

Midnight Showcase

Erotic-aah Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-23

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The Prize of Queens, Megan Hussey

Brumbies, Ricci Love

Claiming The Lamb, Meagan Hatfield

Three Shakes of a Wolf's Tale, Michael Barnette

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

Special Edition Vol. 06-23

Jaded Beasts IV

Horse - Sheep

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
www.midnightshowcase.com

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

Published by
Midnight Showcase
PO Box 300491
Houston, TX 77230 USA

www.midnightshowcase.com

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ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-23

Credits

Editors - Anna Fallon & Nancy Schumacher
Copy Editors – Jane Carver & Mae Powers
Format Editor – Jewel Adams
Cover Artist: Carmel St. James

Printed in the United States of America

Jaded Beasts IV, Horse & Sheep

Horse – Edgy and egocentric they may be, but this sign is very smart and shrewd; and are also industrious, sociable and are often warm-hearted. They do tend to act condescending a bit, but do it with an innate grace.

Sheep – A talented, imaginative and refined person, this sign is very susceptible to being taken advantage of by others. They love to be surrounded by tranquility, can easily solve problems, are quietly passionate, and dislike war.

The Prize of Queens, Megan Hussey

Marguerite transforms into Pegasus when danger strikes, but fate sends her ranch-hand Cole to aid in stopping a thief who threatens their lives and love.

Brumbies, Ricci Love

Rebecca and Kurt are high powered business rivals. The brumbies are the wild horses of Australia. Join them in this magical love story.

Claiming The Lamb, Meagan Hatfield

An artifact in Lara's Year of the Sheep painting draws out an ancient evil and the lusty dragon lord sent to protect her from it.

Three Shakes of Wolf's Tale, Michael Barnette

Maryanne Lamb is working undercover to infiltrate a crime ring headed by the Wolf of Hong Kong but she's in for a big surprise: love.

The Prize of Queens
by
Megan Hussey

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<http://goldenmuse.tripod.com/>

The Prize of Queens
by
Megan Hussey

Chapter One

If Peter Martin lived to be hundred years old, the boy swore he'd never forget the sublime sight of the Pegasus. And, thanks to the Pegasus, he just might live long enough to get that opportunity.

Taking full advantage of a sun-soaked Sunday morning, one he felt was best spent in the dew-glistened azure meadows of Bayville, Florida, the 14-year-old made quick, restless apologies to his sleepy-eyed mother and escaped their cramped homestead.

Then, running swiftly into a meadow that bordered their hedge-lined, carefully landscaped property, he yelped and turned restless circles in his favorite bed of dandelions. He threw his head back and basked in the breezes of a flawless Florida morning. And he ran barefoot through soft, dewy grasses toward an uncertain destination.

Soon, he supposed, he would abandon this nature made haven to visit its owner, his neighbor, Marquerite O'Mara. Peter harbored something of a crush on Marquerite; a tall, sturdy woman with broad shoulders, an easy laugh and sparkling green eyes that always reminded him of his grandmother's emerald bracelet.

Unlike those tanned swimsuit models, the pouty lasses whose images flooded his father's desktop calendars, Marquerite seemed more at home in a pair of jeans than a thong bikini. Still, even Dad admitted, she cut a fine form astride one of her prized palominos, the soft, curly strands of her fire-red hair flowing freely in the breeze.

Despite their shared wonder at the vision of Marquerite, sitting tall as she did in the smooth leather saddle of a sleekly maned ivory

charger, Peter and his father, Roland, also shared a common curiosity. Why, they wondered, did she always ride alone?

Marquerite acted as the sole owner and proprietor of the Jaded Lady Ranch; a sprawling, tree-lined fifty-acre property she shared with a stable of five palominos. These stately animals claimed consistent blue ribbons at state and county fairs, as well as national horse shows.

Peter sometimes watched as the horsewoman groomed and shod her prized charges. He noted that, while Marquerite always seemed a beaming, sweet-natured woman, her horses easily earned her broadest smiles.

“And while she’s always friendly to my parents and me, she just seems more relaxed around the horses,” he mused.

Even so, he always looked forward to their Saturday morning chats in her clean, though decidedly rustic, kitchen. She always offered him freshly made bundt cake and some inside advice on the art of horsemanship, a profession he himself intended to investigate right after high school.

This morning, in fact, he intended to ask what he considered an all-important question: if Buttercup, his prized Arabian mare, was ready and qualified for her first jumping exhibition.

First, though, he wanted to enjoy a little more time outdoors. With that in mind, he ran forward toward a narrow cliff that stood at the back of Marquerite’s property and overlooked a flowing brook. This narrow body of water literally sparkled this morning in the beams of the overhead sun. And, as always, Peter took a moment to admire and bask in its crystalline radiance.

His quiet observations were jarringly disrupted by the sound of a low, savage growl, followed immediately by the ring of a vicious bark, sounds that slashed the air above him and prompted the boy to turn sharply in their direction.

Peter’s eyes flew wide open as he desperately sought an escape. Then he screamed outright as, staggering backward, he slipped on some gravel that lay precariously underfoot and careened over the side of the cliff.

Legs and arms flailing wildly, Peter tilted his head upward and opened his mouth to scream again; this cry dissolved into an open-mouthed gape as he saw a massive winged creature appear suddenly above him.

At first, the mysterious entity resembled a sleek cloud of pristine ivory that hovered low overhead. It soon became apparent, though, that the cloud had wings and a long, sleek tail, not to mention a silky mane that framed a noble nose and vivid emerald eyes. The creature also boasted a strong, sturdy mouth; one that now grasped Peter's shirt collar and pulled him safely to the opposite side of the cliff. Setting the boy gently on his feet, the creature then executed a smooth landing of its own.

Peter looked briefly across the water to see the once ferocious dog retreat quickly from the side of the cliff. His sharp, low whimpers indicated his shock and wonder at the creature before him.

"No doubt," Peter breathed as he turned to face the rescuer he almost feared. "I hear ya', Buddy."

Face to face, the creature radiated with a sheer luminosity that enveloped its entire being, an illusion that created an ethereal, almost angelic effect.

Yet, instead of likening the creature to the archangel Gabriel, this heavenly spirit bore a distinct resemblance to a creature in need of a hoof pick.

It looks like one of Marquerite's horses, he pondered, shaking his head in sheer wonder. *Only, as far as I can rightly recall, none of those critters spout wings.*

Come to think of it, horses, on a general basis, just weren't supposed to fly.

Peter's eyes rolled heavenward, and he fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Chapter Two

Marquerite O'Mara bit her lip self-consciously as she regarded the boy who lay quiet and still in the soft depths of her white velvet couch. Peter shifted restlessly, seeming to fight the haze of unconsciousness that currently held him captive.

Even as his caregiver pressed a warm, moist cloth to his forehead, trying desperately to rouse him, she also hoped he would retain no memory of the sight that undoubtedly prompted his fainting spell.

Earlier that day, Marquerite was enjoying a quiet morning walk when she saw her young neighbor just a few feet away from her, with his back turned in her direction. Poised to call out a neighborly greeting, she instead gaped, in utter petrified shock, as she witnessed his fall.

First, she spotted the mangy dog and heard, all too clearly, its vicious bark. Then she heard Peter's horrified scream and saw the boy plummet from the edge of the cliff.

She knew that, as a human being—one often acknowledged for her strength and tenacity—she could not move quickly enough to save her young friend.

Ah, but the Pegasus could.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Marquerite quickly set aside her momentary misgivings and shut her eyes tight. She vigorously flexed her arm and leg muscles so that all tension fled in a wave from her body then relaxed as a warming strengthening white light flooded her subconscious. This psychological force field soon spread to her arms, legs and finally her heart—until her entire being basked in the depths of a warm spectral glow.

As always, she exhaled sharply, experiencing the transference; a process that gave her ultimate power and restored her to what she truly considered her natural state.

She sighed in marked relief as she once again regained her wings, those two long, liberating appendages that seemed the most natural part of her being.

And the wings did not stand as the sole byproducts of her magical transference. Whenever some leering chauvinist told Marquerite she had ‘a nice pair of gams,’ she wanted to shout back, “I have two more where that came from, Buster. Mind if I test them out on your rear?”

Today, though, the bliss of the transference proved short-lived, and her newly spouted mane blew recklessly around her head as she raced forward toward the cliff. Taking full advantage of her renewed power surge, Marquerite soared, in her Pegasus form, above the sparkling brook. Swiftly she caught the falling, floundering body of her neighbor and friend.

Although she initially intended to deposit the boy safely on the cliff’s left bank, this plan swiftly changed when he fainted. So, she instead resumed her human form then carried Peter to the sheltering confines of her nearby ranch house.

This task seems a lot easier with four arms—legs—whatever, and a pair of wings, she rolled her eyes heavenward. *Though I never have gotten used to that long, wide snout.*

Her musings were disrupted by the sound of a low, sharp moan, one released by the young man who now opened his eyes and blinked questioningly in her direction.

“Marquerite?” Peter’s voice sounded soft and weak. “Where am I?”

Beaming, his hostess squeezed his hand. “You’re at my house, Peter. You suffered a nasty fall, but don’t worry; everything’s going to be all right.”

The boy nodded, but his brow furrowed noticeably. “What on earth was that creature that saved me? That thing?”

Cringing at the boy’s blunt, decidedly unflattering description, Marquerite shrugged.

“I don’t know who or what saved you,” she told him, her tone low. “I found you unconscious on the far bank of the brook, just opposite the cliff.”

She cringed at the thought of deceiving a friend—especially one as young and trusting as Peter. Yet, even he would never understand. No one ever could.

She quickly changed the subject. “I have a piece of news that I believe will cheer you. Peter, I’ve noticed you have a real way with

horses, good grooming skills, a steady, sensitive riding technique, and a strong eye that senses thoroughbred quality in an animal.”

Immediately Peter brightened, and he rose slowly but surely up on the couch.

“You really think so, Marquerite?” His wide blue eyes shone with evident excitement.

“Indeed I do,” she nodded. “And, with that in mind, I want to offer you a summer job as my ranch hand at the Jaded Lady.”

The enthusiastic response that Marquerite expected was replaced by a deeply set frown.

“I wish you had offered me this job two weeks ago,” Peter sighed, shaking his head. “As it stands, Dad and I plan to show Buttercup this summer at jumping exhibitions. I visited you today to ask your opinion about that, to ask you if she is truly ready.”

Nodding, Marquerite patted the boy’s slight shoulder in tender reassurance.

“Only you can answer that question, Peter,” she told him, adding with a broad gesture, “Has she told you she’s ready?”

Peter snorted. “Okay, I’m still reeling from the idea that horses can fly,” he scoffed. “Are you telling me they talk, too?”

She stifled a sharp guffaw. “What I mean, Peter, is that a relaxed, confident horse is one that’s ready to compete. Does your horse tense up before she takes a fence? Or does she soar like the wind? Does she throw back her head when she runs? Or does she duck and snort like she’d rather be chomping hay? When you ride her, can you feel her power?”

Peter, to her delight, quickly nodded his keen assent.

“Yes, yes, yes, and...” he paused, and Marquerite chuckled as he ticked off her questions on his long, lean fingers. “Yes! Buttercup is ready.”

“Then show her to the world,” Marquerite encouraged, and she beamed as her rejuvenated patient jumped surely to his feet. “I’m sure I can find another ranch hand in these parts.”

Peter shrugged. “I don’t know if you can find someone as horse savvy as you are.” He cocked his head in apparent curiosity. “Do you think you lived as a horse in a previous life, Marquerite?”

Clapping the boy’s back, his hostess laughed in spite of herself as she walked him to the door.

“Something like that,” she gave him a conspiratorial wink. “Now get home to your parents. I’m sure they’re worried about you.”

* * * *

Marquerite worried later that afternoon, as she settled her aching body against the woven cotton comfort of her grandmother's rainbow-colored afghan; a cushiony garment that covered the surface of her slick mahogany recliner.

The afghan represented one of the few feminine accents in this room, which was practically decorated in a Southwestern motif; a style also highlighted by the presence of a broad, sprawling fireplace, paintings that depicted quaint countryside scenes and freshly polished cherry wood furniture.

Marquerite had designed and helped build this home ten years ago, shortly after her college graduation. Her lucrative career as a successful, nationally renowned teen show jumper bankrolled the home, as well as a stable of prized horses whose impressive show winnings continued to support their owner.

Yet, for her, the five horses of the Jaded Lady signified far more than a collective meal ticket. Her palominos shone as the jewels of Marquerite's crown and bore names that befitted that status.

Diamond Girl, Ruby Red and Sweet Sapphire were her prized mares; Sterling Silver and Prince of Gold, her noble studs.

They were, in fact, the only studs in Marquerite's life. After a few disastrous attempts at collegiate dating, the horsewoman resigned herself to a solitary existence. This way, she enjoyed the freedom to ride the range whenever she pleased. Moreover, she could assume the form of the Pegasus whenever needed and literally fly through open spaces, as per the gift bequeathed her at birth by a mystical grandmother.

Grandma Lucia studied and lived the tenets of the Chinese zodiac, and, with a single kiss, she infused in Marquerite the power of the horse—the power of the Pegasus.

By living alone, Marquerite could call upon this power whenever needed, as proved the case this morning. And, from time to time, she transferred simply for the joy of it, to truly savor her natural state.

Even so, she realized now that her days of freedom were numbered. The rigors of a busy horse show schedule, as well as the recent acquisition of several acres from a neighboring farm, exhausted her. Even after a full day's work under these frenzied conditions, sleep never came easily, this owing to recent reports of a horse thief in the area.

Two of Marquerite's neighbors had lost prized horses, also losing valuable income in the process.

For this devoted equestrian, the theft of one of her horses would feel more like the loss of a child. So, the time had come, she decided, to hire some help at the Jaded Lady Ranch. Now that Peter had rejected her offer, she planned to place a 'help wanted' ad in the local equestrian journal; one she herself wrote a column for on a weekly basis.

While she wrote "Straight from the Horse's Mouth" as a detailed missive about the latest equestrian events and techniques, Marquerite's next contribution to the Equine Journal would be far more abbreviated. It would read something to the effect, "Ranch hand needed at the Jaded Lady. Apply in person to Marquerite O'Mara."

Chapter Three

Cole Evanston couldn't believe his eyes—or his good fortune.

As a lifelong equestrian, he fervently followed the career of Marquerite O'Mara; a championship show jumper who now groomed and trained the finest mounts in Florida, if not the entire southeast.

As a ranch hand, he envied her success. Although himself a seasoned rider and jumper, one who constantly honed his skills on his parents' twenty-acre farm, Cole's family couldn't afford to train him properly for the horse show circuit. He did attend these shows, however, and always marveled at Marquerite's skill and precision atop a horse. Moreover, he admired the gentle hand and exquisite patience she applied to her mounts.

As a man, he also admired the way her shoulder-length, flame red hair flowed beautifully behind her as she rode, and the manner in which her tall, broad-shouldered form sat so regally in the saddle.

For all the times Cole attended her shows, he never dared approach or speak to her. For while she always greeted her fans with kind smiles—and gave autographs whenever requested—Marquerite never engaged in long conversations with, or truly opened up to, her public.

And given the way the sumptuous redhead 'opened up' to him in his fantasies, he didn't want to see his illusions dissolved, to be just another adoring fan to the illusive horsewoman.

Friends told him not to worry; they assured Cole that his tall, muscular form, topped by a bronzed, sculpted face, luminous ebony eyes, and long waves of gold-tinged auburn hair, could win the attention of any woman.

"She's not just any woman," he assured them.

In time, Cole basically surrendered the idea of meeting Marquerite, that is, until he saw her advertisement for a ranch hand.

“As far as I know, she has never asked for help at the Jaded Lady.” He shook his head confusedly as he regarded her ad in The Equine Journal.

Cole knew he could handle the job. And since his younger brother Calvin seemed eager to assume leadership of the Circle C, their family farm, he felt free to venture forth on his own.

And if there's anyone I'd love to do some venturin' with, it's Marquerite O'Mara.

* * * *

Even when she didn't sport wings, Marquerite O'Mara knew how to fly.

She now took in her breath as she crouched low over the neck of Diamond Girl, a sleekly coated ivory palomino. The mare, too, rode in particularly strong form this morning, as she and her rider easily took the white posts erected in Marquerite's meadow.

Like me, she loves to run free through a Florida morning. Marquerite almost 'whinnied' herself as she soared toward the azure sky, one with the horse that launched her high into the heavens.

All too soon, though, the moment passed. And Marquerite made a hesitant return to earth.

Swooping in for a smooth, seamless landing in a bed of emerald-hued grass, Marquerite stroked Diamond Girl's neck and clucked her tongue softly. Then, raising her head, she glanced briefly at a white picket fence that adjoined the meadow then did a swift double take as she realized that another ethereal creature now occupied her property.

Like the horses that walked her land, this creature too had a long, luxurious mane; yet, his was decidedly darker, and shone almost bronze in the sunlight above him.

This hue, in turn, matched his skin, which seemed kissed by the sun. And his eyes shone forth in a captivating shade of midnight ebony.

Allowing her gaze to wander just a bit lower, she noted the stranger's broad shoulders and bulging chest, both covered quite fetchingly in a form-fitting black shirt.

A pair of sinfully tight blue jeans covered his long legs, which now carried him forward into the meadow.

As the man drew closer, Marquerite noted that his strides were smooth and imbued with confidence. And he dazzled her with a full-toothed smile as he came abreast of Diamond Girl.

Indeed, even the horse was not immune to his obvious charms. She wagged her long, smoothly groomed tail and snorted in apparent appreciation as the stranger stroked her neck.

"I see you have a way with the ladies." Marquerite winked and added, "Especially the four-legged variety."

The man before her chuckled then offered his hand. "I'm Cole Evanston. I'm here to find out more about the ranch hand position."

As Marquerite grasped the stranger's hand, she momentarily lost herself in the firm masculinity of his touch—and in the deep dark eyes that seemed to study her so thoughtfully.

"You seem familiar." The horsewoman cocked her head. "Are you Mack and Deirdre Evanston's son?"

Cole nodded. "I've run their horse farm for ten years," he shrugged. "For a ranch of its size, it produces good horses and quality hay." He raised his eyebrows. "Some say there's a direct correlation."

Marquerite smiled slightly and nodded. "Your family and ranch both boast excellent reputations," she nodded, affirming his words. "And frankly, Cole, excellence is what I need for this position."

She continued with a deep sigh, "During the past few months, my ranch has experienced its own growth surge; so much so, in fact, that I'm constantly running my horses from one show to another. And when I'm not on the road, I tend my land."

Again, Cole dazzled her with a radiant beam. "And you do both very well. Marquerite—if I may be so bold as to call you that—I've seen you ride at many shows." He paused, eyes suddenly alight with what appeared to be sheer wonder. "You're amazing."

Ducking her head, Marquerite grinned almost shyly and gestured toward Diamond Girl.

"Thanks, but the horses are the amazing ones," she corrected gently. "I'm just chief cook and bottle washer around here." More seriously, she added, "I'm also the owner and guardian of my stable, a responsibility I take very seriously. And I've been very concerned about the rash of horse thefts that have hit our community this summer."

Cole's smile disappeared, and he nodded grimly.

"My neighbor got hit last week." His eyes narrowed in what appeared to be a show of raw, indignant anger. "Like my family, the Brinkmans use their horses as work animals. The loss of a horse means a loss of income; it's a big hit."

“The situation is also tough for show jumpers,” Marquerite gestured expressively and said, “Especially when you’re talking about a fine animal like the palomino.”

She paused to gaze admiringly upon the soft, luminous coat of her current mount.

“A horse of royal lineage.” Her voice was low and reverent. “The prize of kings.”

Her eyes widened as a firm, bronzed hand appeared across Diamond’s ivory neck, providing a startling contrast.

“In the case of your stable,” her visitor intoned, “the prize of queens.”

“You’re hired,” Marquerite breathed.

Chapter Four

When Cole reported to work the next day, the first sight that met his eyes was one that brought a welcome smile. It was the vision of a laughing Marquerite, riding another of her prized horses and carrying on what seemed to be a spirited conversation with a boy on an ebony mount.

Both waved broadly as they spotted him at the fence, and soon, per Marquerite's instruction, he rode beside them on the back of the stallion, Sterling Silver.

"I'm Peter, Marquerite's neighbor," the boy extended his hand, adding in what Cole considered a charmingly official tone, "You know, she wanted me to be her ranch hand this summer. Unfortunately, however, I encountered prior commitments and scheduling conflicts."

The boy graced Cole with a brief, sharp nod. "I'm sure that, in place of myself, you'll fill the job just fine."

Stifling a sharp guffaw, Cole nodded his thanks. "Thank you, young man. I feel much better now."

He truly did feel better a moment later, as he rode fast and free through Marquerite's meadow, at the side of his equestrian idol.

Her advanced trotting and posting techniques greatly impressed him; he marveled at the sheer fluidity of her motions, and the fire that filled her radiant eyes as she charged boldly forth into the meadow.

Following this emerald gaze, Cole admired the towering stands of oak and orange trees that bordered her land, and the bountiful beds of lavender violets and lush crepe myrtle plants that lined the meadow before them.

Throwing his head back, he rejoiced in the feel of a light morning breeze as it lifted the strands of his long, thick hair upward around his head—which he turned just in time to catch Marquerite's probing gaze.

In his interactions with her yesterday, Marquerite's expression had seemed pleasant but guarded, her manner well befitting a perspective employer.

Now that she was in what seemed to be her element—a horse's saddle—her ivory-skinned face wore a full-toothed smile. Her eyes and cheeks, meanwhile, simply glowed.

Suddenly, impulsively, he wondered what she would look like in bed, underneath him—after he pleased her thoroughly.

These heated musings were startlingly disrupted by the sound of a loud, shrill voice, one that rang out suddenly and loudly behind them.

“Peter!”

Cole saw the summoned boy blanch visibly then turn in the direction of the authoritative cry.

“I'm fine, Ma.” He waved reassuringly at the slender, graying woman who now stood at Marquerite's fence.

Kate Martin only glared and pointed a firm finger in his direction.

“Son, did I not ask you to stay home this morning?” she demanded.

Cole threw Peter a sympathetic glance as the boy dipped his head self-consciously. “I finished all my chores before I came,” he muttered.

“With your father away on business, you have additional duties,” the woman reminded him, her lips firmly set. “And after that near disaster last weekend, I told you to stay away from her property.”

“I saved his life!” Marguerite protested.

Cole jumped as he heard the uncommonly pointed declaration pass the lips of his easygoing employer.

Their visitor, for her part, shook her head. “Peter claimed that some unusual winged creature caught him over the brook.” She narrowed her eyes in Marquerite's direction. “A fair number of strange occurrences seem to happen at this place, Ms. O'Mara.”

Cole cringed and was poised to defend his boss and friend when she spoke for herself.

“By contrast, Mrs. Martin,” Marquerite grinned, “Nothing much seems to happen at your ranch, and no one sees fit to come around it, not even your husband.”

Cole stifled a laugh. Peter only reddened and shifted restlessly on his mount.

“Mom, Marquerite did save my life,” he insisted. “She found me on the cliff and took me into her home.”

“And now you need to come back to your real home.” His mother, still glaring openly at Marquerite, planted her hands firmly on her hips. “If you want our ranch to produce enough money to finance your all-important ‘show tour,’” She sniffed out these last words in what Cole considered a brisk, haughty tone, “then you have to come home and help me out.”

Sighing deeply, Peter waved briefly at Cole and Marquerite and urged his horse homeward. His mother, for her part, said nothing as she turned away.

Cole waited until the two were out of earshot before turning to Marquerite.

“Pay her no mind, Marquerite,” He patted her arm reassuringly. “Everyone knows her as the Bitch of Bayville.”

Marquerite warmed him with an affirming smile. “Thanks, Cole.”

Pausing, she shook her head and sighed deeply. “I’ve made every effort to be friendly to that family—and Peter and his dad are friendly neighbors.” She rolled her eyes. “I eventually gave up on winning over the Mrs.”

“Marquerite, she’s jealous of you,” Cole insisted. “You found success on your own; she had to marry it. And, despite their combined efforts, the Martins’ ranch has struggled for years.”

Pausing, Cole once again laid his hand on Marquerite’s bare, sweat-beaded arm. “You just keep on shining.”

If Cole had made this observation before he met her, he would refer strictly to Marquerite’s career.

Yet, now that he stood before her, faced with the sheer luminosity of her ivory skin and the gentle upturn of her cherry red lips, his thoughts were anything but businesslike.

“Marquerite, could I take you to dinner tonight?”

* * * *

“This wasn’t precisely what I had in mind.”

Cole literally screamed over the pulsating rhythms of a country western jukebox, one located in the corner of a Bayville pizza parlor with checkerboard tiles and slickly surfaced booths.

Marquerite chuckled as she noted the firm pout on Cole’s full, admittedly luscious lips and the puppy dog gaze that currently colored his wide dark eyes.

“Well, Cole,” she spoke between sizable bites of succulent pepperoni, “what exactly did you expect?”

She cocked her head as Cole released a long, slow breath.

“I hoped to find a quiet restaurant—maybe get a good steak and learn more about you.”

Marquerite chuckled. “Well, the first thing you should know is that I don’t do fancy restaurants; it would involve the wearing of an ancient, mummification-based torture device some call a ‘dress.’” She cringed in an exaggerated show of distaste. “Anything else you need to know, you can ask just as well right here; you’ll simply be competing with the amplified strains of the chart-topping ditty ‘Honky Tonk Honeymoon.’”

She shivered slightly in spite of herself as Cole’s intriguing eyes crinkled adorably at the corners, and he released a low, manly chuckle.

“I do admit I’m having fun here.” He reached across the table and grasped Marquerite’s free hand. “And it’s all your fault, Miss.”

Marquerite smirked, and shook her head. Men seldom referred to women of her age and physical stature as ‘Miss.’

“Well, I certainly don’t mind sharing a pizza pie with a handsome young man.”

Oh, why did she have to go and say that? Now he stared at her all misty-eyed, with those lips turned upward in a sensual smile.

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Cole’s tone sounded low and intimate. “I was beginning to think you only had an eye for the horses.”

Marquerite sat back sharply in her seat, eyes narrowed.

“I only have time for the horses,” she corrected. “And that’s fine by me. I know their intentions, and I can count on them to stick around. To accept me for who I am.”

A long pause ensued, after which Cole shrugged and folded his hands before him on the table.

“Okay, I’ll own up,” he released his words in an extended gust of air. “I was trying to ask you on a date.” He spread his hands in a seeming gesture of supplication. “I know you don’t date; you’ve stated as much in your column. I guess I hoped you would make an exception for me.”

With this, his gaze again warmed, sending an involuntary chill down Marquerite’s spine.

“I still hope to change your mind.” He leaned forward across the table. “If not, I want you to know something. I am honored to share a

pizza with Marquerite O'Mara. I am thrilled at the prospect of working at her ranch."

He again smiled, this time the dazzling, full-toothed beam that so charmed her the day of their meeting. "I would like to be her friend." He raised his eyebrows. "I also want to make one thing perfectly clear."

With this, his intense, sultry eyed gaze seared the depths of her feminine being. "If the lady ever yearns for a little excitement . . . or maybe she reads a book or sees a movie that sparks some feelings she hasn't experienced in awhile, and maybe she needs someone to act out a fantasy that keeps her awake at night . . ."

Marquerite trembled as Cole's suggestive words sparked the quickenings of her heart and telltale wetness in her most private area.

"Cole, what are you saying?" she breathed.

Instead of saying anything, Cole surged impulsively across the table and captured Marquerite's lips in a short, seething, full-mouthed kiss, one that, while brief, carried a degree of passionate intensity that quickly stole her breath.

"What I'm saying," His eyes were wide and passion-dazed, his lips still dangerously close to hers. "Is that, just as I submit myself to you as an employee on your ranch, I'd gladly do the same in your bedroom—and in a far more intimate way. I'd gladly and willingly do whatever you wanted, in your bedroom, in the stables; surely you envision where you would take your pleasure, and in what manner."

"Want a serving of sausage, Marquerite?"

The woman jumped as Geneva Green, the owner of Bayville Pizza, approached. A former college roommate and longtime friend to Marquerite, Geneva graced her friend with what she perceived as a sly, catlike beam.

"Um, could we have the check please, Geneva?" Marquerite felt the color rise in her cheeks as she avoided Cole's probing gaze.

Moments later, Marquerite stood enveloped in the velveteen depths of nightfall; endless ebony accented by a sprinkling of luminous starlight. She savored the night and its mystery, as well as its eternal promise of forbidden pleasures. A woman could lose herself at night; the darkness would keep her secrets.

"Cole, do you have to go home right now?"

"No, Ma'am."

"I want to go for a ride."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Chapter Five

Dang it! If Cole Evanston lived to be hundred years old, he'd never understand Marquerite O'Mara.

And if Marquerite continued to tempt, torment and sexually frustrate him to the point of duress, leaving him feeling physically debilitated, he probably would never get the opportunity.

It turned out that when Marquerite expressed interest in 'a ride,' she meant atop a horse.

Drat his luck.

"I always find that, when I need to clear my head, a good ride does wonders for me." Her posture seemed stiff as she stood in the stables of the Jaded Lady, slipping a rose print saddle blanket over the back of the mare, Ruby Red.

"You know, we could find another way to relax you; one that would be more invigorating." Cole's tone was cool and smooth.

He sucked in his breath as he saw those ruby lips part ever so slightly—and a becoming blush rise beautifully in her cheeks.

Even so, he noted with a sigh, she soon turned once again to her horse. She seemed to seek understanding in the sheer ebony depths of the creature's wide, beneficent eyes.

Coming up behind her, he placed his hand on her broad, sturdy shoulder, savoring the feel of her sublime power as it rippled through her strong, but feminine, form.

Her words, however, were not as warm.

"It's too soon," she whispered.

Nodding, Cole patted her shoulder and returned his hand to his side.

"Then let's take a ride, Marquerite. This evening, though, let's share the ride."

* * * *

Soon Marquerite basked in the radiant onslaught of a Florida evening. Resting her head easily on Cole's strong, firm shoulder, she

murmured contentedly as she savored both his sheer physical strength and the divine honey tones of his masculine voice as he hummed a moonlit melody.

Cole hummed softly as he raised his hand from the bridle of Ruby Red to grasp and cover her own. As his song flew easily on the wings of an evening breeze, Marquerite closed her eyes and smiled.

Her peaceful reverie was startlingly disrupted by the sound of a high-pitched scream that rent the air around them.

Her eyes opening wide, she turned her head to see one of her most beloved neighbors, Ella Swinton, run briskly through the meadow toward them.

“It’s happened again!” Her words rang out in a frantic shriek.

“Ella?” Marquerite shook her head, baffled. “What happened?”

The short, graying widow resembled a tiny speck on the vast landscape of Marquerite’s property. Yet, her voice resounded loudly and clearly in the night.

“Elsbeth, my prized mare.” Tears loomed visibly in Ella’s eyes as she stood beside Marquerite’s horse. “She is gone.”

* * * *

“I just can’t believe this,” Roland Martin sighed deeply as he surveyed the shattered remnants of the lock that once fastened Ella Swinton’s stable door.

“I lock my stable securely every night.” Ella sank into the comforting arms of her neighbor, Marquerite. Cole, meanwhile, joined Roland in searching the stable area for any clues or evidence.

“We know you did, Ella.” Cole patted her shoulder. “The scum must have shot or blasted the lock open.”

Nodding, Roland narrowed his eyes in concentration as he fixed a new locking mechanism to the front of Ella’s stable. “As I drove home this evening, it’s a good thing I saw Marquerite at the side of the road, and she flagged me down.” He stood up, surveying the results of his handiwork. “And it’s lucky that I had all the supplies needed to replace your lock.”

“Thank you, Roland,” Ella nodded, and offered her neighbor a weak smile. “I won’t truly feel ‘lucky,’ though until Elsbeth is recovered.”

Marquerite hugged her reassuringly. “We’ll find her, Ella. I promise you; we’ll find all of them.”

* * * *

Early the next morning, Ella and Marquerite walked the open fields of the older woman's property with Sheriff Eugenia Dale, the presiding law enforcement officer in Bayville.

As Cole watched the scene from his place in Marquerite's field, he noted that all three wore expressions of complete and utter disbelief.

His assumption was verified a moment later, when his employer joined him in the field. "The thief left behind no clues, no evidence, nothing—not even footprints."

Cole started. "How is that possible?"

"I wish I knew," Marquerite sighed deeply.

She relaxed visibly a moment later, as Cole dug his hand into her broad, work-laden shoulder and massaged it thoroughly.

"You take your occupational title with great seriousness, Mr. Ranch Hand." Marquerite's intimate purr belied her light words.

Chuckling, Cole drew closer to Marquerite. He openly admired the way her heated emerald gaze betrayed the truth of her feelings and the way her ruby lips turned upward in what seemed to be a guilty smile.

"You deserve to relax." Stepping forward, Cole graced Marquerite's cheek with a warm, tender kiss. "You deserve pleasure."

"I deserve to know who is robbing my friends of their horses; of their very livelihood." Marquerite stepped back, scarlet lips now firmly set.

Cole's comforting hand rested steadily on Marquerite's shoulder.

"That leads to my next suggestion." He regarded Marquerite with a penetrating stare. "Since many of these horse thefts happen at night," Despite Cole's serious tone, his tongue caressed the word 'night' as though it was silken, "Would you like me to stay here with you tonight?"

He grinned slyly as a telltale flush flooded Marquerite's cheeks.

"Do you mean to stay in the guestroom?" Her voice betrayed a slight tremble.

Cole shrugged, his eyes searing her with a gaze of blatant seduction. "Whatever pleases the lady."

Marquerite opened her mouth to respond then closed it as she and Cole noted the approach of Sheriff Dale.

The tall, slender, generally beaming blonde today wore a pronounced frown that seemed to bespeak cautious reserve.

"Marquerite, we need to talk."

* * * *

As Marquerite sat across from Cole at her dining room table, she noticed that his seductive leer morphed quickly into a look of acute concern.

“Do you mean to tell me Marquerite has been implicated in the thefts?” He turned fully to face Sheriff Dale, who now stood, with arms folded, beside the table.

“Between you and me, I think it’s ridiculous.” Eugenia shot a sympathetic smile in Marquerite’s direction. “A few minutes ago, while walking Ella’s property, I met up with Kate Martin.”

Marquerite cringed slightly—Peter’s surly mother.

“Let me guess,” she raised her eyebrows in Eugenia’s direction. “She sent her best wishes and passed along her freshest strawberry pie for my enjoyment.”

Eugenia snorted. “If Ms. Martin has it her way, Cole here will have to slip you one of those pies with a file inside.”

Taking a seat at the table, the sheriff continued, “When I asked her what business she had on Ella’s property, she claimed to have a lead regarding the horse thefts.”

“Bless her,” Marquerite rolled her eyes.

Eugenia chuckled.

“She mentioned the fact that we’ve been unable to find footprints at these crime scenes, only hoof prints, as one would expect to see on a ranch. And she reminded me that, in each case, one set of hoof prints seems markedly different from the others; and in each case, this particular set leads directly to and from the crime scene, as if the stolen horse was lead away by another of its kind.”

Her eyes narrowed in what seemed to be a show of studied contemplation. “This seems, not only nonsensical, but downright impossible. Mrs. Martin, however, offered one possible explanation.”

Again, she shot Marquerite what the rancher perceived as a sympathetic glance.

“She claims that, after her son fell from the cliff on Marquerite’s property, Peter apparently credited his rescue to a strange winged creature.”

She shrugged and shifted uncomfortably. “A winged horse. And she claimed that Marquerite may have trained this creature to spirit the stolen horse away from Ella’s home.”

Cole guffawed. “And who, pray tell, were the evil accomplices of the nefarious Marquerite? Santa, the Easter Bunny and a wacky blonde fairy from the Emerald Isle?”

Marquerite arched her eyebrows curiously at this last assertion then shook her head.

“Eugenia, feel free to inspect every inch of my property,” she gestured out the kitchen window toward the vast azure vista that distinguished the Jaded Lady Ranch, “Including the stables. You’ll find nothing amiss.”

“I know that, Marquerite, because I know you. I’ve known you since grade school.” Eugenia stepped forward to give her friend a reassuring hug then shook Cole’s hand. “I will be forced to complete a walk-through of your property, including the stables. Hopefully this will clear the air and clear my way toward finding the real thief.”

Chapter Six

Marquerite sat quietly before the clear, rippling brook that defined her estate. Crouching low in a golden patch of dandelions, she hugged her knees to her chest and closed her eyes tightly.

The rhythmic ripple of the waters before her soothed her senses, as did the gentle breezes that swept easily through her flame red hair. And the birdsong, flowing from a nearby oak tree, added to the ambience, lulling her slowly into the past.

Soon she was ten years old again, enjoying a summer's day on her family farm.

At that point, she already knew she was different. The transference had happened several times—and she loved it, unabashedly.

What child, after all, didn't relate to a favorite animal? What little girl didn't love horses? And what child didn't dream of flying?

On stressful days, Marquerite retreated to this flowing brook and returned to the time when she cherished her gift.

Spreading her arms high above her head, she envisioned them as the Pegasus' wings.

If the transference makes me a freak of nature then why do I feel so natural in this state?

"Sometimes, in fact, I wish I never had to leave that state," she said aloud.

"Well, you look like you're about to leave for somewhere, with your arms a-flappin' all the way. I, for one, hope you stay."

Marquerite's eyes flew open, and she turned to face the other human occupant of her equine estate. "I'm just recalling a simpler, less complicated time in my life," she sighed wistfully.

Nodding, Cole eased slowly down on the grass beside Marquerite.

For a moment, the two sat in companionable silence, basking in the gentility of sweet Southern breezes and the radiant vision that distinguished a nearby bed of red and gold roses.

“Things will settle down, Marquerite,” Cole reassured her in a smooth, comforting tone. “Eugenia will find the real thief and the horses, and we’ll be able to rest easily.”

She took in her breath as Cole wrapped his firm, muscled arm securely around her shoulders.

She exhaled sharply a moment later, as he gathered her gently into his lap. Soon he cradled her lovingly against the surface of his firm, massive chest.

She sank easily in his embrace, amazed at the way her shoulders sagged and her body relaxed.

The only other time she truly relaxed was when she rode and, of course, when she flew.

“Cole.” She raised her hand to caress the planes of his smooth, bronzed cheek. “I’ve decided I would like you to stay with me at the ranch—just for safety’s sake, of course.”

“Of course.” Cole gave her a sly grin.

Marquerite cleared her throat. “And you can stay in the guest room, of course.”

“Of course.”

“We still will maintain a strictly professional relationship.”

“Of course.”

“You’re repeating yourself; if you weren’t so hot, it would be supremely annoying.”

“Of course.”

* * * *

“Mrs. Martin, why?”

Later that afternoon, Marquerite sat in the Martin family’s brightly decorated living room, a room accented by pastel furniture, as well as seashell pink curtains with matching shag carpeting.

The only dark point of the room, in fact, was the firmly set glower that marred the delicate features of Kate Martin.

“Why?” Marquerite gestured broadly as she repeated her earlier sentiment. “I know we’ve never been friends, or even friendly neighbors...”

“If I could will it as such,” Kate replied, slowly and deliberately, “it would have been you, and not my son, who fell from your cliff that day.”

Marquerite nodded and cocked her head. “Yes, well, thank you for sharing.” She extended her hands in a gesture of supplication. “Just so you know, Cole and I are building fences on both sides of the cliff.”

Snorting sharply, Kate waved away her attempted consolation. “Don’t post the fences on Peter’s account. I’ve instructed him to steer clear of you and your property.”

Pausing, she seared her visitor with a sullen glare. “You will not rob me of what is rightfully mine.” She raised a slender finger for emphasis. “In any respect.”

Marquerite started. “This isn’t about your husband, is it? I assure you, Roland and I are nothing more than friends and fellow ranchers.”

“To hell with him!”

Marquerite jumped as her hostess released these words in a furious growl. And her eyes widened as the woman paced tensely across the room.

“You have everything I want. And most of all, you possess the power.”

“The power?” Marquerite squinted in confusion. “Listen, I’d be pleased to help you build up your ranch . . .”

“Screw the ranch!” Kate balled her fists and stomped her feet. “You know what I mean.”

Marquerite grinned through gritted teeth. “Um, sure. Know what? As much as I hate to, I have to go now.”

Before you take a pick ax to my person, Psycho.

Marquerite nodded briskly as she arose from her seat and walked with quick, certain steps toward the door.

“Thank you for the coffee,” she offered, adding silently, which you probably poisoned, you Duchess of Dementia you.

Kate’s next words stopped Marquerite in her tracks.

“I know your secret, Marquerite O’Mara. And I will use it to destroy you.”

* * * *

Cole stood at the upstairs window of Marquerite’s guestroom, staring reflectively down at the vast expanse of emerald-grassed meadows that bordered her property.

He immediately recognized Marquerite’s tall form as it trekked the neatly tended landscape toward her home. He also noticed the uncharacteristic sluggishness of her movements and the way her shoulders sagged with the weight of her situation.

Marquerite, he decided, needed a distraction. And he would be pleased to provide it.

* * * *

Marquerite sighed deeply as she mounted the thickly carpeted staircase that led to the second floor of her home. Her head bowed with the ungainly weight of intense, complex concerns, worries that seemed to know no end or resolution.

Would she lose any of her precious horses to the thief who couldn't, wouldn't be caught? Would she herself be branded that thief and lose everything?

The sound of pounding, pulsating water sharply disrupted her troubled meditation. And lead her with steady, cautious steps into her bedroom.

She took in her breath as she immediately noticed some changes in her linear, orderly décor, starting with her very own bed.

Across her crisp, unruffled white comforter laid a pair of clean, but slightly worn, blue jeans and a tight white cotton shirt.

