

# A Little Bit of Tina



Evelyn Starr

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A Little Bit of Tina

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## **Dedication:**

For Deucette especially, since she solved the dilemma  
of “the beggar man”.

## Chapter One

“...have had...*enough!*” Erupting into the street, Tina Farrin punctuated her words with a few vicious jabs of the broom she held straight out in front of her like the weapon it had just become. And she fully intended to use it in any way that might become necessary. She fully intended to rid herself, once and for all, of this menace.

The man hunkered down in the doorway of the unoccupied shop next door, wrapped in a tattered and filthy overcoat despite the new warmth of the June day, scuttled backward a little and turned blue eyes to her.

*Homeless.*

*Pitiful.*

To Tina’s way of thinking, there wasn’t much of anything on this earth that was more pitiful or more terrifying than the poor, unfortunate souls who had nowhere to go.

It was kind of a ‘there but for the grace of God’ thing.

But at the moment, just as she’d said, she’d had enough. Way more than enough. She’d had too much

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to give a moment's thought to pitiful, or terrifying, or even God and how he could allow such things to happen.

Because there were shelters.

There were *laws*.

And this man with the sapphire eyes above a healthy growth of dark and scruffy beard had no right to squat here, right next to her trendy shop in San Francisco Street. Because his presence here caused people...the women she targeted as customers...to cross the street and pass by as quickly as possible on the other side. At almost a dead run sometimes, without even noticing the shop she'd named Movie Star and filled with all kinds of tempting, glitzy delights. Because more often than not they'd fixed their gazes instead on the vaguely-threatening man who'd recently become a fixture in the doorway next door.

Nearly a week, half a dozen calls to the cops, and her business was hurting. It was hurting bad. And if she didn't do something herself, didn't do it right now...

"Shoo!" she shouted, darting across the no-man's land that always appeared as if by unspoken agreement whenever the bum, or hobo, or whatever the devil they preferred to be called these days appeared, Tina jabbed with her broom again, as menacingly as she could. "Scat!"

The man scuttled backward a little more. The eyes he raised to her were wide, and startled. But that was the only move he made. The only clue he gave that he'd even noticed her.

"You gonna call the cops again?" he demanded, glaring at her with a look that wasn't quite cowed. Not the way men in his position were supposed to look beaten down and cowed, she thought.

"For all the good it does!" she snorted. "Now, get out of here. Go find yourself a soup kitchen. Go anywhere. Just get out of my face!"

He made a growling, impatient kind of a little sound. But he didn't scuttle away again. He just continued to gaze up at Tina, almost challenging her to do something about him...almost challenging her to get rid of him.

And then something strange happened. Something truly weird and unforeseen that took her breath away for a minute, then made it exceedingly hard for her to get it back.

*The man's eyes.*

Tina staggered back a little, her broom-weapon faltering and then drooping, almost forgotten, between her hands.

She'd been prepared for a lot of things when she'd sailed out of the shop to do what the police didn't seem inclined to do...chase this beggar man away before he could shut her down for good. She'd been prepared for the pity and the despair such people always aroused in her. Had been prepared to feel just the slightest bit revolted at the very notion of coming into contact with the man's filth and his odor, and to feel more than a little guilty that she'd felt any of those things. *But business was business, and...*

She'd expected a lot of things. Expected down-and-out, defeated, world-weary and drug-depleted.

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But this man's eyes...

Tina's breath hitched in her chest.

The man's eyes...hell, the whole homeless, slightly tattered, huge and indigent *man*...were absolutely gorgeous. He had good teeth...really straight, really white teeth, and clean fingernails. And if his clothing was shabby and his overcoat streaked with dirt and something that looked suspiciously like motor oil, he didn't smell bad. Not like he *should* have smelled.

Something wasn't right about this man. Something was not right as not right could be, and Tina's broom dropped all the way to the ground, its bristles slapping the pavement with an oddly audible noise in busy and crowded San Francisco Street, where every other sound and every other person had somehow, magically she supposed, ceased to exist.

The man's eyes were magnetic. Unlike any she'd seen in any man's face, let alone a homeless man's. Not that she'd had much occasion to see many homeless men's faces. In that she was in agreement with all her fleeing customers. Up until this morning she'd always made it a practice to give them a wide berth because she *couldn't* look at them...couldn't bear to look and know there was nothing she could do...nothing that would really make a difference, anyway.

But now, staring straight into clear blue eyes her Grammy would have called 'burning blue'....eyes the color of a Santa Fe summer sky, she realized that they were aware. They were clear and sharp beneath an overgrown crop of hair that couldn't exactly be called red. That was too dark...too close to auburn-chestnut

to be called truly red. The eyes were only a small part of a face that bore a shrewd and intelligent expression beneath a growth of beard that wasn't quite as scruffy and wasn't quite as untended as it had appeared on a quick glance. It was an expression, she thought in that first awestruck moment or two, the homeless man tried to hide with a deliberate blanking of his face. As if...

*He hadn't been living on the street long.*

What had he been? An accountant, maybe, before some media-hyped scandal had destroyed his world and his reputation by forcing his company to close and lay off everyone and anyone? Or maybe a lawyer. But, no. With everybody suing everybody else these days over everything a person could possibly imagine, it was highly unlikely she'd just come into possession of an unemployed and homeless lawyer.

She settled for accountant. Large as he was, as obviously physically fit and able to menace with a gesture or a glance, he didn't try to do anything of the kind. In fact, he seemed almost self-effacing. Like he'd spent most of his life in the unglamorous background and wanted to keep it that way...wanted anything except to be noticed.

Accountant seemed to fit, so she held tight to the notion.

And when in the blue blazes had she decided she'd 'come into possession' of him, anyway? He was the city's problem. The welfare peoples' problem. Some church's problem. Not hers.

That had to be the soft-hearted side of her speaking up again...what her dad would no doubt refer to as



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the soft-headed side if he was still alive to give his level-headed counsel that had always kept her from doing insane things. Like the really, really insane one she sensed she was about to do in another minute or two. Or was it only because she found herself...

But that was not possible. *Straight teeth or no, bluer than blue eyes or no, she was not attracted to a street person.*

Was not!

She simply wanted to get rid of him. That was all. And since she obviously couldn't chase him away from his chosen hang-out, since the police seemed unable or, as seemed one whole hell of a lot more likely, unwilling to chase him away for her...

*He needed a chance. That was all. And she had apparently been the one chosen by God and His guardian angels to give it to him.*

"Get up," she snarled, lifting her broom to nudge him with its tip.

He scuttled backward again. *Tried* to scuttle, though he'd backed himself all the way up against the papered-over door of the closed shop and had nowhere left to go.

"Get up, I said!" This time she didn't nudge with the broom as much as thwack him with it. Thwack him hard enough that he winced a little and allowed the shrewd look to peek through again.

Shrewd, and even *amused*. Which was the last straw. The very last.

Tina brought her broom down again. She brushed his shoulder with it first and then, when that seemed to do little or no good, landed a good solid blow on

his lap. On a part of his lap that ought to get his immediate attention, and obviously did.

"Owwwww!" he bellowed and almost, but not quite, clutched at his groin. "Lay off, Lady! That smarts!"

"Then get up!" She made another menacing move, and this time she left no room for doubt. It was a jab aimed straight at the family jewels. A jab that said the next time he wasn't going to be doing anything but roll around in the middle of San Francisco Street whimpering and twitching in the throes of a hurt he was going to feel for a good, long time. And remember for even longer.

Dutifully, he got up. And Tina backed away. Slowly. Carefully.

Standing, he was even bigger than he'd looked crouched in his doorway.

He was a good six and a half feet tall. A towering specimen of a man with the shoulders of a linebacker in full pads. Except that obviously, his overcoat falling open a little to reveal a T-shirt that appeared much more recently washed and much more presentable than anything else he wore, he wasn't wearing anything but his own well-developed muscle. His own well-developed and very well *fed* muscle.

"How long have you been on the street?" she demanded, manipulating the broom in a way meant to let him know she planned to hold him at bay even though he hadn't made the slightest move toward her and hadn't done the slightest thing to threaten her.

"A while." His voice was good, too. It wasn't rusty

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or raspy or pleading, the way she'd always imagined a street person's voice would just naturally be. It was full. Deep. Rich. As rich as the burnished deep-red of his hair and accented with an undertone of laughter that didn't seem to fit his role in life. More than anything, it was a self-confident voice, a composed and controlled one...the voice of someone who had no clue he might not be in complete charge of his world and everything in it. The voice of someone who still felt like he was on top instead of right down here at the worst, the absolutely most inconceivable and irreparable of bottoms.

That only made Tina's heart twist more.

That only made her even more determined to be insane.

"Don't you lie to me!"

The homeless man flicked his gaze across the street just briefly. Toward the dim and unwelcoming antique shop that stood directly across from Movie Star.

The place was dark, as usual. Deserted-looking as usual, except for the enormously bulky and creepily evil-looking wooden cigar store Indian that glared back at them from a display window. As deserted-looking as it always was until the panel trucks arrived every now and again to drop off a load of antiques or pick up a load. Right now, the only hint that life ever went on over there was a hand-printed sign on the door that said, simply, 'by appointment only' without offering so much as a telephone number where a person could set up that appointment if they were of a mind to.

"You're not," she said, glancing from him to the antique shop and then back to him again.

The street man stood up a little straighter. He pulled his overcoat shut around him as if the day was freezing instead of balmy, and he was freezing along with it. "I'm not what?" Now, too late, he seemed to try to insinuate a little of the anticipated begging note into his tone.

"You are *not* going to rob that shop across the street."

"I never said I..."

"I don't care how desperate you are. How hungry." Though Tina thought he hardly looked hungry. And wasn't that good enough reason to do whatever it took to get him off the street and out of trouble before it was too late? Before he really did get hungry, and had to resort to breaking and entering to get his food? "You're coming with me." She used the broom expertly, the way her Grammy had taught her with plenty of example, to steer the homeless man around in a wide circle and back him step by step, directing him to go exactly where she meant for him to go. Toward the front door of Movie Star.

If he wouldn't save himself, as she had every reason to doubt, then she was going to save him. It was her civic duty. Her *Christian* duty.

"What the hell..." His voice slipped back into its old, Tina thought its usual, tone of firm command. "Where the hell do you think you're..."

"Since you're so determined to hang around this neighborhood making a nuisance of yourself, I'm going to clean you up and put you to work."

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"Work?" His voice rose on a note of disbelief. "Are you nuts, Lady? I..."

She jabbed him with the broom. Jabbed a little off to the side and a little high. But jabbed accurately enough to let him know exactly where she was thinking of jabbing. "Get inside."

"Lady..." He backed away obediently enough. Backed into the shop where he immediately looked larger, immediately looked excessively muscular and excessively male when surrounded by all the glittery, ruffly, floaty and filmy clothing she sold...clothing that might have been, could have been, worn by the movie stars of fifty years ago when glamour had still been the fashion and glamour had still been desirable.

"You're taking a job," Tina declared. "Here, where I can keep an eye on you. So, move!"

"But I..." This time his glance at the antique shop was unmistakably desperate. Desperate enough to convince Tina she'd reached quite a few right conclusions about him.

"Get going."

He glanced over his shoulder, trying to see where he was supposed to get going. "Won't the owner of the shop..."

"I'm the owner. I'm Tina Farrin." She continued backing him toward the small bathroom cubicle between the showroom and the back room. "Now take off that filthy coat, and..."

He clutched it tighter around himself. "Not on your life, Lady. Not in a million years."

"It's filthy."

Sticking his chin out just as he reached the

bathroom door, he seemed about to resist at last. About to break free and mow her down in an effort to escape.

For just a second Tina's heart faltered.

*He could do it.*

He had the physical presence and, she suspected, the strength to mow her down and do anything he wanted to her. Except that everything, every instinct she'd ever possessed...and she knew her instincts were good when it came to judging people...told her this was a gentle man. A kind and considerate one who, no matter what unfortunate circumstances life had thrust upon him, would never think of hurting a woman. Or even being rude to one.

He was her Grammy's definition of a gentleman.

Tina thought. *Hoped.*

And in the next second he proved it. "Okay," he responded agreeably enough. "I'm taking a job. But what..." Letting go of his overcoat just long enough, he jabbed a thumb back over his shoulder toward the rest room. "Why are you..."

She forced him backward again, still menacing with the broom.

"Listen, Lady. I tried to tell you before..."

"You've been hanging around my doorway making a nuisance of yourself for a week. Now I think it's time you worked off all the trouble you've caused me. I think it's time you pulled yourself together and got yourself back on track."

"Lady, I don't want..."

"I don't *care* what you want." Jab. Shove. Poke.

He backed all the way into the rest room.

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"You're going to clean yourself up. That's all that matters right now. You're going to clean yourself up, or I'm going to do it for you. And then I'm going to put you to work." They were statements of fact, not invitations to argument, but for a minute Tina felt sure he was about to try to argue anyway. She saw it in his face...a quick flitting of pure, mule-headed stubbornness that just as quickly gave way to an ingratiating smile she didn't trust any more than she trusted him to cooperate. "Now, give me that filthy coat so I can burn it."

"No way in hell, Lady. No way am I giving up my coat."

"I'll pay you enough to buy a new one at the Goodwill. A better one."

Clutching the coat tighter, he shook his head and kicked the door shut between them.

Hearing the lock click, Tina felt her shoulders sag as she turned back to the store, intent upon emptying her cash register and hiding her money. Just in case.

*She was going to have to ride herd on this one while he was in her shop.*

He might be a new street person, but she had a sudden, an almost unquestionable, instinct that he was a very dedicated one. That he would bolt the first chance he found and disappear, never to be seen again. Which was only what she'd wanted in the first place if she was to be completely honest with herself.

But now that she'd taken a good look at him, she'd decided what she'd originally wanted wasn't good enough. What she'd wanted originally...for him to just go away and become somebody else's

problem...was going to leave a whole pile of questions unanswered. And if there was one thing Tina Farrin hated more than having scruffy street people hanging around her doorstep scaring away her customers, it was unanswered questions.

Questions like...*what was this guy doing on the street in the first place, when it seemed the last place he belonged?*

She might not have good instincts when it came to controlling her impulses, but she was confident of her ability to read people. An ability that was all but screaming at her right now that there was something more to this story. Something she should know. Something that could make all the difference. In her life as well as his.



### Chapter Two

**T**he instant her footsteps faded away on the other side of the door, Gage Prescott turned to look at himself in the mirror.

“Shit,” he said to the bearded and overgrown reflection that looked nothing at all like his own, and wondered what the sweet hell he was going to do now. How he was going to get out of this situation that he...that none of them...had ever imagined.

He’d had to come in here. Had to go along with what that potential madwoman with the broom had suggested. He’d been afraid she was going to make a scene in the street if he didn’t. And a scene...anything that made him out to be anything other than exactly what he’d worked so hard to become, a common, invisible street bum...was the very last thing he needed.

His first assignment with any real meat to it, and he was about to blow it. He knew he was, and with a sick feeling rising in the pit of his gut, he peeled off the overcoat he’d stained and soiled with such care. Peeled it off and let his gaze drop. To the reflection of the gun...a very businesslike Glock in a very businesslike shoulder holster.

"And how in the hell am I supposed to hide that?" he asked his reflection in the mirror.

Looking around, he saw very few options. There was a little cabinet. A pink thing with silver stars painted around the edges and all over the front. It was one of those things meant to hold an extra roll of toilet tissue or two, maybe some extra Kleenex and a few other girly kind of things that didn't bear too much thinking about because it made him blush furious red just to think about them.

But not a Glock.

Absolutely, certainly, definitely not.

There was a medicine cabinet, but that was even worse.

First thing he knew, she...Tina, she'd called herself...would be getting one of those female Migraine things and coming for her aspirin substitute. Then *he'd* get a migraine when she opened the door and found...

Kicking off his battered loafers...he'd scoured the thrift store for two pairs in his size just so he could appear in a mismatched pair consisting of one of each...he stepped up onto the toilet, praying like hell the pink plastic seat would hold, and lifted one of the suspended ceiling panels, also pink and also liberally festooned with stars and swirls and odd little cloudy-looking curliques.

It wasn't the best place. Wasn't a place where he could get to the gun in the split second he was likely to need it. But at least it was safe. And it would have to do for now. It would have to do until he had a chance to investigate the rest of the shop that would

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still allow him a perfect vantage point from which to watch for his target's arrival and find a better hiding place...a more quickly accessible one. And a way to move the gun there without being caught. But for right now...

Stripping off the holster, he shoved it into the cavity above the ceiling and quickly followed with the cell phone in his pocket. That was something else he shouldn't be caught with. And if push came to shove, the way it was all too likely to, he'd just have to hope he could grab up the phone he'd seen on the counter next to the cash register and make the necessary calls from there without Tina overhearing. Without blowing his cover completely and exposing himself for what he really was.

*This will have to do*, he thought, shoving the panel back into place before he stepped down from the toilet, *this was the best he could do for now*.

And in the meantime, he had the other weapon. The snub-nosed .38 in the ankle holster beneath his thrift store jeans.

"That should be a nice little surprise," he informed the bearded reflection in the mirror, grinning. "For anybody who decides to screw with me."

On the other side of the door, he heard Tina's footsteps returning.

*Cash safely tucked away in some hidey-hole*, he thought, flashing himself another and even more devilish grin in the mirror as he spun the hot water tap to 'on'. *Cash safely hidden from the vagrant who'd steal anything that wasn't tied down*.

For a minute, as he splashed water over his head,

wetting the too-long hair he'd washed only two days ago because he couldn't stand to walk around with it as filthy as the boss would have liked, he wondered if he would be able to find it anyway.

Just as a test, of course, since the last thing he needed or wanted was her money.

Just as a way to keep his mind occupied and his skills sharp until something cut loose at that antique shop across the street. Until the next shipment arrived.

"What are you doing in there?" Tina demanded, tapping impatiently at the door. "I have boxes out here waiting to be lifted. Things to be unpacked, and a display rack to be taken apart and moved."

"Hard labor," he chuckled to himself, flashing himself one last appraising glance in the mirror before he turned and opened the door.

The instant he did, Tina looked him up and down...looked him all over with narrowed eyes, in a way that set him to tingling in all the right places. All the places that shouldn't be tingling with a woman he'd only just met and who'd seemed to want to emasculate him just a couple of minutes ago.

But what a woman!

Gage returned her stare with a long and appraising look of his own.

Not too short, not too tall. About five-six or seven, he thought. Just the way he liked them.

She wasn't fat, either, and wasn't exactly skinny though she could have used a little more meat on her bones. She was fashionably emaciated, enough that he wanted...that it was all he could do not to...suggest

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an early dinner at a place he'd used before, at the La Fonda just up the street. A dinner a homeless vagrant would most certainly not be suggesting in this world or any other world Gage had ever been privy to.

So he bit down on his tongue and continued to stare, determined to do his damndest not to speak first.

She had dark hair. Not quite black, and not quite dark brown. He saw something exotic and slightly unpredictable in her face...something that might be Latina. It was evident in a subtle duskiness of skin, in the tilt of snapping almost-black eyes and the smooth crescents of cheekbones. And in her mouth.

*Oh, God.* Her mouth.

It was a sensuous swell of faintly pouting, ruby lips. A definitely Spanish mouth, with a definitely Spanish promise of passion, and delight, and...her grandfather had been Latino, he guessed. Or maybe her grandmother. They'd passed down just enough hint of their sizzling Latina blood to influence her appearance in a way that set a man's heart to pounding and his mind to wondering what kind of passion she would arouse in him if he ever gave her half a chance to...

Glancing at her tits, her nicely rounded and jauntily upright tits, he felt a burst of sadness that he'd never have the chance to arouse any kind of passion, Latina or otherwise, in her.

Because this woman deserved passion.

Her taut, tight body all but cried out for passion, and his taut and suddenly tight body cried out that it was all too ready and more than eager to give it to

her.

But he had a job to do.

He had to keep his eyes open and his wits about him. Had to concentrate on what was going on out on the street, out on the other side of it, without looking like he was concentrating on anything at all.

That was going to be hard as hell to do, but he had to do it. Even when Tina licked her lips, a little flicking of pink and moist tongue across ruby-gleaming fullness that set every muscle in his aching and already-overextended groin to shrieking with the purest agony he'd ever suffered.

"Well," she said, and her voice was every damned bit as tight and wound up as Gage felt right at that moment. "That's better."

Still, he didn't say anything. Didn't trust himself to say anything, since all that was likely to come out was something on the order of 'come to me, baby, let me fuck you, let me love you'. And he figured she'd probably beat him...beat the homeless and shiftless vagrant she thought him to be...to death with her broom if he did.

"You clean up good," she declared, inspecting him again in that way that put so many unacceptable ideas into his head and damned near made him forget what he was doing here, on this particular street, in the first place. "Now, how about telling me just what the devil you were doing out there? On the street?"

"A man's gotta be someplace," he grumbled carefully, in his best down-and-out voice.

"There are all kinds of places," she shot back. "Why the hell did it have to be *my* place?"

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Well, now, that was the question of the day, wasn't it? A question Gage had no way to answer.

So he shrugged. "You said you had something you wanted me to do."

Thankfully, mercifully, she backed away from the door then. Gave him a chance to escape his little pink-and-silver prison. Which he did, and immediately moved toward the front of the store. Toward that nice big display window that gave him a perfect shot at the front door of the store he'd been instructed to watch.

Nothing had happened over there yet. Nothing had changed. Thank God.

*It would be his head on a platter for sure, his tit in a wringer, if something did happen and he missed it because he was...was...*

"Here!" she yelled, catching his arm to drag him back. Catching him with a touch that burned, God help him, like liquid fire right through his skin and changed the vague discomfort between his legs to a full-blown, sizzling and leaping need.

*Not good*, he told himself even as he looked where she was pointing.

"Those," she said, sounding awfully stern for such a young and delectably delectable thing, "need to be opened and unpacked."

"I..."

*Hell. He could hardly look at the boxes for looking at her.*

"The contents need to be sorted by color, and then they need to be..."

Gage hardly heard the rest of what she was saying

through a sudden humming whine inside his head.

He'd have to work fast. Have to unpack the way a man had never unpacked in his life, if he was to get back to a place where he could see that antique shop window. Unless...

He discovered he could see it pretty well from here anyway, if he just shifted his position a little, just enough that he could half-turn as he worked and angle his line of sight to the side a little. That would still give him a shot at the front door of the shop across the street. Since there was no back door to the place...he'd checked and made absolute certain of that...he'd be able to see anyone who came or went. For sure he'd see the truck when it arrived.

They used big trucks. Panel trucks they had to park on the street, blocking the sidewalk and forcing all the pedestrians to this side, where they'd be nicely out of the way, perfectly out of the way and able to run for cover when it all went down.

Soon, he hoped, lifting the first of Tina's boxes-needing-unpacking down from the pile under her watchful eye. Soon, because he didn't know how much of this girly stuff he could take. And he didn't know *what* the hell he might do if he ever found himself face to face with a box full of...

"What's in these, anyway?" he asked, taking the knife she offered him, a very small and very pathetically non-lethal Exacto that was only going to make his work that much more complicated and that much slower.

"Clothes," she replied. "I sell clothes. Women's clothes."



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"And..." The knife was enough to slit the tape at one end of the box. And then all he had to do was catch the free end and rip. And the box...

Gage Prescott wasn't a blushing man. In his line of work, you had to get used to seeing everything...the intimate, the gory, the disgusting...real quick. Or you just didn't make it through the day. But this...

His face was on fire when he reached in and pulled out a handful of...*things*. He didn't know what the hell else to call them. Just *things*. Little corsety-looking bra things with garters and lace and some kind of fluffy, feathery stuff that he wasn't going to touch in a million years, not when his pecker had just stood up and taken real interest and real notice. The things were mostly white, with a few mouth-watering little pink ones and a couple of red ones down there at the bottom of the box that no doubt would exactly match the color of his face.

There wouldn't be much sorting by color here. But looking at the stack of boxes that still remained as he shoved the one filled with *things* toward Tina, he wondered what in the hell kind of horrors he was liable to find in the rest of them.

"I'll just take these up front," Tina laughed softly. "Unless you'd like to sort them by size for me?"

"I..." It came out a garbled 'agggghhhing' sound. Kind of like a man being strangled with a silk stocking. Or the lacy garter from one of those *things*.

She laughed again. A little more softly. In a way that made his poor, overburdened and overtaxed pecker ache to its root. And made him wonder if she'd give him a break...*when* she'd give him a

break...so he could slip out through the back door and take a second or two to put it out of its misery. He reckoned that was all it was going to take. A second or two, a stroke or two, and he'd shoot the biggest wad of his life out there in the alley behind the girly-girl store.

And what the hell would the guys on the job make of that?

*He didn't even dare think.*

Once Tina was gone, once his face had quit trying to spontaneously combust and once he'd had a chance to check out the street and the store on the other side and determine that nothing had happened yet...that the sign was still in place in the window, where according to the best information he'd been able to get it would remain until just before the event went down...he went back to the boxes.

The next box was bigger. Heavier. Filled with shoes. They were pretty deadly looking shoes, he saw when he peeked inside one of the individual boxes, shoes with heels damned near as high as his hand, clear plastic things trimmed with flashy jewels and more of that fluffy and feathery stuff. But shoes, just the same. Nothing more threatening than shoes.

For the first time in his life he thought about his mother's wish that he'd become a priest, and thought that might not have been such a bad career choice after all.

Sure as hell he wouldn't be in a predicament like this if he'd opted for the monastic life instead of his significantly more action-packed and violent present line of work.

## A Little Bit of Tina

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He sorted the shoeboxes by size, anticipating Tina would only demand he do it anyway. He stacked them next to the doorway leading into the shop, then turned his attention to the next of the boxes.

It was bigger than the others. Was almost enormous. And it weighed next to nothing when he lifted it down from the stack, surprised to realize the stack was in reality nowhere near as big as it had looked at first glance...that there was actually a *sofa* under there, and not nearly as many chances for future embarrassment as he'd believed. Setting the featherweight carton on the floor in his chosen spot where he could look through the dress shop and straight into the front window of the bogus antique shop across the way, he found himself staring straight into the eyes of the very different *thing* that sat in its display window.

He'd noticed it before. Hell, he thought a man blind from birth would notice that thing, just from the vibe it gave off. It was the biggest, the ugliest and lurkingest and most evil-intentioned wooden Indian he'd ever laid eyes on. It gave him the creeps for sure, because it seemed to be watching him, watching every move and knowing exactly what he was up to. He thought it might even be planning, in some peculiar and otherworldly kind of way, to tip his hand before he could even think about playing it.

No doubt about it. That damned, creepy Indian was going to haunt a few of his dreams for a while to come, as even the sordid details of his day to day life had never haunted it.

And that only made him return, almost fondly, to

the idea of himself as a priest, locked away safely inside a monastery somewhere.

A monastery would be nice. Perfect. Just the place to avoid all the terrors and pitfalls of...

The latest box nearly exploded when he slit the tape and pulled it away.

Startled, reaching automatically for the Glock in the shoulder holster that was no longer there, Gage stumbled backward a step or two, stepped on something he hadn't seen lying on the floor, and lost his balance.

He went down hard. Went down flat on his backside, empty-handed and unarmed, in the middle of a room suddenly filled with floating and fluttering color. Soft and unexpected color, in every shade imaginable. Color that engulfed him even before the entire building had stopped shaking and shivering with the violence of his fall. Color that swallowed him up in its vibrant and tickling sea even before he heard Tina's startled voice at the doorway, saying "what the hell?"

*Feathers.*

He was drowning in a sea of them. Red, and blue, and yellow, and a thousand more colors he couldn't put names to. the carton had been filled with feathers. *Real* feathers. Millions upon millions of them, just waiting for their chance to...

Feathers surrounded him. They nearly drowned him. And God in heaven, they were *soft*. They were scented, too, with the most delectably female and enticing scent it had ever been his pleasure to inhale, and made up into some other kind of things for which

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he had no name. But he had a sudden, definite...make that a pronounced and aching... interest in them, whatever the hell they were. Tugging at some of them...at a handful of brightly-purple ones, trying to shove them away before they had the effect that soft and sensuous feathers so often had upon the parts of him that had no business being affected by anything at all until he'd finished his current job and tied up all the loose ends associated with it, he realized these feathers were strung together somehow. Strung along a tough cord at the middle of what turned out to be an elongated, fluffy shawl kind of thing that he suddenly, ardently, wanted to wrap around the lovely...make that the *naked* and lovely body of Miss Tamale Tina Farrin.

Feathers, specifically designed and engineered to be wrapped around a woman's body. Feathers, specifically and diabolically designed to tickle arms and face and every other bit of exposed flesh with the promise of...

All Gage could do was groan, softly and with complete anguish, when his pecker suggested *it* would like to feel the stroking of those feathers along its parched and burning length. When it suggested in no uncertain terms that it wasn't going to be responsible for itself if it didn't feel that very stroking, and feel it soon.

"What the hell?" Tina still stood in the doorway over him. Attracted, no doubt, by the crashing sound of his fall. She stood motionless, towering over him with her mouth open for the longest of minutes before she bent at the waist and broke into laughter. And

once she'd started, it seemed all she could do was laugh. And laugh, and laugh, and laugh, in little rising and falling, silvery and insanely sensual notes that only worsened his pecker's problems.

"What the hell's so funny?" he demanded, fighting off the purply thing only to find himself immediately ensnared and imprisoned by a clutching duo in yellow and green.

"You. In my boas."

"Snakes?" he snarled, finally extricating his arm from the yellow thing, only to find the green one had wrapped itself tightly, viciously, around his thigh. As if it, too, wanted to engage in that soft and increasingly desirable stroking. "What the hell do snakes have to do with..."

"Not snakes. Boas. Feather boas."

He turned his attention to her. Glared at her, hoping like hell she wouldn't notice his unmistakable arousal if he kept her attention occupied elsewhere. "Get me out of here."

"Gladly," she said, still laughing as she held out a hand to help him up.

Instead, in the instant when their palms met and their fingers locked, an eternal and endless fraction of an instant when another burst of white-hot lightning seemed to melt his flesh to hers and meld them into a single and inseparable entity, Tina went to her knees on the floor next to him.

### Chapter Three

If her street man's eyes had burned bluer than even the bluest New Mexico sky when she'd stared into them on the street outside her shop, it was nothing compared to the way they looked when her knees turned to water and, useless to support any amount of weight at all, folded effortlessly beneath her.

In the second when his hand touched hers, his eyes turned incandescent. Turned deep as one of those New Mexican skies lit by late-afternoon sun that melted azure into deepest liquid sapphire.

Tina discovered she couldn't breathe. Couldn't convince her hand to release his, mainly because she no longer wanted to release.

Tearing her gaze away from the eyes that seemed to scorch a scintillating path right through her, Tina looked down instead. At the enormous, well-formed hand that held hers. A superbly muscled and powerful hand, furred with darkly-auburn hair. A hand that had never known a day of weakness, never been truly dirty or unkempt in all the years of this man's life. Once again she felt a burst of the shimmering wonder that had dropped her to her knees in the first place, and with it came another of those oddly confused moments when she felt

certain...beyond certain...that everything was not as it appeared with him. That he was something infinitely more, something no doubt surprisingly more than simply a down-on-his luck probable accountant who'd had nowhere else to take his rest than in the doorway of an empty shop on a busy Santa Fe street.

"I..." Gulping once, then twice, then a third time before she felt confident enough of her voice to go on, Tina shivered a little and tried...too late, as it turned out...to pull her hand free of his.

"You what?" His voice dropped to a whisper, a sultry and suggestive one redolent of wanting and needing, his hand clasping more firmly around hers, refusing to let it go.

"I d...don't...I don't even know your name."

"A pity," he murmured, his eyes commanding hers to lift again. To fasten their gaze to his again, so that the two could never be separated.

As their hands could no longer be separated?

Tina shuddered. A little. She had the presence of mind, but only just enough presence of mind, to ask herself one last time exactly what the *hell* she thought she was doing with this homeless man.

"Don't you think I sh...should..." Once again, she couldn't finish a thought. The presence of mind was gone now. Evaporated into a cloud of steam beneath the brilliant blue heat of the gaze that, like the man's hand, refused to let her go. Refused to let her ever be completely herself, completely separate, again.

"You should what?" he asked, an undertone of deep and rich laughter creeping into his voice to



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render it slightly husky. Slightly unsteady.

"Know? Your name? If I'm going to..."

Laughing openly now, he pulled a little harder. Tugged at her hand and her arm, urging her to lower herself all the way to the floor...all the way to the layer of strewn and scattered feather boas that frothed and foamed like a liquid rainbow all around him.

Tina did as he so obviously wanted.

Legs now too weak and quivery to support her even in a kneel, she collapsed to the floor next to him. Half on top of him and half inside the circle of arms that just naturally, as if there had never been a second's doubt that they would, closed around her and held her to him.

His T-shirt smelled fresh. Just-laundered. And it was crisp to the touch when her cheek brushed against it. Crisp and taut, stretched across a layer of magnificent muscle that shook the tiniest bit with laughter or maybe with something else. Something indescribably, inexplicably else. Something that might even be...

Tina didn't want to believe it was desire. Didn't want to believe this was happening, could possibly be happening.

But it was.

"If you're going to what?" he demanded, his lips close to her ear and brushing folds of flesh that had suddenly gone on heightened alert. That had reached National Security Level Red in less than the time it took her heart to grind out one stuttering and uncertain beat.

*Attack imminent!* her whirling and confused mind

screamed. *Take cover! Prepare to meet your doom!*

She ignored it. *Red alert, be damned.*

If there was a color more intense, more visceral and primal than red, they'd already reached it. And gone way, way beyond it.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "*What are you?*"

"What do you think I am?" he responded instantly, maddeningly.

"Not what I th...thought at first."

"And..." His lips continued to graze her ear with searing strokes. Strokes that, in another second or two, were going to lead to something she'd never in a million years dreamed she was going to do when she'd unlocked the door to her shop this morning and stepped out of June coolness into its dim and familiar gloom. "*What did you think at first?*"

She didn't answer. Couldn't answer. It took every bit of strength she possessed, every bit she could summon, just to breathe. Just to sustain her own life in the face of an onslaught so egregious and so unexpected that it had transformed her world and every opinion she'd ever held about anything in that same hitching and unstable heartbeat.

"Be honest," he urged as his mouth began to wander. As it began to blaze softly flaming trails across the super-sensitized skin of her cheek. As he pulled her deeper and then even deeper into his embrace and the tickling rainbow embrace of what felt like a million feather boas instead of just fifty. As he sought her lips with his own, her mouth with his own. Sought them, and found them.

"I..." *What the devil was he talking about, anyway? Be*

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*honest about what?*

It didn't really matter, anyway. Not when his mouth and his lips had already claimed hers. Not when she'd had her first taste of him and found him as minty-delicious and undeniably clean as all the rest of him.

*Not what he seems*, her mind chanted foolishly, idiotically, endlessly. *Not what he seems, not what he seems, not what he...*

"I wish," she gasped between kisses, barely able to stop herself from returning each and every one of them. "Wish..."

"Your wish," he murmured, turning her over on the sea of boas, turning her onto her back so that now he could kneel over her in a position of utter dominance and total command, "is my desire."

"You don't even know what I wish!"

He laughed again. Softly. Seductively. Staring straight into her eyes, he frowned for a moment, very slightly, as his thoughts seemed to pry into hers and then to meld with them. As he probed with a mind that was sharper than she'd first suspected, and much more incisive. A mind that missed nothing and stored everything. A mind unfogged by drugs, or alcohol, or hard luck...unfogged by any of the personal calamities and shortcomings she'd always imagined sent good and decent men onto the streets in the last stages of lives destined to end far too soon and far too tragically.

