of water.

"It's all right," he said. "You didn't have a choice."

"No, I didn't," she said, the realization hitting her like a blow. "How did you know?"

"Everyone feels the same way," Quince said. His handsome face hardened. "*Everyone*," he said with stark hatred.

"Who is he?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. But it's obvious what he wants."

"The tapestry," Deirdre said in a small voice.

"I want it, too."

"What's so important about an old tapestry?"

"I'll be honest with you," Quince said. "I don't know. But he wants it. That's good enough for me to try to stop him from getting it. Anything Broderick goes after with such energy can't have good results for anyone else."

"You didn't find who had bought the tapestry?"

Quince looked around in disgust. "The place is a nightmare. Your boss doesn't seem to keep anything in order."

"Maurine said customers like it that way. They root around and when they find something, there's the chance—in their minds, at least—that it is valuable and has been overlooked. Maurine doesn't overlook anything in the store."

"Except her filing system."

"I don't know," Deirdre said. Shock was slowly

fading, and she was starting to think more clearly. "The only reason you want the tapestry is to keep Broderick from getting it? You just want to be a spoiler?"

"I'd be more than a spoiler," Quince said, "if I could."

"You'd hurt him?"

"I'd kill him. But that's not easy."

"You've tried, haven't you?" Deirdre read the answer on Quince's face. He had more than hatred for Broderick. He had contempt and maybe even a hint of admiration for Broderick, too. There was something beyond even that, but Quince hid it quickly from her by turning.

"I've got to go. There's nothing more to do here."

"If . . . if I find where the tapestry was shipped, I'll call." Deirdre frowned. "Wait! How do I get in touch with you?"

Quince stopped at the door leading from the antique store. He turned and said, "I'll be in touch with you."

He spun around, bumped into Maurine and then lithely dodged her and was gone from sight in seconds.

"Let me guess," Maurine said, watching as Quince vanished from sight. She put down a large bundle on the counter and wiped off her hands. "That was Quince? Your rescuer? You described

him real good, girl. Only you forgot to say anything about him having a temper. What'd you say to make him that angry?"

"I didn't say anything," Deirdre said. "He did most of the talking."

"The tapestry," Maurine said, looking stern. "You didn't give him any information about it, did you? That's what made him so mad."

"I let him look, but he couldn't find anything. I didn't know where to look, either."

Maurine glanced toward the open door to the storeroom.

"Never let a customer go back there. If they hurt themselves, we'd have lawsuits out the wazoo."

"He wanted to see if the Garson estate merchandise had any clues."

"Clues? Why would the junk back there have a clue about who bought the tapestry? He was looking for something else."

"He said he—"

"Deirdre, don't believe everything you hear. You're not the world-wise, street smart, hard-bitten bitch you think you are."

"I'm not a bitch!"

Maurine had to laugh. "Got me there." She sobered and added, "And you don't know what it's like out on the street, either."

Deirdre had to admit her friend was right. She had been raised out by Riverside in a nice

community. Nothing too ritzy but not poverty level, either. Mostly two parents in the house and a strong feeling of family had pervaded. There had always been food on the table and clothes on her back, even if they were not always the best quality, and she had gone to a decent enough public school. After all that, though, nothing in her life had prepared her for Quince.

Or Broderick.

Just thinking about the darkly forbidding man sent a new shiver of dread up her spine. Or was it dread? Deirdre could not understand it, but she felt herself turning wetter between the thighs as her pussy began to churn and clench.

"What should I do?" Deirdre asked uncomfortably, sure Maurine would know she had been thinking of Broderick and how excited she had become. She moved to keep the counter between her and her friend.

"Stay clear of the whole thing. If I have to, I'll go to the cops, but that's mostly useless. All they want to do is misdirect traffic at Colts games." Maurine leaned over the counter and put her hand on Deirdre's arm. "That was supposed to be a joke."

"Sorry," Deirdre said. "This is all coming at me like I was tied on the railroad tracks and knew a train was coming full tilt. Sam, the . . . then—" She had no idea what to call everything that had

happened after she had caught Sam with his bimbo. Dark clouds and Quince saving her and Broderick doing whatever he had done to her and the tapestry.

"You need a break. Go get some coffee. There's a Starbucks around the corner." Maurine smiled ruefully. "There's a Starbucks around every corner. I'd even heard they had run out of places for new ones so were starting to put Starbucks inside existing Starbucks." She heaved a deep sigh. "You're still not laughing. That was a joke, too."

"I'm all right, Maurine. Thanks."

"But?" Maurine fixed hot green eyes on her.

"I want to know more about who bought the tapestry. That's the center of all this. The tapestry must be more valuable than you thought."

"I doubt that. I sold it for ten thousand bucks. It couldn't have been worth more than that if it were the Bayreaux Tapestry."

"Who bought it?"

"Nope, no, no way. I'm not telling. Not that I want to fuel your curiosity, but it'll be best if you don't know. Maybe Quince and that other guy will leave you alone."

Deirdre started to say she was not sure she wanted either of them to leave her alone but wisely held back her reply. The rest of the day went quickly, a steady stream of customers coming in to blow dust off old lamps and look at

the curious bookends Maurine had accumulated over the years. By the time the CLOSED sign went up in the door, Deirdre was exhausted.

"You look a fright," Maurine said. "Let's go grab some food. I'll buy again." Maurine threw her hands up in mock horror. "What am I saying? You should buy tonight. I bought the last time."

"Thanks, Maurine, but just I want to go home. I'm not used to being on my feet all day. And the customers!"

"You did good," Maurine said. "With even the most contrary of them. But are you sure you want to go home?"

Deirdre heard Maurine's unspoken words "right now" tacked on the end of her question. Her friend might be right about being alone, but Deirdre had her fill of humanity for the day. She had always been an introvert and needed to recharge her batteries – alone.

"Another time. Maybe Friday," Deirdre said.

"I'll hold you to it – unless I get a hot date. I do that now and again, you know."

"I'll date again, too. But not now. It's too soon. Sam hasn't even cleared out all his junk," Deirdre said.

"Go clear it out for him. Dump it on the curb. It's all he deserves," Maurine said firmly. She hugged Deirdre, then pushed her out the door. "Go on now. I need to run errands if you're not

coming to dinner with me.”

Deirdre waved goodbye to her friend and got into her car. She hesitated for a moment, staring into the rearview mirror. Had something moved? Deirdre could not tell. She started her car, ground gears and got it into reverse, and wheeled out of her parking spot. Hitting the street, she merged with the traffic and got home somehow. The distance between the antique store and her parking spot behind the apartment seemed to vanish because she kept turning over everything that had happened to her. Sam. Quince. Broderick.

Always dark, brooding, dangerous Broderick. Where had she seen him before? He was so familiar, yet she knew she would never have forgotten him if she had met him before.

She hurried to the back of her apartment building and went to the freight elevator. Although she lived only on the second floor, she had no strength left after a day of work to trudge up the flight of stairs necessary to get home. Tenants were not supposed to use the freight elevator since there was one in the foyer, but Deirdre did not care. Walking around seemed like too much effort. She got in, crossed to the far side and punched the button for the second floor. The elevator shivered and shook, matching the way her muscles felt, then began grinding upward. As the doors opened, she started to step out. Deirdre froze before they got halfway open.

“Good evening, Deirdre,” Broderick said.

Deirdre reacted rather than consciously thought what to do. She stepped forward, put both hands against the man’s thin chest and shoved hard. He looked like a lightweight but moving him was harder than she thought it would be. But her sudden attack took him by surprise and he staggered back, giving her the chance to get back into the elevator. Frantically punching buttons, Deirdre got the elevator doors closing. Then she saw she had inadvertently pressed the button for the top floor rather than returning to the ground floor.

She leaned on the ground floor button, hoping it would reverse the elevator’s direction. It did not.

“Oh, no, no, no,” she moaned as the elevator continued to grind its way inexorably upward. She wondered if she could press the ground floor button and bypass Broderick on the second floor. Impatiently, she waited for the elevator doors to open on the top floor so she could reverse direction.

“No!” She gasped when Broderick stepped into the elevator. “How’d you get up ten flights so fast?”

“You should not try to avoid me, my dear,” Broderick said. His voice sounded like broken glass being crushed to powder under a boot heel. He laid his bony hand on her cheek. She started to

recoil and avoid the touch but found herself unable to move.

Deirdre closed her eyes and experienced a dizziness that swirled about her mind and body and caused her to wobble about.

"You should eat more, my dear," Broderick said. "You have become faint."

"That's what Maurine is always saying, too," Deirdre said. She felt a warmth passing through her body as if she had already made love all night long and was now basking in the warm afterglow. Somehow, she forced open her eyes and stared into those deep, dark pits of Broderick's eyes.

She turned in the circle of his arms so her back was to the still open elevator doors. With all her willpower, she summoned strength and heaved. She threw herself backward out of Broderick's grip. She caught her heel and fell heavily, but she saw the elevator door closing again. This time Broderick was trapped within the elevator cage. Deirdre scrambled to get her feet under her. With luck, he would end up at the ground floor and –

Her hopes were dashed when the elevator doors opened immediately. Broderick stepped out, an unstoppable force clad all in black.

"I am disappointed," Broderick said. "You act as if you do not like me. I want only the best for you."

Deirdre looked around frantically. Broderick cut her off from the stairs leading down. From

what she could tell, these apartments were empty. The entire tenth floor had been undergoing renovation for months so the landlord could turn them into luxury apartments with a view. Some view. Deirdre had checked them out and the best view was of the city center. Lights and smog and noise. But she cared less about how the building owner was going to get rich than she did of saving herself. She found the door leading to the roof and got into the steep stairwell. Slamming the door behind her would slow Broderick. She looked up the stairs and hoped the door to the roof was unlocked. If not, he had her trapped.

She took the steps three at a time and reached the top, gasping for breath. Hand trembling, she turned the knob. Open! She burst out onto the roof, hunting for the fire escape down to the ground. She could go to her car and get the hell away.

“My cell phone,” she said, remembering she had carried it with her. She stared dumbly at her empty hands. Somewhere she had dropped her purse with the phone and all her belongings. Although Deirdre did not know what it might be, there might have been a weapon in the clutter, too.

She ran for the far side of the roof, seeing the iron handholds circling up from the ladder down the building. As she grabbed the cold iron and looked down, she saw two eyes peering up at her.

They were dark and hard.

"You are making me mad, Deirdre," Broderick said. He came up the ladder and advanced on her. All her adrenaline-fired strength faded now as Deirdre backed away from the man.

"How did you get out there so fast?"

"I am very agile and in good condition, in spite of what you seem to think. Perhaps I should show you once more how fit I am."

Deirdre tried to find words. She could not. Trying to scream produced only a choking sound deep in her throat. Her voice was held captive, and her feet were not moving any more. She lifted her hands, balled them into fists and prepared to fight.

"Is that what you want? Really?" Broderick stood two paces from her. Deirdre started to take a swing at him and then lowered her hands. They unclenched and then reached for him. How she wanted him! What had she been thinking of, trying to batter him with her futile blows?

"No," she said in a low voice.

"What do you want?" He came closer with his gliding, boneless stride. She inhaled sharply at his closeness. There was a suggestion of mint about him. Her nostrils flared. It excited her. *He* excited her.

"I want you," she said, stepping closer. Part of Deirdre wanted to cry out in fear and rage. She should run. The greater part caused her to put her

arms around Broderick's neck and pull his head down so she could kiss him.

Her hot lips brushed across his cool ones. The feel thrilled her. Her heart raced faster as she crushed her body against his. Her lips parted as her tongue sneaked out to touch the tip of his. Her heat met his chill. Somehow, this excited her more. She pulled his face down hard to hers in a kiss that spoke of her rampaging emotions. Her passion knew no limits.

His hands moved around behind her, stroking tenderly over her back, moving lower, pressing into her fleshy buttocks. Broderick's fingers began bunching up her skirt. She felt the cool night breeze blowing across the roof along her calves. As he continued to draw up her skirt, she felt the wind whispering over her knees, her thighs and then across her drooling pussy. The cold wind and his clenching hands against her now-bare ass cheeks inflamed her to the point where she could no longer restrain herself.

"Take me. I want you so!"

"And you shall get me. All of what you want. But you have been naughty."

"No, no," Deirdre cried, fearing Broderick would pull back from her in her moment of need. "Don't go. I want you!"

"You were supposed to wear a thong—or nothing." His fingers cut into her flesh as he tore

at her satin panties. She gasped as the elastic waistband cut into her flesh. For a moment, she thought she was going to climax as the panties pulled up hard against her mons. Then Broderick tossed the torn panties away.

"Now," she gasped out. "Now I am naked for you."

"You were supposed to be like this always. Will you forget?"

"No, no, I'll go naked. Commando style."

"Commando?" He peered down at her, his dark eyes ablaze.

"Without panties. Without any underwear." Her brain tumbled up and down, over and under and left her so confused she could hardly form coherent thoughts. All she knew was that she had to have him. He had to possess her totally.

Broderick chuckled.

"I like that. Commando style. So your pussy lips will always be within reach for me."

Deirdre gasped as Broderick reached down and ran his hand over her blood-engorged sex lips. His middle finger curled about and slid deeply into her center. He began stroking in and out, but as thrilling as it was, she wanted more.

"Give it to me," she pleaded.

He moved around her, his finger never leaving its heated, damp sheath between her legs. His thumb pressed into her rigid little clit, and she thought she might get off. But he knew exactly

when to stop. Her body tensed, and her expectations soared, only to fall back at the last possible moment. He pushed her ever higher toward the breaking point emotionally, then allowed her to recover. Deirdre could not complain because she recognized that each time he took her to new highs, without orgasm. Tantalizing her, teasing, showing her things about her physical and emotional responses she had never known before.

She sagged down onto his hand. His probing finger fucked deeper into her, but he prevented her from getting off this way. He had circled her and stood behind her now, his chest pressing into her back. Her ass moved into the circle of his groin, and she felt the hardness there.

"Please, please," she begged. "I want that." She wagged her butt so he would know what she was asking for so earnestly. As she moved her bare flesh against his cloth-imprisoned cock she felt it stir and become even harder.

"I want you to have it, too, when you are ready."

"I'm ready now!" she protested.

"You are ready when I say you are," he said sharply.

Deirdre cried out as if she had been struck. He pulled his pleasuring finger from her and pressed his hand into her belly, holding her close. His

other hand moved around her so once more she was in the circle of his arms. This time they both faced the same direction. Deirdre's vision was blurred, but she looked out over the ten story drop.

A flash of vertigo hit her as he bent her forward over the edge of the roof.

He was going to throw her to her death!

Then she braced herself and knew Broderick was not doing any such thing. He was positioning her properly before entering her from behind. Deirdre braced herself against the edge and looked out into space. The sensation of closeness as he moved behind her contrasted sharply with the feeling that she could fly. All she needed to do was take a step into space and she could . . . soar!

His hands stroked over her belly and worked up over her breasts. Somehow he worked his cool fingers under her blouse and pressed down hard. Although she wore a bra, it was as if it did not exist for Broderick's strong fingers. He caught the hard nubs of her nipples poking into the cups of her bra. The combination of imprisonment and stimulation drove her crazy with need.

"Soon, my darling, soon," Broderick whispered hotly in her ear.

Deirdre could not speak when he felt his naked cock moving between the white half moons of her ass. He touched lightly on her anus and then worked lower, finding the juicy slit that lead

to her molten core. The tip of his dick probed a few times against her trembling, blood-engorged sex lips as he positioned himself. Then he rammed smoothly all the way into her pussy.

At the same instant of penetration, she felt a sharp nip on her earlobe. Buried balls deep within her, his cock pulsed with wanton power. And he sucked at her ear. She knew it must be bleeding, but he was licking and sucking and lapping up every drop as blood drops formed.

Deirdre looked out again and knew she could fly. She leaned forward. His powerful grip on her breasts kept her from falling as she looked straight down almost a hundred feet. The world was so small and insignificant compared to what she felt now.

He pulled back slowly, drawing his thickness from within her. But the lapping at her earlobe continued and sent new electric tingles volting throughout her chest. When the electricity from the ear sucking collided with the warmth building within her loins from the fucking he gave her, Deirdre exploded within.

Her come was enough to cause her to lift her voice and cry so that angels in heaven heard. But she knew only tiny moans escaped her lips although the orgasm was more potent than any she had ever experienced. She had thought Sam was a good lover.

Broderick was a million times better.

He stroked more quickly now, the carnal friction between his cock and her pussy walls mounting. She was pushed inexorably to another come. And she felt completely on fire from between her legs all the way to where he suckled at her earlobe.

She felt a hot exhalation of breath in her ear, then he sucked so hard that she cried out as he drew more and more blood from the tiny bite. Everything crashed together. Her inner muscles clamped down fiercely around his steely cock as orgasm seized her totally. Deirdre was vaguely aware of a distant cry. Broderick was coming, too. This fed her desires. She had gotten him off. She had brought him as much pleasure as he gave her.

Deirdre sagged forward, hands gripping the verge of the roof. As if from a thousand miles away, she heard him say, "Find out the name of the one who purchased the tapestry. Find out and I will come to you again. You will be rewarded if you do as I say."

"I will, I will," she sobbed out. "And I won't wear any panties."

Her answer was Broderick's mocking laughter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“More,” Deirdre pleaded. “Again. I want to feel you . . .” Her words trailed off when she realized it was no longer night. She straightened and looked at her hands. The palms were rubbed raw from where she had leaned against the ragged edge of the roof. Turning slowly, she came out of her daze. Her eyes widened when she stared eastward and saw the sliver of sun creeping up over the horizon.

She sank down to the roof, shaking all over. She had been on the roof all night and had only now come out of her trance. She tried to figure how long she had been here, unmoving, leaning on the edge of the roof and peering down a hundred feet at the ground.

“Eight hours,” she said. “Maybe ten.” It hardly seemed plausible, but she had no other explanation. Her skirt hung in tatters. She reached over and picked up her discarded panties.

Broderick had ripped them apart when he had removed them from her. She dropped the destroyed panties and touched her breasts. They were still sore from the intensity with which he had grabbed them. While he was fucking her.

Deirdre's hand went to her earlobe and touched it. She winced as a needle of pain lanced into her ear. Her fingers came away bloody. The first time he had taken her, he had only nicked her fleshy earlobe. This time he had turned it to hamburger, and it hurt like hell.

"What is going on?" Deirdre wondered aloud. "What the hell is making me behave like this?" She remembered too well how she had tried to run from Broderick when she had seen him outside the elevator. But then she had willingly offered herself to him. She had *wanted* him intimately inside her. She had even hungered to take his dick in her mouth and suck him off. Deirdre laughed without humor. That and a thousand other things had raced through her mind that she wanted to do to him.

They were all sexual. She ought to want to kill him, and she did now. Faced with the man in the flesh, though, turned her completely around. She did not want to kill him, she wanted him to fuck her. Deirdre moaned as she stood. She was sore from what they had done. She hoped he was as achy and stiff as she was.

"Stiff," she said, laughing ruefully. That was the

way she wanted Broderick whenever she saw him. Holding her skirt together the best she could, she went to the stairs and went down them slowly. Peering out at the base of the steps, she saw that no one was stirring yet. She had worried that workers might be busy with the renovation, but it was still too early. She hurried to the freight elevator and took it down to the second floor. Again she worried she might be seen.

Then a new fear clutched at her. She had lost her purse somewhere, and it had her door keys. Deirdre clutched at her skirt and backed away when she saw the apartment door was ajar.

“Broderick,” she said. Deirdre was not sure if she desired him or desired him dead. She went to the door and pushed it open with her foot, looking around. Noises came from the bedroom.

Deirdre grabbed the quilt off the sofa and slung it around her. She was more naked from the waist down than covered without the quilt. This gave her a semblance of decency and security. Going to the bedroom door, she steeled herself for facing Broderick again.

What she saw was totally unexpected.

“You!” She tried not to sneer but failed. “What are you doing here?”

Sam looked up. He had stacked all his clothes on the bed and was cramming what he could into large cardboard boxes piled on the floor.

"Getting my shit."

"I'd have put them out for you," she said. "It's easier to just toss it all out the window."

Sam looked behind him at the partially open window and nodded, as if he had just heard the truth of the universe revealed to him.

"Good idea. Saves hiking up and down those damn stairs."

"Jesus, Sam, you are such a loser." She dropped in a chair and stared at him.

"Me, loser? Look at yourself. What have you been up to? Fucking a wildcat all night long?"

"Oh, please," Deirdre said. She pulled the quilt a little tighter around herself as she turned her legs to one side. No reason to flash him. The sooner Sam was out of her life, the better. "Who was she?"

The question slipped out before she could stop herself.

"She—" Sam began.

"Never mind. It really doesn't matter to me," Deirdre said. She wanted to ask a dozen other questions but got better control over her anger and did not put them into words. She wondered if the bimbo was a better lay? What did she give Sam that he was not already getting? Was it only the thrill of possible discovery that added spice to the lovemaking? In Deirdre's own bed! Or was Sam just a heartless bastard who thought with his dick when he bothered to think at all?

“Are you about done?”

“I need to get this stuff outside,” Sam said. To her surprise, he went to the window and lifted it, then began heaving his cardboard boxes loaded with his clothing out. “That really saves me a bunch of work. Thanks for the idea.”

Deirdre wanted to throw him out after his belongings.

Sam finished pitching his clothing out and then faced her. Deirdre tried to read his expression but could not.

“Why are you such a bitch?”

“Bitch? Me? Me! How dare you? Get out!”

“Deedee,” he said, using his pet name for her, “this is all so stupid. I shouldn’t have been banging her like that when you were on your way home. I apologize for that.”

Deirdre was taken aback by such brazenness.

“You’re apologizing for getting caught, not for screwing her. How many other times have you brought women up here behind my back?”

“You could have joined in. No reason to get so bent. A three-way would have been really cool, you know?”

Deirdre got to her feet and let the quilt slip from around her hips. She was mostly naked from the waist down and did not care. She was cloaked in her indignation and outright anger. Holding it back the whole time she had been with Sam

because she was afraid of making him mad and having him leave her no longer mattered.

"You hurt me, Sam. You lied to me. Heaven alone knows what else you have done behind my back, and I was too stupid to find out about. Get the fuck out of here or I'll lose my temper."

Deirdre felt the crimson tide rising in her throat and knew she was red-faced in her fury. Sam shrugged and brushed past her, looked down at her nakedness and then asked, "Could you loan me fifty bucks until I can get a new place?"

Deirdre made a grab for him, but he was too agile. He slithered out of her reach like a greased weasel and was through the front door before she could recover her balance. Furious, she went to the bedroom window, looked out and saw him going to retrieve his clothes. She slammed the window and locked it. Somehow, this put everything into perspective. She was in control. She was closing off one part of her life and locking that son of a bitch out of it forever.

Deirdre threw herself down on the bed and started to cry. After a few minutes, the tears dried up and she found herself just too mad to do anything but grind her teeth together.

"I loved you, Sam," she said. "Why didn't you love me back?" Even as the words came out, she knew she had never loved Sam. Not for the person but for the security it offered. No more Saturday nights without a date, even if it meant ordering

out for pizza and watching crummy reality shows on television. It had been nice to curl up next to him at night, even if they didn't make love. He had been a security blanket for her. She had not really loved him.

