

Loose Id



The
PICK UP
Line

LOUISA TRENT

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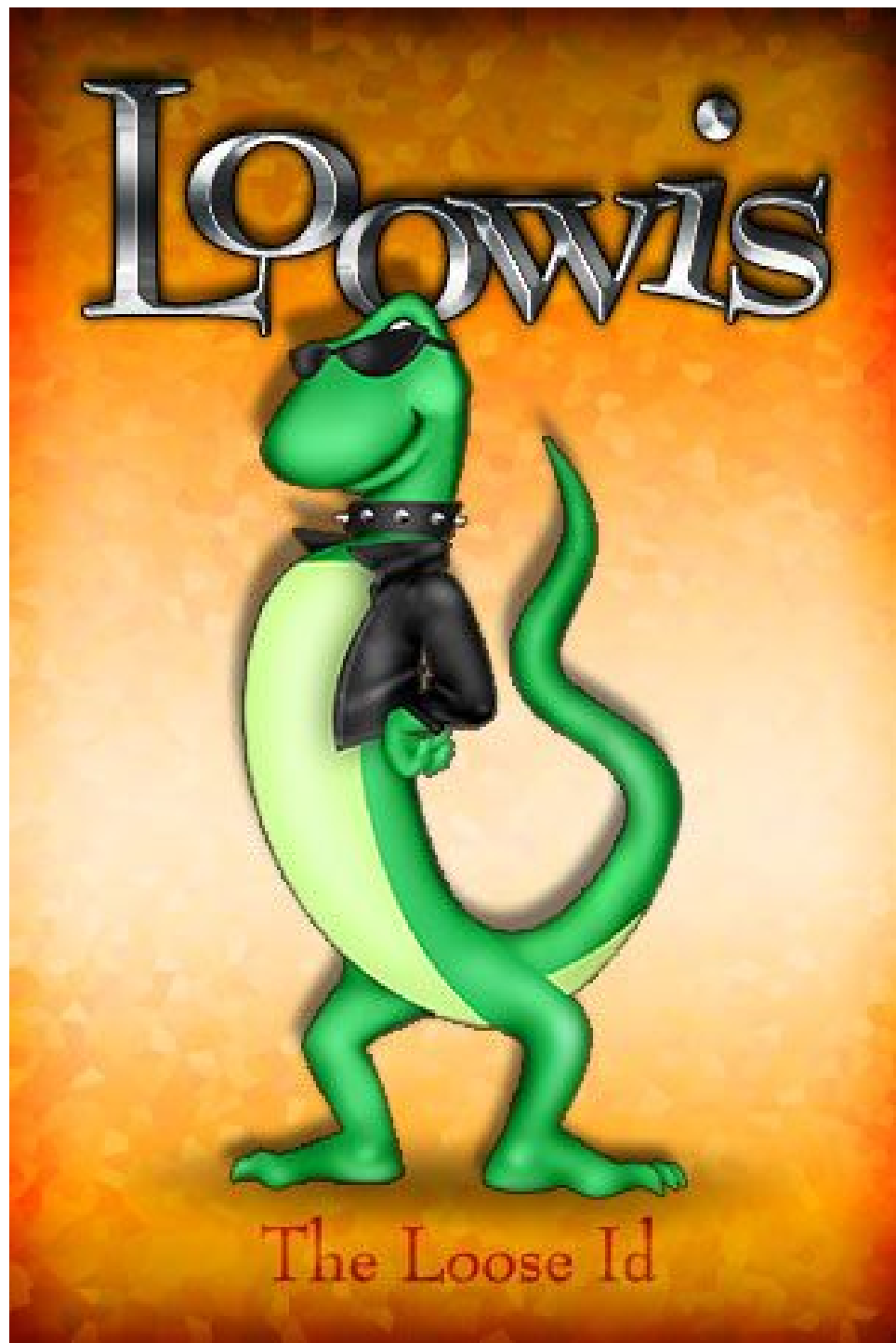
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Chapter One

As usual for a Friday night, Sprout's Café was packing 'em in. Not a table stayed vacant for long in the popular restaurant down on old Fenton pier.

Lou Franco stood in the crush at the front counter, one of the many unhappy patrons waiting on his takeout order. Cheek by jowl wasn't *exactly* how he would have described his ticklish position with the customer up ahead of him in the pickup line, but the expression came mighty damn close.

Hoping to extricate himself from the tight spot, Lou tried putting it in reverse.

And got nowhere quick. His back was literally up against the wall.

Next, he sidestepped. Left side. Right side. Any side? Nope. And with his dick already riding the customer's rear bumper, edging forward amounted to suicide.

On the bright side, Lou figured this front-to-back squeeze had all the earmarks of an opportunity made in Heaven. Maybe he'd even add a name and number to that little black book he'd been meaning to buy.

Except -- was he goosing a male or a female?

He didn't know. Couldn't tell. And not the sort who swings both ways, the ambiguity presented a definite problem.

When a guy was single and rapidly approaching farty --

Damn! To get him riled, Pete deliberately mispronounced his old man's next birthday. As if the milestone wasn't humbling enough already, his son relegated his age to the level of potty humor. Now the kid had him doing it, too.

Okay, where was he?

Uh-oh. Brain freeze. Not for the life of him could Lou remember his last thought. Was this one of those embarrassing senior moments all the old farts -- er -- *middle-aged* talked about?

Eventually, his premature senility or situational anxiety -- or whatever the hell had caused him to blank -- cleared, and Lou started over.

When a guy was single and rapidly approaching...*ahem*...the BIG FOUR-OH, sex had plenty enough built-in complications already without throwing the current androgynous look into the mix. Old-fashioned or no, Lou liked to know up front, before making that all-important first pass, that his date and he would use separate washroom facilities during the course of the evening -- the unisex at Sprout's excluded. Long and short, for his own piece of mind, Lou needed to ascertain if the customer up ahead of him in line shared the same territorial rights as he to the urinal.

A covert investigation, of course.

Coming right out and asking, "Hey, you a he or a she?" probably wouldn't cut it. The customer might construe such a question as impolite. Even rude. And nothing but nothing would kill a blossoming romance quicker than jerk rudeness. Then again, if it turned out the customer did *not* belong to the feminine persuasion, the offended fella might just try landing Lou a sucker-punch. And in this close encounter, he had no place to duck. Damn awkward.

Nope, for definite, direct confrontation was not the way to go.

But he had to do *something*. At the very least, he owed the person up ahead of him in line an apology. 'Course, the "Pardon me" would go down a helluva lot easier with a "Ma'am" or a "Mister" attached.

Perspiration popped on his brow. Suddenly, his silk tie felt like a hangman's noose around his bobbing Adam's apple.

Okay, okay. No need to panic. *Yet*. He had options. This was what he'd do:

(1) Assess the customer's build.

Hmm. The customer up ahead was tall, just a few inches shy of Lou's own six foot-two height. But all those lanky feet and inches hung on a graceful frame, leading him to deduce that size told him squat.

(2) Strike up a conversation in the hopes of determining genitalia by way of vocal cords.

An iffy proposition at best, and with his tin ear, doomed to fail. These days, most male pop singers sounded like chicks to him.

(3) Ask the customer to turn around so he could do a face scan.

Sound idea, that.

Except -- neither of them could move. No kidding, between the customer and the wall, this line had him sandwiched. And, in this PB&J, his nuts were getting jammed but good.

(4) Conduct a discreet survey of the customer's wardrobe.

Everybody knew clothes made the man, while a woman made whatever she was wearing kinda wonderful. Yep, it was all about the duds. Starting at ground zero, he'd work his way up.

Lou dropped his gaze to the floor.

And snorted. The customer wore mustard-colored work boots. Like they told him anything! Even Mister Antoine, the interior decorator Lou had hired to class-up The Pink Flamingo's strip club image, wore work boots. Everybody and their granny wore work boots.

Though...*though*...the feet those work boots encased looked kinda tiny. Now he was getting somewhere! Pigmy-sized work boots could mean the customer was female.

Or, that the dude he was courtin' just happened to have small feet.

The shoes, Lou concluded, gave nothing away.

Same for the baggy, multi-pocketed cargo pants. Pete called them "raging," which meant, Lou assumed, that everyone, both males and females, wore them. *Nada* again.

Even the tasteful red-plaid boxers, revealed by the customer's sagging waistband, no longer defined gender. Ever since fashion designers started sticking their collective noses in underwear -- the last bastion of masculinity, and the single solitary place they should have kept their *haute couture* nostrils out of -- males and females alike wore boxers. And that was just so wrong.

What was up with the world today?

Men should look, talk, act, and think like men. Ditto for women. This transgender business had gotten *way* out of hand.

While figuratively scratching his skull -- *figuratively* because the line was packed too tight to do it for real -- Lou let go a blustery sigh.

And immediately realized he had overlooked something, a sex-specific something, which might help clear up his current confusion.

(5) Check out the customer's hair, the ends of which his exhaled breath had ruffled.

Twisting his jaw, Lou narrowed his sights onto the top of the customer's head, zooming in on those cylindrical, keratinized, often pigmented filaments characteristically growing from the epidermis of a mammal.

Because the chromosomal truth, baby, was always in the "do."

This do was a definite don't.

Collar-level brown hair looked like some twisted barber had gone at the thick layers with a hedge trimmer. *Whack. Whack.* Either that or the shaggy ends constituted a snotty

stylist's vision of glam. Then again, what the hell did he know from hair trends? Angelo, a seventy-year-old *paisano* who buzzed and shaved and clipped in a one-man shop down in Little Italy, had been keeping him neat for years.

Geez! He couldn't catch a break even if his balls depended on it. And, whoa mama, did they ever! The little tingling action below his belt had swelled to some major proportions. The boys needed an answer quick! Was his dick poking a fella or a femme?

Pulling out all stops, he moved onto the last resort, the final option of a desperate man. Over a wide but thin shoulder, Lou darted a downward glance into the customer's gender-neutral gaping cotton shirt, where he --

(6) Copped a Peeping Tom.

Whew! For definite, the customer was female.

For double definite, Lou felt like a real A-wipe for wondering what else she had pierced besides that sexy raspberry-toned nipple.

No place to go *butt* into her, Lou levered a hand between the press of their bodies and tapped her arm. "Excuse me, ma'am. About my -- uh -- uh --"

How to phrase the delicate circumstance?

Asking if his dick was rubbing her the wrong way lacked a certain amount of finesse. A man didn't want to misplace his couth at a time like this...

Taking some advice from Pete, Lou tried getting in touch with his feminine side.

Nope. Nothing. Either too long a stretch or he plain didn't own a feminine side; in either event, he came up empty. This left turning on the charm.

Lou gave a shudder. *Man*. His short hairs were still smokin' from the last time he'd turned on the charm with a woman in a crowd. 'Course that crowd consisted of female office workers protesting sexual harassment. Busy checking out all those sweet womanly curves, he hadn't noticed the rally signs the gals carried. Things had turned ugly fast.

As smooth he was not, Lou stuck with the truth. “About the position my condition is in -- if you feel the need to slap my face or anything, go right ahead.”

At that exact moment, the line inched forward. The freed-up space gave the customer swivel room, enough space so she could turn her head.

Her wash-and-wear features crinkled into a broad, friendly smile. “Slap your face? Hardly! The only question is, do we introduce ourselves first or say fuck the formalities and go straight to bed?”

Chapter Two

Lou exhaled the breath he'd been holding.

Whoa, yeah! She was his kind of woman.

Straightforward and to the point. Damn cute, too, in a tousled, natural sort of way. A pert nose; a wide, candid grin; dancing blue eyes -- this lady knew how to have a good time. Would she consider having a good time with him?

He took a chance. "I've got no place to go 'til eleven. What d'ya say we compromise and do both?" He stuck out his hand. "Lou Franco. Your place or mine?"

He groaned. Could he get any more trite? Geez, he was so out of practice!

Obviously the forgiving sort, she didn't draw attention to his blunder. "Blue Heron, here. Free 'til seven p.m. tomorrow. Either place will do."

Her brisk, no-nonsense handshake suited her to a tee.

As did her name. Blue Heron. Just like the bird, she had long legs, a long neck, sort of a pointy chin...and wings. Not the angel kind. And not the embarrassing, feminine hygiene product kind that sent Pete and him scurrying to the fridge during TV commercials. Blue's wings spoke of a free and soaring spirit.

Lou sighed again, this time not so gustily. Did he ever need some wing flapping in his life! He'd had his feet stuck firmly in the mud too damn long.

After their hands separated, Blue kept smiling. As if she wanted him to say more. As if she *expected* him to say more. What the hell was he supposed to say?

Kiss of death, small talk. As evidenced by the "your place or mine" cliché he'd just let loose on an already cliché-ridden world.

When he didn't say more, when he just stood there with his tongue and dick tied up in knots, she said, "Well...I guess...I'll just get back to my menu selecting now," and turned away.

A handshake, an introduction, and already he'd messed up.

Lou stared at the back of Blue's crazy, mixed-up hairdo, pondering his own bewilderment.

A momentous, make or break moment hovered in the balance. She'd pitched the ball. The game was up to him. Could he slam a homerun, or should he give up and return to the lockers, dragging his bat?

Damn! The pressure of being a man in today's world was enough to make him want to hang up his dick forever. In Pete's post-modern, pop psychology, crappola-speak, he felt a mite conflicted. How should he play this -- real deal or pretend cool?

Yeah, right. His hurting 'nads, he was cool! Even as a young man, he'd never been cool. Besides which, his full-blown, very *uncool* hard-on had pretty much given away the genuineness of his interest.

Real, it was.

Boring. Average. A guy who, for twelve years, had dragged his tired butt out of bed every morning to drop a sandwich and an apple in his kid's school backpack. And now that Pete had left for college, Lou still woke up early, though a need no longer existed. Pathetic.

What woman wanted pathetic?

Women wanted exciting. Navy SEALs. Spies. Bodyguards. Bloodsucking vamps.

Hey, he used to be a police detective! Maybe he could somehow work his former career into the conversation --

Naw. His cop days were a lifetime ago. He was no longer that man.

"You a vegetarian?" Lou finally thought to ask, grabbing at straws, wanting to keep the conversation going, wanting to hear her voice again, wanting to get to know Blue Heron.

She stared straight ahead. "Why, yes. You?"

This was going great! Terrific! He asked a question, she answered it and then asked a question of her own. Give and take. She hadn't totally shut him out.

"Vegetarian? No, not me," he said, manfully. "That would be my son. He converted four years ago. In high school. According to Pete, Sprout's is the only restaurant in Fenton with stuff on the menu that doesn't feel pain."

In front of him, a wide set of shoulders shook in laughter.

"I love my kid," he continued, since he was on a roll. "But sometimes I don't know which planet Pete beamed down from. *Feel pain!* What kind of organic propaganda is that? Humans are carnivores, right? Not herbivores. Man needs to eat meat, the rawer the better --"

Lou stopped. Listen to him! What an idiot! Blue wasn't laughing *with* him, she was laughing *at* him. When had he started saying humiliating stuff like that?

He knew the exact moment: eighteen years ago, when a maternity nurse had placed a little blue bundle in his arms.

And Lou had not a single regret. Not about having to worry about unexciting things, like sneaking protein into his kid's diet so he'd grow into a strong man. Not about highfalutin' things, like losing touch with the "child within him," so he could concentrate on the child who'd be up the creek without him.

But wasn't life strange sometimes? At twenty-one, he hadn't intentionally opted into single parenthood. At thirty-nine, he hadn't intentionally opted into the dating scene, either. But there it was, and here he was, trying to get a date, and so out of it, he had not a clue what to do next.

Mortified, Lou straightened his cufflinks.

Blue turned toward him again, her smile sunny and warm. "Relax, Lou. We're a go. Just so happens, you caught me in a horny mood."

"Yeah?" His voice, even to his own ears, sounded almost pitifully hopeful. Did she mean what he thought she meant?

She nodded reassuringly. "Uh-huh. Now, about your son -- not to worry. I've been a vegetarian longer than your Pete, and apart from a bout of prolonged sexual frustration, I'm perfectly healthy. And that's in every area." Her voice turned solemn. "You?"

"Healthy? Yeah. Real healthy. I jog three times a week, and my cholesterol is right where it should be."

She shot him a probing look, one of those searching gazes that made him realize she wasn't talking about that whole confusing HDL versus LDL business his doctor was forever explaining to him. What she wanted was a statement as to his sexual history. Could he get any thicker?

"I get it. *That* kind of health. Yeah, I'm healthy, very healthy. Real...um...healthy, I guess you could say." Blue Heron was the most forthright person Lou had ever met, because if that question wasn't a sexual go-ahead, he was his uncle's monkey. Or, was that a monkey's uncle? Or, maybe he was thinking of spanking the monkey? But whatever the correct saying, it looked to him like maybe he hadn't struck-out at bat, after all.

And that was good news. No boner about it, his love life sucked. Pete hadn't needed a babysitter for years, but he was too full of testosterone to go without supervision. So -- when The Flamingo closed at two a.m. Pete's dad went straight home from the club.

Alone. Always alone. And that was every night.

With an impressionable teen, to whom he forever preached the joys of abstinence, bringing home some bar floozy was out of the question. As a result, Lou went without sex for extended periods of time.

Thirteen months, three weeks, two days, twenty-two-odd hours, without. But who was counting?

Him. He was counting.

Tick tock. After dropping Pete off at his college dorm last week, the countdown had started.

His turn now. Lou intended to concentrate on his own love life for a change, instead of always worrying whether Pete was doing the right thing by Mary, or Sue, or Wendy, or whichever girl his son was seeing that week.

The end was in sight. But holy premature ejaculation! He didn't want his dry spell to end while waiting in a takeout express line! At the very minimum, he wanted to get his pants unzipped first. Why wouldn't the damn line move, already?

"Everything is made to order at Sprout's," Lou said, trying a new small talk angle to get his mind off the possibility of sticky boxers. "That's why I always call ahead."

"I wish I had known. I'm new in town."

"Really? So -- how long you staying?"

"Three more days."

"Really? *Really!* I could...maybe...you know...if you're not busy or anything...show you around. Except for a stint in the navy, I've lived here all my life."

"Sweet of you to offer. Thank you! I'd like that. It was only by accident that I wandered into Sprout's tonight. Good thing I have an adventurous nature, or I might have kept walking. Think of what I might have missed!" Her bottom cuddled unmistakably closer to his dick. "By the way, Lou, is a woman with an adventurous nature okay with you?"

He thought maybe that was an invitation, so he R.S.V.P.'d low to her ear. "How adventurous are we talking?"

"Here, let me show you." She took his hand and placed the palm under her loose shirt. "Crowds make for a kind of public privacy." Over her shoulder, she winked. "Or an exhibitionist's dream."

"I don't think --"

"Relax, Lou. Don't think. Go where the mood takes us."

His mood took him to Blue's dainty breast, where, finger by finger, he cupped her, pierced nipple and all. When had he last felt such softness, a woman's velvety softness?

So long. Too long! Romantic feelings had him all choked up. But he only trembled a little, only from head to foot, with a lot of other stuff going on in between. "You feel good, Blue. Real good."

"Let's make it easier, shall we?" She worked one button, then two, until her raspberry-toned nipple, gold ring shining, stuck out through the gaping edges of the shirt.

"Hey, hold on," he growled. Removing the menu from her grip, he covered her up with the folded laminated sheet. Blue was for his eyes only!

While her giving bottom wiggled against his erection, he worked undercover, worshipping her silky flesh.

"Oh, yes." She sighed. "Oh, yes." Elegant throat arching, she rested her head back against his chest. "Oh, yes, yes, *yesssss*."

Maybe Blue liked it. She sounded like maybe she liked it.

Her abandoned response triggered a reciprocating recklessness in him. What would she think, say, do if he pushed his palm down the front of her loose-fitting trousers?

Right before taking the plunge, Lou fell back.

Things were getting a little too wild. "Button up, Blue, then call in your order. By the time we get to the front of the line, the cook will have everything ready, and we can leave."

Although, who cared about food? Food was the last thing on his mind. But Blue might be hungry, so...

After pulling her shirt closed, she patted her multitudinous pockets. "Fuck! I left my cell at work --"

Lou reached into his jacket, pulled out his only connection to Pete, and handed it over. "Here. Use mine."

"Thank you," she said, but distractedly, searching the dinner specials.

"Want the number?" he asked, trying to speed things up.

She glanced up from her menu surfing. "Committed it to memory, eh?"

"Yeah. I call every Friday night --"

Damn. Now she'd probably make a wisecrack, something about him needing to get a life, which was the truth -- he did need to get a life. But when he recited the digits, Blue just punched in the numbers, no comment made.

After a full minute of listening to the ring, Blue expressed her concern. "Fuck! What the fuck is wrong with the lazy fuck at the fucking takeout counter? He's not fucking picking up the fucking phone."

Excusing himself from Blue, Lou approached the manager, the burly guy wearing the green "Vegan pride" ribbon on his lapel. "Pardon me."

"Wait your turn, Mac."

"The name is Sir, not Mac, and for the past forty-five minutes, I have waited my turn."

The manager's face turned a mottled shade of turnip-purple. "Your point, Mac --?"

Lou knew a little something about customer satisfaction. Since he wasn't satisfied, he shared a heartfelt slice of advice. "Believe me, I know how it goes. You're having a bad day. You probably had a fight last night with your girlfriend because she slept with your best friend. Again. Then driving to work this morning you got the one finger salute from some joker just because you cut him off going through red. You hate your lousy, go-nowhere,

meaningless life, your expanding gut, your rising forehead, your shrinking dick. Too bad. Suck it up and keep the damn line moving.”

No threat, no intimidation, just one oppressed slob in the universe to another oppressed slob in the universe, Lou leaned into the counter and said, “Hand over my order. Don’t make me veggie-cide you, okay?”

The manager passed him the waiting brown bags.

After forking over the cash, a ten-buck guilt-tip included, Lou returned to Blue.

He tried to smile. Unfortunately, full-blown arousal had stiffened his face muscles along with his dick. “Like fake burgers?”

“I love a good faux burger. Not as much as I love good sex, but then nothing comes close to an excellent fuck. You offering one or both?”

“Both. I’m offering you both.” Before his luck turned bad, Lou placed his hand under Blue’s elbow and escorted her out Sprout’s trendy, art-deco door into the night.

Chapter Three

Ordinarily, Blue didn't go around accepting offers of veggie-burgers and sex from men she'd only just met. She especially would never accept an offer of a veggie-burger and sex from a conservative-looking businessman like Lou Franco. But there was just something about him...

When determining whether a stranger had the makings of an ax murderer or the potential for friendship, she invariably relied upon instinct. Her instincts told her the man of the sad expression and soulful brown eyes was safe.

Not harmless. *Safe*. A distinct difference.

With a safe man, she could take off her clothes, confident he wouldn't jump her bones. Until and unless she gave him the go-ahead. With a harmless man, she could also take off her clothes. But *really*, what was the point?

Lou fell into the former category.

His affection for his son came through loud and clear, and put her right at ease. The world could be a big, bad, scary place, and she had to protect herself while still leaving herself open to possibilities.

Lou was one of those possibilities.

And after standing in front of him in a pickup line, after getting up close and personal with the lower regions of his anatomy, that gorgeous bulge under his belt to be precise, she knew Lou not only satisfied her safe criteria, but he also came equipped with a lovely, thick penis.

Male genitalia. A subject on which she could expound with an expert's authority.

As Blue huffed and puffed to keep up with Lou, she shot his erection a covetous glance. Never, but never, underestimate the appeal of a huge dong to the discerning woman. And she was just such a discerning woman.

"Obviously, you weren't lying when you said you jog three times a week," she said to Lou, the safe and well-endowed stranger she'd selected for some weekend fun.

"Sorry." Immediately, he slowed his pace.

No veiled insults hinting she had fallen out of shape. No innuendo about lax athleticism leading to soft muscles. That passive-aggressive shit sent her right up the wall! She spoke her mind, let the chips fall where they might, and said, "fuck 'em" if they couldn't take a joke. Would a straight-up man like Lou accept her assertiveness in the bedroom? Would he find her unfeminine attributes too off-putting to put out?

Looked like doubts had started creeping into his thoughts. A tight expression quirked Lou's world-weary face, deepening his already pronounced character lines. His life-marked features interested her as an artist. As a woman, Lou turned her on.

Especially his mouth. His mouth really lit her fire. A sense of humor had cut sharp brackets into the outside edges of his firm lips. Though soft-spoken, Lou's lips practically shouted sex. *Yum.*

But -- would those yummy lips say "yes" to a weekend of mindless fucking?

"No," Lou said.

Had he read her mind?

She forced out a laugh. "No? No, what, Lou?"

“No. I didn’t lie about jogging. I don’t lie.”

“Never? Not even social lies?”

Another prolonged pause. Evidently, Lou was an extraordinarily careful man. On a thirty-second delay while he mulled over his response, he carefully weighed each word of his reply. “No. I don’t lie. Not even social lies.”

“Then tell me true, honest Lou, what’s an avowed carnivore doing with a veggie-burger?”

No thirty-second delay here. Before she could say *gotcha*, Lou quickly explained his way out of her entrapment, a snare she had used to catch him a lie. “I eat rabbit food only under duress. Force of habit explains the veggie-burger. See, every Friday night the deal is I pick up dinner, and Pete meets me later to do some male bonding over tofu -- his, and beef -- mine. I forgot he’s off at college and ordered for him anyway.”

When his expression went from somberly serious to seriously somber, she wondered how Lou came by those sexy laugh brackets on either side of his mouth. Forget a ready sense of humor -- the guy hadn’t cracked a smile yet.

“Okay,” he said. “I didn’t really forget. I just really didn’t want to remember.”

His yummy mouth twisted. “Okay, I did remember, but I thought if I stood in line at Sprout’s like I always do on Friday night, it would seem like old times, like he hadn’t left home.”

Her eyes smarted. “You miss him. You miss your son.” Familiar territory. She knew all about missing someone.

“Yeah. I miss him. A hell of a lot. I love that kid. The house is empty without him.” He sighed.

How refreshing! Lou actually acknowledged owning soft feelings. Another man had openly admitted to sensitive emotions, and because he’d worn his heart and soul on his shirtsleeve, she’d loved him with her own heart and soul.

Gillian.

Gill's last words had admonished her to can the sadness. Not satisfied with her nod, he had then extorted from her a promise to be happy. She hadn't given her vow of happiness lightly, so she would at least have to try. That meant seeing this pickup through.

Blue sniffed vigorously when the tears started to well. Weeping all over this nice man would only scare him off. "Your son will come home, Lou. I graduated college five years ago, and I still visit my folks whenever I can. And I call home at least once a week."

When Gillian was alive, she had visited more frequently, her housemate in tow. Her parents had welcomed their daughter's live-in non-lover with open arms and non-judgmental hearts, accepting the unorthodox nature of their relationship without question. Her mom and dad had loved Gillian almost as much as she --

Blue shook her head. No. That wasn't right. Not *had* loved Gillian. She *still* loved Gillian. She would *always* love Gillian. He was with her every second of every day.

Now, when she returned home, the situation was different, naturally. As her pain would only hurt her parents, she hid her horrible sense of loss, her anger, too. Until she could get her heart unbroken, she lived a lie whenever she went home. That deceit caused her to keep the visits short and spread far apart --

Lou interrupted her morose thoughts. "My car's not here. I parked at work and walked down to the pier." He nodded at the upscale models in Sprout's parking lot. "Which one are you?"

Pushing the gloom away, Blue said brightly, as perky as a butterfly out to sample nectar from every flower stamen in the meadow, "For fuck's sake, Lou! Do I look like a Lexus or a Mercedes to you?"

At his swift and honest "No," she grinned in delight.

“Glad to know I’m making the right impression, Lou. I wouldn’t want to mislead you in any way. Actually, I drive an old shitbox, a wreck of a Chevy truck, and she’s back at the hotel. I walked here, too. See? We must think alike.”

“I doubt it.”

Lou sounded so wary, Blue could easily have laughed ’til she cried and cried and kept on crying.