Peering intently at her, the heat in their azure-cobalt-sapphire depths increasing with each silently humming second that passed, her street man did

indeed seem to know what she'd been thinking. And more importantly, he seemed to know what her body had been wanting. For some time now.

He laughed. Again. Just as he'd laughed before.

A knowing laugh. An intriguing, inviting, intoxicating one.

And this time when his mouth found hers, he left no room for resistance.

Arms splayed wide, stretched straight out at her sides in a posture that offered no defense and no protest, Tina closed her eyes and allowed his tongue to enter. She savored the minty sweetness of it as it plunged deep, plunged expertly, entwining itself with hers and making itself one with hers just as his hand had claimed hers so completely a minute or two before.

She didn't move, except to open herself a little wider to him. Didn't make a sound, other than a soft and feral purring that rose from her throat unbidden, seeming to vibrate gently and inexorably in time to the pounding of her pulse. A pulse that seemed suddenly to reverberate like the discharge of dynamite through every single part and parcel of her body.

"I'll tell you my name," the street man murmured, his lips releasing hers at last as he reached for the tiny pearl buttons of her blouse, "later."

"Is that a p...promise?"

"Is that what you want, Tina? Promises?"

"And why do you always answer my questions with more questions?"

Releasing the first of the tiny, slippery pinpoint

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buttons his hand, seeming all the more enormous now in contrast to their tininess, moved on to the next. "Do I?" he whispered.

There he went again. Confusing the issue. Confusing *her*.

*Did he what?*

The tips of his fingers coaxed diamond sparks from her flesh as they brushed against it, against the soft roundness of the upper curve of her breast, laid bare now, and unrestricted as opalescent white silk parted beneath his hands.

"Y...you know you d...do," she whispered, unsure exactly what she was saying, exactly what she'd accused him of. Sure only that if she had accused him at all, she'd had a reason. A good one. And that he had provoked...

*Was provoking*, she amended around a deep and quavering sob that escaped lips beginning to ache for the touch of his again. Lips that had already begun to form words that would beg him to return to her, beg him to sample her and taste her...to let her sample and taste *him*...as they had before.

But that was not to be.

His fingers, deft and delightfully agile despite their overwhelming size and strength, had freed the last of her buttons from its hand-embroidered hole. His hands, also enormous and also gentle, brushed her breasts.

Once.

Lightly.

Sending up more of those delirious diamond sparks. Sparks that mixed with shimmers of emerald,

and ruby, and topaz so that the entire back room of her shop...the entire world within and around her shop...seemed to suddenly blaze with jewel lights shimmering against the underlying softness of perfumed feathers.

He gasped.

Or was that her?

And did that matter, either? Did that make one tiny, infinitesimal, sub-atomic bit of difference?"

His hand grazed the flesh of her breast, and it seemed literally to jump beneath the touch. Seemed propelled by the sudden and massive thrusting and lunging of her heart so that it almost reached for the hand he withdrew as quickly as he'd lowered it.

He gasped. And she groaned. "My God." Her voice was weak. Barely there. Not even there. "What are you doing?"

In reply, he pressed his palm lightly to her nipple again...her thoroughly aroused, thoroughly eager and anxious nipple...and cupped his fingers around the soft mound surrounding it.

Tina was not large as women went. She'd often wished for a little more, wished for the kind of lush and looming cleavage that would fill out some of the more slinky tops she sold in the shop called Movie Star to true Hollywood legend proportions. But in that instant, when this unknown and yet thoroughly, intimately known man cupped his fingers around one of them, her breasts suddenly were the perfect size. The absolutely most delectable, most desirable size. Because they fit his hands as if they'd been made for him. As if she and he had been made for each other.

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"I really th...think..." she murmured, the protest falling far short of what she'd meant it to be.

"Don't," he replied, his hand lifting so that his fingertips stroked steaming paths along her flesh. "Don't think." And now his fingers were playing with her nipple. They were strumming it lightly, plucking at it with quickly expert motions that aroused it to a hungry peak. A hard and straining peak that wanted only...wanted nothing more than...

"Suck me?" she whispered, her eyes wide open and her gaze fastened, fascinated and mesmerized, upon his.

Laughing again, in a way Tina felt sure he knew was enticing beyond any limit of feminine endurance, he lowered his head. To her breast. He hesitated for a moment, just long enough to make her certain she was about to die from the agony of wanting and needing he'd aroused and now meant only to deny. Then he took her nipple between his straight, white, perfect teeth that seemed as completely out of place in a homeless beggar man's face as the beggar man himself seemed hopelessly out of place amid the tossed and tumbled softness of her carton of feather boas.

He took her nipple between his teeth and nibbled gently. Closing them around it, the sharp edges barely grazing her skin, barely threatening to hurt and injure, he tugged gently. Tugged insistently.

And with each tug came a fresh burst of diamond-jewel light. With each tug came a fresh stuttering of Tina's heart and a newer, stronger, gasp of breath barely escaping a throat turned too hard and too

seared to be capable of sound.

Unable to speak, unable even to groan, she raised her hands. Catching the back of his head, feeling the unexpected softness of hair recently washed, maybe even yesterday morning, she twined her fingers deep into the crisp and rioting auburn, chestnut, wine-deep red waves of it and pulled him toward her. Pulled him down so that his teeth gave up their gnawing and suggestive torture and his mouth fastened firmly upon and around a nipple gone absolutely wild, absolutely crazed and insatiable with the need for more, more. *More!*

He hadn't quit laughing. If anything, the depth and huskiness of his laughter had only increased. Only grown more promising. More illicitly delightful.

He brushed the tip of his tongue across the upthrust peak of her nipple lightly, and Tina stopped breathing altogether.

He nipped again, using teeth and lips in tandem now, and she started again.

He suckled gently, then hard, then even more gently, and she found her voice at last.

"In the name of God..." she murmured, shivering as a first wave of shimmering moisture burst inside her body and began immediately, inexorably, to flow through her and from her.

As if he'd known what she was thinking, as if he'd sensed exactly what was happening to her, one of his hands slipped downward to the hem of her fringed suede skirt. Finding it, finding the opening where the garment wrapped around and fastened at the front with a single turquoise-encrusted silver button, his



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hand separated the softly-brushed leather folds. Separated them and found the scrap of silk panties she wore underneath...the lacy, lovely, and at the moment completely frustrating scrap that separated her from...

As easily as if the sturdy silk had been woven of gossamer, he ripped it away. And his fingertips found other flesh. More needful, if that was even possible, flesh than that which he continued to lave with searing tongue-strokes and taunt with devastating brushes of teeth against tremulous and trembling skin.

His fingertips found the seething wetness between her legs and brushed it lightly. Just brushed it. Not promising anything. Not guaranteeing anything.

"Please," she whispered. Head thrown back, a trailing end of scarlet feathers floating down to cover her face and her eyes, to color it the exact shade of the whirling need that had seized every fiber of her, she closed her eyes and whimpered the word again. "Please?"

He only laughed. Only left her aching, suffering nipple behind in order to turn his attentions and his torture to the other one, to arouse it to the same ominous Red Alert. Only continued to stroke softly with fingertips that already seemed to know every intimate fold and crevasse of the most intimately private parts of her and yet seemed at the same time to want to know even more. To want to know everything.

Where they stroked, his fingertips left firetrails of light and heat. Light and heat that were immediately

absorbed by her hungering flesh and transmitted deeper, into the very heart of that hunger.

But it was a hunger that wouldn't be satisfied. Wouldn't even be eased or assuaged. It was a hunger that had begun in the moment when their hands had first touched with a searing and glistening certainty that this had always been meant to be...*they* had always been meant to be.

Tina shuddered. She attempted to raise her hips to meet the fleeting and frustrating touch of his fingers to her flesh. But he wouldn't allow it. Somehow he'd seated himself atop her. Astraddle her, with the unmistakable hardness at his groin pressed against her thighs mere inches short of the place where it truly belonged. The *only* place she would allow it to belong.

Mere inches, and yet...

Tossing her head back and forth, her throat emptying itself in a long series of wordless yet completely clear, completely explicit groans, Tina thought that delightful, enormous, delicious hardness might as well be miles away.

Miles and miles and *miles*, because the man held her down with the mouth he'd fastened to her breast and the body with which he'd imprisoned her legs and a hand that had risen to her shoulder to pin it tight to the unyielding hardness of the floor beneath the softness of feather boas.

Miles and miles and miles, because Tina understood without having to be told that though this man would take her, would take her well and completely, he would do it only in his own time.

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Would do it only when he was ready, when the as-yet-unseen hardness between his legs became too much for him to endure. Would do it only when he'd reduced her to complete helplessness, complete and whimpering subjugation, beneath him.

Would do it only when there was nothing either of them could do but surrender to the need that whirled and spun like an out of control mad thing in the superheated air above their makeshift bed of dream-soft feathers underlaid with the hardness of solid rock maple.

## Chapter Four

**T**he touch of her.

Sweet God in heaven, Gage thought for sure he'd lost his mind, because the touch of her was deadly. Like the touch of no woman he'd wanted to know in his entire life. Not that there had been that many. For a man his mother and sisters insisted was good-looking...a fact he did not see whenever he glanced at himself in a mirror...and damn near irresistible, he'd had very few real encounters in his life. He'd always been too shy, as tongue-tied and backward around women as he'd been known to be fearless and sometimes even brutal in his work, to ever really get to know one of them.

Not the way he sensed he was about to get to know this one right now.

Because the touch of her...oh, God. The touch of her.

He felt a wildness in her. Something barely held back, something ready to escape and devour him. Something that no doubt would teach him a thing or two, though he wondered for the most fleeting of moments if he was strong enough, when it came right down to it, to survive the kind of lessons he suspected

## A Little Bit of Tina

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Tina held in store for him.

For a second...a thoroughly crazed and thoroughly fear-riddled one...he almost thought about asking her to go easy on him, because he was a...

*But hell. Shit.*

No way was he ever going to admit to this delectable creature made up of pure Latina fire that he was a virgin.

*No fucking way in hell.*

Tina moved beneath him. She moved gently, smoothly. Reminding him that this was no time for daydreams. No time at all.

Wild but sweet, she was like honey stolen from a swarm of angry bees. She was as hot as her dusky skin and ruby lips had hinted, yet she was soothing in her coolness at the same time. She was a tropical wind blowing up from a secluded gulf on one of those picture-perfect islands he'd always wanted to visit. She was demanding, yet eagerly submissive like...well, hell. He didn't know what that part of her was like. That just seemed to be Tina. Part and parcel of her. The way she was and the way, he hoped with every ounce of hope it was possible for his heart to hold, she would always be.

*Always?*

The notion almost made him stop. Almost made him release the breast he'd taken between his lips, to taste and savor and marvel at the steady tightening and hardening of a rosy nipple that shouldn't physically be able to tighten or harden one single bit more.

*When the hell had he ever thought 'always' in*

*connection with a woman?*

The answer to that one was simple.

*Never.*

He'd needed women, like any red-blooded American male who'd reached the age of thirty had needed them once or twice in his life. And he'd wanted them. Oh, God, how he'd wanted them! To satisfy needs that had to be satisfied. But that was as far as it had ever gone. He'd wanted them, but never been able to approach them. Never been able to avail himself of the professional types who would have been approachable, if he hadn't thought it was just a little bit of a sin and one hell of a damned and crying shame to have to *buy* it from them.

*This* was as far as he'd ever worked up the courage to go. Until just a minute or two ago. Until he'd touched the shimmery silk of Tina's shirt and managed to unfasten those confoundedly small and slippery buttons without ripping a single one of them off. Until he'd touched the even more shimmery and twice as soft satin of the skin that lay beneath.

Given the name of the shop, Movie Star, and the box full of lacy and horrifying *things* he'd confronted so unexpectedly little more than half an hour ago, given the satin sleekness of the black garters he'd encountered when he'd reached in to pull Tina's panties away, he'd expected her to be wearing something similar underneath the shirt. Something lacy, sexy, all but indescribable for which he would have no name. And instead had found nothing but her. Nothing but Tina.

Smooth as satin, soft as silk and as creamy-

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shimmery in the late afternoon light as a golden pearl only recently hauled up from the depths where it had been born, Tina looked good. Tasted good. And the touch of her...

His poor pecker lost its mind. Simply and completely. If it could be said to have a mind in the first place, which he suspected every damned man on the planet had believed it did at one time or another.

It was hard. God, was it hard. Like rock. Throbbing, pulsing rock subjected to the full torture of both blowtorch and jackhammer.

No, it *was* a jackhammer, slamming out a repetitive and insistent beat as it tried to shatter its way out of his thrift store jeans and bore its way into her. Into the softness he'd discovered with his fingertips and then been just too plain chicken-hearted to plumb further, because softness like that had to be deadly. Softness like that had to kill, had to wound, and maim, and...

Beneath his touch, Tina shuddered. She made a sound that couldn't exactly be called a groan, but couldn't exactly be called a sigh, either. A sound that lay somewhere in between, and communicated with crystal clarity everything she was thinking. Everything she was feeling.

Everything she was wanting.

For him to touch her more. For him to touch her deeper.

For him, period.

On all new ground, Gage felt his heart falter. He felt it threaten to fail in another second or two, because this was so much more than he'd ever expected. This was so much more than he'd ever

known...this woman who wanted him with such open ferocity. This *enormous* ferocity, and this air of determination to lift herself onto the hand with which he'd only meant to stroke, only meant to explore a little before...

*What?*

Gage supposed he knew what. And he supposed he hadn't been going to admit to himself, not completely anyway, that he'd wanted to screw Tina Farrin the instant he'd set eyes on her. The instant when she'd come after him with a broom in her hand and a look of hot tamales on fire in her flashing, snapping, almost-black eyes.

He'd wanted to screw her, and he still wanted to. And seeing as how she seemed so willing and so eager, he knew he was going to do it. But for right now, with her lifting herself, thrusting upward, trying to thrust upward with her hips, trying to capture his fingers and his hand and take them prisoner inside her...

He held her down. Had to, to give himself a second to breathe. To wonder how in the hell he had come this far this fast. How in the hell he'd been outside one minute, doing as he'd been told to do, watching the bogus antique store across the street because something was going to happen there any time now...

*The antique store.*

*Shit.*

Gage almost stopped again. But it was too late to stop. Way too late. Even though his sources had seemed positive something was going to happen over there in a day or two, or maybe even today. Because



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there hadn't been a delivery in a couple of weeks. Hadn't been any sign of activity, and even though there was no way of knowing when the targets would show up again or how they would show up, he'd been sent in to keep an eye on the place and let them know the instant it looked like something was going to happen.

And with his luck, the people he was after would choose this precise minute, this precise day, to start up the activity no one had been able to predict in the three or four months since it had been noticed.

At the moment, preoccupied as Gage was with things he had no business being preoccupied with, he could think of nothing but the female beneath him. The one who'd begun to breathe in short, hard gasps as his fingers found their way into her, as they parted the silken-velvet folds of her flesh almost without him knowing they'd been going to do it. Nothing but the way she'd started to whimper softly, deep in her throat, with urgently needful little sounds and the way she stared up at him, a flutter of bright red feathers obscuring most of her face, and the way she'd renewed her efforts to lift herself onto his stroking and not-quite-probing fingers.

Her body moved in slow and sultry waves, undulating as she escaped the grip of his free hand at last. Held only by his hips now, her thighs and legs spread and still pinned firmly to the feather-strewn floor, the upper half of her seemed almost to ripple, seemed almost dream-like as it tensed and relaxed, lifted and receded, always trying to capture more of him...all of him.

*Hell. Surely he could spare a minute...two minutes...*

Plunging once more, plunging his two fingers as deep into her as he could manage, Gage opened them slowly. He spread them apart, and with them he spread her as well. Pulling, tugging gently, pressing insistently, he urged her to open for him. To ready herself for the invasion he could safely say lay well into the future. For he meant to take his time. Meant to stir in her the same kind of hard and knotted longing for release that was already making a living misery of his own existence. Meant to stir in her a heat at least equal to his own or maybe, preferably, a heat so immense and so overriding it would render his own scorched agony inconsequential and unimportant.

He spread his fingers and then he held them that way, delighting in the taut straining of muscle and tissue as her body adjusted itself to accommodate him. Delighted, too, in the low murmur of sound that broke from her throat, a silken feline growl of warning entangled with promise.

Slowly, slowly, not quite as experimentally as before, Gage moved his hand again. This time he rotated it. Varying the pressure he exerted on flesh that instantly, insanely grew wetter and softer until he closed his fingers again and waited. Just to see what she would do. Just to see if she would back away, if she would slip free of the digits that no longer impaled her, as he was giving her every chance to slip free and back away.

Instead, she continued her maddening motion. Her lifting, swaying, erotic *rippling* that sent shock waves

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through him...shock waves that hammered relentlessly, pitilessly at the deepest and most needful core of him. Never backing away, never opening her eyes so he could read her gaze and know if this was truly what she wanted or if she was merely caught up in the heat of the moment and about to give in to something she would regret later...something for which she would hate him until the day she died...she continued to murmur wordlessly, making small but unmistakable sounds of encouragement.

"Last chance," he murmured, holding his hand still only with the greatest force of will he'd ever known.

Still, Tina said nothing.

She did nothing but attempt to rock her imprisoned body back and forth in some way, attempting almost desperately now and with an escalation of her soft moaning to ease the torment he inflicted. She attempted to take for herself what he hadn't yet started to give.

*She wanted him.*

*So obviously.*

And that delighted him. That...

Uttering a long and slow groan of his own, Gage withdrew his fingers slowly. Almost leisurely. Beginning to shake violently, he nevertheless kept his hand steady. Kept it true on its course as he paused just at the entrance of her, just at the place where the moistened velvet of her flesh tightened instinctively around his fingers and clung as if it thought to hold him back. And then he plunged again. Plunged harder, plunged all the way, his fingertips gliding effortlessly along her tight channel that opened as if

by magic before them. He slipped easily through fold after fold after fold of delectable and barely-explored flesh that parted eagerly before his assault, only to close again quickly behind him with that same clinging force that had striven to prevent him leaving her ever again.

He slipped in. Hesitated. Pulled back gently but firmly, leaving no doubt that it was he who controlled, he who said what would and would not be. He pulled back slowly, prolonging the agony of need and desire he saw on the face beneath the string of brilliant feathers. He pulled back, but only until he found the small nub, hardened already, that pulsed eagerly in the instant he touched it.

"Oh," Tina's groan was long and rolling, long and undulating. It seemed likely never to end as he stroked deliberately at that one tiny but vital bit of her. "Oh, my...God." Back arching, her weight supported only by the back of her head and the hips he held pinned with the weight of his body, she undulated again. Undulated harder, still struggling to control the hand that held her.

"You're sure?" he asked, knowing that in another moment...another fraction of a moment...it would no longer matter if she was sure or if she was ready. In another second it would be too late, and he would take her. If it wasn't too late already.

Seeming barely able to control their motion, Tina lifted her hands. For the most fleeting of instants Gage was sure she meant to push him away. But then her seeking and blindly groping fingers found what they'd wanted. They found his belt. Small and soft,

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seeming seized by some irreversible tremor brought on by extreme nerve damage, they fumbled at his belt. Fumbled with it and finally succeeded in releasing it. In releasing his fly and then, finding the barrier of his jockey shorts, seemed stymied by them.

Slowly, making certain her fingers never lost the chance to keep up the desperate, scrabbling struggle that incited him even more...almost...than if she'd held the full and suffering naked length of him between them, Gage leaned forward. Holding her entire body still now with the nearness and the weight of his own, he bent over her and kissed her again. Kissed her hard, with lips that cared nothing about the possibility of bruising. Kissed her full on the mouth, the way her lips replied instantly she'd wanted to be kissed all along.

Her lips parted beneath his. Her mouth opened instantly, allowing him complete and unrestricted access to everything she had, everything she was, every secret and delicious part of her. And he seized the opportunity, plunging with his tongue at the same precise instant that his fingers plunged elsewhere, forsaking the kernel he'd aroused, surely as much as it could be aroused, in favor of deeper and wetter parts of her.

She groaned again. Wordlessly, the sound losing itself inside the depths of him and, unable to undulate up and down as she had before, she began a slow and deliberate swaying from side to side.

For the moment, his mouth fastened upon hers and devouring hers, he allowed her to take control. Allowed her to wriggle herself, her flesh fresh with

moisture that burst in steamy clouds from every inner part of her, harder onto his hand. Allowed her almost to satisfy her need.

And then he withdrew. Completely. Withdrew his mouth, his hand, everything but the weight that pinned her to the floor. He withdrew, and with one hand caught the much smaller ones that reached instinctively for him, reached to pull him down, pull him back. And catching them, wrapping his fingers around them, easily able to grip and control them with only one of his, he held them away from him as his other hand worked, not entirely efficiently, at his jeans and underwear.

It was time. Past time. But when he looked down at Tina...when he saw the look of shining expectation on her face, mingled with a soft hint of disbelief that she was about to do this, that she was about to take this tumble on the floor in the back room of her shop with a man she still believed nothing more than a homeless beggar...he hesitated again.

Somehow he'd risen to his knees. Somehow shoved his jeans and his underwear down, freeing himself. Readying himself. Somehow, through the heady heat of imminent success that filled him to overflowing and caused his overtaxed and overburdened pecker to surge even more and leap to even greater heights, he'd reached down and released the single, enormous silver button that held her butter-soft black suede skirt closed at the hip. And now he heard himself gasp. Felt his heart begin to thunder in ways it hadn't ever thundered before...not in moments of the most extreme stress he'd known, not in moments of the

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greatest fear and certainly not in any moment he'd ever dreamed of sharing with a woman.

She was beautiful.

Simply beautiful, though as he knelt there, his jeans halfway removed, staring down into the dark eyes that looked so imploringly up into his, he thought that word wasn't enough.

*"Beautiful!"*

The sound of it, the feel of it when it slipped across his tongue and escaped his lips in a trembling whisper, was too cheap ever to describe her. Too inadequate.

*Beautiful.*

*No.*

Tina was more than beautiful. So much more that he would never in a million years be able to...

"I still," she whispered, seeming to struggle with the words just as she struggled to do some unknown thing with hands that no longer seemed completely able to grasp or completely able to remain still, "I still don't know your name."

"Gage," he replied, and that was all. That was all there could be, all he was capable of.

"Gage." She smiled, and the light of it shimmered in dark eyes that never wavered, never faltered.

"Dear God." He tried to move, then. Tried to free himself of the jeans that now trapped his legs and held them useless as effectively as he'd ever trapped this woman beneath him and held her helpless with the weight of his body. Tried to figure out exactly how he was going to get rid of the ankle holster and its secret surprise that wasn't meant for her to see.

Because sure as hell there was going to be every need in the world to get rid of it in the next second or ten. But for the moment, shocked into rocklike stillness, there was no hoping he'd be able to move. Kneeling in front of her and over her, a suppliant at the most beautiful altar he'd ever encountered, staring down at the lovely offering spread before him for his pleasure...a lovely offering given to him and him alone, to savor and sample for as long as he liked...he could only gape. Mindless. Witless.

He could only kneel before her, conscious of the harsh rasp of his breath as it tried to rip its way from a throat gone suddenly tight, suddenly unresponsive to even the most life-sustaining and necessary of commands.

He was gasping. Immobile, in the last stages of life as he'd ever known it just before it must, most certainly must, give way to all the vast and varied unknowns of encroaching death.

But not Tina. Smiling again as she whispered "Gage. I like it. It suits you," she moved her arms again, and to his badly distorted and mind-altered vision, it seemed she was moving incredibly slowly. Seemed she must surely be fighting to swing them around and up, her hands reaching toward her shoulders, through a virtual sea of invisible yet thick and inhibiting substance. She seemed all but frozen, her movements all but imperceptible as those small and lovely hands finished their travel. As they reached her shoulders at last and then didn't stop there, except to grasp at something.

Something red.



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Or was that only his vision, fading to nothing now that every throbbing and calescent blood vessel in his brain had begun the final and fatal process of rupturing? Was the red only the tint of his own blood rising up from the inside to drown him and sweep him away on the tide of inhuman and unsurvivable suffering she'd created there?

Gage didn't know.

Didn't care.

Because in the next second her arms swung again. Toward him this time, carrying with them a part or maybe the whole of that misty, floating tide of most brilliant, most visceral and primal color. They swung forward and with a quick flicking of light and shadow that might have been...that probably was...only one more trick of his ruined vision, something fluttered down and around his neck. Something light and lovely, something soft and drifting that wrapped him immediately, inextricably, in cloudlike embrace.

*Feathers.*

God in heaven, he felt the silky prickle of feathers against his neck and his shoulders, felt it tighten gently but incessantly, felt it tickle skin already atingle with anticipation, and longing, and desire so scalding he expected at any moment to smell the pungent aroma of those very same feathers being singed to dull blackness.

And then he felt himself being pulled down.

Down, and down, and down. Felt himself being pulled toward the brink by the loveliest woman he'd ever seen, a woman who shimmered atop her billow of softly perfumed feathers.

## Chapter Five

*Gage.*  
The name was perfect. As the man was perfect.

It was no more a name that should belong to...that ever *could* belong to a homeless and destitute man living in a doorway than this man could ever have been either of those things. And the only wonder was that Tina had ever been fooled, even for a single instant, into believing he was.

As she flipped the scarlet-red feather boa around his shoulders and pulled gently, first urging and then commanding him to come to her, to come down and do what he'd so far only suggested he might do, she knew beyond any shadow of doubt that she'd been fooled. Badly. And that somehow, once she'd got her equilibrium back and pulled herself together into some semblance of order, she was going to learn the truth about this Gage-with-no-apparent-last-name. But for now...for this earthquaked and earthquaking moment, she had other things on her mind. Other plans for the man who'd swept her up with one look, only to sweep her away completely with the next.

Gage-with-no-apparent-last-name groaned when

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she pulled him toward her. He groaned softly, the sound of a man in very real and very fatal distress, but he didn't resist. Not at all. If anything, shivering slightly as he lowered himself to her, managing to extricate himself from his jeans one leg at a painful time with something more than the usual amount of difficulty, he seemed more than willing. Almost reverently willing. And at the same time, or at least that was how it seemed to her confused and more than a little clouded mind, he found the single button that held her skirt together. And once found, once he'd released it and the thin layer of suede parted, there was nothing left between them. Nothing but a tiny bit of garter belt and a pair of sheer, lace-topped stockings that did nothing at all to block the sensation of his bare legs touching hers. Stockings that only, in some quivering and shivering way, managed to increase the sensation. As if the filmy and fragile fibers of silk from which they'd been created were some kind of magical transmitter designed to amplify every brush of sensation and send it screaming, spiraling, rocketing, deep into her.

"This isn't right, you know," he growled around and through another deep-seated groan of purest agony.

"Wh...why..." She'd wanted to ask why not, but she couldn't. And not just because she thought she already had a pretty good idea. Not just because she thought...was almost certain she *knew*...he wasn't a homeless person in need of saving from himself at all. It was because she'd decided at some point in the last four or five thoroughly confused and unsettling

minutes that Gage whatever-his-name-was had come here for a reason. A very specific, very purposeful reason. And she suspected it might not be a reason of which she'd approve. But none of that mattered at the moment. Because once he'd unclothed her, Gage had lowered himself over her.

He'd lowered himself close to her and begun to stroke her. With the tip of the most magnificent, most desire-swollen and eager manhood she'd ever seen. Though she'd only seen one before, back when she'd been in high school. And it certainly hadn't been doing *this* at the time!

Gage had begun to brush the tip of himself, the tip of that wondrous and engorged member, across the most secret parts of her. The ones she'd kept so sacred and untouchable, the ones she'd guarded so zealously, believing in her younger innocence that they should be held back. Kept for the one man she would love, the one man who would love her above all others and cherish the gift she had to give exclusively to him.

The one man who'd never, in all the Saturday nights without dates, in all the tear-stained prom nights spent at home in pajamas and bathrobe, in all the months and years when her girlfriends had found, one by one, the men of their dreams, materialized.

The one man she'd already, at the unclaimed and unapproached age of twenty-six, decided wasn't going to come.

Tina had a decision to make. And only a second left in which to make it.

She sensed that Gage's stroking, his gentle rubbing

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and his holding back with arms that quivered, taut with the effort of that holding back, was a test. She sensed, or maybe she even knew, he would pull back and away if she said the word. If she said 'no'.

It was a split-second decision she'd never been prepared to make. Not by anything her mother had told her, or her teachers or her counselors, not in all the long and frank talks they'd had about the things that could happen to girls...women, too...who weren't careful. Who weren't prudent.

It was a split-second decision, and she made it without even that much hesitation.

Laughing a little to cover a sudden surge of nervous uncertainty at the thought of what Gage with-no-last-name was about to do if she gave him even the slightest nod of approval, Tina tugged again on the boa with which she'd ensnared him. Tugged, and felt his shiver of surrender as the feathers did what she'd already discovered feathers did to him.

As they drove him beyond the point of reason, or return.

Gage shivered a little more violently as he began to shove. At her.

And Tina shivered too as she felt the first and very tiniest tip of him begin to part her flesh. She shivered, felt herself try to tighten involuntarily as if her body truly believed its efforts could keep out any man who meant to enter there, and then immediately tried to relax again.

Tried, because it was impossible to relax. Impossible to do anything but concentrate upon the one unexpected, unforeseen and unimaginable point

of contact between Gage with-no-last-name's body and hers.

Slowly, gently, revolving his hips a little now as though he truly did mean to screw himself into her, he began to part the folds of unplumbed flesh that really had no idea what to expect now that the invasion had begun. Only that she'd heard somewhere, from one or maybe from all of her girlfriends that it would hurt when it finally happened. That it would be incredibly painful, a dry rasping of hard flesh against unready flesh, that it would feel like she was being torn in two, that her living flesh was being severed violently, brutally, fiendishly by some wild beast that had no tolerance for her weakness, and no sympathy for it.

The thought made her tighten even more.

Still not inside her, still working to part her so that he could begin the process of entry, Gage stopped. He looked down at her with knowing eyes, and murmured one word. One humiliating, shameful, hateful word.

"Virgin?" he asked softly.

Too numb to deny, too ashamed of her old-fashioned and sickly-sweet notion that in this day and age there was any sense in holding herself back for 'the one man', Tina bit her lip and nodded, struggling to hold back tears.

Gage sighed. Softly. With a shudder of sound that said this was her last chance to say 'no'. Her last chance, forever.

Biting down even harder on her lip, she didn't say it. Because what if Gage *was* the right one? The only

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one? What if this was how she'd been destined all along to meet the right one? What if this, the only time a man had ever paid any serious attention to her in all those barren and bleak twenty-six years, was the way it was supposed to happen to her? What if this was her chance?

Biting down almost hard enough to split the skin of her lip and draw blood, Tina said nothing. And waited, trying to relax, trying to spread her legs apart a little wider even though the hardened and quivering muscles of her thighs would allow no such thing.

"Then I'll be careful," he murmured, shoving a little harder so that the tip of him was now nearly inside her. So that the outer layers of her had parted, not too painfully at all, and the inner layers seemed to be resigning themselves to the fact that in another second or two they were going to be forced to part as well. "I'll go as slowly as I can." Bracing himself on one arm, he lifted a hand to her forehead and nudged a lock of hair back from where it had become caught and entangled on her eyebrow. He nudged it back, tucked it behind her ear, then let his fingers trail slowly down the long length of it until finally his hand ended up right where it had started. Pressed palm-down against the floor next to her hip.

And he pushed again. Harder. More insistently.

He pushed himself into her, and it wasn't a dry rasp of flesh as one of her friends had described a first experience in the back of a pick-up truck after a night of football-championship drinking and carousing.

It was more of a smooth gliding. A hard but

lubricated urging of unrelenting rigidity that did indeed force her to part. It was uncomfortable. A little. But not painful. Not yet. Not even when Gage stopped and held himself very still, her flesh wrapped so tightly around him that he might now have been an intrinsic and inseparable part of her.

"Are you sure?" he asked, holding himself there with an effort she felt. A supreme effort against the instinctual need she felt swirling around him. Swirling through him. The need of man to have woman. Of man to take woman and make her his own.

"H...haven't..." Tina shivered at the sensation his speaking had set up inside her. She *felt* his words! Actually felt them, as his entire body vibrated the very tiniest bit with each and every one. She felt them in the shaft that joined them. That most surely and certainly had already joined them in a way that was irreversible, that was... "Haven't you done it already? Haven't you?"

He flashed her a curious look, and then with a single shove, a mighty one that did indeed threaten to rip her to pieces, she realized he hadn't done it at all. Not until just now. Not until this moment, when she felt a wave of searing, burning, rending pain as something inside her gave way. Not until the instant when her body put up one last fight, offered one final and all too flimsy defense against his onslaught, and she felt herself contract for an instant and then, helpless beneath the power and determination of his thrust, felt the last and final barrier give way just as suddenly, with that one burst of mindless pain.



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Only then did she understand that he'd given her a last chance. That he'd waited to be absolutely sure before he'd taken her for real. Before he'd...

But now he was inside her. All the way. He was filling her to depths she'd never imagined it was possible to be filled, with a length and a breadth and an absolute delight she'd never imagined either, not even in her wildest and most colorful dreams of what it would be like when...*if*...this moment finally arrived. He was inside her and he had stopped again, no doubt to give her shocked and stunned body a moment to adjust to its new existence. And the pain was gone. The hurt and the discomfort had faded as quickly as they'd come, or nearly as quickly.

She'd opened to accommodate him and suddenly, as he began to pull back, as he began to leave her...

Fingers tightening on the boa, she dragged him forward. "No," she whispered. "Don't!"

"Tina..." Raising himself to hands and knees, still connected to her in that tenuously final way...still, but only for a moment or two longer if he held his present course...he continued to try to get away. "I have to..."

"No!"

"But don't you want to..."

In the next second, acting purely on instinct that screamed at her, literally *screamed*, that it would be the mistake of a lifetime to let the contact be broken because she might be too terrified to let it be resumed, Tina lifted her hips. Lifted them right off the floor and shoved with her heels. Not hard, but hard enough to move herself onto him again. Hard enough to elicit

from him a low and sibilant hissing of breath between teeth he'd clenched in response, and hard enough to send another shivering current of delight into the deepest and as yet still untested depths of her.

"My God." Catching her hips with his hands, cradling her backside easily with enormous palms that refused to let her body drop back to the floor, Gage pulled her more tightly onto him. He'd begun to rotate his hips again, in the way she'd noticed before. As if the motion could insert him deeper into her than he had already. As if it would allow him to supercede all human physical boundaries. As if it would make the depths of her endless, and able to accommodate anything he might choose to...

Shuddering, shivering, helpless to do anything now that her legs and backside were completely in his control, now that the only thing that supported the lower half of her was those large and firm hands that picked her up even farther than she'd raised herself and pinned her even more securely to him, Tina closed her eyes and waited to see what would happen next.

"I can't believe," he whispered, sounding strangely short of breath and strangely thick-voiced, as if something had broken loose inside his throat in the same way something had most decidedly broken loose in the most intimate parts of her, "you never fucked before."

Slowly, afraid to move too quickly, afraid to do anything for fear it might diminish what she was feeling...the sheer, animal pleasure of discovery she'd waited intolerable years to begin to feel, Tina shook

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her head. And smiled a little. A very little. Just enough to communicate without words. Enough to be certain he *knew*.

"You like this," he murmured, using her to pleasure himself now. Guiding with his hands, he backed her away from him, off him, in a long and fluid motion that enticed rather than disappointed and promised rather than denied.

"I..."

*Of course she did. Of course she liked it.* And in that long and heart-shattering moment when its pounding began to sound like a fusillade of repeated cannon shots thundering inside her ears, she would gladly have killed all those girlfriends who'd whispered that this was something to be feared. This was something unpleasant and hurtful that had to be borne because men expected it to be borne. She'd have killed them bare-handed.