And he certainly had never loved her, not to treat her the way he had.

"You were right about him, Maurine," she said to herself. "I should never have hooked up with him. All he wanted was crash space and a pussy to fuck every now and then. When he found a new one to stick himself in, he didn't need me anymore."

Deirdre sat on the bed, arms wrapped around herself, shivering as if she had caught a chill. But it passed and she felt as if she had just recovered from a long, wearing fever. Deirdre did not feel restored but she felt better, and that was good enough for the moment.

She went to the door, made certain it was locked and chained, then checked the windows. Sure that she was safe and secure, she went to the bathroom, stripped off her tattered clothing and ran her hands over her body. In more than one spot she found scratches and dried blood, as if she had run through thorny underbrush. Memory fought to surface as to how she had gotten the small cuts, but concentrating was not something she could do at the moment.

Turning on the shower, she stuck her hand into the stream and fiddled with the faucet knobs until it was just the right temperature. Only then did she duck inside and edge into the pelting water. Bit by bit she relaxed and moved closer to the shower head. Twisting the dial, she found a pulsating spray that soothed and stimulated at the same time. Deirdre closed her eyes and let the water cascade over her battered body until she felt human again. Thrusting her head entirely under the water got her raven-dark hair ready for shampooing, but she had forgotten to bring the shampoo and conditioner in with her.

Muttering under her breath at having to leave the delightful water, she swiped water from her eyes with her hand and began groping around for the bottles. Something made her look around. An uneasy feeling mounted. She was being watched. She knew it. Her eyes darted around and then to the small frosted window on the wall adjacent to the shower.

"Who's there?" Her cry might have made the peeping Tom leave or it might have been nothing more than a shadow passing across the window. But the darkness vanished.

Shivering again, Deirdre grabbed the bottles of shampoo and conditioner and quickly washed her hair. The relaxed feeling had passed. It might have been a shadow from some tree limb she had never seen before. That window was high up and hard

to reach from below because of the landscaping. She was certain pyracantha bushes with impossibly long thorns grew below the window and stretched the length of the building.

By the time she found her favorite fluffy towel and dried off, she was feeling worlds better. An occasional glance at the bathroom window showed nothing. Deirdre shrugged it off. Nerves. It wasn't as if nothing stressful had happened. Oh, no. Only breaking up with her boyfriend and then the strange encounters with Quince and Broderick.

The thought of Broderick made her feel a bit queasy. There was something about him she had to remember. She had been on the roof for some reason. She might have even spent the night there. Deirdre touched a few of the scratches and knew she had to put antiseptic on them. But how had she gotten them? They looked like scratches from running through thorn bushes. Like the pyracanthas below her bathroom window. But that was silly. She had spent the night on the roof because—

Because what?

Her thoughts were too jumbled to get straight. Something had happened, and she had wanted it to. That much she was positive about. Humming to herself, she dressed in a denim skirt and found a decent T-shirt to go with it. Nothing outrageous but nothing too conservative, either. She looked

down and saw her nipples poking impudently against the cotton front. It had been years since she had forgotten to put on a bra. Whenever she went out braless it was because she chose to. This time she had just . . . forgotten.

Deirdre started to pull off the T-shirt, put on a bra and leave. Then she stopped.

“Why not go like this?” She felt free, freer than she had since she had met Sam. The gentle swaying of her breasts and the way the soft fabric rubbed over her nipples reinforced her sense of being unconfined. Then she realized she had forgotten to put on panties, too. That was something that never happened. She went to her dresser drawer, opened it and looked at the neatly folded clothing inside.

“No thong,” she said. “So, no underwear.”

Why she had come to this decision baffled her but it felt right. As right as anything she had ever done in her life.

After brushing her still-damp hair, she grabbed her purse, made certain she had her cell phone and then left the apartment. As the door closed, she wondered if she would ever return. It simply did not matter to her anymore. Before Sam had been such a cheating dickhead, she had always gone into the apartment thinking of it as home. No longer. Now it was just a place to hang her clothes. If something else came along, fine. She would go with the flow. She would be a free spirit. She

would not care what anyone else thought.

As Deirdre stepped out of the foyer into the bright Indiana autumn, a gust of wind whipped up under her skirt and caressed her sex lips. The shiver that passed through her was delicious, one of a kind and something that had been absent from her life far too long. She should have stopped wearing the panties and bra a long time ago.

Deirdre got into her car, rolled down the windows and let the wind slip through her hair, drying it as she drove. She sang along with the radio, then got bored and punched buttons randomly in a vain attempt to find something that interested her. By the time she was ready to give up, she was slipping into her parking place behind the antique store.

She bounced in and waved jauntily to Maurine, who looked up. The woman's eyes went wide, then narrowed.

"Look at you, girl," Maurine said. "You look like the cat that ate the canary. Or maybe some canary ate your pussy?"

"Oh, right, ruin this fine day by being crude," Deirdre said, tossing her purse under the counter. She jumped up onto the counter and crossed her legs. The nakedness beneath the denim made her feel . . . naughty. And wild.

"Something's changed," Maurine pointed out.

"Can't I be happy for a change? I got rid of

Sam. Threw his ass out. Along with all his clothes. He won't be darkening my door again."

"Good riddance," Maurine grumbled. "I hope you learned something."

"Like what?"

"Like don't let leeches into your bed. They'll suck you dry."

"That's not so bad," Deirdre said, laughing. "But it's hard to do."

"You *are* in a mood today," Maurine said. The woman looked more closely at Deirdre. "There's a glow about you. Your skin is so white. Like fine bone china. I never noticed that before. And your baby blues are sparkling. Whatever happened – and it's got to be something other than cutting that loser boyfriend of yours loose – I wouldn't mind a double dose of it myself."

"You should be so lucky," Deirdre said. Vague memories fluttered through her mind. The roof. Looking down ten stories and fearing she would fall, only to fly. And the feel of a cock moving in from behind her. A tight knot formed deep within her as her pussy began to water. Uncomfortable now, she jumped off the counter and glanced back, hoping she had not left a betraying wet spot. She was excited and had no idea why.

"I know what it is," Maurine said. "It's that blond fellow. Quince."

"Quince?" For a moment Deirdre was confused. She had a hard time remembering who Maurine

meant. Then she shook her head. "Oh, him. Nope, haven't seen him."

"I can actually believe you from the sound of your voice, but something's got you all worked up. And I haven't even told you what I found." Maurine reached into a folder on the counter and pulled out a sheet of notebook paper. She rattled it a couple times, then handed it to Deirdre. "The name and address where the Garson heir is. The house has already been sold, but I tracked the woman down. Beth Underwood."

Deirdre stared at the address. It was just out of town, not that far from the store. Her expression convinced Maurine.

"Go on, I can run the store without you. Go talk to the woman and find out what you want to know."

"The tapestry," Deirdre said. A voice deep inside her head urged her to leave immediately, but she hesitated. "Are you sure you can keep the home fires burning?"

"As slow as it's been the past week, the fire wouldn't have to be more than the flame from a cigarette lighter. Go on. I saw the way you wanted to ask questions."

"Find answers," Deirdre corrected. Somehow, determining the provenance of the tapestry mattered more to her than anything else. She looked up at her friend. "What about the buyer?"

"First things first. If you ask your questions of Beth Underwood, you might not want to go to the ends of the earth tracking down the tapestry. It might be nothing."

"You're hoping the buyer will get more from you, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," Maurine said in mock disgust. "I don't want potential buyers annoyed by new-hire clerks unless it's absolutely necessary. Now get on out of here. I've got work to do."

"I thought you said —"

"All right, all right," Maurine said, "I've got work to think about. Be back before closing, and we can go grab a bite to eat."

"You just want to hear all about what I find out."

"I didn't just fall off the turnip truck," Maurine said.

She was talking to Deirdre's back. This time, Deirdre did not bother to turn on the radio. Leaving the car windows down was stimulation enough for her as she began working on what to ask. It was hardly twenty miles to the woman's house, a small cinder block house not far from a municipal golf course. Deirdre pulled into the driveway. A Buick was parked there, a nice car but nothing too expensive. It went with the house and its neat, unpretentious lawn.

Deirdre rang the bell. A short woman, years older than Deirdre, answered. She pushed back a

strand of graying hair and smiled.

"You must be the one Maurine told me to expect."

"Ms. Underwood?"

"And you must be Deirdre. Call me Beth." She stepped back and let Deirdre into the house. The living room matched the exterior. Neat, plain, with only a few more ornate paintings on the walls that looked out of place.

"From my grandparents' estate," Beth said. "They fancied themselves to be collectors, but they were more like accumulators. If something caught their fancy, they bought it."

"That's better than being a snob about it," Deirdre said, looking at a painting. "Is this an original?"

"I think it is, but Dali produced thousands and sold them like yard goods." There was a touch of irony in Beth's words.

"You think your grandparents were defrauded?"

"Oh, not at all. My grandfather had a good eye for fakes. It's just that that one and the others aren't worth more than the memories. They got it on their thirtieth wedding anniversary trip to Spain. If I tried to sell it, I might get a few hundred for it. It's worth more, and my husband lets me keep it up."

"He doesn't like it?" Deirdre had to admit it was glaringly out of place with the furniture and

other decorations.

"He hates it. He threatens to throw tomatoes at it, but he won't."

"The price of true love," Deirdre said, feeling a momentary pang.

"That's it, Deirdre," Beth said. "What is it you were most interested in?" She motioned to a chair across from a straight backed cherry wood chair where Beth sank down. She saw Deirdre's expression. "Bad back," she explained. "Soft chairs make it almost impossible for me."

"The tapestry," Deirdre said, getting to the point. "Tell me about it."

"Oh, that," Beth said, smiling. She got a distant expression. "That was their pride and joy. I'm not sure when they got it. Perhaps on their tenth anniversary, since that was the only other trip they ever took to Europe. They found it in Germany somewhere."

"Do you remember where exactly?" Deirdre felt her pulse accelerating. The tapestry! She was close to finding out why Quince and Broderick were so intent on getting it. She just knew it.

"Bavaria, perhaps. I don't know. My mother was hardly four when they went, and she was always vague when it came to talking about them. I do remember my brother and me being left with our grandparents when our parents went on vacation. Neither of us liked them much, so that's what stuck in my mind rather than them prattling

on about vacations and trinkets.”

“Sorry,” Deirdre said. “But this Bavarian tapestry, what did it look like?”

“Hadn’t you seen it? I thought Maurine had shown it to you.”

“I started work for her after it was sold. It intrigued me, but it was already out of the store. I wanted to know more.”

“That sounds like the Garson curse,” Beth said, smiling. “That’s what I always called it, at any rate. My grandfather had a curiosity bump a foot tall. Never was a mystery he wasn’t interested in solving. But the tapestry is hardly a mystery. It was a well enough done tapestry, about five feet long and perhaps half that tall. They kept it on the wall of their bedroom.”

“What was woven on it? What did it depict?”

“They never let me or my brother into the room, but we would sneak in now and then. I seem to remember trees. A very peaceful forest scene.” Beth blushed a little. “And in the woods were people, well, being people.”

This took Deirdre aback.

“You mean they were . . . ?”

“Oh, yes, they were copulating. All of them. Many, many of them. Couples, trios, more. It was all cleverly worked into the scene so it wasn’t obvious, but some of the things they were doing—well, I’ve never done most of that, and Paul and I

have been married over twenty years.”

Deirdre pondered this. She had not expected the tapestry to have pornographic content but then she had not known what to expect. Was this enough for both Quince and Broderick to fight over it? Possibly to the death, from the way Quince talked?

“Were your grandparents interested in such things?”

“Not at all,” Beth said. “That was what surprised me. My grandmother actually snapped at me when she caught me trying to touch it once. That was not like her at all. She had other ways of being unpleasant. Both of them.”

“They were close?”

“Oh, yes,” Beth Underwood said. “I’ve never seen a man and woman more in love to the exclusion of anyone else. I should have such a marriage, not that I’m complaining. But sometimes Paul gets on my nerves. I never saw that with my grandparents. Ever.”

Deirdre wondered if they were simply good at hiding their arguments. The Garsons were from another generation, after all. Two or even three generations back men and women did things differently.

A sexy tapestry? Deirdre almost laughed aloud. Perhaps things were not that different then. Instead of X-rated DVDs, the Garsons enjoyed an erotic medieval tapestry.

"There were other tapestries," Beth went on, "but my grandfather was not interested in tracking them down."

"A set? How many others?"

"He never said. Maybe he didn't know," Beth said. "I got the impression there were at least four or even five. All had been in some monastery in the Alps."

"Do you know the name of the monastery?"

"I'm sorry, I don't. I wish I had a picture of the tapestry to show you, but I don't. Somehow, selling it was not a great loss." Beth glanced toward the Dali. "There were other memories to keep, and Paul and I needed the money." She sat a little straighter in the chair. Deirdre guessed the money from the tapestry sale might have gone toward doctor's bills.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the tapestry?"

"Not really. My mother once said something about it being a gift to my grandparents from some Italian count."

"Italian count and a German monastery?"

Beth shrugged. "You know how it is. Family tall tales can become the truth, or at least the truth as far as younger generations know. My mother and her parents never got along too well."

"Neither did you and the Garsons?"

"It might have because of all the stories my

mother told about them while she was growing up. Today we'd call it benign neglect. Then, well, my grandparents were just too much in love with each other to care about anything else going on around them."

Deirdre had enough to think about. How she would track down a single monastery in Germany or an unnamed Italian count was beyond her. At least she had learned the tapestry was part of a set, even if she had not learned how large that set might be. It was a starting point for answering her questions.

She thanked Beth Underwood and took her leave, drove slowly back to the antique shop, and not once did she feel the need to sing along with the radio. Deirdre was too lost in thought for that.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“You’ll go blind doing that,” Maurine said, looking at Deirdre hunched over the computer keyboard.

“No, no, I won’t,” Deirdre said. “I’ve been doing a lot of different searches. Different search engines, new –”

“Stop!” barked Maurine. “I can get into my online bank account and bid on stuff on eBay. That’s it. That’s all I want to know. Otherwise, the Internet is a black hole for my time.”

“You should be able to do searches to find merchandise for the store,” Deirdre said. Her eyes fixed on the screen and the long strip of text that slowly paraded past. She had found a German university mentioning tapestries. She did not understand German but only scanned the site for pictures, on the off chance she could find what the Garson tapestry looked like. A pornographic tapestry such as Beth Underwood had described

ought to be obvious.

"I'll let you do it. I need to get some work out of you."

"Sorry, Maurine. I didn't mean to lose myself in this the way I did," Deirdre said. Reluctantly, she pushed back from the computer set up in the corner of the antique store. From what she could tell, Maurine did not use it for pricing or hunting but only for what she had claimed. Financial checking and surfing on auction sites to find items she wanted. The antique store owner did not even sell online. "You could make a lot more money by putting photos of your merchandise up for people to see. They can be anywhere in the world."

"Just what I need, to be a worldwide powerhouse of antique selling."

"You could double your income." Deirdre saw this was more a lure than anything else she had said. "It's not that hard to do. And you don't have to eat the shipping costs. Make the junk they buy one price, plus shipping and handling. You might make more off that than the actual item."

"I don't sell junk," Maurine said haughtily. "I *buy* junk and sell antiques."

Deirdre had to laugh.

"I found a lot about the tapestry. While I can't be certain, the Garsons may have gotten the tapestry from Count Luigi Dicosta. The count died in 1959. I'm not sure when the Garsons went to Germany, but it was a long time ago."

"This is like a treasure hunt, isn't it? You dig around online and find a place to throw up dirt like a dog digging a hole to bury a bone."

"I'm not looking for the loose dirt. It's the bone I want."

"Silly you," Maurine said. "It's the boner I want. But then you're getting it from Quince, aren't you? He's the reason you look so happy all the time."

"Quince? Not him," Deirdre said, shaking her head. "There's something about him that I don't like."

"He's dangerous. You can't help but be attracted to that. I know you," Maurine said. She sighed. "I know me, too. I'd love to get him horizontal and find out exactly how hard-on dangerous he could be."

Deirdre started to say something more but memories crowded in and confused her with flashing images and dark shadows that floated like menacing black fog.

"Broderick," she said softly.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know. But that's wrong. I think I do. I know I do but every time I concentrate on remembering, it slips away. Like holding onto a greased pig."

"As if you ever tried to do that—unless Sam was kinkier than I ever thought."

Deirdre wanted nothing to do with Sam. Even thinking of him made her stomach turn sour. She reached out and pressed the Enter key to bring up a short biography on Count Luigi Dicosta. There was not much. He owned a small estate in the north of Tuscany. He might have been rich or he could have been nothing more than a pauper with an estate he could not afford to maintain. Not a single word in the short biography mentioned tapestries, though. For all she knew, Count Luigi might have been the biggest dealer in medieval tapestries in all the world. Or at least Europe.

Information on what she thought was the right set of tapestries she found in other places. However, the hints were tantalizing crazy-making.

"There were five. Beth Underwood didn't know for certain, but she said there were more than the tapestry her grandparents had."

"Don't you go quitting your job," Maurine warned, "and become a detective. I need you more than CSI ever could."

"Don't sweat it," Deirdre said. "I like working here."

Deirdre leaned back and thought about what Beth had said. The way her grandparents had kept the tapestry in their bedroom had to mean something. Pornographic pictures aside, there had to be an esthetic appeal. Deirdre wished she could find a drawing or photograph of the tapestry – of any of the five in the set.

“Why don’t you go catalog the rest of the merchandise from that estate? I’ve been so busy I haven’t had a chance,” Maurine said.

“Busy? You were complaining about how slow it’s been in the shop.”

“I always find something to gripe about,” Maurine confided. “Too busy, not busy enough. Never just the right flow of cash and customers.” She peered over Deirdre’s shoulder at the information about the tapestries, then shrugged and turned away. Deirdre knew she ought to get to work on something that mattered more to her boss.

Reluctantly, she pushed away from the computer and went to the back room. Her hand touched the knob on the door and began to shake. Something about the storeroom caused her to tremble. Quince had mentioned something.

“Broderick,” she muttered. With a sudden surge of courage, she threw open the door and stepped inside. The light went on revealing the dusty expanse of goods waiting to find new owners. Deirdre fixed her eyes on the pile of merchandise Maurine had bought at the Garson estate sale. It was by the barred door leading into the alley.

“Where Broderick is,” she said, her voice trembling as much as her hand. Deirdre closed her eyes for a moment and composed herself. It was

so hard remembering, but it was all so close, so very, very close to rising to the top of her memory. Something about Broderick in the alley had frightened her.

She pressed her legs together as she realized she was beginning to turn wet. Something about the mere name of Broderick aroused her. And she couldn't remember!

Deirdre pushed shut the door and went to the stacks from the estate. With only a quick glance in the direction of the barred door, she started working through the newly purchased goods. After a few minutes, she realized she had already worked through much of the boxes. Knives, swords, daggers, all were familiar.

"Quince," she said, struggling to put him in this room. It seemed that she had worked alongside him looking for something about the tapestry. Deirdre broke out in sweat as she worked until the T-shirt was plastered to every curve of her body. She looked down at her breasts and saw the contours. It was as if she had entered a wet T-shirt contest—and won. She smiled.

"Broderick would like this," she said. Then fear seized her. Broderick? Faint wisps of memory of his hands pressing intimately into her breasts returned. She felt warm all over—and remembered his cool hands pressing into her hot flesh.

"What's going on?" she moaned out.

Determined to forget everything that troubled her, Deirdre began working with a passion that was soon real. The material from the Garson estate fascinated her. Beth Underwood's grandparents had been more astute purchasers than their granddaughter thought. Much of the art deco statues and lamps would fetch good prices. Again she wondered why Maurine refused to go online with all this. She might sell any of the Erte prints in a book for enough to cover all her expenses in buying the estate material. Deirdre examined the prints and knew they were first-rate. Not originals, only prints, but good ones.

When Maurine called to her that it was closing, Deirdre had completed her inventory.

"What'd you find?"

"A lot of great stuff, Maurine," she said, wiping away the sweat on her forehead, then looking around for somewhere to dry her hand. She hesitantly used the denim skirt stretched so tightly across her thighs. Her outfit would have to be washed anyway.

"Anything about the other tapestries you discovered?"

"Nothing that Count Luigi might have given them," Deirdre admitted. "But you can score a young fortune off much of the artwork. They were a lot better picking and choosing than Beth Underwood said."

"All she wanted was the Dali," Maurine said. "That and a couple other prints of 'Dogs Playing Poker' quality. Glad to hear I'm going to be rich. Let's go to dinner."

Deirdre tried to peel the T-shirt from her flesh and found it was almost glued in place.

"Oh, Maurine, I have to get cleaned up. It's dirty back here, and I can't go out like this."

"Run on home, change and meet me. I'm starving for more than food," Maurine said. "I need some company."

"Let me give you a rain check," Deirdre said. "I feel positively awful." To emphasize her point, she sneezed. She did not have to fake it. Her head felt like it would explode because her sinuses were so clogged up.

"I need a fan back here," Maurine said, looking around. "Okay, I'll let you go this time."

"You're a dear," Deirdre said, going to hug her friend. Maurine hastily backpedaled and shook her head.

"You *really* need to get cleaned up, girl," Maurine said. "No offense, but you are right about needing a bath. Take a good, long one. With bubbles."

"I'll even let my rubber ducky float around," Deirdre promised. She found a rag and wiped her hands off, only to find she had smeared them with more grime. Deirdre grabbed her purse and left through the rear door. She kept the car windows

rolled down all the way home, although it had turned downright cold out. Autumn had slipped away and winter was boldly moving in. Before long, there would be snow on the ground.

Deirdre dashed to apartment, got to the foyer and looked up the stairs to the second floor. She had gone up so many times she could not remember but she looked over at the elevator. Why take the elevator?

“Because Broderick will be waiting for me,” she said as if she were in a trance. She pressed the button and the elevator doors opened quickly. Deirdre caught her breath. She expected to see—what?

She reached down and tweaked her own nipples, feeling their hardness pulsing frantically. Warmth spread throughout her chest and down into her pussy because of Broderick.

“Broderick?” The name came to her lips more easily now, but she fought to keep it from fading. It was as if someone used an eraser on her memories and had done a poor job, leaving smudges behind. “Broderick?” Deirdre reached down and pressed her palms down between her legs. The denim skirt turned damp as she massaged herself.

She snapped out of the trance and looked around guiltily. There was no reason for her to act like this because Broderick wanted her to.

"He *wants* me to? How stupid is that?" Deirdre guiltily took her hands away from her hidden sex and stepped into the elevator. The door closed behind her. Her hand reached out. She hesitated. All she had to do was press the 2 button. She almost pressed the button that would take her to the top floor. Why would she ever want to go there? The landlord had told her the apartments there were being renovated and would not be fit for occupancy for another few weeks.

Her finger stabbed down hard on the button that would take her to the second floor. The elevator shivered and shook, then began its quick climb. She usually walked up the stairs for the exercise but something had drawn her to the elevator tonight. She quickly left and hurried to her apartment. Fumbling for a key, she eventually got the door open. Deirdre had turned suddenly very clumsy. It was a relief for her to slip inside, close and lock the door behind her.

