



# Midnight Showcase

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## MILE HIGH CLUB



*Mile High Club*

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*Mile High Club*

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*Turbulence by Anne Leland*  
*In the Arms of a Wild Woman by Alyssa Brooks*  
*Goddess in Training by Terry Spear*  
*Elevated Pleasures by Kara Griffin*  
*Silver Linings by Mae Powers*  
*My Angel by Beverly Rae*

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**MILE HIGH CLUB - Erotica Digest**

Fasten your seatbelts, or handcuffs if you prefer, while we take you to heights unknown. Join THE MILE HIGH CLUB with six sensual destinations from six sensational authors.

Love is in the air!

## **MILE HIGH CLUB**

### **Turbulence** *by Anne Leland*

When airline mechanic, Laura Seraph boards flight 1152, landing in the lap of a ghost hunter isn't exactly in her itinerary. Looks like it's going to be a bumpy ride.

### **In the Arms of a Wild Woman** *by Alyssa Brooks*

Chocolate is Joss's business and recluse Flora's biggest yearning. The attraction between them is undeniable, but when Flora discovers he owns a cocoa farm, lovemaking becomes sweeter than ever.

### **Goddess in Training** *by Terry Spear*

In a game of the gods, Athena chooses librarian Lisandra, a virgin, to be goddess of fertility. Zeus orders Assarian, god of pleasure, to train her in Mount Olympus .

### **Elevated Pleasures** *by Kara Griffin*

High atop the mountains in Scotland, a search for a beloved necklace brings two lovers together on a quest to rekindle their own Elevated Pleasures. The cold mountain air can't chill the fire between Lex and Ruann.

### **Silver Linings** *by Mae Powers*

In Silvera, Kaden and Xera are use to cultural taboos amongst the Wysp fairies. Will they dare to shrug off strictures and follow their hearts?

### **My Angel** *by Beverly Rae*

Free-spirited, sex loving, Casey Williams adores men, all kinds of men. Yet, she's never met one who could tame her or win her heart. That is, until she winds up bungee jumping in tandem with devilishly handsome, Josh Morgan.

**TURBULENCE** *by Anne Leland*

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## **TURBULENCE**

**By  
Anne Leland**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

Who traveled at this hour of the night? Or should she say morning? At two o'clock in the morning, even the birds were safe in their nests sleeping.

As Laura Seraph visually inspected the smooth silver steel of the puddle-jumper, she re-tucked her stray wisps of hair under her baseball cap. Emblazoned with the Crystal Air logo, the hat had been part of her daily wardrobe for so long, she was surprised it hadn't sealed itself to her tawny-brown curls.

Now here they had her going on another emergency run in hours best kept by vampires. Sleep fused her brain so tight she couldn't even remember who called her and what she was required to fix when she got there, but, somehow, she'd made it to the runway at least.

Laura climbed up the slightly rusted steps, stepped onto the plane and peeked into the cabin to wave a quick "hello" to the pilot. A squat man with a mustache waved back. Charles Langford, or "ol' Chuck" as regulars called him. Good. Tonight's flight would be a comfortable one.

She walked to the back of the cabin, helping herself to a bottle of water from the galley along the way. There wouldn't be any stewardesses tonight, nor passengers. Just her, Chuck, and the calm serenity of the pitch black sky. One of the few and far between perks of being a mechanic for an out-of-date, under-funded airline.

Maybe she could procure a job with one of the larger airlines, but then she'd have to deal with schedules and corporate mucks that

based their decisions on shareholders. Crystal Air, though not perfect, was family.

Family complete with a black sheep or two. Like her new trainee. Jack couldn't tell a rivet from his asshole. They'd hired him right out of trade school and, from what Laura could tell so far, he'd obviously conned his teachers into passing him or cheated his way through.

Cocky as all hell, he wouldn't listen to directives, either. She'd been cocky in her younger days, too, but at least she'd known what the blazes she was doing.

She plopped down in the window seat of the second row, swung her legs up, and stretched them across the vacant seat next to her. Tucking the bottle of water into the pouch of the seat in front of her, she settled into the position, attempting to find a comfort zone to ride out the duration of the two-hour flight.

Pulling the brim of her cap down to shade her eyes, she crossed her arms and tried to relax. Hopefully, she'd catch a catnap along the way.

Before the pilot even closed the main hatch, Laura drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

She never heard the other passenger slip onto the plane, or sit down in the seat across from her.

The sound of the engines roaring to life only served to propel her deeper into sleep and closer to her fate.



## CHAPTER TWO

A sharp pain at the base of her skull jarred Laura's eyes open. As she struggled to clear the remnants of sleep from her brain, her head flopped up, then cracked down against the airplane window bringing another searing slice of agony to her skull.

Turbulence. Damn.

The airplane wobbled from side to side, then dove into a swoop, lurching her stomach as if she rode the Black Widow roller-coaster at Valley Fair. She scrambled to sit upright before her head met the walls of the airplane again.

"You really should wear your seatbelt."

The deep voice instantly snatched the last trace of sleep from her brain. She shifted sideways in her seat to find the source of the command. The sight of the mystery man nearly knocked her back into unconsciousness.

Long black hair curving to meet his linebacker shoulders, white t-shirt fitting snug along the surge of muscles underneath, trailing to a set of massive thighs encased in denim—gorgeous, buff, perfection.

But who was he and what the hell was he doing on her flight? "What are you doing here?"

He narrowed his gaze. "A little short on manners today?"

This hunky stranger who obviously stowed away on her airplane was giving her a lecture on manners? Some people had a hell of a lot of nerve. "How did you get on the plane?"

"I walked through the door."

"Look, this isn't a joke." She stood up and made her way to the aisle. Chuck could notify the authorities, and they could lock themselves in the cockpit until they landed in case this dark-haired goon had thoughts of taking over the aircraft.

A violent bump of air jolted the plane and she careened backward like some cartoon character flailing off the edge of a cliff. She landed against a hard wall of muscle and musk, as two strong arms encircled

her torso, propping her up, bracing her for the next bounce of turbulence.

The sexy stranger pulled her backward until she sat down on his lap as if sitting in a comfortable chair. He grabbed a set of buckles and strapped her to him, before she could even think to protest.

Laura wriggled around, searching for the latch to release the buckle.

“Sit still.” He commanded.

“Let me go, you jerk.”

“Jerk? I saved you from breaking your neck.”

So he did. One point for her rescue, but she still wasn’t going to stay strapped to him. She found the metal edge of the latch.

His hand clamped around hers and he pushed her arm away from the buckle. “I said, sit still.”

The plane lurched and dove, dragging any undigested contents of her stomach along for the ride.

He relaxed his grip on her hand. “Look, let’s just get past this turbulence, then you can move wherever you like.”

She nodded. The airplane shuddered, bombarded by continual pockets of air. Attempting to get up again right now would be tantamount to suicide.

A small part of her—growing bigger by the moment—protested, not wanting to get up from the comfort and safety of her mystery man’s lap. The thick fabric of her jumpsuit didn’t diminish the heat and hardness of his muscular frame. If she could conjure up a fantasy, he’d definitely make the top of the list.

Still, what was he doing here? For all she knew, she was getting hot and bothered over a terrorist.

“So, you still haven’t told me, what are you doing on this plane?”

“I called in a favor from a friend.”

“This is a secured flight. You shouldn’t be on it.”

“I have friends in high places.”

She could feel his grin, even though she couldn’t see it. Laura didn’t buy his act of innocence anymore than she could quell her curiosity about the thick ridge of muscle pressing against the seat of her pants. “Must be nice. What is it that you do?”

“I’m a paranormal investigator of sorts.”

“A what?”

“A ghost hunter.” Laura’s body quaked nearly as hard as the walls of the airplane as it headed through the gale force winds. “Seriously?”

The stranger’s massive hands wrapped around her waist, twisting her around until she was almost nose-to-nose with him. His dark eyes instantly quelled her laughter as the buckle bit into the small of her back.

Sitting on his lap without having to look at him was one thing. Face to face, she heated up faster than an engine core on liftoff. Laura caught the faint smell of peppermint and wondered if his lips would taste as fresh and tingly. They rested only inches from her own lips; a nibble might be quite—rewarding.

Hold up. Drop-dead-handsome in a bulky wrestler kind of way or not, the guy still hadn’t explained himself or how he wound up on the plane.

*Ghost hunter.* There was a new term for stow-a-way. “What do you really do and why are you here?”

His gaze spoke as if he read her innermost thoughts. “I am a ghost hunter.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“So, are there any on this plane?”

“What?”

“Hello? Ghosts.”

“Yes.”

“Get out of here.” Laura glanced from side to side, not really knowing what she expected to see. Maybe fluffy white tufts of air or...*stop it!* There were no ghosts on the plane, the jerk was playing with her to distract her from finding out who he was.

A cold stream of air shot through her body. Instinctively she snuggled into the warmth of her captor’s body. “Who are you really?”

“You’re cold.” He stated matter-of-factly as if he could feel the plunge of temperature in her. “I’m Malik.”

The heat from his body transferred to her, instantly warming her like a snug blanket. As she marveled over her reaction to him, the airplane stilled, resuming a smooth course. Apparently, they’d flown through the worst of the turbulence and come out clean on the other side.

A ghost hunter? Did people really make a living hunting down spectral phenomena? And what did it have to do with this particular

plane? As far as Laura knew, no one in the history of the entire airline had ever complained about any hauntings or ghost sightings.

She, herself, didn't believe in the garbage. A second slice of cold snaked down along her spine as if a frigid sign.

A sign of what? Warning? Probably her own sixth sense trying to jar her back into reality and the stranger who trespassed.

*Malik*, he said his name was Malik, wasn't that French? Were there French terrorists?

She still sat on his lap, like a lover cuddling up to her man in front of a toasty warm fire.

"You can unbuckle me now." She straightened up, knocking the top of her head against his chin. "Ow."

Instead of reflexively reaching his hand to his own wound, he rubbed his hand along her hairline. "You okay?"

*I was.* The gentle gesture touched a surprising rush of feelings deep inside her. Their eyes locked and suddenly she had the compelling urge to discover if his lips really did hold a hint of peppermint.

They were as soft and pliable as she imagined. She licked her tongue along the inside curve of his lips as she deepened the intensity of contact. No peppermint, but scrumptious, nonetheless.

So caught up in her sampling of his flesh, it took her a minute or two to realize he didn't return the kiss. Wrenching her mouth from his, she struggled to push away from him, but the tight restraint of the seatbelt stopped her motion.

Her hands scrambled and clawed at the fabric trying to find the metal latch. Malik smoothly pushed her hands to the side and popped the buckle open. The ends of the belt fell to the floor with a thud as she jumped off his lap.

"It's okay." His voice followed her into the aisle.

She whipped around to face him. Damn...if only he weren't so irresistibly male. "What?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Happens all the time."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, hard to avoid." His cocky smirk dimmed obviously in reaction to the look of disgust radiating from her face. "Not that I didn't enjoy it."

"Bullshit. Look, whatever, whoever you are, I have no idea what your deal is, but don't think for a second I'm interested in...whatever it is."

How stupid did that sound? Well, how the hell did you act when a guy shot you down on a kiss? Why did she kiss him anyway? “And don’t play innocent with me, I don’t know what your deal is, but you can’t hide an arousal like that.” She pointed toward his groin and the prominent ridge under the tightly stretched fabric of his jeans. Her lips parted as the full shock of size penetrated her conscious thought. She’d felt it, but, oh my God, he could seriously hurt someone with that thing. No wonder, he probably did have women lining up for a ride and stealing kisses.

He followed the line of her finger and then looked back up, staring directly into her eyes. “Do you blame me?”

“Huh?”

“You’re a beautiful woman.”

Then why didn’t he want to kiss her? Why the hell did she care?

“I’m going to talk to the pilot. You stay right there.” Damn, she sounded so juvenile, as if he could go anywhere.

She turned towards the front of the plane and made her way up the aisle.

The low growl of his voice stopped her in her tracks. “I wouldn’t go there if I were you.”

### CHAPTER THREE

He'd fallen in love with her. If that's what you could call it. Malik wasn't sure exactly what "it" was, or even if his kind could feel such a thing, but what he felt for Laura defied any other explanation.

Love.

Shit.

This couldn't be good.

Not that he could do much about it anyway.

He had his orders.

If she happened to step inside the cockpit right now, she might not make it. Fantasy only went so far. If her mind cracked, he'd have a heck of a time explaining the failure.

"Look. There's a few things you might want to listen to."

She wheeled around to face him, crooked her elbows and balled her fists against her hips. "Such as?"

"I suggest you sit back down."

"I suggest you have two minutes to say what you have to say before I have the pilot radio the authorities."

She just had such tenacity. He couldn't recall ever seeing someone so determined, so focused. Maybe he could get her to sit on his lap again with a little extra coaxing?

Taking an interest in his mark was not acceptable, yet, every minute he observed her, she captivated him.

So much that he'd taken far longer than expected to collect his anti and move on. His superior's were not pleased.

Laura Donahue proved a bigger distraction up close than he'd ever imagined. The feelings were foreign. Nothing he could even put a name to. All he knew right now is he had to stop feeling *whatever* it was that zapped him to the core when he looked into her honey-brown eyes. Eyes weighted with intelligence and a fierce combination of strength, tempered by defiance. An enigma he could obsess over for a millennium.

"Well?" She tapped her foot on the floor in a steady rhythm.

"I really think you might want to sit down for this."

"Is this some kind stall tactic you're using? If so, it's not working." She moved to turn back towards the front of the plane.

"It's not."

"Then spill whatever it is that you think I need to know before I turn you in."

"Sure you don't want to sit down?"

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Positive."

"Okay, then, don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'll consider myself on notice."

"I'm here to take you in."

"What?"

"Ghost hunter, remember?"

"Yeah," she snickered "but what that's silly fantasy got to do with me?"

"You're a ghost, sweetheart, and it's time to go home."

"What?" The honey-brown flecks in her eyes darkened. "I'm a ghost? *Uh huh*. Okay. And you're a werewolf, right?"

"No, I'm an arch angel."

\* \* \* \*

If he didn't have such a serious expression on his face, she might have instantly dismissed his claims, but something in his demeanor stalled her reaction. Without speaking a word, his mere presence commanded instant respect, as if he possessed an inherent integrity strong enough to silence the most daring of wills.

She, however, was never known as a person to back down from a good challenge and damned if she'd start now. He had no idea who he was messing with. "You're an angel? I thought you said you were a ghost hunter?"

"Ghost Hunter *of sorts*, is what I said. Hunting is my assignment, though I'm more of a collector of lost souls."

"So, let me get this straight. You're an angel who collects dead people?"

"An *arch* angel."

"There's a difference?"

"Huge difference."

"Sure." His logic and fantasy were exacerbating. Why was she bothering to listen to him anyway? Her subconscious nagged a harsh warning, but she persisted despite the warning bells chiming in unison with her curiosity. "So if you're an angel, where's your wings?"

“Don’t have any.” He rubbed his hand along the outside of his stubble-free chin, then pointed his index finger towards her as if a light bulb flickered on in his brain. “Unless I’m called to battle.”

Laura contemplated the answer for a split second, then shook the nonsensical ravings away. “And I’m a ghost, right?”

“Yep, that about sums it.”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of game you’re trying to play here, but your time’s up.”

Without offering him a chance to reply, she quickly made her way towards the main cabin. Once inside, she could lock the doors and have the pilot radio out.

Malik, if that’s really what his name was, might be a devastatingly handsome stow-a-way, but he was either a nut job or god knows what. Either way, she didn’t need to stand around trying to figure it out. With sixty-three million dollars worth of airplane to protect, listening to the ravings of a lunatic-maybe-terrorist wasn’t the wisest recourse.

A ghost.

Her?

No chance.

And how on earth did he ever think in a million years that she’d remotely believe he was an angel? He looked more like a man who might win a wrestling match with The Rock, rather than the right hand of God.

Laura reached out to unlatch the door to the cockpit, just as a wall of solid muscle appeared, as if he materialized through the very fabric of the door.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Laura blinked her eyes. Counted to four. Opened them back up again but still couldn't erase the reality of what she'd just seen.

"I need to sit down." The words trickled from her lips as she fell into the nearest seat in the cabin, expecting the floor to open up and flush her into the cradle of clouds below.

Malik formed his lips into a curve reminiscent of a smile. "I told you, you should sit down."

"We're not back on this ghost thing are we? Who are you?"

"I told—"

"No." She cut his words another fairy tale could leave his tongue. "Who are you really? And what the hell is going on here?"

The airplane vibrated and hummed in tune to her churning emotions. She stared at the hulk of a man hovering over her, close enough that she could see the deep creases stemmed from the corner of his eyes and the long jagged scar that ran under the side of his chin to disappear when it met the underside of his ear.

His body held mysteries she could only begin to guess at. Damn sure wasn't any angel though. She doubted they were prone to age lines and battle scars.

Then how did he manage to materialize through the cockpit door when he'd been sitting at least sixteen rows back. She'd never heard any movements on his part. Maybe he was...

"You. You're a ghost. That explains it. Whatever *it* is. This can't be happening. Why are you here? Are you a ghost?"

"I'm not a ghost, sweetheart."

Laura barely registered his protest as her mind tried to wrap around the inexplicable realities of the situation at hand. "How did you get here? Did you..." The word felt too harsh to speak aloud as if breaking a sacramental vow. She forced the statement out in a whisper. "Did you die on this flight?"

“No.” Malik slid his index finger under her chin, tilting it upward, not allowing her to break contact with his dark eyes. “I didn’t.”

The meaning veiled by his words shot through her like an ice storm in the dead of winter.

\* \* \* \*

This case wasn’t going anything like he’d planned. Usually he stepped in, got directly to the point, rounded up the lost soul and escorted them to the next stage.

Wham, bam, thank you Malik, then back to saving the next poor soul.

The anguish in her eyes as the reality of her situation sunk in tore at his insides like an angry pack of demons.

He might rather spend a day or two hanging out with Lucifer and his posse, than continue this mission.

What harm could it do to have let her continue the apparition cycle anyway? Living in unhampered bliss, like a mouse on a wheel, until she was ready to come home.

Who said the perception had to be squelched on the innocents?

Why was he suddenly questioning his directives?

The mission had been cast always for the greater good, not for the unusual case. Not for the Laura’s who held on by sheer will, not malicious intents or despair.

Her strength of character still clinging to the duty she perceived unfinished. Her heart still floundering for the lost chances. It touched a chord in him, deep in the walls of an undefined place, a chamber long closed to a warrior of justice.

He’d loved once as a human, but it lay so far behind him now he couldn’t recall the sensation.

Or believe that’s what he felt now.

It wasn’t part of his code.

Putting things right. Keeping order. Taking the course of righteousness. These things he understood.

So why, then, did this woman twist his gut in a knot?

With a snap of his fingers, he could dissolve the fantasy and escort her to the next doorway.

What did he expect to accomplish by dragging this scene out?

A reprieve.

A hidden solution?

A smile. A smile and a fleeting moment of time.

*Mile High Club*

With the most beautiful spirit he'd ever encountered.

Wrong by all accounts.

Punishable in ways he'd rather not think about.

Time.

A simple calculation, an irrelevant spec in the chain of the universe, but a flutter in his heartbeat with each second her cool breath caressed the harden shell of his flesh.

If he broke the fantasy, he'd lose the girl.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“You’re telling me I’m...” Laura could barely embrace the thought in her mind, let alone force it to leave her lips.

The muscles around his jawbone strained as he replied. “The flight you were on never made its destination. When the airplane hit a pocket of severe turbulence, there was a mechanical failure.”

“Okay, now I know you’re full of it, I’m a thorough mechanic, I would have checked...” She felt the blood drain from her skin, the cold chill spike in. Her trainee, Jack. Jack had been working on the airplane that day. A simple procedure, she’d thought even he could handle.

When they’d sprung her from bed in the middle of the night, her brain hardly functioning, she’d never thought to inspect his handiwork before boarding. She’d realized the error too late. And now. What was happening now? Was any of this real? Or was this some kind of joke?

“Did Jack put you up to this?”

“No.”

“Then is this some kind of mind game you’re trying to play?” That made sense. Maybe some new terrorist trick.

“It’s not a game.”

Images bombarded her mind, like a bad movie playing the same reel over and over. *A sharp blow to the back of her head jolted her from her nap on the airplane, awakening her into a mass of turbulence knocking the airplane as if it were a toy in the hands of an over-exuberant child. She clawed her way towards the cockpit when she heard the boom. The airplane tossed her against the bulkhead as it turned into a spiral dive.*

Laura pushed the pictures to the back of her mind, but they sprang forward all over again.

She turned her attention back to Malik. The stony fix of his features offered no reprieve.

“If what you’re suggesting is true, then what is this?” She motioned around the cabin, her hands flapping like wings of a

butterfly. “Where are we? How do you explain that I’m still on this plane?” She needed some affirmation. Some answer to black out the horrid visions of the truth. Her skin prickled. Ice flowed through her veins.

“You’re caught in a loop of sorts.”

“Why? How? I don’t understand.”

“Your spirit must have some unfinished business.”

“And what does that have to do with you?”

“I’m here to help to you.”

She contemplated his response. The horrid images continued to cycle in her mind, until a glimmer, a shred of a new scene, a peaceful contemplation and prayer came through. Something... something... “I think I might know why.”

He looked at her as if he didn’t want her to find the answer. “Really?”

The image dissipated. Laura struggled to recapture to the moment but it was as if the entire movie reel had been nothing more than a bad dream, hazy under the light of dawn. “No, forget it, it’s silly.”

“Try me.”

“I think I, lost it.” Though the haunting images left her, she knew with a nameless level of certainty that despite her surroundings, his words held her unspeakable truth. “This is crazy. How could my life be over?”

“I don’t call the cards, sweetheart, but everyone draws that hand sometime.”

She touched the flesh of her forearm. The patch of skin puckered around her fingertips, but held its solid form.

Malik slipped his fingers over hers as if he knew exactly where her thoughts raced.

Suddenly, she needed more than anything to connect with him, to prove him wrong, to feel the blood pumping through her veins, the rush of sexual energy filling her body.

Entwining her fingers with his, she tugged on his arm, the motion drawing her upward against the formidable wall of his chest. He drew backwards, pulling her with him until their bodies aligned in symmetrical union.

She stood on her tiptoes to join her lips with his. For the second time, she played the fool. His mouth was an unbreakable barrier.

What was she doing? What the hell was going on? Was any of this real? Was she dreaming?

As she rocked back on her heels to back away, he unraveled his fingers from hers, catching her wrist with a force that nearly crushed her bones. Before she could utter a word of protest, Malik bent down and capture her lips with a searing kiss.

The temperature in her body rose to the verge of combustion as his tongue explored every inch of her mouth, tangling with hers in mutual need.

She'd always longed to be kiss like this. A show-stopping, movie-worthy, firework match of desire and decadence.

This must be a dream.

Things like this didn't happen.

And if it wasn't a dream, the alternative was—

*Relax*, she directed herself.

Whatever the moment, whatever the reason, however she got here—right now, she didn't want to wake up.

\* \* \* \*

Malik knew she sensed the connection in human fashion. Her mind couldn't even fathom the way their souls were blending together, but he felt every ounce of energy peak through his essence as if he'd been jolted with a stream of lightening.

Laura's aura drew him like a magnet, begging to fuse their union.

He didn't even know he could experience such a powerful fusion.

Sure he'd come in contact with other angels, who spoke of encounters—even took leaps of faith towards reincarnation to foster their illusions.

He'd always scoffed at their folly.

He was a warrior.

A defender.

Not a lover.

But he wasn't laughing anymore.

He was praying this miracle wouldn't come to an end.

Praying he wouldn't be damned for caring more about the spirit of this woman he was sent to save, than her salvation.

Hoping against hope that his maker would forgive him.

Because he wasn't sorry.

Not one bit.

For the first time in his human or angelic state, he knew the true meaning of bliss. Understood the term "soul mate" without question.

He probed her essence, wrapping around it, taking her into his. His wings unfurled, curving a protective barrier around their union.

Only he wasn't sure if he was protecting it or trying desperately to contain her spirit, lest it leave him.

How could this be happening?

How could this have happened?

He'd seen enough in the universe not to question.

This couldn't possible be the will of God.

Could it?

His connection to the realm seemed to be broken. He couldn't sense anything outside of his need for Laura.

He wanted to be a part of her illusion. Willed his shadow form to delve into her fantasy. To touch her as a man.

Malik knew she saw the form of his prior human self. He wanted to see her the same way. To pleasure her body in the way she'd be accustomed to.

Yet, he knew if he trapped himself in her mind, he might be lost there forever if the cycle remained unbroken.

If her illusions splintered, they'd both face a fate beyond imagination.

Love.

Undoubtedly, he loved her.

Would it be enough to save them?

As he jumped back into the murk of the illusion, her fingers raked along top of his shoulders.

It would have to be enough.

Certainly the director would have foreseen this...*complication*.

Peter wouldn't have put him in this position if it weren't possible.

Would he?

## CHAPTER SIX

Malik's hands defined her body as if he were a sculptor fashioning his clay into an exquisite work of art. Every move precise yet filled with passion.

Oh, yeah, her flesh was real. Real and scorching under the delicious magic of his touch.

His tongue flicked along the rim of her lips, then slowly trailed along the underside of her chin, finding the soft patch below her ear. The one spot guaranteed to drive her wild.

How did he know?

Didn't matter. All that mattered was the moment, the surge of hot adrenaline raging through her veins, pounding her heart to thrum again her ribcage like a chained tiger. All that mattered was the pleasure.

The connection she felt with this total stranger was incredible. How could she feel so much with someone she knew so little about?

Kismet.

Laura didn't believe soul mates existed. In spite of it, this was the closest she'd ever come to understanding the terminology.

His hands clamped around the curves of her ass, lifting her up as his mouth worked along the slope of her breast. She slid her arm between their chests and fumbled with the zipper of her jumpsuit, pulling it down to her belly button, giving him free access to her aching flesh.

She wanted to feel his mouth cover every inch of her body. Every cell in her cried out for more.

As she inched her hand away from the zipper pull, her fingers grazed along his pants, finding the tip of his cock begging to break free of its restraint. She rubbed the rough fabric along the length of his shaft, it pushed towards the strokes, stretching the fabric further.



Her lips curved upward as she continued to tease his cock, then split to form a wide circle as the gasp of intense pleasure left her lips. Malik's tongue had found the hard peak of her nipple.

If she were a ghost, how on earth could someone possibly affect her the way Malik did right now?

His warm breath and the swirling motion of his tongue competed to bring her an indescribable ecstasy searing a straight line of pleasure from her breast to her sex.

A trickle of hot juice burned the inside of her thigh. She wanted to bring him to her wet sex, have him taste her excitement while she did some sampling of her own.

\* \* \* \*

They couldn't continue like this. There had to be some punishment waiting for the price of this much pleasure.

Delving into the scene of her dream world dragged him into an unimaginable whirl of energy exchange. His illusionary body rippled with lightning fury, melding against Laura in the same fashion their spirits had, but connecting in a way of flesh and fantasy unknown to him before.

A primal piece of his spirit recalled the sensations, but never in such a way with such haunting need.

At her urging he released her form, thinking she desired to break their contact. He mourned the loss with every fiber of who he was, but she surprised him by dropping to her knees and reestablishing the connection with her fevered attempt to unbutton his pants.

God forgive him, he helped her undo the imaginary constraints. His need sprang free, splashing a trace of hot fluid on her cheek as wrapped her lips around the patch of virile flesh.

No.

He shouldn't take this much pleasure from her illusions.

The need for release struck through him like a mortal blow from a renegade demon.

Her lips danced along his flesh drawing an animalistic growl from his throat. Pushing into the inviting warmth, Malik felt the arc of his energy ebbing into Laura's. He knew on every level, she experienced the same.

He had to have her.

In every way imaginable.

He loved her and there was no turning back.

Damn them both to an eternity here. Because being here meant she'd forever be with him.

Joining.

Two souls.

\* \* \* \*

Malik pushed her away from his engorged cock a moment before she sensed he would release. She pushed back, wrapping her lips around him again, wanting more than anything to feel him cum against the tight suction, filling her mouth with his pleasure. Pleasure she gave him. Willing.

Unlike any other man she'd been with, he touched her in places she couldn't even begin to describe. As if her whole life had been leading up to the one perfect moment with him.

An hour ago, she thought him to be a terrorist. Now, she was convinced he was here for a far more meaningful reason. To rescue her.

To free her soul. To bring her love.

Love she'd never known, but always clung to the illusion of finding.

What other explanation could there be?

Somewhere deep inside she knew her life was ending.

Somewhere deep in her heart, Laura believed God heard her final cry.

Again, Malik pushed her from him, this time pulling her upward, stripping her jumpsuit from her body with reckless abandon.

"I want..." His breath was ragged as if from a man who'd run too far, too fast. "Not like that. I want to be one with you. Inside you."

She barely confirmed his request with a nod before he lifted her up to wrap her legs around his waist. His cock pushed deep into the swell of her sex. The mix of pain and euphoria blasted through her brain, muddying any sense of time or place. There was only this. There was only now.

"I'm ready." She whispered into the damp curl of hair at the nape of his neck. "I'm ready to let go now."

The plane bounced, trembling with the force of steel ripping to shreds as it met the ground.

She knew right then, her fate. The reality crashed around her, screaming fire through the airplane as she released herself to Malik's loving embrace.

\* \* \* \*

Their spirits fused.

Her illusionary form shuddered with the force of their mutual climax, as their energy fields ebbed and waned, bonding together in an intense burst of light.

At the last possible second, he pulled himself from her mind before the airplane disintegrated.

His wings sprang open, wrapping around the misty shapes they now embodied. Gently guiding them upward toward a shaft of beckoning light.

Malik felt her confusion and awe and infused her spirit with comfort. Their pattern was one of symmetry now, operating almost as if one being with two wills.

She spoke to him on a wave no other would understand.

“Am I...”

His answer flowed into her awakening. “Yes.”

“Are we...”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t quite what I imagined. But it’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

If angels could smile in the sense that humans do, then Malik’s face would light up like the sun sparkled the waters on earth.

Though he’d fought many battles, stood on the righteous side, and knew unconditional grace, he’d never truly understood the power of, nor the glory of, love.

“I never understood it either,” she added to his thought. “I prayed to God when I knew I was dying to bring me one last chance at finding it. I guess he listens.”

“That’s not exactly how it works. There’s a few more factors to the equation.”

“I see. Will I see and understand everything you know?”

“In time. Though time doesn’t work in the same sense here. As your soul crosses over, you will continue your path of enlightenment.”

“Will you come with me?”

“I cannot.”

“But...”

“You’ve already seen the answer—I’m a warrior. My place is out here, defending souls and the gates of heaven when necessary.”

He wrapped the shadow of his wings more tightly around her spirit in a futile effort to comfort her sorrow, and his own. As

knowledgeable as he was, he didn't understand why such a treasure should be brought to him, only to be wrenched away. Though, that line of thinking bordered on selfish need. He'd obviously been brought to this miraculous juncture for Laura's benefit.

He could think of no other sacrifice he'd be more willing to make. He'd do it all over again.

Or spend an eternity trying.

No matter where her spirit moved to, though, their souls were inexorably linked. If granted reincarnation, he would become her guardian angel until they could someday possibly have a chance of reuniting, if only for a brief second before she passed through the gates again.

It would be enough.

It would have to be.

Laura needed the strength he was destined to provide.

Never once in his entire charge as an archangel had he questioned his duty.

Until today.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Religions refer to the gates of St. Peter, but stone pillars with golden archways don't really exist in the kingdom of heaven. In a more simplistic view, perhaps, the gates are a portal. A passage through with entry into the realm can be gained.

Malik landed on the threshold, still housing Laura's spirit form along with his own under the protection of his wings. Her mind tried to absorb the complexity of the otherworld, washing away its mortal ties in waves of awakening, like grains of sand pulling back into the open sea with the rush of waves on the shore.

He sensed Peter drawing nearer and knew his last moments with Laura were upon them.

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"For you to go. You must pass through the gateway, I cannot follow."

"I don't understand. Why not?"

"I'm a guardian. It is not for me to dwell in the actual realm, nor cross the gate unless summoned."

"I want to stay with you. Why is this happening?"

"Your spirit has been destined. My mission was to release you from your ghostly walk on earth. And so it is done."

"No. Why would God do this? Why would I find love only to lose it? We've only just—"

He felt the struggle between her fading humanity and the knowledge of awakening flowing through her spirit. On a deeper level, she understood, but her stubborn mortal concept of fairness and love clung hard to the values she once knew.

Values recently resurrected in his own soul. Her pain was his. How could he possibly bring comfort when his own spirit shattered under the weight of losing her so quickly after they connected in ways he still struggled to make sense of?

“Know that I love you in a way which transcends time and the universe which divides us.”

He poured every fiber of his spiritual makeup into hers, hoping against hope to ease her grief.

Just as he bonded with her spirit, it wrenched away, sucked into the vacuum of space by Peter’s hand, crossing over into the light.

His wings retracted as the hollow ebb of her absence filled his soul. Her spirit flickered out of sight, and it took every ounce of restraint he ever possessed in human or spiritual form to resist following.

Peter transferred a message to him. New orders. A ghost turned poltergeist interfering with a human home.

No chastise for his weakness.

No repercussions for partaking in Laura’s illusions.

No consequence he expected.

The aftermath was the vacant ache ripping a cavernous hole within him.

Half of his soul went with Laura.

The other half dutifully resumed his mission.

It’s what he was.

An archangel.

A ghost hunter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

A flickering row of dusty fluorescent bulbs stretched shadows along the empty hallway. His hulking human form cast no image on the faded wallpaper as he moved towards the abandoned room.

What he'd find behind the door would be no easy task.

Not like rescuing Laura.

If he were capable of missing someone, he missed her.

A distinct part of his makeup remained with her, aching to be joined again.

His human form hesitated a step.

This was no time for distractions. Poltergeists were akin to second-generation demons, only with less sense and twice the fury. Difficult to break their cycle while keeping your wings intact.

He checked the hallway for signs of life, before stepping through the hotel room door. Should a human be observing, it would be more appropriate to use the doorknob.

Materializing on the other side, he immediately sensed the presence of another spirit.

Could it be?

No way. Not possible.

Yet, there she stood with a sultry grin plastered across her face.

Laura nodded towards the corner of the room, where the demon spawn bubbled with apparent distain for their intrusion. "The higher ups thought you might need a little help with this hellion."

The poltergeist hissed and spit a razor sharp blast of air in her direction. Before Malik could reach her, she deftly swiveled sideways to avoid the blow.