If she'd had even one tiny iota of strength left in hands that flailed helplessly against the floor at her sides and seemed able only to clutch at the cloud of boas. Hands that crushed and mangled rainbow feathers as they tried desperately, futilely, to find something solid to hold. Something against which she could brace herself so that she could gain some leverage and some control over a situation that had escalated far beyond her control and far beyond her knowledge of *how* to control. Hands that accomplished absolutely nothing with their grasping motions, hands that could only tighten into twisted claws as Gage just as slowly and twice as deliberately began to maneuver her forward again. As he began to

slip her back onto the long and rigid length that throbbed now in a beat that not so much matched the thumping rhythm of her heart as complemented it.

She could feel the pulsing of him. Could feel the quivering delight in the part of him that slipped so slowly, so incredibly and inexorably slowly, along the deep and hidden inner channel of her. And she felt herself mist in response. Felt a sudden, simmering flowing begin from tissues that had never flowed before. Not in this way. Not in response to something so perfect and so long overdue that in less than the space it had taken her to realize it was happening, the misting became a torrent of searing moisture bursting from secret cavities and concealed crevices of flesh she'd never known existed.

The deep and elemental wetness broke from her body in the same way a groan broke from her throat. Without thought, without a need for conscious input, or even consciousness.

The flood tide broke over him as he increased the rhythm he'd set up. As he drove her backward, more helpless now to fend for herself, and then just as quickly jerked her forward and onto what had never completely left her in the first place. His rhythm became first rapid, a wet gliding of flesh now grown used to the rigidity it stroked so fervently. Then it became a series of excruciatingly pleasurable blows of thighs against hips as he increased her movement yet again. Increased it to the point where...

"Too..." He didn't finish, and Tina opened her eyes. Just in time to see his face as he stopped what he was doing to her and with her. Just as he forced his

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body to a standstill, halting movements that had become wild and almost reckless. Halted so that she lay with her shoulders and arms pressed tight to the floor and her hips lifted all the way onto him. With them lifted so high and her legs spread so wide that her flesh pressed tight against him. So high and so tight that there was nothing of him to be seen because he'd long since been buried. Inside her.

"Too..." Tina didn't finish, either. Words seemed to have lost meaning. Speech, and even thought seemed so inconsequential, so out of place and so utterly ineffectual that there was no reason to even try to finish. "Too," she murmured again, as though she understood what he'd meant, and maybe even agreed completely.

"It's too fast." A droplet of sweat slipped from between the roots of Gage's deep-red hair. Fascinated, feeling suspended in time as well as in mid-motion, Tina could only watch mesmerized as it made its way down the side of his forehead, a single and glistening pinpoint upon which she was able to focus everything so that the strange and off-kilter spinning of the world all around her slowed just a little. Slowed just enough.

The droplet hesitated next to the slight indentation at his temple, seeming undecided about where it should go next, or even if it should go at all. Seeming caught for that split second in the tiniest crinkle of skin that in a few more years, in ten more years, might amount to a wrinkle. And then it began its downward course again. Across the high and angular plane of a sculpted cheekbone. Gaining speed as it

reached the tiny hollow below and rushed onward, it slowed again when it met the last barrier. When it met the slight prominence of bone beneath the taut and dark-whiskered flesh that covered his jawbone.

Tina watched, more fascinated than ever, as if that single, gleaming droplet was the last point of reference in a world to which she no longer belonged. A world that had lost all reality and in which she'd become a shadow of herself...a shadow of a woman who no longer existed and no longer wanted to exist in any form she'd known before.

She watched as the drop quivered at the very edge of his firmly-set jaw and then dropped. Watched in breath-held astonishment as it seemed actually to hover in mid air, a magical orb with the power to change instantly and forever anything it might deign to touch. Watched with curiosity growing, with the sense that something infinitely wonderful and eternally powerful was just about to happen, as the drop fell finally.

As it landed upon a thigh. Her thigh, that Gage held upraised and imprisoned within the circle of his arm.

### Chapter Six

He hadn't wanted to do it this way. Hadn't wanted to lunge at Tina and hammer at her as if he was nothing more than a sex-starved animal in heat. He especially hadn't wanted it once he'd realized she was a virgin too, and had seen the look of surprised pain that twisted across her face when he'd given the one long shove that had solved that little problem for once and for all.

The problem was he was an animal in heat. That was the only way he could describe the overwhelming need for satisfaction that had damned near swamped him the instant he'd given that shove and felt the bursting of her cherry. And in the following instants, too, when he'd felt the tightness of her closing around him and realized with a kind of stunned refusal to completely understand that he was the first man in the history of the world who'd ever felt that exact tightness, that exact snuggling of this warm and already incredibly wet female body around himself.

Either he was an animal in heat or he'd been working too hard and playing too little. Whichever it was, he'd let things progress too rapidly. Thinking too

much of his own self-centered need for pleasure and his own eagerness to shed his own too-long-suffered virginity, he'd given no thought at all to what *she* needed. No thought to the fact that it was different for women...that they had more to lose in this venture than the man. He'd given no thought to the notion that she'd waited an entire lifetime for her pleasure and might deserve a little more than a quick and hearty banging between the boxes and the feathers on the floor in the back room of a dress shop.

He'd given no thought to anything, and so that was exactly what he'd ended up doing. *Banging* her. Hard and fast. Hard enough and fast enough that he felt like a real shit now, when he looked at her face and saw her wide eyes, smoldering not with any of the feelings of excitement, or fulfillment, or gratification that should have smoldered there, but with a faintly astonished look of shock and blank-minded horror instead. He'd banged her so hard and so fast that he hadn't even let her have a chance to take a breath. Or catch up to what was happening to her.

"Why did you..." Her lips parted and the tiniest tip of a pink and succulent tongue appeared between them, to moisten and try to soothe skin that looked like it had been parched in the sun for a week, a month, maybe even a year. "Why did you s...stop?"

"Because it shouldn't be this way." Feeling more like a shit than ever, Gage released her. He released his pinching death-grip on her hips, praying like anything he hadn't inflicted bruises there. That she wouldn't have to bear such hurtful reminders of his outrageous behavior. Or maybe it should be his



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outrageous *lack* of behavior. He tried to ease her away from him and lower her to the floor free of him.

But Tina wasn't having any of it. As if she'd anticipated what he was thinking and what he was about to do, she wrapped her legs around his waist almost before his fingers finished relaxing their hold. And now she was pulling herself the full distance back onto him. Now there was no need for him to support her because she supported herself, the long and agile muscles of her legs tightening around him. And there was no use trying to leave her, because the equally agile and ten times as determined muscles inside her tightened around his pecker, threatening to crush it with their brand-new and never-before-tested strength.

"How should it be?" she asked, her eyes still wide with the expression he only now realized wasn't shock or horror at all, but wonderment instead. Wonderment, bordering on outright delight. "How else could it be?"

"Slow," he murmured, attempting to lower her to the floor again, this time by lowering himself. And once again she foiled him. She locked her lower body, locked every muscle so that the only way to lower her would be to snap the bones in both of her legs and maybe her hips as well. She locked herself so tightly that he felt enmeshed in a steel trap designed for killing rather than just for holding its sexual prey helpless.

And maybe that was right.

Maybe that was what she...what all women...had truly been designed to do.

Capture men. Take them as prey and then hold them until they died in a silk-and-velvet-lined trap from which there would never be escape because men, the victims, would never *want* to escape.

"I should have taken it slowly," he gasped, knowing he could not do even that now. Knowing she was in control, those straining legs and rippling, tightening and releasing muscles were in complete control and he *would* do their bidding or die refusing. "I should have given you a chance to..."

"But I want you to," she murmured, her voice dropping to a new and all too sultry register. "I want you to fuck me."

"I..."

She relaxed her legs a little. Just enough to slide her body along his pecker that had now grown too hard to bear, too hard to endure, too hard almost to even hope to find relief for the agony it had created for itself. She slid herself with the same deliberate slowness he'd suggested just the moment before. A slowness that maddened with its dewed and clinging glide, a slowness that only increased the tension in his pecker that couldn't possibly grow more tense but did, couldn't possibly grow more needful or more incapable of satisfying its own needs, but did.

She stroked herself slowly. Relaxing her legs, then tightening them, she pulled her body along him and around him as easily as an acrobat would pull herself into position on a trapeze or a parallel bar.

Except that acrobats never set the trapezes or parallel bars on fire with their maneuvers. They never instilled in the trapezes or the bars this soul-searing

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*craving* to...

"Oh, God." Realizing she'd somehow managed to wrap one of the feather things around him...wrap it right around the root of his cock so that the motions of her body crushed it between them and the heavenly tickle of silver-gray feathers only added to the agony he'd started to feel deep inside...Gage felt the killing internal pressure swell even more.

Pressure that should have long since broken.

Dangerous pressure that needed to break before his balls, overfilled and throbbing to a point that no man...no *human* and sane man...could possibly endure, exploded. And still there was no end in sight. Still there was nothing but the slip-side of female heat that only grew wetter, only grew more persistent and more maddening with each and every long shiver of her flesh along his. Still there was nothing more than the deadly-incendiary combination of Tina and the silken mass of feathers she alternately crushed and then wafted across the most sensitive and engorged parts of his body.

"God in heaven." He was going to have to lower her. Somehow. His body had gone wild with the need to take her. And his arms had reached their limits. Quivering and shaking like the arms of a man in the last moments of a terrible, the most painful and horrible death imaginable, they needed to collapse. Were *going* to collapse.

But her legs were still locked. Her hips and her back, too.

The trap had sprung tighter than ever around him. Made up of simmering velvet flesh and blood-colored

feathers, the trap dug deep into him and then deeper still, tormenting him and mocking his every attempt to move with its incredible, its inescapable *tightness*.

It took the very last of Gage's willpower to force his body to turn in the moment when his arms gave way. It was all he could do to roll onto his side atop the carpet of heavenly-soft feathers that instantly swelled up to smother him, and her, and the both of them together as they dropped to the floor at last, still inseparably intertwined in an act he'd started but which he no longer recognized or felt the slightest power to finish.

The cloud of feathers slipped away, then. At last. They slipped away from his pecker. And that was a good thing. Because Tina's body had begun to move faster. She'd begun to release and then reclaim him with lightning-quick thrusts, the fever of her movements increasing, the heat he felt pouring from her surging and surging, surrounding the two of them and showing no sign of abating or even diminishing. And with each movement the essence of her thickened around him. It eased the way for more frantic plungings, more frantic reclaimings. And the scent of her perfume...Gage tried to drag in a deep gulp of it. He wanted to savor it, a scent slightly redolent of lilacs and roses in the rain that had begun as a faint suggestion of perfume only to blossom with the heat of their coupling until it became a thundercloud of fragrance ready to burst over him and inundate him.

She moved faster and then faster still. And Gage lost himself...lost all track of himself as his body, long

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since claimed by hers and doomed to hers, at last began to respond. As the muscles in his groin began to contract in slow and grinding waves that, no matter how hard they tried, could not seem to ease his suffering. Could not seem to give him the thing he now wanted, now craved, more than he'd ever craved any single thing in the world.

*Release.*

"Tina..." Her name was no more than a strangled gasp across lips barely able to form the two simple syllables.

"Isn't that what they call this?" she demanded, her face a sheen of silken dew, her hair a tossed and whipped cloud of dark satin strands spread out across and insinuated between those blazing riots of color. "Fucking?" With the word, she tossed one of those feathery things around his neck again. Tossed it there, and then immediately tightened it, increasing the sweetly soft and tickling hold the luscious thing had on him until his body screamed for release. Pleaded for release. Pleaded for *mercy*.

"Tina, I need..."

Laughing softly, brushing the feathered ends of the thing across his face as if to wipe away the veil of sweat that nearly blinded him, Tina moved more savagely upon him. And as her stroking search for satisfaction intensified, as all last fragments of hesitation or uncertainty vanished with the heavenly misting of moisture that seemed to overtake the inside of her, explosion became inevitable. She stroked the feathers across him diligently, fluttering softness that failed abysmally to ease scorched and

aching flesh, and the deep, cramping agony inside him increased for the shortest of split seconds. It increased, became unbearable, and then he felt a sudden, stabbing twisting...a sharper stabbing than any he'd ever known, followed immediately by an easing of suffering so equally unknown, so incredibly sweet and hot and flowing that it tore the breath from his throat and his lungs. A release so complete that, for a second as his mind wheeled helplessly down and down into a pit of encroaching madness lined with brilliantly-gleaming feathers, he became unaware of Tina. Unaware of what was happening to her in the same moment that he'd succumbed to his own incendiary explosion.

"Fucking," she gasped as her body turned to a turbulent sea around him. As she began to pour out essence upon essence, eternal essences, for him. "That is what they call it."

Gage tried to speak, but could make only softly strangled sounds...sounds that were immediately lost, wordless and unintelligible, in drifting spirals of crimson and cobalt and purest, most snow-white and angelic feathers that she brushed across his face.

Gradually, the spasming contractions inside his body began to ease. Began to diminish, but not to halt. Not yet.

"It's what they call it," she murmured, moving her mouth very close to his ear so that her lips stroked tantalizing, torturous trails of electricity through its folds and into its opening. "Fucking. And I like it, Gage Whatever-the-hell-your-name-is. If you even have a name."

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He whimpered. Helpless beneath the new onslaught. Helpless as his body, already reduced to a morass of useless tissue and spent moisture, tried once again, gallantly, to perform. Tried and incredibly, beyond any human expectation or expectation of expectation, managed one final, short but heated pumping as his decimated balls gave up the very last of what they had. In the same instant that his decimated pecker seemed to implode upon itself, losing all substance and all coherent form.

"God," he breathed, astonished by the whimpering note he'd never before heard in his voice. "Tina..."

"It's fucking," she repeated, and this time when she stroked his face with blazing-red feathers, she wrapped the ends all the way around his throat. Wrapped him inside the tickling and tantalizing thing and then immediately seized up another...a strand of feathered delight the shade of the summer-sky turquoise the Native American jewelry-makers sold on the street. Just down the street, beneath the wood-beamed canopy of the old Governor's Palace on the plaza. Tina enticed him with the gemstone-hued things, enticed and teased and tormented until his tired body tried to respond. Tried again, tried desperately.

But there was nothing left of him.

She'd taken everything. Taken what he'd had to offer and then more, and it was one of the purest wonders of the world that she hadn't killed him. That she could still go on. That she possessed the stamina and the drive to go on, after, when...

"You aren't human," he murmured, closing his

eyes against the sight of her leaning over him, long and shining dark hair nearly reaching the heaving surface of his chest and barely adequate to cover the gently swaying, dusky pink glory of her breasts. "What kind of devil are you?"

At last, laughing again, she abandoned him and sank to the feathered carpet next to him. But she didn't abandon him entirely, either. Sinking down and away from him, she returned right away. To cuddle up next to him in the same second he'd thought he was alone again and felt his heart begin to break. She cuddled and, still laughing softly and enticingly, spoke in an amazingly strong voice that seemed unaffected by any of her recent exertions.

"I'll never be able to sell these things now."

"Wh...what things?" Gage's hand trembled so badly when he reached for his ruined pecker, just to make certain it was still there in some vaguely recognizable form or other, that he worried he might never be able to control its motion again. That he might never be able to control anything again, and would be imprisoned for the rest of his days in his own useless body, doomed to lie forever upon the floor of the back room of a store where women bought and sold indescribable, lacy things. Forced to lie here and await the return of his captor, his torturer. Forced to wait until she did whatever she wanted to him and with him.

*Whatever she wanted.*

And would that be so bad? Would that...

"...boas," she was saying.

He'd caught up with her in mid-sentence, and



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what she said, the reference, made so little sense it might as well have made no sense at all.

"Wh...what?" he stammered, finding his pecker at last and experiencing a fresh round of dismayed terror when he realized he'd gone numb and could barely feel anything.

"Pay attention." Lifting the turquoise thing again, she brushed it across his chest and then down, over the hand that cradled his pecker as if it had just suffered the worst, the most grievous and painful injury it was possible for any pecker to suffer. "The boas. *These*. I'll never be able to sell them, now that we've crushed them, and...and..."

"Boas." Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, Gage's mind began to function again. It began to pick up the scattered and shattered pieces of itself, and to realize that life did indeed go on and he was not at all paralyzed or as helpless as he'd first thought. "That's what you call them?"

"Of course it is. What else would I call them? And what am I going to do now?"

She tried to sit up, but he caught her with an arm and pulled her back. Held her down. "Rest for a while."

"No, I meant what am I going to do with the boas? I certainly can't sell them after we've...we've..."

"I know what you meant." At last, Gage managed to laugh. A little. Weakly, and in a voice that still didn't sound entirely like his own, even on his worst and most exhausted of days.

"Then what..."

"You don't need to think about those damned

things now."

"Well, somebody has to think about them." She sounded offended. Really, really offended, and that only made him want her more. Made him want her again, with a body that couldn't possibly want in any of the appropriate ways for hours and hours yet to come.

"Rest," he ordered again, settling her more snugly into the curve of his body.

"In the middle of a work day?" Offense turned to a tone of undisguised scandalization as she tried again, a little more weakly this time, to pull free of his embrace.

And now, at last, it was Gage's turn to laugh. Now, at last, he was *able* to laugh. "You screw the living eyelids off the first man you drop your panties for," he declared, "and then you're horrified at the idea of taking a minute or two to breathe because it's the middle of the afternoon?"

"I didn't drop my panties for anyone. As I recall, you dropped them for me. You ripped them right, straight off me. And I'm damned well going to deduct the sixteen dollars for them right off the top of your first paycheck."

"Sixteen *dollars*?" This time it was Gage who sounded scandalized. Who sounded downright horrified. "For a pair of *underpants*?"

"They're silk," she huffed, managing to sit up at last, wrapping herself in one or two of the feathered things...what had she called them? Boas?...that were indeed crushed and mangled and sperm-spattered to the point that nobody in their right mind would ever

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buy one of them. Not that he'd ever been able to imagine anyone in their right mind would ever have bought one of the damned things in the first place. Seeing as how they amounted to nothing more than instruments of torture, and everything that went along with torture. "They're Lady Godivas, trimmed with hand-embroidered lace. And I'm *so* not happy that you took it upon yourself to..."

"I thought Lady Godiva went nude?"

"Don't get cute with me," she snarled. Literally *snarled*, showing her small and just-naturally-lovely teeth.

Gage almost laughed. Almost tried to cuddle her again. Almost tried to get hard again. "I wasn't getting cute," he replied, stretching out on his back, mindless of his nakedness now that he'd done the absolute with this woman he barely knew, and feeling careless of what she might think of him for any of it. "I was asking for information, that's all. I thought Godiva went around in her birthday suit, tormenting the poor bastards of the kingdom until they tried to castrate themselves with their..."

"Your knowledge of history...literature...whatever the hell that story is...is appalling."

"Then set me straight," he urged, enjoying himself more and more with every delight-packed second that passed.

"I didn't hire you to tutor you," Tina declared, and got to her feet. A little clumsily, he noted with more than a little sense of pride in accomplishment. As if she'd been rubbed damned raw and was going to be feeling the reminders of him and all he'd been to her

for a long, long, long time to come. She bent to snatch up her skirt, barely visible beneath the foaming tide of feathered boas, and when she did her tits dangled invitingly, just within arm's length.

He reached up to touch, and she slapped his hand away. "If you want an education, go back to school. If you want a whore, go out to..."

"I don't want an education or a whore." Sitting up, Gage searched for his underwear amongst the frothing feathers.

Apparently they'd disappeared. So he settled for wrapping himself in one of the feathered creations. A suitably sedate if decidedly un-masculine number in deepest black shot through with sparkling streaks of gray and white.

"I don't care what you want." Buttoning her skirt around her delightfully bare and perfect ass, Tina evaded his touch again, more deftly than before, when she bent to retrieve her crumpled white shirt. "Lady Godiva is the brand name of the panties you ruined. And you are going to pay, Mister. You are going to pay every cent you owe, before I *consider* letting you off the hook!"

"Fine." Shuddering, clutching the feathered loincloth that already, against all odds and all probability, had begun to coax a little life and a little spirit back into his still-aching pecker, Gage staggered to his feet. "I'll pay for them. The boa-things too. Just let me know how much, and..."

"You?" Her look changed to one of amusement. "Where are *you* going to get six hundred dollars to pay for a carton of boas, when you don't even have

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twenty-five cents to..."

"I have my ways," he muttered, wondering as he reached for his jeans, careful not to lift them too quickly and let the ankle holster he'd somehow managed to shed along with them drop from the leg where he'd hidden it, exactly what the hell had come over him. How the hell he'd let himself be distracted this way.

Because even if Tina Farrin was the most beautiful, the most incredibly desirable and desirous woman he'd ever had the pleasure to run across, he'd finally returned to his senses enough to remember that he still had a job to do. An assignment to carry out.

An assignment that should have...that should always have had...his full attention. And then, as he headed toward the front of the shop to check on the darkening street and make sure nothing had happened while he'd been preoccupied, he realized with a sudden and sick thumping of his heart that he'd been an even bigger fool than he'd first believed.

Because not only had he abandoned his assigned post and been grossly derelict in his duty to his superiors, he'd never even thought about locking the shop's front door.

## Chapter Seven

**T**he truck was back.

It was the first thing Tina saw when she rounded the corner at the end of her block, staggering beneath the weight of a stack of garment bags filled with vintage evening gowns...the very real movie star thing...bought just the night before from a fading local celebrity who'd fallen on hard times.

A big white panel truck...an *enormous* truck, unmarked in anyway...stood parked squarely in the middle of the sidewalk across the street. Right in front of the antique shop that had moved in six months ago and seemed to do very little of anything concerned with business and everything to do with annoying the crap out of her. Everything, like parking those honking big trucks on the sidewalk two or three times a month and bringing the whole street almost to a standstill, with traffic backed up miserably and the tourists upon whom she depended for a good part of her livelihood looking for an alternative route and an alternative shopping neighborhood. One that was less congested and much less stressful.

And that was only one of the things that annoyed her as she stormed down the block, keys jangling in a

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hand beneath the piled garment bags, eager to get the shop's door open so she could get rid of the heavy load of sequins and beads that no human could possibly ever wear and yet expect to stand fully erect at the same time.

The other thing that annoyed her was Gage.

He'd returned, just as he'd promised. Or more probably he'd never left. Once again clad in the derelict overcoat she hadn't been able to snatch away from him the day before, though she'd certainly tried, he'd resumed his place in the doorway of the shop next to hers. Sitting in the midst of a pile of tattered blankets, he seemed completely unaware of her as she struggled toward him, balancing the heavy bags on her shoulder, her head, the side of the building, and any other surface that looked like it might be sturdy enough and clean enough to bear the load long enough for her to insert her key and turn it in the lock.

Sitting on the doorstep next door, shoulders hunched beneath his disgusting coat, Gage with-no-last-name munched halfheartedly on a flat and nasty looking breakfast bar of some kind, seeming unconcerned by anything other than the sidewalk in front of him and maybe, occasionally, in the truck on the other side of the street.

"And to think," she muttered, shoving the shop door open with a wicked thrust of her hip, "I screwed that. I actually let that touch me, and..."

To her surprise, Gage was right behind her. He was like the vampires in the movies. Moving with that same strange and agile athletic grace she'd noted

yesterday and thought so out of line with his situation in life, he was in the shop almost before she was. Invited in like one of those vampires, and damned near as impossible to get rid of now that she'd done the inviting.

Sweeping the garment bags out of her hands with an effortless ease that took her breath away, he set her heart to hammering all over again. Just the way it had yesterday, when it had thrummed with all kinds of inappropriate and inconceivable rhythms.

"Watch your coat!" she ordered, her voice a little sharper and a lot more shrill than she'd ever intended. "You'll get the gowns dirty!"

"Isn't that what garment bags are for?" Turning away from her, Gage made no effort to hold them away from himself as he stepped to the counter and dropped the load of gowns onto it in an unceremonious heap.

"Do you trust garment bags to never rip?" *Do you even know what a garment bag is for? And somebody remind me...why the hell did I ever get involved with you in the first place?*

"You gotta trust somebody, Lady." Shrugging, he pulled the half-eaten breakfast bar from a pocket of his overcoat and began to munch on it again.

So. It appeared they'd come full circle. It appeared she'd accomplished nothing yesterday...nothing except losing a virtue and a dignity she'd give just about anything to have back. He'd returned to the derelict street person he was...a real pain in the behind who just wasn't going to go away. And she...

"Did you sleep in that doorway all night?" she



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demanded, scowling as she flipped on the lights and turned the sign in her own door to display the side that read 'open'.

Gage shrugged again and finished his breakfast in a single, enormous bite. "A man's gotta sleep somewhere."

"Will you stop saying that?"

"Saying what?" He looked surprised.

"That somebody's gotta do something. Or some variation of something."

"Sorry."

"Didn't you even think about going to the shelter, the way I told you to go?"

Shrugging, Gage didn't answer. He just headed for the back room and the few boxes he'd left unpacked the day before, tossing his disaster of an overcoat into the broom closet as he passed it by, so that there was at least a hope of her getting hold of it and getting rid of it when he wasn't looking.

The damned thing was that bad.

But then she stopped in mid-step, halfway to hanging her own jacket on the coat tree behind the cashier's counter.

Gage had changed his clothes.

*And that was peculiar. Really, really peculiar.*

She'd seen no bags anywhere around him...no paper bags, no plastic, or duffel or any other kind of bag. Not even the pilfered shopping cart that so often accompanied someone living on the street. She'd seen only the man himself. But somehow, somewhere, he'd come up with a pair of well-worn corduroys that looked clean and at least halfway presentable. And a

dark blue plaid shirt, a big and loose flannel one that he wore partially buttoned over his T-shirt.

He'd changed his clothes somewhere. And once again she had the creeping feeling that he wasn't telling her everything. That he had some kind of secret he'd made it a point to *not* tell her. That maybe he had all kinds of things he wasn't going to tell her unless she forced the issue. Things like...

"Okay," she said, stepping up to the doorway between the front and back rooms. "First things first. You're going to sleep on the couch in the back room tonight."

His eyebrows lifted in an expression of real astonishment, and he started to shake his head. "You're going to trust me alone in here all night, Lady? Just like that?"

"You can't be sleeping in doorways. And if you're thinking of robbing the register for some quick cash, you can just stop right now. I take the money with me when I leave. And since I don't suppose there's anything else in here that you'd want to steal, I figure you'll be all right in here."

"Thanks," he muttered, and looked none too pleased.

"And now I need you to get to work. I want you to finish unpacking those boxes, then flatten them and carry them out to the dumpster. And after that I have a display rack I need taken apart and moved."

"Your wish," he muttered, his face quirking with a crooked and slightly sour smile as he bowed slightly toward her.

"But the first thing I need you to do is tell me your

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name."

He frowned. Looked confused. "I thought I told you yesterday."

"You told me it was Gage. But Gage what?"

Now he looked wary. "Isn't Gage good enough?"

"Not if you're going to work for me."

"What?" His eyebrows went up. "You're not telling me you're going to turn in taxes for the piddly-ant little amount you're planning to pay me?"

Spoken like a true accountant, she thought, remembering that her first impression of him had been exactly that...of a sharp and educated man down on his luck. An accountant who'd been involved in some major scandal and been so disgraced he had nowhere left to go but the street and nothing to look forward to but the charity of others.

"Beggars can't be choosy." Tina said it and immediately, even as she was in the process of hearing the words come out of her own mouth, remembered something else. She remembered that that was exactly what he was. A beggar. A man who spent his nights in doorways, sleeping on cobblestones and cement and shivering inside his old overcoat because the June nights could get downright chilly in the high desert, even in the heart of downtown Santa Fe. And she wished like anything to take the remark back. She even thought about kicking herself for saying such an insensitive thing in the first place, but then immediately thought better of that idea because she'd only be calling attention to it. And if Gage hadn't noticed, as he apparently hadn't...

He was still eyeing her with that suspicious, that

slightly devious and even underhanded look. "Prescott," he said at last, his tone suggesting he thought he'd been backed into some kind of corner. "Gage Prescott. Now I suppose you're going to run a background check on me?"

"Should I?"

Shrugging again, the muscles in his jaw jumping a little as they tightened, he turned away from her. "Are you going to believe me if I say no?"

Tina hesitated.

*Was she?* Did she really think he wouldn't rob her blind if she continued to trust him and continued to give him free access to her shop and everything in it?

"I should fire you right now," she murmured, watching in inexplicable fascination the ripple of long muscles in his shoulders as he bent over one of the remaining cartons, struggling to cut through the heavy packing tape with the tiny knife she'd given him. A tiny and inadequate one, since she hadn't really trusted him at all. Not with anything that might be a weapon and might be used against her.

Intent upon his work, he didn't even glance at her. "You can't fire me."

"No?" Now it was Tina's jaw that tightened. Her back and her stomach too, as her body automatically readied itself to do battle. "Watch me!"

This time Gage did turn his head. And flashed her a smile that could only be described as incandescent. One that could...and probably had, more times than Tina could count...charm the pants off the most staid and upstanding of old society matrons. A million-watt smile, displaying a mouth full of orthodontically

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perfect and opalescently white teeth. A smile that reached his eyes and there transformed itself into a long and piercing look that suggested in no uncertain terms things no woman under the age of a hundred who still had a pulse would ever mistake for anything but exactly what they were.

It was the most specifically *suggestive* look it was possible for any man to direct at any woman. And Tina felt her knees weaken until it seemed a foregone conclusion they would turn to mush and deposit her, a trembling heap of gelatinous nothing, right at his feet. Right where she suspected he wanted her.

"You can't fire me," he said, turning his grin, thankfully, to the box beneath his hands. "And you won't. Because I still owe you sixteen dollars for your precious Lady And The Tramp silk panties that I ruined."

Tina felt herself blush. Whether it was from the sheer, overwhelming candlepower of his smile or from the double meaning in his remark about the panties, she couldn't tell. But she knew it was one doozie of a blush, and she knew he couldn't...didn't...fail to see it when he glanced up at her again, his grin widening and seducing even more. "That's Lady Godiva," she muttered, wishing she could tear herself free of the charm he wrapped around himself the same way she'd wrapped the boas around him the afternoon before, when she'd lain on the floor right there where he was standing now, with her legs spread as far apart as they could go, practically begging him to...

The heat and intensity of her blush increased.

"Whatever." Gage's mouth quirked a little at one corner in unconcealed amusement.

*Damn his derelict hide!* Wasn't it bad enough that the man literally exuded animal attraction and pheromones of the most irresistible kind from every pore? Did he have to look at her that way, too? Did he have to be a mind reader?

"The point," he murmured, moving his gaze back to her face so there was no way she'd ever have a chance to escape, "is that you won't fire me because you want your sixteen dollars. You won't let me out of your sight until I work your little panties off."

This time the blush was so bad that she turned and ran. Actually *ran*, stumbling a little in her panicked haste to get back to the cash register and count out the change for the morning.

*God! What he'd said!* Was he really thinking...could he possibly have been suggesting...

Her face was on fire. That was the only way she could describe it. It was on fire with flames that were never going to be extinguished. Not until she got rid of Gage Prescott somehow. Though a niggling little part of her mind that usually was pretty good at knowing up from down and left from right warned there was going to be no getting rid of him now. It warned things had already progressed to the point where getting rid of him was the very last thing she'd ever manage to make herself do.

*But whatever happened, whether he stayed or left, she certainly wasn't going to screw him again!*

Kneeling down behind the display case next to the register, she concentrated on rearranging a display of

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the flashy, dangly jewelry she ordered especially from New York...expensive jewelry that only one out of a hundred women would ever wear, but for which they'd be willing to pay the small fortune she asked for it. She hoped the useless activity would take her mind off the muscled vagrant in the back room...hoped it would help her forget the things he'd done to her and with her in that very same room.

And it almost worked.

It *did* work, until she lifted her gaze to find him standing not five feet away, his hands tucked deep in the pockets of his frayed and sleep-wrinkled corduroys, staring out at the street.

"Remember what I said about firing you?" she demanded, breathing a sigh of relief that her voice betrayed none of the rioting confusion of desire and determination not to feel desire that she'd been experiencing.

"I'm finished with the boxes." He didn't turn his head. Didn't take his eyes off the thing he was staring at.

The truck parked on the opposite sidewalk, she realized with a spurt of icy irritation.

"And you think that gives you the right to just *stand* there?" Getting to her feet, she stepped around the counter and went to his side.

Gage shrugged. And didn't say anything else.

"It's a truck," she muttered, her irritation increasing. "You act like you've never seen one before."

"Do they do that often?" he asked, nodding at the offending vehicle. "Park in front of that store like

that?"

"Two or three times a month," she replied, glaring at the man who'd appeared from the store...a delivery driver she'd seen before, and even had a few arguments with before she'd concluded there was nothing she could do about the trucks and the confusion they caused. Especially after she'd done a little reconnoitering for herself and discovered that, unlike the shops on her side of the street, the ones across the way had no alley running behind them. That they had no back doors through which to accept their deliveries.

"...over there?"

With a start, Tina realized Gage had been saying something else, asking her something else, and she'd missed almost all of it. "I'm sorry?" She watched the delivery man roll up the back door of the truck and lift out a hand truck. "I didn't hear...I wasn't..."

"I asked if there's ever any activity over there. Besides what's going on right now, I mean."

Tina frowned. "Why are you so interested, anyway?"

Gage tilted his head a little, still watching intently as the delivery man disappeared into the shop with a load of boxes marked 'valuable antiques - handle with care'. "Seems kind of odd," he went on, ignoring her question. "Doesn't it? To pay all that rent and then just let the place sit idle, not doing any business?"

Frowning at the place where the delivery man had disappeared into the shop, Tina didn't know what Gage expected her to say. So she didn't say anything.



## A Little Bit of Tina

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"Rents in this part of town aren't exactly cheap," Gage persisted, sounding very sure of himself.

"How do you know what the rents are?"

He didn't smile. Didn't show any kind of expression. "I have my ways. They're expensive, all right. So it just seems...odd...that someone would set up shop over there and then never be open for business. Except to accept deliveries that never seem to get sold."

"They get sold."

Gage gave her a sharp look. "What do you mean? How do you know?"

"Well..." Tina felt suddenly disturbed. Suddenly *very* disturbed, as if she'd just gotten herself involved in something she should see. Something she should have seen all along, but hadn't. And didn't.

*Something involved with Gage Prescott's real reason for taking up residence here, in this particular street, in the one specific place where he had?*

*Something that meant the police weren't able, or maybe weren't willing, to even try to chase him away?*

*Something that should frighten the living daylights out of her, if she had the sense to be frightened?*

The ideas were so ludicrous that she pushed them right, straight out of her head.

"They have to be selling stuff," she murmured thoughtfully, still watching as the delivery man returned for a second load of boxes. "I mean, you see it for yourself right now. They get deliveries of antiques. And a little while from now, tomorrow morning or maybe the day after, another truck will come to pick up shipments. You can set your watch

by it. It always happens that way."

Gage's full attention was on her face now. And it was sharp. Piercing. "The stuff they pick up? Is it the same stuff they've just dropped off?"

Frowning, she looked up at him. "I don't understand why you're so interested in what they're doing, anyway. I don't know why it should concern..."

"Just answer me. Do they pick up the same stuff? The same boxes marked 'antiques'?"

"Most always." Tina's heart started to pound again. And not in the way it had a little while ago...not in the pleasurable and aroused thrumming way that had resulted from the sight of Gage Prescott's whitely perfect smile. This was a new hammering. An alarmed and vaguely unsettled one, telling her in ways she could no longer doubt that she really had stumbled into something here. Something dangerous.