Trembling, she dropped her purse and keys to the table by the door.

"I need a drink," she said. Deirdre jumped a foot when a voice answered.

"What kind? Beer? Mixed drink?"

She swung around and stared at Quince, standing indolently in the doorway to her bedroom. He leaned heavily, one shoulder against the doorjamb and a bottle of Sam's beer in his hand.

"How'd you get in?"

"This beer tastes like shit. I thought you had better taste."

"Take it and get the hell out. How'd you get in? You broke in?" Deirdre could not keep her thoughts straight. She was startled to see anyone in her apartment, much less Quince. To have him badmouth the beer was something that pushed her over the edge.

"It wasn't hard. You need better locks on the door."

"That's the landlord's doing. He has to get in," Deirdre said, not sure why she was defending herself like this. She swallowed, got her courage up and said, "You broke in. I'm calling the cops."

"After that stunt the other night, how long do you think it'll take them to get here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Naked nine-one-one. Sounds like a new TV show."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Deirdre saw a change come over Quince. His expression turned to one of concern. He put down the beer and came toward her. She backed up but found herself pressed hard against the closed and locked door. She was trapped.

"He really did a number on you, didn't he?"

"Who?"

"Broderick, dammit! He's had you again, hasn't

he? That's the way he works best. He can scramble up your head and erase memories. What did he tell you to forget?"

"If I forgot, how . . ." Deirdre's words trailed off. Tiny sparks deep within flared into blinding light. The blocks Broderick had put on her memory broke apart. "Oh, no. He fucked me! Twice!"

"You know more than that. You know what he asked and what you told him. He wanted to know about the tapestry. What did you tell him?"

"I don't know that much. Didn't then," she amended, not sure why she should do anything but call the police. But Quince was right. She had been stark naked when the police had come to her aid before. The cell phone was still in her hand. She had begun dialing late at night and had finished early in the morning. Broderick had stolen the entire night from her—and he had fucked her.

Coldness clutched at Deirdre's heart. He had not only fucked her, she had desired him more than she had ever wanted a man in her life. She had begged to do things for him, to him, that she had never considered before. Broderick did more than jumble up her memory to suit himself. He provoked desire in her.

"How does he do it?"

"You don't know?"

Deirdre shook her head.

Quince stepped closer. She caught the scent of his body, of his maleness. His arms caused the seams of his shirt to strain. Tonight he wore a dark brown knit shirt that stretched across his broad chest. Dark jeans and boots were all Deirdre noticed before Quince kissed her. She tried to resist and then found herself melting into the strong circle of his arms. Her lips tasted his, and her heart raced away with itself.

Whatever Broderick had done to her forced her to want him. Deirdre knew her desire for Quince was all hers. She wanted him. All of him.

Her fingers clutched fiercely at his back, pulling him in closer. She felt the play of his muscles against her body and desired him even more.

The crush of their lips abated as she opened her mouth just enough to let his tongue come questing in. Their tongues dueled and stroked and then began darting back and forth in an erotic dance that caused her to gasp for breath.

"Oh, Quince," she whispered. "This isn't right."

"I'm not forcing you," he said harshly. Quince tried to back away. Deirdre refused to let him go.

"I remember so much now. I know Broderick made me. Hypnotized me somehow into doing what he wanted."

"He's a master. He's had a lot of practice," Quince said with what she was coming to think of as his usual bitterness.

"Forget him," Deirdre said. "Forget him." She knew what she needed. Sam had been a fool to throw away what they had. She would have stayed with him forever if he had not flaunted his affair with that bimbo. Quince was not like Sam. Or Broderick. There was a steel center to Quince that drew her powerfully.

Then she felt something else steely and hard pressing into her leg. She curled her right leg around his thigh and began moving up and down on him, smearing the wetness leaking from within her as she felt his cock getting harder and harder. Because of her. Because he wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

She kissed him again. Really kissed him. They were both gasping for air when they broke away.

"This wasn't what I expected," Quince said.

"Disappointed?"

He showed her that he was as eager for what she offered as any man ever in her life. His hands, warm and strong, slid under her dirty T-shirt and peeled it away from her skin. She had sweat so much it had glued to her flesh, but the way Quince pulled it free sent new shivers of arousal into her.

She gasped, closed her eyes and almost sank to the ground when his hands cupped her breasts. He caught the hard pink nipples and then began twisting them to and fro like knobs on a radio. He found her frequency quickly. He pressed down hard with his palms. Deirdre rose onto her toes.

Sensation filled her like liquid flowing into a glass. She reached down and put her hands over his, hidden under her T-shirt.

"I want you," she said in a choked voice. Truth rang in her words. Quince had saved her from the black fog the first night they had met—he had rescued her from Broderick. She remembered how he had come to her in the storeroom of the antique store and the pair of them had gone through the Garson estate merchandise—and again Quince had kept Broderick from her. He had done as much to protect her as anyone could.

She still had fallen to Broderick's hypnotic spell twice.

"You know it all now, don't you?" Quince kissed her ear, then drew back. "He bit your ear. He took your blood."

"I have scratches all over," Deirdre said, suddenly fearful. She tugged at her T-shirt and quickly stood naked to the waist in front of Quince. "See the scratches? I thought I'd fallen into a thorn bush."

"He scratched you all over your body," Quince said grimly. "The son of a bitch!"

"Don't talk of him," she urged. "Don't." Deirdre clung to him. Her hands slid down his broad back and went lower, to the thick slabs of his ass. Quince tensed and she felt the ripple of his powerful muscles. Deirdre began working to get

his jeans free.

"Is this really what you want?" He asked but never gave her a chance to answer. Quince bent over, caught her under the knees and around the shoulders and easily lifted her off the floor. She was in his arms, hers around his neck.

As he carried her to the bedroom, he bent over. His hot breath gusted across her aroused nipples. Then he lightly licked. Electricity jolted her at every touch of his lips. When he began sucking, Deirdre thought she was going to come.

She hardly knew when he lowered her to the bed she had vowed to never sleep in again. Somehow, that vow dissolved as her passion grew. She lifted her hips off the bed as he worked on her skirt and pulled it free. She was glad Broderick had ordered her not to wear anything under her clothing. Being naked for Quince as quickly as possible was important.

He caught his breath as he gazed down on her nakedness.

"You're beautiful," he said in a husky voice.

"I'm not. I'm too fat. I'm—" Deirdre never got out another word. He went down on her, his mouth pressing into her raven-dark bush. His tongue licked slowly up one sex lip and down the other before parting them. He caught the rigid flaps between his teeth one at a time and gently gnawed. Every touch of his teeth caused her hips to rise off the bed. She crammed her crotch down

into his face.

His tongue slid easily into her moist interior. He began whirling his tongue about within her pussy. He touched every single square inch of her trembly inner tunnel until she tensed, trying to clamp down on his slithery oral organ.

“More,” she gasped out. “Do me.”

“I’ll give you more,” he said, looking up at her. Deirdre’s eyes were blurred, but she saw him looking up at her, her breasts framing his handsome face. His close-cropped blond head disappeared as he burrowed back and began eating her pussy. He lapped and licked until she was thrashing about on the bed, unable to speak coherently.

Deirdre fought to keep from abandoning all her inhibitions. She hardly knew Quince. He had broken into her apartment and now he was tongue fucking her. And she wanted more!

Her legs pressed firmly into either side of his head until he reached up and forced her legs wider. Like some primal force of nature, he rose up until he towered over her. She opened her legs even more in wanton invitation. He reached down and finished the job she had begun. His jeans dropped down and let his erection come snapping out, long and hard and desirable.

He gave her no chance to appreciate the sight. He sank on top of her, his body pressing her down

hard into the bed. His hips moved slowly. She felt the purpled knob atop his cock press into the cunt lips he had kissed and licked only seconds before. Then he sank balls deep into her heated core.

For a long minute, they hung suspended in time and space. He filled her to overflowing. She tensed her strong inner muscles and clamped down firmly on him. She felt every contour and ridge along his entire buried manhood. Then, no matter how hard she tried, she could not hold him within her.

He drew back until only the plum-tip of his cock remained within her. He stroked back, filling her once more. Over and over he repeated this, building speed. Deirdre clutched at him and wondered how she had failed to find him before. They were soul mates. They were meant for one another.

Quince bent over her, looking down into her eyes. He watched as he moved his hips with sureness.

Deirdre ran her hands up and down his upper arms, then closed her eyes as a tidal wave of emotion flooded over her. She was carried up and away from her own body, even as she was held captive to the sensations he released within her. She gasped as she came. The next thing she knew, Quince was lying beside her on the bed, his arms around her, keeping her safe.

She snuggled closer, her head against his chest.

She heard the strong beating of his heart. Her nostrils flared at the scent of his body. She liked it and moved closer.

“You never answered me,” she said.

“About what?”

“Broderick. How does he hypnotize me? I don’t like that. How can I stop it?”

“You can’t,” Quince said. “He’s a vampire.”

Deirdre sat bolt upright in bed and stared at him. Her heart jumped into her throat when she realized Quince was not joking.

## CHAPTER NINE

Sunlight woke Deirdre. She stirred, murmured and rubbed her cheek against a man's hairy chest. For a moment, she was taken back months. She started to whisper Sam's name, then came fully awake. Sam was gone. She sat up in bed, the sheet dropping from her. It took only an instant for her to see that she was naked and so was the man beside her in bed.

"Quince," she said, everything rushing back to her. They had made love all night long. They must have because she was sore, and it was not just from finding new and different positions. Rubbing herself produced a soft warmth that crept throughout her. This was something she had wanted – and which she had gotten.

"Umm?" The man stirred, then his strangely colored eyes popped open alertly. Or were they colored at all? Deirdre could not tell. In the morning light they appeared gray, but she had seen them with gold highlights and even blue,

mirroring her own. Now Quince's eyes were indescribable. Just like the feelings still rampaging about inside her.

"You said he was a vampire. I remember that. You told me, then you distracted me and we, we—"

"We fucked our brains out," Quince said. "You're quite athletic. I didn't think it would be that good."

"Well," Deirdre said, grabbing for the sheet to pull up and cover her chest. "Thanks for nothing."

Quince's strong fingers twined through the sheet and kept her from hiding herself. He grinned and she melted inside. Or was it melting as much as it was catching on fire again? Deirdre was too confused to know what was going on.

"If you call that nothing, I want to stick around to see what you call something," he said. He tugged a bit more and pulled the sheet from her fingers. He reached out. She tensed, thinking he was going to make a grab for her breasts. He surprised her. His hand pressed gently into her belly before stroking slowly back and forth.

"All right, it was something. A little something," she said, not wanting to admit it had been the best sex of her life. She had wasted far too long staying with Sam and knew now what she had been missing.

She looked down where the blanket covered Quince's midsection and saw something poking

up to form a tent. He was getting a hard-on just touching her. Deirdre had to reluctantly admit she was getting hot watching him slowly get an erection. Reaching out and pouncing on it, or sucking on his cock, or any of a dozen other things flashed through her mind.

Then she remembered.

"Broderick is a vampire? You're joking, right?"

"No." The simple flat denial sent a chill through her. Whatever arousal she had experienced a second ago vanished.

"He . . . he bit me!" She began frantically searching her body for the scratches, then touched her earlobe where Broderick had chewed so eagerly. "I'm going to be a vampire, too! I don't want to be!"

"Good, it's hell being a blood sucker," Quince said. His voice took on a curious mixture of emotions. Hatred and loathing were there. Deirdre got that clearly. But something else was alloyed with the description. Respect or admiration? Possibly, but she did not think so. It was more like love gone wrong, like she felt about Sam.

"But Broderick *bit* me!"

"Don't believe everything you see in movies. A vampire's bite doesn't turn you into one of them. Nobody knows what creates a vampire, but they thrive on the misinformation. It wouldn't surprise me if some of them weren't script writers out in Hollywood so they can generate fear. There's

nothing more they like than to cause people to fear them.”

“But they drink blood.”

“Of course they do. They’d drink it like a Big Gulp if they ever had the chance, but they control themselves. Not out of any liking for humans. They hate us. They know what would happen if they went on a blood-engorged rampage of binge drinking. We’d finally wake up and realize the danger.”

“We’d kill them all?”

“Every last bloodsucking one of them,” Quince said. Again Deirdre caught the mixture of fear and love. Love? That made no sense. Quince was alive and vital. He was warm and he had responded so completely when they had fucked.

Made love. Deirdre had to change it mentally. She and Sam had fucked. There was physical release but no emotional bond. With Quince it was the complete package. Or it had been. Now she felt him drawing away from her because of everything he told her about vampires.

“They’re dead, though? Like in the movies?”

“That’s right. Because they’re dead, they don’t need to eat. They don’t need the blood to stay alive. It’s like some ugly, sick dessert treat. What makes it all the more delectable for them is playing with humans before drinking.”

Quince stared hard at her.

"He screwed around with my mind," Deirdre said.

"He screwed more than that," Quince said. Now there was no hint of admiration for the vampires. Only stark hatred dripped from his words.

"Yes," she said, getting angry. "So I won't become a vampire. How did he hypnotize me?"

"That's some weird power they do have. They can't change into bats and fly around, they don't need to sleep in coffins filled with cemetery dirt, and they can go out in the sunlight even if they don't much like it."

"That night when we met the first time," Deirdre said. "Broderick had turned into a black mist. He was coming after me until you rescued me."

She reached down and put her hand on his chest. She felt the strong, steady beat of a human heart there. His flesh was warm and his heart beat powerfully. Quince was no vampire.

"The mind power. He wanted you to think black fog was coming after you. He wanted to hide. Hell, he just wanted to practice. There's no way of telling what goes on in his warped mind."

"How old is he?"

"I don't know for certain. He might be two or three hundred years old. From things he has said, he's at least a hundred."

"How do you know him?"

Quince jerked away from her hand and sat up, feet on the floor as he faced away from her. The sun slanted through the window and bathed him in its warmth like a spotlight.

“Let’s just say I want to drive a stake through his black heart.”

“That kills vampires?”

“No, that doesn’t kill them. I meant it figuratively. He has to be decapitated.”

“His head cut off?” Deirdre experienced a sudden panic at the notion of Broderick headless. Somehow, she was certain his severed head would continue to grin through those thin, cruel lips of his, mocking her.

“I have to catch him first.”

“You said vampires aren’t afraid of the sun. They don’t burst into flame or turn to ash?”

“More movie shit,” he said harshly. Quince got to his feet, bent and gave Deirdre a good look at his tightly muscled butt. She found it hard to juggle two trains of thought at the same time. She wanted Quince in bed with her again, but she had to find out about Broderick. The claim that he was a vampire was too fantastic, even if did explain her lapses in memory.

And why she had desired him so. Broderick had forced her with his hypnotic spell to make love to him.

At least, that’s what Deirdre hoped was true.

She remembered seeing Broderick and feeling something stir within her. He was a dominant man—vampire! For a moment, Deirdre thought she would be sick as she remembered the way his hands had stroked over her, touching her, invading her most intimate places. Then she reached to her ear and felt the rawness where Broderick had licked at her blood. He had sampled her like an appetizer before the main course.

What was the main course for a vampire like Broderick? Deirdre was not sure she wanted to know.

Quince pulled on his jeans and gave just a little wiggle to get everything in. He zipped up and turned to face her.

“You’re in big trouble,” he said.

“I’m on the Pill.”

“Not that,” he said in disgust. “Broderick wants you for some reason.”

“For some reason?” she flared. “Did you ever stop to think that he finds me attractive? Like I thought you did?”

“He’ll drink anybody’s blood. There are only a few he toys with the way he has been with you. He wants something.”

“The tapestry,” she said. “He asked repeatedly about who had bought the tapestry, and I didn’t know. Don’t know, but I’ve found out some details of its history.”

"You have?" Quince sat on the bed. His weight caused it to sag under him, pulling Deirdre toward him. Quince was past noticing such intimate movement together now that she had mentioned the damned tapestry. She could parade around naked all day long and not get a rise out of him. A rise of any kind.

"I talked with the Garsons' heir, the granddaughter. All she kept were a couple prints. The rest was auctioned off, and Maurine happened to get the tapestry."

"What about it?"

Deirdre related all she had learned. Quince turned pensive, pursed his lips as he thought and then shook his head.

"I don't know what Broderick wants with a tapestry with dirty pictures woven into it."

"There were five in the set. I can't find much more about it. Not yet," she said. Deirdre's pulse quickened. She could keep Quince around by doling out snippets of information he obviously had not found for himself. All he had to do was spend a few hours on the Internet hunting up the details and following it back, but he hadn't.

"Keep looking. I'll keep hunting for Broderick."

"Your only interest in the tapestry is that Broderick wants it," Deirdre said, a light dawning.

"You're using it as bait."

"Why not? He started looking for it more than a

year ago. There's nothing else that's kept him this interested since I . . . since I took a vow to kill him."

Again she heard more in the words than Quince actually said. The depth of the hatred for Broderick was immense, but something else entered and she could not tell what.

"You don't care about the tapestry?"

Quince shrugged. "I'm not an art collector. The only thing I care about is ripping off Broderick's foul head and sending him to hell permanently."

"That's pretty graphic," she said.

"That's the way it will be." He got off the bed and grabbed his knit shirt. He put it on, making it look like a second skin. Deirdre sighed. He was one hell of a good-looking guy, but his intensity about Broderick cast a darkness over him that she imagined in serial killers.

"How many other vampires have you killed?"

"What?" The question took him by surprise. "None."

"I thought you were a vampire hunter."

Quince snorted in disgust. "More Hollywood crap. There are no vampire hunters."

"But Broderick —"

"This is personal. I don't care if everyone else in the world is a vampire. Him, I'll kill. Him, I *have* to kill." Again the intensity cowed Deirdre. She shrank back as Quince went to the bedroom door. He turned and looked at her in her naked glory.

The sunlight came through the blinds and shone across her breasts.

“Get a new lock for the door. A good one,” he said. Then he was gone. She heard the outer door open and close behind him.

Deirdre fell back in bed, staring at the ceiling. She had looked at this precise spot the night before, but under such wondrously different conditions. Then Quince had been on top of her – had been inside her. Shaking off the memory, she got out of bed and looked at the clock.

“Oh, no, I’m going to be late for work!”

Deirdre dashed into the bathroom and quickly showered. Her hair looked like a rat’s nest, but she could do little more than brush it. Knots remained. She would try to work them out during the day when Maurine wasn’t paying a lot of attention. Deirdre hated doing personal things on her friend’s time. She worked at the antique store, after all, and owed Maurine a full day’s work. Too many times she had complained about secretaries spending all their time fussing over their makeup when they should have been working. Deirdre was not going to turn into one of them.

She grabbed a blouse and opened her bureau drawer, then hesitated. Bra. Panties. Her hand shook as she reached out and touched them before letting them drop back. The hypnotic instructions Broderick had given her were too potent for her to

overcome. She swallowed hard, tried to put on panties and could not force herself to do it. Broderick had ordered her to wear a thong or nothing. It had to be nothing.

Deirdre slipped into the lime green blouse and found a skirt that might have matched Quince's shirt in hue. She hoped this was a nice autumn combination and found a broad leather belt to finish off the quickly assembled attire. Then she rushed out, again skipping breakfast. Somehow, this time was not so bad. She had been on the receiving end of terrific fucking both times, but this time she had the feeling it had been mutual. No matter how intent Quince might be on killing Broderick, he had gotten into the lovemaking in a big way. She just knew it.

The drive to work took forever, traffic backed up and no side streets open. She closed the door to the shop behind her.

"Sorry I'm late," she said to Maurine. The owner looked up from receipts scattered across the counter.

"No biggie," Maurine said. "I heard there was a ten car pileup out on I-65 that's got traffic all tied up everywhere." The redhead looked up, her eyes sparkling. "I ought to fire you, though," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"You got me sucked into this tapestry nonsense," Maurine said. She held up a flimsy yellow sheet of paper. "I finally found the address

of the buyer.”

“No!”

“I did. My records are a mess, and I had thought it was lost, then I remembered how—” Maurine yelped as Deirdre snatched the paper from her grip.

Deirdre scanned the sheet, then looked over the top at Maurine.

“The buyer’s north of here, way out past Zionsville. That’s only a couple hour’s drive from here.”

“I remembered this morning that I had asked if the buyer wanted me to drive it out and he said no way since it would have been a couple days before I could go, that he wanted it delivered FedEx right away, so I did. It was his dime.”

“Have you sold anything to this Carson Calhoun before? Weird name.”

“He probably thinks Deirdre is weird, too,” Maurine said. “And the answer’s no. This was a first time sale, but I have hopes he will drop some of his benjamins my way again.”

Deirdre stared at the address, thinking hard. The rural area had lots of farms, but many of them had been subdivided into tract housing. Somehow, she doubted Calhoun’s home was a mere cracker box set amid a hundred other houses that might have been cloned. Who hung an expensive tapestry on the wall of a mobile home?

"Go on," Maurine said.

"What?"

"Ask. You want time off to go."

"Well, yeah."

"Sorry, can't do it. The weekend's not that far off, but I'm not sure I want you bothering a potentially big customer." Maurine snatched the sheet from Deirdre's fingers and tucked it into a folder.

"I wouldn't bother him. Not really. I found out a lot about the tapestry and that there are others. He might commission you to find the rest so he can get the entire set."

"In your dreams." Maurine looked her over and shook her head. "You're full of piss and vinegar these days. Breaking up with Sam is the best thing you've ever done. You've come alive the past couple days. It's a new you, Deirdre. A better you."

Deirdre started to tell Maurine why, then clamped her mouth shut. She was not sure how much she ought to tell her friend about Quince and about Broderick.

"Getting some, is that it?"

"I—" She sputtered at Maurine's unexpected question. Then she blushed and finally laughed ruefully. "Yeah. Does it show?"

"Big time. Is it that hunk that was in the store the other day?"

"Quince," she said. Deirdre could not help but

remember the long night they had spent together. She blushed again.

"That good, huh? Congratulations, but I'd watch it with that guy if I were you."

"Why?"

"I'll steal him from you at the drop of a hat. He had a nice butt."

"Gee, I hadn't noticed."

"Oh, yeah, as if I believe that," Maurine said, grinning ear to ear. "What else is nice about him?"

"All the right things are nice and big," Deirdre said. Then she remembered how icy Quince had turned when Broderick had been brought up.

"There's always a fly in the ointment. What is it?"

"Do you believe in vampires?" Deirdre asked.

"Wow, that came out of left field. Does he bite?"

"Not him, another guy." Deirdre shivered as she remembered Broderick coming toward her, his dark eyes infinitely deep pools of coercion. He need only speak and she would do whatever he said. She became acutely aware that she was not wearing a bra or panties because he had told her not to. Even with Quince's help remembering what Broderick had commanded her to forget, she was not entirely past obeying him.

"The one who followed you the other night?"

"He did more than follow."

Maurine was silent, waiting for Deirdre to continue.

