

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Charlene
Teolia

Only Human
THE STAR

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Only Human

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ONLY HUMAN

Charlene Tegli

Author's Note on The Star

The Star is often the most beautiful card in the Tarot deck, with an image of water. It represents hope, healing, unexpected help and clarity of vision. The heroine of *Only Human*, Elaine Llewellyn, finds all four of these things in the hero, Damon Thorne. In the story, as in *The Fool's Journey*, this card points the way but it's up to Elaine to take action to receive the promise of The Star and her happily ever after.

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Prologue

A faint odor of turpentine, a north-facing window and scattered canvasses leaning against odd surfaces would have proclaimed the rectangular room as an artist's studio even without the presence of the artist.

However, the artist was in fact resident, and his persona seemed to fill the room in a way that went far beyond the physical space he occupied in front of an easel.

The light was failing and the artist worked furiously to keep pace, mixing a color in the center of his palette and applying a bold slash of color to the nearly complete portrait of a woman.

It might have been a trick of the fading light, or an artistic suggestion of shadow that subtly overlaid the woman with an impression of darkness. The curve of her face, turned away and gazing at a distant point outside the painting's frame, gave her a further sense of remoteness, even though the posture was one more suggestive of passion and the figure was depicted nude.

The woman of desire and darkness reclined in the frame as if seeking escape from her temporal boundaries, as if she resented the artist's effrontery in capturing her there, and waited for him to lay down his brush and turn his back before making good her escape.

A final touch of gold gave the woman a contrasting brush of light from a point outside the frame, as if the painter wanted to reach in and diffuse the shadow that lay over her. Light and dark played over her body in a silent, eerie contest for dominion.

The light didn't reach to her face.

For a time, the man stood and gazed at his creation. Jet-black hair hung between his shoulders, tied back with a leather thong to keep it neatly out of the way of his work. He worked bare to the waist, and the dying light outlined sharply developed muscles

and intensified the coppery glint of his skin. Worn denim jeans hugged his lean hips and thighs. His feet were bare, spread wide for balance on the old wooden plank floor.

Finally, he set aside the palette, palette knife and brush, and wiped his hands on a cloth.

The painting was distinctive, sharply focused and vivid, and deeply surreal in the way dream images are often vivid beyond the limits of real life.

Just as the image had come to him that morning when the wind rose with the first warnings of the approaching tropical depression.

He stood looking at her for some time. Then he picked up the brush again and signed with a bold slash.

Chapter One

The sullen gray sky loomed heavily over the twisting, rutted highway. That is, it did whenever it was visible through the tangle of branches overhead. Which wasn't often, but often enough to tell Elaine that the weather was a perfect match for her mood.

With a soft sound of self-castigation, she wondered for the umpteenth time what in the world she was doing in this apparently forgotten corner of Maine, besides bouncing painfully over frost heaves left in the concrete from the previous winter, ostensibly in search of her bed-and-breakfast.

Elaine was beginning to think that the place didn't exist.

Certainly it couldn't be doing much of a booming business if this was any example of what a guest had to go through to get there.

Get there. She made a rude sound of frustration at the phrase. It seemed she really couldn't get there from here. No direct roads to anything, anywhere in this oppressively humid, claustrophobically wooded landscape. Of course not. That would have made it far too simple, she fumed.

Then she caught herself. She was doing it again.

Making a conscious effort to relax, Elaine carefully loosened her white-knuckled grip on the rented sedan's steering wheel and breathed out, imagining the tension flowing out of her too-slender frame with the controlled breath.

She wasn't in a race, she reminded herself. It really didn't matter if she didn't arrive at the B&B until after dark, or if she didn't arrive at all. She wasn't on her way to a meeting. She was on vacation.

Vacation. Her lips compressed into a wry twist at the word. Enforced leave of absence was more like it. Although at the moment, exile seemed like a more appropriate description.

Exiled from the bustle of Boston's international business community to the lonely wilds of Maine that were beginning to give Elaine some unwanted insight into the source of Stephen King's gruesome imaginings.

It was all too easy to imagine that instead of the promised comfort and charm of a country B&B with a fifteenth-century French bed, she was headed towards an encounter with a psychotic backwoodsman or something even more unspeakably evil.

Instantly, the imaginary scenario sparked a chain of worries. She hadn't left a will. She hadn't left an outline of her itinerary, and her body wouldn't be found until the car rental was overdue. If she did live through the encounter, she'd have to explain to Avis' insurance agents and she didn't have —

"Stop it," Elaine said out loud.

Her hands were clenched painfully around the leather-wrapped steering wheel once again, knuckles showing whitely in contrast to the soft, brown leather.

Mickey's words came back to her in a gentle echo.

"Karoshi."

"Bless you," she'd answered politely.

"Don't get funny with me. Karoshi. That's what you're after."

"Does it go with sushi?"

"It goes with a death certificate. Sudden death from overwork among the Japanese. They were taking the business world by storm, and then they started dropping at their desks like flies."

She hadn't had a snappy comeback for that one.

"You're heading for trouble, Lainie, so you are." The burly Irishmen's pale blue eyes were concerned.

"You're full of it, you big Mick, so you are," she'd mocked in a lilting imitation of the typically Irish turn of phrase.

"Sure, and I am," he'd agreed. "But don't be changing the subject on me. You're burning out, Lainie m'girl."

She wasn't, she'd argued. She'd lost a little weight, true, but nothing to worry about. Maybe she didn't sleep well, but who could sleep in the city during the summer heat? As for his statement that she was too tense, too drawn, well, Boston traffic would make a person with nerves of steel uptight, the way those drivers cut each other off and disregarded red lights and lane markings as if it was downtown Bangkok, for heaven's sake —

"Lainie," Mickey had cut in. "You're taking a leave of absence. Now."

And he'd taken away her beeper, her Palm Pilot and her laptop with its wireless connection to the office network and pushed her out the door, leaving her staring at the solid oak portal and muttering plaintively, "But what about the presentation for the Irish trade board?"

Maybe he'd had a point, she admitted to herself now. Tension rode her like a second skin, clinging as oppressively as the cloying, humid air.

Such a small thing, getting lost on the way to a B&B. It was hardly important enough to get upset about. She hadn't always been so — so *uptight*. Had she? All that psychobabble about Type A personalities and the increasing rate of heart attacks among female executives didn't have anything to do with her, Elaine Llewellyn. She knew what she was doing. She was in control. It was this damned highway, and the ridiculously out-of-the-way bed-and-breakfast, and the incompetents responsible for road maintenance who should have been filling in the ruts and putting up at *least* the occasional road sign —

She was doing it again.

"I'm on vacation," Elaine said out loud, in a firm voice. "I am not on a schedule. I am not in a hurry. I am relaxed."

A low rumble of thunder greeted her announcement.

The first fat drops of rain splattered against the windshield minutes later. Then, as if some celestial dam had burst, the lowering sky darkened and let loose with a torrential downpour that shrank her range of visibility to mere feet beyond the sedan's hood.

Well, that was just wonderful, she fumed. This was perfect. She'd be sure and remember to tell Mickey all about her *relaxing* retreat from endless rounds of research and meetings and interviews and late-night sessions at her computer. The miserable traitor.

Instead of being safely, comfortably ensconced in her private office, she was navigating unfamiliar twists and turns on a narrow, winding country road that was hazardous under the best of conditions, let alone in driving rain and zero visibility.

Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel once again, but Elaine didn't bother to try to unclench her hands. Instead, she concentrated on peering through the windshield in search of something, anything resembling the landmarks she'd been told to look for when she'd booked her room.

Maybe the trip was a bad idea. But she'd felt so lost, so alone in her apartment without the drugging oblivion of work and more work to block out the silence and the emptiness that stretched ahead of her.

Without work, she didn't know what to do with herself. Without a schedule, she'd felt ridiculously anxious. Without reports to read and figures to wade through, sifting data until a pattern emerged, her mind had been left unoccupied and the unthinkable had happened.

She'd started to feel.

And she'd felt out of control.

Without the rigid, self-imposed control of her schedule and her workload, she'd been left teetering on the edge of chaos, threatened by the dark maelstrom of memories she couldn't afford to relive. Like a wild beast kept chained and imprisoned, emotions had stirred to life and prowled restlessly, looking for a way out past the barriers she'd

erected as protection against the devastation that could strike if she allowed herself to feel.

Safety lay in compartmentalizing her thoughts, rigidly imposing order, and keeping an impenetrable barrier around the dangerous realm of emotions with a clearly posted warning—*beyond here be dragons*.

She wasn't ever going back to dragon country.

At the very thought Elaine shivered, suddenly cold in spite of the heat and humidity unrelieved by the downpour.

She wasn't going to think about it. Instead, she was going to find salvation in the security of her planned tour of Maine's coastline. She'd chosen a series of stopovers far enough apart to keep her occupied with driving and sightseeing day after day.

She was going to keep busy, but not push so hard that she couldn't also manage to relax and enjoy herself at the same time.

She was not going to spend her time thinking about the past. The past was dead and buried.

But I'm not, some corner of her mind protested.

No. She wasn't. She was alive, and her life was just the way she wanted it, no matter what nosy so-called friends like Mickey had to say about it. And that was enough thought on the subject.

With firm control, Elaine focused her attention on the problem at hand, namely navigating the twisting road.

A problem that abruptly became far more difficult when a jagged flash of lightning split the darkness and almost simultaneously a thunderous crack filled the air.

Then there was another crash as her phantom worries about the rental car took on form and substance. A tree trunk landed heavily across the road, bounced once against the sedan's hood and fell to the road again, effectively blocking it. Once she'd come

abruptly to a complete stop, she could only stare at it through the windshield, unable to fully process what a close call she'd just had.

If she'd been driving any faster...if the tree had been bigger...if the air conditioner on her own car hadn't died, causing her to get a rental...

A sudden vivid image of her little white Renault, crumpled like a soft-drink container under the lightning-felled tree, with her inside the twisted frame, appeared in her mind with nightmarish clarity.

Well, it hadn't happened, Elaine told herself firmly. It didn't matter how, or why, or that she hadn't seen the near-miss coming. She was safe.

For a long time she simply sat there, frozen and shaken. Finally, she shut off the headlights and the engine and stepped out into the rain to eye the damage.

One good look told her in no uncertain terms that she wasn't going anywhere. And the tree now blocked off both lanes. She'd have to leave the car there and call for a tow truck, after a road crew came along to remove the tree.

Arms wrapped around herself in a futile attempt to ward off the wind and rain, she glanced through the trees, hoping for some sign of human habitation.

There. A light. And as long as it wasn't the Bates Motel, she'd have someplace to take refuge from the storm. It might even be her bed-and-breakfast.