Three years since Gillian’s death, she still broke down at regular intervals. Like spring rain, sometimes her weepiness would last uninterrupted for days. Other times, the tearful showers fell only intermittently. Laughing one minute, sobbing the next.

She’d felt that way all evening. And in that dangerously erratic, slightly schizoid mood, she’d decided to pick up Lou. What the fuck, and why the fuck not? She’d needed a distraction, and Lou fit the bill.

Too bad, she wouldn’t fit Lou’s bill.

Gill had understood her, without her ever having to explain. But conservative Lou wasn’t used to a woman like her. Clearly, he didn’t know what to make of her.

Lately, she didn’t know what to make of herself.

Hey! Lou and she had something in common!

“Nice, both of us being on foot tonight,” Lou offered. “Nice, we both like to walk. Nice, it’s a nice night for walking, too.”

“Yes, nice,” she strained through clenched smile. “And I think, Lou, you’ve covered the topics of exercise and weather rather nicely.”

Wound a little tight, Lou flinched at her sarcasm.

Shame drenched Blue in clammy sweat. What was wrong with her? Sure, she wasn’t as nice as Lou, but she wasn’t mean. She never tried to get a laugh at someone else’s expense, and here she was going hard on nice Lou, jazzing him, picking his every word apart. Instead

of handling the sex maturely, she was behaving like a bratty sixteen-year-old kid out on her first date.

Only her first date hadn't happened until art college. And even then, the date hadn't really been a date at all...

Oh, Gillian! Why did you force that promise of happiness out of me? I'm no good at happy, not without you.

"I'm botching this, aren't I?" Lou mumbled and detached his hand from her elbow to fix his tie.

A tension tic, she decided. His pencil-straight tie needed no adjusting.

She should lighten up on Lou. Taking her sadness out on him was wrong and petty, spiteful, too. Lou had played no part in her broken heart. Not his fault he wasn't Gillian.

"Lou," she said, softly, "I want you to know, you're not botching things. You're doing just fine."

He hesitated. "Sure?"

"Positive!" She beamed at him, just to put his mind at rest. The least she could do after snarking at him.

After that, they walked side by side along the pier, two separate people, each trapped in their own separate thoughts, their own separate lives.

Suddenly, incongruously, a hand gently cupped her nape; large fingers tickled the skin her butch haircut left bare.

Well, well, well! Le surprise. What was Lou up to? And how far would he take it?

Less than a minute later, she had her answer.

Nice guy Lou shifted his hand to the center of her back, before dropping the palm lower. Lower as in against the small of her back lower, under her shirt lower, where her nerve endings picked up the dry coolness of all five of his fingers.

Woot! Lou was just chockfull of interesting and conflicting personality facets.

She hadn't taken him for the sort to take the initiative. In fact, she assumed she'd make the first move, just as she had inside Sprout's.

But, no. Lou folded her into him, his jaw lowered to her jaw, and everything else, including her sadness, disappeared in the press of their bodies.

His free hand, the one not carrying the takeout bags, wrapped a shoulder. Combed through her hair. Smoothed down her back. Again. Then, palmed her bottom cheek.

Sweeeet! Lou was an ass man!

Gillian had been an ass man, too, but from an entirely different perspective.

At that evil thought, she went for it. Lifting herself atop Lou's commendable erection, she kissed him. As in *really* kissed him. Deep throat kissed him. Going at it heavy-duty, she rooted for his tongue, her sex drive kicking in and going strong.

Whoopeeee. I'm getting some tonight...

Gillian would have approved. He'd gotten some just about every night of the week, though never from her.

As the gloomies reclaimed her state of mind, both hands clenching, she lunged for Lou's neck, nearly throttling the air out of his lungs in the process, barely getting enough oxygen herself.

Gimmeegimmeegimmeeee. MORE!

Pace yourself, Blue. Don't swallow him whole, don't attack him like a shark with a guppy.

Stumbling backwards, Lou pulled away, their lip suction breaking. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." He moaned. "Couldn't help myself, Blue."

What was there to help? And why had he retreated?

She had no idea.

Nothing new there. The subtle nuances of the man/woman thing often escaped her.

"Can you breathe?" his concerned voice asked.

"Yeah, Lou, I can breathe."

"Good," he replied, obviously relieved. "Your lungs were laboring."

Is that why he had stopped, because of a little gasping on her part? Her assertiveness hadn't turned him off?

Shit! In that case, she had better get her ass back to the gym, pronto! After Gill's death, she'd lost all incentive to go. Her live-in non-lover used to kick her lazy butt all over the place about staying in shape, keeping healthy, treating her body like a temple -- no junk food, no cigs, no liquor, no blow, not if she wanted to hang onto her talent.

If Gill had *really* wanted her to hang onto her talent, he never would've up and died! Her talent for art, for happiness, for life was buried with him. What did any of it matter? Why bother going on without him?

She patted her back pockets for her one-way ticket to emphysema.

Fuck! She was all out. No pack. "Got a smoke on you, Lou? I always light up before, during, and after sex."

"Sorry. I don't smoke."

Natch. All those nasty tobacco fumes stinking up his nice, dark, businessman suits...

He shrugged. "I gave 'em up eighteen years ago."

"Bully for you." Now she'd have to listen to some twelve-step recruitment program campaign. Bor-ing. If she wanted to slowly kill herself, that was her fuckin' business!

While she waited for the lecture, Lou funneled under her loose shirt again, to the bare skin of her back again, his dexterous fingers rising upward to where her bra fastener would've been had she been wearing a bra, which she was not, never had, not even a training bra. No need. Which was why, right from the start, she'd made a point of letting Lou see and touch what he was getting -- or, rather -- what he wasn't getting. No false

advertising. No false build-up leading to a disappointing conclusion. No false front. No pushups, no miracles, no falsies.

She was flat. No tits at all.

Like her or don't like her, she was who she was. But who was this guy she'd picked up?

She wasn't quite sure. For safe, he seemed awfully intense. She had to face it, to go off with an Amazon like her, the dude had to be starved for sex --

His hunger could mean only one thing. "A recent divorce, right?"

"I'm not divorced."

Blue wrenched away. The two-timing lizard was still married! Lou, who had only just said he never lied, was lying through his teeth, lying in the most despicable way possible.

Chapter Four

Blue glared at Lou.

Low-life bastard! Bottom-feeding pond scum!

Creeps who cheated on their wives were the dregs of the universe. In the sisterhood she belonged to, a woman never, *ever*, knifed another woman in the back, especially not over a man. Not even over a man with an incredibly huge dong.

And here she'd thought Lou a member of a dying breed of sensitive guys!

Yeah, the fuck was sensitive, all right. Sensitive, her balls!

Really, how gullible could she get, anyway?

Blue knotted her hands at her sides. "Hold on one fuckin' second. Where the fuck do you get off thinking I'd fuckin' do this with a married man? And where the fuck is your wedding ring? I looked, ya know! Whadya do, pocket the gold band at Sprout's before the tit action?" She took a shaky inhale. "You practically stuffed your meat into me, and in a vegetarian-friendly restaurant of all places! Have you no principles?"

"I wouldn't be here, Blue, if I were married."

The weird part was, because Lou spoke with such quiet dignity, she actually believed him. And because she believed him, she went very still inside.

Please, God, don't make him a widower! One broken heart in a bed is enough.

Lou played with his tie. Again. "The truth is, I've never been married."

But he had a son, a son he was close to, a son he lived with in the same house before the kid left for college. Something didn't add up here. "Your Pete is adopted?"

"No."

Every gay couple she knew, and she knew quite a few, was going the baby route. Single hets, too. But Lou seemed too conservative for anything smacking of reproductive innovation...

She asked anyway. "You used a surrogate?"

"No!"

Whoa. His raised voice actually knocked her back on her work boots' rubber soles. She must've hit a nerve or something to create that seismic reaction in the mild-mannered Lou.

The explosion gave her reason to hope: Could be, Lou had something hot going on beneath his cool surface...

Lou looked kind of taken aback himself. "Pete is mine. All mine. I was his father from the moment he was conceived, and I'll be his father 'til the day I'm put in a hole." His tone leveled down a few hundred notches on the Richter scale. "Look, could we please keep walking?"

"All right. Sure." Her feet started moving.

And he said nothing. Minutes of dead air passed.

His silence just got her so bull. Though, *really*, why should she care? His life, his business. Same went for her. His prerogative, if he didn't want to talk about anything personal. She had secrets, too. A broken heart, as well. They were just in this for the sex. As long as he wasn't married, she was cool. But what a rocky start to a one-off!

P'shaw! One-off? Who was she fooling?

She was *so* outta here. A girl looking to get laid didn't need this kind of aggravation --

"I was in the navy and lonely for home," Lou said, his fingers on his tie. "I had one *date* with a woman on shore and didn't use anything. Luckily, I wasn't a total inconsiderate moron. I left her all the pertinent information on how to get in touch with me should something develop from the night."

"And it did?"

"Yeah, Pete did. When she wrote and told me about the baby, I asked her to marry me. She was a decade my senior, just coming off a bad marriage and a worse divorce. Bitter about both, she wanted nothing to do with me or another baby. Plus, she already had two little ones. She told me to stick the wedding band. That she'd just put the baby...*my* baby, *my* flesh and blood...up for adoption."

Blue's feminist hands fisted at her sides. "*Her* body, *her* choice!"

Lou didn't seem to hear her. "I talked her out of the placement, with the agreement I would take over full financial responsibility for her while she was pregnant and for the baby afterwards. I was getting out of the service, had a steady job waiting for me here in Fenton, and I could afford to raise a child alone. Everything worked out good for all parties involved. Pete's eighteen now and a real great kid."

"And Pete's mother?"

"After I paid her off, I never heard from her again."

Now, Blue's suspicions rose. She loved the sisterhood, but every now and again, a bad grape spoiled the bunch. "Did you have a paternity test done?"

Lou looked at her like she was an abomination, or at the very least, like a member of the insect family. "Why? Pete is my son."

If she were keeping track of his character traits, after "nice" and "serious" and "quiet" and "gentle," she would have added "trusting" to her descriptions of Lou. And after restoring

“sensitive” to the list, she’d also pencil in “non-judgmental.” Maybe even “tolerant.” After all, he hadn’t given her that expected lecture on not smoking.

Once Blue caught a bone -- or a boner -- between her teeth, she didn’t easily let it go. She had more questions for Lou. “Why didn’t you marry? Alone, with a child to raise -- wouldn’t a wife have eased the burden?”

“Burden? Pete was never a burden. He made my life...well...fun. I don’t know what I would’ve done without him. Besides, help with childcare isn’t a great reason for getting married. And life gets in the way of dating, you know? Things get complicated, and future dates don’t work out for one reason or another.”

Aha! Loosely translated, Lou had a major inability to commit. Unable to sustain a long-term relationship, he jumped from one bed to another. In other words, Lou was your typical marriage-phobe male.

Fine with her. She was only after a weekend of his time --

Make that a *night* of his time. The guy was too intense for her. One hormonal fuck and out the door she went, her promise to Gill partially kept.

She nodded, her mind all made up. “No need to turn this into any more than what it is, Lou. I completely understand. Sex without obligation is what I want, too. Flowers make me sneeze.”

“No, Blue, it’s not like that,” he protested. “I’m attracted to you --”

“Shh.” A finger to his deliciously sculpted lips, she silenced him. “No lies.”

He gently shook her finger away. “I told you, I don’t lie. You’re in town for three more days. Let’s take it one hour at a time, okay? And I’m real sorry about raising my voice like that back there. I don’t understand what came over me. Please give me another chance.”

He dropped his eyes to his shiny dress shoes. “I like you, Blue.”

He sounded so sincere! And maybe he was sincere, but she didn't take his guy-speak to heart. Men spoke the ol' party line as a matter of course. After a while, the pretty words became automatic.

"Lou, I already told you, I'm horny. And if this works out tonight..." With a shrug, she left the open-ended invitation dangling.

"Well, seeing I'm on probation, I'd better start showing you what I can do."

Lou reached for her. Then, his mouth descended. And off blew the top of her head. The guy had promise, she'd give him that.

"Lou," she gasped at the end, still rubbing her lips against his lips, still grinding her pelvis against his bulge, her made-up mind about a one-night stand all but forgotten in the lovely mashing of their bodies.

Actually -- Lou had taken no part in the mashing. She was the masher here. Like a cat with an itch uses a scratching post, like a depressed artist with no energy for human interaction uses a dildo...like a grieving woman uses a man to get her through another long and endless night...she was using nice-guy Lou.

"I'll never make it to where we're going. I'll die if I don't have you. Lou, Lou, Lou, I think I am dying. Please?"

They started a brisk walk, not a marathon like before, but a speed-walk, both with sex on their minds. This time, her long-legged stride kept up with Lou, no catch at all in her breathing.

Except for the breathless snag her sexy companion caused.

Off in the distance, a few men moved along the river pier. Fishermen, mostly, hauling tackle, bait, and rope, back and forth from their skiffs. To avoid detection, Blue dragged Lou further into the darkness. Alongside a boat named *Merry Melody*, she worked her shirt buttons.

Upon seeing what she was up to, Lou dropped the takeout bags. In a voice of inconvenient reason, he said, “Blue, the dock isn’t the place for this.”

“Too bad. I can’t wait.”

“Not here.” He raked a hand through his neatly crisp hair. “Listen, we’re close to where I work. We’ll have privacy there. The building is right around the corner.”

“What’s wrong with this corner?”

“I’m crazy for you, Blue, but --”

This was his idea of *crazy*?

If he didn’t deliver the goods, she’d show him real crazy. She’d freak if she didn’t have him!

She ripped into another button on her shirt.

One look at her bare skin, at the gold glint of her pierced tit specifically, and Lou stopped trying to drum up excuses as to why they shouldn’t do what they both wanted to do. “Damn!”

A self-satisfied smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Up ’til then, nice, mannerly Lou hadn’t used any bad words. Not that “damn” exactly qualified as a bad word, at least not in her foul-mouthed point of view, but the damn was a shitload better than darn. Darn would have weirded her out, big-time. And he had uttered the “Damn!” with a decent amount of conviction, which had punched the mild expletive up a notch, knocking out the insipidness and giving the mild curse some much needed panache.

“Please excuse my language. I never should have sworn in front of a lady.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Who the fuck was the lady here? “S’okay, Lou.”

Infinitely gentle hands shooed her fingers away from their appointed task. “Allow me,” he said softly, courteously, respectfully, and took over the undoing of her shirt buttons, one slow pop at a time.

What would shake this guy up?

His son. Anything to do with his son. The guy loved his kid and that explained his verbal explosion back there. Gotta admire a quiet man who cranked up the volume for those he loved.

Lou finished the row of buttons on her shirt, without faltering.

And that just *so* pissed her off. She would have appreciated a little trembling, as she was so obviously lust-addled herself.

But no. Rock-steady hands carefully parted her shirt. Just a bit more. Only enough to widen the pale strip of flesh currently displayed. Not nearly enough, not fast enough, not in her present, hurry-up frame of mind.

Quit fucking torturing me!

"There's a chill in the air tonight," Lou said solicitously. "Is the breeze off the river too much for you?"

Fuck his control! Fuck his consideration, too! How could he keep his cool when she was burning up? Her temperature had to have spiked to like a zillion degrees --

She'd told Lou she was horny. Twice. Horny was funny. Everyone joked about needing some, about trying to get some. Sexual desperation was fair game for comics and made for some excellent laugh material.

Nothing remotely funny about the sexual desperation she'd come down with for Lou. This was worse than having the flu. No one laughed about getting the flu. Maybe it was the flu. She did feel sick. To her stomach. To her head. Her body ached, too. She had other associative symptoms, as well. Her breasts hurt. And her pussy...

Drenched!

Nope, not the flu. Unless she had a bad case of the Lou Flu.

Humiliating!

"I'm not cold," she finally answered, then cringed at the ridiculous understatement.

God, she sounded like a wuss! What was up with her? She never allowed herself to show any sign of weakness. Why didn't she just tell Lou she was hot for him and that he'd fucking well better do something about it?

Because...because...because -- well -- because what if he turned her down flat? What if he rejected her?

Too tall, too unfeminine, too all-around *different* to join the mainstream, she had schooled herself not to care about the opinions of others. In defense against a cruel world, she had armed herself in childhood with a biting sense of humor. Barbed irony was her weapon of choice. After years of honing her skill to pointed precision, she could cut a self-depreciating laugh in any situation. And then, when she wasn't looking, this Lou person had snuck up on her and crossed the funny moat into her laugh fortress, and totally disarmed her humor. In his company, the sharp blade of her wit had dulled. What was worse, stripped of her protective shield, she felt things much too much.

Why'd she ever go and pick him up?

Piss-poor idea. Lou was *so* not the guy for what she had in mind.

Chapter Five

Blue's eyes went wide as Lou dipped his head to hers.

"If you do get cold, just tell me," Lou said, voice serious, his well-defined masculine jaw slanting to her less-than-feminine jaw, his beautiful firm lips seeking her not-so-beautiful, lax lips.

No quick kill here. Though clearly he had no need to romance her, Lou took his time over her seduction. He had to know how his closeness affected her, how he drew her, how susceptible she was to him! Yet, he kissed her tenderly, as though he really wanted to kiss her. As though he had nothing else in mind, as if the embrace wasn't a stepping-stone to somewhere else. He took her lips as though the kiss was a destination in and of itself, not just a brief detour on the express lane to bed.

She resented the hell out of Lou, then. *Get out of my face and into my pussy where I need you.*

"Doing okay?" he asked against her open mouth.

"Effin' f-fine."

"Good," said Solemn Lou. "I'm glad you're fine."

Oh, but she wasn't fine. Wasn't fine at all. His gentle kiss devastated her, swept her away. On the dark pier, she felt unmoored, a clunky boat -- an ugly barge -- set adrift. How could he do this to her?

Two big hands swallowed up her small breasts. But rather than smother the fire, his touch added gasoline to the flames when he petted her nipples. Fully engulfed, about to spontaneously combust, she moaned in pained, open-mouthed pleasure. Belly clutching, she wound her fingers in his short, conservative hair. "Don't stop."

At her heated instruction, something changed. Where before Lou had reverently fondled her breasts, now he squeezed. Kneaded. *Pinched* the tips!

"Damn, damn, damn," he muttered.

Jeez, she rated three cusses in a row!

In the darkness, his mouth found her gaping mouth again, his tongue -- forceful now -- pierced the interior again, ramming this time toward the back of her throat. Despite the best of intentions, she slid ever deeper into Lou's weird, mild-mannered rap.

Though -- *though* -- where had his mild-mannered nature gone?

The rough kiss, the boxer's hold on her, the heady grunts and groans, were hardly the sort of foreplay she'd expected from this quiet-spoken guy of the dark suit and tie. Lou's preliminaries were not neat and tidy. Not a tribute to a staid businessman's organizational skills. His moves contained no artful choreography; the arrangement of steps did little to impress. His hands, *uncool* now, *unsteady* now, moved all over her, seemingly in several directions at once.

His clumsiness thrilled her. Had *she* done that to him?

En route to his zipper, his wildly roaming, clutching, greedy, entirely human hands bumped into her similarly inclined hands.

"No!" he growled. "I'll come if you do. Let me do you."

Blue Heron on the receiving end of foreplay?

New concept, that. Just never happened. And a man taking charge? What the fuck!?

But “O-okay,” she managed to stammer.

After she gave the go ahead, fear, that pleasure-depriving monster, slammed into her gut with the force of the seven furies.

What was this? What was going on? Why was she letting him do all the work?

Evidently, Lou didn’t view foreplay as work. Or if he did, he certainly enjoyed his occupation. So, she let him. Quite simply, she submitted. Anything else required more energy than she possessed. For some reason, her stamina had hit the skids.

“Lou, Lou, Lou,” she gasped, and sputtered, and choked.

“Yeah. Who knew?”

Fuck, not her. Where had this delight come from? Like fragile fireflies, the glittering feelings, the brilliant emotions, lit up the darkness inside her. She hadn’t expected this reaction, didn’t necessarily even want this reaction. Experimentation without commitment? Yeah! Bring it on! But a draining upheaval that left her weak and depleted? No, no, *no*! She didn’t need this shit in her life, not now.

Big hands moved from her tits to her ass, a close-cropped head bowed, a mouth latched onto her pierced nipple and pulled. Pulled. Pulled. Powerfully pulled. Slightly edgy, unquestionably erotic, this new Lou person was powerfully pulling the rest of her, too. Unprepared, *unsuited*, to go to that place, to enter the vortex, at first she resisted the awful attraction. Couldn’t he see, couldn’t he tell, she was not like other women? She was used to taking charge! Calling the shots! Giving the orders!

When his teeth scraped delicately back and forth against her hardened nipple, he completely unhinged her. She howled like a she-wolf to the night sky. The void between her legs went from dripping drenched to pussy puddles; tingly nerve endings vibrated on the outside of her skin. Everything, all her perceptions magnified, and raw, raw outside and in, she gave herself passively over to Lou.

Who was this stranger? And who was this girlie-girl she'd morphed into in his presence? Why had she allowed him to set the lead when she'd never allowed anyone, neither man nor woman, to set the pace in anything?

Until tonight, she'd never followed anyone or anything. Not social dictates, not fashions, not other people's moralistic idea of what was right and wrong. She was her own person. No one told her what to do. She governed herself!

But when Lou mouthed his way from her breasts to suck on the tight, hot flesh of her belly, and said, "Your trousers...open them," she didn't question his authority over her. Rather, she rushed headlong into dangerously submissive territory.

Two streetlights shone down upon the pier, the dim electric globes illuminating the moonless night hardly at all. A thick cloak of fog rising from the river covered the dock as well. And she wasn't shy about her body. Nudity was only nudity. Only the unrevealed human form. She had gone naked outside many times...

What with the price of supplies, the cost of studio rentals, and the few works that ever sold, artists never had any real money. Who could afford the expense of hiring a life model? In the culture to which she belonged, swapping off on posing only made sense. For that reason, she was forever whipping off her clothes for some artist or other. After spending a few hours in the buff, seen as nothing more than line, shape, form, color, size, texture, and position, she had long ago lost her inhibitions.

But this nakedness differed from all those other previous occasions of nakedness. This was nothing like the essentially *boring*, under-the-covers-in-the-dark nakedness with her previous lover. Nor was this the teasing nudity of Sprout's. And because this nudity seemed so strange, her usually sure and facile hands fumbled.

Still, riding high on the promise of imminent pleasure, she managed, albeit gracelessly, to release the zipper on her trousers.

“Down and off,” Lou demanded, his former mild-mannered voice now frighteningly authoritative. “Boxers, too. Bare to the skin.”

Who was this scary dominant guy?

And why couldn't she tell him to go fuck himself?

But, no. She said nothing. At his edgy command, she silently pushed the baggy trousers and underwear over her hips, lowering them together down her legs. When they fell loosely around her ankles, she kicked free. In her gaping shirt, work boots, and socks, she faced Lou, the slight breeze off the river doing nothing to lower her fever.

His intense dark eyes surveyed the pubic curls on her pussy. “Soft and silky.” He squatted down in front of her. “Open your legs.”

Helpless not to, she did.

And his hand was there, right there on her upper thigh. “May I touch your vagina?”

May he touch her *what?*

Lou's clinical terminology broke the spell. Almost broke her up, too.

Vagina. Too cute!

What was wrong with “cunt”? And why was he asking first? When a girl had her pants off, wasn't that a clue for the guy to dive right in?

Not Lou. He didn't dive anywhere. He had a dominant side, true, but he was also the respectful sort, the type who asked permission first.

“Sure, Lou. Make yourself at home. My pussy is your pussy,” she answered jauntily, hiding how deeply his respectful deference had touched her with a backlash of irreverence.

After stroking along the outer lips, he gently separated the folds and sent an investigatory finger up inside her... *vagina*. “You're pierced here, too.”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly just to prove she could still speak.

She'd had both piercings done a month earlier, as symbols of her sexual liberation. Lou was the first man to see her gold rings.

"You're wet," he remarked, slipping in another finger.

"Oh, golly gee whiz, Lou, really?" She rolled her eyes. Her pussy was squishy soaked, splashing louder than the ocean that surrounded them. "Tell me something I don't already know."

"You're beautiful."

Cheap shot! So what, he sounded sincere? The words amounted to male baloney.

If only to let him know she knew he was talking trash, she had to give him a comeback, something wickedly funny and original. Originality was important to a creative person like herself.

"I'm not beautiful."

In an awed voice, a compliment in and of itself, he said, "Believe it."

She almost did. And where had her wit gone?

The two thick fingers inside her pussy began to move. Slowly. Up and down. In and out. Her hot juices easing the motion. Breasts pointing, thighs going taut, tendons tightening, she leaned back against the anchored boat.

Lou looked up from his preliminaries. "Do you ever have trouble taking large-sized men?"

Men?

One lover and a few tepid penetrations did not an authority make. To be fair, though, how would Lou know how many men she'd fucked?

She'd picked the dude up for a weekend of randy sex. Naturally, he thought she was *that* kind of girl. Still, what the hell kind of a question was that to ask in the heat of the moment? What? Was she, a game-show contestant? Besides, at a time like this, how did he

expect her to think? And, by the way, how come he could think? Kind of insulting how he could put the question together.

Once again, she struggled to come up with a retort, something to prove she was as removed from this as he. A dirty joke would go a long way toward lightening the oppressively heavy mood.

She came up empty-handed. No hilariously raucous dirty joke. Not even a flat and unfunny clean joke. What was the use? Nothing she could dream up would prove that this, that what he was doing, was less than cataclysmic.

When he thumbed the top of her sex, then started a low-down dirty massage, she groaned full-out, all pretense of control gone. When he pressed against the clit, no pride whatsoever, she cried out without restraint. The climax hit her hard and unalterably, claiming her there against the boat as Lou knelt at her feet.

At her unrestrained cry, two huge dock toughs -- not the fishermen she'd seen earlier off in the distance -- materialized from out of the dense river fog. They stared. At her. At her bare and heaving breasts, at her splayed thighs, at the junction of her body where pumping fingers glistened wetly with her juices.

Need driven, touch hungry, desperate for Lou's embrace, she'd behaved foolishly. Irresponsibly. Selfishly. Recklessly. Foregoing privacy for sensation, she'd put them both at risk. She was naked and splayed, and those two threatening toughs looked like they wanted a piece of the action. They'd double rape her and do who knew what to the quiet businessman kneeling at her feet. Oh, God, what had she done?

"Lou!" She wheezed the warning through airless lungs. "Watch out behind you!"

Panther-swift, Lou pounced to his feet. Blocking her naked body from their prying eyes, he spun to face the men as they stealthily approached.

"It's two against one," she whispered from behind the protection of Lou's broad back. "Don't be a fool. They look dangerous. Use the cell to call the police --"

The men kept coming.

And Lou wasn't reaching for the cell.

One man broke a beer bottle against a piling. Wildly swinging the broken glass, he sliced the fog, the jagged edge within cutting range of her companion's face.

Lou didn't back down. Didn't retreat. Unruffled, he removed his somber, dark suit jacket and passed it behind him to her. "Here. Cover yourself."

In no particular hurry, he unhooked his gold cufflinks, placed them in his pants' pocket, and then proceeded to roll up his pristine white shirtsleeves.

What? Was he actually preparing for a fight? Two river rats, one of whom was brandishing a nasty-looking glass weapon, against one quiet-spoken businessman? Was Lou insane? He didn't stand a chance!

Lou didn't share her negativism. "Keep moving, boys," he said calmly. "And I won't have to hurt you."

Funny man. Like he could hurt those two scummy rodents.

The vermin sized up Lou and then shrugged at one another. The broken beer bottle made a watery splash as the glass hit the river. Averting their jaundiced eyes, the river rats turned and scurried back into the fog.

Had she been sucked into an alternative universe, the Twilight Zone or something, where good won out over evil? This scene could not be happening! No way could a respectable businessman scare off those two river rats!

Blue watched in mesmerized shock as Lou adjusted his sleeves. For the very first time, she noticed his hard, lean arms, the veins bulging over the pronounced biceps.