And on the floor, grazing the feminine folds of her cotton dust ruffle, stood a pair of sleek, gleaming leather cowboy boots.

"Damn." Marquerite shook her head. "Even the sight of his laundry does something for me. That's just sad."

Forcing her gaze beyond the bed, and into her adjoining bathroom, Marquerite faced an even greater temptation, the sight of her young, muscular ranch hand in the shower.

He had, she was relieved to see, closed the door before turning on the circular showerhead, the water resounding loudly from the confines of the stall.

Her senses came alive as she spotted the toned, bronzed outline of Cole's perfect form, which stood solidly under the onslaught of the descending water. His sleek auburn hair was plastered to the long, firm planes of his back, and, through the glass, she admired the sculpted outline of his long, muscled legs and taut, tight derriere.

After sweeping luxuriously across his unbelievably rock hard thighs, her gaze ventured daringly just below his trim waistline.

Even through the foggy shield of thick paned glass, Marquerite got a distinct sense of the length and succulent thickness of Cole's manhood.

His shaft, which descended gracefully beneath the planes of his sculpted abdomen, was not only long but also fully and beautifully erect.

I myself enjoy the lemon-scented shower gel he's currently squelching. She smirked slightly. *Apparently, though, he really, really enjoys it.*

Her smile dissolved to a full-mouthed gape a moment later, as Cole threw back his head, his long, wet hair flying wildly behind him. And her eyes widened as, in what seemed to be a clearly impulsive move, he took that glorious shaft into the confines of his masculine hand. His arm and shoulder muscles flexed repeatedly as he stroked himself into a state of full, undeniable arousal.

Chapter Seven

Marquerite watched, transfixed, as the descending water droplets continued to coat and cool his manly body.

Yet, they apparently failed to cool his intense passion, which soon was expressed in the low, enraptured moans that escaped his masculine throat.

Chills coursed the breadth of her being as she heard his moans of desire and saw the corresponding flex of his massive chest and the noticeable hardening of his long, luscious shaft.

“I shouldn’t be watching,” she told herself, shivering slightly. “This is a private act that clearly doesn’t involve me.”

Oh, but she was wrong, she learned, moments later, when Cole again pitched his head back and literally hissed her name.

Marquerite gasped then turned, walked quickly from the master suite and hit the staircase with swift strides.

Ignoring that secret part of herself—that naughty, forbidden inner impulse that called her back to the source of her temptation—she raced down the stairs and into the kitchen. Quickly, she retrieved a frozen chicken from her corner freezer and set about preparing an evening meal.

Her head was bowed low over her task—even when she heard his steps on the staircase. Even when she smelled his freshly showered, masculine scent. Even when she caught a glimpse of his hard, bare chest, still sprinkled with dewy water droplets that luminously defined his taut nipples and chiseled abs.

“Can I help you with anything, Marquerite?” His tone sounded low and suggestive. “Can I do anything for you?”

“Well, you can help me heat up this chicken,” she shrugged; adding silently, Insert your own vulgar, rather obvious joke here.

Cocking her head sideways, she regarded his partially naked form with narrowed eyes. “I’m going to get you an apron first.”

Soon, Cole stood close beside her in the kitchen, working quietly to prepare their evening meal.

The only problem was that ‘quiet’ never sounded so blasted loud.

His breath seemed heated and flowed freely through his thick, sensuous lips. And her heart pounded like thunder.

His nearness intoxicated her, and his fresh, clean scent continued to flood her senses.

She didn’t resist when he placed two firm, but tender, hands on her shoulders and turned her slowly toward him. And when his mouth covered hers, she could do nothing but savor the sublime sensuality of his kiss.

In fact, she sank with relief into his arms and basked in his kiss, pressing herself into the depths of his firm, masculine body.

Soon their tongues also touched, and entangled in a succulent tango that matched the soothing, massaging rhythm of his hands on her shoulders, down her back and finally around her waist.

She sucked in her breath as Cole literally swept her from her feet, elevating and exalting her in a passionate embrace.

Marquerite fell forward in his arms, losing herself in the bronzed cocoon of his massive, muscular body. She moaned in spite of herself as her sensitive nipples, still covered with a white cotton shirt, made startling contact with his masculine chest. And she sighed as the soft, silky strands of his long, thick, still damp hair brushed against her cheek.

She had to admit that his mouth thoroughly captivated her; caressing and playing her like a finely tuned instrument. He cradled her, yet the sheer strength and certainty of his grasp would not be mistaken.

She also perceived very clearly the heated intensity of his words.

“Marquerite, I must have you.” He grew temptingly close and nibbled her delicate ear, his hot breath falling hard on her neck.

His tone grew almost desperate as he pressed against her, demonstrating, as he did, the heaving of his perfect chest and the full, firm hardness of a second, newly formed erection.

“What will it take? What can I do to drive you over the edge—to make myself irresistible to you?”

Marquerite giggled then started at this unique and most welcome sound.

“Just love me, Cole.”

Marquerite exhaled sharply as he carried her from the kitchen. She shivered under the weight of his sultry gaze as he carried her up a nearby staircase and onward toward her bedroom.

“It’s been so long . . .” she shook her head, tone vague.

She grinned as Cole planted sweet baby kisses across the soft surface of her cheeks and chin.

This tender nurturance continued in her room, as her conscientious ranch hand set her tenderly on the corner of her bed. Kneeling almost worshipfully before her, Cole held her gaze as he took her weary, work-worn feet tenderly into his strong hands.

“What kind of ranch hand would I be if I didn’t put my hands to work, to ease my lady’s tension?”

“Your lady?”

Marquerite was about to correct Cole’s bold assertion, but, dang it, it just fell so easily on her ears. And his hands felt equally good as they freed her weary feet from the confines of her shoes and rubbed her soles, sending reams of healing energy through her body.

His hands, meanwhile, ran their way with torturous slowness up the denim-clad curves of her legs and thighs then gently massaged her hips. She purred, softly and winsomely, as her womanly areas were treated to the deep, probing strokes of his strong, sturdy fingers. And her gaze narrowed, in blatant desire, as his tender palms caressed her feminine nest through its sheer denim cover, a sensation that sent tiny bolts of electricity coursing directly to her nub, which already heaved and throbbed for his attentions.

This keen, almost agonizing sense of anticipation found quick relief, as Cole unfastened the clasp of her azure-hued jeans and unzipped them with almost torturous slowness.

Purring her anxious encouragement, Marquerite leaned forward to kiss Cole’s succulent lips. Then she buried her hands into the soft, luxurious depths of his long, thick, bronze-hued hair as he slipped her jeans, with luxurious slowness, down her sturdy legs.

Tossing back the soft, curly strands of her fiery locks, Marquerite hissed her approval as he stuck probing fingers into the confines of her soft cotton panties.

His fingers felt like electrical currents that sent waves of pleasurable arousal coursing throughout her body.

This sensation only intensified as his agile fingertips probed and massaged her feminine nest then reached between her sweat-glistened folds to rub and penetrate her clitoris.

Marquerite grinned, in spite of herself, as shards of electric ecstasy permeated her being and slowly overwhelmed her senses.

The grin dissolved to an open-mouthed gape as he removed her underwear and his fingers, replacing both with his tongue.

While Cole's warm, full lips slowly parted her moist, feminine folds, his tongue laved and lapped her aroused clit until it throbbed into his mouth, and he unashamedly devoured her, bringing her into the unfettered dimension of an intense, screaming climax.

Doubling over, Marquerite grasped Cole's beefy shoulders and practically lifted him from the floor. Then she used her substantial feminine strength to pull him physically onto her bed and boldly straddled him.

"Oh, Baby, yes." It was Cole's turn to throw his head back, his luminous hair falling beautifully across Marquerite's pillow and his eyes closing slowly.

With his eyelashes forming delicate crescents across the planes of his bronzed, sculpted face, Cole resembled an angel in ethereal repose; ah, but there was nothing 'angelic' or 'reposed' about the feel of his firm, muscled arms as they grasped her waist and brought her body down, with gentle and deliberate certainty, atop his own.

"Take me, Marquerite." He opened his eyes to sear her with a bold, seductive gaze.

All too pleased to oblige, Marquerite engaged him in an open-mouthed, passionate kiss as her hands canvassed his firm, muscular chest. She relished the feel of his bronzed, sweat-beaded skin and enjoyed his expression of quiet contentment as her firm, but gentle, touch stiffened his nipples and prompted that flawless chest to rise and fall with deep, labored breaths.

She grinned further as she felt his impressive manhood swell between her legs, raising her body and exalting her before his eyes. Releasing yet another giggle that bordered on girlish, Marquerite slid jubilantly down the length of his lean, muscled body, scanning the surface of his flawless skin with famished hands and eyes.

Soon, she faced the succulent length of his golden, deliciously erect shaft.

Then she devoured a new and uncommon treat, suckling the massive length and breadth of Cole's cock while flicking its delicious surface with her tongue.

Yet, the real treat for both arrived moments later, as he grasped her hands and pulled her slowly, gently upward until their heated gazes met and locked.

Their lips soon followed, as they kissed deeply and passionately. Marquerite lost herself in Cole's tight, heated embrace. Soon she lay beneath him and savored the whole of his masculine strength; an essence balanced by both sleek beauty and sweet, tender nurturance.

Again, they kissed, their mouths and tongues devouring one another with the heat of unleashed passions. Marquerite thrilled, as Cole's bronze-tinted feather soft hair descended against her cheek, and his wide, dark eyes pinned her with a penetrating gaze.

"Do you know how long I've waited for this?" He leaned down to plant a firm, hot kiss on her forehead. "How long I've fantasized about you? How long I've desired you?"

These last words came out on a long, heated breath, and he descended upon her in a frenzy of reverent desire. His body became a blanket that coated and enveloped her, and he cradled her with a gentle, refined mystery that nearly suspended belief.

Then, finally, she exhaled and surrendered. Throwing her head back, she swept Cole into the loving cocoon of her arms as he kissed and nibbled her neck.

Both moaned, and their voices lifted and mingled in a sensual symphony as she spread her long, toned legs to accept his advances.

Cole pressed his body fully into hers and finally allowed his long, erect shaft to probe then penetrate her.

She marveled at his never-ending resource of gentility and restraint, even as he probed her, his hands clutching her shoulders. His fantasy fulfilled, he was ever tender and loving . . . but still quite passionate, as he demonstrated through the final mighty thrust that sent them hurtling over the edge.

Cole's deep, honey-laved growl seemed to emanate from the haze of ecstasy that enveloped Marquerite, and her own body erupted in shards of unbridled ecstasy. Her heart pounded, her pulse soared; her entire body radiated with the heat of an explosive climax.

She gasped for breath as she wrapped her arms around Cole's massive shoulders. Her arms trembled and quaked.

Oh boy. She rolled her eyes, blowing a sharp gust of wind that lifted the strands of her fiery red hair. *I'm in trouble. Deep trouble. And how.*

Chapter Eight

Later that night, Peter Martin saw an unthinkable spectacle—for the second time.

Unable to sleep, he peered out his window to admire the velvety skyscape of a stormy Florida night. Instead of witnessing an atmospheric vision, pure and uninterrupted, he saw the graceful soaring of a winged creature that shattered the darkness with an unmitigated ivory invasion.

While sleek, winged and white in hue, the creature seemed far too large to be a bird. It was clearly of equine origins.

“Mom!”

Peter’s eyes opened wider, and he trembled in spite of himself.

Far from being a phantom or dream, the creature he saw the day of his fall was evidently real. And it had returned.

“Mom! Come quickly! It’s back!”

Kate Martin already stood in her son’s doorway, one hand planted firmly on her hip.

The other held a camera.

* * * *

Marquerite soared freely through the open air, her jubilant mood further enhancing her pure, radiant essence, an essence especially showcased in her natural form.

As Marquerite, she rode high; as the Pegasus, she flew. As Marquerite in love, she flew highest of all. And now she felt one with the sky, dancing a flawless tango with the majestic moon that ruled the night around her. Indeed, that all-illusive beacon seemed easily within her reach. And she took it as easily as a mare took a white picket fence.

The night belonged to her; her heart belonged to Cole.

Marquerite returned to her natural form and to her bed early the next morning.

“But have I returned to my senses?” She buried her head in her hands as she regarded the slumbering form of her handsome ranch hand.

For so many years, she successfully resisted most suitors, constantly afraid that one would discover her secret. Anyone who drew too close immediately gained the power to reveal and ruin her. As a successful single woman, she found the security and peace of mind needed to lead a sane, fulfilling life.

So why do I, at this point, have to go and screw it up so thoroughly and royally?

Her troubled musings were startlingly disrupted when, in an unexpected move, Cole sat upright in bed. His wide, dark eyes flew open as he swept Marquerite into his arms and pressed her sweat-glistened naked body fully against his own. Soon his lips once again devoured her, suckling her breasts, nibbling her neck and finally covering her mouth.

As the couple lost themselves in a long kiss that was both heated and leisurely, he laid her gently into the depths of her soft feather bed then covered her body with his.

“I just awoke from a dream.” He cupped her face in his masculine hands and melted her with a searing gaze. “Then I saw my dream was real, true and lying beside me.”

And soon he was inside of her, heatedly pumping all coherent thought from her worry-ridden mind.

Once again, she lay sated and exhausted in his arms.

Okay, so that’s why I have to go and screw up my single life so thoroughly and royally. Glad he clarified.

* * * *

That afternoon found Cole and Marquerite once again on the back of a horse; only this time, the owner of the Jaded Lady Ranch took the reins.

Picnic basket in hand, Marquerite escorted Cole to her favorite lunch spot, her own emerald-grassed meadow. The two stopped to admire the smooth crimson roses and lavender lilacs that lined the meadow but chose the bank of a jewel-hued stream to share their noon feast.

And a feast it was, thanks to Cole’s culinary skills. He prepared roast chicken sandwiches, coated with gourmet mustard, for their lunch, as well as sumptuous fruit salad and homemade chocolate pudding.

Marquerite parked herself squarely on Cole's lap as he spoon-fed her heaping helpings of lunchtime treats. Afterward, she laid her head on his chest as he lovingly stroked her straight, sturdy back.

"You take such good care of me." She nestled sweetly in his embrace.

"It's about time someone did." Drawing back, Cole cupped her cheeks in his tender grasp and kissed her. "Why is it, Ma'am, that such a warm, vibrant, utterly sexy woman remains single?"

Marquerite openly basked in the smoky warmth of Cole's intense, dark-eyed gaze. Though happy, she shifted uncomfortably in the wake of his words.

"My life revolves around the horses." *And that's no lie.*

Cole shrugged. "Well, my ranch work is important to me, as well." He cocked his head curiously. "It's also important, though, to make time for a personal life."

It was Marquerite's turn to cock her head.

"And rumor has it," she nudged him playfully, "that you, sir, have made plenty of time."

Cole blushed in response. *The man even blushes hot.* Marquerite curled her lip vindictively. *Drat him to blazes!*

"To use a hopelessly rural stereotype, I guess I have sewn some wild oats." He shrugged. "My main focus, though, was always my family farm."

He paused and kissed her soundly.

"That is, when I'm not reading your column in The Equine Journal." He ran a tender hand slowly down her cheek. "Wondering at the woman behind those words."

Marquerite grinned but shook her head. "Does the mention of bridles and reins turn you on?" She cocked a sardonic eyebrow. "If so, maybe we should take a trip into town some evening, to my friend Mitzi's extra-special 'adult novelty' store."

The radiant ring of Cole's ebullient, deeply intoned laughter disrupted her word flow.

"The fact that we share a common interest and occupation does turn me on, very much so." He rested his head on her shoulder then kissed her neck affectionately. "Beyond that, though, I really marvel at the intelligence and humor you invest in every word of your column."

Marquerite nodded. "And which 'Straight from the Horse's Mouth' column would you deem your favorite?"

Cole's smooth, sculpted forehead wrinkled adorably as he seemed to consider this question.

"I loved your profile of the last Derby winner. Very in-depth. And your essay about the beauty of a horse in motion was downright poetic. I'd have to say, though, that my favorite..."

"You don't have to say, Cole." Leaning forward, Marquerite pressed her lips warmly against Cole's. For a long moment they lingered, their mouths and tongues meeting in a sweet, leisurely kiss.

Finally, Cole withdrew though he still ran his hands lightly through Marquerite's coppery tresses.

"Well, that's much appreciated, Ma'am." He chuckled her chin playfully. "I was, however, just about to disclose the details of my favorite 'Horse's Mouth' column."

"And I would love to hear all about it sometime." Marquerite grinned and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "For now, though, it's enough for me to know that you can name and describe my columns. That's so much more than any man has been able to offer me in the past."

She paused, and tears filled her eyes. She sighed as Cole gathered her in a warm, light embrace.

"I'm here now." He hugged her almost fiercely to him. "I'm here for you."

Chapter Nine

Marquerite flew again the next morning, before a large audience of friends and neighbors.

Luckily for her, she was on a horse this time.

At the invitation of a local equestrian association, Marquerite rode Diamond Girl—one of her prized palominos—in an exhibition of show jumping.

Marquerite exhaled sharply as her horse soared in a radiant flourish above pristine ivory posts.

In her human form, this was the closest Marquerite came to freedom.

“At least, I thought so once.” She turned her head to wink slyly in the direction of a gentleman who stood in the front row of the audience at the horse show.

His impressive height effectively dwarfed those around him, and, even from a distance, she spotted the deep ebony hue of his eyes.

His flowing, bronze-auburn hair fell beautifully across his shoulders and was topped today by a charming, wide-brimmed cowboy hat.

A freshly starched denim shirt and a pair of tight blue jeans completed the picture.

“And very well, I might add.” Marquerite almost blushed as Cole rose to his feet, wildly applauding her winning completion of the jumping course.

Soon, Cole stood at her side, and he looked on with obvious pride as Marquerite received a multicolored banner and a dew-glistened bouquet of ruby red roses for her performance in the saddle.

“I’m so proud of you, Baby.” He planted a warm, affirming kiss firmly against her cheek.

“You go, Marquerite!”

The rancher turned to acknowledge the cheers of yet another devoted fan. Peter Martin stood in the second row, grinning and pumping his fist in the air with obvious boyish enthusiasm.

Marquerite continued to smile broadly as she waved in the boy's direction. The shivers that coursed her spine in the wake of a winning performance morphed perceptibly to chills, however, as her gaze shifted to the woman who stood staunchly beside Peter.

With her set mouth and narrowed eyes, Kate Martin didn't seem to share her son's enthusiasm. Marquerite, nonetheless, greeted her with a gracious wave and the slight hoisting of her victory banner.

Okay, maybe not so slight. Marquerite smirked, a playful leer that quickly dissolved as she felt the pure, unmitigated hatred of Kate's glare.

And she was not alone in this observation. Cole wrapped his arms protectively around her shoulders and smiled slightly as she tipped her head against his sculpted chin.

The smile did not reach his eyes. In fact, his gaze narrowed and hardened as it pinned his lover's rival.

His gaze held a certain warning. Hers answered with an outright threat.

* * * *

Marquerite and Cole finished the afternoon with a leisurely stroll across the sun-sprinkled hills of her meadow.

They fed the horses, gifting Diamond Girl with an extra apple for her superior performance in that day's show. Then they walked arm in arm toward the homestead.

"So," Impulsively, Cole grabbed Marquerite's ample derriere and blew suggestively into her ear. "How would you like to celebrate your big win in today's horse show? Would you like to claim your young, willing, passably attractive ranch hand as a trophy?"

Equally impulsive, Marquerite swept Cole's succulent form into two hungry arms.

"If you're 'passably attractive,' Michelangelo's Statue of David is kinda' cute." She seared his thick, sensual lips with a bold but tender kiss. "I would be proud, Cole, to claim you as my trophy. Anytime, Babe."

She frowned deeply, though, as Cole's previously pliant body stiffened abruptly in her arms. Following his concerned gaze, she spotted a powder blue truck that appeared in her winding cobblestone

driveway. The driver's door opened, revealing a short, petite woman whose coppery auburn hair mirrored Cole's.

Marquerite cocked her head. "Is that your. . ."

"Mother!" Cole's strides seemed long and almost desperate as he raced toward the driveway.

As Cole and Marquerite walked forward to welcome their unexpected guest, the rancher saw the reason for his concern.

The delicate, light-skinned face of Cole's diminutive mother bore a thin but noticeable sheen of freshly shed tears.

"Mom?" Within seconds, Cole stood at her side, and placed two reassuring hands on her quivering shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Deirdre Evanston sobbed loudly but then balled her tiny fists with a raw determination that Marquerite admired.

"He took our horse, Cole." Deirdre stomped her tiny feet. "The thief struck our ranch."

These last words released themselves as a low, anguished cry, and Marquerite cringed as Deirdre collapsed in her son's supportive arms.

"Oh, Mom." Cole drew his mother closely to him and tried desperately to rub some tender reassurance into her quaking shoulders. "When did this happen?"

Deirdre drew a deep, steadying breath. "Yesterday evening I saw some sort of a strange animal on our property, prancing and running with our horse, Mischief. It was late, and I didn't bother to investigate. Then this morning, I went out to feed Mischief, and his sister, Dandelion, and noticed that Dandelion was pacing restlessly across her stall; she just wouldn't stop."

Pausing, she sniffed loudly. "When I took the feed bag to Mischief's stall, I learned the reason. He was gone." Deirdre shook her head and spread her arms expressively. "Without a clue or trace."

Deirdre shut her eyes tight as Cole pressed his lips against her forehead. "Everything will be all right, Mom." His tone was low and soothing. "Don't worry about anything."

Marquerite shuffled uncomfortably then stepped forward.

"Ma'am?" She offered her hand to a sniffing Deirdre. "I'm Marquerite O'Mara, Cole's—um—employer. I'm pleased to meet you though sorry that we have to meet under such sad circumstances."

Deirdre nodded and managed a small smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Marquerite. Cole speaks so highly of you."

She grinned, waving an accusing finger in Marquerite's direction.

“Though I think you’ve been working my boy too hard. Whenever he visits home, he seems distracted and downright exhausted.”

“Ahem!” Cole and Marquerite cleared their throats in what she considered an impressive show of flawless synchronicity. “Cole is a good worker, very creative and energetic.” Marquerite felt the color rise in her cheeks. “You should be very proud, Ms. Evanston.”

“Call me Deirdre.” The proud mom displayed an endearing grin that mirrored her son’s. “And I can’t thank you enough for giving my son the job of his dreams.”

She nudged Marquerite and winked. “You’re his idol, you know.”

“It’s true.” Cole agreed readily, and graced ‘his employer’ with an endearing, flirtatious wink.

Marquerite ducked her head. “Aw, thanks.”

She stepped forward to grace Deirdre’s slight, slender shoulder with a reassuring pat. “If it would help, Deirdre, I could loan you one of my horses for use at your farm. Sweet Sapphire and Prince of Gold in particular are sturdy and strong, great workers.”

Deirdre beamed radiantly, her eyes suddenly and refreshingly alight. “You mean you would loan me an O’Mara palomino, a horse worthy of a king or queen, just to work my land?”

Marquerite shrugged humbly. “If it would help you.”

She started as tears formed in Deirdre’s dark eyes, further intensifying the wisdom and warmth inherent in her gaze. “Marquerite, I’m honored,” she whispered. “I can’t thank you enough.”

The rancher waved away her gratitude. “It’s nothing, Deirdre. Cole can take you to the stables now, if you like, and help you load a horse into one of my trailers, which you are also free to borrow.”

While Cole and Deirdre retreated to the southern border of her property, Marquerite headed for her kitchen, where she aimed to whip up some comfort food for her favorite neighbors. An hour and a half later, she enjoyed a rich tuna casserole and some freshly squeezed lemonade—alone.

In light of recent events, she worried about her absent guests. Surely, it wouldn’t take this long to choose a single workhorse, especially with Cole’s expertise. And as dusk descended on the Jaded Lady, signified by the streams of pearl pink sunset that flooded the

dining room window, she rose quickly to her feet and turned for the doorway.

She took in her breath as she saw that space occupied by a tall, sturdy, most familiar form.

His expression, however, was not so familiar; in fact, its stone-faced coldness made her twitch uncomfortably.

“Cole, what’s wrong?” She cocked her head curiously. “Where’s Deirdre?”

“We loaded Sweet Sapphire into a horse trailer, and I took her home.” His tone was low. “I’ll return both the horse and the trailer to you within a week, Marquerite.”

The rancher arched her eyebrows, wondering at her lover’s solemn, tight-lipped expression.

“No rush, Cole.” She managed a weak smile. “Take all the time you need.”

“I said a week, Marquerite.” Turning abruptly, Cole headed for the winding staircase that led to the upper floor. She was fast on his heels and wrapped her arms lovingly around his stiff, tension-wrought shoulders.

“Isn’t this just awful, Baby?” Sighing deeply, she rested her head against the back of his neck. “The thief has done more than claim our property. He’s destroying our peace of mind, our sense of security.”

Pausing, she tightened her grasp around Cole’s shoulders. “We have to find the culprit.”

Her brow furrowed as, in a sudden, unexpected move, Cole turned in her arms and broke gently, but purposefully away from her.

“If I had been home when the thief struck, I might have saved Mischief.” His words released themselves in a low, sorrow-laden voice that broke Marquerite’s heart.

His next words, however, assailed that same heart with shards of icy emotion.

“Instead, I devote all of my time, energy and attention to you.”

Although he didn’t sound angry, his tone held a tint of guilt and regret that tore at her soul. “Cole.” Grasping his shoulders, she turned the solemn man firmly in her direction and stared deeply into his eyes. “Do you regret our time together?”

Cole regarded her a moment then shook his head.

“How could I regret these past days?” His smile, while wan, was nonetheless warm and reassuring. “They’ve been the fullest, most perfect days of my life, Marquerite.”

Grasping her sturdy hands between his, he kissed them fiercely.

I have the work worn hands of a rancher, she observed quietly, tipping her forehead against his. *And he kisses them with such gentility—as though they were the slender, refined fingers of a duchess.*

All too soon, he dropped her hands and once again moved away. “For years, Marquerite, I devoted myself to a single goal.” He raised a stout finger for emphasis. “I was determined, not only to maintain my parents’ farm, but to make it a success—much like yours.”

He smiled then, his boyish grin making what Marquerite considered a welcome return.

“You’ve been a part of my life for so many years, in so many ways.” He spread his arms expressively. “As an inspiration, a role model...”

He paused, his eyes suddenly alight with passionate fire. “And, of course, you’ve been my deepest, most sensual fantasy.”

The warmth these words created within Marquerite extinguished. Cole frowned and folded his arms protectively before him. “Now, though, you are my reality.” He shrugged almost helplessly. “And as such, you’ve consumed my life and attention.”

She cringed visibly at these words; then, with some effort, she drew herself up and met Cole’s penetrating gaze head on. “Cole, I never required you to stay here,” she reminded him. “If you need to go home, see to Deirdre and take care of the horses, please feel free to do so.”

“I think it would be best.” Cole’s reply came too soon and certain for her liking. “I’m so worried about my family and our farm.”

Marquerite nodded and bit her lip sympathetically. And she didn’t resist as he drew her tenderly into his arms and covered her mouth with his.

She lost herself in Cole’s kiss and murmured approvingly as his smooth lips soothed and massaged her own.

The feeling faded all too quickly. “I’ll come back to you first thing tomorrow morning,” Cole said. He nodded reassuringly then planted a kiss on her mouth before finally pulling away.

“I know.” Marquerite nodded. “You’re never late for work.”

She smiled slightly as he seared her lips with a deep, intense kiss.

“I didn’t just promise to return to the job,” he reminded her, beaming warmly. “I said I’d come back to you, Marquerite.”

These words, while spoken warmly and with great passion, proved little comfort as she curled up in her rose-patterned comforter that evening, its warm, silken confines her only source of solace in a cold, solitary bed.

The paradise she discovered with Cole now seemed a distant dream; a rich, delicious memory that now seemed unreachable.

She sniffed his warm, musky scent in the satiny depths of her sheets. She saw strands of his silken auburn hair on her pillowcase and felt his gentle, but masculine, essence everywhere within the room.

Marquerite sighed deeply as she closed her eyes and settled into the tender cocoon of her comforter. She hoped desperately for sleep; instead, she saw the unwelcome image of her lover, standing naked and bronzed above her with eyes that seemed all-too-knowing.

With another deeply felt sigh, she sat upright in bed and grasped a nearby remote control. Clicking the on switch, she stared blankly at a screen that showed her the grainy scenes of a black-and-white murder mystery, one that apparently concerned a crazed serial killer on the rampage in a darkly-lit mansion.

“Okay, so there are people out there with problems worse than mine.” Marquerite pursed her lips empathetically.

Even so, she mused, her own life seemed rife with mysteries. Problematic puzzles that could not, would not, be solved.

This much, however, was clear. She had a thief to catch. And a man. Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Ten

The sound of knocking awoke Marquerite the next morning, rousing her from a restless, troubled sleep.

She squinted through tired, partially opened eyes at a clock that read 6 a.m.

“A little early, even for Cole,” she mused.

Marquerite stood up slowly, vaguely wondering if she should greet her lover in her nightclothes, if she should treat the sexy Cole to an early morning tease.

She chuckled as she realized that, in lieu of a sheer, sexy nightie, she had opted for comfortable sleepwear last night, specifically, her grandma’s old pinstriped flannel nightgown and some decorative (though hardly matching) powder pink bunny slippers.

“Well, this getup doesn’t exactly scream ‘seductress,’” she grinned slightly as she ran a brush through her mass of fiery red hair. “Perhaps I’ll opt for a bathrobe this morning.”

Moments later, her feet strode lightly down the hallway, and she grinned girlishly at the prospect of greeting Cole with a warm kiss of good morning.

Her smile dissolved as, instead of the tall, muscular man she expected, her front door opened instead to reveal two petite women, both of whom wore deeply set frowns of apparent concern.

In addition to this frown, Kate Martin’s green eyes blazed with an unmistakable fury. And Sheriff Eugenia Dale’s forehead wore lines of concern that marred her youthful beauty.

“Marquerite, are you busy?” Eugenia cocked her head, her tone noticeably strained.

The rancher shrugged. “If I told you I had a sink full of dirty dishes and downright rancid morning breath, could I postpone this little coffee clutch?”

Kate Martin leaned forward to stick a long, rude finger in Marquerite’s face.

“You can’t charm your way out of this one, O’Mara,” she barked. “I have evidence this time.”

Without further hesitation, Kate pulled a square, white-framed instant photo from her compact turquoise handbag.

Marquerite’s eyes rolled heavenward (a typical reaction, she noted silently, to the very presence of Kate Martin) then widened in shock as she investigated the photo.

The picture’s pure ebony background, beautifully illuminated by a sheer shower of stars and a luminous moon, depicted a commonplace night sky. Not so common, however, was the winged creature whose startlingly ivory skin stood in contrast to the darkness of the surrounding night.

“You look as if you see a ghost, Marquerite.” Kate Martin’s cutting tones sliced clearly through Marquerite’s shock-induced haze. “Or is it simply a shadow you see?”

Quickly regaining her composure, Marquerite narrowed her eyes sternly in Kate’s direction. “I refuse to listen to psycho babble, or stare at your bad perm, without the presence of my attorney.”

Eugenia cleared her throat. “Actually, Marquerite, I encourage you to call an attorney. And soon.”

Marquerite waved away her friend’s assertion then stood back to allow her and Kate entrance into her home. “I’m sure we can clear this up ourselves, in due time.”

Some time later, however, the matter remained unclear and particularly uncomfortable for Marquerite.

“Yes, so the creature appears to fly above my property,” she finally acknowledged, spotting the telltale image of her tall, crisply painted barn near the bottom of the photo. “How do you know it’s a genuine photo and not a digitally enhanced image?”

The sheriff shook her head. “I already considered that possibility,” she sighed. “I even searched the Martins’ home office but found no digital or photographic equipment.”

Even Eugenia cringed as Kate snorted indelicately. “You honestly believe that either my husband or I would have the technological know-how to pull off a digitally re-mastered photo?” The woman literally crossed her eyes in Marquerite’s direction.

The rancher beamed broadly then nodded her assent.

“Excellent point, Kate,” she acknowledged. “As a very occasional dinner guest at your home, I can verify that, between the

two of you, you just barely manage the preparation of a decent submarine sandwich.”

“Enough!” Eugenia held up one hand in the direction of the women, ceasing their heated conversation. “The photo is genuine, and it was shot on your property, Marquerite.”

“Okay,” Marquerite relented with a sigh then shrugged. “How does this relate to the horse thefts?”

The sheriff shifted uncomfortably. “As you know, we have been unable to find any trace of human footprints leading away from the crime scenes,” she reminded the rancher. “Also no telltale hair, skin samples or scraps of torn clothing.”

With this, the sheriff pinned Marquerite with a penetrating gaze. “Yet we have consistently found eight pairs of hoof prints leading from each crime scene.”

Eugenia waved an expressive hand high in the air above her. “The reason we haven’t been able to catch the thief is that he or she is not human. It’s a horse that lures others of its kind away from their ranches and into the thief’s clutches.”

Marquerite cocked her head. “Sheriff, if you weren’t a law enforcement agent, I would inquire as to the specific nature of the substance you’ve been smoking.”

The laughter Marquerite expected was replaced by a deeply set frown.

“Marquerite, you can train a horse to do anything,” Eugenia reminded her. “You, of all people, should know as much.”

“And if that is indeed the case,” Marquerite stroked her chin thoughtfully, “theoretically, Sheriff, any rancher could train their mount to become a ‘horse thief’, most literally.”

She grinned evilly in Kate’s direction. “Even Ms. Martin here could manage that much.”

Kate gaped openly in the face of this assertion. “What right or reason do you have to call me a thief?” she barked, emerald eyes flashing.

Marquerite sighed, and gestured almost desperately. “Kate, I came to your house last week in a feeble attempt to be a good neighbor. And the only response you could offer was one of jealousy; you kept insisting that I had something you wanted. For once and for all, would you be more specific?”

“You know what I want, Marquerite.” Kate’s gaze was dark and narrowed.

The two stared wordlessly at one another, their gazes locked in a keen, sublime tension that sparked the air around them. A tension broken by a loud, sharp sigh that emanated from the third person at the table.

“Would you two like to draw guns at dawn?” Eugenia cocked a curious eyebrow. “If so, I could reserve and rope off the parking lot at Pixie Mart tomorrow morning, and you ladies can have at it. For now, Marquerite, I need some answers.”

Marquerite released a long, exasperated sigh. “How do you know this winged creature is the culprit in the horse thefts?”

“Several victims have been questioned for information about the thefts,” Eugenia replied. “This Pegasus, I guess you could call it, has been spotted at several crime scenes.”

Marquerite started, and her mouth fell open. “Impossible,” she breathed.

“How do you know?” Kate’s smile was simultaneously sour and triumphant.

Marquerite glared openly at her smirking accuser but addressed the sheriff.

“How do you know the creature belongs to me,” the rancher asked, “and not my friendly neighbor here?”

Eugenia bit her lip then gestured toward Kate. “Kate can’t be the perpetrator.”

“Why?” Marquerite folded her arms before her in a defensive stance.

The sheriff looked at the suddenly, and in Marquerite’s view blessedly, silent Kate.

“Because this morning, she became the latest victim.”

* * * *

An hour later, Marquerite sat alone at her kitchen table. While her awkward morning visit was behind her, and her unwelcome guests had left, after conducting a complete investigation of her property, of course, their accusations rang endlessly in her mind.

How could Eugenia, her lifelong friend, suspect her of these thefts? How could the victims pin the crime on the Pegasus, when Marquerite knew all too well that her alter ego, while a curious and downright odd creature, to be sure, was no thief? In fact, when her blessed grandmother instilled within her the power of the Pegasus, a symbol of the Chinese zodiac, she had intended Marquerite’s alter ego as a true, natural extension of her strength, nobility and grace. The

Pegasus reigned as a force of good, a magnified version of the woman who embodied her.

Furthermore, when Marquerite assumed the form of the Pegasus, she never ‘blacked out’ or felt out of control. Whatever form she assumed, she remained still and always Marquerite.

Or did she?

At this point, I can't be sure of anything. She settled her elbows on the edge of the table and buried her head in her hands.

She looked up sharply as her front door opened to reveal the one person she still trusted.

Cole's bronzed skin, cheery, white-toothed smile, and warm, expressive eyes seemed like welcome rays of sunshine in her dark, dreary world. His towering height and muscular frame fed her wavering strength.

All of this was proverbial chicken feed, however, in comparison to his actions.

Cole offered her no words of comfort and no spoken romantic notions. Much to Marquerite's surprise, he descended lithely to his hands and knees and crawled slowly in her direction, his hungry, intense gaze holding and ensnaring hers.

She took in her breath as he swept aside her checkered tablecloth and slid smoothly underneath it.

“Cole, what on earth are you doing?” For the first time that morning, Marquerite laughed almost giddily.

The mystery soon was solved, as Cole kneeled before her legs and slid her nightgown slowly and seductively upward—leaving some soft, tempting kisses in his wake.

Even as his succulent mouth canvassed her bare, sensitive skin, she wondered at his ultimate intention. As his agile hands parted and massaged her soft, creamy thighs, her clit began to throb in sweet anticipation of his oral ministrations.

Her eyebrows arched curiously a moment later, as his massage grew decidedly more private. His fingers probed and tickled her sensitive feminine folds until they opened for him, widely and willingly.

His fingertips teasingly tickled her clit, now soaked with aroused wetness, straining for his attentions.

Cole's ultimate target lay just underneath, within the confines of her tight, slick pouch. Marquerite inhaled sharply as he worked his strong, manly finger into her vagina, probing and caressing, as it

seemed to search for a certain pristine goal. His other hand, meanwhile, continued to rub and stroke her thighs, hips and finally her famished clit.

Her breath suspended when she finally realized his intentions. While one hand massaged and stimulated her nub, the other sought the ultimate source of a woman's pleasure.

Marquerite just wasn't sure how much pleasure she rightfully could withstand.

"Criminy, Cole!" Marquerite's entire body exploded with hot, sharp spasms of sublime ecstasy. She trembled as his masterful fingers prompted her greatest pleasure, causing her heart to pound and setting her soul afire.

Finally, his fingers found their ultimate mark and ignited the internal feminine volcano known as a woman's g-spot.

Marquerite threw her head back and screamed outright as her body erupted; indeed, every inch of her being seemed overcome by waves of incredible orgasmic bliss. Then, just as the spasms subsided, her heaving clitoris erupted, treating her to yet another explosive climax.

Marquerite moaned loudly and reached down to bury trembling fingers into the silken strands of Cole's long, thick hair. A broad beam crossed her hot, flushed face as her breasts and womanly mound reverberated with tiny lightning bolts of sublime satisfaction.

Her grin broadened a moment later when suddenly Cole emerged from beneath the table and stood to face her. He buried his hands in the depths of her soft, flaming hair and pulled gently back until their gazes locked. Their lips came next, as they met in full for an intense, full-bodied kiss.

Finally he drew back to stare deeply into his lover's eyes. Smiling gently, he ran a tender hand slowly down her cheek. "Feel better, Baby?"

Marquerite nodded, and winked slyly.

"Yep, Darlin'," she nodded. "I'd say that most definitely qualified as a day brightener. And I assure you, further, that I definitely needed one."

An hour later, Cole again served her at her table. This time, though, the 'hot dish' took the form of a steaming plate of golden waffles drenched in strawberry syrup.

"Damn, multiples orgasms and homemade waffles, all in one sitting," Marquerite mused, and chomped happily on her breakfast treat. "This man is good. A keeper, I'd venture to say."

She nudged Cole playfully as he took a seat beside her at the table. "How did you know I needed a pick-me-up this morning?"

Cole grasped her delicate hand then raised it to his succulent lips for a soft, gentlemanly kiss.

"I saw Kate leave your house with the sheriff." His words were accented with a sympathetic beam. "I figured they weren't here for a social call."

"Not at all," Marquerite agreed, rolling her eyes heavenward. "Cole, they once again accused me of being a horse thief."

Cole gritted his teeth, and brought his fist down on the table in a sudden fit of anger.

"Why?" he demanded. "Where's the evidence? And how could it possibly be traced to you?"

Marquerite bit her lip then shrugged. "They claim that the thief has trained a horse to lure prospective prey away from their farms."

Cole shrugged. "You are the best horse trainer in the area, but you're far from the only one. The question still remains; why do they suspect you?"

It was Marquerite's turn to grit her teeth. *Dang it; I was hoping he wouldn't go and ask that question.*

She replied aloud, "Cole, the sheriff believes that a special type of horse is involved in these crimes, one recently photographed on my property."

Cole gaped. "A palomino? Again, I repeat; while you are the best palomino breeder in these parts, you are not the only one."

I just happen to be the only one that spouts wings from time to time. Marquerite snorted loudly. "The sheriff was referring to a specialized type of palomino. The same type that Peter spotted on my property a few weeks ago."

"Oh, you mean the winged creature?" Cole rolled his eyes. "Marquerite, do you honestly think anyone will believe an adolescent with an overactive imagination and his certifiably creepy mother?"

Marquerite waved away his attempted consolation. "Kate took a photo of the creature, Cole," she whispered, shaking her head sadly, "on my ranch."

Chapter Eleven

Cole snorted. “So Peter laid his hot little hands on a wicked cool computer photo program. And?”

Marquerite cringed visibly. As much as she disliked Kate, she did not want to see blame placed on the young, innocent shoulders of her longtime neighbor and friend.

“Peter didn’t create the picture,” she sighed. “No one did. It’s genuine.”

Cole cocked his head, and narrowed his eyes in blatant confusion; an emotion mixed, Marquerite believed, with more than a little concern.

“Sweetheart, you’ve been under a great deal of stress lately.” Reaching across the table, he covered her hands with his. “And we all know this Florida sun can have, well, adverse effects on people. Maybe we should get away for a couple of days.”