Taking her keys and pocketbook, Elaine trudged towards the beckoning light and eventually found a winding driveway leading towards it from the road. The name on the mailbox was unreadable in the darkness. She hesitated a moment, then shrugged and headed up the drive.

It was probably some nice, old couple who'd be happy to rescue her. A couple who liked to play Scrabble. A nice retired pair who'd fuss over her and tell her to come in and get dry.

Not a homicidal maniac.

Of course not.

Another flash of lightning, and Elaine pushed aside vague, half-formed fears about what might be waiting for her in the face of what definitely threatened her. Not wanting to be caught by another storm-struck tree, she put her head down and ran towards the source of light ahead.

A shambling farmhouse sat at the end of the driveway, looking as if it had defied the encroaching forest for two hundred years and couldn't hope to hold out much longer. Still, it looked safe and dry. Elaine climbed the flagstone steps and hammered on the solid wooden door.

An answer was so long in coming that she'd nearly decided the house was empty.

But just when she was about to turn away, the door swung inward.

A man stood in the doorway, barely visible before another flash of lightning brightened the yard for an instant. Long enough to see him clearly. A forbidding-looking man with stern, chiseled features below straight blue-black hair. Fathomless black eyes. An unsmiling mouth. Broad shoulders, muscles that might have been sculpted, a hard, flat stomach leading down to no man's land.

No woman's land.

Dragon country.

Chapter Two

Elaine stared at him in silence, caught between the storm and the man, not certain which represented the greater threat.

Finally, he broke the silence with a surprisingly gentle voice. "You're late. You should have been here before dark."

Then he indicated the door and waited for her to precede him. Of course, Elaine thought stupidly. The bed-and-breakfast. She must have found it after all.

"Sorry," she said through chattering teeth. "I think I took a wrong turn."

The man looked at her and said nothing.

It disturbed her. Enough that she babbled on in useless explanation, "The directions were fine. Really. But I missed my exit and had to backtrack, and I got lost."

He just looked at her, expressionless. Inscrutable.

Then he touched her shoulder as if he wanted to reassure her. "No. You aren't lost. Just later than I expected. I was worried about you in the storm."

"Oh."

"We've had flood warnings. The water level's higher than normal from the heavy snow this winter."

"Oh," Elaine said again. Well, of course, her host would be concerned about a tourist wandering around in the dark in a storm when flood warnings were being issued. Bad for business.

"Well, I'm here now," she stated, unnecessarily.

"Yes," the man agreed. His hand brushed her shoulder again, wiping away the rain. The touch carried an imperceptible something that disquieted her. The unhurried motion seemed to give him time to savor the slick wetness of rain in contrast to the bare

hollow of her collarbone before gliding over clinging silk. It was an aware touch. A learning touch. The way a lover might touch her.

The way one once had. Long ago. In the past, now dead and buried, when she hadn't known enough to stay out of dragon country.

Elaine jerked away, knowing her reaction was out of proportion to the gesture and yet unable to stop herself. "Don't." The word was cold, clipped.

He drew back but stated the obvious. "You're wet."

She was aware of that. She was also, thanks to him, aware of the gooseflesh that covered her bare arms and the way the lemon yellow silk tank top lay plastered against her, revealing every curve and the puckered nipples that stood sharply out.

That unwanted reflex embarrassed her. Defensive, she wrapped her arms around herself, shielding herself from those eyes. She had the uneasy feeling that they saw entirely too much.

"You're cold and soaked," her host stated in a gentle tone, not moving. "You need to dry off and get warmed up."

For some reason, he reminded her of a patient hunter, coaxing a wary creature of the forest to trust him. Making no sudden movements, as if taking care not to startle her, he removed the faded blue denim shirt that hung open on his shoulders and placed it around hers without actually touching her.

It was worn soft from repeated washing and warmed from his skin. It wrapped her in warmth and comfort and something that felt like protection. Maybe even possession.

"Thank you," she managed, embarrassed beyond words but thankful for the concealing folds of the garment. Even if wearing the shirt he'd just removed did carry an intimacy that disturbed her almost as much as his innocent hand on her shoulder.

Elaine sighed inwardly at herself. She was being ridiculous, reading too much into the gesture. He was her host, for heaven's sake. He wasn't making a pass at her. He certainly wasn't going to force himself on her. He was simply trying to be courteous to a

guest, extending the same hospitality to her that he would to anyone caught in a similar predicament.

He could hardly have his guests coming down with pneumonia. Bad for his professional image. Certainly not the way to build a reputation for a restorative vacation spot.

“Come this way,” the man said, and without waiting to see if she was following, he turned and headed towards the curving staircase. Still, Elaine had the uneasy notion that he was completely aware of her and would know instantly if she weren’t behind him.

Mickey was right. She did need a vacation. Her nerves were obviously shot if she was imagining things like that.

Uptight, that was her. Worrying about everything and acting like a textbook obsessive-compulsive. Still, she did think her boss could have eased her into this instead of taking away all her work and making her go cold turkey.

But she knew even as she thought it that she would never have slowed down. She would have found ways to do “just one more little thing” until she was back to an eighty-hour workweek.

Well, she liked the pace, Elaine protested to herself.

But there was no arguing that her nerves were shot. Feeling slightly sheepish, she meekly followed her host and made a silent vow to behave herself and take things slowly.

She’d rest, sightsee a little, maybe do some shopping, and then get back to her job. One great advantage to consulting work, there was endless variety. Every project was something new. There was never any danger of the mindless tedium of repetition that might allow her mind to wander. No, the endless streams of data to research and organize kept her mind fully occupied.

And maybe that had led to a sort of mental backlash, with wild imaginings racing through her brain. Repression, was that the word for it? Elaine debated that briefly and

then nearly ran into the man's broad back when he stopped inside the room that must be hers.

As if to forestall her complaint that this wasn't the room she'd asked for, he turned to her and said, "This room has a fireplace. You'll be more comfortable in here if we lose power."

She felt a pang of apprehension. "You have power failures out here?"

"Sometimes. But you'll be all right. There's an emergency light in the outlet and the oil lamp on the dresser is kept full. Matches beside it."

The man looked her over as he spoke and she wondered what he saw.

A bedraggled, too-thin blonde woman that might, under the right circumstances, have been attractive but never pretty. Nose too Roman, chin too stubborn, features too irregular in a white, pinched face. Mouth too tight from stress, faint bluish shadows under her eyes from lack of sleep.

At least the blue smudges matched her eyes, Elaine thought wryly. What else? Formerly crisp tailored linen and silk shorts and shirt in neutral navy and solid lemon yellow that shrieked conservative, and probably also compulsive, since nobody but a really-and-truly, Type-A-for-anal person wore such severe casual wear.

He was probably thinking that she looked like a hag.

He was probably more afraid to be alone with her than she was to be alone with him. And they did seem to be alone. She hadn't seen any signs of any other guests.

After a moment, he told her, "I've started the fire for you. Extra blankets are on the top shelf of the armoire if you need them. Towels are in the cupboard in the bathroom at the end of the hall."

"Thank you," Elaine said. The weather this time of year produced sudden temperature changes. Now that the storm had gone from threat to reality, the shorts and shirt that had been comfortable earlier left her shivering. In another few hours she might be looking for an extra blanket.

"No luggage?"

"In the car. I had an accident," she admitted, and realized that until then she'd almost forgotten about it. Instead, she'd been completely fixated on him. Obsessive and compulsive, indeed. How could she have forgotten a thing like a tree hitting her car, no matter what the man looked like?

He moved towards her so quickly that she didn't have time to back away, closing gentle hands over her shoulders, deep black eyes searching her face. "Are you hurt?"

He was too close, she thought, panicked. She could feel his body heat radiating towards her. She could smell the clean masculine scent, some combination of sun-warmed skin and pine and something else, an elusive animal scent, that lured her into wanting to move closer. Her mouth went dry. Feeling like she was talking through a wad of cotton wool, she managed to answer, "No. I'm fine."

Still, he didn't release her. "You're sure?"

And her wild imaginings decided that he could see all the way into her soul and knew that she was lying. That she was hurt, deep inside where it didn't show.

"I'm sure. Please let go of me," she said in a rush.

He did, but unhurriedly. The way he seemed to do everything. "All right. I'll get your suitcase. You take a shower and get warmed up."

He left after collecting her keys and a jumbled description of where she'd left the car. She stared after him, shaken more by the encounter than by the impact of a tree trunk crashing onto the hood of her rented car.

He seemed, for all his apparent gentleness, like a far greater menace than an irate insurance agent.

It took several minutes before she managed to gather herself and make her way on unsteady legs to the promised shower.

It occurred to her that she was still worrying and didn't show any signs of stopping.

Damon Thorne held the car keys she'd given him. The faint imprint of her personality, her presence, lay there in his hand, and he couldn't have stopped himself from closing his fist around it any more than he could have stopped the storm.

She was here.

If he had been a man given to emotional displays, he might have smiled. He might have shouted his triumph to the lightning-cut sky.

Instead, he merely closed his fist around the leather that belonged to her and walked with his usual measured strides to the car.

Her suitcase matched the key holder. Thorne noted that detail with a faint sense of tender amusement. She liked neatness and order. Liked things to match.

She also didn't like the dark. He'd begun to grow concerned when the skies darkened and she didn't arrive. He'd turned on the porch light for her and waited.

It seemed to Thorne that he had waited for her forever.

He wondered if she knew him, if she'd felt the shock of awareness and recognition he'd felt when he touched her. He hadn't been able to resist that, touching her, not when she was there in front of him and he could see her silk-covered, rain-dampened breasts, nipples tight and hard against the fabric. It had been all he could do not to cover them with his hands, stroking her nipples with his thumbs while the soft weight of her breasts filled his palms.

Desire. It raced through his blood, heated to the flash point by nothing more than the thought of her. Impatience followed. The woman he wanted was here, but he couldn't act on his desires just yet. He would be patient with her for the moment.

He would have to be. Because he was everything she feared most.

The power failed just as she finished rinsing her hair. Elaine opened her eyes to darkness, swore and groped for the knobs to turn off the shower.

The perfect ending to a perfect day, she thought. How hard would it be to find a towel in an unfamiliar place in total darkness?

She slid the shower curtain back and stepped out, taking care not to slip. Where was the towel bar? Elaine groped her way along the wall until her hands closed on fabric. Ah. There. She pulled the towel loose and wrapped it around herself.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door. "All right in there?"

"Yes," she answered. She tucked one end of the towel between her breasts, making a sort of sarong, felt water trickling down her neck from her wet hair and grimaced. Was there a second towel? She felt around and located a smaller towel, used it to blot most of the moisture from her hair and rehung it in the dark.

"I've got a flashlight for you here," her host said. "I'll set it next to the door."

"Thank you."