A television set followed the wake of the pocket of air, catching him square in the shoulder, bruising his human form while simultaneously damaging his shadow wing. The cry that escaped his lips was primordial.

Laura sprung into action, slapping a bolt of energy straight into the center of the bubbling mass, halting its attack immediately. The

demon spawn fell to the floor in a writhing puddle, screeching, collecting its strength for retaliation.

Malik pushed up against the pain and stood up. Laura's eyes connected with his, looking deeper past the illusion of the present, finding his soul, infusing the power of their spiritual connection to rejoin.

Love in its purest and primal form.

He gave over to her every last reserve, praying their union would never be broken again.

Readings his thoughts, she flooded the knowledge and events of the past day to him. She'd stood before Peter, begging their case, wanting to know how to make right the travesty of their parting.

Laura had stood firm on the stand of soul mates and how disharmony in this world or the next would be affected by a union denied. For broken souls would become wanderers. And she feared that Malik might fall from grace, as would she. She would be unable to bear the beatitudes and blessings of her choices, when the only choice she wished for is to be rejoined with Malik.

"Peter laughed at me, if that's what you might call it, at least it resembled a laugh. He said my destiny was mine to choose even though it had been foretold already. Normally I'd find that perplexing, but somehow it all makes crystal clear sense now. So all I needed to do is decide this is what I truly want, and here I am."

"So they planted you? They already knew what would happen when I entered your mission?"

"As Peter put it. They thought it time you took a partner and searched for many moons until they found a suitable possibility."

"You."

"Yes."

"But you're so young to undertake these challenges. There are perils far beyond what you may think to understand. Let alone, there's never been a female spirit among us guardians of the gate."

"Well, maybe it's time. Who got splattered by the poltergeist anyway, and who took him down a notch? You need me."

In ways it would take a millennium to fathom. "So, it appears, I do."

He reached out and kissed her pouty lips, the taste igniting a flame of desire to drench the curves of her figure with warmth of his mouth. Would they be able to quench their passion in human form again?



God, you are too good.

As their lips parted, she whispered, “I had the choice to go solo. Not once did I hesitate to choose you. Think you can get use to the idea of a partner?”

“And then some.”

Laura grinned, then turned her attention to the entity in the corner of the room.

The poltergeist glowed with a recharged resilience. There would be no rationalizing with it, no showing the entity the disillusion it operated under. Once an evil-spirited ghost transformed to its mischievous demonic shadow, the only way to deal with it was on a physical plane. Draining its energy and resilience, until it could be cast into the underworld where half-breeds were chained for eternity, until their souls somehow become salvageable.

The demon spawn rose up, ready to blast another bout of rage in their direction.

Malik and Laura looked at each other and smiled. “Let’s do it.”

Malik had his doubts whether this particular poltergeist would ever find redemption, but his course remained true to the mission. Capture, not kill.

With Laura here and his spirit complete, anything was possible.

Only, he intended to hurry and bring this bad boy down, because Malik had a mission of his own to complete and it had nothing to do with ghosts or demons.

More like flesh, fantasy...and forever.

**In The Arms Of A Wild Woman *by Alyssa Brooks***

Chocolate is Joss's business and recluse Flora's biggest yearning. The attraction between them is undeniable, but when Flora discovers he owns a cocoa farm, lovemaking becomes sweeter than ever.

## **In The Arms Of A Wild Woman**

**By**

**Alyssa Brooks**

### **Prologue**

Flora's heart twisted, the pain swift and gut wrenching. Immediate tears flooded her eyes and blurred her vision, blinding her from the sight of Doug's favorite restaurant. She gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles whitened and hurt. She should pull over before she wrecked. Nervousness fluttered in her heart, increasing its beat. She didn't want to die in a car accident. Damn, how she loathed traffic.

She shook her head and tried to find a way to clear her thoughts. Blasted, she needed to find a way to enjoy life again. She couldn't go on like this. Every time she drove past a fast food joint, or walked down the aisle of a grocery store, it reminded her of Doug's unhealthy eating habits. How blessed she was that her allergy to yellow dye number five prevented her from eating most of the food others enjoyed. Because of that, she'd chosen to eat all natural, as well as healthy. Not that it didn't drive her insane—the thought of biting into a juicy burger, or slurping a bowl of Jell-O did tempt her—but she *had* to control herself. Doug hadn't. She'd watched him go from a normal weight to three hundred-fifty pounds as he used his job as an excuse to eat junk everyday. Before they could even have children, he'd died.

Again, a wave of aching pain flooded her chest. A horn sounded behind her, jolting her back to the busy, noisy city street. God, sometimes she hated New York. No one cared about anyone. Life was rush, rush, rush...

She wasn't happy here. Sometimes, she wished she could escape. Runaway. Start another life where she could forget. Somewhere slow, quiet, peaceful.

Hell. Maybe she would one day.

Finally, she found an open spot in the traffic to pull over in front of a travel agency. She parallel parked her BMW, and shut off her engine, taking notice of the advertisements for tropical vacations.

The notion hit her hard and fast, and she jumped in her seat. Why one day? Why not now? She was tired of the modern world that slowly stole lives. Until this moment, she hadn't wanted to spend Doug's life insurance payout, or her trust fund. No amount of money could replace a lost loved one.

But now...

"Doug would want me to do this," she told herself in a stern voice. "Don't be a chicken."

Restarting her engine, she pulled back into traffic and headed off to look for a real estate office. She didn't need a vacation. She needed her very own island.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Don't worry, be happy...don't worry...*

The catchy jingle replayed through Joss' mind as he gripped the steering column of his plane, his knuckles white from the death hold. Again, a strong wind jolted the aircraft and his heart lurched.

Joss stuffed the fear down deep within him, refusing to believe he faced any sort of problem. So, it was the blackest of nights, storming, and with high winds at that. He'd be fine. Bad things didn't happen to him. He lived a good life, though his existence was simple for someone of his wealth.

Twenty minutes from now, he'd be in Jamaica on vacation, laughing at this little storm while he burned off stress.

Again, the light plane lurched, this time jerking violently to the left, and he nearly flipped. He grasped the steering column, reasoning that maybe the time had come to try radioing in again. The last twenty minutes all he'd gotten was static.

All around, black clouds and lightning threatened him. The rain pelted down so hard he could hear it over the roaring engine. He could not see anything else beyond the raging squall, no sea or land, not even the moon. The darkness opened wide and swallowed him whole.

A snaking feeling of anxiety curled in his belly, and somehow, he tightened the muscles of his hands and arms even more. Acceptance forced its way through his denial. He might be in real trouble here.

He reached for the radio, prepared to call in a mayday, just as another gust slammed into the plane. His sweaty grip slipped, his ability to hold the plane against such a wind faltering. The aircraft spun out of control, spiraling downward. A scream broke free from Joss's lips. In his mind, one simple, irrational thought mocked him. He was officially facing his first-ever tragedy. Bad things did happen to him after all.

\* \* \* \*

Flora snapped upright, the loud crash knocking her from her peaceful moment. She scrambled from the pelt lined window seat, where she sat enjoying the lightning, and leaned against the bamboo sill to peer up the mountainside. Rain blew under the overhang, the wet wind whipping against her face. In the far distance, nearly at the peak, an orange-yellow ball of fire burst into the black night.

Her heart skipped a beat. Someone, or something, had just crashed on her island.

Despair and excitement, two opposite emotions, both flooded her at once. This was *her* land. She didn't want to be bothered, not by anyone or anything. She wanted the world to leave her alone.

Yet, to see another person's face, to hear their voice, to feel their warmth...

No. She'd bought this island and chosen to live here because she wanted to be secluded away from humankind and their modernization. Chatting with Eddie every six months when he delivered her supplies was more than enough socialization for her.

She stood, wiping her damp bangs from her eyes. She didn't know what had crashed on her island, but she wasn't waiting until morning to find out.

Crossing the floor of her bamboo cabin, she grabbed the pigskin pouch, which contained some first aid items and hiking staples, from where it hung on a nail in the wall. She looped the strap over her head, across her chest and then lowered herself down the ladder of her tree house.

The black, storm raged as she ran, the rain beating on her like falling stones, her shoes slipping on the wet rocks as she climbed the steep slope at record speed.

\* \* \* \*

She really hoped a satellite had fallen from the sky.

In the hour it took Flora to reach the steepest peak of the slippery cliff, she had a lot of time to remind herself why this could be nothing but trouble. If someone were injured, she'd have to radio for help, which would bring people to her private paradise—along with questions and funny looks. Most people thought she was crazy for her lifestyle choice—just as they'd assumed when she'd decided to purchase the island.

Flora scaled the final precipice towards the crash site, her feet slipping on the wet rocks and moss, her flashlight providing little aid in the thick of the lush trees. Her hands gripped the jagged limestone,

her fingertips sore from clinging to the rocks. With all her might, she pulled herself to the flat summit and faced the looming situation.

A biplane had crashed nose first into a large tree, and smoke spiraled from its tail, the left wing snapped from the blow. The glass from the pilot's seat window was shattered. On the ground in front of her, a rather large-sized man lay sprawled unconscious on the ground.

Her stomach fluttered as she gulped in an immediate rush of fear. Slowly, she inched forward, half-expecting him to jump at her. He didn't budge as she neared him, but the fact did not relieve the tension knotting her body.

Flora shook as she knelt beside him, using all her strength to roll the brawny man onto his back. His image stunned her momentarily, stealing away her breath as she stared at his dark features. Longing filled her. She desired to touch those thick, long lashes, to caress the stubble of the cocoa shadow covering his strong jaw, to run her fingers through his tousled hair. He reminded her of a teddy bear—big, scruffy, and soft, yet in a very sexy way. Never had she seen a man who looked so strong, yet cuddly before.

*Soft?* Right. As if to prove to herself what a numbskull she was being, she poked at his well-muscled arm. The man was hardly soft.

He also wasn't moving. Damn. Was he breathing?

A jolt of new panic jumpstarted her heart. She didn't think twice about the need to save him, instinct setting her to action. Kneeling over him, she leaned her head to his chest and waited for the gentle rise and fall of his chest against his cheek.

He wasn't breathing.

Quickly, she grabbed his hand, searching for a pulse. She found the slow, steady beat of his heart in his wrist. Thank God.

Nervousness flooded her. She'd have to do CPR. While she'd taken the classes years ago, she'd never actually performed on a real person. Only dummies. What if she screwed up?

\* \* \*

*Holy moly.* Again, Joss snuck a quick peek out his left eye. He'd never seen this coming when he'd decide to play dead in order to study whoever approached. He'd heard her climbing the cliff's side, and a million warning signals had gone off in his head. Since he didn't have a clue what island he'd crashed on, for all he knew this was some drug runner or pirate's hideout. He'd feared many things, but not a lone, sexy woman, who was currently about to perform CPR on him.

Her breath caressed his lips as she drew closer. Every muscle in his body tensed in awareness, his mind reprimanding him for playing such a dirty trick. But he could not resist the thought of her lush mouth upon his, even if it was only because she was trying to save his already quite safe life.

Just one taste, then he'd stop her...

Her soft mouth upon his made him lose control. She tasted sweeter than honey, her lips so soft and full, he couldn't stop himself. Joss swept his hand to the back of her head and drew her into a kiss. His mouth devoured hers, hungry for her passion as his cock leapt to attention.

At first, she made a halfhearted attempt to pull away from him, then, to his pleasant surprise, she softened, her cry of shock transformed into a moan. She cautiously slid her tongue into his mouth, and with a gentle flick, she caressed the inner recesses.

Joss was lost, swept away by her response, forgetting his pain, the situation, everything. All he wanted, all he needed, was to dip inside this strange woman and find satisfaction. The urgent excitement rippling through his body stole away all else but his desire for her.

Shit. He must be in heaven. How could this be real?

He'd died. That was the answer.

He almost laughed. Might as well enjoy his afterlife then. Perhaps he hadn't had his first streak of bad luck after all.

Trailing his fingers along her side, he cupped one of her breasts, flicking his thumb over her budded nipple. The woman gave a sudden squeal and yanked backwards as she leapt to her feet. She stumbled away, her breaths fast.

"How *dare* you touch me?"

She said it liked a shocked innocent, in such a haughty tone he couldn't restrain his chuckle. But he really shouldn't laugh. After all, she was right.

What had he been thinking, kissing this stranger in such a fiercely passionate way? She'd been trying to save him, and he'd assaulted her.

"I'm sorry. Please, forgive me." Slowly, so not to jostle his injured leg, he sat. "That was out of line and—"

"You bet it was!" she screeched at him.



“Whoa...” Her reaction a mite stronger than one would expect for the situation. He’d kissed her, not attacked her. He bit his cheek, running his gaze over her length.

He sensed something hard and unyielding about her, a guarded demeanor in her body language and tone. And damn...she plain looked like a wild woman. Her blonde, butt-length mess of waves and deeply tanned skin wasn’t the half of it. She didn’t wear a top, or a bra for that matter, allowing her handful of breasts to jiggle freely. Not that he minded. And her skirt was some sort of rough leather, not tanned soft like you’d find at a store, but more basic in appearance. Across her chest, she wore a leather pouch, like something one would imagine a Native American wearing.

Who was this defensive, untamed woman? Tall, and lithe with tight, sinewy muscles, she was the opposite of everything he admired in woman. Short, curvy, sweet women attracted him. Yet, something about her aroused him like no female ever had. Even now, shot down as he had been, he craved to taste her lips once again, to tangle his hands in her wild frizzy curls, and do animalistic things to her body.

His eyes swept over her again, and that’s when he noticed. By God, she was wearing Nikes! Not old ones either, but a newer style he remembered seeing advertised in the last year or so. What the—

“I see you are fine. It’s cold and damp, and for all we know, the storm isn’t finished. The tropical weather systems have a way of fooling you. We’ll retrieve your belongings later. Let’s go.” Without preamble, she turned and headed to the slope. In a swift, agile movement, she lowered herself over the side and disappeared.

“Wait!” Joss called after her. “My leg! I can’t climb down.”

“You can kiss me like that, you can climb,” she replied sternly.

\* \* \* \*

What really bugged Flora was not his kiss, but the desire overpowering her. Not just for his touch, either. Hearing another’s voice, feeling his warmth, had sent a strong longing through her. She’d needed to get away from him like a person needed to run from a tornado. Around him, the emotion was so intense she felt as if she’d be torn and scattered in pieces.

This was exactly what she’d feared.

She lowered herself down another slope, refusing herself the privilege of looking back. If he followed, he followed. She almost hoped he didn’t. The man was far too good-looking, the sexy lilt to his voice far too appealing for her to bear. After all, she hadn’t been

laid by a man in years. And by years, she was being generous. By God, she forgot what it felt like to orgasm.

The man was so near, so available, and who was here to stop them but *them*?

*No, no, no!*

She would not allow this to happen. Whoever he was, he was suddenly more of a concern than a hundred people invading her island. She needed to get rid of him and fast.

She refused to look back. Really, she would not...but...*no!*

A surprising deep male shout of pain blasted through her thoughts, making her stop in her tracks. Without thinking twice, she turned around. Her gaze found him standing atop the precipice, his hands on his hips.

She thought of his leg complaint, regret rushing through her. The poor man, how could she push him like this? He didn't know the terrain. "I—"

"If you weren't going to help me down, why'd you even come up?" His tone reflected annoyance, strong but controlled.

She didn't like his angry tone one bit. People could be so testy at times, one reason she'd left the world behind to live alone. Annoyance crept through her. Now, despite her seclusion, the world was invading her peaceful island. Sure, he was just one man, but one was enough. Besides, he'd bring others.

Her spine stiffened as she raised her chin, her stare intense. Inside, she hardened, forcing herself to cease feeling for this man. She turned, and continued her trek down the cliff side.

## CHAPTER TWO

“How long do you think you can ignore me?” Joss asked her and shifted the weight from his leg. He’d stood in place for over fifteen minutes, watching her fish in the shallow, rocky depths of the beach with a handmade spear.

Hell, he hadn’t hiked all the way down here to be ignored. The climb had been treacherous with his leg injured. How on earth she’d ever expected him to do it in the dark boggled him.

Then again, he couldn’t have stayed up there with no food or water, perched on a cliff, listening to the haunting sounds of wild animals. Last night had been so dark he’d been afraid the black would swallow him whole. And talk about uncomfortable. By the time the sun had risen, he’d been ready to throw himself down the hill.

The jagged cut along his calf throbbed from the trek down the mountain—without the slightest aid from what appeared the small island’s sole inhabitant. After she’d abandoned him the night before, he’d managed to wrap his leg using his shirt, but the makeshift bandage was now filthy and did little good. Whenever he moved too much, or leaned too hard on the leg, blood oozed from the covering. He needed aid cleaning it, a new dressing, not to mention some water...if he ever got her to acknowledge him.

What kind of woman was this?

He was beginning to think she might be crazy. Her concentration remained on the rippling saltwater, patiently waiting and watching for an opportunity. That, or she was purposely ignoring him. The fact that she only wore a skimpy sarong, her breasts free, her tanned skin glistening under the sun, did not appear to faze her. He was a stranger to her and he’d think she be embarrassed and want to cover herself.

“Hey!” he shouted, this time a little more forceful. His stomach rumbled in agreement to his agitation. He hadn’t eaten anything but chocolate since yesterday. He was starved, his mouth dry and parched. She didn’t have to be friendly, but she could give him a damned drink. If not a cold beer, then at least a glass of water. “Hey!”

Her chin jerked towards him, her crystal blue eyes hard as gems. For a moment, she stared at him, looking wilder than he'd imagined her last night. Hotter, too, because as hungry and thirsty as he was, he'd much rather be tangling his hands in that frizzy hair. Spreading her long, thin legs. Spearing her with his cock.

His little man stirred, threatening to stand to attention. A knot in his throat formed, one he could not swallow, not anymore than he could make his rod relax.

With jerky strides, she walked from the water and thrust her spear into the bank. Crossing her arms, she glared at him. "You made me miss our breakfast."

"Our?" He raised his brows. "So, you did intend to feed me?"

"Of course. I couldn't let someone starve to death on my island." With long strides she headed towards the lush, thick forest. The Nikes were gone, her feet bare. She walked with grace, not faltering on the hot sand, not lowering her chin for a moment. "Next time be quiet or you'll go hungry."

A tingle of irritation rippled through Joss as he limped. "But you could let a man scale a cliff side with an injured leg."

She stopped in her tracks, swinging around to glare at him with those steely blue eyes. "I won't deny the fact that I am not exactly thrilled at the notion of having a visitor. And you..."

She trailed off, biting her cheek. Her gaze softened, the hardness allowing a hint of despair to shine through. Suddenly she didn't look like a mean, wild woman, but a lady in need of a hug—maybe some chocolate. The burn to wrap her in his strength and erase whatever pained her nearly overcame him.

He wondered what she'd intended to say. Why she wouldn't want people around her. Why, it appeared, she was the only one in residence on this island. No way could she be here by herself. Could she? How could a woman survive?

He spent a lot of time hiking and vacationing in Jamaica since it was such a quick flight from his cocoa farm on the Mexican Yucatan peninsula. He didn't know this island, but he was well aware of the environment and wildlife in this region. Beautiful though it might be, the rainforest was a dangerous, uncaring place.

Frowning, his gaze held hers. He wanted to read her eyes. "You are the only one on the island?"

Again, walls of blue rock fortified her resolve, strengthening the wall between them. "Of course."

“You aren’t lonely, being stranded here by yourself?”

She swung away from him and continued her trek into the woods. “I’m not stranded. This island is my home. I live here by choice.”

He followed her down a short dirt path and through thick brush while they talked. To keep up with her, he had to pick up his pace, an action that made his limp worse. Pain shot in tingles up and down his calf.

Joss had a hundred questions he wanted to fling her way all at once. “That’s a bit odd. Don’t you—” He decided not to ask. He had a feeling she’d strand him again if he pushed things too far. He’d do his best to be friendly and polite. And he’d make sure his belly got some nourishment before he asked anything personal. “I’m Joss, by the way. Who are you?”

“Flora,” she answered.

Never had a name seemed more inappropriate.

“Flora.” He couldn’t contain the snicker. “*You’re* named Flora?”

The short path through the woods broke onto another beach, this one a secluded stretch of white pristine sand. Two high cliffs formed a cove, and about hundred feet in front of him was a rather large, intricate tree house built of bamboo.

He scrubbed his hand along the stubbly growth on his jaw. What the hell had he crashed into? He glanced at her again, wishing her could read her more easily. The brilliant sunlight made her light blonde strands glisten, filling him with the desire to finger the wild mass.

Without waiting for him, Flora strode to her home, and climbed a ladder. Peering down at him, she again gave him a mean glare.

“You don’t know me. Don’t pretend to. We’re stuck with each other for six months until my supply boat visits. We’ll have to tolerate each other until then, so we’ll both have to make the best of it.”

She whipped a flap over the door, disappearing.

Determination flooded Joss. He would not be ditched again. He was parched, starved, and didn’t exactly have anywhere else to go. She had supplies and she *had* to help him.

His limp increased, blood from the cut once again oozed from the filthy shirt bandage. One step at a time, he forced himself to walk briskly despite the pain. Gritting his teeth, he made his way up the ladder. Finally, he made it to the top, climbed on hands and knees onto the landing, and reached to open the flap. But before he could, the flap burst open, and Flora’s head popped out.

"I—" They came face to face, but mere inches from each other, close enough for their lips to easily mesh in a fiery kiss.

So close...

"What you said about getting along. I think I can agree to that," he told her in a soft, sensual tone meant to seduce her. He was all too aware of the power of his deep voice and southern inflection from growing up in Florida. For the first time in years, he purposely used it.

This close to her, the alluring scent of sugar and flowers emanated from her person, the sweetly sensual combination flooding his nostrils. Despite the hardness of her demeanor and body, something soft and delicate about her lured him. He couldn't help himself.

As she lifted her chin and cast a glare at him, he caught her in his arms, and wrapped her in his strength. All he could think of was kissing away her anger, to feel her willing in his grasp, to taste her sweetness.

\* \* \* \*

Maybe she could've pulled away...maybe...if he didn't smell so good. But even after a night in the pouring rain, he still carried a hint of cocoa. The scent was arousing. A deep longing for chocolate—and a man—overpowered her.

If he were going to kiss her, she could not stop him. She wasn't sure she wanted too. Just knowing he was on this island had quickly become too much. She wanted him. Needed him. Her supposed reasons why she had to resist his charms were diminishing, blowing away on the wind.

Joss hesitated only a moment, but the few seconds were enough to drive Flora insane. She couldn't wait. Didn't want to. She needed his kiss.

Bringing her mouth to his, she brushed her lips over his, and relished their soft, lush caress. When he did not pull away, she dared to lick him, slowly running her tongue over his bottom lip. A tingle ran down her spine, arousal awakening in her body for the first time in so very long.

The bastard...why wasn't he kissing her back already? Why...

*To hell with it.*

She grabbed his mouth with hers, taking him into an embrace. Her mouth devoured his, hungry, needy, desperate. Finally, he responded, knotting his fingers in her hair, and drawing her close. His

tongue battled hers, swiping in and out of her mouth. They melted together, two hot, eager people thunderstruck by desire.

To her disappoint, Joss yanked away, leaving her breathless. He cleared his throat, his tone apologetic. "Sorry about that. But...I'm not entirely at fault this time."

"No," she replied, still famished for his touch. Every fiber of her being craved him.

Awkward silence spread between them, thick and tense. Flora remembered why she preferred to avoid human contact. She simply wasn't good with people—or awkward moments. Her skin crawled, her insides twisted in discomfiture as she became self-conscious. And yet...

Though she was ill at ease, she didn't not want to send him away. No, she wanted him near. Truly, if she desired him gone from her island, she could easily radio in for help. But she hadn't even admitted she had a way of communicating with the outside world to him. She didn't want to admit it to herself. Wrong or right, a secret part of her wanted to keep him here.

Hell, she wanted him, period. His mouth, his arms, his body, his closeness...he possessed so much that she craved. He was here, he wanted her, and she needed him. Damn all her promises to herself. She was a woman first and foremost. Whatever made her think she could go this long without a man? She needed a cock between her legs like he needed food. No matter her fear, when it boiled right down to it, she could think of nothing but 'why not?'

Stepping back, she pulled aside the flap, allowing him access to her home. "Come on in, Joss, you must be starved."

## CHAPTER THREE

How did she go from sounding so harsh to so sweet and singsongy? Yet, it suited Flora, the soft, yielding tone that invited him in. Hell, he'd expected a slap in the face.

He sensed more to Flora than met the eye. What, he was eager to discover. The woman intrigued him thoroughly.

He stepped inside, following her. Her tree house palace amazed him. Everywhere he looked was proof of her ability to survive on this island—a feat he wasn't sure even he could tackle. From what he could see as they walked, she'd built at least five rooms on two levels, furnishing them with all sorts of natural, handmade items. From hammocks laced together made of braided grass-like material, to blankets and floor coverings of crackled leather, to wind chimes of seashells. He noted bowls, plates, and cups carved from wood or dried, cleaned coconut shells. Fresh flowers were everywhere he looked. His mind couldn't take it all in—her home seemed more like a movie set than real life. Yet, here and there he saw touches of modern conveniences—candles and matches, battery operated lanterns, pots and pans, even a rifle. Proof she wasn't completely secluded from the real world. Just like the Nikes.

"Sit down there." She nodded towards a cozy corner. Bamboo racks angled across it, and a thick, comfy looking blanket stretched to form a hammock-like bed. He limped to it, taking a seat on the edge.

She walked across the room and filled a coconut half with water from a plastic pitcher. Then she grabbed a large basket and returned to him. Kneeling before him, she handed him the drink. Taking a big gulp, Joss relished the warm liquid.

"Drink it slow. You're dehydrated. Swallow too fast and you'll get sick," she told him as she unwrapped the dirty shirt he'd wound around his leg and revealed the large, jagged cut. Her fingers caressed the outer area of the injury, concern softening her blue eyes.

She drew her hand away, sifting through the basket. "It's dirty. I think there may be some glass in it. This will hurt."



She pulled out some peroxide, a pair of tweezers, and needle and thread. He didn't dare admit how terribly he longed for some anesthesia. Hell, even whiskey would do, but his pride shut his mouth. "I can take it."

"Right." Her tone relayed she didn't believe him. "Tough guy."

"No...just a typical man. Do me a favor." He cringed as she removed a sliver of glass. "Talk to me."

The glass pulled free, allowing him a moment to relax. Then, she picked up the peroxide, pouring it over the cut. The stinging liquid bubbled and foamed as she caught it with a rag and dabbed the area. When she'd finished cleaning it, she threaded the thin needle. "Why don't you talk to me, Joss? Who are you? Where were you headed when you crashed here? And why, I must wonder, do you smell like rich chocolate?"

He looked straight ahead, gritting his teeth as he spoke. The needle pierced his skin, making every muscle in his body tense. Determined not to concentrate on the pain, he answered her question. He liked that she noticed his smell. That she wanted to know more about him. "I own an organic...chocolate bar...company. I call it Joss's Choco." The thread pulled through his skin, causing pain to sear up his leg. "And...my...own cocoa farm in Mexico. I live in southern Florida, but spend half the year in Mexico overseeing things. While I'm there...I like to... visit the islands. Jamaica mainly. I like to hike."

"Won't be doing that for a while," she commented. She tied the stitch then stabbed him again.

"No. I won't."

She paused, looking up at him with huge, questioning sapphire eyes. "Family? Kids? A wife?"

His heart lifted as he realized she must really be interested in him to question his relationship availability. "No."

"Good." She answered quickly, and went back to her tortuous healing.

"Good?"

She shrugged. "No one will miss you terribly."

His hopes crashed. "Oh."

Why did he care? She wasn't even his type. Yet, he couldn't stifle this wild attraction to her. He barely knew her name but he wanted to love her. Never before had a woman struck him so hard,

right in the heart. He'd always known one day he'd marry, settle down, but he'd never found Miss Right. At least, not until now...

She worked the last stitch, tying it in a neat knot. "Eddie is my supply man. He comes every six months with the list of goods I've requested. You can ship out with him then."

"In six months?"

"Yes." She sat back on her heels, setting the needle aside. Gazing up at him, she looked so sweet. So willing. "A long time, I know."

Joss didn't care about the six months. His farm was self-sufficient, despite the time he spent there. He could trust his employees. His parents would handle the rest all too gladly. They happened to love his chocolate. No, his business would be fine.

Six months with her? He doubted he'd ever come to mind it. All he could think about was holding her. Being so close to her they became one. "Well...I suppose we best have fun until then?" He wrapped his arms around her waist, and when she didn't resist, he drew her to him.

\* \* \* \*

Why did she feel like such a liar? Sure, she hadn't told him about the radio, but he hadn't asked either. At least a hundred times, she told herself she didn't want him sending out distress signals because it would draw strangers to her island.

But deep down, she knew that was ridiculous. They'd come, they'd go, and her life would go on, only slightly interrupted.

She could tell herself many things, and reason with all the logic in the world why this was not what she wanted. But her body—and her heart—didn't believe them. Damn it, she wanted him, all of him. Now. Hard. Fast.

She had no one to answer to but herself. Right here and now, her desire was enough to sweep aside all rationale.

She relaxed in his hold, allowing her body to melt in to his. "Yes, Joss, let's have a lot of fun."

His coconut cup dropped to the floor with a clatter and splash. He chuckled, low and deep, the laughter sending tingles down her spine. His fingers caressed her bare back, coming to grip her waist. He pulled her around, laying her on the hammock under him.

Staring deep into his wide, dark eyes, Flora soaked in his passion as Joss straddled her and his lips grabbed hers, his tongue swooping along the inner recesses of her mouth in swirls and flicks. Slowly,

ardently, he explored her. She reveled in his greedy devouring, her body flooded by yearning.

To her dismay, he pulled away from the kiss. A quiet cry escaped her, but he quickly satisfied her with his nibbles. Inch by inch, he savored the skin of her neck, biting, and sucking his way to her collarbone. Licking along the dip of the bone, he continued his trek to her chest.

Cupping both her breasts, he lifted their weight, and drew them closer to his face. Flora arched, ready for his mouth on her breasts. Silk arousal dampened her thighs, her nipples budding into two hard peaks as he rubbed his thumbs over them. Leaning forward, he claimed her left nipple. His tongue traced the pebble, enveloping more of her flesh within his moth and suckling. His teeth grazed her sensitive skin as he nursed, drawing hot insatiable desire from her. The attention was a torment, making her writhe under him.

More, she needed *more* than this!

His hardened cock lay rigid between her thighs, so close to her sex she wondered if he could feel her liquid arousal.

Joss continued his appraisal of her breasts, massaging the globes as he consumed them. Then, without warning, he tore away his mouth and lifted his head. "You know what I want, Flora?"

"What?" she answered, breathless from the lust sweeping through her.

"To taste you. All of you," he told her, his voice husky and his accent thick.

How could she deny that? She gave no reply except a warm, inviting smile. Joss returned his mouth to her body, traveling south with his kisses, over her belly, her lower abdomen, to her thighs. He lifted her hips, bringing her moist pussy to his face and his tongue delved into her folds, licking her from front to back. Pausing at her clit, he nibbled the pulsing nub, then returned to his long, caressing stokes. With his lush lips, he rubbed her creases, his tongue skilled as he teased her with tiny circles and up and down motions. Her clit tensed with heated need, and her passion soared from his every touch.

"Joss...I need..." Such wanton arousal controlled her, she couldn't even finish her sentence.

"*Shhh*...I know." With his fingers, he spread her open. He continued to consume her with his mouth, his hand now joining the fun. With two thick digits, he plunged into her tunnel, thrusting in and out of her. She arched against the welcome invasion; aware of how

tight her vaginal walls were around his fingers. His cock would fill her to the max, a point she craved. Bucking to the rhythm of his pumping hand, Flora writhed with hot ecstasy.

But oh, she needed more.

Joss removed his fingers, then sat up. He brought his hands around to cup her ass and lifted her closer to him, so near that his jutting member touched her folds. She pushed against his cock, impatient. Joss positioned himself, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. Then, with one full thrust, he rammed into her depths. Her sex stretched to accommodate his size as she bucked against him. With steady momentum, he fucked her, his hands kneading her hips. The hammock swung underneath them, causing their bodies to sway to the rhythm of their lovemaking.

Joss did not cease his attentions. Bringing his hand to their joined bodies, he found her clit, and rubbed the pulsing nub in circles. The touch drove her already lust-tortured nerves to the brink. Her sex muscles threatened to convulse at any moment. As if Joss could sense it, he brought his hand round, cupping her ass. Slowly he slipped between the crack, running his hand along the seam of the intimate area. With his pinky, he delicately pressed into her anus, not hard, not deep, but soft, and teasingly. Flora lost it, her pussy shuddering with ecstasy, her body washed over with the hot relief of her orgasm. Joss drove deep within her one last time, jerking. His warm seed spilled in her as he relaxed, and their bodies melted together as if one.

\* \* \* \*

Joss was positive his leg still pained him, but he couldn't feel a thing other than pleasure. Tingles of happiness and leftover ecstasy crawled over his skin. Rolling off Flora, he snuggled next to her lithe body, cupping her every curve. He wrapped her within his arms and drew her tight against him.

Nuzzling her neck, he murmured, "I keep thinking I must have died in the wreck and that I'm in some sort of afterlife. This is all too incredible. Unbelievable—"

"Wonderful?" she suggested, her tone soft, as if she too were basking in bliss.

"Wonderful," he agreed.

What a change from the woman he'd faced when he'd crashed on this island. Of course, part of him had known it all along. Underneath her hard shell, she was a sensitive, kind person. He didn't understand the façade, or the island for that matter, but he hoped he soon would.

He traced a finger down her side, his cock twitching against the cushion of her ass. He could almost go at it again, if she were willing.

She emitted a gentle moan from his touch. "We could go swim in the lagoon, but I'm not sure I want you to bathe."

"An odd statement," he laughed, poking her side. "You'd rather I stink?"

"No, silly, I'd rather you smell like chocolate. I could eat you up. Every inch of you." Taking his hand, Flora slid her tongue along the thin bones leading to his thumb. She enveloped it, lightly grazing it with her teeth. Her tongue wrapped around the digit, deliciously fucking it as she suckled. To his disappointment, she pulled away all too soon. "Chocolate is my one weakness. It's been forever since I had a taste."

A question sprang in his mind. He wrinkled his brow, settling his hand on her hip. "If you desire it so, why not have it brought in on this supply boat you spoke of?"

