

LUST

An Anthology Of Torrid Romance

Louise Bohmer, Barri Bryan

Kristina Diesen, Jamie Hill

Jane Leopold Quinn, Susan M. Sailors

Cheri Valmont, Lois Wencil

Emma Wildes, Brenda Williamson

Lust: An Anthology Of Torrid Romance
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Whiskey Creek Press

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LUST ANTHOLOGY

by

Emma Wildes, Jane Leopold Quinn, Barri Bryan, Susan M.
Sailors, Louise Bohmer, Lois Wencil,

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& Brenda Williamson

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

LUST ANTHOLOGY

The LUST Anthology is a collection of wonderful stories and poems that I really enjoyed reading. Whatever your pleasure, this compilation has something for everyone and is bound to entertain you and keep you satisfied.

4.5 Kisses

Kerin, Two Lips Reviews

Lust: An Anthology Of Torrid Romance
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Dedication

We'd like to thank Jan, a very talented and amazing Executive Editor, for her support and belief in this project and us.

We'd also like to thank the WCP authors who participated in this anthology. It was a pleasure reading your stories and working with each one of you.

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Table of Contents

Lady Rothburg's Advice

Emma Wildes

Mercenary Desires

Jane Leopold Quinn

Concealed Weapon

Barri Bryan

Chocolate At Midnight

Susan M. Sailors

Red Willow

Louise Bohmer

Hope Finds Hope

Lois Wencil

Taming Thera

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LADY ROTHBURG'S ADVICE

by

Emma Wildes

The vestibule was full, well-dressed people milling like jeweled birds in their finery, which was exactly what she'd counted upon. Brianna Northfield let her husband slip her cloak from her shoulders and deliberately kept her back toward him, smiling and nodding at several acquaintances in the throng.

This was the first step in her plan, and she certainly hoped it worked, for she felt half-naked.

Colton took her arm, his gaze thankfully intent on scanning the crowd for a way to proceed toward their private box. "This way, my dear. I think we can squeeze through over by where the Earl of Braden is standing."

"That young woman with him is not someone I know," she murmured, noting the beautiful young lady's fiery hair and lush figure. "Good heavens, he must be old enough to be her father."

"His latest mistress, I believe," her husband said coolly. "I'm sure they are here at the opera together simply to annoy his wife. Discretion has never been Braden's long suit."

The note of disapproval in her husband's voice did not escape her, but at least it wasn't directed at her. That is, not yet. Colton Northfield, the fifth Duke of Rolthven, did not believe in public displays of one's private life. She had learned that much in three months of marriage.

If he had a mistress, he would certainly not bring her out and flaunt the affair in front of all of fashionable London society. She simply prayed he didn't have a mistress, nor did she want him to ever feel he required one.

His grip on her arm was polite, the pressure light as he guided her toward the elegant carpeted stairs that led up to the gilded box which overlooked center stage. Heads turned as they passed, friends giving greetings, and Brianna noticed more than one gentlemen let their gaze linger on her and several raised brows among the ladies.

Fine. That was exactly what she wanted.

She felt it the moment Colton noticed her gown. They were halfway up the stairs and he faltered, almost stopping, his fingers tightening. "Good God, what are you wearing?"

"Should you really be halting on the stairs, staring so pointedly at my bosom?" she asked with a calm she didn't particularly feel, taking another determined step. "This is Madame Ellen's latest creation, and the neckline is a little daring, yes, but I am assured I have the proper figure to pull it off."

Her husband didn't move for a moment, his glittering gaze still intent on the ivory flesh that swelled above the material of her bodice, the entire upper curves exposed. "You certainly can carry it off, but perhaps you should have asked yourself if you *should* carry it off. Or better yet, ask me."

"People are staring, Colton, wondering if we are actually arguing in public."

Uttering a low curse, he responded by almost dragging her up the rest of the way, his long fingers around her wrist as he

ushered her down the hallway and into the balcony with their private seats. His expression was hard to read, but his mouth was tight as he seated her and took the next chair. "I suppose since we are here, wrapping you in your cloak and carrying you outside might be noticed," he said sardonically. "Though I imagine more opera glasses will be directed toward your breasts on such lavish display this evening rather than at the stage. Whatever possessed you, Madame, to choose such an outrageous gown?"

Because I want to seduce you. She gazed at him. He was as devastatingly attractive as ever this evening, even with a frown on his handsome face, and the sensual line of his mouth compressed in reproof. Tall, with thick chestnut hair, and a lean, athletic build, on one of those rare occasions that Colton smiled, every woman in the room felt a little flushed. With as much composure as possible, Brianna answered, "There are many ladies in attendance this evening attired in gowns every bit as fashionably low-cut as mine. I thought you would like it."

"Like having every man in London ogle your bare bosom?" His brows lifted, but his gaze strayed downward again.

"No," she answered, a flicker of hope stirring, because though he sounded annoyed, he couldn't seem to stop staring. "I thought *you* might like the way I look in this gown."

For a moment he looked surprised, his blue eyes narrowing a fraction. "You are stunningly beautiful, Brianna, and I always admire the way you look, my dear. Why do you think I married you?"

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Shaking out her fan, Brianna said furiously, "I hope you didn't wed me, your Grace, simply to have as an ornament on your arm at functions such as this one. I am a person, and a woman, and your wife."

Looking uncharacteristically disconcerted, Colton said, "Perhaps that wasn't well put. I meant you are always attractive to me, you do not have to be half-naked for me to think so."

"Then prove it."

"I beg your pardon?"

The orchestra stirred then, beginning the tedious business of tuning their instruments, the dissonant sounds wafting up from the pit below. Raising her voice so he could hear the words, not caring about the boxes all around them, Brianna said clearly, "Tonight, I want you to prove to me that you find me wildly attractive."

* * * *

Women were such unpredictable, irrational, and emotional creatures, Colton Northfield pondered darkly, only half-listening to Herr Mozart's creation, the troupe on stage attired in bright costumes, the music lively and predictably engaging. Next to him, his lovely wife sat in rapt audience, her fan waving in languid sweeps against the closeness of the huge room. Tendrils of silky auburn hair brushed her slender neck, and her delicate face was slightly flushed from the heat.

He hadn't lied—she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, and from the first moment of their

introduction nearly a year ago, he had intensely wanted her. Courtship, the necessary engagement, and their adjustment to wedded life had not changed that one bit. Even now, seeing the quiver of her opulent flesh as it swelled above the bodice of an ivory gown that—no matter what she said—bordered on scandalous, made his erection swell uncomfortably against the confinement of his fitted breeches.

In retrospect, maybe he hadn't been the ardent lover she expected, but that was out of deference for her innocence and inexperience. Brianna was a proper young lady, and usually a little shy. He had curbed his lust as much as possible and kept lovemaking between them somewhat of a subdued experience, trying to allow her to get used to the intimacy of the act and loosen her understandable inhibitions

There was certainly nothing inhibited about her tonight.

Maybe he'd been going about things in the wrong way, he wondered suddenly, with pure male speculation.

It seemed like forever before the music ended, the applause ceased, and the chaotic exodus from the theater began. Taking advantage of his superior height to spot the appropriate opening, Colton escorted his wife outside as fast as possible, barely taking the time to exchange the usual after-performance pleasantries. Once their carriage was brought around, he helped her in and followed, rapping sharply on the roof to signal the driver.

In the shadowed interior of the coach, with her cloak slightly open so that the sumptuous flesh that nearly spilled from the front of her gown glimmered pale, Brianna looked

more tempting than ever. Clearing his throat, he said, "Did you enjoy the production, my dear?"

"Yes." Her voice was hushed, and his wife gazed at him from under her long lashes in a provocative way he'd never seen before. With every breath she took, her breasts threatened to fall free from the bare confines of her gown.

"Did you like it?"

"The view was spectacular," he said dryly, not bothering to hide his open lascivious interest. "And, yes, I thought the opera itself diverting."

She smiled, looking nothing like the young ingénue he had married, but instead every inch an alluring, gorgeous woman. "If I can divert you in any way, please, fell free to indulge yourself. *Now* would be fine."

Bloody hell.

He didn't intend to move. Engaging in an indiscretion in a carriage was not very dignified after all, but Colton suddenly did not care about that in the least. Reaching over, he scooped Brianna into his arms and settled back into his seat with her draped across his lap. Lowering his head, he kissed her hungrily, his tongue exploring her mouth, tasting every sweet corner. She responded with equal abandon, her arms going around his neck, her slender, voluptuous body pressing against him. Not releasing her mouth, he eased the cloth from one shapely shoulder and her bared breast filled his hand with a soft, supple weight.

Perfect.

Everything faded. The clattering of the wheels of the vehicle as it rolled along the cobbled street, the warm evening

... everything except the hard throbbing of his cock. He could hear her erratic breathing when he finally broke the kiss and slid his mouth down the graceful length of her neck, his lips lingering for a moment at the point where her pulse beat fast and light. Brianna made a small sound as his thumb circled the luscious crest of her pink nipple, her head falling back against his shoulder. "Colton ... oh, yes."

Her skin was soft, smooth, and infinitely female. His fingers deftly found the fastenings at the back of her gown, and it was around her waist in moments. Licking the enticing valley between her breasts, kissing her mounded flesh, sucking on her nipples until they were erect and tight, he could feel his lovely wife's arousal in the way she clung to him and whispered his name.

The ducal carriage had nice wide seats, something he hadn't particularly appreciated before. "I cannot believe I am doing this, but God help me, Brianna, I need to have you now," he said raggedly, laying her down on the seat.

"Take me." Her hair had loosened and it framed her face in a silken tumble, her shoulders ivory in the dim light, her naked breasts tight and quivering with the motion of the vehicle. He thought he would cease to breathe when she reached down to pull up her skirts above her waist, baring long lovely legs in their silk stockings and garters. Her pubic hair was a small auburn triangle between her white thighs, and as he discarded his coat and unfastened his breeches, she spread her legs in graphic erotic invitation.

So hot with urgent need he felt like he might combust at any moment, Colton accepted gladly. Freeing his pulsing

erection, he lowered himself over his wife's sprawled half-dressed body, adjusting himself between her open thighs. Bracing one hand on the upholstered seat, he guided his rigid cock to her entrance, finding her wet and accommodating to his penetration. Brianna clutched his shoulders as he thrust inside her body, a low moan coming from her throat.

It was so good, he thought in feverish pleasure, not bothering to caution her to be quiet. The idea of his driver overhearing them make love would normally have appalled him, but at the moment, he just didn't care. Withdrawing, he pushed back inside her tight passage with long strokes, the pumping of his swollen shaft matching the swaying motion of the carriage.

Brianna arched to meet him, her hips lifting for each penetration, her eyes shut, long lashes dark against her flushed cheeks. Feeling the sharp bite of her fingernails through the fine lawn of his shirt, Colton was almost startled to realize she was going to climax so quickly, her muffled scream ringing out as she arched frantically and her inner muscles began to ripple and tighten.

It sent him right over the edge. Pushing in deep, he erupted with such intensity, his body shook as he held himself still, the rapture taking him prisoner, holding him as he flooded her with his seed and groaned in release.

When he could finally breathe again, he registered two things. The first was that his gorgeous wife smiled up at him in a way that could only be described as triumphant.

The second was that the vehicle they occupied in a state of scandalous near undress was coming to a halt.

"Bloody hell," Colton muttered in disbelief. Had he actually just fucked his wife in a moving carriage like some randy schoolboy?

* * * *

The afternoon sun slanted in the tall windows, laying blocks on the rich patterned rug. French doors were open to the gardens and the scent of blooming roses filled the air. Across from her, Letticia raised one blond eyebrow and said suspiciously, "You look strange, Bri."

"I do?" Feigning innocence was impossible and Brianna laughed.

"Yes ... a kind of cat who got into the cream kind of strange. Oh!" Sitting up a little more on the settee, Letticia said, "My heavens, don't tell me you actually *tried* it? You wore that gown last night?"

Reaching for her cup of tea, Brianna murmured in amused recollection, "Yes, I did. You should have seen him, Letty. I think he gave up on watching the stage halfway through the opera and simply stared at me. Well, at a certain part of me anyway."

Her friend grinned, her blue eyes alight with mischievous interest. "Seriously? The duke is so controlled and proper all the time. I just can't picture it."

"Well," Brianna confessed, "he was outraged at first, but it was too late to drag me home; everyone would whisper over it and you know how he hates that sort of thing. I must say though ... he rather warmed up to the idea of a garment that afforded such easy *accessibility*."

"You're joking."

Lowering her voice a notch, Brianna added, "In the carriage on the way home, no less. I was ravished most thoroughly and loved every minute of it. Though I have to say, it was a little embarrassing to alight so obviously disheveled." Recalling how her husband barely had time to fasten his trousers and help her jerk her dress back up before one of the footmen opened the door made her blush.

Letticia's cup rattled as she placed it in the saucer abruptly. Her eyes were wide. "In the carriage? Oh, my. Was it wonderful?"

"Yes," Brianna said truthfully. "He comes across stodgy and dignified, but that isn't his true personality. I think Colton has always had the opinion that I would be horrified if he exhibited openly his passionate nature. Furthermore, I know he was raised with the idea he was going to be a duke, and should have a decorum that befits his exalted station. When he courted me, he barely did more than steal a few chaste kisses, though I know he wanted much, much more." Lowering her lashes slightly, she said, "It's indelicate to discuss, but there are some things a man cannot hide in today's fashion of fitted breeches."

Her friend sighed, sitting back in her chair, adjusting the sleeve of her light blue day gown. "I am so jealous. It is all very romantic."

"Actually, I'm finding Lady Rothburg's book is correct, that what women feel is romantic, and how men define that intangible emotion are truly two different things. Colton is very dutiful about gifts of jewelry and flowers and the like,

but I am sure he would be astounded to know that I would appreciate a warm smile or a tender kiss more than some diamond bauble. He simply does not think that way."

"But you are going to educate him, I take it?"

"Let's just say there is some common ground and I am going to work so we find it. If men, like the book says, define romance as sex, then I'm going to make sure he finds me very romantic. I refuse to let my husband look elsewhere because he finds me dull in bed."

"That book," Leticia pointed out, "is something I doubt your gorgeous—but very respectable—husband would want you to read. I still cannot believe you found it in that dingy little shop, much less bought it."

It was true, Lady Rothburg's work, *Things Every Woman Should Know That Their Husbands Keep From Them*, had been publicly banned over a decade before when it was first published.

Brianna said serenely, "It's most enlightening and entirely to the benefit of our marriage. Why should he mind if I read it?"

"Because it's scandalous and entirely about sex, written no less, by an infamous courtesan."

Unfazed, Brianna reached for a lemon tart on a small plate on the tea trolley. "Maybe so, but he seemed to like her advice in chapter one." Taking a small bite of her pastry, she chewed daintily and swallowed, adding, "And you should see what she suggests in chapter two."

* * * *

Something was going on, of that there was no doubt.

When the door into his bedroom from the adjoining suite opened, Colton wasn't precisely surprised, but still a trifle wary. During dinner, Brianna had been particularly animated, and if they hadn't had guests, he might have asked her flat out why exactly she was acting so markedly different. Usually his beautiful wife was a bit reserved.

"It's late and I dismissed my maid for the night. Will you help me out of my dress?"

She'd taken the pins from her hair and it fell to her waist in lustrous auburn curls that caught the low light. Barefoot, she walked slowly toward him, her brows arched slightly in teasing question.

Hell yes, I'll help her off with her dress.

His fingers fumbled slightly as he complied, slipping free the fastenings on her evening gown, until it slid off her slender shoulders and fell to the floor. Her chemise was nothing like the usual demure undergarments she wore, but instead made out of a lace so sheer, she might as well have been wearing nothing at all. Colton could not help it, his breath went in sharply. His voice a trifle thick, he said, "I see Madame Ellen has been at her scandalous work again."

Turning around, Brianna smiled at him mischievously. "It has been a warm summer. I wanted something a little cooler to wear under my gowns."

"It's warm all right," Colton muttered darkly, tugging at his cravat, pulling it loose and discarding it carelessly.

"Shall I go back to my room?"

He almost didn't register the delicately asked question. Pink, perfect nipples thrust high against the sheer fabric, and the soft weight of her opulent breasts was molded by the fragile material. It fell to mid-thigh, and Colton could clearly see the intriguing darkness between her legs. A soft waft of her signature perfume drifted in the air, an enticing fragrance reminiscent of lily of the valley. "I beg your pardon?"

Her laugh was light and provocative, her soft mouth curving. "I asked if I should go back to my room, but I am going to assume that," she pointed at the sudden prominent bulge in his tight breeches, "is my answer. Here, you helped me; it's my turn."

To his utter astonishment, his beautiful, refined young bride dropped to her knees in front of him and began to unfasten his trousers. The brush of her slender fingers through the material was excruciatingly arousing as she worked, and he hardened further, almost holding his breath as she finally tugged open the last button and freed his erection. "Brianna," he said hoarsely, as she began to stroke his cock, her hands caressing him. "Good God, what are you doing?"

Wiping a bead of semen from the engorged tip, she looked at the substance on her finger with open curiosity, and to his shock, licked it off. "It's salty," she said artlessly, looking like a young Venus, all veiled lush curves and flowing hair. Her lashes lowered a fraction and Colton felt a rush of molten heat through his veins as she leaned forward and took him in her mouth.

Never in his life had he been so outraged.

Never in his life had anything felt so good.

Oh, he'd had lovers before his marriage that had pleased him orally, but they had been experienced women, not innocent, genteel young ladies. His hands went to her hair, and he had every intention of demanding to know just where Brianna had gotten the idea to do something so wanton, but just as his fingers sank into the silky mass to tug her head up, she began to gently suck.

A low sound tore up from his chest and his body quivered. Without thought, he pushed deeper in her warm mouth, and she took him all the way to the back of her throat. Sliding up, her tongue licked the crest and then she repeated the motion with tantalizing slowness over and over. Colton groaned, not able to bring himself to make her stop until he felt his testicles tighten in preparation for ejaculation. He absolutely refused to come in her mouth, it was not something a gentleman did, but he was wild with need for release. "Enough," he growled, somehow finding the will to pull free, scooping her off the floor. He crossed the room, practically tossing her on the bed in a flurry of auburn curls and long silken limbs. Jerking up the hem of her chemise, he heard the delicate material rip, and decided if it was already damaged, it would come off faster if he just tore it. Brianna gave a low gasp as he deliberately jerked the bodice apart, but he couldn't tell if it was dismay for the loss of the garment or excitement.

Gloriously nude, she stared up at him, her mouth pink and inviting. Knowing if he entered her now, he'd explode at once and cheat her of any kind of release, Colton undid two

buttons on his linen shirt and whipped it off over his head, and then stepped out of his unfastened breeches. "If you wish to play wicked games, Madame," he told her, his glittering gaze admiring every inch of her body, "it is my turn."

She licked her lips. "I wish to play any game you choose."

"You'll like this one." Joining her on the bed, he nuzzled her breasts briefly, kissed her stomach, and then buried his face between her legs.

Brianna gasped, as he expected she would, and for a moment, her thighs clamped together in protest against such a sinful kiss, but he didn't allow it. Insistently, his hands pushed her slim legs apart, and he pressed his mouth against the sensitive moist folds of her sex. Licking and stroking with his tongue, he teased her just as she had him, and he could feel her arousal when the small nub between her folds began to swell against the pressure of his mouth. She tasted sweetly female, and as he brought her to climax, her small cries of pleasure inflamed him even more, if that was possible. In moments, Brianna convulsed, her hands grasping his arms as she shuddered and moaned. Not giving her time to recover, Colton moved up between her open thighs, and thrust into her still contracting passage.

As predicted, it was over quickly. Her wet heat milking him, his orgasm began after the first three thrusts, the sensation of carnal release so intense, so good, that he closed his eyes and went rigid. Beneath him, Brianna ran her hands down the damp skin of his back, clutching his buttocks as he flooded her with hot sperm, coating the entrance to her womb.

When he could finally speak again, he stared down at the utterly tempting, disheveled woman in his arms. "Do you mind telling me," he asked unevenly, his chest still lifting erratically as he struggled to regain his breath, "just what has gotten into you, my dear?"

Her fingers traced the small of his back. "It seems to me that *you* are in me, darling."

A muffled laugh escaped his lips. "And it is a delightful place to be, but that is not what I meant, which I have a feeling you know full well." The fragrance of flowers drifted from her hair and he couldn't help but kiss the side of her graceful neck, inhaling the sweet scent. "Whatever gave you the idea to ... well..." How in the hell did a man politely ask a woman why she wanted to suck his cock, Colton thought darkly, discomfited because he could sense Brianna's amusement over his quest for the right words.

"I thought you liked it." The husky note in her voice matched the light stroking of her fingers down his bare back.

"Madame, you know full well I liked it, but you are being evasive."

"Must you be analytical at this particular moment?" Beneath him, Brianna arched a little, and added breathlessly, "You still feel so big."

Her words sent a jolt of new arousal straight to his groin. It was true, his erection hadn't faded, even with the force of his recent climax. Colton decided she was right, at least for now, the cause of her sudden sexually adventurous spirit wasn't important. Not when he could make love to her again.

He kissed her and whispered against her soft lips, "We'll talk some other time."

* * * *

Sure enough, the expected figure skulked in the doorway of the tobacco shop across the street. Narrowing her eyes, Brianna felt a surge of irritation and unease, wondering if she should report this to the authorities. After all, her husband was a rich man, and if someone wanted to kidnap her, she should be on the alert.

It was the third day of spotting him here and there and she was becoming more and more convinced that the odd little man in the brown checked cap was following her.

Slipping back into the shop, she asked the milliner's wife, a stout woman who ran the front part of the establishment, if there was a back exit she could use. Though obviously surprised, the woman directed her to a door at the back, and accepted some coin to send her clerk outside in an hour or so to instruct Brianna's driver to take the carriage on home. Something about the woman's expression told Brianna that the vagaries of the rich and titled were to be met with resignation, and she slipped into the alley behind the shop with a grin on her face.

Luckily, it was a very nice day, a sky of cerulean blue above with just the slightest dusting of clouds. When she had gone a good ways down the alley, skirting some very dubious piles of rubbish, Brianna let herself in the back entrance of a flower shop, bought a bunch of daisies from the startled proprietor, and regained the street.

Feeling rather clever, she walked several more blocks to her sister's townhouse, and was delighted to find Rachel at home. In minutes, she was ensconced in the informal drawing room, sipping tea.

Dark-haired and slender, Rachel was almost a decade older, and her blue eyes reflected consternation. "Following you? And you spotted him ... oh, dear."

Lifting her cup, Brianna sipped the sweetened tea. It took a moment or two before she actually registered her sister's shamefaced expression. Colton was very good friends with Rachel's husband, in fact, that was exactly how they met in the first place. Brianna felt a tremor of suspicious doubt as she eyed her sister's half-guilty face. "You don't seem particularly concerned."

"I'm not sure what to say."

It was a lame answer, and Brianna frowned. "Rachel, is there something I should know?"

"Well ... should know? Perhaps. Peter has confided in me with the strict proviso that I keep silent." Her sister looked pained, setting aside her teacup. "However, you are my sister and this puts me in an untenable situation."

Brianna stared, mystified. "What situation?"

"Colton thinks you are having a ... torrid affair. The man following you might be in his employ."

Her sister could have decreed the sky green, and the grass blue, and not startled her so thoroughly. Brianna said, "*What?*"

"That was my same reaction, it was such a ludicrous suggestion. Rest assured, neither Peter nor I think it is true, and have said so."

Realizing her mouth hung open, Brianna snapped it shut. "We're just barely married," she mumbled. "Is he insane? I love him ... I know it isn't particularly fashionable to feel such a thing, but I truly do. And the truth is, he knows it, I could swear it!"

"Men are insecure creatures, Bri. Trust me on this."

"Why would he think such a thing?" Even as she spoke, a terrible realization that both infuriated her and gave her pause, came to mind. Setting aside her cup, Brianna got abruptly to her feet. "Never mind. I think I must be going."

* * * *

The door to his study flew open with such force it actually hit the opposite wall. Not quite prepared for such an invasion, Colton glanced up, startled. His secretary, a thin young man built like a lanky scarecrow, jumped up so fast, he toppled over his chair. Rising politely to his feet a little more slowly, Colton registered the angry flush on his wife's smooth cheeks as she came into the room with a premonition of imminent disaster. He said as blandly as possible, "Good afternoon, darling."

"Here." Marching straight to his desk, she dumped a book on top of the pile of correspondence he'd been going over.

What the devil is going on now?

Brianna wore light blue, the fashionable gown demure but still clinging suggestively to her lovely curves, and her

beautiful eyes fairly flashed vivid anger. Realizing that whatever was going on, he was not particularly in favor at the moment, Colton cleared his throat and said abruptly, "George, you may go now. And please, if you will, close the door behind you."

The young man complied with almost comical haste, and when the door clicked shut, Colton said coolly, "It is quite apparent you are angry with me over something, but you know I dislike displays of emotion in front of the servants, Brianna."

"You dislike displays of emotion at any time, your Grace," his pretty wife informed him tartly, "but I thought I could reform you. I suppose that was my mistake, for all I received apparently, for my efforts, was to somehow earn your distrust."

"Reform me?" He stared, taken aback by the shimmer of real tears in her eyes.

Putting her hands on the top of his desk, Brianna leaned forward slightly, her furious gaze holding his. "Did you hire someone to follow me, Colton? Did you actually think I might be having an affair with another man?"

Relief flooded through him, for it was obvious her outrage was very real. He hadn't actually thought she was gaining sexual knowledge by leaps and bounds in someone else's bed, but she was learning it somewhere and it was driving him insane with curiosity and jealousy. It was his turn to flush slightly, his cravat feeling suddenly a little tight. "Perhaps we should sit down and discuss this calmly."

"No." Her soft mouth set stubbornly, Brianna shook her head. "I do not feel calm at all and refuse to pretend otherwise. Unlike you, I am perfectly willing to let others see I have emotions."

"I have always been reserved, Brianna," he said stiffly, the implied criticism in her tone stinging a little. "You knew that before you accepted my proposal of marriage. I am sorry it disappoints you."

"You are more than reserved, sir, you are ... stuffy."

"Stuffy?" Colton slowly lifted a brow. "I see."

"But you are improving, thanks to this." She pointed at the book lying amidst his scattered papers.

For the first time, he glanced down and registered the title. "Good God," he muttered. "Where the devil did you get this?"

"Does it matter where I found it? What matters is that it has been very informative."

Stopping himself from pointing out to his gorgeous bride that no lady of breeding should read the work of a loose woman who had once made a living of selling her sexual favors, he instead digested Brianna's statement with discomforting insight. "Why," he managed to keep his tone conciliatory only with the utmost control, "did you think you needed to be so informed?"

"Because I have no intention of ending up like Lord Braden's wife and meet you at the opera with your mistress on your arm."

With a touch of exasperation, he declared, "Brianna, I do not have a mistress."

"That is a relief to hear." Her lower lip quivered slightly, and she took a deep breath. "But what about in the future? You have pointed out to me often enough the lack of fidelity in aristocratic marriages, and I have ears and hear the gossip. I do not ever want you to seek another woman's bed because you find mine boring."

She looked so adorably sincere, that Colton stifled the urge to haul her promptly into his arms and assure her in the most physical way possible she was in no danger of him desiring anyone else. Instead, he said, "I can appreciate that sentiment for I have been driving myself insane, wondering where on earth you were learning such ... er ... adventurous techniques. Forgive me for even harboring a doubt, but it was logical to assume someone was tutoring you, and it wasn't me."

Her lush lashes lowered a fraction. "No, not you. Please, you did not even make me remove my nightdress when we made love the first time, Colton."

"I was trying to be a gentleman." He felt defensive, for what he'd done, and what he had wanted to do, were two entirely different things, and for her benefit.

"Lady Rothburg says there are no ladies or gentlemen in bed."

"Is that so?" Moving a little to lean one hip on the surface next to him, he crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his wayward wife, recalling the outrageously pleasurable interludes he'd had recently as she followed the advice in the notorious book. "I take it, since you sought to change matters, I was the one you found boring."

A small flush spread up her graceful throat to stain her cheeks. Still standing on the other side of the desk, she admitted, "Not boring, for I enjoy it every time you touch me, but I felt something was missing. Sex was pleasurable, but not exciting."

The fact she was perfectly right made him feel like a fool. Well-meaning, perhaps, for he wanted her to feel cherished in his arms, not ravished, but apparently she preferred the latter. "You wish excitement, I take it?"

"Only with you, Colton, for I love you. But, yes, I suppose I find it more exciting when you lose some of that formidable control and show how much you desire me." Her gaze was utterly sincere, and he couldn't help but feel humbled.

Huskily, he said, "I also love you, Brianna, though I know I have said it infrequently for I am not comfortable revealing my emotions. I do desire you always, of that you can be sure, whether I show it or not."

"Like ... now?"

"Now?" he repeated.

"Why not?"

The question, asked in a sexy timbre, sent a streak of sensation straight to his groin. Instantly, his cock began to stiffen in anticipation. When his wife moved suggestively around the desk, his hands spanned her slender waist and he pulled her close, saying in a low growl, "Now would be fine."

Twining her arms around his neck, she offered her luscious mouth for a kiss, her breasts pliant against his chest, their weight full and intoxicating. "Take off my dress and sit in your chair," she suggested in a murmur against his mouth.

"My chair?" He was going to argue that there was a perfectly good bed upstairs, but saw the heavy light in her eyes and remembered the book. Intrigued, Colton complied. Once she was nude, he settled her on his lap as he sat in the large chair behind his desk. Brianna lost no time in moving so she spread her legs and straddled him, and he closed his eyes as she fumbled to undo his breeches. His freed cock pulsed, he wanted her so fiercely, and his hands went to her hips to lift her as she took him in her hand and positioned herself with the throbbing crest at her female entrance.

She sank low as he thrust upward and the result was pure, molten ecstasy.

His wife was an apt pupil, he thought a little later as she rode his shaft, her eyes half-closed and her lush breasts swaying in the rhythm of their intercourse. The fact that anyone could walk in bothered him slightly, but then again, the risk was inherently worth it.

Maybe he could be reformed after all.

When she climaxed with a muffled cry, he came so hard and fast that he gasped out her name, burying his face between the soft mounds of her delectable breasts.

Sex in the chair in his study, that was hardly decorous or behavior befitting a royal duke, he thought as he drifted back to earth.

But it was certainly adventurous and infinitely pleasurable.

Stroking his wife's silken skin, inhaling her delicate scent, Colton smiled in pure male anticipation and silently thanked the very naughty, very wise, infamous Lady Rothburg.

MERCENARY DESIRES

by

Jane Leopold Quinn

Chapter 1

Rowdy Pierce heard the girl's terrified screams just before he shattered the rickety wooden door of the wattle and daub hut with a kick from his size twelve and a half boot. By the flickering light of an old-fashioned kerosene lamp, he spied the young woman, her arms and legs flailing at the man on top of her. Rowdy dove across the dim room, slammed into the bastard, and without a second thought, slit his throat, dumping the son of a bitch face down into the dust.

Turning back to the woman, he saw that she had scrambled to a sitting position against the wall and wrapped her arms around her drawn up knees to cover herself. She stared up at him with a wide-eyed look of horror and revulsion. He didn't blame her for that. She'd been traumatized, possibly raped, and didn't know that the big, bearded man came to rescue her. She didn't know that for all his adult life, rescuing people was his job, first in the military, and now with his own company. Rowdy wiped the blood from his knife on the terrorist's clothing, sheathed it, and approached the girl. There was no time to waste.

* * * *

Sara Stewart fought back the horror of this nightmare day. Jewelry designers from Chicago weren't generally held hostage on vacation. Terrified and freezing cold, even in the

unbearable heat of the Egyptian desert, she hugged her knees tightly to her chest. In this room, she'd been punched in the stomach, slimy fingers had squeezed her breasts, and she had bruises up and down her arms and legs. The least of her hurts were the slap to her face and the weight of the man's body crushing the breath out of her. He had been trying to rape her, and she wasn't about to let him. What she didn't know now was if this new guy killed his buddy so he could take his turn.

Sara's mouth hung open as she looked up and up to find the man's face. Her heartbeat faltered. Wild gray hair and beard and a black eye freaked her out when she thought she was numb. The man loomed above her, legs parted, white-knuckled fists clenching aggressively. In camouflage pants, shirt, and big brown boots, he looked every bit as ugly and dangerous as her vile captors. Whoever he was, why ever he was here, she'd kick, scream, and scratch him too. He may be bigger and stronger, but he wouldn't get an easy rape.

The man slowly crouched down to her eye level, and Sara barely breathed, bravado almost deserting her. *Green*. Her captors were dark-eyed. This man's were green. In the flickering light, his hazel eyes glowed warmly, with bits of gold and rust in the irises.

"It's okay now. You're safe, Miss."

The low, curt sounds coming from his mouth didn't register at first, the horror of the day still foremost in her mind. She stared into his compelling eyes and finally processed his words. *English*. He spoke English. American English.

"Are you Sara Stewart?"

She nodded, tears of relief trailing down her cheeks. "Are you American?" Her voice was scratchy from screaming.

"Yeah," he said again, clipped. "We gotta get outta here." He stood and scanned the room. "Where are your clothes?"

"T-tore 'em ... I..." she whispered falteringly and hugged her knees more tightly.

"Here." The green-eyed man stripped off his shirt and wrapped it around her. "Put your arms in," he ordered.

She did, even though the action exposed her bare breasts. This was no time for modesty. *Good God*. His chest was all she could see. A dark T-shirt tightly encased his body, strained over his shoulders, and barely contained his bulging biceps. Dragging her gaze down to his big, brown hands buttoning the shirt down her front, she clenched her teeth to control the panic. "Who're you ... did my dad send you ... how'd you know where I was?"

He gripped her shoulders and ducked his head to look in her eyes. "My name is Rowdy, ma'am. I'm getting you out," he spoke with confidence. "Don't be afraid, but we've gotta go. Now."

He stood, pulling her to her feet. She'd known he was big, but the man was a giant. And thank God for that because his shirt was long enough to cover her decently.

"Can you walk? I could carry you, but I'd have to tip you over my shoulder, and I don't think you'd care to flash your ass ... er ... your bottom. So, you need to walk under your own steam." He steadied her with hands on her shoulders again. "Okay?"

He was being considerate, but his body vibrated with impatience. His gaze galvanized her, and Sara nodded. She'd do whatever she had to do. It hardly mattered that her feet were bare. "Okay," she murmured, shaking so hard her teeth rattled together.

"You'll be all right," he assured her, his voice a deep rumble.

His assurance didn't come with a smile, but then he wasn't a cheerleader. He was her hero.

Rowdy stepped in front of her, opened the door, and looked right and left. Wrapping his big hand around hers, he drew her out of the hut behind him. Right now, his confidence was all she had, and she tightened her grip. He swept the gun slowly from side to side across the open space. A full moon, bright enough to glimpse his face, showed his fierce, intently aware expression. She ignored the pebbles cutting her feet as they crept along. Any pain was worth it just to get out of this hell.

"Where are we?"

"Shh ... stay behind me." He tugged her in closer.

His deep voice did little to calm her. She'd believe they were out of there when they were out of there. Her heart still thudded in fear, and she could feel the rigid tension in his body.

Suddenly flattening both of them against a wall, his palm spread over her stomach, he grunted a wordless warning. Her heart rate kicked into double-time. She could barely hear with her pulse pounding in her ears. Sara held her breath and drove her fingernails into the wooden wall, afraid to touch any

part of him, not daring to distract him. He was her only protection. Two men spoke Arabic to each other, then drifted away. Rowdy and Sara had been invisible in the deep shadows.

He held still a moment longer, slipped an arm around her waist, and whispered directly in her ear, "Run."