"He's a vampire. An actual vampire. Not like in the movies, though. He can come out in the daylight, but Quince said he doesn't like the light. He doesn't need blood to survive but enjoys it like, like—" Words failed her for a moment as she remembered the sharp pain in her ear and the soft touch of Broderick's tongue moving to lap up the blood. "Like a wine connoisseur. Broderick drinks blood like you or I'd drink a fine wine."

"I'm not much for wine if it's not out of a box," Maurine said. "And I never cared at all for blood. Leave that to the Goth kids. This isn't some Goth you're talking about, is it?"

"Broderick is for real."

"You could call the cops, but I'd forget all about the part about him being a vampire. There aren't too many folks around here that would believe you." Maurine smiled grimly. "I'm not sure you'd find many who would believe you even in Transylvania."

Deirdre started to say that was just part of the movie myths, but she did not know for certain. What Quince had told her was scary enough. Broderick had powers that bent a person's will. Deirdre knew this only too well. She knew some of the things that Broderick could not do, but she was at a loss to understand how he had come to be a vampire. Quince had not known or maybe

refused to frighten her further. Seeing the look on his face when he spoke of Broderick was frightening enough.

“He might be a practical joker.”

“Broderick’s no joke,” Deirdre said.

“I meant your Quince. He could be yanking your chain to see how you react. Guys’ll do that for fun, just like a cat will play with a mouse.”

“You remember what I said about calling the police the other night? That was the first time Broderick . . . visited me.” Deirdre had trouble putting into words what had happened between her and the vampire. If she ever got to court and had to testify, she would be lying under oath if asked how much she had wanted Broderick. It had been deep inside wanting, a yearning, and she had suggested more things that Broderick could ever have put into her head. He might have hypnotized her but he also opened floodgates of desire that threatened to drown her.

“That was your vampire? You might need some time off, but not to go traipsing after that tapestry. In fact, if I give you any time off, you have to promise not bother Mr. Calhoun.”

“I’m fine, Maurine. Really.” She paused, then asked, “Do you believe me?”

“That this Broderick fellow did things to you? That I can believe, but he’s no vampire. He took advantage of you. Think about it, girl. You had

broken up with your boyfriend, if you want to call Sam that. You were shook up, confused and hardly knew which way was up. He took advantage of you. But a vampire?" She shook her head.

"You're probably right," Deirdre said. The bell on the front door clanged, and she left Maurine to go talk to a customer. The sales pitch turned out to be more than an hour long and the woman bought more than a thousand dollars worth of antiques. By then, Maurine was happy and had forgotten all about Deirdre saying Broderick was a vampire.

Deirdre had not forgotten. She couldn't.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Tomorrow, too,” Deirdre said. She glanced at Quince sitting beside her in her car. He stared straight ahead as if by force of will he could move the cars ahead of them like parting the Red Sea. Whatever he tried, it did not work. The traffic jam was impenetrable. “I said, Maurine gives me both Sunday and Monday off. We can get out there today, find what we need at Calhoun’s house, then come back tomorrow. She doesn’t have to know.”

“Too damn crowded on the road,” was all Quince said in reply.

“I told you,” Deirdre said in exasperation. The traffic jam on I-65 and the way everything she said to Quince went in one ear and out the other was beginning to fray her nerves. “Maurine doesn’t want me annoying a potentially good client. I saw the delivery slip, but I don’t think she realized I got the exact address off it. She grabbed it from me before most people could figure it out.”

"Good," Quince said. He gripped the dashboard until his knuckles turned white.

"Let's think of this as a vacation. You don't have to kill a vampire today or do anything but be with me."

"Good," Quince said. He started to roll down the window to shout at a driver ahead of them. He stopped when Deirdre honked the horn and got his attention.

"Better," she said when he turned his pale-as-ice-chips eyes toward her. "I'm in the car, too. I'm driving. I know where we're going, and I didn't tell you. I'm mighty glad now. You need me to get you there."

"Sorry," Quince said, but from his tone he was lying. "It's just that I can feel Broderick is hot on the trail of the tapestry. If he beats us there, he will kill Calhoun and take it."

"And you won't ever know why Broderick wanted the tapestry. You could care less that a man's life might hang in the balance."

"I care. It's more complicated than a single life, though."

Deirdre heard the utter hatred come into Quince's words again. Whatever Broderick had done, it had scarred Quince for life and given him a mission of vampire killing that would never end until either Broderick or he laid dead in a grave.

"Are there any American vampires? Broderick has a European accent, though I can't tell what

country he's from."

Quince laughed harshly. "Romania. He's from Romania. Isn't that a laugh? The coincidence of a vampire from the Transylvania Mountains, just like in the movies."

"Maybe that's where the legends came from. Bram Stoker might have known Broderick and used him as a role model in his book."

"I doubt it. Broderick would have killed anyone trying to expose him."

"Like you?"

"I'm not trying to expose him to the world. Just the opposite."

Quince folded into himself so completely Deirdre knew he was not going to talk anymore about Broderick or vampires. She concentrated on maneuvering through the gridlock on the freeway. Whatever tied up traffic did it so completely that she wheeled off the freeway at the first exit she came to.

"Where are you going? Calhoun lives that direction." Quince pointed, as if this would get Deirdre back on track.

"Too much traffic. If we have to fight that all the way out of town, it'll take a week to get there. I can find a way through the town. There are back roads all over the place. Something's got to go in that direction that's not completely jammed."

"I don't know," Quince said. "We know we can

get there on the highway.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure? Broderick has been around for hundreds of years. Letting him live—or un-live or whatever you would call it—another few hours isn’t going to matter.” Deirdre saw that she had said the wrong thing again. Quince turned even more sullen and crossed his arms over his broad chest as he sank down in the seat as far as the seatbelt would allow.

Deirdre tried to shrug it off but couldn’t. His black mood irritated her. She was happy to be out driving with a stud as good looking as Quince. He liked her, too. She knew it, but he was too focused on killing Broderick. That thought sobered her. She had no love for the vampire, either, but Deirdre was not sure she could kill him if it came to that. Chopping his head off was a bit extreme, even if he was already dead.

“How’s that work?” she asked suddenly. “If Broderick’s dead, how can he move around and talk and . . . and—”

“Fuck?”

“Yes, that,” Deirdre said self-consciously. She was no prude, but the way Broderick affected her with his hypnosis made her uneasy to talk about what he had forced her to do.

She also had the uneasy feeling that Broderick had not worked as much evil hypnosis on her as he might have on someone else. Deep inside, she had wanted to do everything they had done

together. The taste of his cock, the feel of him moving in her pussy, it was all lurking just below her consciousness as wanting him. Wanting him badly.

Never had Deirdre felt more embarrassed or ashamed of herself. She glanced at Quince, sure he was reading her mind. The blond man had turned so he could stare out the side window, as if this showed his distaste for her leaving the freeway.

“Looks like rain,” she said.

“Heavy clouds,” he agreed.

Deirdre saw that it was not likely to engage Quince in any kind of decent conversation. She turned up the radio, and he did not move to change it. Irritated, she turned it off and listened to the sound of her tires crunching over the poor pavement of the side road she had chosen. Before she had driven five miles, she had to take a detour onto a dirt road. Then the rain started falling. At first it was only a downpour. Then it turned into a torrential rain that made it impossible to see much beyond the front of her car.

“I can’t go on. We have to pull off the road.”

“I saw the sign for a restaurant. Not too far ahead.”

By the time Deirdre pulled into the restaurant parking lot, her shoulders were tense and she was ready to snap Quince’s head off if he said so much as one word about leaving the main freeway.

Somehow, she thought they still would be caught in the traffic jam. Whatever had tied up the road had backed up traffic for miles. If the police closed the freeway, there would be thousands of cars hunting for alternate routes. Deirdre felt some small satisfaction that they were ahead of the pack; as if this was a race and they were all going to the Calhoun house.

"Come on," Quince said, opening the door and making a dash for the overhang of the restaurant roof and the faint protection that offered. Rain hit the ground so hard it splattered up knee high.

Deirdre followed, getting soaked to the bone in only a few seconds.

"Oh, this will never do." She shivered. The rain-soaked clothes clung to her body like a second skin and chilled her to the bone.

Quince went into the restaurant. Deirdre had to catch the closing door to keep from being crushed. She glared at him. The least he could have done was hold it open for her. She glared even harder when she saw him talking to a pretty young cashier, hardly out of high school.

"Coffee would be nice," Deirdre said, standing beside Quince and taking his arm. He pulled away slightly. Deirdre could have killed the cashier when she smiled just a little too much at Quince's reaction.

"Might as well get a pot," Quince said glumly. "The road's out. The highway's out. There was a

big wreck that caused the backup. And now the rain's washed out that covered bridge we crossed a few miles down the road so we can't go back."

"Going on along the road's mighty dangerous, too," the young girl said. "They don't do much maintenance on the roads this time of year, and the one you'd be on is dirt. Was dirt. It'll be mud now."

Deirdre could have strangled the girl. She was far too cheerful about it.

"You might want to stay the night. We've still got a room left. But it'll go fast with the rain driving more and more folks in."

"Room?" Deirdre did not understand.

"There's a motel behind the restaurant," Quince said. "What else can we do? We'd better take the room right away and get you out of those wet clothes."

"I didn't pack for this. I don't have any more—" Deirdre cut off her explanation when she saw how interested the cashier was in the byplay with Quince.

"My folks own the motel, too," the girl said.

"Do you get a commission for any business you drum up?" Deirdre doubted that, but the cashier obviously enjoyed the idea of a full motel. The people staying would eat at the restaurant and leave tips. Deirdre suspected this was a family run operation and the girl doubled as a waitress.

"Let me give my mom a call," the girl said, picking up the phone.

Quince looked at Deirdre and shrugged.

"Do you have two rooms?" Deirdre asked. She did not like the way the girl assumed she and Quince would be in the same room.

"Sorry, only one left. It's getting late, and if you don't want it, I can let my mother know."

"We'll take it."

"Just go around to the office and pick up the key. Breakfast is included in the price, if you work up enough of an appetite."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Deirdre snapped. She was tired, the hunt for the Calhoun house had not gone as she planned and now they would be on the road an extra day. When they had started, the idea of spending another night with Quince in bed next to her would have been exciting. Now it was nothing more than an annoyance.

"The rain might keep you awake. Or if you're the kind who is soothed by it, you could get a nice night's sleep."

"Come on," Quince said, taking Deirdre's wet elbow and steering her back to the door. Outside the rain hammered down even more furiously. "Drive on around. I'll get the key."

"You ought to spend the night with her. She wanted you to," Deirdre said.

"What's got into you? She was just being

friendly.”

Deirdre bit back any further debate. She was getting into the same kind of argument with Quince that she had always gotten into with Sam. It made her a little uneasy to think that her problems with Sam had been of her own manufacture. Then she remembered him in bed with the bimbo. No matter how she had acted toward him, she had never done anything to deserve that. Still fuming, she dashed out and got into the car and drove it around.

By the time she had calmed down enough to open the door, Quince had the key and pointed to the rear of the motel.

She wondered if he wanted a ride, then saw him trooping gamely through the puddles in the parking lot. She rolled down her window as she came even with him and called, “Want a ride?”

“Yeah, if you’re going my way.”

“I’ll go any way you want, mister.” Her heart beat a little faster at the innuendo. Even more surprising to her, she meant it. The sight of Quince all soaked like she was turned her on. His clothes were plastered to his strong, muscular body like a second skin. As he turned to look at her, she could not keep from looking at his crotch. The bulge there reminded her of how big his equipment was. And how she wanted to release it. The thought of taking his cock into her mouth was enough to

make her forget all about her discomfort and their argument.

Deirdre screeched to a halt at the door of the last room. Beyond stretched what might have been a grassy pasture, if she could have seen it through the driving rain. She jumped from the car, locked it and then ran to the motel door. This time Quince held it open for her. She burst through into the room, trailing water behind.

"I'm wet."

"It's raining."

"That wasn't what I meant," she said. Deirdre reached past him and shoved the door shut with a bang. The pounding rain outside isolated them in their own little world. She stood close to him, looking up into his fathomless eyes. They were a pale green. Or so it seemed as she studied them for any hint that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

"How wet?" Quince moved closer until their bodies touched, but he did not reach out to take her in his arms. They shared their body heat for a moment, almost touching but never quite rubbing against one another. Moving in a sinuous dance to music only they shared, they moved about. Quince's arm brushed hers and sent an electric jolt through her.

She pressed closer so her breasts lightly pressed into his chest. They rebounded, moving apart and turning. She took a step forward, her legs circling

his thigh. She tensed her muscles and felt the powerful muscles in his leg respond. She rubbed her pussy up and down on his leg.

"You weren't lying. You are wet. I can feel it, even through my jeans."

"I wasn't lying," Deirdre said, reluctantly releasing her leg lock on him. The buildup to what she knew was inevitable took on a delicious turn as she reached down and caught the edges of her T-shirt and began peeling it off. The way he watched her so intently excited her even more. She held him captive with the simple act of pulling off a wet T-shirt.

Deirdre stood clad from the waist up only in dampness from the rain. She tossed the T-shirt to him. He grabbed it and stepped forward.

"Your turn," she said.

"Not yet. Not quite yet." He looped her T-shirt between her legs and began drawing it back and forth. At first there was only mild pressure on her pussy mound. He pulled harder and harder until she was lifting up on her toes. The feel of the cloth sliding back and forth thrilled her more than she would have ever thought. She gasped out, "I want to see you naked."

"Do you say this to all the guys you bring to out of the way motels?" Quince tossed her T-shirt down on the bed and stepped away from her.

Deirdre shivered, and it was not entirely from

the cold and wet. Quince removed his shirt and discarded it. He did not stop there. He kicked out of his shoes, then skinned out of his tight jeans. He was clad only in his wet socks and boxer briefs.

"Your turn," he said.

"I'm not so sure." Deirdre thrilled at the effect she had on him. The bulge at his crotch grew as she watched until it had to be painful trapped in his underwear. Deirdre turned slightly and rubbed her butt against the growing lump. She felt his erection shake and begin to pulse. Rather than keep it that way, she stepped away from him.

The teasing had gone on long enough for Quince. He took two quick steps and put his arms around her. They both faced the same direction now. Deirdre canted her head back and closed her eyes. He kissed her. Then he began working his hands down her chest. Only for a moment did he fondle her naked breasts. His fingers quested lower. She thrust out her hips so he could more easily unfasten the button holding her jeans. Then he worked steadily lower until his fingers coursed through the tangled mat between her legs.

"Oh, Quince, that feels good," Deirdre sighed, "but—"

She never got any farther. His hands snaked around her hips and caught at the waistband of her jeans. With a sudden yank he got them down around her knees, effectively hobbling her. She lost her balance and fell forward. Deirdre caught

herself on her hands, bouncing on the bed. In this position her butt was thrust back into the curve of Quince's groin.

She gasped when she felt him grasping the fleshy moons of her ass cheeks and then poke forward with his cock. His long, hard flesh slid forward and touched her pussy lips.

Then he was firmly, deeply inside her.

Deirdre sobbed with joy as he began stroking back and forth. He was everything she could ever want in a man. Handsome, commanding, he took charge and knew what he was doing. The feel of him warming her with the friction of his fucking told her that. He filled her to overflowing, and she could not get enough of him.

Before she knew it, she cried out and sank forward onto the bed away from his still-rigid erection. He followed her to the bed, pinning her down with his weight.

"I don't know if I'm up for more. Not right now," she said, hardly believing she uttered such words. How could he have worn her out?

"Turn over." He lifted himself off enough so she clumsily scooted about under him. Her legs were still tangled in her jeans, making movement difficult. Somehow, being bound up like that, restricted in the way she could move, turned her on.

Then he was kneeling on her chest, his cock

poking forward between her naked breasts. Quince reached down and pressed her breasts together until the nipples almost touched. She looked from his intense face to the head of his prick slipping back and forth across her sensitive breasts.

New desire flared within her. Deirdre found it hard to keep her vision focused. She looked from his slowly fucking cock to his face and then back, but she finally settled on Quince's face. He was intent and enjoying himself. She found this contagious and she began to gasp and moan as her own pleasure mounted.

She finally craned her neck forward and caught a white stream of his cum before sinking back to the bed.

"Wh-where are you going?" Quince had hopped off the bed.

"Be right back." And he was. He brought a washrag soaked in warm water and a towel to gently clean off her breasts and chest where he had come.

"That was so good."

He tossed the washrag and towel aside and lay beside her on the bed.

"He's a damned fool," Quince said.

"What? Who?"

"Your boyfriend. He didn't know what he had, and he walked out on it. You're better off without him."

“What about you? How is it you don’t have a dozen girls hanging around your neck like a necklace?”

Deirdre realized she had said the wrong thing, although she was trying to keep the mood light. She enjoyed the floaty feeling from the after-love as much as the foreplay or the actual fucking.

“I move around too much. No woman’s going to go with me when I might be out of the country in a few hours and not back for months—or ever.”

“Broderick?”

Quince’s dark expression told her he had devoted his life to tracking down the vampire and killing him. Deirdre started to ask what horror Broderick had done to make Quince so focused but she settled for putting her head down on his broad chest.

“What do you think is so important about the tapestry?”

She murmured something. Her mind had been drifting, touching on everything imaginable but the tapestry.

“Don’t know,” she sighed. “Don’t care. Could sleep like this all night long.” She moved a little closer to Quince and felt his warmth the entire length of her body. She kicked free of her jeans and wrapped one leg around his tree-trunk-like thigh. The pressure there made her feel content and secure.

"There's something about it that Broderick wants. There might be a power to it. A magical spell. He's big into believing that shit."

"You believe in magic?" she asked. Deirdre stroked over his hairy chest. "I do. Now."

Her eyelids drooped as she drifted off to sleep. Quince remained awake a few minutes longer, then put his arms around her and held her close before going to sleep.

At the motel window, watching, watching, watching was a dark figure.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Deirdre sat up in bed, looking around. She had the uneasy sensation of being watched. But it was not Quince. He slept quietly beside her. He stirred when she moved, his heavy arm flopping onto the bed. She rose and went to the window. In their haste earlier, they had neglected to draw the curtains closed. White nylon curtains let in the light and supposedly afforded a little privacy, but Deirdre knew they were not all that effective. She had seen into rooms with only these flimsy curtains pulled in more than one motel.

Looking out, she saw that the rain was letting up. It was still quite a downpour but nothing like it had been when they were forced off the road. She looked around the parking lot but no one dared the rain yet. The sensation of being watched remained. Uneasily, she thought it was quite a bit like the feeling she had when Broderick was near.

She picked up her T-shirt and put it on. It felt

clammy against her warm, dry skin. She wiggled into her jeans, again acutely aware that she had no panties because of the hypnotic orders Broderick had given her. Quince had not noticed—or more correctly, he had probably not minded that she was a few items of clothing shy of complete attire.

Deirdre glanced back at him, then unlocked the door and stepped out into the bone-chilling rain barefoot. She walked a few feet away from the room, paused and looked around for any movement. Nothing. She returned to the door and started in when she noticed mud under the window where she had drawn the heavy curtains. Deirdre took two quick steps over and knelt. Reaching out, she traced over the muddy footprints. The toes pointed toward the window. Whoever had stood there had been peering into the motel room.

Deirdre swallowed hard. It might have been anyone passing by who had heard her or Quince cry out. Simple curiosity. Blatant lust. Whoever had spied on them probably stood still for some time from the amount of mud that had worked its way off heavy boots with a waffle-pattern sole onto the concrete walkway. She looked around in panic. The only sound was the falling rain hammering against the cars in the parking lot. A flash of lightning lit the scene with eerie illumination, but it might as well have been a graveyard for all the life she saw.

She jumped when the thunder rumbled through the motel. Cold and wet again, she returned to the motel room and closed the door behind her. She made certain the chain lock was added to the usual deadbolt lock, as if that flimsy chain would keep out Broderick.

"It might not be him," she muttered to herself. She sat in a chair and hugged herself as she shivered. Seeing the towel on the floor that Quince had used to dry her off, she grabbed it and began mopping up the new rain from her hair. Then she wiped off her feet and was still cold.

Reluctant but seeing no way around it, she peeled off the clinging T-shirt and jeans again and stood naked at the foot of the bed. She stared down at Quince still soundly asleep and had the urge to awaken him, maybe by taking him in her mouth and gently sucking. Having his cock come alive in her mouth would be a thrill for both of them.

But she did nothing of the sort. Deirdre closed the curtains fully and stared at them, imagining Broderick on the outside watching as she and Quince made love. She stepped away, then lowered herself onto the bed again. This time Quince stirred, mumbling to himself. He was dreaming. She wished she could insinuate herself into those dreams to get some idea what went on in his head. He spoke quite a lot but never

revealed anything of himself. What drove him to kill Broderick was a mystery, but she felt his intensity every time he mentioned the vampire.

Vampire. The word rolled around inside Deirdre's head like the thunder crawling across the parking lot outside. She had no proof that Quince had told the truth. Vampires were creatures of myth. He might have told her Broderick was one to get her to do what he wanted – to get her into bed with him.

If that was the only reason, it had worked well. She moved a little closer to his warmth and sighed when he reached out sleepily, his hand working between her thighs and finally resting on her pussy. She rubbed her legs together and Quince moved his hand a little more, parting the sex lips and giving her an even greater feeling of his closeness.

Quince could have told her anything. Making up a lie as big as Broderick being a vampire seemed unlikely. When the words had come from Quince's lips, she had *known* he was telling the truth. Tiny details meshed perfectly with facts that were so big and obvious she could never deny them. Broderick was a vampire. Quince had nothing but contempt for the stories about vampires, probably because they attributed so many powers to vampires. Broderick's uncanny ability to hypnotize her into doing whatever he wanted was more than enough.

She reached to her earlobe. It was still sore from Broderick chewing on it and then lapping at the blood. The tiny scratches all over her body were caused by Broderick's fingernails raking at her and leaving bloody tracks. She did not remember but suspected Broderick had feasted on each and every bloody scratch, too.

He drank blood. That made him a vampire, whether he was alive or dead. Undead. That was something she had to have explained to her. Broderick's hands were cool, but he was obviously alive enough to get a hard-on. He had used that prick to pleasure himself—and to fuck her. If his heart did not beat, how did he get an erection? There were too many unanswered questions, and Deirdre was getting sleepy again all snuggled close to Quince.

How she wished she could step into his dreams and fulfill his fantasies.

Deirdre awoke with a start when the bed moved under her. She reached out but found only a warm spot where Quince had been. The man was up and dressed, pacing at the foot of the bed. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not notice she was awake now, too.

"Good morning," Deirdre said. The faint rays of light snaking past the closed curtains told her it was at least eight o'clock. It would be Monday morning since they had driven into the storm and

stayed her on Sunday. Deirdre worried that they would not find the Calhoun house and be able to get back to Indianapolis by tomorrow morning. She did not want Maurine knowing she had come out here to harass her prize customer. If she did not find out what she wanted right away, it would never do to take another day. Calling in sick would be a shitty thing to do to Maurine, and Deirdre knew she could never lie. Maurine had trusted her and given her a job when she needed it. There was no way she could betray that friendship after only a single week of working at the antique store.

"He was here. He must have been," Quince said.

"Broderick?"

"Who else? The tapestry is drawing him."