Elaine waited until she heard his footsteps moving away and then opened the door. The flashlight was easy to spot, right where he'd said it would be, and turned on. She picked it up and let out a long breath of relief. She had light. She wasn't dripping wet. She could find her way back to her room and get dressed without having to be rescued by a strange man while she wore nothing but a towel.

Would that be so bad? The unexpected thought was followed by an image so vivid it stopped Elaine in her tracks. The man, slowly untucking the towel's corner that held her makeshift cover in place, then unwrapping her and letting the towel fall at her feet. Leaving her naked. As she imagined that he stood in silence, looking at her, she felt her nipples pebbling into hard buds, her sex swelling with anticipation, growing hot and slick.

Elaine slammed the lid on her imagination and forced her feet to start moving again. Her body, however, remained aware and aroused, as if the man's presence had woken long-buried responses and needs.

Safely in the bedroom with the door shut behind her, Elaine leaned up against it, clutching her flashlight and debating what to do next. The fire provided soft, indirect

illumination while casting shadows. The beam from her flashlight revealed her suitcase, sitting at the foot of the bed. The shirt he'd loaned her, which she'd left on the bed before going to take her shower, was gone. Presumably he was wearing it once again.

She should open the suitcase. Pull out some clothes. Put them on, arming herself against runaway fantasies and her body's traitorous rebellion in the process.

Elaine closed her eyes and imagined what she wanted to do instead. Take off the towel. Walk naked across the room and lay down on the bed. Touch herself the way she ached to be touched.

"Get a grip," she said out loud.

How embarrassing would that be if her host came to check on her and caught her masturbating?

Another imaginary picture unfolded in her mind. She sprawled naked on the bed, one hand pleasuring her breast, while the other moved between her legs. She explored the slick folds of her sex, stroked the sensitive bud of nerves at the top, then slid a finger into the tight opening below. The man watched her, his eyes fixed on hers and burning with hunger.

Jesus. She was losing her mind.

Or was it something worse? Was it starting again? Elaine made a small sound and slid down the door until she sat on the oak plank flooring. She'd buried her sex drive and her visions both, locked them away. If her long-denied sexual needs were breaking free, what if the rest broke loose, too?

"Damn you, Mickey," she whispered into the darkened room. If she were working at her usual pace, this wouldn't be happening. And she wouldn't be here, alone in a house with a man she was entirely too aware of, in the grip of something she might not be able to control.

Chapter Three

Thorne waited in the kitchen for her. It was an effort, leaving her alone in the dark. But he'd made sure she had what she needed. A light. Her clothing. She could manage on her own, and when she was dressed she'd need to eat. She hadn't eaten regular meals for far too long.

He thought of how she'd looked on his doorstep, so fragile, with the storm behind her. She was too thin, pushed herself too hard. Denied herself too much. She might not be ready to let him approach her as a lover, but he could see to it that she went to bed with at least one kind of hunger satisfied.

Thorne had just finished assembling a pile of sandwiches and cut fruit when he heard her coming down the stairs. "In here," he called, loud enough for his voice to guide her in the right direction. The glow from the kitchen oil lamps would do the rest.

Her footsteps came closer and then the beam from her flashlight preceded her into the kitchen. "Hello?"

"Hi." Thorne wiped his hands on a dishtowel and turned towards her. "Dinner's ready. Have a seat, if you don't mind eating in the kitchen."

"I don't mind." She hesitated. "You don't have to feed me your dinner. Only breakfast was included."

He wondered how to tell her that she'd jumped to the wrong conclusion and that this wasn't the bed-and-breakfast she'd been looking for. Tell her too soon and he might frighten her. She needed shelter from the storm and a decent meal, and she wasn't going to find either tonight unless she stayed with him.

On the other hand, the longer he put off telling her, the more upset she'd be when the truth came out. He hated to begin with deception, but couldn't see a better solution for now except to wait.

"Pretend it's morning," Thorne suggested with a smile intended to put her at ease.

She frowned and he could practically see her thinking of excuses to refuse and go hole up in her room. He picked up the platter of sandwiches and the bowl of fruit and set them on the kitchen table, where he'd already laid out plates and silverware for two. Oil lamps placed on the counter and the table illuminated the room enough to eat by.

"You'll have to wait for the road crews to come out and clear the trees before you can go anywhere," he pointed out. "I'm sure you intended to find a restaurant tonight, but even if the roads were passable, nobody's going to be open in this weather. Might as well join me."

"Okay. Thank you." She took a chair, turned off her flashlight and set it beside her.

Thorne placed a thick sandwich on her plate and took one for himself. Then he helped himself to a generous portion of fruit and offered her the bowl. She accepted it and spooned a small quantity onto her plate. He resisted the urge to tell her to eat more. It was a start.

"How was the drive?" he asked her.

"Okay. Until the end." She gave him a small smile.

Thorne kept up a light patter of conversation, enough to distract her but not enough to keep her from eating. Her guarded manner gradually relaxed and by the time her plate was empty, he no longer worried that she'd bolt with the first polite excuse she could invent.

He cleared the table when they finished and set the dishes in the sink. The kettle that he'd set on the woodstove would be hot by now. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Sure."

Thorne pulled out two mugs, dropped tea bags into the bottom and filled them with hot water. He placed one mug in front of her and held his while he considered the next move.

"It's a bit early for bed," he began, and broke off when he saw her expression change. Her eyes lidded, her lips parted slightly. A flush spread over her cheeks and her breathing sped up.

Was she seeing what he'd seen? The two of them, naked and tangled together on the bed. Her legs locked around his waist while he drove into her.

"Sorry," she said, giving her head a slight shake as she picked up her mug. "My mind was wandering. What were you saying?"

"Nothing important." He took a sip from his mug. "I'm surprised you're not more shaken up after that accident."

"Oh. Right." She stared down at the tea. "I'm probably a little more shaken than I realized. That would explain a lot."

"You'd be entitled." He offered her a hand. She looked at it, hesitating for a few seconds, before taking it and letting him help her up. "Why don't you take your tea and turn in?"

"I'll do that. Thanks." She slipped her hand free from his, picked up her flashlight, switched it on then took her mug.

He watched her walk away and suppressed the urge to follow her. Soon enough she would come to him, if he were patient.

Elaine retreated to her room before she lost her mind completely and asked her host if he wanted to join her. She'd heard him say it was early for bed and flashed on another image, this time both of them naked. Him on top of her. Inside her.

It had been so long. She didn't want a lover, but a stranger, a night of uncomplicated sex, that much, maybe she could have.

She wanted to feel the solid weight of him over her, the heat and hardness of him inside her. She didn't have to guess what kind of sex partner he would be. He wouldn't

be the gentle, undemanding kind. Not inconsiderate, but if she got naked with him she knew how she could expect to be taken.

Hard. Fast. Repeatedly.

Elaine finished her tea while she paced the room, wavering. She could do it. She could satisfy her body's craving with this man, safe in the knowledge that she'd never see him again. She could go on with her vacation, then back to her life. And she should remember to buy herself a vibrator or something so she didn't let the pressure build up to this point again, where she was seriously contemplating a one-night stand with a total stranger.

She'd never gone off the Pill. It had seemed easier to just keep filling the prescription instead of having to make the decision to do something different.

That made the idea seem even easier to contemplate. She really could do it, give herself permission to have a night of lust without any fear that it would lead to unwanted consequences, emotionally or physically.

And maybe satisfying her sexual needs would help her keep a lid on the rest of Pandora's box.

That factor decided Elaine. She didn't want everything she'd buried to break free and overwhelm her. Sex she could handle. The rest...no. Unthinkable. Unbearable. Sex was far safer.

Besides, she couldn't believe a man who fed her tea and sandwiches because the storm had blocked off any other hope of dinner and brought her a flashlight so she didn't stub her toes in the dark would be a poor choice to sleep with. That, and every vibe he gave off practically screamed virile male.

Virile, but not the type to overstep the line or put her in a position she'd be uncomfortable in. He'd done nothing to make her feel threatened. He'd been careful to put her at ease. The way he'd looked at her and his attentive manner indicated interest, but he was clearly leaving it up to her to decide if she wanted to approach him.

How exactly to go about approaching him stymied her. She was out of practice in more ways than one.

Elaine started running various lines through her head before she realized how ridiculous she was being. He was a man. What was she saying? Women needed a reason to have sex. Men just needed a place. If she walked up to him and kissed him, or maybe just starting taking her clothes off, he'd probably take care of the rest.

Determined, she set the empty mug on top of the dresser and went back downstairs.

She found him in the kitchen, tidying up.

He looked up when she walked through the doorway. "Did you need something?"

Yes. She needed something. She just didn't know how to ask for it.

Elaine started to answer him and then hesitated. Was she so out of practice that she'd misread his signals? What if he wasn't interested at all? What if the idea of a guest making a pass offended him?

Only one way to find out. She took a deep breath and looked directly into his eyes. "Yes. I need something."

Hoping she wasn't making a complete idiot of herself, she pulled her shirt off and let it fall to the floor.

He didn't look shocked or offended. He just looked, his expression turning intent. "Take off the bra."

Elaine complied, her hands fumbling with the front clasp. Her fingers seemed to tangle in the straps, but she eventually managed to get the bra off. Then it joined her shirt on the floor. Her hands went to the button at the waistband of her pants next, but he stopped her.

"No. Let me." He walked towards her and hooked his fingers into her waistband, using it to draw her closer to him, until her naked breasts touched the soft fabric of his shirt. He undid the button, unzipped her and let her pants slide down her hips to pool

around her ankles. He placed his hands on her waist and lifted her free of the material, leaving her wearing nothing but a pair of panties.

Elaine glanced down and realized she was wearing plain white. Well, too late to try for the seductive look now. She'd have to hope he didn't care.

He caught her look and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure. I just, well, didn't expect. Um. That is, I didn't plan. I mean, white." She waved in the direction of her underwear. "I think it should probably be black lace."

"If the color bothers you, we can get rid of them." He slid his fingers under the waistband at each hip and tugged downwards. Her panties rolled down her hips and he bent his knees, balancing in front of her to pull them all the way down.

Elaine put a hand on his shoulder for balance and stepped out of them, one foot at a time. That left her with her legs slightly apart, and her bared sex at his eye level.

Oh, hell. This was embarrassing. It had been so long since a man had seen her naked, and here she was taking it all off in front of this man who looked like he would fit right in with supermodels. And he was looking at her crotch.

Well, they probably all pretty much looked the same, Elaine consoled herself.

Then his hand stroked the soft thatch of hair covering her pussy and embarrassment was buried under a landslide of lust. "Oh," she gasped.

She'd forgotten what it felt like to have a man pet and stroke her between her legs, search out and stimulate the bud of her clit, touch the puffed and pinked lips of her labia, swollen and slick with arousal.