Her mouth gaped. *Ohmygod!* She had underestimated Lou! The neatly tailored dark business suit jacket had concealed more than an impressively masculine body. Those threads hid deadly animal intimidation. Steely will supporting brutal strength. Civilized manners disguising primitive savagery. In the jungle, Lou's calm control would make him king of the

wild cats. On a dark pier, in the low-rent district of town, his feral coolness had chased two river rats back into the fog. Now that it was too late, Blue realized she was in way over her head.

Lou Franco wasn't tame, and he wasn't safe. He wasn't tame or safe at all.

Excitement exploded bright within her.

Chapter Six

Lou placed a kiss on the high slant of Blue's cheekbone. And tasted only fog-misted bare skin, inhaled only sea-scented bare flesh. Though his career would seem to suggest otherwise, life had severely limited his hands-on experience with women.

He brushed his knuckles across Blue's strong and angular jaw, still flushed after her climax. Though he could count his lovemaking opportunities on less than ten fingers, he'd always tried to put the lady's pleasure first.

No need to try with Blue; pleasuring Blue had been his pleasure.

Given some privacy and a place that didn't reek of bait and that day's catch, he would have fallen to his knees again and finished what he'd started before the interruption.

He'd never gone down on a woman, never even asked if he might, but tonguing the small gold hoop that decorated Blue's sweet, silky folds had driven him crazy --

Damn! Who was he kidding?

The gold hoop didn't drive him crazy. *She* drove him crazy. Blue did that to him. With her boyish body and straightforward manner. And damn, her passion!

Fear had chilled the lady's heat, and she shivered. "Those men --"

“Are gone. Please accept my apologies for letting that go so far. I have no excuse.” He shook his head ruefully. “I want you, Blue. But I also want to do this right.”

Dazed, Blue didn’t seem to hear. “I know what we’ll do...we’ll go right down to police headquarters, file a report. Despite the dark and fog, I got a good look at those bastards. If we give a description, then --”

“No need for an ID. I know them, Blue. And they know me, too. I’ll pay them a little visit tomorrow and remind them of that fact.”

“You can’t do that! Those men are vicious thugs.”

“Yeah, they are. Now hush.” He ran his fingers through her softly tousled hair. The shaggy style had begun to grow on him. “Let me worry about them.”

When Blue began getting her gear together, he stopped her. “Please -- allow me.” Dropping to his knees again, he rounded up all her clothes.

Except for the red-plaid boxers. Those he put aside.

Then, because he couldn’t help himself, he ran his palm up the back of her leg. When she trembled, he looked up into her face. “You okay?”

“That never happened to me before. You know?”

“Those two hoods won’t bother you again while you’re in town.”

“Not them.” She searched his eyes. “I didn’t mean them.”

“I know,” he whispered, retrieving her cargo pants. Her bewildered excitement got to him; her confused arousal mirrored his.

Her lush mouth, formerly slackened with desire, suddenly tightened. “Wait -- what about my boxers?”

“You’re not wearing them.”

Her tone went from bedroom to belligerent. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because I don’t happen to like them.”

“What? You find my underwear threatening?”

Lou sighed. *Here we go...*

Blue was itching for a fight. Half adrenaline meltdown, half a political stand.

“I’m not threatened, Blue. And you’ve got nothing to prove. Not with me, anyway.”

“Oh, don’t I?” Her hands went to her hips; her legs spread militantly wide.

At her stance, his gaze dropped to her opening, his avid gaze stroking the wet folds. “Inside Sprout’s, we stood real close, close enough for you to know what I’ve got. And what I’ve got makes this competition pretty much over. I’ve got one, you don’t.”

And why the hell would any woman even want a dick?

Dicks got in the way a lot, especially when a man was trying to reason his way out of a non-existent argument. They got hard at inopportune times. They needed protecting during sports. Sure, they made peeing against a tree easier during camping trips and came in handy when a man wanted to get inside a woman’s body, but other than that, forget it. Dicks were more trouble than they were worth.

Exhibit A: Case in point.

“You want to argue? Okay,” he said, gloomily. “Here, I’ll make it easy for you.”

He rolled the men’s underwear into a tight ball and tossed them into the drink.

“There! Go ahead and have at it. Call me a sexist pig or whatever the current expression is nowadays. As for me, my blood is pumping plenty hot enough already, and it’s pumping for you. And for this.” Reaching forward, he lightly caressed her labia.

Owing to the awesome responsibility of raising an inquisitive little boy, he used only the correct anatomical names for female organs, even in his thoughts. Owing to certain prurient aspects of his job, he made sure Pete learned sex the decent way.

“Don’t try breaking my balls, Lou.”

Obviously, Blue didn’t share his concerns about getting the anatomy right.

"I don't need to break your anything to make me feel like a man. Let's keep this date respectful, okay, Blue?" He withdrew his hand from her body.

"We're not on a date, Lou. All we're gonna do is fuck ourselves silly." She looked at him pointedly. "Maybe. We'll have to see how things go. Right now, things aren't looking too cool."

Yeah, this he knew.

"I'm sorry to hear things aren't looking good, Blue, because I'm desperate to take you to bed."

"Like I said, Lou, I'm horny. But this is about more than underwear. This is about..."

Damn! Damn! Damn! He already knew what this was about!

Why couldn't she have worn boxers due to their affordability? Or practicality? Or because boxers don't ride up and give wedgies?

Pete had already given him the drill -- boxers represented a woman's stand against male tyranny, against an oppressive patriarchal social system.

Who cared?

Not he. Idealistic dogmas were for the young, and he was no longer young nor idealistic.

Here on out, Blue would hunt down subversive meanings in his sentence structure. And sooner or later -- most likely sooner -- he'd slip, and she'd find something and shoot him down.

Regardless of Pete's coaching, his kid's old man still made mistakes. He still held doors open for women. Still stood up when women entered a room. Still carried heavy packages for women. He liked that women wore panties! Blue's vagina filled him with gratitude, and in return, he had ten inches of gratitude with which to fill her. That seemed equalitarian to him.

Blue pulled away from him. “Never mind what this is about. What’s the point of even discussing it? A man like you would never understand.”

A door slammed in his face, and Blue left the room.

He was a man. She was a woman. Basic. Concrete. Why cloud their attraction with abstract ideology? He wanted her, dammit! And she wanted him. Didn’t that wanting speak for itself?

Her glare said no.

“Blue, listen, if I were wearing frilly panties under my suit and you asked me to chuck ‘em because you hated them, and besides which, you had to touch me, couldn’t stop touching me, and those frilly panties got in the way, regardless of my political leanings, those panties would be history.”

After that long-winded explanation, he pulled her back to him. “You have the silkiest skin, Blue.” He inhaled her female fragrance. “Blue, you smell so damn good.” He tongued her navel. “Blue. Blue. Blue. I don’t want to mess up, and I’m so afraid I will. You want me to jump in the river and go get your boxers? Say the word, and I will. I just don’t want to mess up, Blue. Okay?”

Her voice softened. “Oh, Lou. I don’t want you jumping into any river.”

“No?”

“No. You’d probably catch pneumonia, and I’d never forgive myself.”

Damn, the view was excellent from where he squatted. The glitter of that gold hoop mesmerized him. “Blue?” he asked, optimistically. “Are we all square now, Blue?”

“As long as you understand my position.”

“I do.” He picked up Blue’s foot and eased the wide-legged trousers over the work boots and up her amazingly long legs. “I swear I do.”

A thought occurred to him. In the heat of the moment, had he gotten carried away, gotten too rough with her? “Did I hurt you when I...you know...pulled on the hoops?”

“You mean, the piercings on my tit and pussy?”

Geez! His ears flashed hot. Flowery language like that would put greeting card companies right out of business...

Blue couldn't know her defensiveness wasn't necessary because she didn't know him. And that was the problem with pickups: Strangers getting into bed together.

They needed more time!

Blue was testing him, like Pete used to do. Unsure of him, she was putting him through some junk. Well, okay. He was a big boy. She wanted to dish out some grief? Fine. He could take it. He'd prove he was man enough to partner a strong woman like her. Without crushing her. And without allowing her to ride roughshod over him, either.

He swallowed. Hard. Resisting the rough language he'd grown up using on the Southside, the punk talk he'd put aside to raise up his kid right, he said, “Yeah, Blue, those piercings.”

“Why, Lou, do you like hurting a woman during sex?” she asked contentiously. “You into the BDSM scene? Is force your thing?”

No, force was not his *thing!*

He never threw his muscle around, especially not against someone smaller and weaker. No spankings for Pete. No hitting, slapping, or bullying women. Yeah, he'd worked as a cop. Yeah, part of his job function at The Flamingo entailed chucking rowdies out the door. But force was never his first choice; force was always his last resort. When someone pushed, only then did he push back. As to BDSM -- he'd seen one too many abusive relationships to think humiliation and pain constituted foreplay. He wanted no part of that scene.

But he did want every part of Blue, even the dicey, hidden, troubled parts of Blue.

Lou gave his cufflinks a flick. “What exactly do you need from me?”

“I’m not a shrinking violet, and I don’t take orders from anyone, anywhere, and that includes in bed. We need to agree in advance -- who’ll be the bottom if we’re both suited for the top?”

“First off,” he said, laying down some base rules of his own, rules he could live with and still face his son, “Let’s not label what we do together, okay?” Regaining his feet, he thumbed her bottom lip. “Understand?”

“I don’t like labels, either.” She nodded, everything decided. “Okay, so this is what we’ll do: Rather than butt heads in the boudoir, we’ll switch off between dom and sub.” Her blue eyes shone bright, like a kid waiting for Christmas morning. “What about cuffs, whips, and floggers?” She licked her lips. “Clamps and things?”

Almost forty years old, a poster boy for sexual discretion, who had never strayed far from the conventional during those few times he’d been lucky enough to unzip at all, and now he was supposed to jump in and do bondage?

Blue had called herself adventurous, and he’d do anything her prurient heart desired, but wouldn’t swapping favorite colors have been nice, too?

He tried stalling her. “What’s a vegetarian doing with leather cuffs? Don’t cows have to go to moo heaven for the making of those?”

She slanted him a disgusted look. “I’d never ask an animal to pay the ultimate price just so I can indulge my deviant appetites. I was talking metal cuffs and clamps, cat-o’-nine-tail flayers.”

He should’ve known. She probably wore synthetic work boots, too. “Yeah, okay. Cuffs are fine. The other stuff, too,” he agreed, but all the while wishing Blue would slow down. They’d only just met. Shouldn’t they get to know one another generally in bed first before moving onto specialty areas? What was the damn rush?

Three days. The length of Blue’s stay in town. That was the damn rush.

Bring on the whips. Better get cracking!

She grinned. "I packed some neat toys in my suitcase. They fit together."

Like those plastic bricks Pete used to play with on the kitchen floor. "Good," he said, dryly. "Maybe we can build something. You know, a skyscraper."

She dropped her gaze south of his belt buckle. "*Ahem*. I think you've already got one of those erected."

Her tone said fun, but Blue's pinched mouth said different. Now that her climactic flush had worn off, she looked a little pale. Her former dexterous fingers skidded on her shirt buttons. The close call on the pier had thrown her for a loop. He could kill those two creeps for frightening Blue.

Straightening his legs, Lou finished dressing Blue, making sure his suit jacket wrapped her shoulders for extra warmth. "Zip up."

During the course of any given day, sex hung heavily on his mind. A whole menu of favorite imaginings, all unfulfilled, kept him busy whenever need overtook reason. But the reality of Blue far surpassed all those wild and raunchy sexual fantasies. Real always trumped invention.

Lou picked up the dropped takeout bags. "Let's go."

Chapter Seven

They walked side by side on the black pavement, wind squalls scattering orangey-brown leaves around their feet. Usually, Lou bumped into a Good Time Charlie staggering along the sidewalk, career drunks seeking that last one for the road before heading home.

Not tonight.

This evening, the bars looked abandoned, the change of seasons driving even the most diehard customers back to their seedy flophouses.

Lou had grown up on the Southside of Fenton. The area had been like the Wild West back then, desperados and lawlessness running rampant. New jobs had reduced the crime, and the area had slowly improved, though not enough for a woman to walk alone certain places.

As they entered one of those certain places, Lou held Blue close, one arm slung around her shoulders -- to discourage the piercing cold and any would-be muggers prowling for candidates to finance their next fix.

The Southside provided Lou's paycheck, but choosing to bring up his son among trees, not broken hypodermic needles, he'd moved his address out of the old neighborhood

eighteen years earlier. Though his desertion still nagged him from time to time, his kid took precedence over everything, even principles.

Blue led his hand to her breast. "Please, Lou? Let's cut to the chase! I can see a dark doorway straight ahead. No one will bother us there."

What was with her?

Considering what had just transpired, the lady was coming on too strong. "Quit now!" Though it just about killed him, he pulled his hand free. "I can't do right by you in some damn doorway."

Doing right by Blue meant no short shrift, careless loving. Regardless that he could easily skywrite with his dick, he was waiting to get her someplace alone and private and warm.

They kept walking, going deeper into the block of run-down peep shows, dirty bookstores, XX-rated movies...

And a bright pink building with a burlesque marquee out front.

"The Pink Flamingo," she read. "Exotic dancers inside."

Blue glanced over at him, disapproval stamped on her features. "I'm a fairly liberal person, and I have no problem with nudity, but establishments like this degrade women. Making money off female dehumanization is beneath contempt."

"Men would look silly on stage in pink feathers."

"Pink feathers!" Blue shook her head. "Is that what management forces those poor unfortunate women to wear?"

Poor...unfortunate...forces...

His back went up. "Those ladies are some of the best paid entertainers in the industry. And no one *forces* them to wear anything --"

"I bet. Management, I'm sure, would prefer total nudity, which would objectify the women all the more."

“That’s not what I meant.”

Lou frowned. Another argument brewing. Defending himself was not how he’d envisioned his night with Blue.

He’d worked as a plainclothes detective for almost fifteen years before plunking his Medal for Valor in the drawer and retiring from the force. He knew which end was up, and he knew the difference between reputable and disreputable. The Flamingo was an honest establishment. Even Pete, a card-carrying PC member, had given The Flamingo his stamp of approval --

Every Friday night, they did dinner together at The Flamingo: fake meat, veggie-burger for Pete; no faux about it, red-blooded cow for his old man. Inside his strip club office, they’d shoot the breeze. Or argue. Or laugh their ten-inch -- like father, like son -- very *un*-vegan meat off. Before Pete left for college, they’d done a lot of talking about women. Generational issues aside, they both agreed they didn’t understand the opposite sex worth squat.

Blue proved this assertion. While understanding the need to set her straight about the nature of his work at The Flamingo, Lou had not a clue as to how to keep his foot out of his mouth during the process.

How to tell her he never mixed business with pleasure, which meant he kept the strippers more than ten inches away from him at all times. He had a working relationship with the exotic dancers he employed, and that was that.

He ran a tight club. The exotic dancers kept on all their feathers. No funny stuff went on during his watch. Some of his ladies -- and they were ladies, every last one of ’em -- were wives and moms. Others were students working their way through college. But whatever they did during the day, they relied on him to keep them safe at night, a responsibility he took seriously.

“The Pink Flamingo has an employment waiting list that’s as long as the line at Sprout’s tonight,” he said, keeping his explanation low-key. “And the feathers the entertainers wear cover more skin than sunbathers show at a public beach.”

Blue cocked her pointy chin at him. “Sounds like *someone* squeezes club hopping between the awesome responsibilities of single parenting.”

“Yeah, I go to The Flamingo.” *Like only six days a week, every week.*

“Glad to hear you have your priorities straight, Lou. Tell me, what would you say if your son expressed an interest in seeing feather-clad strippers pretend-fuck a pole up on stage?”

“Pete has seen the entertainment. And for your information, the dance routines use tastefully choreographed moves -- none of that pole stuff. As to my priorities, they’ve been pretty damn straight for the last eighteen years. My son comes first, last, and always. I’d never do anything to put him in jeopardy. You’re crossing the line here, Blue.”

His low-key tone?

Gone. Shot. Already, he’d blown his stack twice tonight. And losing his cool under fire was something that never happened.

“Oh,” she said, softly, her chin dipping. “You’re right. I really did cross the line with that crack. I can tell you’re an excellent parent. Please accept my apology.”

“No need to apolo --”

Before he completed his acceptance speech, her chin jutted. “But the way I see it -- owners of adult entertainment businesses profit from female exploitation. Strippers are little better than prostitutes, and the owners and management of such establishments are little better than...than...pimps!”

“I can’t speak for all burlesque houses, but at The Flamingo the dancers are not prostitutes, and since the owner and manager of the club don’t procure sex, there’s no way you can classify either as a pimp. You’re way off base here, Blue.”

“What about lap dancing?”

“What about it?”

“When women get paid to perform a sexual service, I call that prostitution.”

“Lap dancing is not allowed at The Pink Flamingo. For that matter, neither is table dancing.”

Lou took pride in the place, pride in the entertainment value he offered. Since he booked all the talent at The Flamingo, and no one got up on stage without an audition first, he could personally guarantee the acts were classy, even artistic. No vulgar bumping and grinding. No taking it all off. He had strict rules, and the exotic dancers observed every one of them.

Besides -- Tomas Ruiz, owner of The Flamingo, was fast becoming Fenton's most influential and upstanding citizen. With a heart as big as his wallet, both used to improve conditions in town, Tomas had a reputation to uphold. No way would Lou's boss back any shady operation.

Lou sighed in disappointment. He'd thought to take Blue to The Flamingo, show her around, have dinner with her in his office, introduce her to the staff. Her disapproval pretty much sank that plan. Blue had already made up her mind, and in her mind, he worked as a pimp. *Nice.*

Lou withdrew his arm from around Blue. “Where would you like to eat?”

His libido still buzzed, but Blue's poor opinion left a bad taste in his mouth. They'd eat somewhere else and then afterwards, he'd walk Blue back to her hotel.

He'd go only as far as the lobby. No further.

“My workshop at the gallery is private. And we're almost there. The building is right up ahead.” Blue winked.

Lou straightened his tie. “You an artist?”

She nodded. "Multi-media. I have an exhibit going up next week -- 'Unwrapped Packages.' I'm in town for the opening at GoCA."

GoCA -- the Gallery Of Contemporary Art -- was located in a beat-up old warehouse Tomas Ruiz had renovated at cost. Lou had been there a lot, though not recently, what with getting Pete ready to leave the nest and all.

"I like art," Lou said, leaving out that he didn't know anything about the current exhibit. "Multi-media. 'Unwrapped Packages.' Right, right."

"My exhibit has a little of everything. Photography. Painting. Sculpture. Collage. The display is ongoing, so I add new specimens as I find them." She grinned, one part mischief, two parts sex. "I'd love to add you to my collection, Lou."

"Wait. Collect --"

"Here we are now." Blue flashed her employee security clearance to the guard on duty at the gallery's side entrance.

After signing them in, Blue led the way through the industrial-size space: Vaulted ceilings. Gleaming, hardwood floors. Stainless steel doors. Movable white walls.

"I'm back here." She keyed a door. "We'll eat first, and then I'll show you around."

"I'd like that." Too bad he couldn't share where he worked with Blue.

"After the tour, we'll fuck."

Blue had the evening activities all scheduled: Dinner, tour, sex. One-two-three. This was one real contemporary evening they were having. Only one hitch -- he wasn't participating in the sex part.

"Blue, I hate to mention this, now that we're getting all romantic and everything," he said dryly, "but I don't have any condoms with me. I didn't plan on having sex tonight."

"You always plan in advance? Sex never sorta just happens?"

"No. Sex never sorta just happens."

“Jeez, you’re a careful man.”

He supposed so. But maybe playing it safe wasn’t always a good thing. After all, the one careless slip in his life had produced Pete.

But that was then, and this was now. Now, no condoms equaled no sex.

And no sex might be all for the best. Pickups didn’t strike him as all they were cracked up to be. Call him a damned romantic straight out of the Middle Ages, but to his mind, sex worked out better if a man and a woman had a few dates first. A few getting-to-know-you conversations over cups of java. Maybe some popcorn sharing while sitting side by side together at the movies. Many, many respectful kisses exchanged outside the door before moving into lingering kisses inside the door. Maybe, then, they’d get into some beginning petting in the living room. Followed by some intermediate petting. Then, lots and lots of advanced petting. Then foreplay. Light, medium, heavy foreplay. Steamy, all-night-long foreplay. Hands. Mouths. Tongues. After weeks of this, when the Big Night finally arrived, he was thinking along the lines of some fine wine, possibly bubbly, chilling beside a table in a dimly lit restaurant. Soft music playing in the background. No damn arguments going on in the foreground. No need, because by that point in the relationship, they would have hammered out all the basic differences between them and had already reached some sort of mutually acceptable and amicable understanding.

Lou checked his watch. *Let’s see*. Blue and he had known each other all of an hour and a half. They still had a lot of hammering to do. Too bad the clock was ticking.

Inside the messy studio, Blue kicked aside a turpentine-fragrant drop cloth and walked to a long table, piled high with just about everything, including what looked to be a dismantled kitchen sink. A million or so unlabeled compartments, some small, some huge, decorated the front. She must have had some sort of system going because, without pausing, she reached into one drawer, and pulled out something.

She turned back to him and held up a box, easily the size of a six-pack. “Not to worry,” she said breezily and flipped the lid. “See? Condoms.”

Was she kidding? Joking around? Trying to get him to run for the hills?

His mouth fell open. The carton contained enough rubber to bounce them both ceiling high. Blue had to belong to one of those on-line sex shops, where ordering in bulk saved cash.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he said, trying not to gawk at the row upon row of festively wrapped squares. “Do I get smoke breaks in between, or are we going ’til one of us drops?”

In answer, Blue laughed.

He didn’t. “Mind if I take off my tie?”

“Not at all.” Her lips turned up at the corners. “Be my fucking guest. And in light of that philosophy --” His eyes followed as she went to a small table and pushed a load of junk onto the floor. After brushing off a paint-splattered chair, she commandeered a seat. “In fact, feel free to take everything off.”

Yep, this was a brand-new age in dating, all right.

He loosened the knot at his jerking Adam’s apple. “Thanks. Just the tie for now, if you don’t mind.”

After hanging the neckwear neatly over the back of another paint-splattered chair and heaving a stack of papers onto the floor from the same, Lou took a seat, too, and began unloading the takeout bags. Veggie-burger for her, cow-burger for him.

Maybe over dinner they could talk. Get to know one another. A flamingo had just waded into the room, feathers flapping. Hard to ignore a bird that big, especially seeing the big pink bird stood between them.

He wanted to tell Blue about the turn his career path had taken after his stint in law enforcement, explain how sometimes an ordinary man had to make life-altering choices.

Yeah, compromises, too, when he had a little boy at home who depended on him to feed, clothe, and keep a roof over his head.

And one more thing. Pete, selfish kid, expected him to stay alive for him, too.

In the line of duty, Lou had come *this* close to making his son a foster kid. Unwilling to test fate again, he'd decided that no matter how much he loved detective work, no damn medal-producing career was worth leaving his kid alone in the world. When Tomas Ruiz offered him the manager's gig at The Flamingo, he'd jumped at the chance.

So, how did he tell Blue all that?

No way to make the truth any easier, he jumped right in. "About our earlier argument --"

"Wait a sec, I'm starved here." Blue whipped the paper off the takeout meal and crumbled the waxy sheet into a ball. She took a bite of the veggie-burger, chewed, swallowed, and then wiped her mouth on a paper napkin he'd arranged at her "place setting." Afterwards, she put her meal aside, balancing the veggie-burger crookedly atop the balled up paper. "Lou, I'm sure we have political differences, ideological ones, too. You think stripping is fine. I happen to disagree and spoke my mind on the issue. And that's all our argument about The Pink Flamingo was -- a debate over an issue. Nothing more, nothing less. If I came on too strong on the subject, if the argument got personal, then I apologize again. I never meant to attack you or impugn your character, not in any way. Fuck, I like you. I'm attracted to you." She laughed. "My nose is now officially back in joint. How's yours doing?"

Under the pretense of straightening out the wrinkles from the waxy paper placemat under his own beef burger, he kept his eyes downcast. "My nose is doing fine, thanks."

"Good. I wouldn't want out-of-joint noses ruining good sex."

And that was it. That was all she had to say. He folded his cow-burger back into the waxy paper, vacated his seat, returned the chair to where he'd found it, and walked around

the table. After pulling Blue up out of her seat, good intentions forgotten, he rammed his tongue down her throat. Not exactly smooth, not exactly how he had planned for the evening to go. Then again, since copping a look down Blue's shirt, both his plans and his questionable *savoir-faire* had flown out the window.

Her lips. No lip gloss, no perfume, just herbal soap, some mint toothpaste, and Blue, the sweet, natural flavor of woman.

Too political, too idealistic, too everything he wasn't anymore, Blue was still searching for who she was, while long ago, he'd found himself in a little boy's eyes. And their differences didn't matter. He drank from her mouth like he was dying of thirst.

Blue. Blue. He slaked his thirst on Blue.

Until the damn pink flamingo gave him a nudge, reminding him that with a lie coming between them, kissing Blue just wasn't right.

He backed off.

But thinking they were getting down to business now, Blue closed the gap with a leggy step and started attacking his belt buckle.

Ugh! Could he not do anything right tonight?

He stilled her tugging hands. "I think I should leave."

Her arms fell back to her sides. "Because of our argument?"

"Partly," he said wearily. "Partly because of our argument."

"Fuck!" Her shaggy hair whipped like a cyclone around her face. "It's me, isn't it? You're not attracted to me."

Doomed, defeated, he undid the belt. "That was no goodbye kiss. I want you so bad I hurt."

"No need to patronize me, Lou. I understand."

He unfastened his gold cufflinks, placing them one by one on the table. The shirt, he folded over the back of the chair that held his tie. He slipped off his shoes -- lazy man loafers -- and placed them side by side out of the way beneath the chair. That left him in suit trousers.

Brushing Blue's shaggy bangs out of her eyes from where they'd flopped, he said, "Could we maybe take it slow. Why the rush?"

"I don't mean to offend your gentlemanly sensibilities, but if we're going to do this, I want it done fast. No more fucking preliminaries. I really am horny. You know how it goes." Her fingers worked the buttons on her shirt.

"Sure, Blue. I know how it goes." Lou tried not to feel let down. This was just the way men and women conducted business these days.

Not that he was any kind of authority on the subject. Almost forty years old and he'd never gone to bed with a woman. There had been some sofas, a few back seats of cars, one narrow hallway -- because of his size, doing it against the wall hadn't worked out so swell. But no bed. He'd never, not once, gotten all his clothes off during sex. And wasn't that something not to brag about?

He wanted to get naked with Blue. He wanted a bed for them both to get naked in. He wanted a night, a *whole* night, start to finish, spent with Blue, naked with him in that bed. A cup of coffee the following morning would have been nice as well. He'd grind the beans, serve it, too, so long so he could drink the cup naked with Blue.

Looked like he wasn't getting anything on his wish list tonight.

"How old are you, Blue?"

"Twenty-seven," she promptly replied.

The young never hesitated over their ages.

As he'd left his twenties behind a son ago, he dragged his feet. "I'll be forty next month."

“Middle age is no crime, Lou.”

No, he'd broken no law. And, ordinarily, he didn't mind the gray in his hair. At least he had hair. And workouts kept him in good shape. Morning erections still started his days. He could keep up with Blue, sexually. But life had dented him, bruised him, left him both scared and scarred. Any lofty principles he'd once entertained had pretty much fizzled. A compliment, calling him jaded...

Except where love was concerned.

His kid had made love real for him. Love was one of the few things he still believed in. Nope, he wasn't cynical about love.

This wasn't love. This wasn't even making love.

Blue had assigned her clothing to a haphazard heap on the floor. Beads of honeyed moisture dribbled down the insides of her shapely thighs. She was *very* wet.