"Maybe we're leading him to it." Deirdre pulled a blanket up around her. As much as she wanted to entice Quince to come back to bed and get naked beside her again, the room was cold.

"Has he been in touch with you?" Quince swung around and fixed her with his colorless eyes.

"You sound like you're accusing me of something," Deirdre said, outraged. "I'd never do it intentionally."

"You were under his spell. I know how powerful that can be."

"How do you know?"

Quince looked away. "I just do. If he's watching us, we could be leading him to the tapestry rather than using it as bait. Could he know about Calhoun?"

"Only if he got to Maurine and found out from her. We've been together the rest of the time."

"Except for a few hours at the antique store after you found out."

"I never left the shop. And I was with customers. Maurine would have noticed if Broderick had come in."

"He could have hypnotized both of you."

"And he could be a little green man from Mars," Deirdre shot back, angry now. "If he's got all these super powers, why doesn't he just cloud our minds so we don't argue over what he can and can't do?"

"He's evil, that's why. He would get a sick pleasure from knowing we were struggling to figure it out. He enjoys torture." Quince's voice lowered to a whisper so that Deirdre could barely hear him say, "He enjoys pleasure, too."

"We're wasting time here. Let's find Calhoun's house, look at the tapestry and figure out what to do then."

"What if he won't let us see it?" asked Quince.

"Why wouldn't he? He's probably proud of it. He'll want to show it to knowledgeable collectors so he can lord it over us. That's the way men are

who have that much money. What good is having a valuable piece of art if you can't parade it in front of all your friends? You have something they don't."

"There are other collectors," Quince said. "Sick ones who buy masterpieces, put them in private vaults and never share them. They're the worst of all. They're so selfish they can't share with the rest of the world."

"I don't know if Calhoun is like that. Neither do you." Deirdre dropped the blanket seductively, letting one breast poke out. The cold room turned her nipple hard. And she was not sure it was only the cold that did it. Seeing Quince this intense did things to her. Good things. Sexy things.

"Let's go," he said. "At least there aren't any bags to pack."

"Or jaws to shave," Deirdre said, scooting to the edge of the bed and stroking across Quince's face. The stubble was like a bristle brush, but she liked it. She shivered thinking what it would be like rubbing against her inner thighs as he licked—

"Come on," Quince said, interrupting her fantasy.

"Okay, okay." Deirdre knew she had to be back in town tomorrow morning, and there was scant time since they hadn't found Calhoun's house yesterday. Not that she was complaining. The rain had made her tense, but everything after they had

reached the motel room had been decidedly worthwhile.

She got into her T-shirt and jeans again. They were still damp, but she went into the bathroom and turned on the heat lamp. Standing under it for a couple minutes improved her outlook and dried the clothes on her while Quince fumed and fussed about.

"There," she said, running her fingers through her hair in a makeshift combing. "Am I presentable?"

"Not to the queen but nobody else would notice."

Deirdre was not sure if Quince had complimented her or insulted her. In any case, she was staring at his broad back going through the door. She pulled on her shoes and hurried after him. The rain had turned to a fine mist. She ducked her head down and ran to the car, feeling the insidious moisture working its way back into her clothing.

As they drove out, she asked somewhat more sharply than she intended, "Do we stop for the free breakfast? I'm sure the waitress would be happy to see you again."

Deirdre got even madder when Quince ignored her. She drove along the muddy road a ways and found better pavement. After that they made good time in spite of not returning to the freeway.

"It ought to be around here somewhere," Deirdre said after they had been driving for more than an hour. She craned her neck and looked past Quince, trying to read the names on mail boxes along the road.

"There," he said. "It's not exactly what I expected."

Deirdre braked and stared straight ahead. A ten-foot-tall brick wall marched along the road, interrupted only by a massive iron gate. Worked into fancy wrought iron on the gate was the name Calhoun. She drove a little closer so they could look into the grounds. A quarter mile off loomed the Calhoun house.

Only "house" was a feeble attempt to describe it. Mansion was closer.

"He's got some bucks in the bank, that's for sure," Deirdre said. "No wonder Maurine wants to humor him and coax a few more dollars out of him."

"Clayton Calhoun," Quince said, reading the name off the mailbox set into the wall. "Have you ever heard of him before?"

"No," she admitted. "I don't think Mr. Calhoun and I travel in the same social circles."

"We can't just ring the bell and get inside," Quince said, "but I've got to get the tapestry if I want to use it to lure out Broderick."

"Buying it off Calhoun isn't likely to be possible. I know what he paid for it—I saw the

receipt. A man with the kind of money he does would want to turn a quick profit. Unless you've got more money than I think, the most we're likely to do is get a look at the tapestry."

"There's no reason he would permit that," Quince said. "Men like this value their privacy."

"Let me guess. The brick wall around his estate gave it away." Deirdre tried to estimate how much land was enclosed. Acres. More. Clayton Calhoun must have bought an old farm and then built his house and grounds where corn used to grow.

"We can claim to have car trouble. When he goes to call, I can—"

"Are you crazy?" Deirdre asked. "That's almost like breaking and entering." She pursed her lips and thought a moment. "That might even be easier. Out here in the country, what kind of burglar alarm would he have?"

"Who's the one talking crazy now? He's rich. Rich men are paranoid. He probably has dogs roaming the grounds. Or guards. He certainly has an alarm system."

"I don't know how to get past one. Do you?"

"No."

"Let's drive around," Deirdre suggested. "We might figure out a way in to at least see the tapestry. He might even know more about it. Finding that out could be useful."

"All I want is to trap Broderick," said Quince.

Deirdre knew he wanted to do more than that. She drove along slowly as Quince studied the wall. The way he grew increasingly angry told her that the Calhoun estate was well protected. When they reached a branching road that went away from the estate she braked. In the rear view mirror she stared at the imposing wall.

"What do we do now?" Deirdre asked.

"I'll sneak in. There's got to be a special room where he keeps his trophies."

"You think the tapestry is a trophy?" She had the image of deer heads mounted on walls.

"There is some reason Broderick wants it. That means it is special and Calhoun must know it."

"Do you think Calhoun is a vampire, too?"

"I doubt it. Broderick would know him."

"There might be a falling out. Do vampires get along well together?" Deirdre had the sudden fear of an entire town of vampires, with vampire politicians and judges and schoolteachers.

"I don't know. I've only come across a couple vampires in the past five years. Broderick never spoke of others, except in a slighting way. He considers himself to be superior to all of them—to everyone."

"I have to be back at work tomorrow morning," Deirdre said. "I won't leave Maurine hanging, and asking for more time off. I haven't worked there long."

"Come with me," Quince said suddenly. He

turned. His eyes flashed a pale blue. "Why bother working for someone else?"

"You want me to be a vampire hunter?"

"I'm not hunting vampires, just Broderick."

"Oh, yeah, right, I forgot. How do you make a living? You flit around the world chasing after Broderick. Where does the money come from for the plane tickets and food and motels?"

"I get by," Quince said.

"I can't. I need to pay the rent and be sure I have food on the table."

"We can be a terrific team."

Deirdre looked into his eyes and felt her heart skip a couple times before returning to normal.

"What are you proposing?" Deirdre bit her lower lip at her choice of words. It did not sound as if Quince wanted more from her than a companion to find Broderick and kill him, with the added bonus of someone good in bed.

"Nothing," Quince said, turning away. He opened the door and got out, standing in the middle of the road to stare at the Calhoun estate. Deirdre drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and considered driving off. She doubted Quince would even notice she had gone since he was too intent on finding and killing Broderick.

She got out and stood beside him. Somehow, being close to him reassured her. Every time she thought about Broderick, she got an uneasy

feeling that crawled across her skin and made her shiver. Quince might be lying to her about Broderick being a vampire, but she could not argue with the strange spell he cast over her.

Somehow, the men in her life were both concentrating on the tapestry more than they were on her. She was nothing more than a way to get to a piece of cloth with pornographic figures woven into it.

“You’re going to help me?”

“I don’t know why,” Deirdre answered. And she didn’t. As much as she was attracted to Quince, she was not sure he wanted her for anything more than a way to find the tapestry.

“You mean, you don’t know how you can help,” he said with his cocky assurance. “I do.”

Deirdre glared at him as he outlined his scheme.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"This isn't going to work." Deirdre chewed her lower lip as she stared at the bell on the gate.

"Of course it will," Quince said. "Just do as I told you."

"I'm not dressed for it. I don't look the part," Deirdre protested. "I look more like a drowned rat than an investigator."

"Tell him you're undercover."

"We were undercover," Deirdre said, "but we weren't wearing tatters like this. We weren't wearing anything at all."

"Do it," Quince said. "Do it or go back home and I'll figure out some other way."

She looked at him and saw how determined Quince was. Nothing got in his way when he was like this. Irresistible force versus an immovable object. Quince would win.

"We're going to end up in jail for certain," she said. "He's going to call the cops, and we'll be

having mug shots taken before you know it."

"Good," Quince said, shocking her. He flashed a winning smile. "I'll give you a copy of my mug shot for your wallet if I can have yours for mine."

"Just like high school," she said. With a feeling of dread, she reached out. Her finger poised over the large plastic button that would ring someone in the distant Calhoun mansion. She almost chickened out, then saw the small closed circuit camera partially hidden near the iron gate. Everything she and Quince had done so far had been observed. It might all be on tape. She only hoped that there wasn't any sound along with the pictures.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," she said under her breath. With more confidence than she felt, she stabbed down on the button. Deirdre stood for a moment, holding it down as if she expected to hear the doorbell ringing. That was absurd. The house was a quarter mile away, half hidden by elm and oak trees threatening to drop their colorful leaves at the lightest breath of wind. She released the button and took a step back, wondering if anything would happen.

She jumped when a voice blared from a speaker she had not even seen.

"What is it?"

"I, uh, my name's Deirdre Tyler. I'm investigating possible fraud."

"I know nothing about fraud."

"It might have been committed by Carfax Abbey Antiques. Or maybe fraud's too harsh," she said, starting to babble. "You might have bought a fake tapestry."

"Tapestry?"

"From an estate sale." Deirdre heard Quince hiss at her. She knew she was panicking and fought to regain control. Clayton Calhoun might not know or care that the tapestry had come from an estate sale. All that mattered to a buyer was the price, not where the seller had obtained it.

Unless it was possibly a fake or stolen property. That was the lever Quince insisted that they use to get in to see the tapestry.

"Ms Tyler, what is it you want?"

"I need to examine the tapestry for authenticity."

"Does that matter?"

"It does if you thought you were buying a tapestry once in the possession of an Italian count. Count Luigi Dicosta," she blurted out.

"Interesting," came the level voice. In spite of the tinny quality of the speaker, there was a resonance that caused Deirdre to stand a little straighter. She felt as if she had been called into the principal's office for some schoolgirl misdemeanor.

"I am not sure if the store owner knew there was ghost of a chance the tapestry was a fake."

"Are you an expert in such tapestries?"

"I have an expert with me," Deirdre said, motioning for Quince to come closer so he would be in range of the camera. His nearness gave her confidence.

"What is your interest, if you are not an expert?"

"I'm the investigator," she said.

"For the insurance company," Quince spoke up. Deirdre let out a sigh of relief. They had rehearsed her story for almost fifteen minutes, with all the details laid out so she would sound convincing. She had ended up forgetting most of them when Calhoun spoke to her.

"Uh, you are Mr. Clayton Calhoun?"

"I am."

She heaved a sigh of relief. If she had been wasting all this effort on a butler or guard, she would have fainted dead away. As it was, she thought the man was inching toward letting them in, no matter that their story was so obviously stupid. If she had been Calhoun, the speed dialer would be humming with nine-one-one to summon the police.

"It will take me only a couple minutes, Mr. Calhoun," Quince said.

"I have it in a special . . . place."

"I know proper handling of valuable artifacts, should this prove to be legitimate."

Deirdre liked the way Quince hinted that

Calhoun might be going to such trouble for a fake tapestry without actually saying as much. He was cooler under pressure than she was. Or maybe he was better at lying. The thought intruded that his story about Broderick was pretty incredible. It was not every day she heard a man accused of being a vampire. Nor was it every day that she believed such claims.

"It would be a pity if I happened to purchase a fake," Calhoun said. "Very well. Please come in."

The gate lock hummed and then clicked open. Quince moved to swing back the iron gate so Deirdre could drive through. When he started to close it, the motor pulled it from his hand and slammed it back into place. Deirdre winced as the lock clicked shut. It was like she had been put into a jail cell and was doing hard time, no parole, no escape possible.

"Let's get this done." Quince slid into the passenger seat. He looked racehorse eager now, all trace of moroseness gone.

"What are you going to do when you examine the tapestry? That won't get you any closer to Broderick."

"It might. If I can figure out what it is about the tapestry that has brought him halfway around the world, I might be able to bait a trap for him."

"A mouse trap," she said. "To kill him."

Quince answered by cracking his knuckles,

then pounding his right fist into the palm of his left hand. There was no mistaking his intention.

"You keep Calhoun occupied while I check out the tapestry," Quince said. "Whatever it takes."

Deirdre tensed. He made it sound as if she was supposed to throw herself naked in front of Clayton Calhoun, if necessary. She had to remind herself that Quince cared less for her than he did his revenge on Broderick. That made her both sad and angry at the same time. Maybe Quince would be different once he settled the score with Broderick.

"This is one fancy place," Deirdre said, ducking down so she could peer around the roof of her car and stare up at the mansion. Calling this place a house missed by a mile. Mansion was closer. She could be talked into calling it a palace. "Who'd have thought such a place could exist in central Indiana?"

"Any idea what Calhoun does to get his money?"

Deirdre shook her head. She knew nothing about him. It might have been better if they had waited a week. She could have done an Internet search on Calhoun and possibly unearthed more about the tapestry. Quince had pushed her to come right away, though, and now she was dreading it. Facing Calhoun and lying was nothing she wanted to do.

Quince shot from the car and was already up

the broad steps to the huge double oak doors before Deirdre turned off the car engine. She trailed behind. As she got to the top step, the doors swung inward. She almost expected to hear organ music ominously billowing from inside. Nothing of the kind happened. The entryway behind the doors was light and airy, being lit by two-story tall stained glass windows.

The man at the door was certainly no butler. He was shorter than Deirdre but stocky. He wore a pair of khaki pants and a red-and-black checked flannel shirt, although the weather was hardly cold enough yet for such dress. He wore narrow lens glasses cut into an octagonal shape. He peered at them over the tops of the glasses and smiled faintly.

"You hardly have the appearance of investigators for any insurance company."

"We usually dress better, but we've been working an auto insurance fraud case. We were undercover until yesterday when the home office assigned us this case."

"Case? You think of the tapestry as being worthy of such a lofty term?"

"We don't know. You paid a considerable amount for it," Quince went on. "That might be fraud if you bought a bogus tapestry."

"Come in."

Deirdre was uncomfortable as she slipped past

Clayton Calhoun. She was intensely aware of his hot gaze following her every movement. If the situation hadn't been the way it was, she would have called the police to report him for being a stalker. Saying that he undressed her with his eyes understated it. But then could she really blame him? She wore a dirty, skintight T-shirt and no bra underneath. Her nipples poked out impudently – and turned harder when he closed the door. He kept the house like an icebox. No wonder he wore a heavy flannel lumberjack shirt inside. But she turned away from him, though the way she filled out her tight jeans probably gave him just as big a treat as seeing her breasts.

"Air-conditioning broken?" Deirdre had to ask.

"I prefer it on the cool side," Calhoun said. "Please come into the sitting room."

He led the way, giving Deirdre the chance to look around. The huge entryway was tastefully decorated. Two cherry wood tables sported small brass sculptures, possibly Renaissance era. She doubted they were reproductions. The marble floor under her dirty shoes was impeccable. She felt guilty about the muddy tracks she left behind, but Calhoun took no notice.

She glanced sideways at Quince. The blond man was engrossed in the paintings on the walls, but nowhere did he find a tapestry.

"Some refreshment, perhaps?" offered Calhoun. He stood quietly across the sitting room,

separated from Deirdre and Quince by a large table surrounded by comfortable looking wingback chairs.

“Yes, thank you,” Deirdre said. She had missed breakfast, not wanting to endure the free one offered at the motel, and had not thought to bring even bottles of water along when she had started on this peculiar trip.

“Could I see the tapestry? That way, we can be out of your hair as quickly as possible.”

“There’s no rush. I don’t see many people, don’t get many visitors.” Calhoun peered at them over his glasses, pushing them up onto the bridge of his nose using his index finger.

“You must have several staff to run a house this large,” Deirdre said.

“It is quite taxing, yes,” Calhoun said. “But I do what I can by myself. I am a very private person.”

“Is that why you had the tapestry express mailed rather than having the shop owner drive it out?” asked Quince. Deirdre motioned to him to tone down his questions. That sounded like an accusation.

“Not at all. I would have welcomed Ms O’Connor. She struck me as a very knowledgeable woman. No, she said it would be a few days before she could deliver it, and I saw no reason to put her out like that. And, I must confess, I was in a hurry to see my purchase. The tapestry appears

to me to be quite authentic."

"You know of the rest of the tapestries?"

"The Clerestory Tapestries? Of course I do," Calhoun said. "While I do not actively seek to collect them as a set, when one came available I naturally put in a bid for it. I was quite lucky."

"How did you hear that Maurine had it for sale? She doesn't advertise on the Internet."

"You said you wanted something to drink?" Calhoun asked, suddenly solicitous of her. "Some tea? Or I have some bottled water. The wells out here in the country are all contaminated with fertilizer from long years of agriculture."

"I'm sure," Quince said brusquely. "May I see the tapestry?"

"Oh, you young people. Always in such a hurry. Sit down, relax, tell me about your work. It must be fascinating, undercover work. I see the television programs, of course, but they are all so tidy and finished in a single hour. The real work must take far longer."

"It does," Quince said.

"What is your area of expertise again? You mentioned the count." Calhoun fixed his gaze directly on Quince, shutting out Deirdre.

"I, uh—"

Deirdre saw Quince struggling to remember the research she had done. Calhoun had caught him. If Quince were the expert he claimed, he would know.

“Count Luigi –”

“Please, my dear.” Calhoun cut her off with his words as surely as if he had slapped her.

She stared at him in wonder. He had appeared to be in his sixties, but now she was not certain. His thinning hair was still brown, though he could have colored it. Somehow, he did not seem the kind for such vanity. She glanced around the room, hunting for something to divert Calhoun’s attention from the obvious fact that Quince knew less about the tapestry than she did after he had been declared the expert.

“I could use something to drink. Tea would be very nice.”

“And perhaps I can find a few crumpets to go with it.”

Deirdre was not sure but thought Calhoun was ridiculing her. The man silently left the room, going out a side door. She heard his steady stride down the long hallway leading to the kitchen. If he was as old as she thought, he moved with an easy, liquid grace of a man half his age.

“He almost had me. I couldn’t remember the count’s name. What was it?”

“I can’t give you everything I found, not enough to fool him. He’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

“That was quick thinking to ask for something that will take him a while to fix,” Quince said.

"Thanks," Deirdre said dryly. "He knows we're not who we said. He's nobody's fool."

"He's an old man," Quince brushed away the obvious. Deirdre realized how dangerous it could be for both of them because Quince was so totally focused on the tapestry and how it led to Broderick that he ignored everything else. Calhoun was rich and had probably earned the money through quick wits and more than a touch of ruthlessness. She had seen that side of the old man come out for a moment when he had addressed Quince. Somehow, Quince had missed it.

"Don't underestimate him. He—" She cut off the rest of her warning because Calhoun returned, pushing a stainless steel silver service cart.

She moved closer to Quince, both for the security his nearness gave and so she could prompt him if Calhoun started interrogating him again. Calhoun had cleverly cut her out of the conversation before. They might as well leave if he did that again and Quince was unable to respond with the right answers.

That Calhoun was so suspicious did not surprise her. She was more than a little amazed at the ease of getting into the mansion.

"Here you are, my dear. Black tea. I brew it strong. If you put some lemon in it, as I do, you will find it most tasty. Or you might try some cream, though it is only half-and-half, I am

afraid.” He indicated a small silver creamer.

“Put in both for me,” Quince said, when he saw that Calhoun was going to serve. Both Calhoun and Deirdre stared at him. He was unaware of his gaffe.

“He’s such a joker,” Deirdre said quickly. “Just lemon. For both of us.”

“Is there an insurance problem, if the tapestry turns out to be a fake?” Calhoun asked. He carefully poured and handed the cups to Deirdre and Quince.

“It is a matter of being certain you haven’t been defrauded by an organized ring of criminals. They deal in fake antiquities.”

“How odd they would choose one of the Clerestory Tapestries.”

“Why is that? They are valuable, aren’t they?” Deirdre asked.

“And they are cursed, too. Oh, you are surprised at that?” Calhoun chuckled. He sat in one of the chairs and crossed his leg, balancing his teacup on his knee. “Perhaps you do not believe in such things.”

“The authenticity of the tapestry, not any supposed curse, is what matters,” Deirdre said, glancing at Quince for a cue. He was as taken aback by the comment as she was.

“What’s the curse supposed to do?” Quince shifted his cup from hand to hand without

drinking.

"Oh, nothing much, in the scheme of things. But it is getting late, and I suspect you want to examine the tapestry," Calhoun said.

"Yes, right away." Quince stood but Calhoun did not move.

"She can examine it. You and I need to compare notes about the tapestry's history."

"But he's the expert," Deirdre said.

"My dear, you are far too modest. I can tell you know a great deal. Perhaps you were even a dealer in such artifacts at one point."

"Go on," Quince said. "You know what to look for."

"This way, my dear. I am sorry to be so stubborn on this point, but I have made it a rule that only one person at a time should examine any of my treasures."

"Why is that?" Deirdre followed Calhoun from the room. They took the same corridor that led to the kitchen but he opened a door she had not noticed before and went into a maze of rooms that she thought brought them to a room just off the main entryway. They had turned and twisted about so much she was not certain.

Calhoun stood in front of the cyber lock, blocking it from Deirdre, unlocked the massive, carved wooden door and pushed it open. The room inside was dark and humid.

"I keep it temperature and humidity

controlled," he said, turning on the overhead light. Only dim lights came on. Deirdre had seen such an arrangement in museums to protect their most valuable books and paintings from damaging light rays.

"You don't have a flash camera do you, my dear? No, I suppose not." Again he raked her with his eyes, not missing a single curve. She had dressed for Quince. Deirdre felt as if Calhoun was undressing her.

"Where is it?"

"Over there, in the case. I must ask you not to open the case. You should be able to examine it well enough, I trust."

"I'll see," she said, not wanting to protest too much. All she wanted was a good look at the tapestry—one of the Clerestory Tapestries, he had said—to get an idea why Broderick was so interested in it.

"I'll return in a few minutes," Calhoun said, stepping back and closing the door. Deirdre started to protest when she heard the locking bolt click shut. There was no way to open the door from the inside. She tried the knob, only to find her suspicion was accurate. The door was securely fastened.

Heaving a sigh of resignation she went to the case and peered at the tapestry. The dim light made examination difficult, and she was not sure

what she was really looking for. The tapestry was small, as such things went, hardly five feet long and only three wide. She moved around to get a better look when she heard a sharp click followed by static.