She tucked her sweaty hand into the hot, dry lifeline of his and took off. He hadn't asked if she could run, just took it for granted. And by God, she had no intention of failing him.

Chapter 2

Rowdy jammed his nine millimeter into its holster when they successfully reached the stand of palm trees at the edge of the compound. There was no time to waste. He had to get the girl into the Egyptian clothing he'd brought as a disguise, get her on the horse, and get the hell away from here.

"Water ... please..." she panted.

Rowdy held a canteen of water up to Sara's lips. "Not too fast. Take it easy." Then he handed her a pair of white, ankle-length cotton drawstring pants. *Poor kid*. She stood so quietly, so passively, just holding the pants in her hands. He couldn't blame her for wilting after what she'd been through, and the added run through the compound seemed to have used up any remaining stamina.

"Sara!" he muttered, taking the pants from her. "Are you with me?" Her shaky hands were ice-cold. "You need to snap out of it now! We've got to ride, and you have to be alert. Don't collapse on me now." Shit, of course she was traumatized, but they didn't have time for her to wallow in

fear. She glanced up at him and nodded briefly. It was enough. She'd heard him.

Coming around behind her, he held the pants in front of her as if she were a child and urged her to step into each leg. She leaned back against his chest for balance, and her round ass brushed his cock. He sucked in a breath at her awkward movement. *Holy Christ, now isn't the time to get your dick going, boyo.*

Shaking off the burst of testosterone, he lowered a dark blue abaya over her head and wound a matching hijab around her hair and shoulders. The Egyptian robe and scarf covering her light hair would make her almost invisible if they ran across any other desert travelers.

She took a step and doubled over with a gasp. "My feet!" *Christ.* He'd forgotten about that. He didn't have time to doctor them now but had to do something to help her. Sweeping her into his arms like a baby, he deposited her sidesaddle on the waiting horse, then tore another hijab in half to wrap several times around each foot. She wouldn't be walking for a few hours, and this would be enough protection until he could clean them.

Rowdy also donned a dark abaya, mounted up behind Sara, and lifted her leg over the pommel so she sat astride. Deafening explosions broke the quiet of the night and lit up the sky over the compound where she'd been held.

Sara jerked at the sounds and peeked around his shoulder. "Oh, my God, it's gone." She ducked back into the shelter of his body and dug her fingernails into the arm he held across her stomach.

He shouted, "I set explosives before I found you! The fires'll keep the bastards busy for a while." With that, he nudged his heels into the horse's ribs, slapped the reins on its neck, and they flew off across the desert toward the pickup point.

* * * *

Exhausted and overwhelmed, Sara sank back into the arms of her rescuer. With a name like Rowdy, she had no doubt he was American. Gratefully relaxing into the protection of his strong arms and broad chest, she rolled her head back onto his shoulder, thankful for the feel of the dry desert air blowing in her face. *Freedom*. She'd been taken hostage earlier that day from the archeological site she'd been visiting. Terrified that she'd die in that horrible place, and that the kidnappers would rape her, she'd intended to fight to her dying breath. But she'd been rescued by a white knight and was deliriously joyful to be free again.

Sara shifted in the saddle for a more comfortable position and felt something hard prodding her bottom. *Is that what I think it is? My white knight is turned on? Nah, it's probably just adrenalin*. Erection or no, the arms around her were thickly-muscled, his chest was broad and hard. He enveloped her in warmth and security as he silently guided the horse across the sands. Surely he was an honorable man and wouldn't take advantage of the situation.

* * * *

"We're making a pit stop, and I'll get your feet cleaned up."

Rowdy's voice jolted her awake. The back of her head must have hit his face, and they both grunted an 'ow' at the same time. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Sokay," he mumbled, climbing off the horse and swinging her into his arms.

She hastily clung to his neck, her face even with his. *Wow! How manly is this? It's so romance novel.* She couldn't really see what he looked like under the beard—the moon wasn't *that* bright—but his nose had a little flat spot on the bridge, his lips looked full and sensual, and he sure was in great shape. Without even breathing heavily, he put her down at the edge of a pool of water and hunkered down by her feet.

"They're not too bad," she said. She'd forgotten they were even scraped up.

"Well, let's see," he said, as he unwound the scarves. "Give 'em here."

"No, that's okay. I'll do it."

"Let me do it right. You don't want them to get infected!" He glanced up. "I have the medical kit right here."

"Okay." *Let him take care of you.* Their gazes connected. Her face grew hot remembering the hard length of his penis. He shook his head once, briefly, and focused his attention back to her feet. She let out a breath and hunched over, watching him smooth a wet cloth, then his fingers, over the abrasions on the soles of her feet.

"Damn, they're beat up. Sorry you had to run."

"It's okay. I would have run over hot coals to get away. I wish you'd let me do that. You're too rough." She blinked back tears at the sharp, prickling pains.

"Hold still," he ordered but then softened his touch, sliding his thumb along her arch.

Reflexively pulling her foot out of his hand, she sobbed and fell back into the grass, covering her face with her hands. One minute she'd been sketching ancient jewelry designs, the next she'd been blindfolded and tied up in some dirty hut. Now she was with another stranger, at an oasis in the middle of the desert, with millions of stars overhead. "Oh, God," she moaned. "This just doesn't seem real. Who are you anyway?" Sara pushed herself up, feeling too vulnerable lying down. He'd wrapped her feet in gauze and slipped on soft sandals without acknowledging her breakdown.

"I was hired to retrieve you," he said in a low-pitched voice as he tucked the medical supplies efficiently back into the kit.

"Retrieve?" She tried to see his face, but his chin was down.

"Yeah."

She licked her lips. "Are you in the military?"

He rubbed a long forefinger across the canvas of the kit.

"No."

"Um..." She was distracted by his enormous hands.

"Used to be."

"Oh..." It was like squeezing out information bit by tiny bit.

"I work for myself now."

"Okay." The whole conversation took less than a minute. He'd first hunkered down by her feet, but now that she sat up, they were nose to nose.

He drew his eyebrows together in a frown and fixed her in his gaze. "Why were you in Egypt?" he rumbled at her.

"The tomb," she replied softly, a little intimidated by his accusatory tone. "It's the first tomb to be opened in the Valley of the Kings since the '20s, and my dad knows some people who could get me in to see it."

"You didn't consider the danger?"

"There wasn't supposed to be any." Sara shivered.

"Are you an archeologist?"

"No, I'm not quite that intrepid. I design jewelry and have a shop on Oak Street in Chicago. I was going to create a series based on the ancient pieces." She stared out into the desert.

"You'll be all right once you get home and put this behind you."

Her gaze snapped back to him. She wished she could see him more clearly. He *seemed* to be looking at her. "You do this for a living. Stuff like this doesn't happen to ordinary people like me."

He shifted his head slightly in the moonlight. His eyes were intently focused on her mouth like he was going to kiss her. A frisson of sensual feeling passed over her—or maybe it was just an ordinary shiver. She rubbed her hands up her arms, pulling the abaya tighter. Maybe it was confusion. Maybe gratitude. "I don't even know your last name," she whispered,

not wanting to break whatever surreal enchantment they were under.

"Pierce." His gaze stayed on her lips.

"Rowdy Pierce?"

He huffed a deprecating laugh.

His face transformed into adorable fan lines at the corners of his eyes, a flash of white teeth in the middle of the scruffy beard. She got a glimpse of what he might look like under the beard, but the truth was that it didn't matter. His eyes had meant warmth and safety when he found her in the hut. He'd treated her with gentle consideration. Something had sparked between them, maybe only because they were alone in the vastness of the desert. It made a kind of sense on a physical level too. Rowdy Pierce was a major hunk in cammie pants and a tight T-shirt.

Realizing she was escalating things, Sara lifted her hand to his face, slid her fingers through his beard. Soft. It was much silkier than she'd imagined.

He stiffened, his lips parted, he blinked once in surprise.

She grazed his lips with her thumb. Smooth. She traced the sculpted lines. He bit at his lip; his tongue touched her thumb. Sara moaned. She didn't know why, but her rapidly thumping heart told her to kiss him.

Suddenly, there was a wild look in his eyes, a questioning look.

God, she'd made a fool of herself. He didn't feel the same powerful pull. "Oh..." Her heart pattered wildly. She felt lightheaded ... and hot.

"You shouldn't have done that."

The sexy growl from deep in his throat took her breath away. The spark exploded, and she found herself flat on her back, those soft, smooth lips opened to cover hers, his tongue speared inside her mouth, and he kissed the living daylights out of her.

He leaned on his elbow, cupped her head with one hand, and touched her body with the other. His palm curved over her breast, caressing and massaging, the center pressing rhythmically on her nipple. Her lips opened in a gasp at the streaks of pleasure racing from her breast to her belly, and lower. Eagerly, he filled her mouth with his sweet, thick, rough tongue pumping, tracing, thoroughly exploring every corner. It was devastatingly sensual. She didn't know where her heat ended and his began.

Sara moaned, suckled his tongue passionately, gripped the strands of his beard. When his kiss took her more fiercely, she slid her arms around his shoulders, stroked fingers through his hair. She circled his nape and pulled him toward her, straining upward, wanting to feel his chest on her breasts. That solid, magnificent chest. Shaking, she gripped his robe, fingers creeping up his T-shirt. Her palms curved so naturally over his muscular pecs, over his peaked nipples.

His sheer masculinity aroused her. His big body covered hers, a heavy, muscular thigh thrown between hers, his knee pressing upward on her clit, the swollen hardness of his penis grinding against her hip. *Good God! Hard. He ... it's hard. Solid. Lo ... o ... ong.* Unconsciously, Sara rolled her hips, massaging his cock. Her world condensed to the scorching flame generated between their bodies. Something inside her

yawned, contracted, and opened again, the ache so strong that she moaned into his mouth.

His hands fanned across her back, holding her tightly. She slid hers up over his shoulders and clung. He broke the kiss and gasped raggedly for air. "Rowdy..." She fought for breath, not wanting the kissing to stop. Tears rolled down her cheeks; she gripped his face and frantically ate at his mouth. Alive! She was alive. She owed this man so much, everything. Every inch of her softer body fit against his potent, powerful frame. He felt like heaven and tasted better. It was a taste she'd never had before and knew she would never forget.

"Sara." His whisper was hoarse.

Slippery, salty tears on her lips, on his, she gasped in a sharp breath when his hand cupped her breast. *God, yes ...* It was still tender from the assault in the hut, but she didn't want him to stop. He circled his palm over her nipple, then gently pressed and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, streaking lightning through nerve endings, racing tingling heat to every distant part of her body.

"Baby..." The endearment came out in a growl as he took her hand and steered it to his cock. "Touch me."

"Uh ... yeah," she whimpered, tentatively tracing its length as he softly groaned. *God, it was a sexy sound.* She slowly closed her hand around him, slid it up, fingered the tip, felt the moisture seeping all the way through his cammies.

"Rowdy..." Her moan was short-lived before he crushed his lips down on hers again.

Her heart beat so hard she couldn't breathe, couldn't move her head. "No," she moaned. He didn't stop, his fingers trailed

down her center, lower, until his palm flattened on her mound. She squirmed, not in pleasure. In panic. She groaned, "Nooo..."

Rowdy stilled. The heat poured off him, his breathing was labored.

Her eyes squeezed tightly shut to close out the memory of her near rape. "Stop ... please stop."

Chapter 3

Rowdy pushed himself to his feet, heart pounding, cock aching. *What the fucking hell are you doing? Your job is to rescue her, not to finish the rape.* "I'm sorry." He had to clear his throat. She lay on the ground at his feet, eyes wide in panic and fear, hands covering her mouth. Her blonde hair shimmered in the moonlight and spilled in disarray over her shoulders and into the grass. He'd never seen anyone more beautiful with her icy-blue eyes and her soft kissable mouth.

He didn't mix business with pleasure. He didn't break his own rules. He hadn't fucked anything but his fist in a long time, and who said his rules were written in stone anyway? Sara Stewart was stronger than her fragile façade indicated. She'd started it, and horny bastard that he was, he took advantage. But she was sweet. So sweet. Sparks popped inside his eyelids as he squeezed them closed.

Son of a bitch, he was in over his head. He was personally and unprofessionally in over his head. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "That won't happen again."

* * * *

This time Rowdy mounted the horse and pulled Sara up behind him. He didn't think it would be a good idea to hold her in his arms any longer. They made their way out of the oasis, headed north again, and he soon realized his mistake. He'd pulled her arms around his middle and told her to hang on. The blood in his brain raced to his groin, and the hard-on that hadn't eased off since he first saw her pulsed and ached the minute he felt her body plastered against his back.

He could feel Sara's hands clasped around his waist, her fingers locked together. Through his thin T-shirt, and even the abaya, he could feel her brush his belly with her thumbs, feel her breasts crushed flat on his back. The breasts he'd caressed for too short a time.

Was she as turned on as he was? *That* thought seared him through in the cool desert night. Heat started deep in his belly, flooded his cock, curled around his heart with lust. Adrenalin still raged through his veins. He wanted to spread her slim thighs and drown his cock inside her feverish, delicious pussy. She'd be wild and wet...

Rowdy shuddered. Sara'd been kidnapped, beaten, almost raped. *God dammit, you're an animal.*

Hell. The 'vette. That was the only thing he could think of that would take his mind off Sara's body and what he wanted to do with it. Willing the blood flow back up to his brain and away from his cock, he hoped that concentrating on switching out the alternator would appease his need.

Well, hell. That didn't work. Everything about her, every place where her body hugged him kept him stiff and throbbing right up until they reached the pickup point.

* * * *

They'd stopped, the absence of the bouncing horse Sara's first hint. She jerked her head from Rowdy's back and failed at stifling a soft moan. Exhausted, she was still amazed that she'd fallen asleep riding a horse. Rowdy's back, while padded with muscle, was not a particularly soft man-pillow. Blinking and looking around, a sliver of gauzy white light lay across the horizon to the east as backdrop to three Bedouin tents.

"We're here," he announced, lifting his leg over the neck of the horse and sliding off.

"Where?" she whispered groggily, too tired to raise her voice in the morning stillness.

"Our camp. Here..." He raised his arms to help her off.

Sara clutched his shoulders, telling herself that it was because she needed steadying, not that she wanted to be in his arms again. Then she straightened up and attempted to step back from him. *Don't be a fool. You're almost home. You'll never see him again.* She panicked at that thought. *It's only gratitude. That's natural. He's your hero, and you're grateful.*

"Sara," he murmured in her ear. "Come on. You can rest until the helo gets here."

He guided her to the tent in a formal, possessive way, with his palm at her back. Tired and confused, Sara's body hummed with tension. It was all coming to a close now. She'd been so aroused until ... until he'd climbed on top of her. Part of her wanted to run like hell and another part wanted to stay with Rowdy and have wild, animal sex. Good Lord, what had

gotten into her? He wasn't at all like the sophisticated, polished men that she was used to back home. Of course, his long hair and beard could be cut.

Rowdy raised the tent flap and motioned her in. Before he could disappear, Sara touched his arm. "You're coming back?" She held her breath.

"I'm just going to get some wash water," he said, but his expression didn't give a hint about his thoughts. "You're safe now. The helo will be here any minute, and you'll be on your way home. You can rest." He pointed toward a rickety looking cot.

The flap closed behind him. It was almost over. She'd never see him again, and she didn't want to leave without ... without what? He wanted her, she could tell by his every movement, by the way he looked at her ... fierce and confused in turn. Sara was a free spirit, an artist. Artists took risks. Coming to Egypt was more of a risk than she'd intended. Being with Rowdy was another risk. He'd saved her life, and she was grateful. But there was more. His sense of responsibility, strength, protectiveness attracted her. He was so serious, and that translated into intense, passionate lovemaking. She'd probably never know anything like it ever again. *At least thank him for saving your life.* A moan slipped out. *Good one. You just plain want him.* Wrapping her arms around her waist, she closed her eyes in anticipation of his return. He had no idea...

She heard the rustle of the material. Her head snapped up, and there he was, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. Her heart hammered; she sucked in a breath. It was obvious he'd

tried to fix himself up. He still had the beard, but his hair was wet and slicked back. He couldn't do much, though, about the bruises turning colors around the warm, welcoming golden, green glow of his eyes. Baggy-in-the-knees cammies clung lovingly to his hips and flat belly. His T-shirt stretched tautly across his chest and shoulders. The first time she'd seen him, she thought he was as ugly as the man who had tried to rape her. Boy, had she been wrong.

He stared intently at her, indecision clear. Oh, he wanted her. His pants weren't baggy enough to conceal his erection. Sara opened her arms, and Rowdy stepped into them. She wanted to hold him, to taste him, to luxuriate in the heat of his body, to rest her head on the safety of his chest, to rub herself like a cat against his hard, well-earned muscles. No effete, upscale health-club-type Chicago businessman, he was the kind of man who would hold a door open for a woman, hoist her over his shoulder, and carry her through.

His chest lifted with a deep breath, and her ear tingled with the sensual question, "You're sure now?"

Sara answered with her body, sliding her hands up his spine, undulating her belly across his. She pressed her mound against the long, thick, rigid rod of his cock, and she wanted to growl every one of those luscious words out loud. Moaning frantically, eyelids at half-mast, she stretched up and took his lower lip between her teeth in a controlled bite.

He groaned, curled his fingers around her bottom, and squeezed, bringing her tight against his penis.

She sobbed and tugged at his T-shirt, pulling it out of his pants and pushing it up. Skin. She wanted to finally feel the

muscles layering his chest. A sexy line of hair ran from one male nipple to the other and down the center arrowing straight to his penis. Her fingers itched to follow the trail, but before she could grasp him, Rowdy bent his knees, picking her straight up.

"Put your legs around me, Sara," he whispered just before he took her lips in a hard, searing kiss.

His deep, gruff voice, the huff of the soft, sibilant S bathing her face ... she'd do anything that this man asked. They didn't have much time left. *Take what you want, what you need from him. Forget everything else. Nothing matters now but this.* She locked her fingers around his neck, then tightened her legs around his hips, clasping her ankles over his butt. He sat on the cot and pressed her mound against his penis, never breaking the kiss. She thrust her hips rhythmically, frantically against his, moaning at the promise of being filled by him.

She caressed the yellowing bruise below his eye with gentle fingertips. Every inch of her skin crawled with want, her thighs quivered, and her sex flowered open, wet and ready for him. She almost laughed at her purple prose, but that's what she felt—an aching softening, a rush of warm cream, a pulse throbbing in her clit. Sara whimpered in her throat as she speared her fingers through his hair.

His breath bathed her chin, and he rasped, "I wanted you from the minute I saw you." Then he took her mouth again. His hard, encompassing mouth, his strong, thick, slippery tongue thrusting inside, filling her. He traced a path down her neck with his lips, over her collarbone, then nudged at the

fabric over the round curve of her breast. "Take this off," he demanded as he quickly unbuttoned her shirt without her help.

Sara arched, held her breath and watched his every move. He tantalized her with slow nips closer and closer to her aching nipple. Heat bloomed. She'd never felt anything like his focus and intensity before. The sight of his big, raspberry colored tongue on the tip of her breast sent a sizzling path of lust through her veins, flooding her womb with heat, a spike of delicious desire. Big hairy face or not, she wanted his mouth on hers again.

Sara vibrated with the waiting, crying out when his lips finally closed around her aching nipple, working it with his tongue, nipping with his teeth. "Rowdy..." She gripped his ears. He groaned as he suckled. She caressed the side of his face as if he were a baby. The eroticism of the sight caught her by surprise, the close up of his eyelashes resting on his cheeks, the little wrinkle between his eyebrows. She moaned and arched into the cushion of his face, tossing her head at the roll of his teeth, the back and forth of his lashing tongue.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, she opened her mouth to cry out, and suddenly Rowdy's lips covered hers again. At first, the short, intense sweeps of his tongue, matched by hers, were a powerful massage on sensitive lips. Then, they collided in an explosion so hard their teeth clashed. Passionate, voracious, insatiable emotions became a wild rush of desperate, frustrated craving.

More, more!

A tremendous noise battered her ears.

"Fuck." His guttural exclamation was short and foul. "Show time, baby," he rumbled in her ear. It was the only way to be heard, the thwapping of the helicopter blades were deafening.

He gave her one final, deep, penetrating kiss, sipping and nipping at her mouth. "My name is Peter."

He brushed a thumb over her lips, her eyebrows, concentrating his passionate gaze on the separate parts of her face as if to memorize the whole. An ache, deeply embedded inside her, would destroy her if she didn't push it back down. If only the helicopter hadn't come. If only they'd met somewhere else, somewhere civilized. If only this weren't over...

* * * *

Rowdy's heart felt torn in two. There were a hundred things he wanted to say to her, to hear from her, but they'd run out of time. He allowed himself another final, private look at her beautiful face and devastating blue eyes before he kissed her for the last time, touched her eyelids, the tip of her nose, the crest of her cheek bones, and finally her lips. How could he let her go?

In his business, there was always another job to do. Time to put Sara on the helo and move on. Rowdy pulled her through the tent opening and led her toward the giant military helicopter hovering a few feet off the ground, poised and ready for takeoff.

No time left. The ache, snaking and swelling through his body, wasn't just from his unrequited lust. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He clasped his arm protectively

around her waist as they ran straight into the noise and dust. Sweeping her into his arms, he tucked her head against his chest to shield her eyes and almost fell to his knees with the powerful hunger for the sweet, luscious, quivering woman clinging tightly to his neck, breathing hotly against his skin.

No time left. He thrust her into the opening, and as soon as her knees landed on the metal flooring, she crawled like a baby further inside. A crewman grabbed her under the arms, pushed her into a seat, and buckled a shoulder harness and seatbelt around her. She was handed a helmet, and before putting it on, with tears rolling down her cheeks, she met Rowdy's gaze through the wide door of the helo.

No, he mouthed, shook his head. *Don't cry.*

He should be happy that this was over and that a large amount of money would be deposited into his bank account. She was grateful, and he'd become too involved. But a healthy jolt of lust connected them when they touched. Hell, just looking at her turned his balls molten. He was a mercenary, and she was an artist from Chicago. They were worlds apart.

Christ, man. You're an idiot.

The helo rose, hovered. He saw bewilderment, then panic in her eyes. Her mouth moved. He heard her voice in his head.

"Thank you, Peter Pierce."

More cocky than he felt, he tapped his forehead in a mock salute, and mouthed back, "You're welcome, Sara Stewart." Rowdy watched until the helo was out of sight, a long time in the clear, bright sky. Thoughts of home blindsided him. He'd

hated the small Kansas town he grew up in and couldn't wait to leave, couldn't wait to get out in the world and do something important. Now he just felt abandoned, as alone as he'd felt for years. His father had died when he was in college, his mother lived in a nursing home. He wondered if he'd ever have a chance at a normal life. As normal as it could be for a guy who knew ten different ways to kill a man and had used them all.

Goodbye, Sara Stewart. The words lingered in his head for a long time before he thought to get out of the hot, desert sun.

Chapter 4

Three months later...

Rowdy watched Sara through the store's window. Just as she'd said, her shop was tucked in between upscale designer clothing and extremely expensive bed linens. He didn't want her to see him just yet. She probably wouldn't know him clean-shaven. That hurt. He'd know her anywhere.

She held a piece of jewelry in her hand, studying the display cases as she came down the center aisle from the workroom in the back. Hot damn, she looked good, no longer the grubby, frightened girl he had rescued. She cleaned up good. He'd always thought that women who wore pressed and creased jeans were pretentious and uncomfortable, but hers looked soft and lucky cupping her ass like that. She also wore pointy-toed stilettos that made her legs look like they stretched forever. Long enough to wrap around his waist. *Oh, yeah.*

Before Rowdy could make his move, another man entered the shop. Sara greeted him with a smile, and they kissed each other's cheeks. "Fuck." His stomach roiled at the thought that this could be her boyfriend. He'd come all this way, and he'd kill any man in his way. The two turned to a display case, and Sara went behind the counter to pull trays out. They bent their heads over the counter, and she held a ring up for the customer/boyfriend.

"That does it," he muttered. He wasn't going to waste any more time. This asshole was not going to have her. Rowdy pushed the door open and stalked through, lips pinched, his glaring gaze hidden behind aviators.

"Hello, Sara."

* * * *

Sara's heart stopped beating for a second. She looked to her customer as if he were the one who spoke, then to the man at the door. That voice. She'd know that voice anywhere. In disbelief, she watched the Greek god stride across her shop. Dressed in mouthwateringly-fitting black jeans and a white, long-sleeved dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up over thick, muscled forearms, the sight of him tugged at her heart, and every other part of her suddenly hot and soft intimate places. *Good Lord, more purple prose.*

Instinctively she knew him—his clean-shaven, unmarked face. She knew his hair, still long, pulled back in a neat salt and pepper ponytail at his nape. In slow motion, he reached up and removed his sunglasses. The shop disappeared. Her customer disappeared. She gripped the edge of the counter.

His warm, moss green eyes held her enthralled and breathless. Her mouth fell open, and she didn't care. Opening it further to speak, she found she couldn't utter a word.

"Sir, the store's closed." He broke the spell, but never took his eyes from hers.

Her face flamed. Speechless, deliriously happy, and the most turned on she'd ever been in her life, she managed to croak, "Hello, Peter."

"Well, I guess I'll leave, Sara."

She nodded absently, then remembered her customer. "Don! Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," he dropped his voice so only she could hear and patted her hand. "I'll talk to you another time."

Sara watched as Don left the store, then as Peter closed and locked the door and turned the "Closed" sign outward. *Rowdy*. His eyes, those burning green eyes, sliced through to her soul.

"I've thought about you," they both said at the same time.

"I've wondered what you're doing." Again, at the same time.

She watched his cheek bones flush, his nostrils flare, saw the muscle at the side of his jaw work. She knew her own cheeks burned brightly. Crossing her arms over her chest, she asked, surprised that she sounded normal, "Are you in town for business?"

"Yes. No," he retracted. "I've wondered about you," he repeated.

"Why?"

"Sara." He sounded awkward. "I don't have a prepared speech. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the minute I put you in that helo."

"What happened between us?"

He brushed his hand through his hair, releasing some of the strands. "Damned if I know. I just couldn't put you out of my mind."

His uncertainty was endearing. "I know," she said.

"You, too?"

She heard the hope in his voice. Nodding, she slowly backed toward her workroom. He followed, never taking his gaze off hers. Sara quickly sidled around her worktable, needing a little space. Almost as shocking and horrifying as her kidnapping had been, Rowdy showing up in Chicago at her shop was pretty scary, too.

He picked up a dainty screwdriver, rubbed his finger along its narrow length, frowning a little. A scorching blast of hunger and need slammed into her. He was so big, his shoulders massive. The sensuality of his huge hands toying with her teeny jewelry tools was a promise of what he could do to her with those hands.

His beautiful eyes shifted to her face. "Tell me now if you want me to leave, because I'm not going to wait much longer."

Her body thrummed with anticipation. She felt herself flowering again, moistening, aching, wanting his thick, hard, ridged cock inside her. She wasn't sure if stretching out the wait was causing more pleasure or more anticipation. "You shaved."

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his jaw. "When did you notice?" His gaze locked on hers, in a powerful, sensual hold.

"Rowdy..." *Jesus, he looks good.*

"Sara..." The smile crinkling the corners of his eyes belied the tension she felt in his body. "You're not doing any better than I am."

Sara gave a little huff of agreement and shook her head slowly back and forth in amazement. Back home in Chicago, she'd tried to put him out of her mind, but he'd been larger than life. Her hero. They'd made a connection out there in the desert. She hadn't known that he felt it too. Until now. Taking the first deep breath she had in a long time, she knew that his merest touch would be enough to send her over the edge.

"Leave ... or stay?" He edged around the table, a predatory light in his eyes.

She feathered her fingertips over his shirt front, enjoying the crisp, cotton feel, liking even more the hard, thick pad of muscles underneath, remembering the line of hair down his chest. Leaning into him, her lips curved in a flirtatious smile and, with a seductive purr, she said, "Stay." She found his nipples with her thumbs, their stiffness arousing her even more. "Rowdy, please stay. God, I want you."

* * * *

Rowdy groaned and lifted Sara up onto the table, mindful of all the little tools and stones, and caught her lips in a hard, possessive kiss. He pushed her sweater off her shoulders and traced the edge of the tank top with both thumbs, stroking over to the center of her breasts.

"Not here."

"Where?" His voice was an embarrassing breathless, husky whisper.

"My office ... big couch."

"Thank you, Lord." He swept her up—he loved doing that—charged through the doorway to her office, kicked the door shut, and dropped her down on the sofa. The little devil lay there beaming up at him with those blue eyes, not looking icy at all. Rowdy knelt beside the couch. "Take this off," he ordered as he pulled her sweater and tank top all the way off over her head.

"Son of a bitch." His breath caught in his throat. He was afraid his heart would stop.

"You don't like it?"

Her falsely innocent question kicked it back in. "Like?" he gasped. Glancing at her pleased expression, he dragged his gaze back to her breathtaking breasts. His tiny feminine side appreciated that her bra was spectacular, the colors shimmering into each other, the lace barely covering her. But he could give a shit. The huge masculine side wanted to taste the soft, cushiony skin, preferably ... now. He lowered his head and sucked her nipple between his teeth.

She responded with a sharp cry.

Right through the lace, he rocked it, lashing the tip with his tongue.

She twisted and surged, her fingers in his hair, gripping his head. "The other one," she begged with little kittenish mews.

He was a good boy; he did as he was told. With a final nip, he lifted his head and whispered, "The jeans."

She nodded frantically. "Uh huh..."

He slid them down her long, beautiful legs, right off over the sexy stilettos. "Fuck." The panties matched her bra, blonde pussy hair peeping through the lace over her mound. "Jesus, sweetheart, you're killin' me," he groaned. "Long legs, sexy underwear, and stilettos? I've died and gone to heaven."

Sara groaned. Her chest rose and fell sharply. "I want you inside me now. Slow later," she ordered, gripping the front of his shirt.

"Yes, ma'am." He stood, divested himself of his shirt, boots, and jeans, and after peeling her out of her bra and panties, knelt between her thighs on the cushions. "Leave the shoes on," he commanded. He didn't give a crap if those spikes scratched his ass to ribbons.

"Rowdy, I want you ... now." She clutched his arms, pulling him toward her.

Chapter 5

Shaking, you'd think it was his first time with a woman, Rowdy pushed her thighs out, rolling them open. God, she was pink and wet and ready, her clit swollen and red, her pussy soft, winking moistly at him. "Hoh ... Jesus..." he intoned reverently. He wanted to ram his aching cock inside her little hole until she shrieked with pleasure.

She moaned, threw her head back. "Oh, God."

She squirmed when he pressed his thumbs on either side of her clit. "This is so pretty, darlin'."

Her hips pumped, she gripped the sides of the cushions.

The sweet little nub hypnotized him, swelling and burning cherry red.

"Oh, God ... please..."

He slid his middle finger into her entrance in short, slow, twisting pumps.

"Rowdy, please..." she begged.

"Jesus," he whispered. She tightened on the tip of his finger. His cock surged in anticipation. She took his two fingers, all the way in, her muscles contracting around them. He pressed on her G-spot. She growled long, low, and feral.

"Yeah, now." His shaking fist gripped his cock and steered it into her sweet, tight pussy. "Jesus," he groaned, twisting his hips, circling and teasing. More like torture. *Hot ... feel good ... want inside.* He was a caveman, and Sara was his woman.

"God," she panted hoarsely, surging up, tossing her head back on the cushion, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

He inched in, hips pumping shallowly, her silken walls luring him in.

"Rowdy ... please!"

Jesus, one more push. "Shit!"

"What!"

"Condom," he barked.

"Don't you have one?" Her panic unmistakable.

Rowdy scrambled off, reaching for his pants. Ripping the package open, he sheathed himself, just *that* almost driving him over the edge. "I'm back," he muttered as he resealed himself at her entrance.

Now Sara's hands were at his waist, his hips, cupping his butt. She gave a sharp tug. Rowdy obeyed and thrust, burying the thick head of his cock in as far as he could go. He

grunted at the spike of pleasure roiling from inside his balls, racing through his body, and tried to pull out to thrust again. She wouldn't let him go. Fine with him. Pumping and circling his hips, he fucked her. He hadn't thought he'd last long, but it seemed like hours. His eyes rolled back in his head. She was hot and wet and tight, so slippery. *Jesus, God...*

His tightening and aching balls, the raging heat and pressure of his cum, like no other feeling known to man, it had to explode. No choice. No stopping it. Coming ... He squeezed his eyes shut, groaning through the sensations. They bucked against each other. She kicked his butt with the sharp little spikes and panted.

His cum roiled, rose violently and burst from his body, hot and dense. *God, I'm dying.* So good. His body pumped uncontrollably. He didn't want it to end.

Finally ... though ... he slowed, felt her arms around his back, hands stroking, felt her fingernails digging in, scratching.

Christ. Shuddering, he dimly wondered if she'd had an orgasm. He'd been so hungry for her that he'd done nothing to help her. What an asshole. He'd make it up to her. Even if it took a lifetime. "I'm sorry..."

Her fingers stilled. "What for?" she asked warily, in a low, whispery voice.

He collapsed to her side against the back of the couch and pulled her tightly against him. "I don't even know if you came. I was an animal." He tipped her chin up and turned her face to his. "It'll be better next time." Her silence unnerved him. *Please, God, don't let me screw this up.*

* * * *

Sara cupped his face in her palm and rubbed her thumb across his lips. She smiled when he bit at the ticklish feeling. It was the most spectacular sex of her life. She'd come in spades, and he actually *cared* whether she had or not. Rowdy Pierce was a special man. "Next time?" She giggled. Kissing his chest, she whispered groggily, "You think you can do this again? I'm not sure either one of us would survive."

* * * *

Sara awakened alone, covered with an afghan. Stunned, she lay there, unwilling to face the possibility that he was gone. Even though she'd only known him less than twenty-four hours and most of that was spent running for their lives, she hadn't been embarrassed with him. His response to her body, her response to his, had been as if they'd been together for years.

She listened for sounds from the shop; there were none. Squeezing her eyes closed, taking a deep breath, Sara knew she wanted to be with him again. Her body hadn't felt this gloriously well-used in ... in ever. This couldn't be the end. He hadn't come all this way to Chicago for one time with her.

The little bell over her front door dinged, and she leaped off the couch. Who was coming in? The door had been locked. Wrapping the blanket around her, tucking it in over her breasts, she crept to the office door and pushed the lock in. She was in no mood for a customer, and if it was a robber, he'd just have to take everything.

The knob turned. She stared at the door.

"Hey, babe, you in there?"

Sara let out the breath she'd been holding. Awash with giddy, sensual feelings, she opened the door a sliver and peeped out. Rowdy was back. With shopping bags.

He crowded her back into the office, green eyes sparkling mischievously. "I found this food shop down the street ... but..." His gaze swept her from head to foot. "But I'm not hungry." His nostrils flared, and it was hard to miss the flush of sensual awareness on his cheeks as he backed up and relocked the door. "Are you hungry?" His smile quirked up on one side.

Sara slowly shook her head and met his gaze. "As delicious as you look in those jeans, you need to take them off." Her heart beat like a trip hammer. "I *am* hungry, as a matter of fact."

His mouth opened, eyes widened, and he tugged open the button at his waist. "What do you want?" His jaw worked, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

"Take it all off and lie down on the couch," she purred. Boots, jeans, shirt—all came off. No underwear. She hadn't noticed that before. Now it was her turn to feast her eyes. Magnificent! Broad shouldered, narrow hiped, he looked like a statue, except that he was warm flesh and hard muscle. His erection curved up his belly from its black nest. She let the afghan slip to the floor. She could practically see him throb.

He crooked a finger at her, giving her a squinty stare. "Come here, honey."