"I don't eat it, or anything processed, for that matter. Everything I consume comes directly from this island and my hard work. I'm allergic to food dye, so I learned early on in life to watch what I eat very guardedly. I miss chocolate, but I prefer to live this way. You, dear Joss, are the sweetest torture."

Joss saw an opening in the conversation and decided to take it. Maybe he could figure her out. "Is the allergy why you chose to live here, alone?"

No, he quickly decided to himself. There must be something more—something extreme. No woman would be living secluded like this without reason.

"Partly," she answered, providing him no answers.

"So why?" he pressed.

"I was tired of the world, the business of day to day life, traffic, the noise, pretty much people in general." Her tone hardened just a notch, no longer so soft or sweet.

To calm her, he stroked his hand along the side of her hip, down across her rear, and back again. His fingers trailed her tanned skin over and over as he thought of something easier to ask her. Finally, it came to him. "Where did you live?"

"New York City."

His hand paused. This woman had resided in New York? Was she joking? He resumed his stroking, but the fuse of curiosity had

been lit. “No wonder. Did you ever think to try Montana or Texas first? I mean, why not move to the country? Why an island?”

She shrugged and rolled away from him. Her tone strengthened, growing even steelier. “It’s just the way I wanted to live. I like my life here.”

He knew he was pressing, but couldn’t stop. “Alone?”

“Yes. Alone,” she nearly snapped.

“Don’t you have any family? Parents? Siblings? You never dated? Had friends?”

For a moment she paused, and he was certain she wouldn’t answer. That he’d pressured her too much, too soon, and he’d probably starve for it. Or have to do without her sweet body. Dammit.

When she finally answered, he’d wallowed in silence so long, her voice made him give a slight jump. Her tone was stiff, but not angry. “My parents support my decision to live here alone. They laugh and say they should get their own island. They visit. I’m their hottest vacation spot, but they like to travel the world, too.”

“And there’s no one else you miss?”

He just didn’t know when to stop. Okay, he did, but an itching, burning inquisitiveness in him couldn’t.

He noted how her body went limp in his hold and her shoulders hunched. “I was married, okay? You don’t let up do you?” No longer did she sound testy, but sad, tired, broken.

He pulled her even closer, if that were possible, their bodies sandwiched together. “Please, tell me what happened. I want to know. I want to know you.”

“He was only twenty-eight, but he would never listen to me. Never touched the salads I made. The weight he put on from the time we married to the day he died was mind-boggling. In the end, all the fast food he ate gave him a heart attack.”

Shit. Well, he had his answer, though he felt terrible for it. She sounded ready to break into tears.

Flora’s motivations and stony demeanor now made sense to Joss. He cuddled her closer, hating the pain in her voice, wanting to make her forget. There was nothing he could say to comfort her, so he laid his cheek on hers, and relished her warmth. Then, he offered her the only thing that came to mind. “I have chocolate.”

She twisted her neck, and looked up at him with wide, questioning eyes. “What?”

A chuckle escaped him. She looked so cute, so confused. "Chocolate bars. All natural, no chemicals or dyes. Organic chocolate bars. There's a whole case in my plane. I carry them with me when I travel and give them out as samples. No better way to sell chocolate than to tempt taste buds."

Her eyes grew even wider. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

She snapped upright. "Let's go."

"Wait, wait." Joss laughed like he hadn't since he was a boy, pulling her back to his side. "I can't hike up there today. I'm thirsty, hungry, and my calf hurts. Beside, I wasn't quite finished with you." He nuzzled her neck, trailing kisses along her upper spine. She tensed under his attention and wriggled her ass against him. His cock sprang to attention, nestling between the cleft of her cheeks. Reaching around, he cupped her sex. "Please."

She moaned as he slipped a finger into her silky mound, and her body relaxed as she gave in to him. "Tomorrow then. Promise me."

He nudged her thigh upward, allowing himself access to plunge into her sex with his fingers. "Mmmmm...I don't know. Convince me."

\* \* \* \*

Joss's movement woke her, the hammock swaying as he stood. Flora opened her eyes, watching him. The man enthralled her. She hadn't thought it possible, to experience this feeling again. When she'd come to this island, she'd never wanted to be close to another soul again. She planned to be alone, forever.

Now, all of those old thoughts and emotions were fading. A new passion swept through her, her heart light and soaring, her body yearning for him constantly. Impossible as she'd once believed it, she'd found herself a new lover.

Until he left.

Like a swift kick in the ass, disappointment and gloom hit her. She shook them away, refusing to think on the fact that she would not leave, and she doubted he'd stay.

Watching him explore her kitchen area, she focused on his body. The stealthy way his muscles moved and flexed as he stretched and bent.

But then he did something she'd never expected. Her heart leapt with fear as he bent and opened the chest hiding the radio.

## *Mile High Club*

She hadn't planned to tell him, not for a little while at least, not unless she needed to. She didn't want a bunch of strangers here, not anymore than she wanted to let him go right now.

Joss stood, the chest door resting on his hand as he studied the radio. Then, quietly, he shut the lid. Turning, he continued to rummage her kitchen. He found a banana, sighed with a disappointed shake of his head and peeled it.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Over the following couple of days, Joss complained many times about the bananas, but never once said a thing about the radio. At first, he'd been surprised she hadn't dug it out first thing, radioed for help, and had him forcibly removed from the island.

Hell, he didn't even know if it worked. Since she had no electricity, she'd have to power the radio with batteries. Likely, they were dead. Otherwise, it meant she'd kept him here when she didn't have to. That action spoke louder than words. He didn't know whether to hope the batteries were good or bad. He wanted her to be as drawn to him as he was to her, but he didn't want her to be capable of calling for help. When he considered the distasteful notion of leaving her and returning to his typical existence, his stomach knotted.

Hell, he'd thought when he'd volunteered to hike up to the plane by himself that he wanted some time to clear his head. How wrong he'd been. He'd spent every moment of the last two and half hours aching for her. Not even the rocky climb or sight of his beloved, yet damaged plane had been able to turn his thoughts.

After returning with the chocolate he promised her, Joss found his way through the trail in the woods to discover Flora bathing at the lagoon. Both excitement and relief flooded him as he gazed on her beautiful, sun-kissed form. With swift, agile strokes, she moved gracefully through the clear blue water. Joss sat down the box of chocolates, and squatted on a large, sandstone rock jutting out over the water's edge. Flora dove under, and popped up, waving as she spotted him. She resumed swimming, coming towards him with renewed speed.

Was it him she was excited for? Or the chocolate?

With a chuckle, he sat back and pulled a bar from the box. He removed the wrapper and the scent of cherry cocoa infused the air. Joss inhaled, never tiring of the scent. If it was the candy she was after, he couldn't blame her.

## *Mile High Club*

\* \* \* \*

Flora reached the water's edge, leaping from its cool depths to the rock. She climbed over Joss and straddled him. He had chocolate and she wanted some. Now.

He chuckled, his tone low and humorous. "See something you want?"

"Hell yes!" She chased down his hand with her mouth and snatched a bite of the chocolate bar. Heaven wrapped around her tongue, flooding her with pleasure. Moaning, she licked her lips.

"My God, do that again." He broke off another piece of chocolate. Placing the treat on her tongue, he ran his large hand down the sensitive skin of her back. Flora moaned once again as arousal flooded her nether regions.

While the chocolate melted on her tongue, she scooted down, and unzipped his pants. Taking his half-hard cock in her mouth, she licked the almost-melted chocolate up and down his shaft. The prick hardened in response. Grasping it, she proceeded to lick her chocolate lollipop clean.

His body stiffened underneath her, every one of his muscles going tense. Knotting his fingers in her hair, he guided her head up and down. She followed his lead and pumped his sweet shaft in and out of her mouth. With her tongue, she relished every inch of him until his cock was completely clean.

Moving over him once again, she positioned herself over his steel-hard rod. She grasped it, rubbing it along her wet folds as she bent and bit off another piece of chocolate. She savored its delicious texture, guiding his cock to her slit. Her pussy ached and yawned for his fulfillment, every inch of her body was hot with desire for him. Rocking her hips back, she took him inside of her. Her muscles stretched to accommodate his size as she began to buck on top him. Kneading her ass in his large palms, he steadied her motions, which drove her wild. All at once, an orgasm possessed her body, lifting her high. She peaked, crying out as her vaginal muscles spasmed around him. Collapsing on top him, she panted with freed desires that had been pent up far too long.

He jerked within her, spilling his hot come into her sex.

They cuddled together, enjoying the quiet moment, the gentle breeze washing over them, the sounds of birds calling in the distance.

Bliss.

Chocolate and fantastic sex...could it get any better?

Suddenly, Flora's introspection was interrupted. The whirring sound of a chopper cut through the air. She rolled off Joss, looking up to find a helicopter hovering high overhead. The glint of its metal reflected off the sun, twinkling in the blue sky.

Absolute despair flooded Flora. She'd lost him. Someone must be looking for Joss. Now, he'd leave and she'd be alone on this island once again, just as she preferred. Or rather, *had* preferred. Flora wasn't so certain she could simply go back to life as it had been.

Joss practically jumped to his feet, grabbing her hand. To her surprise, rather than trying to flag down the copter, he pulled her into the cover of the woods. When they were several hundred feet into the lush, green forest, he paused, breathing heavily.

He leaned against a tree, running his hands through his hair. "Damn. I forgot all about the distress calls I made."

Flora couldn't believe her ears, but she liked the sound of what he was saying. "So...you mean you don't want to leave...me?"

She studied his puppy dog eyes and looked for even a hint of doubt. All she found was a burning passion, one that devoured her hungrily, as if he needed her so badly he'd die without it. The look warmed Flora with love, a comforting feeling she'd almost forgotten.

He wrapped his arms around her, drawing him to her. "Hell no, at least, not now. If I did, I'd have radioed in."

"You know about the radio?" Flora asked innocently, faking surprise.

"Sure."

"So you *want* to say?" she asked again as the sound of the chopper in the distance faded. "You're sure? We can still—"

He drew her even closer, pressing his hips against hers. "That's what I said. I mean—if it's fine by you. If you get sick of me, you can always radio in and have me removed from your little paradise."

"True." She gave a light laugh. Somehow, she doubted that would happen. Being wrapped in his arms felt right. She hadn't thought it possible, but she was falling in love again.

"So what do you say? Six months to get to know each other in a tropical paradise?" he suggested with a sexy glint in his dark eyes.

When he looked at her like that, how could she resist? "So long as you keep the steady supply of chocolate and sex coming my way."

He chuckled. "The sex I have an unlimited supply of. As for the chocolate, a box will only last so long, and with the way you're going through it...of course, we could radio in, let my family know where I

am, and maybe, in a month or two, you'd like to check out my cocoa farm."

Leave her island? A couple days ago, Flora wouldn't have even considered it, but now, she barely needed a few seconds to give it contemplation. Something in her felt different. Ready. Besides, who could resist a visit to a cocoa farm? He was talking unlimited chocolate at hand!

A smile broadened on her face as she answered. "Sounds good. It's a deal." She laid her head against this chest and inhaled deeply. His rich, cocoa scent filled her nostrils. Heaven.

Joss cupped her chin, lifting her to face him. "Let's seal it with a kiss."

Bending, he claimed her mouth in a fiery embrace, his full lips devouring hers with all his passion. Flora kissed him back with every desire in her, hungry for his closeness. As far as she was concerned, she could kiss this man forever.

The End

**Goddess in Training** *by Terry Spear*

In a game of the gods, Athena chooses librarian Lisandra, a virgin, to be goddess of fertility. Zeus orders Assarian, god of pleasure, to train her in Mount Olympus.

## **Goddess in Training**

**By  
Terry Spear**

“Zeus, my husband, god of all gods and goddesses, ruler of Mount Olympus and my heart, you are wrong when you say pleasuring a woman is strictly a physical thing. That a man and a woman need not share their love for one another to be totally satisfied, and that a marriage that binds them forever is unnecessary.” Hera stroked his curly gray hair and nipped at his ear.

Zeus leaned over and kissed his wife’s cheek, his hands touching her skin in whisper soft caresses. “Hera, goddess of marriage and married women, and my beautiful wife, you are wrong. Whether love exists or not between a man and woman, the sexual act is all that is needed between mortal and immortals alike. Take Asarian as a prime example. As god of pleasure, he imparts sexual gratification to women who have never before experienced such wonders. Neither he nor they fall in love. ’Tis a lustful joining of the bodies, and both male and female are totally satiated, blissfully satisfied in the end.”

She nuzzled her face against his broad shoulder. “But ‘tis not a joining of the souls. The act alone does not complete them. ’Tis the long-term commitment which makes them whole.” Hera wound one of her golden curls around her finger, considering her husband’s words, annoyed that he oft had trysts with mortals and immortals alike, either through trickery or by capturing their hearts. She sighed deeply. Revenge was sweet whenever she took these women to task. Stepping over to the Pool of Visions, she peered into the crystal clear water and swept her finger in circles in the warm liquid.

Zeus chuckled darkly. “So it will be a contest of wills again, my love.”

“Aye.” She studied the images of women in various occupations all over the world, army soldiers, doctors, store clerks, teachers, nurses...a librarian. Too cliché.

For three hours, she considered hundreds of thousands of

candidates. In the end, she came back to the librarian, petite, pretty in a boring way, unwed, and best of all—Hera smiled—a twenty-six-year-old virgin.

“The librarian is my choice.” She folded her arms, totally smug. “Now, my husband, find a man who will give her pleasure, that will make her complete without either of them falling in love.”

Zeus pulled Hera into his arms and moved his lips over hers in a searing kiss. “Asarian will do my bidding.”

“Nay, my husband. Her lover should be a mortal like she.”

“You stated a woman would not be content with a man giving her just sexual fulfillment. What better choice is there than Asarian, god of pleasure, who can give a woman an organism with merely a smile? If she is happy, then I am right.”

“Nay.”

Zeus trailed kisses down her neck, and slid his fingers underneath her silk gown, criss-crossed over her breasts. Instantly, her nipples tightened with his touch, sending a tingling all the way to her toes.

Zeus smiled. “She will be a demi-goddess, then, as Asarian is a demi-god.

“All right. What shall she be the goddess of?”

He slipped Hera’s gown off her shoulders, baring her breasts as the shimmering silk caught on her golden belt. His fingers traced her swollen nipples, sending fiery liquid shooting through every inch of her. “Your choice, love,” he whispered against her ear.

“Goddess of fertility,” she mewed, her hands struggling to remove Zeus’s belt.

“Goddess of fertility?” He quirked a silver brow. “A virgin?” He laughed. “As you wish. Asarian will give the woman pleasure like she has never felt before, but such as is his nature, he will not fall in love, and he will enjoy the experience completely. The young woman will feel likewise, only she will bring fertility to childless couples after the task is done.”

“And if they fall in love?” Hera tossed his belt to a velvet-covered bench.

Zeus unfastened her belt and her gown slid to the floor in a puddle of pale blue silk. He shrugged a shoulder, his gaze taking in her appearance, admiration evident. “It will not happen.”

“But if it does?” She raised a brow and tugged his toga past his hips. God of gods he was the perfect male specimen, his shaft rigid with eagerness, his blue eyes smiling with wickedness.

He lifted her in his arms, and stalked toward the Pool of Pleasure. "Then their lives will be their own. Nay interference from either of us, forever more."

"Forever is a very long time, my husband."

He stepped into the warm, silky aqua water with her. "No more words about it, goddess of my heart. Time to show me how much *you* love *me*."

\* \* \* \*

Asarian stalked into the library, wearing denim shorts and nothing else, as Zeus advised him. "Wear as little as you can to stir up the frigid woman. You can do it with your handsome looks and just a smile. Melt her to the icy core," Zeus had recommended. "Convince her to accept your offer of a night of pleasure as you have done with countless other women, and you will win my favor."

Asarian had it in mind to do it, too. One look at the lady through the Pool of Visions, though plain of features had convinced him—though she possessed dull blond hair, a small pert nose, petite of stature, a face a bit mousy, her large brown eyes and a curvy body compensated well enough for whatever was lacking. Still, she did not hold a candle to Hera's beauty.

He would warm the librarian's frigid body with his pleasurable touch and teach her the gift a man could bestow upon her. From then on, she would never again wish to hide her womanly virtues.

The goddess of marriage had implored him, "The lady is untried, use finesse and show her you can be more than just a one-night love affair. Show her what a man has to offer. Should be a difficult challenge to win, but not impossible for one as gifted as you."

Sighing, Asarian knew, though he wished to please Hera, she would always hold his heart hostage. How could any woman compare? Yet, the notion she wished him to win the challenge, nagged at him. He would do anything to please her, but the goddess wanted him to ensnare the woman's heart, and give his own to her, which he could never do. Love the ladies, pleasure them, but not with his heart—that was the only way he could manage to remain devoted to his queen, his heart intact. Forever pledged to her, his first and only true love. Though he'd never pleased Hera, he'd lusted after her for an eternity.

But as soon as Asarian entered the reading room, where Lisandra Atkinson sat reading to a group of children, he knew there'd be trouble. Her brown eyes, already strikingly big, widened even further.



The words she'd read from the book instantly died on her tongue, and her gaze shifted from his black hair hanging loose at his shoulders, to his chest, down to his shorts, all the way to his bare feet.

The way she appraised him made his shaft jump with intrigue. How the mousy woman could do that to him with just a look was unfathomable.

Twelve children of various ages, all young, stared at him, too, and for an instant, he felt embarrassed for the intrusion. He, the god of pleasure. He couldn't remember a time in his life he'd ever felt that way.

Lisandra swallowed hard, then rose from the tiny chair she was sitting on. "I'm...I'm afraid you can't be in the library without shoes and a shirt on."

His lips curved up. He'd seen the sign on the library door. *No shirt, no shoes, no service*. But *he* intended to provide the service. The fewer clothes, the better. "I had naught else to wear, my lady." He bowed his head slightly, his eyes focused on hers. 'Twas the way to gain a woman's intrigue.

She was supposed to demurely look away, cheeks flushed, but then again look at him, to show how interested she truly was in him. Or hold his gaze and bold-faced ask him to join her at the nearest bar for a drink after work. One or the other. She did neither.

Instead, her expression turned into a myriad of emotions ranging from horror and disbelief to compassion. He read women's feelings well, 'twas why he was so attuned to pleasure them with the proper skill. But he wasn't sure how to handle this woman, not at all.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Mister..."

He offered his hand. "Asarian. Please, call me by my given name." Though he had only the one, but no lady ever seemed to mind. Most he'd charmed hadn't even cared he had a name.

She took his hand to shake, but he captured her small-boned fingers, and raised them to his lips and kissed. It should have turned her knees to jelly. Instead, he was the one overpowered by her scent, her sweetness. The smell of lavender scented her skin, and at once, he wished to get on with the seduction, anywhere but here in front of an audience of young mortals. However, Zeus had insisted he bring Lisandra to Mount Olympus, the perfect place for lovers to mix.

She pulled her hand free from his. "I'm Lisandra Atkinson and the head librarian here. *Uhm*, we have the Salvation Army next door. Perhaps you could go there to..." Her eyes glanced down at his shorts

and shot back up to his gaze. Did she see how willing he was to have her?

He tried to remain serious, though he was certain his eyes sparkled with humor. Ladies oft said that about him.

“Do...do you have any money?” she asked.

Money? He had no need of money. Best to humble himself. He motioned to the children. “I wished to hear you read to the small ones. Would you mind my listening too terribly much?”

“But...but our policy here is that everyone must be properly clothed and...”

He folded his arms. “I have no shirt or shoes.”

She bit her lip, like he wished to do with a gentle nip, then she said to the children, “I’ll be right back.”

The kids stared up at him in awe. He smiled, turning to watch Lisandra’s denim skirt swishing mid-calf, her ass wiggling suggestively. She would be his without a doubt, when the silver sphere rose in all its glory this very eve in the house of the gods.

“Where are you from?” a wide-eyed, brown-skinned girl asked. She looked like a youthful version of the serving girl to an Egyptian princess he had once pleased.

“Mount Olympus. And you?”

The girl giggled. “From right here.”

“Oh, the library.”

The children all laughed.

Lisandra walked back into the room carrying a T-shirt against her silk-clothed breasts, which jiggled with her hurried steps. Before long, he had every intention of suckling on the taut nipples that strained for release against the hint of a lacy bra.

She glanced at the giggling children and seemed pleased Asarian had entertained them. “Here,” she said, offering the pale blue shirt embossed with red hearts to him. “It’s for a library fund drive to support the children’s library. We’re supposed to charge for them, and the participants are to walk and encourage businesses to support the effort. But we always have a few extras for volunteers.”

“I will volunteer to do anything for you,” he said most sincerely. She smiled, and he found the look was as sexy as any siren’s. Even Aphrodite, goddess of love, could take a hint or two from the innocent sensuality of the mere mortal.

Taking the cotton fabric, he brushed his fingers against hers, figuring to send a sizzling sensation through the nerve endings in her

skin, to trigger the ache in her groin, like the one that already plagued his own. For an instant, she seemed shocked. He smiled. It had worked, only his shorts had grown increasingly tight—uncomfortably so.

“I can’t do anything about your feet,” she said, then retook her seat. “If anyone complains, you’ll have to leave the library, I’m afraid.”

“*We* won’t,” a redheaded, freckle-faced boy enthusiastically said, grinning. The other children quickly agreed verbally or with exaggerated nods.

Though he had nothing against children, as god of pleasure, he’d never concerned himself with them, only to think that the girls would some day grow to be his students when they reached an acceptable age. But it amused him to be so well-liked by the small ones, and it seemed to even please the librarian more, which could only help to aid his quest.

Lisandra motioned for Asarian to sit on one of the chairs situated on the outskirts of the room, but instead he sat down on the floor, cross-legged, just like the children. If they could garner her attention in such a manner, mayhap he could, too.

Her mouth lifted at the corners, full pink lips that glistened with some kind of gloss that intrigued him to no end. Her eyes sparkled with mirth, and he wondered then how he was going to get the woman to agree to go with him to Mt. Olympus. It would be so easy to pleasure her here, amongst the dusty books of learning, a place that seemed to capture her heart—of course, after the children and other patrons left for the day. But Zeus insisted that if he won the challenge, the lady would become the goddess of fertility and needed to see who her rulers would be on Mt. Olympus beforehand. Hera insisted also, saying that it was where she fell in love with Zeus, and if her plan were to succeed, Asarian would have to make love to Lisandra there.

But Lisandra didn’t seem to be the kind of woman, who cast aside her inhibitions and did whatever she felt like. Not like some of his conquests, one of whom joined him in a deep sea cave after they scuba dived to the hidden spot, and another who made love to him in a cruise ship’s swimming pool, while most of the passengers slept, the water rising and falling while the ship tilted on the high seas. This woman, if he could even bed her, would more than likely opt for the sanctity of a bed, the first time around.

Asarian listened as she finished the story and reading time was

over. Soon mothers were ushering their children out of the room, and Asarian waited while Lisandra locked the back door.

“Did you need a ride somewhere?”

“My chariot awaits,” he said, motioning to a gold Jaguar shining in the fading sun.

“That’s yours?”

He pulled out a set of keys. “Would you like to take a ride?”

She grabbed her purse and locked the front door behind them. “Thanks for the offer, but I only live a couple of blocks over and it’s nice weather this evening.”

Suddenly a blue norther blew in; clouds blocked the sun and rain spilled from the heavens. “Come,” Asarian shouted over the punishing winds. “I’ll take you home.”

Already Lisandra’s wet silk blouse was plastered against her lace bra, leaving nothing to the imagination, her nipples hard and exposed for his visual pleasure. He yanked the car door open and helped her in, then dashed to the other side with a glance heavenward. “Thank you, Zeus.”

He couldn’t have planned it better himself. The winds whipped into tornado strength, sending trees crashing across the road.

Then the car lifted, swirled, disappeared into a black void, and reappeared in a sky filled with fluffy white clouds against a pale blue backdrop. With a jolt, the car landed on Mount Olympus.

“Ohmigod,” Lisandra said, staring out the window. Clouds ringed the purple mountains. White marble pillared porches of Grecian temples housing the various gods and goddesses dotted the mountainsides.

“Ohmigod,” Lisandra said again, her hand resting on her breast.

“Come, Lisandra. I don’t think we’re going to be able to return the way we came.”

“Ohmigod.”

He smiled. Aye, and goddesses.

“Let’s see if we can find anyone, shall we?” He pulled her from the car, but her knees buckled. Lisandra stared at the spectacular vista, the Greek temples built just like the Parthenon and the temples on the Acropolis of old. “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” she whispered under her breath.

Glancing at Asarian, she thought he looked like one of the Greek statues she’d studied in college. She could imagine a grape leaf positioned over his naked privates, his torso, legs and arms well

muscled, his hair dark, and curly, his eyes aquamarine blue, a Grecian god carved in marble. She envisioned a wreath of grape leaves encircling his head after winning a marathon against competitors from other Greek states, competing naked, and his body shimmering in olive oil.

She wished she hadn't given him the T-shirt now as it hid many of his physical attributes that vied for a prominent place with the other wonders of the world.

His arm wrapped around her waist, supporting her, he led her toward a building where white marble pillars, decorated with the figures of maidens, held up white roofs.

"Where...where are we?"

"Mount Olympus."

"Right." She'd hit her head. That was it. For a hallucination, this was sure realistic.

Their footsteps echoed on the marble floor and when they reached a circular pool of blue water, a woman leaned against the edge, a goblet in one hand, her hair curled around her fingers with the other, and a smile affixed to her lips. "Welcome, Asarian and..."

"Lisandra," she offered, hesitantly.

As the beauty rose slightly in the water, Lisandra realized the woman was stark naked. Her heart raced in overdrive. "You...you know her?" she asked Asarian.

"Demeter, Goddess of the Harvest," the beauty said. "I'm leaving. Make yourselves at home." She glanced at Asarian and raised a brow, her lips smiling. "Hera told me everything. Good hunting." Winking, she stepped out of the pool, then left the room.

Lisandra closed her gaping mouth.

"Would you like to swim?" Asarian had already removed his T-shirt.

She stared at his bronzed chest. Her gaze dropped lower. His shorts were already bulging. "I...I think I need to wake up."

"You've read Greek mythology, aye?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"Here we have a library filled with the deeds and stories of all the Greek gods, goddesses, demi-gods and goddesses. Maybe you'd like to read them sometime." His fingers trailed down her arms to the tips of her fingers, sending shivers through her. He raised her hands to his lips and kissed each. "You have the prettiest hands."

"Right."

He examined one, then the other. "'Tis true. Every bone is delicate, perfect. Your skin is like unblemished peaches." He nuzzled her neck and her whole body heated. "You smell like jasmine, sweet and summertime fresh."

His fingers pushed the pearl buttons of her blouse through the holes. Too mesmerized by his actions, she didn't make a move to stop him. She was dreaming. It was all a wonderfully sexy dream, and she didn't want to wake up, ever.

Reaching up, she encircled his neck with her arms, and pressed her breasts against his bare chest. No sense in letting this great dream go to waste.

His mouth curved up. He slipped her blouse off her shoulders, the wet silk clinging like a second skin. Then he clicked his fingers, and maids dressed in colorful silky sheer togas reaching all the way to their ankles, came at his beckoning, carrying goblets filled to the rim with a golden liquid.

"The nectar of the gods," he said, offering one to Lisandra.

The women disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

"Plan to get me drunk, do you?"

He grinned, his look pure evil. "In the mood, darling."

She sipped the sweet wine and the drink sent warmth through every vein. "Wow, powerful punch."

Taking her goblet and his, he set them on the floor, then unfastened her bra. Massaging her breasts, he caressed the tips, pinching, squeezing, brushing them between his fingers and thumbs. "Beautiful," he said, his mouth soft against her neck, his hands sliding her skirt off, then her wet panties.

Raw desire stirred her. She tugged his shorts down and his erection sprang free. Smiling at the pure size of him, thick and hard, throbbing with need, she imagined there wasn't a fig leaf in all of Greece that could have concealed his cock.

"I hope," he said, trailing kisses down her throat, "you are pleased at what you see, and not amused."

"I was thinking how a leaf couldn't hide your..." She ran her finger along his length to the velvet tip, making it jump.

"Whatever brought that to mind?" He brought her breast to his hot mouth suckled.

"Statues of Greek gods." Gripping fistfuls of his hair, she arched back, the heat pooling between her legs.

He chuckled, then lifted her in his arms. Carrying her into the

pool, he said, "I am Asarian, demi-god of pleasure."

"*Hmmm*, you sure are," she purred, enjoying the feel of his hard muscles and the warm, silky water against her skin.

He sat her on a smooth marble seat in the pool, then spread her knees with his hands. His blue eyes gazed into hers with passion and unfulfilled lust.

She licked the wine off her lips and he smiled. Leaning forward, he licked her lips in a sensuous caress. His hand swept down her belly, then his fingers slipped between her legs.

Leaning back, she concentrated on Asarian's actions, wanting to soak up every detail of his erotic touches. Her hands explored his muscular thighs, as his fingers teased her sensitive bud. This was like no other erotic dream she'd ever had.

"Make love to me," she implored, barely breathing.

"You're so beautiful, Lisandra." He stroked her harder, building the heat. Her body ached for completion.

The tip of his penis touched her sex, then pressed to enter, stretching her to accommodate him. She moaned as his engorged shaft filled her. Easing out, he pushed forward, deeper, penetrating her virginal shield. His fingers shifted to her breasts, touching the nipples, tormenting her as he drove into her tight sheath.

Squeezing his butt, she felt the muscles tighten with every thrust, smelled the musky scent of him, tasted the wine on his lips. She never wanted to let go of him, wanting the moment to last forever.

A climax rippled through her, contracting around his engorged shaft, shattering those thoughts.

Shuddering inside her, he groaned.

"I think I love you." She stroked his long hair, her body still heated, satiated.

He pulled away from her, and smiled. "You are truly beautiful," he said again, touching her nipple.

"I don't believe in all of this." She waved at the temple. "I've been knocked unconscious in the storm and I'm dreaming all of this."

A woman dressed in a white toga with one breast bared, stalked toward them. "Zeus wishes you to see Aphrodite. She desires your pleasure."

Covering her breasts, Lisandra stared at the woman.

"Later," Asarian said, his tone annoyed.

"Not too much later." The woman turned and walked out of the temple.

Lisandra hurried out of the pool. "I'm not really here. But I'm getting dressed and getting out of this...this nightmare."

"Lisandra," Asarian said, grabbing for her hand, but missed her.

"Okay, I don't believe in all of this. But if I did...if I did then from what I know of the Grecian gods and goddesses, they were all fickle. I mean, thanks for making love to me. It...it was the best thing that ever happened to me," she said, jerking her panties up her legs, but her wet skin hampered her efforts.

He rested his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugged him off.

"If...if you truly are a god, demi-god, whatever, you can take me home. Now."

"I thought we could go to my temple and—"

"Home, now!" She yanked her blouse on.

"I could pleasure you at your house instead."

She glared at him, then shoved her shoes on. "Take me home, this very minute. Then you're free to see Aphrodite and whoever else you have to pleasure!"

\* \* \* \*

Reclining in her satin bed, Hera studied Asarian, then lifted a cup of wine off the table and ran her finger over the edge of the goblet. Ever since Asarian had returned Lisandra home, he had found no woman he wished to pleasure. Surely, the mortal had cursed him in some way.

"What seems to be the trouble, love?" Hera asked, her voice as sweet as the nectar she sipped. "Lamenting over Lisandra?"

He dragged his hands through his hair, wishing it was Lisandra's soft curls that he fisted in his fingers, instead. "Nothing." He glanced down at the floor, then back at Hera. "And everything." He threw his hands up. "I have no idea what's wrong with me!"

"Do you love her, my god of pleasure?"

"Nay." Folding his arms, he paced across the marble floor. "Nay, nay, nay. I do not make it a habit to lose my heart to a lady, mortal or immortal, my queen."

"You cannot stop thinking of her, love?"

He stopped pacing and scowled at Hera.

"Do you wish to pleasure me? Mayhap the urge will come again and you will wish to delight women all over the world."

"Nay." He shook his head and stalked across the floor to leave Hera's room.

"She is seeing other men, now. Did you know?"



Yes, he knew. Mayhap, that was what perturbed him so. He'd plucked the virginal flower. She was meant to be his. He shook his head again. "Think you I care?"

Hera laughed, and he stormed out of her bedchambers.

He hadn't gotten very far when Zeus summoned him to his throne room. When Asarian walked in, Zeus motioned to the women curled at his feet to leave. With giggles and flashy smiles meant to entice Asarian, they fluttered away.

"I have told Hera I have won the bet. That you gave the mortal woman a night of pleasure and now she is enjoying the company of other men without losing her heart to you. But Hera informs me you have lost your heart to the mortal. Tell me, Asarian, this is not so."

"I feel nothing for the woman, my king."

"Good." Zeus rose from his golden throne. "Then I will see her myself."

Asarian couldn't squash the panic making his heart beat ten times harder.

"Asarian, Aphrodite says she has not seen you ages. Perhaps you will visit her?"

"Aye, milord." Asarian gave a slight bow and hurried out of the throne room.

As his king wished, he headed toward Aphrodite's temple, but before he was totally aware of what he was doing, he found himself running up the steps to the library where Lisandra worked. He would not allow her to steal what was not hers...his heart. If Zeus wanted her, Asarian would not stand in his way. But he would not spend one more minute thinking about the mortal.

He grabbed the door handle and jerked. Locked. His blood sizzled. Peering into the library, he saw the blond vision flip on the lights. He banged on the door. She jumped, turned, and stared at him, her brown eyes growing large, her succulent lips parted in surprise.

For a moment, she hesitated...

Did she not remember him? Did she not remember his making love to her? He couldn't get the wench off his mind no matter what he did. . . How could she not remember him?

She crossed the floor to the door and unlocked it. "You're not real... None of what happened between us was real...But if you were, the library isn't open for another hour, Asarian." She glanced down at his clothes. "Why are you wearing that?" She pointed to his toga, then reached behind him and locked the door.

"You can't see any other man." Asarian meant to sound good-natured, calm, loving. The words came out in a growl.

She folded her arms and tilted her chin up. "I haven't seen you in weeks. Haven't heard from you. Why should I pine away, waiting for you to return like some elusive dream I made up in my mind?"

He clamped his mouth shut, locked his teeth together.

Someone knocked on the library door. She glanced at it. "For heaven's sakes. Can't anyone read our operating hours displayed on the door?"

Asarian's heart stilled when he saw the gladiator-looking guy standing at the door, a devilish smile pasted across his face. Zeus, in disguise, no longer gray-haired, but a blond, and just as strikingly handsome.