It felt so good. Elaine clutched his shoulders with both hands, feeling the muscles hidden under the fabric of his shirt, the heat of him. He caressed and explored her with an unhurried touch, and by the time he finally worked a finger into her she was trembling.

"You're so tight," he murmured. He thrust his finger in and out of her, working her sex, then added a second finger, stretching her and opening her further. "I think I'm

going to have to make you come before you can take me. We need to make your pretty little pussy ready for my cock."

Her legs quivered and she felt her knees go weak at his words.

"Open your legs wider for me."

She did, adjusting her stance. He dipped his head closer, letting her feel the heat of his breath against her flesh, and then his tongue lapped against her clit. He sucked at the sensitive bud while his fingers penetrated her and it felt so good, Elaine didn't know how she was going to stay standing.

His mouth moved over her, setting off waves of heat. His fingers thrust into her with an insistent rhythm, in, out, opening her more. Elaine could hear her breathing, rapid and uneven, and it seemed loud even over the noise of the storm outside.

A third finger joined the first two and Elaine felt so hot, so swollen, so stretched and filled. She made a low sound of pleasure. He sucked hard on her clit and the pleasure became a wave that broke over her. She shuddered and felt the inner muscles of her sex clamp down on his invading fingers as she came.

He withdrew his fingers slowly as her climax ended but continued to lick and suck her clit, the folds of her sex, drove his tongue into her and made a sound of satisfaction when she shuddered at the sensation. He penetrated her with his tongue in a series of slow, deliberate thrusts, and then drew on her sensitive clit once more before releasing her and lifting his head to look up at her.

"You taste good."

Elaine didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't say anything. She just stared down into his eyes, her breath still coming hard and fast.

He stood up and unbuttoned the shirt he'd put back on after loaning it to her. This time when he took it off she was more prepared for the impact of his naked torso, muscular, hardened, an expanse of skin she wanted to touch and explore.

She waited while he undid the button at the top of his jeans, lowered the zipper, stripped them away, revealing lean hips, long, well-muscled legs and a thick, hard cock that made her suck in her breath.

"Maybe I should have asked first," he said as she continued to stare in silence. "Did you want more than what I just gave you?"

"Yes." The word came out husky, her voice caught in her throat. Elaine licked her lips and tried to speak again. "I want more."

"Be sure." He moved closer, until his cock nudged against her belly. "I won't be gentle. I won't give you one quick fuck and let you go. If you let me, I'll use that pussy of yours until you can't think of anything but my cock inside you, fucking you hard."

Elaine swallowed. She wanted that. She wanted him. And she wanted what he promised, for her world to shrink until it held nothing but him and what he was doing to her, leaving no room for thought, for memories or visions.

"I'm sure." She took his cock in her hands and stroked the hard, heated length of his shaft.

Chapter Four

He let out a low, growling sound of pleasure in response and thrust into her grip. Elaine felt herself relax a little, encouraged by his reaction. This was going to be all right. She hadn't made an idiot of herself, hadn't misread him, and he hadn't acted at all disappointed with her body's thinness or her out of practice performance.

He felt so warm and alive in her hands. Touching him provided an unexpected pleasure and met a need she hadn't realized she had. She wanted to touch and be touched, give as well as take, the vital human contact filling her senses the way he'd filled her body with his fingers. A preamble, a taste of what would come.

"I like your hands on me," he told her. His eyes had gone even darker, pupils expanded with desire. "A little too much. If you don't want it up against the wall right now, you'd better stop."

His words stopped her breath. She stared at him, caught between her own need and a shiver of apprehension at the predatory expression on his face. Her hands tightened on him involuntarily and he reacted with a speed that made her world spin. His hands seized and cupped her butt, lifting her and pulling her into his body. She let his engorged shaft slide free of her hands and wrapped arms and legs around him for stability.

He turned and took a handful of steps, the movement sending her sliding up and down him in a tantalizing brush. Then Elaine felt the wall, cool and smooth at her back while he was hard and warm between her legs. His hands on her butt flexed and his hips shifted. She felt the broad head of his penis nudge against her folds, slick and softened from his mouth and the orgasm he'd given her, and knew he'd prepared her well. He'd find no resistance when he thrust home.

Her heart skidded and her belly clenched in anticipation. *I won't be gentle*, he'd warned her, and nothing about him looked gentle in the soft light.

The stranger between her thighs, poised to take her, looked fierce and demanding and urgent. His eyes glittered, jaw tightened in a hard line, his muscles bunching with the effort as he lifted her higher. A momentary panic made her pulse flutter. She pushed it down. She didn't want gentle tonight. A gentle man wouldn't overwhelm her, wouldn't fill her mind and her body with himself so utterly that no room remained for anything else.

He drove into her, one fast, hard stroke that brought him inside her as far as he could go and a soft sound broke from her lips at the suddenness of it. Before she could adapt, adjust, he pulled back and drove forward again. She took him, closed around him, clung to him and felt her heart beat in time with his as he made her body mesh with his. He built the tempo, the rhythm of his thrusts sending their hearts racing as he took her hard and fast against the wall, leaving her no time to catch her breath, pushing her to the peak.

His cock driving into her became the center of her awareness. The harsh sound of their breathing and the thunder of blood in her ears drowned out the storm. His hands holding her, the demanding push of his flesh into hers, the dark eyes that held hers and wouldn't look away all locked her into a world of heat and yearning and a need that was almost pain.

Elaine felt it build to a flash point and then felt herself break around him and heard his growl of satisfaction and victory as he pumped himself into her in a liquid rush. Her strength seemed to drain away, leaving her boneless and limp, held up only by his unwavering support.

"That was nice for a warm-up," he said, his voice thick. He made no attempt to withdraw or to relent on his physical claim. His eyes were hot and as openly possessive as his hands cupping her ass to hold her steady for his thrusts.

She looked at him through half-lidded eyes, struck dumb by the shattering pleasure and the shock of a man's body invading hers. It had been so long, she'd forgotten. Or maybe it had never felt this way. That thought was traitorous and it opened the way to memories she refused to revisit, so Elaine slammed the door on it and tightened her inner muscles around his still-engorged length, buried so deeply inside her she could feel him press against the opening of her womb.

"I told you I wouldn't be gentle." He ground himself against her and Elaine nodded, giving wordless agreement. "I told you how I'd take you. I gave you fair warning."

"You did," Elaine whispered. Her voice wouldn't come to make the words more audible or give them any force or substance.

"I want you in bed the next time." He withdrew as abruptly as he'd filled her the first time, leaving her empty and aching and a little lost. He shifted his hold, catching her knees with one arm to lift her cradled against his chest. Elaine let her head rest on his shoulder as he carried her up the stairs and to the room she'd left such a short time before.

Inwardly she felt off balance, reeling from the suddenness of it. He'd gone from complete stranger to sex partner so quickly. She hadn't even thought to ask his name. She'd asked for sex instead. Part of her felt it was only right to compartmentalize sex so completely, that she could allow herself this because it was an encounter with a stranger for one night, and not knowing his name kept her safe.

Safe. Elaine closed her eyes and realized he hadn't used a condom in the kitchen. What had she done? Was it going to be a problem? Fearing the consequences of ignorance more than she feared the contents of Pandora's box, she cautiously lifted the lid a crack and opened her senses to the man holding her.

He was strong and vital and didn't have so much as a cold. *Strong, so strong.* She didn't even have to try to read him, he flooded her with information. Elaine felt a surge of panic and struggled to slam the door in her mind shut, turning it off and shutting

him out. She could let him into her body, but she didn't want him in her head and most of all she didn't want that cursed gift alive inside her against her will.

But at least she knew he wasn't going to give her an embarrassing or potentially incurable disease. It gave her a perverse satisfaction that her unwanted ability was good for something. She could relax and let him drown everything else out with no fear of physical consequences.

He lowered Elaine onto the bed and followed her down, planting his arms on either side of her, his legs wedged between hers. "You look so frail," he said in a soft voice. "But you're steel underneath, aren't you? You've had to be."

Elaine blinked at him and felt her face go blank, shuttering her emotions. "I don't know what you mean."

"Liar." His voice was calm, level, not accusative. His eyes were knowing in the soft glow from the fire, and they crinkled a bit in the corners as if he was smiling at her just a little. "You didn't ask my name and you aren't the kind of woman who sleeps with strangers."

"You don't know that." He *couldn't* know that. Although his perception unsettled her.

"You aren't. But you didn't want to be alone tonight." The hint of humor vanished from his face as he looked down at her, solemn and intent. "I won't leave you alone."

He couldn't have any idea how badly she needed this, how desperate she was to have a shield against the past and the future when the one she'd been clinging to was back in Boston. But the possibility that he saw too much made her wonder if a night of sex with him was a mistake. She stared back at him and considered telling him she'd changed her mind.

"Look at you, all nerves." He lowered his head to kiss the hollow of her throat. "You don't sleep well, you don't eat enough, and you work too hard."

"If I'm such a hag, why do you want to fuck me again?" The sharp words burst out of her before she could bite them back. Elaine wanted to groan out loud but managed not to.

"I didn't say you were a hag." He kissed her shoulder and let his lips trace the delicate outline of her collarbone. "Just tense and tired. But I know a very good way to relax you and spend all that tension."

"So now I'm a mercy fuck." Oh, lord, what was wrong with her mouth? Elaine tried to backtrack, tried to get a grip on herself. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that. I don't mean to be difficult."

"Yes, you do." He kissed the curve of her neck and his breath feathered over her skin, making her shiver. "You want to fight as much as you want to fuck me. You want me and that makes you angry, doesn't it?"

She bucked underneath him, suddenly furious and determined to get free of him. "Don't say that. You don't know me, you don't know what I want or how I feel."

"Don't I?" He raised his head and looked into her eyes again. He held her easily, pinning her with his weight and refusing to let her shift him off. "Do you want it rough this time? Will that make it easier for you?"

His questions pierced her and splintered her control. She vacillated between anger and tears and he must have seen the liquid sheen in her eyes because he made a low sound and lowered his forehead to touch hers. His body shifted on top of her, rocking into her as he slid his arms under her to cradle her close.

"Shhh," he murmured. "I only meant you could blame me if you wanted to, be angry if it makes you feel safer. If I make you take me, it isn't your fault and you don't have to think about why you're letting a stranger give you comfort and release."

"You can't comfort me." Her voice came out dull and flat. Her throat felt tight with unshed tears.

"You don't think so?" He rocked against her again, this time aligning their bodies so that his cock nudged between her legs and pressed lightly against her opening. She

was still soft and slick from the heated encounter in the kitchen, and Elaine felt her flesh yielding for him. With just the tiniest bit of pressure the head of his cock would be inside her again, followed by the rest of him until he was sheathed to the balls.