She moved toward him, placed a hand in the middle of his chest, and pushed. He easily toppled back. *Oh, God. It bounced.* He wrapped a hand around his penis and slowly slid it up to the tip while watching her. She licked her lips; his gaze followed her tongue. As much as she wanted to take him in her mouth, she wanted him inside her more. A high-pitched mewl came from her throat. Cream trickled from her drenched pussy.

He started to look desperate, like he was worried she wouldn't come to him. He massaged himself again, his eyes slits, taunting her. God, she wanted that huge bad boy inside her. Sliding along his thighs, she put her hands on his shoulders, and impaled herself. Impaled very slowly. Enjoying every second.

With a deep growl, Rowdy gripped her waist and pulled. Hard. Sara threw her head back and shouted. He was in, as tightly as it was possible to be. He took her head between his palms and kissed her, covering her mouth, eating at it, thrusting his tongue as she rocked wildly against him. She cupped his head too, taking his mouth with equal ferocity and a groan that wouldn't end.

He gripped her bottom, took control, and rammed her against his cock. He reached between them and pressed and flicked her clit until she felt the flutters in her vagina, the waves of contractions, the sun bursting, stars shattering.

Moments later, they collapsed on the couch, Rowdy clasping her close with quivering arms, Sara biting his shoulder in a passion-induced reaction to another huge orgasm.

* * * *

Hours *and hours* later, after making love in every room of her apartment, Rowdy and Sara stood in the shower locked in each other's arms. His heart thumped under her ear, she ached oh so pleasantly, was drowsy and satiated. They had even made love in the shower, a risky proposition, but they'd managed beautifully. Peter Pierce was a *very* strong man.

"I wanted you from the first moment."

"No..." she moaned. "Even then?"

"You were traumatized. I didn't want to touch you."

"But I touched you first."

"I must have scared you ... my beard."

"I ... your eyes." She nibbled at his chest. "Your eyes were so warm. I knew you'd protect me with your life ... trusted you."

"I couldn't stay away," he murmured in her ear while tracing his fingers over her thighs, higher and higher, until his soapy fingers pushed into her sheath.

"Yes, darling," she groaned as he pumped them in and out. "Oh ... yes." She was going to come again. They hadn't known each other long, but he knew her body so well. It was a while before she again felt the water pelting on her skin, the steam shrouding them.

Sara thought she was probably half in love with him.

"Do you think you could stand to have me around?" he whispered.

She gazed up at his face. He had that hopeful look again. Her lips curved in a smile. "Yeah, I could stand it."

"Yeah, you can stand more of this." His head angled for a kiss.

"Why, of course, my dear."

"Ouch!" He jerked.

"Who thought that biting a man's nipple could be so painful," she murmured into the cushion of his chest hair.

"You naughty girl. Am I going to have to spank you?" He drew in a quick breath.

She gave his cock a delicate yank and licked the offended nipple. "If you think you can catch me."

Sara giggled. She made it to the shower door before a muscular arm clamped around her waist and drew her back to cradle his rapidly rising cock against her bottom.

CONCEALED WEAPON

by

Barri Bryan

He carries a weapon concealed from view.
The bulge it creates offers a clue
That his piece, like the sword of Damocles
Is suspended between his waist and his knees.
Head for your hideout, stay on the run
With accuracy his smoking-hot gun
Will draw a bead if you hesitate,
Once in his sights, accept your fate.
He's *slow* on the trigger, *slow* on the draw,
Against his ambush there is no law.
A backstreet meeting at sundown's watch
And you become another notch
On the bed of this western Romeo
This sweetly seducing Lothario
Who asks no questions, shoots on sight,
Then rides for the border in the dead of the night.

CHOCOLATE AT MIDNIGHT

by

Susan M. Sailors

"So you've never been on the tour?" Ann asked.

"Nope. Not yet," Christine answered, feeling a bit guilty. She'd worked at the Midnight Inn for over two months, but she still hadn't taken the "Midnight Tour." She just wasn't sure if graveyards and candlelit paths were her thing, especially since the tour catered more to couples than to groups.

Ann smiled broadly. "You're in for a real treat then. It's such a beautiful evening for it, with the snow and all. It'll be a winter wonderland. I hope everything goes well."

"I'm sure it will." She smoothed the skirt of her Victorian maid's outfit and sat down. "How many guests will be going out tonight?"

Ann looked down at her, seeming genuinely puzzled. "It's Sunday, remember?"

Christine nodded. "Right. No tours on Sunday." She started to fold tea napkins again. "Is Erik doing all this just for me? He really shouldn't—I can go with the other guests on one of my nights off."

"You really don't have a clue, do you?" Ann said, laughing and sitting down next to Christine. "Of course Erik is doing all this just for you."

"You're saying he likes me?"

"I'm saying he's unbelievably nuts about you. Absolutely crazy in love with you." She took Christine's hands. "Did that guy really do such a number on you?"

Christine looked down, thinking of David. "It wasn't that bad."

"Well, he obviously took away your confidence. You aren't even aware of the way Erik looks at you. And by the way, guys don't turn into helpless little puppy dogs just because a girl is pretty. He really cares for you. He's been planning this ever since you started working here."

Christine thought back to that day she ran into Erik at the coffee shop. He'd been very sympathetic about her losing her job and very enthusiastic about getting her something at the Midnight Inn. She'd thought he was just being nice, as always, but even something about that set off an alarm in her head. Erik was very introverted, and others had pointed out before that he talked to Christine more than he did with anyone else.

Christine sighed. "You're right. I think he does like me. I can't believe I didn't get it till now." She rolled her eyes. "I think some of my other friends have actually hinted at it before."

"Well," Ann said. "We need to get done with all this and go upstairs to get you ready." She put the silver tea service away and started on the napkins Christine had been neglecting.

"What am I going to wear? I was just going to throw on a pair of jeans and a blouse."

"Don't worry about that. We've thought of everything."

"You've been in on this all this time?"

Ann nodded. "Just think of me as your fairy godmother. I picked out a wonderful costume for you."

"Costume?"

"One of the gowns like the ones the guests wear. I thought the jade one would be ultra sexy, but Erik thought you would prefer the dark blue one."

Christine smiled and nodded. "I've always liked that one. I guess I mentioned it."

Ann folded the last napkin and put them in their drawer. "Come on. Stop daydreaming. It's time for all your fantasies to come true."

* * * *

Christine looked at her reflection, thinking it couldn't possibly be her own. Ann had done wonders with her dark hair, which she usually kept in a no-nonsense bun, and the dress really did suit her. The dark blue made her misty blue eyes look even brighter, and her pale skin gave her a very ethereal look. She did a little twirl, which her tummy didn't like at all.

"I think I'm getting nervous," she said to Ann.

"I can guarantee that you are nowhere near as nervous as Erik is."

"I'm hardly going to be able to talk to him."

"Everything will be fine." Ann gathered all her things and headed for the door. "And you have to give me every detail tomorrow night."

"When is Erik coming to get me?"

Ann smiled knowingly. "He'll be here any minute. But you won't hear him knock."

"What?"

"Think about where you are." She waved playfully. "Later."

Christine sat down and thought. "Okay, I'm in the costume room. So what?"

She looked at the changing room, then all around the room at the racks of costumes, the tables laden with glittery jewelry, and the enormous mirrors lining the walls.

The mirrors.

She looked toward the far wall. Christine knew that mirror had a door behind it. She started to walk toward it, but then she remembered that anyone standing on the other side could see into the room. She felt herself glowing bright red as she turned away. She stood there for a moment, taking deep breaths. Then she felt a gust of wind from behind her.

"Christine? Are you ready?" Erik asked.

She'd never noticed how soft his voice was before or how tenderly he said her name. Her mind was flooded with a million memories of glances and smiles that she had missed, or often dismissed, in the past.

"Yes. I'm ready." She turned to face him and was struck by him as she never had been before. It might have been the fact that she'd just learned how he really felt about her or some other factor of time and place, but regardless of the cause, she had never seen a more handsome man in all her life.

His reddish brown hair looked more vibrant, and his eyes were startlingly blue. He was wearing a black velvet cape

over a black tuxedo and white opera gloves. He smiled warmly and extended his hand gracefully to take hers.

Time seemed to stand still. Christine felt herself slipping into another world, another life, as she followed Erik through the mirror. He closed the door silently behind them, though he never took his gaze off her. The atmosphere in the passage was breathtaking and she understood why it was so popular as a beginning for the tour. He led her through the candlelit corridor slowly, taking great care with each step and supporting her gently.

She felt like this silent walk was representative of their relationship. He'd always been right there with a kind word, making sure she was okay. He'd been sweetly sympathetic when she'd been upset or sad over David. He'd never tried to impose upon her, though now she realized how easy it would have been for a man who was interested in her to have moved in quickly after the whole David fiasco. But she knew in her heart that Erik would never do such a thing. She smiled at the thought.

He'd always protected her. He walked her to her car when she got off work and was the first to volunteer when she needed help. And he'd been her savior the night of Gretchen's party. David had shown up, and from what she'd heard, Erik had been the one to get rid of him. All she'd seen was David leaving, and suddenly Erik was by her side. She'd never thanked him for that.

She sighed, feeling safe with his arm at her waist. She almost couldn't feel the icy wind or the small flakes of snow touching her cheeks. As he helped her into the carriage with

such care, she knew she would always feel safe in every way with this man. She smiled at him and held his hand a moment longer.

He didn't smile back, but he kissed her hand gently. Then he closed the door and climbed into the driver's seat.

As the carriage moved along slowly, Christine began to feel a certain measure of nervousness again. Did Erik know Ann had told her how he felt about her? He surely knew how oblivious she had been previously. She had no idea how to act. She started to take deep breaths again. The tone of the evening was set flawlessly, so there was no denying that they both knew what was going on. The question, of course, was what was going to happen. She knew Erik would never do anything to make her uncomfortable, so she figured the pace was hers to set. But that didn't really ease her mind.

Christine didn't know exactly what the tour entailed. She knew there was a garden with a labyrinth, a gothic graveyard, complete with marble angels, and the manor house. It was almost an exact copy of the inn itself, but on a smaller, more intimate scale. Couples could book ahead to have dinner and even spend a night there, away from the other guests, at the end of their own private tours.

She briefly imagined what it would be like if she and Erik spent the night. She thought about how his hands would feel on her skin, taking her dress off, how his lips would feel against her neck or her breasts. She didn't even notice the carriage had stopped, and she suddenly found herself with Erik holding his hand out to her, as an image of him kissing her breasts floated through her mind.

She blushed bright red and took his hand quickly.

"I'm making you nervous, aren't I?" he asked once she was on the ground.

She shook her head vigorously. "I'm making myself nervous." She pulled her wrap closer and took his other hand in hers as well. "Erik. I really had no idea you felt this way about me."

Erik smiled and looked down at the ground. "I'm not very good at expressing my feelings, though I think everyone else around us picked up on them very quickly." He looked up and she was glad to see he was smiling.

"Apparently so. I can't believe I was so blind."

He kissed both her hands. "I can't believe every other man in the world has been so blind."

He took her by the arm and led her toward the garden. "I thought you'd prefer the maze to the graveyard as a starting point."

She smiled. "Yes. I think I would." She stopped him briefly. "And I love the dress. It was the perfect choice."

"It looks exquisite on you," he said. He looked into her eyes, and neither of them was able to break the spell that drew them to each other.

Erik cradled her face gently and brushed his lips across hers. She gave in to the caress, putting her hands on his chest and moving closer. His own hands went around her shoulders as he pressed his lips to hers more firmly. She opened up to him and he explored her mouth slowly. She felt she was suddenly in a fantasy world inside a snow globe, safe and warm in his arms. Her arms went around his neck and he

pulled her body flush against his. She could feel what their play of lips and tongues was doing to him.

When he pulled away, he was blushing. "I suppose that isn't the most romantic way to show you how strong my feelings are."

She shook her head and giggled, trying to control her blushing. "There's no need to be embarrassed, Erik."

"Is that why you're such a lovely shade of red?" he teased.

They both laughed, and the tension dissipated quickly.

She slid her hands down his body and took his hands in hers again. "I trust you, Erik. I know now how much you've cared for me and protected me over these past couple of years. I just wish I'd seen it sooner."

He shook his head. "I think now is the perfect time. You were worth waiting for."

She smiled and started heading back down the path, leading him by the hand. He couldn't seem to take his gaze off her.

When they reached the house, a candlelit dinner waited for them. A fire blazed in the marble fireplace.

"I'm not really hungry," Christine said.

"The food can wait. But I am very hungry."

Christine turned to him and he captured her mouth again. She gave in to the kiss completely as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His hands moved up and down her body slowly. He released her mouth and moved down her neck. His tongue found the hollow between her breasts.

"Erik," she gasped. "Get me out of this dress."

"My pleasure." He swept her into his arms and carried her up the stairs. Candles and a warm fire also lit the bedroom. And the walls were covered in mirrors, reflecting the firelight all around them.

She laughed. "Did you pick this room especially?"

"I certainly did." He turned her toward the mirror so he stood behind her. He moved her hair aside and kissed her neck. His hands cupped her breasts, and her nipples hardened instantly. He began to undo the laces on the front of the dress, freeing her breasts so they could fall into his eager hands.

The dress slid to the floor.

He groaned at the sight of her sheer black lingerie. "You're so sexy," he whispered in her ear. He ran his hands down her body. "So soft."

Christine struggled to keep her eyes open because she didn't want to miss a moment of his ardent display. He undressed quickly, pressing his body to hers. He groaned deeply in his throat as their hot skin touched. Her black bra and panties soon followed his clothes, and he stood behind her a long time as he took in her beauty.

His gaze met hers in the mirror. "You're so amazing. I can't wait to taste you." His hands slid down slowly.

Christine blushed and hid behind her hair.

"What is it, Christine? I won't do anything you don't want to do."

"I've never really done much," she whispered.

He laughed softly and kissed her cheek. "I certainly have no problem with that. I want to explore with you. I want us to discover things together."

She smiled up at him, and the reluctance in her eyes went away. "I've always been curious."

He swept her into his arms again. "I can satisfy that right now."

He sat her on the edge of the bed. "Lie back if you want to, but I think you'll enjoy being able to watch me." He put her legs over his shoulders and slowly lowered his lips to her pussy.

She gasped when his tongue ran over her clit. She was already very wet, and he seemed to enjoy the taste. He swirled his tongue in and out of her, then began laving and sucking her clit. She couldn't take her eyes off him. She'd never dreamed it would feel so good.

He pulled away and looked up at her as his fingers continued working her. "You taste so good, Christine. Sweet and creamy." He smiled. "Are you enjoying it?"

"Yes," she said breathily.

He lowered his head again. He moved his hand down so he could slide his fingers in and out of her. He inserted one finger, then two. She groaned and ground herself against him. When he inserted a third and began sucking her clit, he felt her tightening, almost ready for release. He worked his fingers in and out and licked her clit as fast as he could.

"Oh, Erik. *Yesss! Yesss!* Oh, yes, Erik, yes!"

When her tremors subsided, he licked up all her juice, obviously enjoying the taste and the warmth of her silky

pussy against his mouth. When he was done, he crawled on the bed beside her and cradled her in his arms. Her scent was almost overpowering.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it so much. You deserve this kind of pleasure in your life. I want to fulfill your every desire." He began kissing her. She responded immediately, trying to pull him even closer.

He moved on top of her, positioning himself between her legs. He pulled away from her mouth so he could lavish attention on her breasts again. They were full and heavy, and they longed for his tongue and his touch. He took one nipple into his mouth and sucked gently.

Christine arched against him. She reached down and stroked his cock. He sucked harder on her breast. She stroked him tentatively, but became more confident as she heard his groans of pleasure. He pulled away and sat up to look down at her hand.

"I like watching you do that. Rub it against you."

Christine rubbed his cock across her thigh and then brought it to her wet pussy. She rubbed his tip across her opening, and he moaned loudly.

"Guide me inside," he whispered huskily.

She tilted her hips up and guided his cock slowly. She wrapped her legs around him and brought him back down to her. He penetrated slowly until they were face to face again. He kissed her gently and then slid his whole length into her.

She gasped and squirmed for a moment.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He held still, as though afraid he might hurt her.

"It's uncomfortable, but it's getting better." She shifted again and slid him in and out carefully. "Much better."

"I've wanted you for so long, Christine." He matched her slow rhythm. "Ummmm. You feel so good."

Christine pulled him even closer. She wanted all of him, and she wanted to give him as much pleasure as he'd given her. She couldn't believe she'd ever overlooked such an amazing man. She kissed his cheek and buried her face in his neck. Quicker than she'd expected, she felt another orgasm coming.

"Erik," she whispered.

He groaned. "I know." He bit her neck gently, then added, "I can feel it, too. I love how you feel around me."

That did it. She came again, loving the feel of him hard and hot inside her. She cried out, wanting to say, "I love you," but not wanting to burden the moment. It was all so new, and she didn't want him to think she said it just because he was good in bed or because she thought she had to.

He slowed his pace, apparently enjoying how she felt coming apart all around him.

She sighed and kissed him sweetly, and then she began to move her hips again. "Come on, Erik. I want you to fill me full."

He moved her hips higher so he could go even deeper. She writhed as she felt his cock sliding deeper. As he looked down at her, he caressed her cheek, the power of his feelings obvious in his eyes. It only took a moment for him to fall over the edge.

* * * *

"This is wonderful," Christine said, licking the cream from her lips. She leaned back on the rug in front of the fire.

"I made this myself," Erik said, holding up his own bowl.

"Is that why you didn't mind us eating dessert first?"

Erik smiled. "You can have dessert first whenever you want it."

A mischievous smile spread across her face. "And when I want seconds?"

"I'll be more than happy to oblige." He dipped his finger into the chocolate sauce, opened her robe, and smeared it over her nipple. Then he slowly licked it off.

Christine set her bowl on the floor and ran her fingers through his hair as he laved her swollen bud.

When he was done, he looked up at her. "Will you stay the night?"

"I'll stay every night," she whispered, leaning down to kiss him.

He pulled away. "You don't have to make promises, Christine. I want you to have time. Your happiness is what matters."

She caressed his cheek. "Who could make me happier than you could? Who could love me more than you do?"

"Those are unfair questions. I wouldn't answer them even if I knew."

She laughed. "Oh, Erik. Let's just accept this for the wonderful thing it is. You're one of my best friends, and you're the kindest, most patient man I know. I never dreamed I'd have this."

"Have what?"

"A lover who was also such a good friend—someone to love me so completely, just the way I've always wanted to be loved."

"Just the way you've always deserved to be loved."

Christine swirled her finger in the chocolate left on her plate.

Erik smiled, sitting back in his chair. "Did you have something in mind, my lady?"

Christine nodded slowly. "Ann is going to want lots of details tomorrow night, so I better make sure I have lots to tell her."

She parted his robe and ran her chocolate-covered finger up and down his already hard cock. She moved across the rug and leaned over him, licking the tip of his cock slowly. "It's a good thing I love chocolate so much." She took his cock into her mouth slowly, licking him in long strokes. Once she'd taken all of him in her mouth, she began to suck harder.

He groaned. "I think it's my new favorite food."

RED WILLOW

by

Louise Bohmer

I was twenty-one, and I knew nothing of love, let alone the finer workings of the female body. To put it bluntly, I was a backward, simple farm boy that summer.

Willow changed all of that.

She was only five years older, but in terms of experience, that woman had worlds of knowledge over me. Willow came to stay with the woman who owned the bed and breakfast next to our farm, that summer in '96. She stayed in the basement suite of an old, heritage farmhouse, owned by a kind elderly lady, who used to change my diapers. Damn, did I feel strange that August, sneaking into Mrs. Pillar's basement window just to have a stolen hour or two with my Willow.

Willow was an uninspired sketch artist and painter, and a distant relation to Edie Pillar. The older woman had taken pity on Willow's depressed situation, and shipped her over to our small, rural community in Alberta to take in some "therapeutic relaxation," as Edie use to put it, and for a change of scenery.

There was no doubt, from the first time my gaze lighted on that feisty, curvaceous redhead, I was entranced. My schoolboy heart had never thudded so hard as in the moment I was introduced to Willow.

I worked as a handyman out at Mrs. Pillar's heritage home. I was cleaning the gutters the day Willow arrived.

"Hey, buddy."

The female voice came from below me, and I jumped on the ladder, nearly tumbling to the leaf-scattered lawn below. I steadied myself on the rickety, wooden contraption, and turned to get a better look at my visitor.

"Think you could help me haul a couple of my bags from my car? I wouldn't ask, but I have quite a bit, and it is hotter than hell out here." She smiled, and my heart caught in my throat.

Willow wore a dark blue tank top and cutoff jean shorts. They clung like wet fabric to her sculpted, hourglass curves.

"Sure." I flashed her a friendly grin as I descended a few of the splintered rungs, and hopped to the ground. Swallowing over the nervous lump in my throat, I hoped I didn't appear a horny, awkward youth to this vision of vital loveliness before me.

* * * *

We were sitting on the back porch, watching the blazing prairie sunset, sipping on lemonade made earlier by a thankful Mrs. Pillar. Willow turned to me, her silvery-blue eyes twinkling with some unspoken mischief.

"You know." She ran a slow, seductive hand up my jean-clad thigh. "Aunty Edie is a very open-minded lady." Leaning closer, her warm breath fanned my ear, raising the flesh on my legs in chilled, electric bumps. "She has given me complete freedom while staying here."

Her breast brushed against my arm, and I tensed.

"After all." Her whisper tickled deeper in my ear as she moved yet nearer. "I am a grown, once-divorced woman, Jamie. And Auntie Edie knows I will respect her rules of decorum while under her roof. Keep it neat and discreet is her only rule."

My cock twitched in my pants, blood surging to its tip, as her tongue traced the inner shell of my ear, tormenting me further. Stifling a moan, I traced my hand up her pale, creamy thigh. Willow's hand slid lower, and she squeezed my crotch gently, then massaged in a delicious pattern through the worn denim. A flood of lust rushed into the head of my penis, and I felt it tingle with the oncoming erection. This time, there was no fighting my grunt of pleasure.

I'd never felt anything like this, not with any of the local girls I'd had the odd off-again, on-again romance with. This was instantaneous, potent, and raw. Lust of the deepest kind drugged my mind and ate at my thoughts. She was so bold, and I found I liked that.

Her touch deftly slid to my belt and unfastened the buckle. She slid my zipper down and reached her hand past the thin, cotton sheath of my underwear. I felt her warm skin close over my hardness and I sighed.

Her finger slid up the head of my cock and, in the moonlight, I watched her trace small circles in the spurt of pre-cum that jetted from my stiffness. I was so hard it hurt. I moaned, as she worked her now damp fingers under my glans, and then dipped her mouth to my manhood.

"Jamie? Willow out there with you, kiddo?" Edie Pillar's cigarette-scarred alto wafted through the screen door, along

with a blue plume of smoke. It lingered on the open front porch, like a lazy ghost.

Willow slid her mouth away from my shaft quickly, and tucked my erection back into my pants with a swift, gentle touch, then zipped me up. I stared at her, stunned and aroused; she'd managed to get my hard girth back into my jeans without pinching or maiming anything. I'd never been able to master the same feat, when the fathers' of a few girls I'd taken to the local, closed-down drive-in-turned-make-out-place, showed up with a scowl on their faces and a bat in their hands. This was no girl I was dealing with—this was a woman, and I felt totally out of my league.

I regained my senses, and managed to hide my arousal, as Mrs. Pillar shuffled to the entrance in her knitted slippers and peeked out, squinting through the whorls of smoke drifting from the glowing ember of her *Number 7*.

"I'm going to bed, Willow, hon." She gave the two of us an impish, knowing grin. "Will you lock up for me when you turn in?"

Rising from the porch swing, Willow walked to the screen door and opened it, leaning in to plant a goodnight kiss on Edie's wrinkled cheek. "No problem, Aunty. Go get some rest." She tugged the grey knit sweater a little closer around the older woman's frail frame, protecting her against the slight chill in the air. I smiled at the tender action.

"Night, Jamie," Edie called and smiled, as she slowly moved back into the light spilling from the old homestead. "Thanks for cleaning the gutters today. Fantastic job as

always, sweetie." Her dainty, gnarled hand waved to me as she moved from my sight.

"You're welcome, Mrs. Pillar," I called back to her. "Have a good night."

She shook her finger at me for using the formal moniker, and reminded me to call her "Edie" with a good-natured grin, as she left our sight.

As Willow took her place beside me once again, we could hear Edie's footsteps ascending the oak staircase, up to her bedroom on the second floor. Tilting her head, this enthralling redhead I had come to want so badly, so quickly, listened until the footfalls tapered off. I held my breath as she sat still, waiting. When, after a length of silence, I moved to stand, she pushed me back against the swing, and grinned at me lecherously.

"You ain't going anywhere, Jamie." Her hand slithered back up to my groin, and she cupped my straining cock, working her fingers over it through the material, in tortuous, urgent strokes. "Shhh..." she admonished quietly, when I failed to muffle my groan. "Just give it a few more minutes, darling."

After all the lights in the house were doused and the silence crept in deeper through the windows and doors, Willow slid closer to me. Her eyes glinted in the moonlight, and I could see her wide grin as her face came closer to mine

My mind went through a hundred—perhaps a thousand—images as she kissed me deeply and hungrily. I knew nothing about this brazen beauty. Oh, I knew the basics by then. Where she was from ... why she was here—sort of. But she knew nothing of me either, except my age and that I was a

single, young guy. I felt primal in that moment with her—timeless and instinctual.

"I'm on the pill," she murmured into my ear, as her hands once again went to work on unbuttoning my jeans. "You don't have to worry."

"Okay." I breathed against her ear, as her grip coiled around my painfully hard erection. I felt dumb and clumsy, but I wanted her too desperately to feel shy or embarrassed. All my fears went out the window with Willow. She made me feel wanton and bold.

Her tongue flicked out across her lips and over the head of my penis. I groaned, and my pelvis thrust against her mouth as she sucked hard on the head.

"I don't think we have time for that tonight," she whispered, as she tugged my pants and underwear down to my knees with a few sharp pulls.

In the cool, silver moonlight, I watched her stand and shed her clothing. Her hair turned to cold fire in the midnight shine. Her skin was like smooth ivory. I swallowed hard as I drank in her form. Full, round breasts with large, taut nipples that her hair just brushed the top of. An hourglass of smooth curves from head to toe. My cock jumped and spurted as I gazed at her voluptuous beauty. I wanted her more than any high school cheerleader I had ever had.

Willow pushed me back against the swing, and she yanked off the white T-shirt I wore. I was young and hard-bodied from harsh farm work; even now, after ten years gone, I still have that rangy, lean-muscled farmer's build. She traced the definition in my biceps and smiled as she stood over me. I

nearly came right there, when her free hand trailed to her own sex and she played with her clit as her fingers stroked my sinewy chest, down over my ribcage, and over the lines in my flat stomach.

Moaning, she straddled me and positioned herself to take all of me. I knew I was of decent size, as other girls had struggled to take the whole of my length and girth. But Willow swallowed me up like a glove. I'd never felt anything that fit so perfect—that was so hot. Digging her fingers into my dark blonde hair, she pulled my head back and kissed me hard, as she rode me with a frantic grinding of her hips. I fought to hold back my ejaculation, wanting to pleasure her, impress her, as much as she was doing for me. My head swam with sensations, need, and a lust so fierce I thought it would swallow me whole.

Willow's hand trailed down her body, and she leaned away from me some. Her fingers found her pussy once more, and she dampened the tips with her own juices before rubbing her clit with urgent strokes. Her free hand found one of her delicious breasts and began kneading and squeezing the firm, round flesh. I followed her lead and took her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the straining, dark bud. Willow moaned in enjoyment as I nibbled and sucked on the tip and areole. My skin was alive with the frosty bite of the air, and an electricity I had never felt before or since.

"Ohhh, Jesus, Jamie," she rasped into my ear, then grabbed a hank of my hair and pressed my face into her neck as she bucked against me harder. "I'm going to cooomme..." And with a few sharp thrusts of her hips, and

a loud, wailing moan I was afraid Mrs. Pillar might hear, she climaxed all over me.

I could feel her wetness running down my thighs. Grabbing her hips, I guided her forward urgently, bringing myself closer to orgasm. She smiled down at me, running a hand over my half-lidded eyes. She ground herself into me faster and faster. I tilted my head back, and bit my lip furiously, as I let go inside her. Never had I felt such a release. I would've screamed out, had it not been for the time and place of our excursion.

Little did I know, it would be the first of many nights of lovemaking with my Willow. And when she left that autumn, she left me with a hole in my heart that's never been filled.

* * * *

I remember the day Willow told me she was leaving—going back to Vancouver, to open her own art boutique. Aunty Edie had given her the money to invest in the business that would sell Willow's exclusive creations, plus works by artists she knew on the island, whom she would commission to craft pieces for her.

She took me by the hand, leading me away from the house and into the field that Mr. Pillar used to hay and plant wheat in the far section when he was still alive. Mrs. Pillar was playing cards with the ladies in town, and we had the place all to ourselves, but Willow said she didn't want to be indoors.

"Not on a day like this." She'd smiled suggestively at me, as she led me from the front porch and into the hot

September afternoon. "Today's a day for being outside, enjoying the sunshine."

I knew what she meant by that, could see the gleam in those deep blue eyes, and I had no choice but to follow the lady I loved so much it hurt. We had a chemistry that could melt metal, and Willow's wild, imaginative ways thrilled me to no end. Sometimes, when I would sneak into her room, through the back door on the walk-in basement, she would let me stay over, setting the alarm for just before dawn's light, so I could vacate her bedroom before Aunty Edie woke up. We'd talk about things we'd like to do with our life, places we'd like to see. I have no doubt Edie knew about those late-night trysts by the knowing smiles she'd give me and Willow, but she never said a word to either of us about our discreet affair.

"I want out of Fort's Hill, eventually," I told Willow that final afternoon, not realizing the bomb she would drop on me, after a few hours of wild, passionate sex in the sunshine.

She pulled me close to her, and placed a slender finger against my lips. "We didn't come out here to talk, Jamie." She smiled. "At least, not right away, sweetie." Leaning closer, my lover whispered in my ear, "Fucking first, baby. Conversation later."

At her throaty, low command, I felt my cock jump in my tight, faded jeans. Damn, no one could get me hard faster than my Willow.

"You always know how to cut to the chase." I gathered her fiery curls into my hand and yanked her head back, the way I knew she liked, trailing hot kisses down her neck. "Don't you,

lady?" My voice came ragged and raspy on that final sentence, before she claimed my lips with hungry need and pushed me down into the fallow field.

Our clothes fell to the warm ground in a frenzy of trembling fingers, entangled arms, and frantic kisses snatched. We went crazy together—no inhibitions between me and Willow. Naked in the field, I straddled her, smiling down at my vibrant beauty as she smiled up at me. She brushed her fingers through my hair, and I shivered as her hand slid down my belly and wrapped around my stiffening cock.

"I want to try something, baby." She brushed a fingertip over my lips. "Want to see how long you can hold out; let me tease you, before you beg to be inside me." Her laugh was soft and sultry, and my cock pulsed in her grip as she squeezed the shaft, then slid her snug grip upwards.

I groaned, unable to conjure coherent words, as Willow's nimble fingers swirled seductive circles over her aureoles, and then tweaked her nipples and pulled. I went to sit up, but she skillfully pinned me to the dried, yellow grass with a shapely knee, grinning down at me as she continued to play with her generous mounds.

"I ... don't..." The intense desire thickened my throat, and I had to swallow to clear my stolen voice. "...think I can hold out, baby."

Bending over me, her russet hair tickled my chest as she kissed me deeply, and let her knee slip lower, until she rubbed it lightly over my penis. I clenched my jaw, trying to hold back my need to throw her to the ground and take her

right then. More than anything, I wanted to please my Willow, and playing these sexual games thrilled us both.

Her tongue flicked into the shell of my ear, and she nipped at the lobe; my penis jumped in her grip, and her chuckle feathered my chin as she nibbled and kissed her way to my neck.

With a low growl, I wrapped her in my arms and rolled her over, pulling Willow onto my chest. She threw her head back and laughed, running a hand down my bicep as we settled in the waist-high grass together. As soon as I let my arms loosen around her, she shimmied away over the grass, and sat up, straddling me.

"Not yet, darling," she purred, and while atop me, Willow moved backward, sliding her wet sex down over my throbbing hardness. "I'll give it to you soon, but not yet."

Working her soaking slit back and forth over the length of my shaft, Willow moaned and closed her eyes, using one hand to touch her most sensitive spot. The other she wrapped around my girth, and while she played with herself, working herself closer to climax, she squeezed and stroked my cock until I bucked beneath her. I had to strain myself, clench my jaw tightly, so I would not flip my lover to the ground and take her like a feral animal. My desire, my need for release, was so great it was making me crazy with need.

"Are ... you," she paused, licking her lips as she continued to manipulate us both, giving sexual delight with her skilled caresses, "going to make it, Jamie?"

"You keep doing that, lady," I panted, "and I won't make it inside. Damn, I'm near bursting."

With a lecherous laugh, Willow slid yet lower, and then rose up higher on her knees. She tickled the seam of her labia with the head of my penis. "Want inside?" She licked her lips suggestively.

"Please, baby," I squeezed her hips with urgent, hungry hands. "Let me inside. I need to feel you around my cock."

Willow shimmied a bit higher on her knees, and positioned me below her entrance. Like a warm, tight glove, she slid down around me, and I sighed as I relished the pleasure as she started to grind against me. I focused on controlling my desperate need to orgasm, as I rubbed against her snug walls with mind-numbing friction.

Willow threw her head back as I began to pump upward. "Damn ... yes ... that feels sooo good."

Her hips moved in a rhythmic, erotic dance, and as she leaned back, angling her pussy so my cock rubbed her in just the right spot, I slipped my hand down my stomach, and found that soft, tiny mound between her legs. My fingers pinched and rolled her clit—a bundle of pulsing nerves and swollen flesh. Willow cried out and bit her lip as she juttled forward hard, and then dug her nails into my chest as she came.

A few deep, upward thrusts and I soon followed her in my release. Letting out a hard, long grunt, I spilled my seed inside Willow, and she collapsed atop me. Both of us were breathing hard as I wrapped my arms about her naked back. I felt satiated—contented like never before in my young life. In the two and a half months we'd spent together that summer, she'd taught me a myriad of ways to tease and

please her, and taken my satisfaction to new heights with her experience.

Willow opened her eyes and grinned up at me. "Damn. Maybe I've taught you too well, Jamie."

I rose up just enough on my elbow to smile down at her and brush stray curls from her pale face. There was a light spattering of freckles across her nose, and I traced them with my finger. Giggling, Willow batted my hand away, and then her face went serious; I thought I caught a tear in her eye before she looked away.

"Hey, sweetheart." I kissed her cheek, and when she still didn't look up, I stroked her face as I crouched over her, a concerned frown pinching my face. "What's wrong? You never cry, Willow. Come on." Tucking my fingers under her chin, I urged her face up, and her eyes looked into mine. "You can tell me." My heart did a nervous flip-flop, and my stomach sank, at the look of deep sadness in her watery eyes.

"I'm leaving, Jamie." I barely heard the words through her tears, and my heartache. "Aunty Edie and I were talking ... and I really want to get back into my art." She sniffed, and her glance darted from mine. "She's willing to invest some money in a venture of mine. I'm going to open an art boutique in Vancouver." Willow leaned closer and brushed a soft kiss over my lips. "Come with me, Jamie. You can write, get away from your father, and that farm that's choking the life out of you. Run away with me and become a writer, darling. I'll take care of you."

A large part of me wanted to throw away all my responsibilities and go with her. But I knew I couldn't. The

thought of pursuing my secret dream of becoming the next Ernest Hemmingway—it pulled at my gut to tell her yes, but I knew my brother Doug couldn't work the farm by himself with our old man. Dad's temper and harsh nature were something I had always had to protect my younger sibling from, and I couldn't leave him to his own devices now; Doug was just too fragile to battle our abusive old man alone.