Asarian seized Lisandra's arm and guided her into her office. After shutting the door and the rest of the world out, he turned to glower at her. "See you other men? Other male admirers?"

Her lips turned up in a sexy smirk. "Do my brother and cousin count?"

"Some would think so."

She laughed and the sound was like a bit of magic, designed to ensnare him. He advanced on her.

She backed into her desk and folded her arms. "What is it you want from me?"

"I am the god of pleasure and I want you, like I know you want me." He unbuttoned her unfeminine jacket and pulled the beastly thing from her shoulders.

She didn't stop raise a hand to stop him, though she frowned at him. "We...we were truly on Mt. Olympus? You're really a god?"

"Aye."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What I know how best to do."

"Seduce women?"

He yanked her blouse from her skirt and pulled the silky fabric over her head.

"We can't do this here," she said, her words speaking her mind, but her heart raced beneath his fingertips, and her voice said emphatically, 'yes!'"

Her fingers grasped at his toga, slipping it off his shoulder. The fabric fell to his gold belt.

Lisandra hurried to pull off his belt, then watched as the fabric

slid to the floor. His cock jutted out to her, thick and eager.

She knew she couldn't have the sexy demi-god as much as she wanted him for keeps. She knew he was meant to give women pleasure everywhere, and she had no right to have him for her own. But his devastating touches had spoiled her for anyone else. He was her first love, she reminded herself.

He shoved the papers off her desk and leaned her against the bare wood. For weeks now, that's what she'd wanted, his physical love. Yet the connection she'd felt with him went beyond the physical, although she realized that's all she could really hope for. No commitment. Nothing permanent.

He suckled her breasts, his hands caressing her thighs, his thumbs growing closer to her drenched short curls. Switching breasts, he laved the other nipple, sending a tingling straight to her sex. The sweet ache intensified.

"I love you and hate you," she whispered against his cheek as his fingers stroked her bud.

"You are beautiful to me, Lisandra," was all he said. He positioned himself between her legs and penetrated her ready body, pressing his thick shaft deep inside her. He thrust deeply, and she soared into the clouds, higher and higher until she was within reach of the pinnacle of Mount Olympus. Heat poured through every vein, her body perspiring as he pressed against her, his skin sweaty, his musky scent an aphrodisiac.

She tasted the sweet nectar on his lips when she climaxed, and she cried out. Embedded to the hilt, he spilled his warm seed inside her, his breath labored. "Sweet goddess."

"Aphrodite," Lisandra said, shoving him aside.

"What?"

"She is a goddess. I am not. Love them and leave them," she said, her finger tracing his nipples.

"Nay, I pleasure them, Lisandra."

"Same thing."

He shook his head. "'Tis not the same thing. I never lost my heart to any of them."

"And me?"

He sat on the edge of the desk and studied her. "I don't want you seeing other men."

"Ah, you want me for your own, godly one, but you'll sow your seed where you like."

He smiled, then his face hardened. "Zeus waits at yonder door. You will not succumb to his charms."

"Zeus?" she squeaked.

"Aye. He intends to make you his for a time. But Zeus will not touch you if you tell him 'no.'"

"You're a jerk, you know?" She zipped up her skirt.

He ran his hand over her hip, then stood and pulled her close. "Tell me you will see no other males."

"I will not." She wiggled her fingers. "I'm unattached, and before this it didn't mean a thing to me. But after you..." Tears pricked her eyes. "Well, hell, after you, I realized I needed someone in my life."

"Like me."

"Yes, like you, but not you." She jerked her jacket on and fastened her buttons.

He reached down and unfastened them. "Wrong holes, love."

"Don't you dare call me that. To someone like you, love means nothing."

With regret that his encounters with the nymph always ended in strife, Asarian stormed out of the library, giving Zeus an uncustomary glare. The god of gods grinned back at him.

Planning to seek out the lovely lasses, who needed to be pleased, Asarian returned to Mount Olympus, but he wasn't there twenty minutes before he popped back in the library. Only this time, like Zeus, he had changed his appearance. Zeus wasn't anywhere in sight, but that fact didn't lessen Asarian's concern any.

Dressed in the finest of suits, Asarian strode to the checkout counter. "Where do I make donations to this fine library?" The place was small, the Texas town Lisandra lived in diminutive. But he wanted to see if she'd truly fall for any mortal, who tried to catch her eye.

Another librarian, a young girl, smiled at him and fluttered her dark lashes. Her actions meant to entice him, but triggered not a spark of interest.

"Donations?" he asked again, rather brusquely this time.

"Ms. Lisandra Atkinson would handle that, but she's with a customer at the moment."

"Customer?" As in sexual customer? Zeus perhaps?

Asarian stormed around the counter and shoved Lisandra's office door open.

Before he could control his actions, he shoved the man standing

too close to Lisandra against the wall.

"What...who...what...?" Lisandra sputtered, shrinking behind her desk.

"I'll call the police," the clerk said.

"Who the hell are you?" the man said, his lip quivering with cowardice.

"You were getting ready to molest Lisandra."

"I was not! I was trying to sell her some of my books."

"She doesn't want any."

"Who do you think you are," Lisandra asked, "coming in here and abusing my patrons?"

"I came to make a donation." Asarian let the man go, and jammed his hand in his pocket. Pulling out a check, he handed it to her. "So you can buy some more children's books."

She stared at the amount on the check. "A half-million dollars?"

"Is it not enough?"

She sat down hard at her desk. "Who are you?"

"Someone who wishes the best for you...and your patrons. Will you go out to lunch with me?"

"Well, *uhm*, yes, of course. Can we drop by the bank and I'll deposit this in the library account? And, well, thank you so much, Mister...?"

\* \* \* \*

Lisandra ignored the little voice that told her that there must be a catch as she poked at her enchilada. After her encounter with Asarian, this was just what she needed—plans for a new, bigger library swirled in her head. "Are there any restrictions, Mr. Candy, as to what you want us to spend the money on?"

"Whatever your heart desires."

She couldn't help thinking the man seemed familiar somehow, the way he gazed into her eyes with sexual intrigue, the way he ran his hand through his hair. But the only one who came to mind was Asarian and unless he'd had a face and body job, and replaced his long curly black hair with a blond bur and his vivid blue eyes with brown...

"I can't thank you enough for giving us such a generous amount of money."

"You're most welcome. I'm from New York City, and haven't made reservations at a hotel. Can you recommend a good place to stay?"

“Sure, the Holiday Resort is the nicest hotel we can offer here.”

He lifted his chin, a small smile settling on his lips, then nodded. Pulling a cell phone out of his pocket, he punched in numbers. “Yes, I’m calling to make reservations for a room tonight. You’re booked?” He glanced at Lisandra. “I see. I don’t have a flight out until tomorrow morning. Can you recommend another place for me to stay? The Canton Hotel? Thanks.” He took a deep breath and punched in some numbers. “Yes, I need a room for the night. Booked? Is there a convention in town?”

Lisandra shook her head.

“Old car exhibit? Can you recommend anything else? Thanks.” Mr. Candy considered the table, then punched in some more numbers. “I’m looking for accommodations for the...booked until Sunday? Because of the antique car show. Thanks.” He faced Lisandra. “You wouldn’t consider putting me up for the night, would you?”

“Well, I...uhm, well...”

“I promise I’ll be out first thing in the morning.” He pulled out a checkbook. “I don’t mind paying for accommodations, really.”

“No...no, that will be all right.” She was a sucker for anything stray or stranded. What the heck, the bank verified the check was good. He had to be legitimate. “What did you say you do?”

He gave her a slow, easy smile and she swore then he looked like Asarian, kind of. “Broker in love.”

She raised her brows.

“Wedding arrangements at some of the most high-classed establishments in the world. Wealthy clients will pay anything for the experience of a lifetime.”

“Why give to my library?”

“I was here a while ago on personal business and saw how much the children loved hearing you read to them. Many of the books are old and worn. I thought you could use some extra money for funding.”

“Well, I can’t thank you enough. We’d like to honor you and your firm for such a generous offer.”

“I’d prefer to keep it as an anonymous donation, Lisandra.”

“Sure...yeah, sure.” She couldn’t help feeling there was something else going on with the guy, but she couldn’t place her finger on it.

After they ate, she gave him directions to her simple one-story, three-bedroom house. “My grandmother’s,” she explained as they

walked along the rose-lined brick walk. "Smells heavenly nearly every season. Jasmine in the spring, roses in the summer and fall."

"Beautiful," he said, staring at her, but she didn't think he meant the flowers.

She rubbed her arms, then motioned to the door. "When my grandmother died, she gave the house to me, her only granddaughter."

"And your parents?"

"Killed in a car accident when my brother and I were little. My grandmother raised us, but my brother moved to your city and settled down. He hates the small town life. Only visits once in a blue moon."

She closed the door behind him and waved to the living room. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink? Coffee, tea?"

"Water, if you don't mind."

"Uhm, tap water okay? I don't have any of the fancy bottled stuff." She turned to find Mr. Candy behind her, way too close for comfort.

"Has anyone told you how beautiful you are?" He reached out to touch her cheek, but she moved out of his path.

"Excuse me, but I have no idea what you think your check buys, but books is all, mister. I'm not part of the bargain."

Mr. Candy's brows raised and he chuckled. "Sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. I'll sleep on a park bench tonight, if they're not all taken."

She folded her arms, ready to let him do just that.

He waited, she didn't contradict him. He gave a small bow, just like Asarian did when she first laid eyes on him.

Narrowing her eyes, she glowered. "You wouldn't know Asarian, would you? He didn't put you up to this?"

The man's lips curved into a smile.

"Damn him! I'm not seeing anyone, but if I do, it won't be one of his blasted friends. Get out. Go sleep on a bench for all I care."

The man snapped his fingers and vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Frowning, Asarian reclined against a tree in a mist-laden forest, while the goddess of the hunt, Artemis, sat nearby with twenty of her wood nymphs in audience.

"I think you love her," Artemis said, drawing one of her silver arrows from its quiver.

"Like you love Orion?"

She *hmpfed*.

“What if it’s just a passing fancy?”

“Hera says you’re not eating, not sleeping, not pleasuring the ladies.” Artemis shot her arrow into the air. “Sounds to me like love, Asarian.”

“I don’t fall in love.”

“Maybe not before.” Artemis glanced at him. “Cupid hasn’t been around, has he?”

Asarian grunted. But the breeze shifted and a familiar fragrance wafted in the air. He tilted his nose up and turned.

Like a goddess, Lisandra walked toward him, a sheer toga of violet hanging from one shoulder, leaving a breast bare, the hem of the gown reaching her ankles, her feet bare. Her blond hair was tied up in pearls on top of her head, her pink lips frosted, and her large brown eyes as alluring as ever. She bowed her head to Artemis.

“I’m the goddess of the hunt,” Artemis said, standing.

“Yes, I’ve read all about you.” Lisandra glanced at Asarian as he quickly rose to his feet. “I am the goddess of fertility. Seems I lost in a bet between Hera and Zeus.”

Asarian stared at her, then noticed her belly slightly swollen, her breasts larger than before. “You carry my child,” he said under his breath.

She snorted. “So it seems. Do I have my own temple, or do the demi-gods have to share?”

“You are mine,” Asarian said, grabbing her wrist, wanting no mortal or immortal to claim the woman who had stolen his heart.

She raised her brows. “Dear Asarian, how can you say such a thing? I am now a goddess in my own right and won’t succumb to your charms.”

Artemis laughed. “She loves you, Asarian. Take her to your temple before I get weary of this and have to search out Orion.”

“Because you love him,” Asarian said, then faced Lisandra. “Zeus did not win the bet, if you love me, Lisandra.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. He pulled her close and kissed her cheeks. “I love you, too, you bewitching vixen, so Hera won the bet.”

“You’re not saying this because I’m having your baby?”

Asarian smiled. “Ask Artemis or any of the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. I’ve been intolerable to live with since I met and lost you. Now, I will show you my...*our* home and how much I truly love you.” He lifted her chin. “You do love me, don’t you?”

Her lips curved up in the most deliciously wicked smile he’d ever



seen. Aye, Aphrodite could learn a thing or two from the minx, or was it just he, god of pleasure, who could be so won over by the lady?

No matter, he would not give her up for all eternity.

She kissed him back. "So if Hera wins the bet, I will not be the goddess of fertility?"

"Nay."

"But," she said rubbing her belly, "I like the idea of being a goddess. That way you can't boss me around."

He laughed, but before he could transport her to his chambers, Hera and Zeus appeared in the grove.

"News travels fast," Asarian said, bowing.

"Aye, so the lady wishes to be a goddess, though Hera has won the bet and the two of you are free to do as you please," Zeus said, stroking his beard.

"'Tis acceptable to me, my husband," Hera said, "just knowing I won the bet."

Lisandra smiled. "And Asarian said I could read from the library anytime I wanted."

"You can manage it, my dear," Hera said. "Zeus?"

"'Tis all acceptable to me, also."

When they vanished, Asarian and Lisandra said their goodbyes to Artemis, then Asarian transported Lisandra to his chambers. "What gave Mr. Candy away that he was not who he said he was?" he asked, pulling the silky toga down Lisandra's shoulder.

She reached down and touched his cock already rock hard and ready. "He wasn't the marrying kind, yet he owned a wedding brokerage."

"Seems he's the marrying kind after all."

Their tongues tangled as their fingers tore off the rest of their clothes. "Yeah, and he found us the most extraordinarily extravagant place for us to get married in the whole world. I'd say he was pretty damned good at his job."

"I'd say." Asarian suckled her breast. "Tell me how you want me to pleasure you this time, love."

"*Hmmm.*" She tongued his nipple. "Let me show you the ways, my god of desire."

\* \* \* \*

Hera pulled her hair loose in a cascade of blonde curls, as Zeus eyed her with interest. "I like the girl and knew she was the one to win Asarian's heart."

## *Mile High Club*

“Never would have guessed it,” Zeus said, pouring fresh goblets of wine. “She’ll make the perfect demi-goddess of fertility, don’t you think?”

“She’s got a good start on it,” Hera said, smiling. She sipped from her goblet, then licked Zeus’s lips. “But I wonder...”

“Aye, what now, my love?”

She peered into her Pool of Visions. “Nestor, demi-god of wisdom needs a match.”

“Playing Cupid again, love?” Zeus ran his hands down her silky arms. “What will the bet entail this time?”

The End

**Elevated Pleasures** *by Kara Giffin*

High atop the mountains in Scotland, a search for a beloved object sends two lovers on a quest to find their own Elevated Pleasures. The cold air of the mountain does nothing to chill the fire that sparked between the Philadelphia man and his Highland lass.

## **Elevated Pleasures**

**By  
Kara Giffin**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

Grace Thornberry held the gleaming object, studying it for a moment before placing it strategically near the rocks where someone should find it. That someone had to be Rueann, her granddaughter. If the old tale of the Heart of Pearl held true, Rueann would be reunited with her love. It was the only way—the only thing Grace could think of to help her sweet granddaughter. Grace knelt down and pushed the strand of pearls and diamonds closer to the rock, positioning it so the sun would shine on it in the early morning—right where her granddaughter should find it. Then its magic would do the rest.

“Grace, dear, we should head back, it’s getting colder. What are you doing down there?” Joseph asked.

She rose, giving a fond glance at her husband, as he helped her. She brushed the dirt from her hands, looking down at her prized possession. “I had to take care of something, but I’m ready now.”

Joseph took the pipe from his mouth and smiled. “Come, it’s getting chilly. These mountains take the wind out of you. I shouldn’t have listened to you and brought you here today. You know you haven’t been well lately. Are you cold?” Joseph placed his arm over Grace’s slim shoulder and helped her up the trail.

“Oh, I am feeling much better now. Everything will work out.”

Joseph patted her arm and smiled. “These mountains always make you happy. There’s something special about these rocks. You’ve always been fond of this place, and that’s the only reason I brought you here. I hoped it would do the trick. What had you so upset yesterday?”

Grace took a deep breath. She had to tell Joseph, and since she needed his help, he had to know. "I received a phone call from Rueann."

"Oh, when? Why didn't you tell me?" His bushy eyebrows rose.

"Last week, dear, but I was too upset to talk about it. I'm feeling better now that I have figured out how to help her. Rueann told me that she and Lex parted ways. Can you believe those two? Something happened, but she wouldn't say. They are meant to be together and I mean to see it."

"I'm sure you do. Does this have anything to do with a certain necklace? Are you going to have those young 'uns come up on this mountain in hopes it'll bring them together?"

Grace snickered. A twinkle in her shining blue eyes. "Oh, you know me so well. Yes, the Heart of Pearl will do it. Imagine, after all these years. The necklace has a chance to do its magic once again. Remember when—"

"I sure do, love. If it wasn't for that necklace, I never would have realized how much I love you and we wouldn't have had all these wonderful years together."

"Who would have thought that when you gave it to me, it would save us? I don't know what I would have done if you went off with Agnes Harper."

"Agnes never could hold a candle to you, Grace. I didn't think you would accept the necklace."

"I didn't, dear. Don't you remember? I gave it back to you and walked away."

Joseph chuckled. "Yes, that's right. The memory is a little foggy. Why did you come back?"

"I loved you, but something made me believe in you and that the necklace tied me to you forever."

Joseph grinned. "It was the mountain, too. Don't forget the mountain. Do you think they'll fall for it? Just how do you plan to get them to come all the way here? New York is a long ways, and if they're not even speaking then..."

"Well, I haven't thought about that yet. I suppose I'll just have to fib a little."

"Very well, dear. I'll be happy to be your assistant in this swindling. We must help the kids out. I've never met two people more bullheaded, nor so suited for each other. Let's head down the mountain and get warm." Joseph kissed her cheek and took her hand.

## *Mile High Club*

## CHAPTER TWO

Rueann Swenson ran to the phone. She'd just arrived home after a busy day at the bookstore, where many authors had been at the book signing. Timeless hours had been spent running back and forth from the shelves to the register. Now, she just wanted some peace and quiet, and to sit for at least five minutes. The phone rang again, and sounded as though it was a loud siren, making her head throb with the noise. It must be important, because it kept ringing, at least ten times.

She hurried to the table and picked it up. "Hello."

"Rueann, it's Granddad. I need you to come here right away."

"Is everything alright? What's happened? Are you alright?" Rueann gripped the receiver, tightening her knuckles in despair. She sat numbly on the chair waiting for the news that would surely upset her. "Is Grandmom okay?"

"She just has a touch of the flu. Can you come and help us out? I'm afraid your grandmother thinks she's dying and wants you and Lex to come. You must or you'll disappoint her. I fear I don't know what to do for her or to help her spirit."

"Oh, Granddad, I don't think that's possible. I don't know if I can get away right now and besides, Lex and I—"

"I've already spoken to him. He's taking the midnight flight, number 133. I need you to come, too. I've never seen her so bad, Rueann. You'll be able to bring her spirit up. She's been talking about you for three days."

The desperation in her grandfather's voice persuaded her to give in, and she nodded to herself. "Alright, if you really need me then of course I'll come. I'll call the airport as soon as I get off the line with you. What have the doctors said?"

"Grace refuses to let them look after her. She's given up and just says to let her die in peace. If it is her time, I'm sure you'll want to come, but it could just be the flu."

"I'm sorry, Granddad. I'll get there as soon as I can. Please, let her know I'm on my way. Tell her that I love her."

“I will. See you soon, dear.” The line went dead.

Rueann sat for what seemed hours thinking about her sweet, frail, grandmother. She was her closest family member even though she lived thousands of miles away. If her grandmother needed her, she would drop everything and go at once. There was just one little thing that stood in the way.

Maybe a large thing—Lex Masterson. Her six-foot-five ex-boyfriend, who she’d just broken up with two months ago was going to be on the same flight, going to the same destination, and would be staying in the same house. If that wasn’t bad enough, her family adored him, and was as close to him as if he’d been born a Thornberry. Rueann wasn’t ready to face him again, not after their last encounter. That night there had been enough sexual tension to make her ignite and forget that she didn’t want anything to do with him.

But Lex was just too damned gorgeous, too sexy, and too appealing for his own good. Which was exactly why their relationship ended. Who in their right mind would have believed that far-fetched story anyway? He’d claimed he didn’t know how the woman ended up in their bed or even who she was. Oh, right and the brunette just magically appeared beside him and he’d never invited her. She’d been shocked to find him in the arms of another woman, so shocked that she didn’t speak to him for an entire week. When she finally did allow him to explain, they’d become so heated in their argument that the old spark—maybe sexual explosion was more like it—overtook her.

She regretted her actions that night, and swore she’d never get close to him again. The sex was great—was always great, but she needed and wanted more. She needed a man whom she could trust, who she could exist with and grow old with, not some cheater who lied.

Fortunately, Lex didn’t consider their romp a truce and knew she didn’t accept his explanation. She’d left in the morning before he awoke, leaving a note expressing her position. Empathically, she stated that she didn’t want to see him again and not to contact her. He called her several times in the next weeks, but she hadn’t returned his calls and they eventually stopped. What could she say? Thanks for the great sex, but I don’t want anything to do with you, not after you broke my heart.

Rueann wasn’t born yesterday, nor did she want a relationship with a man who couldn’t be honest and trustworthy. She just wasn’t



ready to be so forgiving. And to think, she'd hoped their relationship would move to the next level. She should have known he wasn't ready for commitment—she should have seen the signs.

Her phone rang again, bringing her out of her rumination. "Hello."

"Rueann, don't hang up."

"I won't." She closed her eyes, hearing that deep sensual voice that always made her melt. Something about the way he spoke always excited her, right down to her panties. Damn Lex for being so sexy and making her want him. All he had to do was say her name, twitch his finger, and she was ready to strip down to her birthday suit and offer herself on a silver platter. "Make it quick, I have to call the airport."

"No need to, I already got you a ticket. Do you think she's really dying?" His voice deepened with emotion. "Rueann, are you there?"

Tears sprang to her eyes at the realization that it was possible. "No, no it's just the flu. She'll be alright, she must be."

"God, I hope so. Do you want me to pick you up?"

"What? Oh, no that's alright, I can take a cab. I'll meet you there. What time is the flight?"

"Midnight. I really don't mind stopping by to pick you up. Are you upset?"

She'd forgotten that Granddad had told her he was taking the midnight flight. She didn't know how to respond to his question. Upset, that was an understatement. "Of course I'm upset, my grandmother is ailing, and I'm thousands of miles away. Once I get there, I'll feel better. I'm sure it's nothing, but it's better to be safe and go check on her."

"No, I meant about me coming along. I'm not exactly your favorite person right now, but you know how much Grace means to me. I love her as if she was my own grandmother."

"I know that, Lex. Right now I'm more concerned with Grandmom than our situation. I really must get going if I'm going to pack and be ready on time."

"I'll pick you up around nine-thirty. Don't argue, be ready."

Once again, the receive went dead and Rueann stared at the modern sculpture on her wall. He didn't even give her a chance to argue. So like him to demand that she be ready. Now what would she do? She'd have to be in his presence for the next few weeks. How on earth could she stop herself from wanting him?

She picked herself up and hurriedly packed warm clothes, knowing how cold it was in Aberfeldy this time of year. If her grandmother wasn't so ill, she might actually be happy to be returning to her childhood home and seeing her grandparents.

Rueann finished packing, made the phone calls to her boss and her friend who would look after her apartment while she was gone. Two hours later a knock came at the door. Lex arrived right on time. Nine-thirty on the dot—he was never late for anything. It was one of the things that she admired about him. Given his occupation, he ran his life like clockwork with his schedule down to the minute. Of all the men to fall in love with, she had to pick a prestigious attorney. In his business suits with his hair pulled back, he looked formidable and demanding—quite intimidating. But when he dressed casually, his edge disappeared and a certain boyish charm could be seen in his eyes.

Rueann rolled her suitcase to the door, opened it, and flicked off the lights. Not bothering to invite him in, she blocked the doorway and waited for him to move out of her way. She couldn't bring herself to look at him while she fumbled with the keys to lock the door.

“All set?”

Her eyes traveled up his solid frame stopping on his chest. Averting her eyes from his, she just nodded. *Look at the sidewalk, look at the car, just don't look him in the eye and you'll be just fine. You don't want him, remember that. Remember what he did. He's a liar and a cheat.*

The driver of Lex's silver limo, Steve, took the suitcase from her and opened the car door. Rueann slid inside and waited for Lex to enter. He sat by her, flipping through a packet of papers, then he handed her the plane ticket.

“I'll pay you back as soon as we return.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“No, I insist. I...thanks for being so concerned about Grandmom, and for coming with me. I'm certain she's not going to die, but my grandfather sounded so sad.” She kept her eyes averted, watching the trees and buildings that they passed. For a few minutes, she studied her fingernails to keep her eyes off him. Now if only he didn't smell so heavenly. Why did he have to smell so sexy? His familiar scent would drive her crazy for the remainder of the ride. “Shouldn't you sit on that side?” She pointed to the opposite seat.

“I'm comfortable right here.”

Minutes went by in an uneasy quiet. Rueann didn't know what to say to him, or even if she should try to make idle conversation. This wasn't at all what she'd imagined her next encounter with Lex would be like. No, she imagined that she ran into him at one of the swanky nightclubs they frequented, with her on the arm of a sexy guy who would make Lex regret what he'd done. Like that would ever happen.

"Are you ever going to look at me?" Lex tapped his thigh with a folded newspaper, then tapped her arm with it. "Afraid?"

Rueann lifted her chin. Big mistake. Once she looked into his eyes, she was a goner—it was as if he had some kind of magic over her. She stared into his black eyes, unwilling to let him mesmerize her. "Okay, so I'm looking. I am not afraid of you, Lex. What is it you wish me to look at?"

"We should really talk about—"

"I have nothing to say, Lex. It's over, been over. Why don't we just consider ourselves friends on this trip and leave it at that?"

"I can't do that. You are more than that to me, have always been. Why won't you believe me? I told you the truth, Rueann."

Rueann held up her hand, continuing to stare at his magnificent eyes, eyes so dark they held such an intensity. She could almost see herself in them. No wonder witnesses caved in on cross-examination, which was why he'd won most of his cases. "Please, I don't want to discuss our relationship—not now, not ever."

Lex didn't say a word, but shook his head as if he didn't understand. She wasn't about to explain herself to him. Rueann turned her head and continued to peer out the window. The closer they got to the airport, the more her stomach fluttered. Flights always made her nervous, not to mention the awkwardness of seeing her ex again. She'd forgotten to bring her tranquilizers and would have to suffer through a long flight. She really needed something to take the edge off.

Reaching across, she opened the bar door and took out a bottle of *Jack Daniels*. This would do perfectly. She poured herself a good amount and didn't bother to put the bottle back. Mind-numbing liquid almost choked her as it went down, but anything was better than thinking of the flight or dealing with Lex.

A hand appeared before her face and reached for her hair.

"Hey, we're here." He lifted a lock of her red springy curls, rubbing it between his forefinger and thumb. "Do you think you can walk?"

“Of course I can walk. Why would you think I couldn’t?”

“Maybe because you just drank half a bottle of liquor. Alright then, let’s get checked in, and we’ll get something to eat. Are you hungry?”

Rueann nodded. Steve opened the door and helped her to the sidewalk. She waited for him to hand her the handle of her luggage. Lex retrieved his bag and spoke to Steve for a minute before starting off toward the sliding doors of the airport. Inside, few people walked the corridors. Lex took care of their luggage and they checked in. Now they only had a few hours to kill until the flight took off.

Lex led her to a seating area by their flight terminal. They’d arrived early enough that there were still many vacant seats. “We can wait here, or go get something to eat. We have plenty of time before our flight leaves.”

“I’d rather stay here. I had a long day and I’m tired.”

He handed her his newspaper. “Okay, I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere. Can I get you anything? Another bottle of JD?”

“How about a water?”

“You got it.”

Rueann leaned back on the seat, her mind slightly hazy. She closed her eyes, and waited for Lex’s return. The next thing she knew, someone shook her. She opened her eyes to find him smiling at her. His sexy mouth tugged at her heart as he handed her a water bottle.

“Oh, I must have fallen asleep. What time is it?” She yawned, then opened the water, taking a big gulp.

“Eleven-thirty. They’re boarding us now. Are you ready? They called our seat numbers a few minutes ago.”

She nodded and they walked to the flight attendant. Lex placed his hand behind her back sending little twinges of heat up her spine. She gritted her teeth against saying anything and just smiled at the attendant.

“You two wouldn’t be going on a honeymoon, would you?” The perky attendant asked, practically dripping with enthusiasm.

“Oh, no, definitely not.”

Lex frowned at her, then smiled at the attendant. “Thanks.” He took the boarding passes from her and continued to lead Rueann toward the ramp.

Rueann wasn’t surprised to see he’d booked them in first-class. Perfect, now she could finish herself off with some champagne. The attendants offered them comforts while they got settled. Champagne

was placed in her hand, and she set out to drink it straight down. A short time later, the flight took off and they were on their way to Scotland.

Three drinks later, Rueann began to feel the affects of all that liquor. "I need to use the restroom. Be right back." She rose and shuffled past Lex, careful not to touch his body in any way, nor giving him a glance. She knew if she did, he'd make her melt again. Once she'd taken care of business in the restroom, she opened the door to head back to her seat, but she found Lex standing outside the door.

He pushed her back inside and closed the door.

"Rueann, do you know how much you make me want you? It's always been that way, since the first time I laid eyes on you."

Something caught in her throat, something the size of a giant frog. She couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't move. He always knew what to say and how to affect her. The ideal of having sex with Lex on plane certainly did have its appeal.

Lex placed his hand on her cheek and moved his mouth close to hers. Now her heart beat so rapidly the thumping made her sway on her feet. Why she wasn't hyperventilating, she didn't know. She stood there staring at him in awe.

"I've always imagined making love to you on an airplane, now is our chance."

He trailed his firm lips along her neck, blowing his hot breath along her skin. Everywhere his breath touched, her skin heated and sent a rush of passion through her. He was careful not to touch her yet with his mouth, a ploy he always used to get her excited. Damned if it wasn't working. She tried to focus on the *employees must wash their hands* sign, but it became a blurred vision. His magical hands moved over her shoulders and down her arms.

"Lex, I..."

His lips found hers, capturing her lips so completely. Lightly moving his tongue against hers, he fondled her cheek with his hand and kept her from moving away. Against her better judgment, she responded. He backed her up against the tiny sink, pressing his bulge against her stomach. The hardness of his erection sent her mind spiraling, as if she didn't give a damn about anything. All she could focus on was the heat of his mouth and body, and the hardness of his cock pressing against her.

Lex pulled away, gliding his hand down her blouse. For a moment, she felt the cool air hitting her skin and wondered when he'd

unbuttoned her top. Whenever his tongue did its magic, she became completely unaware of her surroundings. His hand moved slowly downward toward her breasts. Instantly, her nipples hardened, wanting to feel his touch, wanting to feel his warm mouth take possession. She couldn't hold back the moan of pleasure that escaped her.

His breath became harsh, and he whispered against her breast. "We're going to become members of the Mile High Club."

She grabbed hold of his dark hair, knowing she should push him away from her, but when his mouth covered her nipple, the only thing she could do was hold him there. With a drawn-in breath, she reveled in the excitement of his mouth doing those marvelous things, things she hadn't felt for many weeks, things her body demanded.

"Yeah, baby, that's it. Enjoy the feeling." He flicked his tongue over her erect nipple, toying with her so expertly while sliding his hand between her legs. "I missed you, Rueann, and want you—need you."

She threw her head back, delighted to know she still held such a hold over him. How could he still want her when he'd had the brunette? Her mind yelled, insisting that she stop the farce, but her body wanted something else altogether. Mind over matter wouldn't be so easy. Matter would win out this night.

Without another thought, she placed her hand on his zipper of his jeans, slipping the tips of her fingers over the hardness of his penis, caressing him urgently. Her fingers worked to undo his pants, and she released him.

"Touch me, baby, like you used to."

She did as he asked and caressed his silky hot skin, moving her hand lightly over his shaft, teasing him with wanton touches. With a few pumps of her fingers, he was more than ready. And so was she, given by the amount of moisture now soaking her panties. She'd probably explode as soon as he entered her.

Suddenly, he lifted her onto the sink, her bare bottom resting on the edge. The cold stainless steel didn't register through the haze of sexual longing. The drinks made her head fuzzy. All she could feel was the pressure of Lex's fingers working up the frenzied havoc. He knew right where to touch, pull, tease—all which sent her over the edge.

"Lex, if you don't...hurry, I'll scream."

"*Shhh*. I'm hurrying, Rue. Just hold on a second."

Someone had the nerve to knock on the door. Disappointment riddled through her—it wasn't meant to be.

"We'll...I'll be out in a second." Lex grinned after making that announcement. "Now hold on to me, baby and we'll go for a ride." He positioned his erection, but hesitated.

Rueann pulled her head away from the wall. "Hurry, Lex, hurry."

"Are you sure you want—"

"Yeah." Rueann moved her body closer to his, urging him to press onward. She needed him, wanted him to pump her body until she reached the stars. All she wanted to feel was the mindless torment that he gave her.

Lex groaned, moving his shaft inside her. His hands gripped her bottom, pulling her against his erection until they fused together. He stilled. "Baby, oh sweetheart, you are so tight and wet. I want to explode right now."

Rueann let out a scream when he shifted her, pulling out, then moving within her. With her legs wrapped around his waist, she gripped him and never wanted to release him. Lex leaned close and kissed her. Such a loving kiss, long, hard, and yet tender. It made her want to cry out. She kept to the pace of his tongue's caresses, while feeling him pumping inside her. Each thrust sent her closer to the stars, closer to bliss. Her legs began shaking as culmination rushed through her.

No words were needed now, not forgiveness, not anything—just the exquisite joining of their bodies. Lex was an excellent lover and had always taken care of her needs. He resumed kissing her breasts, and at the same time, pressed his thumb against her clitoris in a frantic motion. She couldn't hold back when the climax came. Tremor after tremor coursed through her body with delightful twinges of satisfaction. Pulses of pleasure made her close her eyes tightly and her breath all but ceased. She threw her head back and wallowed in the remembrance of how skilled he was. Her climax consumed her, and she wasn't aware that another knock came at the door.

Lex grunted at the intrusion, but kept at his intent. A moment later, he pulled out of her and let his semen explode on her curls. Rueann reached down and stroked him until his orgasm receded. He leaned in and took her mouth again, giving her another sensuous kiss, then he moved his mouth in a trail of feather-light kisses along her jaw.

## *Mile High Club*

“People are waiting,” a raised voice came through the door. “You need to come out of there, or I’ll have to get security.”