He started to shake. And when she swayed toward him, pink-tipped breasts bouncing just the tiniest bit, gold hoop glinting in her nipple, honest to damn, he backed up.

He'd faced down the wrong end of a gun on numerous occasions and never once broken a sweat, never once retreated from the danger of a bullet. But as Blue approached, streams of perspiration sluiced down his bare back.

And running away had never looked so good.

Chapter Eight

Blue crossed the floor to Lou, memories dogging her steps.

Tall and gangly growing up, she'd lived mostly in her head. Her height and creative bent had always made her an oddity. The same two characteristics had also made her a trendsetter, not a trend follower.

From elementary school through high school, the role of class leader had fallen to her. Teachers expected more *from* her because there was so much more *of* her in inches.

As it turned out, her teachers had been right: Leadership came naturally to her assertive personality and independent spirit.

But there was a downside to her height and radical freethinking. Taller than all the boys in her class and with her head always stuck in the clouds, she had missed out on dances and proms and the back seats of cars -- all those boy/girl social activities.

She hadn't understood dating in high school, and almost a decade after graduation, she still didn't understand dating.

All the falseness. The artificiality. The putting your best foot forward nonsense. Why was any of it necessary? How could two people ever find out if they were right for one another if they weren't who they really were when they were together?

Dating made absolutely no sense to her!

She wasn't about to bore Lou with her feelings on the subject. She'd never get laid that way. The guy probably already considered her weird. Nor would she go into a tedious recounting of her background. Why would Lou want to listen to a *CliffsNotes* rendition of her life?

Gillian. He was a major part of her life, the love of her life. If she were to give a synopsis of her life, Gillian would feature in the first sentence.

However, she never discussed Gill with anyone. Not their love affair, and certainly not his death. She hadn't reached that calm plateau yet where she could talk about her beloved Gillian and not break apart.

To mask her uncertainty, she ran a brazen finger under the waistband of Lou's suit pants.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She undid the top button and started easing down the zipper. "I'm making you comfortable."

"You think dropping my trousers around my ankles will add to my comfort level?"

"Okay, maybe I was talking about my own comfort. In case you hadn't notice, I am completely naked here, Lou."

"I noticed," he said, sheepishly.

"Good. Now, we're getting somewhere. Since I'm naked, and you're nearly naked, what do say we put all this completely and nearly nakedness to good use, hmmm?"

"There's no bed."

As though swatting an irritating fly, she waved her hand dismissively at his excuse. "Minor inconvenience..." With a tug, she hastened the descent of his suit pants to the floor.

Her eyes dropped, widened, flew back up to his face.

“What?” he asked.

“Your boxers! They’re *silk*,” she sputtered. “Black silk.”

“So? I happen to like the way silk feels next to my skin. On the pier, you felt like silk next to my skin.”

She was about to call him on that outrageously tacky pickup line, when the blunt end of Lou’s silk-encased penis butted her belly. No biggie --

Except they stood almost a foot apart.

“Excuse the guy’s impulsiveness,” Lou offered. “He doesn’t get out all that often.”

Speechless, she stared at his penile extension.

“You okay, Blue?”

Unless he considered swooning okay, she was *not* okay.

If there was one geographical region on the male anatomy with which she had an intimate acquaintance, it was the penis. From the line at Sprout’s, she knew Lou came well endowed. But she had no idea, none whatsoever, that the male organ came super-sized.

“You’re h-h-huge,” she stuttered.

Lou looked at her sideways. “To be honest, there’s very little mileage on him. Hardly broken in at all. He’s almost brand-new. And tonight, he’s staying put inside the boxers. For the sake of full disclosure, I wanted you to see what you were up against.”

“Right from the start, I suspected you for a real pain in the posterior, and you will be.” She grinned at his blanched coloring. “The clamps will never fit.”

“No damn clamps on the first date. He’s a big guy, but he’s got a tender heart. You know what I mean? In this one area, I’ve gotta hang firm.”

Oh, he was firm and then some. Was he more than she could handle? She didn’t have all that much experience, after all --

Her first and only lover, Jeremy, a British academic, measured in at six inches. Six and a half, max.

Lou's black silk boxers contained at least ten inches of American-bred cock.

No Brit reserve resided in that organ! Not without a shoehorn and a lot of lube would *that* fit in her ass.

A frisson of excitement erupted inside her as she thought about Lou erupting inside her.

She took a step forward.

Lou stood statue-still as she reached inside his boxers and skimmed a bold finger down and around the massive length and breadth hidden in black silk.

A drop of pre-cum bubbled from the blunt top. For her?

That small bit of liquid signified Lou's arousal. That he let her touch him, without so much as a twitch, without trying to make a grab for her, signified the power of his control.

That she immediately reached under the jutting flesh and greedily cupped the weighty sac, signified her own lack of thereof.

Under her clenched fingers, he felt very heavy, very tight, very hot. He had to ache! And yet he stood quietly while she examined him in the minutest detail.

Blue shivered. How could any man have so much command of his body? And what would she do if he turned that command upon her?

"On second thought," she said, before losing courage, "let's do it now, before we take the tour."

"By *it*, you mean making love?"

Well-hung and quaint, too. "Yeah, that's what I mean."

"I can't, Blue. Not until we talk."

"No need --"

“We’re talking first,” he said with an underlying strength that unnerved her.

She’d show him! Who did he think he was, bossing her around, telling her what to do, setting down limits? No one unnerved her! When she got through with him, Lou Franco would beg her for it.

Tossing her head, Blue strode purposefully to the worktable. No sense pretending she was a mincing girly-girl when she was almost six feet tall. No sense trying to be something she was not. Assertive and forceful and independent, as far removed from the concept of shy as night was from day, Blue meant to show the quiet businessman he did not hold the upper hand --

At least, not until she told him he could.

They’d talk, all right. Later.

Much later.

She slid slowly up onto the edge of the worktable, one teasing fanny cheek at a time. Picking her feet up off the floor, she hiked them onto the top, heels on the edge, toes dangling out into space. Leaning back onto her bent arms, she nonchalantly widened the space between her knees.

“C’mere, Lou.” She hooked a finger at him. “My pussy is your pussy, remember?”

Lou walked to the table. He looked between her legs, inside between her legs, deep inside between her legs. At her *vagina*, she thought with a self-satisfied grin. He was like a kid in a candy shop with all his looking.

Her Cheshire cat grin faded.

She thought she might come. From the sheer excitement of his intense attention, she thought she might climax. No man had ever looked at her as Lou was looking at her now. And he had yet to touch her.

She wanted him to touch her! The same way he’d touched her on the pier!

But his hands remained hanging loose at his sides.

Gnashing her teeth in frustration, she tightened her own grip on the tabletop. Why didn't he fucking touch her?

The doubts crept in. The pier had been dark. As a dim workspace equaled an artist's headache, she made sure the studio came equipped with plenty of wattage. Did she look ugly under the harsh light? Too wet? Not demure enough? Was her thatch of curls not to his liking? Did the ring through her pussy turn him off now that he could see the gold hoop up close? Should she have raced to the bathroom to douche first?

Lou broke into her obsessing. "Your body is beautiful."

Nothing like a little praise to reassure a girl!

"*You're* beautiful," he amended.

However, too much praise amounted to male bullshit.

Despite her well-earned cynicism, despite his bogus compliment -- or outrageous lie, depending on her level of generosity -- her hips started to roll.

She couldn't stay still. Couldn't stop the undulation. Couldn't prevent the writhing dance. Strong of body and liberated of mind, she never thought of herself as helpless, but fuck, she felt helpless now! Her need for him made her so.

Why?

She understood her need for sex, but why did she need *him*?

They'd only just met. Had nothing in common --

"I can't do this. It's not right," he said.

Oh, did she ever agree! Of course, this wasn't right. *They* weren't right, not for each other. In the most hideous of ironies, that mutuality should not have mattered to her. Whether he approved of her or not, liked her or not, should have had no impact on her, whatsoever. Why care about the opinion of a man she'd picked up in a takeout line?

But she did care, and for that reason, she couldn't blow him off.

He said gently, "I'm sorry."

So, he'd changed his mind. Decided against going to bed with her. So what? Situations like this must happen all the time. She'd just toss off his "no, thanks" as one of those incompatibility, lack of animal magnetism, sorts of things.

Only, she couldn't. They had both agreed to a weekend of partying, and now he was reneging, backing out. Not as though he was turning her down for a drink after work, he was turning her down for S-E-X. What choice did she have but to take his rejection personally?

One thing for sure, she would absolutely *not* beg him to stay! She was desperate for sex, but not quite *that* desperate. His loss, if he wouldn't take what she offered!

She rarely masturbated, didn't get the point, and so, wasn't very good at it. But she had to do something to quench the horrible pressure building up inside her...

And to pay back this ruthlessly gentle man for making her suffer the agony of helplessness.

She was not helpless! Not powerless!

Once before, a man had made her feel both helpless and powerless. Though hardly his fault, the reality was Gill's sexual preference had excluded her from fully sharing her life with him. She'd had to stand back, helplessly, powerlessly, when he'd looked at men with desire flaring in his eyes. The love of her life had never looked at *her* like that.

Not again. Never again! She would never again want a man who would not, could not, want her back. She was no masochist. The next time she gave her heart to a man, he would return the favor.

While Lou's gaze rested uneasily on her, she indulged her whim for revenge...

And her screaming need for completion.

The masturbation started as a tease, a taunt, a sexy way to even the score -- how dare he reject her! She would *make* him feel what she felt, *make* him regret turning her down.

She would *make* him want her as she wanted him. Without reservation. Without reticence. Beyond logic. Because there was no logic to this, no reason to explain her attraction to him.

And his attraction to her.

Lou Franco had wanted her on the pier. And something had changed. Something had altered his “yes” to a “no.”

Wiggling like a naughty girl in need of a spanking, she bore down on the worktable, the tilted position of her pelvis grinding her hips into the wood planking.

“Mmm,” she offered with the slightest of smiles, “the roughness feels so *goood* under my bottom.” She purposefully rolled her eyes back in her head. “Know what I mean, Lou? Sometimes a femme just needs it *haaaard*.”

Her knees crudely widening, but only by mere increments, she slowly, oh-so-slowly, slid a hand between her legs.

His harsh breathing telling Blue she had fully engaged Lou’s attention, she languidly slid two digits inside her pussy.

Like the worst sort of ball-breaker, she purred. Licked her lips. Was he suffering yet?

If so, not enough. Not after what he’d done. Getting her all hot and bothered and then rejecting her, wasn’t the behavior she’d expected from a nice man.

Payback time.

She started pumping her digit. The motion was not pretty, not romantic. Nothing about this showed her in a favorable light.

Who cared?

Down and dirty was the way to torture a nice man like Lou.

Her free hand went to her nipple. Pressing. Pinching. Nails digging. Deeply scoring the areola.

At Lou's audible gasp, her juices saturated her brown pubic hair. Her fingers slid on her slick flesh.

Wet sounds filled the quiet room. And Lou, standing directly in front of her, his eyes on her pussy, had to hear every squish.

A double-edged sword was revenge.

The tendons in her thighs tightened. A fist clenched inside her belly.

She was about to come. About to break apart. Again.

Because Lou was watching her.

Okay, *now* she would beg.

"Please, Lou. I don't want it to happen like this. Come inside me," she cried.

With one of her hands lurching faster and faster between her splayed thighs, and two fingers of the other hand pinching and twisting her nipple, great big, fat, weak tears streamed down her face.

And then Lou materialized directly in front of her, his dark and serious face floating before her half-closed, streaming eyes.

He gently removed her hands from her perspiration-coated body. "Blue, I can only give you this."

Dipping his head, his beard-roughened jaw rubbing against her sweaty skin, he kissed the inside of each thigh. "May I, Blue?" He licked the crease where uppermost leg met the junction of her body. "Please tell me I can."

"Yes," she grated out.

Just like on the pier, he didn't rush the claiming. First, his firm lips staked the uncontested territory. Next, he kissed her vanquished core, a gentleman-conqueror's courteous tongue stroke. No need for a forceful invasion -- she was wide open to him, as open as a woman can get for a man, her body surrendered to him.

He found her clit and lingered. Teeth scraping, gallantly scraping against that scrap of sensitized flesh, he pulled on the hoop. A piercing that had started as a symbol of her sexual liberation she would hereafter associate with her helplessness, her powerlessness, to him.

What the fuck had she done?

How had she ever thought to allow this man into her body and then walk away?

She'd just tied herself to a man about whom she knew very little, except that he was strong enough to show tenderness. They were as alike as careless and carefree. The man folded his clothes, for Pete's sake!

Yes, for his son's sake, Lou probably had learned to fold clothes. And wash dishes. And nurse the usual childhood illnesses, while she was your typical self-absorbed, self-centered, twenty-something. What did she know about Lou's brand of selflessness? She'd never taken full responsible for another human being but herself --

Blue thrashed her head on the worktable. That is, until Gill got sick.

But before then, she'd never taken care of anyone. Never worried about anyone. Never missed a night's sleep over someone's every fitful breath...

That all changed when the man she had loved -- no, still loved -- fell ill.

And then Blue knew. Because of the gift of caring for Gill, she understood why Lou took such care with her, why he possessed a soothing touch.

He'd nurtured another life. Cherished a soul other than his own. As surely as he'd shaped his son, his son had shaped him, changed him. Lou had spent his whole adulthood giving, not getting. No wonder the guy was so serious, so responsible!

As responsible Lou seriously mouthed her pussy, as he bestowed upon her a shallow and delicate French kiss, as the careful man gave her a careful tongue thrust, Blue acknowledged there was no going back, no undoing the changes this night would bring. Just as Pete had changed Lou, Lou would now change her. Why hadn't she realized that was just how it went before it was too late to run?

Between her legs, Lou's in-and-out motions interspersed with talented tongue curls. The empty room filled with the gulps of a man swallowing. Repeatedly swallowing. Lustily swallowing. No man but Lou had ever tasted her essence, sampled her cream, acquainted himself with her flavor.

He tongue fucked her. For minutes? Hours? Who knew how long it lasted?

She only knew he performed the cunnilingus thoroughly. Lou branded her with gentleness, but he marked her all the same.

Sobbing, grabbing at his head, her fingers clawing through his crisp hair, she convulsed. Once. Again. Her body twitching, she came on a helpless and powerless scream.

Chapter Nine

Blue rose from the worktable in boneless satiation, pushed her perspiration-soaked bangs out of her eyes, and drew her sweaty body upright, intent on confronting Lou on her feet, not lying on her back.

He had already withdrawn from her, left her before the echo of her orgasm had even dissipated, a dispassionate abandonment. Now, as she fought her way back to self-reliance, he coolly gathered his clothes together and crossed the room. Only his eyes touched her as the aftershocks of climax wracked her body.

A single word ripped from her throat. “Why?”

“Because we don’t know one another.” He pulled his white shirt on over his dark suit pants. “Because I thought maybe we could have something good if we took our time. Because I start work at eleven, and I didn’t want to leave you alone afterwards thinking maybe I had used you for sex when it’s not that way. Not because I didn’t want to, sweet Blue, because I did want to, bad.”

He picked up his suit jacket and shrugged into it. “We need to talk, Blue. You have only a couple more nights left in town, right?”

Lou was now fully dressed, and she just didn't have the energy to climb back into her own clothes. What was the point? She'd opened herself up to him. He'd seen her weak and crying. Sweating. Her fingers, coated with her own juices, jerking between her legs. He'd heard the wet, sloppy sounds her pussy made as she masturbated. Heard her come as he'd delved into her with his tongue. He'd tasted her secretions, swallowed her excitement down his throat. Part of her was inside his belly.

She wanted him to come inside her body, without wearing a condom. She wanted to feel his hard male flesh moving within her, no rubber in between. She wanted to wear his semen like Miss America wore her crown.

Why?

Because he had called her beautiful? Is that what this was all about?

Was she so petty, so superficial...so insecure...that a man's off-handed praise would make her cast self-protection aside?

She knew better!

Calling her beautiful was a cheesy pickup line. A sappy platitude a man spoke to get what he was after. Fake compliments were so unnecessary! Lou could have had whatever he wanted from her sexually without having to resort to lies.

She would *not* plead with him to stay.

Blue straightened her wide shoulders, shoulders too wide for a woman, and walked to him, her bare breasts bobbing a little, her thighs slick from her juices and his tongue. "Tomorrow night, seven-to-nine, my exhibit opens here at GoCA. The reception is one of these glitzy, formal affairs artists have no choice but to attend. Can you make it?"

"I wouldn't miss your opening night reception for anything."

He sounded sincere. But his dark brooding eyes had hooded, and his face looked strained as he reached for her breast, gently rubbing the hard, reddened nipple.

Fuck his gentleness! What would push this controlled man over the edge, over the brink? What would it take for him to toss his clothes on the floor and ravage her, no thought of restraint, no thought of consequence?

She felt wild. She recognized the same wildness lurking inside him, too. On the pier, with those two river rats, she had seen the animal side of him. Had those two men touched her, Lou would have killed them. He might mask his dominant nature behind cool politeness, rein in his strength with well-exercised control, but his authoritative power was there nonetheless.

Release your animal passion on me, Lou. Hold nothing back.

“Open your legs, Blue.”

About time, he showed his true self!

A dark thrill shivering through her, she allowed her thighs to loosen.

“More,” he ordered.

And helplessly she did. Unable to deny his power, she spread herself for him.

His hand left her nipple to cover her pussy. “Will you be with other men while you’re in Fenton?”

“Define ‘be with.’”

“I mean...” His large finger slipped inside her wet pussy lips. “...will you let any other man inside here, inside your vagina?”

She fluttered her lashes. “Oh, Lou, nice Lou, nothing so normal as that.”

“Could you maybe give me a straight answer?”

“Okay. Possibly. Possibly, I’ll engage in vaginal intercourse with a heterosexual male this weekend. I think that answer would go down without a raised eyebrow in most suburban bowling leagues -- is that straight enough an answer for you?”

“Yeah. It’s straight enough for me, Blue.”

“Super. Awesome. Freaking wonderful. Now you tell me -- why do you ask?”

“Because...” He delicately rubbed her clit. “...I know you need sex, but don’t go to other guys to get it. Let me be the one to give you what you need.”

She shuddered. His clit-rubbing was turning her on. Again. “No promises, Lou. I’ll have to see if you loosen up some. A girl has to leave her options open. You know? Find a little fun wherever she can.”

He took a deep breath, still rubbing her clit, another finger deviously moving upwards. “You’re more than fun to me, Blue. So go easy.”

Another pickup line, she reminded herself. The words meant nothing.

But deep inside herself, in that weakest part of herself, she yearned to believe him. All women hungered to believe men meant the pretty phrases they turned.

She said nothing in reply, but when he offered her another finger, an easy slide up into the clasp of her body, she took it. Greedily.

He smoothed his free hand down her bare back, and her breasts peaked, the nipples as sharp as a sculptor’s carving knife. Cool fingers cupped her bottom cheek. “I’m willing to do whatever, to have a chance with you. It doesn’t need to be *normal* sex. But no other guys, okay? I’m old-fashioned that way. I know you’re adventurous, that you’ve got a free spirit, but be mine, alone, for the next couple of days. We can work this out, I know we can.”

She’d presented herself to Lou as a good-time girl. Now that Lou believed her bullshit, it rankled. More so, because he was playing this cool.

Well, then, so would she. Let him think he was only one man among many. “Sorry, Lou. No guarantees.”

Withdrawing his touch, Lou left her high and dry, left her trembling on the verge of another climax, and without saying another word.

She shook, coming down off the adrenaline rush, coming down from the expectation of what might have been, just coming down.

Pleasure a distant memory -- spite, too -- she started to pace the studio. She had to do something to discharge her tension.

Naturally, same as always, she talked to her beloved Gillian in her thoughts.

See that, Gill? Another man just closed a door in my face. What's wrong with me?

When she was younger, before she'd come up against some of the complexities life had to offer, she would have laughed her ass off at the idea of falling in love with someone who didn't fit society's idealized image and narrow definition of a man. Had someone shown her a photo of a young, sensitive man, an obviously, no question about it, *gay* young man, she would have said: "God, not me! I'm no fag hag! I would never, not in million years, fall in love with a queer."

And she hadn't.

She'd fallen in love with Gillian.

A poet, an artist, a dedicated social activist, a sexy and charismatic guy who openly, no apologies, made love to other men.

Wiping a tear away, Blue drew on her trousers.

Who knew why one human being irresistibly drew another? Who knew what inspired a need to be with one special person to the exclusion of everyone else?

That is, if one found that special person at all.

Some people never did find that special someone, Blue mused sadly, as she shrugged into her shirt. How truly blessed she'd been to have found Gillian! He'd been perfect for her in every way --

Except one way.

And knowing they'd have no happy ending, she had loved him anyway. His soul complemented her soul. Their spirits touched, even if their bodies never had.

They'd met as college freshman at the same art college. Both far from home for the first time, they had enjoyed an instant affinity. And right from the very first, Gillian had been

honest with her. In his honest, Gillianesque fashion, he told her he wasn't straight, wasn't bi, but was happily gay, and please not to try and change him.

She hadn't.

Nor had she stopped loving him simply because he hadn't fit her expectations of what a sweetheart should act like, think like, or do in the privacy of their own little world.

Gillian was unquestionably, positively, not a virgin when they'd met, while she remained so during their relationship -- despite her heart-mate's insistence she experiment with a heterosexual man. "So you'll know what you're missing," he'd said.

A complete waste of effort! She'd known her own heart, and her feelings were real and lasting and true. She wasn't missing anything! Besides, since she'd never had sex, how could she possibly miss it?

Gillian had been the love of her life in every way -- except physically. Like two misfit peas in a funny little pod, they had complemented one another just like any other long-time married couple. They had finished each other's sentences, laughed at one another's stupid jokes, understood each other's motivations, appreciated one another's creativity, and shared the same ideological leanings. From their joyous start to their sad, sad finish, the bond between them had remained unbroken.

And unbrokenly platonic.

They'd lived together for six lovely years, inseparable since that first day, linked at the heart muscle --

Until Gill's heart muscle had weakened irrevocably, and death severed them forever.

Three years since his passing, and Blue still grieved. And if not for a promise, she would have remained a virgin, as well.

The love of her life had made her swear, on the site of his future cemetery plot, no less -- the horrible ghoul! -- that after a suitable period of mourning -- he gave her a year, she'd taken two -- she'd lose her hymen.

Last year, in London, she'd fulfilled her obligation to Gill.

With Jeremy. The British art historian had been teaching a grad course on the High Renaissance, a class she'd only enrolled in to fill all those hours of empty time --

After Gill's death, she could no longer seem to paint.

Paint! What a laugh! Unable to eat or sleep, never mind paint, she'd only existed, barely functioned.

One bleak and rainy London day, she'd taken Jeremy aside after his lecture on Da Vinci, explained her problem, and asked if he'd mind giving her a different sort of tutoring.

Jeremy hadn't exactly minded taking her cherry, but he hadn't exactly shown any enthusiasm, either. The arrangement was all very civilized, all very convenient, all *verry* Brit. They'd simply fallen into the habit of having tepid sex together in his flat when they both had nothing better to do.

At the end of the semester, when they went their separate ways, she'd felt a twinge of remorse and a tremendous sense of relief. Though she missed the sex, she hadn't missed the man providing the perfunctory orgasms.

In one respect, though, her brief interlude -- she couldn't classify it as an affair -- with Jeremy had been a flaming success: She'd discovered she not only liked sex, she *loved* sex, even tepid sex, and that, surprise, surprise, she was quite good at it. And, since Jeremy had taken care of the embarrassing business of her virginity, she could concentrate on adventure, just as Gillian had made her promise to do.

And whom did she choose for her first adventurous pickup?

An extraordinarily careful man who insisted upon getting to know her *first*.

Lou would never really know her unless she told him about Gillian. And she couldn't possibly tell conservative Lou about the beauty of loving a gay man. He would never understand, and she couldn't bear to explain, couldn't bear to share Gill with anyone else.

In life, she'd had no choice but to share Gillian. But in death, oh, in that long last sleep, her beloved Gill belonged solely to her.

* * * * *

The day following the episode on the pier, Lou paid an etiquette call on the two small-time thugs who had scared Blue.

After reminding the Reilly brothers of their manners, Lou washed off his nicks and cuts, slapped a steak over his swollen eye -- good thing he wasn't a vegetarian -- and stuck his bruised knuckles in an ice bucket. When his vision improved enough not to walk into walls, he changed out of his bloodstained clothes and took a walk down to Water Street, where he dropped his stained suit off at the dry cleaners.

At least twenty bars dotted the riverfront. Vasquez & Sons Cleaners held a central location to all of them. Since lots of bars equaled lots of brawls, the cleaner had lots of experience removing dried blood.

Clean suits mattered to Lou.

When he was a kid growing up, his Italian immigrant folks had always put food on the table, but lacked the finances to provide much else. At a young age, he'd learned to take real good care of his belongings. The same held true for his good name. The former had to last, but the latter was irreplaceable. To this day, Lou was real particular about keeping his wardrobe and his reputation clean.

After leaving off his suit at Vasquez & Sons, same as usual on his day off, Lou stopped in at The Pink Flamingo to check on how things were doing.

From the sound of things, things weren't doing so swell.

Inside the kitchen, Stan was throwing another one of his hissy-fits.

Ducking his head to miss the soufflé pan sailing through the swinging doors, Lou entered the war zone. One look told him the egg whites had hit the fan.

Managing a club wasn't only about bouncing bellicose patrons and keeping a watchful eye on the dancers: A certain amount of applied human psychology also fell under the job description. From listening to whisky-induced bar confessions to calming the bimonthly hysterics of a certain temperamental member of his kitchen staff, Lou soothed lots of ruffled feathers at The Flamingo, not all of them pink.

The head chef stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, toe tapping, arms crossed over the eye-popping girth of his white apron. "I cannot work under these deplorable conditions, Louis --"

Stan always called him Louis, never Lou, and always with a cultured accent of unknown origins. The mystery dialect tended to fade in and out, depending on the chef's mood. Seemed kind of silly, considering Stan was born and raised in Fenton. Lou only put up with the bogus accent and overblown ego because the dude could cook.

But, evidently, not for that night's upcoming menu, unless Lou stepped into the fray.

Kissing his day off goodbye, Lou turned to Stan. "What happened?"

"It is the --"

Here, Stan paused to hunt down the right word.

"How do you say -- that which controls the heat in the oven?"

"Thermostat," Lou supplied the unneeded translation. Someday, Lou would have to tell Stan that just because a chef wasn't born in Europe didn't mean that chef couldn't put together a mean ratatouille.

"Ah, but of course. *Thermostat*. She does not work."

"How do you know the thermostat is blown, Stan?"

The chef hefted a Frisbee-like pastry from the counter.

"You see? My Grand Marnier soufflé...she refuses to rise to her usual golden puffy heights." Stan burst into sobs.

This was where applied human psychology came into play. It took Lou only an hour to mop up Stan's tears, but the rest of the day to pretend to change the faulty thermostat. *Pretend* because Lou tested the thermostat and the control worked just fine. But what did that matter if the chef wasn't working at all?

At six, Tomas Ruiz caught him on the way out the bright pink door. "What the fuck happened to you? You're looking a little dented there, Lou."

"I ran into the Reilly boys down at the pier last night. They were disrespectful to the lady I accompanied, so today, I stopped by their place to explain the meaning of common courtesy."

"I hope to fuck they look worse than you, *ese*."

"They do."

Tomas raised a brow. "You don't go around smashing skulls too often. Who's this lady you went to the boards for?"

Lou couldn't hold back the smile. "She's 'The One.'"

Tomas smoothed a hand over his gaudy red and yellow floral shirt. "The One?"

Since meeting his wife, Seraphina, Lou's business associate had taken to wearing sappy Hawaiian shirts, a drastic departure from his usual all-black wardrobe. Somehow, the new sappy style in threads suited Ruiz. Lou had never seen the guy happier. And now that Tomas was about to become a proud papa, he floated on air.

Tomas grinned. "The One what?"

"The one I'm marrying," Lou replied.