"I..." Dropping my eyes from hers, I swallowed over the lump forming in my throat. "I can't, Willow." I brought her hands to my lips and kissed her fingertips. "Don't misunderstand me, darling. I'd love to run away with you. Love to see my name on the *New York Times* bestseller list one day, and you with your successful art boutique." I smiled against the tears that burned behind my eyes. "But you know the story with my father, the farm, and Doug. I can't leave until that old bastard is gone."

My jaw clenched as I thought of the countless beatings Gregory Fowler, my father, had heaped on his younger, weaker son. I hated the man, although I'd never utter the true extent of my rage for his years of neglect and maltreatment. His abuse had chased my mother to an early grave.

As my words died on my lips, she looked up, and her damp, beautiful stare was filled with despair. Silently, she begged me to let her go, but she asked me to make her stay as well. I could feel the torment in her soul in my gut, and it cut like a dull, rusted blade. No matter how much I wanted to, I knew I couldn't hold her back from her dreams. Holding back the misery that scraped at the back of my throat, I

kissed the tip of her nose, brushing away the bead of a fallen tear with my lips.

"You have to do this, baby." I ran my callused fingers through her soft red hair, and thought of how much I'd miss those fiery locks. "I know this is something you have wanted for a long time."

Willow sat up beside me and wiped her damp face with her palms. "Come with me, Jamie." She grabbed my hands and clasped them tightly. "You can't let your talent with words dry up while you listen to that bitter, old man tell you you'll never amount to anything. Bring Doug with you..."

I smiled sadly, and the tears denied me my moment of dignity as they spilled on to my cheeks. Holding a finger to her lips, I stopped Willow's words. "I can't, sweetheart. We both know that."

Her bottom lip trembled, and she bit it to keep herself from sobbing. I looked away to keep myself from breaking, but I squeezed her hand hard to let her know how much I loved her.

Resting her head back against my chest, Willow whispered, "If you don't come to me one day, Jamie, I'll come back for you."

* * * *

Ten years after Willow waltzed out of my life, my father passed on and I was called back to the farm by my brother, to deal with the will and divvying up the farm. Doug was a great guy, and one hell of a farmer, but the man had no head for financial affairs. He'd always referred to me as the

"intellectual" of the family, and I sure wasn't going to leave him to deal with Dad's estate all by himself, no matter how many bitter feelings were built up in me from my time spent on that farm, and the treatment my old man had dished out to me and Doug.

After Willow didn't return within a summer of her departure, I moved over to Vancouver to live with my uncle Benny—a much better man than my father. He employed me with an arts and culture magazine he ran, and I was trained in the finer details of writing articles for public consumption, on everything from the latest amateur theater company performing at the Commodore Ballroom, to what was going on along Granville Street. I enjoyed the work immensely; it kept my mind off the lost love of my Willow, gave me time to search for her in the city, and honed my talent for writing.

I found Willow's shop within a few months of moving to Granville Street. It wasn't hard to find on the boardwalk filled with eclectic, artistic shops. My hand trembled on the doorhandle as I walked into the store that damp October afternoon.

The woman behind the counter—a pleasant, tall African-American woman—informed me that Willow was on vacation with her ex-husband. He'd come searching for her when he'd found out she'd returned to Vancouver, and they'd decided to take a second honeymoon, to try and patch things up; they were in England.

My heart was not simply broken, it was shattered into many pieces, and I avoided that area of the shops, and that section of Granville Street, from that day on.

Since coming to Vancouver, and working for my uncle at the magazine, I have sharpened my craft with words. Willow was right about one thing that summer: I couldn't let my talent die, and now, I have a successful novel climbing up the *New York Times* bestseller list, just as I had always dreamed. But the dream just doesn't feel complete without my long-gone, wild love.

I've never forgotten that red-haired vixen who stole my heart, or that summer of my twenty-first year, when Willow taught me everything I know about love and lust, and wanton desire. Oh, hell, sure, there have been other women since, but none have moved me to my core the way Willow did. Our lust was explosive, and my love for her is eternal. Do I regret it? Hell, no. The heartache was worth the memories she gave me.

Pa's funeral was a small affair. Not many people got along with the old man; he was a gnarly old farmer with a lot of enemies in our small town. But because our last name, Fowler, carried weight in the town of Fort's Hill, those who hated my father never dared run him out of the sleepy community. My pa always said I had too big of a head on me—too big of dreams. Sometimes, I wonder if he's proud or disappointed in me, now, on the other side. He wanted me to take over the farm and look after Doug. He saw my leaving Fort's Hill as an ultimate betrayal.

* * * *

Doug brought the last of the dishes into the kitchen, and I rolled up the sleeves of my old, flannel work shirt as I took the pile from his hands.

He pulled the stack of worn-out china away from me. "Nah, I'll finish up here, Jamie. There's someone out on the porch to see you."

I looked up at him, puzzled. *Did I mishear him?* I wondered.

"Go on." He smiled his slow, sincere smile, and nodded toward the living room entrance. "Go talk to your company, and I'll work on these dishes."

Frowning at him in my bewilderment, but not saying a word, I wiped my hands quickly on the tea towel, and strode through the dusty living room to the front, wraparound porch of our old farmhouse. *Who the hell could be here to see me now?* I wondered, looking up at the mantle clock as I laid my hand on the door. My glance darted to the thick curtains drawn over the picture window. Damn, how I wanted to see through their dark beige cloth.

I adjusted my baseball cap and wiped the sweat from my brow, as I walked out onto the porch. In the dim light of late evening, I didn't see her at first, sitting on the porch swing, smiling up at me with anxious, sad blue eyes.

When my gaze fell upon that flaming red hair, my heart nearly stopped. "W-Willow?" I could barely choke her name out over the lump forming in my throat.

The ten years apart had barely changed her wild, untamable beauty. She rose from the swing, wearing a

simple, snug black dress that hugged all her curves in all the right ways. Her hair still fell long and wavy down her back.

"I'm sorry to hear about your dad, Jamie." She reached out to touch my face as she drew nearer, but then her hand fell to her side, and she looked at me, tentatively. "He didn't look too good last time I came through town." Her eyes dropped from my face, and her voice grew low and husky. "Looking for you."

I grabbed her fingers, and I pressed her palm against my chest, wanting her to feel my frantic heartbeat. What she could still do to me, with just one look, one smile, after all this time. "You've been back?" I blurted out. "When?"

I grabbed both her hands then, pulling her closely to my chest. Willow gasped, and then grinned, before her face went serious, and she looked into my eyes with what I thought could be a plea for hope, for forgiveness. But I needed to know why; why did it take her so long to come back to me? And why did she remarry the man who'd nearly destroyed her soul, or so she used to tell me that summer so long ago? Were they still together, and was she still in Vancouver? So many questions slammed into my mind.

"Why, Willow?" I croaked, my voice betraying me as it broke. "After all this time, why did you come back, really? And why did you," I dropped my gaze from hers as I swallowed, "go back to him?"

"So much happened after I left here, Jamie. I made some bad choices, and it took me a long time to get back on my feet, but I am finally on top of things now..." Her head dipped again, and she stared down at her fingers, as they fidgeted

near her lap. "I haven't been with Tom in eight years; it was a big mistake, trying to patch things up with him; I regret taking him back every day, but at least I learned what I do want from the experience."

I pulled her back to me, not believing what she'd just told me, not wanting to hope; to feel that love, that longing for her, seeping into my bones again, but I had to know everything. "You still in Vancouver? Still have the shop on Granville?"

She nodded, and wiped the dampness from her pale cheeks, accented with just a hint of blush. She cocked her head, as I let the grin I couldn't hold back spread across my face.

"I know you came to the shop that one time so long ago now." Willow ran a slow finger down the side of my face. "Bernadette told me when Tom and I got back. It's haunted me all this time, Jamie. If you had come sooner ... if I had known you were in Vancouver, working for your uncle—living there..."

I sighed slowly, feeling like that twenty-one year old, inexperienced farm boy again in Willow's presence. Damn, all the old feelings came rushing back and punched me in the gut like a hammer.

"I've read your book, Jamie." Willow turned her head from me, and my heart lurched into my throat. The book had been dedicated, and written about her, but I had changed the names within the work, to protect her and myself; and to keep the piece a work of fiction, I had added elements of

fantasy from the life I had dreamed of many times, including Willow as my love.

"What did you think?"

She smiled up at me, and I saw true pride in her face. "It's an amazing story; I knew you'd make it as a writer one day."

I felt the heat in my face, blushing like a schoolboy, and I brushed a stray curl from her smooth cheek. "Thank you."

Her face went serious again, and she whispered, "Will you let me explain, darling? Will you give me time?" She looked away, and this time, pulled from my arms, to walk to the edge of the porch railing. "I understand if you want nothing to do with me, Jamie. If you tell me to go, I'll go. But just know, I always loved you, and I never meant for things to turn out this way. There's a lot of explaining for me to do, but if you can be patient with me, I promise I'll tell you everything." She looked up then, and her eyes spilled over with tears once more. "I guess what I am asking, sweetheart, is," Willow swiped at the tears, "do we have a chance, after all this time?"

My heart twisted, and it felt as if someone had punched me in the gut. I could feel that old, powerful lust for her stirring inside me. I remembered that wanton summer, and it drifted through my mind in a blurred trail of tangled arms, sweaty bodies entwined, and secrets words whispered. I shifted on my feet, staring at her intently, and I felt my cock twitch in my faded jeans. Muffling the groan that built low in my throat, I turned away from Willow for a moment, taking off my ball cap and running my trembling fingers through my still-golden hair.

"I've never stopped wanting you," I said, walking to her. "Never stopped loving you. You've got all the time you need from me, sweetheart. Christ, Willow..." My face broke into a wide grin. "I never thought I'd see you again; you can't know how I've ached for this."

Taking her in my arms, tears spilled down my cheeks, and I brushed at them with an absent hand as I kissed her sweet-smelling hair.

"Let's go for a ride," she whispered. "My car is just down by the gate."

I followed her to a black Chrysler 300, parked on the other side of the old oak tree that stood just off to the right of the front gate. A short, dirt road divided our home from the fields of wheat we kept, and the grounds for our livestock. Willow took my hand and stopped, looking out over the golden fields, losing their luster as the sun slipped below the prairie horizon.

Brushing her lips over my throat, I felt Willow's teeth nip at my neck. "I changed my mind. Let's go for a walk in the wheat field instead."

I shuddered at the feel of her teeth, and my cock stirred to life in my pants, beginning to stiffen. Wrapping my arm around Willow's waist, I led her into my father's field. Once again, I felt like that boy barely out of his teens, seeking a tryst that summer so long ago with my impulsive, spitfire lover.

We'd ventured no more than five feet into the wheat stalks, when Willow turned to me with that impish grin I had missed so much, and pulled me to the ground. I sat beside

her, and she guided my head into her lap. Together, we sat that way for a while, watching the sun go down and listening to each other's breathing. But when it came to Willow and me and our lust for each other, our intense desire, we could never hold out long.

My fingers traced the hem of her black dress, now strained tightly over her crossed legs. Across my erection, my jeans strained painfully now, as I slid my caress beneath the dark material and up Willow's thigh. She moaned and leaned back, as my touch dipped beneath the hem of her panties, and I swirled my thumb over her clitoris.

"Lay back, Willow." My plea came hoarse and low. "I want to taste you. It's been so long."

Obeying my request, she lowered her flaming hair to the ground, pulling her skirt up to reveal a scarlet, silk thong—no more than a wisp of fabric—as she settled her back against the moist earth.

Pulling the silky material aside, I traced light circles through her fiery pubic hair, teasing her with my touch, but not quite giving her what she wanted yet. While no woman since Willow could compare, I had honed my crafts of sexual enticement and experience in the last ten years. Maybe that old, nervous vibe, from my youth and that summer spent in Willow's arms, was still burning in my gut, but I was no longer the shy, inexperienced farm boy in need of teaching. And I wanted to please Willow in ways I never had before. This time around, there would be no leaving, on either of our parts.

"Please, Jamie," she begged, as I stroked her inner thighs with slow motions, brushing over that throbbing spot she wanted me to touch so badly. "Touch me. God, I can't stand it anymore."

"Tell me something first." I urged back the fleshy hood of her clit, and I blew on the swollen nub. "Tell me that I've always been the one you desired the most." Bending my head, I flicked the tip of my tongue over that throbbing bundle of nerves and flesh. Willow groaned and arched her back. "Tell me no one has made you come as hard as I have."

Raising her head, she looked at me with blue eyes that glittered with carnal delight. I'd never had the courage to talk to her like that in the past; the one thing I felt compelled to rectify tonight—the last inhibition I had left to shed. Willow always brought out my wild side, but in our long ago affair, she was the one in sexual control. This time around, I wanted a taste of that seductive control she'd once held me captive within.

"No ... one," she murmured, as she pulled the stretchy, soft dress over her head, exposing her beautiful breasts to the now approaching dusk.

My hands slid up her stomach, and I kneaded her supple, pale flesh while my teeth nipped at her labia, then I slipped my tongue up the length of her plump, moist lips. Willow whimpered and threw her head back, as she curled her fingers around her small mounds, pinching her tiny, hardened nipples as she squeezed.

"Ummm ... lick me, please, Jamie." She writhed beneath me, her gyrating hips begging my mouth for satisfaction.

"How bad do you want it, baby?" I pressed my grizzled cheek against her thigh, and then peppered the crook of her groin with kisses, licks, and tugs of my teeth, all the way down to her buttocks. Willow squirmed and muttered urgent commands, frenzied curses of pleasure, as I splayed her labia, nudging back the hood of her clitoris once more.

"Tell me." I blew on the exposed flesh again, and Willow dug her nails into the ground. "Do you want me to lick your pussy, darling?" I slowly lapped my tongue across the nub, and then sucked hard on it for a brief moment. "Want me to make you come with my tongue, baby?"

Her throaty words punctuated the frantic toss of her head. "Damn ... Jamie." Willow took a shaky breath before continuing, "You've changed a lot since that summer. I can feel it in the way you touch me."

"Is that right?" I rolled her damp clit between my fingers, and she cried out. "I want to hear you say it before I'm going to give you release, Willow." I stared hard at her, as Willow struggled to keep her eyes open through the flood of sensation. She bit her lip, and I could tell she was enjoying this bit of torment—my titillating method of torture.

"Make me..." Gasping, her eyes rolled back in her head and she shivered. "Make me come with your tongue ... Jamie. Make me come, baby."

"Good girl." I smirked up at her as I wrapped my arms around her legs and pulled Willow closer. "That's what I wanted to hear."

Lowering my face to her sex, I sucked her clitoris into my mouth, running my tongue over the sensitive tip while my

fingers parted her wet slit and I slipped two fingers into her, curling them forward to find that place that would take her over the edge.

"Christ ... Jamie." Her breathless words urged me on as Willow buried a hand in my hair, guiding me with the need for release. "I'm soooo ... close." Crying out, she bucked against my face as she reached climax. Her satisfaction trickled down my palm and I inhaled her beautiful scent, covering my face.

As her sex relaxed its grip on my fingers, I slid from within Willow and moved up her body, propping myself above her on my hands. "Enjoy that, darling?" I bent my head and took her mouth in a raw, hungry kiss. Willow's hand slithered down my torso, to my belt, and then gripped my straining cock through my jeans. I moaned as she massaged.

"Seems like you might have some things to teach me this time around, Jamie." Unzipping my pants with one deft pull, Willow massaged my erection against the thin material of my underwear. I moaned as her fingers slid beneath the elastic.

"And I am very anxious to learn, sweetheart," Willow whispered, as she pulled away my jeans. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

HOPE FINDS HOPE

by

Lois Wencil

"Have I got a surprise for you." Mark chortled as he slid from the motel room bed.

Hope watched him swagger across the room. He looked good naked. Broad shoulders, slim waist, tight butt. *Not many men of his age could say that, even when dressed.*

She'd been lucky to meet him. There weren't many as amply endowed—big heart, big bucks, big cock. At least his was bigger than Dan's. And she'd been unbelievably fortunate that he'd been attracted to her. After Danny's death and the divorce, she'd devoted her time to work. What, other than bills, was left? So she gained weight, stopped cutting her hair, wearing makeup, and going out. Everything cost money. She had little of that.

But Mark had changed her life. He tried so hard to make her happy. He took Hope to his spa. There he got her the full treatment. She'd gone to bed with him out of gratitude. Sex with Mark had given her momentary forgetfulness. Too bad happiness couldn't be purchased or gifted.

Take tonight for example. He wanted to take her to the city for dinner and a Broadway show. She had to say no. He seemed so disappointed. But Hope couldn't have sat through it. She needed action. She needed to be fucked senseless. Not fed and entertained—not seduced, not romanced, not made love with or to. She needed orgasms, multiple orgasms, nothing more.

At all sports including sex, Mark was an experienced player. However, even he'd only helped to hold her sadness at bay for a short span of time. The afterglow from sex without love just didn't last.

Hope never should've been married on her birthday. Too bad she hadn't realized it until the divorce. Well, today was the first time in a long list of first-times she'd have to face. At least she wasn't alone. But, if marriage had been bad, this attempt to forget about it seemed to be doomed to failure as well.

"Hey, come back to me." Mark raced back to the bed and gathered her into his arms. "What's wrong, love?"

Hope felt him wiping away the tears she hadn't realized were spilling down her cheeks.

"Can you try to tell me, angel? You begged me to do it harder. Did I hurt you?" Mark crooned as he held her against his chest.

He who had made intercourse into a science, craft, and art, thought he'd done something that displeased her? Hope smiled at the idea. Mark seemed to care. She was almost tempted to tell him that this was the first anniversary since her divorce and also her birthday. But why bother? Although he was the second man she'd ever slept with, Mark was just the latest in the line of attempts at rebuilding her life. A life without Dan or Danny Junior.

"No, you didn't hurt me." She sobbed.

"I'm glad. Baby, I'd never hurt you if I could help it. I adore you."

She nodded.

"And I found out that today's your birthday. You should have told me."

"How did you find out?"

"I've got secrets. One thing you can count on, I plan on making it an event you'll never forget."

His lips trailed fiery nibbles as his tongue darted out to capture her remaining tears. Hope knew she better pull herself together. He gave her good sex. She shouldn't expect anything more from this man. Mark wasn't her husband. What good had a spouse ever been to her anyway? She'd forget the good times they'd shared before Danny Junior's illness, someday. But that would leave her nothing but her dreams. Were they only illusions of hope? Or were dreams wishes for what once was and might be again? Where was Dan? Did he even remember their anniversary or her birthday? How foolish she was to think of him now. He hadn't been there when they'd needed him most. At least Mark was with her. He wanted to please her. She would learn to be satisfied with that.

Hope twisted in his lap. She pressed her open lips to his. Her tongue showed him what she needed, demanded. She felt his penis respond. Her hand sought to encourage its growth. *Be thankful, she told herself. Not many men have his stamina or his staying power.*

Mark pushed her away. "I'll give you what you want," he said huskily. "But first don't you want to open this, while I force myself to wait to enter you, again?" Mark whispered.

"Later, I'm already occupied," she murmured. Her mouth closed over his penis. She sucked him in.

"I like that," he moaned. "Don't stop, oh, baby, you do know how to please me." His hands began to tease her hardening nipples. "I need you, Hope. I don't want to come yet. Let me? Hurry."

Hope stared at the familiar wrapping on the ring box he'd dropped beside her. "Mark." She choked out.

"It can wait. I'm glad you can't."

Hope glowered as he laid her back on the bed. His mouth suckled each of her breasts. His lips trailed kisses down over her abdomen and beyond.

"I thought you couldn't wait," she breathed.

"I'm on my way." He punctuated each word with a kiss. His tongue traced her navel, and then continued its downward trail.

Her legs parted in anticipation. His fingers, first one then two, slid into the wetness of her vagina. His tongue traced the folds of her vulva. Then his mouth fastened onto her clitoris. His ministrations were a torture that soon turned to bliss. The fire of her need drove thought away. Hope was lost. As he continued his ministrations, she dug her fingers into his dark, curling hair. She writhed. She demanded he enter her. Mark wouldn't stop tantalizing her engorged clitoris. She wanted him thrusting hard into her.

"I'll be there soon. Come! I want to taste you as you climax."

"You must want to drive me mad," she moaned. She begged him for the release her body craved. Without it, Hope would die. And she came.

Then, and only then, did this lover mount her. Mark thrust into her. He withdrew almost to the edge of her vagina. She lifted to draw him back. She met his next thrust. He must give her yet another magical orgasm. Tease time was over. She wound her arms and legs about his body. He fit her so well. Their juices mingled as they clung together for survival. The mating went on and on until the harmony of their joining brought the simultaneous orgasm that left them spent.

Hope came back to life in slow stages. *This one has been a real workout. Sex without love. Who could ask for more?* But she knew the answer. For she'd made love with Dan. She'd heard him murmur, "I love you, wife." He'd kissed her eyelids closed. He'd stroked her hair until she'd fallen asleep in his arms. And if she'd waken during the night, she'd still have been cradled against him. But that was before. This was now.

Minutes went by. Mark managed to gasp, "That's it for now, precious. I love what you do to me. Before and during, you make me feel young again. After, I feel my age."

"You mean you can feel?" Hope sighed.

"That's about all I'm up to at the moment."

"Knowing you, that won't last," she replied.

"Complaint?"

"I have no complaints with our fucking."

"When it's you and me, we make love. I hate that word, Hope."

"Sorry." She leaned over and kissed him.

Mark pinched her butt. "Your present, do you have it?"

The search began. The box had fallen to the floor. Hope found it while Mark watched. "I've never had a gift from Tiffany's before," she said as she carefully undid the paper.

Mark smiled. "It's only the first, so you don't have to be that careful. It's only gift wrap."

She opened the box and cradled within its black velvet nest lay a ring. Diamonds encircled the huge blue-flame sapphire, which rested atop a band of platinum.

"Its blue reminds me of your eyes as you reach climax. Do you like it?"

"It's gorgeous. I can't accept this," she protested.

His lips silenced her. Ending the kiss, Mark took the ring and slid to his knees before her. "This ring is a promise of our life to come. Please, accept both it and me. I want you to become my wife."

Hope gulped. *Marriage?* That was what she'd done with Dan. Could papers and a judge sever the bond made in church? Of course it could. It had. No more marriage for her. "Mark..." She placed her fingers on his lips.

He kissed her fingers and took both her hands in his. He continued, "Listen to me. I don't feel right giving you a true engagement ring until my divorce is final."

"Divorce?" *A possible reprieve?*

Mark nodded. "It won't take long. I promise you."

"Promise me? What about her, your wife? You're married." She hadn't known. He'd phoned her every night he hadn't been with her. Where had she been, his wife?

"Yes, I promise you. Just trust me!"

"Trust? I, she, we should trust you?" Was she angry, hurt, sad, what? Hope couldn't think. So she listened as he talked on.

"The papers were served to Joanna two days ago. She doesn't know about us. I didn't want you involved."

"You didn't want me involved? Well, I'm not."

"You're not involved. I've just been existing. Then we met. I loved you from that first minute. Now I want to be free. I need to be free from her. I want to love you, live with you, take care of you. Hope, stop. Don't look at me like that."

"I never would've gone out with you if I'd known." Hope couldn't believe that she'd been taken in, fooled once again. She grabbed for the sheet. She had to cover herself.

"I'm sure she'll give me quite a battle. She doesn't love me. However, she does love the perks of being married to me. Once she is certain that her lifestyle is secure, she'll be glad to sign the papers. Then she won't have to sneak around and hide her girlfriend."

"Your wife has a girlfriend?"

"A female lover."

"You've known about her?"

"I've known. But we've tried to keep it secret from the kids," Mark replied.

"Kids? You're telling me that you have children?" Hope felt a stab of pain that nearly made her double over. To get mixed up with a married man was one thing. But to destroy a family was heinous.

"We'll have the kids most weekends. They're great. You'll like them. They'll love you. Don't look like that, Hope. It'll all

work itself out. We are meant to be together. You must know that. Just say yes. Please, say you'll marry me?"

Before she could reply, he'd slid the ring onto her finger. It was a perfect fit. But was he?

Hope couldn't absorb all that was happening. "You're asking me to marry you while you're still married?"

"Not for long. Joanna gave me a child out of duty. The other two were accidents. She was trying to convince me that she wasn't a lesbian. She was afraid I'd tell her family. She never had any interest in sex with me. We haven't been together since her last pregnancy."

"But I called you. You phoned me. Where was she?"

"I used my cell phone."

"And you asked me out, slept with me while you were still living in the same house?"

"I'm not moving out of my home. You'll love it. Of course, you can redecorate or even change the furniture."

"And your kids?"

"There are three of them. All live away at their schools. The twins are juniors at Penn State. Frank is in his senior year at Marstone Academy. I'll let them meet you after Jo and I tell them about the divorce."

"No! This can't be happening. I never said I loved you. I never asked for a commitment of any kind." Hope felt her anger rising.

"You're not a woman who sleeps around. I've done things to you that you've never even read about in books. You wouldn't have let me if you weren't planning on being in my life. I've had one-night stands. I know the difference."

His experience had been gained through practice with many. She felt defiled. Well, wasn't that what she got for fucking him? It had felt good, though—especially this night.

Mark tried to take her in his arms. She pulled away.

"I'll open the champagne," Mark told her as he moved from the bed.

At least, he knew enough to give her space. He seemed so calm, so sure of himself. She hated him.

"If you think I'm going to get involved with breaking up a home, you're the biggest nut I've met in this fruitcake world. What happened to marriage and female/male relationships during the years I was married to Dan?"

"What do you mean, darling? I'm the only partner you've slept with since your divorce. I love you. You care for me. So why should we let the fact that I remained in a marriage until I met you come between us?"

"Why? How can I trust you? What other secrets, I mean surprises, might you spring on me? Cheat on one, cheat on the next."

"Hope, I'm being completely honest with you," Mark snapped.

How dare he get angry with her? How dare he think she'd accept his offer?

"Why else would I tell you about my family? Why else would I offer you marriage? Why would I buy you..."

"Buy!" she yelled. "You're a cheat, a liar. Do you think that any ring could make up for those things?"

Hope yanked the ring from her finger. She hurled it across the room. Grabbing for her things, she fled into the bathroom. They both heard the lock engage.

Hope curled into a fetal ball on the bathroom floor. She sobbed silent tears into the bundle of clothing she held against her. *Not again! Not another betrayal!*

She listened as Mark knocked on the door. Hope heard his litany of pleas delivered in his coaxing baritone. It was only sounds, not words. She must find a way to escape from him, to get out of this motel room. When alone, she'd make sense of it and put yet another in a series of disillusionments behind her.

Hope got to her feet. She managed to dress. What good would a confrontation do? She didn't love him. She'd never said a word about loving him. She didn't know where his idea of a promise ring had come from.

Again she whispered the words that were supposed to give her hope. Hope still had hope. She'd better watch out. She felt the hysteria rising. *Later! Always later!* There would be better times, better men, a better life out there waiting for her. She had no time for depression or regrets. The first was a lack of hope. She still had dreams and time to live them. And the second was looking back on what might have been. She must force herself to look forward to what would be.

So she turned on the shower to hide the noise. Then she wriggled through the window, and walked away from the "now" into the "what was to come."

* * * *

Hope couldn't decide which hurt more, her head or her feet. Strange that it wasn't her heart. Walking the short distance to phone a cab had been foolish. It was a pattern—no, an old habit. "Flight from a fight," was her mantra. She'd grown up in a home where "a fight a day kept facing reality away" was the norm. But she'd left that behind, too.

She feared that Mark would follow her. She didn't want to ever see him again. After their child's death, Dan might not have talked to her. They hadn't been able to share even their grief. But he'd never kept secrets, told lies, or went to bed with other women. But Dan wasn't her husband any more. She ran from him. Maybe she really didn't matter to anyone. He hadn't followed her either. She had to stop comparing every guy she met, everything they said or did to Dan. If he'd been so perfect, why wasn't she with him? Good question without a good answer. A hot shower and sleep, that's what she needed.

Hope checked her watch. Two more hours and this horrible day would be over. As she unlocked the door to her studio apartment, she heard the phone ring. Then Mark's voice, "Hope, why did you sneak away? We need to talk. Please, pick up."

The hell I will. Why should I? The only thing I have to say is that we're through.

The phone rang again. Mark begged, "Hope, I'm worried. I tried to find you. I don't know where you went. If you don't pick up this phone, I'm coming over. I'm on my way. This is too important to wait. I've got to explain."

"Explain this!" she snarled. "Explain it to your wife. Be honest with your kids. I'm not interested." Her words were shared with only the small empty room where she'd slept for the past months.

She grabbed her car keys and headed back down the three long flights of stairs. She dropped behind the wheel, inserted the key and floored it. She peeled from her parking place. Her car was too old for such abuse. So was she.

But where should she go? Her friends were married. Most of them had kids. They went to bed early. She hadn't really seen any of them in months. She liked being alone. Families only made her miss what she'd lost, what she'd never have again. Besides, she couldn't just walk in to someone's home at this time of night. What was that about depression and regret anyway?

She drove. Without conscious thought, she found herself at the cemetery where Danny Junior's body lay. But the gates were closed. Did her little boy like heaven? Did he miss her? At least he didn't hurt any more.

Mark had said he was on his way. He'd wait at her apartment. She never should've given him a key. Too late to think of that now. She'd better get some gas and figure out where she was going to spend the rest of this night. She wouldn't go back to her room or to him. She'd never play a part in wrecking a home. He could just tell his story to his next conquest. The tale of the frigid wife had been the norm. In this modern day, was the lesbian wife its replacement?

At least he could go home. Where was home for her? It sure wasn't this third-floor, one-room place where she ate

and slept. She should really think about painting it. Maybe tomorrow she'd buy a few plants. Danny Junior and she had planted bulbs. He'd loved flowers.

Maybe she should check into a hotel. It would be a waste of good money. But what choice did she have?

Her stomach rumbled. Mark had wanted to take her to dinner. It might've been better. She hadn't eaten much that day. She sure could use a drink, not champagne either. Then the idea hit her. She'd take a trip down nostalgia lane. She'd go and have a cheeseburger and a beer at The Silver Spur. That was where she'd first met Dan seven years ago, on her twenty-first birthday.

Too bad Lauren and Sharon didn't live around here any longer. They'd taken her to The Silver Spur to have her first legal drink. They'd made such a production of it. They even insisted the bartender card her. And Dan and his buddies had joined in the fun.

Hope remembered. The car seemed to know the way. And she parked in front. There'd never been a spot right in front of this bar before tonight. *Destiny, an omen that her luck might change*, Hope told herself.

She sat mesmerized by the garish flashing lights of the sign. In her mind, she could almost hear the classic country and western music. She thought she heard Patsy Kline sing *Crazy. 'I'm crazy, crazy for feelin' so blue ... '*

She couldn't just sit here replaying songs that no longer meant anything in her head. Was she going in or not?

She flung the car door open, got out, and began to walk to where she'd spent the happiest night of her life. In this now

rundown bar was where they'd met, danced, and fallen in love at first sight. But that was then. This was now. She was lonesome. But she'd be that no matter how many people were around her, or where she went. But alone here was better than being with Mark there. How things had changed.

Hope strode through the door and straight to the bar. The place was packed. The noise and heat enveloped her. The music was old. The bartender was new.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

Nothing that's on the menu. To the waiting man before her, she said, "A cheeseburger..."

"Rare and two Bud Lights."

She whirled around, only to drown in eyes whose fiery green would make an emerald jealous.

"I trust you'll let me buy you a beer and a burger on your birthday and our fifth anniversary?"

"How did you know? What are you doing here? You remembered..." She couldn't stop babbling. A feeling of warmth spread over her. It was so very good to have him next to her, to see him here. He wasn't Adonis, but he was her Dan. Well, maybe for now she could pretend.

"I didn't know. I just hoped. I thought you might come so I waited for you. And yes. Did you think I could forget?"

"I don't know what I thought. I just wanted to come here."

"You're looking great." Dan leaned close and raised his voice so she could hear his words.

"Thanks," Hope managed to answer. Her mouth was dry. Her heart hammered so loud that he must've heard it. Her face felt flushed. She kept licking her lips. He'd think her a

fool. She didn't care. She was with Dan once again. For this short time, that was all that mattered.

The bartender set down their beers. Raising his glass, Dan mouthed, "To you. To us!"

Hope smiled. "Would you like to dance?" She needed to hold him.

"Never thought you'd ask," he replied as they fell into one another's arms. And together they moved. The music changed its beat. They danced on. It stopped. They were forced to move apart.

The cheeseburger was cold by the time they returned to their stools. She ate it anyway and watched him. He watched her. Something Dan had given her would be part of her for tonight.

They talked about nothing. They thought about much. Should they just enjoy the moment? Let the past be past? Leave one another once again? This time, would it be forever?

Midnight came. That day ended. Still they sat, now talking little, holding hands.

Too soon the bartender announced, "Time for last drink orders. We close in twenty minutes."

"I suppose I'd better go," she told him. Now she'd have to decide where.

"Can I walk you to your car?" he asked.

"I guess." Hope wanted to take him home. But Mark would be there. She'd had sex with Mark earlier. That fact stood between them now, would always stand between Dan and her. Had he made love with another woman? It shouldn't

matter. It did. What would he say if she told him about Mark? They were divorced. Would he care?

"Coffee? We need to talk," Dan began. "Do you want to talk?"

"About?"

"Us, Danny Junior, our future."

Wasn't it too late for that? Hadn't they talked? No, they'd put up a wall of silence after Danny's death. They both worked to pay off his medical bills. After that, there seemed to be nothing to accomplish together, nothing to say to one another. So she had packed her things, said good-bye, and moved out. But he hadn't stopped her. Could he have?

"Sorry. I just thought ... I just wanted. I just hoped..." He couldn't seem to get the right words out.

"I've missed you," she blurted.

"Me too."

They stood not knowing what to do, or what to say, next.

"Come home with me, Hope?" His voice trembled.

"I can't."

"You mean you won't."

"Yeah."

Dan kissed her cheek and turned to leave. "I understand. Happy birthday."

She watched him walk away from her. He'd never done that before. This was the tomorrow she'd never thought she'd have a chance to have. Dan still wanted her. She still needed him, not just for sex, but for living together, loving together, sharing a future, perhaps even another child.

And she ran. Never again away from him. She called,
"Dan, wait for me. I love you."

He turned, and held out his arms. And Hope flew into them
and held on. Their tears mingled as she whispered, "Take me
home, please."

And he did.

TAMING THERA

by

Cheri Valmont

Chapter 1

"Do hurry, child," Thera Perceval's aunt insisted when Thera avoided her hands. "You must change ere the knight sent by your intended arrives."

Blast! She despised her father, John Perceval, for forcing her to marry her sister's betrothed. If Kathryn had not succumbed to illness two months prior, Thera would be blissfully running through the castle grounds with no care save causing her father and aunt immense aggravation, pretending she was the son her father never had.

Did her father have no sentiment?

Kathryn's remains were barely covered when he informed Thera of his decision. A proper tutor had descended upon them one week later. A sennight after, Monsieur Montague threw up his hands in defeat and moved on.

"Why should I dress up for this knight? Why couldn't the *great man* come to collect me himself?" If he had, Thera could have discouraged him the sooner. Now she would have to convince his lackey of her unsuitability, and then have the knight inform his master.

"Do not question your lord's decisions," said her aunt, Lady Charlotte. "If he insists on having you tutored in the proper way a lady should treat her master, who are we to defy him? Now do hurry, the good knight is due here anon." Her aunt

motioned for the maids to continue assisting Thera with her kirtle.

It had taken one of her father's strongest knights to get the struggling Thera into her solar for a bath, and all her maids—most she didn't know very well—and her aunt, to get her into her garb, which they hadn't accomplished yet.