Looking up, Deirdre stared across the room at a small television set. It had been turned off when Calhoun showed her into the room. Now it was certainly on. Snow danced on the screen. As she watched, a picture formed, as if being played back from an old VHS tape.

"Quince?" She abandoned her study of the tapestry and went closer to the television. On the screen she saw a man who looked a great deal like Quince. She peered closer at the small screen. "It is Quince."

She wondered if this was some closed circuit TV hookup showing the sitting room. Then she frowned. Quince was stripped to the waist. And he certainly was not in Calhoun's sitting room. She could not figure out exactly where he was. As the camera changed angles, she saw a four-poster canopy bed. The stone walls were covered in places by tapestries, but none was a match for the one from the Garson estate in the case behind her. Fascinated, she watched Quince move slowly to the bed. He turned and faced the camera.

The static died down, and she heard a voice she remembered all too well.

"You are so handsome," Broderick said. "You

are the kind of man who would set my heart to beating, had I a heart."

A dark form momentarily came between Quince and the camera. Then the field of vision changed. Both Quince and Broderick were in the picture. Quince looked totally enraptured. Broderick reached out and lightly touched the blond man's cheek and moved closer.

Deirdre gasped when she saw them kiss. It wasn't as if Broderick kissed Quince. It was a mutual kiss. One of passion.

She stepped back in fascinated horror, staring at the small TV.

They embraced. Broderick whispered something she could not hear, but Quince pulled back. The smile on his lips was one she thought only she had seen.

"A moment," Broderick said. He moved so that his lips brushed along Quince's muscle-corded neck, then worked up to his earlobe. He bit, causing blood to spurt out. His quick tongue worked to snare every precious red drop of blood. Quince sighed in the same way he had when Deirdre had given him head in the middle of the night. But Quince was not half asleep. He was aware of what Broderick did and obviously wanted more.

If she had any doubt that Broderick was truly a vampire, it was gone now. And then she knew

why Quince was so determined to kill him. After the vampire had sampled the blood dribbling from the bitten ear, he put his hands on Quince's shoulders and gently pushed the man down.

What he did was out of the picture frame, but the expression on Broderick's face and the sounds Quince made left nothing to her imagination. It sounded exactly the way it did when she went down on a man.

"You are the best I have ever found," Broderick sighed. His face reflected the pleasure Quince gave with his mouth.

Deirdre spun about, back to the screen when she heard the cyber lock opening.

Calhoun came in, looking from the tapestry case to where she stood across the room.

"Have you examined it adequately?"

Deirdre struggled to find words. Any words.

"I . . . I had a difficult time," she said, fighting to put her chaotic thoughts into order. "The light. So dim."

"Yes, I can understand that. Why are you over there?" Calhoun asked.

Deirdre looked behind her at the television. The screen had gone blank. Whether the tape had run to its conclusion or if the set had been turned off deliberately just as Calhoun in, she could not tell.

"I heard something. This TV," she said, pointing. "Is it part of a security system?"

"I've had quite a talk with your young man,"

Calhoun said. “It seems he is less knowledgeable about things such as my tapestry than you are.”

“Could I have a little more time with it? Just a few more minutes. Please.” She needed more than that. She had barely glanced at the tapestry when the video of Quince and Broderick had started, completely stealing away her attention. Even now, she was hard-pressed to describe the tapestry but could give every detail of the bedroom where Quince and Broderick had –

She swallowed hard again, hardly able to wrap her thoughts around what she had seen.

“Perhaps you would care for something to eat before continuing?” The way Calhoun said it turned a simple offer into an order.

Deirdre nodded. Calhoun held the door open. As she passed out of the room she looked back at the TV screen, almost expecting to see Quince with his lips around Broderick’s cock. But it remained blank.

Tantalizingly, tormentingly blank.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You appear upset, my dear. Was there something wrong with the tapestry?"

"I didn't get the chance to look at it closely enough, that's all," Deirdre lied. She could not get the image of Quince and Broderick together out of her mind. What bothered her most of all was how she felt about seeing Broderick nip Quince's ear and lap the blood. It had reminded her of the thrill she felt when the vampire did that to her.

Even more disconcerting, she had gotten hot at the idea of Quince and Broderick together sexually. The video had cut away at the very instant when she would have seen more of the man on vampire action, but it took little ingenuity for her to imagine what that was like. And it excited her sexually. Embarrassed, she tried to cover her confusion and arousal, but Calhoun pressed her constantly.

"Was it the proper color? You could not tell from the texture, not behind the glass, of course,

but the technique of the weaving? That was proper for the period, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so. Mr. Calhoun, to be honest, I am at a loss to say what I saw." That covered her perfectly since it was nothing but the truth. That she was talking about something other than the tapestry was probably no surprise to Calhoun.

That thought startled her. Calhoun had to know what she had seen. How had he come by the video and why had he shown it to her unless he knew more than he should? Broderick was after the tapestry. Maybe Calhoun knew and used it as a lure the way Quince had intended. That explained much, but it created more questions with no answers.

No immediate answers, she corrected herself. How to get the solution to her problem was yet to be determined. Quince would have to help.

"Please, my dear, be seated. I must tend some business but will return in a few minutes." Calhoun smiled pleasantly at Quince, who scowled in return. Then the older man disappeared. Deirdre wasted no time rushing to Quince and grabbing him by the arm.

"I saw, Quince. I saw!"

"The tapestry? Is it for real?"

"Not that. I saw the video."

"What are you talking about?" He peered at her. His eyes were like cat's eyes now. "Tell me!"

"You know what I mean," she said. "You and Broderick. Together."

"I don't have any idea what you mean."

"You were *together*. That's why you hate him so much, isn't it?" Deirdre saw the man turn as white as a ghost. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He clamped his mouth shut and jerked free.

"How did it happen, Quince?"

"His hypnotic powers. His damned powers of persuasion, that's how. I did things with him I never want to do again. He told me what he wanted, and I *wanted* to please him." Quince slumped. "I wanted to *pleasure* him. And I did. More than a few times, too, in every way you can imagine and probably some you can't."

"Where? When?"

"What does it matter? It happened almost five years ago in London. I was a student at Oxford in medieval studies, and he was an instructor. It was only by accident I discovered that Broderick was a vampire. When he knew what I had found out, he . . . ordered me to never tell anyone."

"And he had you do other things. With him."

"Yes." Quince's simple answer carried a lifetime of pain, anger and humiliation.

"It's not that bad, Quince. Really. He forced me, too."

"It's not the same for you. He didn't make you do anything you hadn't already done."

“That’s the point. He made you do it.”

“I wanted to do it. I liked it, just as you did. You were repulsed by the idea Broderick had that kind of power over you, but you liked it. So did I.”

“Oh,” was all Deirdre could say.

“How did you see that video?”

“It just came on. There was a small TV set, and when I started to examine the tapestry, it turned on by itself and the video of the two of you began. I never got a chance to really look at the tapestry.” It obviously pained Quince to admit what he had done with Broderick, but Deirdre was discomfited by her own response. She could have watched the video all the way through, all the way to ultimate pleasure for both Quince and Broderick.

That was wrong, but it had also been impossible for her to take her eyes off the sexy union.

“Calhoun had a television set in the room where he kept the tapestry?”

“That’s weird, isn’t it? The tapestry is in an air-conditioned, humidity controlled room. Why would there be a TV showing such a video?”

She answered her own question. It had been there so she could see it. Calhoun had played it for her, timing his departure and arrival perfectly. What he had to gain from it was beyond her, however.

“Who is he? Calhoun?” wondered Quince

aloud. "I thought he was only a curious buyer of an old artifact. He's got to be more."

"Do you think he has something to do with Broderick? An ally?"

"Broderick has no allies. He has no friends. He goes through the world alone because he prefers it that way."

"Like a scorpion ready to sting anyone who gets too close," Deirdre said.

"As much as I want to see the tapestry, we've got to get out of here," Quince said.

"Should we wait for Calhoun?" Deirdre was becoming more frightened by the minute. Calhoun did not look like a vampire, but she knew so little about them. She would never have picked Broderick out as a vampire, either, even with his cold hands and pasty complexion. All she knew of vampires was wrong. Calhoun could be another kind of vampire. Or exactly like Broderick. She just didn't know enough to say.

"Hell, no," Quince said, grabbing her hand and dragging her from the room. They went into the entryway. When Quince had trouble opening the double doors leading out, she had the image of them being trapped inside the mansion, rats in a cage. Rats in a maze. She remembered how Calhoun had led her through the labyrinth of corridors and rooms to reach the tapestry.

"Got it. Door swelled and got stuck," Quince said in triumph, pulling the door open. A blast of

cold wind hit them in the face. Deirdre lowered her head and pushed on, Quince still pulling her along.

“What’ll we do when we get to the gate? I can’t crash through it in a junker like mine.”

“Get there. I’ll think of something. Just get us the hell away from here.”

Quince slid into the passenger seat. For a second, Deirdre thought he would reach over and grab the wheel from her. But even if he had, it would not have mattered. She couldn’t get the engine to start.

“Come on, come on,” Quince said anxiously. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. The engine just won’t start.” Helpless, Deirdre looked out the windshield and saw the rain beginning again. A few drops, then more, until the glass was completely covered with fresh water. She turned to Quince. “What are we going to do?”

“I’ll see if there’s anything under the hood. Pop it open.”

Deirdre reached down and found the hood release by her left knee. She heard it open but could not see it because of the rain hammering so furiously against the glass. Quince jumped out and vanished into the rain. In a few seconds, he came back and shook some of the water off like a drenched dog.

"I don't know what's wrong. I couldn't see anything."

Deirdre started to ask if he had checked the spark plug wires, but Quince would know to do that. A quick glance would tell if someone had sabotaged the car. Considering how hard it had rained since they had left town, water might have gotten into the electrical system and shorted something out. Or it could have been something else. Deirdre just did not know.

"What are we going to do?"

"We don't have much choice. We get out of here on foot."

Deirdre was not going to argue. She opened the door and let out a yelp of terror. Standing in the rain was a dark figure.

"I heard your engine grinding," Calhoun said. "Is there anything I can do?"

He stood amid the downpour under a large umbrella. Calhoun was an island of dryness. He silently held out the umbrella to shelter Deirdre. She got out, not knowing what else to do. She looked over the car. Quince had also gotten out of the car and stood where he got soaked.

"You can use the phone to call a tow truck. There's a garage in Zionsville. That's only a dozen miles away."

"Thank you, Mr. Calhoun," Deirdre said. She worried that he would ask why they had left in such a hurry, but he patiently walked beside her

up the steps to the front door. Along the way, Quince edged closer but never quite found shelter from the rain under Calhoun's umbrella.

"You are both soaked through and through," Calhoun said. "Go upstairs. There is a bath at the head of the stairs with plenty of towels. When you're dry, come back down and you can phone from there." He pointed to a telephone on a table in the entryway.

"I've got a cell phone," Deirdre said. "I can use it."

"As you wish, my dear, but we are in what is referred to as a 'cell hell,' and it is very difficult getting a good signal. That's why I still have a land line."

Deirdre and Quince went up the broad staircase, dropping water as they went. Quince looked over his shoulder repeatedly. Calhoun stood at the foot of the stairs watching them with his intent brown eyes. What worried Deirdre was the faint smile on the old man's lips. It was as if he knew a joke they didn't.

"Here's the bath," Quince said. "You go on in and dry off. I'll –"

Deirdre pulled him in and closed the door. She looked up into his fathomless eyes, then kissed him firmly. Hard. With all the emotion locked up with her. Part of that came out as passion, but she had to admit there was a considerable amount of

fear mixed with it, too.

He broke off. "What was that all about?"

"I needed to tell you that I don't care what happened between you and Broderick. I don't care!"

"You ought to," he said sullenly. He tried to push her away, but she clung to him. She pressed her cheek against his chest so hard that she caused a new trickle of water to drip down. He tried to break free, but Deirdre was determined to hang on. And she did.

"I don't care. I know how powerful he is."

Quince relented.

"We have to get dried off and get away from here. I don't trust Calhoun."

"We should never have barged in like we did," Deirdre said. "I knew we should have been more cautious."

"Caution be damned," Quince raged. "We had to find out about the tapestry. If we play our cards right, we still might. I can keep Calhoun busy. You go back to the room and get a good look at the tapestry."

"Quince, I don't know if I can find the room. This house is a maze."

"And you didn't leave a trail of bread crumbs," Quince finished in disgust. "That's all right. We'll figure out how to get to Broderick."

"Just Broderick? Why not Calhoun, as well? He might be a vampire."

"I told you I'm not a vampire hunter. Broderick is the only one I want to kill."

She looked up at him but did not goad him further. The world could be filled with vampires and all Quince would care about would be killing Broderick. It made her uneasy, but she understood the reason after seeing the video.

"Let's dry off. Calhoun will be expecting us back pretty soon."

"He's a strange old bird," Quince said. "I get the feeling he's got us boxed in here."

Deirdre looked around the spacious bathroom. Fluffy turquoise towels hung on a rack near the claw-foot bathtub. The tub might have been an antique but she thought it was more likely to be a replica. But the entire room had been outfitted with antique fixtures. The towel racks were bright brass rods and the toilet had a tank mounted on the wall above with a pull chain dangling down. She grabbed the towels and pressed one into her face, then ran it over her hair to get dry.

"Here, let me help," Quince offered. He grabbed a towel and began mopping up the water on her neck and blotting up the dripping water from her hair. She sighed when he moved lower, pressing the towel into her back and lower. She felt herself thinking about stripping off her wet clothes, turning and having Quince make love to her and to hell with Calhoun. Let him wait.

"There," Quince said. "You can finish off the rest."

"It's more fun when you do it," she said playfully, but the moment had passed. Quince worked to get himself dry—or drier. Without shedding their clothes and tossing them into a dryer, they would stay damp for a long time. She watched Quince buff himself off, wanting to do it for him. He tossed the towel down and went to the door.

"You coming?"

"Wait, Quince. We need to figure out what we're going to do."

"You're right. Call information," he said pointing to her purse with the cell phone.

Deirdre knew what would happen before she pressed the 411 to find the nearest towing service. The ROAMING indicator flashing on the tiny screen never stopped. She tried again, then looked up at Quince.

"He was right. No cell phone service here."

"I thought as much. Do you want to bet that the phone downstairs is out of service, too?"

"Then we walk," Deirdre said firmly. "We get out of here if we have to climb the wall and hike all the way back to Indianapolis."

Deirdre finished blotting up the water clinging to her clothes the best she could, then hung her towel up where it had been. She hurried after Quince. By the time she got to the entryway he

was already on the phone. His eyebrows arched, then he nodded. When she got to his side, he hung up.

“The phone worked?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The only towing service is so swamped they are only answering emergencies, and there are a lot. They said they could get out here sometime tomorrow afternoon.”

“Then you must stay,” Calhoun said. “I have plenty of room.”

Deirdre jumped. She had not heard the man approach.

“We can go,” Deirdre said. “It’d be too much trouble for you to—”

“Nonsense,” Calhoun said briskly. “This will give you a chance to rest. Then you can examine the tapestry again.”

“Both of us?” asked Quince.

“One at a time. I have my petty rules.” Calhoun shrugged and smiled ruefully, as if those rules were imposed by someone else, and he could never change them.

“We’ll stay, then. Thanks for the offer,” Quince said.

“Why don’t I show you to your rooms?”

Deirdre glanced at Quince, but he had missed what Calhoun said. Rooms. They were getting separate rooms. Whether putting them together violated another of the many rules that seemed to

govern Calhoun's existence or if he had simply realized they were not a couple, she was hesitant to ask.

"You settle in. We can dine later."

"We wouldn't want to put you out, Mr. Calhoun," she said. "You're being so gracious to let us stay and look at the tapestry again."

"Think nothing of it," he said airily, waving his hand about as if shooing away flies. "Let me show you your rooms."

He led the way back up the broad staircase and down the hall. Calhoun pointed out one room for Quince and the next for Deirdre.

"Make yourselves at home. You know where the bath is. Dinner, such as it is, will be ready in a couple hours."

Calhoun left them in the corridor, going back downstairs. He hummed some tune Deirdre could not identify.

"He's one happy old fart," Quince said.

"Why not?" Deirdre looked at the paintings along the corridor. Every part of the house was decorated expensively. "He's rich. And now he's got company."

"Or captives," Quince said glumly.

"We don't have to be in solitary confinement," she said. "Later on, come to my room."

Quince smiled crookedly, then glanced toward the stairs. "Do you think he would care?"

"Would he even notice?" Deirdre countered.

"Oh, I bet he would. This entire place is wired. See that small plastic bubble. An eye in the sky like they use in Vegas casinos. There are other cameras hidden around the place."

"But not so well that you didn't find them," she said. Deirdre was uneasy at the smoky black glass hemisphere in the center of the ceiling halfway down the corridor. Whoever watched through it could monitor all activity in the hall, even if the lights were turned down.

"I keep alert. You should, too," Quince said.

Deirdre was stung by the implied criticism.

"It wasn't me who came barging in here. Are we prisoners?"

"We might be. I'll call around and see if I can get another towing service out. Might be a shade tree mechanic around somewhere who could look at the car and fix it. That'd be better."

"I've got to call Maurine and tell her I won't be in to work tomorrow."

"That's the least of our worries. The tapestry —" Quince bit off his sentence when he saw Calhoun returning.

"You're ready for dinner, I trust. I got hungry and suspected you were, too, considering all that you've been through. I put few things out. Not much and certainly not fancy, but it will do on a rainy night like this."

Deirdre started to say something, but Calhoun

interrupted her. "I know, I know, my dear. You would like dry clothes. I'm afraid I have nothing to offer you other than a bathrobe. Your friend is too large to fit in any of my clothing, it would appear." Calhoun eyed both of them critically. Again Deirdre got the sensation of an ancient man with infinite wisdom looking down his nose at them, as if they were hardly more than bugs.

"We'll be fine, thanks," Quince said. "But I could do with some of that food." He shot Deirdre a knowing look, as if saying that he would occupy Calhoun while she examined the tapestry again. They followed Calhoun down the stairs.

Deirdre moved close to Quince and whispered, "I can't find the room again. Even if I could, it was locked. One of those cyber locks."

"You will let us look at the tapestry after dinner?" Quince called to Calhoun. The man stood at the bottom of the stairs. He turned and looked up at them.

"I see no reason why not. Come along now. I opened a few cans of tomato soup and made sandwiches. I hope you both like roast beef."

"Why not?" Deirdre asked.

"Oh, so many people are vegetarians these days. They take it as an insult if you offer them meat of any kind, as if you have blasphemed their religion."

"You get that many visitors?" Quince asked.

"Enough, a few," Calhoun said, opening the

door to an elegant dining hall. Deirdre caught her breath. While the food was as Calhoun had said, it was set on fine china plates with crystal goblets. "I seldom drink anything but water. Please excuse the lack of choice."

"That's fine," Deirdre said. "It's been so long since I ate, I can't remember my last meal."

"Undercover work is difficult, I suspect," Calhoun said, sitting at the head of the table. He had placed Deirdre to his right and Quince to the left so they faced one another.

They made small talk until the last of the sandwiches were devoured. Quince leaned back, picked at his teeth with his thumbnail and fixed his colorless eyes on Calhoun.

"Let me look over the tapestry. Deirdre has said it is quite a fine specimen."

"Indeed, has she? It surprises me she had enough time to examine it that carefully."

"Why do you say that?" Deirdre tensed. Calhoun was playing with them.

"Oh, as you said, the distractions," he said vaguely, though Deirdre knew exactly what he meant. She almost asked how the video had come to be played—and how Calhoun had come by it in the first place. The flickering lights silenced her.

Calhoun looked up at the chandelier over the dinner table.

"Oh, my, how unfortunate. The lights go out

often here in the country during storms." Before he finished his complaint about faulty electrical service, the lights went off entirely. The room was suddenly as black as the inside of a coal sack.

"Perhaps the lights will come back on," Calhoun went on. "If not, I must say you are out of luck examining the tapestry."

"Why?" Quince sounded belligerent. Deirdre's night vision slowly allowed her to see him across the table. She thought he held a knife in his hand, as if to defend himself from the old man.

"I have an electrical lock on the door. When the power goes out, locking bolts are thrown and cannot be retracted until electricity service is restored. It's one of those protective things the security service recommended."

"What'll we do?" Deirdre looked around, seeing shadows and dim shapes now. She caught her breath when she thought she saw something moving near the door leading to the kitchen area. As quickly as she spotted it, it vanished. It might have been nothing but nerves. Outside thunder crackled over the hammering of falling rain. She must have seen a reflected lighting bolt.

"I would suggest retiring to your rooms and getting a good night's sleep. There is nothing I can do. I am not even sure I have a working flashlight around."

Calhoun rose and moved through the room with the easy grace he had shown before. The best

Deirdre could tell, he saw perfectly in the darkness.

"We can get to our rooms, Mr. Calhoun," said Quince. Deirdre and Quince bumped into each other. She reached for his hand and found the one clutching the knife. Quince quickly shifted it to his other hand. He held her hand and led her from the room with faltering steps until they reached the entryway.

Here the lightning flashed cast intermittent illumination that allowed them to go up the stairs.

"At least the security cameras are all out of service," Deirdre said.

"I don't buy the electricity going off like that. It was too convenient, almost as if was turned off on cue."

"What's he gain by that?"

"He kept me from looking at the tapestry. There's got to be something important there, a clue to why Broderick wants it so badly. I know I can figure out what it is and use it against him."

Deirdre stopped in front of Quince's bedroom door.

"Come with me," she said. "Sleep with me tonight."

"Afraid of the dark?"

"No, yes, I don't know. What's wrong with being with me?"

"I intend to prowl around later, after Calhoun's

gone to sleep," Quince said.

"Stay with me until then."

"The cameras," Quince said. "I bet he knows if we go together into a room."

"So what?"

"He put us in separate rooms for a reason. I want to know what that is, as well as getting a look at the tapestry. There's more going on here than meets the eye."

Deirdre tried to convince him with a kiss to join her, but she missed his lips and got his cheek in the dark. And then Quince was moving away, leaving her alone in the hall.

She heaved a sigh and went to her room. She opened the door and stepped into the musty room. It had not been aired in months. She went to the bed and was surprised to find fresh linens. Stumbling around a bit, Deirdre went to the window and flung open the heavy drapes. A bolt of lightning dazzled her, but she decided to leave the drapes open to get some light, however intermittent.

"Sleep? I'm not going to sleep," she vowed. She sat on the bed, her back against the ornately carved headboard. Deirdre drew up her legs and clutched them tightly to her chest. If she had to stay this way all night to keep from drifting off to sleep, she would.

Mostly, she wished Quince would come in and make love to her.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Deirdre stirred when she heard movement in the room. Sleepily, she looked up from where she had rested her head on her knees. She had a sore back from sleeping in this position but knew it would not matter soon enough.

“Quince?”

“My dearest,” came a whisper almost drowned out by the rain pelting against the bedroom window. “Here.”

She tried to see him but sensed his presence close. He held out something in front of her.

“What is it?”

“Inhale. Now!”