Marquerite squeezed Cole’s offered hands then raised them to her lips for a long, warm kiss. She realized, at this point, that she must tell him the truth.

And, at that point, he’ll send me on a nice, long vacation, she mused. *He might even buy me a decorative ivory straight jacket—with a matching pearl choker necklace—for the trip.*

At any rate, she realized, Cole must know the truth. And in lieu of telling him, only one other option remained.

“Cole, let’s take a walk.” She rose from the table and stepped purposefully toward the door, motioning Cole to follow. “Let’s go see the horses.”

Soon the couple strolled hand-in-hand through the dewy, crystalline grasses of Marquerite’s meadow. In marked contrast to other days, when Marquerite basked and pleased in Cole’s company, her shoulders now tensed as she contemplated an uncertain fate, both as Cole’s woman and as her own.

Could he accept her in her other form? Could anyone? And would anyone believe that, regardless of the physical form she took, she would never commit a robbery?

She almost cringed as Cole regarded her with sincere, loving eyes.

This is surely the last time he'll look at me in love. She forced a small weak smile for his benefit. After he sees the transference, his love will dissolve in a fit of confusion. Fear. Perhaps even hatred.

She shook her head, hoping to clear it of offending, downright frightening thoughts.

If he's going to love me, he must love all of me, she reasoned silently. *Including the Pegasus.*

Without further hesitation, Marquerite turned toward her lover and clasped his manly hands between hers. "Cole, I have to show you something, a very unique, rather striking part of myself."

Cole wiggled his eyebrows, obviously interested. "Do you have a tattoo inscribed on a particularly naughty body part?" He pursed his lips, seeming to ponder if there was indeed any part of Marquerite's body he hadn't seen yet.

"No, it's nothing like that," she sighed, adding silently, Men!

"Cole, at the time of my birth, my dear grandmother, a mystic and psychic who embraced the symbols of the Chinese zodiac, imbued me with a special gift: a talent, if you will."

She paused and shifted uneasily. "Personally, I consider her gift to be the most natural and beautiful part of my being," she smiled but only briefly. "Unfortunately, however, this special quality could prompt others to view me as a freak."

Straightening Cole balled his fists and flexed his impressive shoulders. "And just who, I want to know, called my lady a freak? I'll give them something to 'freak' about."

"Cole, please, focus." Marquerite gritted her teeth, then added silently, Again, I repeat: Men.

Aloud she continued, "Baby, when you see this side of me, you'll likely 'freak' as well. You'll probably run screaming from my property and never return." She shrugged and bit her lip helplessly. "Even so, in order to understand the accusations made against me and to help me disprove them, you must see this side of me. You must learn my secret."

Cole immediately slipped one hand from Marquerite's tight, warm grasp but only to run it with infinite tenderness down her cheek.

“Marquerite, these last few weeks have been magical,” he whispered. “You’re the warmest, funniest, most intelligent woman I’ve ever known. I can’t imagine feeling otherwise; I can’t imagine disliking anything about you.”

With this, Cole pierced her lips with a hard, determined kiss. “I love everything about you,” he insisted. “I love you, Marquerite.”

She sobbed openly then threw herself into his arms. Their embrace felt tight and fierce, and they clung to one another as Marquerite whispered in Cole’s ear, “I love you too. I’ve resisted my feelings for so long, and I just can’t fight anymore. Just like this secret side, you’ve become a part of me.”

Cole drew back slightly and cupped Marquerite’s chin in a firm but gentle hand. He tilted her head upward until their intense gazes met and locked. “Okay, Babe, the suspense is killing me.” He smirked slightly. “What is this magical mystical secret?”

Marquerite shifted somewhat uneasily then replied, “I think I’ll need you to kiss me first.”

Cole chuckled and nudged her playfully. “And why is that?”

“Your love gives me wings.”

Marquerite inhaled as Cole’s mouth covered hers, and she hungrily drank in the most delicious of his kisses. His passion fed her energy, and his sumptuous lips buried themselves shamelessly into hers. Soon she felt her spirits soar and her inner essence surge.

The change, she knew, lingered imminently. And, for the first time in the presence of another human being, she almost welcomed it. She yearned to share her full and true self with the man she loved, to assure herself finally that he loved her, all of her, without pretense or condition.

And, for the first time, she thought this just might be possible, that Cole was the man who could not only accept and tolerate her difference but also embrace or even savor it.

Could it be possible? *I’m about to find out.*

Ignoring Cole’s startled objections, Marquerite broke abruptly away from him and ran with quick, frenzied steps across the emerald-grassed meadow.

She could not ignore the burst of kinetic energy that overtook her form, sending lightning chills from her head to her toes. She felt the streams of telltale heat invade her mind and being, and soon the resulting glow emerged in the skin of her arms and legs.

Closing her eyes tightly, she voiced a silent prayer that Cole could understand and, dare she hope, accept the divine metamorphosis he would witness. As if in answer, her step became light, as light as the air itself.

* * * *

Cole stood motionless at the center of Marquerite's meadow, his dark eyes wide.

Had Marquerite gone insane? Had he? If not, why did his lady's body seem to change before his very eyes? Why did her legs, already impressively long in his estimation, seem to lengthen further still and her already fair skin become almost translucent? Even her hair grew out from her head and flew like a mane behind her.

"Like a mane?" He shook his head confusedly.

* * * *

Marquerite soared high into the air, throwing her head back to bask in the natural, liberating sensation that distinguished her transference.

Soon the Pegasus kissed the clouds and bade the sun good morning then spread her ethereal ivory wings to fly higher still. She seemed in a virtual race with the luminous azure skyline.

As much as she enjoyed the transcendental bliss of her transference, Marquerite realized that, this morning, at least, the sensation would be fleeting.

She could not risk the possibility of a stranger or, worse yet, a particular neighbor she knew all too well, seeing her in her natural state.

Although the secret already seems to be out, she mused, rolling her eyes heavenward. Even as a horse, she still could manage a few human facial expressions.

Furthermore, as natural and relaxed as she felt in this state, she experienced the same feelings with Cole. And especially during this difficult time, she yearned to stand at his side or, better yet, to drown happily in his embrace.

Still, she sighed reluctantly as she landed moments later at the center of her meadow.

It's finally time to come down to earth.

She averted her eyes as her body again morphed, and she reassumed her human form. Regardless of her form, her woman's heart still pounded with anticipation, mixed with a fair amount of trepidation.

How would Cole react to this secret, unexpected side of her? “I realize those women’s magazines always tell you to ‘surprise your man,’ to show him a new and exciting side of yourself.” She cringed as she caught sight of her disappearing fore hooves. “Methinks this goes a bit far.”

Just how far, she didn’t know. Could Cole possibly accept her, all of her, in her true natural form?

Marquerite took in her breath then exhaled just as sharply. As the transference reached its completion, she straightened her spine, braced her arms and legs and raised her gaze from the ground beneath her.

Up to this point, she mused, she had lead a solitary life and, for that matter, a good one. She had found—no, created—both success and content in an existence that could have felt empty and desolate.

The man who stood before her, she realized, added passion, romance and excitement to that life and, she admitted, love. She hoped for his acceptance; but she would not beg for it.

Regardless of Cole’s reaction, she could not change her true self. And, even if he left her today, she would take pride in herself and her exquisite, powerful gift.

She would manage, but she would miss him.

Sighing deeply, Marquerite finally looked at her beloved, to gauge his reaction to her long-held secret.

Knowing Cole as she did, Marquerite mused, perhaps she should already have known. She smiled nonetheless as she saw the warm, inspired glow color his emerald eyes.

“Marquerite, that’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.” His tone was low and tinged with awe.

Then he fainted dead away.

Chapter Twelve

Late that afternoon, Marquerite sighed in relief when she saw Cole's luminous eyes open wide. And when they opened, they again shone with love for his doting caregiver.

As he lie in her bed, his muscular, powerful form covered with a crisp white sheet, he stared worshipfully at the woman who mopped his brow with a terrycloth wash towel and a nurturing touch.

"Marquerite." His voice, while raspy, remained unmistakably strong. "I dreamt you were an angel."

His lover guffawed outright.

"That must have been some nasty fall, then." She leaned forward to deliver a playful smack to his shoulder. "You must have hit your head. Hard."

Cole chuckled, and shook his head. "It was no dream, Marquerite. You turned to a radiant ivory wraith right before my eyes. You flew. And it was..."

"Bizarre, I'm sure." Marquerite pursed her lips demurely. "To say the least."

Cole shook his head. "Beautiful," he corrected.

Sitting forward, he cupped Marquerite's cheek tenderly in his masculine hand and kissed her lips with a sublime passion. "I always sensed something so special about you, Marquerite, almost magical. You always seemed one with your horses. And you shared their strength, their nobility, their purity."

He gestured gracefully across the bed toward her, whose face flushed heatedly in response.

"I always knew you were a prize, Marquerite." His beam shone boyish and radiant. "Now I know you are a woman of magic." He nodded and added, "And of bravery. You saved Peter's life that day on the cliff."

Marquerite leaned forward to wrap her arms around Cole's strong, supportive shoulders.

"I did," she agreed then drew back to stare deeply into his eyes. "I saved Peter, but I did not steal his family horse. I have never abused my gift, Cole. And I have never committed a crime."

Pausing, she cocked her head and chuckled dryly. "Although several people have put out a proverbial APB for a mythical winged creature." Pausing, she bit her lip self-consciously. "That description does narrow the field of potential suspects, doesn't it?"

Cole shook his head and gathered his woman into gentle, all-encompassing arms. "Kate Martin has been your neighbor for years, but she has never been your friend," he reminded her. "She obviously saw you in your other form and decided to frame you for the horse thefts that she herself commits."

"Of course I've considered that possibility," Marquerite agreed. "The only problem is, Cole, that a trained horse of some sort is involved in the thefts."

With this, she raised a sardonic eyebrow in Cole's direction. "We both know that, between the two of them, Kate and Roland Martin couldn't train a horse to eat hay."

Cole chuckled and ran a comforting hand through her windswept hair.

"True," he agreed, "but, given their notoriously poor track record, both at horse shows, and in the overall productivity of their farm, they're likely desperate enough to learn the finer points of training. And stealing."

Marquerite stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I agree that the Martins are desperate people. And no, Kate has never been my friend although, as you know, I adore Peter."

She sighed almost desperately. "What about the others, Cole? What about my friends who have lost their horses, lost their livelihood, to what they describe as a winged horse?"

Cole's answering shrug seemed equally desperate. "They're just urgent for answers, and Kate planted the idea in their minds," he offered gently.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, which Marquerite shattered with the firm, brisk snap of her work worn fingers. "We need to ask your mother about this, Cole. We can depend on her for the absolute truth."

Cole nodded and squeezed her shoulders.

"You're right," he agreed, adding, "Until this point, Mom has been too upset to discuss the details of the theft. I noticed this

morning, though, that she seemed more calm and accepting of the situation.”

Pausing, he gave her an affectionate nudge. “Your loan of a horse has helped us incredibly.”

Marquerite took in her breath as, in an impulsive move, Cole reached across the bed and planted his hands firmly on her arms. With a sexy growl, he pulled her forward into his embrace until her body reclined easily with his.

Yet, there was nothing ‘easy’ about the way he pressed his lips hungrily into hers and grasped her waist to draw her closer to him.

“I was so worried for Mom and Dad yesterday that I forgot to thank you properly.” He punctuated his words with a ‘gratifying’ squeeze on the rear. “It’s time I rectify that situation.”

Without further hesitation, he swept Marquerite into his arms and drew her into an all-encompassing cocoon of tender passion.

His succulent mouth coated her face with sweet kisses, and nips that felt like warm, wet raindrops. His hands molded and massaged her back and shoulders, easing her work-weary muscles. His firm, rock hard hips served to cradle her and rose suggestively so she could feel the impact of his long, hard, fully formed erection.

And all of that transpired before he threw off the sheet.

“Mercy.”

Marquerite shook her head in sheer wonder as Cole made quick work of his T-shirt and jeans; soon his bare, bronzed body shone gloriously in the light of the incoming sun. His heated, dark-eyed gaze capturing hers, he reclined back temptingly into the crisp ivory sheets that lined her luxurious feather bed.

“Take me, woman,” he growled.

She took in her breath, and her gaze devoured his bronzed, heaving chest, his firm, toned hips, his masculine legs and the long, hard shaft that both beckoned and saluted her.

Despite this glorious spectacle, it was still the vision of his sculpted visage that most intrigued and impressed her.

She relished the sight of his finely formed lips, lips she’d soon kiss. And she already ventured to touch and stroke his bronzed, sculpted cheekbones.

The bare heat that emanated from his radiant eyes finally undid her, prompting her to strip away her jeans and join him in her bed.

She now knew with all certainty that he would accept her in any form; for once in her life, she could relax and savor the company of the man she loved, without fear of judgment or discovery.

He accepted, and desired, all of her.

"I love you, Cole."

Descending with a relieved sigh onto her bed, Marquerite covered the flawless, muscular physique of her golden lover. Soon their bodies tangled in a heated clench, their arms, legs and tongues merging delightedly in a virtual cocoon of intimacy.

Marquerite sank with a relieved sigh into Cole's embrace then pressed her body in sublime hunger against his.

They clung to each other as their hands clasped, and their kisses deepened. Marquerite then wrapped her arms tightly around Cole's shoulders and trembled as their tongues engaged in a graceful but frantic tango.

Cole drew back long enough to cup her cheeks in two tender hands. "I love you, Marquerite," he whispered.

In correspondence with these impassioned words, his manhood surged powerfully between her legs. As the two again kissed, Marquerite draped her legs around his perfect waist and opened herself totally. Then, throwing her head back, she rode him like the finest stallion.

Some time later, the couple lay tenderly together in a soft mass of billowy sheets, sharing heated whispers and leisurely kisses as their sweat-glistened bodies basked in the ruby rays of a Florida sunset, rays that shone through a nearby window.

Cole cradled Marquerite in his arms, and the woman drowned both in a golden sunset and the love of a luminous man.

"I feel so peaceful, Cole." She reached upward to plant a sweet, tender kiss on the beaming lips of her lover. "So loved."

Cole gave her a hearty, full-bodied squeeze. "If I have it my way, Darlin', you'll never feel any other way."

Marquerite returned his beam but stiffened slightly in his arms. "We can't ride off into the sunset, Cole. Not, at least, until we catch the horse thief and clear my name."

Nodding, Cole drew Marquerite's body once more to his; but, this time, his embrace seemed more protective than passionate. "We'll do whatever it takes, Love," he reassured her, and emphasized his words with a rejuvenating kiss. "And we'll do it together."

Chapter Thirteen

“I’m telling you, that’s all I remember!” Deirdre Evanston stood at the center of her kitchen, hands planted firmly on hips as she regarded her silent son. “Why do you pressure me for details and clues that simply don’t exist?”

Marquerite chuckled as Cole shuffled slowly from one foot to the other then shrugged. “We just have to make sure we leave no stone unturned, Ma. Much is at stake in this case, including our horse and Marquerite’s reputation.”

Grinning, Marquerite stepped forward to grace his shoulder with a reassuring pat.

What we have here, ladies and gentleman, is proof-positive that Cole Evanston is a man among men. Deirdre is his mother. I’m his lover. And despite these seemingly insurmountable conditions, he’s still standing and speaking coherently.

Aloud she said, “Deirdre, we know you didn’t directly witness the theft of your horse. You did, however, tell Cole that you looked briefly out your window that evening and saw your horse run alongside a strange animal.”

Marquerite paused, pinning Deirdre with an intense, imploring glance. “Can you describe the creature for us? Just tell us everything you remember, no matter how bizarre or unbelievable it may seem.”

Deirdre regarded her a moment then shook her head. “I’m sure I imagined it.”

“She saw the Pegasus, Cole,” Marquerite sighed.

“The winged horse?” Deirdre’s dark eyes flew open wide. “It was real?”

Marquerite’s gaze collided with Cole’s; she drew strength from the tenderness and exquisite understanding apparent in his gaze.

“Several victims have seen a winged horse at the scene of the thefts,” she told her, tone gentle and noncommittal. “Someone apparently trained this...this creature... to steal for their benefit.”

Pausing, she cocked her head. “Deirdre, could you please describe the winged horse to us?”

Deirdre bit her lip then shrugged. “Well, its most distinguishing characteristic was, of course, its wings; one generally doesn’t see wings on a horse, at least not in these parts.” She wrinkled her forehead to what Marquerite considered adorable effect.

“Do you recall the color of the creature?” she asked Cole’s mother.

Deirdre pursed her lips thoughtfully. “It was difficult to see it fully in the dark. Even so, I believe that this particular winged—um—horse thingy had a grayish color.”

Cole narrowed his eyes, seeming to contemplate the definition of the term ‘horse thingy.’ Marquerite, meanwhile, smiled for the first time that day.

Well, make that the second. She felt the color rise in her face as she contemplated her earlier encounter with Cole.

Aloud she enthused, “Deirdre, you’ve helped me tremendously. I love you!”

She embraced the older woman then added, “And, by the way, I love your son, too.”

Joining hands, Cole and Marquerite kissed warmly as Deirdre gave the rancher a friendly high-five.

“I’m genuinely thrilled to hear both of those little tidbits, Marquerite,” Cole’s mother said and smiled.

Back in Marquerite’s truck, she contemplated her situation as she drove a long, quiet road home.

Quiet, that is, except for the frequent exclamations emanating from her backseat. As Cole explained the secret of Marquerite’s gift to his stunned mother, Deirdre seemed to experience a sort of spiritual reawakening.

“Oh, my God, are you joking? Good Lord! My heavens, she grows a tail and everything?”

Finally, Cole threw his hands in the air then offered his mother a comforting nudge.

“I know this is all overwhelming,” he smiled reassuringly. “Marquerite is an overwhelming woman. She’s also an incredible person, and I hope you can love and accept her. All of her, just as I have.”

Deirdre thought a moment then nodded. “Well, it’s not all bad, Cole; she’s a smart lady with no visible piercings and a steady job.”

The smirk on her lips burst into a full-fledged, radiant beam. "She's also a fantastic person, and I wish you two all the best in the world."

Marquerite looked briefly over her shoulder and gifted Deirdre with a loving, warm-eyed gaze. Then, very reluctantly, she averted her eyes to the road before her.

"I hope you still feel that way after today, Deirdre," she warned. "After you see the things I have to show you; the full and true extent of this 'secret life' of mine."

Cole arched his feathered eyebrows in Marquerite's direction. "How so, Baby?"

The rancher gritted her teeth. "You may have wondered, Cole, why I seemed so pleased to hear your mother's description of the Pegasus thief. The reason, Cole, lies in the color of the horse she describes."

"Gray," Cole recalled, nodding with certainty.

"Gray," Marquerite repeated, tone soft and distant. "The color of the rogue Pegasus, according to my grandmother."

Cole narrowed his eyes in what appeared to be keen curiosity.

Or he might just be thinking, 'What the hell have I gotten myself into?' Marquerite added aloud, "My grandmother always said that, someday, I would meet the ultimate counterforce, someone who also had the power of the Pegasus but in a dramatically different form."

"This mystic horse would sport green eyes, a gray coat and a dark spirit." She looked meaningfully in Cole's direction. "And if I ever met her, she would stop at nothing to defeat me and usurp my power."

Cole smiled immediately, and snapped his fingers. "Baby, you're brilliant," he kissed her cheek. "The case is solved."

"The case, yes," Marquerite agreed, adding with a defined frown, "but not our problems."

* * * *

An hour later, Cole stood quietly in Marquerite's meadow, wishing fervently that she stood beside him. Instead, he shared this space with Marquerite's neighbor, Ella Swinton and Sheriff Eugenia Dale.

On another day, this group of four friends might have enjoyed a festive picnic in the airy, flower-laced confines of this grassy knoll.

Today, however, they watched intently as an ivory-hued creature scaled the skies above them, her gossamer wings cutting a graceful silhouette against an azure sky.

Despite the unimaginable beauty of this spectacle, Sheriff Dale remained unimpressed. “You know I’m going to have to arrest her, Cole.”

Shaking his head briskly, Cole pointed in the direction of the swiftly descending Pegasus. “Before you make any decisions,” he implored her, “just watch what happens.”

They all looked on intently as Marquerite made a graceful landing, just barely missing the pouting, plastic pink flamingos in Kate Martin’s yard.

Immediately, Kate’s front door opened and the visibly incensed woman ran forth to meet her rival.

“Get off my property, you beast!” Kate’s finely formed features contorted in an angry scowl. She stomped her feet as she ran forward onto the lawn, and her nostrils flared furiously.

Stopping, Kate’s expression went blank as her complexion grayed noticeably. Her arms and legs, which just moments earlier had flexed and flailed in anger, now thinned and elongated. Her hair and nose soon followed suit until she assumed in full a most peculiar form.

Peculiar but one not unfamiliar to her assembled audience.

“She’s a Pegasus, too!” Deirdre nudged Cole playfully. “Compared to Kate, son, Marquerite makes a much cuter mythical creature. You definitely got the better deal.”

Cole regarded the horses, which faced one another in a defensive stance, with intent and serious eyes.

“Ladies?” He turned slowly to face Deirdre and Ella. “I need you to pay close heed to those horses and tell me which one you spotted on your property the nights your horses were stolen.”

The entire group watched attentively as the two Pegasus suddenly launched themselves heavenward then met mid-air in what seemed to be the start of an altercation.

The gray Pegasus launched herself at the ivory-colored wraith, her nostrils flaring in apparent rage. Marquerite, the stronger, sturdier horse, easily dodged her enemy’s charge and launched herself fully into the side of her rival.

As the horses grappled, Deirdre and Ella turned simultaneously in the direction of the sheriff.

“As I told Cole and Marquerite, the gray horse is definitely the thief,” Deirdre insisted.

“Most definitely.” Ella nodded her agreement.

The sheriff immediately withdrew her wallet and opened it to reveal a shiny gold badge, an official-looking symbol, that she waved somewhat helplessly in the air, in the direction of the battling creatures.

“Um, stop in the name of the law?” she shrugged and cocked her head uncertainly. “Dang it, the police academy just didn’t cover this particular crime scenario.”

She fell silent as the ivory Pegasus repeatedly nudged, pushed and head-butted her gray nemesis. Finally, the smaller horse staggered visibly in the air and began a slow descent downward.

Immediately, Kate’s front door opened, and her husband emerged to race toward the meadow. His tortured gaze never left the sky, and he barely noticed when a throng of angry neighbors surrounded him.

“You have to be in on this.” Ella pointed an accusing finger in his direction. “A horse could not have broken the lock on my stable or driven my prized stallion so far from my property.”

She paused, nodding knowingly. “Two days before the theft, you offered to muck out my stalls. While you were acting the part of the good neighbor, you must have messed with my lock, so it was no longer secure. Then, on the night of the theft, your wife spirited my horse away.”

Roland Martin sighed deeply, clearly too tired and worried to object. “Kate always pressed me to succeed, to run the most profitable horse farm in the area.” Pausing, he shrugged helplessly. “When I couldn’t meet her demands, she hatched a plot that would net us the best horses in the area. Of course, we couldn’t show or sell them around here, but I could take them out of town.”

Cole nodded and glared openly in Roland’s direction. “After, that is, you stole them from other farms.”

Yet Deirdre, he noted, remained unconvinced. “Your horse was among those stolen, Roland!”

“I’m sure that ‘theft’ was part of their plot,” Cole accused, shaking his head. “Just a cover-up.”

Roland nodded his reluctant agreement then turned his attention to his wife; who, even while falling hopelessly to the ground, still managed to shoot him an irritated, intimidating glare.

Even she appeared intimidated as she landed awkwardly and reassumed her human form, and her delicate wrists immediately were confined in a pair of shiny steel handcuffs. Soon enough, her husband sported a matching pair.

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

“You’re going to tell us where you keep the horses.” Eugenia stared, with unforgiving eyes, at the silent, visibly shamed couple. “Then you’re going to jail.”

“What about our son?” Roland objected.

“He can stay at my ranch. He’ll always have a place with me.”

Everyone turned to face Marquerite, who had reassumed human form.

Whatever form she takes, Cole grinned as he ran forward to encompass her in a warm, tight embrace. *I love this woman so, so much.*

Aloud he asked of his ladylove, “Do I have a place with you, Marquerite?”

Marquerite returned his beam and wrapped her arms around his shoulders in an affectionate squeeze. “Always, Cole.”

For the first time in her life, Marquerite’s heart truly had wings.

The End

Brumbies
by
Ricci Love

Rebecca and Kurt are high powered business rivals. The brumbies are the wild horses of Australia. Join them in this magical love story.

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Brumbies **by** **Ricci Love**

Chapter One

The chill of an iced drink made Rebecca cry out and jump forward as it set a course down her bare back. A chain reaction of drink spillage resulted within the group of immaculately dressed and groomed young women. Among them stood, some the wives and girlfriends of the biggest names in the business world of Australia. Unlike Rebecca, she *was* one of the biggest business names in Australia, here with some of her greatest rivals, dressed in figure clinging, post office red, backless silk she cops a drink down her back. Might just unravel her aloof manner. Almost

"What the..!" *Who the hell could be so useless?* The trickling liquid reached the top of her red silk lace panties and a cold shiver entrapped her. Turning around, an apologetic looking grin and bright blue eyes which crinkled delightfully at the corners greeted her. A man she'd never seen before almost laughed at her, but then something about him exuded want. The shiver through her now had nothing to do with cold ice. Passion shook her to her very core. Fighting for control over her wayward emotions, Rebecca reprimanded him harshly. After all she must save face amongst her colleagues. She could almost hear the men snickering and saying the Ice Maiden just got iced.

"Are you always this useless? Didn't your mother ever teach you to carry your drinks carefully?" she chided.

Her tone sounded opposite to her thoughts, *I wouldn't mind a piece of him, blonde hair and blue eyes always a sucker for them.*

What a pity he's so clumsy. Rebecca's condescending tone rippled quiet giggles around the group who had stopped primping and seemed in awe of this stranger. Her heart thumped at the proximity, *look cool, stay calm*, she glared directly into his eyes, *like deep pools of shimmering tropical water. Snap out of it Rebecca!*

"So sorry. I, um...was pushed. Some bloke bumped me and...Well, you know" A gruff voice with a rich quality made him very attractive to Rebecca. With some kind of 'the boy next door' feel, his accent broadly Australian. *Great just what I need some outback redneck.*

He held out his hand, "Kurt Madison, it's a pleasure to meet you Miss er..."

Rebecca almost faltered as she contemplated her hand touching his. "Needn't think being nice will get you anywhere! Excuse me," she answered, *time to get the ball back into my court*, Pushing past, dangerously close to Kurt. "I'll just go and mop up a little." Raising her eyebrows at her group of friends which caused a further round of laughter, but every set of eyes remained fixed on this man with the rugged face and shock of sun-kissed blond hair.

Of all the nerve, someone pushed him my foot! A smile presented despite Rebecca's effort to remain aloof, not the tidiest pick-up she'd ever experienced but certainly the most original. Madison...yes, No doubt related to Gerald Madison, obviously being annoying ran in the family. I know he's watching me, I can feel his stare burning into my back. Maybe, if this guy has nothing at all to do with Gerald Madison's race horse training company, Rebecca considered they may be able to spend a little time together. *I could make some time in my busy schedule for him. With any luck he's only visiting from somewhere and I won't have to worry about emotional involvement.*

Rebecca trained horses as well. In fact for the last two years running her horses had more wins than Gerald's, except the Melbourne Cup, his horse won last year and would be up for back to back wins this year. Horses were serious business in Australia. Rebecca coveted the Melbourne Cup win, the race that stopped a nation. This year she would have that, well she had the best chance at having it. All she had to do was keep her eye on the prize and not let anything distract her from her business. But she'd heard whispers of Gerald making secret changes to his business line-up and that worried her a little.

Kurt apparently would not to be put off. "Need a hand with

that?" he suggested as he stepped into her path. "I'm quite good at cleaning up things"

"Well, you'd have to be, I'm tipping you've had a lot of practice!" Rebecca tried to push past, but Kurt wouldn't budge.

He laughed then and became instantly more desirable. His nose crinkled at the sides, and dimples creased in his cheeks.

"Come on girl! Don't be so hard on a bloke, I'm just a man after all." Leaning into her as he lowered his voice, "I'd love to run some more ice down your back. Especially on a hot night, cool breeze blowing through the room."

Now that's the best offer I've had for two years. *If only life could be that simple, but I think I could get hooked on this guy. I've been there with Brad, a relationship built on sexual attraction is bad news. I will never be sexually controlled again.* Despite her reservations Rebecca found it hard not to feel physically attracted to Kurt Madison. *How can I get out of this? There's only one way, be a bitch.*

"Who do you think I am? Office Slut? It'll be a cold day in Hell, actually it will have to freeze over, before you ever get that close to me, icecubes or no icecubes. Now, get out of my way!" she seethed through clenched teeth. The passion rose. *Damn, that may have been a little too harsh.* Pushing Kurt aside and making a beeline for the toilet door about ten steps away. Kurt looked shocked and never stood in her way this time.

Leaning on the back of the restroom door Rebecca analyzed the mixture of feelings running through her. Stepping over to the hand basin and looked in the mirror. Turning on the cold water tap, Rebecca questioned her reaction and actions. *Why do I always do that? Why do I always have to pull the Tough Bitch act? I need someone in my life, why can't I just let my guard down once?* Splashing some cold water on her face and staring at the reflection in the mirror. "Well, if he's serious surely he won't let that put him off!" *Now, I'm talking to myself!*

"Look at me, thirty years old and sworn off relationships! All because Brad Rivers is a two timing prick and I am tied to a job I'm totally over! How did life get to be so damn complicated? Whatever happened to house, car, two and a half kids and happily ever after! Probably doesn't exist, not for me anyway." Rebecca felt better saying it out loud.

She glared defiantly at her own reflection as her natural optimism kicked back in. "No, I refuse to be so negative, if other people can

find it so can I. I deserve to be happy, everyone deserves to be happy. Now, if Kurt is outside this door when I go out I'll at least give him the benefit of the doubt. If not, then he's not worth it anyway."

Tucking a slip of long, dark hair back in, refreshing her lippie and checking her back, *there, not too bad at all*. Luckily I chose this backless dress, anything else would have been badly stained. It seemed the drink he had must have been clear because any that clung to her bottom had all but dried now. *Ok, out the door we go!* Looking around Rebecca saw no sign of him, *typical!* A little disappointed, but not really surprised. All talk, most men were.

Kurt was well aware that there was no-one within a bull's roar of him when he spilt the drink, actually the glass contained iced water only, he had no intention of staining that stunning dress of hers. Every part of that woman, from the shining oil black hair, down to her red painted toenails peeping out from her stiletto's attracted him.

He had to meet her anyway he could, so he tipped a little of his cold drink down the firm and lean muscle of her back. It landed right in the curve he longed to kiss and caress as he worked his way down to her tightly and perfectly protruding backside. How he wished he could be that stream of water now coursing into the top of her underwear. *At least I got her attention and it was worth it, this woman is a complete knockout!*

Of course it's not everyday a bloke needs to go to such lengths to get some attention. But this gorgeous female drew him in like a bug to the light. It was worth the try anyway. That glare she gave, *Crikey! Could cut a man in half I reckon!*

He watched her come out of the bathroom and stayed out of her line of vision. *Hah! I knew she'd look for me, I win again.* But that thought didn't make him feel any better, he hadn't meant to really upset her. *Probably to 'blokey' for her anyway, I'm sure she'd prefer a stuffed shirt to me. I should have shaven at least.* Rubbing his chin and feeling the two day stubble, which grew slightly darker than his golden blonde hair. Feeling suddenly self-conscious Kurt thought maybe a tie wouldn't have gone astray either! After all this night was designed to be the night he met all the big wigs.

Taking over Madison Enterprises was not first on his list of favourite things to do. Kurt felt he owed it to his parents to keep the company, they'd built up, in the family. *I'll handle the business ok, more than likely die of boredom buying land and building resorts to sell. Whatever happened to country life, a loving wife, four kids, and a faithful hound? Gulping down his drink, non existent that's what.*

Watching her lithe body weaving back through the pack of executives, *too upper class for me. I reckon she thinks that.*

But, boy, what wouldn't I give for a shot at the title! I would make her the happiest woman in the world, or die trying. Still didn't get her name. Surely anything worth having is worth a struggle, who wants a woman that has no backbone anyway. I'm not giving up just yet, I'll give it another whirl, if I get another knock back then I'll leave well alone.

Slowly, but surely, Kurt worked his way through the crowd in the direction of the only woman, in years, he'd paid any more than a token attention to. She began talking seriously with a man in a staid blue suit, Kurt knew she was totally oblivious to him moving into the conversation group behind her.

No-one in this group of men knew him from a bar of soap, Kurt stood there nodding and smiling with them. *How embarrassing, They are going to think I am a first class knob. Now don't lose sight of the prize, doesn't matter what they think, well, not tonight anyway!* Clearing his throat and speaking slightly louder than anyone else he said, "yes, and I hear that a low weather pattern is closing in towards the South!"

Open mouths and stares of confusion met within the circle because they had been talking about the Middle East situation. But in every crowd there is always someone who will go along with you for a short while, that was the principle he worked on. Kurt waited for this person to step forward. *C'mon, c'mon someone say something.* It felt like an eternity then, suddenly, a portly looking gentleman smiled and spoke up.

"Really? I hadn't heard that, down south eh? Can't get much more south than Australia."

I hope she's listening to this or I'm a goner! "Yeah, fair dinkum. Much lower than here, more underground really. They reckon that it's gonna be so cold Hell will freeze over for sure!" All, except for the Portly Gent, slipped away amidst a variety of excuses, clandestine looks to each other and shaking of heads.

"Good Lord, I hope so! I once had a very fine woman tell me she would reconsider my proposal when Hell froze over!" he smiled at Kurt and winked.

Kurt grinned broadly but tried to keep a serious tone to his voice, "You too? What a coincidence, same here, fairly recently actually." *Now that should provoke a reaction.*

Over his shoulder he heard her giggle. *Ah! got her then*, a wink for his new friend. The man then took his cue and slipped away, but not before he shook his hand and whispered good luck. Kurt just kept talking. "Yep! Sure will be cold...yep...bloody cold. Lots of people are going to get a shock when Hell freezes over. They'll have to come good on a few promises, I tell you." Rambling on until at last she spoke.

"Alright, okay, enough! Do you always ramble on to yourself?" She turned around to face Kurt and he reveled in the torrid feeling that came with being close to this woman.

"Only when a beautiful woman, such as yourself, won't tell me her name," he answered cheekily.

Sweet, he was sweet. Butterflies in the stomach, haven't felt those for a while. "Rebecca, pleased to meet you Kurt." The electricity jumped as hands gripped in a slow handshake, Rebecca didn't want to let go as the heat of friendship and maybe a lot more traveled her body.

"So you're a rider, yes?"

She smiled, *it's been ages since I competed in cross country races, but saying I ride will do for now*. "Yes, well, sort of. Don't do much of it these days, too busy." Looking over her shoulder, Rebecca gave her friend Sophie a wink, she smiled and returned the thumbs up signal. If Kurt did not know who she was it couldn't hurt, for that reason she did not offer her surname. At least the conversation might steer away from racing for once. As much as Rebecca loved being the boss she never really expected it would take her away from her best friends, her horses, so much. Her father still owned the training property further up north and Rebecca took her most prized racers up there to be especially prepared. But with the demand of the business side of things she hadn't ridden her own brumby, Jade, for almost two years.

I'll keep my position to myself for a while longer, he'll find out and run away soon enough. There didn't seem to be many men around that could handle a women in a high power job.

“Madison, you are related to Gerald Madison I presume?” *Please don't let him have anything to do with the business.*

If he has then this may be absolutely impossible. Rebecca just could not fraternise with the enemy, she found it unethical. *Anyway Gerald would blow a fuse!* Now that may be fun to see but she wouldn't use someone else's feelings to do it.

“Do you know Gerald well?”

“Yes, I do. Quite well in fact. He's a fantastic businessman.” *I love the way he isn't clean shaven.* Her eyes travelled the length of his jawline, strong, determined. Well, he had proved that! Very sexy in the rough! *Phew! Getting a bit hot in here feels like my face is on fire.* Rebecca still didn't have an answer to her question, but somehow the fact didn't bother her too much right now.

“He sure is. Do you feel a little warm? I do...care to pop out to the balcony for some fresh air?”

Oh no! My face must be red! How stupid of me. Rebecca could see that his complexion seemed quite pink. *Rip a few of those clothes off you and cool you down! God, stop it, that is not helping. Those ice cubes sound very inviting at the moment!* “Yes, what a lovely idea! Looks like no-one else has thought of it.”

Stepping outside they quickly realised why no-one else ventured out here. A strong Southerly wind blew across the balcony causing Rebecca's hair to come loose at the sides. “Oh my goodness! My hair, It'll take me all night to fix up!”

What am I saying? I couldn't give a toss about my hair. Her hands went up to catch the fallen pieces and tuck them away. His hand rested on hers, softly, causing goosebumps up her arm. “No Rebecca, leave it, it looks wicked like that! That's if you don't mind of course?” He seemed careful not to repeat the mistake he made earlier by being too crass.

Mind? As if I would mind! How thoughtful of him. “No, I don't mind at all, it's nice to be able to feel comfortable with someone and not have to look my best.” His hair flopped around also, *very cute.*

“Believe me Rebecca, you do look your best, in my book anyway.”

Kurt pulled the seats around to the corner, just out of the wind. Still a breeze, but infinitely more comfortable. Sitting down they chatted about everything from their favourite movie to their favourite icecream.

Having many similarities but enough differences to make it

interesting. Rebecca felt relaxed and totally at ease, Kurt relaxed forward his elbows on his knees. Neither of them had mentioned work. For a short while the world of business faded away and Rebecca felt they were just two ordinary people getting to know each other.

“Rebecca, I am sorry about that ice cube comment, it was rude of me to treat you that way. I just was so desperate to talk to you and it just come across as sleazy. I don't think you are that type of woman I hope you can believe that.”

Kurt sounded so sincere, *I would love to just kiss those lips.* “”It's fine Kurt. I do understand I'm just glad you came back. I'm sorry for being a bitch, sometimes I'm like that you know.” Suddenly Rebecca wanted him to know how multi-faceted she was. *I need him to know that I have my moods as well, but I am not a shallow person.* “There are a lot of sides to me Kurt, some I don't even know myself yet.” That sounded a bit like a line from the movies.

“Don't worry I have been known to be a bit of a bitch myself at times!” he joked, lightening the mood, which Rebecca appreciated.

Her laugh rang out across Sydney Harbour, nothing delicate about Rebecca's laugh which she inherited from her father, Lou, a wise old horseman. Kurt grinned suddenly and looked pleasantly surprised at the sound..

“Funny you should say that, I had noticed a certain Princess Bitchface about you!” she retorted happily. The laugh felt good, it seemed ages since she'd genuinely laughed out loud. *I can't believe this, he's perfect!* But then nobody could really know a person after one night, could they? But this was more about the feeling he gave her. The same type of feeling Rebecca had from being with the horses, she knew instinctively she could trust them and they her. Too much time passed without spending time with her equine friends. *Damn this job that keeps me tied to the office!* Rebecca knew the horses loved her and would protect her, somehow that same feeling surrounded her now. *Maybe this time, just maybe...* She shuddered suddenly and realized the temperature dropped. Rebecca did not want to go inside and break the spell between them.

“Come on, Bec, better get in before you freeze. We need more drinks anyway.”

Reluctantly Rebecca stepped through the door Kurt held open for her. She liked how he called her Bec, it sounded so casual, yet intimate. Kurt steered towards the bar, the rush of warm air felt good

on her bare shoulders but Kurt's hot hands felt better. It was an almost protective motion that amused Rebecca. *Fancy him looking after me!* As if she didn't do a good enough job herself, still fun to pretend for a moment she did not run a high powered corporation in the racehorse industry.

It felt nice to imagine she could have a normal life without camera's clicking everytime she left the house. But owning Australia's champion horses for racing and breed came with it's price. Sometimes she longed for the days up north with her dad, as a young girl and then blossoming into womanhood. Just them and the wild brumbies, the toughest, sweetest and most loyal horses of all. Rebecca remebered where she was as the rush of voices filled her ears.

"Yes, it's much warmer in here. I just didn't want to stop chatting. You are easy to talk to," admitted Rebecca.

"Don't worry about that, won't be long and you'll be wishing I'd put a sock in it! Listen I hate these posh parties what say you and me get out of here?"

Rebecca considered this for a moment, should she? Admittedly she had nothing else planned for the evening and spending more time with Kurt one on one sounded delicious.

"Oh...well. Sure why not? Where do you want to go?"

"You know that piano bar over the block called The Lounge, meet me there in half hour. Don't say goodbye to anyone just slip out through the kitchen. Less gossip and scandal that way. Why don't you and I forget business for one night? No strings attached of course, looks like I just got an emergency," he whispered, just as Gerald came toward them. She nodded. Rebecca had no intention of making conversation with Gerald, even if it meant she would sit in The Lounge for half an hour waiting.

Gerald noticed them together, *damn! What's Kurt doing with her? I should have kept a closer eye on him, this is bad. If she finds out who he is, Lord only knows what information she'll extract from him. A real smart cookie that one, better than any of the blokes I know at wheeling and dealing. Fancy going from that buck-toothed mousy young girl, to the most formidable business person running a company in the country today!*

Gerald gulped at his scotch, *Kurt can't be chummy with her if he's going to run my business, no way, I won't allow it. Too dangerous, far too dangerous. I could lose everything I've built up, I bet that old weasel Lou has put her up to this. Best get over there and*

save Kurt before he puts his foot in his mouth.

Gerald rushed up to them, feeling a little panicked. "I see you two have already met, great! Save me the introductions." Pulling at his collar, he saw Rebecca tense. Gerald never tried to make friends of his business rivals. Business was business and the company he'd built from scratch was the most important thing to him. He'd started by mortgaging the family home for one race horse colt. Trained him, cared for him and got him winning races.