"Nay, Aunt. I shall not adorn myself like a peacock dressed for a king's feast. If the knight likes me not as I am, then he can return to his master and inform him I'm unsuitable."

A dagger into the heart could not have wounded Thera as much as when her father informed her she was to be given in her sister's stead to the powerful lord. When she had been young and pretended to be a squire, he had thought it amusing, ruffled her then short hair, and made jests that one day she would make an exemplary knight. He'd taken it for granted that she would outgrow her hoydenish ways. However, with no lady wife to see to his children and him away frequently on Crusades, his widowed sister could do naught with the rebellious Thera.

"Thera! How can you think to shame your father by breaking his vow?"

"He vowed to give Kathryn over as the man's bride. He's old enough to be my father!"

Lady Charlotte's face showed her displeasure, made severe by her hair twisted into a tight bun beneath her wimple. "You know women have no say in these things, Thera. You're fortunate the man is not old enough to be your grandfather."

"Had I found such to be truth, the following morrow all the castle folk would have seen the last of me."

Her aunt gasped at her audacity. Bold and direct, Thera had no need for perfidious words, priding herself on honesty in her dealings.

"Thera, forsooth, you would have shamed your father worse than any son could have."

Thera stopped her struggles and glared at her aunt. Her aunt had chosen words that would most aggrieve Thera. She escaped her captors, stalking over to the embrasure, so she might gaze on all the activity in the courtyard below. From her window in the south tower of the keep, not only could she see the inner bailey, but also the outer bailey, and beyond the castle walls. Trying not to give into the missish tears threatening to fall, Thera watched the strong force of her intended make their way into the outer bailey with mounted knights and horse-drawn wagons. If the size of his force was aught to go by, her betrothed was a man to be reckoned with.

How she wished this had naught to do with her. When Kathryn had spoken of her intended, Thera had disregarded her words. By rumors from the household knights, the man was purported to be a powerful and fearsome warrior, a man neither to take the actions of a willful Thera lightly, nor to find her mannish ways amusing.

Give Thera chain mail to clean and polish and she was content. She could hone a knight's sword with an edge sharp enough to cleave his enemy in twain. She could recite almost every adventure of every knight within her father's retinue.

Thera grimaced. She could not execute a proper curtsy if her life depended upon it, nor could she wield a needle with any accuracy. As a female, she was hopeless.

Her agitation rising, Thera looked back at her aunt and maids waiting impatiently to help her don her finery. Rich tapestries, brought back from the Holy Land by her father, graced the stone walls of her bedchamber, warming the cold edifice with their brilliant colors. A trunk filled with beautiful silks to make lovely clothing, had Thera been so inclined, sat at the foot of her bed.

Was she mad to wish that the man had come to Garforth Castle, instead of sending his lackey? The man was monstrously huge, so she'd heard, taller than a tree, and with the strength of ten knights in his massive arms. Would she be more fortunate in her dealings with the knight he sent to instruct her? This knight was rumored to be refined in the arts, literature, and proper etiquette, as well as in the art of war. Surely even he would have no success in assisting Thera overcome her hoydenish ways.

* * * *

Ranulf de Meurtes, Earl of Moncliff, balked at the finery his brother Simon insisted he wear. He was a man of war, not some foppish lordling intent on impressing the ladies of Garforth Castle. Ranulf prepared for the coming meeting with Lord John and his unknown daughter, Thera, in a tent they'd erected in the outer bailey.

"Ranulf, you are the one who insisted on this farce. Comfort aside, no refined knight would show himself in chain

mail to retrieve his bride. Christ's wounds! What induced you to decide to do this?"

Ranulf gazed at his younger brother with disgust. "What think you, Simon? I settled on the man's eldest daughter because a passing knight mentioned she was biddable and sweet. I'm thirty and seven, brother, and widowed this past score of years. I'm bone weary of the rigors of training and warfare. I've done my duty by my overlord in his crusades."

"Aye, you have that. No one would blame you for extracting your vow, since Lady Kathryn has died, or for refusing the other sister in her stead."

Ranulf looked at his brother's expectant face. Simon was the knight Ranulf knew he could never be, so caught up as he was in all the trappings of war. He'd sent his brother to court, so although Simon was a valiant knight, he also knew well the ways of a courtier.

"The passing knight knew naught of another daughter. If she exists, I would find out her disposition ere I make my decision to accept her. If the man is attempting to pass a niece as his daughter, I shall be sore aggrieved."

Simon nodded his head in agreement. "Lord John would be foolish to deceive a man of your reputation. Why, he would know what type of retaliation would be forthcoming."

Ranulf saw the look of intentness on his brother's face. His brother stood a few inches shorter than Ranulf himself and shared the same dark golden coloring. Whereas Simon maintained the perfect form Ranulf had once been blessed with, now Ranulf's war ravaged body no longer sent ladies into a swoon of delight. That was why Ranulf only made use

of light skirts now. He was not certain how a lady wife would react to all the battle scars marring his large frame.

How could he hope to pass for a refined and cultured knight, when warfare was all he knew? Ranulf had no conception of how to act in the presence of a lady any longer, if he'd ever known. Give him the company of men where he could speak and curse as he chose. As far as matters of the flesh, give him a wench who would let him slake his thirst and be done with her.

Only one thing drove Ranulf to consider a wife, well mayhap two. One, he needed an heir, or all the warring he'd done would be for naught, and two, but at the uppermost of his mind lately, Ranulf wanted peace in his home and a wife in whose soft arms he could forget the horrors of war.

"Mayhap, I am a fool to consider this. 'Tis a sound match, though. Surely the sister be not so different from the Lady Kathryn?"

"You think not; forsooth, how different are we two?"

Ranulf frowned at his brother. True. For two men who used to look so similar, Ranulf and Simon were not at all the same in temperament. Whereas Simon was lighthearted, Ranulf was—and had always been—a driven man, since it had been to him to build a life for the two of them after their father's death. A man of war just as Ranulf was now; their father spent his life devoted to serving his overlord and away from his family.

Although Ranulf trained hard, his father took no interest in either brother until the death of their mother. And since Ranulf was the oldest, the old man had been especially hard

on him, driving him to train almost beyond the limit of his endurance. Nevertheless, neither son ever lived up to their sire's expectation, no matter that Ranulf had become a seasoned knight by the age of six and ten.

"You might be correct, brother. Which is why I mean to go through with this farce. If Lord John's missive proves correct and he does have another daughter who shows signs of being as agreeable as the Lady Kathryn, I'll follow through with my vow to take her to wife. Only he will know my true identity and that my decision rests with his daughter's good behavior. If the girl proves untrainable, I'll not waste my time. Someone else desperate for an alliance with Moncliff will do as well. I'm too old to put off the getting of an heir."

"Your reasoning is sound, brother. Should we proceed as we first planned, with me preparing her for you ere your wedding? The girl has been raised by her aunt; there should be only minor things she needs in the way of training."

"I know not; something is urging me to find out for myself if I should waste time on the girl's training or look elsewhere, anon."

Besides his short time as husband to a sweet girl named Isolande, who'd died in premature childbirth, Ranulf's life had been consumed with training and fighting wars. He found it easier to fight than to struggle through the disappointment of losing his wife and unborn son.

At least he still had Simon, and soon he would have another wife, someone sweet and comforting, who might let him find his ease between her tender thighs and not be too disgusted by his hideously scarred body.

Chapter 2

Ranulf grimaced as the girl, Thera, bit his finger as she accepted the viand he'd offered her from the trencher they shared.

"Oh, forgive me, sir!" the girl apologized again. Ranulf lost count of how many times she'd done such since they'd sat at the head table for supper.

After the first debacle of their introductions, when she almost sprawled at his feet as she attempted to curtsy before him, Ranulf had used his iron control to resist retracting his offer to marry such an unsuitable lady. Since that time several hours ago, the night had been one etiquette *faux pas* after another.

Even as uncouth as Ranulf was, Simon's drilling of proper etiquette had left some impression, enough for him to know the girl had not one inkling how to behave in proper society. He could at least be grateful she'd not wiped her greasy mouth on her sleeve.

Even as Ranulf had that thought, the girl, Thera, did just that. When he felt her eyes upon him after her lapse, he schooled his features to keep them neutral. Her expression was expectant, as if willing him to react with disgust and spurn her in the name of his lord.

Ranulf had a thought. He looked directly into her gray eyes, 'twas then he realized she was savoring his reticent reaction. The minx! Was she doing this apurpose to force his hand?

Without waiting to finish her bite of food, she asked him, "So, sir, was thy lord well when you took thy leave of him?"

Ranulf watched almost mesmerized as her neat white teeth chewed the viand he'd fed her. Except for the girl's first unguarded reaction to him, Ranulf had found naught but resistance in the lady.

Lord John had been none too happy about Ranulf's plans to find out the girl's suitability ere he decided to accept her. To him, one girl should be as good as the other. However, Ranulf would not accept a hoyden without an ounce of ability to run a house as large as Moncliff. Her father insisted Thera be accompanied by one of her maids to act as chaperone to avert any scandal in case another match need be made.

Ranulf agreed reluctantly, he'd no desire to drag another lady off to Moncliff, but he would if he must.

"Verily, he was not in top form, which is why he did not accompany me." Ranulf recited his excuse.

"Dear me, is the poor man decrepit due to his advanced age?"

Ranulf almost choked on the mulled wine he'd sipped from the goblet the two of them shared. Before he could answer, the girl stood next to him and pounded on his back. Ranulf wanted to laugh now. The girl was determined to make him disavow her on his lord's behalf. He was certain of it.

Why would a girl spurn a great alliance?

Thera intrigued him. She did have beguiling gray eyes, with a lovely complexion the color of fresh cream. Her hair covered with a veil, it was difficult to see the color, but by her dark slanting brows, she could only have black hair. Her exotically shaped eyes and long luxurious lashes urged a man to delve into her hidden secrets.

When he realized he was standing, gazing down at her, trying to answer his own questions, Ranulf looked around the table at her family's anxious frowns.

By the rood! Did they all expect him to spurn the girl? He was vexed he'd allowed the girl to embarrass him. He regained his seat and reached for their goblet, so he might occupy the hands that longed to grab her scrawny neck. Nay, not scrawny. Truly, the girl had a throat Ranulf wouldn't mind caressing.

His decision made, Ranulf would take the girl. Why should he not enjoy the pleasure of taming the fair Thera? Obviously, her father had no control over her, so someone would have to take the duty. Ranulf hated the thought that it would be some craven old bastard who would not have a care for breaking the girl's spirit. He would not tell Lord John about his decision until he sent for the lady's family to witness their wedding.

It would be Ranulf's pleasure to teach the girl the proper way to be submissive to her master. Even if it killed him!

Chapter 3

"Why, why?" Thera groaned as everything dissolved into disorder. Her maids ran around her like pullets with their heads chopped off, shoving her clothes into trunks.

She'd failed! Every blunder she'd executed last night had done naught but amuse the knight sent to train her. She'd been certain once she bit him, he would spurn her before her father and his guests, but instead he'd stood, gazing down at her as if she presented an intriguing puzzle he meant to solve.

Thera admitted her first inelegant curtsey to the man had not been all her doing; as soon as her gaze collided with the impressive visage of the behemoth knight, she'd been struck dumb by his sheer physical presence. He was beautiful; there was absolutely no other word for him. His facial expression may have been hard, but his features, they were perfect, at least to her. He had a battle scar running up the left side of his neck up onto his left jaw. Her ladies had whispered they found his countenance scary, but not Thera.

Oh, how cruel the fates to send the one man she might consider giving up her freedom for, but that the man be sent to train her to be another man's wife!

"Thera, hurry along, child, do! Sir Ranulf is waiting. All the wagons are loaded and the knights are mounted. Do not make the man wroth with you on your first day of travel."

Her aunt's words snapped her out of her reverie. "Can I not say *adieu* to Papa first, dear Aunt?"

"Bah, run along then, your ladies and I will make quicker work of this than with you daydreaming."

Thera hurried down to the great hall looking for her father, so she might have a private word. Why was her dowry not accompanying her? As she walked through the great hall on her way to the inner bailey, Thera received the well wishes of the servants and serfs still about their daily routine.

She dreaded leaving all that was familiar. Thera did not want to think about what waited for her at the end of her journey.

Once she saw the male servants bringing down her trunks, Thera rushed out to find her father. When she finally caught

sight of him, he was conferring with Sir Ranulf, as if nothing were amiss. As if he had not a care save bidding the good knight a fare-thee-well and God speed on his journey.

Did he not care that his only surviving child was taking her leave of him?

For the second time in as many days, Thera felt an almost overwhelming urge to give way to tears. She'd barely slept yester eve, with all the worrying she'd done. She'd also had a difficult time forgetting about the very masculine Sir Ranulf, her new tutor. He looked to be a man of war, pure and simple; she had difficulty imagining him to be a courtier, well versed in the finer arts. His bearing was primal, leading Thera to believe he took what he wanted and God spare whoever attempted to deny him.

Now his brother Simon, she had no difficulty believing he could compete with any courtier she'd ever met. He was all that was gracious and chivalrous. She could imagine him tutoring a hoyden like herself how to act in proper society.

Thera shook her head and gazed back toward the men; Sir Ranulf had caught sight of her. He looked up at her with an enigmatic look on his face. His gaze sent a shiver of delight skittering up her spine.

Stop it, Thera! The man is your tutor. She couldn't let herself be drawn to him; if she did, she'd have naught save heartache.

"Ah, Thera, come along, girl," Lord John called out, motioning her to join them.

Thera willed her reluctant legs to obey, but it was difficult. Would she be so hesitant if she were destined to become Sir

Ranulf's bride? Verily, she would have tripped over her own feet to get to him. She must stop being so foolish. From the time of her youth, she'd heard that most ladies had no say in who took them to wife. If the man were pleasing to the eye and generous in spirit, she should count herself fortunate. If only her bridegroom be as pleasing to her senses as Sir Ranulf.

When she reached the two men, she tried to give another curtsey, but this time she did fall headlong toward her tutor. She gasped when he scooped her up against him to prevent her crashing into his tree-trunk like legs. She looked up at him as if he'd saved her from a berserker, instead of an inelegant tumble.

Verily, the behemoth smiled down at her from his immense height.

"Pray excuse me, sir; these skirts often get in my way."

Sir Ranulf chuckled at her words. The deep rumble from his chest communicated itself to her even through their clothing. How she would love to hear him laugh at a jest she'd made, rather than the fool she'd made of herself.

"That will be remedied soon, my lady. Ere you reach Moncliff, you will glide as if on a cloud," Sir Ranulf assured her, as he set her back on her feet.

"Truly, they will consider you a master if you can accomplish that, sir."

When she turned toward her father, there was a frown on his face, but from Sir Ranulf she heard another warm chuckle.

"Daughter, I pray you do not give Sir Ranulf any excuses to send you back. Do everything he directs you to do. Understand?"

Her father would know what kind of reaction his words would evoke. It was more like than not she would balk at his directions, but a look at his face showed his seriousness. What would happen if she convinced Sir Ranulf of her unsuitability?

Would her father disown her?

"I shall do my best, Father." It was all she could promise.

Did Thera have the fortitude to change against her will? She'd been happy pretending to be her father's son and doing all things manly, well except for wenching, of which her father's men made a sport. She'd heard the gossip about which maids were a good tumble and which of their antics the men found stimulating.

Some intrigued even the virginal Thera. Ofttimes the men forgot she was female, allowing her to be privy to some of their bawdy talk. Although untouched, Thera had heard plenty of talk to pique her interest about what went on between men and women.

As her gaze returned to Sir Ranulf, she felt embarrassed color creeping up into her face at the thought of doing some of those things to him.

He returned her gaze with a good deal of interest in his blue eyes. What was the man thinking when he looked at her? Did he see beneath her charade to the clumsy girl only pretending to be a lady?

"That is all anyone can ask for, demoiselle. Now if you'll allow me to assist you." Giving Thera no time to protest, the masterful Sir Ranulf picked her up and deposited her on the horse brought especially for her from his master.

"*Adieu*, Father. Will you come for a visit soon?" She'd not meant to sound so beseeching. She'd never been as frightened of anything in her life as she feared relinquishing control to her unknown master. And what about her dowry? She feared asking after it in company, and besides, maybe the men had already discussed this very issue.

"Forsooth, my dear, fear not, we'll follow along in a fortnight to witness your marriage." Her father looked toward Sir Ranulf as if sending him an unspoken message.

Verily, the big man grunted and nodded, before leaving her and moving to his own steed. All the other knights were mounted, Sir Ranulf's brother, Simon, included. One of her maids, Lady Colette, the widow of one of her father's knights, who was to accompany Thera as chaperone, was put in one of the wagons for the trip.

Simon seemed quite taken with the lady, assisting her himself and seeing to her comfort.

Thera smiled. Mayhap the fair Colette had made another conquest already.

As soon as everything was loaded into the baggage wains, the company set out on their journey.

It was not a grueling trip, when they came to the end of their first day of travel. Sir Ranulf and Simon paid every heed to the needs of the two ladies, stopping periodically to allow

them to relieve themselves and nibble on some bread and hard cheese, and sip some wine.

As soon as everyone dismounted, Sir Ranulf barked out orders to set up camp for the night. Thera and Colette were to share a tent, but Sir Ranulf informed Thera, "You shall dine with me in my tent, tonight. Your maid can take her meal with Simon."

What could Thera say to that? The man was to be her tutor, so she must do as he bade her, mustn't she?

Truly, the thought of having a meal alone with Sir Ranulf excited her. Who was she to tell him nay? Especially when deep down, she was thrilled at the prospect.

"Very well, Sir Ranulf. Might there be some place I might rinse the dust from our travels?"

"Aye, there is a stream through that copse of trees," he informed her as he pointed toward the trees on the left of their impromptu camp. "But I cannot allow you to go alone; there could be any number of brigands about. Get what you need from your baggage, and after I've seen to my steed, I'll be happy to escort you for a swim."

"Should I ask Lady Colette to accompany us?" Thera did not really want her maid along, but thought it only proper that she make the suggestion.

"Nay, Simon shall see to the good lady. We shall only be gone a short time. Meet me beside the trees once you are ready, my lady."

After their short exchange, Thera rushed to get a washing linen and drying cloth. Along with the sweet smelling

handmade soap, she grabbed clothing to change into once her bath was complete.

Chapter 4

Ranulf rushed his task of feeding and watering his steed, Spiros. He did not want to think about how much he looked forward to spending time alone with the willful Thera. At times, she seemed almost captivated by his presence, but at others, she seemed to be doing her best to distance herself from him. He wanted to find out the true Thera. At his suggestion of a bath, her face lit up; but was it only the thought of the bath that thrilled her or perchance was she looking forward to his presence as well?

After retrieving his own necessities, Ranulf set off to join the fair Thera at the edge of the woods.

As he walked toward her, he couldn't help noticing how petite she was, her head would barely reach his chest. She still wore her veil and circlet around her head, modestly keeping her hair hidden from the prying eyes of the men. As soon as he got her to himself, though, he meant to take off her veil so he might gaze upon the dark hair hidden beneath. Truly, that was not the only thing she had hidden that Ranulf was determined to see and soon.

She fidgeted. Did he sense the slightest bit of excitement about her? Or was it Ranulf's own excitement making him think she might feel the same?

Against his will, Ranulf felt his body stir. He had to think of something else. The girl did have a fair amount of clothing. She'd probably need help before she could avail herself of the cool stream. By the rood! He was right back to thinking about

her body again. Would he ever have imagined himself playing lady's maid to this girl? Nay, never. However, the thought of relieving her of her garments did hold a certain appeal.

When he reached her, she smiled up at him uncertainly. Ranulf felt his lips twitching in return. Mayhap her training would not take so long after all.

"Have you everything you need, my lady?"

"Deed, I do."

Ranulf put his hand at the small of her back to guide her, not proper etiquette he knew, but he was unable to resist touching her even through her clothes.

Both silent, they made their way through the thicket of the woods. Before leaving the camp, Ranulf charged Simon with keeping everyone away from the stream. He wanted Thera to himself. This would be her first lesson. How to relinquish control to a man. And one he would savor teaching her.

Once they reached the bank of the stream, Thera looked around uncertainly.

"I should have asked my maid to accompany us, sir; I need help with my gown."

Ranulf gave her a smile and told her, "Nay, my lady, you have no need of a maid. I will do the honors if you would permit?"

"You? But what sort of knight would know the workings of lady's garments?"

Ranulf chuckled now. "The sort of knight who has spent many an evening divesting said ladies of their garments. Without complaint, I might add."

If Ranulf thought to shock her, he was sore disappointed. She just gave him a curious stare and turned her back to him. It was Ranulf who was dumbfounded at her lack of protest. He actually felt a twinge of jealousy for the ease with which she let a man she didn't realize was her intended touch her. Now that Ranulf thought about it, the girl's father had actually told her to defer to Ranulf in all things.

How far would she let him go before putting up a protest of modesty?

After that intriguing thought, Ranulf set about disrobing the girl as far down as was proper without being indecent. Although he was sorely tempted to remove every stitch of her clothing, he stopped at her shift. The garment was made of thin unbleached linen, and with her back to him, he could make out the rounded globes of her buttocks. With his hands gripping her slight shoulders, Ranulf whirled her around to face him.

She was surprised at this sudden movement, and her mouth dropped open, revealing her lovely white teeth. However, after a momentary look at her surprised face, Ranulf couldn't prevent his gaze from dropping down to the front of her practically transparent shift. He could make out the pebbled hardness of her nipples pressing against the front of her garment, before his gaze was irresistibly drawn to the midnight color of her thatch, seen clearly through the transparent shift.

The girl must have noticed the intense interest on Ranulf's face, because she blushed becomingly and tried to ease her shoulders from his grasp. Her action wrenched him from his

lascivious thoughts and brought him back to himself. By the rood! The girl had him forgetting all his plans.

"Allow me," Ranulf said as he divested her of her golden circlet and veil, which hid the glory of her hair from him. He was dumbfounded. Her hair was as black as midnight, at the moment plaited, but Ranulf spun her around once more so he could release the glorious tresses from their confinement.

Once that was done, he let his fingers glide through her hair, which was as lustrous as the finest imported silk he'd ever felt.

He thought he heard the girl choke. "Is anything amiss, my lady?"

"Nay ... nothing is amiss, Sir Ranulf," she insisted, but she sounded breathless.

Ranulf knew if he didn't get her into the water soon, he would be making love to her in a thrice. "Try the water. 'Tis cool though, so do not be startled."

She nodded without looking back at him and walked over ere sliding into the stream. He heard her give a surprised gasp even though he'd warned her of the chilly water. When she turned around to look at him expectantly, his gaze was riveted on the tightly furled tips of her breasts.

He heard himself swallow harshly at the sight she presented. Her midnight hair flowed around her like a veil of black flame, cascading down and floating on the water about her slender hips. Her gray eyes compelled him to join her in her bath. Now the decisive moment was at hand, Ranulf hesitated. He could feel the insistent press of his sword

against his breeches, urging him to find safe haven within the warm sheath of her comely body.

"Won't you join me, sir?"

"Nay, my lady, mayhap I will avail myself once you are finished."

Ranulf smiled when he saw her give a moue of disappointment. So the girl *did* want his company.

How intriguing.

As Ranulf watched her wring out her bathing cloth and begin washing her face, her unconsciously graceful movements mesmerized him. Once she'd washed her throat and arms with the now soapy linen, it took all Ranulf's will not to say God curse everything and join her in the cool stream.

After she'd soaped her delicate throat and shoulders, she dipped her body completely into the stream. She shot back up with a gasp, wet hair plastered to her head and body, her shift now completely translucent. She pushed all her hair out of her face and looked up at him on the bank.

God's wounds! He could stand it no longer! His will broken, Ranulf barked at her, "Close your eyes!" Obviously something in his voice urged her to obey him without question.

Ranulf divested himself of most of his togs, leaving his braies as a barrier to prevent temptation, and joined Thera. When he stood before her, touching her shoulders with his hands, her eyes shot open, looking at the expanse of his bare chest with an enigmatic expression in her lovely eyes. Did the crisscross of scars across his chest repulse her? In his urge to get to her, he'd forgotten all about the wounds that might cause a young virgin's disgust.

When she remained silent, Ranulf went to turn away from her. But she grabbed his arms and cried, "Nay, do not!"

Ranulf looked down at her in surprise.

"Do not hide yourself from me, good knight! I was surprised at all the badges of honor you sported, is all. Please, do not turn away."

To say her reaction surprised him would not correctly confer the depths of it.

He remained stone still as he felt her gaze rake over the battle scars on his chest and the ones that ran up his neck to end at his jaw line.

"May I?" she asked Ranulf and after receiving his stiff nod of consent, began trailing the tips of her fingers over the scarred ridges.

Verily, she acted as if his hideous scars had her in awe, but it wasn't until she walked through the waist deep water and went around his back that he felt the extent of her wonder. At the first touch of her lips against the ridges of his scars, Ranulf sucked in his breath sharply.

Forsooth, the girl had him practically unmanning himself with her actions. He continued to stay as still as a statue while he let her have her head. He knew he should stop her—the girl was under the impression Ranulf was her tutor—but she didn't seem to let that thought reach her as she kissed and touched his scars with what almost seemed like reverence.

"Am I not hideous to you, lady?" Ranulf had to ask.

"Nay, sir knight, you are all that is mighty and strong to me."

Just the girl's words made Ranulf whirl around so he might grab her to him. His sudden movement, at first frightened her, but as he began raining kisses onto her face and neck, she obviously decided to give herself over to the pleasure his caresses created within her.

With the first kiss to her lips, Ranulf knew he held a virgin in his arms. He had to restrain himself from moving too quickly. Instead of plundering her mouth as was his wont to do, Ranulf teased her lips open so he might explore the treasure within.

She moaned and undulated against him with untutored movements. God's wounds, it would be his pleasure to give her the proper tutoring! Could he convince her his master meant for him to teach her everything there was to know about pleasing him? Or should he give up the farce? Nay, her own father had told Ranulf of the difficulty he'd had with the girl since she found out Lord John meant to give her over as wife. Ranulf would let her know his true self ere he told her it was he who would be her lord and master.

If she let him convince her it was his job to tutor her in all things to do with pleasing her master, who was he to deny her his expertise in lovemaking?

The girl was still in the throes of passion when Ranulf pulled away from her.

"Thera?"

"Ah, aye..." Her whisper light voice trailed off as she gazed with passion-filled eyes in the direction of his face.

Should he do it? Would she call him a misbegotten cur once she found out his farce at her expense?

"You know I've been sent here to tutor you in all things to please your master, do you not?"

The glaze receded from her eyes. She looked none too pleased to be reminded of his duty here.

"Aye, it has been drilled into my head from the moment we received his missive."

"One thing I'm sure he left out of the missive."

"And what was that, Sir Ranulf?"

"I am to tutor you in *all things* to pleasure your master." Ranulf kissed the side of her neck right below her earlobe, so she would have no doubt what he meant by his words.

She sucked in her breath. He didn't know if it was his kisses or his words prompting her reaction.

"I don't understand."

"My master has no need for an untrained wife. He desires a woman with some experience with men."

"He would?"

Damn, would Ranulf's own words haunt him? Would she think to stay a virgin, thus causing her new master to repudiate her? He hoped not.

When Ranulf didn't answer, Thera whispered, "So you are to see to my training in this as well?"

He swallowed and nodded. Would she take the bait? As he looked down, he saw her bent head. He willed her to look up at him, and as if by divine intervention, she did, staring him directly in the eyes. He saw no fear there; in truth, he saw excitement in those gray depths.

Then Thera nodded, as if resolved to the fact her new master wanted her to be trained prior to their marriage.

"Shall we begin?" Ranulf asked her.

"Aye, Sir Ranulf, I am ready."

"Please, my lady, when I am tutoring you, I insist you call me by my Christian name."

"Very well, then, Ranulf, shall we begin?" she repeated his words.

Now *she* stood as still as a statue as Ranulf untied her shift and let the front gape open. "Now, first, Thera, if I may?" Silently she nodded her consent. "A man desires a woman who craves his touch on her body. So first, you must allow your master the freedom to touch you, as he will. Do not be surprised to feel his touch all over your body. Let me demonstrate."

As Ranulf let his fingers trail along her delicate collarbone, he felt a quiver of excitement through her body. He let the drag of his fingers run over the tops of her small breasts. Ranulf had never thought a woman without ample charms could seduce him as Thera had. When he pushed the edges of her shift aside, he received his first glimpse of the large nipples he'd noticed earlier through her transparent garment. However, this lesson wasn't just about glimpses. He let his large hands grasp her high, firm mounds.

Looking down at her entranced face, with her eyes closed tightly, Ranulf pinched both peaks between his thumbs and forefingers, twirling them.

The previously silent Thera gasped and her eyes shot open, first looking up into Ranulf's face, and then down to where his fingers caressed her body.

He let his hands continue the sensual onslaught on her body until she panted her pleasure.

Chapter 5

As Ranulf touched her body more intimately than anyone ever had before, Thera could barely breathe. When he'd first told her he was meant to tutor her for her new master, she'd been tempted to refuse. But the thought of him being the one to tutor her inexperienced body in the pleasures of the flesh appealed too much.

Would he do to her all the intriguing things she heard from the knights in her father's household? Or even let her do to him all the explicit things she'd heard a woman could do to a man?

It was the thought uppermost in her mind when she'd agreed to allow his tutelage. She had no care that her new master wanted a woman with experience; she would remain a virgin if she did. But the thought of Ranulf touching her and allowing her to touch him sent her heart fluttering wildly in her chest.

As her heart fluttered now.

"Now, I shall show you another way a master would enjoy touching you," Ranulf interrupted her thoughts, sounding breathless himself.

Without waiting for her agreement, Ranulf leaned down to pull her up into his arms, until his face was directly in front of the gaping opening of her sodden shift. With one meaty arm beneath her buttocks to support her, he used his other hand to push the edges of her shift off her shoulders, until her upper body was completely bare to his gaze.

Thera didn't want to show embarrassment, but she felt something like heat creep up into her face. She needn't have worried; the sight of her small breasts captivated Ranulf's gaze. Her heart jumped when she saw him lick his lips as if anticipating the taste of a succulent morsel.

What did he mean to do? Having had no experience, Thera feared not knowing how to respond to him. When she saw him lean closer to her body, she waited with bated breath, until the tip of his tongue darted out to stab at one of her hard nipples. She jerked as the heat shot from the tip of her breast down to settle at the bottom of her belly.

At her jerk, Ranulf pushed his other arm around to hold her steady as he began to suckle her in earnest. The more pressure he exerted with his suckling, the more the ache between her thighs increased.

Is this normal?

He continued his assault until Thera writhed and moaned in his arms. Then he let her slide down his body, letting her feel his body's reaction to what he was doing to her. Although she'd once gotten a glimpse of a knight without his clothing, his member couldn't compare to Ranulf's huge manhood. She felt it press against her belly as he let her slide down his heavily muscled body.

Oh, dear heaven! Could she possibly accommodate all of him?

Once she was lower, but still held against his body, Ranulf pulled up on the hem of her shift until he exposed the midnight hair guarding her inner core. He held the majority of her shift behind and up against her back, so it would not be in

his way. Once securing her shift, he reached down with his free hand to caress the damp curls. When he let one finger press between her thighs to touch something hidden there, Thera moaned and jerked against him.

Thera noted Ranulf's breathing became as erratic as hers as he began rubbing her with his finger. She felt something warm and wet flood between her thighs; he must have felt it also because he gave a groan and pressed a finger up into her body.

As his finger pushed upward, Thera felt a fullness she never had before, and then it retreated, leaving an emptiness in its wake. She wanted to feel the fullness again so she began to move her hips to try to push down on his finger. He heeded her encouraging movements by pressing a finger back inside her, whilst he used his thumb to rub against that part of her body hidden by her damp curls. In moments, Ranulf had Thera riding his hand as she would her mount.

Something was happening; she felt an excruciating pressure building within her inner core. Was she going to die from this? Should she ask him to stop?

Thera's unspoken protest died on her lips as Ranulf lifted her higher so he could suckle her breasts, whilst he pumped his finger into her body.

Her protest forgotten, Thera let out a sharp scream, causing Ranulf to bring her down for a kiss to smother the rest of her sounds, whilst his fingers continued to work their magic, until she jerked and writhed against him. Then her body went limp from that awe-inspiring feeling she'd just experienced.

As she fought to regain some measure of composure, Ranulf let her slide slowly down his body until her feet touched the streambed. Not only could Thera feel the hardness of his body against hers, but she could also feel his heart pound. She looked up at him in question. What could she do for him? She knew from all the bawdy talk she'd heard that men enjoyed the things a woman did for a man. And one thing in particular had always intrigued her.

Would he let her do such?

Ranulf's height put the water barely at the level of his thighs, so Thera didn't have far to descend until she was at the level of his fearsome sword.

He touched her shoulder for her to look up at him, which she did, and shook his head. "Nay, my lady, do not."

But Thera nodded her head as she looked into his fire-banked eyes. "Shall you deny me, sir knight?"

"Nay, my lady, I shall deny you naught. I would not force you to do anything you do not desire."

Thera undid his wet braies and let them sink beneath the water; his massive member sprang forth into her waiting hands.

Thera gazed at Ranulf's manhood with wonder. Monstrously huge was an apt description for the man and his member. For some reason, Thera remembered the words of her father's knight and giggled, which Thera never did.

"Is aught wrong, my lady?" Ranulf asked gruffly.

Thera looked back up at him and smiled, "There is naught wrong, my fearsome knight, except, mayhap, my fear of your monstrous sword."

Ranulf's suspicious gaze receded to be replaced by something else, something warm and inviting. "Fear him not, my lady, he is only meant to give you pleasure."

While the big man stood with his legs braced apart, Thera bent so she might touch the tip of his manhood with her tongue. She heard his sharp intake of breath at her first touch. She tried to remember all the things she'd overheard the knights say about what the wenches had done for them.

After letting her tongue circle the tip of his rod, Thera opened her mouth to take him in. She held his heavy manhood steady with one hand, whilst she cupped his sac with the other, letting her mouth play over his flesh. He felt like steel encased in a silken sheath. She felt one of Ranulf's hands at the back of her head, encouraging her to let his length slide in and out of her mouth, which she was happy to accommodate.

Before long, Ranulf jerked his rod from her mouth so he could continue to pump himself, roaring as his seed shot out to spill beside them in the water.

He pulled her back to him for a long satisfying kiss. Would the rest of their trip be filled with such wonders?

Chapter 6

A fortnight later, after many leagues, they were two full days from Moncliff, the place where her dreaded bridegroom awaited her. The closer they got to the castle, the higher Thera's anxiety rose. She'd spent untold hours as the willing pupil of Sir Ranulf in his quest to prepare her for her groom.

Ranulf even gave the lessons she mightn't be too thrilled to receive a sexual connotation so she would enjoy them.

Under his more intimate tutelage, she thrived. He'd taught her the pleasure she could obtain by submitting to her lord and master—had he been her lord and master, of course.

She peeked beneath her lashes at Ranulf as he rode beside her, the sun gleaming off his thick golden blond hair, causing her heart to ache. What was he thinking as they got ever closer to the place he would have to give her over to his master?

They would be reaching Moncliff by dusk the following eve. This was their last night of lessons. He'd shown her the pinnacles of glory that could be reached between a man and a woman. He'd allowed them both all the kissing and touching they desired, save one: the ultimate consummation between a man and a woman.

Thera was determined she would not go to her bridegroom a virgin, and not because of his preference for experienced women, but because she wanted to give Ranulf her virginity. It may mean naught to her intended, but it meant something to her. The thought of Ranulf being her first lover thrilled her.

The rest of the day was grueling. By the time they stopped to set up camp, Thera felt dusty and dirty and not at all tempting. She and Colette set about preparing the meal for the men. Thera was finally allowing herself to enjoy some of the women's duties she'd abhorred prior to meeting Ranulf.