She gasped when he pinched her. She sucked in both her breath and the dust just under her nose. She started to sneeze and then found she was caught between sneezing and coughing.

“Wh-what was that?”

“Do you feel it yet?”

"Did you give me a drug?"

"No, not like you mean." His voice was hoarse and harsh. Deirdre started to ask more but felt a sudden lightheadedness that caused her to topple onto her side on the soft bed.

"Do you feel it now?"

"I do," she said. Somehow she saw perfectly in the darkness now. Every item on the table beside the bed was as if a spotlight had been cast on it, yet the lights were still off. The flare of lightning outside almost blinded her. But she found more than her vision had been augmented. She heard. She smelled. She tasted.

She felt.

Quince's hands moved slowly up her legs, stroking. He flexed his fingers and pressed into her flesh. The sensations ripping through her almost pushed her over the edge of orgasm.

"What's going on?"

"You will now have the experience of your life."

Before she could respond, hands worked at her jeans and pulled them down around her ankles. Those same hands pushed upward, taking her still damp T-shirt over her breasts and arms to dangle around her neck. She was naked from neck to ankle and felt the air currents blowing across her primed body everywhere. Her tender inner thighs quivered at the light touch of air. Her breasts grew taut and her nipples hardened into aching little

buds. But most of all her pussy began to drool obscenely. She was oozing out her inner lubricants in a steady flood as if she were totally aroused.

Deirdre realized she was. The simple act of having her clothes pushed off her body had turned her on more than she ever had been.

“What did you do to me?”

“That is the wrong question, dearest one,” came the whisper. “What I will do to you is of more interest – to us both.”

Strong hands gripped her hips and lifted her up. She turned and came down on the bed on all fours. Like a dog she balanced in the middle of the soft mattress. Hands moved restlessly over her. Every touch was electric. Fingernails raked her ass cheeks, her thighs, moved between her legs and pushed them apart.

“You are ready for me. I can smell it.”

“Oh, oh!” Deirdre tried to speak but pleasure drowned out her words. The light touched the deep scratches, the pressure against her rounded buttocks as he moved into place, all thrilled her a hundred times more than she had ever thought possible. If she received any more stimulation she was sure she would go insane.

His cock thrust powerfully into her from behind. Deirdre came. He withdrew. She came again. When he began fucking her from behind with long, muscular thrusts she was coming like a

machine gun firing. She gasped and moaned and trembled all over.

He reached around her hips and found her clit. A finger pressed down, then began to rotate slowly.

"Oh, yes, oh, no, oh!"

Her brain jumbled from the multiple orgasms, she was sure she could not tolerate any more stimulation. She was wrong. The finger pressing into the tiny spire began moving more insistently. When the rotation was coordinated with every thrust of his cock into her tight cunt, she came again. Sweat poured from her body and dripped onto the bedspread. Deirdre did not care. She was totally wrapped up in a wild, woolen blanket of total carnal delight. She had read the magazines about the Big O and had always wondered if it was a myth.

It was teeth-chattering reality for her. Again and again.

"Ah, yes, my dearest one, yes, you are so snug around me. Your pussy pleases me greatly."

"Big, big inside me. So much bigger than before."

"Let yourself go. Let me fuck you all night long."

"Can't, can't," she sobbed out. "I'll burn out like a light bulb."

"Then burn brightly now."

Finger on her clit, groin rubbing against her ass,

cock buried far up her pussy, everything came together for Deirdre. She flopped facedown on the bed. She never lost contact with the erection thrusting so rhythmically into her. He followed her onto the bed, crouched above her and kept fucking her until she almost fainted from the intensity of her come.

"No more, please, no more."

"Then suck me off," came the command.

She let him pull free of her spasming pussy and rolled over. She immediately found a dick thrusting into her mouth. She took it greedily, licking and sucking and tonguing until he blasted out his creamy load into her mouth with the pressure of a fire hose. She was up to taking the huge outpouring. And then she had to sink down, letting the limpness trail from her mouth. She shuddered and then smiled.

"It's never been so good," she said.

"I know." The cruel laughter echoing through the bedroom shocked her.

Deirdre's eyes shot open. Her head dangled over the edge of the bed, forcing her to look up past a flaccid organ. Standing over her was Broderick.

She jumped as if she had been poked with a pin. Coming to her knees, she stared at the vampire. With her enhanced vision, she saw every line of his thin face, the cruel lips pulled back into

a sneer, the deep set eyes that seemed to be pools looking into infinity.

"Broderick!"

"Yes, dearest, Deirdre, at your service." He performed a mocking bow. Then he reached down and drew up his pants and fastened them around his slender waist. She caught sight of his belly. He had a flat stomach, tightly muscled and incredibly sexy.

Deirdre shook herself. She was under Broderick's spell again. He had done something to her again.

"What did you give me? What drug?"

"Not a drug. Do you not see better? And experience strange, wonderful sensations you never have before felt?" He fanned his hand a few times a foot from her breasts. The light pressure of the moving air against her nipples made her almost come again. "Tell me truthfully. Would you not like to live like this forever? To experience such pleasure again?"

"It's a drug."

"No," Broderick said. "It is not a drug. Rather, it is ash of vampire. You are experiencing a fraction of what I do."

"I'm a vampire!"

"No," Broderick said. "It is more complex than merely sniffing the ash of a deceased vampire. Far more complex—and painful. You would not like that part. This is a passing phase for you. Soon

your vision will fade. You will think you are . . .”

“I’m going blind!” Deirdre cried. She clapped her hands over her eyes. The thunder from outside no longer sounded as close by. And smell. Her sense of smell was fading. She recognized the heavy musk of her own sex, but the more subtle odors of the bedroom were vanishing.

“Not going blind. Nor are you dying. Those are common thoughts. Rather,” said Broderick, “you are returning to your normal human self.”

“You fucked me.”

“I gave you the experience of a lifetime.”

“You used your hypnotic powers on me!”

“Did I? Think back. Did I?”

“No,” Deirdre reluctantly admitted. “You hardly said a word. I thought you were Quince.”

“Ah, dear Quince. I hunted for him, but he is loose in the house.”

“You wanted to fuck him, is that it?”

“I have done more than want to fuck him. I *have* fucked him. And he is an excellent partner.”

“You’re gay?”

“I take pleasure where I can. Male. Female.” Broderick shrugged. Deirdre could hardly see him in the darkness now. She imagined him leering. “When you are immortal even pleasures such as you experienced wane. Women for me over a century or two were exciting.”

“Then you moved on to Quince?”

"No, my dearest one, I had many other men before Quince. But he is the one I have most enjoyed."

"You forced him with your hypnotic trance," she accused.

"What is wrong with that? I did the same to you when first we met. You had no complaints, other than the one you tried to phone in to the police. They found you naked, still holding your cell phone, didn't they?" Broderick chuckled. "That must have been a gorgeous sight."

"I was lucky not to get arrested. They thought I was on dope or something."

"Something they could never appreciate," Broderick said. He heaved a deep sigh. "As pleasant as it is to listen to your sweet voice once more, we must get away from this house."

"Why? Aren't you and Calhoun in cahoots?"

"He is evil," Broderick snapped. "He is no friend. He is certainly not your friend, either. Or Quince's. As hard as it is for you to believe, I feel some affection for Quince, even as he hates me to the core of his soul because I fucked him—and he enjoyed it."

"You don't have a soul." Deirdre flopped down on the bed and worked to get her jeans up and her T-shirt pulled down.

"You wear no panties or bra. Good. I prefer it that way. Do you see why? It would have taken extra seconds to strip them from your body. Those

are seconds of stark pleasure that you would have been denied."

"What are a few seconds to an immortal vampire?" Deirdre asked harshly. She still glowed from the fantastic flood of sexual exhilaration that had washed through her like a hurricane, but she felt used.

"To me, nothing," Broderick said. "To you, it could be a significant portion of your ephemeral life."

Deirdre sat cross legged on the bed, glaring at the vampire. At that moment she hated him about as much as she had loved him only a few minutes earlier. The conflicting emotions left her dizzy and disoriented.

"Off the bed," Broderick went on. "We must escape."

"Who is Calhoun? What is he to you? Why is he such a threat?"

"He has found one of the Clerestory Tapestries," Broderick said. "I must have it." Broderick turned. His dark eyes glowed in the darkness. "Even if it is not the one I seek, I must have it. With it and the other four, there are no bounds to the power I can control."

"I knew there were five. Does Calhoun have all of them? I only saw the one."

"You saw it?" Broderick grabbed her by the shoulders and shook so hard her teeth rattled.

Enough of the vampire dust remained in her bloodstream to resist when he used his hypnotic talents on her. "Take me there. Immediately. Take me to the Tapestry of Resurrection!"

"That's what it is? It grants immortality? What do you want that for? You're already undead forever." That she had resisted his mesmerizing command took Broderick aback.

"The proper one of the Clerestory Tapestries can resurrect the dead."

"It'd give you life? I don't understand. You're immortal. That'd mean you'd be mortal again, wouldn't it?"

"You cannot know the loneliness of going through time, watching those you love live and die in a wink of the eye, over and over. I did not want to be a vampire. I certainly did not realize how mind numbingly boring immortality could be. Yes," he said, his voice crackling with emotion, "I want to use the Tapestry of Resurrection to return to a normal human life span."

"Most people would jump at the chance you've had to live forever."

"I am not truly living. I am certainly not dead. Undead. I take pleasures where I can. Yes, they are intense as you experienced, but eating only rich desserts becomes a chore after a few hundred years. I want to know that I can die, that I will – but at some time in the future in some fashion I cannot predict."

Deirdre stared at Broderick, wondering if he was telling the truth. The last vestiges of the vampire ash he had given her were gone now, but she thought she heard sincerity in his words.

"I was in the tapestry room, but it had a cyber lock on it. When the power went out, Calhoun said the room locked down automatically and would not open again until the electricity came back on."

"He is a liar. Nothing he says can be believed. Take me to the room."

"Quince might have found it already," Deirdre said. She worried about seeming to be in league with Broderick. If Quince thought they were teamed up, he would kill her as quickly as he would the vampire. His hatred ran that deep.

"Then we must find him," Broderick said lightly. Deirdre heard more in the vampire's words. Something that would cause Quince to fly into a berserk rage. Broderick might actually be fond of Quince.

Deirdre opened the bedroom door and pointed to the security camera.

"I am aware of it. Do not worry about it. Come along."

"Is this a vampire thing like you can't cast a reflection?"

Broderick laughed. "More silly movie inventions. Why shouldn't a solid body cast a

reflection? I cast a shadow."

"You go out in daylight, too."

"I have an aversion to sunlight, but that has nothing to do with being a vampire, other than not wanting my flesh to rot. Sunlight is a potent destroyer. However, my eyes are geared to the night, as you discovered."

"I can still see better than before," Deirdre said. "A little." She felt a surge that went all the way down into the core of her being when Broderick touched her arm. Some of the potent reaction caused by the vampire ash remained. Or was she responding to him in a normal fashion? That frightened her, if so.

"What does it taste like? Blood?" she asked in a small voice.

"May you never discover that."

"It's good, isn't it?"

"More than good," Broderick said. "Enough of such small talk. The tapestry. Where is it?"

"It's hard to remember," she said. "Calhoun took me through a maze of corridors and rooms."

"There is enough of the ash still in your system. Smell where you went. Follow your own scent. It is powerful."

"There," she said, taking in a deep breath. "I went that way with Calhoun."

"Yes, yes, I smell it myself now!" Broderick grabbed her arm and pulled her through the darkness. They twisted and turned and finally

came to a halt in front of the locked door to the room containing the tapestry.

"This is it," she said, marveling at the ease with which Broderick had threaded them through the labyrinth of Calhoun's mansion.

"He cannot have it locked in the manner you described," Broderick said. "He would be unable to retrieve the tapestry should there be a fire."

"The room might be fireproof," Deirdre said.

"He would not take such a chance. Calhoun would want the tapestry next to him as he escaped."

"Are you going to set fire to the house?" Deirdre asked.

"The idea had crossed my mind, but there must be some other way in. Let me examine the numeric pad on the lock. The keys with smudges on them will be the ones Calhoun touches most."

"Four," Deirdre said, remembering then. "He only punched in four numbers."

"An easy combination, yes, I see which four. There are only twenty-four possible combinations of those keys." Fingers flying, Broderick began going through the combinations one by one. After almost a minute of effort, the locking bars on the door snapped open.

"You did it," Deirdre said in admiration. She went inside when Broderick pulled open the door. She took two quick steps into the vault and stared.

The case that had contained the tapestry was now empty. "It's gone!" she cried.

Deirdre's words echoed in the room. The door had been slammed shut behind her and locked again.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Deirdre swung around and grabbed for the door handle. It would not budge.

“Let me out! Broderick!” She could not believe she was calling out to the vampire to rescue her. When she heard nothing from the other side of the door, she stepped back. Panic would not help her now. She had to figure a way out of the room. Deirdre turned and examined the case that had held the tapestry. She saw that the tapestry had been removed through the side where a small door dropped down. Whether Quince had stolen it to use as bait to capture—kill!—Broderick or if Calhoun had taken it, she had no way of determining.

A quick examination of the rest of the small vault showed no way out other than through the door. The locked door. She went back and pounced on the door, shouting until she was hoarse.

She stepped away when the energy had totally fled and she could hardly lift her arm to bang some more against the solid door. She saw how the hinges were recessed so she could not pry loose the hinge pins and escape that way. She ran her fingers around the door and frame but saw nothing to help. The small cyber lock on the inside of the door was probably the only way to open it from inside the vault.

"Why didn't I see what the combination was when Broderick found it?" She knew it did no good to kick herself now. Deirdre began pacing, looking at the floor, the ceiling, the walls. There had to be a way out.

She could not figure out what it might be.

Then the door opened.

"Broderick!" She ran to the door as it swung back. Her eyes went wide when she saw Quince.

"You were expecting a vampire?" he asked. "I know Broderick is here. I found his . . . spoor."

"He locked me in here. We were trying to get the tapestry and he—"

"You were, were you? Did he get the tapestry?"

"It wasn't in here. I looked and then the door was locked. But it was not here when I got stranded. Calhoun must have removed it earlier."

"He lied about a lot. I saw outside, in the distance. Lights are on in a house about a half mile down the road."

"You got out?"

"No, the entire mansion is sealed like a prison. The doors are locked, and the windows have bars over them."

"What are we going to do?" Deirdre tried to keep from crying. She wanted to hold onto Quince for the security it would bring, but he was distant now. And she knew why. He thought she had fallen under Broderick's spell again. She started to tell him about the vampire ash, then realized how Quince would react. If he was keeping her at arm's length now, he would shove her back into the room and lock the door.

"Find Broderick. Find Calhoun and the tapestry."

"Are they working together?"

"Hardly," Quince said. "Broderick is in as much trouble as we are."

"Then let's have a temporary truce and get out. Then you two can hate each other all you want."

"The hatred only goes one direction," Quince said hotly. "You know that. You saw the video Calhoun has." Quince looked past her to the small TV on the table beside the empty tapestry case. "My god," he said, pushing past her.

Deirdre turned and saw the white static firming on the small television screen. This time she saw not a video but a live feed from a security camera.

"That's the entryway," Quince said. "Broderick is hunkered down in the shadow, waiting for

something."

"For Calhoun."

"For Calhoun, if he has the tapestry. For me, if I happen to get there first."

Quince grabbed her by the upper arms, lifted her off the floor easily and deposited her out of his way since she blocked his way from the room. It took Deirdre a few seconds to compose herself, then she dashed after him.

"Quince, wait for me. You might be going into a trap. Why would Calhoun show you anything on a security monitor? He has to know where we are." Her logic slowed Quince and finally stopped him. He stood, head down for a moment, then he spun.

"What do you think we ought to do?"

"You want Broderick, he wants the tapestry. Calhoun has the tapestry. We should find Calhoun."

"Cut the head off the snake," Quince said, nodding. "It might take until sundown to die, but it'll die eventually."

"How do we find Calhoun? This is his castle. He knows his way around inside. I had a devil of a time finding the way back to the room."

Quince glared at her. "Broderick found the way with that damned sensitive nose. He can sniff out a smell better than a bloodhound."

"Where would Calhoun go? Some control center? How do you find that?"

“Central. Panic room. Middle of the house,” Quince said to himself. He turned slowly as if he had become a needle in a compass. Pointing, he started off silently. Deirdre followed without a word. She stepped as lightly as possible, worrying that Calhoun could hear. Then she realized how silly that was. If Calhoun had his security cameras working, whatever noise they made meant nothing. He could see them coming.

“Wait,” Deirdre called, but Quince was moving fast through the darkened house. He got across a room and out the far side before she could reach him. As she left the room, she saw a corridor stretching both left and right. Quince was nowhere to be seen. She started to call out, then stopped. Quince was too determined now to let her know where he was. Being with Broderick as she had made Quince even angrier at her.

She started along the corridor, making her way carefully. Now and then she bumped into a table or chair in the dark, but then she came out into the entryway. Lightning momentarily illuminated it and let her get her bearings. She homed in on the shadowy corner where they had seen Broderick.

“So you have found me. So easily, it seems, my dear.”

“I’m not ‘your dear’ and why the hell did you lock me in the vault?”

“I didn’t. Calhoun came along.” Broderick let

out a deep sigh, as if lovelorn and without hope. "He had the tapestry. He lured me away with it. I did not realize he had locked you in the room until I lost him."

"You lost him? What about that nose of yours? Couldn't you smell him? Or see him? Your eyes cut through this darkness like you had infrared lenses on."

"He is cleverer than that; I found myself in a maze that even my senses could not unravel. Eventually, I found myself in this entryway."

"So you decided to sit like a spider in the middle of its web and wait for him to blunder by? That's not much of a plan."

"No, it isn't," Broderick admitted. "It is better than roaming blindly through this puzzle of a house. Calhoun is somewhere safe, watching on his cameras." Broderick pointed to the small, dark hemisphere high on the ceiling. Deirdre knew it was there. Otherwise, it was invisible to her ordinary vision. For a brief instant she wished she had another whiff of that vampire ash. Being so alive had made her realize how much she had missed in life. In college she had never been one to take drugs, but from everything friends had said, snorting the vampire ash was nothing like the drugs they took. She had not been altered, she had become greater in all the senses she normally had.

And the sex had been fantastic.

"We have to join forces," Deirdre said. "As long

as Calhoun keeps us apart, he can control us with no trouble. Together, we can get out of this trap."

"I must do more than escape the jaws of Calhoun's trap," Broderick said.

"The tapestry," Deirdre said with some resignation. "You and Quince are so much alike."

"Are we, now? In what way? Size, perhaps?"

"I didn't think an undead would worry about such human things," she said. Deirdre was a little disgusted at Broderick for saying such a thing. They were in serious trouble, and he joked about how big his dick was compared to Quince's. "Besides, you ought to know firsthand."

Broderick's deeply resonant laughter filled the entryway and then filtered through the mansion. Deirdre noted that the thunder was dying down as the storm wore itself out. How that would help right now, she did not know, but once they got away from here, they could walk along muddy roads without being drenched.

The vampire reached out and caught her wrist, pulling her down to sit beside him. Hidden away in the shadow, she felt more secure. And somehow, being with Broderick made her feel protected, too. She still tried to move away. He had used her. He had hypnotized her into fucking him and not wearing underwear and –

"You need to relax, my dear," Broderick said. "Tenseness will cause you to make mistakes."

“And how should I relax?”

Deirdre never got any farther. Her lips were covered by Broderick's in a kiss. She felt the cool flesh against hers and tried to scoot back. She found herself pinned in a corner.

“Calhoun cannot see us. I chose this place well. He knows we are here, but he cannot see us.”

“Oh.” Deirdre tensed when she felt Broderick's hand slip under her T-shirt and work up to her breast. His fingernails scored long scratches. “No, please, no, oh!”

He pushed up her thin cotton shirt and applied his mouth to her left breast. He lapped and licked avidly at the bloody scratches. Somehow, he caught her nipple in his oral attack. She found herself shoving her breast forward, hoping Broderick would take more of it into his mouth.

He did. His tongue, fresh and wet with her own blood, toyed with her nipple. She felt it turning harder with lust until it ached. She reached down and out so that her hands rested on the back of Broderick's head. She could have pushed him away. Instead, she pulled him closer. Her moans filled the entryway now as he continued to lick up the thin flow of blood from the minor wounds on her side and breast.

Deirdre felt herself beginning to cream. Her arousal grew as she imagined Broderick taking her here, pushing her flat onto her back, pulling down her jeans and entering her pussy. She knew well

the feel of his cock stroking back and forth within her. When he fucked her, he sent illicit sexual thrills throughout her body. She knew how wrong it was and yet loved every instant of him pressing her down with the weight of his body, parting her sex lips with his meaty cock, fucking her hard and fast.

She cried out as a small orgasm seized and held her for a moment. She settled back against the wall, Broderick's mouth still moving all over her breasts. But she felt only his tongue. There was no sampling of her blood.

"St-stop," she said. "No more."

"You are attuning yourself to me, aren't you?" Broderick looked up. His ebony eyes danced with amusement. A drop of blood remained at the corner of his mouth. When he realized that Deirdre was staring at it, he thrust out his tongue and made a slow circuit around his thin lips until he captured it. He smacked his lips as he took the drop of her blood into his mouth. "Tasty," was all he said.

"Don't ever do that again," she said, revolted.

Broderick laughed, reached up and tugged her T-shirt down over her breasts.

"You are such a delightful woman," he said. "When I become a human we shall enjoy one another for years."

"Will you have your vampire hypnotic powers

if you become human again?"

"No, of course not." He grinned, his face only inches from hers. "But then I do not need them with you now."

"You just made me . . ." Deirdre gasped when she realized Broderick had done no such thing. She had wanted him and he knew it. He had taken advantage of her desire for him.

"We will be so good together," Broderick said.

Deirdre pushed him away and got to her feet. She was still wobbly and the warm muzzy feeling that still suffused her body reminded her of what had just happened. It was hard to concentrate on what needed to be done. Find Quince. He would save her from this vampire.

"We have to find him. Quince."

"I hear him not far away," Broderick said, rising to his feet in a slow, fluid motion. He stepped into the middle of the entryway, glanced in the direction of the security camera and made an obscene gesture. "Come. Hurry, my dear."

"Don't call me that."

"Do you prefer 'my dearest?'"

"Go to hell," Deirdre said.

"I have lived there longer than you can imagine," Broderick said sincerely. Then he was moving fast. Deirdre slipped on the slick marble floor and finally caught up with him in the dining room. Broderick turned slowly, obviously looking for Quince.

"Is he here?"

"Call out to him," Broderick said softly. "He will attack me. He is in the kitchen. I hear the rattle of metal. He has picked up a knife."

"Quince! Quince! I'm in the dining room. Please. We have to get out of here."

Broderick moved away from her as a dark shape momentarily blotted out the doorway leading to the kitchen. Then Quince came to her.

"I should let you get out of here by yourself," Quince said. "Taking up with Broderick is—" Quince yelled when Broderick grabbed his wrist and lifted him off the ground. He kicked out, but the vampire swung Quince about easily. The knife Quince had found in the kitchen clattered to the floor.