"Sorry, I am just leaving, we'll talk tomorrow...emergency, gotta run!" Kurt waved off Gerald as he swiftly walked off toward the exit door. Gerald never got to say a word and when he turned around to address Rebecca she had headed off in the opposite direction, not surprising as he knew Rebecca was loathe to speak with him at anytime. *Well thank goodness they never left together.*

Now Gerald owned the next biggest stock run to Lou and Rebecca Deegan's. Gerald meant to own the biggest and once he had made the purchase of the land he'd tried to buy for the last 5 years, he would hold a nice generous acreage right next to Lou Deegan's run up north. Then Gerald's horses could be as good and better than Lou Deegan's. Kurt would be going to try and get Lou Deegan to see reason tomorrow. After that it would be up to Kurt and his hard-nosed business attitude to see that old swamp was cleared and Madison Equine Enterprises built the state of the art horse breeding and training centre there. Any of those feral brumbies giving him trouble could easily be culled.

Chapter Two

The atmosphere felt relaxed. Rebecca felt a little self-conscious walking in on her own. She was greeted with no less enthusiasm than if someone accompanied her, she walked to the bar.

A smiling face greeted her, “What can I get for you Ma’am?”
“Ahh, I think I may have a nice cold beer for now thanks.”

“No problems”

Rebecca loved the crisp taste of cold beer. Never really one for fancy drinks, although she loved a good glass of wine or Scotch now and again. Looking around Rebecca decided that perhaps she would look less conspicuous sitting. In the corner she spied a cozy, dimly-lit booth, that would be perfect. She walked over and sat, a pang of guilt engulfed her. Still there was nothing wrong with coming out for a drink, didn’t have to be a reason. Loads of women went out with men they had just met. Rebecca still felt a little uncomfortable though. About twenty minutes had passed and Rebecca hoped Kurt would keep his word and turn up. The beer went down easily and she’d almost finished and tried to decide whether to get another or wait for Kurt.

“Hello Pretty Lady, would you like some company or are you expecting someone?” Rebecca looked up at the unfamiliar voice.

Yuck! A middle-aged looking man, neck, wrists and fingers dripping with gold jewelry and with dark greasy hair, hovered over her. Momentarily caught off guard and not too sure how to answer him, Rebecca just stared, trying not to laugh in the man’s face. Rebecca paused as she searched for a perfect way to tell him to bug off politely.

“She is expecting someone...me,” Kurt spoke rather firmly and somewhat protectively.

“I do apologize Miss, sorry to bother you” Gold-Man beat a hasty retreat.

Rebecca smiled widely, amused at the timing.

“May I join you? Although I see you are doing well on your own!” he teased, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Well, I thought so.” Rebecca replied, her dark eyes sparkled with humor.

Kurt sat. He felt a little nervous for some reason.

“I’ve almost finished my beer, can I get you one as well?” she asked.

Kurt smiled broadly, “boy, a man could get used to this. I’d love a beer thanks!”

Rebecca laughed as she got up from the table. “Well, I do have some high expectations as well you know!”

Kurt couldn’t tear his eyes from her as she moved to the bar. My God, she looked lovely. And a good sense of humor as well.

He watched her order the drinks, two pints of beer. She carried the large beers back to the table, managing to not spill a drop.

“Well done, not sure I could have made it back without a spillage!” Kurt quipped.

“That’s why you are buying the next round. After drinking this maybe neither will I!” Rebecca quipped. Kurt laughed.

He certainly did not want to disclose his work. The fact that he was about to take over and expand his Father’s race horse business should not need to interfere tonight. He knew it would end the evening before it had even started, work talk always did. “How about we make work a no go area for this evening, I spend enough time there during the day.”

“Now that is the best suggestion you’ve had all night.” Rebecca looked relieved, obviously she didn’t want to get bored by his work stories.

“Let’s hope it won’t be the last!” He looked deep into her eyes and Rebecca returned his gaze without hesitation. Kurt felt the heat rise.

Kurt felt an unspoken understanding between them. The sex would be great, if it came to that.

Having no trouble in the conversation line, Kurt talked. She studied him unashamedly as he recounted a funny story from earlier in the week. Kurt knew Rebecca was checking him out as he bought more drinks, loving it and he hoped she liked what she saw. He could see that she wasn’t afraid to enjoy herself. Neither was he if he could switch off Ruthless Business Man

“Oh Man! I tell you, sometimes I wonder if some people are born with any common sense at all!” He shook his head in laughter as he finished his story.

Rebecca laughed too. “Well, I guess the whole world can’t be as perfect as you and I,” she answered with mock sincerity.

“You got that right! Especially in your case” His eyes leveled hers, he made it no secret he thought she was the most perfect woman he’d ever met. Rebecca’s face colored a little.

“You aren’t so bad yourself,” she observed giving him a sexy wink.

It was his turn to color up now, feeling a tad foolish about blushing, but pleased all the same.

He stood up, “right then another round of beer or would you prefer something else?” Kurt reddened again at the unintended innuendo, “drink I mean”

Rebecca grinned widely. “Beer would be fine, for now,” she openly flirted.

Kurt thought his head would explode at the thought of holding her against him but she left no doubt about her attraction. He walked to the bar, *I don’t want her to think I am thinking casually. I want her to know that I want a serious relationship but how the hell am I going to stop at a goodnight kiss?* Ordering the beers and hoped she had a strong constitution because he became less and less convinced he would be able to walk away for a night alone unless she insisted.

Kurt thought dinner may be an option as well. He didn’t want Rebecca to think that he was trying to ply her with liquor to take advantage of her. Excess alcohol always worked for him in the past, but he only used it to get information, and if the women wanted him so bad, then so what? Kurt wanted to leave those days behind, after he had his parent’s company on track he was out of the business altogether. He’d only arrived today and he’d flatly refused to talk shop until tomorrow, his official start day. His father had to do some fast talking to even get him to go tonight. Kurt only agreed when his father promised he would not let on to anyone about who he was. Tomorrow would be soon enough for everyone to hate him.

He was embarrassed to think how he used the women, some the daughters of rival company bosses, some the wives. Not something he was proud of. But that happened a long time ago, in the past, it couldn’t hurt him now. Tomorrow was another day.

“Dinner sound good to you?” he asked as he sat again.

“Absolutely perfect” she smiled. Rebecca engrossed him in conversation once more.

* * * *

The restaurant held a soft glow of dimmed uplights and their table sat in a secluded corner, excellent. Apart from privacy neither of them wanted to chance any encounters with someone they knew. Rebecca wanted to tell Kurt who she was and what she did but it seemed so refreshing to find a man who did not have a clue who she was. At least she knew he wanted to be with her, not the rich, executive woman. From earlier conversation she gleaned from him he had just returned from a long stint in Asia and had shirked Australian society for a few years, trying to find himself. He offered little more in personal detail and that suited Rebecca fine for tonight.

Tonight was for them to enjoy each other. They browsed the menu together, their booth seat being a lushly cushioned half circle.

His body touched hers ever so slightly, enough to make her pulse race and food selection difficult.

Kurt cleared his throat a little. “What would you like for starters.”

Rebecca felt like saying, your tongue in my mouth, but instead she managed, “I think the steamed Asparagus spears with buerre blanc.” She swallowed, it sounded loud in her ears. “What about you?”

“I think, maybe I’ll have the natural Oysters with Coriander-Cucumber salsa.”

“Good choice.” Rebecca looked at him. He was almost too good to be true, she hoped he wouldn’t be.

Kurt finally traced his index finger down her cheek. Rebecca used all her strength not to moan. Her eyes closed momentarily and she was transported to a very sublime place. Emotional bliss. She wanted him to kiss her, right there and then. Her eyes opened just as he lowered his hand, again lost in each other’s gaze, understanding each other on some unconscious level.

“Rebecca, I don’t want to...Well, I do want too....Oh shit!” He swore, no doubt at his inadequacy in explanation.

“It’s okay. I know what you are trying to say. I want to take it slow as well. I’m just scared I can’t.” Rebecca could not believe his consideration and caring.

“Yes, exactly...That’s it...Exactly. You are a truly remarkable person Rebecca.”

The sound of him saying her name made her want him even more. Plus he'd commented on her as a person and not just her looks. "Thank you Kurt, I appreciate that comment."

"I mean you are stunning, don't get me wrong, But you have such a beautiful heart. I can't believe that you are single."

Rebecca felt his need to see he wasn't shallow. Her spirit soared high because she just knew he was different. This was exactly what she had been waiting for, at last. Time would tell she knew, but she hoped with all her being everything would be fine. Their fingers interlocked automatically, as if they were meant to be that way.

The waitress approached the table. "Good Evening, My name is Lucy and I will be your waitress for this evening." Her smile looked rehearsed

Kurt and Rebecca greeted her with genuine smiles.

"Are you ready to order?" Lucy asked.

"Yes Lucy, I believe we are." He looked to Rebecca for confirmation, she nodded.

"We'll have the asparagus and the natural oysters for starters. I'd like to try the Eye Fillet with Gorgonzola Sauce, cooked medium, and what would you like for mains Rebecca."

"I'd like the Pan Fried Trevalla with Hollandaise sauce, thank you Lucy and could we please have the wine list?"

"Certainly, I'll bring it right over."

She wandered off to find the list and to her credit remembered to bring it straight back.

"Do you drink wine Kurt?" Rebecca asked him, their hands, apart now, much to her regret.

"Well, surprisingly enough, I am no expert!" His humor lightened the moment perfectly.

"That's okay, I can be knowledgeable enough for both of us," she giggled.

"That will probably be quite handy in many areas," Kurt chuckled. Rebecca perused the list and noticed an unusual find, 1995 Pirie. This Tasmanian sparkling wine had won best in the world in that year, even beating the French sparkling from Champagne.

Rebecca thought Pirie would be perfect.

She called the waitress back over and ordered the wine. They chattered away like lifelong friends, sipping the sparkly and enjoying the lightness of the bubbles. Rebecca though nothing could ruin this night, nothing at all.

Rebecca looked at the asparagus, steaming hot on her plate, smothered in the white wine and butter cream sauce. It struck her then what a phallic symbol they were. *Trust me!* she thought. How am I going to eat these without making a mess?

She looked over at Kurt who was about to devour his first plump oyster. He had the shell in his hand and her body reacted as his lips cupped the shell and he let the oyster slide into his mouth. A hint of tongue, pink and sexy showed. Rebecca wished he had his lips cupped over her pussy. Kurt looked up as if suddenly aware of her gaze. "I'm sorry, you don't mind me using my fingers do you? I always seem to make a mess with those little forks."

"Not at all, I am going to do the same."

Rebecca gripped the firm piece of lightly steamed asparagus in between two fingers and a thumb, let some of the sauce drip off and brought it toward her waiting mouth. Her head slightly tilted back she placed it between her lips, softly bit the end off it, her lips closed around the vegetable, she felt sauce clinging to them, she swallowed. Kurt looked spellbound by this scene, she noticed when she looked over. He slid towards her and laced his fingers into the back of her hair, guiding her face towards his own. Rebecca did not fight against it.

Kurt didn't kiss her straight away; he licked the Beurre Blanc from her lips in one swift lap of his tongue. If Rebecca hadn't been sitting, she would have collapsed for sure. As his lips met hers in the frenzy, both intense and soft, she knew he gave her the best kiss she'd ever had. She opened her mouth to him.

He cupped her face in his hands. Jolts of electricity seemed to run through her each and every time their tongues met. It seemed like an eternity, as if time stopped completely before they parted. Hot breath and misshapen hair, she knew her grooming would match his, entrees barely touched. Rebecca returned his smile her heartbeat trying to get back to normal.

"Well, I guess we should eat our food!" Kurt observed.

Rebecca laughed out loud, "I think that is what started it." Heads turned at her bold laughter.

"You, Young Lady, are what started it, looking so delicious, a man just couldn't resist!"

The comment pleased her. "I bet you say that to all the girls!"

"Not bloody likely. You are truly one of a kind, Rebecca...I don't even know your last name." Kurt continued to eat his oysters as

she gazed at him wanting his lips on her again, ignoring his comment about her last name. Kurt looked over at her, “and you can stop looking at me like that too. That’s what started all the trouble last time.” He chastised her with humor.

“I don’t think it was that, I think it was this!” She proceeded to raise another piece of asparagus to her parted lips.

“Rebecca! I’m tellin’ you girl, cut it out or we are going to be black-banned from restaurants across town!”

Rebecca looked up innocently. “Whatever do you mean?”

Kurt laughed and handed her a serviette. “Now, wipe your lips and please, for the sake of me, and my underwear’s, future embarrassment, use a fork!” he growled playfully.

“Yes Sir!” They both laughed out loud this time.

* * * *

The end of the night imminent, and Rebecca knew how she wanted it. After getting out of the taxi, Kurt left his car in the patrolled parking lot as he’d been drinking, and now they walked towards Rebecca’s Penthouse.

Everything felt perfect, holding hands seemed like the most natural activity in the world. It was as if they’d known each other a lifetime. Rebecca stopped at the doors not really sure what to do, her head told her to say goodnight but her heart told her to hold onto him and never let go. He stood there before her. Tall, broad and sexy with a wonderful personality to boot, *why do I hesitate?* Then Kurt spoke for both of them.

“Tonight has been more than perfect, Rebecca. I want you to know that. I do not want to ruin what we may have by rushing into anything further. I don’t want to hurt you.” That was just what she needed to hear.

“Oh Kurt, I’m no prude, believe me. I don’t want to waste a minute but, yes, I feel the same. I don’t want to hurt you either.” Kurt smile seeming to appreciate her honesty.

This time Rebecca made the first move, stepping forward and placing her arms around him, her cheek resting comfortably on his chest. His arms held her tightly against him and he ran his fingers through the back of her hair. They became one in that instant. “Kurt it may be wrong but I am not ready to let you go just yet, please come upstairs with me.”

“I don’t expect anymore than we’ve already had, we’ll go as slow as you want,” he answered softly. They moved into the lift and

Rebecca pushed the top floor button, Kurt still had one arm wrapped tightly around her as she did with him.

In the penthouse they relinquished their hold on one another. The mood lessened a little.

“Drink?” Rebecca enquired. “I have some Chivas Regal if you are a Scotch drinker?”

“Now that would be perfect,” he replied.

“Well, I see no reason not to finish the evening as we started it!” Rebecca smiled.

“Something tells me it’s only just beginning!” Kurt smiled back. They sat in her easy chairs and sipped their drinks, before long, they moved out the French doors to the balcony. The city looked fabulous at night.

“Rebecca?” Kurt looked at her with desire and respect all at once.

“Yes?”

“I have never felt like this before, I mean I’ve been in love. But when you are close to me, I just get all...well you know. It’s downright embarrassing. I can’t be in public like that. It’s rather noticeable.” He looked sheepish.

“Yes, I noticed!” She smiled at his shyness, mixed with male pride, at her observation of his uncontrollable erections. “And if it’s any consolation, my feelings may not be as...up front...But they are nonetheless just as uncomfortable, in the nicest possible way.”

They laughed again and instinctively moved closer together. It was as if their body’s had a mind of their own.

Rebecca put down her drink as Kurt nestled into her from behind. They stood like that for the longest time.

Rebecca knew it was going against all the promises she made to herself, but she reasoned that even if it was only one night, it was exactly what she needed at this moment. She unlinked his arms from around her. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you!” Turning to touch his face, it felt like heaven. He understood immediately. This time there was nothing gentle about the kiss, he crushed his mouth to hers. Rebecca pulled his face closer to hers, fingers scruffing his hair. No turning back now. She was all woman and she needed her man. He broke away from the fervid kiss. “Not here Rebecca, take me to your bedroom, you deserve the best”

Rebecca obliged and led him by the hand into her room. A magnificent four poster bed, which belonged to her grandmother,

stood majestically at the end of the large room. He stood her before him. “May I please undress you?” he asked.

She almost felt self-conscious, as if it was her first time. “Of course”

Kurt took a deep breath to stop his hands from shaking as they undid the top of her halter neck dress. He let it fall from her shoulders and took a step back and a sharp breath. Rebecca obviously loved nice underwear, so did Kurt. Her generous breasts sat high and proud, despite their size. Kurt thought they just may be the best thing he had ever come across in his life. Apart from the sound of her laughter, of course, nothing could top that.

He outlined her breasts with his hands, her nipples hardened and jutted out. Feeling the weight of them his cock strained at his zipper. Plump, large nipples, he loved that. He dropped to his knees and wrapped his mouth around her left nipple. Now it was her turn to gasp sharply. He sucked with a gentle pressure. Rebecca moaned loudly and gripped his hair.

He shifted to the other nipple and slightly scraped his teeth against it. Her legs buckled a little and she gripped his head for support. “Kurt! My God, please” He knew she couldn’t wait any longer either. Stopping his nipple feast, he unzipped her skirt, revealing G-String panties. The milky white globes of her ass felt as taut as they looked. He gripped them in turn and slid off her underwear, her musky female scent flowed into his nostrils. Then he stood up, not able to wait any longer. He lifted her to the bed and laid her back across her heavy velvet bedspread.

He stripped his clothes off, making sure he didn’t forget his socks. She stared in awe Kurt worked hard at the gym to maintain his six pack abs and bulging biceps. His dick bulged also and was plenty bigger than average. He touched her body all over, electricity raced from her it seemed her skin buzzed. Rebecca gripped his cock and pulled him on top of her as she parted her legs and thrust up toward him. “Fuck me please?” she begged. Remembering at the last second he grabbed a foil from his wallet. He always carried one. Slipping on the rubber he moved over her once more.

Rebecca was so wet, he easily slipped into her but he was careful to take it slow. This just seemed to drive her even wilder, she reached down and gripped his buttocks and wildly thrust her hips at him. “Oh Kurt, yes!” she cried out as he struck up a solid pace of deep driving.

He cried out not able to hold on any longer he thrust hard into her and held there as Rebecca rocked her pelvis against him. They came together, her body convulsing and pussy gripping him so tightly he thought he would be squeezed out of her. He came, without delay. It was as natural as eggs on toast for breakfast. Panting he removed the spent condom, placed it on his underwear on the floor and held Rebecca in his arms. Rebecca groaned and hugged him to her.

“I still don’t know you last name.” Kurt mentioned.

“Deegan, my name is Rebecca Deegan.” Rebecca replied.

Deegan. His father had mentioned that name but he’d brushed it off, refusing to discuss any business with him until today. Well Rebecca Deegan was just about perfect to him.

He kissed her again.

Chapter Three

“Good morning Gorgeous,” Kurt whispered as he saw Rebecca stirring from sleep. He’d been watching her sleep for about half an hour. His mind still tried to comprehend all the feelings swirling around inside him.

“Mmmmm...What time is it?” Rebecca replied sleepily, rolling to her side, towards him.

“Just after six, a little early.” Removing a lock of hair from her face, she was beautiful.

“Goody, I don’t have to be at work for another two hours, it’s nice to wake up with someone”

Kurt’s hand already exploring her breasts, her back arched toward him. Her fingers trailed down his body towards his hardness. Her hand gripped him and caused, yet another, a sharp intake of breath from Kurt.

Her lips kissed his shoulder and found his nipple, she nipped it a little, he squirmed with delight and groaned a little. His reaction spurred her on She kissed down to his belly-button and played there for a while with her tongue. Then she looked up at him, her lips encircling the tip of his penis.

The feather light actions on him were the best he’d ever felt, it was so pure. He was getting towards the point of no return and thoughts ran rampant. Rebecca seemed to sense this. Pushing herself up, she straddled him then her pussy opening just poised over his cock. It was rock hard. Last night had definitely done nothing to quell the desire. Rebecca lowered herself, Kurt thrust upwards at the same time. She sat back fully onto him, not wasting any of his length. Working herself in a circular motion, she rode him, groaning her delight. Kurt was all out of control now, if he ever had any!

“Oh, Rebecca! You make me so horny I just can’t help myself!” he said breathlessly. She leant forward and kissed him.

“It’s okay Babe, I’m right there with you!”

Kurt felt her tighten around him and his own orgasm began. Rebecca collapsed on top of him and he kissed her sweetly.

“Anyhow you still haven’t told me what you do yet!” And there it was, the question he had been dreading. It hung in the air like poison gas. Everyone would find out soon enough who he was. But somehow he wanted Rebecca to be the last to know, he wasn’t sure he could handle it if she decided to have nothing to do with him. Sure he took some hard-line business tactics, he’d used women, but his time in China taught him differently. He owed it to his father to do this one purchase for him. After that he would try and have a normal life, perhaps with a little property of his own and a few horses.

“We’ll worry about that later won’t we? I really have to go soon and I can’t thank you enough for the time we’ve had together, I hate to leave.”

“I love this pendant, what’s it made of?” Rebecca touched his carved wild horse pendant which he’d sat on the bedside table.

“It’s jade. A dear old Chinese man gave it to me as I’m born in year of the horse. Funny old bloke. He said if I get into trouble to listen to the call of the horse. Mysticism runs deep in China and I thought well who am I to argue. I can use all the help I can get sometimes.” Kurt stopped realizing he may bring more questions about who he was if he didn’t shut up.

“I’ll see you again, won’t I?” she asked.

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

* * * *

“You’ll do what?” Lou spluttered out the words in shock.

“We are going to purchase the last of the bush swamp area out near your property. We plan to make it into a training haven,” the younger man said, matter-of-factly.

The nausea formed in the pit of Lou Deegan’s stomach, only just behind the anger surging to his brain. The natural wetland covering about half of the one hundred acres this upstart referred to, was known around these parts as the swamp. It held many memories for Lou Deegan and his family but even more importantly the Brumbies ran wild here and Lou could not let them down.

That would explain his vivid dream last night about a magnificent white brumby stallion coming to him and conversing as if he was human. Lou could not understand what the horse tried to say, but he felt the panic. Lou had always had a sixth sense with horses and he sometimes felt he could understand them clearly in his thoughts.

Thank goodness the meeting was held outside, Lou always preferred outdoor meetings, he may have punched a wall otherwise.

One hundred acres of rugged land and one of the last natural roams of the wild brumbies filled his mind with a mass of recollections. Some of his worst, some of his best, but it remained the last piece of untouched wilderness around these here. This oasis of gnarled trunks with holes and knotty root systems, holding a myriad of animal life, could not be sacrificed this way, for the greed of Gerald Madison.

Now a year or two since Lou rode out that way, heck, it had been a year or two since he'd graced the back of his placid mare, Maggie. The business he spent his life building kept him in town far too long, everything demanded attention. Lately, he felt the twinge of his seventy year old body. This year, for the very first time in his life, he felt old. The city long since, took away the best of his health.

"You can't touch the swamp, it's a natural wetland and home to the brumbies. It is one of the last remaining natural habitats." Lou lengthened his body to full height, wiry and muscled, he still cut a formidable figure. He glared at the thirty-something man, motivated by greed and power. Lou's glare was answered with a smile, which seemed to ridicule the older man from his well worn cowboy hat to the tips of his boots. Lou felt the contempt emanating from the cocky man's aura, but something else as well, a hesitation of some sort.

"We..." he emphasized, and spoke again, "can do whatever we please, once we own it, and you can stop living in the past and get with the program, Old Man!" The younger man adjusted his Armani suit. Lou's temper flared but his years taught him not to react from emotion, any problem had a solution, if you thought on it long enough.

Lou stared deeply into Kurt Madison's eyes. He drilled into the younger man's soul, testing what he would find there. Would it be hatred for life, insecurity, abuse? Many, many years ago Lou would've called upon the ancient spirits of the swamp for assistance. Could he still do this? He possessed a psychic gift, becoming stronger with age. Lou's spirit traveled through the younger man's eyes and downwards into the soul. The way seemed blocked. Lou could not break through the barrier, his mind searched for something to give him some hope. He'd met none so purely evil that they would be beyond redemption, well, maybe one or two but they had not, strictly, been human.

Lou's spirit eyes scanned the black wall in front of him. Every part underwent intense scrutiny. Sometimes the opening could be so small it would be easily missed. Lou never missed, he always believed every soul had some good in it and could be saved from eternal wandering. What a terrible thing it must be as a spirit, to never be able to find home and be settled. His eyes locked to a hairline fracture close to the left side edge. Out of this crack streamed an almost impossible to see pure white light. *Ah! Found it.*

Approaching the almost microscopic fracture, Lou's spirit eyes entered the barrier effortlessly. Once beyond a person's mental barrier Lou could see everything about their life. Inside, the white consumed him, normally this would be filled with memories of everything that had ever brought a person happiness throughout their life. Inside here felt remarkably empty to Lou. This younger man's memories were current until about the age of two, then very little after that.

What happened to this child to stop him from feeling happiness at such a young age? These type of people were the hardest to help for it had been so long since he had been happy he had probably forgotten what it could be like. As Lou scanned up until the present time he felt surprised to see the face of his daughter smiling back at him. This man knew his daughter and even more than that loved her. Lou had no idea what this meant or where it would lead but he knew enough about Rebecca to know any man she loved could never be so evil as to destroy nature. Beside Rebecca's image, sat an old cross-legged Chinese man nodding and smiling, he looked to carving something out of a green stone. Then the white brumby stallion appeared. The horse neighed and reared up, shaking his head and snuffling.

From years of horse experience Lou knew this horse was happy. He couldn't work it out, why would the brumby be happy with the man who was about to destroy his lands. Well Lou had learned one thing. He really had no part to play in this situation, the best he could do would be to trust in the wetland spirits and the brumbies and know all would be well. *Easier said than done with Gerald Madison's son playing Mr. Tough Guy.*

Lou began his journey back out, *poor kid*, he thought. By now, he feared Kurt Madison may love the power and money kick too much to want to deal with his spirituality. That usually came later in a man's life. As Lou's spirit re-entered his own body he saw Kurt wobbled a little and had become visibly shaken by the intrusion.

"Stay out of this, Old Man, and there will be no trouble. We have

made up our minds. My father will have that land.” Kurt's eyes looked toward the ground, the sky, sideways. He would not hold eye contact with Lou.

“We'll see.” Lou simply replied, and Kurt looked almost scared. It was always a moving thing for a man to face up to the feelings inside him. “You know my daughter, Rebecca.” Kurt looked stunned at his words.

“How did..?”

Kurt turned on his heel, opened the door to his black sports car, jumped in and took off in a screeching of tires and cloud of smoke. Lou watched until the vehicle had disappeared around the corner.

Now it was time for Lou to consult the wetland and brumby spirits once again, possibly for the last time in human form. Lou walked back to the place he had parked his beat up Dodge Ute, the door gave off its familiar groan as he pulled hard to open it, "I know how you feel!" Lou said and smiled at the door joint as he climbed in. Pulling it closed in an equally hard manner the door slammed loudly, the only way to latch it properly these days. Not bothering to go to his city apartment, Lou headed for his ranch and best friend, his horse.

* * * *

Driving quickly, too quickly, Kurt still felt the strangeness that possessed him in those moments. For some reason he could not tear his eyes away from the old man, *maybe he put a vex on me or something?* Proud of his toughness and ability not to show emotions, Kurt felt so unsettled. As if he had been scrutinized from the soul up. His sweaty palms slipped on the steering wheel and his precious Dodge Viper careered into dustbin on the sidewalk, met with the brick wall and stopped.

Feeling his head slam against the steering wheel, he thought how lucky he had been that no-one had been walking past just then. Touching his fingers to the stinging spot on his forehead he felt relieved that it wasn't bleeding profusely. Kurt just had the feeling the blood poured everywhere, *bloody old fool must have jinxed me.* When the beating of his heart had slowed back to normal pace, Kurt shut off the engine and stepped out of the car, inspecting his front fender. The damage quite severe really but nothing his insurance wouldn't cover.

He took out his cell phone and dialed his personal assistant, she could sort it for him, his first day on the job and the troubles had started already. Add to that the fact that he'd just found out Lou Deegan was Rebecca's father. How the hell did he know, no one

knew, heck *he* never even knew who Rebecca was. Now he realized and kicked himself for not paying more attention to his father yesterday. She would surely hate him for what he tried to do to her father's company, her company.

Kurt just felt as if he belonged somewhere else today. Flagging down a cab he mumbled out his address and sat back to let the whole afternoon wash over him. Perhaps he should go to the hospital to get checked out and maybe he would, tomorrow. Right now he wanted sleep.

Throwing a few notes roughly at the driver he welcomed the familiar feel of his parent's home. Luckily they weren't home. His bedroom, his sanctuary, the one place no-one could touch him, the one place Kurt could be himself. He flopped onto the bed and drifted off to sleep.

In his dreams he found himself greeted by the strangest of creatures, almost horses but changing form rapidly. So much so, he woke with quite a start. *What are those ghostly things whispering my name?* He thought. Sweat dripped from his brow and his heart thumped quite firmly, but why? Kurt even felt a little scared and the darkness crept up while he slept making him feel uneasy. Even now the noise which could only be described as screaming horses sounded inside his head, "boy, now they were some kind of dreams" he spoke aloud, in an effort to calm himself.

As he reached for the lamp switch he thought felt something damp trail across the skin of his wrist, he yelped drew his hand back suddenly. Jumping up he flicked the main light switch and bathed the room in light. Nothing had changed, he searched around his bed, nothing. "Must be imagining this shit!" He gripped the jade horse pendant and he could swear it felt hot. He couldn't help remembering how it felt when Lou Deegan stared at him. First thing after the deal, Kurt decided he would go and see him, then go and see Rebecca and tell her everything. He had a feeling he knew just where to find the old man. Kurt did sleep some more, eventually, but the light stayed on.

* * * * *

Maggie, a brumby, stood proud, in the field and ran into her stable as soon as she sighted Lou. Her ears twitched a little and her nostrils dilated as Lou strode toward her with his saddle. Lou saw her every week and made sure she received exercise, the grand-kiddies saw to that. Rebecca was his youngest of five and the only unmarried

one left. Lou smiled at his own thoughts, hardly kiddies anymore, the youngest girl had just turned twenty. Five grandchildren in all, three boys, two girls and Lou taught them all the same as his own offspring. No reason why a girl couldn't rope a cow, or a boy grow a flower. They had grown up the better for it and now they could pass the skills down to the little-un's when Lou left this earth.

He stepped up to his trusted mare and patted her firmly on the neck in the big slaps he knew she loved. Placid didn't mean weak, Maggie topped all the others in her day, she would never give as long as Lou stayed in the saddle. Probably give them a run for their money even now. The horse whinnied low and turned her head to give a playful nibble to her master's shoulder. Then her front legs pawed the ground alternately. Lou laughed and spoke to her as he would any human.

"Yes, time we had an adventure, my trusted friend. You think a couple of oldies like us are still up to it!" Lou laughed as Maggie pawed the ground with her right, front hoof and raised her head up and down as if to nod. "Too right, we are, Maggie, too right we are."

Maggie stood obediently as Lou expertly saddled her and climbed aboard. A rush of energy ran through him and he wondered why it had taken him so long to do this. He knew why, because the moment he sat on her again, he would not return to town, ever. Once he was mounted comfortably, she sidled up to the familiar hook in the wooden post, Lou grabbed his dusty saddle bags and attached them. Checking inside, he found all the supplies he needed, lovingly refreshed by his eldest daughter every so often, in case of just such a moment. Grabbing his swag he threw it over his back with the leather strap diagonally across his chest and pointed Maggie's head for the door.

Maggie walked out of the stable and stood still, her ears pricked ready to hear the signal from Lou. He looked around his ranch, checked for water and matches and heeled her lightly in the ribs while hollering, "Yahhhhhh!"

Maggie whinnied loudly, reared up and took off. Lou felt the rush of wind in his hair and raised his hand to keep his hat on. Realizing he still had his business shirt and tie on, with his blue jeans and fringed leather chaps. He chuckled and thought he would look a sight, *well it ain't like I'll be needing the shirt and tie again!* The breeze in his face let him know this was where he belonged not running some racehorse company. Rebecca could take that now if she wanted it.

In about an hour the pair, horse and man, arrived at the edge of the wetlands. He rode the perimeter to give Maggie a chance to cool down and stretch her muscles, while he looked over the size of the area. It seemed so hard to believe these may be under threat. He'd always camped out here, loving the closeness to nature he felt. None of his buddies would join him, they hated the noises in the night. That suited Lou just fine, peace and quiet.

Here he had learned to meditate in front of the fire, watching the flicker of the flame and opening his subconscious to the spirits. The first contact with the Wetland Spirits put the wind up him for sure, but it hadn't been long and he conversed with them happily for hours. There is nothing remotely aggressive about the Spirits, they never had anger or sought revenge. Because they knew all things would come to pass, if not in this lifetime then the next. A very valuable lesson and one Lou had learned well. Tonight he may call on them again, but he worried he would just feel so peaceful, he may pass over to them and leave this material world behind. It would be so easy.

Halting Maggie at the familiar spot, his favorite spot, his tree sat on the outermost edge. Taking the tack from Maggie he left her to graze, wearing only her halter. Maggie would never wander far, in fact she usually stayed where she could see Lou.

Lou took his gear to just past the clearing and nestled everything away in the designated area's. His saddle stayed close, to allow him to rest against it when ready to sleep. Building his fire in the small rocky clearing, he brewed a pot of coffee. The strong scent entered his nostrils and he inhaled with pleasure. *Ahhhhh! Nothing like drinking fresh, hot coffee beside the fire.*

Sipping tentatively whilst contemplating his next move, Lou had a feeling. He knew Kurt would come, before this all ended, he knew he would come.

Relaxed and reminiscing his life, Lou and Maggie waited. The night air came down humid and sticky, there had been little rain in past months. A perfect place to spend the night. Or even forever.

* * * *

"Do we have a deal?" Kurt eyed the men carefully. They may go back on their word yet, but he had come prepared to up the offer if need be. He knew they were all in financial ruin and had to sell all their assets. Five years ago, this particular group of businessmen had been the high rollers. They held the power, they had the money. Kurt knew it would be only a matter of time before he saw their demise,

they had gotten to old for the game. He had stepped in under them as soon as they had taken their collective eyes off the ball. Now the six stuffed shirts squirmed under his gaze.

"Rumor has it you are going to bulldoze. I'm not sure we can sell under those circumstances!" Gary Buffer spoke up, being the head chairperson.

Kurt laughed out loud. "You can't afford not to sell to me, if the banks liquidate you, I will be the highest bidder anyway. At least this way you gentlemen save face and recoup some losses. You may even be able to keep your fancy homes!" Kurt stated, snidely. The group looked at each other and passed the contract around to be signed. Looking pretty dejected, Gary made the final and deciding mark.

"Thank you, Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure doing business with you!"

Kurt acted very smug but the truth was, he felt strange about it all. The pleasure hadn't really been there, but he remained determined to follow through with his father's wishes. *There is no way I can back out now*, I'll be the laughing stock, he thought. Kurt now owned the Wetland area and the one hundred acres surrounding it. Later on it would get transferred to his Father's name and Kurt could leave all this business crap behind him. He prayed he could make Rebecca see reason. Picking up his briefcase, he marched confidently out of the room, leaving them to wallow in guilt about how they had sold out their oldest friend, Lou Deegan.

Jumping straight into the Jeep Cherokee he had taken whilst his Dodge underwent repair, Kurt headed out the road and straight for wetlands. He knew where to go as he had sniffed around out there five years ago. A gravel road went almost out to the edge of the wetlands, he'd have to walk a little way in though.

Sure the dealings had been lower than a snake's belly, but that was business. No-one had ever given him a break, so why should he worry about the feelings of a few tired old men? *They are way past it anyway, and by the end of tonight I shall have beaten Lou Deegan as well.*

Minding not to go too fast, he drove up as far as he could, opened the door and stepped onto the rocky, makeshift pathway. Walking very gingerly, Kurt headed toward the patch he had seen Lou at five years ago. He could see a horse a little way off and began to sweat, and knew it would be Lou's horse.

After walking over the uneven ground, he sidled the horse so as

not to startle it.

“Pay no mind to Maggie, she won't hurt ya. She knew you were coming before you even did.” Lou Deegan's voice wafted from behind a big twisted and bent tree. Kurt wished he had worn something more comfortable than full business attire. He side-stepped a little more as the horse turned her head to focus on him. He tore his gaze away and stumbled a little.

“Bout time you got here, Mate. I been waiting on ya.” Lou drawled.

As Kurt finally caught sight of the older man he realized Lou had his back to him still and really had no clue how Lou knew he was there or even who he was as he couldn't have seen him from that position. Standing at the edge of the Wetland Woods looking down at the makeshift camp, Kurt wondered where he would sit.

“Pull up a stump,” Lou said, sweeping his arm, then speaking again. “Actually that rock over there is pretty comfortable. My children and grandchildren sat there listenin' to stories. Just as I did when Grand-Dad and my father brought me here.”

Kurt stepped down a little closer and said, “you been coming here *that* long?” Lou looked up at him sideways with half a smile on his face at the unintended insinuation.

That'll be enough of that!” Lou had a laugh in his voice as he continued, “go on sit down, don't worry about the suit, it'll clean.”

Kurt sat on the rock and found it did have a certain kind of comfort. Here he became eye level with Lou, even though he had no wish to be scrutinized that way again, he looked over at him. “The deal's been done.”

“I know” Lou replied.

“How do you know that?” Kurt questioned him.

“Well, why else would you be here?” Lou stated.

Kurt wanted to say a great many things, but the words just wouldn't come. He imagined how it would have been to sit here with his father when he'd been young. Perhaps he may have had some happy memories then.

“I'm sure your parent's did the best they could at the time, Kurt.” Lou's words made Kurt uneasy, had he known what he'd been thinking?

“I don't talk about it.” Kurt answered.

“No, but you sure think about it a lot.” Again the words of the old man spooked him. Kurt shifted a little on the rock.

"Why are we here, Lou?" Kurt had begun to wonder what the purpose of this visit here was.

"Well, I'm here to say goodbye and make peace with the animals and the wetland spirits." Lou poured two cups of coffee and handed one over. "Why are you here?"

"I don't really know, I wanted to let you know the deal had gone through, I guess." Kurt searched inside his mind for a better reason but couldn't find one.

"I thought you would try and stop me." Kurt challenged.

Lou chuckled, "well, I had planned to, but after having the night here, I realized if I fight, you will be even more determined. If you have made up your mind then nothing I can do will stop you."

"Sure you won't send those spirits after me?" Kurt asked remembering the cold feel on his wrist last night.

Lou laughed out loud this time, "what? You think I practice voodoo or something? No, the spirits go where they choose, any insight I may have gained from them is used purely to learn and assist."

"What will happen to them when this place is gone?" Kurt wondered why he asked that, he shouldn't care. *Why do I even believe they exist?*

"They will find their way, it is a pity about the animals though. Not too many left in some of the species. Little frogs and such. And the brumbies are a proud bunch."

"They need this area?" Kurt had never really considered this fact before.

"Yup." Lou offered over a piece of jerky as he spoke. Kurt refused he'd never liked that stuff.

"Well, it's too bad about that. I think I'll be off now." Kurt stood and brushed his trousers down.

"Yup." The old man offered no more conversation.

Back at the Jeep, Kurt thought about the animals, it played on his mind. He felt the jade horse pendant warm against his chest. Gripping it in his hand he felt powerful somehow and he closed his eyes to the comfort washing over him. The voice of Lee Yin, his old Chinese mentor, sounded in side his mind. *Remember, you are a horse. You must help the brumbies, not destroy their home.* Kurt shook the thought from his head. If only it were that easy, the wheels now in motion and Kurt was powerless to stop it.

Chapter Four

“Oh Gary. No! What have you done? How could you sell us out, after everything we have done for you?” Rebecca looked into the face of one of her father’s oldest friends. To his credit he had come to her in person to let her know of the sale.

“Rebecca, I am truly sorry. I have a gambling problem, all my money has gone. He stitched us up good. We had no choice but to sell or be ruined.”

“Who did you sell it to?” Rebecca calmed a little her natural empathy kicking in.

“Kurt Madison, Gerald’s son.”

Those words seemed to pierce Rebecca’s heart like a sharp dagger. There couldn’t be two. She sat back into her chair with a thump. “Kurt.” No wonder he wouldn’t say who he was. Did he know who she was? What was she thinking, of course he must know, everyone knew her. Had it all been...no, she couldn’t bear to think that way.

“Here is some information on him. Maybe it will help.” Gary handed her some papers and turned to leave, “I am truly sorry Rebecca and tell Lou I am. I never meant to hurt you two.”

“Tell that to the brumbies who will more than like be hunted and shot now Gary.” He left and Rebecca stared down at the papers. Copies of old newspaper clippings of Kurt with various women to do with the business community, *Playboy strikes again, Madison has pillow talk session, Kurt Madison romances wives and daughters of corporate bosses...* There it was in black and white and although he seemed much younger in these photo’s, it was definitely him. How could she have been so naïve, so stupid?

But Kurt never talked business, didn’t want to talk business, so what could possibly have been his motive. Maybe he placed a bug in her home to find out information. All Rebecca knew was that she must save the brumbies, if she had to stand in front of them and be

shot herself she would. To hell with the business, the animals were more important.

Rebecca rushed home and changed, pausing to look at her bed, still in disrepair from her time with Kurt. It pained her to think the best time of her life may have all been for nothing. She headed for the wetlands. Her father would be there, Gary said Kurt saw him before he closed the deal. She hoped her father wouldn't be disappointed in her lack of discretion.

* * * *

Driving out to the property she loved so much, her mind thinking over all the times she spent on the wetlands watching the wild horses. She'd befriended a couple, well they befriended her really, and Rebecca loved the wildness of the brumbies, stocky build, fast and tougher than any other horse breed she'd dealt with. Her dad rode a brumby, Maggie, and that horse chose her father and never looked back. She allowed him and only him to ride her, even Rebecca couldn't mount her, Maggie just kept side-stepping away. So many memories, no way would Rebecca let the brumbies be harmed.