*Something illegal?*

"Most always," Gage repeated. "But not always?"

"Well...no. I mean, it's almost always the boxes, but sometimes there's furniture, and bigger stuff. The last time, two weeks ago, they hauled in that big old ugly wooden Indian."

"The one in the window."

It wasn't a question, and Tina didn't feel compelled to answer.

"When's lunch break?" Gage asked abruptly, turning away just as abruptly from all that was going on in the street.

"Not till eleven o'clock at least."

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He shot her a look. "Any chance we can make it earlier?"

All concerns for the truck on the sidewalk and the activity that had never seemed particularly strange or inexplicable before evaporating, Tina felt her heart surge with sympathy and concern. "Is that all you've had to eat?" she asked, following him toward the back of the shop. "Just that one horrid breakfast bar?"

He shrugged. Looked stern and indomitable, and she knew he wasn't going to answer. Knew his pride wasn't going to allow him to answer.

"I guess we could go earlier," she murmured and blushed again, hoping he hadn't noticed that slip-up, either. The 'we' she'd used instead of the 'you' she'd meant.

"I hear La Fonda's good." He'd already stopped next to the empty mahogany display rack she wanted moved, and bent over it to examine the way it was put together.

"*La Fonda*? Isn't that a little beyond your expectations?"

He flashed her another of those heart-stopping smiles. "How do you know anything about my expectations?"

"Well, really. I mean it's one of the best restaurants in town. *The* best restaurant along the plaza. I just think it's a little pricey, that's all. A little bit of a jump from a stale breakfast bar in a doorway to the fanciest dining room I know."

"And even if I say I'd be willing to pay?"

That sent her into gales of laughter. That lightened the mood and chased away for once and for all the

lingering shreds of doubt and unease he'd started with his strange questions.

*The man would be lucky to buy himself a cup of coffee at McDonald's.* So the idea at he'd be able to buy lunch for even one person at La Fonda, the historic old Harvey House at one side of the plaza...

Still laughing, Tina went to the counter and began to unpack the piles of sequined and jewel-studded gowns she'd bought from the impoverished old-time movie star.

*If that wasn't the most ludicrous idea she'd entertained yet...*

### Chapter Eight

Tina Farrin was sharp as a tack. Bent over the display rack with one eye still fixed to the view beyond the front windows, Gage twisted his shoulders a little to adjust the shoulder holster beneath the baggy shirt he'd worn over his T-shirt.

She didn't miss much. Like that slip he'd made a minute ago, offering to pay for breakfast at a swanky place like La Fonda. Even if he could afford it in his real life, without too much worry that he'd have to leave some important bill unpaid to compensate, that had been a stupid mistake. One of many stupid mistakes that had already aroused Tina's curiosity and made her a danger. To herself as well as to him.

He'd have to be careful. Have to feel his way slowly and go easy with the kind of questions he'd been asking when the La Fonda blooper had popped out. The kind of questions that always summoned that intense look to her face and started her to asking a few pertinent and unanswerable questions of her own.

But the questions he'd asked her *had* been worth it. Because he'd learned his info was good. Not that he'd ever really doubted it, of course...not when he had

the best sources, the most reliable sources, a man in his position could ever have. But even if he'd already known most of what Tina had just told him about that shop across the street, that the activity over there was entirely predictable and his target apparently wasn't being very careful, or very smart, it was a good thing to know he was right. A good thing to know this might be easier...a hell of a lot easier...than anyone had thought.

And, kicking himself mentally, he had to remind himself that that was just one more kind of dangerous thinking. That was a way he couldn't allow himself to think, because in his line of work there was no 'easy'. There was no 'piece of cake' and no 'sure thing'. There was no certainty. And to think anything else...

Well, to think anything else meant he could be shot. Could be killed in a single, careless instant of his own. It had happened to plenty of cops before. And it could happen to him, too. Any time. Any place. Including San Francisco Street in sunny Santa Fe.

If he wasn't careful.

So, he was sure. His original sources had been corroborated. His information was complete, the others hadn't missed anything, and now all he had to do...all he *could* do...was stay here. And wait.

Shifting his gaze a little to the left, Gage eyed the phone next to the cash register speculatively.

They could have raided the shop across the street a long time ago. Could have tried, anyway, once they'd had a damned good idea what was going on there. But it had been better to wait. Better to watch until Joshua Collins actually showed his face. Until they

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could catch him *and* his crew with the goods in their hands. And after last week's spectacular diamond heist from a jewelry store in Amarillo, this had seemed like the best time...the perfect time...to do just that.

It had been hours, since last night, since Gage had called in. He'd thought he'd have a few spare minutes this morning before Tina arrived to harass him into working for her for another day, but as luck would have it, she'd showed up early. And cranky. And more determined than ever.

He needed to call in soon, before someone from his team came looking for him and blew his cover for real. But she was too sharp. There was no way he could call from here. Not from the phone on the counter and not on the cell phone he'd clipped to the back of his belt where it, like the Glock, would be conveniently ready yet still out of sight beneath his shirt. Not with Tina hovering around, curious as all get out and just damned, bull-headed determined to ride herd on him every second of the day.

That would just be stupid. As incredibly dangerous and stupid as underestimating his target.

Clamping his arm around the Glock in the holster, Gage took reassurance from its presence. He was glad as hell to have it back where it belonged, solid and ready against his side instead of hidden above the suspended ceiling in the rest room where it wouldn't have been any use to anybody when the moment came. As he sensed the moment was going to come fast once things got rolling. As he sensed it was going to come very, very fast.

La Fonda was one of the places he'd used before. One of the places he knew. There was a phone in the lobby there, in a secluded and private corner not far from the men's room where he could make the necessary calls without having to worry he'd be observed or overheard. It was closest secure phone he knew, and he had to talk Tina into getting him there.

*Or into leaving him alone.*

*Leaving him alone could work, too.*

"Look," he said, straightening away from the wooden rack that had been put together with all the fiendish and incomprehensible deviousness of one of those damned Chinese puzzles he'd never in his life been able to figure out. "You were right. I'm hungry. Really, really hungry. And I was just...as an employer...as *my* employer...I think you have a duty to look out for the welfare of your employees. I mean, how am I supposed to work...how am I supposed to give you one hundred per cent and unpack all your cartons of little..." Pausing, he bit his lip as he felt hot color flood his face. "How, when I'm about to collapse from starvation?"

Tina looked back at him through narrowed eyes.

*She wasn't buying this.* Not one single bit of it. He could see it in her expression. In the way she looked skeptical, her face crinkling the tiniest bit around her eyes and at the center of her forehead. Like she knew she was being fed the biggest line of bullshit heard in the new century. Like she knew damned well he wasn't anywhere close to starving or about to drop in his tracks. He could see it in the way she bit down on a corner of her lip as if she had to struggle to keep



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from scowling. Or maybe from laughing again, right in his lying face.

It was an expression that made him want to kiss her. Shamelessly and thoughtlessly, the way he'd kissed her just the day before. The way that had led to...

And he wasn't going down that path again, either! Was *not*.

He might be new to this kind of assignment, might be out undercover and on his own for the very first time, but he knew better. He'd been trained better. He'd let her get to him yesterday, let her defeat all the time and effort he'd put into landing this assignment in the first place. He'd let himself get carried away once. Badly carried away. And he was damned if he'd let it happen again.

No matter what.

Consciously, he tried to slump his shoulders. Tried to make himself look smaller inside the flannel shirt that even though it was the largest decrepit used shirt he'd been able to find, even though it was two sizes too large, still wasn't enough to make him look anything like the scrawny and underfed transient he was trying to be.

"I could really use a substantial meal," he murmured, and this time his effort was to look pleading. Even pitiful. To round his eyes and try, though he suspected he wasn't a hell of a good actor or even a hell of a *bad* one, to look pitiful.

"I know you could." Abandoning the load of incredibly overdone evening gowns she'd been messing with on the counter top, she reached for her

purse. "That's why I'm going to go and get you something more substantial right now. But you don't need fancy food. You need something fresh, something simple and edible, from the little café down the street. And coffee. You can make that while I'm gone. There's a machine in the back." With that she slung her bulky purse over her shoulder and turned toward the door. "I'm closing the place back up. Locking the door," she advised. "No customers are going to come this early. But if they do, don't answer. Don't let them know you're here, because you wouldn't have the slightest idea what to sell or how to sell it. You'd probably end up giving the place away. I'll be back in five minutes, so..."

"Don't forget to take your money," he called as she stepped outside and reached to pull the door shut behind her. And now he was the one who had to struggle to keep laughter from erupting in his throat.

Tina glared at him for a moment. Like she thought he'd been serious. Which, he supposed she had. Because he'd certain as hell never given her any reason to trust him with *anything*.

She scowled, she hesitated for a second as if she was reconsidering the whole idea, and then she was gone. Just like that. Just as easily as that. She pulled the door shut, tested the lock, and was gone. And he was alone at last. Alone with the shop across the way that he'd been sent to watch. And the truck he'd been ordered to find, and the cell phone he'd been afraid to use.

"Thank you, Jesus," he muttered, directing a fervent look at the old fashioned, silver-painted

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molded tin ceiling as he pulled out the cell and flipped it open.

The call was answered on the second ring. "Marcy," was all the Chief said...his last name, snapped out in the clipped and businesslike tone that always left Gage wondering if he'd just landed himself in serious, serious trouble, or if the Chief was merely busy, and too impatient to be polite.

"The truck's here."

"What's your take on the situation?"

"The owner of the shop across the street from Collins says..."

"I thought you were supposed to be a homeless man?"

"I was, but..."

"I thought you were going to remain inconspicuous and not attract attention?"

"You don't know the owner of this shop." Even though he knew better, Gage almost laughed. And only managed to bite it back in the nick of time. "This woman was born suspicious." *And hot.* "And her window's a hell of a lot better place to watch the antique shop. I can see right into the place from here, when the truck's not..."

"You don't mean to tell me you're *inside* her shop? You don't mean to tell me you've involved her in..."

Fighting back another chuckle that wouldn't be good...wouldn't be at all appropriate or even very wise at this moment, Gage shook his head and kept his eyes on the truck and another load of boxes being wheeled into the shop. "Like I said. You don't know this woman. She involved herself. She came after me

with a broom. So it was either go along with her or let her cause a ruckus that would have involved the whole street."

"She have any clue what's really going on?"

"Nah. She believes I'm a transient." Pride swelled in Gage's chest and his voice as he made the announcement. *Maybe he wasn't as bad an actor as he'd thought, after all.* "She's trying to save me from myself. From life on the street. She's even ordered me to sleep in her back room tonight."

"Her back room?"

"Yeah. But once she's gone and the place is closed for the night, it really *will* be a good place to watch from. The best place, because I'll be completely out of sight and..."

"You just watch yourself, Prescott."

"Don't I always?"

Chief Marcy made a little harrumphing noise, a skeptical one. Remembering the incident with the biker gang, no doubt.

But Gage had been new then. That had been three and a half years ago, and he'd learned a hell of lot since then. About sticking to his business, and not getting involved in things that weren't his business. Even if they weren't entirely on the up and up, weren't entirely the most legal...

*And, shit. Who the hell was he trying to kid with that load of crap?*

The truth was, the Chief had all the reason in the world to assume he was going to blow this operation.

*Hell, he might even have blown it already, with all his distracted attentions to...to...*

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"Did your shop owner say anything about what's been going on at Collins' shop?" Marcy growled.

"She says it's like clockwork. They unload the stuff. They're doing that right now, as a matter of fact. Then the next day another truck will come and they'll re-load the stuff. She says it goes down that way every time."

Marcy grunted. "What about Collins? He show his face?"

"No." Gage felt a twinge of guilt about that. Joshua Collins, dealer in stolen jewels and middleman in one of the biggest and most profitable break-and-enter rings ever to hit this part of the country, might damned well be inside that shop this very instant. He might have shown up at any time while Gage had been busy in here...yesterday, while he'd been screwing the ever so delightful and ever so delectable Tamale Tina Farrin. Or he might have slipped in sometime during the night, when Gage had nodded off. He might have easily slipped past the other members of the team, posted strategically at either end of the block, so even if Gage *thought* he was telling the truth right now, he was just about to do the most absolutely unthinkable thing of all. He was about to tell a bold-faced lie to the Chief. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of him. My thought is, he's not going to show until the deal goes down."

Marcy grunted again, this time in agreement. "I'll wait for your call," he said. "And Prescott..."

At that moment Tina appeared outside the window, a bag of food in one hand and her ring of keys held ready in the other. Another fifteen steps

and she'd be at the door. Another twenty, and she'd...

"I gotta go," Gage mumbled, turning his back to the windows and the door so she wouldn't catch sight of the cell phone.

"You watch your ass, Prescott." The Chief raised his voice a little. "Collins is one slick bastard. He'll get away and leave you looking like..."

Keys rattled in the lock at Gage's back. The door creaked and started to swing inward. "Will do," he muttered, and broke the connection. Flipping the cell phone shut, he managed to jam it into the pocket of his jeans just in time. Just in the nick of time.

"I don't smell coffee." Tina breezed past him, toward the back of the shop. And Gage wanted to kick himself.

*Coffee!*

He hadn't exactly promised he'd make it, but he'd known that was what she expected. Had known that was an order from his employer, and not a request from a hot little number he'd taken into the sack. Or whatever.

*He could have made the damned coffee while he was on the phone.* It wouldn't have been that hard. And that way she wouldn't have been looking at him with that old suspicious, skeptical, unconvinced gleam in her eye now.

"What is it with you?" she demanded, reaching for the can of coffee herself. "Do you have some kind of attention deficit disorder or something?"

*Now there was an idea.* He wished he'd thought of that one himself. It would have been such a

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convenient excuse, such a perfect explanation for...

"Is that why you're living on the street?"

He didn't answer. Couldn't really answer because there wasn't any easy answer.

"You know..." Slamming the filled basket into the coffee maker, she flipped it on and turned to glower at him again. "Something about you just doesn't add up."

"Huh?" Gage's heart flipped inside his chest. Flipped and flopped several times. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what it means. Just look at you."

Gage did. He looked down at himself. At the gray corduroys with the torn hem and the frayed seams. At the ketchup stain on the knee that he'd seen as an added plus when he'd spotted the pants on the ninety-nine cent rack in the thrift store. He looked at the elderly flannel shirt with the two missing buttons, one of which he'd replaced with a large safety pin so the thing wouldn't flap open too far at the wrong moment and reveal too much Glock to eyes that had no business, none at all, knowing that particular secret. He looked at the mismatched loafers worn with torn socks and the very convenient lines of scab along the back of one hand, where he'd scratched himself while riding his Electra Glide Classic hell bent for leather through the brush out by the old nuclear facility.

He'd thought he looked pretty damned convincing. But he had a feeling...a really creepy and really horrid one...that Tina was about to blow that opinion all to hell and back.

"You just don't fit," she said, handing him an egg muffin from the bag.

"I don't fit what?" He hated eggs. Hated the slimy feel of them and the idea that the cholesterol was no damn good for him. Hated even the thought of biting into one of them after the chicken and cheese breakfast burrito with green chili one of the beat cops had delivered to his doorway at four-thirty this morning, and which he'd devoured with all the relish a delicacy like that deserved. But seeing as how he was supposed to be homeless and all...seeing as how he'd practically insisted he was on the verge of starvation...

He bit. Swallowed. Fought back a shudder and bit again.

Three bites was all it took to get the revolting thing down.

Watching him, Tina seemed satisfied. For the moment at least. And then she was handing him another, with the words, "chow down, big boy. I got half a dozen of them. And pastries, too."

*Hell.*

"I don't fit what?" he asked again, steeling himself to bite into the second egg muffin.

"Well, I mean." She stared at him for a minute longer. Watched him down the second muffin in two bites and then, fiend from the bowels of hell that she was, handed him another. "It's obvious you haven't been on the street long."

"It is?" He swallowed a mouthful of egg...a little runnier and a lot more disgusting than the first two...without chewing.



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"Sure it is. Your hair's clean."

Gage had to resist an impulse...an overpowering one, almost...to reach up for a feel. He couldn't stand to go more than two days without washing it. It had been two days now, and already he felt like he was crawling.

"You're clean," she went on. "If you weren't, I wouldn't have..." Pausing, she blushed in a way that made the egg muffins a little more palatable. That made them a *lot* more palatable since he instantly had other things on his mind. Or maybe he should say on his pecker. "I've seen street people before."

He finished with the last of the egg muffins and reached for the pastry she held out to him. He didn't want that, either. Wondered how he was going to force down one more single bite. But at least the pastry wasn't something he'd think more suitable for the criminally stupid and insane victims of some TV reality show where people ate disgusting things all the time. At least it was something he could enjoy.

"You don't scratch yourself like street people do. You don't stink, either."

*Well, thank God for that. For all of that.*

"What's your point?" he asked, licking his fingers and finally finding the courage to refuse the cheese Danish she'd just pulled out of her bottomless bag of Goodies From Hell.

"My point is that you just don't ring true, Gage Prescott. You're an obviously intelligent man. An..." She bit back the words, blushing again. And he thought he knew what she'd been about to say. He thought she'd been about to declare him attractive, as

she'd already declared him only yesterday, with that lithe and sultry-sweet body that just wouldn't quit. That had his pecker standing up straight and readying itself even now, even after the horror of the egg muffins. "You're standing here in front of me with clear eyes and two thousand dollars' worth of orthodontic work..."

"Closer to five," he muttered, reaching past her for the coffee pot and a foam cup.

"Whatever." She shrugged. "None of it fits. That's my point."

"I wasn't always on the street, you know," he shot back, taking a great deal of care to hide the orthodontic work from her since he didn't think a great big flashing smile was going to fit very well, either. "I didn't grow up on the street."

"I never said you did."

"Then..."

"You're no more a bum living in a doorway than I am," she declared, coming right out in the open with it at last. Right out in the open with a truth that, more than any of the other on-target truths she'd uttered so far, had the power to strike absolute terror in his heart. To set him to sweating, and wanting to take off running. Just running, as hard as he could, to where he could whip out the cell phone again and ask the Chief...*beg* the Chief to take him off this assignment right now and put him back where he belonged. On the street. *Walking* the street. Because just like Tina said, he didn't belong here. Didn't belong at all, and was just about to...

And then she said the worst thing of all. The worst

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thing he'd ever heard.

"I don't know who you are," she declared. "I don't know *what* you are or what the hell you're trying to pull here. But I promise you this. I promise on my Grammy's grave that I'm going to find out. I'm going to stick to you like a burr sticks to a hound dog, Gage Prescott. And one of these days, I'm going to figure you out. I'm going to know more about you than you know about yourself. And when that day comes..."

She didn't say anything else. Didn't say anything more. She just swept out through the doorway, into the front of the shop, like a queen who'd issued a royal edict.

One that was certain to come true simply because she'd *said* it was going to come true.

## Chapter Nine

*Shit.*

Lying on the sofa that was nowhere near as comfortable as it had looked, the sofa he'd dragged over to the doorway as soon as Tina had closed up the shop and gone home for the night, Gage found it impossible to relax. Impossible even to nod off.

Tina'd promised to find him out. And he knew she would. He could only pray like hell she'd been right about the truck. That it would show up sometime this morning, and get him off the hook. That the expected activity would go down before she figured it all out. That he'd have a chance to explain it to her and apologize before she got as furious-mad as she damned well had every right to be furious-mad.

Struggling to find a position on the sofa that wouldn't kill him or leave him permanently paralyzed from an unexpected spinal cord injury, Gage asked himself for about the millionth time exactly what the *hell* he'd gotten himself into.

He asked himself why he'd let himself be shanghaied at the tip of a broom. Why he'd let himself be trapped in a ladies' shop that frankly scared half the be-Jesus out of him with some of its

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contents. And he particularly asked himself why the hell he'd been stupid enough to screw Tina Farrin when he could just as easily have...

And it was just like before. Just like when he'd been telling fairy stories to the Chief and praying he wouldn't be found out. *Who the fucking hell did he think he was kidding with that line of bullshit?*

Massaging his pecker that had never really settled down since that episode among the feathers, he knew there wasn't a way in hell he *could* have avoided screwing Tina. Because she was dynamite. She was exactly the kind of hot tamale he'd thought the first time he'd set eyes on her.

Exactly the kind of hot tamale he liked, and had always prayed to have like him.

*Hot, hot, hot tamale.*

His pecker ached.

It burned.

Sliding down the zipper on his old corduroys that would only look more suitable...more 'fitting' as Tamale Tina would no doubt phrase it...after he'd slept in them for another night or two or three, he shrugged them and his underwear down over his hips so that he stood free to the cool night air.

*Nothing much happening here. Nothing in the shop, nothing across the street, nothing in all of Santa Fe, as far as he could make out.*

He suspected there might be some kind of Department regulation against greasing the old rod while he was supposed to be on duty. He felt almost certain there was. But, hell. Chief Marcy had sent him undercover. He'd said he should lay low and do

whatever he needed to do to catch the Collins bunch in action and with the goods.

Maybe the Chief hadn't been thinking exactly of this. But damn it to hell, this was one of the things he needed to do if he was to be clear-headed enough to make his move when the time came.

*His move against Collins*, he amended quickly, taking his suffering pecker in the curled tube of his fingers. *Because he wasn't going to make any more moves against Tamale Tina*. He hoped he wasn't going to make any more moves against her.

Lying on his back on the sofa with his pants down around his knees, lying with his legs spread as far apart as he could get them, it felt good to run his fingers along the too-tight pecker that had suffered long enough. That had suffered way too much.

It felt good to stroke himself, to feel the combination of cool air and night-chilled fingers soothing and caressing. Felt *so* good to close his fingers tight around the outraged length and run them up and down, up and down.

It would be a while before his balls were ready. It would be a while before he convinced them that this was the best they were going to get, and they'd better relieve themselves now, while they had the chance. While things were quiet and he had the privacy to give them the chance.

Keeping his gaze fixed on the dim night-lights burning inside the shop across the street, trying to keep his gaze away from the persistent scowl of the wooden Indian that seemed to disapprove of what he was doing, Gage tried not to think about the agony in

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his balls. He tried to block that right out of his mind and concentrate on a mental picture of Tina's face instead. He tried his damndest to fool his not-the-least-bit-gullible pecker into believing it was her tight cunt fixed around it and not just a set of everyday fingers that had handled it a thousand times already, trying to do what they were not ever going to completely do again now that he'd known that cunt personally. Now that he'd known it up close, and personal.

*Good God, what a mess!*

If he'd had the wits to know what was good for him...if he'd had any kind of wits or sense at all, he'd never have gotten himself tangled up with Tina in the first place. Because he was way out of his league here. Not that he'd ever had much of a league in the first place. It all went back to that shyness thing...to the fact that he'd never really had the gumption to get himself into such a mess with a woman before, never had the balls to even try. It all went back to the way this throat had always seized up whenever he'd thought about getting involved, and his tongue had turned so goofy it couldn't handle even the simplest of sentences. 'You look nice' had always been more apt to come out a half-hour diatribe on grooming that had set the girls...and later on the women...running before five minutes of it was out.

*He was a sorry excuse for a man.*

*He should have just kept up what he'd done all along, and been happy with it.*

He should have kept on greasing the rod whenever his natural tendency to ogle and get a hard-on made it

necessary.

Above all, he should never, not in a hundred-thousand-million years have thought he was a match for a woman like Tamale Tina. A woman so hot, so gorgeous, so enticing and so terrifying she *should* have had the power to shrink his balls to a wasted nothing with a touch or even a glance from her sweet-sultry, dark-dark eyes.

But, no.

Not him.

Not Gage Prescott, wannabe man-about-town. Not Gage Prescott, wannabe master of savoir-faire. Not Gage Prescott, the biggest fool ever known to walk the earth.

Closing his eyes for a minute, tilting his head back against the slightly soft and slightly scratchy upholstery of the sofa, he felt nothing at all in either pecker or balls except an uneasy rippling of increased discomfort. A discomfort and a tightening that insisted now that he had known the best it was ever possible to know, he wasn't going to settle for anything less.

Sure as hell wasn't going to settle for his own fingers and hand that, no matter how skillfully they'd begun to massage the rock-hard length of himself, were never again going to be adequate to relieve the killing pressures he was capable of building up.

Because the simple fact, the undeniable and inarguable fact was that now Gage had had Tina in all the ways it was possible for a man to have a woman and have her have him, he was not going to be satisfied with anyone or anything else. Ever again.



## A Little Bit of Tina

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Period. End of story.

And that was a real mess.

That was the *worst kind* of mess.

Gage felt a little tear of frustration, and futility, and knowledge that he was going to suffer for the rest of his life for this mistake escape his eye and track a curving, humiliating course across his cheek.

Applying himself harder to the tight and tremoring length he clutched with both hands now, he gritted his teeth and arched his back slightly. Still trying to convince himself that it was *her* there on top of him. That she'd only been a wet-dream to start with and was now coming back into another one. A more perverse one, in which she'd been disembodied somehow, so that the only part of her that had managed to materialize was her cunt. Trying to convince himself that it had materialized because he felt it right now, felt it tighten and loosen the way it had in that first wet-dream. Felt it beginning to work its enticing and just slightly wicked magic on him.

For a minute, he thought the self-deception might be working.

He was definitely feeling something in his balls as he remembered the way she'd wrapped her legs around him and done him instead of just lying there waiting for him to fuck her. He was feeling a deep-down tightening and surging that couldn't be anything but good. And along with it came a subtle rippling of every muscle around his balls and pecker that said if he had the stamina to keep this up long enough, if the night lasted long enough, he might actually be able to find...

Globes of softly golden light burst suddenly beyond his eyelids. Not quite phantom globes. And that had to be another good sign. Didn't it?

Groaning aloud, groaning as loud as he wanted because there was nobody at all in the world to hear him right now, Gage tilted his head back even farther. He tipped his hips up even more and thrust with them, lifting them and it...his hopelessly swollen and unforgiving pecker...into the circle of his joined hands with a short, jerky motion that did nothing at all but increase the agony he felt.

He thrust just that once, violently, and heard a gasp.

One that hadn't come from him, because he was still groaning. Like a man possessed. Like a man about to die and not unhappy about it as long as it meant his suffering would end.

He head, dimly, an 'oh, my God', followed by a 'what the hell' and a 'Gage Prescott, what are you...'

And then he snapped out of it.

Sort of.

Gone in another flash of light, a stronger flash as the overheads in the back room came on with million mega-watt power directly above his contorted and sweat-streaked face, was the wet-dream. Gone was the disembodied cunt that, no matter how hard he'd tried to imagine it into reality, had never been and never would be as sweet and luscious as the real thing. And gone...with the wind that had swept through Santa Fe on this horrible, horrible, horrible June night?...was the illusion that he was alone.

Opening his eyes, too far gone to let go of his

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throbbing and thundering pecker even when the better half of his common sense screamed at him to let the damned thing go and put it away and out of sight, Gage straightened his body. Still clutching desperately at himself, still stroking himself with a determination that was rapidly approaching manic and uncontrollable, he lifted his head and looked toward the door.

Looked straight into Tina Farrin's completely-rounded and disbelieving eyes.

"What the hell..." she began.

"...are you doing here?" he finished for her, and still didn't let go of himself. Because his desperation had grown that complete. That urgent.

There was little left in the world now except the desperation and the remorseless pain of an overextended body that had no idea what to do with itself, no way to do anything at all with itself.

Tina made no sound. No movement.

"Jesus God," he gasped around and through a fresh volley of groans. "Tina. I never meant..."

"What the hell are you *doing* on my couch?"

"What..." His eyes closed again. Like the muscles in his clawed and clawing hands, he couldn't control the muscles that made them close. Couldn't force them to open again once they had. His eyelids had become so heavy. So incredibly and unimaginably heavy and unresponsive, as if they'd been made of iron and been welded shut. His head tilted back again and somehow, using some kind of never before witnessed superhuman strength, he managed to release one of his hands from its thoroughly

unrewarding activity and hold it out to her. "Help me?"

"You want me to..."

"You know...." He thrust at the single hand with which he worked himself. "...what I want. Need. You..."

He heard movement, then. Heard the rustle of a sleeve, of fabric brushing roughly against fabric as the overheads went out, plunging him back into the merciful darkness that had hidden him. Hidden what he was doing and kept it as private as it should have been kept. Would have been kept, if Tina hadn't for some unknown reason decided to...

Shuddering, he released himself. Forced his hands to move to his sides and clutch at the old sheet she'd found and spread across the sofa so he wouldn't have to lie against scratchy-soft fabric. Forced himself to lie still, eyes shut, as he heard another rustling. A more pronounced one.

And then the golden globes of light...the overheads at the front of the store, he knew now...vanished.

And darkness returned.

Sweetest, softest darkness that in some peculiar way, some inexplicable but thoroughly welcome way, wrapped itself around his distended pecker and actually managed to soothe it. A little.

Darkness returned. And so did Tina.

Before he knew what was happening, what was about to happen, he felt a light brush of fingers along his upright and still suffering length. He felt them and heard another intake of breath. A sharper, combined

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intake as he gasped at the same instant she gasped.

"You're enormous," she murmured, her voice a quivery echo of itself.

"I'm..." *What?* Hell, he didn't have the slightest clue what to say to her now. *Suffering?* Now, that would be intelligent, since he thought she had a pretty good idea of that already. *Disgusting?* No. He refused to consider this very natural, this very primal and basic need of his body to have hers disgusting. Refused to entertain that notion at all.

So, what then? What was he, and how was he ever going to explain what he'd been up to in *her* shop, on *her* sofa?

Luckily, in the next second it became clear he wouldn't have to explain anything or do anything at all.

Tina ran her fingertips along him again. A little harder. A little more briskly. And they felt different this time. Felt softer, somehow. Fuller. More...

His eyes didn't want to open. They protested that he would even think of trying to force them to open. But he needed to see. As much as he could. He needed to know, because her fingertips had begun to feel like...

His eyes creaked open and he groaned again, groaned in delighted earnest this time.

*Lips.*

Her fingertips had begun to feel like lips because that was exactly what they'd become.

*Lips.*

Soft, ruby-colored lips, the softest lips imaginable in the world, and firmly pressed together as they

stroked the seething and now leaping, straining, struggling, reaching length of a pecker in the very last stages of sanity and control.

Soft lips, pressed together but hinting... suggesting...

Her lips opened.

She opened them.

And now it was her tongue that did the stroking. Just the very tiniest tip of it, no longer feeling as much pink as it did searing and ruby-red like her lips, it explored him. Tasted him. Searched him, to see if it liked him before...before...

Gage didn't even want to go into that. Because whatever came after the 'before', it was likely to kill him. If the 'before' hadn't already laid complete and utter waste to him, that is.

Her tongue slithered gently, provocatively, along the underside of him. It found the tiny ridge of skin beneath the head. Found it and, curiously or maybe diabolically, flicked at it. That tiny piece of skin. That so inconsequential and fragile tag of extraneous flesh that had the power to send a million-kilowatt charge of electricity through his unresisting body and lift it...lift his back and his shoulders and his hips, lift everything but his head and the lowest part of his legs...straight off the sofa.

But if he'd thought he could catch her that way, if he'd thought any amount of convulsing and screaming...for he was indeed screaming, loud enough to send any genuine bums in the alley behind the shop running for their lives and bring any honorable and duty-conscious cops running to see

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what the hell was happening and who the hell was being murdered in cold blood...if he'd thought any amount of that could force him into the mouth he wanted more in this moment than he wanted even her sweet and pulsing cunt, he'd been mistaken.

Absolutely, dead-wrong, sadly mistaken.

Fleeting as a butterfly that couldn't have tortured him more with the gossamer stroking of dancing wings, she was gone.

Tina was gone, and he heard her laugh somewhere out there. Somewhere in the darkness that had grown complete and blinding as he focused everything on the madly desirous, deliriously eager and wanting bit of flesh attached to that other eager bit of flesh between his legs.

He wanted her to do it again. Would have asked, pleaded, begged for her to do it again, do it over and over and over again. Would have. If he'd been able to string two words together into a coherent sentence.

"Tina..." His voice rose on a peak of absolute suffering. "Please. I..."

She didn't come back. Not right away.

Gage heard another rustling of fabric. A whole series of rustlings. And though he strained with all his might with eyes that had lost all ability to comprehend even if they did manage to see, he couldn't. He'd lost sight. Maybe forever. Lost everything but the swirling, whirling, clouds of blue and scarlet that filled his eyes and matched exactly, swirl for swirl and whirl for whirl, the shards of blue and scarlet agony that threatened to rip his body to pieces.

Tina had come back to him.



### Chapter Ten

She'd fastened her lips around him. Opening her mouth wide to take him in, she'd done it. And once it was done, she didn't feel the slightest bit of regret, or remorse, and most certainly not of revulsion. To do so had just seemed...right. Natural. And once she had, once her startled mind had realized what she'd done and even in some backhanded and inexplicable way started to accept it and enjoy it...

Oh, dear, sweet and loving heaven! She'd been startled and amazed, and even momentarily frightened when she'd flicked experimentally at that tiny little ridge of skin and Gage had reacted in ways she'd never expected.

He'd arched his back and screamed. Had lifted himself up off the couch in one quick and violent, lunging thrust that had nearly jammed the hard and hot length of him full against and into her mouth. She'd been astonished, terrified, uncertain what she should or even *could* do next. But in the end she'd gone back to him. In the end she'd done what still seemed right and natural and expected.

She'd taken him into her mouth, marveling again

at the hot and pulsing enormity of what she'd found...marveling that her body could ever have accommodated such turgid and swollen size as easily as she remembered. She'd taken him into her mouth. She'd closed her lips around him and moved them slowly, still unsure exactly what was the best way to proceed, along the length of him.

And he'd screamed again. Loud enough to wake every shadow within a city block. Maybe more. He'd screamed, his voice drawing out into a long and quavering wail of what might have been the sheerest, most insufferable form of agony she'd ever been forced to witness. Or it might have been a sound born of extreme pleasure. Pleasure so strong and so overriding that it had driven all thought, all humanity, all thought of humanity out of his mind and left only this shell. This shrieking, pleading, trembling and thrusting...weakly now, as if he'd lost some fundamental control of his own nervous system...shell of what Gage Prescott had been before.

Whatever he'd been before. Because she wasn't entirely sure what that had been. Wasn't entirely sure she'd ever know exactly what he'd been before this episode, this night of steaming and aching needs pleading to be met and filled, was finished. Wasn't sure she knew what he was likely to become again the instant she was finished.

Doubting him, doubting herself a little too now that she'd thought about it, Tina hesitated. She slipped her lips free of him and started to sit up.

Instantly Gage's hands lifted. Catching her head, his fingers twined deep into her hair and wrapped it

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around themselves so that there was no longer any possibility of moving away. "For the love of God," he gasped, his voice a low and tortured rasp in air grown suddenly heated and inexplicably unstable with the desire that had seemed only to whisper around them before. Desire that now loomed heavy between them and then, as suddenly as Gage had shrieked, began to shriek along with him. Began to shriek silently, internally, in a voice so strong and so insistent Tina could no longer ignore it, or ignore her most basic impulse when it ordered her to take him again. Take him deeper and stroke him gently. Stroke him no longer experimentally with her tongue as her mouth slipped down, down, down, onto the shaft that leaped at the first...the barest...touch of her lips.

Tina took him in as far as she could and then, closing her lips more tightly around him, began to slip backward. Reversing the process, reversing the softly deliberate, undeniably firm and sure stroking so that finally, after what seemed a very long and very electrically charged span of time-standing-still, she reached the head of him.

Reached it and then paused with only the most sensitive tip of him pressed between lips that held it in place so that her tongue could resume its work. So that it could begin again the gently incendiary flicking and prodding at the tiny ridge of skin that seemed more sensitive than any part of him she'd yet encountered. That seemed the most sensitive part she might ever encounter.