The owner of The Flamingo came down to earth long enough to clap Lou on the back. "Congratulations! How long you been seeing her?"

"Since last night."

Tomas did a double take. "Let me get this straight. You're calling this woman 'The One' --" He made bunny ears with his fingers. "-- and you only met last night?"

Lou didn't take offense. How could he ask Tomas to understand? All those fantasies he'd had about T&A when Pete went off to college? All those plans to sample as many women as he could get?

Gone.

Because Blue was The One.

Sowing wild oats. Making up for lost time in the sack. Lou wouldn't be doing any of that stuff now. Sometimes love happened fast. One glance, one word, one takeout line, and a man was a goner.

Of course, Blue didn't know she was The One for him. Neither did she know he was The One for her. When she did stumble upon those realizations, she'd run in the opposite direction.

Lou was prepared. To wait when she ran away. To dodge all the obstacles she'd throw in the path of love. To fight her and anyone else who got in the way. He was ready.

Because Blue was The One.

"So --" Tomas scratched his head. "What's her name?"

"Blue Heron."

"Blue and Lou -- you two make poetry together. And I mean that literally."

"I guess our names do rhyme, don't they?"

"Yep, and they're poetic justice, too."

Lou's brow furrowed. "Huh?"

"Man, don't you see? You manage a pink flamingo, now a blue heron will manage you. I call that poetic justice."

Lou shrugged. "Never made the connection."

“That’s ’cuz you got it bad, *ese*.” Grinning hugely now, Tomas stuck his hands in his pockets. “Wait a minute! Isn’t your ladylove that artist exhibiting over at GoCA? Gotta be her. Can’t be too many Blue Herons flying around Fenton.”

“Yeah. She’s one of a kind, all right,” Lou said, pride pumping him up. “I’m invited to her gallery opening tonight at GoCA. You know -- ‘Unwrapped Packages.’ I guess she does something with gifts and presents and wrapping paper or something. I haven’t seen her stuff, so I’m not exactly sure what’s in the show. Knowing her, the exhibits should make for some interesting viewing.”

Tomas’s shoulders started to heave.

Lou frowned at his laughing friend. “What’s so damn funny?”

Between guffaws, Tomas said, “Nothing. Nothing at all. The closer Sera gets to the delivery date, the more nothing sets me off.”

Lou doubted approaching fatherhood explained Tomas’s sudden gasping fit, but he let his friend’s laughing-hyena hysterics go. “How’s the mother-to-be doing, anyway?”

“Great. Taking everything in stride. Better than me, anyway. I tell you, this waiting is getting on my nerves. Every time my beeper goes off, I jump clear outta my skin. We’re going to GoCA tonight, though. Sera wants to expose the baby to the Arts, right from the womb. Besides, I wouldn’t miss seeing your face for anything.”

Before Lou could ask him what he meant, a guffawing Tomas Ruiz walked away.

Chapter Ten

As it turned out, “Unwrapped Packages” represented the “transcendental beauty of male genitalia.”

Damn! Why hadn’t Ruiz warned him?

Someone should’ve warned him! An hour after entering the gallery, Lou’s face still burned. Call him old-fashioned, but as far as he was concerned, a man shared his equipment with his hand, or if he got lucky, with his woman. Dicks had no place decorating walls and pedestals, and hanging suspended from ceilings. Just wasn’t decent. Where was he supposed to look?

Right at ’em, Lou guessed, just like everybody else.

Nice, how Blue hadn’t left anyone out. Her multi-media exhibit displayed every size and shape, both uncut and circumcised, from semi-erect to hugely erect. Not since his detective days had he seen so many dicks in any one room.

And to think Blue had hinted at using his package in her exhibit.

Sort of hurt his feelings now. Her interest made him feel cheap. Degraded. Dehumanized, even. Here, he thought she liked him for himself. But no. He served only as inspiration to her muse.

Some muse.

While staring at a sculptured pair of swinging balls, Lou gave a cocky grin.

If he did say so himself, he stacked up pretty damn good against the competition, which was stiff -- and in more ways than one. With a solid two inches on any of the *specimens*, he should crow like a...well...like a cock. In light of Blue's invitation, he supposed he should feel honored about adding his member to the club.

Or, was that, adding his club to the members?

But no matter how he sliced and diced it, Lou had to ask himself -- what was with Blue, anyway?

The day before, she'd declared all self-righteously that The Pink Flamingo objectified women. Didn't her exhibit objectify men?

No difference, not as far as he could see, and what he could see was a bunch of double standards in the single digit range.

While Lou ruminated on the unfathomable vagaries of the female psyche, the artist herself came marching toward him, that determined stride of hers kicking up the ankle-length, royal-purple tunic thing she had on.

She kissed him. On the mouth! "You came!"

Almost. Just from the kiss.

And then, while her kiss still heated his lips, the realization struck:

Blue must have had more pricks in her hands than a porcupine had on his back.

Jealousy reared its ugly...er...head. He tried to swallow it down, but that just got him to thinking of Blue on her knees swallowing something else down, some other guy's something else.

Choking, he rasped, "I told you I'd make the opening, Blue."

"I know. But the way we left things yesterday, I thought you might have changed your mind."

"I wouldn't stand you up any more than you'd blow me off."

She laughed. "Oh, but there's nothing I'd like more than to blow you off."

"No, you wouldn't --" He stopped, reconsidered the alternative meaning of *blowing*, straightened his tie. Maybe she did like him, after all.

Unless, during his eighteen-year hiatus from sex, blowjobs had become such common practice that women just naturally offered to go down on a man, sort of like a handshake, only different.

To mask his confusion, Lou straightened his cuff links. "So -- anyway -- you look beautiful this evening."

She touched his bruised cheek. "I'd return the compliment, but you look like hell. You walked down memory lane with those two riverfront rats, didn't you?"

"Yep. They remembered my right hook real fast."

"Oh, Lou. You should've gone to the cops."

To avoid that subject, he waved a hand around the room. "So -- anyway your...um...stuff...it's...wow...finding the right words is certainly...you know...hard..."

Dancing blue eyes crinkled and a wide smile flashed. "Hard. Now there's an interesting word choice."

"Damn! You know, if I had wanted to come up with a double entendre I would've shot a blank."

Her glance dipped below his belt. "I doubt you ever shoot blanks, Lou."

Damn! Another slip. "I'm a lot self-conscious." He was also a lot erect, a circumstance Blue would undoubtedly notice, what with her glance stuck like glue to his bulging fly.

Finally, her attention lifted back up to his face. “No reason for self-consciousness, Lou. I’m so glad you’re here. I kept watching the door for you.”

Blue was the most straightforward of women. When hurt, her eyes darkened. When happy, her bright smile lit up the room. When she edged toward climax, her whole face took on this real --

Lou chased that memory away. He was already uncomfortably hard, and he still had to get through the night’s festivities. The point was, he wanted to bask a little longer in her grin. Only, he couldn’t do any of that basking, not and call himself truthful.

Keeping the details of his job a secret smacked of deception. Tonight, Blue was showing him what she did for a living, only right he did the same. But would she understand, or would she turn his paycheck into some sort of anti-feminist political statement?

He’d soon see. “Listen, about my job...”

Blue’s hands moved over her body, sort of like a pat down, only done to herself. Then, she sent him a sexy as all hell look. “I’m naked under this caftan, Lou.”

His brow furrowed. Did she mean what he thought she meant?

She nodded and winked.

As he got a clue, his lids lowered. So did his voice. “Naked, huh?”

“Yes. Naked. And this reception isn’t over for another hour. That’s too long to wait.” She grabbed his hand and pulled.

His best dress shoes left skid marks on the gallery’s gleaming hardwood floors. “Where you taking me, woman?”

“Someplace private.”

She took him around a corner.

Or, maybe she took him for a ride -- he knew not which. Because, as it turned out, Blue’s idea of someplace *private* was a huge, limp, anatomically correct, rubber dick.

Blue dragged him under the one-eyed monster. “Watch the pump,” she whispered, indicating what looked like a foot pedal placed off to one side. “Step on that, and the penis goes from deflated to full thrust.”

Yeah, he understood how that went. One look at Blue as she came toward him in that purple number, her body fluid under the clingy cloth, had performed the same pumped-up sensation on him.

A pair of rubber testicles swung in his face, and Blue’s merry blue eyes took on a wicked blue gleam. “Let’s have some fun. You do understand the concept of fun, don’t you, Lou?”

He got the distinct impression her question had nothing to do with his word comprehension skills. He got the distinct impression that, still miffed over what hadn’t happened the previous night, Blue had just issued him a challenge.

A challenge he hedged. “That depends on the fun.”

“Let’s play a game, ’kay?”

He kept one eye on Blue, the other on the world’s largest dildo. “What kind of game?”

“A sex game.”

Damn! What a moron! He should’ve known! A woman scorned, Blue was out for blood.

“You know,” she added, “a role-playing game.”

Great. Role-playing. Right up his alley. Something he did every day of the week. Almost forty years old, never acted on a stage, not even in a high school production, and he was supposed to embark on a Shakespearean career, in public, under a limp dick, no less. Swell. Just damn swell.

He swelled even more at the thought.

“Ever play guardian and ward?” she asked. Her brow arched in a dare.

A dare he refused to take. “Can’t say I have, no.”

“Really? Well, it’s a simple variation on the teacher and schoolgirl scenario. I’ll show you. Take my cue and jump in.” She batted her gold-tipped lashes. “Oh, sir,” she said in the demure voice. “I suppose if you insist, I have no choice but to obey you and disrobe. I mean, you *are* my legal guardian.” Her hands went for the zipper at her neck.

Damn! Damn! Damn! He’d already agreed to bondage, were they doing exhibitionism now, too?

Getting naked under a limp dick inside an art gallery during an opening night party was not his idea of fun. Neither was getting thrown in lock-up for lewd and indecent exposure. If Pete found out what his old man was up to after only one short week on his own, Lou would never hear the end of his son’s razzing.

“Not here, Blue,” he growled. “How about we play something else? Something that maybe won’t get us busted? Later on tonight, after this gala is over, I could stop at a convenience store and pick up a can of whipped cream. Maybe some maraschino cherries, too. Possibly a bunch of bananas. You know, kinky sex stuff.”

“Oh, Lou. That’s so *old*. And tame. Where’ve you been for the last couple of decades?”

Home with his kid, spooning whipped cream onto chocolate pudding and fantasizing about licking the foam off something else.

“Whipped cream and fruit are dated, Lou. Next, you’ll suggest lavender pleasure balls, and they went out eons ago.”

Lavender pleasure balls? Never heard of them, but they sounded like a good time to him. In private. Behind closed doors. *Locked* and closed doors.

Blue tilted her jaw. “Role-playing games promote trust and openness.”

Could she push any more buttons? Not since Pete claimed a dime for every bedtime kiss had he felt so manipulated. “Fine. I’ll play the damn game. All right?”

Blue pinned him with a look no ward would ever have given her appointed guardian. “Disrobe, sir!”

Geez! Demure to Domme in all of sixty seconds. He could almost hear her cracking the vegetarian-approved, cat-o'-nine-tails switch on his bare butt.

Lou tightened the knot in his tie. "In dirty books, men always stay dressed. And they always give the orders."

"You read erotica?"

"Not really *read*. And they're not really books. Magazines. And no, I don't buy them for the articles. I buy them strictly for the pictorials."

"Why?"

"Why do I look at porno pics?"

"Yes, why?"

"For inspiration. You know, for intimate moments."

Her eyes widened. "You jerk off to visuals!"

"Shhh!" He checked out the walls, looking for ears. "Not so loud."

"But, Lou, you're an attractive and single and virile man. Any woman would have sex with you."

Yeah, right.

She was good for his ego, but for the sake of full disclosure, it was time to eat humble pie. Fair was fair, and he couldn't expect Blue to open up to him unless he cut a vein and bled, too. "I don't get sex any time I want it, or for that matter, any time I'm climbing the walls for it. I don't do that sort of thing, because up until recently, I had an impressionable son living at home. How could I teach Pete to respect women if I was out screwing around all the time?"

Her mouth gaped. "How long?"

"Over a year. Before then --" He shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"Oh, but I do."

Little sadist! Getting arrested began looking good.

Lou stared up at the ceiling, dropped his eyes back to hers. Honesty was a bitch at times. "Five years."

"What!"

"I'm practically a monk, okay? Hence the dirty mags hidden in the bathroom, hence how come I know in jack-off stories the man never walks around with his wood sticking out. Where's the dignity in that?"

"If you ask me -- dignity is much overrated. Do your clothes ever get wrinkled?" She flicked his tie.

"Not often." He patted the striped silk back in place.

"I didn't think so. Too bad."

He didn't like opening up stuff, stuff better kept locked away. Some stuff ran deep, made a man who he was and who he wasn't. But Blue needed more from him, so he had to go there, had to talk about his past.

Could he even put it into words?

He took a deep breath. "When my parents immigrated to this country, they didn't have much. Don't get me wrong -- they loved us kids, but in terms of things money can buy, there wasn't much to go around, and what there was got sliced thin. In my family, we had dignity, our good name, but only one change of clothes, washed clean, patched neat, pressed dime-bouncing straight. Call me superficial, but I value nice suits on my back." He paused, took another breath. "Though not nearly as much as I value respectability."

Blue's head lowered. "Growing up, I had enough outfits to open my own boutique. I never had to do without anything. Maybe if I had, I would place more value on material possessions. As it is, I just don't. And I don't think a person needs to stay in control all the time." She looked up, searched his face. "I want you to lose control, Lou. For me. Can you do that or is that just too *not* respectable?"

Blue had hit an artery with the point of her knife and cut deep. His carotid gushed red. He lived by personal standards, by certain rules. He didn't know if he could release those controls even if he wanted to, and he wasn't so sure if he did want to. Without rules, chaos ruled. Without standards, men behaved like savages.

But when Blue went for his fly, he went for anything he could reach. And letting go suddenly got a lot easier.

Bunching up the purple fabric, he palmed her bare bottom. With a feverish groan, he squeezed. Returning the favor, Blue went from cupping his dick to squeezing his dick. Damn! Blue gave good hand.

But a hand job would never satisfy him.

Lou wanted into Blue. All the way into Blue. Into the blue yonder of Blue. She was sky, he was mud, and after being stuck to the ground for so many years, he wanted to fly. With her.

Blue started sinking to her knees. "You got me off on the pier, and again in my studio. My turn now."

Before she hit the floor, he grabbed her elbow and pulled her back up, brought her close. "Not like we're hanging numbers on a scoreboard."

"I don't understand."

This, he knew.

No time to explain, Lou pressed his foot to the penile pump. The giant dick inflated and rose --

Creating a barrier between them and their curious audience.

"Son of a gun!" he boomed. "So -- that's how the display works. Thanks for showing me, Miss Heron."

From out their twittering throng of spectators came a familiar guffaw.

Tomas Ruiz stopped laughing long enough to say, “Lou, does this mean you’re glad to see me or are we still only friends?”

Chapter Eleven

Drawing her after him, Lou stepped around the thrusting penis. While Blue looked on, he leaned into a very pregnant woman at the laughing man's side and bussed her cheek.

And then she knew how Lou came by those brackets cut into either side of his mouth. The smile Lou gave the expectant mother brimmed with warmth and caring.

"How you doing, gorgeous?" he asked.

"Very well, Lou, considering I'm in labor."

The laughing man sobered immediately. His olive-toned complexion paled. "L-L-labor? What do you mean you're in l-l-labor, Sera? You never said nuthin' about labor! Is the b-baby coming?"

"Generally speaking, that is what labor means. Don't worry, dear. We have ample time to get to the hospital. At least long enough for Lou to introduce us to his friend."

"Talk fast, dude," said the expectant father.

Lou did. "Blue Heron, I'd like you to meet Sera Ruiz. The joker at her side is her husband, Tomas."

Unless Blue was very much mistaken, the expectant mother was in some serious pain, but wasn't letting on due to her extremely nervous husband. With that uppermost in mind,

she cut the polite chitchat introductions and moved to the heart of the matter. "Anything I can do, Sera?"

"Aren't you sweet, Blue! But I think labor tends to run its own course."

"*Um*. I don't know if I can go through with this." Tomas clutched his wife's hand. "It's too soon. I'm just not ready."

"Remember what the midwife in the prenatal class told you, dear. There will be some discomfort, but after they put our baby in your arms you won't remember any of it."

"*Um*. I don't know --"

"You'll do fine," Sera soothed the strapping man. "Deep breaths now. In and out slowly. Keep your eye on the focal point."

"You're my focal point, Sera," the muscular man wailed.

"And I'm not going anywhere, am I?" Sera said patiently. "I'll stay with you every step of the way."

"Promise, *ruca*?"

"Yes, I promise."

The two women exchanged knowing looks.

"Please excuse my husband, Blue. This is his first baby, and he's a little apprehensive." Sera suddenly winced, and no amount of loving concern for her husband could hide her discomfort. Nevertheless, Mrs. Ruiz managed to say evenly, "Now, Tomas, I think we should leave. The contractions are a little closer together."

With a strained parting smile, Sera called back over her shoulder as she led her husband away, "Nice to meet you, Blue. Please come visit us at the old Monroe place."

"I'll do that," Blue promised before remembering she was leaving Fenton.

After the departure of the parents-to-be, Blue turned to Lou. "You know something? I think Sera will do just fine during labor and delivery. But I'm not so sure about her husband. Tomas seemed a little wobbly on his feet."

"Tommie is a guy you want on your side in a fight. But with Sera, he's a cuddly teddy bear."

"How do you know them?"

"I'm years older than Tommie, but we grew up in the same neighborhood on the Southside. We still...uh...run into each other now and again."

"A baby," Blue said, wistfully. "Just think, soon Tomas and Sera will have a family. Truly a miracle."

"You want kids, Blue?"

Simple question, complicated answer.

She'd loved Gillian, but knew he would never give her babies. He wouldn't even discuss sperm donation with her. One day, while out shopping together, he'd caught her in the children's department looking longingly at a pair of tiny crocheted booties. Gill told her then if she wanted a baby she'd have to do it the old-fashioned way...

"Yes, I want kids," she replied. "Someday, I'd like a dozen or so."

Lou drew a finger down her jaw. "Remember I told you Tomas Ruiz owns The Pink Flamingo...?"

"Ugh!" Remembering their argument, she shook her head from side to side. "Let's not spoil our evening by discussing that horrid strip club." She tried dazzling him with a smile. "I have big plans for tonight. What do you say we go back to my hotel after the show?"

The finger on her jaw stilled. "I'll meet up with you there later. Here, I'm only getting in the way."

"Nonsense! I want you to stay!"

He gestured behind her. "Someone's trying to snag your attention. She looks fit to bust with a question. And I have something to do, too, so I'll leave you to your admirers."

She asked flirtatiously, "Do you consider yourself one of them, Lou?"

"I'll show you just how much I admire you later on," he said gruffly, the set of his jaw telling Blue that nothing she could do or say would persuade him to stay.

Feeling as blue as her name, she handed over the plastic hotel key card, whispering "Room 312" under her breath.

With a salute, Lou took off and Blue turned her attention to the waiting woman with the question, the brightness of the opening night gala suddenly gone dull.

* * * * *

Blue waited 'til well after midnight for Lou to arrive before deciding he'd stood her up.

Asshole. Passive-aggressive jerk. Didn't even have the balls to tell her to her face he was dumping her.

Disgusted with Lou in particular and all males in generals, Blue tore off her frilly lace robe -- a purchase she'd made only that morning and with Lou in mind.

Why'd she even bother?

Because she'd wanted to please him. Because she'd wanted, just once, to look femmy for a man.

No, not just any man! She'd wanted to look feminine for only one man.

Big, fucking mistake.

Even if she got boob implants and a change of attitude, she'd never appeal to an old-world sort like Lou Franco.

And to think she'd come *this* close to making a hair salon appointment to get styled and shaped and feminized!

On that humiliating thought, she stomped over to the big, empty, king-sized bed.

The soft sound of a door opening and closing. A terse order in the dark hotel room coming from behind her. "Don't move. Stay just like that."

"Just like that" was naked and kneeling the coverlet.

Usually, she wore a loose T-shirt to bed. Tonight, expecting a visit from Lou, she hadn't even bothered with that nod to modesty.

He came up behind her, his lips softly mouthing her shoulder, his teeth tenderly nipping her bare skin, his large hand lightly capturing her small breast.

Giving him no shit for keeping her waiting, dragging no explanations out of him, she arched against him. "Lou."

"Blue," he grunted in reply.

She angled her jaw. *"Please?"*

Who was that pleading woman? Blue Heron never begged anyone for anything, especially not a man!

Except Gill. She had begged him. Not for sex -- she would never have done that to him -- but she had begged him not to leave her. A fat lot of good that had done her. He'd left her anyway, died in her arms.

Lou didn't kiss her, and she didn't want him to -- she was long past kisses, long past needing foreplay. One palm flattened on her bare belly, he brought her bottom closer to his hard bulge. Delicately squeezing her pierced nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he spoke directly into her ear. "Go easy on me tonight, Blue. It's been awhile for me, you know? I'm not exactly a tiger in the bedroom."

On the pier, she'd witnessed Lou's wildcat ferocity, that uncivilized part of himself he kept under wraps.

C'mon, Tiger, show me some claws and fangs! Now. Right now!

Lifting his palm from her belly, Lou gently perused her spine, from nape to the small of her back. "Do you prefer to make love in the dark or with the lights on?"

Make love? Who the hell wanted to make love? Didn't he get it? She needed him to lose the politeness and fuck her hard. The harder the better, the raunchier the better. Force would make her forget. Dirty sex would make her forget faster.

Only she couldn't seem to forget. Couldn't seem to escape.

Gill's face suddenly flashed before her, his expression disapproving.

What did he want from her?

On his deathbed, Gill had told her to get on with living. To move on, to find a man, to find several men, and take them all to bed, *preferably* at the same time. She was only doing what he told her to do!

"No lights," she said listlessly, sucking back the tears.

Lou filled his palm with her bottom. A thumb skimmed the crevice. "You said you're adventurous -- but is there anything you don't like, anything you prefer men avoid?"

Men. There was that same plural again!

She'd had only one lover. As to preferences -- before Lou, she *thought* she preferred to control the encounters, she *thought* she preferred to take responsibility for her own climaxes, she *thought* she preferred the superior position.

With Lou, she *knew* she would prefer total submission.

She shivered in expectancy. *C'mon, Lou, show me what you got!*

"No, Lou, there's nothing I won't let you do to me."

Do *to* me, do *to* me, do *to* me. She wanted the fuck done *to* her. Not with her. *Do me, Lou. Do me hard! Fuck Gill right out of my bones.*

Lou reached between her legs. "You're wet."

"Since the line at Sprout's," she confirmed, because her wet excitement was the truth, and she saw little point in role-playing the demure miss now.

Lou didn't hurry to undress. Didn't rip off his clothes. Didn't scatter each gentlemanly article of apparel every which way. He folded each piece of his wardrobe and placed them neatly on the chair beside the bed.

This wasn't looking good. What tiger approached mating so fastidiously?

"Get up on the bed now. All fours," he specified.

Well, well, well. All fours, eh?

Looked like the wild beast in Lou had finally broken free!

She was an anal virgin, but Gillian had shared, and so she knew all about the "ouch factor." Sure, she wanted dominance, sure she wanted down and dirty sex, but if she didn't speak up, she wouldn't sit down tomorrow. "I'm adventurous, Lou, but I expect you to use lube for butt fucking."

He spoke sharply, "Don't use the 'F' word again. I plan on making love to you."

Semantics!

"Okay, Lou, when you *make love* to my ass, a little dab will do me."

"I'd never hurt you, Blue!"

Nerves made her say, "Hey, Lou, since we're going the animal route, ever hear the bestiality joke about the farmer's daughter and the --"

"Drop the comic routine, Blue. It's not you."

She wanted to drop the act, she really did, but her defenses had served her long and well. Only Gillian had ever slipped beneath her radar. "Don't think you know who I am, Lou, because you don't."

And she didn't know him, either. Could she trust him?

Oh, not about the sex. She knew Lou wouldn't hurt her physically. But what about her already battered and bruised heart? Would he take as much care with her feelings as he would with her body?

A knight of old, he chivalrously helped position her on the bed. “You’re right, Blue. I don’t know you, and that’s the problem with going to bed too soon.” He started working her clit.

Rather than gasp in pleasure, she snorted in derision. “Yeah, right. We should wait. Twelve hours or so would make all the difference in the world. Tomorrow, we’ll complete one another’s thoughts and everything.” Just like she and Gillian used to do.

Tears puddled in her eyes.

Lou broke into her grieving. “I’m not even thinking kink until we get up to speed on regular lovemaking. Besides, on the second date, I’m grateful to do missionary.” He laughed. “Who am I kidding? Missionary! I’m grateful to kiss a woman goodnight at the door. And here you are, expecting animal. The fantasy alone is enough to bring on cardiac arrest. So -- unless you want to wheel me into an ER tonight, I vote we save anal for later. You know, until after we learn a few pertinent preliminaries about each other. Like addresses, phone numbers, maybe even which side of the bed we sleep on. Or is anal okay, but swapping street numbers too damn personal?”

Yes, addresses were too damn personal. She was only in this for a good time not for anything deep, unless they were talking a deep thrust. And what was he doing in that regard?

A snap in the dark room. A condom?

A condom!

About friggin’ time, too!

“Listen, Blue, I know this isn’t the most romantic position for a woman to make love the first time with a new man, but when I fingered your vagina, you felt small to me. And then in your work studio, when you were up on the table, you looked small to me, too. You saw my make. A rear-entry approach will make it easier for me to gauge the depth of penetration, so I don’t hurt you. I’ve never done this with a woman who hadn’t had kids --”

Lou, the control freak, always thinking ahead.

She resented the hell out of his consideration! How was it he could strategize the fuck like a military campaign, when she couldn't reason at all? "For your information, Lou -- who the hell asked for romance? Not me. I told you I was horny. If you don't get in here fast, I'll come without you, just to prove my excitable state of mind."

"We can't have that happening." He kissed the slope of her bottom. Tender kisses. Gentle, open-mouthed kisses. Soft kisses using tongue. His mouth sliding teasingly down over the fullness of her ass. Sweet kisses, sweet, sweet, infinitely sweet kisses.

Her resentment built. Who asked for sweet?

She wanted starved kisses, the hungry kind, the forceful sort he'd given her on the pier. What ever happened to the tiger in him?

Nowhere to be found. Like page five in the sex manual for rear entries, one hand stayed clinically working her clit as Lou carefully guided himself into her pussy, back to front. "Tell me if it's too much."

"Get real," she countered, but then spoiled the perfectly good sarcasm with a pained moan.

She, who prided herself on knowing her way around a penis, should have anticipated accommodating Lou would be no easy feat. Thirty seconds in, she questioned her former assertion about bigger being better. Would Lou even fit?

"You feel so good," he said over and over again, a prudent man making his prudent penetration, greasing his way into her body with compliments. She didn't believe his bogus rap for a minute!

"I don't want to mess up, I want to make this good for you, and I'm afraid I won't make this good for you," he said, filling her, one excruciatingly slow inch at a time. "Am I too high?"

Too high?

The man was too everything. Too thick. Too long. Too hard. Too heavy. Much too sweet and serious. Was he for real?

“I know I’m hurting you, darling.”

She added too perceptive to her list of grievances against him. As to *darling* -- where’d that come from? Was there another femme in the room? Must be, ‘cause fuck, that old-fashioned endearment didn’t suit her.

Moved anyway, she bit her lip against the sheer romance of that *darling*. “No, you’re not hurting me.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, Blue,” he whispered. “I won’t move until you get used to it.”

That could take a while. She was stretched to the max, and as far as she could tell, he wasn’t all the way in yet.

“I’m not a bride on her wedding night here, Lou. Move already!”

The pressure couldn’t get any worse. Hell! Maybe her tight muscles would even loosen if he got this show on the road.

Taking the hint, Lou began to rock, gently rock, slowly rock, carefully rock, and the horrible pressure inside her gradually receded.