Lex laughed. He reached to pull up his pants, which now were crumpled below his knees. “Alright, we’re through.” He helped Rueann off the sink and buttoned her blouse.

She fixed her skirt, adjusted her hair, and tried to put on a straight face. “Do you think they’ll be angry?”

“No. They’re used to this kind of thing on airplanes. So, how does it feel?”

“It felt great, but...”

Lex laughed. “No, I meant how does it feel being a member of the Mile High Club?”

Rueann smacked his shoulder and opened the door. Five faces looked at them as they exited. One lady looked aghast, probably offended at the thought of what they were doing in the restroom.

“Next time, wait until the passengers are asleep before you decide to entertain yourselves in there.” The flight attendant smiled, and then closed the door behind the lady that entered.

Rueann took her seat and asked for another drink, which she downed as soon as it was handed to her. She wanted to tell him that what they’d shared just then really didn’t matter, but she’d be lying. It mattered.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but instead Lex handed her a pillow. “Sweet dreams.”



### **CHAPTER THREE**

Their flight was delayed by a storm somewhere over the ocean, causing them to divert around it, and they arrived two hours late. Rueann grew more anxious and nervous about her grandmother's condition. She just wanted to arrive. No sooner had they landed, they disembarked and went through the international flight routine. Finally, they made it to the car rental agency. Lex was handed the keys to a plain blue compact car, which was brought around for him. He placed their baggage in the trunk and quickly got them on the road. They should make it to her grandmother's cottage just before darkness.

Lex maneuvered the car out of Edinburgh and veered onto the M90 for the hour and half drive to Aberfeldy. The roads were tricky to drive, narrowing to the point that he'd had to pull over to let other vehicles pass. Whipping wind only made it more difficult. They passed through Kinross, where he pulled over.

"Why are you stopping?" Rueann hadn't paid much attention to where they were, but she knew they hadn't arrived.

"I need to make some phone calls. Will you take over?"

She nodded and got out to round to the driver's side. Lex did the same, and settled in the passenger seat. He buckled the seatbelt, then flipped open his cell phone. For the next hour, he became immersed in business calls, and had various documents scattered on his lap.

"Alright, I'll call you tomorrow and we'll just do a conference. No, there is no way I can make the meeting. I'm in Scotland...yes the Scotland across the ocean. Don't get all riled, Ben. You can handle this one without me. No, I'll just call in and we'll... Yeah, I promise I'll call. Stop worrying." He flipped his phone closed and began collecting the documents.

"Something wrong?"

He closed his briefcase, sighed, then stretched his legs. Long legs that only a few hours ago were naked and against her. Rueann tried to block the image, but it was impossible. It had been a mistake. She just

kept making them, one after the other, mistake after mistake, and her biggest one yet—Lex.

“No, I had an important meeting set for tomorrow. My partner, Ben, is upset because he’s never handled a meeting by himself.”

“I’m sorry. I feel bad that you’re missing your meeting. I know how important your business is to you.”

“It’s just business, Rueann, and not as important as Grace or you are. There will be other important meetings. It doesn’t matter.”

“What’s it about? A new client?”

“Yeah, a large manufacturer who needs new representation. I’m not sure I want to represent them, because they’ve been accused of defrauding their employees out of millions of dollars. I don’t want to talk about that. We’re near Perth. Not much longer. Look at the views, they’re pretty spectacular. We’re getting higher.”

“Yes, I might have to take the roundabout way to get to Aberfeldy. I’ll take Old Crieff Road. It’s just ahead. My grandparent’s cottage is on the Femear Farm on Uriar Road. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I like this country, it’s beautiful.”

Rueann reached Uriar Road and pulled up. She parked the car as far off the roadside as she could. Not that it mattered, hardly anyone drove on this road, mainly just her grandparents or the post. She quickly got out of the car, not waiting for Lex and ran to the door. She flung it open and rushed inside.

Her granddad sat at the small table inside the cozy cottage, drinking coffee, which was probably spiked with whisky. She smiled and darted to his side.

“You’re here. Where’s Lex?”

She hugged him tightly, almost making him spill his coffee. “He’s here, and should be coming in... Here he is now.”

Lex gripped her granddad’s hand in greeting. “Sir, how is she?”

Her granddad’s face fell slightly. “She insists she’s dying, but it’s only the flu. Humor her and don’t mind her babbling. She’s been talking about the old days.”

“I’m going up right now.” Rueann removed her coat and flung it onto the back of a chair as she passed by. She hurried up the steps and entered her grandmother’s bedroom.

“I see things haven’t changed a bit around here. Hello, Grandmom.”

Her grandmother sat in bed with an old crocheted shawl around her shoulders. She clutched her favorite mug, steaming with tea. She

didn't look that ill, Rueann relaxed when she realized it wasn't as bad as she thought it was. Her grandmother didn't look ill, in fact, she looked quite lovely with her hair arranged in her usual short fashion. She even wore that light pink lipstick that she'd worn for at least twenty years.

"Darling, you're here. Granddad told me he called you. I hope we didn't trouble you, but I'm glad you came. You know, I don't have much time left and so wanted to see you before..."

"That's nonsense, Grandmom. You're not dying, you just have a cold. You'll be fine after we get some nice medicine in you."

"Oh no, I feel it. Come, sit with me. Is Lex here?" She patted the bedside and scooted over to make room for her.

"Yes, he came along."

"How are you feeling about that?" Her grandmother clasped her hand and squeezed weakly.

"I-I'm fine with it, Gram. Really, we're both adults and...well, I couldn't deny your wish to see him. I know how much you care for him."

"And do we still care for him, too?"

Rueann didn't know why her grandmother pressed the issue, but as her grandfather asked, she humored her.

"Yes, of course I do. Now, tell me what I can do to make you feel better."

Her grandmother's smile became radiant. Her old eyes twinkled. Rueann eyed her curiously.

"I'm so happy to hear that, dear, and I told Granddad that you still cared for Lex. I want to hear all about..." her grandmom covered her mouth and whispered "...the big breakup."

"Can we change the subject? I don't want to discuss that. There's really not much to tell anyway. We just don't belong together. Now, I came all this way to see you, Gram. Why won't you let the doctors look you over?"

"Those old coots? Why bother? All they want to do is give you foul medicine that makes you sleep. I want to spend as much time awake as I can. I wanted to see you before I passed and, now that you are here, I can go peacefully. You see, there are so many wonderful things to remember, only, I'm not as spry as I used to be and the memories are fading."

Rueann rubbed her grandmother's hand. "What are you talking about, Gram? You're not losing your memory, are you?"

"About all the memories I have are beginning to dwindle, dear. I've lived a good life though and I'm not complaining. I don't want you think that I have any regrets. I've had the love of a good man for fifty-three years." She sighed, then peered toward the window.

"Yes, you're very lucky, Gram, to have had Granddad."

"I just wish..." Her grandmother looked at her lap dejectedly, then raised her teacup to her mouth.

"What is it? If I can do anything—"

"When I was a young lady, your sweet grandfather gave me the Heart of Pearl. It was this beautiful necklace, an engagement present. I cherished it."

"Do you still have it? You never showed it to me."

"Heavens, no. I lost it, you see, many years ago. I was just saying that I just wish I still had it. It would be so nice to be buried in it. That would have been so romantic."

Rueann reached for the teapot and poured more tea in her grandmother's cup. She tucked the covers around her lap and settled at the opposite end of the bed. "Whatever happened to it?"

"I lost it the summer we went to Grampian Mountains on our honeymoon. We were climbing near Glen Errochty and it must have fallen off. I didn't notice until I reached our cottage. I never did get over losing it. The Heart of Pearl was a beautiful necklace with pearls so rare and diamonds between each one. I adored it, but mostly because your granddad gave it to me. He always said he would go and look for it, but the years passed by, and I fear he still aims to go searching for it. He can't, not at his age, not on that mountain. Promise me, you won't let him go looking for it."

"Looking for what, Grace?" Her granddad and Lex came through the doorway. Lex immediately went to Grace's side and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, nothing, dear."

"Grace, you look younger than the last time I saw you. Why, even when you're sick, you look beautiful." Lex held her hand and smiled.

"What a charming man. Rueann, you've done well. Have I told you that?"

Rueann's face brightened. "Yes, Gram."

"I want to know what you were talking about," her granddad said.

"Oh, Grandmom was just telling me about the Heart of Pearl. She said that you might get a crazy idea about going to search for it."

Her grandfather's face became stern, a very unusual look for him. "Yes, it's her wish to be buried in the necklace, and I won't deny her last wish. I planned to go when you got here. I'll probably leave in the morning."

"No, dear, you can't leave me. What if I...Please, Rueann, don't let him leave." Her grandmother's eyes began tearing. She pulled a delicate handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes.

"I won't, Grandmom. Lex will just go instead. Right, Lex?"

Lex looked confused, which made Rueann want to laugh.

"What are you talking about? You want me to go up on the mountains alone, looking for your grandmother's necklace?"

"He won't know where to look. No, I must go." Her grandfather nodded. "I promised I would find it, love."

Her grandmother continued to dab at her eyes.

"Granddad, not that I don't think you can do it, I just don't want you going. You are not in the condition to hike in the mountains and who knows how long it will take."

"See, dear, I told you she wouldn't let you go. Rueann's such a sensible girl. She knows the danger. I just wish I had it though. Now tell me dear, how are things with you? How is America?"

Rueann shook her head. "I'll just have to go."

"What?" Three voices came at her.

"I said, I'll just have to go. I know the mountains pretty well and I'm in great shape. I can go and search for your necklace."

Her grandmother's eyes brightened. "Really? Oh, how lovely you are. You would do that for me? Such a sweet, sensible, girl. Isn't she, Joseph?"

Her granddad nodded.

"Of course I'd do that for you, Grandmom. You know how much I love you."

"If you're going up on the mountains, then I'm coming with you. You can't go alone either." Lex moved closer to her, giving her a don't-argue-with-me-look.

"But you have your important meeting tomorrow. No, I'll be fine. I promise, Gram, I'll find it for you. Now you get some rest. I'm going to make some broth for you." Rueann left in a hurry. She didn't want to be caught up in an argument about Lex going or staying.

Besides, the more distance she put between them, the easier it would be on her when they returned to the States and parted ways again.

After a cozy evening spent with her grandparents, Rueann retired for the night. Even as exhausted as she was, Rueann couldn't fall asleep. Perhaps it was the jet lag or the worry over her grandmother. Added to that, she now had to go up on the mountain to search for a necklace that had disappeared so many decades ago. She was going on an impossible mission. There was no way she'd find the necklace for her. How could she disappoint her? She should just tell her it wasn't going to be found, no matter how many hours she spent searching for it.

Rueann closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. A moment later, someone was kissing her. Lex. She shoved him away.

"Get off me."

"What?"

"What are you doing? Get out."

"Rueann, aren't we past that? I thought...considering what we shared on the plane that you would...No?"

"Damned right, no. Look, just because I gave in to you on the plane doesn't mean that our relationship is on again. I drank too much and wasn't myself. I lost my head for a few minutes that's all. I cannot forgive you, Lex."

"You never let me explain." Lex continued to pin her against the mattress.

"Explain what? That a knockout brunette just happened to be cuddled beside you in our bed. I suppose she was your sister? Oh wait, that's impossible—you don't have a sister."

"I tried to tell you it was Bob and Jeff's idea of a joke. They thought it would be funny. Just listen for once and I can—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Can't you just be quiet for one minute so I can—"

Rueann lost her patience and her temper. "Don't you tell me to be quiet, Lex Masterson. I don't want to hear your excuse. You cheated on me and, and there is nothing you can do to change that."

"I didn't cheat on you, Rueann," his voice rose, then softened. "You just have to trust me for once."

"Trust you? Hah, that's a laugh. I won't ever trust you again."

"This is what I get for having friends who wanted to show me a good time. It was all a joke. Look, I was hanging out with some of my friends and I—"

"I don't want to hear this. Get the hell out of here, Lex, before I do something you'll regret."

"But—"

Rueann pointed toward the door. "Out, now."

"There's no other beds."

"Too bad, sleep on the floor for all I care. Just get out."

"Alright, I'm going." With that, he left just as quickly as he'd come.

She flopped back on her pillow, tears threatening. Why did it all hurt so much? Should she have just let him explain? No, she didn't want to hear the lame excuse he'd had months to come up with. Another night alone, without him, without his glorious body, without his love. She sighed and closed her eyes.

Just as she drifted off to sleep again, she heard a bang in the next room. Lex must have dropped something, but by the sound of it, it sounded as though he'd kicked the door. Probably, she mused. Yes, leaving tomorrow was a good idea.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lex Masterson reached his limit. He didn't know how to get her to listen, or better yet, what he'd say. The truth, he supposed, but the truth didn't exactly sound convincing even to him. What the hell had his friends been thinking? They realized too late what their prank would do—cause him to lose the one woman who mattered most to him. Weeks on end, Lex tried to figure out how to explain and straighten out the mess they created, but more weeks passed without any result.

Not that he was happy about Grace's illness, but it was almost fate that he could at least now be with Rueann and possibly have a chance to explain and win her back. To think that one of the happiest nights of his life turned out to be a nightmare. He just couldn't fathom how it all turned out so bad. Yes, he could—that's what he got for having such a weird group of friends.

He didn't want to think of that night or his friends, and shook it off when he reached the car. He'd spoken to Grace earlier that morning and she'd given him a few possible locations as to where to find the necklace. There was absolutely no way he'd be left behind, and definitely no way Rueann would go on the mountain alone.

Lex moved into the driver's seat and waited for her. Rueann would probably carry on, but eventually she'd give in. She never could stay angry for very long.

"What are you doing? Get out."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not. I don't need your help, Lex. Will you please get out?"

He almost grinned at her sweet tone. Did she think if she sugarcoated it, he would be more willing to let her run off to the mountains without him? "No."

"No? Are you crazy? I said I don't need your help finding my grandmother's necklace."

"But you do need me. Admit it." He smiled. The fire was about to be stoked. Lex gripped the steering wheel and waited.



“What the hell do you mean I need you? I don’t need you. Fine, if you’re so set on going, then go. I hope you get lost. I’ll walk.” She turned and began walking up the road.

He quickly got out of the car and stepped in front of her, gripping her arms. “Wait a minute, will you? Look, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that it would be quicker if we both looked for it. We don’t know how much time we have and I don’t feel comfortable knowing you’ll be alone up there.” He turned his face to look at the distant mountains that grayed against the silhouetted sky. It seemed as if they were so far away, yet he knew it would only take them an hour or so to reach them.

“You’re right, Lex. Alright, let’s put aside our problems and go together, but on one condition.” She shoved his hands off her arms.

Lex cringed. He knew what that condition would be, and knew it would be impossible. He could never keep his hands off her, even for a day. “What?”

“No touching. I can’t think straight when you touch me. I don’t want to make this harder than it has to be. We can’t be together. You know that, don’t you?”

Against his wishes, he nodded. No touching. Impossible. Lex opened the car door for her and rounded to the driver’s side. She couldn’t think straight when he touched her. That made him smile to himself. They would be together and hopefully, this time alone would give him the chance to prove it to her.

Joseph waved to them as they pulled onto the road. Lex concentrated on the drive and didn’t want to add fuel to the fire. At least he’d been able to get her to concede and let him accompany her.

The drive to Buckman’s lodge didn’t take long, but some of the roads were icy and treacherous. During the ride, he became rife with tension. When they reached the road sign to the lodge, he finally turned to look at her. She’d fallen asleep and looked so beautiful to him. Her dark lashes lay against her creamy skin. He wished her pale blue eyes would look at him with love again. Someday, they would, he vowed. Her dark auburn curls framed her face and her soft lips parted slightly. He was never so turned on at the sight of a woman sleeping.

He veered the car onto the drive that led to the Buckman’s main lodge. His feet crunched the snow-covered walk, and he went inside to get the key to the chalet. He’d been lucky they let him rent one, since they weren’t really open to the public. But after mentioning

Joseph and Grace, they told him they would be honored to have him stay the weekend.

Lex returned to the car and drove the five minutes to the secluded chalet, which overlooked a ridge. It looked to be made of ancient stone and timeless as though it had stood on that spot for centuries.

He hesitated in waking her, and decided to build a fire, take in the supplies and then return for her. The mountains ahead of the cottage held his gaze for several minutes. He wondered if they would find Grace's necklace. More importantly, he wondered if those mountains held the key to getting Rueann back. One thing was certain, there was a strong draw to them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Rueann moaned in her sleep. His rock-hard body taunted her, making her want to run her hand along his muscles. As if everything was right in the world, she did as she pleased feeling the ripples of his chest. A nagging sense made her stop. She removed her hand from his chest and rolled away from him. Things were different now, she was different. He wasn't the man she'd fallen in love with. No, he was a two-timing liar.

But he looked hard everywhere, from his jaw line to his long legs. His clothes fit him to perfection, outlining the muscles of his upper body and arms. His raw masculinity made her want to forget herself and forget the hurt.

"Rueann, Rueann. Wake up. Are you alright?"

She opened her eyes and saw him standing beside the car. His deep voice sounded insecure. Rueann leaned her head to the side, and was able to see his sinfully wicked mouth. A mouth that she wanted to feel against hers, a mouth that could do marvelous things to her breasts, and mouth that could make her writhe in sinful pleasure.

Lex moved closer to her, and looked as though he wanted to kiss her. He placed his hand on hers and helped her to stand. He cupped her hip and pulled her toward him. Rueann drew in a breath. He leaned closer, and she could see the warmth of his passionate black eyes, looking so intently into hers. His heated look made her mouth water and her panties dampen. Not again. How could he do it with just a look? Damn her for being so weak.

"I'm alright. You can let go of me now. Remember, no touching."

"I thought you might be sick or something, you were moaning in your sleep."

Rueann kept her cool. "I was? No, I must have been dreaming."

“Dreaming about me?” His voice turned to that deep sensual tone, and he took a step closer. “I’ve been wanting to do this all morning.”

His arm yanked her body forward, crushing her against him. Warm, smooth lips, touched hers. He moved his tongue inside her mouth and took full possession of her senses. Rueann wanted him, wanted to feel him inside her right that minute. A single coherent thought couldn’t enter her mind. Her breasts ached to be uncovered and tasted; she could feel her nipples peaking and becoming taut. She moaned at the pleasure of his kiss, and a throbbing pulse riveted inside her.

Lex groaned, rubbing his erection against her. She could feel the heat rising inside her, and his hard cock pressing so intimately against her leg. Now plastered against the car, she gripped his firm arms and held onto him, returning the blazing motion of his tongue. He broke off the kiss.

“Lex, I...said no touching,” she managed to say. Trying to control herself, Rueann pushed him back a step. She had to put some space between them or she’d jump him.

He ignored her, turned and headed toward the cottage. “We’re here.”

“I see that. It’s really beautiful here.”

“Come on, wait until you see inside. It’s really...”

Rueann couldn’t hear the rest of it, because he’d already entered. She walked inside and saw the dormers a good height above them. The main room had a cozy living area, small kitchen, and another door. Opening it, she peered inside and smiled at the large bed in the center of the room, in front of a large window. It looked exactly like the kind of bed that belonged in a cottage, covered with quilts and pillows.

“What’s in there?”

Rueann turned to find Lex standing behind her, so close that she could smell his wonderful scent. “The bedroom. Which reminds me, we need to talk about sleeping arrangements. You can have the bed, I’ll take the sofa.”

“No, I couldn’t do that. You take the bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Don’t argue, Lex. I insist.”

“Okay, have it your way. I’ll take the bed. It probably gets really cold though at night. Are you sure?”

"Yes, of course I am. I'll be fine *alone* on the sofa."

"Do you want to take a walk before it gets dark?"

"Yes, I'd like that. We should start our search right away. Do you think we'll find it?"

"I doubt it, Rue. It's been lost for years. I hate disappointing Grace though. Let's bring in the rest of the stuff, then we'll go."

Rueann put on her heavier coat and waited for Lex by the doorway. He'd changed into warmer clothes too. The climate had changed and became much colder than the previous day. Lex took her hand, and they walked up a trail that seemed to rise a great bit.

He tried to make small talk, saying, "The land is really elevated here."

"It's a good thing I workout," was all she could think to say.

"So, are you going to stay in Scotland for a while?"

"I'm not sure yet. I guess it depends on how Gram is doing. I know you probably need to get back."

"Yeah, eventually," he said, and veered her around a shrub. Lex stopped walking when they reached the top of the incline.

She stepped beside him and they looked out over the slope, where ridges of snow capped the distant cliffs. Beneath a high pine, a huge boulder was the perfect place to look at the landscape. He pulled Rueann to it and sat her on his lap. She stiffened.

"Are you cold?"

"N-no, I'm fine. Why, are you?" She tried to get off his lap, but his forearm held her in place.

"No. You seem a little tense. Are you still angry that I kissed you by the car? I mean, if you..."

"No. I mean, yes, I'm still angry. I didn't know that you..."

He pushed his hair behind his ear, and moved his face close to hers. "...wanted to kiss you?"

"Yes. I asked you not to. It's just going to complicate things," she whispered.

"Not complicated at all. Do you want me to now?"

"Do what now?"

"Kiss you."

Rueann tried not to move, but he pulled her closer, shifting her bottom. She could feel the stiffness under his pants, and knew he wanted her. She couldn't control the intense urge to hold him and she placed her hand behind his back, hugging him. His warm breath played over her cold ear. He caressed the softness of her hair, letting

his hand slide over her coat, where big buttons kept his wayward hands from swaying her to more uncontrolled thoughts.

He moved his mouth over hers, kissing her gently before moving his face away. "Rueann, I want you to know the truth, and even if you don't ever believe me, I want to tell you. Will you listen?"

"I-I'm not sure I'm ready to hear this, but I'll listen."

Lex cupped her face. "I was going to ask you to marry me." He cleared his throat. "That night on Halloween...at the party...after everyone left. I waited for you in bed, did all those romantic things you like...the rose petals and candles, but I fell asleep waiting for you. I guess I did a little too much celebrating with the guys."

"I had to clean up after the Community Center's party and was late getting home."

"Yeah, I know, but...My friends got this ridiculous idea to dress up that woman in a costume to make me think she was you so they could watch me propose. She must have come in when I was asleep. Anyway, they confessed the next day, after I was about to beat the shit out of them. I didn't know it wasn't you."

"Maybe the hair color should have given you a clue."

"Look, I was half-asleep and felt someone next to me. Who the hell else would it be, except for you? I never thought it wasn't. I kissed you, I mean her, and I was going to pop the question right then, only you yelled at me from the doorway."

"It's all too easy, Lex. You really expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, I do. I even had the ring to give to you."

"You must think I'm stupid. You could have bought it last week."

"The receipt is on the table, back at the cottage. Check the date."

"You're a damned liar, Lex Masterson. I don't believe any of it." Rueann wanted to cry. She got off his lap and turned toward him. "I don't know why you're bothering to explain, it's over. I can't trust you, and I can't be with a man who lies."

"I love you, Rueann. There must be someway we can get past this? My life is not the same without you. It's meaningless."

"No." Rueann felt the sky pressing on her, she needed to be alone, needed to think about everything he'd said. She turned and walked away, brushing the tears from her cheeks. Before she turned on the trail, she looked back to see Lex standing beside the slope. He didn't move and watched her round the bend.

She reached the cottage and ran inside. He must not have followed her and had stayed by the cliff. She was glad, because she needed her space right now. Her eyes had dried up, and she looked at the table in front of the sofa. There sat a scrape of paper with a velvet box on top. She reached for it. It was the receipt. The date read October twentieth, the amount quite excessive. He'd purchased it eleven days before that unfaithful day.

"He wasn't lying. Oh, God, what have I done? I've been such a fool. Why didn't I believe him? He was going to propose." She flipped opened the box and found a sparkling, round shaped, diamond. It glimmered when she moved it, and was so beautiful. She couldn't help it, she cried. She'd have to forgive him. And she'd do so as soon as he returned.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rueann waited all night, but Lex didn't come back. She thought about going to look for him several times during the long night, but it was too dark to go outside. She hadn't been able to sleep and paced the main room inside the cottage. The fire had gone out long ago, yet she didn't feel the coldness inside the cottage. What if something happened to him? What if he was hurt? What if he'd left?

All the impetuous thoughts kept her tense all night. Morning had finally arrived, even though the sky was still quite gray and it didn't look as though the sun would shine. She grabbed her coat and headed back to the cliff. It took her longer to reach it when she lost her way and had to backtrack. She called out his name.

"Oh, please, hear me. Lex. Lex, where are you?"

Nothing.

She reached the spot where they'd last been yesterday and she looked out across the summit, then looked down. The drop was a long way down and she became apprehensive about standing so close to the edge. Before she moved back, she heard someone call her name.

"Rueann."

She turned her head quickly to see him, but he wasn't there. "Lex? Lex, where are you?"

"Down here. Help me."

Rueann knelt on the ground closer to the edge and looked down to see Lex holding onto a tree root that stuck out of the rock. "Oh, my God, Lex. Are you alright? Hold on."

"That's what I've been doing."

"Okay, I'll have to run back to the cottage to get some rope or something. Please, just hold on."

"Rueann, wait."

"Lex, I am sorry. I love you. Just hang on, I'll be right back."

"Don't go. Baby, I can't...I don't have the strength to hold on much longer. I love you, always remember that."



"No, Lex, don't let go," she screamed. She peered over the edge and saw him lose his hold. His body scraped along the rock and he slid down the slope. He disappeared beneath the foliage at the bottom of the slope. Her sob echoed through the summit, and she quickly stood. She noticed a trail that seemed to wind its way down the cliff, and she ran in that direction.

The trail narrowed. A prickly shrub scraped her face when she passed by, but Rueann was beyond feeling pain. She didn't care about that, and only wanted to reach Lex. He had to be alive. Somehow, he had to be. She reached a small shelf of rock that led to another wider path. The only way to reach it would be to shimmy past the shelf. Her foot miss stepped and more rock crumbled away from the ledge. She held her breath for a moment and stood perfectly still.

"Okay, Rueann, you can do this. Just don't look down. Keep your eyes focused on the top of that mountain. There, you can do this." Each step tightened her chest and made her throat close up. She knew she'd die if she fell, especially when she'd taken a quick look downward.

She reached the path and expelled her breath, then she ran farther down. "Lex, Lex, are you alright? Where are you?" A sound of someone moaning was just ahead on the path. She kept running until she spotted his leather jacket.

"Are you hurt badly? Where are you hurt? Speak to me." Rueann grabbed hold of his jacket and clutched him close to her.

Lex groaned. "My leg...hurts, that's all. I think I'm alright otherwise."

She hugged him, kissing his face. "Do you think you broke it?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not broken."

Rueann knelt beside him, checking his leg over and noticed his injury. A twig stuck out of his leg, right through his pants.

"Do it, Rueann."

"Do what?"

"Pull it out."

"Shit, no way. I-I can't. It'll hurt, Lex."

"Yes, you can. Just do it. Close your eyes and yank it out."

"Okay, on the count of three. One...two...three." She did as he asked and yanked it out as quickly as she could. He fell backward, stifling his pain. "Here, I'll tie my belt around your leg."

"Thanks."

An awkward silence fell between them and only the sounds of the mountains filled the air. Wind and bird's calls relaxed her for a minute. Her breathing returned to normal and she could actually feel her heartbeat slowing.

"I'm so glad you're not dead. I thought I lost you forever. You scared the hell out of me, letting go like that."

"I couldn't hold on any longer. I didn't know how far a drop it was. If I'd known it wasn't that far last night, I would have let go hours ago."

Rueann laughed and bumped his leg. "Oh, sorry. I know it's not funny. Lex, I saw it. I saw the receipt. You weren't lying. I've been such a fool."

"I probably wouldn't have believed me either. Come here."

She moved closer to him, and he pulled her to lie on his chest.

"Rueann Swenson, will you marry me?"

"Yes. Yes, I will, but how about we get you out of here first."

"My leg isn't that bad. It's completely peaceful here. There's something special about this place. Do you feel it?" Lex held her and wouldn't let her move off him.

"Yes, it's almost magical. Look at the way the pine needles glisten with dew, as though they're twinkling lights. It's beautiful."

"No, you're beautiful. Promise me, you'll love me forever?"

"Yes, I will, Lex. I promise." Rueann pressed her lips against his, showing him that she really did promise. But Lex wanted more and took the opening to ravage her mouth.

She moved her body as close to his as she could get, and felt his hard body under her. He turned her onto her back and kept kissing her. She wanted to take her sweet old time and kiss him everywhere, but he wouldn't let her. He kept his mouth fused to hers, his lips moving so tenderly. She felt twinges of his tongue vibrating from his moans. He explored the warmth of her mouth, his tongue moved with hers, cavorting in sensuality.

Kissing Lex on the mountain, even with all the bad things that had happened, seemed to make everything right. Nothing else mattered in that moment, except for kissing him. She moved her hand down to feel his arousal, squeezing gently, pressuring as she moved her hand up and down. Groaning in pleasure, his hand fumbled with the large buttons of her coat. Once his hand slipped inside her coat and under her top, he covered her breast with his palm, and whirled his thumb around her nipple. Heat shot through her veins. She sent

him a silent message, when she tugged on his pants. His breathing intensified with each squeeze, each tantalizing stroke of her hand.

Lex broke off the kiss. "I think we should go back," he said, barely able to rasp out the words. He helped her off his lap and grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's hurry and get back to the cottage."

They walked back up the hill and squeezed themselves by the narrow shelf. Once they were on wider ground, Lex took her hand. The sun suddenly appeared from behind a fat gray cloud. It shown in bright rays, with streams streaking the sky around them. Something sparkled in the distance. Rueann stopped, but continued to hold on to Lex's hand.

"I see something over there. Come on." She walked along the path and stopped by a boulder that jutted out from the rocky gorge. The sun retreated again and the sky once again grew gray, only much darker. She looked out at the peaks beyond them, the snow on the higher elevations seemed to thicken. She hoped it wasn't headed this way. She knelt down beside the rock and saw a gleam. There, underneath a few leaves was a necklace. The Heart of Pearl. Excitement overcame her.

"Lex, look at this, I found it."

"You mean the necklace? Really? Let me see it." He knelt beside her.

Rueann held up the beautiful pearl and diamond strand. "It must be my grandmother's. I can't believe it, I actually found it. She'll be so happy."

"She will. We better find some place to hold up."

"Why? We can make it back to the cottage." But when she looked up at the sky, she realized she was wrong. "Is it a storm?"

"Yes, and by the look of it, we better find someplace fast. Come on, I see a place where we can wait it out." Lex started toward what looked to be an old mill. He opened the rusty door and she followed him inside.

The brick walls were so old and crumbling. Some of the bricks had broken and many chips lay on the floor. Panes of dirt-covered glass filled one of the walls, but she couldn't see the storm through them. Lex closed the door against the wind, and the quickly falling snow. Rueann walked to an old wooden ladder and unzipped her sweater. There was only one way to get warm. She placed herself as seductively as possible against the old wooden ladder. If this didn't give him ideas, she didn't know what would.

“Lex, are you cold?”

“Yeah,” he said as if he had a hard time speaking.

“Me too.”

Rueann pulled the end of her sweater lower, then turned back to him to see the heat in his eyes. “I have a thought.”

“Yeah? I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

“Do you?” she asked with a hint of seduction in her voice. “Well, what are you going to do about it? I’m freezing.”

“I’m going to make you so hot you won’t even know there’s a blizzard outside.”

“I can’t wait another second to feel you.” As she said that, she let the sweater fall off her naked shoulder.

He stepped beside her, his hand immediately caressed it, sending warmth all the way to her toes. His fingers swept her sweater off her other shoulder. The garment fell by the wayside, and her nipples puckered out from the coldness inside the mill. Smiling like a wicked boy, Lex kissed her cheek, then her neck. His lips scorched a trail to her breasts. Rueann held her breath when his hot tongue flicked her nipple, but then she groaned when his mouth covered the bud. Shooting lightning riveted her insides, right to her pulsating clitoris. An extreme ache overtook her, as if she’d die if she didn’t feel him inside her.

As he continued to lavish attention on her breasts, she ran her hand through his hair, then down to his shoulders. She wanted him as naked as she was. He removed his jacket hastily, then again fastened his mouth to her breast. Then she heard his drawn-in breath when her cold hands crept under his shirt. She shimmed his shirt upwards until she could remove it. Quickly tossing it aside, she gazed at the hard crevices of his chest muscles.

She ran her hand over his sparsely haired chest, until she meandered southward. Undoing his pants only took a few seconds, and she grabbed his cock, fondling him with care, hoping each touch made him as warm as he’d made her feel. He groaned out a grating breath, and pressed her back against the ladder. Her butt reached a rung, as he pressed her backwards. She closed her eyes and waited to see what would happen.

Suddenly, she felt herself being lifted. Her bottom was placed on the fourth rung. Lex placed her feet on his shoulders and then he swooped forward and lapped at the curls between her legs. She grew more torrid at each suckle, each lick, each little nip. Tormented, she

threw her head back, moaning at each delightful touch of his tongue. When his finger joined the excruciating tantalization, she screamed her pleasure to the high-beamed rafters. Lex grinned at her.

“Is this what you want, Rue? Are you hot enough?”

She swallowed, allowing herself to feel his finger toying with her clitoris. “No, hotter. Make me hotter,” she rasped out. “Please, I need it. I need you.”

Lex kept up the pace, causing her clit to swell and pulsate. She wanted his cock inside her, but fair was fair, and she’d do what she could to enact the same torture on him, as he’d just done to her. She shifted her legs to the lower rung and then jumped off the ladder. On her knees now, she fondled his erection, squeezing him until she got just the reaction she’d hope for. Lex growled in sexual pleasure.

Moving her mouth in position, she teased him by sucking on his head, then using her tongue to taste him. She swished her tongue along the silky skin of his cock until she reached the end of his testicles. His hand tangled in her hair, pulled her forward until his shaft pumped against the back of her throat. She made sure he was dripping wet, wet enough to enter her quickly, because all she wanted at that point—was him inside her.

“Lex,” she breathed out his name.

He took her hand and pulled her up against him. Every nerve ending in her body tingled in anticipation of what was to come. She sashayed to an old table and tested it for endurance. Laughing, she saw him stalk her. Before she could utter a word, he kissed her while placing her on the dusty table.

Leaning on her elbows, Rueann watched him take hold of his beautiful cock, and position it at her entrance. She wanted to yell for him to hurry. Had she?