Straining, his hands convulsing at her hair so that they pulled not quite painfully and not quite hard

enough to make her worry about it being ripped from her head, Gage shuddered. Tina thought he tried to scream again, but all that came out was a low and ululating groan of sheer longing and utterly impatient need to have that longing satisfied.

"For the love of God," he whispered again, more urgently than before. "Don't stop, Tina. Don't ever, ever, *ever* stop."

*And who'd said anything about stopping?*

Feeling the quivering heat of him, feeling the way it filled her mouth and overwhelmed her senses, feeling the way he responded to each and every stroke of tongue or lips or the fingers she'd lifted to grasp at the very root of him...the only part of him that lay exposed to such a grip...Tina had no intention of stopping.

She was enjoying herself too much. Enjoying herself thoroughly, enjoying the feeling of power this activity gave her.

Power over him. Over what would happen next, and exactly when it would happen.

She sensed the power was little more than a thin illusion. She sensed that if he wanted, when he wanted and when he'd regained enough strength to make his wants real, Gage could easily re-capture the power he'd given over to her. She sensed that when the moment came he would not hesitate to re-capture his dominant role and use it to his own advantage. His fullest advantage. But in the meantime, while he lay beneath her in the passion-swirled darkness, invisible to her and groaning helplessly beneath her...

The advantage was hers. All hers. And she meant

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to use it.

Lifting her other hand, she cupped his balls in her palm.

Just like the rest of him, they were larger than she'd expected. Much larger, and every bit as desperately swollen with need. Though she'd never touched a man in this particular place before, though she'd never insinuated her hand beneath this part of a man and lifted it so she could marvel at the sagging weight and firm solidity of what she'd found, Tina knew by some instinct that he was full. That he was suffering an agony the likes of which she...the likes of which no woman...could ever truly understand.

She knew it just by touching him. Just by feeling the dragging weight of him against the palm of her hand. Knew it too by the harshly pleading sound of his voice as the groan rose into another, a thin and wavery, cry of mortal agony.

"You're killing me!" he cried to the ceiling. To the quivering and smoldering air. To the alley beyond the back door and the street outside the front. He cried out shamelessly, so that everyone nearby could hear. And yet he cried out only to her. Only *for* her. Because everyone else, everyone who a moment or two ago might have stood within earshot, had ceased to exist.

There was no one left in the world now except the two of them. No place left beyond the confines of this small and crowded back room, no place beyond the couch that seemed suddenly, marvelously, to encompass all of life as it was known, all of life and the universe that mattered.

Compressing her lips, Tina arranged them into a

tight and small 'o' designed to drag them temptingly across the steaming skin that pulsed beneath their touch. And she began another withdrawal. A slower one this time, one that shimmered across each and every inch of the shaft she'd claimed even as she left it behind. It was a steaming withdrawal. An arduous and torturous one. And once again it ended in hesitation. Ended with her pausing upon reaching the head of that shaft.

Once again she stopped. And this time she remained absolutely still for a few seconds. A few precious but eternal and endless seconds designed specifically to torture him with all kinds of promise and all kinds of instantly instilled doubts that the promises would ever be fulfilled.

She meant to torture him. And it worked.

Buried deep in her hair, his hands weakened. Losing their grip, making no effort to retain or regain it, they fell away. And the sounds...the fragments of sentences and even of words...that rose from his lips were now a desperately whispered babble that showed little reason, little or no coherence.

"Please, you...you don't...I don't know...when I've ever..."

Pressing her lips together again, Tina puckered them slightly as if in preparation for a kiss. And then she pressed them to the very tip of the shaft that awaited her...pressed them against him in another obviously and spectacularly successful attempt to entice with promises but leave their fulfillment painfully undecided and painfully uncertain. She pressed them hard to the tip of him but kept them

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closed as if refusing him entry forever, now that she'd taunted him to the very brink with the possibility of it.

"Witch!" Gage's chest shook with the effort required to lie still beneath her depredations. His arms and his legs, too. "Devil woman! You don't know...what you're...doing to me."

*Maybe not completely. Maybe not at all.* But she had a good idea. She'd discovered instinct was a wonderful thing. An exquisite and far-reaching thing that only seemed to grow and expand as she freed more and more of it. As she gave it and herself free reign to do all the things that had once seemed to be far, far, far beyond the realm of any imaginable possibility.

Inexperienced as she was, with only the whispered tales of girls at the back of a school bus or at a dozen teen-aged slumber parties to draw upon...tales of sex, and lust, and things undreamed and inconceivable, Tina had discovered she already knew what to do. She already knew, without really having to think about it or take a moment to gather her wits together, exactly what to do to elicit another long and low supplication from Gage. Another sob of sweet yet unbearable suffering.

As naturally as she'd taken him into her mouth to begin with, now she pressed her lips to the tip of him, allowing them to part only the tiniest bit. Only enough that when he thrust upward with his hips in a sharp and convulsive movement, she'd granted him just enough room to feel a hint of entry. Just enough to allure while still holding him back, and away from what every sense, every deepening awakening of awe

and amazement told her he wanted. Just enough to hold him away from the prize he sought, with every rigorous and futile thrusting of his body, to claim.

A long series of whimpers, of outrage mixed with frustration and defeat, told her she'd succeeded. Admirably.

And so, in reward, she parted her lips a little more. Allowed him a little more of the entry he so obviously craved, only to once again hold him there, far short of his goal, with the soft roundness of puckered lips. Wrapping them tighter still around the full and throbbing tip of the full and throbbing head that tried again, tried in vain as before, to insert itself all the way, Tina held him prisoner, knowing he would not back away because the spiraling needs of his own body would not allow him to back away. Knowing he would only try, would only continue to struggle, for that which she'd decided for the time being to deny.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispered, sobbing again through the plea. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

Tina had no time for an answer. No chance, when her lips parted a little as if she'd thought about giving one, only to have his next lunging upward thrust succeed. She had no time even to think about teeth and the possibility that they could inflict injury on the demanding flesh that surged forward instantly, out of her control now, demanding and insisting she give what it wanted. *Everything* it wanted.

"Suck me," he murmured, his voice a little stronger as he filled her mouth with himself. "Suck me, Tina, until I can't...t...take any more. S...suck me



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unt...til..."

She could barely make out the words, so low and so hoarse had Gage's voice become. Or maybe it was the incessant humming, the incessant and steadily rising rhythm of blood droning in her ears, that blocked the sound. Still, on some level she *did* hear. And on some other level she responded, closing her lips again around him. And as his body quivered, as his hips sank back to the sofa cushions, she followed after him and along with him so she wouldn't lose him.

"My...God," he shuddered, the sound barely human now. "I don't..." Without warning, his hands rose to find her. Rose to surround her waist and lift her, his strength only seeming more superhuman and more incredible considering the condition to which she'd reduced him.

He lifted her from the place where she'd knelt, at the very edge of the couch, teetering precariously between balance and complete disorientation as she'd fastened herself to him and upon him. He lifted her easily, turning her body even as she clung doggedly to the long and heated shaft that had become the sweetest, the most irresistible and intoxicating morsel she'd ever had the occasion or the pleasure to enjoy.

He turned her so that she lay atop him. Lay stretched lengthwise along him, her mouth continuing its exploration and conquest of him, and her legs parted so that her...

"God in heaven!" It was her turn to scream, shrilly and almost beyond the realm of human hearing, as he joined her. As he fastened his mouth upon the part of

her he'd turned so that he could reach it easily and without straining, the wet and throbbing part between her legs.

Astonished, amazed, caught entirely by surprise and instantly, helplessly, breathless with it, Tina felt Gage's mouth fasten firmly and inescapably upon the flesh between her legs. Flesh she'd never dreamed could be so sensitive, so aware and so instantly responsive. Not even when he'd held her down, impaled upon the shaft that only moments ago had been the one thing she'd dreamed of having inserted into her. The one thing she'd craved, even as she'd denied herself in her teasing and tormenting of him, to have inserted there.

But now...now...

"Dear, sweet God in heaven!" Her scream became the feedback whine of a lost and irretrievable mind as Gage's mouth surrounded her most private and personal flesh with a searing and saturating lava of wetness. As she felt the first insidious thrust of his tongue into the depths of her.

As she felt herself begin instantly to draw in upon herself and to gather, getting ready for the explosion, the culmination of all culminations that had to be imminent. Had to be...

"Sweet," he murmured, his mouth scarcely pausing in its new and indescribable laving of her. And she realized she'd stopped. Had frozen, her heart halted in her chest and her breath trapped deep within lungs that had lost all elasticity and all flexibility, with his shaft forgotten and abandoned by her mouth.

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Taking him in again, taking him in quickly and firmly before she lost the will to do anything or even to *think* about doing anything, she tightened her lips around him. And began, mindlessly and effortlessly, to suck upon him as he'd begun to suck upon her.

He was sweet. Infinitely sweet, and excruciatingly potent as he swelled again, swelled anew and even more, beneath her fevered attempts to extract the very life, the very essence from him.

Gage laughed softly.

She felt the rumble of it against the already tremulous flesh he'd invaded and encircled with the simmering and billowing warmth of lips and a mouth that showed no sign of slowing, no sign at all of stopping their deadly, insidious, demonic invasion. She felt it rumble within her, too, as he began to flick his tongue in response to every motion of her tongue upon him.

She dragged her tongue across the small and vibrant ridge at the tip of him, and he responded with a light but deadly flick...a nearly killing one...at the tender nub of flesh at her opening. She slipped her tongue farther along him, slipped it downward and ever downward toward the place where his engorged shaft strained outward from his body, and he matched the movement with one of his own. He matched it with a deep plunging of his tongue into the farthest reaches of her...reaches that had never before known such a tenuous and infiltrating tendril of soft persistence.

She curled her tongue lightly against him, wrapping it partially around him, and he replied by

moving his tongue inside her. By fastening his lips more firmly around the outermost folds of her and starting up a swirling motion that seemed to sweep every last bit of the inside with its scalding and torturing reach.

She whimpered against the hard ridge of flesh that filled her mouth so completely that no other sound was possible, and his only answer was another low rumbling of laughter, accompanied by a murmur of approval as once again his tongue delved. As she spread her legs even wider for him, allowing...inviting...him to seek depths of her that could, in every literal and figurative sense she could even begin to imagine, take...no...more.

Tina came. In great and mighty gushes that threatened to reduce her to a weeping and withering mound of charred flesh, she came. Into Gage's mouth. And came, and came, even when he did not.

She had no idea if he held himself back, or if she hadn't yet been inventive enough or enticing enough to cause him to come. She could feel him quivering, could feel the surging and pounding need in the shaft she'd taken all the way in, taken to impossible depths, all the way to its thick and engorged root. Could feel it in the thighs she held with tight-clenched hands, too. Could feel the taut trembling in powerful muscles beneath the lightly, delightfully furred silken skin of his legs.

She could feel his need, but he didn't come.

For the moment he seemed interested in nothing but what he was doing to her. In nothing but drinking in the drenching tide that poured from her body to fill

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him and sate him. In nothing but increasing the flow with another, an even more demanding and inciting thrust of his tongue into flesh so sensitized, so overloaded with sensation that she screamed again. Screamed in earnest, choked by the resistant male hardness that filled her mouth and her entire being, and began to twitch mindlessly.

Unable to release his shaft, unable to urge her lips to relax or to stop their desperate, demanding sucking, unable to extricate herself from him, or from the mouth that had not stopped with her orgasm, the mouth that seemed only to want to drive her mad by eliciting from her another, and then another and another and another and so on into the madness of infinity, Tina lay helpless atop the man who plundered her very life force.

Knees digging painfully into the couch cushions at either side of his face, she attempted to maneuver herself into a position that would allow him even easier entry.

Even deeper entry.

## Chapter Eleven

*God in heaven, what was he doing here?  
What was he thinking?*

Tina Farrin was one hot tamale, all right. With her tight but quiescent little cunt quivering against his mouth...quivering, and moistening, and seething, inundating his mouth with a sweetness like none he'd ever known...she was even hotter than he'd expected or anticipated. Right now she was pouring forth enormous quantities of herself upon him and into him. And he could only open his mouth wider, only open it to the point that his jaw ached from the trying and his mind reeled, steeped as it was in the delicious delicacy of creamy flesh that, as she moved her legs a little, pressed itself down more tightly upon his mouth. That pressed itself down until he feared he would drown in it. Feared he wouldn't drown, wouldn't end his life in exactly this way, with Tina's sweetest woman's flesh pressed onto him and into him, her body pleading for more even as it released untold and undreamed of amounts of her vital essence upon him.

*But what in God's name was he doing here? How the hell had it come to this, when every bit of his instinct,*

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every bit of common sense or better judgment he'd ever possessed kept shouting inside his head, telling him in no uncertain terms that a lot of careful investigation and observation...one hell of a hell of a lot...was about to go right down the tubes if he didn't manage to get control of himself and his carnal urges? If he didn't manage to resist the irresistible heat that had begun to rise as soon as he'd lifted Tina onto himself and felt her begin to jerk for him, as if when he'd reached into her with his tongue he'd touched a nerve. As though it was the one vital nerve he could have touched, the one that controlled every fiber of her and had the power to drive her completely beyond control, beyond redemption, beyond survival.

He had no idea why she'd come back to the shop when she had. Why she seemed driven by some primeval and all-powerful radar to come to him at the particular moment she had. He had no clue why she would have chosen that very time, in the middle of the night, unless it was specifically to rain down upon him the ecstasy she already had...a sweet and burning ecstasy that had him praying to his mother's God...his God now, too...that He would let this continue. That He would grant Gage's most fervent, most ardently offered plea that the ecstasy, the strumming and thrumming and sweeping delirium of the first few seconds when Tina's tongue had taken him and his had taken her, would continue and continue. That it would never stop.

Because he would die if it stopped.

He knew that now. Gulping of the dewy rush that broke from her, sucking persistently at the folds of

flesh that surely, certainly, had to be softer than any other folds of flesh on this earth or in the heavens above it, he knew that she was his life. His only hope at life, his only hope of going on. And when he thrust with a tongue that seemed suddenly indefatigable, when he touched with that single bit of flesh that refused, like his pecker that now struggled as mightily to resist giving in as it had wanted to give in only seconds ago, to relinquish its strength and will to go on...

Screaming, she jerked.

He knew it might not be the best idea to reduce her to this shrieking and shrilling, this most basic and instinct-driven form of existence. There was no telling who might be lurking nearby, no telling who might hear and decide the time had come to summon help. No telling what that help...what the responding cops he might even know and count among his own friends and co-workers...would say once they'd found him here with his pecker rammed as far into this woman's hot and sucking mouth as it could possibly ram, and his mouth fastened on her cunt in a way that suggested he wasn't going to let go in this century or any century yet to come. There was no telling what they would think or, he couldn't deny imagining it, how high he would rise in their estimation once they'd caught him in the act. The simple, gorgeous, elemental and electrifying act of sucking at Tina Farrin as Tina Farrin sucked at him. Of returning each of the favors she bestowed upon a pecker that now literally spasmed with the burning agony of holding back when his every instinct was to



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fill her mouth the same way she'd filled his. When all he wanted was to cream into that waiting receptacle even as he continued to explore, sucking and nipping and thrusting, the abyss of wet and pliant flesh she'd offered up to him so eagerly when she'd planted her knees at either side of his head and pressed herself onto his mouth.

There was no telling what his friends would think or say if they found Gage Prescott...shy, fumbling and mumbling confirmed bachelor who couldn't for all the gold in the universe work up the courage to *speak* to an attractive woman at a party or in a bar much less fuck her...with his tongue buried so deep inside Tina Farrin's cunt that he feared he'd never come out. Prayed he'd never have to come out.

Tina was trying to say something. Her mouth filled with his pecker, her lips alternately spasming and then relaxing around it as she sucked at him with a mindlessness almost, though not quite, the equal of his own, she'd begun to form strange and strangled syllables.

"...me," she seemed to be trying to say in that garbled and choked way that made any understanding impossible. "...ne...un...ack..."

And it didn't matter what she'd been trying to say, anyway. Her body told him that. Told him in no uncertain terms as the greatest, the most searing and sweeping and surging wave of sweet moisture broke within her, leading him to thrust again with his tongue, greedy to capture every glistening droplet for himself.

Reaching the depths of her, his tongue

immediately withdrew. His teeth, guarded carefully, grazed the folds of flesh that jerked beneath their touch as her entire body jerked across his, convulsing as she somehow, magically, moved herself so that his tongue rested against the hard and pulsing kernel that needed...he could feel its need, its extreme need, its desperate and determined need...to be stroked.

To be laved with the long and stirring caresses he bestowed upon it.

To be soothed with brushes of tongue that did nothing at all to soothe, in the same way the greedy sucking of his lips did nothing to soothe the outer whorls and folds of her.

Cunt to his mouth and pecker to hers, Gage met every one of her attempts to drive him beyond the brink with an attempt of his own. And for the moment, for the exhausted, soaring and infinitely satisfying moment, he succeeded.

But Tina was gaining ground.

Her body continued to pour itself out for him in massive waves. She continued to make those incoherent sounds that now no longer sounded like words as much as they sounded like purely animal, purely primeval grunts and growls and groans of a beast turned loose upon him, a beast that writhed and wriggled, straining with tight calves and tighter thighs, that clenched with clawed hands and greedy lips. Her thighs shook against his face even as he knew his shook next to hers. Her arms grappled ineffectually to control the increasingly random, increasingly haphazard and convulsive movements of her upper body as she began at last to wear him

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down. Wear him out, and wear his pecker to the point where it would no longer be possible to stop the inevitable. The wrenching, the pounding, the emptying. The resulting lightness and the feared and deadly limp unresponsiveness that would come along with it.

Sucking at her, kissing her with open mouth and invading tongue, Gage didn't want this to end. Ever.

He didn't know what he would do when it had to end. When the upward spiral was complete, as he knew it would be very soon now, and the moment came. When all of Tina's sucking, all of her caressing and cajoling and coaxing, could no longer turn him hard. No longer make him throb the way he throbbed right now, the most intimate and inebriated parts of his body beating in exact, in perfect and precise time with the part of her that pressed itself to his mouth, willing him to take more. To take deeper. To take harder.

A second later, acting purely on impulse, he nipped at her. Nipped lightly, closing his teeth down upon a ridge of creamy and instantly yielding flesh.

He nipped, and Tina cried out. Nipped again and she barked a little, very softly, around and onto the shaft with which he continued to fill her mouth.

He nipped harder, and realized her cries were those of approval. Of wanting more. And more, and more and more. He realized she'd gone beyond the point at which there was any clear distinction, any real or important distinction, between absolute pleasure and abysmal pain. He realized they had become one and the same for her, just as they had for

him.

But he wouldn't hurt her. Wouldn't nip any harder at the still-flowing folds of flesh. Wouldn't draw blood, or inflict upon her any injury that she would feel later. Because he didn't want her to remember him with pain lancing through her. Didn't want her to only remember him when she moved and her body responded with outrage and revulsion.

No. He wanted her to remember the pleasure of this moment. This last, instinct rose up to warn him, moment of their ambrosial and elemental joining.

He wanted her to moisten whenever she remembered him. For as long as she lived, and maybe on and on into the hereafter that now, suddenly, seemed so infinitely possible and even logical, he wanted her to grow wet between her legs at the very thought of him. Wanted her to grow wet only when she thought of him and wanted her always to think of him. Wanted her to come forever, when she was in a crowd or when she was alone. Wanted her to come because there would never be a moment of pleasure greater, never be a kind of pleasure greater or more gratifying than the one he was giving her right now.

He wanted her to remember him with sweeping bursts of intimate moisture and plundering inner tinglings. Wanted her to remember the feel of his mouth as it closed around her and the sweep of his tongue as it ravaged her. Wanted her to remember even when he wasn't with her. Even, maybe, when his name and the details of his face had long since been lost to her.

He wanted her to remember him. *And she would.*

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The tightening had begun deep down inside him. Brought on, aided and abetted by the sweeping flicker of the simmering female tongue that continued to prod at him and flitter over him and dare him to do what he most wanted to do, the tightening had begun to twist a little, in a way he knew all too well. A way he dreaded because it meant the end had drawn near, inescapably and finally near, and yet which he anticipated with every fiber of his being because the end could only be another beginning. Another way to shower her with himself and fill her with himself, and...

The tightening had begun to intensify, and his arms and legs and every other part of him but the balls and pecker upon which his entire existence now centered had begun to lose sensation. Had begun to grow heavy and turgid, to resist the inputs of brain and central nervous system.

His entire body had begun to soar uncontrollably toward the moment...the one...

Tina continued to suck. Harder now. And in response, he closed his mouth around the sweet and soon-to-be-lost folds he'd sought desperately to claim for his own before. But not nearly as desperately as he sought now, inserting his tongue to its fullest reach and then stretching it out, stretching it so that he reached a new depth, his lips mashed hard against the creaminess at the outside of her so that he could will himself to know every centimeter of the even creamier creaminess inside her.

He sought the very bottom of her, reaching and grasping, his fingers tugging a little at her hips as if

he thought he could force her closer than she'd already forced herself. He sought the bottom of her and then some, quivering inside as well as out as her body released upon him another searing-sweet blast of moisture that failed to quench a thirst that could no longer be quenched.

She came, in that exquisite and inexhaustible way it seemed only women could come, and deep inside him the first scalding tremor of impending orgasm reached the surface. Reached it and quivered there as her mouth, responding to the pressure and the plundering of his own, tightened in its efforts to draw it out of him. Draw everything out of him and then some. And then even more.

"Christ." Gage hadn't said it. Couldn't possibly say it, because speech had long since been impossible for him. But he felt sure the internal shriek had been audible. Felt sure Tina heard it, even above the continued feral whimperings with which she filled the room. The low growls and murmurs and susurrations of the hungry she-beast she'd become. The one who'd already devoured him and now sought even more sustenance, even deeper and more fulfilling sustenance from him.

And then he gave it to her.

As simply as that, the searing column of cum spewed from his pecker into her mouth. Into the very, the deepest and most thirst-scalded recesses of the mouth that continued to suck at him. That sucked even harder, her tongue trailing even more debilitating streaks of fire and lightning across the surface of him as he emptied himself.

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She whimpered as he filled her. As he felt the steaming fluid fill her mouth and then overflow, oozing between her tightened lips and out around the base of him. She whimpered again when he nipped again, still demanding the sultry female wetness she seemed powerless to deny, powerless to stop or even to control. Moisture that filled him now to overflowing in exactly the way he filled her. To the point that she gagged a little and stopped her debilitating and enervating writhings atop him. To the point that she abandoned the balls she'd been massaging so determinedly with exploring hands and pressed down on the sofa cushions with them, as if to separate herself from the tremoring shaft that continued to pump out enormous, unstoppable, unmanageable quantities of himself into her.

"No," he said, his tongue leaving her for a moment, but not his mouth. "Swallow," he ordered, his hands finding the back of her head and pressing down, holding it rigidly in place so that she had no chance to disobey his direct order. "Swallow," he repeated, brushing the folds of a cunt that instantly, miraculously, steamed with even more creamy moisture as his lips continued their slight contact. "Take in everything I give you."

She shuddered a little. He felt her mouth work around him, felt it tighten in a way that only deepened the rippling waves of agony that still, endlessly, cramped through him. He imagined her throat struggling to do what had to be done, struggling because her mouth was held open now, her jaws forced wide so that they could not help,

could not do anything but hinder. He felt her struggle, then heard a low groan as she succeeded only to be instantly inundated with the greatest burst of cum yet, the last and final, mighty spewing that made it necessary for her to swallow again, swallow immediately.

And even then, even when she'd done as he'd required and swallowed every droplet he'd offered to her, he refused to release his hold upon her. Even when her lips quivered around him, exhausted and depleted by their efforts, even when his pecker had begun to reduce itself to the limp and manageable size that would make it possible for him to carry on with his daily life until the next inevitable swelling, he held her head down. Held it firmly, her forehead pressed against his thighs and her mouth having no choice but to continue to surround and accept the shrinking bit of him as he thrust with his tongue one last time. One last long and delirious time into her wet and quivering center. One last time as he felt her entire body quake atop his, completely sated, completely drained.

He thrust one last time and then, retrieving his tongue from the depths it had plumbed so eagerly, he murmured one last command.

"Lick me," he said, taking deliberate care to brush her exhausted folds with his lips and delighting when she gasped a little in response, the sound still choked by the fullness of him inside her mouth. "Lick me until I tell you to stop."

He knew she'd had enough. Knew she was too weak to move away from him, not even to roll off and



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allow gravity to do the rest and pull her to the floor. He knew she'd overloaded on the sensations he'd inflicted upon her even as she was inflicting equal and opposing sensations upon the corresponding parts of him. But he wasn't ready to let her go just yet. Wasn't ready to set her completely free or allow her to begin her recovery.

"Lick me," he said, relaxing his grip upon her head a little, only as much as necessary, when she failed instantly to comply.

And then she did.

Obediently, releasing his now-flaccid pecker from its warm and encompassing cocoon, she ran her tongue across it. She flicked at the tiny ridge of skin that no longer, temporarily, had any power to arouse or incite. She ran it along the shortened length of him and swept it sideways across the root of him before she began her travel up the other side, up to the unresponsive tip again.

"Balls too," he ordered, refusing to release her another inch. "Lick me clean, Tina."

Once again, she did as he'd asked. No, as he'd *demand*ed. Grunting a little in that feral and inarticulate way that had delighted him so much before, she turned her attention to his balls, stroking repeatedly, compliantly, with feather-light strokes, leaving a film of gentle moisture that instantly cooled, instantly soothed. On hands and knees now, her strength regained somehow, she worked atop him, her cunt enticing inches from his face and spread out for him to inspect at his leisure, she plied herself to him, sweeping first at the upper surface of his balls

and then, nudging gently with the tongue that bathed him all the while with its soothing strokes, she turned her attentions to the underside of him.

"Do you like me?" he murmured, letting go of her head experimentally, and for no more than a fraction of a second.

"Mmmmmmm," she responded, never ceasing her ministrations.

She never pulled away, either. Not for so much as a second. And that gave him the courage to release his hold upon her completely. To lie back amid the twisted and sweat-soaked sheets that covered the sofa. To lie motionless as Tina carried out his orders implicitly.

As she licked at him and around him. As she knelt over him, every part of her completely and shamelessly exposed to him, licking at him and giving every indication she would continue until he told her she could stop.

## Chapter Twelve

“Why did you come here tonight?” Gage asked over his third cup of the too-strong coffee he’d brewed by dumping an extra half-serving into the coffeemaker.

Wrinkling her nose, Tina squinted at him, wondering how on earth she was ever going to explain herself. How she was ever going to make it sound like she hadn’t mistrusted him, hadn’t thought better of leaving him alone inside the shop in which she’d invested everything she had in both time and money, like she’d come creeping back in the wee small hours because she’d been convinced her ‘homeless’ protégé might be up to some kind of no good.

“I had a strange man sleeping in my shop,” she said at last, picking her way carefully through what could prove to be the most delicate subject she’d ever had to pick her way through.

“Not so strange any more,” he pointed out with one of those white and brilliantly perfect grins that was all but guaranteed to set the heat to rising inside her and start her heart to thumping almost hard enough to beat its way out of her chest. “Don’t you

think?"

Feeling herself turn the most agonizing shade of red imaginable...the shade she'd already told herself, more than once, she was never going to turn again when dealing with Gage Prescott...she turned her face away from him. Fiddled with the coffee maker, adjusting all kinds of settings that had no need for adjusting, and didn't look at him.

"If you're going to go home and change," he murmured, his voice lowering to what she thought, or maybe only hoped, was a deliberately seductive and deliberately suggestive key, "you're going to have to get going. You're going to have to..."

"There's no need to go home." Still she avoided the gaze he'd fixed on her face. Avoided any kind of look or statement that could give away even a small part of the chaos and turmoil she felt welling up inside her.

*For God's sake, It's not like you're falling in love with this man!* she shouted at herself, giving herself a little mental shake. *You don't know the first thing about him!*

But the idea was there, and once it had been planted it wouldn't be chased away. Not completely, or not for very long, anyway.

"So you came on down here at four o'clock in the morning, all ready to..."

"Four-thirty." Her face burned hotter still. "It was four-thirty. Not four o'clock."

"Same difference." Gage lifted a hand, and for a minute Tina almost flinched away from him, fearing he was going to catch her chin with his fingers and turn her head. Fearing he was about to force her to look at him.

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But he only ran his hand through his hair, rumpling it into an even more tangled mess than it had been already. And then he dropped it back to his lap. Dropped it harmlessly, disappointingly, without ever trying to molest her or bother her the way her body kept insisting it wanted to be both molested *and* bothered.

"You came down here at four-*thirty* in the morning..." he paused long enough to grin at her again in that same completely unacceptable, lewd and lascivious way that she could no longer deny set her every nerve to humming and her every sense on heightened, maximum, red alert. "Why? Because you just couldn't wait to get to work? In case some insomniac tourist just had to buy some little feathery, lacy thing she couldn't live another minute without?"

Getting to her feet, Tina turned her back completely to him just in time. Just before the flames would beyond any reasonable doubt have erupted from her cheeks and singed him even at arm's length. Searching for an answer, her mind whirled in a complete dither, unable to find a single plausible way to extricate her from this impossible morass of insinuation and innuendo she'd gotten into so easily and without so much as a second thought.

She was just about to admit defeat, just about to give in and tell him she didn't know what he wanted her to say, didn't know what he *expected* her to say, when Gage made a small hissing sound between his teeth and bent over to retrieve the balled-up flannel shirt he'd tossed on the floor next to the sofa.

"What?" she asked, looking around in alarm,

expecting to find the place on fire or that it had been robbed or maybe was about to be robbed right now.

For a split second she saw nothing, and then a low rumble and a far-off, almost inaudible grinding sound of someone shifting gears inexpertly drew her attention to the street beyond the front windows.

"Oh, for the love of God," she muttered. "Here we go again."

"You said it would be back," Gage said and, not bothering to stop long enough to straighten out the bulky ball of his shirt or pull it on against the early-morning chill, plunged into the still pitch-dark shop. "And there it is. Right on schedule."

"There it is, a pain in the ass," she muttered. "You'd think the police would do something about that, but..."

He flashed her a strange look. A too sharp, too penetrating and way too perceptive one. "You've called the police about this?"

"More than once." She'd stepped up next to him at the front window, and he switched his bundled up shirt from one hand to the other quickly, as if he worried she might soil it if she brushed so much as a finger against it. And that only made her scowl deeper. It only worsened a mood already made none too pleasant and none too optimistic by the appearance of that damned truck. "I've complained and complained, because every time they park on the sidewalk, the truck's there for hours. Half a day sometimes. And that screws up my business big time. Because when the tourists see the street blocked, they don't drive down here. And don't walk either, what

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with all the pushing and shoving on the sidewalk just to get past."

"So you lose business." Gage had never really taken his eyes off the truck, never really switched his attention from it to her even when he'd been talking to her. And Tina could see he meant to keep it right where it was...meant to focus every ounce of it on the truck and not on his work at her shop. Until finally, eventually, the truck would pull away and things would return to normal.

*Whatever the devil 'normal' was supposed to be.*

For some reason his interest in things he had no business being interested in irritated her. Really, badly irritated her.

"Well as long as we're here," she grumbled, glaring at him in a way even he couldn't miss, even with his attention drawn to something so unworthy of anything more than the most cursory of attentions, "we might as well get to work."

"Regular slave driver, aren't you?" This time Gage did spare her a glance. A very quick and fleeting one that only, immediately, switched back to the street and only, immediately, aggravated her even more.

"For God's sake," she snapped. "Come away from there, will you?"

He turned. Halfway. Facing her without really facing her and turning away from the view of the street without really turning away at all. "It's early," he complained, and didn't move a muscle.

"It's almost seven. We can clean this place up a little and open early."

"If there's not going to be any business anyway..."

Hands on her hips, Tina advanced on him and was gratified to see him back away. A few steps only, but backing all the same. "I really am going to fire you this time," she warned, attempting to maneuver him into a corner from which he could neither see the street nor escape.

"Your panties aren't paid for." Besting her again, he maneuvered her. Urged her to turn, so that he could still see the street and she couldn't see anything at all but the inside of her store and the oddly intense, more out of place than ever expression upon his face.

"I'll call them a loss," she shot back and just stood for a moment, glaring up at him. Watching him watching nothing at all. And once again she had that weird and creeping sensation that nothing at all was right here. Nothing at all was right about this entire set-up.

"Who are you?" she demanded as she had once before, with no apparent reason to hope she'd learn anything useful.

He flashed her his best smile...the perfect one she'd long since decided he adopted deliberately, whenever he thought it was likely to help him weasel out of a tight situation and avoid having to answer questions he'd made it obvious he wasn't about to answer. "Gage Prescott," he replied without hesitation.

"And Gage Prescott is..."

The smile lingered on his lips, even though it never reached his eyes. Even though they remained as cold and deadly, as ominously flat and without readable expression, as they'd been since he'd first heard the



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rumble of the arriving truck and practically flown the length of the shop just so he could get a look at it.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked after a while.

"I expect you to tell me who you really are and what you're really doing here."

That got his attention at last. "Why should I be anything besides exactly what I appear to be?"

Her shoulders shook. Her stomach and all the rest of her insides, too. With a sudden boiling up and over of rage. "You keep doing that!" she all but shouted. "I've asked you before to stop, and now I'm demanding it. Stop answering my questions with questions!"

Gage's smile widened. For a second, a long and sharp-edged one while a fresh round of hot and harsh words bubbled unspoken on her lips, Tina thought he was about to do it again. She thought he was about to come up with one more question, one last question that would send her into a shrieking and howling frenzy of mingled rage and furious frustration at her inability to elicit anything *but* questions from this bull-headed man who'd been a mystery for far too long.

"I'm just a down on his luck nobody," he responded without so much as turning a hair or flashing a single look that might indicate he knew she knew he was lying. "I'm just what I appear to be. Some guy you plucked off the street out of the goodness of your heart and..."

"Goodness, my ass!"

Gage's eyebrows went up. His eyes flicked briefly

to her and over her before his gaze returned doggedly to the street, and his mouth quirked as if he was preparing to favor her with another of those dastardly-deliberate smiles.

"Don't bother," she snapped, and when she turned back into the store, turned back toward the back of it and all the work that waited there, he didn't follow. As she'd known he wouldn't.

And her rage steamed up a little more.

*He was a pain. The most royal pain in the butt she'd encountered in her life.*

And that was saying something, since she'd had a few relatives down through the years about whom the phrase 'pain in the butt' could have been coined. But even *they* hadn't antagonized her the way Gage Prescott did. Even they didn't rouse her to such a new and never before reached height of simmering, helpless fury.

Simmering because she wanted to fire his ass right here and right now. Because her common sense kept trying to tell her she'd been an idiot to get mixed up with him in the first place, and was a really, really *stupid* idiot to let herself stay mixed up with him.

And fury, because she couldn't any more fire his ass than she could fire her own.

And it had nothing to do with the pair of sixteen-dollar Lady Godivas he'd ripped off her body the very first chance he'd gotten, either.

She wanted to think it was the panties that made her keep him here.

She tried like hell to think it was the panties, and nothing else.

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But she'd always been too intrinsically honest to pull that piece of wool...or would it be that piece of silk and hand-embroidered lace?...over her eyes for more than a second or two.

Standing in the lightening gloom of her shop at daybreak with her hands on her hips, staring at the man who stood resolute in the front window ignoring her, there was no way she could avoid facing up to the very shocking and very unforeseen truth that she wasn't going to get rid of Gage Prescott, wasn't going to fire him, because she couldn't fire him. Couldn't think of anything when she looked at him except to remember all the things they'd done yesterday and today. The things they'd done with each other and to each other in the back room of this very shop.