He did some stroking. Nothing too strenuous, and still almost too much. He was larger than Jeremy. And just like Lou, she hadn’t had sex in a year...

He kept to an easy tempo. Not what she’d had in mind, but in the end, she was grateful for his restraint. Rustier than she realized, she never would have walked again had he pushed and drove and *THRUST*, like she’d wanted him to do initially.

Lou had realized her delicacy, damn him! Lou had known her body wasn’t prepared for his amazing proportions. She was wet as she could get, he’d done all the right things, and her body had still protested the invasion. Understanding he could hurt her, he’d held back, put her needs ahead of his own. How many men would have done the same?

Though the gentleness had to cost him, had to tax even his tremendous control, Lou lightly caressed her face. Making the extra effort, he kissed her bull's-eye on the lips, as her climax quickly -- and thankfully -- approached.

Despite the first time awkwardness, despite his formidable size, despite everything, she catapulted toward orgasm, the achievement in the face of pain speaking not so much for Lou's fucking by-the-numbers skill, but to his nearly superhuman kindness.

She came first. A man of the old school, naturally, Lou waited before following. But while her pleasure rang loud and brash, a free-for-all bellow that bounced off the hotel walls, he muffled the sounds of his own release.

And that just *so* pissed her off.

Afterwards, shattered -- and resentful over being shattered -- Blue flopped inelegantly onto her belly, face down on the nearest pillow.

"I'm sorry," Lou said.

At the apology, she turned to her considerate lover. "Sorry? What for?"

Did Lou realize she secretly nursed a grudge about his market share on control? Was he that intuitive?

She certainly hoped not. A woman liked to keep some things to herself!

"I'm sorry, Blue, for letting that get out of hand."

Out of hand? That mild joining was his idea of out of hand?

"We never should've done this tonight, Blue. We should have taken our time, gotten to know one another first. Sex is too special to rush. I know you're leaving town, but we could have done the e-mail route. And then, sometime later, in the future, at a mutually convenient time, maybe then we could have made love."

In the dark, her mouth flapped open, then snapped shut. The guy next to her in bed needed to learn how to enjoy himself, live in the moment. Life was short. Didn't he understand? No one had a guaranteed right to a future! They had only the right here and

now! The only guarantee in life was the lack of guarantees in life. That truth had been impressed upon her in the saddest of ways. Gillian's passing had taught her that waiting until tomorrow just wasn't wise.

Digging deep, she pasted a grin on her face -- just in case Lou could read her expression in the dark as she looked over at him. "Lighten up, would ya! I'll still respect you when the sun comes up, especially if you get me off again."

So, she nursed a lingering resentment over his high-handed control, and so, she felt some negligible aches in her female parts, she was not about to forgo another splendid orgasm. Though tightly wound, Lou had all the makings of an outstanding lover.

That is, if he dropped the gentleness, the sweetness, the restraint, and went wild for her, lost control because of her, forgot everything else but her.

Flipping over onto her back, she pressed his big hand into her pussy. "I'm all about immediate gratification here. What say we go another round?"

Chapter Twelve

While Lou watched, entranced, Blue artlessly swung an endlessly long and infinitely graceful leg over him, until she had posed herself above him in the superior position. Though her bouncing breasts made his mouth water and the opening between her thighs made him drool, two hands at her waist, Lou picked her up and set her back down on the bed. “Not like that, darling.”

She stuck her pointed chin out at him. “Then how?”

For her sake, he had to be strict. “You know how.”

Cursing him out under her breath, she went to all fours. “Arrogant ass.”

“Speaking of which --” He smoothed his palm over the silky flesh of her rump. “-- you’ve got a nice one back here.”

She did, too. Her bottom, like all the rest of her, was perfect.

Unable to help himself, he got a little frisky and began loving her with his mouth. The outside of her buttocks first, butterfly kisses placed on that petal soft skin, followed by some naughtier tonguing into the crevice.

Then, he lost it. Got carried away. Again. Lust dimming his perspective and reason, he opened her up in back and licked his way inside, thrusting his tongue toward the dainty puckered dimple, spearing the seductive opening with the tip.

“Oh, yes, Lou, yes. Lube. Top draw. Beside the bed. Hurry. Hurry. Hurry!”

Smiling at her single-minded enthusiasm, he reached for the generic hotel nightstand, opened the drawer, felt his way around inside.

Damn! The drawer was so crowded with gadgets he couldn't find the lube.

His better than average night vision advised him the contents of the drawer included everything but a blow-up dolly. Sure, he was a poster boy for sexual discretion, but he worked in the adult entertainment industry. He knew his way around sex toys. But some stuff inside that drawer even he didn't recognize.

What was going on with Blue?

He could deal with randy sex. Hell, with his hard-on, he could go all night, non-stop. Even in a video arcade, she wouldn't find a more reliable joystick. He'd do all sorts of fun combos for her...if fun was what this was all about.

Even with Blue's body humming in front of him, Lou wasn't convinced this was about fun. Or even about sex. His gut told him, Blue's free and easy partying routine was just that -- a routine. An act, as fake as a faux burger. Behind her big talk, sunny smile, and truckload of fun toys, lurked a sad story.

Closing the drawer, he opened the tube of lube, smeared his middle finger, and saw to his lady's needs.

Her vagina felt swollen. “How's that feel?”

“Cool and refreshing, like a fuckin' mountain spring. And you've got the wrong erogenous zone, fella. I thought we were doing the deal?”

Why was she so damned hot for anal?

Trying not to laugh at her disgruntlement, he said, “Good! Cool and refreshing is what I’m going for. Not so sure about the mountain spring part, but I’ll take your word for it. And we are NOT doing anal, so quit asking.”

After replacing the top, he set the tube of lube carefully aside. “May I?”

Only when she said, “Yes, fuck you,” did he ease his way back into Blue.

His sweet-talking lady came on the first shallow stroke.

* * * * *

Much later, wide-awake in the hotel room, Lou acknowledged wanting to stay, while knowing he had to leave.

Blue hadn’t asked him to go, and what with Pete away at college, he had no need to hurry back to his lonely house, but spending the night with Blue, with the way things stood between them, just didn’t feel right.

Putting off his leaving, he inhaled Blue.

Shampooed hair. Soap-fresh skin. The musky scent of sex.

He also listened to her sleep.

Moans. Groans. A clutch in her ragged breathing that sounded suspiciously like a sob.

Not pleasant sounds. Sounds hard to hear.

He tried comforting her with his body, staying close while trying not to disturb her, hoping shared body heat would soothe her tight muscles.

Nothing helped her fretful stirrings. The mattress springs twanged in complaint as she tossed and turned. Why the restless sleep in a seemingly laid-back woman like Blue?

No clue.

The reason behind her fitful slumber was only one of the many details he had yet to fill in. Apart from her privileged background, he knew very little about Blue. What made her tick?

Once again, he had not a clue.

She didn't know everything about him, either --

Correction. He hadn't *allowed* her to know everything about him.

Twice, he'd had mind-blowing sex with a woman who would despise him for his career choice. Owning up to his occupation now would only make the situation worse. No matter what he said, she'd think he had duped her, made a fool of her...taken advantage of her.

He'd arrived at the hotel with honorable intentions. With a flamingo tailing him, he'd let himself into her room with the key she'd passed to him at GoCA, prepared to tell all. Except, the pink bird had flown away when he found Blue getting into bed. Rather than reveal the truth about his profession, he'd made love to her instead.

Blue was The One for him. And with only a brief time to prove it, he continued the deception.

Hotel curtains never closed tight enough. Through a crack in the drawn drapes, a narrow band of moonlight seeped into the room. By that faint golden glow, he memorized what made Blue beautiful and unique, beautifully and uniquely Blue. There wasn't another woman like her on the planet, and he wanted to celebrate her rareness, enjoy everything that made her so special.

Tonight, while they made love, he'd missed out on gazing into Blue's eyes. He hadn't felt her breasts against his chest, her belly against his belly, the cradle of her loins against the protrusion of his. Taking her from the rear had felt so cold. So anonymous. But someone had to show some common sense. Someone had to take this seriously, make sure a certain sexy pervert didn't get herself hurt.

He was that someone.

Serious wasn't glamorous. Sensible was downright boring. But with love came responsibility. He accepted that responsibility because a man paid dues for the privilege of making love to a woman.

“You always wake up like that?” his woman grumbled over her shoulder.

He looked down at himself.

Uh-oh.

Trying not to trip over his hard-on, Lou scrambled to rise.

She reached for him. “Hey, hold on there. Answer the question.”

“What question?” No need to avoid meeting her eyes. Blue wasn’t looking at his face. Blue was looking a whole lot lower.

“You know what question, Lou.”

Showdown time. “Yeah, I always wake up with an erection. But I wasn’t asleep.”

“So it was like that...?”

“The whole time, yeah.”

She checked the bedside clock. “Man! What are you on?”

You. Just you. Only you.

He sighed. “I can keep it up for as long as I’m interested. As you can see, I’m plenty interested.”

“Well, hell, what’s a girl to do?” She dropped him to the mat.

Grabbing onto both his shoulders, she hoisted herself up into the saddle, bottom up in the air like a jockey at the Kentucky Derby, and straddled him. Immobilized, imprisoned, by her thighs, by his own inability to leave, he looked up at her in despair. “Careful, Blue! That’s a spike, not a thumbtack, you’re about to sit on.” Two hands bracketing her waist, he licked a raspberry-tipped breast.

In his mouth, the formerly soft nipple hardened to an excited point.

A flush heated Blue’s skin. Her bottom wiggled. “Mmm. Oh, yes. Like that.” With a roll of boyish hips, she lowered herself until her hot-pink sex lips hovered above his eager dick. Clearly, she was going for a quick and hurtful impaling.

Not on his watch!

He restrained her, held her back, so she couldn't plop down on top of him, thereby thrilling him and causing herself untold agony.

Sure, she was moist, but he needed her wet.

He hoisted her high over his face and mouthed her pubic lips. While she squirmed, he lapped her, long and lazy licks at the opening to her body, before sinking his tongue into her vagina.

"You taste good, Blue," he said, a little later, resting his jaw against her mons. "And you're about to come. You want me in or out when it happens?"

"In, but --"

"Fine. But you're only getting half." There, he'd set the limit. Again.

"But Looooou --"

"Easy, Blue," he ordered and loosened up his hold on her so she'd have some room to negotiate the descent. "And open your legs up so it won't be so tight."

She dripped for him, hotly creamed for him. But her flesh was also inflamed because of him. His dick had made her passage tender, and they needed to take care --

No. *He* needed to take care. Of her. Blue was his responsibility.

Lou made a decision. "You get ten minutes."

"And ten inches?" she negotiated.

He snapped on a condom. "You're already sore. I'll give you half."

"Pleassssse --"

"Five inches and five minutes. That's my last offer, Blue. Take it or leave it. And don't try to cheat. I'll have my eye on the clock the whole time."

“Jeez, Lou,” she gasped, lowering herself onto his dick, not as slowly, not as cautiously, as he would have liked. “Eye on the clock, huh? Don’t let passion sweep you away, or anything.”

For her sake, he wasn’t about to let that happen.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, Blue shivered and began to towel off briskly.

Normally, she started each day with a hot shower. Today, too. But halfway through her sudsy ritual, she lowered the temperature from boiling to cold. After the steamy sex of the night before, she needed the frigid water to lower her spiking fever.

Last night, after three climaxes, she'd still pleaded for another. Even a quickie.

Lou had flatly refused.

In that clipped, aloof, militaristic voice of his, he said, "Later."

The nerve! Lou assumed an awful lot. Like he'd get a later. Who said anything about a later? She'd never said he'd get a later with her.

Blue took a swipe at the fogged-up mirror in the hotel bathroom. Would she go to bed with him again?

Only one certainty, she decided, staring at her steam-obscured reflection. She'd bitten off more than she could chew of Lou. And she hadn't even gone down on him!

She'd invited him to participate in a fun-filled weekend, a good time, some sexual adventuring, lots of lower primate fucking --

If ever a man was *so* not a barrel of monkeys, that man was Lou.

He wasn't even one monkey. He wasn't even the barrel. A barrel, she could've tipped over and pushed.

No one pushed Lou Franco. The obstinate man refused to budge.

And still, even with his arrogance, even without wild monkey sex, he took the top of her head off. His gentle kisses drove her crazy. She could easily come from his kisses.

Blue smiled into the glass. A generous lover, he took her to paradise, slow and easy, the intensity gradually escalating to a careful crescendo --

If he ever let go, they'd have some serious vine swinging going on.

To take the monkey analogy one step further, she wanted Lou to lose his grip on the vine and fly through the air with her, his banana in her mouth. To put it in human terms, she wanted Lou to lose his manners, forget about neatly folding his clothes, neglect screwing the top back on a tube of lube, dispense with his tie and cufflinks, and get down with his personal Tarzan.

But nooooo. When he'd left her hotel room at three that morning, he looked as neat as a pin, every hair in place, not one smudge on his immaculate white shirt, not a rumple on his gray suit trousers. Somberly attired, he could have gone directly from shagging her to a wake. She, on the other hand, sprawled atop a mountain of crushed bedding, her hair stringy and knotted, her body covered in a slick of sweat.

No semen, though. Careful Lou had zealously guarded her with a condom.

The girl in the foggy mirror shook her head in irritation. For sure, the guy was no prototype for spontaneity.

Taps at the hotel door. One-two-three.

Lou?

Had he decided he couldn't stay away, couldn't keep his cool hands off her?

Most likely, he'd forgotten something. Like the shine on his imported leather loafers --

Just as she was, she raced for the threshold. What did she have to hide?

Everything emotionally, she answered, nothing physically.

She'd feel less naked emotionally if she was decently covered.

After going through all the time-consuming bother of tucking herself into her new lace robe, sash tied at the waist, she tripped over her own two feet in her haste to yank open the door.

Not Lou.

Jason Andrews, male slut extraordinaire and all-around handsome devil, stood in the hallway. With his glib tongue and long blond hair, he had charmed his way into every female artist's panties in their collaborative.

Except hers. And not because she wore boxers.

She felt not the least inclination to boink Jas.

Annoyed beyond belief at Jason for not being Lou, she glared at her fellow artist.

A glare he missed because, elbow leaning against the frame, Jason's glance never met her eyes. "Looks like you were expecting me, babe."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're wet. Gotta be for me."

"You wish." She smirked.

For her own gratification. Jas had yet to look past her pussy.

The robe was *lace*. *Eyelet* lace. A very open, spider-webby pattern. He could see everything.

"Catch you in the shower, then?" he said, stating the obvious as he sidled into her room.

She made no attempt to bar his entrance. Jas was a leech and a flake, but hardly dangerous. Besides, the stud knew she had zero tolerance for his hanky-panky.

He also knew she could take him, one hand tied behind her back. “Nope. I had just finished the shower before your unwelcome arrival.”

He sighed theatrically, brushed back his gorgeous mane of thick hair. “Would that I knew your habits! I might’ve joined you and washed your back. Such a long back it is, too. However do you reach?”

“I manage.” She closed the door after him. “What can I do for you, Jas?”

“Oodles --”

She rolled her eyes. “Get to the point, Jas.”

His mouth lifted at the corners. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“No, but I can blame you for boring me. And you do.”

“All right! All right! I’m here to beg a favor. I need a tall, narrow-hipped, small-breasted, tomboyish female model for my Roman mythology panel. Natch, I thought of you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, really! You’d make one ballsy Diana.”

“Me, a vegetarian of questionable virtue and nurturing aptitude, model for the quintessential virgin goddess of hunting and childbirth --?”

“Your inappropriateness will be our little secret.” He grinned winningly. “And you do owe me, Blue.”

She did. Seven inches worth.

He’d made an excellent model, too, standing limply patient -- until she’d greased him up. Then, he’d just about spewed into her palms --

Jas was a premature ejaculator if ever she’d held one. “I suppose, you’ll insist upon my wearing a tiny toga?”

“Nope.” He wiggled his brows.

“A nude-toned body suit, then?”

“Plebian! A goddess in vulgar spandex? I think not. I must have authenticity! This is a nude modeling gig.”

“Fine. All right. I agree.”

He actually rubbed his hands together. “Stupendous! Time and place?”

“My work studio at GoCA, seven o’clock sharp. Keep me waiting, and I’m out the door.”

All offended male, he puffed out his chest. “I never keep a woman waiting.”

She just bet. A woman would have to go off at first stroke to keep up with Jas.

“Not only will I be on time, I’ll be on my best behavior.” He winked. “That is, until you tell me to play Orion to your Diana.”

Conceited pig! Good thing his enormous talent offset his enormously inflated ego. And good thing, too, she never confused the artist with his art. “Lay a finger on me, and I’ll substitute a plaster cast of a two-inch cocktail wiener for you in the exhibit.”

He gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.”

Realizing he wasn’t getting any action from her, Jas headed for the door.

At the threshold, he turned back. “Blue, I know what you did for Gill in his final months. How you took care of his every need. He had no family, and at the end, his lovers were nowhere to be found. In those last moments, only you held his hand. I’ve always admired what you two had together. Even without the sex, I was jealous.”

Hot tears stung her eyes. “Stop, Jas. Please?”

“He loved you, Blue. Maybe not the way you deserved to be loved, but Gill did love you. You’re one nurturing lady, which is why I want you for my Diana.”

She waited until the hotel room door closed before doubling over.

Stumbling to the rumpled bed, she fell facedown on the pillows and let the soaking tears fall.

* * * * *

Past six and going on dark.

Blue finally dragged her tear-dehydrated body off the bed and pulled on a pair of clean men's trousers and a tailored man's shirt.

She nixed the boxers.

And not because Lou didn't like them, either. Hell, his preference had nothing to do with her leaving the boxers in the hotel, or with anything else. The man had fucked her, but he didn't fucking own her. The less she wore, the less she had to remove for her modeling assignment for Jas -- that was all going without the boxers signified.

Drained from her most recent torrent of tears, Blue left the hotel and headed for Sprout's, dragging her ass. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten a full meal, and her stomach had started to protest. Could be her depression would lift with a full belly.

She wolfed down an enormous salad at the restaurant, and then she set off for GoCA. Now that she'd filled her belly, she felt better. Or, at least, better able to cope with Jas. En route to her workspace, chin down, counting the cracks in the sidewalk, generally minding her own business, she very nearly plowed into Lou --

On his way into the strip club they'd argued over the night they'd met.

After steadying her, he bent slightly, as if to give her a kiss.

Blue pulled back, nearly falling in her urgency to escape his lying lips. "You're going in th-there? Into...into The Pink Flamingo? After you and I --" She shook her head, tried to straighten out the confusion. "After you and I slept together, you're getting...*a lap dance?*"

Unable to breathe, unable to speak, his betrayal smothering her, she could only stare at him. After welcoming him into the most private part of herself, he was paying to watch other women take off their clothes?

“It’s not what you think, Blue.”

He didn’t know what she thought! Good thing, too, because the hurt, the devastation, the humiliation of having a man -- no, *this* man -- play her, had her *thinking* about rolling up into a ball next to the street curb.

No way, was she letting the pain show.

Salvaging what remained of her pride, her lips curled in a sneer. “You deny you were on your way inside?”

“No, I don’t deny it. But I’m not here for the entertainment.”

“Don’t tell me,” she said sarcastically. “You’re the CPA who does the books, right?”

“I work here, all right. But not as the accountant. I manage The Pink Flamingo.”

Which was worse? Watching the entertainment or providing it?

Providing it! By far.

Revulsion filled her. The man was nothing but a pimp in a nice suit!

Just about wrecked, she pulled it together. She would *not* show this lying bastard, this sexist opportunist who made his money off the degradation of downtrodden women, how his deception had made her question her judgment. “You might have told me, Lou. We had a heated argument over this strip club in this very same spot.”

“If I had told you, would you have listened? Or would you have condemned my occupation without hearing me out?”

At his continued coolness, her temper ignited and flared. “Oh, don’t you turn this back on me! You lied!”

“You never asked what I did for a living.”

“Hair splitting!”

“Maybe so. Maybe I’m guilty of a lie of omission, but you never once asked about my job. You never wanted to know anything about me, other than if I was into S&M.” He fixed his already straight tie. “Listen, I didn’t tell you because I knew you would react just like this. You made it pretty damn clear what you thought of The Pink Flamingo and its owner and operator.”

“I suppose you don’t exploit your female employees?”

“Never have, never will.”

She laughed. “Do I look naïve to you? Beautiful women surround you every night at work. Those women take off their clothes for a living. Their paycheck depends on pleasing you. And you expect me to believe you’re not getting pussy on the side, any time you want it?”

“You have a very low opinion of your sex, Blue.”

“I totally respect the sisterhood!”

“Then why the blanket denigration? Why attack the moral values of a whole group of women based solely on how they earn a paycheck?”

“This is about you,” she said heatedly, getting flustered. “Not about these unfortunate women. You lied about where you work -- who’s to say you didn’t lie about your sexual history as well? You led me to believe you don’t jump from bed to bed. And like a fool, I believed you!”

“You can still believe me. I don’t sleep around. I don’t hit on my employees. That’s called sexual harassment. And a low stunt to boot. The ladies who work for me are some of the most decent human beings I’ve ever known. They work nights so they can stay home with their kids during the day, or because they’re doing something else, like going to school. And for the last time, they are not strippers -- they’re exotic dancers. Seraphina Ruiz, the owner’s wife, the lady in labor you met at GoCA, used to work at The Pink Flamingo.”

“As a stripper?” she bellowed.

“No, as a singer. And she’s a former missionary. Her nose isn’t stuck up in the air like yours is about the place I manage.”

“My nose is not stuck up in the air! I’m merely advocating for women’s rights! Stripping demeans women.”

“It’s narrow-minded attitudes like yours that demean the ladies who work for me, not anything they do at The Pink Flamingo. I run a respectable place.” He raked both hands through his hair. “Look, Blue, I manage a club that just happens to employ gorgeous women. Why apologize for that? Adult entertainment is a business like any other. I’ve never dated any of the exotic dancers. I’ve never even laid a hand on any of them --”

“Yeah, right.”

“I haven’t!” His tone kicked up a notch. “I don’t get this! You’ve had your hands all over the privates of your male models. And did I say anything? Hell, no! I give you credit for conducting yourself professionally, which is a hundred percent more than you’re willing to give me. I take my work every bit as seriously as you.”

This, she believed. Lou took everything seriously. Too seriously. Would a serious man like Lou put his job in jeopardy by fooling around with the staff?

She fidgeted, checked her watch, refused to give him the benefit of the doubt. She hurt, dammit! And that was just so unfair. This weekend was supposed to be about fun, about having a few laughs and great sex. How dare Lou Franco turn this into something else, when she wasn’t ready for something else!

She couldn’t deal with all this heavy crap, all this self questioning. Not right now! Right now, she needed superficial. Yeah, she liked Lou. She liked him a lot, more than she wanted to like him. But this, all of this, cut too close to the bone.

In a small, scared voice, she said, “Excuse me. I’m meeting someone in my studio in a few minutes, and I can’t arrive late.” She turned swiftly to go.

“We’ve got to talk,” Lou yelled after her. “When can I see you again?”

She didn’t answer. Head down, she hurried toward GoCA.

Fun-loving Jason waited for her there. He never took anything seriously. If there was ever a man out for a good time, it was Jas.

And a good time was all she could handle right now.

Chapter Fourteen

This time, always-late-Jas had already arrived and flicked on the lights inside her studio. Charcoals and sketchpad leaned against his easel, high stool installed behind.

The artist turned to the door as she entered. “Blue, I hope you don’t mind my making myself at home?”

“No, not at all. Setting up beforehand saves time.” She gazed at the heap of black satin pillows strewn on the floor. “I gather you’d like me to assume a reclining pose?”

“Yes. Diana at rest, her bow and arrow off to the side. Is that all right?”

“Fine. No problem.”

The studio had no changing room, but the workspace did come with a privacy curtain installed off to one corner, where models could change out of their street clothes into costume. Or, if a life model, take off street clothes and throw on a sheet or a robe before revealing all to the artist.

More important things on her mind than modesty, she stripped off her shirt where she stood.

She pointed to the gold ring piercing her nipple. “Out or in?”

Jason flipped open his large drawing pad. “In. This is a modern interpretation of the Roman Myth, after all. The piercing will lend the work a contemporary feel. Diana was no wimp. Neither are you, Blue.”

He offered up a cheeky grin, a player’s grin, a superficial and flirtatious grin that meant nothing. “Not only do you make one saucy goddess, you’d make a myth believer out of any man.”

Jason and his male nonsense! But bless the charmer for putting forth an effort to make her laugh.

A shame the effort was wasted on her.

Not even a stand-up comic could humor her out of her present funk. She had descended into a numbing bleakness, a tired apathy, a black hole of despair. Nothing seemed funny to her, especially not herself.

Was it all myth, then? Soul mates, spiritual attraction...happily-ever-after love...did the male/female thing boil down to a cheap pickup line?

She had cared for Lou. They had only just met, but she thought she might have even fallen for him, just a little, which would explain, she supposed, why his deceit had gotten under her defensive armor, under her skin, too. Already hurting from Gill, now she had a fresh wound to nurse. How much more bruising could her heart take?

Blue raised her foot onto the top of a chair. She didn’t need this shit from Lou! This weekend was about keeping a promise, about sexual experimentation and exploration, not about pining away for a man who had lied to her from the first moment. She didn’t need a guy who didn’t know how to have a good time, who rarely cracked a smile, at least not in her company, whose whole basic philosophy of life differed from her own.

Fuck him!

She bent to unlace one sturdy work boot, then the other. As she unrolled her thick hiking socks and discarded them, from out of the corner of her eye, she noted the artist ogling her.

So what, his behavior was unprofessional. Big fucking deal. No secret, Jas liked women. No secret, he openly practiced screwing around. He never pretended he was anything but a slut. Jason slept with all his female models. Why ruin his track record now?

Sex with Jason! What a giggle! Now that *would* make her laugh.

After dropping her trousers, she faced Jas as naked as the day she was born. “Where would you like me?”

“Sitting on my face,” was his prompt, good-natured reply, his gaze slowly sinking to her pussy.

She sighed. What Jason lacked in subtlety, he made up for with a lack of a complication. Intense about his art, shallow about everything else, Jason would provide her with a light-hearted romp, exactly what she’d had planned for this weekend before meeting a serious someone else.

A tragedy, Lou still held her interest, even after disappointing her.

And she knew why. Although Lou had deceived her about his job, his emotions had been sincere. The genuineness of his feelings for his son had touched her.

Though tenderhearted, the guy wasn’t a pushover. His dispensing with those two river rats on the pier had proven his mettle. He had certainly dominated her!

She’d like it.

A feminist, through and through, yet she’d liked Lou holding the upper hand on the sexual reins.

Why? Why had she let him take charge?

Because her submission to domination had been one-man specific -- that had to be the underlying reason. She never would have taken that authoritative bullshit from any other guy.

Jason held up a bottle. "How about a little wine first?"

"Sure." She never drank, but what the hell and why the hell not? Maybe a bit of the grape would dull the insistent ache inside her.

One glass led to another. A little wine led to a lot of wine. Soon, the inexpensive vintage had taken the edge off her hurt. When she went to the pillows and scooted her butt onto the black satin softness, she felt no pain at all.

She reclined, her woozy head propped on an elbow. Diana, the slightly tipsy Huntress, looking for fresh meat. "Let's get started, Jas. Is this how you'd like me to pose?"

With a drunken giggle, she splayed her thighs wide.

* * * * *

The Flamingo's burlesque review rehearsed up on stage, the dancers strutting their stuff to the beat of the drum, their high heels kicking in unison, just like a chorus line from the Ziegfeld Follies. Lou tried to concentrate on the routine, but the steps, the fancy footwork...the choreography...sailed right over his head.

Never before had he let outside concerns interfere with his ability to do his job.

Until now.

Now, Blue commandeered his every thought.