"I can give you this." His voice was a velvet promise in the storm-shattered night. "The comfort of a warm body against yours, a human touch, easing a human need."

Need. She had a lot of it. Her emotions felt as wild as the wind and rain outside, shifting and out of control and she needed to lock on to something, some center, to keep it all from sweeping her away. Elaine wound her arms and legs around him with a soft sound that wasn't quite a sob, arching her hips up to meet him, forcing the head of him inside her.

"Please." Her voice was ragged and the harsh sound of her breathing seemed overly loud in her own ears.

"I won't leave you alone," he promised, and thrust home, filling her in one sure stroke.

Thorne forced himself to pause and allow her time to adjust to him. He'd taken her relentlessly in the kitchen. Now he wanted to savor her. Not that she would allow him to go too slowly or be too gentle.

She was so fragile that a gentle touch would break her. Passion and frenzy she could accept, but if he kissed her the way he wanted to and simply held her in his arms, she would shatter. And she wouldn't allow that. She wanted to keep him at a safe distance, wanted physical closeness while evading intimacy because she wasn't ready to deal with the consequences of letting him into her heart.

Thorne intended to find a way into that well-guarded fortress, by guile or seduction or force, by whatever means he had at his disposal. He wanted much more than one night with this woman and he hungered for far more than her body. He wanted all of her, and he wanted her to share the rest of his days. And nights. Her body was such a pleasure to him that it nearly stopped his heart.

He felt the strength in her as she rose to meet him. It contrasted so starkly with the dark smudges under her eyes and the body that was all hollows, too thin, running on nerves and sheer will. Her inner strength had brought her this far, but her body had nearly reached its limits.

If he had his way, she wouldn't leave his bed for a week. She would sleep and make love with him and eat and sleep again, until her face lost its pallor and her body released all tension. It would take more than a week of rest for her to fill out properly, but it would be a good beginning.

She moved under him, urgent and restless, and Thorne answered her silent demand with a slow almost-withdrawal before driving all the way into her again. Her body welcomed his, her sheath tight and hot around his shaft, her skin sliding along his like silk.

"Like that?" Thorne asked her, his voice rough with desire. He tightened his arms around her, holding her closer as he thrust deeper and took more of her.

"Yes." She burrowed into him, her cheek pressing against his chest, hips rocking up to meet his strokes as if she wanted to lose herself in him. He hoped she'd find herself instead. He established a steady rhythm that gradually built, drawing it out as long as he could, wanting to prolong the pleasure of their bodies locked in a timeless dance where he led and she followed.

He felt her shudder underneath him, felt the quivering in her inner muscles as she gripped him and knew she was on the edge. A little harder, a little deeper, and he pushed her over. She cried out and convulsed and knowing that she was coming brought him instantly to the peak. He kept up his steady, driving thrusts as he poured himself into her, extending her pleasure and triggering a series of orgasms that made her gasp and tremble before finally subsiding.

"You're very good at that," she said after a long silence.

"We're very good together." Thorne pointed out the obvious as he rested with her, delaying the moment when he'd have to leave the intimate clasp of her body.

She didn't answer. He didn't really expect her to. He levered himself up and looked down at her in the fire's glow. It played over her body, making a pattern of mysterious shadows and highlights. "Beautiful."

He admired the elegant curve of her breasts, small and perfectly shaped, the line of her neck. He'd painted it all before he'd met her, but seeing it in the flesh affected him on every level. She drew him like a magnet. Thorne imagined painting her in a variety of poses and wondered if she'd consent to model for him, or if he'd have to work solely from memory and flashes of the future.

"I'm not," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Very ordinary. Passable when I make the effort."

"Maybe you've never really seen yourself in the right light." Thorne withdrew from her with a twinge of regret and rolled to lie beside her. He placed a hand on her belly and followed the dips and curves of her torso in a lazy exploration. "I didn't take the time to appreciate all this when you got naked for me in the kitchen. I'll make up for that now."

He felt her tremble when he made an unhurried study of her breasts, stroking her nipples and watching them harden as she reacted to his touch. He'd seized his opportunity when she gave it to him and taken her without delay. Now that he had her in his bed he wanted to make the most of it.

She shivered again and Thorne leaned down to brush a kiss over one rosy nipple. "I'll add a log to the fire," he told her. He suited action to words and crossed the room with easy strides, pulled a log from the brass holder beside the fireplace and fed the fire.

That chore done, he returned to the bed and kissed her other nipple, watching the bud tighten for him. "Stay here."

He gave the order and left her, confident that she'd remain where she was, if for no other reason than because she hadn't recovered enough to stand yet. The brief intermission in a night of sex that was far from over gave him chance to clean up. He took a clean wet washcloth back to the bedroom with him and used it to sponge gently

between her thighs. She watched him do it and didn't demur but Thorne knew the intimacy of this act troubled her more than the act that had caused the need for it.

She was willing to fuck him, let him come inside her and leave her sticky with the seed he'd spilled and marked her with, but letting him treat her like a lover got to her. Reaching her wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter Five

Elaine fought the urge to protest as he took his time washing away the residue he'd left on her sex and between her thighs. It was a small courtesy, but it implied so much. That he had the right to touch her and care for her as a lover would instead of simply taking what he wanted. His action pushed past the boundaries she'd erected and threatened her. But she couldn't say so without sounding deranged or unbalanced, not to mention ungrateful, so she said nothing. The tension she'd released in the series of orgasms he'd given her came creeping back until she felt stiff and wooden.

"You could just say it bothers you," he informed her. "Tell me to stop."

"Would you?" Elaine asked, suddenly interested in the answer.

"No." He smiled at her before he bent and brushed a light kiss over the flesh he'd so carefully cleansed. "I like touching your pussy. I like looking at it, kissing it, licking it, and I loved fucking you. If you wanted your pussy to be off-limits to me, you shouldn't have gotten naked in front of me and put your hands on my cock."

Well, that was blunt enough. While Elaine blinked and searched for a response, he returned the used cloth to the bathroom and then came back to the bed. He tugged back the quilt and patted the sheet-covered mattress in invitation. "Come up here. You'll get cold if you stay outside the covers."

She turned over and crawled up to meet him as he slid under the covers and pulled her into his arms. He tucked her up against his side, pillowed her head on his shoulder and placed her hand over his heart. He held her where he wanted her with one arm around her shoulders. "Comfortable?"

Elaine nodded, feeling rigid in his embrace.

"Of course you are. Which is why you're holding yourself so stiffly." She felt his hand ruffle her hair in a playful touch.

"You don't seem bothered by that," she said, letting her irritation come through in her voice.

"I'd prefer you draping yourself all over me, pliant and loose and willing. But I'll take you prickly and full of resistance if that's what I get. Either way, you're naked in bed with me."

She frowned as she tried to decipher that. "Are you saying you'd keep fucking me if I wanted you to stop?"

He reached his free hand around to find her chin and lift it up, making her look at him. "Look me in the eye if you're going to insult me."

Elaine flushed in embarrassment and closed her eyes against the sharp sting of tears. She felt her lips tremble and a sudden tightness in her throat choked her to the point that she couldn't even apologize for her behavior. She was being unreasonable and antagonistic to a man who'd shown her nothing but kindness and consideration and mind-altering sex. What was wrong with her?

She swallowed hard and managed to say, "I'm sorry. If anybody behaved inappropriately, it was me. I threw myself at you." Her voice broke and she huddled against him, feeling humiliated and bewildered.

"You didn't do anything you need to apologize for." His voice was gentle and his hands stroked her reassuringly as he held her tight, not letting her pull away from him when she tried. "If I was offended by the sight of you without your shirt on, I could have looked away. I didn't look away. I told you to take off the rest. I helped you finish undressing and I got my hands on you and in you before you could change your mind. I put my mouth between your legs, and then I fucked you against the kitchen wall without stopping to introduce myself. Since you are not a woman who has casual sex, that alone would be enough to put you off balance."

Elaine forced herself to breathe as she made the sudden tears recede. She blinked furiously and took shallow breaths until she regained control of herself. "I'm acting like an idiot."

"You're acting like a woman who just had sex with a strange man and liked it a lot and isn't sure how to handle what comes next." His voice was calm and steady, like his hands on her, and Elaine found herself lulled into relaxing by degrees. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Would you prefer that I kicked you out of bed?" She could hear something suspiciously close to laughter in his voice. "I'd much rather fuck you again."

She didn't have an answer for that so she stayed silent.

"Did that make you nervous?" he asked her.

"No. Relieved," Elaine answered honestly. "I don't want you to kick me out of bed. I want you to fuck me again."

"If you want to make me instantly hard, that's exactly the right thing to say." His arms tightened around her and he pulled her up to lay on top of him, her limbs sprawling over his. She felt his cock twitch against her belly and felt an answering heat steal over her.

"It was my fault you got defensive," he added a minute later. His hands trailed up and down her spine in caress that set fire to nerve endings she hadn't known she possessed. "I pushed you. I did it on purpose, and I'll keep doing it, but I'll try not to push too hard, too fast. It'd be unfair to let you blame yourself for reacting when I crowded you."

Elaine frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." He cupped the curve of her butt with his hands and gave her a gentle squeeze. "I'm strong enough to take whatever you throw at me, especially when I instigate it. But it stung me to hear you imply I'd take you by force when we both know we're in bed together because we want to be."

He made her head spin. He was an enigma, and she was too confused for puzzles. Elaine kept quiet and tried to focus on the good feelings he generated with his hands,

the pleasurable warmth of his body against hers, cradling hers. If she focused on the moment, she wouldn't think about anything beyond the moment. It was a great plan, but she couldn't seem to stop her brain from churning in unwanted directions.

"You confuse me," she admitted. "Why are you so sure I don't have casual sex all the time? For all you know, I might pick up a different guy every night of the week."

"Which is why you're so comfortable with this." The edge of laughter was back in his voice. "You don't do strangers. It's been a very long time since you've done anybody. And the last time was anything but casual, which is why you've got 'No Trespassing' signs all over you."

Elaine felt herself going rigid again. "Why would you say that?"

"There's one now." He tapped her between the shoulder blades. "I can read them, but I'm not going to keep out. I want you."

Elaine levered herself up, preparing to slide off him, but he caught her and wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her in place. "No running off. You asked, I'm answering. You could listen."

She let her breath out with a huff. "You're holding me too tight."

"I'm holding you just right." He shifted under her and the fit of their bodies made her breath catch in spite of her irritation. "And that annoys you, too. You don't think it should feel this good. You don't want it to feel so natural to be with me, because this is all his territory in your mind, isn't it?"