Screeching to a halt as she spotted Kurt standing next to a Jeep, Rebecca flung off her seatbelt and stormed out of the car, not even bothering to close her door. The anger she felt consumed her, but it masked the pain and humiliation of falling for his playboy smooth talking. This was exactly why she never had relationships, nobody can be trusted, no matter how sincere they say they are.

"You asshole! You used me!" she shouted and stood about six foot away from him, not daring to get closer. His presence still affected her and somehow she wished this would turn out to be a dream and Kurt would love her for real.

"No I never used you! Rebecca, I'm sorry, I didn't know who you were. You know that, we never talked business." Kurt replied firmly.

"Bullshit, you would have done your research, just like on all those other women you used. I saw the newspaper clippings. You worked for your father to get this land for greed. Nothing more." The sting of tears bit at her eyes.

"Rebecca, that happened a long time ago. After this time I swear I was leaving the business. I owe my father this much if we lose this deal his company will fold, I can't let that happen."

"You can't go through with it. Even if what we shared is not real, those horses living out there are real and you cannot let this land be

cleared and the Brumbies culled.” Rebecca’s tears fell from anger, not sadness. How could Kurt act so bloody innocent?

“What the hell are you on about woman. The time I shared with you was real. Surely the brumbies can be rezoned or sold or something, they don’t have to die.”

Rebecca wondered how a grown and intelligent man could seem so brainless. “Kurt, bloody hell, what life is it for them to be sold and owned, they are free spirits? They are territorial and the other stronger horses will target them. Brumbies are wild and free creatures, they are proud. If you can’t see that then I was stupid to fall in love with you!”

“You are in love with me?”

Rebecca simply said, “I was mistaken. A bad judge of character. How can I love someone after one night? You are a horse killer and I can only ever feel hatred for you now.”

“Rebecca...I...I have no choice. I’m sure Dad won’t cull them.”

“Well, you ask him then? You ask him and see. But if you two think you can get around me without a fight you are sorely mistaken. I will be there every step of the way to slow you down and see the horses are safe. You’ll have to cull me before you get your filthy hands on any of those brumbies!” With that Rebecca strode back to her car, got in and did a u-turn. She let the wheels spin as she took off knowing it would shower Kurt in dust.

Now at her family home on the training property, Rebecca headed for the stable to saddle one of the horses, she chose a large, solid stallion she called Bobby. His racing name was King William Red, now retired he liked a run now and then and he would keep his head around the wild horses.

Rebecca intended to find them, she wasn’t sure what to do but she just wanted to see them again. Then she would go see her father and see what could be done. With the wind in her hair and the power of a horse beneath her, Rebecca knew this was her calling, not sitting in an office. She needed to be out here with the horses.

* * * *

“Bloody women! Jesus I totally stuffed up this time!” Kurt had organized to meet his father on the main road to take him over the land he now owned. He loved Rebecca but felt torn between his loyalty to his parents, Rebecca and the brumbies. *No way will Dad have them shot, he loves horses.* His father’s car stopped on the side of the road in front of his. They got out at the same time.

“Good work Son, you did me proud.” Gerald slapped him on the

back.

“Dad what will happen to the brumbies?”

“What?”

“What plans do you have for the brumbies?” Kurt repeated.

“Plans? Well, ummm, what do you reckon? They’ll have to go.”

His dad had a half grin on his face. Kurt did not feel amused.

“So you’ll have them killed. You never told me about this earlier. Dad you can’t just kill them all for your own benefit!”

“It’s for you too, your children. There are more brumbies in other areas. Don’t go soft on me Kurt.”

Kurt felt outraged, and let down. His own father knew nothing about him. He thought he could just let innocent animals die. He thought Kurt could just put wild horses to their death. Kurt got back into his vehicle and headed along the road to Rebecca’s family property. He had to find her and let her know he would have no part in this madness. He had to win her back. In the rear-vision mirror Kurt saw his father shaking his head as he got into his car and drove in the direction of the wetlands.

Turning left and heading up a long dirt road, Kurt thought this must lead to the property. Either side of the road stood gum trees, their leaves shining in the sunlight. Before long he came to an open gate, with the Deegan name on it. He continued and the area opened up to a wonderful oasis of garden. Driving slowly around the back he saw Rebecca’s vehicle parked. Getting out to have a look around, he saw a young bloke leading a horse in. “Hey mate? You seen Rebecca Deegan around here anywhere?”

“Yeah, she took off on Bobby bout half hour ago. She looked pretty mad, I never spoke to her.”

It had been a while since Kurt had ridden a horse, but he thought he still could.

“You got a quiet one you could saddle up for me? It’s urgent I see her.”

“Yeah sure, guess it won’t hurt. If you want to know where to find her follow the fence-line till you come to the edge of the wetland then ride around behind the wetland and go straight ahead. You’ll come across her there somewhere. She’s gone after the brumbies I reckon. It’s where she always went.”

Before long Kurt was in the saddle and following the young bloke’s instructions. His heart pounded at riding again. But the magical feeling of it told him it would become a regular pastime.

What the hell was he doing being an asshole in business anyway? He hated the corporate life. Officially this was Kurt's land now. He'd paid for it with his own money and was meant to transfer it to his dad, but Kurt had a better idea. His dad would just have to live with it and find a legitimate way to save his business.

* * * *

There they are! Her heart thumped in excitement as she dismounted, tied Bobby to a branch and moved toward the mob. They were still quite a distance but their heads came up and they sniffed the air at her presence. Rebecca could see the Stallion leading the bunch wasn't the one she remembered. She stood still, not wanting to spook them. Many more of them now. It looked at least one hundred roamed around in the band. They were beautiful, the wild horses.

A mix of all the horse brought into Australia in the settlement days. Some escaped and bred in the wild, now many of Australia's national parks had a problem with the damage they did to the land. It wasn't uncommon to see them culled from helicopters. Perhaps a necessary evil but what about a national park for Brumbies? Rebecca walked into the clearing a little and the horses looked over and simply went back to grazing. She sat in the long, dry grass and just watched.

Suddenly the leader reared up and pawed the air sounding his high pitched neighing around the land. Rebecca tensed, something had spooked him. Could have been a snake, or a smell there was no way to tell. All she knew was a hundred strong head of wild horse now headed straight for her and the ground shook with the thundering of hooves. Trying not to panic Rebecca mentally calculated the distance to get back to Bobby, no time, but she must try. No way she could outrun them. Getting back to her horse was the best chance, damn idiot for wandering so far away from him. For the very first time in her life Rebecca felt scared in the presence of the wild horses but she was in their territory now and she should have taken more care.

Rebecca ran as fast as her legs would go, her chest burned from lack of breath. She could see Bobby grazing, his ears pricked, now his head nodded around. He knew the horses were on the way, he stood his ground. Pushing her body harder than ever Rebecca threw herself across the ground just as the brumbies veered around the thicket of trees. Bobby snuffled and stepped on the spot showing mild distress. Quickly rising she patted his neck and climbed up on him. Leading him a little deeper into the bush and out of the way of the stampede.

“Shit that was close Boy, sorry to spook you like that. Rebecca realized she hadn’t thought about Kurt at all in the last hour, thank God for small mercies she thought. Still getting trampled by wild horses was not a preferred option either. Only a couple of stragglers ran by now and Rebecca led Bobby out into the clearing once more. The sight greeting her struck terror into her heart. The brumbies bolted along the wide stretch of land, but over to the left she saw A lone horseman, on a familiar looking horse. One wrong move could draw the brumby stallion toward the rider in a protective move. Then the rider held aloft something white and waved it around in the air calling her name.

Oh dear God! It’s Kurt, what the hell is he doing out here? The brumby stallion changed direction and headed straight for the white makeshift flag waving.

“Kurt!”she screamed. “Ride Kurt, hurry!”

Kurt realized at the last minute the foolishness of waving around the small towel and yelling. He’d heard the pack coming a way off but they seemed to be heading away from him. Then he’d spotted Rebecca riding behind them and without thinking sought her attention. Now he had a mob of wild horses headed directly for him. He turned his horses head and kicked her ribs. She took off, but she panicked as well and reared up. Kurt felt himself fly up in the air and dreaded to landing. He grasped his jade horse and prayed to be saved. Otherwise he could never ask Rebecca to marry him and join him here on his land with the brumbies. He hit the ground with a hard thud, knocking the wind from his lungs. Gasping for breath, he felt the jade horse heat up, almost burning his palm, but he held fast. His mind swirled in a cavalcade of colors and Chinese voices, the strange ghosts of his dreams were there and a pure white wild stallion reared up. Kurt curled himself into a ball and squeezed his eyes shut tight. Around him her felt the pounding of hooves, in his mind he focused on the white stallion as the ghostly things picked him up and sat him on the back of the stallion. Up here he felt safe. Somehow he knew he would survive the stampede, he stayed still and lost himself in his daydream.

* * * *

Lou, relaxed by his small campfire, knew the spirits would call him if they needed him. The strange feeling he wasn’t alone now surrounded him and Lou relaxed himself into a meditative state. As if on a television screen he saw the scene play out. Rebecca screamed

and Kurt Deegan sat directly in the path of the wild brumbies. Lou reached out with his mind and called forth the white Stallion. He built a protective shield around the young man and although many hooves thundered close to him, none would strike. Now for his daughter. But before he could see to her she had headed her horse alongside the raging stampeded. Headstrong woman Lou thought but all he could do now was see Kurt did not get stomped into the ground, he may have had bad intentions but Lou knew he loved Rebecca so he had to give him the chance to make her happy.

* * * *

Rebecca reined Bobby around the side of the pack, she had to get to the leader and direct him away from Kurt, if he still survived, and from harming themselves and other wildlife if they headed for the wetlands. Besides that she knew her dad was in those wetlands and she wouldn't have him in danger. Rebecca tried and tried to catch up to the lead Stallion but he was just too far ahead. Bobby foot must have struck a rock as he whinnied loudly and came to a dead stop, reared up and threw her to the ground. Shit Rebecca thought. As she looked up she saw a pure white stallion running beside the mob leader. The large horse didn't look like a brumby; in fact it didn't look like any horse she had ever seen.

Almost transparent in it glowing whiteness, Rebecca drew her breath in slowly as the horses changed direction again and then as if the total mood changed they stopped running and started grazing again. The white stallion appeared before her and nuzzled her up to a standing position. Rebecca could feel no pain from her fall, so no broken bones. She placed her hand on the horse's nose and the love radiating from it felt amazing. The horse nudged her a few more times and then she noticed Kurt huddled up on the ground. The horse nodded and nuzzled into her neck.

In her mind she heard a voice, *go to him, he has something to tell you. Do not be angry his life and yours have been spared by the wetland spirits and the spirit of the horses. You must live to continue your work protecting the brumbies and the other wildlife.* Rebecca looked deep into the white Stallion's eyes, was this the voice she heard? Yes Rebecca it is me, I must go now. farewell. The stallion nodded and wings sprouted from its back, just below the neck. Beautiful white feathered wings, "Pegasus? But how?" Rebecca asked in awe of this wonderful horse she thought to be mythology. *His jade horse pendant has the power of the Ancients. Protect it well and it*

will protect you. The Pegasus rose into the air, flew a little way and totally disappeared from sight. Running now to Kurt's side she called his name. He did not budge but he answered, "Rebecca?"

"Yes Kurt. Are you okay? I mean we both are, I just had a conversation with Pegasus I think. I'm sure I'm going mad."

"So he was here, I wasn't just dreaming." Kurt replied and opened his eyes. "I'm so sorry Rebecca, I should not have put you in danger like that."

"Why were you out here Kurt?" Rebecca asked as she helped him up, her desire tugged at her once again.

"I'd come to tell you. You were right about Dad, I never thought he could just kill a horse. I really did not mean for this to happen this way."

"Can you stop it Kurt?"

"I can, this land is officially mine and I'm not going to hand it over to Dad. I'm keeping it and with your help I'm going to make a wildlife sanctuary, and that includes the brumbies."

Rebecca felt her heart swell with pride and joy. "Oh Kurt! I'd be honored to help." He swept her up into a kiss. None of the passion they'd shared had been lost. Rebecca hugged her to him as hard as she could. She held his jade horse pendant, "You know, this saved our lives today."

"Yes, I think it did."

Rebecca led Kurt to find their horses and ride them back then she would take him to find her father and tell him the news.

* * * *

"Dad?"

Lou recognized the sound of his youngest daughter's voice without turning. "Yeah, I'm here Rebecca. Hello again Kurt."

"Mr. Deegan, nice to see you again."

"Call me Lou. Now what could possibly have you two out here together?"

"What? Apart from my crazy old father who seems to have taken to living in the bush?" Rebecca laughed, "We have some news."

"News? Well that sounds intriguing." Lou sat again and motioned the rock, Rebecca wasted no time sitting and accepting a coffee. Kurt did the same.

"Kurt is keeping the land and saving the wild animals. He won't hand it over to Gerald." Rebecca sipped her coffee.

"I see. Well as far as I'm concerned the business is yours I've had

enough.” Lou watched the smile spread over his daughters face, then she frowned.

“I’m so glad you are retiring so you can enjoy life Dad, but I don’t really want the business either. We could sell it. Share up the money for the whole family and spend some time together.”

“Sure we could. I’d even give Gerald first offer, with a few extra clauses in the contract guaranteeing the safety of the animals and future development.” Lou decided.

“I could arrange that and you keep this land out here, between the two of us we can see the brumbies are safe.” Kurt replied.

“We’ll work it out Kurt. Now how about you two? Will you be seeing each other personally?”

“Dad!” Rebecca cried in shock at his words.

“With your permission, Sir, and Rebecca’s of course, I would love to date your daughter.”

“After what we’ve just been through how could I refuse?” Rebecca replied.

“See, I told you wild horses couldn’t keep me away didn’t I?”

The End

Claiming The Lamb
By
Meagan Hatfield

An artifact in Lara's Year of the Sheep painting draws out an ancient evil and the lusty dragon lord sent to protect her from it.

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Claiming The Lamb
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Chapter One

“Thank you for coming.”

Lara May stood outside greeting the mass of people streaming into the exhibition hall. When she angled her head, her eyes went wide in disbelief at the number waiting to get in.

“Gee, sis,” she leaned over to whisper in her sister’s ear. “Did you invite all of Southern California or just San Diego?”

Sasha tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder and cast Lara a patronizing look. “You are lucky I got any of these people to come at all. Paintings based on the Year of the Sheep,” she said, turning her attention back to the guest list in her hand. “Who ever heard of such a thing?”

“No one,” Lara replied with a smug grin. “That’s why I’m a genius. My show will be a huge success and everybody’s here to revel in it.”

“And here I thought sheep were mild-mannered pessimists,” Sasha grumbled, checking another name off her list. “One would think you were a dragon with your need to be the center of attention.”

“A-ha! I’ve rubbed off on you.”

“Humph,” she huffed, nodding down to the cross and vial she constantly wore around her neck. “Now if only I would do the same.”

“Sasha, don’t start up with that vampire stuff again,” Lara said and groaned. “I swear, that boyfriend of yours has brainwashed you. Next thing you’ll be telling me the Wolf-man is real.”

At her sister’s arched brow, Lara rolled her eyes and made ‘you’re crazy’ circles with her forefinger.

“I’m not crazy,” Sasha bit back, her face flushing bright red. “And neither is Jacob.”

“Whatever you say,” Lara said, pecking her on both cheeks. “But I’m going in to get some champagne before you start lecturing me again. I’m not about to shell out all this money on catering and not have a few glasses of the good stuff.”

“Just don’t have too many,” her sister scolded.

“Oh, *mom*, what would I do without you?”

Still laughing to herself, Lara rounded the large *Shoji* screen and made her way into the main viewing area. Pristine white carpets, natural woods and the diagonal pattern of the room all conveyed a feeling of openness and calm. Lara smiled. Ever since her first trip to the orient, she’d loved Oriental design and culture. It was why she’d studied both Feng Shui and the signs of the Chinese horoscope in the first place.

Though the Friendship Garden in Balboa Park definitely focused more on the Japanese culture than Chinese, it seemed only fitting she open her Zodiac exhibit here. In order to blend in with the lavish gardens and to appease its director, she’d opted to serve a menu with a decidedly more Japanese flair. She’d also chosen to wear her long brown hair in a bun, held by chopsticks and a dress that put a flattering, American spin on the popular Japanese kimono, knowing if she managed to impress the director her art would be showing here until the end of tourist season.

As she walked toward the buffet table and flowing champagne fountain, Lara smoothed her hands down her waist and hips, even though she could see no wrinkles...yet. While the red satin dress looked and felt wonderful, she realized she’d be standing all night if she wanted to get through the evening without creases.

After popping what she vowed to be the first of many sushi rolls into her mouth, she picked up a champagne flute and made her way through the crowd, smiling pleasantries as she went.

So far the evening seemed to be going off without a hitch. She even had a few interested buyers, which was always a good thing. Yet, while she spoke with the director about the evening’s show, she

couldn't ignore the prickling sensation creeping along her spine. The heat of someone's gaze burned her back as sure as if fire licked her skin. Frowning, she whirled around. Her eyes raked the crowd, instantly settling on a tall, broad shouldered man staring at her from across the room.

A feeling of awareness glazed over her as she regarded the handsome stranger. He wore black from head to toe—black pants and a long sleeve knit shirt, which gave him a dangerous yet sexy allure. Though he had a rich, almost regal air about him, the raven colored hair spilling above his eyes gave him an irresistible, just out of bed, tousled look.

A lump caught in her throat and her breath came hard and fast in her lungs. It became all she could do to keep her thoughts trained on the conversation with the director, and not the man across the room. As if he sensed her reaction to him, a devilish smile twisted his thin, yet sensuous lips. He lifted a thumb, dragging it across his lower lip as he blatantly looked her up and down. Her insides quivered and a knot of desire coiled tight and hard in her belly.

What the hell am I doing?

The thought came, even as she excused herself and began walking inexplicably toward him.

His shuttered eyes seemed to drink in the sight of her. The satin dress suddenly felt delicious as it swished and slid against her skin. The diamonds cascading between the cleavage exposed by her plunging neckline suddenly felt like beads of ice on her heated skin. It was as if her every sense was heightened, on alert from his presence.

He's dangerous.

"Hello," she said, fingering the flute's shaft as she stepped up to him.

"Ms. May, it's an honor to finally meet you," he said in a deep, velvety voice.

Lara smiled and looked up his well over six-foot frame to his face. A sigh sounded inside her at the sight of him. The man was sinfully gorgeous—and huge, she thought, perusing his muscular build. Like some kind of warrior or knight in the books she used to read as a child. She hadn't thought men like him even existed.

His chin and jaw were lean and square and she itched to run her palm along them. He had a perfect Roman nose and dark black brows framed his breathtaking eyes. She'd never seen anything like them in

her life. They looked like pools of mercury streaked with black and flecks of gold.

“Well, this is unfair.” She managed a playful tone. “You know my name and I don’t know yours.”

His cheek twitched as he kept back a grin.

“I’m sorry—where are my manners?” he asked, extending his hand. “Lachlan Black.”

When she slipped her hand into his, warmth feathered through her. And when his soft lips caressed her skin, the burning quickly spread to flame.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Black,” she said with a cordial nod. “So, are you enjoying my work?”

“Yes, very much,” he said, pointing to the easel in front of him. “I’m especially fond of this painting.”

Lara sidled around to stand beside him. She smiled at the picture he mentioned. It was her favorite in her Year of the Sheep collection. Sasha had posed for her, wearing only an antique pair of jade and gold earrings—nothing else.

“Do you paint from life?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then the likeness to the real object is staggering.”

She snapped her head toward him. “Do you know Sasha?”

A deep chuckle rumbled through him. Lara’s eyes fixed on his quaking chest. The ridges and contours of muscular body were visible even beneath the expensive knit. The idea of her sister’s hands smoothing over that chest made her ill.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure. I was speaking of the earrings,” he nodded to the picture.

“Oh,” she smiled, turning her attention back to the painting. Relieved he wasn’t an acquaintance, or worse, ex-boyfriend of her big sister’s. “They are beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” he said, looking at her. “I don’t think I’ve seen anything more stunning.”

Heat blossomed on her cheeks. Clearing her throat, Lara pointed to the gold design above the raindrop-shaped jade stone.

“These gold symbols have been around for centuries,” she said. “Like the Zodiac, their meanings are deeply rooted and have long been speculated to have a hidden connotation in certain circles.”

A wicked smile curved lips.

"I am surprised one such as you knows anything as complex as Chinese Zodiac, much less their hidden meanings."

"Really," she said. "But a man, such as yourself, is well versed in such affairs?"

The moment she said it, she wished she could recall the words. Being a sheep, she had an inherent knack for getting off on the wrong foot. It had caused more than one bungled romance.

However, he only smiled and leaned toward her. "A man like me is well versed in many affairs."

A shiver of delight fluttered up her spine at his low spoken words. When she moved to reply, only a shuddered sigh escaped her lips. As if sensing the calamity warring inside her, he spoke instead.

"What, may I ask, is your fascination with the year of the sheep?"

"It's the year I was born," she answered.

"Yes, I can tell."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she bristled.

The smile that passed his lips melted her insides. "You are an artist, so I can only assume your funds are nowhere near the range required to finance that jewelry around your neck, much less the food and beverage bill for this evening."

"Is that so," she asked, trying to look casual as she sipped from her champagne flute. This tall, dark stranger had her number all right. But she wasn't about to let him know it.

"Nice try—but I am quite wealthy, thank you."

"Really?" His handsome brow arched.

"Yes. My grandmother left me a veritable fortune when she passed last summer."

"Ah," he said smugly.

"What?"

"Another Sheep trait...benefiting from the deaths of others. Fortune smiles on you. You don't have to work hard...shit falls into your lap."

Lara released an unladylike grunt. "And what sign are you, may I ask?"

His silver eyes turned steely. "Dragon."

"That explains your arrogance." *And his charisma.* "So tell me, *Dragon*, is there anything else you'd like to enlighten me concerning myself?

God, was she flirting with him?

"Romance."

Her heart thudded at his words. She watched as his mesmerizing eyes danced over her neck and chest, settling on her cleavage. Her nipples pebbled in response, pressing delightfully against the satin. She swallowed hard and licked her lips. Like an animal stalking prey, his eyes shifted to them and Lara felt them instantly heat and soften under his gaze.

“What about romance?” she whispered.

He bent down to her ear. “You thrive on it.” When he spoke, hot breath fanned against her skin, sending goose bumps racing down her arms. “Moonlit walks, candle lit dinners, rose petals on silk sheets.”

Lara closed her eyes as his words caused a vivid picture to spring to full, techno-colored life into her mind. His large, muscular body naked and looming over her, their limbs entwined. Blood-red rose petals on silken sheets slipping beneath her naked skin with the same delicious softness as her satin dress.

Her breath hitched and she resisted the urge to reach out and grab his brawny biceps and pull him into her arms. When he leaned back and looked into her eyes, his burned with a desire mirroring her own.

Why did you have to be so beautiful?

She heard his question, though his lips did not move. Yet she was too lost in a haze of desire to question it. The deep timbre of his sexy voice made her body ache for him in a way she’d never experienced.

God, this arrogant bastard was turning her on. She’d gone too long without getting laid. If she were Sasha and half believed in spells, she’d think this dragon had cast one on her.

“Lara.”

At the familiar voice she reluctantly turned from the intriguing silver-eyed man.

“Yes, Sasha?”

“The reporter is here to interview you.”

“Okay, tell him I’ll be there in just a minute,” she said, turning to excuse herself from Mr. Black.

He was gone. Craning her neck, she searched the crowd, but couldn’t even see his broad-shouldered back.

“Lara,” her sister impatiently whined.

“I’m coming,” she said, taking one last look around the room before going with her sister.

During the entire interview, Lara had problems keeping her mind off Mr. Black. On more than one occasion she caught herself glancing out the windows to see if he roamed the winding pathways in the

gardens. She did a double take anytime a man dressed in black entered the room. That curious ache he'd lit within her only seemed to have brightened at his sudden disappearance, not diminished.

The moment the reporter and cameraman left, she high-tailed it to her sister.

"Sasha." She bent her head over her sister's shoulder, trying to spy the guest list. "You invited everyone, right?"

"Yeah," her brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Can you tell me more about this Lachlan Black guy? Where is he from? Who does he know here? Where does he work?" *Is he married?*

"Lara, I don't have a Mr. Black on this list."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I spent hours collecting names and contacting everyone. I've never even heard of a Mr. Black." Suddenly *that* look crept into her sister's hazel eyes. "I don't like this, Lara. Where is he? I'll call Jacob and get him to..."

"Oh hush with your paranormal paranoia, sis. Sheesh, you're such a distrustful monkey."

"Lara, you need to stop stereotyping people based on their horoscope—including yourself."

* * * *

Lachlan stood in the shadowed garden, watching the long legged vixen through the window. Though jasmine blossomed at his feet, every breath he took drew in the lingering feminine scent of her.

Lara.

His blood thrummed, as hot and red as the dress hugging every luscious curve of her body—each one his hands itched to caress and his tongue longed to explore and taste.

Until tonight, he'd forgotten how long it had been since he'd bedded a woman. However, five minutes alone with this brash artist and her full red lips, dark chocolate eyes and shiny brown hair brought it back to jarring focus.

It had been nearly a decade. To humans this might seem like eternity. Yet having lived eight hundred years and bound to live at least three hundred more, ten years seemed like yesterday, though at times it seemed an eternity.

Ten years ago my last brother still lived.

Lachlan slammed his eyes shut at the searing memory. Gritting his teeth, he forced his thoughts off the girl and back to the task at hand.

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

It didn't matter how bad he wanted to slake his lust on her sweet and supple body. She held the key to ending his centuries of fighting...the reason his entire family had been slowly executed one by one. He would have it, and her, no matter what the cost.

Chapter Two

Lara pulled her flimsy wrap tight around her arms, wishing she'd brought a jacket like her sister told her. Though still technically summer, the late August nights had a tendency to get cool, especially in such a wooded area. As she meandered along the low-lit garden path heading for the main gate and the parking lot, her mind wandered to Mr. Black. The sinfully handsome stranger had, in minutes, awoken passion like she'd never known and then vanished just as fast.

"Hello, Lara," a deep male voice purred in the darkness.

She gasped and turned toward the sound. No one stood on the pathway behind her. "Hello?" she called out, tugging the wrap tighter around her shoulders. "Who's there?"

Lara was certain she'd been the last to leave the exhibit, so was not surprised when no answer came. With a shrug she turned back around. A shocked gasp escaped her when she slammed into a hard chest. The man was dressed in black and almost invisible in the dark. Slowly her gaze traveled past the sandy blonde hair that curled around his columned throat and up over the firm planes of his sculpted jaw. Her eyes widened in horror at the inch long fangs draped over his sensual mouth.

"No!" she shouted, though it came out as little more than a whisper.

Impossible. Her sister had been right all along. Not only were there such things as vampires, one stood right in front of her.

"Oh yes, Lara," he said, running a finger down her cheek.

A hiss came from her at his touch. He was cold as ice. Something in his blue eyes flickered at her response. She sensed he liked her fear. At the thought, a knot of dread coiled in her belly, unfurling a ribbon of terror to trip down her spine. Lara pursed her lips, mentally berating herself. Why did her sheep characteristics always kick in at times like these? Why couldn't she have been born a Tiger? She took Tae-Bo. She should be fighting him not cowering.

“H-how do you know my name?” she asked, backing up a step. “Who are you?”

A disturbing smile edged across his mouth.

“That doesn’t matter,” he said in a monotone flavored with a hint of a European accent. “All you need to know is that you have something I want. And I always get what I want.”

Lara took another cautious step back. She figured she couldn’t outrun him, but knew she had to try. The second she whipped around to sprint down the path she froze. A stocky, beefy-necked vampire stood behind her, blocking her way.

“Come now,” the blonde vampire said. “Can’t you stay and play nice? We’re playing nice with you.”

“We?” she gasped.

Five more vampires crawled out from the darkness.

Panting, desperate for air, she eyed the encircling horde.

“Yes, I know,” he continued, “so many of us for one small human woman. It’s embarrassing how little Cateryne thinks of me these days. But all will be as it was before. After I get what I came here for.”

Lara gulped a swallow. “What do you want?”

The leader clasped his hands behind his back and strolled with feigned indifference to the window looking into the main viewing room. The long black trench coat he wore billowed behind him as he walked.

Though it was dark inside the hall, the security lights illuminated the space enough for her to see which painting he pointed at.

Sasha. Oh God no. Not...

“The earrings,” he said.

Lara was so caught up with worry for her sister his words did not register at first.

“The...earrings?” she frowned.

“Yes.” The playful demeanor left his posture and a red glint burned behind his blue eyes. “Where are they?”

“I-I don’t have them.”

A snarl puckered his lips, causing his fangs to flicker in the low light.

He must have moved with lightening speed, for Lara did not see his advance, but her head snapped back and pain burst across her cheek where he struck her. If his vampire crony hadn’t come up from

behind and grabbed her, she would have sailed halfway across the gardens.

“Try again,” his voice sneered.

Blinking back the dizziness threatening to overtake her, she lifted her gaze to his. Her head lolled as she tried to focus on his face. He brushed a strand of his shoulder length blonde hair from his mouth and stared down at her.

“Where are the earrings?” he repeated in a strained voice.

His blue eyes blazed murder. She had a feeling he would follow through with their threat if she didn’t give him what he wanted, but she’d rather be sucked dry than live knowing she sent this monster after the only family she had.

“I told you, I don’t know,” she said through clenched teeth.

As if in warning for what was to come, the vamp holding her, gripped her upper arms in a bruising hold. It wasn’t tight enough. Pearls of white light exploded behind her closed lids and she fell on all fours from the force of his next blow. The coppery taste of blood flooded her mouth from the gash in her lip.

The leader stepped up to her. His black boots shone in the glinting moonlight. Lara balled her fists as he hauled her to her feet. If she was going to die, she wasn’t going to go without a fight.

With a savage scream, she swung her arm out, using every bit of strength she had. Her fist caught on his right cheek. His head didn’t move, but a splintering pain erupted from her fingers to her wrist. She cried out, cupping her wounded hand protectively in the other.

“Stupid bitch,” he bit out, grasping her behind the neck and hauling her into his icy cold embrace.” We’ll just have to do this the hard way,” he said, spinning her around and splaying his large hand between her breasts. Lara winced as he tilted her head roughly to the side, exposing her neck to his mouth. Strands of his hair tickled the exposed area of her décolleté and his hot breath danced on her skin. As she realized what he intended to do, claws of fear sank into her heart.

“After I turn you, you’ll be my slave,” he whispered in her ear. “You’ll do *everything* I ask of you. I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

Lara gasped in shock when he pinched her nipple through her dress and ground his rock hard erection against her backside.

“All of it.” He groaned, running a hot trail down her neck with his tongue. When his teeth grazed her flesh, she whimpered and clenched her eyes.

“Let her go, Uther.”

At the bold order, Lara opened her eyes. Only the five vamps stood in front of her. Where was that voice coming from?

“Figures,” the person spoke again. “Only a pathetic bloodsucker like you would have to turn a helpless woman to get her to bed you.”

Uther clutched her close to him and growled. His deep roar vibrated through her body, resonating his anger and hate, but Lara ignored it. Instead she darted her eyes about for the source of the voice, which seemed to come from above.

In a whoosh and flurry of wind, a man leapt down from the copper and clay shingled roof.

Lara’s eyes widened and a startled gasp flew from her lips.

“You!”

“Lachlan.” Uther sneered. “My old friend.”

“I am no friend to you,” Lachlan snapped, stepping into the garden’s dim light.

“Oh my God,” she whispered at the sight before her.

Though Lachlan looked human, large scaly black wings fanned out on either side of his back. His black shirt was gone exposing his chiseled V-cut abdomen and arms of corded muscle. He wore intricate silver cuffs around his wrists that matched his silver eyes.

For a brief moment he stared down at her. Those hot, shuttered eyes galvanized her to the core. They were electric, shining like white lights in the darkness.

Without warning, a vampire sprang into the air behind Lachlan, its claws ready to sink into his back. Sooner than she could shout out a warning, a gust of wind whipped her face and Lachlan’s wings snapped wide. She stood amazed as he scooped up air and flew almost twenty feet into the air. Black, horny scales rolled forward onto his skin taking the place of his tanned flesh. A long, pointed tail grew from his body and his handsome face elongated, becoming reptilian.

A dragon.

Lara shook her head to keep from fainting. This couldn’t be...vampires and now a man turning into a dragon.

A second vampire shrieked. His white teeth flashed and he leapt toward Lachlan.

The dragon’s massive wings flapped as he turned around, sending strands of hair and dust into her eyes. She pinched them shut. When a deafening scream blasted through the night sky, she opened them in time to see a shaft of roaring flame shoot out of the dragon’s mouth.

A wave of heat from the intense fire poured over her. The inferno enveloped the two vamps. Their flesh dripped under the flame's heat, oozing from their skeletons like wax melts down a candle.

Uther cursed and sank his teeth into her neck. At the unexpected and sharp pain she cried out. Though she tried to wriggle free, he held her tight against him as he drank. His arms coiled around her like a constrictor with each gulp he took. Unable to move, she stared in a daze at the dragon flying in the air, watched how with effortless grace and strength it sank its eagle like talons into another vampire and ripped him in two.

Oddly, she heard no screams of pain from the vampires or screeches from the dragon. Only Uther's deep, measured swallows as he drained her body.

Weak and tired, her eyelids fluttered and her knees buckled. With a triumphant groan, Uther tore away from her throat. Lara would have collapsed if he had not held her around the waist, keeping her upright.

When he pressed a bloodied wrist to her mouth, she became vaguely aware of a voice shouting her name and looked up.

The dragon had transformed back into Lachlan from the waist up. He was stalking toward Uther, hatred blazing in his eyes.

"Don't drink from him, Lara," he ordered, fending off another one of Uther's cronies.

Uther grabbed a fistful of her hair and wrenched her head back. Lara's mouth gaped open from the pain, unintentionally catching the stream of droplets he squeezed into her mouth.

"No!" Lachlan screamed. Lara closed her lips. No matter how delicious the sticky, warmth tasted against her tongue, she swore not to drink from Uther. His threat of making her his slave replayed over and over in her mind.

Lachlan pinned another of Uther's vampires down and in one swift twist, broke its neck.

"It's over, Uther," he growled, stepping toward them. "She's mine and you know it."

"Cateryne will not like your meddling, Dragon Lord," Uther spat.

"That fucking witch can burn in hell."

At that, Uther tossed Lara to the ground. She cringed when she hit the cold pathway, closing her eyes as her cheek rested on the slab of stone.

“Not before you and the rest of your kind do,” Uther said. “My lover’s already taken care of those feeble brothers of yours,” he said with a malicious chuckle. “The rest are soon to follow.”

Lachlan bellowed in anger and ran toward him.

“Kill her,” Uther shouted to his last living minion, before he turned to flee.

“Come back here, coward,” Lachlan yelled, trailing close behind.

Freezing arms wrapped around her, lifting her up as if she were no more than a rag doll. On the verge of passing out, Lara looked up into the menacing face of the vamp holding her. His heinous smile made her heart thud. When he cupped her head, forcing it back and opened his mouth she didn’t have the strength to scream. Wincing, she waited for the pain—waited for the looming blackness to claim her.

A sickening thwack as moisture sprinkled across her skin made her open her eyes.

The vamp’s face was gone, replaced by the fat, triangular end of a dragon’s tail. Crimson blood had spurted on her face and neck.

She groaned and her eyes rolled back when the tail pulled out, leaving a gory cavernous hole.

“Bloody hell,” Lachlan said. A brace of arms encased her, strong as steel. Lachlan’s strong, masculine scent teased her dulled and dying senses.

“Come on, Lara, hang on for me,” he said, bending to slide a solid arm beneath her knees and hoisting her up into his arms. Warm muscle cocooned her and she nuzzled against it.

Something in him hesitated. She thought perhaps he contemplated leaving her to chase down the retreating Uther. Or maybe he wanted to kill her himself. But when he stared down at her with his shimmering silver eyes, those errant thoughts vanished completely. For while she saw some feral burning in their depths she could not place, unconcealed concern and tenderness covered his handsome face.

“Hold on,” his deep voice rumbled through her. Then the world seemed to float away. The crisp cool night wind massaged her face. Lara’s head fell back from the bliss. It wasn’t until they moved through the moist expanse of a cloud that she realized they were flying.

Chapter Three

Uther stepped into the bedroom of Cateryine's underground den. The black stone walls were illuminated by dozens of candelabras placed around the room. A huge four-post bed draped with an immaculate white sheet commanded the room. Cateryine sat on the edge of it wearing a virginal white dress that perfectly complemented her Mediterranean coloring. Her long black hair cascaded in shiny rivulets down to her perfectly round hips.

Uther's breath caught. She was stunning...she was his. His Goddess.

"Cat, baby," he whispered. "I'm home."

An errant smile inched across her face as she stood to meet him.

"Then come say hello to me properly, my lover," she said, crooking a long finger at him.

He growled in his throat and stalked toward her. Bending her back, he took her lips in a savage kiss. Long black nails dug into his shoulders, urging him deeper. Uther coiled his arms around her slender waist. Greedily, he ate at her mouth, squeezing her tiny frame against his until her presence filled and warmed the void where his heart once resided.

Cateryine pulled away, tracing a forefinger down the bridge of his nose.

"You ate without me," she said, licking her lips before pouting out her bottom one. "And after I went and ordered take out," she motioned to the corner of the dark stone chamber.

A man and a woman stood, gagged and wide-eyed. They were both naked and chained to the stone wall. Ribbons of blood trickled from dainty bites along the woman's neck and breasts. Visible welts and puckered burns marked the man's raw flesh and his penis had been ripped off. Cat loved her toys, Uther thought with a proud smile. It looked like she'd used a few of them last night.

"I see you had some fun while you waited for me, hmm, my Goddess," he said. He chuckled, tilting his forehead against hers and hugging her tight.

"You know how I get when I'm bored," she said, tracing her finger along his lips.

"Yes, I do." He nipped her finger, drawing a teardrop of blood. She arched into him as he took it into his mouth, tasting and suckling her sweet, salty perfection.

"Hungry are we?" she teased, pulling her finger away.

"Mm." He ground his hips against her and eyed the soft mounds of her breasts hungrily. "You're always looking out for me, my love."

She cooed, running her hands through his hair as he lowered his head, planting hot openmouthed kisses along her chest.

"I'm absolutely ravenous." He growled, feeling his fangs lengthen. They burned, itching to taste her, claim her, brand her once again as his and only his. "But not for those humans you captured."

Uther opened his mouth, ready to bite into her sweet flesh when she drew back.

"Ravenous?" Her black eyes regarded him wearily. "But you fed."

"Not exactly," he replied, shifting under her harsh stare. "You were right," he sighed. "The girl was more of a problem than I anticipated."

Joy lit up her dark features. "Ooo, my present," she said, clapping like a child at Christmastime. "I'd almost forgotten. Where are they?"

Uther stared down at her palms thrust out in front waiting for him into put the gift in them. He shifted his weight and cleared his throat, unable to look in her eyes.

"I don't have them."

When she made no sound, he swallowed hard and glanced up. Fury flickered like flames behind his lover's marble black eyes.

"What do you mean you don't have them?"

"Lachlan Black," he blurted out. "He came before I could finish turning the girl."

"Black," she seethed. In the blink of an eye, her beautiful face contorted into a horrid mask, reflecting the demon that lived within her.

"That *Derkein* toad!" She shouted dragon in her native Greek.

Knowing well his mistress's hatred of the Black brothers and their never ending quest to thwart her destiny, Uther took a step back.

"I need those earrings—they are the last piece." She growled up at Uther, "How could you?"

"He killed my men," he said, backing up another step, "and flew away with the girl—"

"Yet you live?" she interrupted. With a feral howl, she took up one of her toys and hurled it at the chained man.

The woman beside him cried and whimpered into her gag as the axe lodged in his chest with a sickening thwack, spraying blood across her naked body.

Cateryne ignored her cries and began to circle Uther like a panther stalking prey. For a moment, Uther shared the woman's fear.

"Tell me why Black has the girl, the earrings are still hidden and you live...now!" she shouted, lashing out her hand. She slapped him. Her nails scratched across his cheek like claws, raking bloody streaks across his face.

Uther clenched his jaw and fell to his knees on the cold stone at her feet. Wrapping his arms around her legs and clutching her butt in his hands, he burrowed his head between her thighs.

"I beg you—forgive me, my love. There is no excuse. I'll get them for you. I promise," he murmured, planting kisses on her mound through her dress.

"Swear it," she demanded.

He looked up at her. Tears of admiration, and fear formed in his eyes. He was scared to death of his woman and loved her for it. "I swear on my life, you will wear the jewelry of Draco and rule this world, my Queen."

A faint smile touched her still heinously transformed face. Delicate fingers danced in his hair and around his ears before they moved to pull the white fabric of her dress up around her waist. She wriggled her hips, teasing him with her beautiful mound while silently telling him what she wanted.

At the price of forgiveness for his failure, a devilish smile curved across his lips. He licked them before parting the dewy petals of her sex with his fingers and slipping his tongue along her slit.

"Yes," Cateryne sighed, sitting back on the bed's edge and spreading her thighs. "I will wear them, my lover. All of them." She threw her head back and dug her nails into the sheets as Uther nibbled, licked and explored her slick core.

"Then that *Derkein* will be mine," she gasped. Her inner walls clenched and shuttered against his probing fingers and hot tongue

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

with her release. “Yes,” she cried, clutching his head in her hands. “They’ll all be mine.”

Chapter Four

“Lara,” a man called.

She moaned. The guttural whimper sounded like no more than a strangled croak to her ears. Her mouth felt like sand coated her tongue and her lips burned from being so chapped.