Of all the discovery scenarios Lou could've imagined, Blue catching him on the way into The Pink Flamingo featured as the worst. After getting to know one another, he had hoped to explain rationally how managing a strip club was not synonymous with being a scumbag procurer. By then, he'd reasoned, she would have developed some trust in him -- in them -- enough to listen.

She hadn't listened to anything he'd said today.

He didn't blame her for thinking he was a sleazy liar, out cruising for whatever he could get. Since he'd given her no place else to go, where else would she have jumped to, if not the wrong assumption?

Blue was The One, but too afraid she'd think he was off his rocker...or that she'd turn tail and run...he hadn't told her so.

He'd messed up.

And acting ashamed, like he had something to hide, had only made him look guiltier. He hadn't been up front with Blue, and now he was paying the price.

But how big a price did he have to pay for one dumb mistake?

Fear of losing her had tripped him up. He hadn't deliberately set out to trick her! That she thought otherwise was the crux of the problem. Blue figured, to have sex with her, he'd kept his mouth closed about where he worked. No use denying that some of his reluctance in telling her the truth stemmed from wanting sex --

But the majority came from wanting Blue.

Hindsight told him he should have done things differently. Withholding information was dead wrong, no matter what. But even the dead wrong deserved a second chance. Even guys who messed up big should get an opportunity to straighten things out.

Bottom line, Lou couldn't just let Blue walk into his life and walk right back out again without trying everything in his power to stop her. Anything she wanted, he'd do, just so long as she didn't turn away from him.

He had to find Blue. Had to state his case. He had to leave right *now!*

Lou had kicked aside his chair in the audience and was walking toward the exit when Tomas Ruiz entered the club and handed him a cigar.

The blue cellophane gave the news away.

Lou thumped the new daddy on the back. “A son! Congratulations! How’s the mommy doing?”

“Better than me. I nearly decked the attending physicians for not pressing some magical button to speed up Sera’s labor. Who’d think seven pounds of humanity would take so damn long getting out?” Tomas shook his head. “I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

“What does Seraphina have to say on the subject?”

“She reminded me of something I once told her.”

“Which was --?”

Tomas hung his head. “Can’t say.”

“I see.”

Despite her diminutive stature and gentle demeanor, the former missionary was one strong-willed and capable lady. Sera would get whatever she wanted from her doting husband. If she wanted twelve kids, his buddy would comply with a smile on his kisser.

“You’re one lucky man, Tomas Ruiz. Give your growing family my fond regards,” Lou called back over his shoulder as he hurried through the club’s pink door.

Growing up, Pete seldom came down with anything more serious than the sniffles, but for emergencies, Lou had kept a standby babysitter on retainer. Combined with a work ethic inherited from his parents, and Lou never missed work. Not as a cop, not as a detective, not as a manager of a strip club.

He was missing work that night.

Lou raced to GoCA’s back entrance, where, no questions asked, the uniformed guard passed him right on through.

Blue worked alone in a deserted building at night. What if he’d been a psycho ex-lover? Or an estranged husband with a restraining order out against him? Or just some pain-in-the butt masher Blue didn’t want to see?

Letting a strange man into GoCA without first ID'ing him amounted to lax security, and there was no excuse for lax security, which meant some higher ups weren't doing their jobs.

Tomorrow, bright and early, he'd pay a visit to the head museum cop and raise holy heck, Lou decided, entering the main gallery on the first floor. Veering sharply to the right, he proceeded through an out of the way utility door he'd stumbled across the night of Blue's opening gala. He ambled down the hall, and turned the knob to Blue's unlocked studio.

A sound coming from the interior raised hackles at the back of his neck. Without announcing his presence, Lou peered through the now-cracked door.

A tall, blond, loose-limbed male stood in the middle of the studio. Dressed in rumpled jeans and undone shirt, he smiled real lazy-like at something deeper in the room.

Lou figured him for one of Blue's "specimens." He also figured any man about to dip his wick in plaster for a penis cast was entitled to a bemused expression.

That was what he figured before spying Blue, lying naked across a heap of glossy black pillows on the floor. Then the urge to knock the teeth out of that fella's bemused expression got Lou by the balls.

Heart pounding, eyes squinting, sweat breaking out on his forehead, Lou gritted his teeth as the guy squatted down next to Blue.

Don't you touch her, you cock-sucking fuck!

But the cock-sucking fuck did touch Blue. His hands swept all over her.

Bile backwashed into Lou's mouth and gagged him. But like a passerby at a car wreck, he couldn't turn his eyes away.

Mumbled voices...laughter...

Blue was letting the fuck touch her legs.

That did it!

Lou was storming the room. He was pulling the fuck off his woman. He was smashing his fist through the good-looking fuck's face. Then, he was setting down the law to a certain shaggy-haired artist!

And if he did, he'd lose Blue forever.

Cool. Stay cool. He had to keep his head. Blue was a free agent. He couldn't pull some machismo territorial act on her. He couldn't go even moderately ballistic. She'd agreed to adventure, not to exclusivity.

Opening the door the rest of the way, Lou entered the studio and crossed the floor to Blue.

She craned her lovely long throat up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Searching for you."

"Well, as you can see, I'm rather busy at the moment."

"I don't mind waiting."

Why was she doing this? Why wouldn't she give him -- *them* -- a chance?

"Suit yourself." She giggled. "Oh, dear! Where are my party manners? Let me introduce you." She waved a none-too-steady hand between the fuck and him. "Orion, this is Lou. Lou, Orion. And I, of course," she slurred, "am Diana, the Huntress."

Christ! Blue was stinking drunk.

"In the Roman myth, Diana put an arrow through Orion," Lou offered, noncommittally. "At least, that's the way the story goes. Personally, I've always felt somebody else did the deed." He narrowed his eyes at the fuck.

The cocksucker gave him a wink. "May the best man win the goddess."

Lou had every intention of winning, because not winning meant losing Blue.

He was not losing Blue.

The fuck didn't worry him. A strong woman like Blue would make mincemeat out of that good-looking dildo. What worried Lou was losing Blue to that self-destructive streak inside her. He'd do everything to ensure that didn't happen. But he had to play things carefully. Not mess up again. And that meant stowing his temper. That meant, keeping everything nice and low-key. Civilized. He would not rip the fuck limb from limb, would not take Blue over his knee and give her the spanking she deserved. More than ever, he needed to stay in control.

Lou straightened his cufflinks. "Who's up for a threesome?"

Chapter Fifteen

While Blue watched in inebriated amazement, Lou removed his suit jacket, folded the dark material neatly, and then hung the coat over the back of a chair.

A careful guy about to embark on a polite, politically-correct orgy.

Geez, whatever happened to the salty sweat and sprayed semen?

Looked like no one would need to duck the fallout from wild monkey sex here. This bloodless event promised to be hermetically sealed.

With her head spinning from the wine, Blue just couldn't come up with a reason, any reason whatsoever, why a conservative, straight-up dude like Lou would suggest a ménage, something so completely out of character.

Lou smiled cordially. "So, what d'ya say? Threeway, anyone?"

Jas piped up. "I'm in."

"Glad you two fellas are so fuckin' amenable," she grouched spitefully. "What? Are we playing tennis, everyone taking turns? Hey, don't look now, but I've got all the balls." She guffawed hysterically at her own joke.

Lou straightened his tie, said with absolutely no show of emotion, "I'll do whatever you want me to do, Blue, tennis included."

Heady, how he lusted after her.

“Sure. A threesome is fine.” She sipped from her glass of wine.

Why not have group sex? The threesome wouldn’t mean anything, and a quest for meaningless had inspired this weekend.

Blue stopped sipping the wine and gulped the wine.

Lou crouched next to her on the pillows. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough to drink for one night?”

“Nope, not by a long shot.”

Lou removed the long-stemmed plastic glass from her hand anyway. In transit, some of the wine spilled, a burgundy trail rolling down the slope of her breast, the red rivulet transforming her belly into a twenty-four-proof lake.

“Hey, no fair, Lou!” she cried. “Give that wine back. I haven’t emptied the bottle, and 2006 was a very good year.” She belched the remnants of overindulgence onto her tongue, the aftertaste not nearly as bitter as Lou’s treachery. “Would you care for a glass?”

“I don’t drink.”

The guy worked a bar in a strip club, and he didn’t drink.

She pointed a finger at him. “Liar. You’re nothing but a fuckin’ liar.”

“I don’t lie, Blue.”

“You lied to me about what you do for a living. I can’t believe a thing you say.”

He had probably lied about his lack of a sex life, too. What guy goes from celibate to a threesome in the space of one weekend? Lou was most likely involved in all kinds of weird activities.

Jas, never one for confrontation, started getting restless feet. “You two obviously have some history. I don’t want to get in the middle here.”

Like a hussy, Blue drew a finger around her pussy lips. “Don’t worry, Jas. I’m the one who gets that position.” She glanced over to the lying club owner. “You want me in the middle. Right, Lou?”

Lou didn’t even blink. “Whatever you say, darling.”

At the old-fashioned endearment, the artist in attendance angled his jaw to the door.

Poor, superficial, Jas! First sign of anything heavy going down, and he looked ready to bolt. Meanwhile, serious Lou had both feet glued to the studio floor. Words like *darling* fell from his lips without sounding corny. Solid and dependable Lou, nothing ruffled him, nothing made him run.

He’d run from her. She’d make him run from her careless approach to life.

Neat and tidy Lou didn’t do careless. An emotionally cluttered, malcontent nomad like her would drive him crazy. For God’s sake! She lived out of a backpack. Didn’t even own a suitcase. If anyone asked, she gave her residence as “Forwarding.”

With a wine-stained finger, Blue stroked down into her pussy. Deep down into her pussy. She hadn’t always had a vagabond-itis. For six years, she’d made a happy home for Gill and herself. She’d made sure her live-in non-lover sat down to three square meals a day. And if he gave her a hard time, she gave him a hard time right back. After all, someone had to remind him to eat. Like many creative geniuses, caught up in his work, Gill had often forgotten to take care of himself.

Blue arched her throat, her thumb working her clit. Gill and she should’ve gotten married. She could’ve taken better care of him then. He would have had to listen to a wife. But more than a friend, way less than a Significant Other, she and Gill had no legal bonds.

Why hadn’t he let her take better care of him? Why hadn’t he married her? Why? Why? Why?

So, they wouldn’t have had sex. Big fucking deal! Or, Gill could have made the extra effort and tried for bi --

But Gill had never tried to be anything but what he was. Gay. Gay. Gay! Happily gay!

What about her? Where had his fuckin' happy sexual orientation left her?

Nowhere but unhappy!

After Gill died, she gave up the apartment they shared and drifted aimlessly, from one artist friend's sofa to another artist friend's floor, from motel to hotel. If not for her Key West studio, she'd have had no return address for her mail...

Blue tossed her head, and the uneven strands of her hair fell into her eyes. "Mmm." She licked her lips. "Mmm. Better hurry up and make up your minds, gents. As you can see, I've started without you. Still want a threesome, Orion?"

"Not if you and this guy have a private thing going. That's way too much drama for me."

"Lou and me? Nope, we don't have a private thing going. No drama." She pulled at the ring decorating her nipple. "You still in, Lou?"

"Right, Blue. I'm in. For keeps," he added. "Nothing you do will drive me away."

Oh, Lou was good! Real good. Luckily, she knew all the fashionable buzzwords. That phrase contained all the profundity of a guy on the prowl. What he had just spouted had all the earmarks of another classic pickup line.

"So, Lou, you want in my pussy or in my mouth? Or maybe, you want into my butt? I'm not a tight ass, so maybe you'll fit." Sick inside, she laughed at her own crude humor.

"Whatever you say, Blue," Lou said.

She looked down at herself. "Look at me, boys! I'm a fuckin' sight. Wine on my tits, wine in my pussy, too." She glanced at Lou, but spoke to the younger man, "Jas? You want to lick me out?"

At the question, Lou's features set in hard lines. The harsh glare of the studio's white lights had aged him. He looked a little haggard, a little shopworn, a lot ragged around the edges. For sure, life had kicked Lou in the teeth once or twice.

The enamel on her own smile had gone through a lot, too. She knew all about those kicks in the face. But look at her! Still laughing, still joking around. Unlike stodgy Lou, she still knew how to have a good time. Lou should take a leaf from her page of poetry. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may...

She twittered. Maybe if Lou caught a glimpse of her rosebud, he might catch on to her verse.

A little dizzy, she stretched out further on the pillows. The softness felt good behind her shoulder blades. The room didn't tilt quite so much now that she had prostrated herself on the floor. "Who wants to serve as my love slave?" She crooked her finger. "Come on, Orion! Do the Goddess's bidding."

Giggling at her own intoxicated wit, she closed her eyes to escape dour Lou's look of censure.

What did she care if Lou didn't approve of her, didn't care for her foul mouth or the subject matter for her art or the fact that she wore boxers instead of panties? Let him leave if he didn't like her lifestyle! Who the hell needed him, anyway?

Blind to her surroundings, no longer portraying Diana, no longer a goddess of myth beckoning to her chimerical lover, simply Blue, a flesh and blood, hurting, slightly drunk, imperfect woman who was about to have sex for all the wrong reasons, she held out her arms to anyone who would have her ugly sad self.

To escape grief, to prove her desirability, to shake a dour man out of his complacency, for every wrong motivation known to womankind, she would sandwich herself between two men. Although a bad idea, a capricious idea, a mistake she'd most likely regret in the morning, she'd do it anyway.

A tongue, surprisingly arousing as its moist heat swept across her belly, cleansed the grape stain from her skin. When the point of that tongue dipped into her bellybutton to scoop out a wine droplet, she panted, open-mouthed, spreading her alcohol fumes around.

Yes, yes, oh, yeeees!

Jas really knew how to use his tongue! Her toes curled, seemingly of their own volition.

Who knew she would respond so rapidly? And to Jas of all men! He'd never had this impact on her before. In fact, the good-looking artist's attentions, though flattering, had always left her unmoved.

He moved her now. She couldn't stay still. Squirming and wiggling, she opened her eyes, looking to the man who had caused her to dance.

Not Jas.

Lou.

The strip club owner crouched between her splayed thighs, drinking the wine from her body.

Relief and shame warred within her.

Relief, because after responding so devastatingly to Lou, she didn't like to think she could respond so devastatingly...and indiscriminatingly...to Jason.

Shame, because she had manipulated the very private Lou into performing cunnilingus in front of another man. How he must hate this open display of sexuality!

The undamaged part of her heart bled for him.

The battered and bruised part of her heart had no more blood to let.

Selfishly, she didn't tell Lou to stop. He was the one who had suggested the threesome. That suggestion still rankled. How could he claim to care for her and then share her with someone else?

As her climax approached, her resentment and hurt drifted away.

Along with Jas.

As far as she was concerned, Lou and she were alone in the room.

This was not good. While wanting Lou to lose control, she had expected to remain uninvolved. Her clenching fingers, her clenching pussy, were not signs of detachment.

What was happening to her? She was a take-charge, sexually liberated, if screwed-up woman. A woman who never leaned on any man.

She slipped back into the mythical role of Diana, the goddess of the hunt. Sometimes, pretending made life easier to bear.

Curling a finger at Jason, she said seductively over Lou's dark head, "Don't hang back, Orion. My bones are long. There's plenty of me to go around. Jump right in. Don't be shy."

Her fellow artist snickered. No virgin to threesomes, Jas was far from timid in matters of sexual license --

He looked intimidated now. Darting a sidelong glance at Lou, he surreptitiously reached for her.

His destination? Presumably her left breast, the one closest to him.

At the first delicious stroke, her nipples peaked, jutted, elongated.

But not in response to Orion.

Lou's hand had arrived on her right breast first, long before Jason's landed on her left, and what he did there drove her wild.

Jas eventually joined in, his fingers playing on her left nipple. Both men now caressed her breasts, and she moaned through her open, gaping, alcohol-slackened mouth.

All because of one particular man's gentle touch.

Lou. What he did to her strong woman's body, to her strong woman's mind! Her heart swelled with so many feelings, painful, hurtful feelings, and her pussy went sopping wet with desire.

For Lou. The quiet man consumed her.

Lou and Jason. Night and day. Two men laughably different from one another, both stroking between her legs now.

A rush of feminine satisfaction filled her. An equally strong wash of desolation followed. Her eyes drifted closed once again so as not to see the face of the one man, the only man, who mattered.

She would not cry out to him! Oh, no, she would not!

A long finger engaged her pussy, moving in and out. Her pelvis tilted to receive the second digit, to beg for that man's clitoral caress.

Her nonverbal plea didn't go unattended. After unhooding her sex, the man on the right, the right man, gently rubbed the bud while petting her right breast.

Her back arched, her hips rocked. A trickle of vaginal moisture ran down her leg.

For Lou. To receive Lou. Only Lou.

Her body recognized his touch just as surely as her mind blocked out the other man.

Two men in the room, but she wanted only one man, only the man who said, "Blue," in a harsh, tortured grate.

A sharp blade of self-recrimination sliced through her alcoholic haze. "Go home, Jason," she said, with the unbroken part of her heart, the undamaged part that acknowledged the truth, the part that couldn't bear to cause a good man pain. "This is a private party."

Off in the distance, a door opened and closed.

Quickly reshuffling her naked body on the pillows, she drew her long, strong female body up to a subordinate pose at Lou's feet, where she looked up at his unsmiling face. "I owe you. Anything you want, okay? Any way you want it. Nothing off-limits."

"Blue," he said in an unwelcome voice of reason. "This won't solve anything."

Who was trying to solve anything?

Not she. Survival was her only goal. She'd been trying to get through life, one day at a time, one night at a time, since Gill's death.

She placed Lou's palm over her bare breast again. "I mean it. Anything. You said you've led a celibate's existence, now's your chance to cut loose."

"All of this is my fault. I messed up, Blue. I should've told you what I do for a living. You have every right to feel betrayed. But, Blue, this is about more than The Pink Flamingo, isn't it? This sexual fling isn't something you ordinarily do, right? Something else is going on with you. Tell me about it. Please? Talk to me, Blue."

Talk? He wanted her to talk?

Why should she? Why should she bare her soul to him when Lou still wasn't letting go with her?

He hung onto his damn control for dear life while here she was strung-out and naked at his feet, half-drunk, half-crazed, half in love with a man who wanted to talk, as if conversation ever got a woman off. "No, I don't want to talk." Hands trembling, she unzipped him. "Let me suck you, Lou. We're alone now. What's holding you back?"

Give into me, Lou Franco! Let go, get swept away. Show me, don't tell me, you care. That's the only way we'll have a chance.

His cock looked tremendous, the testicles felt hot and heavy in her cupped palms. A scent unlike any other rose fragrant from Lou's genitals, a pre-cum bouquet. She put her face against his sex, smoothed her cheek up and down the silky, hard length, inhaled him into her nostrils, licked and taunted, and teased him with her tongue, begging him with every beat of her damaged heart to give into mindless oblivion. "What's holding you back, huh, Lou?" she repeated, and took him slowly down her throat.

Chapter Sixteen

Almost forty years old, and until Blue, no women had ever invited him into her mouth. Lou had heard all the torrid locker room tales, juicy accounts relating the orgasmic joys of fellatio. And he'd laughed right along with the bragging storytellers, but he'd never known, not until Blue put her lips around him, what all the hoopla meant.

Now he understood.

When Blue's lips captured the head of his dick, his world bottomed out. He had all to do to say, "Wait --"

A reprieve. She released him. Only to exhale onto the sensitive uncut head she'd moistened. "You want this, Lou. You're dying for this."

"No," he said.

But he lied.

And she knew it.

Instead of falling back, she blew out another airy breath and then tongued along the ridge of rolled-back foreskin.

He went rigid, his body tight enough to snap in two, waiting for deliverance.

Yeah, he wanted this. Wanted her to go down on him. Wanted her to suck him off. Wanted, wanted, wanted...

Blue.

He should not let her do this. Sex wouldn't solve anything. They needed to talk. Something was bothering Blue, and they should sort that something out, because he loved her, genuinely loved her, the first time he'd ever loved a woman, and their future depended upon getting things out in the open.

But, man, her mouth! Hot and untamed. Kneeling before him, he could see that her breasts jiggled, just a bit, and he trembled at what he couldn't see.

Her cunt, her cunt, her cunt.

Christ, but he wanted in her cunt, in her ass, in her throat. And though he knew he should stop it, he couldn't stop it, when she took him between her lips.

Jaw arched to the ceiling, he held onto her shoulders, chanting, "Blue, Blue, Blue. Damn, Blue, just like that. Do me just like that."

And she did. She sucked him off hard.

Her mouth owned him.

She was on her knees at his feet, but he was the helpless one, the powerless one. Because he couldn't stop this now.

He fought the urge to thrust, to drive into her throat, deep down into her long white elegant throat, a place a man his size should never venture. He could hear her moans, smell her excitement, and he tightened his hands on her shoulders, and he let her take him.

Not all of him. Not every last inch of him. He would not give himself over entirely to her pale, long throat. Because he was a man, not an animal, and though he couldn't stop it, he could still temper it, so as not to bruise that throat he loved.

Then came the convulsion, the explosion, the heavy shot. He gave a muffled shout, as every last drop of cum drained out of him.

He groaned, “Aw, Blue.” With a possessive ferocity, he pulled her to her feet and into his arms.

A man held his woman afterward, comforted her, reassured her...thanked her for the gift of her body, for the pleasure of his release. “I never wanted that to happen, Blue. Never expected you to do that.”

Words failing him, he propelled her to the wall, took her semen-salted lips, sharing the taste of his cum in the kiss, back and forth, swapping the earthy essence of sex. But when she rammed his fisted hand between her legs, forcing the hard knuckles into that warm and moist opening, he yanked the kiss to an end.

His gaze dropped. He swallowed the lump in his throat, equal parts excitement and dread. His knuckles looked huge, his fist enormous and thick, her slit so dainty.

“Do it,” she said.

“No.” He rubbed his fist against her cunt, letting his knuckles grow wet with her. “No.”

But God help him, he shook at the thought of doing it, of forcing his whole hand up into her wet, hot, luscious body.

With every ounce of his self-control, he grabbed at her wrist, preventing her from forcing his wide knuckles inside. “Blue, there’s a line, and I’m not crossing it.”

Her lips were bruised red, swollen, sticky with cum. Her body vibrated with expectancy. “There is no line.” She smiled a dangerous smile. And he knew, he *knew* he’d either have to end a lifetime of self-imposed restraint or lose Blue.

And there was something else.

He hungered for the dark side of sex. The forbidden side of sex. He hungered for it all. She was in a dangerous frame of mind but there was a corresponding coil of madness tightening his gut, too. Did the crazies show? Could she see into his psyche? Did she understand his need to claim her every way a man can claim a woman?

His dick, still turgid -- no exaggeration that he could go for hours -- prodded her dampness. With no thought past need, he allowed the blunt tip to sink into the notch.

"Open it up some more," he rasped. "Use your hand to widen it."

She pulled up on the pink folds. "Good," he grunted. Holding himself in his hand, he penetrated the slit. Not a lot. Only a little.

She felt so damn good.

Once, as a young man, he'd foregone responsibility for pleasure. No condom, he'd had a woman. Pete's mother. He still had wet dreams about it. Not about the woman -- her face had long since dimmed to a hazy shadow in his memory -- but about how the sex had felt.

He wasn't young anymore, but he wanted Blue with a young man's lust. The feel of it. The wetness of it. The pulse of it around him. And Blue was obliging. Her pierced breast teased the front of his dress shirt, the hard extension of the nipple taunting him.

The insanity inside him coiled tighter.

His mouth latched onto the pierced flesh of her nipple, and his teeth ground together.

"Bite it," she said.

And he did.

"Harder," she commanded.

And he complied.

"More," she ordered.

Any more pressure and his teeth would open up the sensitive skin of her breast. He'd already left bruises around the nipple, marks he'd given her, discolorations she'd carry for days to come. He had tried to keep a lid on this, and Blue was taking that lid and hurling it across the room.

He toppled back and away. "No!"

"I thought you would give me what I need. Guess I was mistaken."

A challenge.

He stuck his face within a breath of her face, near enough to bump noses, near enough to breathe in her wine fumes.

Unlike many barkeeps, he wasn't a recovering alcoholic but a former cop who'd seen what booze did to good and decent men and women. Liquor never drowned troubles; liquor only sank them temporarily beneath the surface. Blue's lack of sobriety bothered him. What was bothering her?

Choking back his fear for her and for himself, too, he warned, "I won't hurt you."

But what would he do to her? How would this night end?

And how much more could he take?

Not much more, he thought, as the huntress stalked him and pierced his mouth with her tongue. Like a damn war prize, she captured his dick in her hand. Slowly, but surely, she brought him to her warmth, led him right to her folds.

So damn cold outside, so damn lonely. Blue felt hot on his skin, like the sun after a long stretch of winter. And no longer caring about getting burned, he pressed against her opening, skin to skin slick, hardness to softness.

Though she urged him forward, he refused to enter.

No condom.

He put on the brakes. "I'm not suited up."

Breaking the kiss, she cupped his testicles, causing his dick to poke her belly. "I've got protection covered, Lou."

He stared into her half-lowered eyes, and sighed.

Once, already, he'd walked out on Blue, and he didn't possess the strength to walk out again.

Hell! Walk? He doubted he could crawl.

“I swear I’m clean,” he told her. “I’d rather cut it off and feed it to the fish than pass something onto you.”

“And I know you don’t lie. Right, Honest Lou?”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “I swear on Pete’s happiness, I’ve avoided the truth only once in my life -- to get a chance with you.”

That said, he backed her up to the wall.

But still he held back from driving into her body.

Blue set down her conditions. “Bail on me now and I find Jas.”

Some choice.

“No. Don’t get it from any other guy. Let me give it to you.” He went into her, started the motion of sex.

He was only a man, only a dick loosely connected to a brain, and the urge to drive hard and thrust fast played over and over in his head.

He resisted. Fighting the animal part of himself, the uncivilized part of himself he kept locked away, he gritted his teeth and kept the strokes slow and easy, smooth and controlled, ever mindful of the harm he could do if he crossed the line.

He never crossed the line.

Making sure she climaxed, he withheld his own orgasm.

He had a feeling he had a long night ahead of him.

In the grip of post-climactic satiation, her eyes fluttered up. “I want you to leave. If you don’t get out of here, right now, I’m calling security.” She pushed him aside.

And there he was again, up against a wall, no place to go but into her, the exact same spot he’d been when they’d met.

Chapter Seventeen

Blue could easily spit fire.

Lou Franco and his stupid control and his idiotic code of honor!

Well, this slightly drunk artist needed a flesh and blood man tonight, not a bunch of lofty principles. Good manners had no fucking place in fucking. If Lou didn't throw caution to the winds and let passion take him over, she was kicking his tight ass out the door. She wasn't settling for less than all of him, including his cum, including the wild side of himself he tried so hard to keep caged.

She walked naked to the phone on her worktable. "Get the hell out, Lou, or I'm calling security."

From behind her, a hand fell heavily on her bare arm. "You're not calling security, and I'm not leaving. You belong to me, Blue."

Thick and hoarse, the tone no longer coolly polite, his voice sounded different, like his vocal cords belonged to a man pushed to the limit.

He spun her none too gently to face him, and Blue noted the sweat beaded on Lou's forehead, the clenched spring of his bearing, the darkening of his already dark eyes.

At last, a reaction!

“Before tonight is through, Blue, you’ll feel my ownership on every inch of your body.”

About fuckin’ time he showed some balls.

In response, her brain’s circuitry fired off a round of endorphins, the opiate receptors sparking sexual exhilaration.

But -- just in case he was all talk and no action, nostrils flaring, she picked up the phone. Receiver to her ear, she pounded the call numbers for security, egging Lou on with every fiber of her being. This was their last chance! And so far, he had yet to put his cum where his mouth had been. “I want you out of my studio.”

Lou, Lou. Show me what you’re made of, Lou!

He ripped the phone cord from its base. “And I already told you -- I’m not leaving.”

Good, but not good enough. She wanted heat, not words.

Swiveling, she struck him full across the face.