Could the admiration she saw in his eyes as he watched her do those duties have something to do with her new enjoyment?

Ranulf saw to the men setting up camp. He passed by her, causing her a shiver of excitement. She felt the warm whisper

of his breath in her ear, "We shall dine alone this eve, love, bring some cheese and bread, and do not forget the wine," before he disappeared from sight.

Thera completed her duties and hurried over to the tent he'd set up for them. She did wonder why none of the other knights questioned their master's betrothed staying in the same tent as Ranulf. Nor did her maid question her, since she'd spent every night of their journey with Ranulf's brother, Simon. Thera knew the girl was besotted with the handsome knight. She hoped Lady Colette would not be hurt, if, when the journey came to an end, so might Sir Simon's interest.

When Thera hurried into the elaborate tent, which sported many decadent riches Ranulf had brought back from Outremer during his time with King Richard on Crusades, she stopped short when she saw him already within the cool interior.

As heavily muscled as any great knight could hope to be, Ranulf had already disrobed and had not bothered to put on anything else after availing himself of the water he'd used to rinse the traveling dust from his glorious body. As she stood immobile, she watched as he got rid of the water he'd used and poured more water into the aquamanile for her use.

"Come now, sweetling, I have many plans for our evening and I am anxious to get started."

Besides his other words, his endearment set her heart fluttering. She swallowed and started toward the small table where the aquamanile sat, almost tripping on her gown in her haste.

Ranulf laughed and grabbed her to him. "Careful, love, I'm not in such a hurry I would want any harm to come to you. Here, shall I help you remove your togs?"

Thera nodded and watched in wonderment as this fearsome knight played lady's maid for her. Expert that he was, he removed her togs in a trice, nor did he stop at her shift this time. In moments, Thera stood completely naked before him. He wouldn't even wait for her to wash herself, but quickly saw to that duty himself. Although most was done efficiently, Thera felt his reluctance to leave her breasts, buttocks, and thatch.

As soon as he was done, he pulled her by one arm, with her hand in his, over to the large silken pillows spread out for them to enjoy their meal, among other things.

Ranulf lay his big body down amongst the pillows, beckoning her to join him.

"I need sustenance, woman, come and feed your master," Ranulf encouraged her.

What she wouldn't give that he *were* her master, in truth.

She swallowed her heartache that it was not so and allowed him to guide her down next to him. As he lay naked in all his splendor, Thera faced him with her right hip touching his. As she reached for the pouch she'd brought filled with the things he'd requested, Thera felt the warmth of his large hands reaching for her breasts. She pretended to ignore him as he kneaded her breasts whilst she set out their repast.

Tired of being ignored, Ranulf pinched one of her nipples. She gasped at the pleasurable sensation and swatted his hands.

"What is it, love?" he asked with all innocence.

"Are you hungry, or aren't you, sir knight?"

"Ah, love, that is not a question to ask a naked man," he teased before he grabbed the pouch from her hand and pulled her to him for a thoroughly arousing kiss.

"Ranulf," she protested, "what are you about?"

"I'm about the final lesson, love."

Thera couldn't help the disappointment she felt at his words.

The final lesson.

She was thrilled at the thought of what she hoped he meant, but dreaded the thought this would be their last night together.

He must have noticed her frown. "There now, my lady, you shall not regret this lesson. Leave off your worry and enjoy yourself."

Thera looked into his warm eyes, which were as ever seducing her to enjoy him. How she wished they had a lifetime to enjoy each other as a husband might enjoy a wife, or a wife her husband.

She would not let the thought that on the morrow she would meet the man meant to take Ranulf's place in her bed spoil their evening together.

He gave her no more time to dread the coming day, because he bent his golden head to suck one of her pebbled nipples into the warm cavern of his mouth, pulling and dragging on it and its twin until she mewled at the back of her throat.

Ranulf grabbed her by the hips, pulled her up and over him until she sat straddled on his belly of pure muscle. Her exposed feminine core rubbed deliciously against his taut flesh, causing skitters of excitement to rush over her sensitive skin. She ran her fingers through his rough golden chest hairs, petting him as she would a prized mount. She reveled at the sound of his groan as he allowed her petting and savored the sight of her own midnight hair resting on him.

"Come, love, do as I taught you; touch yourself." His deep blue eyes gazed up at her, urging her to take his lead and do as he bid.

With his intense eyes watching her every move, Thera's hands left his chest and slowly moved up her own body, until they hesitated just below her breasts. She felt the lack of movement in his chest as he held his breath in anticipation of her next action.

When she continued on and began caressing her own breasts, his breath came out in a powerful whoosh. "Ah, that's it, love!"

Thera felt movement behind her; she swallowed when she turned and saw Ranulf's hand moving on his body, even as he watched her.

"Thera?"

"Aye, Ranulf?" she whispered.

"You know I mean to love you this eve, do you not?"

"Aye, Ranulf."

"One thing I must say afore we go any further."

"Aye, my lord?"

Ranulf closed his eyes as if savoring her words.

"I am your lord, Thera."

"What!"

Ranulf looked into her suddenly suspicious eyes. "I am Lord Ranulf de Meurtes, Earl of Moncliff, and you, my love are my betrothed."

Thera felt her heart hammer in her chest. If that would be true, then why the farce?

"Why?"

Ranulf closed his eyes again as if realizing she wouldn't let him get away with a simple explanation.

"Your father's missive telling me of your sister's demise and suggesting I take you in her stead made me suspicious. The knight who'd passed a night on his way to my demesne had not noticed any other daughter save your sister."

Thera pushed her hair over her shoulder as she glared at him. "Mayhap 'twas because I thought of myself as my father's son instead of his daughter."

It was Ranulf's turn to look surprised. "What?"

"All my life I wished I had been born a male instead of female."

Ranulf reached up to pull some of her midnight hair back over her shoulder so he could caress its long length.

"Methinks you only pretended to want to be a male."

"What!"

"What male would ever let his hair grow as long as you've allowed yours to grow, sweetling? You may have made yourself believe that here," and he touched the tip of his forefinger to her forehead, "but here," and he touched

between her breasts at the level of her heart, "you're all female."

Could what he deduced be true? Had she pretended she wanted to be a male for some reason unknown to herself? Possibly for attention from her father, who had no time for daughters because of his constant training for battle?

"Now, tell me, love, would you prefer to be my knight or my wife?"

Thera gave a low moan and bent over him to give him a kiss. "Your wife, my lord, please."

With her submission, Ranulf flipped her over until she lay beneath him. A heartbeat later, Ranulf plunged his hard sword into her tight sheath, causing her to gasp in surprise. He held fast to let her inexperienced muscles accommodate his immense size, but once she began to move beneath him as if searching for something she didn't understand, he pulled back to plunge into her again.

The feel of him deep within her body thrilled Thera. Her panting began in earnest as he filled her repeatedly with his thick member. She raked his back with her short nails as her body hurled over the precipice and into heaven, followed closely by Ranulf and his roar of completion.

Thera welcomed the feel of his body pressing hers into the silken pillows. They lay in utter contentment until their breathing returned to normal.

Ranulf picked up his head to gaze down at her. "Welcome home, my love," he said simply.

And he laughed with joy and pulled her to him as he kissed the tears of her happiness that sprang to her eyes.

Lust: An Anthology Of Torrid Romance
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

"I am glad to be here, my lord."

And at the look of love in his eyes, Thera knew her words to be true, as were those of her future husband.

MOVING DAY

by

Jamie Hill

Mel Gibson's bare butt was about to flash on the TV screen. Denise Evans held the remote control in her hands, ready to hit pause and rewind if necessary. She loved Mel in his shaggy, long-haired days, and thought she could just take a bite out of that amazing ass. He flashed her and she hit pause, freezing the remarkable view on screen for Denise's viewing pleasure. She grinned and popped the last bite of a cookie into her mouth. Now this was the life—half-naked men and chocolate on a lazy Saturday afternoon.

A loud banging noise from outside startled her, and Denise rolled up on her side to look out the window. A large moving van was parked on the street in front of her apartment house, and the movers just lowered the ramp to apparently begin unloading. Denise lived on the main floor so she was at perfect eye level with the two men who began hauling stuff out of the truck. She glanced at the TV screen—Mel wasn't going anywhere—and back to the movers again. They were kind of cute; this could be interesting.

Sitting on her sofa and hugging her knees to her chest, Denise nibbled another cookie as she watched the men. The first one was tall with scruffy blonde hair and glasses. Not exactly her type, but he was obviously strong and filled out his jeans nicely from the back view. She watched biceps ripple under his blue uniform shirt, which he wore tucked into

his jeans, and Denise closed her eyes, envisioning a scenario in her mind.

He was strong, all right. He reached down and lifted her off the sofa, effortlessly, carrying her into the bedroom and depositing her gently on the bed. He stood over her and peeled off his shirt, the muscles in his chest and abs bulging, firm and hard as rocks, like those in his arms. She reached for the zipper on his jeans, aching to see what else might be bulging, firm, and hard, and then she looked up into his face.

Denise opened her eyes and saw a front-on view of the man, he had a bad complexion and crooked teeth. *Drat!* She wasn't shallow, and she certainly wasn't perfect herself, but this was her fantasy, and she was entitled to have her dream man look just the way she wanted him.

She ate another cookie and moved onto the next man. His skin was dark and his hair thick and wavy. He was Latino, she decided, thinking she could definitely work with that. He looked good from behind, too, not quite as tall but more stocky and muscular. Denise closed her eyes again.

He rose above her, holding himself up by his massive forearms so he didn't crush her with his bulk. As he lowered himself, Denise glanced down between them and saw his stiff cock, immense and thick, ready to impale her. She almost groaned at the sight of it, licking her lips with desire. She opened her eyes and saw the man standing outside her window, grinning at his coworker. Half his teeth were crooked, the other half were missing. Oh well.

Dropping back down on the sofa, Denise started as her old VCR snapped noisily out of pause mode and a TV show came

on. She grabbed the remote and clicked the set off; Mel's bare butt wasn't going to do it for her anymore. Now she was thinking about the men out on the sidewalk. She wondered if she could get back into her fantasy and replace one of their faces with Mel's. They were so near to her, just outside her window, but they didn't seem to notice her at all. She would just sit and watch them for a while.

Denise loved her fantasies. They were wonderful things for a painfully shy woman without much real life experience. Oh, she had seen a lot in movies and read more romance novels than she could ever count or remember, but there had only been two real live men. One was a coworker at the large law firm where Denise was a legal secretary, and while he was nice, he just wasn't what she was looking for. When it ended—badly, as she recalled—it was very uncomfortable around the office for a few months until he found another job.

The other relationship was fantastic—he was a great lover and everything Denise could have wanted in a partner. Apparently she wasn't the only one who felt that way, as she discovered after six months when she learned that the man had a wife and three children living across town.

That was fourteen months ago. Fourteen months, seven days, if anyone was counting. *Who was she trying to fool?* Denise was counting. Denise was definitely counting.

These days, she settled for her fantasies. In her imagination, she was beautiful instead of plain, quick with a comeback in a Lorelei Gilmore sort of way, and she was skilled and desirable in bed. She could be edgy, demanding,

say things and *do things* she would never consider in real life, because Denise had always been such a nice girl.

Growing up in a quiet little neighborhood just outside Chicago, 'nice' was not a bad reputation to have. But now that she was all grown up and living in the city, 'nice' meant she spent most nights alone. The occasional date ended at the doorstep, which usually left her feeling lonely and horny, and wishing she wasn't so damned nice.

Denise rolled off the sofa and went to stand in front of the bathroom mirror. She was an attractive enough woman. Her brother used to tell her that no one had been hitting on her with an ugly stick—a compliment, she figured, in her brother's own warped way. Her straight hair was dark and thick, with bangs that hit her eyebrows while the rest parted in the middle and fell past her shoulders. It made her feel like Cher to flip it over her shoulder, and she did it when she was feeling playful. She pulled her hair back in a ponytail to study her face in the mirror. She had nice brown eyes and a normal nose; your basic pleasant face. Her teeth were straight and white thanks to her uncle, the orthodontist, and she had a nice smile. Denise thought she could get men if she wanted them, but lately the pickings were a bit slim.

There was Joe in the mailroom at the law firm—he was a sweet man who was quiet and shy, and everyone knew he had a crush on Denise. She really wasn't into his *Clark Kent* looks, but she supposed he was a possibility, if she was brave enough to attempt the office romance thing again.

Then there was Mr. David Rathburn, one of the partners of the firm. He made sure Denise was aware of his interest in

her, and she was flattered. He was attractive, powerful and very rich. He also had an ego the size of Texas, which was a good quality in a lawyer but not so great in a lover. Denise always imagined him with mirrors above his bed, pausing during lovemaking to check *himself* out. But the biggest problem with Rathburn was when it ended—and she felt sure it *would* end—*she* would be the one looking for a new job. Denise liked her position and wasn't going to sacrifice it because she was desperate to get laid.

She wandered into the kitchen and wrapped the cookies up, putting them away. She was ready for something else. Digging through the refrigerator, Denise came up with a bottle of beer and twisted the top off. She was in the mood to relax and unwind, and a little something to drink was just what she needed. She carried the bottle out to the sofa and resumed her position, perched on the edge and staring out the window.

A third man joined the moving party. This one didn't wear a uniform, just tight jeans and a tank top. The jeans were shredded in spots, and from the back, she could see two rips, one under each of his butt cheeks. She grinned as she thought how this vantage point provided an excellent 'rear' view of the men climbing in and out of the truck.

The new guy turned around and headed toward Denise's building with a box in his hands. *He was gorgeous!* she immediately thought, continuing to check him out. He had dark curly hair, brown eyes, and an attractive face. He was tall, and while not as muscular as the men who moved things for a living, he seemed buff and fit, and the biceps that flexed

under his tank top were impressive. As he walked past her, Denise sighed and took another draw on her beer. Now *he* was someone she could fantasize about.

She continued to watch as he helped the movers unload and carried the things one person could handle. There were two flights of stairs to the upper level of the old house, so it took awhile to empty the truck. Denise had another beer and curled up on the sofa to continue the show.

She decided the cute guy must be the new occupant of the apartment. He seemed to be giving instructions to the movers, all the while smiling and laughing a lot. He had a beautiful smile and an incredible laugh. Denise couldn't hear words through the window, but she could hear that laugh.

She started watching the type of stuff they were moving in. So far it had all been pretty masculine, she hadn't seen anything that clearly indicated the presence of a woman or— heaven forbid—children. Denise knew the vacant apartment upstairs was large, two or three bedrooms, and it seemed unusual that a single man would move in there.

He wasn't wearing a ring, but that wasn't always the safest determining factor. Her last boyfriend never wore a ring either, but Denise had seen the wife and kids with her own eyes. She wouldn't make that mistake again. She didn't mind a little mystery, but dishonesty was rude and not something she intended to put up with.

Continuing to stare outside, she decided she'd put up with a lot from this guy. From her point of view, there wasn't a damned thing wrong with him. When he began carrying in painting supplies: canvasses, easels, and partially completed

paintings, Denise thought she was going to cream her panties right there on the sofa. She closed her eyes, clutching her beer bottle to her chest.

She was posing for him as he painted her, naked and sprawled across the bed in his studio. Her nipples puckered and moisture seeped from between her thighs when he studied her intently, his eyes examining every inch of her body.

Denise opened her eyes and looked outside but no one was there. It was probably a good thing, after finishing the two beers, she was a little fuzzy-headed and might have done something to attract attention to herself. She needed to get up and find something else to do. *No, she needed to get fucked.* Or perhaps the next best thing to it.

She strolled to the bathroom and turned the tub faucet on, adjusting the temperature until the water was hot and steamy. That was exactly the way she was feeling, hot and steamy with a truckload of pent-up sexual energy. Denise added some bubbles to the tub and lit a few candles for atmosphere. She peeled off her clothes, sinking gingerly into the water. The wet heat burned her skin a little but she quickly adjusted to it. She liked it hot, and the tingling sensation on her skin excited her even more.

She began massaging her breasts and pinching the nipples, squeezing each of them between her thumb and forefinger before twisting and rolling them tightly. The delicious mix of pleasure and pain made her pussy ache, and Denise's hand dropped between her legs. Her clit was already engorged and throbbing. What she wouldn't give to have a

man at this moment! She closed her eyes as she began stroking herself, and thought of the gorgeous man outside.

Stepping into the bathroom, he didn't speak, just stripped off his clothes and joined her in the tub. His mouth found her sensitive nipples immediately and he sucked each of them until they were pointed crimson cones. He raised her body out of the water and pressed her against the wall, burying his face in her dripping pussy. She could almost feel the length of his tongue as he stroked her silky folds, sucking her clit into his mouth and working numerous fingers in and out of her swollen pussy. She gasped and cried out, knowing she could hold back no longer.

Denise exploded into shudders as her orgasm washed over her. She let her hand fall away; it was tired from the serious stroking she had been doing. She collapsed back against the tub, feeling good, but at the same time dissatisfied. She wanted more—needed more. Grabbing a towel, Denise stepped out of the tub, extinguished the candles and went into her bedroom. She made a quick stop at the window and pulled the curtain back to see if anyone was outside, but they weren't back yet. She let the curtain fall into place and dropped the towel.

Standing in front of the window, Denise rubbed her breasts and imagined being here this way with the curtain open. *She was totally naked, her body flushed pink from the hot water and recent orgasm, and she was touching herself in front of the window. He was passing by her window, would glance up and see her there, and stop to watch as she caressed her full, naked breasts. He licked his lips as she let one hand slide*

down to the soft, fuzzy brown triangle between her legs. He pressed against her window and caught a glimpse of her eyes under the heavy lids. They watched each other for a moment, and he knew he was welcome. When he stepped into her bedroom, he made no sound except to groan as he reached for her and began tasting what she had to offer.

Denise lay back on the bed and pulled her thick plastic vibrator from the nightstand. She turned it on and the soft hum made her smile. It had been just the two of them for so long now, the next time she was with a man he might have to hum like a vibrator to get her off. She chuckled and spread her legs, slowly inserting her plastic friend as deeply as possible. "Oh yeah," she moaned, using one hand to thrust the fake cock in and out, and the other hand to massage her breasts and pinch her nipples. She thought once again of the man outside, and envisioned him rising over her.

His cock filled her completely, deliciously, and he pounded her until she could take no more.

"Now!" he grunted out the command and she came explosively, feeling his heat pour into her in waves.

"Yes," she cried out to him, and held on until their simultaneous shuddering had stopped.

"Rest now," he told her, kissing the side of her face gently. "There are so many more things I'm going to do to you. Relax, and get your energy built back up..."

Denise withdrew the vibrator and turned it off. Her pussy had that pleasant "used and abused" feeling to it, but she still wasn't satisfied. She wanted more, and she knew who she wanted to give it to her.

She went to the window and pulled back the curtain ever so slightly. She might imagine standing naked in front of the window, but she would never do it in real life. She peeked out and saw the two movers closing the back of the truck. They got in, and after a few minutes, drove off. The street looked bare and empty.

Disappointed, Denise pulled on a pair of jean cut-offs and a tank top. She didn't bother with undergarments, with the mood she was in; she'd be masturbating all night long. Might as well make it easy on herself.

She went to the kitchen for another beer and planted her butt back on the sofa in front of Mel. She watched a few more minutes of the movie but soon shut it off. She was wired and randy and didn't feel like watching TV. Looking out the window one last time, she saw a vision too good to be true. Curly-haired-split-jeans-painter was headed in her direction, carrying a pizza box. He strolled past Denise's window, in no apparent hurry, and into the building.

She dropped back into the sofa. He was home. He was most likely alone. What was she going to do about it?

Various thoughts and scenarios flooded her mind, but she knew she would never act on any of them. She was too nice to march upstairs and tackle the man. Good girls didn't do things like that.

Did they? She sat up. She wouldn't actually have to *tackle* him. She could bring him something—a housewarming present perhaps—and at least get in the door. But what? She looked around, not seeing anything appropriate.

The cookies. She baked chocolate chip cookies this morning, and they were fresh and good. He had pizza, but he probably didn't have any homemade cookies. Denise went in to the kitchen and prepared a plate of them, and as an afterthought grabbed the last four beers from the fridge.

Stopping in the bathroom to spritz on some perfume, Denise yanked her ponytail holder out. She brushed her hair until it was smooth and glossy, and then studied her face in the mirror. She wasn't wearing makeup but didn't think she needed any, so she simply applied shiny lip gloss and called it good. Then she picked up the cookies and beer and headed out the door.

With no idea what she was going to say, Denise climbed the stairs apprehensively. *Maybe this is a mistake.* At the top of the stairs, she almost turned around and went home, but something tugged at her from the inside. She stepped up to his apartment door and stood there, thinking about knocking.

When the door opened, it startled both Denise and the man who opened it.

"Oh my God!" He laughed, glancing from her face to the beer and plate of cookies in her hands. "This must truly be a magical house! I was wishing for beer—wishing I'd remembered to buy some when I was out, that is—and here you are. Now I'm glad I forgot."

"I, uh, thought you might..." She held out the plate of cookies, trying to think of something intelligent to say, but her mind went blank.

"Definitely." He smiled as he reached out and took the plate. "Chocolate chip—my favorite. Well come in! I've got

pizza, now we've got something to drink and dessert." He turned and went into the apartment, obviously expecting her to follow.

Denise's heart was in her throat. She wanted to say something clever—where were Lorelei Gilmore's writers when she needed them? But she was at a loss for words. She stepped in after him. "I saw you moving in," she finally managed. *God, what an idiot!*

He smiled at her again and closed the door. "I saw you seeing me move in. I was going to knock on the window and ask you to help, but you looked so cute just sitting there."

"You saw me?" She was mortified. Why had she thought no one noticed her? She wanted to melt into a puddle and slide back down to her apartment.

"Sure. Like I said, I almost asked you to help. Those stairs got to be killers after a few trips. I thought if I had something interesting to watch on my way up..." He looked around her and stared at her ass, raising his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Denise blushed. *He thinks I'm cute? He was checking out my butt?* Someone had gift-wrapped this man and handed him to her on a silver platter. But she had to know something first. She held up the four beers. "I didn't know if you were alone, or if your wife or maybe your girlfriend was here."

He grinned and took three of the beers from her. "Nope, no wife, and currently no girlfriend." He moved to the kitchen, putting two of the beers in the fridge and twisting the top of the third one. "Join me?" He raised his bottle to her.

"Sure." Denise finally smiled and moved in a little closer to him. She opened her beer and took a drink.

"That hits the spot," he said after chugging half his bottle. He set it down and stepped in front of Denise, touching a strand of her long hair. "I wondered what this would look like down around your shoulders."

She froze. He was so close to her, she could feel his breath on her face. How would fantasy Denise handle this? *Why, she'd say something witty, suggestive ... something that would make him grab her and throw her down on the sofa.* Denise glanced at the sofa; it was piled high with boxes and clothes. She said, "Oh yeah. I had my hair in a ponytail, didn't I?"

He moved in closer and said softly in her ear, "Actually, I wondered what it would look like spread across my pillow." He took the bottle from her hands and set it on the table next to his.

"Really?" she questioned thoughtfully. *He'd been fantasizing about me?* It was almost too good to be true. "Well, hmmm. Maybe we should find out."

He pulled back and grinned slyly at her. "Oh, I definitely concur."

Denise's heart leapt. She didn't need witty banter. She could take it from here. Raising her face to his, she slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. It started soft and gentle, but when he parted his lips, she knew what he wanted and gave it to him. Her tongue dipped into his mouth and explored, while his began the same process. He uttered a small groan, and Denise felt wetness seep between her legs.

He wanted her as much as she did him. There was no need for talk.

He backed her up against the wall and let his mouth drift lower; nibbling and tasting the soft skin on her face and neck. His hands cupped her breasts through the flimsy tank top and Denise arched her back into him. *God it feels good to have a man's hands on me!* She kissed him hungrily, pulling back only long enough to strip her shirt over her head and toss it away.

"Oh, yeah." He sighed, massaging both breasts firmly in his two strong hands. "These are beautiful." He leaned over and brought one nipple into his mouth, flicking it lightly with his tongue before sucking it into a taut nub. Groaning with pleasure, he moved to the other nipple, rolling the first between his thumb and forefinger.

"You're a painter," she murmured, trying to keep herself grounded. She was extremely close to floating away.

He grinned up at her. "Yeah. Haven't made much money at it yet, but I'm plugging away." He continued kissing her body as he spoke. "If I painted your portrait, I could sell it in an instant, as beautiful as you are. Of course, I might want to keep it for myself."

Denise felt wetness flood between her legs at his words. Men had told her she was pretty before, but never beautiful. This man was different—she wondered if his hands were as skilled at painting as his mouth was at kissing. She was about ready to go crazy and wished he would get to her lower half. But he was being thorough—deliciously, painfully thorough—

as he covered every inch of her skin with his tongue and hot, sweet kisses.

Finally, he knelt before her and undid the snap of her jean shorts. Denise clutched at the wall behind her as he pulled the shorts down past her knees and she stepped out of them.

"Ah ha," he commented with some surprise, and Denise remembered she wasn't wearing underwear. *What could he possibly think of her?*

"You're so gorgeous," he said softly, and inserted his tongue in her belly button.

She smiled at the answer to her unasked question. He wasn't judging her, but he was damn sure going to make love to her. And she was damn sure going to enjoy it.

He stopped when his mouth reached her fuzzy triangle of hair. He spread her legs, raising one of them over his shoulder. Denise felt his warm breath on her most sensitive area. She inhaled sharply as he ran one finger through her slick folds before gently inserting his tongue.

"Sweet Jesus," she gasped, on the verge of an orgasm.

"Feel good?" he asked, and chuckled when she could only moan in reply. "Come on, baby. Come for me. You're so pretty. I want to watch you come."

Denise grabbed the wall as her shudders began, working their way from the inside out. The feeling was heavenly and lasted so much longer than the orgasms she gave herself. When she could think clearly, she glanced down and smiled at the way he continued eating her enthusiastically. "Thank you," she said to get his attention.

He glanced up at her and smiled. "Are you kidding? *Thank you*. You taste so good, I don't want to stop."

Denise tugged at his hair gently, and he released her leg before rising to face her. "My turn," she whispered, and kissed him deeply. His mouth had the musky taste of her sweet juices and she sucked his tongue hungrily.

"Like that?" he murmured.

She didn't know if he meant the oral sex or the taste of her on his tongue but it didn't matter—she loved them both. "I *love* that," she replied, sucking his tongue clean. She turned them around slowly and pressed him against the wall. "I want to taste you."

He groaned and Denise smiled. She yanked his t-shirt off and dropped it, letting her mouth taste each of his flat nipples before heading south. She tongued his navel and made him groan again. His jeans were tight and made tighter with the solid bulge protruding from the front. "We need to get rid of these," she told him.

"Definitely," he agreed, and kicked out of them as she dragged them off.

She knelt before him, his long, solid erection pointing upwards. "Mmmm," Denise sighed, and licked him from base to tip without touching him otherwise.

He shuddered and reached to the wall for support.

"This is ve-ry nice," she dragged out the words, licking him teasingly.

"You're driving me crazy."

"Patience is a virtue." She circled the rim of his cock and dipped her tongue into the hole at the tip. A fresh drop of his white, milky cum appeared, and she lapped at it like a kitten.

"Christ!" he groaned, and Denise grinned.

Enough was enough, she decided, and sucked his length into her mouth. He gasped as she swallowed him, and slowly pulled back, just to do it again.

After a few minutes, he grabbed her shoulders and brought her face to face with him. "If you keep that up, I'm going to come, like, real soon. I'm not ready for this to be over." He kissed her deeply and their tongues darted back and forth. "I want to be inside you." He gasped between kisses.

"I want that, too. More than anything," she replied, their hands grasping at each other's bodies frantically.

"I want you," he murmured hungrily, and then rephrased, "I need you."

Denise's insides were melting. "Me too," she agreed, suddenly feeling bold. "Fuck me hard and fast."

His cock twitched at her words, and he glanced quickly at the loaded sofa. "Shit! I don't have a bed yet."

She smiled and leaned over the edge of the sofa, resting her breasts on a pile of clothes. "Who needs a bed?" She looked over her shoulder at him, smiling seductively.

"Oh, Jesus," he muttered, staring at her ass sticking up in the air wiggling at him. He grabbed his jeans and retrieved his wallet, pulling a condom from the side pocket. "Gimme a sec." His hands almost shook as he ripped the packet and rolled the latex over his rigid length.

Denise inhaled and shuddered as he grasped her hips. She brought one hand between her legs and clutched his cock, guiding it to her soft center. She left her hand there and caressed his balls for a moment.

"You are so fucking hot," he whispered in her ear, his body covering hers. He reached for her clit and massaged it. "Are you ready to do this?"

She released him and clutched the sofa in front of her. "You don't know how ready."

"Hang on, baby." He pulled his cock almost out of her and thrust it back in forcefully.

"Oh yeah!" she cried, holding on as his body slammed into her over and over again. She wasn't sure where one orgasm ended and the next one began, but when he squeezed her breasts and indicated his release by muttering, "Now!" as he had in her fantasy, Denise collapsed in a quivering heap onto the sofa. He dragged her body up close to him and held her as he emptied into her drenched pussy.

When the trembling subsided, they both leaned forward on the sofa and attempted to catch their breath. "I hope I didn't hurt you," he finally said, brushing her hair away from her face.

"No, it was great. I loved it." She smiled at him almost shyly—it was hard to be too demure with his cock firmly embedded inside her.

He grinned. "I did, too. The only thing I missed was being able to see your face." He kissed her temple. "Next time we'll make a bed on the floor, so we can face each other. I want to be able to look at you when you come."

"Next time," she repeated softly.

He shifted and pulled his body out of hers, watching her face as he said, "That was presumptuous of me, assuming there *will be* a next time." He tugged off the rubber and tossed it into the nearest trashcan, appearing irritated.

She smiled slowly. "I was thinking we could go to my place next time, if we wanted a bed."

He glanced at her and the irritation left his face. "We could," he agreed, grinning. "But I'm starving. I need to eat some pizza, some cookies, and maybe a little more pussy. Then I'll probably be ready for that bed."

She turned around to face him. "I'm pretty thirsty. I might need another beer ... or..." she glanced at his cock, "something else to drink."

His grin widened, and he touched her face. "This could take a while."

"Oh, I totally agree."

"I'm self-employed. I've got nothing but time."

She shrugged. "It's Saturday. I've got time."

He looked at her face and gently squeezed her cheeks. "I love Saturdays. I think I'm going to love Sundays, too, from here on out."

Denise shivered at the possibilities in his statement, and he reached for her.

"You're cold. Come here."

"I'm okay." She folded into his arms, and they kissed softly, pressing their bodies together.

He touched her chin. "You can be honest with me. And though you don't know me yet, I promise you can count on the fact I'll always be honest with you."

"That sounds good." She snuggled into him. *It sounded great.*

"One more thing?" he asked.

"Anything."

He smiled at her. "Would you tell me your name?"

She laughed out loud. "Denise. Denise Evans."

"Hello, Denise Evans." He kissed her forehead and ran a finger over her arm lightly. "I'm Ty Rogers."

"Ty?" Her eyes lit up. "That brings up a whole new bunch of ideas."

He chuckled and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Let's have some pizza and discuss it. I want to hear all your fantasies."

Denise smiled. This *could* take a while.

LUST

by

Barri Bryan

Disputing reason, questioning rhyme

The mystery of lust's paradigm,

Patterns silently through my senses

Lowering my resistance, destroying my defenses

I comply,

As from afar you beckon to me, confident, assured

Daring me to embrace again all my heart has abjured,

Whispering endearments, promising with your eyes,

Arms that reach, lips that lie, words that tantalize,

I fly

To caresses that entice, sweet sounds that persuade

Promises that inveigle; kisses that invade

My senses with a fervor that sweeps sanity aside

And argues for fulfillment that will not be denied,

I sigh

And surrender to an obsession that feeds on an addiction,

Conflicted, cursing, confounded by my amorous affliction

That pulls me like a magnet into passion's flame

And leaves me with the ashes of humiliation's shame.

I cry.

SECRET BIRTHDAY WISHES

by

Kristina Diesen

Aiden Raab hadn't decided whether the folded piece of paper was a gem of opportunity or his worst nightmare. He

desperately hoped for the first. He hadn't a clue why Taylor had recorded the list in the first place, but Aiden couldn't knowingly ignore it. Outlined in thick block letters were the words *Birthday Wish List*. Beneath that were three separate items, each positively more unbelievable than the previous.

Just glancing at the requests made him hard.

Aiden had been searching long and hard for the perfect gift to give his beautiful girlfriend on her twenty-eighth birthday. The obvious answers now lay in his hand. The disturbing question was whether she would be open to fulfilling her own desires if given the opportunity.

He silently slipped the confessing scrap of paper away when Trent strolled in and sat opposite his desk looking totally beat.

"Tell me you have good news."

"I always have good news." Aiden felt a small clenching pang of nervousness. An uncommon feeling. Alien. Then again, this was totally out of his comfort zone.

"Let's hear it then."

Trent kicked his boots up on the desk, relaxing. Too bad he was about to shock the hell out of him. "I know someone interested in getting a little sexual satisfaction from you."

Trent's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch. "Is she beautiful?"

"Stunning."

Aiden waited, mentally reviewing how he was going to ask his best friend about this unusual request. They'd been through a lot together, been there for each other even more. But still, one didn't just ask a buddy for this.

"Sounds like good news to me. What's her name?"

Aiden fisted his hands and tried to relax. "Taylor Adams."

Trent's boots hit the floor with a thud. He jumped rapidly out of the chair. "Taylor Adams? As in your girlfriend, Taylor Adams?"

Slowly, Aiden nodded affirmatively. A strange feeling of anger at her for having to ask this question vied with fascination should this all come together.

"What's the matter, dude, having performance problems?"

The wicked smirk shot his way made Aiden want to pummel Trent. Christ, this was hard enough as it was. Maybe he should just scrap the whole idea as it stood and simply uncover her secret, dirty fantasies on his own. Alone.

"I ain't ever had trouble in that department, thank you very much."

Trent circled the small room. "You want me to fuck your girlfriend?"

Aiden ground his teeth together in frustration. "No, Taylor wants to *fuck* someone while I watch."

His buddy eyed him skeptically. Aiden was no fool. Thinking of the scene as it would unfold made Trent just as hard as him. Still, it had *awkward* written all over it.

"I'd say you got relationship issues."

Aiden felt the firm control on his temper slip. "You know how much I love this woman, Trent. And if this is what she wants for her birthday, I'm okay with that. Just so long as everyone involved realizes there isn't going to be a repeat occurrence."

Surprised by his sense of urgency, Aiden needed Trent to agree. There wasn't anyone else he would even consider asking.

"How do you know she'll agree?"

"Because it's her damn list." Aiden tossed the paper on the desk in between them for Trent to see.

Trent's gaze caught his again when he hit number two. "That one part of the deal, too?"

"It isn't like we haven't shared a girl before."

And though Aiden didn't want to admit it, the idea of watching Taylor deep in the clutches of pleasure, and then pleasing her again by participating, thrilled him. She was a beautiful lover. Passionate, sensual and always fulfilling. Overly so.

"Earth to dumb ass. This is your girlfriend we're talking about sharing."

Aiden fetched the paper back and tucked it securely inside his pocket for later. "I'm only sharing her this once. And only with you. So what's it going to be?"

Trent raked a hand through his short hair. Aiden had seen Taylor peer at him often enough to recognize the attraction. He was comfortable enough with their relationship to know she wasn't looking for an out.

He only hoped she'd be willing to experience and enjoy her own erotic fantasies. Because his hard-on wasn't going anywhere fast until she did.

"For you, Aiden, I'm willing."