He laughed and did as she requested. Both of them groaned at the same time when his length penetrated her and filled her so completely. As if she’d entered another world, she closed her eyes and felt his hardness move within her, then recede. She wrapped her legs around his waist, reveling in the sexual frenzy that overtook her body.

“Yes, Lex, yes. Oh harder, make me scream.”

Lex obeyed and rammed against her harder and harder with each thrust. He leaned forward and tweaked her nipple, then ran his finger over her lips. She tasted herself on his finger. Moaning in mindless surrender, she let the first twinges of her orgasm engulf her. Lex must

have known she was coming, because suddenly he slowed and prolonged the blaze that threatened to consume her.

She screamed his name again and again. As her body came back under some measure of control, she felt him pull out of her. He groaned, then kept moving his hand to gain his release. She wouldn't, couldn't let him do that—not after the tremendous organism she just experienced.

Rueann quickly got off the table and used her mouth to help him. She used every wile to woo his cock to believing he still fucked her. After a few minutes, she pulled her mouth away, and felt his hot serum hitting her breasts. She moved forward again and lapped her tongue over his moist shaft, as she rubbed her breast against his leg.

Lex helped her to stand, and the chill inside the old mill made her shiver.

“We better get dressed,” he said.

Rueann quickly put back on her sweater, she noticed Lex watching her.

“We’re up pretty high, the storm has worsened. Maybe we should stay here until the snow lets up some.” Lex moved to the door and opened it slightly.

A gush of cold air came inside the mill, snow spotted the floor beside the doorway. The storm intensified and it seemed they’d be stuck there for a while.

She stepped behind him and placed her hands around his torso. “Lex, I do love you and I’m sorry for not believing you.”

“I know, Rue. Let’s just forget it. Believe me, I want to. I just want to see that ring on your finger and know that you’re mine forever.”

“I am, Lex.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rueann pulled the car off the side of the road by her grandparent's cottage. Both her granddad and grandmom met them at the door.

"Did you find it?"

"Yes, Grandmom, believe it or not, we did." Rueann held the Heart of Pearl out to her grandmother. "It's just as beautiful as you said it was. I see you're feeling better and out of bed."

Her grandmother looked fondly at the necklace for a few moments. "Your granddad and I were worried. We heard about the storm the other day and became worried when we didn't hear from you."

"Yes, that was a bad storm, but it only lasted over night. We were able to get back to the cottage the next day. The drive back wasn't so bad." Lex hugged her grandmother and then placed his arm around Rueann's shoulder.

"Oh, Joseph, will you look at that? See, I told you everything would work out. Are you two reconciled then?"

Lex gave her grandmother a curious look, then winked at her.

Rueann smiled. "Yes, we did reconcile. In fact, we're going to get married." She held her hand out so her grandmother could see the ring.

"Oh, look, Joseph, a diamond. It worked."

"What worked?" Rueann looked at her grandparents.

"There's magic on those mountains. I must confess, dear, I wasn't really sick. I just knew if you two went up there, everything would work out. And it has."

"Thanks to the Heart of Pearl," her granddad said.

"What do you mean? Are you saying you tricked us?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but your granddad and I just want your happiness. We knew Lex and you belong together. I used the necklace's magic to get you two to spend time together."

Rueann took the necklace back from her grandmother and looked at it oddly. “It’s just a necklace, Gram, though beautiful. There’s really no magic or mystery about it. Lex finally persuaded me to hear the truth and I actually listened.”

“If you say so, dear.” Her grandmother turned and walked back into the house.

“Do you think this elevation has gotten to her? Imagine that, she thinks a necklace brought us together again. I think we should call the doctor, Granddad.” Rueann laughed as she took Lex’s hand and they walked inside the cottage.

“The elevation hasn’t gotten to her, not as much as the elevation has gotten to you two. It wasn’t the necklace that brought you back together, it was the mountain.” Her granddad chuckled.

Rueann didn’t mind him teasing her, because she knew it was probably true. The elevation made her see reason, and if not for that, she likely would never have listened to him.

“I felt strange at times on the mountain. Rueann, didn’t you feel it?” Lex stopped, turning toward her.

“I don’t know, maybe. It certainly was beautiful, even when the storm came, but it was really amazing when the sun peeked out.”

“I think that’s where we should spend our honeymoon. We’ll come back here in the spring, when it’s sunny and warmer. There was something special about that mountain.”

Joseph grinned, taking his pipe from his mouth. “It’s magic, I tell you.”



**Silver Linings** *by Mae Powers*

In Silvera, Kaden and Xera are use to cultural taboos amongst the Wysp fairies. Will they dare to shrug off strictures and follow their hearts?

**Silver Linings**  
**by**  
**Mae Powers**

Xera felt the leaves of the diamente brush against her one-half bared shoulder. It was like a sharp touch, albeit how slight it scrapped her. She jerked from the tiny sting and stood back to look at the shiny, white stalked flower setting in a ruby vase. Its teardrop shaped stems and flowers glistened at her, almost angrily. With her nature attunement, she knew the richly coveted gem flowers were sensitive to Fae or human touch. She was blessed and cursed with both.

The diamente was just another reminder that she worked for the upper class of Silveran Wysps, instead of being one of their classed ilk. For all the lush beauty of the gem-tree rainforest country she lived within, she still would not have it otherwise. Her life had been good, being born to a traveling human and her half Wysp-Fae mother. They had settled in the housing branches of Silvera's lower-middle class district subdivision of Grove-tree, and had made a decent and comfortable living. When the great quake had devastated part of Silvera, her parents had been swallowed up in the giant jaws of a crack in the earth, along with half the residents of Grove-tree. She had been away at school at the time in the sister Wysp city of Torch at the time.

Ten years and she still had set backs with her loss. She'd finished those last few months at the Fae-wizard academy, but had immediately come back the day after graduation, when she'd finally been told that her parents had died in that awful quake.

The city of Silvera had been reconstructed and rebuilt at a fast rate over the years, and even now, she could still see inklings from the loss. The quakes were rare, and not always so devastating, but any Fae or non-Fae seer had not foretold the large one.

The diamente whispered a sway of motion as the breeze from the open shutters filtered through. She immediately went to the large bay window and slid the rare translucent glass shut, so the diamente would not get a chill upon its delicate features, which might cause one

of its fragile petals to drop. She did not want her lofty customer to charge her with the cost of its breakage.

Sighing she glanced around the large sitting and entertainment room. No one was around and the owners of the lush tree house condo would not be back for a few hours. She made a little movement with her hand, ever slightly, and a tiny whirl of glittering magic swirled into the room and went merrily twirling around the tree house of her rich clients. In a few minutes, it came back towards her. She held out her hand and the empath magic twirl hopped happily into her hand. She touched it softly with her other index finger and it dwindled down to a soft purring circle in her hand before it completely disappeared.

“One must always thank magic for its help.” Her mother use to tell her, “No matter how small it’s helpful to you.” Xera couldn’t help but agree. Her father may have been human, but he also was an empathic nature being. She had been bequeathed the best of both their talents and would always be thankful for them.

Once more, she glanced around the large room, to make sure everything glistened and was cleaned properly. The room beamed happily at her. Even though the rich owners had wanted the human cleaning touch, she’d learned early on that homes sometimes reflected their owners and both human and magic were needed to make the house itself feel pampered and cleaned.

She walked to the front door, and it slid open waiting for her to leave. She knew it would self-lock after she left. With a shrug, she went from the spacious tree condo and out onto the wide deck. Very wide for the condo even. She had only seen one more opulently spacious than this one and that belonged to the fourth princeling Fae of Silvera. The place she was headed next. Like the owners of this condo, he was out for the day. It had said so on his magic itinerary, when his private wizard secretary had contacted her the other day to come and clean the tree-mansion (palace) while the princeling was away. He liked his privacy and didn’t have many servants.

She made her way down several tiers of swinging wooden walkways, not coming across too many people, thankfully. She then turned down another walkway that led upwards. This airy, wood-vine bridge was wider than the ones that connected through the lofty tree homes, making it a more used thoroughfare. Fae and other magic and non-magic beings passed her here and there as she walked upwards. She knew she could have used her hidden wings, but up in the long-branches it was considered best to walk the canopied byways. Not

only that, it was trendy and an unwritten rule to do so here in the upper class sections of the wide faring city-tree world.

She went up a narrow, but long side-swinging path, and finally saw the wooden icon that marked the private home of the fourth princeling. It interspersed several floors up into the wooden oakwish tree. The tree's larger branches closed over the threshold for a few moments and she felt unseen guardian eyes upon her. She flashed the work emblem from her necklace and waved it across the wooden and bejeweled property icon that was near the double glass and wood doors. The tree branches glimmered for a few moments, while its magicom mind filtered her identity and her reason for being here. It moved its branches out of the way. The doors glimmered, too, for a few seconds and then gently creaked open to allow her to enter.

Once inside the large foyer, the doors closed and locked behind her. She took a few steps into the foyer and looked around. It was a large open area, with doorways leading into different directions. Some stepping paths led upwards and some led into other rooms downward and upwards. It was a myriad of glittering and subdued decorative styles. It awaited her patiently and she moved towards the nearest stairs.

As she toured the upper floors, assessing what needed cleaning and what didn't, both by magic and non-magic means, she took in the simple yet stylish grandeur of the palatial condo. It was only the second time she had been here, the first, a dozen years. Home from college that summer, her parents showed her more of their cleaning business, catering to the elite. At the time, the fourth princeling's parents lived with him. He'd away for the day, and Xera hadn't met him in person. As for the condo, nothing had not changed, only the house seemed quieter now than before.

She finally came to the largest bedroom. There she saw a huge circular bed with curtained windows behind it. The pale blue satin covers were rumpled, and she wondered if from a bad night's sleep or a wild party upon the bed. She sensed it had been the first. Holding out her hands, she let her empathy embrace the room. It was not something she felt comfortable doing often, because of the invasion to one's privacy. But briefly, she sensed that indeed the room felt sorrow and loneliness, despite its soft beauty of oak and blue and gold décor. She lowered her hands and went to the large curtained windows hanging high from the wooden ceiling. She took one and pulled it back.

She gasped at the beauty she saw from the soft blue tinted windows. The palatial bedroom overlooked a rare upstream that ran from the ground over a mile below. Up and down it meandered, twining through the trees. Then it streamed past the bedroom window before it went downwards in a zigzag, breathtaking flowing trail, towards the hill nearby, where it sloped over the hill and filtered out into the immense Wysple Lake just beyond the lush hillscape. She caught her breath as gamma fish with their iridescent beauty floated and swam merrily by on their journey to the lake. She knew the stream started from the ocean of Trill beyond the borders of Wysp; yet this was the largest upriver on the tri continents of her world Kakth, which she'd learned in long hours of world history in college.

Birds of rare beauty, some she didn't know even the name of, flew by the windows. She pulled the curtain back further and hooked its taper onto the jewel hook at the frame of the sliding windows. She slowly opened the window slightly to let the soft breeze into the musty room. She then moved to the other large curtain and began to open it. Suddenly, she stopped and swirled around, feeling another presence within the room. Yet, when she looked to the open doorway, no one was there. She realized then, the aura or presence of the person would precede him or her, it being a powerful one.

No one was supposed to be here. She preferred cleaning when no one was around, that being quicker and easier for her, and most of the clients she cleaned for did not mind, since she was bonded and of long standing in the communities. Something made her stand behind the curtain, to one side. She was glad she did, for a soft, but heavy shadow entered the room. Then its owner followed.

The thick curtains barely hid her. She peered around one side to see a large being, half man, half beast, enter the room, but not from the bedroom door, from a side doorway she had not noticed. It was located behind the large mirror imbedded in a wall at the far end of the room. It was a Krakken-beastman. She stifled a gasp. Those beings were terrain dwellers. Why had one come up to the tallest part of the gem-tree forest?

She'd never met one before, but had seen pictures of them in her study books long ago. They lived in the lowest parts of the forests of Silvera. She'd only been down-earth a few times to find rare herbs she used for medicines and cleaners for her business and her side remedy shop she opened on weekends. What indeed was this large man-creature doing here in the princeling's bedroom? It was near seven

feet tall, nearly towering over her by a foot. Its shaggy, layered hair glistened like a rare rock gem, unpolished but recently uncovered. His, its, shoulders were massive, but his body was muscular and although covered in a long tunic of forest green, she could tell how powerful his limbs were.

For the first time in a long while, she felt a stirring between her legs. She'd been with a human and had a few Elven lovers, but this was something more powerful, more pulsatingly striking than she'd ever felt before. It sniffed the air, and then spun around, looking directly at the curtains. It stood there almost frozen in surprise as she stepped out curiously from behind the curtain. Her own eyes widened and she could sense his sudden fear, as if being discovered at something he shouldn't have been doing. Or that he'd been found out about a dark secret he was hiding. Then before he could move, his body started shaking ferociously. He groaned and slumped to the floor.

Xera automatically moved nearer. The beast man lay in a heap, for a few mere seconds, then a twinkling swirl of stars and silver mist appeared around him. He began to change before her, in to a full-blown man. Soon it dissipated leaving a naked, amber haired Adonis in its wake. She let out a small gasp as she surveyed his well tanned and toned physique. His long hair lay half over his gaunt face, but it was an arresting face that she became drawn to. His legs moved in a groaning jerk and she bit her bottom lip as she saw what lay between his muscular thighs.

The man could feel her deeply with that thick shaft of his. She felt the moistness between her thighs thicken. Gawd he was devastating to look upon. Suddenly, he turned flat on his back, and the most incredibly arresting sapphire blue yes stared up at her. She recognized the face immediately. Staring up at her with a bewildered look in his misty eyes, lay Fourth Princeling of Silvera, Kaeden Tiraine. A royal born Fae, who had just morphed from a Krakken Man-Beast into the most handsome, sexiest male she'd ever beheld. And for the life of her own sanity and libido, she really was at a loss as to what to make of him and his incredible secret.

\* \* \* \*

Kaden moved through the low-lying bushes with ease, brushing those away that got in his way. He loved it down here in the lower layers of the dense rainforest. The creatures were much quieter and friendlier at times, than some other beings. Moreover, his alter, morph

persona fit better in with the deities and beings of the down-earth terrain. Even as a child he had liked sneaking down to the grassy and mysterious realm of the land layer of Silvera.

He had learned about his shifting ability and curse since his mid late teens. Yet, despite his conflicts about being of a changeling heritage, he had found a way to deal with it. Most of the time that is. His parents had never told him about the morph lineage, he'd always thought of himself as a regular Fae Wysp. After all, he'd had the larger wings of royalty and the upper class. Yet, his Krakken beast had large wings too, though they changed to earthier colors than his blue and emerald ones, when he did become the man-beast.

Below the high rising canopies of the jem-trees and multi layers of the rain forest of Wysp, Kaden found peace in the lowest of the forests, where hardly any jem-trees and vegetation were found. However, the flora and fauna of such trees as oaken and maplaire and huge rosewoods were as magnificent as any above the main ground of the forest. Here he'd seen other life as well. Some Fae he'd seen above ground, but mostly Krakken, a myriad of beast and woodlen folk, like wood nymphs.

Mainly one nymph in particular, he thought as he moved along a dense trail back towards his birth tree. A beautiful blonde haired sprite, whom he'd never seen up close, but had seen gathering herbs and rustic leaves to place in a knap sack. Yet, she was a tall lithe beauty, who's golden blonde tresses and whose quick movements often made him wonder if perhaps there was some Fae ancestry in the nymph. And the strangest thing of all, he'd seen her one time with large beautiful wings. And everyone knew wood nymphs didn't sport wings. In fact, large gauzy wings were mostly purported by royal birthed Fae.

Yet, all in all, though it mystified him, he thought it no odder than if she had probably known about his particular hereditary affliction. Kaden, saw the sun shine barely filtering through the trees, and knew it was time to get back to the tree-home of his. He found his tree with ease. He stood looking at it for a moment, glad he had let the bushes grow high around the old oaken beauty. The door to the magic stairwell would be well hidden behind it. It was tall and beautiful, with many years of wisdom to grace its bark. It had been the tree most of his family and ancestors had lived and been born in – well its large upper branches. He glanced to his left and then his right before moving the large fernah bushes away, and then waved his hands over

the small indent in the large bottom of the tree and a door appeared. He immediately entered its darken entrance way and the door quietly and quickly shut behind him.

He felt for the stairs, and his eyes glowed in the dark, letting him see even better in the dark hollow of the tree. He touched the stair-ladder, and with ease, he glided, climbed the stairs that would lead him way up into the main canopy of the Silveran Wysp rain forest and to the doorway that would lead to his bedroom. Within long minutes, he was there, and opened the door that was hidden behind a large dressing mirror embedded within the secret door's outer side. He knew he had to get back before the change overtook him. He'd long figured out how many hours and when it over took him. Any second now, he'd change back. He liked to be up in his private rooms when that happened, and usually wasn't late for that change to take place.

Kaden felt the presence of another when he first opened the doorway. Moments later, he saw the Fae woman step out from behind the curtains. He'd forgotten that today was the cleaning time of his condo. Yet, it was the woman in particular whom he had been surprised by being there. It was his wood nymph. Yet dressed in a handkerchief tunic and soft brown stocking pants, he saw her ilk to be that of Fae. Minus the wings, most full-blooded and bodied Fae had. His surprise, culminated with his sudden awareness of her sexual appeal hit him strangely and incredibly strong. Then before he could move towards her or anything, the transformation hit him. He fell to the floor unconscious.

Now, he stirred in the large bed, awakening to find himself covered with the blue silken comforter and totally naked. How had he gotten here? Had his beautiful nymph pulled his body into the bed? Where was she? As if in answer to his questions the door to his bedroom opened and he saw someone enter. He inhaled sharply at the exquisite woman entering, who carried a tray of food and beverage with her. She moved slowly towards him, when she saw that he was awake. He shifted himself and edged into a half sitting position, careful not to move to rapidly.

"I am called Xera, Prince Kaden. I hope I'm not wrong in assuming that's who you are."

He smiled at her as she sat the tray down on a nearby bed-inn table. "I am Kaden. Why have I never seen one such as you before? I thought an angelic Fae must you be, upon my awakening."



Her smile made his heart melt and his shaft stir with burgeoning life. "I've always cleaned when the owner is away. I am bonded and in good standing. I... will not say anything to anyone about...well your transformation."

He motioned for the side of the bed, for her to sit. "I am at a loss myself. You are the first to know of it, besides my parents and a few close aides of the family. I am a changeling by heritage. I would appreciate it if you could not tell anyone. For some reason, my instincts tell me I can trust you, Xera."

He studied her as she tentatively sat beside the bed. "I can be, Prince Kaden."

"Please, just call me Kaden."

"Perhaps. I am not from the upper canopy of the Silvera. I'm too use to the formalities, your Highness."

He reached out to swiftly take one of her long fingered hands in his larger one. She shivered under his stare and touch, yet he was not mistaken in the physical interest she had in him. Prettily she blushed under his gaze and it pleased him. He tightened his thighs together and hoped she hadn't noticed the rise of his rod beneath the cover. By the Wysp deities, he wanted her like no other who had ever caught his interest. She was like ambrosia to his sexual palate. Her hand trembled within his, but so did her body as he leaned forward.

Ever so slowly, his face neared her. She blinked, but she did not move away. "I want to kiss you." When she did nothing more than nod slightly he leaned in closer, until their lips were just a breath's caress away.

Tentatively he opened his mouth and then brushed her bottom lip with the briefest of caresses with the tip of his long tongue. Her soft intake made him lower his lips completely over hers. Her lips trembled beneath his momentarily before they widened and she pressed hers closer to his own. He let out a soft growl-groan and then firmly pressed his mouth to hers. Hot and sweet, like wild berries, she tasted. Succulent and warm lips melted into his kiss. Slowly her hand came up to caress his cheek. They leaned in closer to each other.

He felt as if he had really come home. No class distinction lay between them in that simple, but heated kiss. He put one arm around her and drew her closer. His kiss deepened. Her tongue darted into his mouth, flickering, tasting. She let a sigh of contentment escape her lips and then pulled back from him. He felt a great loss when she pulled his arm away from her. He looked deeply into her eyes, seeing

wonder and finally regret within them. And in that moment, he knew his heart had been captivated.

“Your lips are an aphrodisiac, Xera. Let me tasted them again.”

She shook her head softly and moved off and away from the bed. “This is not right. I do not regret the kiss. I’m not of your class, Prince Kaden. I must be going.”

“Wait.” However, she was out the door quickly. Kaden rolled out of the bed to run after her before he remembered being naked. He grabbed a robe hanging from the back of the door and put it on as he ran out of the room. He felt better after the rest, but still felt out of breath as he raced down the long winding stairs. However, by the time he reached the bottom stair, she was out the door.

He stopped just in front of the closed ornate front door. “Damn.”

He knew he could not chase after her. It wouldn’t look right. He knew, that he didn’t want the other beings out there to think he was chasing his mistress. No, she would never be the type to become his mistress. Lover, perhaps, but never his mistress. He wanted her to be so much more. Yet, he couldn’t treat her like a commoner either. He’d felt something in her that was anything but common. Kaden trekked to his private study. There at his desk he sat down and viewed his magicom.

“Tell me about the Home Cleaner who came today.” He vocally commanded the magical electronic device with its large oval shiny screen.

It spoke back to him a sweet musical voice, telling him about Xera of Grovetree, her background that was known, where she went to school, and what her known magics were. He saw the common stuff that was known or could be known about her, just as he might have found out about anyone. Yet, though he read that her father was human, and a highly trained empath, not a lot was known about her mother.

He smiled to himself. Well he had one of the best knowledgeable upgrades of magicoms ever built by Wizard Electronics. He could dig up what he wanted to know. It took him less than an hour to find her mother’s background. He was indeed surprised. Did she know then that her mother, her half-human mother, came from a royal human family? Xera’s mother was the offspring of a human and Wysp Fae father. However, Xera’s grandfather had died from a rare magical ailment, before the child’s birth had been announced as an heir. Kaden learned that another sibling, cousin had inherited Xera’s

mother's place. Yet, it must not have bothered Xera's mother, because she married a commoner human.

Kaden knew then that he had finally found a woman that could share his life and his secret. As he would hers. Yet, he would court her swiftly. And show her that class differential did not make a difference to him. He had a lot to think about. He typed out a message and had the magicom send it to Xera. He knew she had a magicom of some kind, because his cleaning bill was on his financial logs. He grinned and rose to go take a shower. He had a lot to think about and do. Xera was a stubborn and flighty woman who needed a lot of convincing. Something he was going to enjoy doing. His wood nymph would not get away from him this time. Kaden's heart lightened. And his mind surprised his heart. He really had fallen in love with her, almost at first site, since he'd first seen her in the forest. But seeing her in person had cinched it.

Now the fates would be on his side. He had much more to find regarding the laws of Wysp, particularly Silveran Laws. There had to be one that would allow him to make Xera his wife. He just hoped she would want to become his bride. She'd been raised that the old class did not mix privately with the upper class. He'd always hated that snobbish differential. He knew he had some power to change that rule. Kaden rose, and merrily went to go think out his plans.

\* \* \* \*

Xera rushed down the nearest wooden walkway. She only briefly glanced back and was relieved that Kaden had not followed her. She had loved his kiss, and it had melted her heart. No male had ever affected her body, mind and heart so blatantly and with such fierce need as the Fourth Princeling had, and still did. What had possessed her? She knew she couldn't leave him lying there and she had her cleaning mini tornadoes help her to put him to bed. When he'd awakened and looked at her with those large beautiful eyes, she'd fallen immediately under his allure. Her mother had said the clouds of her heart would one day reveal the silver linings of love, when she least expected it.

And she had not expected it this day. She'd been fond of a few men, yes, and even fancied a few in and out of bed, but nothing so explosive as the way she wanted and cared for Kaden. The thought pleased her and then startled the life out of her. She'd been happy with the way of her life after her parents' death and to have it disordered by that devastating but simple kiss scared her with a fierce

startledness. She had run from something and someone for the first time in her life.

Not to mention that it would have been awful for them both to be caught together. She and he were from different class branches. He lived over a mile up in the trees, just like the other lofty rich Fae. Yet, he wasn't lofty, as she might have expected. Her empathic abilities found his kind nature and troubled heart. He had been the Krakken she'd seen briefly one day in the woods, and had run from it, not knowing if he was friend or foe. Yet, she had not wanted to be caught with her wings all out and a glitter.

She'd never shown her wings to anyone other than her parents. It had been too personal. Yet, with him, she'd wanted to for the first time in her life. Moreover, she noticed his emotions, and found him glad to share his own secret with someone. She wanted the same, and to have him sense her own needs startled her. His loneliness found a home within his heart. Yet, she'd been much too aware of their class differences to allow them to become more. Xera was relieved when she got home. She closed up the home shop and went to the back of her shop where she lived in a small, but pleasingly comfortable four-room treehome. She was a bit too unsettled to eat or do anything around the house.

Xera went to her back patio and looked over the forest. The sun, still low in the mid-afternoon, danced merrily through the lower part of the giant gem-oak trees of New Grove. She took in a deep breath and felt relaxed again. The crisp air made her feel refreshed. She found herself walking down the patio steps leading to the next public landing. Two landings down, she made it to the rarely used public garden path that led out to the bottom forest where she often walked to find her herbs and just enjoy nature. She walked for some hours by herself until the sky settled into a soft darkness of ebbing dark-lit beauty.

It was so different looking upon the life of the lower forest, as she had seen it from Kaden's bedroom window way up in the uppermost part of the canopy of the rainforest. That, too, took her breath away, and she admitted to herself that she loved the upstream and the fish fly-swimming by. It was all so incredible. Some part of her felt as if she belonged there, and yet she actually knew she'd always love it down-earth. At night, when she thought no one was around she would come here and walk to the open meadows and allow her wings to

reappear. Then she would spread her large butterfly shaped wings, soar into the moonlight, and become one with the winds of night.

That's what she wanted to do now, become one with the wind and the moon and all things magical in the air. She found her clearing and glanced around herself, making sure no one was around. Then she made her wings visible. She arched and spread them, flapping them gleefully. Then sprinting, she jumped into the next breezy air current and flew upwards, flapping her wings briskly, gaining momentum with each large splay of her wings. She closed her eyes and twirled around and around. Oh yes, this felt so right. Yet, because she was of mixed breed, she'd always been shy about her large wings, ones she knew mostly only royalty had, or those sometimes produced by the offspring of a royal born and commoner.

She'd asked her mother, and she'd told her that her grandfather had been a Wysp princeling, who'd coupled with Xera's grandmother, a human, hence making Xera's mother a halfling. Yet, her mother had never mentioned that Xera's grandparents had married. It didn't seem to bother Xera's mother, but her mother had said she did not need to keep her wings a secret. There was nothing to be ashamed of in Xera's heritage. Her mother and father had been proud of her and it was Xera, herself who had always kept her wings a private thing. Once in Faeling School, a few other kids had teased her about her wings and heritage, and Xera had kept them to herself since.

She knew nearly nothing as wondrous as winging the wind, except walking down-earth in the forest. Two of her favorite things in life. Only someone to share those with would make her otherwise nice life spectacular. Kaden had come into her life. Krakken beasts loved their forests, she'd learned that, but Fae men loved the air and being up high, she'd seen that. He had the best of both worlds. It had made her soar higher than she'd ever soared before. Suddenly she became aware of a powerful presence.

She quickly opened her eyes and saw a shimmering shadow form approaching her with rapid speed. Immediately, Xera flew away amongst the dark clouds with their glittering silver linings. She whisked behind the darkest ones and held her breath, hoping whomever or what ever had not followed her. For some seconds she waited and silence stayed with her. She slowly let out a deep breath and felt relieved she had not been spotted.

Xera turned and froze, just as she had in Kaden's bedroom. He was right there in front of her, flapping his great wings, but she had

not heard him. He was swift and quiet. She knew then that it had been his shadowy image she'd seen in the sky. Only for a brief second did she become scared and then his hopeful look melted her heart and she wasn't afraid of him anymore.

She smiled slightly, and asked softly. "How did you know I would be flying?"

"After you left, I waited until evening and I too had to spread my great wings and fly, to be alone, to think. I could feel your presence. I did not mean to alarm you, sweet nymph."

She grinned. "It was you in the forest, the Krakken I thought I saw. Your secret is safe with me." She hoped he knew that in his heart."

His wings beat in rhythm with her heartbeats. "I do, Xera. Do you know how lovely you look in the night with those beautiful wings of yours flapping as strong as my heart beats for you right now."

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Kaden, I thought the same thing now, how it feels that your wings beat as rapidly and emotionally as my heart."

He moved but a hairs breath from her. "Sweet, Xera, I didn't think that I could fall this instantly and euphorically in love, but I have. With you. Do not let class come between us—nor my secret. I do care for you and desire you. You have but to say yay or nay. My heart, my wings, and my life are in your beautiful hands. Share my life with me and be my wife."

She melted even more, both her heart and her body. Desire flooded her veins. She bit her bottom lip and knew his beseeching eyes captured her soul and her body. She did not want to deny him. And, she could feel it in his emotion filled voice and empathically in his heart, that he greatly cared for her. His eyes smoldered with desire.

"Soar with me to the stars, through the clouds. Walk with me down-earth and let my home become yours. Or I will dwell where ever you wish to, my heart."

She held up her hands and joined hers with his outstretched ones. "You make me feel as if all of those are my home, dear Kaden. The desire and joy I felt from your kiss scared me. Being up here amongst the stars and clouds give me hope that nothing could come between us."

"Then follow your heart and embrace me with your love, Xera, as I would like to do so to you with mine." He pulled his hands from

hers and opened his arms wide. "Love me and let me make such wondrous love to you here and now."

"I would like that very much, dearest Kaden." She flew directly into his open arms, and wound her arms around his chest.

Kaden's mouth bore quickly and heatedly down upon hers. She returned his kiss with fierce abandon, and all her fears melted as the heat in her sex enveloped her wanting to experience what his hardening shaft promised her this night. His hips pressed against hers, letting her feel the strength of his desire. She shivered with an overwhelming need, only he could fulfill. Passion filled not only her mind, soul and heart, but her body screamed for his touch and fulfillment only he could bring to her.

Kaden grabbed her even tighter against his body, and thrust upwards, further up into the air. Winged bodies met in a fierce embrace and searing passionate kiss of lips. Xera held tight to his massive clear chest. Sparkles of his aura heated the wispy streams of air bombarding her. She gasped for air as he soared higher and higher until they were in the midst of a silver gray cloud, whose linings only illuminated the love and passion they were frantically feeling. Then suddenly, it was quiet except for the two of them. No sounds of birds, or any natural object.

Xera held tight to him, gaining her composure back. "Ah, Kaden, you make me feel as if anything is possible. I desire you as much as there are stars in the sky."

"Sweet nymph, and I you, more than the beauty of the star themselves, and the rainforest in which we both feel at home in. Do not let class or secrets or anything come between what was meant to be. Believe in me and this sudden love that we've been gifted with. Know my heart and my body are yours forever."

"As mine are yours, dear Kaden."

Then his full lips came down over hers again, and she felt the wind being drained from her in a most pleasant way—no, in a most enticing, breathtaking passion that made her shiver with the intensity of it.

"Then know my love in all ways, Xera." He said between heated kisses.

She wound her arms around his neck, holding tightly on to him, but pressing her lithe body against his as solidly as possible. She returned his kisses with matched maddening passion. "I do love you, Kaden. I've been such a fool. Love me as wild as the wicked winds

our wings do beat. And I will love you with my body this night and every night from now on in many ways too.”

Kaden groaned against her lips, deepening his kiss. With one arm, he held her against him; with his free hand, he caressed every inch of her luscious body he could. Kaden quickly removed her flimsy tunic and soft pantalets from her body with her wiggling assistance. She helped him quickly to remove his flowing tunic also, letting it disappear down into the clouds as he had her clothing.

They began to touch each other, each feeling the growing excitement and need of the other. Wings flapped in unison and faster as their desires grew into a fierce need for each other. Her hands explored his body, needing to feel the hardness of his strong heat. She wanted him to feel her physically even more powerfully than she felt him empathically. Trickle of wetness flowed between her thighs as her desire for him grew rapidly.

He touched her sex, feeling her moist and ready for him. He stroked her softly at first, but as she leaned into his hand, he thrust his fingers into her, sliding them in and out of her hot wet depths. She leaned her head back, and at the same time hitched her legs around his hips. She pushed up and down on his fingers, feeling her desires flow over them.

“Take me now, Kaden. I need you right now!”

“Yes, love, yes!”

Kaden ached with suppressed need. He wanted to be inside of her, sheathed inside her heated walls. His long thick shaft slid into her in one fluid, hard movement. The wind roared around them as their desires became a tempest of whirling emotions. Xera tightened her legs around him. Kaden held her by the waist and she leaned back again into the empty sky. His head came down and he suckled on the hardened nubs of her full breasts. Her breasts were on fire with his delicious suckling.

Her hips pressed wildly to meet his firm jabs. She boiled inside with such a need it inflamed her mind, body and soul. Her body ached with hot desire and his love engulfed her. She felt his fiery, intense flesh moving inside of her moist walls. He shoved harder and harder inside her.

Tensions of repressed desires exploded from them both. They held and jerked against each other with fierce abandoned passion. Pleasures as strong as the rawest forces of nature intensified within them both, bringing them to a zenith of volcanic and magical



proportions. Winds of change encompassed them both. Passion flared into life of renewed hope and love. Nature's heat consumed the two lovers making them soar to incredible heights.

Their liquid desires joined, making them bond as deeply as any elemental force could be combined. Xera's hands tightened on a solid, fleshy waist. Their hips thrust into one last orgasmic jolt of pleasure. Together, winged beings of might and magic whirled in the air in each other's arms, with the world at their feet and the clouds as their kingdom, governed by love. Their wings beat slower, but with still powerful movements, as they stayed locked in each other's embrace, miles high in the night sky. Their hearts still beat rapidly, but not with just exhaustion from their intense bout of lovemaking, but also with the incredible wonder of their unified love.

Xera knew she would never have to worry about loneliness again, or having to hide her wings when she was with him. Nor, she felt, would he ever again have to hide his secret of being a changeling beast, for he now had her to confide in, as she did him. She moved against him, his shaft swelled within her. His body shivered, no quaked suddenly against her, his large arms seem to get even larger.

She pulled her head back and saw that his face started changing. His eyes glittered with renewed desire, but it was the face of the beast man that now stared down at her. Lust, accented with a silver lining of love, flickered within his deep-set eyes. A low growl escaped his thick lips and he cupped her from behind. She grinned wickedly up at him and nodded. He let out a low and deep growl of desire.