Elaine felt ice form in a column that crept down her spine and spread through her body. A shudder racked her frame.

He made a low sound and rolled with her so that she was covered by his body. He tugged the covers higher and tucked them snugly around her. "Here, let's get you warmed up."

"Why do you want me?" Elaine asked through numb lips. "I'm a mess."

"A little ruffled, maybe, but that's how you're supposed to look when you're having a night of sexual excess." He feathered a kiss over her forehead. "I like the way you look with your hair all tousled on the pillow."

"You're deliberately misunderstanding me," she said, feeling her jaw tighten.

"I was trying to ease up a little." He rocked his body against hers in a movement that was comforting and arousing at the same time. "I upset you."

"Men aren't supposed to be so perceptive," Elaine said. "You're supposed to just take this at face value, a strange blonde who wanted a night in bed with you."

She suppressed a flash of jealousy at the thought that she couldn't possibly be the first or the last woman to take one look at him and start getting naked. There had undoubtedly been a string of others before her and another one would be waiting to take her place when she left. Which had nothing to do with her and shouldn't matter.

"And I'm supposed to ignore the fact that you haven't been with anybody in so long you're as tight as a virgin? That you're jumping out of your skin whenever I do or say anything that makes you feel like you're getting more than sex from me?" He shook his head, making his long hair slide around his shoulders in a sensual motion that caught her attention. She felt tempted to touch the strands and then his bare skin and curled her hands into fists to keep from doing it.

"If you weren't totally closed to the idea of a relationship, you wouldn't be so touchy. It all adds up. You're a very passionate woman who's been alone too long. You decided you could let yourself need one thing. Sex. But you don't think you're ready to accept anything else, no matter how much you need it."

"I can't." She said it baldly, the answer coming out of her mouth before she could stop herself or think of something more tactful or evasive.

"Can't? Or won't?" He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, a sweet, lingering caress that made her throat ache. "Kiss me back," he breathed against her lips. "Open for me. Let me taste you."

It was just a kiss, Elaine told herself. Such a small thing. The brush of his mouth against hers tempted her, enticed her, warmed her. She could feel her lips softening for his brand of gentle persuasion, echoed by her body softening under his, molding to his contours. His chest teased her breasts with a subtle pressure that made her ache for more. His hips rested in the cradle of her pelvis and every time he moved, she moved with him, arching into him.

He made her want until the want became a sweet ache. She opened her mouth for his kiss because she couldn't resist and didn't want to, and made a low sound of pleasure when his tongue swept inside to seek hers out.

The kiss deepened as he tasted her thoroughly, unhurried, as if he wanted to learn the taste and texture of her. The ache inside her became need and need burned until it chased every vestige of chill from her body. The heat spread and built. The kiss became a brand on her lips and she wound her arms and legs around him as she surrendered to it and to him.

He moved over her, positioning himself between her thighs, sliding his penis along her swollen labia, making her breath catch and her sex clench. The blunt head of his cock nudged against her slick folds, and then he took her body in one swift stroke as he took her mouth, laying claim to her. His kisses stole her breath and the length of him filling her stopped her heart, then made it beat in an erratic racing rhythm as he drove into her again and again, his tongue mirroring his possession as it swept into her mouth.

She felt lost in him, lost in a storm of sensation and emotion to mirror the elemental forces unleashed outside. She moved with him, giving him more, wanting him to take everything and leave no part of her untouched. She heard herself making broken sounds of urgent need, heard the thunder of his heart and the harsh sound of his breathing.

"I want you on your knees next time," he rasped out, breaking off the kiss. He thrust into her deeper, harder. "I want to take you with your ass in the air and your legs

spread for me, and your hot pussy wet and ready. It'll be so easy to fuck you fast and deep like that."

Elaine felt her inner muscles clench around the length of his shaft in reaction and then she saw it, herself naked on hands and knees and him behind her, hard and urgent. Saw his hands on the curve of her butt as he held her in position, and the pure abandon on her face as he thrust home.

To her surprise she looked exotic and sensual instead of ridiculous in the act, her light skin and hair such a contrast to his darkness, her slight build fragile in contrast to his muscled frame, his position behind her both possessive and protective, his hands on her gentle, always giving her pleasure and careful of his greater strength. Something was wrong with the image, but she didn't know what. Then she noticed her hair fell at least two inches longer than she was wearing it now.

"I love taking you like this," she heard him say and didn't know if it was in the present or the future. Disoriented, she clung to him and tried to ground herself in the now. She was on her back, not her knees. He was on top of her, not behind her. But she knew she'd lost control and slipped.

Panic surged in her throat. This wasn't working. She wasn't able to lock it down, lock it out, keep it at bay by feeding one need. She clutched at him in panic and for some reason the fear added an edge to desire instead of chasing it away. His next thrust made her cry out and the deep press of him inside her made her need escalate. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough.

She tightened her inner muscles in a useless attempt to keep him inside her, and he ground his pelvis into hers before thrusting in and out again. "Please." Her voice was low and throaty, rasping as she struggled for breath. "Please."

"Please fuck you harder? Please make you come?" He kissed her hard, grinding his lips against hers, then gentling the pressure, softening his mouth on hers. "Do you need to come with me now?"

"Yes." She breathed the word into his mouth, let him swallow her sighs and moans and rocked her hips into his, making his thrusts deeper.

His chest rubbed over her nipples as he moved on her, making them harden into tight buds and heightening their sensitivity. She locked her legs around his waist, felt her spine bow as he drove into her, felt herself edging over a cliff and then falling as they came together in a rush. She felt the liquid jet of his orgasm, felt the endless spasms of hers and felt everything slip away.

She was lying on something soft and velvety, not the smooth cotton of the sheets. She frowned, wondering where that had come from. Then she opened her eyes and saw that she wasn't on the bed anymore. She was in a different room, and this one was all windows on one side letting in a flood of sunlight.

Unlike the flashes she'd had earlier that evening, this time she wasn't outside herself looking on. She was experiencing it from the inside and everything seemed more vivid than reality. She lay on a chaise of some sort draped with red velvet that made her skin look pale as marble in contrast. She was naked, but the room was warm and she wasn't cold, although her nipples were tight because she was being watched. One leg was bent and dangling off the chaise, with her foot touching the smooth wood floor.

"Close your eyes," she heard the stranger she'd chosen for sex say. "I'll tell you when you can open them."

She looked down at her hands and saw that she was holding a long golden feather, covering her sex fig-leaf fashion. As if wearing a feather could make her nudity and abandoned pose modest.

"Don't move the feather," he said. "We'll never get it right again."

Right? *This* wasn't right. What was happening? Where was she?

"Now you're frowning. You know the price you'll pay for that. Don't make me punish you again." She heard his footfalls as he strode towards her and knew from the

sound that his feet were bare. She turned her head in the direction of the sound and saw the knife in his hands, his fingers stained red.

Elaine fell back into the now, felt the smooth fabric of the sheet under her again, saw the stranger poised above her with his face cast in shadows from the firelight, and screamed.

Chapter Six

"Usually, screaming happens *during* the orgasm," Thorne said in a mild voice. He caught her wrists and held them down when she hit at him. "Was it a bad one?"

"What?" She stared up at him, eyes wide and wild.

"Orgasm." He gave her a solemn look. "I'm willing to try again if that one wasn't good enough. I'd hate to leave you disappointed."

Her breath was coming in gasps and her eyes had a sheen of panic. "Get off me. You had a knife. You came at me with a knife." Her voice went higher as she ended the sentence, her body twisting under his as she attempted to dislodge him.

"Good orgasm, bad vision," Thorne guessed. "Wouldn't it be nice if they were all images of puppies and kittens chasing butterflies? In fact, it'd be nice if even half of them made sense."

She stopped struggling and blinked at him. "What?"

"Vivid one," he said. "You felt like you were there and then. What did you see? Besides me with a knife? Was I cooking?"

She took a few deep breaths, letting them out slowly, visibly fighting to regain control. "We were in a different room. Lots of light. Wall of windows."

"The studio." He smiled at her. "I'll show it to you in the morning. There's something you should see in there, anyway."

"Studio." She shaped the word as if she had no idea what it meant. "I was naked. Holding a feather. You told me not to move and then you said—" She broke off and licked her lips nervously. "You said you'd punish me. And you had the knife."

"Maybe we'll take that tour of the studio now," Thorne said. "I'm not sure anything else will reassure you."

He levered himself up off her but kept his hands on her. He didn't want her to bolt from him in panic. That would only make everything worse. It would be cold in the studio, and they were naked. The temperature didn't bother him, but he didn't want her to grow chilled again. Thorne held her with one hand and used the other to jerk the quilt free and drape it over her. He scooped her into his arms bundled in the quilt, effectively imprisoning her in case she tried to escape.

"Come on," he said, as if she was accompanying him willingly. "We'll take a little walk." He carried her down the stairs and stopped in the kitchen to pull a flashlight from a drawer. She jerked when he opened it and he remembered her fear of him with a knife. "Flashlight," he said, showing it to her. "Do you want to hold it?"

She worked one hand free of the folds of fabric and held it out, palm up. Thorne thumbed the switch to turn it on before giving it to her.

"Do you really think I'm going to turn into a knife-wielding maniac?" he asked in a mild voice as he walked with her in his arms.

"I don't know you, do I?" It wasn't an answer, but she sounded subdued rather than alarmed.

"No," he agreed. "But you will."

She didn't answer him, but he took that in a positive light since she hadn't argued the point, either. She would be his woman, although in spite of the speed she'd exhibited getting into his bed she didn't seem inclined to make it easy for him. Thorne didn't mind. Whatever it took, she was worth the effort.

"Shine the light this way, would you?" Thorne made the request in a calm tone, and she cooperated, aiming the beam in the direction he'd indicated with his head. He took the short hallway and another staircase to the studio and then walked to the large canvas he'd finished so recently.

"You won't get the full effect in this light," he told her. "For that, you'll need to see it in the sun tomorrow. But shine the flashlight on it."

She played the beam over the canvas, slowly, moving it in different directions to illuminate different sections. She said nothing for what seemed like eternity, but in reality was less than a minute as she studied the nude portrait of herself with her face in shadow. She guided the flashlight to the lower corner of the canvas to read the artist's signature. Then she made a sound like a sob.

"Guess you recognize the name," Thorne said.

She didn't answer. He sighed. "Right, let's look at the tools." He showed her the carefully stored spare canvases, paints, brushes and palette knives. "The knife I was holding, did it look like this?"

She nodded.

"What do you think you saw?" Thorne prodded her gently.

"I was posing for you," she said. "Naked. The red on your hands must have been paint, and I guess you were teasing me about punishment."

He felt his brows rise. "I think you must've broken off just before the good part," Thorne said. "Sounds like we were about to forget about making art and make love instead." A hopeful vision of the future, a moment he'd look forward to enjoying with her.