He grinned. "Cute lie. I know you've lusted over Taylor before. She's the only reason you're so *willing*."

Trent's eyes glimmered with mischief as he moved toward the door. "Absolutely, pal. You just better hope that she's going to still want you once I'm done with her. I've been dying to show you up."

Aiden eased back in his seat, confident in his decision. "Good luck with that, Trent. Thirty years and you're still trying."

* * * *

The plain unmarked envelope was propped on her laptop when she returned from lunch. Curiosity clawing at her, Taylor used the metal letter opener to neatly slice it open and drop the contents on her desk.

The crumpled paper was eerily familiar. Her heart stammered in her chest when she picked it up and recognized her letterhead. She was looking back at her scribbled secret birthday wish list. How had she lost it? And who was returning it to her? Unfolding the other letter, Taylor instantly recognized her lover's handwriting.

"Well, this should be interesting." She sank back into the leather chair and scanned the brief note.

It's your birthday, so be damn certain we'll celebrate. To find out which of your birthday wishes come true, don't be late.

Below were instructions to one of the luxurious hotels in town and a suite number. The note wasn't signed.

Running it smoothly through her hands, Taylor closed her eyes and pictured the list and Aiden's face when he had read it. He would be jealous at the suggestions. Aiden had always

been a greedy man. A passionate, demanding lover. But was he also intrigued and excited like she was?

They had a healthy relationship, their evenings a combination of love and lust. They were never bored and always hungry for more. She had been thinking to jazz things up a bit when she made the list. Only she had chickened out in delivering it. Obviously it had found its way home regardless.

Having two lovers had always been a fantasy.

Had Aiden really asked someone? Taylor's body tingled with possibility. *Who would he have asked? And how hard had it been to ask something so intimate?* Taylor tensed imagining him as he would be—hard and angry—not being able to participate. She pictured Aiden taking her harshly afterward, an explosion of need.

She started growing wet.

Tonight would be extreme and therefore she needed a little pampering. Grabbing her purse and shutting down her computer, she figured it was as good a time as any to hit the stores.

* * * *

Taylor knocked on the suite door promptly at eight. Punctuality in the name of sexual satisfaction was entirely worth it. Aiden opened on the first knock, his devouring gaze wringing the air clear from her lungs.

He was dressed in only an unbuttoned pair of faded denims that hugged his masculine thighs and gave her the naughtiest glimpse of his already erect cock. Her body

responded accordingly, heating and flushing. Her awareness of what she wore, or better phrased, didn't wear beneath the heavy coat, sent additional pangs of excitement coursing through her veins.

Aiden stepped forward with a black, satin blindfold, carefully placing it over her eyes and securing it behind her head.

"You smell delicious," he breathed softly into her ear.

"You sound wicked."

Aiden laughed as he escorted her into the warm room, her heels clicking on the bare floor. Her ears enjoyed the distinctive click of the lock. *Mmm, locked inside with a dangerously pleasurable man. Two, if he had been serious.*

She worked her lip in delightful anticipation.

"No more wicked than you, love. I admit your wish list surprised me. It excited me too, obviously because tonight I'm going to grant your wishes. Each and every sinful one."

A chill rippled down her spine, despite the thick coat. "I didn't wish for a blindfold."

Her mind reeled. *Is there really another man here? And who?* Aiden's deep laugh vibrated through her.

"Consider that a little playful punishment. If you're cruel enough to make me watch you and another man, then I'm going to return the naughty favor. You'll have to imagine my contorted face and the intense one of your lover's."

His words washed over her. *Lovers.* Her mind wrapped around the outrageous sensation of not knowing who else stood before her. Taylor figured she could at least play along, for now.

"Why don't you take the coat off and get comfy, sweetheart?"

Aroused, knowing two sets of eyes were eager for her to do so, she grinned. Slowly, she undid the large buttons, one by torturous one. "My pleasure."

Carefully, her fingers worked the last one free and let the wool coat hang open before slipping it from her shoulders. Instantly, the air collided with her heated skin, tensing it for she wore very little.

She heard Aiden growl hungrily at her ensemble. But Taylor also heard the sharp intake of breath as it whistled through clenched teeth. Cautiously, as if nearing an unknown animal, she moved toward that noise. The wispy ends of her sheer black baby doll tickled her upper thighs and rear.

"Do I know who he is, love?"

Taylor stopped and waited.

"Yes."

Immediately she felt the scarlet blush creep across her cheeks. How devilishly wrong was standing in front of this man, a friend, in nearly nothing? Her nipples tightened, and already she grew damp. Taylor's stomach knotted.

"And is he watching me right now?"

She heard the deep chuckles of two men before Aiden's rough voice called from across the room. "Raptly."

Taylor's skin crawled with excitement. Her body hummed from being on display, not knowing when she'd first touch, taste, or feel him. Her whole body ached. Longing for something, anything from her quiet gift. She stepped closer in

that direction again, her fingers finally brushing lightly against firm, hot flesh.

Her lips tilted in joy. The blindfold wasn't exactly the torture Aiden had planned. Having to learn her silent lover by all her other senses was going to be exquisite and mind blowing. She had no doubt her sensitive body would revel in each moment.

Taylor's hands grazed up a firm, rippled chest. Bare and definitely hot. She sprawled her fingers out, taking in each ridge of his muscles, circling over his nipples and rising past his wide shoulders and corded neck. Cautiously, she traced the path of his lips with a lone finger, shivering when a moist tongue came out to lick the tip, drawing it into his mouth and sucking. *Yum.*

Sliding her finger out, Taylor continued to discover his features, the sharp line of his jaw devoid of whiskers, and up, brushing her fingers through thick, short hair. Slowly, she pulled him down toward her. Aching for just a taste.

Tasting him was shocking and delicious, like when one first sucked on an exotic fruit. He swept slowly through her mouth, exploring and learning. Images of Aiden growing tense and fisting his hands excited her. She could hear nothing but the pounding of her heart. Every one of her senses was on overload. Taylor leaned into his strong body, craving more.

She was anything but disappointed. Firm, unfamiliar hands worked down her arms, her skin burning in their wake. How different it felt to be touched by another. Aiden had always been demanding, rough but ultimately satisfying. Endlessly enjoyable. His friend was considerably more tender, teasing

her body with a light touch, dragging her need for orgasm to the surface just as rapidly.

The pleasuring fingers moved back up to her breasts, massaging the sensitive buds through the sheer fabric. His tongue still played with hers, sweeping through her mouth and retreating, forcing her to push back to continue the sensation. When his hands lifted, Taylor fell forward in protest and let his unyielding body absorb her weight.

She moaned when his firm, pulsing erection pressed hard against her. Taylor wiggled herself a bit, enjoying the hiss her mystery man made.

"Take me to the bed."

Not missing a beat, large hands guided her swiftly backwards toward what she could only picture in her mind was a massive fixture in the room. At that instant, her silent lover could have placed her on the floor and she wouldn't have cared. Taylor was overcome with need. A desperate, greedy surge to have him inside her and thrusting her over the edge to ecstasy.

And somewhere, Aiden was hot and hard just watching.

"Aiden, what do you see?"

Carefully, she was laid on the bed and hands softly stroked down her sensitized body. They circled her breasts, trailed a teasing path down her stomach and pressed firmly against the damp apex of her thighs. She shifted in a silent beg for more. Instead, they continued down, grasping her ankles and slipping her heels off her feet.

They fell to the floor, forgotten.

"Just a man who might explode before he even takes you, he's so damn hard. I suspect he hasn't ever seen such a sensual, captivating woman."

Taylor flinched when the man's hand tightened momentarily around her ankle. A little male rivalry was there? Oh that could be good, so very good for her.

"And you, sweetheart, look like you might shake with an orgasm in any second yet he hasn't even been inside you. It's quite a becoming look, I might add. I didn't think you'd be so willing to enjoy him."

A crimson blush caught fire on her skin, but soon she couldn't sense it because hands roaming across her body caused a blazing inferno. Her mystery lover knelt in front of her it seemed, because she stroked his clothed legs with her toes. His pants so needed to come off. She sat up. "Let me make you more comfortable."

She scooted closer until his breath seared her skin. "Stand up."

He listened and slowly Taylor let her tiny fingers wander down his firm chest, circling the waistband of his jeans. Her hands pushed inside the unbuttoned pants and shoved them down, letting him discard them.

Taylor's hands massaged up his thighs, learning him as she went. She wanted desperately to take off the blindfold and know his identity. The intimacy of the touch almost demanded it. But she thought of nothing when he closed his hand over hers and raised it to his hardened shaft. It was hot and throbbing. Her own sex responded in need, tightening in eager anticipation.

Taylor stroked him lovingly, growing wetter knowing she'd soon have his massive length inside her, driving her senseless. His fingers teased her chest, grabbing the satin ribbon and tugging it loose. It hung loosely for the briefest of moments before firm hands slid up and pushed it off her slender shoulders.

The air whipped her naked flesh. Clothed only in her thong panties, she waited, the breath wrung from her lungs. Would he kiss her first or touch her? She doubted he would devour her like Aiden. Still, Taylor couldn't wait to know.

She lay herself back down, exposed, figuring Aiden would be clawing this man off her the second she so much as moaned. God, she loved her greedy man. But tonight she wanted both.

Oh yes, two men for her birthday were sure to be twice the fun.

A lone finger snaked her panties down her legs and off. Again, she waited. *Is he itching to touch me just as badly?* Taylor wondered. Did he see her nipples tighten as her chest rose and fell or was he more preoccupied by her smooth mound, shaved and bare?

Obviously the latter as his fingertip petted a path across her sensitive flesh, stroking it, heating her pussy lips. And then, nothing.

"Please. Don't stop," she whimpered in need.

His moist tongue answered, blazing a searing path across her sex and back. Taylor bucked against his mouth in anguish. "More," she whispered.

He obeyed, thrusting his tongue into her opening, flicking the tip inside. A firm, commanding hand held her stomach as his other hand worked with his tongue, heightening her level of pleasure. He pressed two fingers deep and slowly dragged them out before repeating. Taylor moaned in agony.

"Are you going to come so easily for him, love?"

Aiden's dark voice grazed across her. Was he so near, watching the frenzy need spread across her face? Her body shivered picturing him standing above them, barely waiting for his turn. The other man's fingers and tongue pressed on, sucking and rubbing. Taylor couldn't stop her shallow breaths.

"It feels so good, Aiden."

Taylor's mind blanked and her whole body shook from the intense shocks that began violently rolling through her. Her passionate lover was merciless with his tongue. He flicked and probed and stopped only to suck her juices off. Teasing, tasting, and taking. Every nerve ending pulled tight and every touch caused her to shake as she let the clutches of her violent orgasm wash through her.

Her deep moans of delight resounded in the room. Even as pleasure still rippled through her, he had moved away from her for just a moment before she felt his weight again on the bed, this time positioning himself over her. A sheathed cock nudged her tender opening and his mouth came down on hers, Taylor's scent intoxicating on his lips.

His teeth caught her lip in his mouth and sucked as he lowered himself into her wet sex, filling and stretching her walls. She shook with excitement. Waiting for her to accept him, he remained still, only moving his mouth to her ear.

Desperately she wanted him to talk to her.

"Mmm, you feel just as delicious as you taste, Taylor."

Her breath caught in her throat as he began to move inside her, thrusting himself deep before torturously pulling almost all the way out. Her pussy clenched in need.

His voice was harsh yet soft. His words dripped in sin. He was familiar now and anxiously she tried to place the voice, tried to recognize the man who was driving her senses out of this world. Taylor slipped her hands down his hardened back and gripped his ass, showing him what she needed.

"Harder," she whispered.

Her lover growled but obliged, pushing himself deeper as she tightened around him. It felt so strange, so intriguing to be with someone else after so long. Instantly, she thought of Aiden and what this gift meant to him. Taylor couldn't wait to experience two lovers, filling her beyond belief.

Again, his mouth was by her ear teasing her.

"You're an extremely beautiful creature, Taylor. Giving you an orgasm was like glimpsing heaven. Not being able to have you again is going to be hell."

She writhed against his firm body. He pumped into her, and she could feel his muscles work, her own need pulsing again to life. She couldn't think, just feel as he pleased her senseless. She wanted his mouth on hers, but he kept torturing her with his words.

"I want to see your eyes when you orgasm this time. I want you to know me, Taylor. Take the mask off."

She shook her head, feeling an overwhelming sensation just out of reach. It had taken only minutes to be so intensely

aroused again. But it was an unquestionable need. "I can't. Aiden will..."

His body tensed as he yelled, "Aiden, take the damn mask off her! I want her to see me."

He slowed his pace, and Taylor felt the loss. She whined in panic, so close to being showered with satisfaction.

"She can do it herself if she wants."

Her lover grunted. "Your boyfriend is too hard to stand, I think."

Taylor smiled. Aiden was going to be loved forever for this. How desperately she wanted to return the favor.

"Don't you want to see me?"

Solid fingers slid beneath the satin fabric and slowly pulled it away from her eyes. She felt his cock pulse inside her and ached to do anything so long as he continued. Taylor needed release right now as much as she needed air.

She carefully slid her eyes open to peek at the man who was lying so intimately with her. It took her a minute in the dim lighting to make out his face and when she did, Taylor smiled.

Trent.

She should have known.

Formalities over, Trent resumed his delirious movements, and Taylor instantly arched her back, letting him drive deeper into her center. She watched his teeth clench together in pleasure before his mouth came crashing down on hers, assaulting her senses and pushing her shakily toward the edge.

Trent wasn't rough or demanding. He worked her mouth and her sex with smooth movements, taking and tasting her with rapid precision. Catching Aiden out of the corner of her eye, naked and painfully erect was exhilarating. Trent captured her attention completely though when he rocked his movements, and Taylor was helpless to stop the tidal wave of her orgasm as it washed over her.

She shuddered and shook, her eyes barely remaining open to see Trent's face tighten, his body rigid as he plummeted over the edge with her. Panting, he lowered himself to press intimately against her.

Taylor sighed.

"Thank you, Trent."

He nodded, and lay next to her, allowing them both to catch their breath. Her mind buzzed with images of this fantasy come true. How erotic it had felt knowing Aiden was there watching, approving of her actions, and waiting to claim her as his own again.

Eventually Trent rose off her, stepping out of view for a moment. It only took Aiden a second to whisk her into his arms, and pull her flush against his steaming hot body.

"I hope you saved something special for me, Taylor."

She closed her eyes and smiled, almost laughed, even. "I always save something for you, love."

Gazing into his fiercely burning eyes, her heart started racing. Aiden was hungry and rightly so. She knew what his smoldering gaze meant. He ached to have her, and Taylor knew he wasn't going to wait.

"That's good because I have a considerable need to erase Trent clear from your memory."

Mmm, she liked the sound of that. Thank goodness tomorrow was the start of her weekend. She was quite sure she wouldn't be walking anywhere far.

Aiden devoured her then, capturing her mouth with his and seizing her thoughts completely. He hungrily tasted her lips, her tongue, replacing the pleasant reminder of Trent's loving with a growing need to satisfy her greedy man. Her body warmed to his touch, tensing as he squeezed her nipples with his fingers and thumb, rolling them around before groping down her body and pulling her leg around to straddle his waist.

She was sticky and still moist from her previous lovemaking, but that didn't stop her body from heating or her sex from swelling, knowing that Aiden was gripped by a frenzied need to take her.

Taylor's head fell back as Aiden's mouth pressed firm, hot kisses down her neck, drawing a taut nipple into his mouth and sucking it between his teeth. She moaned at the stinging sensation.

She felt fingers weave through her hair, carefully undoing the pins that held her style loosely back. Opening her eyes slightly, she caught Trent's dark stare as he completed his task and released her hair to cascade lightly down her back. The tickle of it brushing her skin was incredible.

Trent's eyes wandered to the front of her where Aiden mercilessly tasted her breasts. Taylor was surprised by her reaction to the picture. Her body was spiraling down the

wicked path toward ecstasy again but she couldn't take her gaze off Trent. His jaw was firm, his eyes a violent storm of jealousy, or was that need?

Aiden pressed her up, and before she could utter even a gasp, he brought her crashing down, impaling her on his thick, pulsing shaft. Taylor clamored to find a breath having it purged from her lungs. He simply held her there, waiting for her recognition of him. Taylor locked gazes with Aiden.

"I couldn't wait another second to have you, Taylor."

His reckless need thrilled her. God, she loved him. "Me neither," she quietly admitted. Lightly, she felt Trent's quiet presence behind her.

"I want you both, Aiden."

She blushed and lowered her eyes. *Will I be able to handle two men?* she wondered. "At least for now, I do."

Watching his powerful gaze, her confidence grew. How many years had she secretly and quietly dreamed about exploring this wicked side of herself? Why was she blushing and scared? Aiden would take care of her. He'd make sure it was enjoyable, that it was exactly what she craved.

Her hands gripped Aiden's muscular forearms when she felt Trent's firm erection nuzzle against her ass cheeks.

"I'll give you whatever you want tonight, love. A gift from me to you."

Her heart thudded loudly in her chest as his hands seared a path across her heated body to her waist and slowly lifted her up and tilted her towards his chest. His cock head teased her entrance but still he remained tucked inside her.

Never even blinking, her breath halting completely, she stared into Aiden's hungry gaze as she felt Trent's hands caress her ass, smoothing a thumb towards her puckered entrance and pressing it in. The initial sensation was every bit as gripping as feeling his touch elsewhere, and she relaxed against his probing fingers. They were icy cold, with lubricant, she realized. She shivered with trembling excitement.

"Is that what you want, Taylor? Talk to me, beautiful. Tell us what your birthday wishes are."

Caught in the depths of a powerful shiver, Taylor moaned, "More."

Aiden held her tightly as he moved off the high bed with her in his arms and spun them around, Trent sitting on the edge. His mouth tasted a path across her skin, delving between her breasts. Trent's firm hands moved up to grip her ass, pulling her back tightly against him, opening her other entrance for him.

The tip of Trent's shaft pushed against her tight opening and Taylor closed her eyes, waiting. Aiden held her off him just enough and the suspense was numbing. They were waiting for her.

She didn't want courteous.

"Fill me, Trent. Please, don't stop."

His hands pressed her downward, and he eased his thick erection into her and paused, letting her relax. Then he moved again, repeating the motions until he had buried himself inside her all the way to his balls. Taylor was surprised by the sense of fullness, surprised by her eagerness to feel Aiden in there with him. Both fucking her to oblivion.

Leaning back onto Trent's hard chest, she gazed up at Aiden who stood with a look of pure pain on his face at not being with her. Teasingly, she worked her trembling fingers down her body to her moist sex where she parted her lips and whispered, "You're turn, Aiden."

Growling and moving toward her in a blur, Aiden stepped between her legs and thrust himself inside her. Feeling both men inside her, sandwiched between their rock solid bodies was excruciatingly enjoyable. Aiden started rocking himself into her, causing her to involuntarily grip his length as his slid away, greedily begging for more.

"Does this feel good, Taylor?"

Trent's hands lightly gripped her hair to pull her head back and rest on his shoulder. Then they tingled down her body cupping her breasts and massaging them for Aiden to see. The fire dancing in his eyes was electrifying.

"It feels insanelly wicked."

Her words were ragged, her breathing already shallow. Trent did nothing more than hold her back and caress her with his hands. He was tight inside her and that was enough for her. Aiden moved, thrusting against her, driving the both of them toward orgasm.

Trent's fingers stroked her breasts and Aiden growled, "If Trent keeps touching you like that, I'm going to kill him."

Taylor gasped when Trent's forefinger and thumb pinched her hardened nubs, pulling them out toward Aiden and back. She couldn't stop the moan of delight.

"Doesn't sound like Taylor wants me to stop, does it?"

The bickering between the two of them was hilarious and all to her benefit. Aiden was jealous to give her the same sinful sensations and he dropped his fingers to her clit, thumbing it with the pad of his digit and Taylor bucked in reaction, jerking back into Trent and knocking them off balance.

"Looks like she likes my touch better."

Surprised by the battle these two playfully took up on her behalf, she found herself unable to stop the spiraling electricity from surging through her body. Trent's hands continued their pleasurable assault on her chest. Massaging, squeezing, stroking. She rubbed her shoulders back across his chest, her mouth dropping back for his.

He took it commandingly, sweeping his tongue deep into her mouth. His movements coincided with each other. The same speed, the same firm intensity.

And Aiden, never the one to be outdone, pounded into her relentlessly. Each deep thrust caused her to tighten, her body to climb closer to the shattering point. His fingers flicked the erect nub of her clitoris in punishment. She writhed her lower body against him, begging for more. Pleading for release.

Her mind flung itself into oblivion. The torture of four hands, the erotic pleasure of two cocks was overwhelming. Her release tore through her, and she screamed her satisfaction into Trent's mouth. Aiden followed immediately behind her, spilling his seed into her hot channel and pumping himself deep inside her. Her entire body was tight, vibrating with energy and utterly exhausted.

She closed her eyes and tried desperately to catch her breath. Aiden pulled out of her and lovingly reached for her as Trent eased himself out. Immediately, she collapsed in his arms.

Aiden brushed her hair away from her face and stroked his fingers across it. His warmth enveloped her and she felt the tugging pull of sleep.

"Did you enjoy that, sweetheart?"

She nodded her eyelids too heavy to lift. "Mmm, yes. Very much so."

He kissed her forehead and laid her on the bed beside him. "I'm glad. But there's still one more wish to fulfill."

Vaguely, Taylor tried to remember. She was too tired to picture what else she had jotted down on that silly piece of paper. "Not tonight, Aiden. I'm exhausted."

Another weight bumped the bed, and she felt Trent's distinctive scent, one she'd never forget, next to her. "You're an extremely sensual woman, Taylor Adams. Too good for my friend, I think."

She laughed and heard the distinctive slap of Aiden's fist against Trent's bare chest. Aiden had picked the perfect companion for her—a close enough friend to confide in, a man who was confident in his sexuality, demanding a response from her. Taylor had known Trent for too long now to be uncomfortable about it. She was glad the mask had come off.

"Ah, but I love him, Trent, that's the best part."

He chuckled and Taylor felt Aiden's possessive hand close around hers.

"An utter shame really. Guess that means I better get lost before lover boy here tries to pick a fight with the wrong man. I'd hate to waste your boyfriend."

He stood and Taylor smiled as Aiden squeezed her hand tightly.

"You tried that a few years back, too, I believe. Wasn't a pretty outcome then, Trent. But if you're glutton for punishment..."

"Nope, I figure you'll need your strength for when she wakes up again."

There was a blur of noise but Aiden's warm breath brushed her ear, tickling her. "Stay with me just a bit longer, love. I have another gift for you."

Taylor nodded but the second Aiden left her side and she felt the warm comforting blanket tucked around her, sleep claimed her. And she slept like the dead.

* * * *

Aiden's heart pounded in his chest when he saw that Taylor was finally stirring awake. It had been torturous not to be able to give her this last gift yesterday evening but he hadn't the heart to wake his passionate girlfriend once he said goodbye to Trent.

Last night had been different. Taylor had responded to the both of them willingly, accepting their gifts, opening herself to a naughty side that he hadn't dreamed of her possessing. It was—in a word—unbelievable.

Or better yet, intoxicating.

A massive turn-on.

Watching her with Trent was pure torture. His cock had ached for her that entire time, seeing her pleasure come at the hands of another man was wicked on her part and he had been overcome with a need to take her and make her his.

Permanently.

Or so he had hoped.

Cautiously, he peeked down at her fragile hand, one slender finger wearing the ring that he had quietly slipped on while she had been sleeping. Would she agree to his proposal and make him the happiest man ever?

Dear Lord, he hoped so. The wait last night had nearly killed him. Her answer this morning just might.

"Good morning, Taylor."

She smiled, her face awash still with sleep. "Hi."

She had a natural glow this morning, her face flush with vibrant color. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good."

She rolled toward him, and it was a wonder that she didn't feel the weighty gold band and one carat diamond on her finger.

"You fell asleep before I could make your last wish come true."

She blushed, and he lowered a finger to raise her face back to his. "There's no need to be embarrassed about it, Taylor. Seeing you last night was invigorating. It was astonishingly erotic for me, too. I enjoyed every minute of it."

Her lips mouthed the word, *Oh*. And then her hand brushed her face and she felt the ring and whipped it out in

front of her to see. The startlingly ocean blue hue of her gaze met his in shock, and he felt his stomach tighten.

"Aiden?"

She looked at him, questioning. Slowly, he pulled her into his chest and kissed her soft, warm lips. Without a doubt, he loved her. "Your third wish, Taylor."

Realization seemed to dawn on her and her hands wrapped snugly around him, pulling him tight. When she looked up again, tears glistened in her eyes. He swiped them away.

"I love you, Taylor Adams. You make me absolutely complete and I don't want to lose that. Marry me."

Her soft body molded against his as more tears started to slip. "Yes, yes I will. Oh, I love you so much."

The imaginary fist finally released its clenching hold on his stomach and he exhaled. Thank God. He lowered his lips to hers, claiming her mouth and showing her just how happy he was to hear those words from her mouth.

"Are you sore this morning?"

Already his mind spun thoughts of how he preferred to spend this joyous morning. He had booked the suite for the weekend. Room service could be delivered. Perhaps they could enjoy the in-room Jacuzzi.

"Just a bit."

He crooked his lips up in a cocky grin. "I could fetch a little ice. I bet that would feel lovely."

Lightly she shoved him away. Aiden rolled back into her, catching her up tight in his arms. "Or maybe a little heat from the whirlpool?"

Her eyes twinkled with mischief. Aiden figured he'd never run out of enjoyment in the bedroom with Taylor—his fiancée. She kissed his neck in return, sliding her tongue up until she brushed his unshaven whiskers.

"Aiden?"

"Hmm?"

He looked at her, appreciating her beauty and treasuring this gift he had.

"I never expected anyone to see that list, but thank you for fulfilling it. My birthday was spectacular."

He chuckled deeply. "It was my pleasure. Besides, my birthday is right around the corner, and I'm just dying to see what dirty ideas you have in store for me then."

Laughing, Aiden figured they weren't about to run out of excitement anytime soon. But in the event they hit a dry spell, he'd just tuck away a few fantasies for his own secret birthday wish list. Just in case.

WHEN THE WOLVES WHISPER

by

Brenda Williamson

Chapter 1

The forest stood dark, ominous, and scary. Nikita turned her head, thinking she heard whispers. Quiet voices that rose in pitch, until the howling wind drowned out the inaudible murmurs. She stared at the long dirt road. Looking back to where she left her car parked, she realized she went farther than she thought. The car was no longer visible. If she hadn't worried about getting scratches on the new vehicle, she would have driven it to her grandfather's old house in the woods.

Gusts from the intemperate weather whipped her long hair around her face. She brushed it away and caught the scent of an animal, not strong, yet dominant enough to overpower the pine surrounding her. In most circumstances, she wouldn't even think to direct her mind to the odors woodland creatures carried. Today, she felt strangely different. Her observances acutely took in everything.

Nikita turned when the fine hairs prickled on the back of her neck. The wind had vanished like the calm before a storm. The warning of danger snaked a chilling shiver up her spine. Then she saw the bane of her uneasy feeling. Three wolves stalked her. They were in the lane between her and the direction of her car. Her pulse quickened. She remembered, from when she lived with her grandfather, she shouldn't run. She should not be afraid to stand her ground or

look a wolf in the eye. Courage would protect her from their confusion and their wariness.

The large wolf, standing at the front of the pack, bared his teeth. Long yellow fangs emerged. Her legs trembled. She couldn't outrun them, and still, she really couldn't believe the old story her grandfather told her.

She slid one foot back. As a child, the house she grew up in seemed a hundred miles from the highway. In her adult mind, she reasoned it had to be close.

Two of the wolves began to snarl. Not at her, but each other, as if they argued. She shuffled back a little farther. The large wolf seemed fixated on her. He wouldn't turn from his steady watch. She closed her eyes in hopes it would break the lock of their gaze.

"One, two, three," she counted.

Her lashes flipped up quickly, and she spun away to run. There might have been fifty yards between her and the big wolf, and she sensed the danger when he began his run for her. She knew her grandfather wouldn't lie, although, he couldn't have anticipated her coming face to face with a big bad wolf. Nevertheless, Nikita didn't have the bravery to test any theories.

The crunch of leaves and sticks grew louder. The distance between them shortened. When the barn came in sight, she knew she'd not make the door in time. Her legs stretched, her arms pumped, and adrenaline rushed madly through her veins. Still, she knew the spurt of energy wouldn't be enough.

The wolf crashed into her. On contact, her feet left the ground and she collided with the wall of the building. She hit

hard at chest level. The pain, however, burned in her thigh. Before the wolf came at her again, she jerked on the barn door and got it open far enough to get inside. She flung herself forward when the bulk of the wolf squeezed in and prevented her from closing the heavy wood barrier. She reached for the shovel propped against the wall.

From the shadows, another wolf emerged. The one that came first stood still. The silence engulfed them so profoundly, she heard his heart thumping beyond the deafening sound of her own. She watched the silhouette of the new wolf standing his ground. Proud, determined, and threatening, he knew how to stare down a wolf, just as her grandfather had told her.

A tingling of excitement crept in on her fear. Suddenly, the silly sensation disappeared when the big bad wolf charged. The one from the shadows came at her and she cringed. Her arms went over her head as she dropped flat to the ground. She heard the whoosh of air and prepared for the impact. A second later, she rolled to look where he set down with a thump. He had leapt over her and landed on her attacker.

A vicious battle raised the pair of wolves on their hind legs. Razor sharp teeth dug into hide. Fur flew in the ensuing frenzy. Because the animals were the same in color and size, she lost track of who was who. She wanted to think of the other wolf as her rescuer. Except when all ended between them, she didn't know if she would be safe from the new wolf any more than she would be from the bad.

The fight rolled them on the ground. They crashed into the barn door. Their weight made it swing open so hard, it hit the

barn wall and bounced back. By the time the door closed, the wolves were outside snarling, growling, and she assumed attempting to tear each other apart.

Nikita crawled to the door. She looked for a latch and saw it had nothing. The only bolt had been outside. She sat for five minutes, or longer, listening to the wolf fight. When it ended, she hoped they had forgotten about her.

Blood oozed from the laceration in her leg. The sting of dirt made it hurt enough that tears welled in her eyes. Her head shot up at the creak of the barn door.

A gorgeous man with dark brown hair and eyes, walked in and stooped down. The tingling of her skin intensified as if white-hot lightning rippled beneath her flesh. She panted from the ordeal as well as the sight of the sexy stud staring at her.

"The wolves," she said in warning.

"What are you doing here?" His deep voice captivated more than her thoughts. Her insides churned with desire.

He scooped her up, and she leaned on his chest. Muscles bulged, taut and hard. She sank against his capable strength and looked toward his delicious full mouth.

"I'm here to sell my grandfather's house."

He made a pronounced display of inhaling with a strange swing of his head. It appeared a funny quirk until she felt like doing the same—sniffing at him to absorb every trace of his maleness.

"Why didn't you shift?" He took long strides from the barn to the house.

She studied the set to his jaw. With the dark stubble of hair outlining his lower face, he had a rugged masculinity. Discreetly, she breathed in his appealing scent.

"Open the door." He waited for her to turn the doorknob, and then with the toe of his boot, he kicked the door open.

"So, why didn't you shift?" he asked again, and sat her on the kitchen table.

She watched him walk to the sink and get a clean rag from a drawer. Muscles stiff and well crafted rolled beneath his t-shirt.

"You're the wolf from the barn?" She cocked her head. "You saved me, why?"

"For myself."

Her intake of air made a wheeze. He turned his head and looked her way. The smile on his face relaxed the buildup of her nervous energy.

"Very funny," she grumbled.

He carried a wet cloth, a dry cloth, and antiseptic to the table. His fingers went to the snap on her jeans.

"What are you doing?" She grabbed his large, warm hands.

"Getting you out of your pants, it makes it all the better to eat you, my dear."

She gasped at the sexual innuendo with a pleasurable tightness in her vagina.

He chuckled and put a finger under her chin, lifting her face. "I've got to see the cut on your leg, okay?"

Nikita nodded, feeling the scrumptious heat of her cravings increasing with the adorable upward curve to his mouth.

"It would heal right up if you'd shift into a wolf," he said.

"I can't shift."

"What do you mean you can't shift?" His dark brows lifted in an arch. "You're Elmer Gant's granddaughter, aren't you?"

She nodded, feeling awkward admitting her flaw. Glancing down, she looked at his long tanned fingers rubbing hers.

"A rare-breed," he commented, almost too hoarse for her to hear.

"Yes, that's what my grandfather called me." She felt a kinship with him immediately.

"You can shift. It's just a matter of getting a missing chemical in your system."

"Really?" She held his hands tighter.

He smiled and she wanted to melt from the radiance burning her soul. His fingers went back to her snap and she let him undo her pants. The zipper slid with ease. He folded the waistband down and as she rocked from one cheek of her ass to the other, he worked her pants out from under her bottom. It could have gone so much simpler if she just stood up, but she liked how close he came to help her undress.

His hands glided down her legs, her shoes came off, and he rolled her short ankle socks over her heels. Slow, torturous, and intentional, he caressed the sole of her foot, while she sat in her panties on the table.

"What chemical?" she finally had to ask.

He went straight to washing the blood from her leg. Most had dried, but some trickled down as he wet over the area.

"Huh?"

His concentration apparently involved his tongue licking over his bottom lip. She squirmed, all twitchy inside with an

imagination running away wildly in a direction that put his tongue in her.

"You said I could shift, if I got a chemical."

"Yup, just have sex with a Wolfgar wolf."

She kicked her leg at him, not finding his joke amusing. The idea however, had the same appeal as slinking down into a bath full of bubbles tickling her nose. Sex with the devilishly gorgeous man fit right alongside eating a dish full of sweet chocolates.

His serious gaze made her swallow. His eyes had a distinct glint of an idea brewing in the dark irises. Quickly, she blinked. What she saw wasn't his thoughts in the dark pools—it was her own.

"This is a joke, isn't it?" She flinched at the pain in her leg.

"No joke." He went back to cleaning her injury. "There are a few females born without a hormone the male secretes during ejaculation."

She didn't want to believe him. It seemed ridiculous.

"Hold this." He pressed the dry cloth on her wound. "If you could shift, this would heal almost immediately."

She remembered her grandfather once cut himself with an axe. He changed into a spry, gray-haired wolf, and within minutes, stood back at the woodpile, splitting wood without the nasty gash in his hand.

"So, do you have a name?"

"Trevor Darke."

"I'm Nikita Gant."

"I know."

"How?"

Trevor picked up a picture frame and carried it to her. She looked at her high school portrait. She didn't even have a copy. She had given it to her grandfather when he came to the city for her graduation. It was the last time she saw him. He died that winter ten years ago.

"Ouch!" She jumped.

"Sit still."

"That's not so easy when you're sticking a needle in my leg."

Dimples dented his cheeks. She let a silent sigh escape. The man oozed sex appeal like a maple tree leached sap in the spring. She wanted to lick his sweet face until she didn't thirst for the scent of him anymore. Though each glance convinced her, she wouldn't tire of the twinkle in his eyes.

Chapter 2

Trevor tried not to breathe. Her intoxicating scent tightened his muscles and made his cock harden and throb. The bitch was in heat, and it was apparent she didn't know it. Her blue eyes watched him enough that he could sense her desire.

"Hold still," he told her again. "If I get the stitches small enough, you won't have much of a scar."

"You said if I could shift, it would heal."

The smile started and he couldn't hide his amusement. "You want me to fuck you?"

"No!"

He laughed and kept sewing her flesh together. "You know, it's no problem. We could do it right here on the table."

"Keep dreaming, wolf man." Her lips pinched with her frustration. "Provided I even believed you, why wouldn't my grandfather have told me?"

"Maybe he figured it was something your mother should have mentioned."