Kaden's powerful rod shoved into her once more. She gasped at the force filling her. He was larger in man-beast form, yet her slickened channel took him in, as he pressed in and out of her slowly at first. Her wings closed and she furled them behind her. She held onto his large neck while he cupped her buttocks, bringing her up against his hips as close as he possibly could. For a long, slow while he moved hard and softly in and out of her wetness, then as she moved in rhythm with his animalistic movements, his thrusts became more frantic and powerful.

Hot intense pleasure built up within her again. He growled his need to be unified with her again. She shoved against him as hard as he did her. His shaft enlarged within her, filling her with his wild fiery passions. Together they came hard and fast and furious. Then he held her tight, and flew downwards as the spasms of their orgasms

overcame them. Within minutes, he had flown them through the open windows of his tree-condo bedroom.

With a wave of his hand, the covers pulled back and he gently lowered their bodies onto the large bed. Contentedly they lay wrapped within each other's arms, sated by lust and warmed by the love that enveloped them as perfectly as their embraced bodies. Together they slept, while their minds filled with glorious thoughts, which outlined the silver linings of their dreams. Dreams they would soon make into a reality of a wondrous new life for them both.

**MY ANGEL *by Beverly Rae***

Free-spirited, sex loving, Casey Williams adores men, all kinds of men. Yet, she's never met one who could tame her or win her heart. That is, until she winds up bungee jumping in tandem with devilishly handsome, Josh Morgan.

## **MY ANGEL**

**By**

**Beverly Rae**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

“Casey, slow down. Are you in a hurry to die?”

At Tilly’s question, Casey stopped, turned, and beckoned her best friend to catch up. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, Til, don’t be so dramatic. We’re going bungee-jumping, not to an execution.”

Tilly’s limp brown hair hung in her face as she struggled to keep up with her friend’s long strides. “I am not being dramatic. I’m trying to get you to realize life is worth living.”

Casey gripped Tilly by the hand, dragging her along and laughed. “Funny. That’s what I’m trying to get you to realize. Live a little. Have an adventure. Get a thrill while your blood’s still pumping through your veins.”

Tilly blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “Right. It’s pumping through my veins, and that’s where I want to keep it.”

Casey paused and wrapped an arm around her mousy friend’s shoulder to push her forward. “You’re always such a worrier. Have I ever gotten hurt? Have you?”

“Well, no. But it only takes one time to die.”

“Tilly, you went through the training session with me. Didn’t you hear how safe this is? As long as you jump with a professional, credible outfit like these guys.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. But I figure any time someone makes you sign an indemnity form, what you’re about to do is dangerous. Maybe even life-threatening.”

Casey laughed again, happy to have Tilly and her quick wit along for the fun. “No one’s forcing you to do this, you know.”

"I know. Like no one forced me to get weighed in front of a stranger, either. And then to write my weight on my hand? Talk about outing me."

"Then why did you insist on coming along?" She pointed at the group on the bridge overlooking the lake, which spread out for a mile below them. "They're waiting for us, Tilly. Move your butt." She let go of Tilly and sprinted toward the people getting ready to jump.

As she grew nearer, she scanned the odd assortment of would-be daredevils. Among them was a young couple kissing and fondling each other.

*Eck. Lovebirds.*

Next, her gaze fell on an older man biting his fingernails. When he noticed her looking at him, he yanked his fingers from his mouth and stuck both hands in his pants' pockets. His nervous smile morphed into the oh-so-familiar man-on-the-prowl leer.

*Oh, crap. Midlife crisis in progress.*

Casey cringed, knowing what lay ahead. Unfortunately for Mr. Midlife, a lay was nowhere in his future. At least, not with her.

She averted her eyes from the older gentleman and moved to the man standing with his back to her. When he pivoted around, her breath caught in her throat, plugged up by the drench of saliva in her mouth. If she weren't careful, she'd drool all over herself.

*Wow, oh, wow. An angel has landed.* She frowned, wondering where such an odd thought had come from, then let her mind move on to the study of *him*. Not being the religious type, she never talked like that. Like angels existed. And certainly not angels who gave her a flash of hot, throbbing desire.

The stranger's short, dark hair sparkled under the afternoon sun, picking out the bronze highlights woven through the russet strands. Glinting, compelling eyes captured hers, holding her to him, while a hint of stubble along his jaw enticed her to reach out and touch. He held his body, an athlete's body, in a casual, carefree stance, while he pulled out his t-shirt from the tucked-in position of his shorts. When he did, Casey caught a glimpse of stunning rock-hard abs and a trail of dark hair calling her name. *Follow me, Casey. Follow the trail to my heavenly delights.*

"Hell, yes, I'll follow you."

"I'm sorry?"

Casey forced her gaze away from Mr. Gorgeous to face the speaker. "What? Oh, did I say something out loud?"

An Asian gentleman wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the company name, *Flying Jumpers*, raised his eyebrows and checked his clipboard. "Are you Casey Williams?"

*Don't look at Mr. Honey-be-mine. Keep your eyes on the Jumper guy.*

"Uh, yeah. I am." Casey swiveled to take Tilly's hand, tugging her into the close group. "And this slowpoke is my best friend, Tilly Sherwood."

Jumper Guy made another check on his list. "Great. I'm your Jump Master, Mack."

*I know who I'd like to have as my master.* Casey focused her gaze on Mack, but her mind was on the hunk watching her. *Just like I know who'd I'd like to have jump me, too.*

"Let's get started. Everyone, if you'll pay close attention, I'll run down some reminders." Mack reached out to check the weights written on Tilly and Casey's right hands. He shot Tilly a questioning glance, rechecked her hand, and scribbled something on his notepad. Turning back to the group, he started repeating some safety measures already discussed in their initial training session.

Tilly, however, ignored the lecture. "Terrific. He thinks I'm too fat to jump. Not that I want to anyway, but I'd hate to be told I'm too fat for the rope to hold."

Casey kept her voice low and tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "Will you give yourself a break? I think they're just surprised at the number because you don't look like you weigh that much." She could feel Tilly's body tense up and hurried to add, "Because you're not fat. You're solid."

Tilly started to object, but Casey pulled her closer to whisper in her ear. "Will you check out Mr. Bod over there."

"What? Who cares? Casey, I'm not jumping. I'm here to stop you and, if I can't, I'll help recover your body. I'll even wait for the authorities, so I can officially identify your remains. But will you give this some more thought? *Pulease.*"

Casey watched the sexiest man she'd ever seen nod at the Jump Master's directions. He grinned a melt-your-knees-so-you'll-kneel-at-my-feet smile as a pudgy, slightly older man joined him. Towering well over six feet tall, his friend's mid-section wasn't the only big thing about him.

"Hey, check it out, Tilly. If the rope can hold Bigfoot there, it'll hold you with no problem."

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

“Isn’t he amazing? Not Bigfoot. His gorgeous friend. I’m telling you right now, I need that man in my bed.”

“What you need is your head examined.”

The Jumper Guy shot them an *oh-crap-troublemakers* glare at Tilly’s outburst and shook his head. “I hope you paid attention. What I said may save you from injury. Or worse.”

“Or worse?” The squeak in Tilly’s voice drew nervous titters from the other jumpers.

Sexy Man’s gigantic friend wiggled his fingers at Tilly and nodded. “Hi. Name’s Walter. This here is Joshua. Don’t worry. Nothing bad’s going to happen. Trust me. I know.”

Tilly blushed under the group’s perusal and offered the chubby giant half a smile. “From your mouth to God’s ears.”

Walter cocked his head at her as if she’d said something unusual. “Well, of course. How else?”

Casey didn’t hesitate to grab at the opening. “Hi. Nice to meet you. I’m Casey Williams and this wimp beside me is my friend, Tilly.” She gave Walter’s hand one quick shake and moved over in front of Joshua. “Hi, Josh. Can I call you Josh? Or can I just call you?” Casey raised an eyebrow to send him her obvious invitation. “Have you jumped before?”

His large puppy-dog eyes twinkled at her. “Nope. Never done anything.”

“Like this. He means he’s never done anything like this.” Walter slipped his hand over Casey’s, breaking her hold on Josh. “Never.”

“Me, either. Should be fun.” Was Walter trying to keep them apart or was it her imagination setting up roadblocks? Either way, she wouldn’t let anything get between her and her future love slave.

Mack didn’t give her time to figure out the answer. “Let’s get started. Who wants to go first?”

Casey turned to the group, surprised when no one offered to take the first dive. She nudged Tilly and nodded toward the harness he held in his hands. “How about you, Tilly? Be the first and get it over with?”

Tilly stepped back, right on top of Walter’s toe. She yelped, hopping up instead of away, stumbled, and landed in Walter’s arms.

“Ow.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

Walter steadied her and forgave her with a sloppy smile. "Hey, no problem. Getting stepped on by a pretty woman is worth the pain."

Casey fought to keep from rolling her eyes. Especially when she saw his sloppy smile returned with one of Tilly's sappy grins. Was their little connection lasting a bit too long? Casey shot her a questioning look, but Tilly missed it as she and Walter kept gazing into each other's eyes.

"Oh, for Pete's sake. I'll go first."

"How about we go together?" Josh winked and moved closer to her.

Pleased with his apparent interest, Casey fluttered her eyelashes at Josh as a zing of excitement raced through her. Jumping with Jammin' Josh would be nothing short of terrific.

But Mack squashed her hopes. "We don't do tandem jumps. Too dangerous."

Casey dipped her head at Mack, trying to decide whether to flirt him into reconsidering. "Are you sure? I mean, we signed the release, so if we're willing to take the risk, then why not?"

"Because our liability costs too much already. And I'd get fired. Sorry. Not happening."

Casey sighed and renewed her focus on Josh. "Okay, I understand. Sounded like a good idea at first because I'd love the company on the way down. You know. Someone to cling to as I scream." Man, would she love to scream for this guy. Scream as she creamed.

Josh's soulful eyes sent an ember to her abdomen, igniting the spark of a flame. "Me, too."

"I'm sorry, guys, but tandem jumping is out. Heads tend to bang together or cords get tangled."

Casey shrugged at Josh, hoping he was as disappointed as she was. "Maybe some other time." One of the organization's helpers placed his hand on her shoulder, shifting her attention away from Josh's sultry gaze. She studied the harnesses he held up, decided she didn't know which part went where, and stuck out her arms. "Okay. I'm ready. Hook me up."

Casey tried to follow the directions of the rep as he slung the shoulder and seat harness around her lean, athletic form. Once he'd fastened everything to the Mack's satisfaction, the rep started attaching jump cords to her legs. "Why so many harnesses, Jump



Master Mack?” Leaning her head forward, Mack shoved the protective headgear into place.

He pointed to the straps wrapped tightly around her legs. “The legs take the bulk of the strain from the rope. Although, remember, the cord will make the tug gradual and easy so there won’t be a big yank to your body at the end of the drop. The other harnesses are secondary and have their own attachment to the cord. However, the body harness is what makes the ride back up nicer, since you’ll be right side up when you’re pulled up to the platform.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember now. Yep, head’s up would be nicer.”

After checking the weight on her hand again, along with all the bindings and hooks, Mack tapped her on the shoulder. “You’re all set. Ready?”

Casey grinned at the teary-eyed Tilly. “Knock it off. I’ll be fine. You’ll see.” Tipping her head in Josh’s direction, she couldn’t help but add, “Too bad someone hard and firm couldn’t take the ride with me.”

As Josh’s eyes lit up as he opened his mouth to speak, Mack headed him off at the pass. “Again. Sorry. Here Casey, let me help you up on the railing.”

Tilly’s squeak brought another round of nervous titters from the group. “Casey, are you sure? Please reconsider.”

Walter took Tilly’s hand in a show of comfort. “I’ve been trying to get Josh to reconsider all day. Do something more, uh, normal. But, of course, he doesn’t have anything to lose considering he’s—”

“Walter.” Josh’s growl of warning sent shivers down Casey’s spine. Not that his low tone frightened her. Instead, the baritone rumble made her panties wet thinking about him growling at her in passion.

“Take it easy, buddy. I wouldn’t have told them.” Walter scoffed at Josh before turning his big grin on Tilly.

With Mack’s help, Casey gripped the railing and hoisted her body up and onto the foot wide plank. As instructed, she made fists for a person on either side of her to grasp and help steady her. Mack took her left hand while another strong grip steadied her right side. Glancing sideways, she noted with a surge of delight that Josh had taken the other position.

“Casey. Think.”

“Damn, you’re not my mother so stop acting like her.” Casey’s nerves jangled as only Tilly could rattle them, but Mack’s calm voice

helped soothe her irritation. "I'll count backward from five. On the count of one, you swan-dive outward. Remember to breathe. Oh, and try to relax and enjoy the flight."

Casey swallowed, shoving her stomach back down her throat. "Got it. I'm ready. Start counting."

Mack called to his crew. "Ready, everyone. Five. Four. Three."

Casey rolled her head and took a deep breath.

"Two. One!"

On the count of one, Casey bent her knees and pushed off the railing into a swan-dive.

"Bungee!"

Seconds passed before she realized the shout wasn't her own.

\* \* \* \*

Casey's heart pounded as the air whipped through her hair and her body gathered momentum, escalating from zero to breakneck speed in seconds. Adrenaline rushed through her and she cried out in exhilaration.

She laughed, joy puffing up her chest. But her laugh ended abruptly when a weight hit her, knocking the air from her and accelerating her dive toward the water below.

*What the hell?*

At first, stunned confusion kept her from recognizing the heavy form attached to her. Josh's arms squeezed her in a death grip as his face pressed nose to nose with hers. The grin covering his face did nothing to relieve the panic flooding into her and she folded her arms around him, afraid to let go of him.

"Wow, oh, wow!"

As the water rushed up to greet them, a gentle pull from the bungee cord started slowing their descent. Slowly, the speed dropped away.

Casey and Josh touched the water, dipping a part of their heads just below the surface, and Casey's breathing jerked through her in ragged pants. But her relief was short-lived as their combined torsos shot back into the air, heading for the bridge. Rocketing through the air for the second time, she closed her eyes and laid her head against Josh's wide shoulder. The wind whipped her wet hair into her face as they reached the zenith of their ascent, paused suspended in air for a moment, and then started the second drop.

"Don't worry, Casey."

His words did nothing to ease her fright as they continued to bounce into a few more rebounds. All she wanted was to touch firm ground again. Preferably in one piece. And away from the crazy person clinging to her. Sexy was good. But sexy *and* crazy?

At long last, the cord straightened out, leaving them with the tops of their heads a few feet from the water. Daring to peek, she found Josh watching her. Anger replaced fear in a flash as she spat out her words. "Are you nuts?" She glanced down at the water and then up to see the people on the bridge above hanging over the railing. "What did you do? *How* did you—?"

"You said you wanted to jump together. So I jumped right after you."

She gaped at him, unable to believe what he'd done. "But you aren't wearing a harness!" Whipping her head around, she gasped and dropped her jaw wider. "Where's your cord?"

"I jumped without one."

The smirk he gave her sent shivers zipping down her spine. "Shit. You really are crazy. You could have been killed!"

After a moment's reflection, she leaned away from him, drew back her hand and stuck him across the cheek. "Forget you! You could have killed *me*!"

He stared at her, confusion in his eyes. "No, Casey. You're safe with me."

She glared at him, unable to think of what to say next, when the sound of an outboard motor turned their heads. Racing from the middle of the lake, a speedboat with two men aboard skimmed over the water's surface, making a beeline straight for them.

"I hope that's the park ranger coming to haul your ass to jail."

"To where? Did I do something wrong?"

Could this nutcase not understand the seriousness of what he'd done? Casey shook her head and leveled her best weapon at her target. Using her most effective tool, she gritted her words at him. "Do you not get it? You jumped without a cord and endangered my life along with yours. Not that I can figure out how you did it." She darted her view from the bridge to the water and back to him. "Pretty damned amazing. Stupid. But amazing."

Was that hurt she saw in his eyes? Had he truly jumped because she'd said she'd wanted someone with her? Unwilling to comprehend such a daredevil action, she turned her head toward the boat drawing near.

"I did it to help you."

The pain in his voice had her searching his face for sincerity. For her? How was she supposed to respond to that?

"Are you two all right?"

Casey nodded her head, not willing to trust her voice any longer. The ranger floated the boat next to them, getting the second ranger close enough to reach out and pull them into the floor of the boat. Waving at the people above, the ranger gawked at Josh's lack of equipment and unhooked the bungee cord from her harness as she undid the rest of the gear.

"Why did you jump? How'd you catch her?"

The second ranger scanned Josh's body as if trying to find an injury of some kind. Finding none, he shrugged at his partner and began checking Casey. She waved him off.

"Just lucky, I guess." Josh ran a hand through his hair and slipped onto a nearby seat.

"I'll say. I've never seen anything like this. And the folks running the bungee operation are freaked out big time. Along with some woman named Tilly."

Casey's legs gave out at the mention of Tilly, and she collapsed on the seat opposite Josh. "You must be the luckiest man in the world."

"Because I caught you?" The smile he tossed her would melt ice cream in a freezer. In fact, it almost melted her stone-cold, furious heart.

Casey's breath caught in her chest again, although this time her lack of breath had nothing to do with freefalling to her death. "No. Because I've decided not to kill you."

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, my God, are you all right?" With tears streaming down her face, Tilly ran her hands over Casey's body. "I can't believe you weren't killed."

Keeping a watch on Josh, Casey slapped away Tilly's hands. The terror she'd experienced earlier had dissipated, giving away to curiosity. Just how had Josh pulled off such an astounding feat? Never mind that they were both barred from bungee jumping ever again. She wanted to know his secret. Was he a stunt man? A magician used to performing extraordinary acts, like Houdini had done? She winced as she recalled how Houdini had died in his infamous water chamber trick. If Josh was a magician, he'd better

watch out, or he'd end up like Houdini. Famous and dead. Still, she did have a thing for dangerous men.

Pushing her worrisome friend aside, Casey strode over to Josh and Walter as they finished dealing with the rangers. "Josh? How about coming home with me?"

Jaws dropped all around her. Except for his. Instead, his lips stretched wide sending corresponding shockwaves into her. "Come home with you?"

*Lust, thy name be Josh.* She reached out and took his hand, noting the sudden tingle speeding up her arm. "Yeah. For a celebration. You know. For not dying in your little stunt."

Walter's head whipped back and forth. "Uh, sorry, but no. He can't."

"Why not, Walter?"

Something in Josh's tone made Casey think of a parent-child relationship. But Walter wasn't old enough to be his father. "Yeah. Why not, Walter?" When he opened his mouth to respond, she added an incentive he couldn't refuse, and closed the deal. "Tilly's coming."

Walter's face lit up, happier than a child with a new puppy. "Oh, well. I guess we could visit for a little while."

Not waiting for him to change his mind, Casey snagged Walter's arm and linked her other one through Josh's. "Okay, then. It's party time. Let's go." She led the way to the parking lot, stopping beside her cranberry red convertible Mustang. "Ya'll want to follow along in your car?"

"We don't have one." Josh slid his hands over the car's sleek exterior, rapture written on his face. "This is so beautiful. You drive this, right?"

"Well, sure. What else would I do with it?" Casey giggled, not sure if he'd meant the question as a joke or not. "But if you didn't drive, how'd you get here?"

"Oh, we sort of dropped in out of the blue."

Tilly's flirtatious giggle answered Walter's strange response. Did he mean they'd walked all the way from town? All five miles? From Walter's appearance, Casey'd bet he hadn't walked anywhere in years. "Okay, then. I guess ya'll can hitch a ride home with us."

Josh nearly knocked Walter out of the way in his haste to get into the car. He hurled his body over the passenger's door, landing on the cream-colored leather. "Wonderful. Let's go."

She waited as Walter and Tilly pushed the driver's seat forward so they could crawl into the backseat. Once they were settled, Casey slid behind the wheel, strapped in, and started the motor. "Home, sweet home we go. Buckle up, Josh."

Josh studied the seatbelt for a bit before snapping it into place. With a satisfied grin, he flipped open his visor and checked his reflection in the mirror on the other side. "Oh, so that's me. Not bad."

Casey caught Tilly's eye in the rearview mirror as they exchanged a questioning glance. This guy said some weird stuff. In fact, he acted almost as if he'd never seen himself before.

Deciding to ignore his odd remark, she kept one eye on the road and the other on Josh as she made record time getting to her apartment. Walter and Tilly chatted away in the rear seat while Josh rattled on over and over about how "great driving was."

By the time she'd pulled into her parking spot at the complex, she wasn't surprised when he groaned out loud, "You really get a kick out of cruisin' down the highway, huh?" She grinned, hoping he'd take her joke for what it was.

"I loved it. Especially since your car doesn't have a lid on it."

"A lid?" Where was this guy from? Timbuktu?

"He means a convertible." Walter didn't take his eyes from Tilly, even while he answered. Casey wondered if anything would take his eyes off her.

She led the way to her first floor apartment, threw open the door, and waited for the usual remarks. Visitors always said something about the mess. So, she wasn't big on cleaning. Her life's motto was "Live, Love, Laugh." Not "Clean, Dust, Vacuum."

"Go ahead. Say what you want. I've heard them all." She rested her fists on her hips and waited. Yet, instead of scanning the room and scoffing, Josh and Walter shot by her and into the tiny kitchen area. Walter flung open the refrigerator door and started scooping out a variety of items.

Casey glanced at Tilly before following them into the kitchen. "Hey, feel free to make yourself at home. Don't worry about us."

"Will do." Walter loaded a bun with a hot dog, relish, mustard, and onions. Yet, in a surprise move, he handed the concoction to Josh, instead of eating it himself. "Try this. You're gonna love it. This, my friend, is a hot dog."

Looking like a kid, who'd just bought his own candy store, Josh's face lit up with excitement. He took the hot dog from Walter as

though it were nothing less than gold, examined it from every angle, opened his mouth, and shoved half inside. A delighted moan rumbled from him as he chewed.

"I told you. Hot dogs are the best." Walter threw another two hot dogs together before Josh managed to finish the first one. "Enjoy, man, because there is nothing better."

Without stopping, Josh nodded and gestured for another. Mustard dribbled down his chin and Casey wanted nothing more than to lick the condiment from his skin.

Josh and Walter finished off three loaded hot dogs apiece before finally noticing Casey and Tilly leaning against the wall, waiting for them. Casey laughed and shook her head in a men-are-such-pigs expression. "Good to see our near-death experience didn't ruin your appetites."

The two men swapped a look before setting their fourth hot dog on the counter. "Sorry. We got carried away. I guess we should have asked first." Walter's sheepish grin added to his apologetic demeanor.

"Don't worry. Knock yourselves out. Must take a ton of food to fill you up."

Walter bent his head as if noticing his bulk for the first time. "I guess."

"Is this one of those devices you told me about, Walter?" Josh pointed at the television set and strode over to flop onto the couch. Walter, still devouring his last hot dog, joined him.

"Yeah. And this one's a good one, too. This is one of those they call 'big screens.'" Walter grabbed the remote, punched on the set, and shoved the last of his food into his mouth.

Garbled responses came as Walter flipped to a movie. A man and woman, stretched out in front of a roaring fire, bumped and grinded together in a noisy and exuberant session of steamy, raw sex.

"Got a thing for porn, Walter? Which, by the way, isn't a problem for me if you do." Casey cocked her head to the side to study the contorted position the couple was in.

Walter broke away from the screen and grinned at her. "A lot of time has passed since I saw anything like this."

"I've never seen anything like this."

Was Josh serious? Casey stared at him, waiting for him to laugh. But he didn't. "You mean on television? Because you've seen people getting it on, right? Like whenever you've had sex?"

"Getting it on? Nope. Never."

*Huh?* Casey closed her mouth when she realized her jaw had dropped open at Josh's answer. "Are you kidding me? No way. Are you saying you're a virgin?" She crossed over to stand in front of the men and demanded their attention. "Are you friggin' for real? Someone who looks like you? Still a virgin?"

Josh and Walter exchanged a look before Walter came to the rescue. "We don't lie." Waving his hands, he motioned for her to move. But she stayed put.

Could these guys be playing her? She studied Josh's face, his gaze focused on her. And she'd have bet her life he was what he said he was. A *virgin*.

"Tilly, you take good care of Walter." Grabbing Josh's hand, she tugged him to a standing position. "I'm going to give Josh here some lessons." Pivoting, she pulled him with her and headed for her bedroom. "Goody. I've never had a virgin."

"Wait!"

At the yank on her hand, Casey spun around to find a very upset Walter following them. "Uh, not happening, Walter. I'm okay with multiples, but the first time..." She lifted her eyebrow at Josh in a telling gesture. "...Should be one on one."

"Josh, you can't. This isn't right."

Walter's urgent plea threw her off-guard. What an insult! Did Walter not think she was good enough for Josh's first experience? "Back off, man. You're not his mother. Or father."

"Walter, I want to." Josh shot them all a reassuring smile. "This is why I came here, right? To experience what I missed?"

"Yes, but I don't think this is what the One-Who-Knows-All had in mind."

*The One-Who-Knows-All? Who did Walter mean?*

Josh's internal struggle flitted across his face. "Maybe Walter's right. I've always heard two people should get married first. Or at least, be in love."

Casey scrunched up her face, disgust mixing with disbelief. "Oh, come on. What decade do you think this is? The forties?"

Walter shot her an indignant expression. "The forty's were wonderful. I should know."

Deciding not to play into Walter's objections any longer, she jerked on Josh's arm and pulled him into the bedroom. Slamming the door in Walter's horrified face; she shoved Josh forward, pushing him



onto the bed. She followed, jumping on top of him with one leg on either side of his waist.

“Casey?”

She shook her head as she unbuttoned his shirt. “Hush. I’ll take care of everything. You’re gonna have only one problem after this. Your first will be your best, so every woman after me is going to disappoint you.” Running her tongue over her upper lip, she delighted in the rock-hard chest under her exploring fingers. “Damn, Josh, how could you have escaped until now?”

His gaze lingered on her breasts as he tentatively reached under her t-shirt and lifted it over her head. “I didn’t escape. I got permission.”

Pausing, she tilted her head at him in question, but when he didn’t offer an explanation, she tossed her unspoken question aside. Sex first. Questions later. “You, dude, are strange. Strange, but oh, so hot.”

His attempt to speak was muffled as her mouth slammed into his. Sliding her tongue inside his mouth, she traced the sides of his mouth, toying with his tongue as she drew in his tastes. At first, his inexperience showed in his lack of response, but he soon picked up on the lesson, bringing her tongue into his mouth. He moaned, an eager sound, flaring the fire within her into roaring blaze.

After unzipping his jeans, she allowed him to slide hers from her hips to rest underneath her butt as she wiggled to help him. Her bra soon fell to the floor, and she heard him gasp as his gaze moved over to her full breasts.

“So?” She cupped her breasts and bobbed them up and down. “Do these meet with your approval? Are they as good as any others you’ve seen?”

The man almost drooled as he stared at her. “I haven’t seen any others.”

“You’re kidding. I know you’re a virgin, but surely you’ve seen boobs before.” She stopped and gawked at him. “Now, I know you’re joking. You’d have to have seen dozens just from watching television and movies.”

He watched her, his hungry gaze locked onto her tits. “But I’ve never watched those things. So I’ve never seen any.” He tossed her a hopeful grin. “Are there really dozens? Do they all look like yours?”

She leaned her hands on his chest, trying to ignore the voice in her head. *This man is seriously weird. Run. Run fast.* “Where the hell

have you been? Did you grow up in some third world country, or something?" *Please explain this. Tell me you were raised by wolves. Anything.*

"I've been in Heaven, of course. You see, I died early, as a baby and—"

Casey flew off Josh, stumbling from the bed and scrambling toward the opposite wall while tugging up her jeans. Forget her shirt. She needed to get away from this nut. "Heaven? You died and now you're back?"

He sat up, staring at her as if *she* was the crazy one. "What's wrong? Didn't you ask?" He frowned and shook his head. "I guess Walter was right. I shouldn't tell anyone."

A framed picture of her parasailing in Hawaii jabbed into her back as she tried to become one with the wall. Remaining rooted to the spot, she couldn't get her feet to move. Like watching a ten-car pileup on the highway, she couldn't leave without hearing more. Still, she wasn't suicidal. "Ya think? Now don't get excited 'cause everything's okay. I'll go get Walter—"

"No!"

She crossed her arms over her bare breasts. No reason to get him any more excited than he already was. "Okay, okay. No Walter."

Josh's brilliant smile almost relaxed her. "Good. I mean, Walter might get mad and send me—"

"Home?" Maybe if she played along with him she could figure a way out of this mess. "You mean..." Rolling her eyes upward, she glanced at the ceiling and then at him.

"Yeah. Up. Home." His frown returned as disappointment layered his features. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Well, it is kind of an odd statement." Don't get him upset. "But, hey, I believe you. Sure, I do."

"You do?"

"Uh, sure." Would any of her neighbors call the police if she screamed? Unlikely. They'd probably think she was in the middle of a climax. Hadn't Mrs. Goeler rushed to her aid when she'd screamed during sex the last time? Talk about Boy Who Cried Wolf? Meet Girl Who Screams When She Comes. But what about Tilly? Was Walter just as nutso?

"Let me explain a little..." At her nod, he continued, apparently placated by her easy agreement. "I died as an infant. Therefore, I never got to live on Earth. And since I'm about to be promoted to a

full-time angel, I asked if I could come to Earth and experience some of what I missed. You know, so I can better help the people I'm supposed to help later on."

Casey searched the room around her, hoping for anything she might use as a weapon. Locking onto her old mahogany dresser next to the door, she remembered she'd thrown her baseball bat behind it in her last-ditch cleaning effort. As a member of her company's softball team, she batted around five hundred. If she could inch her way over to the dresser...

"Are you cold? Did you want to put your shirt back on?"

Her attention whisked to Josh. "What?"

"Your shirt?" Josh flicked his finger and her shirt lifted off the floor and floated over to her. "Did you want your shirt?"

Gaping, she watched, frozen, as her t-shirt drifted to stop in front of her. Gingerly, she waved her hand over the top and then under the bottom of the shirt. "How the hell?"

"I told you. I'm an angel. Or, at least, I will be. But even angels-in-training have powers."

He had to be some kind of magician. A mentally ill one, but a magician, nonetheless. And right now she didn't care how he did his tricks, she wanted him out of her apartment. Taking her shirt out of the air, she slipped it on and zipped up her jeans. But how could she get rid of him?

"Anyway, since I died as a baby, the One-Who-Knows-All decided I could have a little time on Earth as a human. Or part human, actually."

She forced out her words, surprised to find she sounded somewhat normal. "So that's why you've never had sex?"

His creamy chocolate-colored eyes glistened with happiness. "Right. Among a whole lot of other things. Like eating hot dogs. Wow, I sure liked those hot dogs."

A glimmer of hope shot through her. A lunatic with a hot dog obsession. Using the idea, she adopted a pleasant mask and offered. "Would you like some more? I think I have some in the freezer." Moving toward the door, she continued, "How about I go nuke them in the microwave and get them ready?"

"But what about sex? I'd really like to try doing sex first. Then we can eat some more hot dogs."

Casey kept inching toward the dresser and the door. She had to get the bat. Once she had the bat, she'd stand a fighting chance of getting him out of the apartment.

"Uh, you know what?" She nodded, trying to appease him while hoping to change his mind. "Sex is good. But it's not half as good as a yummy hot dog." Just a foot or so to go and she'd grab the bat. "Let's go get the food."

She lunged for the bat, wrapping her hands around the base as Josh rose from the bed. Swinging without looking first, she missed his head by a narrow margin. She readied her arm again, determined to hit a home run.

"Hey!" Josh's hands flew up to block her next hit, ducked, and grabbed for the doorknob. "What're you doing?"

## CHAPTER TWO

“Tilly!”

Casey charged into the living room, chasing a fleeing Josh ahead of her. She slammed on her brakes as she sighted Tilly and Walter, joined in an airtight lip-lock, bodies intertwined and sprawled across the sofa.

Jerking apart at her scream, the two flew to their feet. A wide-eyed Walter rushed after Josh as his friend bolted from the apartment.

“What happened?” Tilly doubled over, barely dodging a swing of Casey’s bat. “Hey! Watch out!”

“He’s a nut. That’s what happened.” Casey sprinted out of the door, intent on making sure the men left the apartment complex.

Josh and Walter raced across the parking lot with the girls hot on their heels. Without looking, Josh dashed onto the main road, leaving Walter sliding to a halt behind him.

Screeching tires and blaring horns ripped through the air as Josh’s body catapulted over the hood of a speeding sedan. His body, airborne from the force of the impact, tumbled over the top of the car, down the trunk, and onto the blacktop. A pickup swerved, missing his head by centimeters, and slammed into a van traveling in the opposite direction of the other lane. Vehicles in both lanes skidded to a halt.

“Josh!”

Casey’s cry joined Walter’s as fear splintered into her. Walter was already crossing the street as she dropped the bat and sped across the parking lot, intent on reaching Josh as fast she could. Yet, as ready as she was for whatever horror that lay ahead of her, the shock of what she saw brought her to a dead stop.

Josh and Walter stood in the middle of the road, brushing gravel and dirt from Josh’s clothes. His gaze caught hers, and he sent her a little wave. A wave no more significant than if he’d met her at a coffee shop for lunch.

*He’s not hurt.* Casey stared at the two men as they reassured the crowd milling around them. *No way can he be uninjured. Not after being hit by a fast-moving car. If fact, he should be plastered on the pavement like road kill.*

“He’s okay. No problem, folks. Trust me. He’s a tough guy. Go along on your way.” Walter grinned at the motorists, happily shoving Josh toward the side of the road. As he passed the motorists, he twirled his hand in the air and a sparkling green mist enveloped the drivers. Walter kept hustling Josh to the side as everyone stopped talking and stood next to their cars, amazement, confusion, and disbelief clouding their faces. After a few moments of silence, one man broke out of his daze and started shouting at the driver in front of him. The clamor of angry voices filled the air as each driver tried to blame the other.

Josh inched closer to her and raised his hands to ward off another attack. “If I come near you, are you going to try and hit me again?”

Casey, shutting her mouth at last, couldn’t get her mind to focus on his words. “What? Oh, no, I won’t. But are you really all right?” She scanned the length of him, noting the torn clothes yet the lack of blood. “But how?”

Walter reached out tentatively and took the bat from her. “I don’t think you’ll need this any longer.”

“I told you. I’m an angel.” His perplexed look didn’t help her lack of cognitive thinking.

“You didn’t!” Walter dropped the bat in his astonishment, clutched Josh by the arm, and dragged him toward the apartment building. “Are you mad?”