She could no more fire him than she could think about giving him up...think about giving up all the delights he'd offered already and all the delights she knew, without even knowing how she knew...he'd be willing and eager to offer in the future.

Gage Prescott was a man of infinite delights. Unusual, unexpected, unequalled delights.

There was no way...never had been any way, really, once he'd touched her and brushed against her with his enormous and enormously attractive body...that she could ever force herself to get rid of him.

So where did that leave her? Where on the face of God's green and glorious earth...

*If you can't beat them, her mind seemed to suggest, join them.*

And what the hell was that supposed to mean,

anyway?

"Okay," she said, already knowing the answer instinctively, deep down in that hidden place where instincts always lurked until the split instant when they were needed to save a girl's butt, "Let's suppose I really believe you're a homeless person..."

"Suppose?" He flashed her another look. Another fleeting and half-distracted one that said he wasn't entirely listening to what she was saying.

*So that maybe she could entrap him if she played her cards right?*

"Just for the sake of argument," she went on, raising her voice a little to make it clear she wasn't about to play any more of his games. "Let's *suppose* I believe you. How did you get here? Where did you come from, and how did you get San Francisco Street next door to my..."

"I walked?"

"You're not going to start with the questions again?"

This time his grin was directed entirely at the street.

For which Tina decided she should be extremely grateful.

"I meant, how did you come to be there? What happened to your life that you wound up a homeless beggar on the street, living in a doorway when you're only...what?"

"What am I?"

Tina bit back an urge...a nearly overpowering one...to shriek at him. "How old are you?"

He still didn't look at her. "That's kind of personal.

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Isn't it?"

"For a woman, maybe. But you're a man, and..."

"Glad you noticed," he murmured, and laughed. A low and sexy sound, it rolled from his throat and made her want to forget all the little ways he'd antagonized her and was continuing to antagonize her. A way that made her want to throw her arms around him and suggest they retire to the back room pronto, and have another go at it...another go at each other. Even when she knew he'd decline the offer and probably only shoot a dozen more irritating and senseless questions at her.

"So you're not going to tell me anything about yourself."

"Why do you think there's anything to tell?"

Tina bit back another infuriated shriek. "Because you didn't just spring up full-grown on the street in this block! Because you came from somewhere, and you are the most maddening, the most infuriating..."

"No? Says who?"

"Says I!" This time she did shout, and wanted to kick herself for doing it when it only elicited a grin and a soft, grunting sound of purest satisfaction from him. "You didn't just start to exist a week ago, when you appeared from out of nowhere and took up residence in that doorway next door. And will you look at me when I talk to you?"

Apparently deciding he'd been watching absolutely nothing across the street and that absolutely nothing was about to happen any time soon, Gage finally turned to her. He finally turned his back on the truck that was the object of so much

inexplicable and incomprehensible fascination, and looked her square in the eye. "Maybe my life before I got here is something I don't want to talk about," he replied very quietly, for once not asking a question but giving an answer.

*And thank you for small favors, God.*

"Why?" she demanded. "What could..."

"I'm thirty-three years old," he interrupted. "And there are just things that I don't care to discuss. With you, or with anyone else. Now, is that all right with you? Is that enough to satisfy you?"

Eyes narrowed, knowing she looked what her Grammy would have called 'piss-ant determined' and for which Grammy would have chided her in no uncertain terms, Tina tilted her head back and peered up at his face as he advanced on her. "Don't you think I have a right to know who I've hired? Who I've brought into my shop, and..."

"Now who's answering questions with questions?"

"Don't you think I have that right?" Her voice rose again.

And once again Gage laughed. As if her anger and her fury and her complete and utter frustration delighted him even more than her spread-eagled and willing body had seemed to delight him a little while before. "You should have thought about that before you hired me."

"I could still fire you."

He laughed again. Harder. "But you won't, though. Will you?"

And somehow that made her seethe more than any other single thing he'd done or said. Because he was

But there was nothing at all to stop her from finding out all about him for herself. Nothing to stop her from finding out everything...every last, little thing right down to the very most inconsequential and unimportant of things...he kept refusing to tell her.

All she had to do was find a way.

## Chapter Thirteen

She was suspicious. Stars at Christmas, was she ever suspicious.

Staring at her, seeing all the proof he'd ever need of her suspicion stamped across her superbly lovely face, Gage could only wonder which was going to happen first.

Was he going to finish his assignment in the complete anonymity such assignments deserved? Or was this little temptress going to one way or another wring out of him some truth that was going to completely blow the whistle on him, and what he was here for?

There was no way of knowing, of course. Though Gage suspected, more and more with every hour that passed, it was going to be a dead heat.

Once again, very briefly, his mind flicked back to the days when his mother had optimistically believed she stood a chance in hell of having a son who was a priest.

*He really didn't need this kind of stress.*

Didn't know how in the hell he'd stood up to it for as long as he had, and sure as hell didn't have a clue how he was going to continue to stand up to it for as



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long as he'd need to stand up to it.

"Gage?" Tina still sounded irritated...hell, she sounded more irritated than ever...when she appeared from the back room no more than two seconds after she'd disappeared inside.

*How many times had she shouted his name, anyway? And how many times had he failed to hear?*

Several, if the pissed sound of her voice was any indication.

"What?" he demanded, setting the bundled shirt that contained his gun back down.

"If you think you can tear yourself away from whatever it is you're doing..." she snapped. "If you're not going to get back to the work I hired you to do and unpack this last damned box for me, do you think you can at least spare a minute out of your busy day to carry it into the shop for me?"

Muttering under his breath, Gage turned away from the window.

It would be just his luck to miss the whole thing, blow the whole operation and make a complete horse's ass of himself...not to mention getting himself fired in the most unpleasant way imaginable...while he was toting boxes and lifting bales for this little tamale who was too hot and too nosy for her own good.

"What damned box?" he demanded, trying hard not to raise his voice.

"Or would you rather let me struggle with it by myself?" she shouted, responding when he failed completely to keep his cool. "Would you rather stand aside, big he-man that you are and watch me having

to shove it along the floor and probably twist my back so I'll be in agony for weeks?"

"Hmph." Doing what he'd never thought he'd do...abandoning his post at exactly the moment when he should have been manning it with every sense alert and every nerve primed and ready for whatever action might be necessary, Gage stomped toward the back of the shop. "Jesus Christ, Lady. Don't have a cow, huh? I didn't know there *was* another box. I..."

Stalking after him in that persistent way that was really, really, *really* starting to get on his last nerve, Tina made a rude and impatient sound. Something somewhere between a snort and a bellow of impatience. "Of course there's another box. There's one *you* failed to unpack or even to notice, because you've always got your mind on something else!"

Impossible as it seemed, given the circumstances and all the confusion, his pecker stirred a little at that.

He'd had his mind on other things, all right. He'd had his mind on every damned thing except what it was supposed to be on ever since he'd moved into the doorway next door with his grubby-ass raincoat, thinking this one was going to be a piece of cake...his first one was going to win him all kinds of notice and recognition.

*It was just too damned bad he hadn't specified in those thoughts what the hell kind of notice he'd hoped to win.*

"How the hell did you manage to move these Goddamned things before I came along to be your Goddamned draft horse?" he demanded, grabbing the box and taking off...almost running...back into the shop, to dump it right next to the pile of evening

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gowns at the end of the display counter that stood farthest from the door. Farthest from the action.

She didn't answer, and he was glad for the small miracle of silence she'd granted him.

She didn't even protest when he went back to the windows. When he picked up the gun hidden inside the shirt and heaved a sigh of relief that the street was still empty, the truck was still closed, the activity hadn't yet begun to start.

Now all he had to do was get the gun on. All he had to do was figure out how he was going to get rid of her, and...

*What the fucking hell had he been thinking, anyway?*

Because she'd been needling him, because she'd been nagging and gnawing and driving him all the way to distraction and back, he'd carried the damned box to the front of the store. When he should have been heaving it into the alley so she'd run after it, screeching and shouting and helpless to come back inside once he'd slammed the door and locked it behind her.

But that wouldn't have worked either, and he knew it. Tina...persistent, opinionated, delightful-in-the-sack-but-a-real-pain-anywhere-else Tamale Tina would only have come storming around the block. She'd only have made a beeline for the front door and ended up putting herself right, square in the place he least wanted her and she least belonged. Right, square in the middle of it all.

*And he shuddered to think what kind of damage a hot tamale like her could do to even the most carefully planned operation.*

"Look," he said and turned around, prepared to pull the old 'I'm hungry' card again, and get her to go for something to eat. Because once she'd gone, once he'd used his cell phone to call in the latest news, he could ask for somebody to intercept her and detain her. Somebody impervious to her charms and deaf to all her threats and nagging, deaf to her complaints about ruined panties and uncarried boxes, who'd hold her until it was over and nothing could happen to her.

"I'm..." he said, and felt the works freeze solid in his throat.

Because she'd lifted something up from among the glittery dresses piled on the counter.

"I didn't know this was here," she murmured, her tone one of absolute and unparalleled delight as she unfolded the thing and held it up to inspect it.

It was a square thing. An oblong. A shawl, he thought they called them, a golden, shimmering and sparkling *dream* of a shawl scattered with some kind of golden-bronze crystals that caught the light and flashed it back at him. Flashed it back, right to the center of his wide and disbelieving, his wide and gaping eyes.

Holding the thing up in front of herself, Tina ran an admiring hand along the silken-fringed length of it as the look in her eyes said she'd never seen anything quite so astonishingly beautiful.

It was an assessment with which Gage *and* his pecker agreed. Completely. Entirely. And so wholeheartedly that for a minute, frozen in mid-word and mid-step, he could only continue to gape

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openmouthed, wondering where in the hell this sudden and terrifying urge to see her wrapped up in it at all costs had come from. The urge to see her wrapped up naked in it, with only her dusky skin and her blue-black, silken cascade of hair to accessorize it.

*The same place, a dry and humorless voice rasped inside his head, that the urge to fuck her and keep on fucking her, to never stop fucking her even if it meant giving up your own life and everything that's ever had any meaning in it came from. That's where.*

Glancing up, seeing his interest, Tina smiled in a way that had the power to set his heart and every other functioning part of him on fire. "Vintage Schiaparelli," she murmured seductively, tossing back her black hair as she held the glimmering thing up higher. "You like?"

"I..." That was all that would come out. And it was a pretty pathetic, pretty moronic and pussy-whipped 'I', too.

*He liked.* Even if she *wasn't* naked beneath the layer of lace that sparked and flashed its pattern of twining vines and fully-bloomed flowers into his startled and disbelieving eyes.

Hell, no. She was fully dressed in some kind of red, suedey-looking getup with fringe and conchas. He could see her clothes right through the sheea-whatever the hell she'd just called it. But his imagination...

*Oh, God. What his imagination was conjuring up to replace the red and the fringe and the conchas! What his pecker was telling him when it stood straight up, filling his jeans with an impossibly humungous, impossibly straining*

*and energetic eagerness!*

"Put that..." *thing away.* He didn't have the strength or the wits to say even that much. And then he didn't have to say anything, because some noise out in the street diverted his attention from the oblong of tantalizing lace he'd never forget, not if he lived to be a hundred and fifty decrepit and decayed years old.

It was them. Or to be more precise, it was *him*. It was Joshua Collins, the elusive head of the Santa Fe chapter of Diamond Smugglers Of America. The man Gage's team had been trying for weeks to find, trying for weeks to capture.

Joshua Collins had come out of the shop with the truck driver. He was standing in the street, not fifty feet from Gage Prescott, the man who was going to make his name in the Department by taking him down and taking him in. He was watching, looking for all God's world like the perennial Sidewalk Superintendent as the driver rolled up the back of the truck and lifted down the hand truck.

Except for Collins, it was déjà vu all over again, as somebody had once said.

*Tina?*

*No, somebody else.*

And what the hell was he doing standing here dithering over who in the hell had said something incredibly stupid, when he had calls to make and a...

Grabbing up the shirt that held his gun, he started to unfold it. Started to reach for his cell phone at the same time. And in the process dropped them both.

And heard a small and startled squeak from right

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behind him.

"My God!" It was Tina, and he wanted to kick himself...*should* kick himself good and hard, right in the ass...for forgetting about her in all the confusion of trucks, and illicit diamond dealers and sheea-whatever shawls.

"Is that a...*gun*?" Tina's eyes had widened to the point that some little, astonished part of what was left of Gage's brain worried they'd pop right out of her head.

Groaning, he didn't even look at the Glock. Didn't need to look as he slipped the holster on and cinched it down tight. *Right where it had belonged the whole time, if he'd only had the brains to stay away from Tamale Tina in the first place.*

"It is a gun." Sounding completely flabbergasted as even Gage had to admit she had every right to be, she sank down on a pillowy pink-satin chair next to the display of those incomprehensible 'things' she'd forced him to unpack on the first day of his forced employment here. "How in the living hell could you bring a *gun* into my shop without telling me? How in the..."

"It's not what you think." Holster on, cell phone ready to dial, Gage looked around with an expression he knew must resemble the killing grimace of a wild man, searching for someplace private. Anyplace, where he could make the call he needed to make without her following and listening, without her asking a god-zillion ill-timed questions he wasn't going to be able or willing to answer.

And then she was back on her feet. Her face was

flushed...with outright fury, he thought...and she was shouting at him again. Shouting in fully enraged earnest this time, in a way he'd never heard her shout about anything before.

"...*dare* you?" He'd caught her in mid-sentence, but that didn't matter a whole hell of a lot. He'd already caught the gist of what she'd been saying, and it wasn't particularly pleasant. Wasn't anything he'd ever wanted or hoped to hear. "How dare you come in here with a...a..."

"Glock," he said distractedly, already giving in and lifting the cell phone to punch the numbers with a hand that wasn't quite steady. "Listen to me, Tina. I need you to get out of here. Right now. I need you to go out the back door and get as far away from here as you possibly can."

"Go?" she demanded, huffing a little. "Where do you expect me to..."

"Away. Go to the plaza, and wait for me there. Or go to La Fonda. That's even better. Go to La Fonda and have yourself some breakfast. And I'll come and get you as soon as I can. I'll..."

"The hell I will!"

Gage wished he could summon up a smile. He knew that smile of his...the one that had cost his parents so damned much money...had the power to make her, or any woman, do whatever he wanted. But there was no time for smiles...no seeming ability in the muscles of his face to do it even if there *had* been time.

"Go," he insisted, moving past her.

*She'd followed him before,* he thought as he rushed



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toward the back. She'd followed him all over hell and back. So maybe he could fool her into following him again. Maybe he could fool her into a place where he could lock her up until it was all over. Until the danger was past and the operation was concluded and she would be safe again in her own goddamned shop.

Maybe he could...

*The bathroom.*

It loomed just ahead of him, just off to his left as he stepped through the doorway that led into the back.

*If he could get her into the bathroom...*

He swung around, trying to maneuver her inside so he could jam a chair under the door and hold her there in protective custody. But she got the jump on him. Leaping in front of him, her sweet and lovely face twisted into an almost unrecognizable mask of fury, she shouted at him again.

"I want you out of here!" she all but screamed, slamming a balled-up fist into the center of his chest.

There wasn't very much to her. She was tall, but slender. Just a little thing, when he came right down to it. But, damn it, that had *hurt*! And he jumped back, maneuvering *himself* into the bathroom.

"I want you out of here," she said again, looking like she was going to follow him again, even into the crapper. "Now. You, and that...that..." Turning speechless at last, at least for a moment, turning into little more than a visibly shaking and potentially dangerous column of rage, she pointed to the Glock now nestled in its proper place beneath his left arm. "I want you to take that *thing* out of my shop, and I

*Oh, he heard her all right,* he thought as he slammed the door shut between them and leaned back against it, the number punched and a voice already answering at the other end.

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## Chapter Fourteen

A gun! Reaching out with a palsied, barely controllable hand, Tina braced it against the wall next to the rest room door and leaned her weight on it.

A man with a gun...a very *big* gun...inside her shop. And she'd let him in. Invited him in. Had actually *ordered* him to come in when he'd showed every last sign in the world of wanting to do no such thing. And then she'd gone a step farther and actually *ordered* him to stay! And all the time he'd had...

*A gun.*

Stupid, stupid, stupid. That was what she'd been. Just criminally, hopelessly, naively stupid.

'It's not what you think,' Gage had said. As if that explained everything! As if she didn't know damned good and well exactly what it was. A gun. A big and deadly one that had been made for one purpose and one purpose only.

To kill somebody.

He was talking now. She could hear the muffled sound of it as he tried to lower his voice to a volume she couldn't hear.

*Still keeping his damned secrets.* Keeping more of his

secrets, when she had every Goddamned right to know exactly what he...

Lifting her free hand to pound at the door as hard as she could, opening her mouth to demand that he first come out of there and then, immediately and without any further discussion or argument, get the hell out of her shop for once and for all, she thought better of it the instant she realized she actually *could* hear what he had to say. Could hear most of it, anyway.

"...Prescott," he was saying. "It's going down." Then a long pause, and he said "Yeah, he's there. Just like the snitches said. He's there and he's not even watching his back." A short pause and then, "They're getting ready to transfer the stuff right now. You want me to take him now, or you want me to wait until he's done, and the stuff is ready to go?"

Sucking in her breath, gritting her teeth tight together in a superhuman effort to stay quiet and avoid discovery by a man with a gun who'd begun more and more to sound like an extremely *dangerous* man with a gun, Tina leaned even more heavily against the wall. If she hadn't had a sudden sparking of genuine terror to lock her knees and prevent them moving at all, she thought they'd have long since collapsed right out from under her.

Gage was silent now.

He was listening, apparently, to instructions from whoever was on the other end of that call.

*The boss, maybe? The big boss, of all bosses?*

Was she mistaken, or did the whole conversation have a distinctly sinister sound to it? Maybe even a

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*mob* kind of sound?

For a second or two, she almost burst out laughing. *Mob*. Now, really. She'd been watching too many bad late-night movies for sure. But then a little niggling of doubt...much more than a niggling, really, it was more like a thunderclap...broke over her.

How the hell did she know she *hadn't* been right about that? About Gage?

What the hell did she know about the mob, or how they worked?

She knew they carried guns. That much seemed obvious. And hadn't Gage said something about diamonds and a smuggling ring?

*It could be a turf war.*

*A gang war.*

It was true Gage Prescott didn't look anything like the late-night movies' version of what a mob hit man looked like. But, then, did she think for even one minute that the late night movies actually portrayed life as it was? And what the hell did that mean, anyway... 'what a mob hit man looked like'?

It was beginning to look more and more like she should have taken Gage's suggestion. She should have lit out the back door as fast as she could run, and not stop running until she reached the Rio Grande. And maybe not even then.

Of course, she could still light out running. Even now it wasn't too late to...

"No," Gage said on the other side of the door, dragging her up out of her fantasy world of mobsters and hits and turf wars. Dragging her up, and making her realize his conversation could end at any minute,

almost before she knew it. And she should be as far away from the bathroom door as it was possible for her to get before it opened again, and he found her...

"Yes," Gage said, "Got it."

That sounded pretty final to her. That sounded terribly final, and she started to move away. Started to rush toward the back door just as he'd insisted earlier. But before she took five steps, she tripped. On one of the damned feather boas that had escaped her clean-up sweep late yesterday, and had been lurking just beneath the couch, just waiting to jump out and snare her ankle at the worst possible moment.

Catching her foot in the rope of feathers that tightened instantly, a pink-tinted snare, her heart leaping into her throat, Tina felt her feet begin to veer out from under her. Felt herself losing balance, and...

There was no way to save herself. Nothing upon which to catch herself. But she tried anyway. Grasping and grabbing as she pitched forward, she nearly managed to topple herself onto the couch's sound-absorbing cushions, only to come up short and pitch headlong across the floor instead. One arm swept her adding machine off her desk with a crash and clatter of shattering plastic, and the other snagged the handle of a mop, sending it and the metal roller bucket in which it had been stored sailing across the room with a heavy-metal thunder no mob hit man...not even a stone-deaf mob hit man...could fail to hear and interpret for exactly what it was.

The sound of a terrified eavesdropper attempting escape.

Just as she'd feared, the door to the rest room flew

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open almost before the din had subsided. And Gage emerged, his gun no longer in its holster but in his hand. Held in a way that said he knew exactly what he was doing and wasn't above using the thing on anybody who got in his way.

The barrel of it was pointed straight at her for only half a second. But it was a *long* half second. Long enough to send her heart into some kind of bizarre and off-balance rhythm that could only have a bad outcome. A very *very* bad outcome. It was more than enough to set her stomach to quivering in the most ominous way imaginable, and turn it suddenly queasy with an all but uncontrollable urge to empty itself all over the floor of the back room.

"Jesus Christ," Gage said, already lowering the gun so that it pointed straight down at the floor. "You damned near gave me a heart attack."

On her back, scooting herself across the floor toward the door in a last-ditch attempt to avoid the inevitable, Tina never took her eyes off him. Her very round eyes that felt like they'd widened to about the size of hubcaps. Hubcaps meant to fit the biggest eighteen-wheeler ever built.

"D...don't..." she stammered, failing to relax even when the gun remained pointed downward. "...sh...shoot...d...don't shoot m...me."

"What the hell?" Gage's shoulders had slumped for a moment as he'd lowered his gun, but now they straightened. *He* straightened. And fixed her with a penetrating glare that did nothing at all to reassure. "What are you talking about, woman? Why the hell would you think I want to shoot you?"

"Y...you..." She continued to scootch backward. Continued to hope, when clearly the gig was up and all hope had long since been lost. "You p...pointed..." Raising one hand, a very unsteady and uncontrollable one, she made a feeble motion toward the gun. "...*that* at me."

"For Christ's sake, Tina, you scared the shit out of me. I thought..."

"I?" She demanded, regaining a little control over both her hand and her voice. "Scared *you*? Well, what the hell do you think you did to me with that...that...I already told you I didn't want it in my shop. I already told you to..."

"You did not." Gage seemed to regain a little of his composure too, and already he was turning toward the front of the shop, tucking the gun back into his holster as he went.

"You still haven't explained why you pointed that thing at me," she called, scrambling to her feet and wondering which way she was going to go...after him to argue, or away from him just as hard and as fast as her feet could carry her? Away from him, to survive?

*Well, if he hadn't shot her by now...*

"I really don't have time to explain anything now," he called back over his shoulder.

"Why?" Allowing her feet to pick a direction for her, Tina discovered they were intent upon following him. "Because you're a hit man?"

That stopped him. For just a moment, hesitating in mid-step, she saw his back stiffen and thought he was about to turn back to her. Then he continued his



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course toward the front window where, she'd only just realized, he'd spent the greater part of his time ever since he'd first set foot inside the shop. "Where did you get an insane idea like that?" he demanded, peering at the truck and the men...there were three of them out there now, the driver, the antique store proprietor she'd seen there occasionally, and a stranger. In a police uniform. A cop who'd stopped for some reason and was waving his billy club at the truck, talking excitedly and seeming to be trying to engage the others in an argument.

"Shit," Gage said, and headed for the door.

"Now, just wait a minute!" Tina almost shouted. "You're not going anywhere, until..."

"Go in the back room," he ordered, already halfway outside.

"I will not! I..."

"Do as I say. That's an order."

"An order! Now, wait just a cotton-pickin' minute! I don't intend..." But he was gone before she could finish.

*I'm going to call the police if you don't clear out of here this very instant!*

Tina almost shouted it after him, almost shouted it as loud as she could. But the police were already here. Obviously here. And something, another of those wormy little niggings of doubt mixed with queasy uncertainty, warned her to be silent. Warned her to stay back, stay out of sight with the door locked, where she could still see what was 'about to go down' but not so close she'd be seen by any of the participants.

Because Gage really had seemed flabbergasted when she'd accused him of being a hit man. She'd seen the shock of it flash in his posture for just a second before he'd regained that strict, almost icy control he'd had ever since the truck had pulled up in the street this morning...the same icy control that had led her to conclude he was a hit man in the first place. The same icy control that had her automatically questioning herself yet again. Had her questioning whether the flash of astonishment hadn't been as much a part of his act as being a beggar man had been a part of it.

For only one thing was clear as she watched the breadth of his back retreating from her front door.

Gage Prescott *had* been putting on an act. Was *still* putting on an act.

And if all the evidence, crazy or otherwise, seemed to point to his being a heavily armed and thoroughly professional hit man, that made one other thing perfectly clear to her.

There was no way in hell she was going to be able to leave now.

Not when things were just about to get good.

Not even if the consequences of her watching...but screw the consequences, anyway. Gage had known she'd listened in on his phone call. She was as sure of that as she was of anything else. And he hadn't killed her. Not even when he'd had his gun trained on her and it would have been easy...so easy, for him to just pull the trigger and...

Tina broke into a cold sweat. Her stomach gave another of those uneasy, just-about-to-empty-itself

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lurches, and she shoved the thought of the gun, the memory of the way the barrel had looked in the short instant she'd had to stare straight into it, to the very back of her mind. And ducked down behind the counter, where she'd be less likely to be spotted by someone out in the street.

Not that anyone was paying much attention to her or her shop at the moment.

Out in the street, all the attention...and there was suddenly a *lot* of attention as people appeared as if by magic from every corner of the city...was on the truck, the driver, and the two men who stood with him next to the truck.

"Give it up, Collins!" someone shouted, and she thought it was Gage.

Instantly one of the men, the one she'd always believed the proprietor of the never-open shop across the way, looked around wildly and even she, who had no experience at all in this kind of thing, could tell he was getting ready to make a run for it.

Quickly she jammed her fingers into her ears, expecting the worst.

Expecting gunshots as the hit went down.

Though it wasn't quite clear to her...not for a second or two, anyway...why there suddenly seemed to be so many cops, on foot and on motorcycles, cops in plain clothes flashing badges and cops in uniforms *displaying* badges, in the mix of hit men and assorted other characters who'd suddenly choked the narrow street almost to overflowing.

She had just enough time to realize Gage was one of them, he was a cop and flashing a badge of his

own, just enough time for the realization to sink in and register completely before her neighbor...the antique store owner...*did* make a break for it.

Seizing the only opportunity that seemed to present itself, since all the rest of the street had magically filled...even if in reality there were no more than a dozen cops in sight...with men and women who appeared entirely focused upon him, the man Gage Prescott had called Collins ran straight at her front door.

Eyes squeezed tightly shut as she heard the loud thud of him slamming into the glass...a thud that by all rights should have at least cracked the heavy pane if not shattered it entirely...Tina did what all the movies had instructed her to do now that gunfire seemed a sure thing.

She hit the deck.

Flattened herself tight against the floor behind the counter, her fingers still tight in her ears and breathing no longer even a remote possibility.

Hit men or police, it didn't matter. Things weren't going well out there, and gunshots would shatter the glass in another second for sure. It was only glass, after all, not some kind of...they would shatter the glass, would tear her shop apart and in all likelihood wound her as bullets ricocheted off every surface the way they always ricocheted on TV.

And who would she turn to then? Who would she sue to have the damages repaired and her ruined merchandise replaced? Who would she sue to have her medical bills...no doubt extensive and *costly* bills...paid? *The mob?*

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Terrified, cowering and quivering both inside and out, Tina almost laughed.

Or maybe she did laugh. Whichever it was, it died in her throat soon enough when someone...the fleeing Collins, she presumed...jiggled the handle of her door. Jiggled it hard, and then pounded once, twice, before he stopped and the shouting resumed, much closer now. And much more clearly audible even with her ears plugged.

She couldn't deny, not even in one of those far-fetched, mob-riddled fantasies, that it was Gage saying "Joshua Collins, you are under arrest for dealing in stolen merchandise. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say..."

She missed the rest of it. Not that she didn't already know what Gage was about to say...all that stuff about courts of law and attorneys being provided, and so on and so forth.

She'd sat up, her ears ringing and her breath returning at last, though it was still a little jagged and jerkily uncertain, to peer around the end of the counter.

Out in the street the truck driver was down. On the ground. He was lying flat exactly the way she'd lain flat, from the all too real fear of bullets about to fly. He was lying flat on his face with his hands clasped behind him. The cop who'd been standing with him had exchanged billy club for the gun he now held trained on him, and the other cops had moved in. Several of the other cops, one of whom was busy handcuffing the driver. No doubt accusing him of being an accomplice of the Collins person who was

still all the way up against her door, his face smashed tight against it the way kids like to smash their faces against glass. His face was all distorted and not the faintest bit human-looking as he tried to protest. Tried to tell a suddenly handcuff-wielding Gage Prescott that there had been some mistake, he was an innocent dealer in late nineteenth century antiques, and anyone could vouch for him, anyone would...

"Yeah," Gage responded, fastening Collins' arms firmly behind his back. "Antique dealer, my ass."

"I assure you, Sir..." Collins sounded and looked ready to babble, or maybe ready to cry as Gage yanked him away from the door and spun him around with one quick, economical flick of a wrist.

"Do you understand each of these rights as I've explained them to you?" Gage thundered, bending down so that his face was very close to Collins' face.

"I do." Collins flinched back the tiniest bit even though it was clear he tried his best to appear unintimidated and outraged rather than frightened half out of his wits. "But I feel I must continue to protest. You have made a terrible mistake, Officer, and there will be repercussions. I assure you, I have the connections to..."

"Get him out of here!" Gage bellowed, shoving Collins onto the sidewalk.

Instantly, two cops appeared...two cops in uniform...who grabbed the man's arms and dragged him a little roughly, still protesting his innocence and his not-quite-convincing outrage in a loud and shrill, nearly hysterical voice, away from her door.

And in the same instant, Gage turned back. He

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turned, but made no other move as his gaze met hers through the glass.

Met it, locked onto it, and seemed to flash her a message she couldn't possibly misunderstand.

*Forgive me*, his expression seemed to say. *Just, please, forgive me for using you? Forgive me for...*

Barely able to move herself, with tears setting in now that a little of the terrified inner quaking had begun to subside, Tina sank against the wall behind her counter and wrapped her arms around herself. Arms crossed across her chest, clasping each shoulder with the palm of the opposite hand, she closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at him. So she might stand a chance of containing the hated and unwanted tears.

Because now *two* things were clear.

She was not going to forgive Gage Prescott. Not now, and not in the next hundred years.

And she was not going to cry in front of him.

## Chapter Fifteen

**T**he look in her eyes killed him. Or at least it killed a part of him. A part of his heart that he'd given over to her without ever intending to give anything...a part he'd never in his life dared or even desired to give to a woman before.

That little part of him died a hard and horrible death in the instant when he looked into the store, knowing she'd been watching, knowing Tamale Tina wouldn't by nature have been able to do anything but lurk exactly where he'd ordered her not to lurk, watching every single, damned move.

She'd looked absolutely, mortally out of her mind with fear. A little wild with it. That was a result, no doubt, of Collins' unexpected though certainly not unpredictable dash for freedom. Gage wanted to kick himself, and damned near did, for having failed to anticipate Collins making a break for the very nearest place of perceived cover...the very closest and most convenient shop to his own.

Tina's shop called Movie Star.

She'd looked completely demoralized by fear, and all he'd wanted in the second their eyes met and their gazes held was to wrap his arms around her. To



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protect her from everything she couldn't be protected from...everything she'd seen, and witnessed, and felt in the last five minutes or so. It shocked the hell out of him and horrified him to realize that was *all* he wanted to do. Protect her now, and promise her with every last piece of his heart that hadn't quite finished dying that he would protect her for ever and ever. From everything that might harm her.

Only two things held him back.

The first was that he didn't have time to protect her right now. The danger was over, and he knew she was safe, if still badly shaken. And he had a job to do...a job he'd been sent here to do, and that was his first responsibility. *Had* to be his very first responsibility. To do his job, and make sure he did it right.

And the second thing was the look in Tina's eyes in the split second before she closed them.

Even through the heavy pane of tinted safety glass, even through the cloud of dust that had risen...the same cloud that *always* seemed to rise from out of nowhere the minute the action started to heat up...he could see her eyes so clearly.

Could see the look of revulsion in them. The hurt and wounded anger at having been lied to and used so badly. The clear and unmistakable message she flashed back at him that just as she'd said when he'd been leaving the shop for the last time, he was no longer welcome there. Would never again be welcome there.

And that was the part that really and finally killed his heart.

That was the part that had him turning, already as professional and detached as the police academy had instructed him repeatedly to be, back into the street. To supervise the loading of every last little content of the bogus antique shop into the two trucks that had pulled up in front of and behind the one the smugglers had meant to use.

As much as it galled him, as much as he'd just realized being a cop had been no more of a viable plan for his life than had being a priest, he had a job to do. And he meant to do it. Meant to fulfill his duty and his obligation to the city and the people...all the people...of Santa Fe before he did anything else.

*And if Tina remained obdurate afterward...if she refused the way it seemed almost certain she would, to give him a chance to explain?*

He'd just have to hope she'd calm down enough to let him.

"Watch it, there," he muttered to a cop who'd nearly stepped on his foot as he continued to stride forward, Tina already pushed as far to the back of his mind as he could push her.

One team had sealed off the truck the smugglers had used, keeping it off limits until it could be processed for whatever evidence it might yield. And another team had moved in. Sweeping into the shop with guns drawn at first, they'd put them away once they'd realized there was no one inside, and gotten down to work. They'd started to load the stuff from the store into the trucks they'd brought, and they weren't being any too careful with a lot of the old-looking things they were hauling out of there.

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"For Christ's sake," he bellowed as a cop's latex gloved hands slipped at one end of a small sofa they'd been toting and the end of it dropped to the pavement with a small and crashing noise that *couldn't* be good, "be careful with that, will you? Those are expensive antiques, for crying out loud! Next thing you know, you'll have the city getting sued for destroying somebody's property!"

*But were they? Expensive antiques?*

Gage didn't have a clue. All that old stuff looked like so much crap to him. But everything they were pulling out of the shop, with the possible exception of that skin-crawling wooden Indian a couple of cops seemed to have gotten wedged tightly in the front door in the process of carting it out, looked exactly like the kind of stuff his mother collected. The kind of stuff she swooned over, and paid prices for that made his dad's eyes bulge and his face turn red.

Gage didn't know the first thing about this old junk. But his mom did, and he trusted her judgment. He trusted that she'd be in a frenzy of ecstasy and torment right now, watching this stuff being hauled into the street and watching it being hauled with no more care than garbage that was just about to be plowed under at the dump.

Leaping in to lend a hand with the stubborn and definitely stuck Indian, seeing as how they were going to be here well into next week if somebody didn't do something about getting it unstuck, he was conscious of Collins, the shop's proprietor, sitting in a squad car not more than fifteen feet away. Looking like he was just about to explode.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Gage demanded of one of the struggling cops in the doorway, jerking his head quickly in Collins' direction.

"Search me." Little beads of sweat had popped out on the cop's forehead, and his face registered the strain of trying to pull a size-twenty Indian through a size-ten doorway. "Watson was inside the shop last I saw, looking for more suspects..."

"There are no more suspects."

"Tell Watson. And look, if you're going to stand there, how about lending a hand with this thing? It's..."

Gage stared at the Indian for a second.

Damndest thing he'd ever seen. Damned if it wasn't. A big old carved thing, splashed with a few little remnants of paint as if it had been all spruced up with bright colors once. About a million years ago.

It was one of those things he'd seen pictures of in books. One of those things they'd once stood outside cigar stores, before both cigars and carved wooden Indians had become politically incorrect. He'd never realized the carved Indians were so big, though. Or so ugly...not that looking half-black with char as though somebody had tried to put it out of its misery by burning it had helped its looks any.

The thing was creepy. Creepy-ugly. It glared at him with the most malevolent eyes he'd ever seen on anyone, living or carved. And in all honesty, there didn't seem to be a place where he *could* grab on. So he just stood aside, his gut tightening as somebody inside the shop...he recognized the voice of the delinquent Watson, driver of the squad car that

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should have long since departed for the precinct...shouted "okay, let's do this! On the count of three..."