“Thirsty,” she rasped.

The soft bed under her sank beneath the man’s weight.

“Here,” he said, offering her a goblet.

Lara shook her head. “Water,” she said. She didn’t want any more wine.

Though his features were blurred, she could tell his eyes regarded her skeptically. Then he thrust the glass at her again. “Drink more of this,” he said, rubbing his bandaged arm. “Believe me, it’s what you need right now.”

Unable to argue any longer, she sat up and greedily gulped down the tart liquid. A sigh murmured from somewhere deep inside her, lingering until she drained the cup. Tilting back her head, she licked her lips, savoring the lingering flavor.

“Mm,” she hummed as he took the cup from her. “More.”

“You’ve had enough,” he replied, slamming the chalice on the table.

She flinched at the sound. Then, all at once, it was as if her mind cleared. Like a thick fog lifting after the sun burned through. The pounding in her head ceased, along with the crippling weakness she’d felt since Uther had bitten her.

Lara looked about the room. It was dark and cold, almost cave-like. The bed she lay on, a lone, wingback chair that sat by the raging fireplace and bedside table seemed to be the only visible pieces of furniture. No books, no television, no lamps. What kind of man would live like this?

A dragon.

She frowned as the image of him from last night flashed in her mind.

“You,” she said, scooting further back on the bed and hugging her knees to her chest. “I saw you...wings...fire.”

As if surprised by her reaction, he moved toward her. A gut wrenching sensation crept over every inch of her being. Her eyes went wide and panic seized her heart.

“You mean to kill me,” she cried.

“No,” he replied, his voice thick and throaty. His arm reached out to her and she flinched, waiting for him to strike her.

A remorseful look spread across his handsome face. “I would not hurt you,” he said, taking back his hand. “I’m not like Uther and his henchmen. I don’t believe in abusing innocent women.”

“Then what war rages in you?” she asked, puzzled as to why her body was suddenly acutely aware of the manly expanse of his shoulders. The soft dusting of hair across his chest—the considerable bulge between his contoured legs.

“It’s just...” he hesitated, his eyes shuttered, concealing the truth lingering in his silver orbs. “...I’ve done something I’m not sure if I’ll regret or not.”

She swallowed at his harsh words. “What, saving me?”

“From Cateryine’s followers? Hardly.”

“Cateryine?”

“The vampire queen. Controller and leader of all your, err...their kind.”

Realization dawned. With a gasp, her hand flew to her neck, cringing when her fingers brushed the swollen and bruised flesh around the sensitive bite mark.

“Oh God,” she said, closing her eyes.

“Lara,” he said, sinking back down on the bed. “It’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad! I’m going to be a vampire now, aren’t I?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered in a low voice.

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

His broad chest lifted and fell with his deep breath and his eyes shifted to the floor.

“Uther drained you enough to turn you, but you didn’t—”

“Drink from him,” she finished his thought.

“Right,” he said on a sigh.

“Then how—”

“Are you still alive?” he asked.

She nodded.

His Adam's apple bobbed and he nodded toward the empty goblet.

Lara covered her mouth with her hand to hold back the bile rising in her throat. "It wasn't wine, was it? Each time you made me drink it, it wasn't wine. Oh God."

"You say that a lot. Are you very religious?"

"What?" she asked incredulously. "No—just answer me. Was it wine?"

He shook his head.

Her gaze fell upon his hand subconsciously rubbing the fresh dressing on his arm. "It was..."

"Your blood," she said, her eyes fixed on the white bandage, which lay in stark contrast to his tanned skin.

Again he nodded his answer.

"What does that mean—what's going to happen to me?"

"I told you—truly, I don't know. Either you will reject my blood and become what you fear, my dragon blood will attack and destroy the vampire blood and you will become a dragoness, or both bloods will symbiotically interlock and you will be a half-breed of each race. Either way, you will never be human again."

They sat still, neither of them speaking. The events of the night played over and over in Lara's mind. Everything from their meeting in the exhibit hall to the horror she'd felt in the garden.

"So," she finally spoke. "It was real then—what I saw last night?"

"Yes," he answered with a thick strained voice.

The muscles of his jaw flexed and bunched while he stared at her. As it had in the exhibition hall, her body thrummed to life under his gaze. She let her eyes travel across the wide expanse of his bare chest and corded abdomen. His hair fell across his eyes, casting his angular face in shadow. The firm, hard planes made him look like an animal—a fierce, dark animal she should be afraid of.

A dragon.

But she wasn't afraid.

"You're really a dragon."

His eyes met hers. "Yes," he gritted.

For the first time since the nightmare had started, she saw in his eyes the man she'd spoken with by the painting. Not the scales, the wings and fire, just the man. The longer she stared at him the more

she noticed a low drumbeat reverberating through her. Its constant thrumming pounded in her ears and coursed through her veins.

His heartbeat.

She took a deep breath, inhaling his musky scent. At the minute hint of blood still lingering in the air, she licked her lips.

His nostrils flared. "Do I have to tie you down?"

The threat took her off balance. "Why?" she asked.

"No offense, but I've been killing vampires for almost six hundred years. I can see your thoughts plain as day on your face—you mean to bite me."

That image he'd conjured near the painting of her beneath rose petal covered sheets as he loomed above her struck her with as much force as Uther's blow had earlier. She moaned and wriggled on the bed. The black satin sheet slipped beneath her.

"Bite you," she sighed, chewing her bottom lip. "Yes, bite you."

"All right, kitty, time to sheath your claws and take a nap," he said, leaning over her. Whether he meant to tuck her in or tie her down, Lara didn't know. And she didn't care. Right now all she could think of was kissing this big, strong beast. But like with any beast, she knew she'd have to approach him with caution and cunning.

So, she waited. Once his face was not a foot from her own, she grabbed his head in her hands, pulled him down, and kissed him sweetly. His entire body went tense and rigid under her hands, as though he'd just been struck by lightning.

Lara took a deep breath, inhaling his potent male scent and lightly caressing his lips. A shudder passed through him, but still his lips remained motionless. With a frustrated moan, she palmed his cheeks, slanted her head and boldly ran her tongue across his lips.

With firm yet gentle strength, he pushed her back down on the bed. A deep furrow creased his brow and his silver eyes seemed to darken.

"Why did you do that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Why didn't you kiss me back?" she asked with a sly smile.

He regarded her for a moment longer before rising off the bed and heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" she called after him, trying to keep her mind off how it would feel to run her hands along that broad, sculpted back of his.

"You need to rest," he called over his shoulder.

“No I don’t,” she said. “I need to know what you want from me...why I’m here?”

Lachlan ceased his hasty retreat and turned to look at her. Once again his eyes shone like white lights. “Everything I need to know about you is in that picture you painted, Lara,” he said, mumbling something else she couldn’t quite decipher before he shut and locked the door.

Chapter Five

Lachlan stood over Lara. For an hour now he'd watched her sleep. Revelled in the tiny sighs she made and how her soft lips parted slightly with each breath.

Soft lips.

He cringed at the desire that stirred in him. He shouldn't know their texture, but they were soft. Of her own free will Lara had reached out and kissed him. No, he sighed, not free will. The vampire blood had won out, even though she'd drunk barely a teaspoon from Uther. He'd seen the look in her eyes—the blood lust in her features while she stared at him. He'd tried to stop the process, tried to prevent the change from happening with his own blood, but he'd failed.

Lara was a vampire...and he was going to have to kill her.

Normally this task would be a welcome one. Since Cateryine had taken the throne, she'd made life for his kind a living hell. Those damned artifacts. Why in the name of the Gods were they ever created? He'd asked that question over and over and never received an answer. All he knew was that the job set before him and his brothers had been to protect these items. To keep them from the vampires at all costs...even if that meant they lost their lives. And that is just what had happened. Lachlan had watched every one of his brothers get hunted down, brutally slain and their artifacts taken.

Now somehow, the jade earrings, the fourth in the five-piece set containing an armband, bracelet, necklace, earrings and headpiece, had fallen into the hands of this small human woman. The person who ended up possessing and wearing all five of the items would have the means to control all of his Dragon kind, bend their will to wreak havoc on each others world. In the name of his brothers and for his kin, he had to reclaim them—all of them. Even if that meant he had to kill her to do it.

At that moment, Lara woke. Her chocolate brown eyes looked startled to see him standing over her. Then they softened and a heart-

stopping smile spread across her face. She groaned and stretched like a cat waking from a nap.

“Good morning.”

Gods, she even purred. Watching as she arched her back, jutting her perfect round breasts upward in a tantalizing display, his cock jerked in response. He had to get the artifact from her and be done with it, while he had the will to do so. Had to get away from her before he did something else foolish. Something comparable to what he’d done last night when he’d fed her back to health with his blood. But he hadn’t been able to sit by and watch her die.

He’d been much more attracted to her last night than he’d thought possible when he’d finally met her. It seemed that every second he spent by her side, the need to claim her grew damned near as urgent and vital as reclaiming the artifacts.

This was a situation he was none too prepared to deal with. Women were a distraction his quest could ill afford until Cateryne was destroyed and the relics returned. But something about this woman set his primal urges on alert, along with his protective nature. If he didn’t get away from her soon and get a grip on his emotions, he was unsure if he could kill her when the time came.

“Hello? I said good morning,” she repeated.

Lachlan shook his head to clear it of his rebellious thoughts. “Give me the earrings,” he grunted.

“What?” she said, pushing herself up to sit.

“The earrings in the painting—give them to me.”

“You too, huh?” she asked. “What is it with you undead and otherworldly men—no dangling jewelry where you live?”

“Don’t mock me,” he threatened. “Just tell me where they are and...”

“And what? You can take me home?” she asked.

A knot formed in his throat. The words of what had to be done, what it was his responsibility to do, wouldn’t come.

“If what you said last night is true and I am no longer human, then I have no home to go to,” she said. “My sister hates and fears creatures like me.”

He sighed. “I thought you lived in a grand mansion somewhere,” he said.

A fleeting look of confusion spread across her beautiful face. “Oh,” she said with a sheepish grin. “You were right about my zodiac

sign and the inheritance bit. What little my grandmother left me I exhausted on my studio. I'm a true starving artist."

"Why did you lie to me?"

She appeared shocked that he would care. In truth he wondered where the question had come from.

"I-I guess I wanted to impress you."

"By proving me wrong," he said, arching a brow.

"You seem to know my traits better than I," she said, swinging her long, slim legs over the side of the bed. "You should know that sheep have a way of getting off on the wrong foot with people."

Lachlan's heart skipped when she stood before him.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked. Though he told himself not to look down, he couldn't help but do it. He stared at her while she looked up at him with those huge doe eyes and blinked.

"You do have a bathroom here, don't you?"

An image of her, rivulets of water dripping down her bathed body, his tongue laving up every one, formed in his mind.

"This way," he said, turning from her.

"Really, I can do it by myself," she called out from behind him.

"I am not letting you out of my sight until those earrings are in my possession."

At least that was what he pretended was his reason for following her to her bath.

* * * *

Lara swallowed. "Right."

His handsome face softened and he turned once again. Lara padded across the cold stone floor, rubbing her hands up and down on her arms for warmth. Then her eyes fixed on the columns and contours of his back and warmth came on its own.

Did the man ever wear a shirt?

Two ridges on his upper back grabbed her attention. They were much larger and protruded more than shoulder blades.

Wings, she realized. That must be where his wings come from.

"Does it hurt?" she asked. They stepped down a small flight of stairs she hadn't known existed until now.

"What?" he asked, walking into a smaller room off to the left.

"You know, when you...change. Does it hurt?"

There was a long pause.

"I feel nothing anymore."

Standing in this dark, gloomy room, his answer seemed even more miserable

A match struck to life sounded in the room moments before a candle began its tentative flickering. Light poured into the chamber as he lit more candles.

“Oh,” she gasped. Unlike the room she’d slept in, this one was marvelous. Intricate gold and marble moldings lined the lavish room. Tapestries of knights fighting off dragons for fair maidens hung on the walls and a large freestanding tub stood in the center.

“What is it?” His tone seemed alert, as if she’d sensed danger.

“Nothing, it’s just this room is...beautiful.”

“It was my mother’s favorite room too,” he said. Relaxing, he arranged the logs and lit kindling in the fireplace before placing a huge cauldron atop it.

Realization hit her like a boot to the gut. “This is your family home?”

His hands stilled.

“Yes,” he said, dumping buckets of water into the cauldron.

A smile crept across her face as she watched him. He was heating bath water. Suddenly self-conscious of the fact she still only wore the equivalent of a satin negligee, she shifted uncomfortably.

“Then what room do I sleep in?”

“Mine.”

The possessiveness of that word on his lips made her belly quiver. Something clicked inside her. Something was different. Sure, she would be the first to admit she’d wanted him the first moment she’d spied him in the exhibition hall. Yet now, even knowing what he was, she wanted him—wanted him with a longing that defied all reason and a need that rebelled against everything she’d ever known. The man had a body like Adonis and a wounded, tortured soul that the altruist in her sheep nature longed to tend and heal.

“Lachlan.”

The hand tending the flames stilled. Her breath hitched when he turned to look at her. It was the first time she had said his name aloud and she could see it had the same effect on him as it did her. His eyes glowed, burning hotter than the fire at his fingertips.

“Yes?”

“Come here.”

He rose to full height. The woman inside her purred at his masculine width and formidable size. Something else within her,

deeper still, thrummed with an age-old dance her body yearned to partake of.

“Why?” he asked. His lips thinned and his mighty chest rose and fell as he fought the same feelings warring within her.

“You know why.”

His head snapped to her, flames flickering behind his glinting silver eyes. “You don’t know what you are asking.”

Emboldened, she stepped closer and reached for him, flinching when he skirted from her touch.

“Lara.”

He must have meant it as a warning, but she only licked her dry lips and brushed a finger across his nipple, watching it pucker and firm beneath her touch. The deep drumbeat began pounding in her head again. She couldn’t stop herself from touching him.

Right now she craved nothing more than this man, this beast.

“Lachlan,” she sighed, smoothing her palm against his warm flesh. It twitched beneath her hand, but he did not pull away.

“This is wrong,” he whispered.

“Why? You are a man and I a woman.”

“No. I’m not a man,” he said, the vein in his neck bulging. “I am a dragon, and I can’t treat you the way you deserve. In fact, I’ll probably hurt you, if not worse.”

She felt his breathing stop beneath her hand as he waited for her response.

“I don’t care,” she said staring up into his eyes. “I want you, Lachlan. Please.”

Lara watched as the last remaining shred of his tightly reigned control cut loose. Lachlan growled and fisted the front of her satin dress, ripping the flimsy fabric from her body. She gasped. Her bare breasts lay fully exposed to his glittering gaze, but she did not show fear.

“So beautiful,” he murmured as he reached out, cupping her breast with his large hand. When her body arched into his touch, he moaned in approval. Grasping the back of her neck with his other hand, he hauled her up to meet his hungry mouth.

* * * *

The minute their lips met, his heart catapulted into the sky. For the first time in ages, the being within him floated. It felt like when he’d first spread his wings and flown through the clouds. True, she may be vampire as he feared. But she was Dragon as well. He tasted it

in her kiss, smelled it on her skin. A low hum of gratitude thundered from inside him and he intensified the kiss. Lachlan succumbed to the animal inside trying to break free. He took her giving mouth in a bruising kiss. No longer did he care if her blood ebbed and flowed thick and strong with the life force of his enemy. For it flowed with his as well. Now all he cared about was this sensual creature, pliable, soft and warm in his arms.

With uncontrollable hunger, he devoured her, sucking her tongue deep inside his mouth, circling and licking, taking all she offered. The beast within sighed as she met him stroke for stroke. At the feel of her dainty hands sliding around his neck his desire grew to a level that scared even him. He grasped her arms and set her from him.

“Stop,” he said, trying to catch his breath. “I can’t...don’t want to hurt you.”

Lara ignored him and draped her arms over his trembling shoulders. “You’re not going to hurt me,” she teased, pressing her hips against his.

Pursing his lips, he covered her hips with his hands, forcibly stilling their erotic undulations.

“Stop that,” he bit out, “or I’ll end up taking you hard and fast, right here on this floor. Dragons are fiercely violent when they mate.”

The blasted vixen did not shy away at his warning, making him wonder if she somehow knew she was changing. Understood what she did to him and liked it. Recognized his control hung by a silken thread around her.

Coyly, her long lashes bowed down and her small pink tongue jutted out, coating her lips to a perfect sheen.

“I have no objections to the floor.” She trailed a finger along his chest, making a shudder of heat shoot to his loins. “But if it bothers you we can go to your bed,” she said, raising her brow. “That is if you think you can make it that far.”

A thundering pulse hammered within his aching cock. Panting like he’d just run for miles, every breath intoxicating him with the scent of her desire, he gave in.

“If you want the bed you better run for it,” he gritted. “Now.”

Chapter Six

Lara's pulse quickened and wet lust pooled between her legs at his low spoken words. With an excited squeal she turned and ran from the room. Just as her foot touched the first stair she heard his booted footfalls pounding the stone floor behind her and knew he'd begun chasing her. Turned on beyond belief, Lara shrugged the rest of the way out of her torn dress and took the stairs.

Lachlan was on her before the fabric touched the floor. His large hands clutched her waist and arms, effortlessly flipping her onto her back. A yelp escaped her when her shoulder slammed against the unforgiving steps. He didn't seem to hear her yelp. Lying between her open and naked legs, he crushed his mouth atop hers, plundering and consuming her with his masterful tongue.

The hard evidence of his desire pressed against her through the pants he still wore. The fabric chafed against the tender flesh of her inner thighs causing the ache inside her to multiply.

A small sigh sounded in the back of her throat when his warm hand covered her breast. He pinched and squeezed the distended nub, while his mouth continued to work its wonder on hers.

Lara moaned and stroked her hands along his columned back and up his abdomen, savoring in the trembling breath he feathered into her mouth. Emboldened by his reaction to her, she smoothed her palm lower. His hot, hard muscle felt luscious beneath her hands, but she wanted to feel all of him. When she reached into his pants, grasping his stiff cock in her hand, he slammed her even harder against the stairs.

She winced at the sharp pleasure pain. Lachlan had warned her about unleashing the beast—said he might hurt her. But so far she didn't regret this one bit.

Suddenly, he pulled away from her, leaving her breathless and panting for more, her heated flesh bereft of his touch. The handsome planes of his face were taut with need and his shoulders trembled as he held himself above her.

Instinctively, she spread her legs wider and reached out to him.

“Lachlan,” she cooed. “Please.”

He grunted and clutched her hips in his brawny hands. Lara writhed beneath him, crazy for his touch. Something about being with him was different—something in her was different. She couldn’t place it, but she could feel it. It was natural, primal—and right. Like a song she hadn’t heard in years yet still knew every word to.

When his hands began kneading the flesh of her thighs, moving slowly up, Lara arched into him. Even the smallest of his touches sent her insides quivering and raging heat burning deep and low in her belly. If this kept up, she would come at his first stroke. Not like her at all.

“God, what’s happening to me?” she sighed in ecstasy as his fingers tweaked and plied her nipples.

He moaned in answer, clamping down his hungry mouth onto her neck.

“You are becoming one,” he hummed in her ear.

“One what?” she asked, tilting her head back to give him better access.

“Of us,” he said softly, taking a sensitive earlobe into his mouth, sending a ribbon of pleasure down her body. “A dragoness,” he whispered, before lifting up to look into her passion glazed eyes. Dark hair tumbled across his forehead, and she smoothed the silken strands back with her fingertips. He kissed her palm. “They are lusty, virulent creatures.”

She clutched his head and pulled him to her chest.

“Yes, we are,” she said with a wicked smile as he claimed a nipple with his hot mouth. Raking and laving the sensitive peak until her insides pooled and melted and moisture flooded between her thighs. She rubbed them together to ease the fire within, whining in disappointment and frustration when neither worked.

Lachlan chuckled against her breast and slid his palm down her belly and between her legs. Her breath hitched when his skilled fingers slipped deep insider her molten core.

“Mmm, you’re warm,” he growled, nipping her breast with his teeth as he glided another finger inside her. “And so wet.”

“Yes,” she sighed. A shudder of delight raked through her. At her response, a feral growl rumbled from him and he dove down on her mouth, taking her in a deep carnal embrace. His hand continued to

stroke her. When his calloused finger found and massaged her clit, her hips bucked off the stairs.

A tiny whimper of protest sounded in her throat when he removed his hand. He smiled against her lips and moved on top of her. Scorching heat came off him in pulsing waves and she yearned for him to brand her, to make his mark on her body and soul—to make her his.

“Please,” she begged, pulling his brawny shoulders. His eyes flashed bright silver before they darkened to solid black. In seconds he discarded his boots and pants and lay flush against her. She purred at the feel of his feverishly warm skin against her own. Of its own volition, her hand reached down to stroke the hard length of him pressing against her stomach.

He hissed in a breath and jerked her hand away.

“No more teasing,” he ground out, bringing her hand over her head, followed by her other one, trapping both of her wrists in his unyielding grip. The position dug the edge of a stair into the small of her back and juttied her breasts out to his glittering gaze. Immediately his mouth claimed one of the hard peaks, making her forget the stair biting into her flesh.

Lara bit her bottom lip to keep from begging for more. Instead she pressed her heels against the banister and lifted her hips, rubbing her swollen clit against his firm cock. His massive body shuddered at the same time she moaned from the bliss.

With a muttered curse, he rose up, positioning the head of his shaft at her weeping center. She held her breath, waiting for him to fill her.

The hands around her wrists tightened to bruising pressure as he slowly entered her. Inch by deliciously long inch, his hard thick rod speared her. She gasped at the exquisite torture of it. When she tilted her hips up off the stairs to force him further inside, his large hand covered belly, pressed her back down.

“Lachlan—please,” she begged.

“Please what?” he teased, pulling back out almost all the way. She knew he was on the verge of losing control, just as she was. His lips were a thin line and his eyes shuttered as he taunted her feverishly aroused body.

“Harder,” she said, licking her lips.

His chest muscles rippled as his hand left her belly to grip the stair over her head.

“Like this,” he said. In one swift lunge he buried himself inside her. Both their cries filled her ears.

“Yes,” she sighed, closing her eyes, savoring in the feel of being stretched by him. But when he slowly eased out, she thought he meant to taunt her again and opened her eyes to look at him.

“No,” she said, wrapping her legs around his waist, locking him within her.

“I’m just shifting you,” he said, taking her legs and pressing them toward her shoulders.

“Why?”

“This,” he gritted, slamming back inside her, deeper than before.

“Oh,” she struggled for breath at the sheer size of him, but it felt so delicious she did not dare move. Instead she propped her toes on the railing and spread wider for him. His eyes blazed. With a low moan, he threw back his head and began driving into her over and over.

The stairs thumped painfully against her back, ramming against her body with as much force as the dragon above her. But with the agony came ecstasy, with the pain, pleasure.

“Ah, Lachlan,” she cried as he pounded inside her, harder and faster. Circling and thrusting his hips into her, mercilessly he ground his pelvis against her responsive clit. Butterfly shudders started to quake inside her. On the edge of climax, yet it still wasn’t enough. A deeper hunger cried out for release.

As Lachlan bent over her, his sweat covered body heaving above her, her eyes focused on the strident pulse thundering beneath the velvety soft skin of his throat. Without hesitating, she leaned up, kissing him there. A primal urge took over, an urge she couldn’t control. Her mouth opened and she sank her newly born fangs into his flesh. Her climax crested hard, lapping her core at the same time his sweet blood began streaming down her throat.

* * * *

Lachlan gritted his teeth at the pain and groaned at the pleasure of her bite. He should pull away, but by the Gods it felt so good to have her suck on him. It was obvious she thought so as well. Not a second after the sharp prick of her teeth pierced his neck, she cried out against his neck and her sheath began contracting. Her sweet body milked him with succulent perfection from both her mouth and her sex. The sensations were like nothing he’d ever felt and more than he could stand.

“Lara,” he cried, slamming into her. The moment his seed burst forth his wings and tail shot out from his body with the same electric force as his cum. There he held himself rigid, feeling his molten seed spurt into her and his appendages quivered. When the wave of pleasure crashed and settled, his wings relaxed and draped over them in a loving blanket. His tail curled around her body protectively.

As he clung to the small woman beneath him, he registered something inside him rip like fragile silk and enter her body along with his hot seed.

His heart.

The organ he’d believed long dead and turned to stone burned to life along with his momentous release and first taste of a vampire’s kiss. And, remarkably, the thought did not scare him as it should have. It actually put a smile on his face.

Gasping for air, Lara pulled away from his neck. Reluctantly Lachlan released his tight hold of her. Her entire body was slick with perspiration and small shudders still visibly quaked through her muscles. Those luscious lips of hers looked painted a bright shade of red. With a contented sigh, he let go of her hands, still pinned above her head.

“Lara,” he said softly.

She smiled and opened her eyes. They went wide and her mouth formed a silent O before she managed to form words.

My wings! He forced them and his tail back into his body, suddenly anxious that the sight of his true self would horrify her.

“Oh God, what did I do to you?” she hushed, covering her mouth with one hand and gently touching his bite mark with the other.

“Nothing I did not let you,” he murmured. Gingerly taking her hand away and bending down to kiss her lips. He tasted the metallic taste of blood, his blood, in her mouth when his tongue jutted inside. It was the most erotic taste he could remember.

“B-but you said I was becoming a dragoness,” she said when he finally pulled away from her mouth. Her voice sounded shaky and small.

“You are,” he answered. “I can feel it. But you are vampire too.” He saw the confusion in her eyes and wanted to wash it all away. Without a word, he pushed up off the stairs, taking her with him.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he effortlessly picked her up in his arms.

“Giving you that bath.”

Chapter Seven

“Why is this room so fabulous and your room so dreary, Lachlan?” she teased, laving soap along his legs.

“I never found a need to decorate it.”

A hint of sadness washed over her soul. “Well, you should,” she said. “I could give you some of my paintings. Bring over a few rugs and lamps. It could be a much cheerier place.”

He released a hearty chuckle. “Until today I had no one to cheer up,” he said, leaning toward her in the tub and playfully splashing a button of bubbles on her nose.

“Not even your family?”

His smile faded. “They have been gone for years now.”

“What happened to them?”

He took a deep breath, spread his arms along the rim of the tub and closed his eyes.

“Back in the thirteenth century there was a trade war. My kin were hunted down by everyone from alchemists looking for derivatives to cure ails to lords wanting dragonheads to bury under their manors for good luck. In short, humans were decimating us. My father entered a treaty with the vampires, who at that time were weak and starving, hiding in the shadows. Because of that treaty they now outnumber dragons a thousand to one and have captured the hearts and imagination of bards and storytellers away from us. Yet that was not enough for the vipers,” he bit, sitting to look at her.

“They wanted us under their thumb, wanted us to be their slaves—and they almost succeeded. But on his deathbed my father told us of the five jewels of Draco, which were part of the treaty. He told us that with those jewels we would be safe. But that if the vampires ever got a hold of them all, hope for our kind would be lost.”

“So, where are these jewels?”

His silver eyes flashed and his nostrils flared.

“You have one of them.”

“The earrings?” she gasped, sitting upright. Water sloshed on the sensitive flesh beneath her breasts. Lachlan stared at her exposed chest and licked his lips. Then he nodded in reply and rose out of the tub. Rivulets of water streamed down his muscular body. Lara’s mouth parched and her sex throbbed at the sight. She already she wanted him again.

“How did these earrings get into the hands of...a human?” she managed to ask as he helped her out and towed her off.

“I wasn’t the only one my father entrusted these artifacts to. Each of my brothers was a guardian as well. Since Cateryine took the throne, she has systematically hunted us down. I have watched her destroy my family one by one and steal the jewels. She means to wear them all. To bend us to her will. If she gets those earrings, we will not be able to resist her, no matter what.”

“So, your salvation depends on retrieving all the jewels and killing Cateryine?”

“Yes. Something I now have to do alone.”

Lara opened her mouth to speak, but the words would not come. Lachlan did not press her. Instead, he carried her up the stairs with athletic grace and laid her on the black silk sheets.

As she lay on her back staring at the dark stones of the ceiling above, she couldn’t help but think on the taste of Lachlan’s blood on her lips. Remember how much she liked it.

“Did my form scare you?”

His question jarred her. When she looked up at him, he seemed to be waiting on a knife’s edge for her answer.

“What? I’m sorry, I was miles off and didn’t hear you.”

“My wings and tail when we mated, did they frighten you?”

Her face softened. “Never,” she said, giving him such a sweet, small kiss it stole his breath. “Will I have wings and a tail one day?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’ve never heard of a half vampire-half dragoness before, so I’m not sure.”

“Hmm,” she smiled, twining her fingers in the responsive hairs on his chest. “So many new things for us to figure out together.”

Lachlan’s blood heated at her words, his body already hungry to claim hers again. With a growl, he gripped her back and side in his hands and hauled her to him.

“Ouch,” she gasped, biting her bottom lip and breathing heavy through her nose.

Recoiling in shock at the strangled cry that came from her, he said, “You’re hurt.”

Though she shook her head, her back arched as if she were in terrible pain.

“Lara, are you all right?”

“Mm,” she said through pinched lips. “It’s just my back, it’s killing me,” she moaned.

Frowning, he gently forced her to turn around and lie on her stomach. Guilt flooded his heart at the welts, bruises and swollen patches along the beautiful, slim column of her silken back.

The stairs.

He bit down on his jaw in anger. He’d rutted her on the hard, jagged stairs with no thought to her comfort—treated her as if she were no more than a whore on whom to slake his lust. Shame and guilt bathed his soul. He was too rough, she too little.

“You should have told me,” he said, dipping his chin to his chest.

At his words she flipped over. His eyes fixed and held on her bouncing breasts.

“It felt too good to stop,” she said with a sly grin.

His cock hardened at the memory, aching to be buried within her soft walls once again. “I’m sorry,” he said gruffly. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” she replied, scooting closer to him. “I also know you would have stopped had I asked you to.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest. “Give me your lips,” he ordered.

Without hesitating, Lara rose up. Those soft, perfect breasts pressed against his chest as she leaned toward him. When she lifted her chin, her rich chocolate eyes were big with want.

Lachlan couldn’t help the wicked smile from crossing his lips if he tried.

“Oh,” she squeaked in surprise. Her lovely eyes fluttered and her head fell back in pleasure.

“Not those lips,” he growled, watching her fall back against the sheets in abandon.

“Lachlan, what...” her words tapered off into a sigh. She fisted the satin sheets above her head and closed her eyes, as his tail spread her thighs wide. Its ribbed tip steadily massaged the sensitive little

button between her legs until she writhed and moaned, begging him to claim her once more.

* * * *

“I need clothes.”

Though he supposed she was right, Lachlan loved seeing her in nothing more than what she had on now—a sated smile.

“What for?” he teased.

“We have to go see Sasha.”

“Your sister?” he asked. “Why?”

“You’ll see. Now get dressed.”

* * * *

“Lara?” Sasha greeted her at the door. “What are you doing here? And what’s with that sickeningly happy smile on your face?” she asked as she stepped back allowing her inside.

“Sis, I want you to meet someone.” She pulled Lachlan into the house and shut the door behind them. “Sasha, this is—”

The iced tea her sister had been holding fell to the floor, erupting in a crash of glass and ice.

“Lachlan Black,” Sasha whispered.

“How do you know him?” Lara eyed the two of them skeptically, wondering if perhaps it was as she’d thought at the gallery when Lachlan had reacted to the painting.

“He’s—”

An arrow shot across the living room, smashing a picture and barely missing Lara’s head.

Lachlan grabbed her, threw her to the ground and landed on top of her.

“God dammit, Jake,” Sasha shouted. “Put that thing away before you kill someone.”

“But she’s a vampire!” Jacob hollered, striding into the room with a crossbow on his back.

“No, she’s my sister.”

“Sister or no, that girl’s a bloodsucker,” he said, pointing where she lay on the floor. “Wait,” he paused, sniffing the air. “There’s something more—”

“Me. You feel me in her.” Lachlan said, rising. “She’s mine.”

“Lachlan?”

“Hello, little brother,” he said, helping Lara to her feet.

Jacob did not move. He stood as though seeing a ghost.

"Now, listen to your mate," Lachlan said, stepping up to give his brother a hug. "Put that thing away before you kill somebody."

"But," Jacob sputtered, "how are you alive?"

"Me?" Lachlan said. "You are the one who disappeared ten years ago."

"Excuse me," Lara interrupted. "But what the hell is going on here?"

Sasha walked over and took her sister's hand. "It looks like our families have a lot of catching up to do."

* * * *

Lara cupped the steaming hot mug of tea, trying to comprehend everything her sister had just told them.

"So, let me get this straight," she started the story again. Hoping one of these times it would make sense. "Jacob saved you—from Uther?"

"Yes, the night I told you I was mugged."

"I don't understand," she said, setting the mug on the coffee table and leaning against the back of the suede sofa. "Why didn't you just tell me what really happened?"

Sasha laughed. "Like you would have believed me. I've tried everyday since to protect you from all of this craziness and you've never listened to me once."

"And the earrings? How did you get them?"

"Me," Jacob chimed in, his gaze settling on Lachlan.

It amazed her how alike the two brothers' were. Same eyes, same hair color—though Jacob was not nearly as broad and muscular as his brother.

"They'd been in Lachlan's care," he said. "So, when I pulled them off a vamp I eliminated, I could only assume he'd been killed. Unfortunately, Cateryine has been able to defeat a lot of us Black brothers."

"It's my fault," Sasha explained. "I never should have let you see them, much less let you paint me wearing them. I should have known it could only put you in harms path. Make Cateryine's men come after you."

"So you knew about all this. The dragons, the vampires, their quest?"

Guilt spread across her face. Then Sasha nodded and clasped her boyfriend's hand in hers.

“What have you been doing these past years, Jacob?” Lachlan asked. “I haven’t heard your name on any of the vamp’s tongues I’ve eliminated.”

His brother smiled, his identical silver eyes shining. “I’ve been laying low brother. Ten years ago I got into a nasty skirmish,” he said, a visible shudder passing through him. “Uther caught me, tortured me and ripped my wings from my back. It was sheer dumb luck I got away when he left some inept guard to watch me. Then I met Sasha and I had a choice. I could continue fighting them as a dragon warrior and in all likelihood die, or I could protect the earrings as a human. Sasha convinced me they would be safer with her. That the vampires would never think to search for the artifacts amongst her kind.” He smiled at her and she gazed back at him with pure love in her eyes.

Seeing his brother not only alive but happy and in love softened a part of Lachlan he’d long forgotten about. For the first time, he saw a life outside of this never-ending war. His gaze traveled over to Lara and he smiled in spite of himself. She looked so beautiful. Her sister had given her a pair of jeans and a curve hugging purple v-neck to wear, though he still rather liked the sweats she’d come over here in, he thought with a grin. For a moment he flirted with the idea of what it would be like to settle down with her—raise a family.

“All that matters is you’re alive, Jacob,” he said.

“No,” Sasha answered, pulling a small velvet box from out of her pocket. “Protecting these is all that matters.”

* * * *

“Now this isn’t like *Buff*y, Lara. It takes more than a jab of a wooden stick. You have to cut off their heads. But before you can do that, you have to wound them enough to do so.”

“Or just use this,” Jacob said, stepping up to her, a huge silver weapon in his hands.

“Dammit, Jacob,” Sasha said. “Why are you on her side? I’m trying to scare her out of going.”

“Hey, someone has to watch my brother’s back. I sure as hell can’t.”

“What is it?” Lara asked, slanting her head to get a better look.

“Hi-tech laser gun I developed,” he said with a proud smile. “I got the idea watching *Van Helsing*.”

Lara stood, staring incredulously at him.

“You know, Hugh Jackman, Kate—”

“Yes, I know what movie it is!” she bit out.

Jacob cleared his throat. "Sorry. You looked a wee bit baffled."

"Anyway, it harnesses solar energy. One shot to the chest will blow the vamp in two, incapacitating it more than enough to decapitate."

Lara snatched it out of his hand, hastily stuffing a few rounds in her pocket.

"What do you think you're doing," Lachlan said, stepping up to her.

"I'm coming with you to defeat Cateryine."

"Like bloody hell you are."

Heat rushed to her face. "Lachlan, I can help you and that's exactly what I plan to do. If you walk in there alone, with no one covering your back, you'll be taken. Maybe even killed."

"She's right, brother," Jacob answered.

"You," he pointed at his brother. "Stop helping!"

Jacob lifted his hands and stepped back. "Come on, Sasha, I think these two have some issues to discuss."

"She can help, you Lachlan. He used to think the same thing, but having someone, anyone, on your team out there is better than being alone."

Once they left the room, Lachlan stepped up to her and cupped her face in his hand. "Lara, I can't let you go with me."

"You're not *letting* me! I'm going."

"Don't you see, if I have to worry about you I won't be able to focus on killing Cateryine."

"Lachlan, I'm not just a human anymore, remember?"

He smiled and ran a finger down her cheek. "How could I ever forget?"

"Please let me help," she asked.

"Kiss me," he grated.

She smiled and rose up on her tiptoes, pressing her soft lips against his. He wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him, kissing her like he'd never see her again. Then he slowly ended the kiss and pulled back.

"Look into my eyes, Lara."

She did as he bade. And even as his hypnotic dragon powers began to seize her mind, putting her into a sleep he hoped would last until this fight was over, part of him knew he would never see her again.

Chapter Eight

Lara snuck past the two vampires guarding Cateryine's chamber. Chest heaving, she tried to remain calm and catch her breath. Lachlan's life depended on it.

When she'd woken this morning and he still hadn't returned, she'd known he was in trouble. They had a bond she couldn't explain. She just felt him. And she felt that something was terribly wrong.

Slipping along the long, dark stone walls, she listened for any telltale signs of activity. Nothing. Taking a deep breath, she double-checked the safety on Jacob's laser gun before peeking around the wall.

Lachlan!

Her eyes found him immediately. He sat at the foot of a large white bed. A knot stuck in her throat when she realized what he was doing. He was smiling and gently rubbing some beautiful dark-haired woman's feet. She sighed and leaned back on the bed, grasping some man's arm. The man stood chained to the wall, the woman's teeth buried in his flesh, feeding from him. Lara's eyes widened in shock—Uther? What the hell was going on? Was this all some game? Had Lachlan been in cohorts with these vampires all along?

No, she shook her head—she wouldn't think it.

Pursing her lips together, she swung out from behind the wall, the laser gun aimed at the woman in white.

"Cateryine," she shouted. "Stand up slowly or I'll shoot you where you lie."

A broad smile crept across the woman's lovely pale face. Lara briefly looked down at Lachlan. He didn't glance up at her. It was like he didn't even see her. It wasn't until Cateryine stood that Lara noticed the gaudy gold and jade jewelry she wore.

"Lara," her smooth, monotone voice said. "We've been expecting you, haven't we, Lachlan love?"

Love?

“Why don’t you stand up and say hello to your mate, for old time’s sake.”

Lara watched in fixed horror as Lachlan stood and stepped toward her. Laser gun shaking in her trembling hand, Lara aimed it from him to Cateryine.

“Stop this now,” she said in an unsteady voice.

“Or you’ll what—?” Cateryine taunted, moving toward her with such grace that she seemed to float.

“I’ll shoot you both and pull that jewelry off your dead carcass.”

The vampire queen’s shrill laugh made Lara wince. “I think not,” she bit. “Lachlan, take the gun.”

Heart racing, Lara stared as Lachlan strode toward her. “Stop, I’m warning you,” she said.

“Go ahead,” Cateryine shrugged. “Shoot him.”

He was not less than five feet away. His handsome face was void of emotion. His eyes lifeless, like a zombie. Lara pulled the trigger back a fraction of an inch, but the memory of him kissing her goodbye sprang to life in her mind and she let go. He easily wrenched the weapon free of her grip.

“Just like I thought,” Cateryine said. “You may be a half-breed, but you’re still more human than either race.”

Cateryine sidled up to Lachlan, running her black nails down his chest, drawing tiny beads of blood. Lara’s pulse thundered an angry tattoo by her temple. He had welts across his beautiful chest, burn marks on his shoulders.

When her gaze settled on the vampire queen her blood ran cold.

“Choke her,” Cateryine cooed.

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed. In a flash he snaked his hands out tightening them around Lara’s throat.

Blood thrummed in her ears and she gasped for breath.

“Lach-lan pl-ease,” Lara sputtered.

“He is mine now, half-breed,” Cateryine said in a hiss. With a satisfied smirk, she ran her palms over his shoulders and dipped her head to lick the bulging muscles of his back.

Lara wheezed, trying to pry his fingers from her neck, but they only tightened. Stars swam behind her eyes and her heart constricted along with her lungs.

“That’s enough,” Cateryine said. The pressure about her neck eased, but he did not release her. Lara choked and panted for air.

“Now,” Cateryine said with a knowing grin, “kiss her.”

Lara’s heart shuddered as Lachlan stepped up to her. His familiar body and intoxicating scent warmed her as he loomed above her and lowered his head. The hand about her neck moved to cup her cheek with feather light tenderness. His eyes shuttered as he bent down. When his soft lips caressed hers with loving tenderness a choked sob rent from her. He swallowed it, swallowed the tears of pain she cried at the cruelty of Cateryine’s game. Only another woman would know what torture this was for her. She’d rather be shot than endure this. But as his wonderful lips worked their magic on hers, all thought began to flee. His tongue danced with hers, their souls mingling together one last time.

“Stop.”

Instantly he released her and stepped back to Cateryine’s side. Lara couldn’t remember ever feeling so alone.

“Now,” Cateryine said, a wicked light in her black eyes as she threaded her hands through the silky hair at the base of Lachlan’s neck. “Kiss me.”

Lara slammed her eyes shut, unable to watch as Lachlan kissed and explored Cateryine’s mouth the way he’d just done with her.