*Finally. At least one of them is sane.* “Good, Walter. So you agree what he’s saying is ridiculous?” Casey saw Tilly cringe at the harshness of her words, but she didn’t care. Following behind the men, she headed up the stairs to her apartment. Should she let them back into her apartment?

Yet making the decision wasn’t an option as Walter hauled Josh into the living room. Bringing up the rear, Tilly and Casey stayed by the door. Casey held onto Tilly, ready to escape if necessary.

“You told her?” Walter whacked him on the arm and glared at his friend. “You know the rules, Josh. No telling any Earth-bound being you’re an angel.”

The girls exchanged a surprised look as Walter’s words sank in. “You believe him?” Could people share a mental illness?

“Well, sure. I kind of have to.”

“You have to?” Casey held her breath, waiting, hoping for a reasonable explanation, yet fearing the worst.

“Because I’m his supervising angel.”

His words echoed in her ears as his form grew transparent. In a sudden flash of light, Walter was gone. Only Tilly's shout kept Casey from cutting and running.

"This isn't good." Josh craned his head upward and shook his head at the ceiling. "The One-Who-Knows-All took him."

Could things get any stranger? Magicians made buildings disappeared on television specials, but men disappearing from her own living room? Casey's mind whirled, trying to scrounge up any ideas on how a man could just vanish. Any ideas at all. They didn't even have to be good ideas. At this point, she'd take any excuse. Except the angel one.

"What the hell happened? Where's Walter?" She winced as Tilly's fingernails dug into her arm in a death-grip clench.

Josh's big, brown eyes met hers as he tunneled his fingers through his hair. Making a you're-not-going-to-believe-this face, he pointed upward. "Up there. Probably getting his butt chewed out big time."

Casey checked out the roof before meeting Tilly's gaze. Could he be for real?

Yet Tilly beat her in voicing her thoughts. "You're for real? You're a real angel? Like with wings and a halo?"

Josh's throaty laugh sent a rush of excitement through her. How in the hell could she be turned on now? But she had no doubt she was. All she needed to do was listen to her throbbing clit. The one throbbing, "Take me, take me!" in a never-ending pulse.

"No. No halo or wings. Just a plain, old body while I'm on Earth. But I do have helpful powers, of course. Like invincibility."

"There's nothing plain or old about your body." Had she said that out loud? The heat crawled along her neck and into her cheeks. Figures it would take an angel to get her embarrassed about anything she said.

A gorgeous, sexy smile repaid her for her compliment. "So? Do you believe me, now?"

Another check with Tilly gave Casey her answer. "Well, duh. We'd have to be in serious denial not to." She felt what little color she had left drain from her face. "Oh, shit. I made out with an angel. Am I going to Hell or what?"

Tilly, a little shaky on her feet, staggered over to the couch. "I sucked face with an angel and let him grab my boob." She buried her face in her hands. "I am so fucked. Oh, shit, I said 'fuck' in front of

an angel.” She raised her head in horror before dropping it down. “I said ‘shit,’ too. Oh, no. I said it again.”

Josh moved closer to take Casey by the arms. “Hey, you’ve done nothing wrong.” He spared a glance at Tilly. “Either of you. Walter and I should have controlled ourselves.” His hot gaze slid to her breasts. “But I couldn’t. I am a man, even if I am an angel.” He skimmed his hands along her shoulders and down her chest, lightly touching her erect nipples along the way.

“Still, I can’t imagine how doing something that feels so good could be a bad thing. Walter never said anything about *not* having sex. Although I guess I’ll find out whether it’s okay or not later.” He darted his eyes skyward. “When I head back upstairs. But until I have to leave, I want to experience everything I can. Everything allowed, that is.”

“Including sex?”

“Casey!” Tilly’s mortified tone left nothing to the imagination. “He’s an angel, for Pete’s sake!”

*A damn hot angel.* Casey puffed out her frustration. “Aw, hell, Tilly. If I’m already headed to Hell, I may as well have some fun getting there.”

“You’re a good person. I know it. Having sex doesn’t make you a bad person.” Josh’s hot gaze lingered on her breasts.

She puffed out her chest, giving him more to drool over. “No, just a horny one.”

“Shut up, Casey.” Tilly moaned as she fell over onto the couch. “You can’t.”

Josh winked at Casey, flipping her heart over. How did this guy get to her so easily? Especially with him being an angel, the ultimate goodie-two-shoes. “Yeah, well. We’ll see.” She’d have to give the idea of sex with an angel a little more thought. Just in case.

This conversation was a little too intense for her. Definitely time to change the topic. “Okay, Josh. Since you decided to drop in...pun intended...on my life, I figure the least I can do is to help you live it up while you can. How long are you planning on staying on Earth, anyway?”

The sparkle in his brown depths lost a bit of its glow as he answered, “Not long. A few days at best. And now with Walter getting called up without warning, I might have to leave a lot sooner.”

The twisting in her gut couldn’t have anything to do with him leaving. Could it? Casey shook off the unfamiliar pang. “Then we’d



better get our butts moving. And I know exactly where we need to go. Come on.” She grabbed Josh’s arm and headed out of the apartment, confident Tilly would follow.

“Casey, I don’t like this. You’ve got your ‘Wild Woman’ expression on.” Tilly rushed behind them as they strode to the car.

“What have I always wanted to do, Till? Something I could never talk you into doing?” She grinned as the silence behind them grew to a stunning level. “You know. Something people do way up high? Like way, way up high?”

She reluctantly broke her hold on Josh as he circled to the other side of the car and she slipped into the driver’s seat. Tilly fell into the back seat even while she started complaining. “No way. You can’t. It’s too dangerous. And you need training. Don’t they make people take classes or something? And you have to have an appointment. You can’t just pop over to do this, can you? And you have to have a physical, or something. I don’t know, but I’m sure you do. And there’s a million other reasons that I can’t think of right now, but you gotta listen. Crap, Casey. For once in your life listen to me.”

Casey couldn’t help but enjoy the surge of excitement trembling in her hands. Finally, she had a reason even Tilly couldn’t argue with. “Don’t you get it, Til? I don’t need any training and you don’t need to worry. I’m perfectly safe, because I have an angel with me.”

Until now, Josh had gone along with the flow, not interfering, yet fidgeting as though he wanted to. “What are you talking about? What’s way up high?”

Tilly slumped against the seat, wrapping her arms across her chest in a defiant manner. “Go on. Tell him what you have in mind.”

Casey steered the car out onto the adjoining road. The road where Josh should have died, but hadn’t. “The ultimate thrill sport. This’ll make bungee-jumping seem like a day at Grandma’s bingo parlor.”

“Yeah? Tell me already.” Josh held out his hand to let the air blow through his fingers. “What do you have in mind?”

Pushing the accelerator pedal to the floor, she clued him in on her destination. “Skydiving.”

Josh glanced at her, a crease marring his perfect forehead even while a trace of exhilaration lit up his features.

“Skydiving? What’s skydiving? I know what the sky is, and I know about diving into a swimming pool, but how do you dive into the sky?”

Casey giggled, the spirit of the adventure already making her giddy. “You don’t know much, do you?” She chanced another glimpse at Josh and marveled at his innocence. An innocence extending to the sexual part of living. “Skydiving is where a person goes up into the sky and, using a device called a parachute, jumps out of the plane into the sky. The parachute floats them to the ground.”

“Oh. Makes sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. Nothing about skydiving makes sense. Unless you have to, no sane person would ever throw their body out of a plane flying hundreds of feet in the air.” Tilly *humphed* behind them.

“It’s a very safe sport.” Casey caught Tilly’s eyes through the rearview mirror to shoot her a warning look.

But Tilly wouldn’t cooperate. “If you know what you’re doing. Which you don’t.”

“Don’t worry. Safety is an angel’s top priority.” Josh’s calm tone mellowed the buzz racing along her spine and she hoped it would do the same for her anxious friend.

Again, Tilly puffed out her irritation and turned her head to stare out the window. Just in time to see them entering the small airport located on the outskirts of town. Casey let out a little *whoop* as she read *Arland Aviation. We Fly While You Ride. Skydiving Available.*

“I bet you’ll need lessons.” Tilly’s mood brightened as she grabbed hold to her last ditch chance to stop Casey’s plan.

“Yeah, well, don’t get your hopes up. Somehow I’ll get them to let us go anyway.” Casey maneuvered the car into the parking spot and slid the gear into “P.” Ready to get the ball rolling, she hopped out of the car, determined to talk her way into jumping. After all, she’d used her charms many times before to get what she wanted. What was one more time?

Crossing to the small, square building a few yards away, she didn’t wait for Josh catch up to her. He followed on her heels, along with a grumbling Tilly.

“You folks want something?” The gravely voice matched the man’s pitted complexion and weathered skin. He planted his bulky frame, hands fisted on his hips, feet wide, taking the tried-and-true I’m-the-man-in-charge position.

She took a deep breath, knowing he wouldn’t be an easy sale. But she’d run into worse and gotten her way. “Yeah, we’d like to do some skydiving.”

The man ran his gaze up and down her before shifting to Tilly. “Ya’ll got dive training? I don’t recognize you from any of our classes.”

*Now’s the time, Casey. Turn on the old charm.* Yet, before she’d opened her mouth to start sweet-talking him, Josh stepped in and took over.

“Hi, I’m Josh. And these are my friends, Tilly and Casey.”

She cringed at his use of the word ‘friends,’ but kept her mouth shut. Give her a little time, and she’d turn them into friends with benefits.

The grizzly man snarled and ignored Josh’s outstretched hand. “Which means you haven’t. Unless you want to sign up for one of our classes, then vamoose. No lessons. No diving. Doing a tandem jump with an instructor is the only way you can jump without lessons and all my guys are busy.”

Casey knew she should keep her mouth shut, but the man’s irascible personality pushed her over the edge. “Damn, but aren’t you a ray of shining light? Get many customers with your attitude?”

“Don’t care what you think. Either you want lessons, or you don’t.” He spat out a wad of tobacco, inches from Josh’s foot. “But tandem’s out.”

Screw the lessons. She couldn’t take any more. “Shit, if you’re the teacher, I’d jump out of the plane without a chute just to get away from you.”

“Lady, you can turn your tight little ass around—”

“I know you’re con game. You want people to sign up for the lessons instead of jumping one time in tandem. Lessons mean more money.” However, she knew if she wanted to jump, she’d have to jump with an instructor. She scanned the area around them, searching for any other possible instructors. But little did she know she needn’t have bothered.

Josh waved his hand in front of the man’s face in a swirl of blue mist. Casey gasped, stepping away as the blue cloud circled around the man and floated to the ground, disappearing before reaching the earth. Motioning to her, Josh held his finger to his lips a moment and crooked his head to the side. Returning to the man, he smiled his glorious smile, offered his hand, and repeated his earlier greeting. “Hi, I’m Josh. And these are my friends, Tilly and Casey.”

The transformation was nothing less than miraculous as the brute’s scowl morphed into a genuine grin. At least, she thought it

was a grin. "Welcome, folks. I'm Jeb. Come on in. You wanting to jump today?"

"Yes, but don't we need lessons?" Tilly's tense voice broke into the conversation, obviously intent on jogging his memory.

Jeb shook his head, dropping Tilly's face. "Not to worry, little lady. I'll take you up personal-like."

"Thanks." Casey linked arms with Jeb, suddenly her favorite person. She spun him around to point at a nearby plane. "Can we go up now?" A wink from Josh sent her heart skipping along with her feet as she led the group toward the plane.

"Sure. No problem. Let me holler for some of the fellas, and we'll get this bird in the air."

"Super. Coming, Tilly?" Casey tossed her question over her shoulder, even though she knew her friend already trailed behind them.

They marched over while Jeb gestured to a few men working on another plane. Once they joined them, he told the instructors about the tandem jump. Casey had to cover her mouth and turn away from them to hide the laughter bubbling up at their astonished expressions. After he finished giving the men instructions, he nodded and climbed into the plane.

As everyone followed him inside, Tilly increased her protests, "Casey, this is not normal. I know you like the thrills of adventure, but this is taking your need for an adrenalin rush too far. Even if Josh can't die, you can. Please, stop before you're a little splat on the ground. I don't want what's left of my best friend picked up by a pooper-scooper."

Jeb retained his goofy grin while helping them put on parachutes and other equipment. He passed out goggles to Josh and Casey, assigning each of them an instructor as their jumping partner. Hank, Casey's assigned instructor, was a hunk and a half in his own right, and she enjoyed the sensation of his hard chest pressed against her back as he detailed the jump procedure. Yet, she couldn't help but wish she was hooked to Josh for the free fall. Imagining his thick, fully erect shaft pushed against her rump sent shivers through her.

"Don't be afraid, miss. I'll take good care of you." Normally, Hank's warm, low voice would have had her thinking about adding to her score in the Mile High Club, but her heart thudded a dull rhythm as she watched Josh get hooked to another instructor.

Tilly refused any offer to skydive, opting instead to cling to one of the benches. She scooted to the farthest spot away from the plane's entry.

"For Pete's sake, Tilly, the plane hasn't even moved yet."

The engine roared to life seconds after her declaration, making Tilly grip a nearby strap until her knuckles whitened in the effort. Jeb, still in his blue-mist-induced happy fog, plopped his mighty ass onto the flight bench and signaled to the pilot. "Okay, let 'er rip, Parker."

Tilly's yelp accented the jerk of the plane as it lurched forward and onto the runway. "Casey! No!"

Casey's laugh echoed in the small cabin as she clapped in delight. "Yay! I'm finally going to get my wish. I'm going to fly like a bird."

The drone of the plane's engine drowned out Tilly's continued cries and pleas. Casey tugged on Josh's arm and shouted in his ear as the aircraft rose into the cloudless sky. "You're going to keep us safe, right? I'm counting on you, you know."

A thumbs up from him was all she needed to feel safe. In addition to giving her the opening to lean on him.

"Okay, folks. Who's going first?"

Casey's hand popped up at the same time as Josh's. "Ready!"

"Me first."

She and Hank stepped forward as she copied Josh's action to grab the loop above him. Twisting to confront him, she punched him in the chest with her finger. "No way. This was my idea so I'm going out the door ahead of you." Snatching his raised hand, she added, "And no use waving your hand to spread the special gas to get your way."

He bent toward her, bringing his instructor with him, as much to shout above the roar of the engines as to make his determination known. The challenge in his eyes met hers with a matching fervor. "I have to go first in case something happens. How else would I catch up to you?"

"Lame excuse, man. You know you could catch up. After all, you did it when we bungee-jumped. Problem is, you don't know what you're supposed to do once you get past that door." She pointed to the opening on the plane, catching sight of a bird coasting in flight beside the wing. The bird's beady eyes connected with hers, almost as if the bird watched her, keeping tabs on her. Casey rolled her eyes at the silly thought.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me.” He grabbed her, stunning her with his intensity. “I couldn’t stand myself if something went wrong. Not to mention the hell I’d live in afterwards. And I mean that literally.”

The molten dark lava swirling in his eyes choked the cocky answer out of her throat. She swallowed, amazed he could stop her heart with one look. Stop it or capture it. Which one was worse? She bit her lower lip, trying to accept the overwhelming emotion firing from his gaze. Could he care so much? Should she let him?

A puff of green smoke startled her out of her thoughts and a sense of relief swept through her. The pea-colored cloud dissipated, flowing out the door, leaving Walter sweeping his arms around the interior. The instructors and Jeb stopped and stared, as if coming out of their trances.

Walter saluted them and winked at Tilly. “Skydiving? Sounds like fun. But even an indestructible angel’s body might have a tough time with a hard landing from zillions of miles up.”

“Hardly zillions, Walter.” Josh waved his hand, creating another blue cloud in front of everyone. Amazement transformed to more dopey grins on the faces of the instructors. Satisfied the men wouldn’t wonder any longer at Walter’s sudden appearance, Josh drew his supervising angel into an enormous bear hug. After patting Walter on the back several times, he pushed him away, and cocked his eyebrows in question. “So? What happened? Are we in trouble?”

Walter made a clucking sound at Tilly and turned to scowl at Casey. “He’s not too happy with your involvement with this Earth-bound woman. Which, since you started cavorting on my watch, means he’s not happy with me, either. Not happy at all.”

“Cavorting”? Who says ‘cavorting’ any more?” Were all angels naïve and old-fashioned? If so, she’d have to liven up the Above once she died. Providing she wasn’t sent the other direction. She blew out a long breath at the thought of Eternity Down Under. “Besides, you and Tilly weren’t exactly exchanging recipes, you know.”

Walter straightened his pudgy frame, puffing out his chest. “I’m not an angel-in-training. I know what problems can happen when fraternizing with Earth-bound women, and I know how to protect against them.”

“Walter’s from a previous age and is very experienced. He’s worked as an angel for a long time.” Josh noted Walter’s raised eyebrows and silent message. “Which is why he’s the mentor, and I’m the trainee.”

“Do you need to get trained in everything?” *She* wanted to train him. Train him and train him hard. In fact, if she were his sexual mentor, they’d practice all the time. Until he mastered all the required moves for graduation. Looking at Josh made her a believer in the old saying, “practice makes perfect.” Although he was already pretty damn perfect.

“Not everything.” His voice dropped an octave. “Although I’m sure you could teach me what I really want to learn.”

“Josh.” Walter’s warning went unheeded, except by Tilly.

“Listen to him, Josh. He’s your mentor.” Tilly scooted over to Walter’s side and clutched his arm for all she was worth. Walter’s chest puffed up another three inches under her infatuation.

But Casey wasn’t about to let anyone interfere now. Come Hell or high water. Or high altitude, either, she would be the one to teach this special angel a lesson or two. Casting off her goggles, she gripped Josh by the front of his shirt and yanked him to her. His lips connected with hers and she thrust her tongue inside to savor his many tastes. Sweet, moist warmth enclosed her tongue and she wished she could enclose his virginal shaft with her own special warmth.

Josh broke their embrace for a second while he threw off his goggles. Their eyes met, each acknowledging what they were about to do.

“Josh! Stop!”

“Casey, you can’t. Not with him!”

The protests of their friends went unheeded as Casey and Josh crushed together. Her hands grappled with his as each of them wrestled with the straps keeping their shirts pinned underneath. Casey’s head fell back, bumping into the front of Hank’s face. “Oh, sorry.” She noted the silliness of Hank’s expression while her breaths grew shorter and faster under Josh’s hot hands. “Will these guys stay out of it the whole time?”

Josh ran his tongue along the hollow in her neck. “As long as I want them to.”

“Good.” She thrust her tits higher as Josh’s mouth moved south. As he sucked her tits through the thin material of her shirt, her hand slid lower to cup the bulge in his pants. Somewhere, lost in the roar of the plane...or was it the roar of passion in her head?...she heard Tilly’s and Walter’s shouts to stop. But nothing could stop her from

her quest for treasure as she tugged his jeans open and shoved her hand down his pants.

*“Argh!”*

The pain of separation hit her as Josh’s mouth was wrenched away from her nipples. Her hand, fondling his shaft, scraped along his zipper as his body fell back against Walter. Walter, hands embedded in the shoulders of Josh’s instructor, yelled as he pulled them apart. “Josh, I will not let you do this.”

“And I won’t let you stop me!” Josh’s features were alive with lust as he fought against Walter, twisting and turning in his attempt to get free. With a wide sweep of his arm, he struck Walter in the chest, sending him hurtling to the rim of the hatchway.

*“No!”* Tilly screamed as Walter’s arms flailed wildly, trying to gain stability. “Walter!” She threw her body forward, arms outstretched, ready to grab him. Yet, at that exact moment, the plane hit a pocket of turbulence sending it bouncing up, then straight down, flinging Tilly headlong into Walter.

They stood, unmoving as if suspended in time and space, locked in each other’s arms, balanced on the edge of the doorway. Together, the two peered out into the blue sky, gaped at each other, and yelled one simultaneous shout as they fell out of the plane.



### CHAPTER THREE

*"Tilly!"*

Casey lunged toward the opening, tugging her attached instructor along with her. Gripping the edge of the doorway, she peered over the side, fear tearing her stomach to shreds. Far below, she spotted two figures, joined in flight, hurtling toward the ground. "Josh! Help them!"

Josh, who'd freed himself from his instructor, held onto a strap to lean out further into space. "Don't worry. Walter won't let Tilly get hurt."

Almost as soon as he'd said the words, the ever-diminishing figures vanished. The bird flying next to the plane swooped right in front of her nose, alarming Casey, and propelling her and her attached partner deeper inside. She banged against the opposite wall and heard him grunt. Yet nothing would detour her from finding out what had happened to her best friend.

"Where'd they go? Are they all right? Did Tilly go you-know-where?" Casey pointed up, wanting Josh to confirm her suspicions.

"I don't know." He swiveled in her direction with a mischievous smirk lifting the tips of his mouth. "But wherever they went, they went together. And I'm sure they're all right." He crossed to her and waved his hand, snapping the harness off her body and releasing the befuddled Hank, who slipped to his rear onto the floor. "Now. Let's you and me get back to doing sex."

"You mean 'having sex.'" Casey glanced around at the groggy, but blissful men around her. "What about them?"

Josh shrugged and wrapped one arm around her waist. "Trust me. They don't care, and they won't remember anything." He tipped his head to the side. "Why? Do you mind an audience?"

The desire building all day zipped into a fever pitch at his suggestion. "I don't mind, if you don't."

A wave of his hand making her shirt and bra disappear answered her. Giggling, she mimicked his wave and made a mock frown when

his clothes remained. Josh laughed and, with another wave, all their clothes vanished, leaving them naked in the chilly air.

“Damn, you don’t waste any time, do you?” Casey checked the other men to make sure they weren’t showing any attempts to move toward them. They stayed where they were, identical goofy grins plastered on their faces. “Remind me to show you how sexy undressing a person the normal way can be.”

“Later.” He pulled her to him, the sparse bit of curly hair on his chest tickling the top of her breasts. “I can’t wait a moment longer.” Taking her with him, he fell onto the mattress that had suddenly appeared beside them.

She laughed, delighting in the touch of his skin on hers. “Fine. We’ll do this your way this time. But I reserve the right to take things slower the next time.” Again, she giggled as he murmured an answer, while his mouth tugged at her taut buds.

His hands roamed her body, exploring every curve, every recess, every bit of her pulsing, lusting, aching-to-be-taken body. She whimpered, not from pain, but the hot, sweet rush of yearning scorching down her abdomen and into her clit. He sucked on her bottom lip, moistening the cleft between her legs. She groaned, unable to wait any longer, and opened herself to him.

“Is this okay?” He growled when he swiped his tongue under one breast. The buzz, the tickle his tongue gave her whipped her into a frenzy, but she knew his question was for the touch of his fingers against her throbbing nub. Slipping his fingers inside her, his thumb rubbed her until she squirmed under his exploration.

“You don’t act like a virgin.” She gasped as he caught her tit between his teeth.

“I guess I’m a natural.”

“Damn straight.” Casey moaned, squirming as her lust built higher and higher.

“Casey?”

“Yeah?” She arched her back, tempting him to feast more on her breasts. He took her hint, shoving his head between them. With his head where it was, she almost didn’t hear him.

“Tell me what you want me to do. Tell me what you’d like me to do. To you.”

She grabbed his hair, raising his eyes to meet hers. “Seriously?”

His grin copied hers. “Sure. I want to please you. Tell me.”

“Eat me.”

“Huh?”

Pushing his head toward her toes, she tried to relax against the mattress. But the anticipation of his mouth on her pussy kept her tense and ready. She watched as he followed her unspoken urging and slid between her legs. A cry ripped from her as his tongue laved her swollen clit. Wave after wave hurried through her as the orgasm broke free.

Throwing back her head, she caught sight of Hank standing over them, mouth slack in his intense scrutiny, and froze. “Uh, Josh?”

He paused his licking to stop and look in the direction she pointed. “Is he bothering you?”

She’d been with men who were uninhibited before, but this one took the Grand Prize. “Nope. I kind of like an interested spectator.”

“Hey, what we’re doing is perfectly natural. So let him enjoy.” He lowered his head and continued his attack on her bushy treasure. In between sucks on her clit, he added, “Too bad for him that he won’t remember later.”

She’d sure pegged angels all wrong. Talk about free spirits. She started to say so when his tongue swirled into her depths again, massaging her wet clit. Instead, her words morphed into one loud moan.

Josh nipped at her, lapping in her wetness as she wiggled in ecstasy. Wrapping her legs over his shoulders, he drank like a man tasting the sweetest nectar of all.

The pressure grew, the ache pounding in her for yet another release. As if reading her mind, he grabbed her clit with his teeth, twirling his tongue over her throbbing bud until she couldn’t stand any more. Crying out, her body jerked as the ultimate climax sent her flying higher than any plane could ever soar.

“Now, Josh!”

Understanding her short command, he lifted his body over hers, letting her legs slide down his torso until they locked around his waist. “You’re sure?”

“Damn it. If you don’t fuck me, I’m going to push you out of this plane without a chute.”

He grinned and shoved his shaft deep within her. Together they pumped, riding the turbulence as the plane jostled in the air. Grabbing his hair, she tugged his mouth to her tits as she slammed her body against his, time after glorious time. With a shout of joy, another climax rocked her body, matching his own trembling release.

“Casey, I love you.”

She stared at him, unsure of how to react. Had she heard him correctly? Impossibly, her heart took flight and climbed to the stars. And with his confession came her own realization.

“Oh, shit, Josh. I think I love you, too.” Closing her eyes, she waited, wanting to hear more from him. Yet even with her eyes closed, the flash of light bursting around them blinded her. Her legs dropped to the floor, emptiness filling the space where Josh’s body had laid. Stunned, her eyes popped open to find herself lying alone on the floor. The men, their stupor gone, stared, jaws dropping at her sweaty, bare body.

\* \* \* \*

Casey’d suffered through embarrassing situations before, but nothing compared to the embarrassment she experienced as she scrambled to pull on her clothes. Thankfully, her clothes had reappeared seconds after Josh had vanished. If they hadn’t, she couldn’t imagine what she’d have done. Even then, she’d kept her eyes averted from the amorous ogles of Jeb and his instructors during the return flight to the airport. She’d never felt such relief as when she’d dashed to her car and fled home.

“Damn it.” Pacing her apartment, she ran yet another possible scenario through her mind. Hours had passed and no sign from Tilly, Walter, or Josh had appeared. For a while, she’d even wondered if she’d dreamed it all. But Josh, the heat from his body, the touch of his skin on hers, was too real, too sensual. No, Josh was no dream.

“Where are you?” She yelled at the ceiling and shook her fist. “How can you say you love me and then evaporate into nothingness?” Had the One-Who-Knows-All taken him? Or worse, had he not meant what he’d said?

Continuing to curse, she stalked from one side of the room to the other. Could Josh be some kind of cosmic player? Had she fallen for a bad boy angel? Maybe he wasn’t really an angel, but a devil in disguise?

“Virgin, my ass. Talk about a jerk. ’Cause if you were innocent, you caught on real fast, Josh. You went straight for the old ‘wham, bam, thank you, ma’am’ routine, didn’t you? But hell, you could’ve at least finished with the ‘thank you, ma’am’ part.”

She fell on the couch, clutching a throw pillow to her chest. *You could have told me you only wanted sex. You didn’t have to tell me you loved me. You could have let me retain my dignity. And keep my*

*heart safe*. Sobs racked her body in strong, painful waves, but the physical ache was nothing compared to the invisible wounds tearing open inside her.

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“I know I messed up.” Walter, wringing his hands together, followed the ten-foot tall One-Who-Knows-All around the room. “I never should have let him go home with her. But you see, I got distracted—”

“By a pair of big brown eyes and a set of smallish knockers.” The One-Who-Knows-All whirled around, causing Walter to bump into him. Walter stumbled back, waving his hands in supplication.

“Oh, my. Well, yes, I did get a little infatuated with Tilly.” He cringed under the other’s scrutiny, but barreled on in his attempt to cover his mistake. “But once Josh saw Casey, I couldn’t stop him.”

Josh sat on a short stool, the one piece of furniture in the room filled with football memorabilia. Posters from every professional and college football team in existence lined the walls, while knickknacks and other souvenir items sporting various team logos and colors lay stacked one on top of the other. Only a space the size of a small office was left free of clutter.

“Don’t blame Walter. I’m the one you should punish.” He rose and placed himself between the two angels. “But I don’t regret a single second of my time with Casey.” Her image floated through his mind, giving him the strength to continue. “What’s more, I wish I could have stayed with her. But I’m ready for whatever consequence you’d like to give me.”

The angel called The-Who-Knows-All picked up an orange and black football and threw it at Walter, barely missing his head. “You’re lucky I don’t demote you to servant angel.”

Seeing Walter hesitate and knowing what he’d like to say, Josh decided to take up the challenge for the both of them. If not, they’d spend Eternity in heartache. And alone. “We want to go back.”

“You what?” The highest-ranking angel raised his chin, daring Josh to repeat his words.

“We want to go back. Now.” Josh swallowed, envisioned Casey’s beautiful face, and kept on going. “We want to be mortal and stay with the women we love.”

Walter gawked at him as if he’d spat cockroaches out of his mouth. “We?”

What was wrong with him? Why can't the guy stand up for what he wants? Good thing Walter had him to give him a little backbone. "Yeah. We. Or are you telling me you don't want Tilly?"

Walter's bushy eyebrows dropped into a single line down his nose. At long last, however, his lips tilted upward as he turned toward the One-Who-Knows-All. "Yeah. We. I do want to go back to Tilly." Standing up taller, he nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now."

The top angel scowled at them, sending a wave of energy crashing through a tower of colorful helmets. "I don't believe this! As God wanted, I allowed you two to experience life because Josh never had the chance, and this is how you repay me? How dare you?"

"How dare we?" Josh stomped over to him and crooked his head up to stare up at him. "Of course we dare! How could you expect me to taste life as a mortal and not want to have more? I want what I should have had the first time. I want to live!"

The rage, the fury building in the One-Who-Knows-All's face threatened to make Josh change his mind. But he refused, calling all his inner strength to bear. Too much was at stake for him to give up. Too much love. Too much living. Instead of cowering, he took another step forward, craning his neck more to keep his eyes locked onto the head angel.

"You had no right to fall in love with a mortal being."

"Maybe so. But you have no right to keep me from her now that I am in love."

They glared at each other, the silence growing as the tension around them gathered strength. At long last, the head angel whirled around, placing his back to Josh. Josh held his breath and waited, knowing his superior would make a decision and pass a ruling soon. Yet when the One-Who-Knows-All spun around to confront Josh, he was unprepared for what came rushing toward him.

A blazing red light zipped between the two angels. One a mere trainee. The other the greatest angel of all. Walter shouted something in warning, but Josh couldn't comprehend the words. Heat, hotter than he'd thought possible, ate up his body as it traveled from his toes to his hair. Pain, greater than he would wish on his worst enemies, pounded in his gut and he fought to stay upright. The force of the pain, the brilliance of the light, brought him to his knees moments before he blacked out.

Images of Casey's bright green eyes, twinkling and mischievous, came to him in the darkness. He reached out, fighting to hold onto the vision, wanting to feel her take his hands. Calling her name, he groped blindly as the world surrounding him slowly materialized.

"Josh?"

He could hear her voice breaking through the sting, the stabbing ache, cutting through the red light. If only the voice was real.

A blaring roar broke through his misery, jerking him into awareness. Walter, as unsteady on his feet as Josh was, held his arm as they stood in the middle of the road outside Casey's apartment complex.

"Move!" Yanking Walter with him, Josh threw his body toward the grass. The eighteen-wheeler roared by them, narrowly missing them. They hit the ground, rolled several times until they banged into a lamppost, with Walter landing on top. The resounding crack meant nothing to Josh as he pushed Walter's hefty body off him. Grayness threatened to take him again as the horrendous throbbing hit him, searing along his arm on its way to his shoulder.

"Josh!"

Trying to push up on the other arm, he swiveled as best he could toward Casey. "Hi."

"Uh, Josh, I think you broke your arm." Casey's perplexed expression fixated on his forearm, bent at an impossibly odd angle.

"I did?" Should his arm look like that? Should his arm hurt this much? Yet even in pain, the exhilaration inside him took over. "We made it, Walter! He sent us back!" With his working arm, he made a fist in the air, but soon changed it to an outstretched hand. "Now how about helping me up?"

As Walter lifted him to his feet, Josh reached out for her. Yet instead of Casey coming to him, Tilly wrapped her arm around his waist while keeping her gaze on Walter. The two lovebirds held onto him, treating him like a lifeline between them.

Why wouldn't Casey come closer? He watched her, emotions altering her features. Was she happy he'd returned? Or had he misunderstood their relationship?

"How can you have a broken arm?"

Her question caught him off guard. Was that all she wanted to know? Breaking free from between Walter and Tilly, Josh inched nearer, letting the two lovers clutch each other instead of him. "That's it? Just 'how can you have a broken arm?'" He gaped at her, hurt

battling with confusion. “How about ‘Josh, I’m so glad you came back’?”

What was wrong with her? Didn’t she get what had happened? Didn’t she understand the sacrifice he’d made? If he didn’t know better, he’d think she didn’t care about him. So, maybe she didn’t?

“You can’t have a broken arm.”

She was stuck on his arm problem. Which meant he’d have to deal with that before he could get to the important matter. “Yeah, I can.”

“But how?” The lines in her forehead eased a bit as she reached out to skim her fingers over his arm. The throbbing intensified and he sucked in air for relief.

She didn’t understand. Taking a big breath, he took the biggest leap of faith. Bigger than any leap from a bungee-jump could ever be. “Casey, my arm’s broken because I’m human. I’m all mortal. For you. For us. So we could be together.”

Her silence was more painful than any broken arm. Still, he couldn’t give up now. “If that’s what you want, of course.” A quick glimpse of Walter and Tilly entwined in each other’s arms, their attention only on each other, left no doubt he wouldn’t get any help from them.

Casey’s mouth opened and closed several times before she managed to speak. When she did, however, she swept his soul into her hands and cradled him to her heart.

“Damn straight I do.”

Josh let out a wild whoop as Casey pulled him to her, pressing her breasts against his chest and her lips to his. “Ow!”

“Oh, crap, Josh. I’m sorry. I forgot.” She lurched away from him, her hands flying to her mouth.

Yet, despite the sting racing through his limb, he clutched her to him. “Don’t worry about it.” Slipping his tongue in her ear, he paused and whispered, “Besides, something tells me living with you means a lot of broken bones in my future.”

Casey laughed, her red hair flying behind her in a gust of wind. Taking him by the hand, she led him to her car. “You’re going to love the folks in the emergency room. They’re all good friends of mine.”

The End