Somebody else yelled "one!" and all the cops braced themselves, their grips tightening on the Indian.

The same somebody yelled "two!" and they strained, bracing themselves even more.

And finally Gage heard the shouted "three!" just as he was opening his mouth to declare this might not be such a good idea, after all, this might not be the way to go. Because the shop's proprietor had gotten the thing in there without damaging it, so logic would insist it could be gotten out the same way. Without all this rigamarole and fuss.

But it was too late.

At the count of three, cops all the way around the Indian grunted, groaned, and heaved with all their strength.

And the Indian popped free.

Somebody...Watson again...shouted "Jeez, take it easy, will you? Not so..."

The Indian seemed to have taken flight. Exploding from the doorway as if launched by a dozen rockets strapped firmly to its carved wooden backside, it flipped into the street with a screeching of wood as it passed through the door frame and slammed to the sidewalk flat on its back with an impact Gage swore actually shook the earth.

And now he heard Collins, even through the closed windows and doors of Watson's squad car.

"Shit on a shingle!" Collins screeched, jumping up

and down hard enough to make the car jump up and down, too. "What the fuck are you goons doing? That's a priceless piece! That came from a woman in Denver who got it as a wedding gift from a source who claimed it had a distinguished history! So if you goons have broken it...if you've harmed so much as a feather on its head, I'll sue. I'll sue the city and I'll sue each and every one of you individually, until you don't have a pot to..."

"Watson!" Gage bellowed.

"Yeah?" Red-face, sweating, Watson stepped out of the shop.

"Get him out of here?"

"Right."

The sound of Collins' outraged bellows grew louder for a second when Watson pulled open the door and jumped into the car. "...hear from my attorney about this!" he was shrieking. "Don't think you won't! Manhandling a valuable item like..."

Looking down at the Indian, Gage groaned. He didn't care who heard him groan.

*What had Collins said?*

*That he'd sue and sue big time if they'd harmed so much as a feather on the ugly piece of junk's head?*

Well, they'd done it all right.

The Indian had once sported three feathers. Three carved ones sticking straight up at the top of its head. One of them bore traces of red paint, another traces of yellow, and the third looked like it might have been blue, before time had faded it and fire had singed it. And now the blue one, the one in the center, lay on the sidewalk a full yard from the rest of the Indian.

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"Shit on a shingle," Gage said, quoting Collins since it seemed the only appropriate thing he could say and since he didn't have the time or the desire to think of anything more creative or original. "This is just fucking great."

"No problem." One of the cops grabbed up the broken feather. "There's a slot here at the top of the head. Looks like the thing's meant to come out anyway." With a quick stabbing motion he jammed the feather into the very top of the Indian's head, only to have it fall out again and land on his feet.

"Shit," Gage said again. "Leave it, will you? You've already done enough dam..."

But another cop had grabbed the feather, and before Gage could so much as think of telling him to put the goddamned thing down and leave it the hell alone, he'd spit out his chewing gum onto the base of the thing and stuck it back into the Indian's head. And this time it stuck.

Shaking his head, Gage turned away.

*What a mess.*

Even he, the most non-antique savvy person on the planet, could tell the Indian was nothing but a piece of trash that had lost any and all worth at about the time it had caught on fire. But he didn't underestimate Collins' ability to raise a real and Godawful stink over what had been done to it.

*What a mess.*

Holding the clipboard somebody'd shoved into his hands when he hadn't been aware of it, Gage moved toward the back of one of the trucks to see what other damage the goon squad had done. Then his eyes

swept the other shop...Tina's shop...and he saw her staring at him. Watching everything with wide eyes from her front window.

"Shit." It seemed to be the only thing he could say any more.

He could take time for her. Had to take time, since he'd been the one who'd involved her in the first place.

He had a job to do, but he couldn't leave her like this. With that terrified-horrified-inquisitive look of not really understanding written all over her face.

It took him only a couple dozen steps to reach her door and only a couple of steps more to shove it open and step inside. But by the time he did, she'd disappeared. As if she'd never been there at all.

"Tina?" he called, heading for the back.

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see you in my shop ever again?" Appearing in the doorway to the rear room...the room where he'd made such incredible, such simmering and singeing love to her that even now it had the power to make him tingle all over...even now, when she was standing right in the middle of the doorway, blocking his path as if she thought he was just about to try it again. As if she'd remembered the love making too, and thought that was why he was here now. That was what he'd come back to claim.

"Let me explain," he began, only to have her cut him off at the knees.

"There's nothing *to* explain. You lied to me."

"Tina, I..."

"I might have expected a street person to lie to me.



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I might have understood it, because street people need to do whatever they need to do just to stay alive. And I might even have understood and accepted it if you'd really been a hit man. But..."

"Listen, Tina, about the hit man part..."

"...you're a *cop*, for God's sake! You're supposed to be on the side of right, and good, and...how the hell can I accept that a cop lied to me, a cop used me, a cop did everything in his power to..."

"Didn't you ever hear of need to know?" he demanded, feeling more and more helpless by the second.

Tina snorted. Not quietly. "What a crock of bull!"

"I wasn't supposed to involve the public," he tried again. "I wasn't supposed to do anything but sit in that doorway with my cell phone, waiting until the stolen goods arrived, and..."

"Then why didn't you?" she demanded, waving her arms as she advanced one step, two steps, ten steps, toward him. "Why didn't you just sit in your *damned* doorway with your *damned* phone, doing your *damned* job?"

*Well, if that didn't take the cake. If that didn't frost the cake, and his hide too!*

*Why the hell hadn't he sat in his damned doorway?*

*He'd tell her why!*

"Because *you* came after me with a goddamned broom!" he roared. "*You* were about to cause a goddamned scene that would have had Collins and every other person...every *innocent* and *uninvolved* person in this whole end of town out in the street watching you blow my goddamned cover!"

That shut her up. Finally.

Taking a step backward now, she looked like she'd been slapped in the face. Her expression blanked for a minute, then a new one rushed in to fill the void. And this one was a look of open-mouthed astonishment, of remembering something she'd completely forgotten and wished could have *stayed* forgotten.

That she'd been responsible for involving herself.

That she'd been the one who'd all but goddamned forced him to move into her shop and make it his watching post when she'd come after him with the Goddamned broom.

That she had nobody but herself to blame. Not him, not the police department, not even the mob she'd been so insanely certain he was a part of.

Nobody.

"I..." she said, and for a minute he thought she'd lost the thread of whatever else she'd been going to say. Then her speech came back to her and she went on. Boy oh boy, did she go on!

"I want you out of here," she said in a low voice that quivered with rage so thick even the sharpest knife wouldn't cut through it.

"Will you at least give me half a minute to apolo..."

"I want you out of my sight, Gage Prescott. I want you out of my shop, and out of my life. I never want to see you again. In fact, never would be too soon. You're despicable. You're...you're..."

She had to stop to take a breath at last, and he jumped in to fill the gap. "I'm sorry, Tina. There's nothing else I can say. I didn't start out to...never

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meant to...look. I have to get back to work. I shouldn't have left the scene in the first place, but I thought I owed you...

Distracted, disoriented, he lifted his hand and dragged his fingers back through his hair.

"I don't know what I thought I owed you. An apology at the least. And more. But you've got to understand..."

"I understand perfectly." Turning her back on him, she started toward the room at the rear of the store again.

"I really do have to get back to work," he called after her. "But I'll come back, and I'll explain everything. I'll make it up to you and I'll answer all your questions...all the ones I can legally answer. If only you'll..."

He never finished, because she didn't seem interested in the finish.

She seemed to have already declared a finish. To all of it.

Vanishing into her back room without another word or look, she left him standing alone in the middle of the shop called Movie Star with his shoulders sagging, his clipboard dangling forgotten from a hand that no longer seemed to have any ability to feel, and his crushed heart beating out the last instants of its life on the pink-carpeted floor at his feet.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Ten Days.*  
Tina's glance at the street...at the antique shop on its other side, now deserted and empty, with a 'for rent' sign prominently displayed in a window and a single trailing end of crime scene tape fluttering listlessly in a late-afternoon stirring of air...was desolate.

Ten days.

Gage had said he'd be back. He'd *promised*, even above her objections and insistence that he stay away forever because she never wanted to set eyes on him again.

Stupid, stupid insistence she now realized had been the very most *stupid* thing she'd ever done.

Ten days, no Gage, and it was time to move on. Time to get her ducks in order, and...

Picking up the latest in what seemed a neverending stack of bills for a business that just wasn't paying off the way she'd envisioned when she'd started out, Tina headed for the back room.

No Gage, and no customers either. No anything but a lot of broken dreams, broken promises, broken hopes that she was going to be the hottest thing, her store the wildest success the too-competitive town of

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Santa Fe had ever seen.

*Of course, she could still do something about Gage if she really wanted. She could still find him through the police department, could still...*

But she had some pride left. Enough of it left to know she wasn't ever going to be able to grovel to him or beg him to come back to her at any cost. When she'd done everything but toss him out of here on his ear, shrieking shrill and vile epithets he'd no doubt remember before he'd remember any of the other, the good, stuff they'd...

And anyway, more to the point, he'd said he would come back. He'd said it even as she was throwing him out. And if she couldn't believe in his promises, if she couldn't believe he might start being true to his word, then what *could* she believe?

She'd just settled herself at her desk in the corner of the back room, settled herself with her back turned resolutely toward the sagging couch she couldn't bear to even look at these days, and the lone remnant of all the action it had seen, the one last pink feather boa left from the carton of thoroughly-sexed and thoroughly ruined ones, when she heard the front door open. Heard footsteps move into the shop and then halt, going nowhere.

*Customer.*

*It figured.*

*Just when she'd decided to do something else.*

"Feel free to have a look around!" she hollered. "I'll be out in a second if you have any questions." Hauling herself back to her feet, she paused long enough to shuffle the stack of bills between her

hands. And to frown.

Usually the customers returned her greeting. Usually they said something like 'don't bother', or 'I'm looking for a black lace garter belt for my Aunt Minnie's ninety-first birthday', or...usually they said *something*. Unless they were one of the snooty and impossible-to-please 'in' crowd.

*And wasn't that just her luck?* On a late afternoon when she'd worked her tail off re-arranging displays that didn't seem to attract anybody, worked herself into a mood and didn't really have the patience to deal with anybody, wasn't it just her luck that she'd find herself on the receiving end of some kind of ridiculous Yuppie crap about nothing being right, nothing being good enough?

Steeling herself for the battle to come, Tina turned toward the open archway that separated the shop from the back room. She turned, took three or four steps, saw what waited in the very center of the shop, right next to the mannequin draped with the gold-lace Schiaparelli shawl, and froze solid.

Turned into a pillar of salt.

Lost all pulse, all heartbeat, all trace or sign of respiration.

Gage stood next to the mannequin, staring at it as if transfixed. He'd lifted a fold of the golden lace between two fingers, and for the longest time he didn't look at her. For the longest time he continued to finger the bit of lace, his expression so intent and so faraway that Tina had no idea if he knew she was there, still paused in mid-step with one foot barely touching the floor.

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She thought he did know. Thought he knew perfectly well, but had decided only to prolong her suspense...prolong her agony.

He was Gage, she saw in those ten seconds. But not Gage, either. Not the Gage she'd known before.

Gone were the rumpled and ragged, slept-in clothes...the jeans and T-shirt that, while too noticeably clean and too noticeably new to ever have made his act truly convincing, had nonetheless been ragged enough to make it at least plausible. At least until she'd looked closer, looked harder. They were gone. Replaced by neat khakis, perfectly pressed and impeccably clean, a classic navy blue blazer and an open-collared blue and white striped dress shirt that looked cool and fresh, and turned the burning-blue of his eyes almost to sapphire. Gone too was the straggly, shaggy and overgrown hair and the dark shadow of beard that, like the clothes, had been nothing more than part of his deliberate attempt to deceive and defraud, to make her look and feel like a complete and absolute...

Reluctantly, she glanced at the storefront across the street. The place stood empty now, had stood empty ever since that afternoon ten days ago, when the cops had hauled away every thing, living and non, they'd been able to get their hands on.

*Not her, she had to forcibly remind herself. Gage hadn't acted to deceive her specifically. Or defraud her. And his intent had never been to make a fool of her.*

He'd had a job to do, and everything had been about that. Only about that. Except for the sex. Except for the instant attraction that had leapt between them

like flame leaping from smoldering carpet to instantly-immolated draperies. And even that hadn't been aimed at making her look like a fool. That had been only inevitable. Hadn't it?

Shivering, shuddering, Tina didn't move. Didn't even try to move.

She could shout those things at herself all she wanted...*had* shouted them more than once over the course of the last ten days. But it didn't change anything.

She still felt like a fool. Still felt duped, and used, and...

It wasn't going to be easy to forgive him. No matter what he might say now. It maybe wasn't going to be even *possible* to forgive him.

Then Gage dropped the fold of lace. He lifted his head and turned it, and when his gaze met hers she saw that his expression was hungry. Like the look of a man who'd been starving for so long that he'd never again be anything but starving. That his hunger, ingrained now and habitual, had damaged him in some way. That it could never again be appeased or sated.

*The hell with hunger.*

*He looked miserable.*

As miserable as...against her will or her better judgment, Tina's heart gave a small, a quavery and quivery, leap inside her chest.

A leap of recognition that he looked every bit as miserable as she'd been feeling. Every bit as desolate and downhearted, every bit as confused about what he was going to do with himself next and how in



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heaven's name he was going to survive the next thirty, forty, fifty years alone.

But it had been ten days. Ten long days without so much as a word or so much as a phone call. Ten days in which she might have ceased to exist entirely, so unimportant and unnoticed had she been in his world.

*Ten days.*

If she hadn't loved him so much...loved him, she realized with a flash of self-honesty that almost sent her to her knees, so much that she'd subconsciously believed she'd been going to die when he'd failed to return that love...she'd have gone straight for his throat. Cop or no cop, she'd have tried to strangle him with her bare hands.

*If she hadn't loved him so much her heart had tried to die the instant it had been separated from him.*

Now, *that* was a revelation. That was enough to make her knees waver and threaten to crumple for sure. That was enough to send her reeling, as off balance as if she'd been tottering along in a drunken stupor, and needed absolutely to grab at the doorframe if she wanted to stay on her feet.

Gage hadn't moved before.

He'd simply stood there, almost at the exact center of the shop, staring at her with those hungry, suffering eyes.

But the moment she faltered, the moment she thought she'd collapse in a stunned heap for sure if she didn't find something a little more adequate for support than the smooth and painted wood beneath her hand, something upon which she could sit and

maybe drop her head down between her knees, he leaped forward. Catching her with enormous hands she remembered so well...enormously strong, enormously comforting and competent hands...he steered her backward, to the couch she'd avoided looking at because to look at it would have meant admitting to herself that she loved him when there was no chance of ever seeing him again.

But now...

"Are you all right?" Once he'd deposited her, boneless and limp, on the couch, Gage knelt in front of her. Knelt almost as if he meant to propose, with one knee up and the other down, touching the floor.

"I don't...I mean, I can't..."

"I'm sorry." Lifting a hand, he dragged it back through his hair. Hair that had been cut and groomed. Deep-red hair that now framed his face softly rather than hanging in rough and too-long tatters designed to cover and conceal. And he'd shaved. It was the first time she'd seen him without the disguise of a three or four-days growth of beard...the first time she'd seen clearly that his jaw was strong and squared, that his face was the perfect oval, the perfectly sculpted and matched whole that most women would die for. Most women would...

*Deception*, something whispered deep inside her mind, and she quickly brushed it aside.

"Job," she murmured, only half-aware she'd said anything, hoping to contradict and put an end to such whisperings, once and for all.

"What?" Gage frowned.

"I..." Looking straight into his eyes, she shuddered

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again, with delight this time, and tried to smile. "Nothing. I just realized I haven't paid you for the job you did here."

He gave a short bark of laughter, and for the first time it was easy laughter. Without the underlying tension that had characterized their earlier time together. Without the slightly distracted sound that had first mystified her when she didn't understand why a homeless man should be distracted, then frightened and infuriated her once she'd realized he wasn't a homeless man at all and the distraction could have its roots in something terrible. Something sinister. Something unthinkable.

"Keep your money," he said.

"But you earned..."

"I didn't earn anything." He laughed again, but it was no longer an entirely happy sound. "I didn't do a very good job here, and I know it. And...listen, Tina. That's what I came here to say. That I know I behaved like a real jackass, and I'm sorry as I can be for what I...I'm sorry I used you, I'm sorry I had to lie to you, I'm sorry I dragged you into something you didn't deserve to be dragged into. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry that we ever found ourselves thrown together in the first place. And if I'd been more careful, if I'd been more professional..."

"Sorry?" Tina hadn't realized how high her heart...her spirits...had soared until they fell again. Like a ton of bricks dropped from an airliner passing high, high overhead. They fell, they smashed, they shattered into little, bitty, ugly pieces that she'd never be able to put back together again because she'd

never *want* to put them back together again. Not that she'd even want to try, because patched hopes...

*So that was why he'd come back.* Not because he'd shared any of the foolish and frivolous feelings she'd been stupid enough to have for him. He'd only wanted to say he was sorry. That he'd ever gotten himself messed up with her. He'd wanted to say he'd never meant any of it, and wasn't going to have anything to do with her in the future.

*"But then why..." If he didn't want anything more to do with her, then why the hell had he come back at all?*

Confused, she frowned at him.

"I know it sounds asinine," he said with another drag of hand through hair that gleamed in the soft shop light, lit from within by the deep and gleaming highlights that turned its color into something more than just ordinary chestnut. Highlights that gave it that deep and coppery hue that wasn't red at all and yet, in some inexplicable way, was the most attractive red, the thickest and most luxurious red she'd ever seen. "It seems like I'm always saying I'm sorry for something. And that's no way to..." He cleared his throat. "What I mean to say, what I'm trying to say..."

"Why *did* you come here?" Tina demanded, finding her voice at last.

"Because I had to tell you...I had to say..."

"I know what you want to tell me." She wouldn't have believed it was possible for her heart to ache any more, for it to break any more. But it did. It broke all over again. Broke harder, into even tinier, even more irretrievable and unreconstructable pieces. "What I don't understand is why?"

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"Why?" It was Gage's turn to look confused. Really, thoroughly confused. Coming up from his kneel at last, straightening with the quick and astonishing grace of a ballroom dancer, he sat next to her on the couch and reached for her hands. He probably would have caught them with his and surrounded them with his warmth if she hadn't moved faster and pulled them back, fearing a single touch would be all she needed to kill her completely, kill her as even his failure to return her love hadn't killed her.

"You were safe," she replied. "You were out of here and away from me. You never had to look back. You never had to think about me or concern yourself with me again. So I really don't understand why you would come back just to tell me..."

Gage groaned. "Is that what you thought I was going to do?"

Tina's heart had stopped sinking, and now it rose again. Rose in an instant, jerking with new fury, new outrage, new... "It's been ten days!" she spat. "What else was I supposed to think?"

He groaned again. Rumpled his hair again, and looked distracted and tense again, with a little muscle jumping beneath the skin covering his clean-shaven jaw. "Look, we got off to a bad start."

"Gee." Getting to her feet, she moved away from him quickly. Before he had a chance to touch her again and she had a chance to lose her head again. Before either of them did something stupid, like...

Remembering all that they *had* done on that very couch, remembering it as clearly and in as much

agonizingly titillating detail as if it had just happened, Tina wanted to slug him. Almost did slug him.

"You think so?" she demanded, facing him with her chin out and her hands on her hips. "Do you really think we got off to a bad start?"

He dared a little smile. One that said he wasn't at all sure it was the smartest thing to smile. "I know so."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Now Gage got to his feet. He came toward her, and if she hadn't been lucky enough to be standing with her back to the doorway and the best route of escape, he'd have backed her into a corner for sure. "I wanted to start over," he said. "If that's okay with you."

*Okay?*

Suddenly light-headed, suddenly dizzy beyond her wildest expectations, Tina had to grab at the doorframe again.

"Ok...kay." She'd meant to ask instead of answer. But it had come out an answer, after all. One she had no intention of ever taking back. If she'd thought Gage would even let her take it back.

"You're serious?" he asked, and when he moved forward to catch her hands...or, rather, the one hand she didn't have to use to cling to the doorframe in order to keep herself on her feet, she was too completely shaken, too completely befuddled, to even think about avoiding his touch. Too astonished by her own easy acquiescence when she should by all rights have still been railing at him and browbeating him for all the shady and underhanded tricks he'd pulled on her to move so much as a muscle when his hands

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found her free one and surrounded it. When a current of electricity, not at all subtle, and not at all mistakable for anything but exactly what it was...a current of all-out, no-holds-barred, desperate and despairing *need*...shivered white-hot through her.

"Then I was wondering..."

"Wondering?" It seemed all she could do was repeat, parrot-like and without any real comprehension of what she was saying, whatever Gage Prescott said to her.

He flashed her a curious look. "That's right. Wondering. Do you realize the only contact we've ever had has been right here? In this shop? Do you realize this is the only place we've ever known each other? The only place we've ever talked to each other, or..."

*Don't go there!* her mind screamed in an instant frenzy. *Don't even go into what else you did with him here! Don't even allow yourself to think about all the...the...*

Quickly, she nodded her head.

"So I thought maybe...if you'd care to give me another chance, if you can find it in your heart to give me another chance..."

Tina looked straight into his eyes again and knew with a certainty that was shocking in its intensity and startling in its clarity that there could be no running away from him. There would never again be any running, never be any hiding. Because she *did* love him.

With every last little bit of her heart. And that couldn't be good. It wasn't good, as long as...

"You have a lot to explain, Gage Prescott."

"I know I do. And I thought...I was hoping...maybe we could..."

"You have a hell of a lot to explain."

He nodded. Briefly. Fervently. In obvious, complete agreement. "So will you have dinner with me?"

"Dinner?" That wasn't what she'd expected, and she knew it showed in her tone.

Gage nodded again. "I'd like to explain over dinner, if you'll let me. If you don't have something else...someone else..." He glanced around at the shop as if he fully expected to find the someone else who'd never existed...not really, not in any way that had ever meant anything...in Tina's life, lurking in a corner and leering at him. Maybe even getting ready to fight him for her hand, her honor, her...

"Dinner." Now *that* seemed all she could say, and it was wearing a little thin. Was beginning to make her sound a little dim-witted. But she was in a dither about what else to say, so she just stared up at him, her hand pressed firmly between the strong heat of his, her gaze unable to tear itself away from the blue eyes that gazed back, seeming to want to see and understand all the innermost secrets of her soul.

"I asked you once before," he replied, his voice turning oddly hoarse. "Remember?"

"You asked me to go to La Fonda. And I said..."

"You laughed. And said something about a homeless man never being able to afford a place like that."

Tina's neck...her shoulders, too...felt all stiff and



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jerky when she nodded.

“Well, I’m not homeless, Tina. I’m not rich, but I’m not penniless. And if you’d go with me, we could...”

She was already reaching for her purse, tucked securely on its little shelf behind and beneath the counter. She was already swinging it over her shoulder, already turning toward the door and reaching for the switch to turn off all but the dim nighttime security lights before he’d finished speaking.

## Chapter Seventeen

Gage was shaking by the time she'd locked the door and led him into the street. He was shaking like hell. Literally shaking in his shoes.

He hadn't been at all sure of his reception after he'd been gone for so long...after he'd spent ten days agonizing over what to do next, ten days reaching for the phone repeatedly only to pull back, his nerve lost and his confidence in ruins.

He hadn't been sure of anything. But he sure as hell hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected to find himself walking along San Francisco Street beside her, taking her elbow when the crowds grew thicker as they neared the plaza, steering her protectively away from those who'd already seen a little too much early evening action and had grown rowdy with it. If anything, he'd expected her to show him the door. Expected her to tell him to not let it hit him in the ass on his way out. And he'd have thought she was entirely within her rights to do it. He'd have thought it was an entirely reasonable reaction. He'd have thought he only deserved it, and would have gone on his miserable way, knowing he'd given her the chance she'd deserved. To spit on him. Figuratively, if not

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literally.

*But this?*

Shaking his head a little, Gage thanked his lucky stars she walked ahead of him and couldn't see what had to be a completely flummoxed look that had stamped itself all over his face.

He didn't have a clue how he'd gotten up the nerve to ask her out to dinner. Even if that was what he'd wanted to do from the instant he'd ridden away in the passenger's seat of the truck hauling the contents of the bogus antique store without looking back, even if it was what he'd rehearsed, grimacing at his reflection in the mirror, a hundred or even a thousand times since then. He'd never expected he'd have the balls to actually say the words, and never...not in his most fevered wet dream...imagined she'd actually *agree* to it!

But she had. And so here they were. Here he was, holding open the big door of La Fonda and here she was, a swirl of dreamy-shimmer, wide skirted turquoise with her blouse pushed down demurely, yet in the most sultry way imaginable over dusky-gold shoulders. And an honest-to-God masterpiece of a Native American silver necklace gleaming against her skin. Here she was, stepping into the cool-tiled Spanish lobby of La Fonda, and here he was, escorting her toward the hotel's dining room just like this was something he did every day. Just like he made it a habit to call ahead and make reservations for the nicest table in the house. Just in case. Just in the unlikely event...

Here he was, here she was, here they were.

*And what the hell was he supposed to do next?*

Luckily, or maybe that should be mercifully, Tina took the first step.

"I've always loved this place," she sighed as the maitre-d seated her at a table near the center of the room.

"You come here often?" Gage felt more than a little awkward as he took his seat across from her. If she'd shimmered in the golden-lit street, that was nothing compared to what she did now. She seemed almost ethereal, floating on and amidst her cloud of silken turquoise, the antique silver of her necklace dusky and perfect against the glowing skin of bare shoulders, the colors making her dark eyes snap and sparkle in ways they hadn't before. Ways they hadn't ever, not even when...

*God, he hoped she didn't see him blush. Hoped he hadn't blushed.*

And God, how he wished he could reach down and adjust his pecker. Or at least brush reassuring fingers across his crotch to let it know all was not lost, all was not yet completely hopeless or out of the question!

"Not as often as I'd like," she replied, glancing around at the hand-painted windowpanes, the terracotta fireplace on a far wall, the cheery sunflowers at the centers of tables. "I always feel like I've been magically transported to some ancient, ancient village in the heart of Mexico." Then, turning back to Gage, smiling quickly at the waiter who offered her a menu, she fixed Gage with a look. A hard look, one that spelled no nonsense. One that said

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she'd *tolerate* no nonsense, and certain as hell would accept no more subterfuge.

Not that Gage was about to lie to her again. About anything. Ever. If he could possible help it.

"Don't get the idea this has changed anything," she said, waving a hand at the dining room that was elegant enough to be the finest in town, yet casual enough at the same time that tourists could feel comfortable. "Just because you brought me here, just because you're about to ply me with the best food in the whole damned state, and no doubt try to pour a bottle or two of wine down my throat..."

Gage dared a smile. "How did you know?"

She scowled. "Isn't that what your kind always does?"

"My kind?" It was his turn to scowl. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You're slick, Gage. You always have a line for the ladies, don't you? You always how to get whatever you want out of them."

He almost laughed aloud. Did chuckle a little. Just enough to send her eyebrows rocketing upward. To have her puckering her lovelier than lovely face into another scowl, this time of incipient anger that she was being laughed at and didn't have a clue why.

*Always have a line? Always get what he wanted?*

Gage chuckled a little harder. *If only she knew.*

He was never anything but tongue-tied when it came to women. Or, he had been in the past, anyway. Tongue-tied and jumpy as a schoolboy experiencing his first hot blast of hormones when he found himself face to face with the kind of beautiful woman he'd

always dreamed of having but never had the nerve to go after. And the more beautiful the woman, the more desirable and dream-inspired, the worse his problem got. The worse *he* got.

For some reason, for no reason, he thought again of Tina as he'd imagined her, wrapped up in that little golden lace thing. And at the thought his pecker leaped, his tongue seemed to swell out of all proportion to the space it had been allotted to occupy, and he found himself speechless. With no hope of ever speaking again. So that all he could do was face Tina across the table. Face her, and withstand the full force of the rage he saw starting to creep into her expression.

"I don't know what kind you are," she amended, the deepening of her scowl only making her look that much sweeter, that much more heart-stoppingly attractive, and that much more hopelessly unattainable. "I gave up trying to understand you a long time ago. Just about the time I saw that damned gun, and realized you'd been..."

"Please." His tongue had loosened a little. Enough that he could at least start to form syllables and words again. But his heart had fallen. All the way to the Spanish-tiled floor, when she'd said she given up on him before they'd even begun. Before he'd had a chance to show her he *could* be honest, could be upstanding, and honorable, and all the other things women seemed to expect and desire of their men. "Can't I explain?"

"And I suppose you have the damned gun on you right now?" Now she had her arms crossed on the

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tabletop. Now she was leaning forward a little, toward him. Turning her scowl, if only briefly, on the waiter who'd arrived to pour wine that someone had ordered.

*Someone.* It had to have been her, because Gage knew he hadn't ordered a thing. He'd hardly had a chance to say a word since they'd been seated and Tina had gone on the attack.

"You could keep your voice down," he replied, pleasantly enough, but glancing around to see who might be listening.

"So you *do* have it!" she declared as soon as the waiter had gone.

"Of course I do, Tina. I always..."

"So, then. I wish you would explain, the way you keep promising to explain. I wish you'd tell me why in the hell I should..."

"First off, let me tell you I'm not going undercover any more."

Her eyebrows lifted again, and her eyes widened, rounding in astonished surprise. "You quit your *job*?"

"Not exactly." It was a struggle for Gage to sit still. A struggle for sure, now that he'd had a chance to study every inch, every centimeter and tiniest bit of Tina's face, to not reach for his pecker. Because it had begun to stir. To lift, and rise. To become a detriment to his peace, his sanity, his state of mind.

Because Tina was...

He lacked words with which to describe her.

Beautiful? No. *More than that.*

Breathtaking? *Even more.*

Incredibly incredible? *More, still.*

Sitting across from him, leaning forward as she was, with the lightly-ruffled edge of her filmy turquoise blouse shoved down, the dusky gold of her shoulders bared, she was the most wondrous vision he'd ever had.

And now his pecker was throbbing. Wildly. The way it had throbbed every instant he'd been away from her and she'd been the one thing that had occupied his mind, the one thing he hadn't been able to put out of it. His pecker throbbed until it almost seemed to thrash, almost seemed to take on a life and a consciousness entirely of its own.

If Gage had thought the nearness of Tina would ease its pain, if he'd thought the nearness of her and the sight of her would do anything but increase that pain to a level he'd never encountered before and one he wasn't, as God was his witness, going to be able to survive...

*Well, he'd been dead wrong. That was all.*

"Then what?" she asked, the anger mixed with surprise in her eyes and her expression easing up a bit. "Exactly?"

"No," he replied, trying not to wince as another white-hot stab of agony, another persistent and undeniable twisting of desire and the need for release sliced through him. "I haven't quit my job. But I've gone back to being a detective. A straight, everyday, ordinary..."

"A detective? Isn't that the same thing?"

Gage shook his head. "Not at all. I'll be doing regular detective things. Regular investigations, where people know who I am and what I am. And no



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more undercover. That...the other day...was my first undercover assignment. And it was enough to make me realize it's not for me. I don't like to be dirty, I don't like to be itchy, I don't like to sit out in the street on the cold, hard pavement at all hours of the day and night. Above all, I don't like it that I ever had to lie to you."

Tina's expression eased a little more. The anger he'd seen in it before had become nothing but a dim echo of itself. Had shrunk until it was almost nothing, almost not even a memory.

*Too bad his pecker wasn't going to do the same.*

Too bad it only grew harder, only grew more distressed and more insistent that what it wanted was sitting right across the table and it wasn't going to take 'no' for a second longer. Wasn't going to let him tell it 'no' for a second longer.

Twitching in his seat, having no choice now, Gage stifled a groan.

*Too bad the Goddamned thing kept reminding him it had been ten days since it had had the chance to...*

"I've been feeling like a complete scumbag for dragging you into that," he said quickly, hoping Tina hadn't noticed his futile attempts to get comfortable.

"You should." She was still scowling, but she'd quit meaning it.

Her eyes were sparkling now. With silver light. In a way that only increased the hard-edged constriction in the lower parts of his body. And her cheeks had flushed, too. With the wine she'd been sipping, he assumed, though when he looked into those dark eyes...when he saw the enticing sparkle that hinted

she might be feeling something of what he felt, might be needing some of what he needed...

She'd become an enticing glimmer of dimmed light upon ruby lips. A delirious swirl of bare skin colored the softest of soft peaches shadowed in rich terracotta. Her midnight hair swept in a gleaming curtain when she turned her head in response to some sound from outside the small and shrinking circle of their private world. Some sound he didn't hear, because he had a fleeting realization he would never want to hear anything again except the low and tremulous whisper of her asking him to come to her. Asking him to take her, the way her body had told him not so long ago it was ready to be taken. Her hair shimmered across her shoulders and the sky-colored fiesta blouse that managed to be demure and proper, yet sinfully wanton, delightfully revealing, absolutely...

Grabbing up his glass, Gage tried not to gulp his wine.

She was old Santa Fe. That was how anyone more articulate, anyone with a brain that still functioned because it was still something other than a depleted and debilitated pile of mush, would have described her.

Old Santa Fe. Perfect. Beyond perfect. Ages-old, timeless, beyond-time perfect.

And he was...

*Not going to last through dinner.*

"So." Clearing his throat, he took another deep gulp of wine. Not even trying any more.

*Chardonnay.*

His favorite. Bottled by his favorite winery.

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He hadn't ordered it, had he? He didn't think he had...was almost positive he hadn't. But if he hadn't, how had Tina known? How had she..."

"So," she murmured in reply, and under the influence of all that was going on with his pecker and inside balls that had suddenly swelled to about the size and consistency of bowling balls, that simple syllable seemed utterly suggestive, utterly incendiary. Murmured by ruby lips that pursed delightfully in a face that had begun to soften with something akin to laughter, it was the single most seductive syllable he'd ever had the pleasure to hear.

*Ever.*

"Are you still on the case?"

His heart faltered. "Only yours." That just slipped out. And when he heard himself say it, he felt a sudden rush of fire as all the blood in his body seemed to rise in his face. All the blood, of course, except that which thundered even more ominously in his groin, warning him that if he didn't...soon...if she didn't...

This time he couldn't help himself. He groaned aloud, and did drop his hand to his lap. Did fumble with his napkin, glad no one was seated in the immediate vicinity, no one was seated near enough to notice what he did beneath its cover.

No one noticed, he hoped and prayed with all the fervor of the priest he'd never been and certain as hell wasn't up to being now, that he brushed his fingers lightly across the hardness that had taken over his entire existence. That he adjusted surreptitiously, nudged it slightly, urging it with unspoken

desperation to be patient. To just wait, and he would think of something. Would think of some way, soon.

Tina sat motionless for another second. She sat very still, watching him, her lush ruby-red lips parted the tiniest bit, her dark eyes amazed and even amused. And then she laughed. Tilting her head back a little, she tossed those magnificent waves upon shimmering waves of hair back and, closing her eyes, laughed out loud with a gentle and musical sound not unlike wind chimes filling a soft summer breeze. Not unlike angels murmuring amongst themselves as they prepared to burst into sweetest song. Not unlike children hard at play and oblivious to everything else. Music not unlike the freest and most unrestrained symphony a man had ever thrilled to.

He *wasn't* going to last. Was *not*.

"Tina..."