"Stop resisting, dear one," Broderick said. "Stop. Stop."

Deirdre had never seen Broderick use his hypnotic powers on anyone else before. The hatred on Quince's face faded, and he relaxed. His struggles ceased by the time Broderick released him. But she saw the burning hatred deep in Quince's colorless eyes. How opposite they were. Broderick's eyes were black and Quince's lacking in all color. Quince was stocky and had hair the color of cornflowers in the spring sun. Broderick was darker than night.

"A kiss, dear one," Broderick said, bending

lower.

Fascinated, Deirdre saw Quince begin to strain to meet those lips.

"There's no time," she said. "We have to get out of here." This wasn't slowing them. "The tapestry," she said, playing a trump card.

"Ah, she is right," Broderick said, his lips inches from Quince's. The vampire bent slightly and lightly nipped at Quince's lip. The man winced but did not move away as Broderick's quick tongue captured the drop of blood forming. Only when he had sampled did he release Quince.

Quince sagged back to the table.

"What can we do to find the tapestry?" asked Broderick. "You have been plotting and planning. I see it in your eyes, my dear."

Deirdre fought back a stutter. How intimidated she felt when Broderick stared at her like that. And how turned on.

"Quince said Calhoun has to have a safe room."

"Panic room," Quince corrected. "A vault somewhere in the center of the house where he can be safe, yet watch us on the cameras."

"We can pluck the cameras from the ceilings and walls one by one," Broderick said, relishing the idea of destruction. "What does that gain us other than blinding Calhoun?"

"Nothing," Deirdre said. "We need a way to get out. Bore through a wall. Jimmy a lock. Get out of here."

Both men looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"It's the way to get the tapestry," she said. She regained their attention. "If it looks like we're escaping, Calhoun might come out of his hidey-hole."

"Then we grab him," Quince said.

"Then I take the tapestry," Broderick corrected. "Isn't it true you want me to be happy, Quince, my darling?" Broderick reached out his long-fingered hand and stroked Quince's cheek. The man turned and kissed Broderick's palm.

"One big happy family," Deirdre said uneasily.

"Let us proceed to find a battering ram and break down a door," suggested Broderick.

"The doors aren't the way out," Deirdre said. "Calhoun will have them bolted, maybe reinforced with steel. How do we attack the walls around the doors?"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"When was the first time?" Deirdre asked.  
"I don't want to talk about it." Quince looked at her. She had stopped working and waited.  
"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious, I guess. Ever since I saw the video, I've had a lot of questions."

"Keep chipping away at the wallboard. We can work the window free in another few minutes."

Deirdre was not as certain, but then Quince might not have been, either. This could be his way to divert the question and not answer how he had come under Broderick's influence. She positioned the screwdriver she had found and hammered at it with a brass statue. Little by little she got the plaster off and exposed brick wall. Working the bricks loose would allow them to push the entire window casement out. Then they would be free of the mansion.

"Where's Broderick?" Deirdre stopped to wipe sweat from her forehead and took the opportunity

to look around.

"Who cares?" Quince lightened up a little. "Maybe he's watching to be sure Calhoun doesn't sneak up on us. We located the panic room but not the ways in and out."

"Ways?"

"Got to be."

"He really got under your skin, didn't he? I know what it's like. He hypnotized me the first times. I think I'm more susceptible now and don't much like it."

"I'm not more susceptible to Broderick's charms," Quince said, working harder until the muscles pressed hard against his shirt. She saw the ripples of muscle as he worked, knowing he put every ounce of energy into the attack on the wall to get rid of his anger. As Deirdre thought it wouldn't take long at this rate, she jumped back, startled.

The window fell outward. Rain spattered her face, cooling her.

"Got it," Quince said in triumph. He stepped closer and peered out. Deirdre's car still sat a couple dozen yards away, rain bouncing off its hood. "Rain's letting up. Time to go."

Deirdre took a deep breath and nodded. This was the crucial part of their plan. They had to lure Calhoun from his safe spot so they could capture him and find out where he had stashed the

tapestry. Deirdre wondered that Quince had gone along with the scheme since he had only wanted the tapestry to use as bait to catch Broderick. Maybe he figured the tapestry would keep the vampire near enough and give him the chance to kill him.

Deirdre tried to sort out what she felt about that. The memory of the incredible sex in the upstairs bedroom kept crowding out rational thought. She cared for Quince but was not certain how she could pigeonhole her feelings about Broderick. He had done terrible things to her and even worse to Quince. But seeing him dead hardly pleased her. There had to be some middle ground. Maybe with the tapestry Broderick would become human and leave them alone.

"He'll lose his powers, won't he? If he gets that tapestry?"

"I have no idea what he thinks he can do with that hunk of bath mat. And I don't much care." Quince turned and sighted in on the dark glass hemisphere concealing the spy camera. He picked up a brick from the wall, judged his distance and heaved it. He shattered it on the first try.

"You ought to have been the quarterback on a football team," Deirdre said.

"How do you know I wasn't?"

He pushed a few bricks outward to make it appear that they had left, then they rushed into the bowels of the house. They knew where Broderick

had hidden, waiting for Calhoun. If the loss of the camera and the potential loss of his victims did not bring him out of hiding, nothing would.

"Has he budged?" Deirdre asked Broderick. The vampire crouched behind a chair in a hallway, staring hard at a blank section of wall.

"Not yet, my dear. Can you see it?"

"A little," she said. A crack ran from the floor to a spot about waist level. That had to be the evidence of a secret door leading to Calhoun's panic room.

"What are you looking at? I don't see anything."

"Quiet," Broderick said. "Go down the hall. We must trap him between us."

Quince grumbled but did as he was told.

"He couldn't see it," Deirdre said. "Why can I?"

"The power of the vampire ash still lingers."

"Have you ever given it to Quince? The ash?"

"Never," Broderick said. "Nor have I shared it with anyone else. I mean it when I say you are very special to me, dearest."

Whether he lied or meant every word, Deirdre was in no position to tell. Any discussion was cut off when the faint line widened a little and then became a crack. She clutched at Broderick's arm. She was continually amazed at how bony he was – and how strong he was.

"The snake slithers from its lair," Broderick

said. He stood slowly, Deirdre beside him. When a full inch of space showed, both Broderick and Quince rushed the secret door and kicked it inward. They tumbled to the floor. Deirdre followed quickly, sure she could stop Calhoun if he tried to sneak past the pair. But she stood in the small room staring at them. They were sprawled on a rug.

"Where is he?" She spun in a full circle, then caught movement from the corner of her eye. Too late. Calhoun shoved her forward. Her legs tangled with Quince and Broderick still sprawled on the floor and went down on top of them.

"He's getting away!" she cried. Deirdre fought to get her feet under her but all she could do was swing about on her knees. The rug under her knees shimmered and turned warmer. Deirdre looked down at it in the faint light of the panic room. Her eyes widened.

"The tapestry! This is it!"

She looked up at Quince and Broderick. They were not listening to her. They were caught in a passionate embrace. She rocked back on her heels and watched in fascination. There was an awful inevitability about the way they moved, the way they struggled to free one another from unwanted clothing.

"What's with you two?" Deirdre reached out to take them by the shoulders and push them apart. "This isn't the time or place."

The tapestry beneath her grew warmer and filled her with a sense of longing. She dropped to all fours and looked closer at the tapestry. The pornographic figures woven into the forest scene moved. Intrigued she followed them about as they cavorted, dancing and fondling, moving and coupling.

"They're fucking," she said in wonder. "How can a fifteenth century tapestry be like an animated cartoon?"

She looked up and saw Quince and Broderick locked in each other's arms, kissing passionately. The thought she had earlier about Calhoun getting away became all twisted around inside now. It hardly mattered what Calhoun did when the two men she loved most in the world were in need of her amorous attention. She skinned out of her T-shirt, kicked off her shoes and then wiggled free of her jeans. Naked, she stood above the intricately entwined pair on the floor. They were naked, also, each with a hand on the other's cock.

"I want some of that action," she said. "Don't leave me out."

Deirdre crouched down so she could press her pussy into Quince's face. He immediately began thrusting his tongue deep into her hot, moist cunt. Volts of sexual energy passed through her. She rocked forward, being certain that she did not stray so far that he could not continue giving her

all the mouth love she could stand, and lowered her face to Broderick's crotch. She left Quince's hand where it was as she began sucking on just the tip of the vampire's cock.

They shifted and moved and began exploring one another's bodies in a complicated dance that ended up with them lying side by side, Deirdre facing Quince and Broderick behind her.

"This is perfect, my dears," Broderick said. He reached around her and clutched her breasts hard. The firm grip sent waves of desire down into her chest. When he pressed down, letting one nipple poke out from between thumb and index finger, Quince bent over and suckled. Broderick's fingers, Quince's mouth. She gasped and almost came.

Broderick pressed closer. She felt his long, cool prick pressing between her ass cheeks. At the same time Quince moved to thrust himself against her crotch. His cock poked into her pussy lips.

"No, no, you can't, not both at the same time. Oh, ooooh!"

Quince reached down, took her creamy ass cheeks in his hands and pulled her forward. He slid easily into her well-lubricated core. He filled her to overflowing. She felt every ridge on his knobby cock as he buried himself balls' deep within her.

She tensed and relaxed her inner muscles to give him a thrill. She succeeded. She felt his cock begin to jerk about within her pussy.

“Keep those buttocks pulled far part,” came Broderick’s excited voice behind.

“Please, no, you can’t. No one’s ever fucked me up the ass before.”

“A cherry ass ripe for the picking,” Broderick said. Or was it Quince? Deirdre’s head spun in wild orbits, the two, man and vampire, worked together to give her more pleasure than she thought possible. She gasped as Broderick gently pressed the bulbous head of his cock against her tightly clenched anus.

“Relax,” Broderick whispered in her ear. “You will enjoy the feel of both of us inside you at the same time.”

“I . . . I can’t relax,” she sobbed out. But she found herself doing so. Broderick’s hypnotic suggestions still worked on her. Even with the thick shaft of Quince’s cock inside her, she managed to bend and twist and thrust her ass back enough so Broderick could scoot closer.

The three of them, lying on their sides, came even closer together as Broderick entered her from behind.

At first Deirdre thought she was going to lose her mind. If Broderick had rammed in as fast as Quince had fucked into her pussy, he would have hurt her. But his entry was gradual. She could hardly tell he was moving, except for the sensations all around her asshole. She was on fire.

Then he sank an inch up her back. The entire length was on fire. Another inch, a raging forest fire. When he was completely within her, both men reached around and began stroking one another. Deirdre was caught in a sex sandwich the likes of which she had never imagined.

She felt them pressed prick to prick within her, separated only by her fragile inner tissues. But the warmth from their presence grew until she was being consumed totally.

She was not sure when Quince began to retreat from his berth in her tight pussy. When he was almost out, he stopped, then reversed. He fucked back into her slowly as Broderick retreated. This back and forth fucking did more to ignite her forbidden passions than anything else. She gasped and moaned and tried to fight down the rising tides within her. She tried to wiggle free, but Broderick's soothing words in her ear kept her solidly between the two.

She climaxed when he bit her ear and began lapping at the blood. Or was it Broderick? It could have been Quince. Both of them licked and lapped at her bitten ears. She came again. Memory of the vampire ash and how her senses had been heightened returned. She came a third time, this time so powerfully that she crushed down on both of their cocks.

Both men went wild, fucking furiously up her pussy and her ass. She felt their bodies rubbing

against hers. Quince ground himself into her breasts. She felt Broderick slamming hard against her silky smooth ass cheeks. She tried to caress and stroke and stimulate, but she was too firmly caught between them.

She heard Quince cry out as he came. Seconds later, a fountain up her ass told her that Broderick had come, also. They clung together for a long time, mutually exhausted.

Then Deirdre stirred and disengaged from them. She let them flop on either side of her on top of the tapestry.

"What happened to us?" Deirdre had been turned on by the idea that Broderick and Quince were making love to each other, but she had wanted to join in. There had been no conscious thought on her part. She *had* to join their lovemaking. And had.

"The tapestry," Broderick said in a dreamy voice. "It's not the Tapestry of Resurrected Life. Not the one I thought, not the one I wanted."

"What is it, then?" Quince asked.

"The Tapestry of Eternal Love," Broderick said.

Deirdre saw tears form in the vampire's eyes. She rolled over, half atop him and kissed his cheeks. How she loved him! It hurt her badly to see him sad like this.

"Let me cheer you up. What can I do?"

"Yes," Quince said, "What can she do? And

what can I do?"

Quince moved on the other side of Broderick, his hand snaking downward to the vampire's groin. To Deirdre's amazement, the limp cock began to stir. Then she saw that Quince was getting another hard-on. And she was experiencing the awakening desire she always got when she was with the one she loved.

The *ones* she loved.

Her mouth found Broderick's and then Quince added his own in a three-way kiss that began to grow and expand and go in other directions. She continued to kiss Broderick's mouth. Quince worked lower.

When they were done a second time, they were all three too exhausted to move. And yet new stirring of lust glowed with Deirdre. She clung fiercely to Quince while Broderick stroked over her body, nipping and licking at blood, until she finally fell asleep.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Deirdre heard something but was too sleepy to care what it might be. She reached out and touched bare skin. Her fingers began moving. A hairy chest moved under her now. Quince. She smiled a little and rolled in that direction, opening her eyes enough to see that she was right. Quince. She kissed his chest. Then the desire that had slumbered within her came alive even more. She began kissing with more passion, working down to his equally somnolent organ.

Taking his penis into her mouth, she began tonguing and sucking until it was a fully functional, ready to fuck cock. It throbbed against her lips and silently encouraged her to take more of it into her mouth. She positioned her head differently, moving around so she was kneeling between Quince's widespread legs. Her fingers stroked over the tightening hairy sac dangling beneath his erection. This produced a soft moan

that encouraged her to suck even harder. The taste of his cock thrilled her—and she wanted to give the man she loved as much pleasure as possible.

As she knelt down, her rear end up in the air, she felt hands moving across her ass cheeks.

“So lovely, my dearest,” came Broderick’s raspy voice. “I want to give you joy.”

She had her mouth full of Quince’s cock but if she had told Broderick what she wanted, he could not have given her more. He stroked over her sleek ass, slid his fingers into the deep crevice between the meaty half moons and began squeezing seductively. If the taste and feel of Quince in her mouth had not aroused her, the way Broderick was toying with her anus now did.

“Ummm,” she moaned out around the thick plug in her mouth. She wiggled her butt to give Broderick permission to fuck her.

The cool hands on her hot flesh were replaced by a more slender shaft poking and prodding at her rear. She had been a virgin up the ass until Broderick had taken her there. Now she wanted him to give it all to her again. It had turned her on more than she would have thought possible. And Deirdre knew Broderick preferred this to fucking her pussy. Whatever pleased him delighted her.

She groaned louder when the thick head of his cock pressed insistently into her asshole. With steady pressure he slowly entered her until he was deeply buried within.

"You are as thrilling as any woman I have ever had," Broderick said softly. "I have had hundreds, my dear. You are the best. The finest. The tightest."

Deirdre pressed her lips tighter around Quince as Broderick began stroking in and out with a long, slow rhythm that ignited her nerves. He found erotic spots within her that she never knew existed. That she was giving him what he wanted added to her arousal. How she loved Broderick!

And Quince! She loved them both! More satisfying, they loved her. She knew they did.

The way Quince bobbed and bucked in her mouth warned her he was close to shooting his wad. She sucked harder. As if Broderick read her mind, he fucked her faster. They were a team, the three of them. They moved together and they came together.

Deirdre almost sobbed when Quince's hard-on began to fade in her mouth. She looked up into his eyes. He craned his neck around so he could see her face.

"You're beautiful," he said. "I love the feel of your mouth on me. I love you."

"I love you," she said.

"And I love you both," Broderick said.

Deirdre saw the battling emotions on Quince's face and then he said, "I love you, Broderick."

"What a trio we are," Deirdre said. She

slithered up Quince's body and lay atop him, her breasts crushing down into his muscular chest. She felt Broderick on top of her, making a man-woman-man sandwich. Somehow, they made love again before slipping off to a deep sleep.

This time when she awoke, she was aware that her legs were sprawled across a cold bare wood floor. It took Deirdre a few seconds to understand. Then she sat up and looked around the panic room. Broderick and Quince lay to one side, arms around one another. A pang of jealousy coursed through her. How had they left her out of their lovemaking?

"The tapestry!" she cried. She put her hands down on the bare floor and spun around. "The tapestry!"

This woke both man and vampire.

"My dearest one, what's wrong?" Broderick asked sleepily.

"It's gone. The tapestry was on the floor when we came in. It's nowhere to be seen."

By this time Quince was on his feet and searching every nook and cranny of the small room. He turned. His eyes were forlorn as he looked at Broderick.

"She's right. It's gone."

"It was not the tapestry I needed," Broderick said with some resignation. "It was another of the Clerestory Tapestries. The wrong one."

"Where did it go? Calhoun had to come take it

away,” Deirdre said. For the first time she realized she was stark naked. That did not bother her. She was willing to be naked and provocative for the men she loved, but there were other concerns.

“We were too busy to notice,” Quince said, standing at the door. He ran his fingers over the edge. A small piece of cloth had been caught between the door and frame. “Calhoun came in when we were . . .”

“Occupied,” Deirdre supplied.

“Fucking the ones we loved,” corrected Broderick. “Yes, I see it. There is no way that cloth could be in the door if he had not lost it on the way out.”

“With the tapestry,” Quince said. “I’m sorry, Broderick. I know you wanted it.”

Deirdre blinked in surprise. Her hand went to her mouth. Quince had gone from wanting Broderick dead to sounding as if he loved him.

“Broderick,” she said in a choked voice, “what was Calhoun’s tapestry supposed to do?”

The vampire shrugged. “Those within its power find true love.”

“The Garsons,” she said. “They hung the tapestry in their bedroom, and everyone said they were the most loving couple ever.”

“But why did it only affect us now?” asked Quince.

“I thought it was odd that Calhoun insisted

only one at a time view the tapestry," Deirdre said.

"So?" Quince frowned.

"So if two people had been together, close enough to the tapestry, they would have fallen in love with each other."

"Perhaps it is good that Quince did not view it, with a mirror handy."

"That's cruel, Broderick. It was uncalled for."

Deirdre stepped between them. "There's no time for bickering," she said. "I don't think Quince would have fallen in love with himself."

"It happened to Narcissus, and he was far prettier," said Broderick. "But I am touched, Quince, by you wanting me to find the right tapestry."

"I'm sorry, too," Quince said, ill at ease at the apology made to the vampire.

"We were in the room together, on the tapestry. We were lying on top of it."

"We were fucking on top of it," Broderick said.

"Could it have made us fall in love with each other? The three of us?"

"I have heard of stranger magicks," Broderick said.

"Is there any way the tapestry can undo what we've inadvertently done?" Deirdre asked.

Broderick shrugged, then said, "Is it so bad, being in love with me?"

"And me," Quince said.

"No," Deirdre said in a low voice. She had been more than a little in love with the two before falling under the influence of the tapestry. But Quince had gone from hatred to love. Was that such a leap for anyone, she wondered. The opposite of love was not hatred but indifference. Quince had been anything but uncaring about Broderick.

"This could be mighty inconvenient," Quince said.

"Because you walk the knife edge between love and hate all the time?" suggested Broderick. The wily vampire had seen immediately what it had taken Deirdre some time to realize.

"We have to get out of here," Quince said, turning angry. He kicked and poked and finally got the secret door open. The tiny patch of cloth ripped from Calhoun's plaid flannel shirt fluttered to the floor.

They ducked under the low-hanging lintel and went into the corridor beyond.

"Would he have left us locked in the mansion?" wondered Deirdre. Even as the words slipped from her lips she remembered they had chipped through the wall and pushed a window out. They were not trapped.

"He could have killed us," Quince said. "We were helpless. He knew we would be because he left the tapestry where we had to walk over it and

fall under its spell. Why didn't he shoot us or cut our throats?"

"Calhoun is nothing if not vicious," Broderick said. "He knew what the outcome of our brief imprisonment with the tapestry would be. It amused him to allow it to happen."

"Then he took the tapestry and left. Why didn't he fall under its spell and come to love us," Deirdre said, "like we love each other now?"

"Perhaps it requires a few minutes to work. Or, like a roller coaster, it builds to a point of no return. We would have to find a book of spells and find the appropriate one. Or experiment," Broderick said. "That might be more interesting."

"You'd use unsuspecting humans as guinea pigs? It sounds like you." Quince sounded more like his old self, but Deirdre saw that there was no venom in his words. Before their fierce lovemaking on the tapestry, there would have been.

"Why not? Your lives are so ephemeral. It would add spice."

"If you look down on us as nothing but short-lived bugs, why do you want to become a human again?" Deirdre asked.

"Boredom. But I do not seek death. I seek a normal life again."

"The grass is always greener on the other side of the grave," Quince said. "There're millions of people who would do anything to live forever. Sell

their souls, anything."

"That is a small price to pay," Broderick said, "compared with what I went through becoming a vampire. But I would knowingly repeat the agony to be human once more."

"He went downstairs from here," Deirdre said. She pointed to patches of mud on the stairs made by a waffle-patterned sole. "Calhoun must have been outside, then came back in." Kneeling, Deirdre traced around the pattern. She looked up at Quince. "This is the same pattern as the shoe prints outside our motel window. Broderick, I'm sorry. I thought it was you spying on us."

"That would be stimulating," Broderick said. "Perhaps later you two can enjoy one another's affections while I watch. I enjoy that."

"Pervert," grumbled Quince.

"I shall show you the joys of real perversion, my dear," Broderick said. He reached out and brushed his long, cool fingers along Quince's cheek. Quince turned and kissed Broderick's palm.

"Calhoun," Deirdre insisted. "He's the enemy. Isn't he?"

"Ah, yes, that he is," Broderick said. "He is diabolical. You might even call him evil."

"What is he to you? How do you know him?" asked Quince.

"An enemy and ancient, yes," Broderick said. "We need not worry too much about him, though."

The footprints go directly to the hole you made in the wall. Calhoun is long gone."

The three stood just inside the window. The rain had stopped, leaving the world outside cool and fresh. Deirdre sucked in her breath as she looked from Quince to Broderick and then averted her eyes. Her life had become very complicated. She loved a driven man and an arrogant vampire. And they loved her.

And each other.

"We have to find the right tapestry for you, Broderick," she said. "Where do we begin?"

"Ah, my dear," he said, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her closer. Broderick reached out and drew Quince to him on the other side. "There will be plenty of time to decide. At the moment, is it not enough that we have each other?"

It was.

THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the middle of winter in Michigan more (how many more I'm not saying) than 30 years ago, I was lacking a name until my father saw the aurora borealis and decided this was a sign, the right name. (I'm so glad my mother insisted on "Aurora" and not "Borealis!") In spite of my name, I have never seen the aurora (but my younger sister in Alaska has and says its constantly changing, shifting nature is like mine). As a child I moved through the Midwest, living in four different states before I was in the third grade. Finally ending up in West Texas, I married, was widowed, and my only child is in his senior year in high school. I love to read fantasy, and writing is giving me an outlet to live it, as well.