Lou, Lou. Show me what you’re made of, Lou!

He caught her hand before she landed another slap. Twisting her around, he held her against his hard body. An erection of awesome proportions branded her bare bottom.

Excellent!

“I’m not going anywhere,” Lou rasped against her ear, his hands roaming, pinching the ends of her breasts, kneading her belly, cupping her mons.

“Fuck you,” she said succinctly, and swiveling to face him, lifted a leg, as if to knee him.

He deflected the blow.

Thank goodness! Rendering Lou incapable of performing would have ruined everything.

He locked her wrists in a vise-like grip, forced her arms behind her back. As her reddened nipples jutted to the ceiling, he lowered his head, took one in his mouth, and bit the end.

Savagely.

Yippee! She'd wear his mark for days to come, she thought in victory, as he dragged her down to the floor.

Her lungs on fire, her breasts heaving with exertion...and arousal...she fought back as Lou forced her down onto her back in front of the worktable.

Loosening the knot on his tie, Lou whipped the narrow gray silk off over his head and sent it flying, tasteful clip still in place. Next, he attacked his cuff links. The old-fashioned jewelry bounced and rolled like gold grenades across the width of the room. When he stripped off his belt, the pliant leather an unspoken, yet ominous threat, her mouth fell open.

Oh, this was *so* good! She hadn't expected this. Hadn't dreamed he'd really go the bondage route. Once again, quiet Lou had surprised her.

Not about to make things easy for him, she renewed her bogus struggles for freedom, making a big show of cycling her legs to kick free.

With a caveman grunt, he pounced.

She shimmied out from under and crawled away.

He yanked her back, his hands everywhere on her flesh, heating her skin wherever he touched. Her breasts, belly -- God, between her legs. He rubbed between her legs, his fingers sliding into her slick pussy. After a lengthy tussle, in which they rolled together on the floor, he *finally* confiscated her hands and wrapped her wrists in leather. Manacling them together, he raised her arms above her head and looped the belt around the leg of the table, fixing the restraint so this time she couldn't get away. *All rigghhhht* --

He stood up, over her, looked down at her. "Open your legs."

Yes, yes, yes...

“No!” she cried.

“We can do this easy or hard. Your choice.”

Hard, hard. Give it to me hard, Lou.

“Go to hell,” she spat, her knees glued together.

He wrenched off his neatly pressed white dress shirt, balled it up, and tossed it. The creased trousers and standard white boxers followed his shoes and socks. Naked, he stepped between her legs and widened his feet, his positioning effectively prying her thighs apart.

“Keep your vagv--” He shook his head. “Keep your cunt open.”

Cunt? This from gentlemanly Lou?

“You’re getting fucked,” he growled.

At last! The wildcat from the pier was putting in a reappearance. What had taken him so long?

Lou’s cock! Good Lord! The length, the thickness, the lancing extension! The guy was a natural wonder. She practically swooned in wonder at the sight.

No *practically* about it -- she shivered convulsively. “Let me up!”

“No.” He lowered himself to his knees between her splayed legs. Without preamble, he pushed his large fingers into her pussy.

She fell back on denial. “I don’t want this!”

“You don’t want me to fuck you? So why are you wet?”

Duh. Because no matter how good she was at role-playing, some somatic reactions were impossible to disguise.

When she said nothing, he shrugged. “Good idea -- the silent treatment. Anything you say will be held against you.” He chuckled. “I used to be a cop. Cry rape, and I’ll get off light. And even if the judge does toss the book at me, your cunt is worth time served in the pen.”

Lou a cop?

So that explained his cuffing expertise!

He smoothed a hand down the inside of her thigh. “Where do you keep the lube for your casts?”

Her body vibrated at his authoritative tone. “Above you. Top left-hand drawer.”

“Stay right there. Don’t go anywhere.”

She blinked. *Huh? Tied to the leg of the table, where did he think she could she go?*

No chuckle this time, he gave a full belly laugh.

Dominance and a black sense of humor, too? Could a girl get any luckier?

While Lou hunted down the tube, her narrowed gaze roamed his nude body.

She painted and photographed and sculpted male nudes all the time. And had never once felt anything.

She felt a lot of something now.

The man had buns of steel!

For the first time, she actually approved of Lou’s tight ass.

When he made the return trip, her eyes widened. His *specimen* clubbed the air, the jut almost a foot out from its black nest of curls.

To think, that hard male flesh had plumbed her mouth! Nothing testified more to Lou’s control than her ability to swallow now. How had he kept himself in check?

His ramrod appendage told her he was not in check now.

Thrilling.

Lou fell to his knees between the vee of her legs and proceeded to lube his hand. “The first time, I go light on you.”

The first time --?

His wide fist glistened with lube, the knuckles pronounced. No polite “May I?” First, he forced his tightly closed hand between her open thighs. Leaning forward, his face dark and intense, he pressed those glistening knuckles into the folds of her pussy.

A cry tore from her dry throat. He was stretching her, widening her, opening by the smallest of increments. She moaned as his bent fingers slipped partially into her body. Groaned as his fist moved inward.

Oh, God. The pressure! The tremendous, awful, compelling, pleasurably painful pressure of those large knuckles pushing into her.

“Next time will go easier,” he said to her whimper of unease.

Next time...?

Would he actually stick around for a next time?

Her thighs went taut. The stress on her muscles increased. Even her nipples -- as sharp as knife points -- hurt --

With a deftness that amazed her, Lou began a one-handed massage on her upper legs. When his kneading didn’t relieve the knots in her muscles, he heaved her legs, one at a time, up off the floor. Bending them back under her chin, he opened her knees wide, as his fist, at the center of her body, insistently sought admittance.

Oh, God! She felt so exposed! Her pussy was so open! Never had she felt so naked, so raw --

So undefended.

She strained against the leather belt, pulled against the restraint. Unable to help herself, she started to pant, then writhe.

Oh God, oh God, oh God! Why was she letting a man see her like this, so ugly like this, so naked like this, so exposed like this, so horribly weak like this?

She tossed her head back and forth on the floor, her sweat-wet hair whipping across her face, her nipples pointing, her belly heaving, her bent legs splayed wide, her bottom hiked up off the floor.

No mercy asked and none offered. His fist drove up into her.

She didn't realize it would be like this. Hadn't known that egging Lou on would impact her, too. If he was losing a part of himself -- his control -- then so was she losing a part of herself -- her long-held defenses.

With all her might, she resisted the total surrender. Gnashing her teeth against the loss of self, she screamed, "Go to hell, Lou" as she came.

Afterwards, breathing raggedly, Lou straightened his body and walked toward the studio door.

He was leaving?

Liar! He told her he wasn't going anywhere!

Regardless of his blatant dishonesty, she bit her tongue against calling him back, sighing her relief when he returned after slipping the lock in place.

Far from abandoning her, Lou dropped to his knees in front of her again. Taking both her legs, he held them out from her body, an ankle each in a hand. He stared down at her slit, stretched out because of the fisting.

"You cunt is beautiful."

Barely holding on, she spat out another, "Go to hell!"

"I'm not leaving you, Blue, not even to go to hell. Scream, cry, holler, cuss me out, call me a liar, accuse me of whatever you feel like accusing me of, but I'm staying put."

She slanted her eyes away as he continued to stare down at her splayed legs.

But, why hadn't he left her? Fucked up like this, she was too much bother for any man. Why didn't he just wash his hands of her? He could get sex anywhere without all this grief.

These days, she was nothing but grief.

He raised her bottom up off the floor. A thick finger -- not just the tip, the full digit -- penetrated her in back. "After I make your cunt mine, I'm owning your ass."

Poetry to her ears.

She managed another fairly convincing, "Go to hell, Lou" in retaliation.

Dropping her legs, he moved over her, on top of her. Mounting her there on the floor, he slid easily up inside her stretched pussy. No holding anything back, this time he shoved himself up into her, giving her his all.

"I'm not going anywhere," he grunted, and started pumping.

His penis, so hot, so hard, so unbelievably meaty and long, drove her immediately to the brink.

She was coming.

"Go-to-hell," she shrieked, simultaneously spewing out her poison and collecting her pleasure.

How he must loathe her!

But even after that ugly display, Lou didn't stop. He kept at her. Jerking his hips, he forced her to climax three more times, in quick succession, before pulling out.

"You didn't come," she accused.

"I'm saving myself for later."

His penis, huge, dripping from the lube, from her...with pre-cum...hovered over her face as he began undoing the belt from the leg of the table. She chafed the blood circulation back into her hands as he pulled the leather strap free.

"Over on your belly now, Blue."

"Do you actually expect me cooperate in my own ass rape?"

He blew out a harsh breath. "I'm doing you. Easy or hard, I'm still doing you." Doubling over the belt, he smiled a smile that boiled her blood. "Every second you delay adds another stripe of flesh off your ass. Now, roll over."

"Go-to-hell!"

As fast as a jungle cat, he rolled her over. The doubled belt came down in swift retribution, the fiery leather lash falling across both buttocks.

She rubbed her smarting posterior. "Fucking asshole."

"That's the plan, darling," he said, hunkering over her prostrate form and mouthing her burning flesh, his lips taking the sting away.

"Darling, nothing you can do or say will drive me away. Not now, not ever. So, quit the theatrics and get up on all fours."

She scrambled into the doggie-position, holding steady as he strapped her around the waist with his belt.

Finished there, he reached a hand under her ribcage and cupped a bobbing breast. "Right from the first, your tits drove me crazy." Slowly, but surely, he turned the hoop in the pierced nipple.

Relatively new, both piercings still showed some signs of swelling. She bit her lip in pained pleasure as he twisted the gold ring and then pulled.

The climax slammed into her, its unexpectedness stealing her breath away. Left gasping for oxygen, she couldn't tell him to go to hell.

Wrung out, she hung her head, seeped in satiation.

He smoothed his palm down her perspiration-soaked back. "Got anything I can use for tit-clamps?" He chuckled. "I didn't exactly come prepared."

She panted, "Bottom compartment on the worktable is where I keep the clips to hold the pages of my drawing pads in place."

"Good improvisation, darling. Real good."

Over her head, a drawer opened and closed.

When Lou skillfully attached the metal clips to her nipples, she couldn't help but think that for a conservative guy he knew his way around BDSM toys. Another lie like his lie about The Pink Flamingo? Did his strippers call him "Master" as well as "boss?"

A firm tug on the belt brought her upright onto her knees. Another tug drew her snugly against his chest. A palm spanned her belly and prevented her from moving. "Hold still -- understand?"

"I will, but..."

"But what, darling?"

"Don't leave me, Lou," she slobbered.

"I won't, darling," he said, and tightened the screws on the improvised clamps. "I'll never leave you."

The pinching sensation felt wonderful. Sighing in ecstasy, she went pliant for Lou, giving him no argument at all when he opened her legs and inserted a smooth plaster cast of a phallus into her pussy.

"I found this on the table," he said in bemusement, sliding the fake cock up higher into her passage.

Nothing would beat the perfection of Lou in the flesh, but when he glided the faulty representation between her pussy lips and pushed the facsimile up and in, she sighed. "I made the plaster penis from memory, after you left me that first night."

"I'm a shade longer when erect, but no complaints. And I'm not leaving you ever again. Onto hands and knees again, darling."

She toppled gracefully. Where had this new femininity originated?

Lou guided her hand to the base of the plaster phallus. "Nice even strokes."

As she masturbated with the poor substitute, Lou prepared her body for the genuine article.

Anal.

Uncharacteristically -- this whole scenario was uncharacteristic of Lou -- he entered her forcefully, filling her ass in one powerful thrust.

The abruptness of his entry hurt. In her pained vulnerability, in something else, too, she started to cry. This episode of the weepies differed vastly from her previous crying jags. As her body sucked him in, salty brine rolled in great torrents down her face. There was no stopping the tears.

Rather than scream, "Go to hell," she sobbed, "Lou, Lou, Lou" as she hit the wall of pained-pleasure and fell apart.

Chapter Eighteen

“Talk to me, Blue,” Lou said afterwards. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know if I can.” She moaned into the black satin pillow, wanting to, Oh, God, did she ever *want* to, talk to Lou.

“I love you,” he said quietly, picking her up from her belly down pose and moving her gently over onto her side.

He loved her?

After seeing her naked with another man, how could he tell her he loved her? How could he say the words so easily, like he meant them, like the words wouldn’t change, no matter what she did?

He loved her!

No man had ever said the words to her before, not even Gill. Though he had loved her, just not in the way she had wanted him to love her. Not in the way, she had needed him to love her. She had offered herself to him countless times, and he had always refused.

“Talk to me,” Lou ordered again, and snuggled her in his arms.

What was there to say? Hadn’t her body already said it all? She’d held nothing back from Lou --

Except her true self.

“Talk to me. Please?” he coaxed.

Tall, flat-chested, narrow-hipped, on her belly, in the dark, she could easily pass as a male. She wasn’t opposed to pretense. No big deal and no big difference.

How could she speak the words? How could she tell straight-arrow Lou that, for six years, she had ignored the female side of herself in order to make herself more attractive to the gay man she had loved? How to explain the boxers she wore were a means to seduce a gay man who couldn’t love her in return? How could she tell Lou that she would have done anything to share a bed with Gill? How could she reveal the twisted pathology of those emotions to another?

She began slowly, one halting, unfunny, truth at a time. “Jason was here to draw me. I was his model. I never would have had sex with him. But then you arrived, and I...and I wanted you to go berserk.”

“Well, you succeeded, darling. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“What must you think of me? Of all this?”

“What I think is that I’m glad Pete is a vegan, glad I went to Sprout’s Friday night, glad the place was so friggin’ crowded. I’m so glad I met you, Blue. I love you, and I want you in my life.”

“You can’t mean that. You don’t need a wrinkled mess like me in your life. You need somebody who’s got it all together, or at least someone who’s permanent pressed. I don’t even own an iron. I don’t use coat hangers!”

“No?”

“No. I hang my fuckin’ clothes on the floor.”

“Boy, in the scheme of things, that’s pretty damn serious.”

“It’s pink,” she said out of the blue.

“What’s pink?”

“My favorite color. My favorite fuckin’ color is pink. Do you believe that? Me, liking pink? But I do. I like pink. Feminine, girly-girl pink. And lace. I adore lace. And occasionally I like to wear a dress.”

“Okay.”

“Spring is my favorite season. As to my favorite books and movies, I’ll write you out a reference list.”

“Okay.”

“I was once involved in a love union.”

“Okay.”

“With a gay man.”

“Okay.”

“I held Gillian in my arms as he died.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “AIDS?”

A common enough -- if erroneous -- assumption. Gillian had diligently practiced safe sex, and so that plague hadn’t been responsible for his death.

“Gay men do die of other illnesses,” she said, defensively. Though Lou didn’t deserve her defensiveness. “Heart disease claimed his life.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Blue. Gillian must have been something else to deserve your love. I’m grateful to him.”

“Why grateful?”

“Because he helped make you the woman you are now, the woman I love.”

Jeremy had proved to her that sex could be good even when the emotional component of love was missing; Gillian had proved that love could be present even when sex was not. What would Lou prove to her?

“I love you,” Lou said unconditionally.

She didn't know if she could ever love someone again as purely as she had loved Gillian, but what she felt for Lou had depth. And meaning.

"I'm totally naked here, and I want to be totally honest, too. Honesty is so important --" Her voice drifted away, then came back strong. "My head isn't on straight right now, and I don't know if I can make you any promises."

He placed a hot, but gentle kiss on her lips. "No promises expected or necessary. Just know this -- I'll never leave you."

A man of his word, a man of honor, Blue believed him -- Lou would never leave her.

No, leaving fell to her.

* * * * *

Blue tossed her last pair of jeans into her knapsack. "That's it. All packed." Closing the flap, she hefted the canvas bag onto her back.

Lou walked her out the door, through the hotel lobby, to the parking lot.

"You know, I think you were right all along," he told her.

Her breathing stalled. Was this where he lowered the boom, where he told her to get lost and never come back?

Every muscle in her body on high alert, she asked without making a joke, without the defensive cushion of humor, "Right about what?"

"About this truck you drive. She really is a shitbox."

A chuckle bubbled up inside her -- *after* her burning lungs pulled in a gasp of oxygen. The delay explained why she had to leave. Until she could get it together, until her up-and-down emotions leveled out...until she could totally trust in Lou's love...she couldn't stay.

Lou gripped her shoulder, his fingers clenched. She hated being the cause of that tension, hated hurting him. "I can't stay, Lou," she repeated. "There's something I need to do. Something I haven't been able to do."

"It's okay, Blue. I understand. You'll come back to me. I know you will."

She wished she shared his confidence! In an unflinching adherence to honesty, she'd given him no assurances. In her unstable frame of mind, how could she?

He pressed something...a piece of paper...into her hand.

"My address. And phone numbers, at work, at home, my cell," he said. "I won't search you out. I won't hunt you down. I know you need your freedom. But call me, would you, so I know you're all right?"

"Yes. I'll call."

"You'd better. You've got my heart, Blue. You'll carry my heart with you wherever you go. I love you."

She nodded, but didn't say the three words back at him.

Lou's smile never wavered. "I'll wait, right here, for you to return."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you, tough guy?"

"Not about everything. But I am sure of *you*."

The man was a rock! *Terra firma* in the middle of a raging sea. A woman could depend upon a man like him, count on him to be there when the chips were down.

The chips were not only down now; the door to the bank had closed in her face. Emotionally, she was bankrupt. But she couldn't draw against Lou, couldn't ask him for a loan. Couldn't lean on his generosity for support. She had to get back up on her own two feet, find her own way out of this bottomless pit of despair. What she had to do, she had to do alone.

A gentleman of the old school, Lou opened the door of her beat-up pickup and helped her inside.

They didn't kiss goodbye.

She gunned it. Got the hell out of Fenton, driving south fast. She kept driving, too. Through the day, through the night. For the next three days she stayed on the road, stopping only for nature trips and something fast to eat, until exhausted, she reached Key West.

Not since Gill's death had she stepped a foot inside her studio. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't face the walls.

She faced the walls now.

And there was Gillian smiling serenely down at her from a multitude of studies. Some finished, some not, all the paintings she'd ever done of the man she had loved and lost.

She had started her art career as a portrait painter, a damned good one, too. The critics called her work gifted. Patrons said she captured not only the subject's physical presence on canvas, but also the person's soul.

Gillian had been a physically attractive man. But, oh, his soul! God, his beautiful soul! Had she done justice to the beauty of his spirit?

One by one, she looked at all of the portraits, every last canvas, feeling Gillian's beautiful soul envelop her as she at last found the courage to tell him goodbye.

Chapter Nineteen

Lou had only just hung up the receiver -- Pete's weekly duty call to his old man -- when the damn phone rang again.

His kid probably calling back to say he had changed his mind. That he wouldn't make it home for the holidays, after all. A forgotten offer -- a new girlfriend, a chance to go skiing, an opportunity to make some extra cash for spending money -- would keep his kid away.

Not having his son with him over Christmas would just about kill him, but Pete was a man now, and his dad had to let him go.

Facing the inevitable, Lou answered the dreaded call. "Ruiz! I thought you were my Pete there for a sec. What! Hey, hold on! Why now? The club is closed tonight. Who let her in?"

Lou shouldered the phone, reached for his tie, slipped the striped silk on around his neck. "You did? Okay. Okay. Since you're vouching for her, I'll give her an audition. But she better be as good as you say."

Lou checked his watch. "Pour her a cup of something, and I'll be there in ten minutes or so." He hung up the phone.

Why not give the dancer an audition? He had nothing better to do tonight anyway, except eat another lonely microwave dinner and playback the memory of Blue in his mind for the millionth time.

She'd been gone since September. Three months of not talking to her directly; though, just as she had promised, Blue telephoned every week.

Messages she left on his answering machine at The Pink Flamingo.

He had to hand it to Blue -- the woman had a real knack for calling on his day off.

Just as well, he got out of his apartment for a bit. Doing something, anything, would make the time pass quicker while he waited for her to return to him.

Blue *would* return to him.

Exactly ten minutes later, Lou rushed through the pink door.

And did a double-take. What the hell? The Flamingo was in total darkness.

Odd, Ruiz hadn't turned on the lights, what with a job applicant waiting for an interview.

He called out, "Tomas, I'm here. Let's get this audition on the road. Where's the dancer?"

No answer.

Was this Ruiz's idea of a practical joke? The place was deserted. No one was here.

Before he could cross the floor and flip the switch, the spotlights on stage came up.

Okay, so maybe someone was here...

The beams stalled at dim. Evidently, the job applicant was going for romantic ambience rather than flash. Fine with him if she preferred the quiet approach; generally speaking, he didn't like a dancer's sensuality to clobber him over the head.

Lou removed his gray wool overcoat and settled into a chair on the main floor to observe the performance. *Whoever you are, please don't make me suffer through another loud rendition of one of Gypsy Rose Lee's striptease classics.*

When the soundtrack to *91/2 Weeks* kicked in, Lou smiled. The music to the movie got him every time.

Slowly and suggestively, the dancer swayed to center stage, a pink feather plume hiding her face. An extraordinary feminine demeanor highlighted a tall and willowy build. Sexy as all hell, but not flaunting it. Elegant in a little white lace cocktail number, she conducted herself like a real lady up there on stage -- no bawdy bumping and grinding for her. Her subtle dance moves had him sitting up and taking notice.

Right from the first, Blue had forced him to take notice.

But why was she doing this? Why the attempt at a masquerade? Didn't she know, he'd recognize her anywhere?

The routine looked effortless, the hallmark of hours spent rehearsing. Like a real pro, Blue swapped her plume back and forth, from hand to hand. Making sure to keep her face hidden at all times, she did a peek-a-boo tease with her loose neckline, letting the white lace slip dress reveal some demure cleavage. When she finally untied the wispy knots at her collarbones and allowed her outfit to gape, his mouth had already leached dry.

With a genteel shimmy, the lace slithered, inch by slow inch, off her shoulders.

Holding the plume vertically between her teeth, so her face remained hidden, she wiggled her wide shoulders.

Like damn magic, the sexy confection slid all the way down to the floor, leaving her in a tiny pink bra and matching G-string. Thigh-high gartered stockings and five-inch stilettos completed the outfit and made him want to sit up and beg.

Lou gawked. Blue was stripping for him!

When the tempo picked up and she twirled, her heart-shaped bottom undulating -- he had to hand it to her, she knew how to shake her booty in a refined, ladylike manner -- he did sit up straighter in his seat then. No longer able to master his overpowering lust, a hot arousal that made even breathing uncomfortable, he vacated the chair altogether in favor of pacing back and forth in the shadows.

Show me your face!

But, no. The vixen continued to torment him. Instead of letting him see her features, she glided toward a stairway that led nowhere, her stage prop, and gracefully raised a foot onto the first step. Using only one hand -- the other still held the plume -- she rolled the garter down her endless leg and over her stiletto. She tossed the frilly elastic at him.

He caught it, brought the wisp of lace to his nose and inhaled the sweet scent of Blue.

The music stopped.

Her cue to finish the act?

She reached for the front clasp on her tiny pink bra.

No!

He didn't want it like this, not tawdry like this! Not up on a stage, and not with her face hidden.

"Hold on," he shouted. "My dancers don't go all the way."

"No topless numbers?" she asked, the plume muffling her voice.

"Not in this club!"

"How about a private show? I could make it worth your while."

"Absolutely not!" he blustered.

"Why?"

"Because I don't do that sort of thing."

The plume lowered. "I'm glad you don't."

He wanted to rush the stage, take Blue into his arms, never let her go...

Though doing nothing just about killed him, doing nothing was what he did. "Did I pass?"

"Pass what?"

"Listen, Blue, I can't take any more of these games."

"I'm not playing a game."

"No?"

"No! I'm on this stage only to show you I've changed my mind about The Pink Flamingo." She hung her head. "I'm sorry if it backfired. I'll just leave."

To give her some privacy while she gathered up her clothes, he turned his back.

"I'm all dressed," she announced, stepping around to face him.

She looked different. More womanly. Softer, too. And not just because of the new hairdo and makeup. Or the dress. Something inside her had changed.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. "Why did you come back, Blue?"

"The reason doesn't matter now. Just please know, I wasn't trying to catch you in a lie."

He digested this. Maybe he'd taken her striptease the wrong way. Maybe he was just a little too sensitive about his job, a little too defensive. Maybe, if he had taken her dance at face value, trusted her motivation, maybe he'd have Blue in his arms right now. Maybe then, she'd look happy instead of looking hurt and sorrowful -- and -- Christ, mortified.

A woman who puts it all on the line, who sets out to seduce a man in a dance, should never look the way Blue looked now.

He'd messed up.

Fear immobilized him. He was so scared of losing her. He wanted to do this right, the way it should be done when a man loved a woman, and he was afraid of failing.

"After all that exercise, you must be hungry," he said. A lame thing to say, yeah, but maybe, *maybe*, they could talk over dinner. "I know this quiet restaurant that serves vegetarian."

"Sprout's?"

"Yeah. Will you do me the honor of having dinner with me there? That is, if you've got time, if you're not just passing through town."

She moved toward the coat closet. "I'm not just passing through town. I've rented a studio on the Southside. I'm getting back into portrait painting again. And...and I'd like very much to have dinner with you."

Portrait painting? He didn't know Blue painted people's faces. And she had rented a studio on the Southside? He didn't know that, either. There was a hell of a lot he didn't know about Blue.

Time to get some things settled. Make it all nice and neat and orderly. Time to get to know Blue.

"It's a dinner *date*," he said, emphasizing the last word so she would understand his intentions. "So we can talk. Maybe get better acquainted."

"I see. A date. Then, yes, I accept." She reached inside the closet.

"Here, allow me," he said, and helped her on with her coat.

She spoke without turning. One arm lifted into the coat sleeve, then the other. "I thought I should learn to use hangers. The man I would very much like to get better *acquainted* with is a real stickler when it comes to taking care of his belongings."

His heart hammered against his ribs. His emotion-filled words came out sort of garbled, not clear and crisp like they should've come out, like he wanted them to come out. "A man's most precious belongings are the people he loves. So long as he takes care of them, he's doing okay."

She smiled. "Apart from the gender-specific phraseology, which I must say is sexism at its very worst, I couldn't agree with you more. In the final analysis, only love matters."

Lou remembered thinking once that it worked out better if a man and a woman had a few dates before falling into bed. A few getting-to-know-you conversations after the movies. A few respectful kisses exchanged outside the door before moving into lingering kisses inside the door. Then, they'd move onto some beginning petting in the living room. Followed by some intermediate petting. Then lots and lots of advanced petting. Then foreplay. Light, medium, heavy foreplay. Steamy, all-night-long foreplay. Hands. Mouths. Tongues. After weeks of this, when the Big Night finally arrived, he had been thinking along the lines of some fine wine, possibly bubbly, chilling beside a table in a dimly lit restaurant. Soft music playing in the background. No damn arguments going on in the foreground. No need, because by that point in the relationship, they would've hammered out all the basic differences and reached some sort of mutually acceptable understanding.

Blue and he had a few differences, and maybe they should go slow, learn everything there was to know about each other, iron out the wrinkles before getting serious.

Then again, life was short and messy. And when it was right, it was right, and nothing else mattered.

Except love.

Lou took Blue's hand in his. "I love you. Will you marry me?"

He added quickly, because women liked such things, "After a romantic courtship, of course."

"I love you, too, and yes, I'll marry you." Her blue eyes twinkled. "But as to a romantic courtship -- I'll give you a week, and that's it. And I'll have my eye on the calendar the whole time, so you can't cheat and take longer."

"Fuck that!"

"Wh-what?"

Laughter rumbling through him, he pulled Blue closer and kissed her soft, pliant lips. “A week is seven days too long. I say we fly to Vegas after our dinner date tonight. When we’re married, that’s when I’ll romance you. That way, the courtship won’t ever have to end.”

Blue gave him a wide grin and then burrowed closer, deeper. She got right *inside* his heart, which was right where she belonged.

 THE END 

Louisa Trent

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

Visit Louisa on the Web at www.louisatrent.com.