"I meant, are you still on the case with the antique shop?" When she leaned closer over the table top again, her eyes sparkled even more. *She* sparkled even more.

It was the Chardonnay. Had to be the Chardonnay, though he was at a complete loss to explain why it was affecting him this way now, when it had never worked so on his mind and his senses and his perceptions after just a glass or two.

"There's not much to tell," he replied, reluctant to talk about...hell, reluctant to *think* about...anything except Tina and the head-spinning things that were going to happen between them once they'd left the restaurant.

Because he, Gage Prescott, shy and clumsy oaf

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who'd never been able to face a lovely woman without miring himself in the deepest swamp of self-conscious agony possible, had fallen. Hard.

No 'ifs', 'ands' or 'buts'.

He'd fallen for Tina Farrin, and he had to have her.

The way he'd had her before. Or he would die.

Because he was picturing her naked again. Naked, except for that too-enticing lace thing he just couldn't seem to get out of his mind. He was picturing her tilted Spanish eyes gleaming at him through barely-there folds of the golden dream in which she wrapped herself, trying to cover herself with that web work that had been made specifically to cover nothing. He was picturing her with a rose as blood-red as her lips and every bit as full and ripe tucked into those shimmering masses of black-satin delight behind her ear. A blood-red rose worn in the seductive way of old. The way of *senoritas* of years long past who, sheltered by protective fathers and defended by hot-headed brothers, had nonetheless found their ways with eyes and golden shawls and flirtatious roses to show their passion and their desire for even more passion to the hapless *caballeros* who'd fallen under their spell.

The vision was so real, the hallucination so complete, that Gage thought for a fleeting instant he could almost smell the sweet and dusky perfume of that rose...smell the wonder of it mixing its essence with hers so that the two became instantly inseparable, similar and yet dissimilar parts of a whole that was so captivating, so enchanting...

He'd fallen all right. As few of the hapless

caballeros had *ever* fallen for the seductive señoritas who'd turned out to be heartless in their laughter, fickle in their affections, thoughtless in their seductions.

But Tina...Tamale Tina...was no señorita of old. There was no incensed father...none that he knew of, anyway...and no gun wielding brothers. She was no demure and saucy señorita with the heart of a siren. And he...

Had fallen hard. Fallen completely. Fallen forever.

*He loved her.* And if that had been hard as hell to admit to himself, how in the devil was he ever going to be able to say it to her? How in the hell was he ever going to get up the gumption to ask her...as he knew beyond any doubt he was *going* to ask her...all the things he was going to need to ask her?

*How the hell was he ever in a million years going to...*

"You capture a band of smugglers right outside my windows," she declared, disbelief touching her eyes as well as her voice. "You capture a ring of thieves you've been stalking for weeks, and you say there's nothing to tell? That the whole episode was nothing?"

Gage felt himself flush again. Or felt his flush deepen, since he was pretty sure his face had stayed clotted with living, scalding color. "It really wasn't that much," he replied, unable suddenly to meet her sparkling, shimmering, enticing gaze. "Just the Collins ring coming down."

"So what you're telling me is that you can't talk about it?" she asked, and a note of suspicion crept back into her tone. "Because it's a police matter, and an open case, and all that?"

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He shrugged. Still couldn't work up the courage to look at her, though he sure as hell tried. "It's a pretty open and shut case. Collins and company have been fencing stolen jewels...diamonds, mostly...for years. Law enforcement has known about them for years, but could never catch them with anything. They were too clever. But we knew if we waited, they'd get careless. They'd decide they were safe, they'd outsmarted us, and they could relax because they'd continue getting away with it forever."

"And they did. Get careless."

Gage nodded. Shivered. Shuddered, as another deep-down bursting of white lightning caught his balls by surprise and set his pecker to hammering for real. In ways no flesh and blood pecker should ever be forced to hammer. And finally, knowing the desperate agony of his situation showed fully in his eyes, he managed to look at her. "Tina..."

"What?"

"We have to get out of here."

"Now?" she looked around, confused, as the waiter arrived at their table again, this time bearing plates of enchiladas and rellenos. As he set them down with a flourish...more food Gage didn't remember ordering, though he must have because once again it was his favorite...rellenos smothered in sour cream and the enchiladas in green chile. "But our food!" she protested.

Squirming a little, frantic to adjust himself again without looking like he was adjusting anything at all, Gage picked up his fork and stabbed an enchilada. "Can we kind of hurry?"

"For a first date," she said with another mock scowl that didn't come close to reaching her eyes, "this is turning out to be..."

"It's just...I don't mind if we talk, Tina. I know we have to talk, but could we just eat now? So we can get out of here, and..." His face flamed brighter. Flamed fatally bright. "Can we wait, and do the talking a little bit later?"

"Fine." She didn't sound as miffed as he'd thought she'd be. "But can you at least tell me if you did find diamonds in all that stuff you hauled out of Collins' antique store?"

Against all odds, against all probability, he found a way to live with himself. With his pecker. "Oh yeah," he said, sniffing appreciatively before taking the first bite of enchilada and even in his distraught and distressed condition finding he was able to savor it, savor the tomatoey-cheesy-green chile deliciousness in exactly the way he wanted to...planned to...savor his Tamale Tina in just a little while. "We found loads of diamonds. We found all the evidence we'll ever need to put Collins and his pals away for a good, long time. And return some very valuable gemstones to some very upset citizens, too."

"Were they in the Indian?"

"What?" Pausing with his second bite in mid-air, Gage searched her face questioningly.

"The diamonds. Were they hidden inside that God-awful, burnt to a crisp wooden Indian?"

"Oh. No. That thing is solid as a rock. We found everything we'd been looking for inside some of the smaller items. An antiques expert the Department



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hires as an expert witness spotted several porcelain statuettes as forgeries, so we smashed them. And there they were. Diamonds. Thousands of dollars of them, embedded inside what turned out to be plaster of Paris made to look like antique porcelain."

"But are you sure nothing was hidden inside that Indian? Because when that feather broke off, it looked to me like it could be the way to open..."

"Tina." Gage groaned for real, this time. In a way no one at all could mistake as his pecker shot him another warning that he'd ignored it for too long. That he'd ignored its needs for far too long, and it wasn't about to be ignored any more. Not without the most dire of consequences. "Eat?" he begged, a note of very real desperation quivering in the word. "So we can go?"

## Chapter Eighteen

*So they could go.*  
He'd had to ask her twice.

She'd been a little dense, there. A little slow on the uptake. But once she'd gotten the message...once she'd looked into Gage's eyes and seen it flaming there, bright and unmistakable, for all the world and her in particular to see...

The day had turned deep-blue by the time they stepped out of La Fonda. And then it had begun to darken inexorably around the edges, well on its way to full and star-drizzled night. And the air had begun to cool as they strolled toward the plaza.

Well, okay. They really didn't stroll. Gage seemed too worked up to stroll, as she'd only just realized he'd been worked up through most of their somewhat abbreviated meal in the hotel's restaurant. He seemed compelled to make a headlong dash toward...she wasn't sure *where*.

"Gage!" she said, touching his arm.

"What?" He seemed not only compelled, but distracted too. And there could be no question at all by what.

It was the same thing that had been bothering her

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almost from the instant she'd peered out through the archway from the back room of her shop and seen him standing in the middle of it, looking more out of place and more hopelessly, decidedly masculine even than she'd remembered in the midst of all the shimmering, sequined silks and satin lingerie that were her stock in trade.

She thought he was feeling the same needs she felt and *had* felt.

She thought he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Thought he wanted her physically, anyway, though she was just as certain he felt all the rest of it, too...the yearning to have this be something more than just another of those quick episodes of hot and certainly fulfilling, yet not quite *complete* encounters of a purely sexual kind.

She'd thought that was what he wanted when she'd stood in the back room and wished with all her heart that he'd give her another chance. To apologize, if nothing else. For being so rude and so unforgiving the last time she'd seen him. And then there he'd been. And it was at that moment that she realized just being together, just encountering each other in the way they were only predestined by fate and their own bodies to encounter each other, just apologizing for what she'd done to him and said to him, wasn't going to be enough.

Not nearly enough.

Because the simple fact, the one incredibly complex and undeniable fact, was that she'd gone way beyond simple heated passion. Way beyond mere sexual attraction. At some point during the ten desolate and

seemingly endless days when Gage Prescott had left her alone and yearning, all of that desire for passion and gratification and instant satisfaction had deepened into something else. Something it was hard even now to admit to herself.

*Love.*

She did love him. Having never experienced the real thing before, she still had no doubt that this was it now...that this shivering, echoing emptiness that couldn't be eased and wouldn't be eased except by him was indeed love. In its purest form. Its sweetest and most multi-layered, its most unfathomable and deliriously promising form.

She loved him. But looking up at him in the dusky glow of lights that lined shimmering pathways of the plaza beneath its canopy of age-old trees, she had no idea how she could ever tell him. No idea *if* she could tell him. No idea at all if he'd be willing to listen even if a miracle happened and she found the courage to try to tell him.

Gage was looking down at her, a question shimmering in his eyes.

"You're running," she said, and hated the breathless note of her own voice. Because it was the note of a woman who'd either just finished an orgasm or was desperate to have one. "And I can't keep up. In these..." Leaning against the nearest tree trunk that was nearly as big around as she was, she lifted a foot and pointed to the four-inch heels the catalogs insisted were sexy, but which were in reality diabolically sinister instruments of torture when they started to pinch. The way they really, really, really

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pinched now.

Instantly, he looked contrite. "I'm sorry. It's just that...before God, Tina. We have to do *something*. We have to..."

"I know."

Finding hers, his hand closed around it. "I don't think I can last much longer. I think we have to find someplace close, Tina. I think...oh, God. These past ten days have been hell. That's all. Pure hell. I thought I could put it all behind me...thought I could put *you* behind me."

For a moment her heart faltered, and wasn't quite sure if it should fall or if it should keep on beating, bravely resolute through a rejection that was going to be bitter enough to kill. Bitter enough to blacken and extinguish even the most brilliant light of love only just being uncovered.

That wasn't what she'd wanted to hear or hoped to hear. Not in the least, not even when the nightmares of living out her life without him, of never finding anyone even remotely like him and never again knowing all the wonder and the delight he'd given her, had assailed her in the darkest parts of nights spent apart from him. But then he went on. And his next words made her heart decide it could soar again, higher than ever and with more lightness, more buoyant, white-lit, invigorating lightness than she'd felt in her life.

"But I couldn't do it," he said. "No matter what I did, no matter how hard I tried to tell myself it was all just a fling...a really ill-advised and poorly thought out fling...you were always there. Inside my mind.

Like you were already a part of me, and had burrowed down so deep inside me that I knew I'd never be apart from you entirely again. Do you...does this make any sense at all?"

Tilting her head back so that she could see his face even when he pulled her closer, pulled her almost up against the taut hardness of the body she'd never been able to put out of her mind, either, Tina nodded.

"Then you'll understand me when I say..."

"Where should we go?" she whispered urgently. "Back to the shop? But it's over there." Lifting a quaking and palsied hand, she pointed. "It's in the other direc..."

"No." He shook his head. "That shop is all we've known. All we've shared. And I want to...I want this time to be something else. I want it to be romantic."

"It wasn't before?"

Tugging at her arm, Gage started to drag her forward again. Along the side of the plaza, toward the Palace where the Indians sold their jewelry by daylight, but which murmured only with shadows now that night had fallen at last, fallen completely, and the Indians had gone home to await the morning. "My car's in the next block."

"Your car? Where are you planning..."

"My place," he said, and tugged harder. Tugged almost hard enough, if she hadn't been going along with him willingly, to jerk her arm right out of its socket.

*What about her place?* she wanted to cry out, but had no breath left to do anything now that he'd taken off at a near-run again, pulling her along in the wake of

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what might be an escape from everything either of them had ever known. Now that he was rushing through sparse evening crowds beneath the Palace's canopy...crowds that seemed to part magically before them as if sensing the abjectness of their need and the strength of their desperation.

Her place was only three blocks away. It was a little expensive, maybe, all the places in this oldest part of town were. But it was convenient, and she could walk to work. She didn't need to drive, didn't need to worry about where to park her car or even if she'd *find* a place to park. Didn't need to worry, when and if the time came, that she might not make it, might not...

They wouldn't need to drive to her place. Wouldn't need to waste the time. If only she could get him to reverse directions, if only she could get him to backtrack.

They'd already left the Palace and its shadows behind. Already plunged into soothing darkness along one of the side streets leading away from it when, without warning, Gage veered off the sidewalk. Dashing through an open iron gate, still pulling her along behind him and through its delicately wrought lacework, almost causing her to careen into the high adobe wall that held it, he swept her into the dark sweetness of a fountain-lit garden.

"Gage?" she asked, breathless once more, more breathless than ever. "Your car is here?"

"No." Taking her in his arms, he pulled her close again. "But we're never going to make it to my car. We're never going to make it to..."

*Anyplace at all.*

His voice trailed off as his lips found hers and closed over them. Trailed off into twilit nothingness that left only the thought of what he hadn't said hanging in the air around them...air grown suddenly heavy with perfumed promise as she opened her lips to welcome him in, welcome him back.

It had been too long.

*Ten days.*

*Much* too long.

It was as if they'd never kissed before. As if they were two strangers just meeting for the first, tenuous time. Two strangers only just encountering the nearness of each other and wondering what they were going to do about it, how they were going to react to it.

Gage tasted faintly of caramel...a natural flavor she remembered from before, the one that seemed to be an ever-resent part of him. And he tasted of wine. Crisp and tart, citrusy like the straw-colored Chardonnay with which they'd finished their meal.

He tasted not sweet. Not exactly. He tasted richly delicious, richly smooth.

As his mouth claimed hers, as his tongue reached and sought, seeming to agree that they really were strangers yet, with a tremendous amount to discover and learn about each other before they could be anything but strangers, Tina tremored with a sharp thrill of insight. Of a kind she'd never known before. Not about Gage, and not about any of the pathetically limited number of men who'd even tried to kiss her in the past, and entice her into belonging to them



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exclusively.

She'd already realized she hadn't known anything about him. Had long since realized that when she'd kissed him before, the last time she'd kissed him and done other things with him that now seemed more the fabric of some fantastical and far-fetched fantasy than of any reality she'd actually lived, he'd been someone else. Someone he'd only pretended to be, and someone who'd never existed at all.

But now, as he backed her away from the wrought-iron gate and the dim glow of light in the street beyond, as he backed her deeper and deeper into the private sanctity of someone's midnight-dark garden, as he backed her closer and ever closer to the whispering melody of the blue-lit fountain at the garden's center, she realized he hadn't really been pretending at all.

Because even when he'd been wearing his disguise, even when he'd been pretending to be what he most decidedly was not, he'd been honest, too. In his own way, he'd been revealing to her the truest and innermost parts of what made him himself all along.

"Tom..." he murmured, never removing the sweet and succulent, Chardonnay-brisk warmth of his mouth from the hunger of hers.

*Tom?*

*What the hell?*

That didn't make any sense. Not even in the topsy-turvy world of misdirection in which she'd found herself a little more than ten days before. Not even in this new and scintillating world in which dreams had become reality and reality had been banished,

hopefully forever, to the realm of dreams meant only to be forgotten.

*What the hell was he trying to...*

Then he finished what he'd started. "Tamale Tina." Dragging his lips away from hers for the very briefest of seconds, he reached for the waistband of her skirt. Reached to pull her full-sleeved and bare-shouldered Mexican gauze blouse free and then lift it. Laughing a little, he slipped his hands beneath the soft material and cupped them around her breasts. Cupped them around bare flesh that first seemed to shrink with exposure to the cooling night air, then seemed in the very next second to sizzle as his thumbs, callused and rough but gentle and kind stroked whispering circles around and across the peaks of her nipples.

"Wh...aat?" she gasped, nearly drowned in the sudden tide of sensation that flowed from his thumbs into her. "What do you mean by..."

"That's what I used to call you." Ducking his head, Gage located one of the suddenly aroused and instantly too-sensitive nipples and took it into his mouth. "In my mind," he murmured when he backed away again, his lips stroking more of those soft and utterly incendiary circles across flesh laid waste, flesh left wanting. "That's how I used to think of you, and Tina..."

"Wh...aat?"

He laughed again. Softly, as he flicked a nipple into screaming arousal with a single, quick and darting motion of his tongue. "I was right."

Gasping, no longer able to see clearly, no longer able to hear anything but the soft plashing of the

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fountain that in a single indrawn and never-exhaled breath became not a soft splash at all, but the thunder of a waterfall plunging thousands and thousands of feet from rockiest headland into deepest, darkest, most primeval and most elemental ocean, Tina curled her fingers into the freshly-cut softness of Gage's dark red hair. She curled them, and she clutched at him. Clutched, so he wouldn't think of letting go...wouldn't even be tempted to let go now that he'd...she'd...

He didn't. Let go. Laughing again, he only paused for the scantest of moments to repeat the name he'd called her. "Tamale Tina," he whispered around the softness of a chuckle, continuing to explore her breasts...both of them now, one after the other and then back to the first again...with the maddening softness of his swirling tongue.

He'd eased her down onto the curved, carved rim of the fountain...a rim wide enough and perfectly shaped to be a seat for lovers.

*Or a bed?*

"Gage," she whispered.

He gave no sign that he'd noticed.

"Gage!"

And still no sign.

"What about the peo..." Gasping, she was unable to finish for a moment when his teeth grazed the rosy skin around a nipple and began to tease it lightly, tease it persistently and determinedly. "What about the people, Gage?" In vain, she tried to push him away. In vain not only because he refused to leave but because her own actions, her own urging of hands

planted against broad and determined shoulders, was only halfway there. Only halfway strong. As if she didn't really mean it. Didn't really want him to go at all.

Which wasn't so far from the truth.

"What about the people in the house?" she whispered, the sound rising to a subtly excited, audibly nervous peak. "What if they look out the window, and..."

He laughed again. As softly as ever. His breath steamed against the chill paleness of exposed skin. "I'm not going to be able to wait," he murmured, abandoning his attentions to her breast.

"But shouldn't we at least..."

Once again, she couldn't finish. Couldn't even think of finishing, when the hand that had so recently played at her breast slipped down and down. When it located the hem of her skirt and lifted, doing momentary battle with soft and billowing folds that first seemed to seek to stymie him but then, true to promise and true to experience, allowed him to find his way beneath. And up. To the thin elastic of fragile lace panties.

*Another pair of Lady Godivas. Down the tubes.*

And who in the hell cared, anyway?

Who in the entire murmuring, plashing, pulsing and quivering world gave one hoot in hell about something as inconsequential as a sixteen-dollar pair of panties when her shop was full of them and when Gage's hand, when his tormenting, teasing fingers...

She heard lace rip. Felt elastic stretch, and stretch, and stretch. Felt it finally give way beneath the strain

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he'd placed upon it. Felt the resulting smoothness of cool night air on flesh that was no longer cool. That had never...not really...been cool since the very first instant he'd done what he was about to do now. Since the very first time he'd...

Tina sucked in a shaky little breath as Gage's fingers flicked across the flesh that waited so impatiently for him.

"We'll have to trust the people," he murmured, shifting slightly on the marble bench that was rapidly growing cold and uncomfortable, pulling away from her enough that he could fumble quickly, with fingers that already had lost much of their ability to do anything but fondle the waiting eagerness of her. Moving away enough that he could release himself with the tiniest of telltale zipping noises and then, a second later, moving over her. Moving atop her.

"This isn't good," he murmured after no more than a second. And lifting her easily, her skirt still billowing around her in a way that left all of her...all of that part of her...exposed, and ready. "We don't want to fall into the fountain."

No. Biting her lip, Tina nearly laughed. *We certainly don't.*

*We wouldn't want the water to boil away in an instantaneous cloud of steam.*

Unaware that it had narrowly escaped a quick and scalding death by depletion, the fountain continued to babble away happily as he lowered her to a small scallop of grass next to a row of sculpted shrubs. Her arm flung out as he did, and she heard a small clatter...a clay-upon-clay sound that seemed

prolonged and enormous in the fountain-murmured night and had her glancing fearfully at the two or three faintly-golden windows at this side of the townhouse.

But no more lights came on. No curtain twitched, and no angry resident appeared to demand they leave, demand to know what they'd thought they were doing here in the first place.

All remained silent behind the high and thick adobe wall that separated this private patch of loveliness from the street beyond. All remained hushed in preparation for what was to come next, and on the softest drift of night breeze, Tina smelled the sharp and piercing aroma of crushed geranium from the pot she'd just upended.

And then the daydream ended.

*Or did it begin?*

Murmuring softly, sounds that conveyed wordless meanings and an infinite endlessness of daydreams beginning as other daydreams did indeed reach their end, Gage came to her.

She felt the tiniest brush of his flesh against hers. She felt the tip of him, tantalizing her, and at the same moment felt every muscle in her body tense slightly and then relax. Getting ready for the softly steaming currents that would very soon begin inside her. Begin to flow from her. Begin to let Gage know he was welcome to her, and she'd waited for him.

Begin to let him know he was all she'd *ever* waited for.

## Chapter Nineteen

**T**here were better places than someone's side yard so near the street.

There were many, many, better places, and he should be remembering he was a cop. He should be conscious of that, and of how it would look if he was caught here, on private property that lay in such close proximity to a public thoroughfare, with his pecker buried deep inside a woman who up until a minute or two ago had had a reputation as nothing but a respectable and law-abiding citizen.

He should be aware. *Should* be.

But in the instant he touched Tina, brushing the throbbing and pounding, neglected head of himself against the softness that awaited it, already misted in preparation for it, he couldn't be concerned with such mundane things.

He couldn't be concerned with anything except what he was about to do. What he meant to do on a regular and frequent basis for the rest of his life, if he had anything to say about it.

Slowly and deliberately, with exquisite caution and extreme anticipation, he entered her. This time, unlike any of the times before, he entered her slowly, the

stroking motion of his body taking her at a speed that allowed him to glory in her, marvel at her, thrill to every burgeoning of moisture and every clinging of her dream-soft flesh upon his.

She'd been beautiful in his dreams. More than beautiful. But all the desperate and longing dreams of the past ten days...the most desolate and alone days of his life...were nothing compared to what he found in her now. Nothing compared to the silken loveliness of her body as it opened before him, no longer resistant or virginal but now tuned to his presence. Now tuned to his every need and ready...make that *eager*...to meet each of them.

He entered her. And despite the desperation to have her again, have her all at once as he'd only moments ago thought he would have to have her, Gage discovered he was able to take his time this time. He discovered how delicious it could be to take his time. To advance upon her one nerve-wracking fraction of an inch at a time, stopping often to savor often. To then advance upon her again as if she was yet-uncharted territory he wanted to explore. Wanted to capture and record so that not a single moment, not a fraction of a moment of what would be the experience of his lifetime would ever be lost, or forgotten.

Gage took her slowly. Breath halted somewhere deep in his chest, his voice rendered useless by a sudden, hard seizing of the muscles in his throat, unable to swallow, even, he took her.

And took, and took, and took.

And once her initial protests had stilled, once she'd



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settled deep into the fragrance of grass that surrounded her...surrounded them...she opened completely for him. Just as he'd dreamed she would. Just as he'd dreamed it had been meant to happen, right from the very start.

Sighing softly, her dark eyes no more than great and glistening wells of deep and untapped emotion in darkness that had settled over this small garden, this one earthly bit of paradise, Santa Fe style, Tina gazed at him in silence. Because there was no longer any need for words. No need for now, perhaps for ever.

He could feel it flowing from her in waves. Could feel it flowing through her and over her.

That she loved him. Though the time had not yet come to say it. Though the time might never come to say it or to hear it, because love was a fragile thing. Love was the fleeting light of sun shining into the deepest red-rock canyons, love was the brief and all that much sweeter bursting of spring upon open desert. Love was a shooting star, a will-o-the-wisp, a blink of an eye that could erase the shimmer of a look almost before it began.

Love was all of that. And it might not last.

But for now...for the moment...

"Tina," he whispered as a new tremor seized him. The newest of tremors and yet the oldest and most time-honored, it began deep inside him as nothing more than a suggestion and a promise. That whatever happened in the future, whatever happened in the moments to come and in the thousands of moments after them, this moment belonged to them. This moment was his, and in it Tina was his. For as long as

he could prolong it. As long as...

But not long enough.

As he thrust deeper still, reaching his limit and Tina's, the dark and tight gathering within intensified. The tremors intensified, and the ache of holding them back and denying them transmitted itself into a pecker that only wanted...desperately needed...to satisfy itself right now. *And to hell with anything else. To hell with moments to come, promises to come, days and weeks and hours to come.*

Briefly, he cursed himself. Cursed his here-and-now desire to live exclusively in the present with no regard to what might happen if he would just be patient. Just be...

Beneath him, Tina began to move. Her body began to shudder and yet not shudder. Because this was a softer writhing. A more internal one that clasped the sweet silkiness of her flesh around him. That began its own swift massage designed to...

"Don't," he gasped. "No."

"But I..."

The sultry motions of her body...the most deliciously female body he'd ever encountered or ever found himself hoping to encounter...hadn't stopped. If anything, they'd only increased, only become a sinuous and insistent rippling of flesh both inner and outer as she groaned gently into his ear. As she pulled him down, tighter on top of her, and caught the lobe of it between her teeth so that she could nibble persistently. Insistently. Sending massive waves of pure and unadulterated fire right, straight to the struggling core of him.

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"Lie still." Using the full weight of his body, Gage tried to pin her to the green-scented grass.

But it was no use. "I c...can't," she whispered, her body only rippling beneath his with more determination. Only softening more, and misting more until...until...

Oh, God. *Until.*

*He wasn't going to make it.*

Tina Farrin had caught him. Hook, line and sinker. He didn't know how it had happened or exactly when. And if he could just tell her...just...

But as his body reached its height of anguished desire, as it speeded up its motions without his permission or consent, slipping back from her with the same delirious friction only to immediately plunge forward again, he knew he wouldn't be able to tell her. Maybe not ever. Because some things shouldn't be said. Some things were too dangerous to be said, some things were far too...

"I dreamed of this," she murmured. No longer holding so tightly to him with her hands, she raised them above her head. One of them snapped off a bright-red blossom from the pot she'd broken a moment or two before, and then came back, lifting the flower between his nose and hers.

Pungent, spicy, filled with more promise...of summers undreamed of, summers yet to come and beyond the realm of dreams...it was a scent that only heightened his awareness of the female flesh he plumbed. A scent that set his head to spinning and his senses to wandering, searching for the line between reality and the murmur that was Tina.

Once again, she shuddered around him and beneath him. And once again he answered with a shudder of his own. Another, deeper and darker warning of the end just about to come. And shuddering, he plunged. Deeper than ever before. Harder than he'd ever imagined.

He buried himself inside her and held himself there. Held her prisoner beneath him, but not still. Because nothing could still the movements of her. The slight liftings of head and shoulders as she strained, wordless and with soft moaning and pleading noises. As if she could impale herself more than he'd already done. As if she could have more of him than he'd already given...more than there was to give.

Something shivered deep inside him, where it mattered. Deep inside balls driven now to their limit and beyond by the sheer insanity of holding back...the sheer insanity of having exactly what he and they wanted right here, and yet continuing to deny it. Continuing to deny himself.

Something shivered, something broke, something rose up white-hot and scalding to fill all of him. Fill every bit and part, every parcel of him.

"Tina." Murmuring her name, Gage pressed his face hard against the side of her head, hard against her hair as if he'd never be able to survive without the scent of it, the scent of her. "Tina. Oh, God, Tina."

*He was in love, all right.*

The realization broke over him with the same fervent stroking of lightning he felt breaking within.

*He was in love with her. He was in love bad.*

And he could never tell her.

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He would never find the courage to say one, single word of what had risen up in his chest to smother him and make all forms of speech impossible again. How could that even be possible, when there was no way she could ever love him...no way a spectacularly beautiful, stunningly soft and clinging woman could ever love shy, backward, inept and bumbling Gage Prescott the way he loved her?

*No way.*

The aching of that realization was almost enough to override, almost enough to cancel out, everything else. Almost enough, even, to negate and vanquish the rising, steaming tide that was just about to burst from him as he began one more long and slow, one more torturously deliberate stroking of his fully engorged flesh into her welcoming depths.

Gage groaned.

And Tina shivered.

*It hadn't been like this before, had it? Those other times, in the back of her shop?*

This felt...different. This felt more potent. More intimate, somehow, as if...

Tina's breath caught in her throat as the idea began to take nebulous, indistinct and yet perfectly distinct, form inside her mind.

*As if he loved her?*

She tried to banish the thought, tried to tell herself it was ludicrous and impossible, tried to tell herself she'd been badly mistaken and was letting herself in for the worst possible kind of letdown if she even for a moment entertained the notion that...

But there it was. And it wouldn't be vanquished at

all.

The idea wouldn't do anything but grow, and grow, and grow, until it had reached proportions where it could no longer be ignored. Where she no longer thought she could avoid telling Gage Prescott everything she'd longed to tell him almost from the beginning. That she returned his feelings. That she returned them a hundredfold, a thousandfold. If only...

*She wanted him to tell her first.*

She wasn't at all sure why that should seem so important. But it was. It was incredibly important, undeniably and sacredly important that, after all the deceptions and uncertainties of the past, he be the one to break the silence and tell the truth first. Say the word first.

*Love.*

Clinging to him, making every effort to tighten herself around him in the way she'd long since discovered gave him kinds of pleasure she couldn't imagine because she'd surely never felt anything at all like them, Tina caught his shoulders with her hands. Crushing the battered geranium flower against his deep-blue jacket, she tried to lift herself. Onto him. Into him and against him.

But he was already as far inside her as it was possible for him to be.

He'd already taken her and he was holding her this very instant, his shaft claiming the very, the most secret, depths of her. His body shuddering atop her in the same way that loveliest and most intimate part of her shuddered and quivered within.

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He had already taken all she had to offer, and maybe a little more.

*And it wasn't enough!*

Crying out silently, a little desperately, inside her mind, Tina tried harder to lift herself to him and claim more of him. As his hips began to rotate, the hammering of her pulse spooled up to an outright thunder that surely he...surely the residents of this house whose private garden they'd borrowed for their own, and surely every one of the evening revelers in the plaza one block over...would be able to hear.

Tina lifted herself onto him and refused to let him go when he tried to back away from her. When he tried to deny her the length and the width that filled her so marvelously. So perfectly.

"No," she breathed into his ear, confirming with her voice everything she was telling him with her desperately-clinging, more needful than ever body. "And no, and no, and no."

"T...Tina." His body had begun to issue warnings. Sweet and hot warnings, trembling now with the first insidious signs of the convulsing passion about to come. "I c...can't...you've got to...to let me..."

"No." Catching the lobe of his ear as she had before, when her soft and repetitive nibbling had seemed to drive him to some all-new and unplanned height of sheer, unbridled ecstasy, Tina refused to let him go at all. Refused to let him back away, refused to let him even try to stroke away the agony she sensed had possessed him. Agony that might be about to kill him in the sweetest, the most essential and

quintessential way possible. "No."

Atop her, Gage groaned. It was a deep sound, a hoarse and slightly harsh feral sound. Of a man gone mad. Of a man trapped in a body gone mad.

And Tina was delighted...more than delighted, as she clenched her internal flesh even tighter around and against that which she'd determined to make her own, special prisoner...to aid in the madness. To do everything and anything she could to see that the madness went on. And on, and on. Because somewhere, in some subconscious place she'd barely recognized or even been aware of until this precise instant, she'd already decided.

Gage Prescott was to be hers.

Absolutely hers.

And if madness was the way...if madness was the best way...

She would instill it in him. She would infuse him with it, permeate him with it, drown him in it. Because he *was* going to be hers. Forever, in exactly the way he was hers at this moment and in this sweetly-scented, burgeoning and fountain-lit place.

*Madness.*

Laughing softly in response to the need she heard rising up in his groans, Tina tightened herself again. Tightened arms, and the legs she'd lifted to wrap around his waist, and the woman's flesh that had more power to tighten and hold than could ever have been supposed.

She tightened. She clung. And, feeling the tremors as the warm and flooding essence of him rose to the surface and then overflowed, flooding into her and



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filling her completely, filling her as even the still-imbedded length and breadth had never been able to fill or to satisfy entirely, she laughed again. Softly.

"No more urgency," she murmured, aware that he might not hear and almost certainly would not be able to answer. Not when caught in the throes of such exquisite and mortal surrender to everything she'd demanded of him.

But incredibly, he tried.

"No..." he seemed to agree, gasping heavily, the air rasping in and out of his throat in thick, sharp bursts. "More."

Laughing even more softly, Tina allowed him to retreat the tiniest bit. She controlled him now. Controlled his every movement with the legs that surrounded him, and his every thought and wish with a mind that had infiltrated his. She allowed him to slide backward for the briefest of seconds, his shaft pulsing in desperate rhythms as it pumped its life-essence for her. And then she jerked him forward again. Tightening, convulsing on her own as the sudden flood tide of response ripped from every tissue of her, Tina pulled him back to her, slamming his hard-muscled body tight against hers, laughing harder and then softly again as the delirium increased. As it spread and blossomed, taking over every part of her.

*Every part*, she hoped with everything with which it was possible to hope, *of him*.

"Lace..." His voice was barely recognizable. Tight, strained with the paroxysms seizing his body and shaking it from core to outermost layer of flesh, he

seemed barely able to utter the word.

*Lace?*

Was that what he'd said?

Yes.

Instinctively, or maybe because the idea had already been implanted somewhere deep inside her subconscious, Tina understood what he was trying to say as he labored over her, surrendering up the very last of himself in abject defeat and simultaneous superb victory.

*The shawl.*

*The vintage Schiaparelli.*

He'd been fascinated by it before. Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, gazing at it with glazed and barely comprehending eyes, he'd seemed mesmerized by it. As, no doubt, Schiaparelli herself had intended her creation to daze and mesmerize any man who fell beneath the spell of its shimmering beauty.

"Wear..." His voice thickened even more as his body lost its ability to maintain his movements. As it came to rest finally, with the length of him still deep inside her but no longer quite as long, no longer quite as vital or as potent as a moment or two before. "Would you..."

One more time, Tina laughed. As softly as before, and just as seductively, even if it might no longer be possible for her to seduce. "You want me to wear the Schiaparelli shawl for you?"

Gage nodded once, his head jerking almost as uncontrollably as all the rest of him had jerked earlier. "And nothing...else?"

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In reply, Tina released her legs and wrapped her arms around him. Holding him tenderly now, she cradled him against her. Still atop her, the shaking and shivering spasms beginning gradually to depart his spent body.

She felt him trying to move. Sensed that he wanted to roll away from her, wanted to roll to his back onto the grass so that he could regain his strength and his will to go on.

But she wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

She wasn't ready to do anything but lie just as they were, intertwined and intrinsic parts of each other, while she dreamed about what she would do tomorrow. With that shawl. And what he would do when she did it.

What the two of them would do together, with the help of a scrap of vintage golden lace created long ago in Paris. Created by a woman who'd known instinctively what glamour meant. What seductiveness meant.

What the loveliest of loveliness meant.

## About the Author

A native of a small town not far from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Evelyn Starr always had a passion for the glamorous, the exotic, the sensuous. And she's always been willing to travel the world in search of them. Among her favorite places are Boldt's Castle in the Thousand Islands, Tasmania, Australia's tropical Queensland, and all the nooks and crannies of the Rocky Mountains she now calls home.

Like her wanderlust, Evelyn's fascination with words and stories began at an early age. She remembers being able to read and write before she started school, and by the time she'd finished first grade, she was writing her own little one-page stories. Following graduation from high school, she left her small-town home and hasn't looked back. She majored in journalism, romance, and adventure, and eventually married her college sweetheart, who remains the most romantic, and the most adventurous, hero of them all.