"My parents died when I was little."

Trevor silently scolded himself. He knew that and had forgotten. Everything he knew about the Gants, he'd learned from Elmer Gant's journals. He hoped sending the letter to the girl in the picture would bring her, and it did.

"Why do you have this old picture of me?"

"It came with the frame."

She looked around him. "It seems many things here belonged to my grandfather. Just how did you come to live here?"

"Inheritance."

"You can't inherit this place. My grandfather sent me a letter saying it was mine."

"When you've rested up, we'll discuss your reason for being here."

He tied off the thread on her leg. Her pheromones kept putting out a strong, almost irresistible scent. He considered dropping her in a bathtub filled with heavily fragranced soap. He'd do anything to tone down the aroma of her sweet, luscious secretions keeping the wolf pack pacing the perimeter of the woods, waiting for her to emerge.

"Tell me about the Wolfgar wolves." She closed her eyes while he wiped the traces of blood from her face.

"Like what? You grew up here."

"Only until I was fifteen and then my grandfather sent me to live in the city with my aunt."

"Puberty." He smiled. "You were sent away to avoid just what happened today. Being unable to shift makes you a target for the unsavory in our breed."

"Why are you no different than them?" She leaned forward, and he could taste the flavor of her breath in the air.

"Good breeding, I suppose." He clenched his jaw and fought the primitive urge to jump on her. "But don't think for a minute I don't want to hump you until my cock falls off."

He wiped along the side of her small nose. A few freckles speckled the ivory skin.

"Okay, I've figured out everyone wants to rape me, but it doesn't tell me about the Wolfgar wolves and why I'm so different."

He swept her blonde hair back over her ear. The silky curls wound around his fingers, and he held her delicate face.

"I don't know why, you just are."

Not only special, she was beautiful. He had loved that picture of her. Ten years and she had matured into a beautiful woman. He touched her silky cheek. Every minute it became more difficult not to throw her on the floor and do everything he yearned to do. Intelligence dictated he control his instincts. His impulses however, commanded he not only have sex with Nikita, he mate with her.

"You are very evasive with answers. Is there some secret I should know?"

He caressed the pulse under her jaw. She stretched her neck and he felt the quickening—the rapid beat created by an

enthralment he enticed. He stroked her collarbone, and she leaned toward him.

"Tell me something, pretty please?" Her lips puckered, breaking down the barrier he tried to keep between them.

Chapter 3

Trevor's palm swirled over her breast, so his light touch kept her nipple from hardening. Nikita watched his eyes. The shimmer of something dark and mysterious flashed. She waited for another hint, fascinated by him in a way, unlike her attraction for other men. This feral draw of his scent overpowered all reason. She wanted to be explored by him, feeling his hands upon her burning hot flesh. What her mind wished for, fate commanded.

He moved his hand down to her waist. She whimpered for the retreat he made from her tightening nipple. She whined a small chirp again when he tugged her t-shirt up enough to push his hand beneath the cloth. His fingers weren't as cool as she thought they'd be. He skimmed his caress over her belly and the muscles retracted from the ticklish sensation. Her white t-shirt rode up on his moving arm.

"Tell me again how you don't want me to fuck you." He pinched her nipple gently.

"I..." Air came out of her lungs without sound.

Speech seemed impossible.

He twisted the tender tip of her breast harder. She shook her head, hoping it would be enough to make him back off. She couldn't just spread her legs for a stranger within an hour of meeting him. Could she?

Her legs opened slightly. The pressure she imposed on keeping her knees together, loosened. Her cunt constricted. Trevor plucked at her nipple in a rhythm, which soon made her insides clench and leak.

"You need a Wolfgar male to bring you to maturity."

"I'm mature enough." She squeaked.

The oncoming climax tweaked nerves inside her.

"You're a virgin."

"I'm not a virgin!" she blurted too loud. "I've had sex with plenty of men. Well a few, but plenty of times."

She rubbed a hand on her neck. The heat had risen. She perspired profusely. Trevor's hand began shaping her breast like a lump of clay. He squeezed and molded it, always making her nipple pinch between his thumb and forefinger. The torture drove her insane, the kind of crazy from wild pleasure, and the sort of delight she might not resist.

"You can't shift until you've had sex with a Wolfgar. Do you really want it to be one of those horny wolves outside?"

Nikita shook her head while he lifted her shirt. She looked at her swollen, milky white breast in the palm of his hand. It appeared different somehow with her nipple spiked and inflamed. His head bent and she whined with the pleasing texture of his cooling tongue. Bathing the sensitized tip, he sucked it into his mouth.

Her small orgasm peaked, leaving her panties wet. Trevor bent lower, kissing her belly. His lips headed for the cream-smearred cotton between her legs.

"Wait." She held him at bay with fists full of his hair.

He looked up and his brown eyes had changed to a dark gold. It frightened her the way he excited her.

"Can't you kiss me first?" She wanted him to fuck her. She lusted for it right from the start. Only she needed to feel like they had something more personal between them. Anything, so she didn't feel as if this were strictly a primitive mating ritual.

"You want human courtship?" He put a finger beneath the elastic of her panties. "You know, I thought I would just do you a favor by breaking your cherry."

"Excuse me!" She pushed him away. "I told you, I am not a virgin."

She jumped off the edge of the table and tugged her t-shirt down.

"You can't change into a wolf until you have sex with me or one of those fellows out there." His head jerked toward the door. "Here, in these woods, that means inviting danger."

"Well, eventually I'll go out of heat and then everything will be normal."

"You don't want normal." He stepped close.

His hand cupped between her legs. She stood like a statue and let him rub his finger over the crotch of her panties. Her willful hips rocked toward him, making his finger press the cloth into her. His head cocked to the side, and he lowered his face to hers.

"Pucker," he demanded with a curled finger beneath her chin.

"I don't need to be schooled in how to kiss."

"Pucker," he said, softer.

His deep voice shot electrical currents to her toes. The power of sound in a hushed tone pushed her lips out. The silliness had its own special thrill. His lips connected briefly, and she hardly felt it worth all the trouble.

She hadn't realized she even closed her eyes, until her lashes lifted, and she watched his mouth moving away. Instinctively, she leaned to follow.

"That's it?" She stumbled forward, off balance from the dizzy way she expected too much.

His grin appeared with the intent to rile her. The wicked way he made her want him should have some drawback. She only needed one little reason for her to back from his hand rubbing harder over her throbbing mound.

"You're an evil man and no doubt rule that pack of lustful wolves outside."

"I do have some say over them." His smile faded.

He twisted her around and strapped his sinewy arm under her breasts. She liked the way she fit against his hard body. He looped a finger in the side of her bikini underwear, and a second after he twisted the fabric, it split at the seam.

He raked his finger into the short-cropped hair of her pussy. He parted the dewy lips and involuntarily, her legs squeezed. Her head whipped to the side in elation.

"I've kissed you. Now tell me why I shouldn't screw your sweet body until my cock is numb?"

His hot breath washed over her cheek. Her lips automatically puckered and stretched toward his. A small cry of disappointment escaped when his head drew back. His long middle finger plunged into her and another cry became a

long-winded whine. She felt the tip of his finger tickling a point inside that made her squirm.

"Trevor." Her arms clung to his.

Her legs shook, and she didn't think standing would be possible once she hit a full orgasm. He found the sweet spot and tormented her with small flicks of his fingertip. She panted heavily in the moments of reprieve. The sphincter of her cunt opened and closed on his knuckles so forcefully, it hurt.

"Trevor, please!" she cried out.

Two fingers jammed up inside her and she shuddered. Violently, her body shuddered in his hold. She shook her head from side to side, fighting the burning sparks ricocheting with such intensity she began to weaken in thought. The clarity of vision darkened.

Her body dripped perspiration. The slickness of her skin didn't give Trevor the leverage to keep her up. She felt herself sliding down harder on his fingers. Her right leg bent and folded behind his denim-covered calf.

She stood that way for a minute and then it was over. Her orgasm rocketed her up on her toes and Trevor scooped her up. He sat her on the table and laid her back. She didn't argue. Her body had exhausted all strength. She had nothing left but rag doll limbs, flopping where he put them. She didn't care or consider anything until air puffed up her sore, aching hot channel.

His hands lay on the insides of her knees. He kept her legs parted as he sniffed her cunt. She felt strangely aroused by the exhale from his nostrils, the cooling air curled into her.

His tongue swiped one pass, and she jerked. He went slower with the second lap. From anus to clit, he dragged the tip of his tongue through her juices.

"I want you to come for me again."

"Oh, I don't think so. I'm only good for one orgasm. You've ruined your chances of getting me to climax again."

"I don't think so." He licked again. "You've just not been with the right man."

"Oh, and you're just so experienced at making women have orgasms, are you?"

She didn't want to discuss other women. Logically, they had been with other people, had sex, and led lives away from each other. The jealousy bug usually hit her when a man dumped her, not when she had a guy staring into her vagina like a gynecologist.

"I'll let you decide for yourself."

His chuckle had the same ambiguous emotion as his eyes when he stared. She tried not to think how weird everything around her had happened. Until the letter came about the property, she hadn't known her grandfather left it to her.

Trevor's hands massaged the inside of her thighs. Then he picked up her one leg, licked the sole of her foot, and sucked her toes into his mouth. He licked the top, around her ankle, and sucked on her shin. He straightened and held her leg out, up, and high, nipping and licking her skin until he put it on his shoulder. He moved his fingers to the strained muscles in the crease of her leg. Her heel slid down his back.

"Oh ... God." She grunted the two words separately.

Trevor sniffed and lapped at her. He made swift jabs with his tongue and alternating swirls around the button of her clit. She lifted her bottom up using her leg as support on his shoulder.

Chapter 4

Nikita tasted good. All he had wanted in a Wolfgar mate, he now had presented to him by fate. He plowed the bright pink folds and slurped up all the cream scented with her essence.

"You're delicious."

"Oh, and I suppose this is the part where the big bad wolf eats me up?" She giggled.

"I plan to do more than that." He unbuckled his pants while sucking on her distended clit.

Nikita squirmed and bucked to his thrusting tongue. He slurped up the sweet juices, and pushed the knot of flesh, circling it with feather light rotations of his tongue. He rubbed his hands over the velvet flesh of her belly and made her anxious in her movements.

"Trevor..." She grabbed his wrists. "Trevor, please fuck me."

He had already dropped his pants. Standing up, he kicked them from his legs. He held her leg up against his chest and fit his cock against her entrance.

"Are you sure?" he teased.

"Yes."

He thrust into her with repeated short strokes until he sank up to his balls. Nikita put her hand out to him. He took her leg from his shoulder and eased it away. He pulled her up

from her prone position on the table. Her delicate fingers curled around his, and he could see the beauty of her ivory skin against the contrast of his dark tan. She lowered the limb to a bent position and her toes curled over the edge of the table. Careful of the wound, he lifted the other leg.

He pounded into the center of her butterfly pose. Her expelling air came laced with feminine grunts. Moans of ecstasy twined their panting bodies. He slid his hands under her bottom and lifted her from the table. Her slender legs folded around his hips.

The nearest wall was to the right of the door. It only took a half turn and a few strides.

"Oh!" Nikita gasped, when he pushed her up against it.

"Pucker." His hips pinned her to the wall and his hands dragged hers up above her head.

Her mouth barely began to form the delightful shape when he attacked her lips. He sucked and pulled at her tongue. He hadn't planned on kissing her and yet, it's all he had wanted to do from the very start.

"God you taste delicious."

"You've said that ... and oh no, Trevor hurry..." she cried.
"Hurry, please."

He rocked his hips. His orgasm had backed down from the full pressure he felt at the table. Nikita's pleas stimulated another part of him. He sipped the saliva from the corner of her mouth as she whined in gasps. He let go of her hands to hold her hips, to pump in and out with hard strokes. Their bodies slapped together, and her wet center sloshed.

Finally, her arms squeezed his neck and their kisses stopped. He had a hand at the back of her head and one wedged into the crack of her ass. He piloted her humping body tight on his cock so when he exploded it would be inside her.

A loud bang at the side of the house made them freeze.

"What was that?" Nikita exclaimed.

"Hold on." His cock hurt with the heaviness of his load. He could have crushed her in his arms as the liquid burned from his loins and jettisoned into her.

A crash of the windowpane on the back door turned her head. He rotated to shield her.

"Trevor?" Her nervous voice questioned the disturbance.

"Hold on for another minute."

He roared with the intense rapture of his ejaculation. The wolves outside howled in synch to his mating. Nikita's whimpers drew his mouth to hers.

"I won't let them touch you." He kissed her softly. "I promise, I won't let them have you."

He let her legs down, and she slid from his cock. It tickled him to feel it glide up to her belly.

"I want you to stay in the house." He pulled her shirt down. "Go start a bath with lots of soap, and I'll be back in a minute."

The howling continued, and she remained next to him.

"Why lot's of soap?"

"Because you reek of sex and they can smell it."

"What are you going to do?" She held his arm.

"Tell them to go on home."

"Will they?"

He cupped her cheek. "The scent is so potent I'll hardly be able to control myself if you don't take a bath soon."

She smiled, and he saw she didn't consider it a problem that he lusted after her body.

"Go on." He swatted her bare ass.

"You shouldn't go out there."

He opened the door. "I'll be all right."

Chapter 5

Nikita watched the door shut her away from Trevor. Her thigh throbbed with pain from her stitched laceration. She hobbled to the hallway and found the bathroom right where she remembered it. It didn't have a place in her memory the way it appeared now. Except on the shelf above the toilet, she saw a familiar bottle of bubble bath, her favorite. Her grandfather gave it to her for her twelfth birthday. He said she should take a bath everyday so she smelled pretty. Now she knew his real reasons.

Nikita turned the spigots on and opened the cap to the bubble bath. Tipping the bottle, she poured a generous amount into the stream of warm water. She looked at the bottle, wishing her grandfather had told her more about how she would come in heat and how she'd acquire the ability to shift.

She pulled the t-shirt over her head, tossed it to the floor, and stepped into the tub.

A thump against the wall drew her gaze up to the window. She climbed on the lip of the enamel claw foot tub and looked outside. A face appeared, startling her, and her wet feet lost

all traction. She squealed, knowing the pain of her landing as she fell back.

"Gotcha." Trevor caught her. "Don't look out the windows."

His eyes gleamed with the shameless gaze he swept over her nakedness. He made it hard to breathe, difficult to swallow, and challenging to think. When he looked at her as if he'd die without a kiss, her heart burst with joy.

She touched his cheek, pulled his face close, and pressed her mouth to his. Her lips parted to suck on his thick tongue slipping between her teeth. Hungrily obsessed by his maleness, she kissed him.

"We need you washed, Nikita." His mouth moved over hers, at the same time he set her down in the tub, into a cloud of bubbles.

"What happened outside?" she asked when their lips drew too far from pecking at each other's.

He looked worried and it made her nervous the way he stood silent, with his hands on his hips. She drew her knees up and held them to her chest.

"There are more of them." His tone had reluctance in voicing his concern. "We're going to have real trouble."

She looked up at the window. "More?"

"A whole lot more. I didn't know so many Wolfgar existed." He began removing his clothes.

His finger tugged at the snap on his pants. He bent down and pulled his boots off. Quickly she saw him go from dressed, to exquisitely naked. She held her breath when he came to the tub. His beautiful tanned body stood out against the pale blue wallpaper.

She scooted toward the faucet end.

"They weren't too happy I had your scent on me." He stepped over the edge and sat.

"Shouldn't we do something? Get away from here, call the police, something?" She slid back with his help.

"We wait." His arms surrounded her. "Now don't worry. I promised to protect you and I will."

For the moment, she trusted his confidence.

"Are you going to tell me now how it is you're living here, and how you think you own this house?"

"Your grandfather left it to the new leader of the pack. It would have been your father, if he had lived."

"Then me?" She put her head back and squirmed to his probing fingers swishing between her legs.

"Sorry, babe, but the Wolfgar wolves haven't got any need for equality between the sexes. It has to be a male, and usually, to keep the bloodlines pure, the male should accept the female from the extinct line."

Nikita twisted to look at him. "You said you lead that pack outside."

"Yeah. He sounded proud. "You want to mate?"

"Didn't we just have sex in the kitchen?"

"Oh, yeah." He nuzzled her jaw. "And hot sex that was. I'm talking about breeding ... you know doggie style, well in our case wolf style."

"What does that prove?"

"You're in heat, remember. We do it until you're out of heat and we hope it takes."

"What takes?"

"The pregnancy."

"Pregnancy! I don't want to get married and have a baby."

"Whoa, babe, I never said anything about marriage. This is just a breeding. I plant the seed and you raise a Wolfgar carrying our bloodlines. He'd be heir to the throne."

"Throne," she scoffed. "We're not royalty."

Nikita stood up, stepped over the edge of the tub, and reached for a towel.

"No, but we're pretty damn close. Gants have commanded the pack for a couple hundred years. Before that, it was the Darkes and now it's the Darkes again. The change in family leadership however is strained."

"Why?"

"Because I'm the last Darke and it's up to me to make a kid to succeed, otherwise, the wolves stay unruly, waiting for my demise so they can battle out who'll be the next leader."

"I'm not sure I like the arrogance in your way of thinking. I wasn't put on this planet to be a doormat or a bitch for breeding. I want kids, but not for your reasons."

"What's the difference?" He stepped from the tub. "You'll have me around to protect you and the pup."

"Why would I need protecting? As I see it, once I'm pregnant, no one will bother me."

She watched his lean hard body move to the towel rack. The well-defined curves of his frame stirred lust within her. He dried off, wiping the towel under his arms, down his sides, and around his semi-erect cock. The man always seemed ready to mount her. She wondered how long before he did

what he wanted, instead of trying to make it her idea. She decided not long, by the look in his eyes.

"Come here." His finger dipped into her cleavage behind the towel she had bound to her chest.

His tug relieved her of balance and she did a tiptoe dance toward him. His hand slid into her hair and his palm cupped over her ear.

"What am I going to do about you?" he whispered hoarsely. "I feel the need to have you and it ain't got nothing to do with your scent."

"Charm will get you a lot," she growled, playfully. "But it won't get you a baby."

His soft full lips covered hers firmly. She still couldn't believe the attraction she felt for him, and she worried the feelings were strictly chemistry.

The bathroom window suddenly shattered. Trevor pushed her to the farthest reaches of the room. His body shielded her and she couldn't imagine her being in heat having anything to do with his heroism. From the start, he consistently rushed to protect her. He made her feel safe.

Nikita clung to the towel and to him. Trevor smelled wonderfully sweet like the lavender bubble bath. It distracted her senses, but not her fears.

"They're going to get in," she said, looking around his shoulder.

"Shift."

"I can't, you know I can't."

"You can now." He tugged her out of the room.

He grabbed the towel she held and unwrapped her.

"Trevor!"

"We're leaving here and you have to shift." He towed her toward the door leading outside.

"You said we'd wait."

"Change of plans."

"Trevor, please!"

His hand had the doorknob half turned.

"Trevor," she cried. "I don't know how to shift yet."

"You'll do it when you need to." He leaned toward her. "I promise. You *can* do it."

He opened the door and looked around outside. She felt self-conscious about her nudity and the fact he planned to make her run outside in such a fashion.

"You said you left your car at the end of the lane?"

"Yes." She held his hand with both of hers.

"You have the keys?"

"I dropped them when I ran from the wolves."

"Then I'll hot wire it, I reckon."

He jerked her outside, and they ran across the yard. The howls came at them from all directions, but only one wolf appeared. Trevor shook her grip free, and she watched him drop to the ground in the shape of a wolf. He shifted so fast, she hardly saw him morph from man to animal.

He looked up at her and she knew he wanted her to change, but how? She tried to think it and nothing happened. She tensed all her muscles as if she could squeeze a wolf out of herself and still, she stood a petrified, naked woman.

The large wolf studying them began to stalk a wide circle. Trevor took the challenge and advanced. Her heart raced with

the terror something would happen to him. She looked around for anything she could use as a weapon.

The howls grew louder. They echoed in the dark forest. She glanced back at the house and while it might have been safe at one point, the wolf sitting on the porch made it off limits to her. The whoosh of leaves turned her to witness Trevor attacking the large wolf. Fur flew in their attempts at overpowering one another.

Trevor yelped, and she raced to help. The magic of shifting happened without thought. Her limbs were all legs, and a sleek fur, like Trevor's, spread over her skin. She leapt on the big wolf. The strength she possessed came as a surprise. Adrenaline flowed in her veins and gave her an added boost of temerity. The blood on Trevor frightened her into a vicious retribution. Her fang teeth cut into the big wolf's flesh just at the shoulder. She shook her head and tore the hide from the bone.

The persistent howls rattled deep into her. When something grabbed her fur, she twisted her head to snap at her attacker, except she met Trevor's muzzle. His wet tongue rolled over her nose and she ran with him to the house. The wolf on the porch, having no help from the pack, trotted off into the woods with his tail between his legs, and they rushed inside the shelter.

Nikita didn't know how to shift back to woman to help Trevor. She looked at his fur, bloodied by wounds in his hide and tried to lick away the pain. He huffed and puffed, exhausted and energized. He nuzzled her body and sniffed

under her tail. The eroticism of his moves aroused her much differently than when she stood as a human.

She tried to keep her vigil that she didn't want him mating her. Her body however, had other plans, and she stood still while he mounted her. He humped her backside, aligned his erection, and impaled her with force. A howling whimper escaped her lungs.

Chapter 6

Trevor opened his eyes and looked around the kitchen. They still lay on the cold tile floor where he bred Nikita. Once they collapsed in exhaustion, he shifted back into a man immediately. It took longer for Nikita to relax and shift.

He stroked a hand down her side. He bred her with an abandoned sense of humanity. He took her like an animal without holding in check his powerful nature. Once inside her depths, he had forgotten her Wolfgar virginity. He stretched her insides until she whined with a pitiful cry while having to stay attached to him for half an hour. He couldn't imagine the discomfort she felt.

He kissed her back and continued to stroke her side. "Did I hurt you?"

She-wolves often fought the coupling but Nikita couldn't have been more cooperative. It didn't mean he didn't injure her with his aggression.

"Won't you tell me what's wrong?" He kissed the back of her head.

He rolled her over into the cradle of his arm. The remnants of tears glistened on her cheeks.

"Tell me you're all right." He kissed over her face.

She nodded slightly.

"I wish I could have been gentler, but I have no control once we start."

"It's all right, it's not that." She twisted against him. "I could have killed that wolf."

He covered her mouth with his and kissed her tenderly, bathing her with his affection. "You were protecting me."

"But the brutality—I wanted to kill."

"No, you didn't. You were scared and angry. It's natural to wish someone dead. It doesn't mean you really want it to happen."

She let out a sigh.

"It's really all right, Nikita. He'll heal as he changes back to a man. Now come on, hold around my neck."

"Where are you taking me?" Her slender arms coiled into place as he lifted her up from the floor.

"To our bed."

"Our bed?" She hiccupped a sob.

The tremors of her stifled cry built steam, and by the time he reached the bed, Nikita cried hard. He then realized the extent of her distress. It made his empathetic heart cringe and his eyes water.

"Our bed." He lowered her onto the soft blankets. "I'm going to check and make sure the doors and windows are secure."

She gave a nod and turned away from him as he drew the covers up over her. He avoided kissing her since he didn't think he could handle her rejection. Especially not while his heart continued to crash against his ribs with a prideful

expectancy of her having his child. He heard wolves mated for life, but since werewolves weren't true wolves, he thought the rules of nature didn't necessarily apply.

Trevor went from room to room. He checked accesses of entry to the house. When he returned, he found Nikita asleep. He stood and watched her peaceful face. The splashes of tiny freckles were more prominent on the bridge of her nose when wet. Tears clung to her cheeks as if they were afraid to leave her.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said when her eyes opened.

A gorgeous, glorious smile turned up the corners of her mouth. He felt better instantly.

"You're not going to just stand there, are you?" Her hand stretched out to him.

Trevor took her warm fingers and kissed the tips.

"You're not angry with me?" He sank down next to her and wiped her wet face.

"Why?"

"You were the one crying."

"Trevor." She sighed. "Things are going too fast, and it seems I don't have any control over my life."

Things had gone quickly that morning. He argued against what he had done by sending the letter and he still fought the reason for doing it.

"Come to bed with me," she cooed. "I'd like to get to know you."

"Oh, and just what did you want to know?"

Trevor held his breath when her hand slid up his thigh.

"Everything," she purred.

The warmth leached from her palm while her fingertips were cool. He put more thought into her fingers curling over the side of his leg and hunting beneath his saluting erection. He moaned at the first touch to his balls. They ached for her handling. He knew the moment she kneaded them gently, he wanted more than a mating from her.

"Come to the city with me." She sat forward.

Her lips pressed to the center of his chest. The heat stirred his lustful desire a little hotter. Her breasts brushed his legs and his cock nestled between them. She kissed his stomach so it pushed him deeper into her cleavage. Impulse, anticipation, and his pulsing hardness brought his hands up to squeeze her flesh to him.

"For a visit?" He tried not to selfishly enjoy it without paying attention.

"Well, if that's all the time you want to stay with me, then yes, for a visit." She shifted on the bed and it separated his cock from the heat in which he had it buried.

"You're not going back there to live."

"Yes, I am."

"You have to stay here. Wolves mate for life," he said it without a true belief in the notion, but a need to argue with anything reasonable she might accept.

"I'm not a wolf—not really."

"You're going to have my baby." He grasped for reasons.

"You don't know that for sure." She scooted back on the bed. "Do you?"

The conversation turned serious, and it meant he wouldn't get her lovely mouth on a part of him begging for his complacent silence.

Chapter 7

Nikita had such a need to have him inside her, she didn't think about birth control. She liked the idea of having his baby and carrying on a legacy. She rose up on her knees and pushed him back on the bed.

"If I have a baby, what kind of father will you be?"

He looked at her strangely.

"You had to have thought about being a father and not some sperm donor to get the job done?" The question had merit.

"No, I hadn't given it much thought." He grabbed her arms, flipped her over on the bed, and hovered over her.

She looked up breathlessly aware he felt the same things she did.

She pulled him down. His lengthy, masculine body, solid, heavy, and incredible, meshed with her soft contours. He united every ache she had with a pulsing cure. He kept a knee to the outside of her leg to keep some of his weight from squishing her. For the most part, his astonishingly hot skin kissed hers from head to toe.

Nikita combed her fingers into the hair on his nape. She played with the strands of luscious silk while staring into his hungry eyes. His hand went to her hip and she moved by his guidance. His fingers slid along the back of her thigh and stopped behind her knee. He pulled her leg up and she lifted it over his hip. On their sides, his cock nuzzled her belly. He

adjusted. She gasped. He fit himself into the moist entrance of her sex and shoved himself into her with vigor.

"Trevor!" she cried out with surprise.

"I want you to stay here with me." His fingers dug into the cheeks of her ass to force her hips against his.

Her breasts flattened in the dark brown hairs on his chest. He couldn't have excited her more. The aggressive movements put her once again on her back, Trevor on top, holding her down with his weight. It sent an erogenous thrill through her limbs.

"I have a life, a job, and oh God," she groaned.

An intense orgasm arched her away from him. He kept flexing his hips and stimulating the fiery nerves already responding. His mouth moved quickly over her breasts. The thread between his suckling kiss and her clenching vagina went taut.

"You'll stay?"

"Noooo..." Her body cramped with jerking spasms.

"Nikita, I want you to stay."

She couldn't carry on a conversation. She gripped his biceps, letting her fingernails dig into his skin to hang on to his last hard jolt. He lowered down after his howling completion, and she felt his sperm ooze out between them.

His nuzzling kisses along her neck drew her in closer until they were simply hugging. "Marry me?"

"You told me not more than two hours ago you wouldn't marry me."

"That was before..." His mouth came close to hers. "That was before we mated and I knew I'd have a bond with you for life."

"I don't know. You want to live here and my home is in the city."

"Is that a yes?" He kissed small pecks to her lips, across her cheeks.

She didn't want to say no when the word yes ran like a racehorse in her head. His hot breath caressed her neck.

"It's a maybe."

"Why a maybe?" He goosed back his head.

"We're strangers."

"Strangers who are naked in bed together if you hadn't noticed."

"It's called a one-night-stand."

"Does it feel like this could be just one night, or even one week with us?" He turned his back to her.

"No," she answered, knowing he couldn't see the shake of her head.

She'd not lie. She couldn't when he looked almost hurt. "I need a little time."

"You didn't need too much time to let me mate with you."

"That's not fair. Escaping the threat of death makes people rush to do insane things."

"Is that the excuse for the first time as well?" he charged.

Nikita sat up and kissed the back of his shoulder. The smooth skin, tight over the roll of his muscles, had its very own attraction. She slid her hand around his bicep to his chest.

"You know I care about you." She watched her hand slip off his body as he stood. "Where are you going?"

He shrank within the blink of her eye and shifted into a wolf. He jumped on the bed and forced her to lie down.

"What are you up to?" She laughed at his licks to her face.

Trevor flopped down between her legs and put his head on her abdomen. The erotic position gave her a shiver. His gaze stayed with hers, even though he rubbed a circle on her skin with his chin.

"You're trying to be cute, aren't you?"

He rose up, and profusely licked her face. She put her hands up to stop him. He manipulated her arms so his paws pinned her. Suddenly, he shifted back to a man—handsome, well-built, and desirable.

"Is it working? I do cute rather well, don't you think?" He leapt off the bed at the crash from the living room. "Wait here."

She watched him walk naked from the room. Not feeling comfortable naked with wolves trying to get in the house, Nikita got up and found a shirt in a drawer. She put it on and started to button it when she saw the edge of a picture peeking out from under his socks. She slid the socks away and stared at the blue-eyed girl. Fifteen and smiling, she remembered the day her grandfather took her picture.

She heard Trevor's footsteps and turned to ask him why he had a picture of her in with his clothes. She found it sweet, except the dresser was old and it was on the bottom, and she deemed it could have just been there and he never noticed.

"Is everything all right out there?"

Her head came up and a man grabbed her. His hand went over her mouth so she couldn't get a sound out. He threw her to the bed and seconds later, she found herself pinned beneath a wolf.

She kicked her legs while laying face down on the bed. The wolf abruptly tumbled off the mattress. Nikita flipped over and saw Trevor, transformed, and fighting with her attacker. As battles go, he ended it quickly, leaving the wolf unconscious and bloody on the floor.

"Is he dead?" She drew her knees up and hugged them, not watching Trevor rise back to his feet as a man.

"Unfortunately, no."

"Now what?" She sank into the niche he made with his arm around her.

"Oh, I don't know—fight the wolves that come to our door one by one, I reckon." He kissed her forehead. "This isn't a one-night stand to me, honey, and it hasn't been for quite a long time."

"There's a picture of me in the dresser."

"It's not the only one. I have others and just so you know, I sent the letter to get you here."

"You're not a big bad wolf in the least, are you?"

"Nikita, I've waited a long time to meet you, and you're everything I imagined."

She smiled and nuzzled her face against his warm skin. "You're not going to get all mushy and tell me you love me too, are you?"

"Do you want me to?"

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"Yes, but let's leave those confessions until we've known each other a little longer." She tilted her head back and he kissed her.

"When?" He speckled her face with dozens of kisses.

"Tomorrow." She sighed. "Let's leave something for tomorrow and deal with your lust today."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Emma Wildes is the author of fifteen novels and numerous short stories. Reading has always been her passion and she finds that vibrant characters with strong personalities have a tendency to draw her straight into a story. She lives in rural Indiana and is working on her next romance. Her best selling novels *Hostage Moon*, *The Switch*, and *Hot Sahara Wind* are available at Whiskey Creek Press. Please stop by and visit at www.emmawildes.com.

Thanks to Mercedes Rice for suggesting the title. Hope you had fun with Rowdy and Sara in *Mercenary Desires*, part of the *Lust Anthology*. Jane Leopold Quinn loves writing sensual fantasies. She considers creating characters, stories, and especially hot love scenes to be her most satisfying mission in life. Please visit her at www.janeleopoldquinn.com for information about her Whiskey Creek Press Torrid book, *Ancient Ties*, a time travel to Roman Britain. *Ancient Ties* reached #1 on the WCP Torrid bestseller list in January 2006 and was given 4 Stars and Top Pick in the June issue of *Romantic Times Book Club Magazine*. In February 2006, Whiskey Creek also published her short story *Valentine's Day*, in its *Torrid Teasers Vol. 2* series.

Billie Houston is a native Texan. She is also a former teacher and educator. Besides penning poetry, Billie co-writes romantic novels with her husband, Herb, under the pen name Barri Bryan. Her book of western poetry titled *Brush Country* won an EPPIE for the best poetry collection of 2004. She also has another novel with Whiskey Creek Press titled *Love Will*

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Louise Bohmer writes erotic romance and erotica. Her characters are usually sassy, sexy, and full of passion. Whether it is a broken heart, a forbidden love, or a long-held desire, perhaps something quirky and kinky, L. Bohmer relishes each surprise a new story brings. Her spicy works can be found at *Tit-Elation*, *Sensual Venus*, *Ruthie's Club*, and in an upcoming Torrid Teaser collection from Whiskey Creek Press. She also works as a freelance editor and edits titles for WCP/WCPT. You can visit Ms. Bohmer at:

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Lois Wencil is absorbed with the struggles of strong women who find answers to overwhelming problems. She has a background in both education and counseling, which has

enabled her to meet many of these heroines. This story, *Hope Finds Hope*, is fiction; the characters' challenges are real.

Her historical romance novel *The Outcasts* is available at Whiskey Creek Press. Her website is www.geocities.com/loiswencil/

Cheri learned to love reading romances of all genres at a young age. In her mid-twenties, she realized the spicier the romance the better she liked it. So it's no surprise she likes to write as spicy as she likes to read.

Cheri was born in South Louisiana, but after years of traveling with her military husband of twenty-two years, she now resides in Maryland.

Sweet Summer Rain, Cheri's debut novel, is a contemporary erotica available now from Whiskey Creek Press Torrid. She enjoys writing different genres, from historical to futuristic. For more information on Cheri's upcoming books and stories, visit her website: www.cherivalmont.com.

Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she still lives with her husband and two sons. She has always loved to read, with romance and mysteries being particular favorites. She enjoys writing romantic suspense and short stories with erotic and paranormal elements. Her first stories for Whiskey Creek Press Torrid include *Far from Ordinary* in the *Summer Sizzlers Anthology*, and *Sweet Reunion* in the *Fall Fires Anthology*. Visit Jamie's website at www.jamiehill.biz, and sign up for her monthly newsletter with contests and news about upcoming releases.

Kristina Diesen currently lives in Michigan with her forester husband enjoying every bit of excitement the seasonal changes bring in the Midwest. Schooled in natural resources but always a romantic at heart, she has been writing for as long as she can remember but just recently made the big jump into being published. You can visit Kristina on the web at kdiesen.blogspot.com.

Also available at Whiskey Creek Press are Kristina's stories *Whatever it Takes*, in the *Spring Flings Anthology* and *Wet, Wild and Willing*, in *Torrid Teasers Volume 10*.

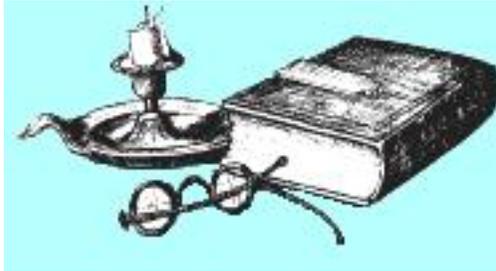
Brenda Williamson lives to write and create stories containing timeless love with sensual, sexy, and spicy themes. Forgoing household chores most of the time, she has a great husband and one son whom put up with her many long hours hidden behind a computer. For contemplation she sits on the porch swing and watches nature inspire from her country home. Some other books with WCPT include: *Range War Bride*, and *The Witch Stone*.

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