"I guess so." She huddled into the quilt. "I know who you are."

"Thought so."

"Damon Thorne, the world-famous artist known for his paintings of psychic visions." Her voice was soft but he heard her easily. "Why are you running a bed-and-breakfast? Your last painting sold for two million at auction."

"I don't run a bed-and-breakfast." He hugged her against his chest. "I never said I did. You assumed, and I let you because I didn't want to scare you. You needed shelter from the storm, and if you thought you'd found your arranged overnight stop you wouldn't feel awkward about staying alone with a strange man."

"I see." Her voice sounded faint.

"I'm not sure you do." Thorne reversed his path and began to carry her back to the bedroom and the warmth of the fireplace. "But I think that can wait until morning. When's the last time you had a full night's sleep?"

She relaxed in his arms enough to let her head rest against his shoulder and Thorne felt something inside his chest ease at the small gesture. "I don't know," she said. "I don't sleep well anymore. I dream."

"Have you been suppressing your gift?" Thorne asked her. If she didn't willingly allow her visions to come in the day, they'd haunt her at night, and he knew from experience that resistance made them stronger and more difficult to understand, more disturbing.

"Tried to," she said in a dull voice. "I thought it was working. I worked hard, long hours, got exhausted enough to sleep a few hours, kept my mind focused all day. But when I got here, it started breaking loose. I kept seeing flashes and I couldn't make it stop. I thought if I—" she broke off, then continued after a short pause, "if we had sex. I thought that would keep me focused, grounded. I'd be able to shut everything else out."

"But it triggered more instead," Thorne guessed.

She nodded. "No wonder you didn't think I was crazy. No wonder you seemed to understand more than you should. You're cursed, too."

"I prefer to think of it as gifted."

"It's a useless gift." The sudden edge of anger in her voice told him they were close to the real issue now, and the real reason for her resistance to him on any level but physical. "What damn good is it to see the future if you can't stop it?"

"Is that what happened?" Thorne asked her, deliberately pitching his voice to a soothing low.

"Yes." The raw sound seemed wrenched from her. "I saw it happening, I saw my fiancé die, and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't get enough warning, it was too late, too damn late." Her voice broke and he felt her body shake with sobs and

wondered how long she'd kept the grief locked inside her, along with the poison of self-blame for failing to save someone she'd loved.

Thorne held her while she wept for another man and ached for her. He reached the bedroom and resettled them on the mattress, keeping her cradled in his arms, stroking her hair, rocking her, kissing her eyelids when she finally fell silent to ease the sting and swelling there.

"What a time you've had," he said softly. "So alone, with no comfort and no peace. Did you think it was your job to stop it? Did you think you were God?"

He felt her go still. "I don't know what you mean." Her voice sounded raw and thick with tears.

"We're only human," he murmured with his lips touching her hair, watching the glow from the fire. "A gift doesn't make us all-powerful or all-knowing. It means we see a little, know a little, and sometimes we don't know why. Maybe you saw only because you needed to know what happened, so you wouldn't be left wondering."

"Only human." She repeated the words, then gave a short laugh. "Maybe I did think I should be God."

"So you blamed yourself for falling short?" He stroked her hair and cuddled her closer. "Nobody can measure up to that standard."

She buried her face in the curve of his neck. "I was so angry with myself. With him too, for leaving me. Isn't that stupid? As if he chose to be killed in a car crash."

"Not stupid at all," Thorne said. "Natural. Didn't anybody tell you about the stages of grief, that anger is normal?"

"I didn't want to talk about it," she said. "I couldn't."

"You're talking now," he pointed out.

She nodded and he felt the silk of her hair slide against his skin with the movement. "I can't not talk to you. You force it out of me. I can't hide anything from you."

"That's the benefit of having a psychic lover," he said with a small smile that he hid against her hair.

She blew out a soft breath. "Any other surprises?"

"Just psychometry. Which you have, too."

"Mmm," she sighed in agreement. "I read you to see if you had anything. Because we didn't think to stop for a condom that first time."

"See? It can be useful," Thorne pointed out. "Now you know I don't have any unpleasant diseases and you can relax and enjoy the sex."

"Aren't you worried about me?" She asked the question in a tone of mild curiosity.

"No." He stroked her hair again. "You suffered a terrible loss, but it's your spirit that's been sick, not your body. Although you've pushed yourself to the limit and you need plenty of rest to recover your strength."

"I'm on vacation." She offered the information almost like an apology.

"How long?"

"Until my boss thinks I'm not going to drop dead from overwork," she said. "Involuntary leave of absence. I don't think he'd let me come back in less than a month."

"Stay here. Spend your free time with me." He felt as if his heart stopped beating until she nodded her assent. Then it resumed its rhythm.

"I should tell you my name," she said a minute later. "It's Elaine. Elaine Llewellyn."

"It is very much my pleasure to meet you, Elaine." He let his hand follow the contour of her cheek, stroke the line of her throat, touch the sensitive hollows of her collarbone.

"Should I call you Damon?" The husky tone of her voice pleased him. Until that moment, he hadn't realized he was unconsciously waiting for the sound of his name on her lips.

"Most of my friends call me Thorne," he answered. "You can call me Damon if you prefer."

"Thorne seems, I don't know, distant. It's your last name." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "I like Damon."

He liked her choice and the reason for it. He felt almost ridiculously pleased that she wanted to use his first name. It suited him to have her call him by a name nobody else used. "I like the way you say it." He let his hand trail lower, touching the upper curve of her breast. "I want to hear you say my name the next time I'm inside you."

"You were right, you know," she said after a short silence. "About 'No Trespassing' signs and feeling like my body should belong to another man. It's hard not to feel like I'm betraying my dead fiancé by having a lover now. A nameless stranger and a night of pure sex, that was easier to accept than, well, anything more. Not that I think you're offering more, I mean, that is..." she ground to a confused halt before adding, "I know I'm not in your league."

"I'm offering more," Thorne said. The last thing he wanted was to leave any doubt in her mind about his intentions. One night wasn't nearly enough and a month wouldn't be, either. But since he had her agreement on that much, he'd take one hurdle at a time. "And I don't know who could be more in my league, or better able to understand my life and my work, than you." He stroked her nipple, his touch deliberately inciting a sexual response. "I told you I wanted you. I intend to stake my claim on you."

She arched her back to press her breast into his hand, accepting his touch and inviting more. "I can't promise anything."

"You said you'll stay for your vacation," he stated. "I didn't ask you to promise anything else." *Yet.* His hand closed over the slight curve of her breast in a possessive hold. She might not be ready to surrender her heart or give him her future, but she was willing to give him her body. He intended to take it and take her to the limit she'd

allow. He needed to make her his. If sex was the only thing he had to work with, he wanted to possess her body utterly. How far would she let him go?

"I told you the next time I wanted you on your hands and knees," Thorne said. "What if I told you I also want something you've never given any other man?"

She stirred in his arms and lifted her head to look at him. "What do you mean?"

He kept his hand on her possessive but careful, stroking her sensitive skin pleausurably, making her breast swell in his hold. "If your body is all you can give me, Elaine, I want all of it. Every inch. Every opening." He used his free hand to uncover her and then settled his palm on the bare curve of her ass. He followed the curve down until his fingertips touched her puckered anus and stroked lightly over that sensitive area. "I want you to give me this."

He felt her shiver in his arms, but she didn't pull away. "Will it hurt?"

"Not if we're careful." He kissed her forehead as he continued to stroke and probe at that tight, rosy opening, getting her used to being stimulated there. "Not if we lubricate you and prepare you well. I'll be gentle with you. I'll work my cock into your ass so very slowly." He pressed carefully with a fingertip and felt her give way to his touch. Her nipple hardened even more against his palm and her breathing sped up. All little signs that told him the idea aroused her. "Will you let me do that, Elaine? Will you let me fuck you everywhere?"

"Yes," she said in a soft voice. "I want that. Something I've never done. No memories, nothing but you."

A mix of possessive triumph, tenderness and lust swirled through him at her answer. "I need to leave you for a minute then." He gave her a swift, hard kiss, then lifted her off his lap and settled her on the bed. "If you want to get started before I get back, you could touch yourself for me."

She gave a little laugh and stretched out on the bed. "Maybe I will."

The sound of her laughter pleased him as much as her willingness to surrender her body entirely to him. Thorne made quick work of collecting olive oil and a condom before returning to the woman he hadn't wanted to leave, even for a minute.

Elaine let her hands drift over her breasts, down her belly, and brush against the pubic curls covering her mons. Since she'd already seen herself do this and seen him come in to watch her, why try to fight it? Her body felt strange to her, as if she was only now seeing it, feeling it for the first time.

She'd never imagined she had the sort of body that made a beautiful nude. Even breast implants wouldn't make her centerfold material, but Damon's portrait of her was undeniably stunning. And erotic. She thought about it hanging in a gallery somewhere. *Well, at least nobody will recognize my face.*

She searched out the tight bud of her clitoris and stroked a fingertip over it while her other hand made a circle around one breast while she thought of a nude image of herself on public display.

"Beautiful."

She turned her head to see Damon carrying a bottle in one hand and smiled at him. "I decided to touch myself for you."

"I like it." His eyes were hot as they devoured her. Having an audience made her bolder. Elaine toyed with her nipple, buried a fingertip inside herself, slid it in and out while he watched her. "My turn," he said in a rough voice. He came over to the bed and put his hand over her sex, manipulating her clit as he massaged her with a circular motion until she moaned. Then he plunged two fingers into her tight sheath, twisting them inside her.

Elaine watched him through half-lidded eyes, her legs sprawled apart for him, one hand still touching her own breast.

"Pinch your nipples," he growled. She shivered and did as he told her, felt the pressure from those twin points shoot to the apex of her thighs, and moaned again as he

took her with his knowing hands. He used one hand to penetrate her in a steady rhythm, the other to press against her mons and subtly stimulate her clit, and Elaine felt orgasm rushing towards her. His name broke from her lips as the climax hit her, and when she drifted back down from the peak, he kept his hands on her, fingers buried inside her, watching her.

“Ready to get on your hands and knees for me?” Damon asked.

Feeling liquid and loose and not quite real, Elaine rolled over and positioned herself for him with her legs apart, offering him a part of herself she’d never imagined giving any man.

Chapter Seven

"Just like that." Damon's voice sounded deep and seductive as he spoke behind her. "I'm going to have your lovely little ass, Elaine."

Heat flared through her at his erotic claim, sending a wave of weakness through her limbs, and she hoped her legs wouldn't collapse under her before he was finished. She heard a tearing sound and realized he was putting on a condom. Then he opened the bottle he'd brought to the bedroom. A moment later his fingertips stroked the tight puckered star of her anus, coated liberally with warm oil.