When she could take no more she tried to step away. But Lachlan’s hand shot out, grasping her about the neck. Lara gasped. The sound mixed with her tears, the most wretched and pathetic sound she’d ever heard.

After a moment, Cateryine pulled away from Lachlan’s mouth, wiping her own before she looked back at Lara.

“Now, my pet,” she said, running her finger along his bicep. “Kill her.”

Lachlan’s face contorted into a sinister grimace. Lara flinched as his tail fanned out and rose up to her eye level. An instrument he’d once used to bring her to the dizzying heights of pleasure sat poised and ready to crush her head like he had that vamp.

Her lower lip trembled, but she forced herself to look into his eyes.

“I love you, Lachlan,” she said through her tears.

His face softened and the hand holding her neck shook. For a moment, Lara swore his eyes, which had been clouded and dazed, seemed at last to truly see her.

“What are you waiting for,” Cateryine shouted. “Kill her now!”

Lachlan hesitated. His handsome brow furrowed. His chest heaved like he couldn't swallow enough air. Then he blinked and with a savage howl he released Lara. Spinning, he snaked his tail out, embedding its tip into Cateryine's stomach.

"Oh!" Lara cried, covering her mouth with her hands she collapsed to her knees on the floor.

Cateryine screamed a warbling high-pitched cry, so piercing and loud Lara had to cover her ears.

Lachlan's back muscles rippled as his wings broke free and fanned out to their impressive size. Lara watched as he transformed into his dragon shape and clutched Cateryine in his talons. She winced and turned away when the dragon opened his jowls and bit off the vampire queen's head.

Shaking, Lara buried her head between her knees and waited for the nightmare to end. Seconds seemed like minutes, minutes like hours.

A large hand covered her shoulder. Lara flinched and slowly looked up.

"Lara," Lachlan knelt next to her.

"Oh, Lachlan," she cried, launching herself into his waiting arms. "I was so scared."

"Love, I am so sorry," he said, raining kisses in her hair and holding her against him.

"God," she murmured, pulling him tight. "You were going to kill me."

"Shh," he said, stroking his hands along her back as he held her.

When the tears finally abated she looked toward the wall.

"Where's Uther?" she asked.

"Gone. He broke the chains and ran off while I dealt with Cateryine."

A shudder passed through her body at that name. Lachlan sighed.

"Lara—"

"Don't," she stopped him. "I don't want to think about it."

"I'm going to say it anyway," he said, grasping her cheeks and forcing her to look at him.

"When I was under Cateryine's spell I had no free will of my own. I couldn't stop from doing what she bade of me."

She shut her eyes at the painful memory.

"No, Lara, stop. Look at me," he said softly. Once she did as he asked, he smiled. "That was until you told me you loved me. Your

love was strong enough to break her spell, jewelry or no. It means more to me than drawing my next breath.”

She inhaled a shuddery breath, blinking back the tears threatening to spill free.

Lachlan brushed his fingers against her lips and propped his forehead against her. “I love you too, Lara May,” he said, before taking her lips in a soft whisper of a kiss.

At his admission, her heart soared. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the passion and love she carried for him in her soul.

Lightness she’d never felt before seeped into every pore of her being. It wasn’t until he trailed sweet kisses along her jawline, cheeks and nose that she looked up and noticed they hovered near the ceiling.

“Oh, Lachlan,” she gasped.

“Hmm,” he hummed against the skin of her neck.

“Please don’t let go.”

“Wha—oh,” he chuckled. “Sorry love, but that’s not me.”

At the realization it was her wings holding them twenty feet in the air she screamed and they started falling.

A sharp snapping sound cracked through the sky and their decline abruptly ceased. “Now that’s me,” he said as they floated in the air.

“Sorry,” she smiled.

“No problem, you’ll get used to it.”

“Seems I have a lot to get used to,” she said.

“Well, it’s a good thing sheep are adaptable if needs be.”

Lara laughed at his choice of words. “But we only find happiness with partners who offer us security.” She joked with a smile.

“So, I guess I better marry you, eh?”

“Lachlan,” she hushed.

“And you sheep are family people too, aren’t you?” he asked with a glint in his eye. “So I guess we better get started on our litter as soon as possible.”

Her heart lodged in her throat and she tightened her arms around his waist. “I think that sounds like a wonderful idea,” she whispered, wrapping her wings around him and tilting her head up for a kiss.

The End

Three Shakes of Wolf's Tale
By
Michael Barnette

Maryanne Lamb is working undercover to infiltrate a crime ring headed by the Wolf of Hong Kong but she's in for a big surprise: love.

www.michaelbarnette.com

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Captive lightning in multiple colors flashed across the ceiling in time to the trip-hammer beat of the band on stage. Wildly gyrating bodies filled the dance floor to over flowing, the flashes from the ceiling repeated in the plastile flooring under their feet.

The rest of the Wolf's Den-- formerly an import export business' warehouse-- was dim as a back alley and anything could, and did, happen there from petty drug deals to outright homicide.

But it wasn't all that terribly different from any of a dozen or so similar clubs that clotted the old Hong Kong shipping district.

One thing set this club apart from those other clubs: It was owned by a man only known as the Wolf of Hong Kong.

Who he really was, and what his real name might be were a total mystery. The fact the Wolf allegedly headed the biggest crime corporation in the whole city-- probably in all of China--wasn't a secret. His company was indirectly linked with drug manufacturing, cloning of human pets for the underground slave trade, and more deaths than the most recent outbreaks of avian flu had caused in the last two decades.

Maryanne Lamb knew why she'd been chosen for the assignment in the Wolf's Den. Looking around made it obvious. All the women working as waitresses at the club were shapely and ranged from attractive to incredibly beautiful, though she suspected few, if any of them, had been born with their looks as she had. She was also the only blue-eyed platinum blonde in the whole place-- not surprising since there were very few Anglo women working there at all. The other reason for her selection for the job had less to do with her

outward appearance and much more to do with the fact she was the most beautiful woman with the requisite field experience in under cover work.

As the most important assignment she'd ever been put on, Maryanne wasn't exactly unhappy she'd been chosen, at least not initially.

But three months of the nightly grind of waiting tables and being groped by strangers, coupled by the aftereffects of night after night of the loud music-- Well it was starting to wear on her patience. Especially since, in all that time, she'd seen not a single glimpse of the Wolf.

Until he showed up she couldn't even request a change of duty. It had taken all of the organization's considerable talent to create an identity that would pass the screening process used by the Wolf's Den. So until she could make a report on his identity-- at the very least-- she was stuck working there whether it took another day or a year to get the information she had to stay.

A hand slid down her leg, only the black hose she wore between her and the groping heat of the damp palm. She forced a smile, and grated out, "Don't touch me, please."

The man just leered and reached for something a little farther up her body as she put the man's drink on the table.

"Come on baby, you know you want it. Dressed like that, you've got to want it."

She sighed. What was it with men? Put on a skimpy costume and they automatically assumed it was either an invitation to touch, or that you were advertising your availability for sex.

"We don't pick our costumes sir, they're assigned to us," she replied as she evaded his searching hand and did her best to resist the urge to hit him in the face with her serving tray.

He just laughed and tried to feel her up, but she danced out of his reach, and dropped his change from his drink on the table and got well away from him.

The club was always busy, but tonight it was beyond busy. Madhouse was the first thing that came to mind, a total nightmare of endless customers dead set on getting as staggering drunk as possible. As far as she could tell the only empty table in the entire place was the one permanently reserved for the Wolf. The bouncers had already run off three groups of patrons who'd tried to claim it.

Glancing that way she got a shock. There were now several goon and thug types standing around the table, acting as guards, even though the table itself remained empty.

A hand grabbed her and she spun to find a half drunken club goer leering at her. "Hey baby, ya wanna dance wif me?" he asked in alcohol sodden English.

"No, thanks. I'm working. You know how it is," she replied automatically.

"Sure, sure, bosses get mad. Maybe after huh?"

She just gave him her best glacial smile and darted away to try and get a better look at the men around the Wolf's table. Maybe being able to pick one of them out of the groups of faces she knew were associated with his crime organization might give her some clue to the identity of the Wolf himself.

Maryanne hadn't made it more than ten feet closer to the table before she noticed that the rippling sea of bodies filling the club were moving, and not in the typical ebb and flow of people moving about the tables, entering and leaving the dance floor. This time there was a ripple through the middle of the crowd, a distinct parting like a shoal of fish moving aside to for a shark.

Her heart started to pound, excitement filling her.

This is it. It just has to be the Wolf. They wouldn't get out of way for anyone else except maybe some kind of celebrity and we always know when any of them are coming.

From her vantage point on the second tier of the club she could catch glimpses of the slow moving knot of people. Men mostly, with a few barely clothed women toward the middle.

She tried to see who was at the center, but all she caught sight of was a dark-haired head that might or might not be the Wolf.

I've got to get closer. I have to find out if one of those people is the Wolf, she told herself as she pushed through the club patrons. Those who'd noticed the commotion on the lower level were as eager to see the new arrival as Maryanne, but they were just curious. Maryanne rose on tiptoes trying to see, wanting to find out if the Wolf had actually come to the club.

If so her months of waiting would finally pay off.

If not, she'd be stuck undercover and working her tail off as a waitress until he did finally put in an appearance.

God let it be him, please. I don't know if I can take the noise in this place much longer.

The knot of people reached the guarded table long before Maryanne managed to get close enough to see who was at the center of the group. When they dissolved from their clump to take seats at the table she finally got a good look at the dark-haired man.

She stared not sure if the man was the Wolf or not. He appeared to be a lot younger than she'd been led to believe, in his mid to late twenties rather than the forty-something man her briefing told her to expect.

Her gaze moved over the man at the heart of the group. Taking in what she could of his appearance in the flashing lights of the club. Younger *and* a lot more attractive than the sketchy descriptions provided by their informants ever suggested. And both facts led her to the abrupt conclusion that this couldn't be her man. Disappointment filled Maryanne, but she squelched it. Just because this man wasn't the Wolf didn't mean the Wolf wouldn't put in an appearance. If someone sat at his table, he'd be there, sooner or later.

Maryanne watched as the rest of his entourage settled around the table, most of the men taking up places as guards, the women taking seats and trying to get as close to the as they could. She felt a momentary pang of jealousy as the blonde woman leaned closer and pressed a heated kiss to his mouth, because she really would love the chance to kiss those sensual lips.

He's just gorgeous. I wonder what the rest of him is like under that suit?

While Maryanne observed the woman's whole body came out of her chair as she deepened the kiss, turning it into something closer to an assault.

When the man-- was he the Wolf or not? - pushed the blonde firmly back into her seat Maryanne couldn't keep from smiling. The stormy expression on his ivory face showed that he certainly hadn't appreciated the woman's brash behavior.

Give it up girl, he's a crime manager at the very least. Or the head of a Tong so no point in even daydreaming over that kissable mouth. You get paid for taking these guys down, not for going down on them.

Or letting them go down on you... She shook herself and banished thoughts about what she'd like to do, or have done to her, by a man that handsome.

She stood there, watching, taking in the sight of the man who might or might not be the Wolf when his dark eyes met hers.

Maryanne felt warmth flood her cheeks, despite her ability to normally keep such reactions under control.

The man's lips curved, revealing perfect teeth in a smile that warmed her blood and blossomed into heat low in her belly in a reaction that startled her with its sudden intensity.

He watched her as he motioned to one of the goon squad surrounding the table. The thug bent down and his boss said something. The man nodded in response and walked away from the table heading directly for Maryanne.

'The Wolf is partial to blondes, especially blue-eyed ones,' she remembered being told at the briefing for this assignment. Her natural coloration, coupled with her good looks were the major reasons she'd been selected for the job. The majority of the other women with the requisite field experience would have required extensive enhancement surgery. They'd saved time-- and a great deal of money-- by giving her the assignment.

Maryanne stood there, poised to bolt, wanting to run from the powerful attraction she felt for the good-looking man at the table.

Girl you need to get laid if a pretty face and what might or might not be a hot body under that suit can get your juices flowing.

Instead of running, Maryanne stood her ground and watched the man at the table. He smiled, his eyes full of amusement. He winked at her. Stunned by the renewed blush that heated her face and fanned a fire much lower in her body, Maryanne struggled to breathe.

Maryanne took a step back, even more ready to bolt for an escape route. It felt like a trap had closed around her, fear and panic coming to the forefront regardless of her training and experience.

And if he is the Wolf do you want to blow your chance to get an ID on him? But the urge to vanish into the crowd, to flee the scene and deny the heat that had begun to dampened her panties was a powerful one.

She hadn't been involved with any men since she'd graduated college with her criminal justice degree over five years ago. Nor had her prior stint in the US Army given her many opportunities she'd wanted to act on. Those few she had accepted always turned out to be mistakes in the long run since her dream hadn't been to 'find the right man and make babies' the way two of her lovers suggested. No, she had a goal in mind which was to become a police officer like her mother and her grandfather before her.

Since she'd gotten her degree she'd been far too devoted to her chosen career to even consider involvement with a man.

After graduating from the police academy she'd gone into law enforcement as a police officer in Los Angeles police where she'd found herself attached to a special gang taskforce due to her prior military experience.

Two years later and with several commendations to her credit, she'd been offered a position with the covert organization she worked for now. An organization that specialized in breaking up international crime cartels: Perseverance.

And that's exactly what she had to do: persevere. The assignment couldn't end until she had the knowledge they'd worked so hard to attain.

This guy stared at her from across the room with such a penetrating gaze had to be her assignment, and there was no option of backing out and trying to hide in the crowd. Not now. Not when years of covert work by other people, and months of her own time were at stake, along with a lot of lives-- innocents as well as criminals belonging to other crime corporations.

The burly man approached her, his size becoming even more apparent as he got closer. She'd known he was a big guy, but he wasn't just big, he was huge. Her head barely reached to his broad shoulder, despite the fact she had four inch heels on and was taller than most women. His sable brown eyes took her in the way a man devoured a sweet treat, all at once and with apparent relish. A lustful glitter filled his gaze. "The boss wants you to wait his table, babe," he said. He spoke English, but his thick accent-- possibly a German or Austrian not that she had any expertise in recognizing accents--made it difficult for her to understand him.

She pasted a winning smile on her mouth, "Okay, sure!" she sounded enthused, but her heart started hammering, and not just from the excitement of her covert work finally bearing fruit. Something about this guy set off every warning bell in her head, words like *dangerous* and *nutcase* coming to mind.

"Come on then," he said, taking her upper arm in a hand that closed completely around her biceps big as a bear's paw. He pulled her along and she almost tripped as they went down the short series of steps to the lower level. Off balance, she collided with the brute's shoulder which earned her rougher handling as he yanked her arm to keep her from falling.

They reached the table without further mishap, and she received no more ham-handed mauling from the goon.

The first thing that Maryanne noticed about the man seated at the table was the thunder and lightning glare leveled on the goon who'd brought her.

"Kiel what have I told you about handling women?" His voice matched his face, a honey warm baritone that sent a shiver down her spine that ended in a renewed blossoming of heat low in her belly.

The man instantly let go of her arm, his face going red, whether from embarrassment or anger she couldn't tell. Maryanne suspected Kiel wouldn't dare argue with the seated man.

"Well?" the man asked, the tone of his voice cracking sharp as a bullwhip.

"Boss, I..." the man shifted from foot to foot like a nervous schoolboy. "I'm sorry." Kiel even sounded sorry. Afraid too if the way he failed to look at his boss was any indication.

"Forgot? Is that what you were going to say, Kiel?"

The man nodded.

"And what did I tell you the last time you 'forgot' Kiel?"

"That if I forgot again you'd make sure I couldn't forget anymore." He did look up then, true fear in his gaze, face gone bloodless in terror.

If nothing else the man's very reaction to his boss' words just about convinced Maryanne that she'd found the Wolf of Hong Kong.

The man's gaze went hard and unfeeling as onyx as he regarded his erring thug. He made a sharp gesture with one hand and snapped his fingers.

Three goons closed in and it all Maryanne just managed to get out of their way as they grabbed their fellow and dragged the man away. "No, I'm sorry. Boss! "

She turned to watch the crowd parting for the struggling mass, and started when a gentle hand touched her abused arm. She turned her head to find herself looking into the same dark eyes that had warmed with genuine concern as he examined the dark smudges starting to appear on her skin.

"Forgive me for employing such a fool. I should have rid myself of him sooner. You have my sincerest apologies for his behavior." He gave a bow and waited politely for her reply.

"I ahhh..." she stammered. He apologizing to her while he'd undoubtedly just sent a man to his death over a bit of rough handling.

The man was a cold-blooded killer, she knew that, yet... he seemed truly unhappy over the minor damage his man had caused her.

Maryanne wondered how many deaths this man might be responsible for, and just how many people the thug who was going to his death had killed. Then there were the people she'd killed, faces that still haunted her dreams from time to time.

Dangerous men, killers who had to be stopped.

Human lives.

A gentle hand touched her arm.

"Do you work here in my club?"

Maryanne blinked herself back to the here and now. He'd said *my club* which made him the Wolf of Hong Kong. "Yes," she managed to get out as found those concerned dark eyes staring at her.

A slight frown tugged at the man's mouth, marring the smile on his very kissable lips--lips she had trouble tearing her gaze away from. The warmth came flooding back, and she fought to control her own reaction. He was the Wolf of Hong Kong, a deadly Tong leader and here she stood wet and ready for him just because he had a pretty face.

Nodding she gave him a forced smile and saw the change in this expression, subtle, but there. A flicker of anger, but at her or his erring goon she didn't know.

"Lies do not become so beautiful a woman," he murmured as he released her arm and returned to his seat between the woman.

Maryanne noticed their jealous glares. If looks could have killed the unveiled hate in their expressions would have caused her to burst into flame and crumble to ash right then and there.

"Go," the Wolf snapped, waving his hands in a very plain demand that they leave.

"But baby we..." the blonde started.

A sharp glance from the man silenced her. The pair of women left the table without a backward glance that told Maryanne volumes about their actual feelings for the Wolf-- or rather their lack of any.

"Come sit with me."

"I really should get back to work..."

"I promise you won't be fired. No one would dare."

She smiled, "No, I guess they wouldn't." She took the offered seat recently vacated by the brunette.

"Do you enjoy your job here? Be honest."

"It's okay," she replied. "The music gives me a headache sometimes, and the customers can get..." she shrugged, "pushy."

He smiled warmly at her. "Is that what I'm being now? Pushy?"

"Oh no, what I meant is they, you know, grab things without being invited to do so."

"Ah, I see. So groping is a problem?"

"Yes."

He laughed softly, the sound sliding through her entire being and turning up the heat inside her another notch. "Beauty is like a bright light, it draws all the pests," he said as he reached out a hand and cupped her chin, gentle pressure forcing her to meet his gaze.

She blushed and he started to chuckle softly.

"You're a lovely girl," he told her and then glanced away. "But my business associates have arrived and it's time for you to get back to work. Tell the bartender we'll take my usual order and that you'll be waiting on my table for the night."

Maryanne nodded and was just getting up to leave when a powerful arm swept around her waist. She all but fell into his lap, soft lips closing over hers in a passionate kiss she was too startled not to return.

Her heart hammered in her chest as heat spread through her entire body and pooled low in her belly, something deep inside her throbbing as moisture gathered in her panties. She moaned and shuddered as his hand slipped up her thigh, the heat of his skin burning her through the hose she wore. The hand stopped at the apex of her legs, pressed gently eliciting a shudder and another moan from her.

She was breathless when the kiss ended, her cheeks flushed with desire, chest rising and falling with each ragged gasp as she fought for breath and self control.

He smiled and winked. "Tell the bartender to give you my mark. He'll understand."

Her mind reeled as he set her back on her feet. She'd heard about the 'boss' mark' but hadn't known what it might be, or how it worked. All anyone would ever tell her was the girls regarded it as an honor to receive it, and once you had it the customers stopped any inappropriate behavior. There were enough rumors of patrons meeting bad ends after groping one of the 'boss' girls' to keep even the most rowdy customer in line.

Well now she would find out all about it, including the effect it had on customers up close and personal.

Very personal. Her thigh where he'd touched her felt hot, like she'd been branded. Everywhere he'd touched felt over heated especially where his hand had come to rest over her mound.

He sat there, smiling slightly, watching as a group of men appeared through the crowd.

Maryanne recalled the Wolf telling her his business associates had arrived and she wondered how he'd known if they were only now close enough for him to see. Then she realized there had probably been some secret signal via a communications device from the bouncers at the door.

So those rumors were true also. He only came to the Wolf's Den to do business. And here he was about to conduct some kind of underworld crime deal. It would be of great value to Per if she could find out what his next move would be as it might give them a clue how to break his Tong.

"You should go get those drinks," he urged, patting her bottom to send her on her way.

The hand on her behind rocked her, not because there was any force in it, but because, yet again, her vaginal walls clutched and rolled reacting with powerful desire to his touch.

"Sure... boss..." she replied, barely able to get her brain to cooperate and make her mouth and her shaking legs function. Still dazed by her body's reaction she hurried away just as a group of men-- thugs and a boss clothed in an expensive designer suit-- joined the Wolf at his table.

Maryanne was halfway to the bar when another woman intercepted her, bumping into her and whispering, "Is that him?"

The undercover Per agent blinked and stared at the beautiful Asian woman. There was something very familiar about her, and then she realized she talked to another Per agent. A Japanese *man* she knew from the Tokyo Bureau. On assignment in Hong Kong, he made very convincing female in the clinging faux-silk dress, high heels and artfully applied makeup he wore.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked in a hard-edged whisper. Glancing around Maryanne tried to see if anyone was watching them, worried they'd be spotted by one of the many bouncers-- more of the Wolf's hand picked thugs-- or anyone else that

might be watching her for their Boss. At least the music would make it almost impossible for anyone to listen in on their conversation.

“Checking up on your progress,” he replied with his lips almost touching her ear. The soft flutter of his breath in her hair sent another jolt of need tearing through her body and she had to stifle the moan as goosebumps rose on her skin.

What the hell is wrong with me? First I get all hot and bothered over a killer, now this? Mary-girl you need to get laid and bad. This is ridiculous.

“Well don’t. Do you want to blow this for me?”

“No, but I’ve got a warning from Upstairs.”

She frowned. Upstairs was their way of referring to the unknown people in charge of the entire organization. Rumor said they were well placed within the international business community, with enough wealth to fund such massive endeavors against crime. With no specific allegiance to any country they called the world their home and all of humanity and civilization their responsibility to protect from the depredations of people like the Wolf.

“Well deliver and disappear,” she said, speaking directly into his ear.

“Rumor is that the Wolf’s lab has developed two very interesting things. A cologne that induces uncontrollable lust in anyone coming in contact with a wearer...”

She frowned. *Well that goes a long way to explaining a few things.*

“I’d say we’ve got confirmation of that,” she muttered.

“Oh,” he glanced back at the table they could barely see through the crowd. “Okay then, I’ll be sure to report that when I go back into HQ.”

“What’s the second thing? I’ve got to get going.”

“A serum that not only prevents aging, but reverses the process.”

She nodded. They’d expected an older man to be the Wolf. She’d met a much younger man who was very apparently the same man who’d held the title ‘Wolf of Hong Kong’ for close to twenty-five years. An anti-aging serum would explain the discrepancy she’d noted regarding his age.

“Well that explains the fact he looks a lot younger than our information led us to believe,” she told him. “Now if you don’t mind I’ve got to wait on his table. You should just trot off to the ladies room so it looks like you were getting directions from me. We can’t

be too careful here.” She pointed in the direction of the nearest lady’s room to aid her cover story should anyone ask what they’d been talking about.

He grinned at her. “Thank you sweetie. That’s a great idea.”

She watched him as he moved off into the crowd. Even from behind he looked female. Shaking her head she went to the bar.

“The big man wants his usual order, and said you should give me some kind of Boss’s Mark,” she stated when the bartender finally arrived to get her order.

“Right away,” he answered giving her a wink and a big grin. He reached under the bar and handed her a black sash with a mass of red fringe and long dangling gold tassels at the ends. “Put it on and I’ll get the drinks.”

She ran the fabric through her hands. It was silk. Real honest to deities silk not the chemically created mechanically spun faux silk moderately well off people could afford. No it was the real thing that only the ultra rich could buy.

But what else could she expect of the man in charge of the biggest most dangerous crime ring in all of Hong Kong? She wrapped it around her hips and tied it at a slight angle so the tassels would sway nicely as she walked. She felt almost piratical with it on.

A tray was placed on the bar top, the man behind the bar smiling at her. “It looks good on you, Lacey,” he said using the name everyone at the Wolf’s Den knew her by. “Congratulations on becoming one of the Boss’ girls.” He winked, “Comes with fringe benefits.”

She groaned at the bad pun as he expected her to and took the tray. “I bet it does,” she remarked as she turned to go.

“Lacey, seriously, he’s a good man to work for and he pays his girls well.”

She shot a smile back at him, “I’m betting he does.” She hurried off carefully maneuvering through the crowd toward the Wolf’s table.

Her sleek and well toned form drew his eyes as she returned, the sash around her hips moving with an almost hypnotic sway that held his gaze the way a magnet held iron.

She wasn’t the simple waitress she tried so hard to imitate, and anyone with the knowledge could see serious training underlying her waitress act. The way her eyes swept the vicinity, her gaze taking in every person at or near the table as she drew near made that quite

evident. And if that hadn't tipped him off, her gracefulness distinguished her from the other women in the club. These weren't a dancer's lithe movements. Her easy grace was that of someone who knew how to kill, and it drew him the way a bee became drawn to nectar filled flowers.

Or the way a tiger knew his mate.

His cock throbbed and went partly hard as he gazed at her, his attention drawn away from his would be business associate and the man's attendant bodyguards.

A creeping chill edged across his senses and he looked up.

Slow, much too slow.

A black rimmed eye of death focused on him from the hand of the Tong boss, the man taking on the task of ending the life of his long time rival himself.

The Wolf's lips drew back in a snarl; cornered beast meeting his end.

But a well thrown tray, complete with a load of glass and beverages spoiled the man's aim. The bullet cracked into the plaster behind him, narrowly missing one of his bodyguards, barely missing his own head. He was moving now, his own gun drawn, sending a pair of small lead killers in the direction of his would be murderer.

He didn't even wait to see if they hit. He knew they had.

He fired a third bullet at one of the other Tong boss' guards just as his own men opened fire on the cluster of enemies who'd come to his club to kill him. To kill the Wolf in his own Den.

The patrons of the club nearest them began to react, the first screams and the sharp tang of panic rising over the music and the smell of alcohol, cigarettes and massed humanity.

A shower of bullets and plaster followed him as he bolted for the nearest way out, his bodyguards doing their jobs, protecting him, dying for him.

He reached the secret panel in the wall and felt one of his own men collide with him before he fell dying to the floor. He shoved the panel open, and turned to fire at the men intent on killing him only to find the waitress-- a compact gun in gripped in her delicate fist. "GO!" she shouted at him as she ran in his direction.

He stepped into the secret passage and froze.

"Sorry boss," one of the two men standing there said as his finger started to squeeze down on the trigger of the big pistol in his hand.

Hot trails and the mosquito scream of small high velocity bullets whizzed past him at head level.

Just like that. One. Two. Both men went down and the woman who was no waitress banged into him.

“Go!” she shouted, her hand pushing at him, urging him to run.

He shoved her into the narrow passageway and yanked the armor lined door shut just as a rain of lead rattled on it. Shoving the locking bolts into place he turned and grinned.

“You handle a gun well... for a cop,” he told her.

She frowned. “What makes you think I’m a cop?”

He shrugged. “Oh, sorry, my mistake. You aren’t a cop, exactly are you?”

He leaned in, inhaled deeply of her fragrance. In the enclosed space her scent was so very intoxicating, the perfume of Heaven itself. He took a deeper breath, drawing her scent in his eyes half closed, cock going almost fully erect oblivious to the muffled sound of something heavy repeatedly striking the wall panel.

“Not that it matters at the moment, but no,” she replied.

Another concerted effort by the men on the other side of the door left a crack through which they could see light.

“Ummm... it might be a good idea if we run. This door isn’t going to keep them out of here forever you know,” she informed him.

He smiled at her, dazed by her scent and the life shining in her bright blue eyes.

“Why?” he asked, needing to know.

She blinked. “Why what? Why run? I don’t know, maybe because the alternative is being killed?”

He shook his head, “No. Not that. Why did you save me?”

The woman sighed. “I don’t know. It just seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“And now?”

The banging on the door grew louder, a sharp crack getting their attention as one of the hinges started to give.

“And now I think we should really run,” she told him as she grabbed his hand and pulled, trying to urge him along.

Laughing he yanked her around and kissed her until his cock felt like it would give up the pressure in his balls, and until she was limp and gasping with an equal measure of passion.

He stepped back, hands gripping her upper arms and just stared at her, seeing her surface beauty and something more; the fierce light of

her soul shining bright as a flame in her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed and he could feel her trembling.

“I...”

“Shhhh...” he murmured, reaching up to smooth hair from her eyes.

The booming on the door increased in tempo and fury and another crack snapped through their awareness.

“We’d better go,” they both said at the same time...

He laughed and she just stared at him, puzzled.

“Seriously,” she added, grabbing his hand and tugging, “we need to get out of here.”

“Of course,” he agreed his hand closing around hers, he followed her down the narrow corridor at a quick jog but he stopped after they’d only traversed about twenty or so feet.

“A moment if you don’t mind.”

She gave him a blank stare until he got a small panel in the wall open. He reached in, pressed his thumb to a touch pad, set his left eye over an optical scanner and nodded in satisfaction when a green light inside turned red and a softly modulated voice whispered, “Identity confirmed. System engaged.”

“What was that?” she asked, peering over his shoulder.

He grinned fiercely and closed the panel. “A little surprise for our pursuers.”

She gave him a blank stare.

“Booby traps in the corridor. We need to go quickly now, they’re beginning to arm themselves.”

“Oh!”

He took her hand and she set off at a fast jog, but it wasn’t what he’d had in mind.

“Run, please,” he requested.

And they did, the woman amazing him when she could maintain a good pace regardless of the ridiculously high heels she was wearing. It brought a faint smile to his face.

A roar of sound came at them from behind as first of the traps went off.

“That should slow them down,” he remarked as they reached a flight of dimly lit stairs.

They went down the steps, taking them well below street level, then following the corridor around several turns before they reached a second set of steps going up.

They rounded a corner that ended in another door but before they reached it he pulled her to a stop.

“Wait,” he told her and paused to place his hand on the doorway, head tilted: listening.

No sound reached them from the other side and there should have been some sort of noise.

A frown pulled at his mouth. “I go first. You follow. Be ready, I think we’re walking into the arms of another welcoming committee.”

“Great,” she replied stepping aside to give him room to dive for cover if he needed it. She concentrated, trying to focus on any sounds that might be coming from the room beyond. Unlike a good portion of the members of Perseverance, she had none of the bio-enhancements becoming common place among the organization's agents and field operatives. Right now she wished she'd gone ahead when she'd been offered the chance and gotten more than the simple visual upgrades she'd opted for at the time. Then again, getting her hearing upgraded and then coming to work at the Wolf's Den would have been a terrible mistake. The music had been bad enough without the addition of audio enhancement.

But it sure would have come in handy right now.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with him she noticed that, while she was breathing hard from running, he didn't even seem winded. Maryanne frowned.

Odd, she thought to herself, *he's not even damp and I'm soaked*. She could feel the sweat of exertion running down her back, turning her bra into an uncomfortable sodden annoyance, dampening her hair so that it stuck to her face and neck. *Yep, very odd*.

Bio-enhancements could account for everything she saw, although the type of bio- upgrades it would take to achieve these kinds of results were ultra expensive.

Then again, he *was* the head of a Tong, so cost wouldn't be an issue. No one at Per had even considered a Tong leader-- any Tong leader, much less the one at the head of the biggest syndicate-- would subject himself to the dangers of the processes involved for the major alterations such extensive changes required.

No, it didn't make sense that the leader of any major crime ring would go through such a dangerous process. It was something she could wonder about later because right now they were in a lot of danger.

“Ready?” he asked, one hand on the bolt that would unlock the door, the other wrapped around the pistol he’d used to such good effect back in the club.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she replied, gripping her own pistol. Her palm was sweaty, heart hammering with adrenaline charged fear.

He unbolted the door, stood there for a moment as if he were gathering up his nerve. He grinned at her and winked. “Don’t be scared now,” he said, his voice gone rough, a growl of sound that sent a shiver of ice along her spine and a blaze of heat right to her crotch.

He winked again and she could have sworn his eyes had changed color from deep brown to a golden color like honey.

But that couldn’t happen... Could it?

Maryanne’s jaw dropped in stunned shock as the Wolf bolted out of the corridor. He was fast. She’d noticed that before, but this... this wasn’t even remotely human.

Wolf was into the room beyond in an eye-blink, a shocked scream and an abrupt hail of gunfire that leaving her pressed against the wall as attempted murder rained in her direction. With heavy gunfire filling the corridor in which she stood, Maryanne didn’t dare step into the room after him because she’d certainly be injured if not outright killed. But that left her wondering how he could walk into something like that without being at least hurt. Unless, of course, the suit he wore was woven from some of the new bullet stopping fabrics commonly worn by many politicians and highly placed corporate executives when they had to make public appearances.

Okay girl, you can’t just let him go out there alone and get killed, she told herself, her heart hammering at a pace that matched the Hell’s chorus of gunfire and panicked screams coming from the room. As she was telling herself that another part of her, the totally rational Per operative part, asked the obvious counter-argument of, *Why not? He’s the leader of a damned Tong that we’ve been trying to bring down for years. What in hell are you doing protecting him?*

But she already knew the answer. It was as simple as a kiss. A kiss that had thrown her mind and body into turmoil and complicated her life to a degree she would have scoffed at had any one suggested she might fall for one of the most notorious criminals in the world.

Maryanne wanted to help, but from the sounds she was hearing, he hardly needed her assistance. She hoped some of his own men were out there helping him take down the enemy Tong gunmen.

However, after the betrayal of his own men in the corridor, it didn't give her much hope of that.

The gunfire in her vicinity lessened, more screams telling her that whatever was going on out there was happening very fast and with brutal finality.

She dared to peek into the room, finding it to be a warehouse full of crates... and bodies. She stared wondering if the dim light was playing tricks on her eyes because there was something about the position of a few of the bodies that didn't seem quite-right. She raised her pistol and stepped cautiously into the room, moving slowly, watching for any sign of life, any hint of danger.

When she reached the first body she crouched down, eyes scanning the immediate vicinity before she turned her gaze on the man at her feet.

It was readily apparent now that she was close enough to see the wound that he hadn't been shot. He'd had his throat torn out by... something. A large animal. Maybe a very large dog, a lion or tiger, something large enough to get a good grip on his throat. Maybe it had been another kind of animal, she didn't know, but it had to be *big*.

Maryanne looked for any sign of the animal but saw nothing, nor did she hear any roaring that a tiger or lion would make.

There was a second man on top of a stack of crates. Maryanne crept toward him, listening to the sounds of fighting coming from deeper in the warehouse. It was a full out battle taking place, but here were notably fewer gunshots.

She looked at the body on the pile of crates. His eyes were open in a glassy, horrified stare and he too looked as if he'd been mauled, but this time whatever had savaged him had done so with brutally large claws.

Killed by animals with no sign of any animal's presence, and that truly made no sense whatsoever to the Per agent.

In fact, as she looked around what she could see of the room and the unmoving dead, she could spot no trace of any wounded animal, and after that many bullets something other than the gunmen should be dead.

She heard a commotion deeper inside the warehouse and she paused as an unmistakable roaring noise broke through the sounds of gunfire. A roar yes, but it came from no animal Maryanne had ever heard, the sound like a combination of a tiger's deafening roar and the sound of an old-time locomotive's steam whistle. She had to cover

her ears as the noise grew to a crescendo that vibrated through her very bones.

Silence, abrupt and complete replaced the racket and Maryanne stood there trembling in the after effect of the impossible sound. Her ears were still ringing but what bothered her most was the heat seething inside her, a heat that burned through every muscle and bone of her body. As she stood there trembling the burning warmth began to pool deep inside her, centering in her womb. Stunned by both the sound and her strange reaction to it, she just stood there wanting an answer to what was happening, but at a loss to connect the odd events to her normal world.

Shaking herself to be rid of the peculiar sensation filling her, Maryanne moved farther into the warehouse, going very cautiously, making sure any dead men she had to pass was really dead and not just wounded. She'd heard a number of stories about people being killed by enemies they'd foolishly presumed were dead only to find out they weren't when they attacked and either wounded or killed the incautious victim of a presumed corpse. She didn't want to become one of the statistics and wind up getting killed by someone she thought was dead.

Maryanne hadn't taken more than a half dozen steps before it dawned on her that she no longer heard anything at all but her own harsh breathing and the pounding of her heart. The warehouse was gripped in a cessation of sound so complete that seemed surreal after the battle and the unnatural scream she'd just heard.

Maybe they were all dead including the Wolf.

But she didn't want him to be dead. Sure it would be better for the world in the long run if he *had* died, but it wouldn't be better for her.

Actually, maybe it would be, she reminded herself, because, really, you can't have a relationship. Besides you only feel like this because of that drug. What you're feeling for him isn't real, it's chemically induced.

While it might be nothing but drug fueled lust, it was hard for her to ignore.

She took a few steps away from another dead man-- this one had died from a visible gunshot wound-- and glanced down the rows of crates and boxes trying to spot the Wolf.

There was no sign of him anywhere.

Mouth compressed into a determined line, Maryanne moved farther into the warehouse, her gun at the ready.

It took several nerve-wracking moments but she finally found him, sitting against a freight container of the type used for overseas shipping. His head slumped forward, chin resting on his chest, entire body limp as the dead men around him. At first she thought he'd died too. Blood streaked one side of his face and his clothes were a gory mess.

She stepped around some of the deceased gunmen and crouched to touch his throat to check for a pulse.

A hand closed on her wrist and she found herself staring into eyes that were no longer the obsidian shade she'd first seen, nor were they the golden shade she'd thought she imagined. His eyes were a rich, velvety brown, like melted chocolate and Maryanne found herself looking into them, her own doubting heart doing some melting of its own as she took note of how pale he was under the blood. His hand even felt cold.

"How did you...?" she began but he shook his head.

"We have to get out of here." He tried to stand but his movements were jerky, uncoordinated, like someone who'd suffered a stroke... or was coming off of some kind of drug.

She frowned. Certain drugs could make their users impervious to pain and fear. If he'd taken one of those in conjunction with any of the so called 'battle drugs' he might have been able to take the whole mess of gunmen on alone. But even those wouldn't have kept him from dying.

Nor would drugs explain the men who died by fang and claw.

Things weren't adding up here and she wanted-- no needed-- real answers.

She stood up and pulled, trying to get him on his feet and for a moment she was successful. It was a brief moment. He teetered forward, collided with her and they went down, her butt hitting the cold concrete painfully as he fell on top of her.

Face to face they lay there, lips almost touching.

He gave her a dazed smile and their lips met, a bonfire heat bursting into life in her belly, a steely rod pressing against her crotch though his clothing. She moaned, wrapping her arms around him, her bruised tailbone forgotten.

The Wolf groaned but broke the kiss, gazed into her eyes for a moment as if he were looking for something. He grinned and shook

his head. “Bad timing,” he mumbled and rolled off of her to lay sprawled out on the cool floor his trousers tented by an impressive erection.

She sat up, wincing at the bruise she knew would be darkening her butt, and turning her attempts to sit into a chancy endeavor for days to come.

“What’s wrong with you?”

He laughed, the sound a rumbling growl of mirth. “I want to fuck you in the worst way,” he replied.

“Yeah, I gathered that,” she remarked dryly as she got off the ground. “But what I really want to know is why you can’t stand on your own.”

He turned his head to focus those dark eyes on her. “Well I can figure that out. I mean, all I did was kill a dozen guys on my own.” He sighed, “And if you’re wondering, I’ve got a few special tricks.”

“Combat drugs?” she asked, voice flat.

“Not exactly, no.” He rolled to his knees and she reached out to help him up.

“Try not to fall on me this time.”

He grinned. “Well you’re no fun.”

She returned the smile unable to restore her professional distance, or her mission focus. The lure of the man-- crime lord or not-- was just too great. “I’m lots of fun,” she countered, “I just don’t think getting my ass flattened between you and the hard floor is a lot of fun.”

He regarded her as she helped him to his feet. “Yes I suppose you’re right. You’ve got such a shapely ass I’d hate to see it get ruined on the concrete. Much better to fall on you somewhere soft...” His hands gripped her behind and drew her close, and he lowered his head until their breaths mingled. At least he was steadier on his feet this time. “Somewhere like a bed,” he finished and pressed a scorching kiss to her mouth.

Maryanne felt warmth spread across her cheeks as their lips met, his hands sliding over the curve of her derriere. She shivered at the touch, and waited for another kiss.

His head snapped up, and he abruptly stepped back, his eyes showing alarm. Though she hadn’t heard anything it was evident from his body language that he had. A hand closed on her left wrist, “We have to go.”

Maryanne didn't argue as he led her out of the warehouse through a door that had been left half open. She found herself in a night wrapped alley and when he tugged to bring her along wherever he was heading, she didn't resist.

They hurried through the darkness and arrived at the parking lot for the club. It was rapidly emptying out of club goers, the gunfight inside causing the patrons to flee the scene. Maryanne didn't even hear the sound of police sirens approaching, but it really had only been a matter of moments since the shooting had started. It would take time for any response from law enforcement, especially here. The cops were very nervous about coming so deep into what everyone including them considered to be the Wolf's territory.

There was one car that drew her gaze; a black sedan with darkly tinted windows.

The Wolf apparently saw it also because he halted just inside the mouth of the alley then backed up quickly making it clear that whatever debility he'd experienced earlier was gone now.

"Those guys in the car are part of the Red Lotus Syndicate. They're out of Japan."

"It's that who attacked you?"