"Olive oil," he said, spreading it over her opening and stimulating nerve endings she'd never realized could give her such pleasurable sensations in the process. He paused for a moment and then his hand returned with more oil. He probed at her anus with his fingertips, then slowly penetrated her, working the lubrication inside her. The oil eased his entry and Elaine breathed deeply, focusing on making those muscles relax and accept him.

"I've heard that's good for you," she answered. Her voice sounded a little ragged to her ears.

"Heart smart." He stroked in and out of her anal passage, very slowly, very gently, letting her adjust to the unaccustomed penetration. More oil and another finger joined the first, stretching her, making her ready for what he wanted. She felt them move inside her in a scissoring action and it struck home what he was about to do, what he was preparing her body for.

His fingers slid out, and then she felt him guide the head of his cock in alignment with her well-lubricated anus. "Breathe out," Damon said. He pushed steadily forward and she felt herself opening for him, stretching to take him. She felt the slide of him as

he gradually entered her untried passage by inches, a sense of unfamiliar pressure but no pain.

The hand that had oiled and stretched her for him settled over her ass as he entered her, caressing the curves of her buttocks and the dip of her lower back as he worked the length of himself inside. His other hand moved around to her front and searched out her clitoris. Elaine sucked in a breath as he stroked the sensitive bundle of nerve endings while he took her from behind, the combination of stimuli sending a surge of feedback through her system, all of it making her want more.

“Damon,” she said with a low moan as she felt him sheath his cock fully in the tight grip of her flesh.

“Yes,” he said in a rough voice. He bent over her to kiss the back of her neck. “It’s Damon fucking your ass, taking what no other man has or will. This is mine.”

She shuddered at his possessive statement, felt her body react, softening for him, accepting him. To her surprise the combination of his hand between her legs, working her while he buried his cock in virgin territory, and his vocal sexual claim on her body, sent her into a heightened state of arousal.

His flesh moving in and out of her felt good, his hands on her, his body behind her, fitting against her and inside her, it all combined in a surge of pleasure that made her cry out his name as he took all of her.

Pleasure intensified. He established a careful, steady stroking rhythm that soon had her moaning and writhing as she tried to find her release. He ground his hand over her clit and that sent her over the edge. The climax was so powerful she thought she saw stars.

Elaine heard his groan of satisfaction and pleasure, felt the swell of him inside her as he found his release and wondered if she’d ever recover from the intensity of the experience. Her legs gave way, and she sank down onto the bed. Damon followed her down, covering her body with his, sheltering and warming her as he rested, still inside her, for a long moment.

Finally, she felt him lift his head and brush a kiss along the curve of her shoulder as he carefully withdrew from her. "I need to clean up," he said in a low voice. "Don't move."

"Can't," Elaine said. She felt her lips curve in a smile and stretched on her belly in lazy satisfaction.

He stroked a hand down her spine, rested it on her bare butt for a moment then moved away. She heard his footsteps receding and yawned, remembering how he'd returned with a cloth to gently sponge between her thighs earlier.

Her smile widened. How different she felt now. She felt lighter than she remembered feeling in a very long time, as if a burden too heavy for any person to carry had finally been lifted away. Relief and peace and gratitude and a careful, tiny ray of happiness stirred inside her.

She might have lost love, but she'd found a lover. She could have this much, at least, for a little while. It was more than she'd imagined, and a fragile sense of hope for the future rose in her heart like a star.

* * * * *

A month later, she reclined naked on a chaise that was draped with a red velvet spread, in a pose of sensual abandon. A long, fluffy feather covered her bare sex like a fig leaf and Elaine looked down at it and gave a little frown of recognition. Sunlight flooded the studio and the room was comfortably warm. In addition to the full sun, Damon had set up a little space heater to make sure she didn't get chilled posing for him.

"Close your eyes," he said in a patient, coaxing tone. "I'll tell you when you can open them."

She shifted the gold feather unconsciously.

"Don't move the feather," he said. "We'll never get it right again."

This, she thought. She waited for what she knew he'd say next, and wondered how the scene would end when the part she knew played out. The future glimpses she saw were always something important. What was ahead?

"Now you're frowning. You know the price you'll pay for that. Don't make me punish you again." She heard his footfalls as he strode towards her and knew from the sound that his feet were bare.

She turned her head in the direction of the sound and saw the palette knife in his hands, his fingers stained red from the paint that recreated the shade of the velvet drape beneath her on canvas, and wanted to laugh at her misinterpretation of this future moment.

Damon's punishments involved extravagance and hedonism, forcing her to enjoy life to the fullest after years of repression and self-denial. That, she now acknowledged, had been her attempt at penance, her way of punishing herself and dealing with a form of survivor's guilt. Damon seemed determined to make up for the years of lack.

She smiled at him, feeling carefree and almost giddy with happiness. "What will it be this time? Sunbathing and a clandestine blowjob on the beach in Rio?"

"Lunch in Paris," he said, deciding her fate. "Followed by an afternoon of decadent sex in a little hotel overlooking the Seine. We'll leave the windows open, and if you're too noisy everybody will know what's being done to you out of sight."

Elaine laughed. "What a life. I never imagined I'd spend my vacation playing the pampered mistress of an eccentric multimillionaire."

"A month isn't nearly enough time to pamper you properly. And don't forget you're also an artist's model," Damon pointed out. "That's a very important job. One I think you should take more seriously."

She arched a brow at him. "I sit around naked."

"You inspire me." He bent and drew one exposed nipple into his mouth, sucking hard enough to make her gasp, then press her thighs together at the answering surge of heat. "Don't underestimate the importance of that."

"Still." She fought to keep her voice steady. "It's not a real job."

"I hope you're not trying to give notice." His face grew impassive. "I can't possibly replace you."

"Damon." Elaine licked her lips nervously, feeling the atmosphere grow tense and serious.

"I have other jobs for you when you're fully rested up," he added, watching her carefully. "You're a financial genius and I have a large portfolio to manage. You could see to it that if my paintings ever stop setting the art world on fire, we're never faced with the threat of turning our home into a real bed-and-breakfast to pay for the taxes and upkeep."

He'd said *our home*. A very different kind of warmth stirred inside her, but caution warned her not to read too much into such a little thing. "Damon."

"You can't tell me you've gotten tired of me." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "You climbed on top of me at the crack of dawn this morning and rode me until you drenched my cock with your come."

Elaine started at that, feeling confused and a little defensive. "I didn't think you minded when I woke you up. I never do when you wake me that way. Are you angry with me because I was on top?"

"I'm not angry with you." His tone evened and gentled as he knelt beside her chaise. "I'm possessive and proprietary and feeling a touch threatened by the possibility that you see this as nothing more than a pleasant vacation, something you'll remember fondly while you go back to your real life, leaving me behind."

Elaine didn't know what to say to that, so she said nothing, staring at him with her eyes wide.

"I can understand that mistress might not be the title you always dreamed of a man bestowing on you," Damon said. "I thought it might be too soon to give you the one I want you to have."

She drew in a breath, wondering if she was mistaking his meaning. She waited for him to go on, while her heart jumped in an erratic rhythm.

"I want you for my wife, Elaine." His eyes held hers and she couldn't look away. "Don't go back to Boston, now or ever. Stay with me. The international business world can get along without you, but I can't."

She didn't want to go back. She'd realized that a week earlier. Once she'd unwound from the tension she'd carried, relaxed from the punishing pace she'd kept up, she'd realized she was incapable of going back to it even if she'd wanted to. The decisions she'd made to live that way had been based on avoidance and it had been brought home to her as she recovered just how close it had come to breaking her.

She was grateful Mickey had seen the inevitable collapse she was heading for and forced her onto a different path. She was even more grateful for the accident of fate that had brought her here. She no longer felt any need to shut out the past or the future. She'd made peace with both in making peace with herself, and with Damon's help she'd learned to embrace her gift instead of wanting to bury it. No, she didn't want to go back, but she did need to.

"I need to go back," Elaine said. She touched her fingertips to Damon's lips to keep him from protesting. "I have to pack up my things and close my apartment."

"Is that all?" His lips moved against her fingers as he spoke. He kissed them lightly. "We'll schedule movers. Or I'll go with you if you think you need to be there to oversee it."

"I don't need to be there," she said, looking at him with her heart in her eyes. "It's not my home. It's just the place I stored my things while I tried to figure out how to live again. If you could call what I was doing living. This is my home, here, with you."

Damon leaned over her and pressed his head against her breast. "As soon as I clean up, I'm going to put my hands on you," he informed her. "Although you haven't answered my proposal."

"Was that a proposal?" Elaine couldn't suppress the hint of laughter in her voice. "It sounded like a royal command."

"I'm too proud to beg," he said. "Although if you put it to the test, I'm not stupid enough to cling to pride while I let you walk away. I love you."

"I love you too." It was easier than she'd expected to say the words, and saying them released a tension she hadn't realized she held inside. Hearing that Damon loved her made happiness bubble up inside her like a hidden spring.

"Will you marry me, Elaine?"

"Yes." It was right, she knew it all the way to the depths of her being. Over the last month she'd felt her heart heal, felt the weight of the past fall away, leaving her with a sense of peace she wouldn't have thought possible. She'd had a shift in perspective with the realization that she was fallible and far from all-knowing and all-powerful. She was only herself. Only human. With very human needs, foremost among them the need to love and be loved.

Damon didn't replace the man she'd loved and lost. In a very real way, she felt like he'd given her back the memory of the woman she'd been then and the man who had loved her, by laying her ghosts to rest. She could think of the past without pain, remember Tony the way he deserved to be remembered, with joy and gratitude for the brief time she'd been given with him instead of bitterness and self-blame.

She was fortunate enough to have been loved by two good men. The first was her past. The second was her future. "Yes," Elaine repeated, "I'll marry you, Damon."

"Maybe instead of Paris, we'll go to Vegas," he said. "We could be married tomorrow."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing. "You want to wait so long?"

"It takes that long to get the paperwork," he informed her. "You can't get married the same day you apply for the license."

"And you know this how?"

“I looked it up.” He turned his head and placed a series of kisses over her bare belly that made her shiver. “I wanted to be prepared.”

“Then let’s go to Vegas,” Elaine said. She didn’t need to glimpse the future to know it shone as bright as a star.

The End

About the Author

Charlene Teglia writes erotic romance with humor and speculative fiction elements. She can't imagine any better life than making up stories about hunky Alpha heroes who meet their match and live happily ever after, whether it happens right next door, in outer space, or the outer limits of imagination. When she's not writing, she can be found hiking around the Olympic Peninsula with her family or opening and closing doors for cats.

Charlene welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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