He nodded. "I'd bet the windows of the car are bullet proof."

"Safe bet," she agreed. While she didn't know a lot about Red Lotus, her friends in the Tokyo Bureau had told her stories that left her cold. The man at the head of the organization as deadly dangerous as the man at her side was purported to be, possibly worse since Red Lotus had gained territory outside of Japan at a pace that left Per scrambling to keep up on their activities. "Can we go back the way we came and find another way out?"

"I think we have to." His head snapped around, eyes narrowing. "Let's make it fast, they've gotten out of the car."

"How do...?" She shook her head and stripped off the sash she was wearing. Shoving it into his hands she said, "Never mind." She'd considered their options and decided she had to take a chance. Maryanne stepped out into the mouth of the alleyway, her gun hand concealed carefully amid the tiered ruffles of her skirt.

She spotted four of them, and from the size of the car she didn't think anyone had remained inside, a definite plus since they could take the car for their own get away. She smiled, "Hello boys," she said as she sashayed closer. "Looks like us girls are out of work for a while, doesn't it?"

They eyed her suspiciously, peering past her into the darkness, probably seeking the bigger shadow they'd caught a glimpse of a moment ago.

An instant of distraction and four shots rang out, four bodies hitting the ground. Maryanne hurried toward the dead men, intent on finding the keys to the car as the Wolf joined her.

She found the keys, "Let's go!"

They got into the car, slammed the doors shut and sped away from the Wolf's Den leaving a trail of death in their wake. As far as Maryanne knew, all the dead were members of the two most vicious crime syndicates in Asia though she did wonder if any innocent patrons at the Wolf's Den had been injured or killed by gunfire or the resulting panic. Either way she couldn't have done anything to prevent it. She had to keep her mind on the job.

Not that she'd performed her job the way the people Upstairs had intended.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Head north," he replied, eyes focused on the rear view mirror, the man watching to make sure no one had followed them. As far as she could tell no one had noticed them leaving.

"Why north?"

"I've got a safehouse just outside of Hong Kong. We should be all right there for a while. We can plan our next move from there."

Our next move? she mused. *What the hell am I doing, protecting him much less running away with him?* But she already knew the answer. She wanted him, and she didn't think pheromone laced cologne was the reason she found him so irresistible because she'd really been in lust from the moment she'd set eyes on him.

* * * *

Pistols drawn and ready, the two of them entered the small bungalow as if walking into hostile territory, the Wolf in the lead with Maryanne on his heels. Using partner tactics – and she hadn't even explained them to the Wolf which gave her another cause to wonder – they searched the three room cottage. No one lay in wait to kill them, and with very surface layered in a thin patina of dust, including the cloth draped furniture, any intrusion would be pretty apparent.

"We should be safe enough here for the time being," the Wolf told her as he slipped his pistol back into the shoulder holster under his left arm and reached for the TV remote. He hit a button and was

rewarded with the sound of a commercial singing the praises of some sports drink.

Maryanne pulled the sheet covering the two- seater couch aside carefully to keep from kicking up the dust too much. She carefully folded the cloth dust side in while Wolf changed channels, stopping when he hit a news program.

The talking head-- a too pretty woman with large almond shaped eyes-- was nattering on about some social gathering that had taken place in the ballroom of one of the larger, more upscale hotels in Hong Kong. Neither of them paid it much attention as they took seats on the couch. At least they hadn't paid any attention until the name Aoki Tobei was mentioned.

The Wolf's eyes narrowed and he turned up the sound as the head of the Red Lotus, the most notorious crime corporation-- part of a one-time Yakuza clan-- appeared on the screen.

He had dark hair streaked with iron grey, and was dressed in an immaculate suit that probably cost more money than Maryanne made in a year of busting her ass for Perseverance. He was rather attractive, though his face had a hard set to it, and his eyes were cold despite the smile he wore. The way he showed his teeth made the smile more like an accessory like the tie he wore, rather than a natural part of himself.

"Who was the man that you killed if it wasn't the head of Red Lotus?" Maryanne questioned.

"One of his cousins. He doesn't leave Japan very often, and he almost never comes out in public like that," the Wolf answered as the man on the TV spoke about his new business venture: a shuttle to cater to wealthy tourists who wanted to go into space. He was speaking perfectly understandable Chinese.

"He's dangerous."

"Like you?"

The Wolf frowned. "No. He's more dangerous than I am. Much more dangerous."

Maryanne's face registered shock. "How? You're in control of the biggest crime corporation in the world."

She saw his expression change from the anger she'd just seen to an emotion she couldn't quite define. Sadness and something else vying for a place on his face. An odd furtiveness in his eyes made her think he might be lying, or just not being entirely truthful. *But he is the leader of the most notorious crime ring in all of Hong Kong, so*

should deceptions and lies on his part really come as surprise? Hardly.

“Believe me, this Aoki guy is a greater danger to everyone than I’ve ever been,” he stated flatly, a sour expression darkening his gaze. “Or didn’t you notice that it was his men who attacked me, and my men who died or chose betray me in favor of working for him?”

Maryanne frowned because what he’d just said was true: his men in the corridor *had* turned on him back there at the club. Moreover he had run from his enemies. Another truth: his most trusted men, his bodyguards, had died to a man in an effort to protect him.

“So what will you do now?” she questioned as she debated what *she* should do, and what she dared to reveal, if anything, about herself. If she told him she worked for Perseverance and had been working to bring him down as surely as the Red Lotus themselves were, he might try to kill her. She decided it was the better part of good sense not to tell him anything about her own mission.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here, to think things out. We never expected something like this to happen, stupid as that might seem. And it really was foolish on our part,” he replied softly. Maryanne listened, but he didn’t really seem to be speaking to her so much as he was trying to work out the situation by talking to himself. “God how stupid could we be? We didn’t even bother to work out a contingency plan....” His voice trailed off as his gaze went to the image on the television, his frown going dark as the clouds found in a typhoon, and seemingly promising the same sort of violence should he ever have his arch enemy in reach.

Maryanne just listened. Hearing him use *we* rather than *I* made her wonder exactly how his Tong had been organized. Perhaps another even less visible partner stood at the helm of the organization, and if that was the case... well it went a long way to explain the present situation. If the Wolf’s partner sold him out to the boss of the Red Lotus, it would mean the end of his role as the head of the corporation. It would also mean the Wolf was a wanted man with a price on his head among the criminal underworld. With a price on his head the Wolf wouldn’t survive the collapse of his criminal organization for very long. It would also mean that her mission had come to an unexpected end. She decided to push for more information. “Don’t you have anyone you can trust?”

The Wolf shrugged. “Maybe. But at this point--” he shook his head, “no, I don’t dare trust anyone.” He leaned back on the couch,

closing his eyes as if he were bone-weary. He did appear tired, or perhaps it was the frustration of not knowing how much of his own organization remained loyal, or still existed for that matter. If his people had gone over to the Red Lotus, or been killed for not bowing to their new master, then the Wolf of Hong Kong might just be skirting the fine line of impending extinction like his namesakes in her own country of birth.

But she couldn't be too unhappy about the collapse of his syndicate if it meant the crime rate dropped across the city. But if Red Lotus was taking their place, things might get worse.

"Aoki Tobei is a menace," he muttered. "One I'd love to get my hands on just so I could choke the life out of him."

"I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way about you," she remarked softly and regretted it the instant the words were out of her mouth.

He abruptly sat up and looked at her, dark eyes narrowed with evident suspicion. "Who do you work for?" The growl was back in his voice, an edge of menace underlying his tone.

She'd said too much. More than any mere waitress would know about his Tong. She'd known her mistake the instant she'd blurted out her clumsy words.

"I..." she groped for an answer then blurted out, "I work for you, remember. Wolf's Den? Waitress? People do talk." She forced a hint of a smile, but the hard stare he gave her showed he wasn't buying her answer. "Not going to believe that, huh?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light.

He shook his head, the motion an unequivocal negative. "No. You were carrying a gun, and you use it very well. Too well in fact. So tell me the truth."

She glanced at her pistol which still lay where she'd put it, on the coffee table right in front of them. It didn't look like anything special, just a small black pistol. But she knew better, and from the way he was eyeing it, he did too.

Maryanne tried to stall, "A girl has to protect herself. Hong Kong is dangerous."

The stare he leveled on her kept her from adding anything more to the attempt at misdirection."

"Let's put aside the crap and lies and tell the truth here. I think you need to at least tell me which gang you work for."

"I umm... don't work for another Tong or anything like that."

“Then who? Interpol? The nuisance Americans with their alphabet soup agencies? You’re an American, is that the answer?”

She shook her head, trying to find an answer she could give: one that wouldn’t get her killed.

“Who?” he pressed, a hand closing on her upper arm in a grip just short of painful.

There it was, the threat of violence if she didn’t give him what he wanted. It really didn’t surprise her. Her heart started to race, but this time it was a touch of fear, not the earlier lust that sped her pulse along.

“I really can’t tell you,” she replied, looking away from him and pulling her arm from his grasp. He let go, which did surprise her. She started to stand, wanting distance between them, her hand moving to scoop up her pistol, just on the off chance he no longer felt any compunction about hurting or killing her.

But escape wasn’t that easy.

The man’s hands closed on her, yanking her down onto the loveseat and pinning her to the cushions, so quickly she didn’t even have a chance to react until she he’d made her his captive. His face close to hers, anger burning in his onyx gaze, he said, “I think you can say. I’d hate to do anything you’ll feel bad about later, but I’ll do whatever is needed to get an answer. And I think you know what the Wolf of Hong Kong will do to find out what he wants to know.”

Her heart was hammering in her chest, but, despite his threat, it wasn’t fear that had set her heart racing this time. Strangely she no longer felt any fear of him at all. Instead it was his weight on top of her, the faint trace of scent-- sweetly spicy-- that clung to him that had her heart beating so fiercely.

For a few of those racing heart beats all they did was stare into one another’s eyes. With the speed of a swooping falcon, he descended their mouths locking, tongues hungrily exploring with an eagerness that belied the dangerous situation they were in and the recent threat he’d made. She felt his cock as it nudged into her crotch, her own answering moisture and need wringing a throaty whimper of desire from her.

He broke the kiss, his gaze showing the desire he felt for her as clearly as the hardness pressing against the barrier of her panties and his trousers. The Wolf simply stared at her for a long moment then his mouth was back over hers for another kiss that seemed to light a fire in her body that burned a path to her soul. She threw her legs

around his hips, and pulled him tightly to her. Groaning when he gave a slight thrust that sent roaring heat through her whole body, Maryanne felt a flame that coalesced in her lower belly, made her juices flow and filled the air with the unmistakable sent of feminine arousal.

The Wolf growled as his lips consumed hers, their tongues twining in a slow, darting seduction that had her clutching at his shoulder with one hand and his dark hair with the other.

Gasping he broke the kiss, his gaze locked to hers. Seeing that her need matched his own he reached for the blouse she wore and started to unbutton it, every other concern forgotten, lost in the all consuming passion that gripped him. Her hands grabbed for his already open suit jacket to pry it off of him and send it fluttering to the floor.

Any number of women had been his for the asking, but he'd never found a woman he'd desired with the intensity he wanted the woman underneath him now. And he didn't even know her name. Worse he didn't even know what her agenda might be, and he realized he didn't care. If she worked for another Tong, or one of the many anti-crime agencies that were trying to break terrorist and criminal syndicates it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the lust blazing through him, blotting out even the collapse of his own organization.

His shoulder holster hit the coffee table as he revealed the creamy flesh of her chest and stomach, lowered his head to kiss the soft mounds of her breasts through the lacy bra she wore.

Her scent was a dizzying mix of woman and a hint of floral perfume that coiled through his brain and flowed right to his aching balls. Her hands as they peeled his shirt off, her fingertips brushing over his chest made him shiver from the increasing need to have her and damn the consequences.

He groaned as she pressed a hand to his throbbing cock. He wanted more than a quick release or mutual masturbation and for what he had in mind the narrow love seat wasn't going to suffice. Growling in annoyance at the inadequacy of the couch he got off of her and scooped her up, smiling when she made no protest, instead putting her arms around his neck and kissing him.

Breathless and groaning with barely contained passion, he kicked the door of the small bedroom open and lay her down, her legs spread to accept his weight. He toed his shoes off, his pants and her panties and hose still a barrier between them. It was such wonderful torment,

those barriers, that kept him from what he most wanted, the heated embrace of her welcoming body.

He opened the closure of her bra and admired the soft globes of pale flesh tipped with tight peaks the shade of coral. He closed his mouth over one and felt her arch with the sensation, a jolt of desire making his dick twitch as she whimpered in pleasure.

“Please, I can’t take this much longer,” she whispered hoarsely, her fingers digging urgently at his shoulders, her legs wrapped around his hips as she ground her pussy against his erection.

“Already? But I’m just getting started,” he murmured into her ear before he claimed the second coral delight for his own, sucking and licking while her sharp cries of passion burned through his veins sweet as honey and hot as a solar flare.

Maryanne’s head thrashed as the Wolf drove her to a height of passion she’d never known. His mouth on her breasts sent liquid flames surging through her to break like waves through her clenching and shuddering cunt. She needed to be filled, wanted to feel the rigid hardness of a cock driving into her. No, not just a cock, she wanted his cock inside her. Wanted it more than she’d ever wanted anything in her life, including her forgotten mission, and her chosen career.

“Fuck me please. God, please I can’t take this,” she pleaded, her nails tearing at his back, drawing lines of stinging fire over his shoulders.

“I will. I promise, I will. I’ll fuck you,” he replied as his so hot mouth worked down her body, kissing, licking and nipping at her skin.

Hands, large, firm, and very possessive, reached the top of her hose and paused. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her, a truly wolfish grin on his face and a glittering blade in his hand. She could feel his other hand at her crotch, pulling at the fabric and nylon of panties and hose.

A moment of terror filled her mind and body. She’d left her gun behind and she was virtually helpless with the man pinning her to the bed.

He winked and licked his lips. A man regarding a choice meal laid out just for his enjoyment alone. The blade flashed downward, slicing through her underclothes without touching her quivering flesh. The touch of the cool air and the nearness of his fingers sent a shock of pleasure through her.

"You thought I'd hurt you?" he murmured as he lowered himself. "But I'd have long since killed you if that's what I'd wanted to do." He licked his lips, "I've got better plans for you than that. Far better. I've been thinking of what I was going to do since I first saw you at the club."

Fingers parted the folds of her womanhood and she groaned at the teasing nature of the contact. Her groan became a sharp cry as his tongue hit her clit and sent a bolt of intense pleasure rocketing to her brain. Her back arched and she gasped as the touch, so delicate but unerring, hit the nub of her clit again and again, thrusting but too gentle to drive her over the edge.

A finger slipped inside, and she rocked to the touch. "More. Wolf, please, more."

The finger was replaced by his tongue as it thrust and lapped at her juices, delving into her pussy faster and faster, then flicking upward to strike her clit and send even more hot sparks of pleasure through her.

She rose on the spiral of passion, the tongue moving inside her moving to focus solely on her clit as three fingers pressed deep into her, thrusting, filling her, giving her the fulfillment she needed to fall over the edge.

"Wolf!" she shouted the only name she knew him by as her world fragmented into roaring release, shuddering completion and the trembling aftermath that left her gasping and limp.

Maryanne came back to herself with the Wolf smiling at her as he smoothed damp hair from her face when. "Good?" he asked, sounding uncertain which surprised her. Almost as if he weren't sure whether her orgasm had been real or faked.

She reached up and took his face between her hands, pulled him down for a kiss. "Oh yes. The best."

She could see the doubt still lurking in his eyes. *Of course*, she thought, *he's probably used to women who'd fake it just to get in his good graces*. She hadn't faked it. Nor did she regret what she'd let him do, or what they were going to do if she got her way. Yes, he was-- or until recently had been-- the head of a notorious criminal gang, but that knowledge didn't dampen her lust any more than knowing he might be wearing pheromone based cologne had dampened her enthusiasm for what she'd just done.

He offered her a smile that made him look even younger, almost like a schoolboy pleased to have gotten good marks when he'd expected much less than a passing grade.

It also made her wonder exactly why he cared.

"Would it matter?"

He looked away from her, nodded slightly. "With you... yes."

What the hell? she asked herself. She'd felt a very strong attraction to him from the moment she'd set eyes on him. Was it possible he'd felt it too? He *had* given her that sash to mark her as his, but she hadn't even considered exactly what was going on in his mind until now.

She touched the erection she could still feel pressed to her hip. "I still want this."

"Do you? Are you protected?"

She blinked. The boss of a notorious criminal organization couldn't be worried she might get a disease from him? Or maybe his concern for her had more to do with her getting pregnant with his bastard than worry she might get the clap from him. Either way she was having trouble grasping his concern. Coupled with the nice-guy behavior he was suddenly exhibiting the entire situation was just too weird. Then again he'd been really pissed over the way his goon had manhandled her at the club.

"Yeah I'm vaccinated against all diseases and I'm not going to get pregnant."

He smiled again, his confidence apparently restored as he unbuckled his trousers and slipped off the rest of his clothes.

Her mouth went dry. He was.... perfect.

He reached for her and she didn't know if it was a trick of the dim light, or whether her eyes were tired, but for the briefest moment his hands and forearms looked as if they were... scaled. She blinked, turned her head and decided it had to be a trick of the light because when she looked again the scales she'd thought she saw were gone.

A frown tugged at his mouth as he asked, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, smiled. "More than okay."

That brought a smile—a genuine smile that warmed his dark eyes — to his face as he sat down on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

Their lips met in a kiss that was needed and gentle, and she caressed his shoulder, feeling hard muscle over firm bones, and loving it. Definitely not the soft executive type one might have

expected from a man in a position of power, but she'd already suspected that considering he'd fought his way out of the club.

Whatever he might or might not be, soft wasn't among his traits.

Crime Lord, yes. Every deadly inch of him.

Powerfully attractive and sexually skilled, yes, those were his traits too.

But just what else might lurk behind his dark gaze, she had no idea.

She did want to find out.

Panting and breathless from the kiss he broke it to stare at her a moment. Grinning this time he quickly stripped off the remains of her underwear, oddly leaving the skirt on her.

"I like how it looks," he told her softly as he bent to nuzzle and lick her breasts.

She sighed from the pleasure. "Okay, whatever spins your wheels," she replied.

He laughed at that. "I'd rather not spin my wheels. I'd rather be getting somewhere."

His hands were splayed on her back, and she almost thought she felt the sharp edge of fingernails-- or was it claws?-- on her back, but she didn't plan on analyzing it too much, not when his mouth on her nipple felt so wonderful. And the way his tongue and lips teased, the way the hard edge of his teeth brought a quick flickering of fleeting hurt that added to the fire he brought to life in her aching pussy.

Gasping the Wolf pulled away from Maryanne.

She saw a wild almost panicked look in his eyes.

"What is it?"

He could feel it happening, the pins and needles sensation dancing through his entire body: like ants trapped under his skin and looking for an exit.

Taking a deep, calming breath he fought against the thing trying to happen to him. Felt it back off, the crawling feeling soon fading.

That had been close. Much too close.

"Nothing," he lied. No way in hell would he could tell her the truth. No way he would let her know.

A slender hand caressed his cheek, the touch so gentle, like a lover's touch. Or a mate's caress.

His hands tightened into fists as his cock throbbed to the beat of his own heart. A heart that he knew paced to the same rhythm as the woman sitting on the bed next to him.

He wanted her with a need close to desperation. A desperation he'd never experienced, but one he was knowledgeable enough to recognize. His own reactions to her presence and hers to him-- he knew she felt it because the scent of her arousal had reached him even back at the club-- were all the clues he required to solve the puzzle of their mutual attraction.

Why now? Of all times for this to happen, why now? Why here? And why her?

Not that he didn't find her incredibly pleasing to look at. And her woman's juices had held a flavor of nothing earthly he'd ever tasted.

The timing of this is terrible. Fuck. Why now? he asked himself again. *All these years and I meet her now?*

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard something," he lied.

He watched as she tipped her head to listen. There was nothing to hear but the usual chorus of insects.

She kissed him, ran both her hands over his shoulders down his spine and he shivered from the heat her touch left over his skin. Passion's heat. No denying what either of them wanted.

"Please."

One simple word. A request that he could not deny.

He pushed her back down on the bed and started to kiss his way over her face, feeling her soft lips pressing everywhere she could reach, feeling her hands roaming over his skin, fingernails gently raking his flesh. Her legs wrapped around his hips urging him to fulfill them both.

The head of his cock brushed the soft threads of spun gold over her waiting entrance and he closed his eyes, fighting the Thing even as he slid himself into her waiting wet heat. A shudder passed through his body as a burst of intense emotion so powerful it left him bereft of thought for a brief instant roared through his entire being.

This was *right*. This was *she* whom he'd awaited his entire life.

"Wolf?" her voice questioning, confused and worried.

He shuddered and lowered his head to bury his face in her softly scented hair, the feel of her breasts pressed to his chest, the sensation of her flesh encasing his throbbing cock combined with the dizzying feel of *oneness* filling him robbed him of the ability to speak.

But it didn't take away his ability to give them both what they wanted.

His first thrust was shallow, just a gentle nudge into her, more teasing than satisfying. He heard her breath catch as her arms went around him and her legs tightened. The creepy-crawly feeling of It trying to break free rippled through his entire body.

His second thrust went deeper, drew a groan from him and a sigh of pleasure from her. "So good," he murmured into her hair as he raised his hips, pulling out, shuddering as he pushed his aching length into her slick depths,

"Please, Wolf. I want this, I want you."

He kissed her gently, looked into her beautiful blue eyes. He rose up on his elbows, took her hands in his and nodded, "I want you too."

He rocked his hips, feeling her thighs tense around him as she met the stroke, his erection sliding in and out of her in a smooth rhythm that pooled flame inside his balls, and coiled tense and needy through the flesh of his cock.

The sensation of this woman's flesh wrapped around him, of the way her inner muscles gripped him, welcomed him, was like nothing he'd ever felt when he'd pleased himself with other females.

This was something more and it went beyond the mere sensation of pleasure. His whole being felt as if it were aflame from the roots of his hair to the ends of his toes, his flesh singing with the knowledge of what he'd found: his true mate.

Maryanne cried out, gasping with the pleasure of what they were doing, and he growled in answer, felt her shiver as he nipped her throat.

It was too o much by far, not enough by half, and he began to drive himself into her faster and harder, all restraint gone. He knew what would happen when he lost control, but that no longer mattered. Nothing mattered but the fact he'd found *her* and he planned to claim her as his own.

Wolf drove himself deep as her pussy pulsed and tensed around his cock, The female's orgasm gripped her and she cried out, singing her pleasure to him in a scream that rang like glass bells shattering in his ears. His own cry cracked the plaster on the walls as the inferno coiled in his balls erupted to bathe her hot interior with sparkling life. He felt as if had died only to be reborn as his true form sought freedom, his soul reaching out to that of his mate.

He growled, barely keeping his form contained as they rocked gently to the final thrusts of his release.

And Maryanne opened her eyes to see her own forearms covered in glistening scales. But the hallucination wasn't confined to her. Wolf's shoulders and arms were also scaled. She'd gasped, shocked, confused, disbelieving. Denying what she'd seen she closed her eyes and clung to her Wolf, while the dim memory of two unnatural screams echoed in her mind.

For a while they lay side by side while their racing hearts slowed, their breathing returned to normal, and the tears that had filled Maryanne's eyes dried on her lashes.

She kept her eyes closed, fingers drawing little circles over his sweat dampened skin. *Skin*, she told herself. Not the firm scales she'd imagined before.

She felt him stir, heard his soft sigh as he drew her closer.

I'm losing it. First I save the life of a man I think is the boss of a Tong, then I climb into bed with him and let him fuck me blind, then I start hallucinating that he's got scales. I either need therapy or detox from whatever I've been exposed to.

She wanted to think she'd been drugged. She wanted to believe everything was a dream. But more than anything Maryanne wanted her simple life as an agent of Perseverance restored.

But she'd seen something that had shaken reality to the core of her mind and the knowledge of what she'd seen... well she didn't think that would just go away.

Wolf moved, and Maryanne opened her eyes to watch as he got out of bed.

"You saw something didn't you?"

She gave a wordless nod, not trusting her voice to work.

"You didn't imagine it."

She sat up, staring at him as his skin appeared to ripple, shades of color flowing over his body until the man she'd met was something other than a man.

His general form was wolfish if you over looked the fact he stood on his rear paws alone, and if one overlooked the bright green and gold scales that entirely covered him, or the addition of a serpentine tail sprouting from the base of spine instead of a wolf's bushy one.

She just stared, too shocked by the transformation to say a word. He'd been right, his appearance was almost too much for her to take, much less accept. She wondered if she *had* been drugged, if she might be suffering from a suggestion induced hallucination, or if the creature she couldn't take her eyes off might be real.

“What? How?”

He smiled at her, exposing teeth that should have terrified her, but didn't.

“My mother was tainted by an evil power long before I was born. She turned into a werewolf.”

Maryanne frowned. “I thought...”

“Yeah, everyone does. Everyone that is but the people who've seen or become one.” He sat down on the chair on the opposite side of the room, his tail slipping through at the bottom edge of the seat to lash slowly back and forth.

She watched it, fascinated.

“What about vampires?”

“Real. Terribly horribly real,” he told her bluntly. “The romanticized version is totally wrong. They're evil, pure and simple.”

“So no dashing undead count to come sweep a girl off her feet, huh?”

“No way. They're killers.”

“And you?”

All trace of his smile vanished. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” she admitted. He was a killer, she'd seen what he'd done back at the warehouse.

Of course she was far from innocent when it came to taking human life so, really, how much different were they? Sure she did it 'in the line of duty' but he did it for reasons he felt were justified too. Just a matter of right and wrong, which was heavily influenced by upbringing. If she'd been born into a crime family she might have been no different than Wolf.

“Okay, I'll accept that your mother was a werewolf. I've never heard of a werewolf that had scales.”

“True.” He rested his elbows on the chair arms and pressed his hands together just below his chin as if praying. His tail waved slowly, the tip dragging the floor with a soft scraping sound. “I have scales because my father was a dragon.”

She stood, ready to call him a half dozen kinds of liar, but she didn't say anything. Instead she sat back down on the bed. “A dragon?” The incredulity in her voice was unmistakable.

“Yes.” He wiggled his fingers which made the scales on his forearms ripple and catch the light so that they shifted between blue and gold like sunlight on water.

“River dragon?” she asked, recalling some of the Chinese legends she’d gained knowledge of just from being in the country for so long.

“Something like that,” he said, avoiding giving her a direct answer.

“So your mom was evil?”

“Yes. Until my father purged the taint from her.” He sighed. “It’s a very complicated story. To sum it up, my father was going to kill my mother. After he injured her badly she reverted to her human form.” He smiled slightly, “He liked what he saw and spared her life, gave her a tiny bit of his own power and that purged the evil from her forever.

“Eleven months later I was born.”

“And your parents? Are they still alive?”

“Dragons can’t die.”

“And werewolves?”

The smile faded. “They live longer than humans, especially when they’ve been Gifted of Power by a Lung.” He wasn’t looking at her anymore when he added, “She died in 1812.”

Maryanne stared and the Wolf gave her a wry smile. “But that would make you...?” she sat back on the bed and tried to wrap her mind around how old he was.

“I was born in seventeen twenty-one.”

“Holy... shit...” she murmured. “Then you’re...” she tried to work it out in her mind, but her brain just didn’t want to calculate the number.

“Three hundred and fourteen years old,” he replied and left the chair he’d been sitting in to come kneel at her feet. As she watched his form shifted, retuning to that of the dark haired and handsome man she’d first met. “I’ve been alone since my mother died.”

“What about your father?”

“He went away the day mother died. I don’t think he wanted to live without her, but dragons can’t die. All I know is that he never came back.”

She touched his face. “So what will you do now?”

“See if I have a team left.”

“Team?” His use of that word puzzled her.

“Yes.” He took her hand and kissed it gently. “The whole Tong is a front for an anti-crime organization. I think Aoki Tobei must have discovered the truth and decided it was time for the Wolf of Hong Kong to be eliminated so he can further his own ends.”

“What!” she demanded, incredulous, wide-eyed as she stared at him. If he’d grown a second head-- in addition to the tail, scales and unusual appearance-- she couldn’t have been more shocked than she was by his admission he wasn’t actually the leader of a ruthless crime organization.

“It took us almost two decades to accomplish what we’ve managed, and now they’re all gone, my entire team.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Some of them might have made it, but...

She remembered the thug he’d had taken away at the club. “What about that guy who hurt me?”

“Even cops get carried away by the excitement don’t they? He was anxious because of our meeting with that Red Lotus representative. See, we were expecting to form an alliance with them that would have let us finally infiltrate their crime syndicate.” He made a helpless gesture, “Apparently they had the upper hand and we walked into their trap, like lambs to the slaughter.”

She snorted, “Not all lambs are so easily led to their doom.”

He looked up, “Oh?”

“My real name is Maryanne Lamb.”

The Wolf chuckled, “Does that make you a lamb in wolf’s clothing?”

“Maybe,” she replied as he moved in and started to suckle one of her breasts. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and leaned back slightly to give him better access for what he was doing. He moved her gently so that she was fully on the bed before he got in beside her and resumed his slow exploration of her magnificent breasts.

“So you aren’t the head of a Tong?”

“We’re no more a Tong than Interpol is, though we don’t have governmental sanctions. No, the Wolf of Hong Kong is...” he shook his head, “was just a cover. One my organization spent years and a great deal of money creating.”

“Should I believe you?” she asked, the question coming out on a pleased sigh.

“Yes. Now tell me who you work for.”

“I doubt you’ve heard of it, but it’s called Perseverance. We’re...”

“A covert organization that operates outside governmental law to end the destruction caused by organized crime and terrorist activities for the good of all mankind.”

She sat up and stared at him in shock. "You've heard of us?"

He smiled. "Of course I've heard of you. But my team and I didn't share the same world-view, though I suppose our goals *are* similar."

She snuggled closer, enjoying the feel of him beside her, the warmth of his body. It was still hard to accept the facts: just that he was part of an organization much like Perseverance was hard enough to accept but adding the whole dragon-wolf thing left her mind reeling.

"Why did you do it?"

He had a mouth full of soft breast and had to let it go to ask, "Do what?"

"Start your group?"

"An actress I knew was found dead of a heroin overdose. There were three problems with that. I knew her personally, she wasn't into drugs. She was found in the harbor, tied up in rope. If she'd overdosed why would she have been in the water? And if she didn't die from an overdose, why wasn't her death investigated?"

"So that's it? You knew a girl that died and you decided to what? Stop the drug trade?"

"No, her brother and I decided to get revenge for her murder. The cops paid with their lives, so have the men that killed her.

"That was a long time ago."

"Why didn't you stop after she was avenged?"

"Because by then we realized a lot of people were dying in Hong Kong. Dying because of criminals. We decided to do something about it, so the Wolf of Hong Kong was born."

"So what will you do now?"

"I have no idea," he replied, voice lowered to a near whisper, gaze averted. "I just know that..." he rose up on one elbow to regard her, "I want you the way I've never wanted anyone before."

"Well we need to figure something out, we can't just stay here."

He grinned at her, the look very wolfish. "We can't?"

She smiled but her look was stern as she said, "No. For one thing I don't think there's any food out in the poor excuse for a kitchen and we're both going to get hungry."

He licked his lips, "But I've got such a lovely little lamb here to eat."

She couldn't help herself, "I think you've got me confused with Red Riding Hood."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But it's a lovely thought. Staying here where I can eat lamb to my heart's content."

"Tempting, but..."

Both of them went silent at once. He raised a dark eyebrow and she nodded but kept quiet.

They'd both heard it. A sound that was out of place.

And they'd both left their pistols in the living room.

They slipped off the bed and crouched at floor level, the Wolf motioning her to stay where she was as he crept toward the living room, the last thing she saw of him was the end of a lashing tail as he disappeared into the next room.

She listened intently for any repeat of the sound she'd heard, sure that it had been the sound of a gun being cocked, but everything was perfectly quiet.

Until the gunmen opened fire on the bungalow.

Wolf came back in, scrambling on hands and knees, and pressed her pistol into her hands. She just stared. He was bigger than he'd been just a few moments ago, no longer human sized he had to be close to nine feet long-- tall-- and he appeared much more like a dragon in form.

He gave her a fierce grin that exposed teeth no earthly wolf ever had, then one large, slit-pupiled golden eye gave her a wink. "Keep down," he said, voice that same husky too sexy growl she'd heard before. He was gone out of the nearest window, hunks of the plaster broken away by his claws pattering onto the floor before she could say anything.

His current form, along with his size, went a long way to explaining the claw and tooth mangled corpses she'd found at the warehouse.

A terrified scream tore the air followed by one of those mentally jarring steam-whistle roars. As before the bellow was immediately followed by complete silence.

A man came in through the window, face stark white with terror. "Save me from the Dragon!" he begged, as an appendage more like a dragon's taloned paw gripped him from behind and pulled him back outside.

He didn't even have a chance scream.

A moment later the Wolf came back inside, entering the bedroom through the door. He was naked, and totally human in appearance. He also looked completely exhausted.

“Red Lotus?” she asked.

He nodded. “We can’t stay here much longer.”

“Where will you go?”

“Hell if I know,” he admitted, dropping onto the bed and closing his eyes. She joined him, laying down at his side.

“Shifting forms always wears me out,” he admitted.

“Well rest a while. We can decide what to do later.”

“Aoki will send another bunch of killers when these don’t report.”

“It will be a while though.”

“Yeah.”

“So now what?” she pressed. She wanted to make a suggestion, but didn’t know how he would take it, much less how those Upstairs might react to a dragon-wolf joining their ranks.

“I have no idea. But it definitely looks like the Wolf’s Tong won’t work as a cover for me anymore. I’d also bet that most of my organization in ruins thanks to the Red Lotus. I don’t have any idea what I’ll do next.” He sighed as her hand traced delicate patterns across his stomach. It tickled and it felt good. “So much work gone quick as three shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Maryanne frowned, “You’re blaming me?”

He shook his head, “Hardly my dear Maryanne Lamb. It’s just a figure of speech I picked up from someone I knew.” He kissed her and she returned the kiss until he pulled away and relaxed onto the bed.

“Tired?”

“Yeah.”

“Get some rest. I’m sure Red Lotus will take their time sending another team.”

“Okay,” he agreed. His eyes closed and she went back to gently caressing his body, trying to soothe his tired muscles and aching joints. By all rights he should be dead, but the fact he wasn’t exactly human had made him tough enough to survive things that would kill normal people.

“Any idea why you want me so much?”

He opened one eye, and smiled. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Like calls to like among my kind.”

She frowned, “Now wait one minute! I know exactly who my parents were, and neither of them did anything out of the ordinary.”

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“How positive? I mean, you did have scales.”

“So what am I?”

“Hell if I know, but I suppose we could find out.”

“How do we do that?”

The only answer he gave was to take her into his arms and growl softly into her ear as his skin changed, hardened, the scales surfacing.

She whimpered and felt something, a tingling itching sensation throughout her whole body.

Looking at herself she noticed that her fingernails were turning black, and a downy sort of fuzz was appearing on her arms.

He started to chuckle and she frowned in response.

“What is it?”

He shook his head and got out of bed, still chuckling, apparently too amused to speak. He returned from the bathroom with a hand mirror which he held out to her.

She frowned, finding herself staring at a face she didn't recognize. It had white hair, more a wooly fluff than hair actually, but there were scales across her nose and cheeks.

“Oh you've got to be kidding me!”

The Wolf did break out laughing then as she got out of bed to look at the rest of her body. She had a stubby fluffy tail and patches of wooly fur mixed with areas of lovely gold scales.

“What the hell!” she asked as she raised her gaze from her own weird appearance.

“It would seem the dragon-wolf has found himself a dragon-sheep.” He licked his lips, and winked. “No wonder you taste so good, you're mate and prey all in one package.”

She couldn't help but giggle at his comment. “But how?”

“Maybe you should ask your parents the first chance you get. I'd bet they know something.”

“Ya think?” she asked wryly as both fur and scales faded away. She felt tired and sat down on the bed. “I just don't understand why they never told me, or how this could have happened?”

He shrugged, “It happens, obviously,” he remarked as he joined her back on the bed.

“But weresheep? I mean, werewolves sure, but...” she shook her head, “a weresheep?”

"I met a werecat once," he admitted. "Had to save him from a vampire. Apparently *weres* taste good to vamps, but since we're as few and far between as they are, we seldom run into one another."

"I thought you said that were-creatures got that way from being tainted. That they were evil."

He frowned, "Guess I should have been more specific. Werewolves typically *are* evil, or at least merciless and vicious without regard for the lives of humans. Some even kill their own kind while others form small family packs. I've heard that a pack lives in America, somewhere in Alaska where there aren't many people around to bother them." He took her hand in his. "Really, not all weres are made by an evil entity or process- you'd say by demons or dark magic I suppose."

She nodded her understanding. She was able to follow what he said, even if the whole thing was difficult to get her mind round; regardless of the fact she herself seemed to be one of these very types of creatures they were discussing. "And the rest of..." she frowned trying to figure out the best way to phrase it, "them?"

"Sometimes a were-creature comes about from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. If wild magic is released, say from a place like Stonehenge or other places of power, it warps the exposed person, and you wind up with were-beings, or people able to perform real magic. Even more rarely, you get what we call an Awakened Soul. That's a person with an animal's spirit, rather than a normal human soul. Some of the Awakened are true Immortals and once they join the ranks of the Awakened, they can't ever die. But they aren't even as common as the Immortal Animals their souls represent. Once in a while what you get is a new mythic creature, but it almost never happens because there aren't many of the beasts of myth left in our world to influence such a transformation."

"Why?"

"Immortal doesn't mean eternal. They don't grow old and die, but they do eventually grow tired and fade away to nothing."

Maryanne rubbed her face, struggling to accept everything he was saying. "This is an awful lot to accept as reality," she told him.

He offered her a sad smile. "I grew up with all of this, but yes, I suppose it is hard for you to step out of the illusion of your normal world into the realm of myths and legends. But, as they say, behind every story is a grain of truth, no matter how fantastic that story may seem."

“So there could even be a good werewolf or a bad weresheep depending on how it happened?”

He nodded. “It’s possible.”

Weresheep. What a concept. Something nagged at the back of her mind. A dim memory from her childhood. A memory of her grandmother wearing an odd pendant. A ram carved from some green stone. A jade sheep? Maybe her grandmother did know something, but hadn’t told anyone else in the family. And since she’d died a few years ago, Maryanne couldn’t ask her about it. She wondered if her mom had the pendant. As soon as the assignment ended she’d have to call her and ask.

The knowledge that she had the potential to release the inner power of her own soul sent a nervous flutter through her stomach. What if she *was* like him, virtually ageless because she was part dragon? It would mean she could do even more for the agency, especially if she couldn’t die. But what would the people Upstairs think if she told them?

She didn’t know how they would react. Moreover she couldn’t state with certainty that she wouldn’t wind up in a lab somewhere being Maryanne Lamb, A Number One Test Subject.

And that possibility didn’t rank high as the kind of thing she wanted to dwell on. Wolf’s flat abs, his muscular thighs, the fine form of his ass, yeah sure, she’d dwell on those. But if she *was* like Wolf nothing she or anyone did would change it, and if not... well then it didn’t matter.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. The big hand wrapped around her own was reassuring and filled her with a warmth, a glow of happiness she couldn’t, or rather wouldn’t, try to put a name to. But deep in her heart, all the way to her soul, she knew the name of that feeling even if she’d never experienced it before. And the name of that warmth, that inexplicable trust, the safety she felt beside a man she’d thought was the leader of the most vicious crime corporation in Hong Kong, was love.

When she looked up at him she saw the same emotions mirrored in his gaze, in the softness of the expression as he smiled at her.

And that was almost as fantastic and unbelievable as what she’d been learning about herself and the real world under the veneer of the reality she knew.

“So now we both have to decide what we’re going to do,” he commented.

Her bright blue eyes full of an eureka glitter, Maryanne said, "You could join Perseverance. We're always in need of good agents."

"Hmmm..." he murmured as he reached up to run a hand through her spun gold hair. She smiled and touched his cheek. Her fingernails were still black and she frowned.

"It will go away," he reassured her.

"You're sure?"

He nodded and kissed her fingertips. "I..." he was still holding her hand.

She raised an eyebrow in question.

"I love you." The admission had come out in a rush and he sat there looking at her with a comic blend of nervous anxiety and hopeful expectation.

Maryanne smiled, "Don't waste time going after what you want do you?"

He smiled back, "Well I've been waiting so long for my mate, I was starting to think I'd never find you."

She slipped her arm around him, "Well for better or worse, here I am, and I love you too."

"Now what do you want to do? If your organization is gone like you think, then it would make sense to join Perseverance."

"Does that mean I'd be your partner?" he asked.

"I'm not sure the bosses would allow that, but you never know."

He grinned, "I can be very persuasive."

She smiled back at him, "I don't doubt it."

* * * *

Three months later...

Maryanne shifted her position and watched the rear of the house where suspected crime boss had taken up residence. There were enough lights on inside and around the residence to rival a city block, most of the luxury home and the grounds around it bathed in artificial daylight.

Beside her the man she known as Wolf, who's real name was Dao Lung-- slipped an arm around her and nuzzled her ear. A gold wedding band glinted on his ring finger.

Maryanne Lamb-Lung could feel hard scales pressing to her body through her clothes.

"We're working," she reminded him softly.

"Umhmmm, yes, definitely working."

Jaded Beasts 4, Horse - Sheep

“Incorrigible, that’s what you are. Simply incorrigible.”

It made them both laugh, their hearts full of joy despite the danger they faced as agents of the same anti-crime and terror unit but neither of them would have it any other way.

The End

**Authors Note: Lung is the Chinese word for Dragon.*