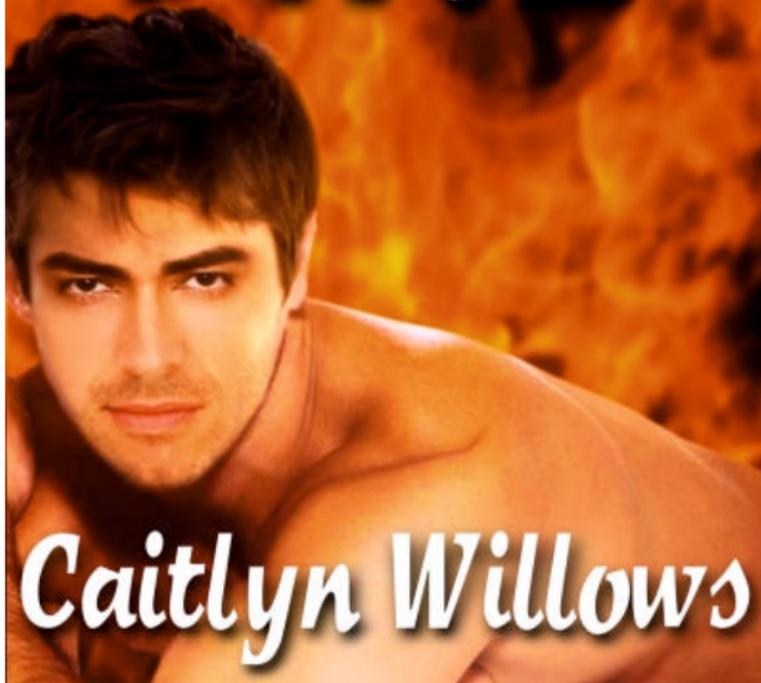


GYPSY FIRE



Caitlyn Willows

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...He kissed her lips—one, then the other, then both—teasing her with a touch of tongue, but not going deep. Down her throat to trace the well at the base. Over to one ear where the lobe begged for attention. Nipping down her neck until she was writhing against him...and then the other side.

She held on to his strong shoulders, letting herself feel it all, arching into him when he seized her breasts in a suckle that pierced pleasure down to her clit. He took his time, kneading one over and over before moving to the next, then starting all over again, until Riley whimpered with the need for attention lower.

Patrick glided down her body. She parted her legs wide, not so silently begging him to take her, to make her come. A new hard-on brushed against her thigh. She wanted it. She wanted it now.

He screwed his tongue into her navel. A moan lifted her hips off the bed. He grabbed the elastic waistband in his fist and yanked down her panties, toyed with the crack of her ass, then hauled them toward her feet.

Riley pulled one leg free. Kneeling before her, he caught it and sucked at her ankle. Soft nips worked his mouth up her calf to the back of her knee, then he eased her leg to the bed and settled there. He urged her thighs apart with deep caresses of his hands. She splayed them apart, desperately wanting what he had to give.

Those fingers found her first, burrowing deep inside and right to her G-spot. Riley gasped and raised higher, offering him another portal as well. He pushed a finger against her tight anus...

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GYPSY FIRE

BY

CAITLYN WILLOWS

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GYPHY FIRE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*A mystical coin dictates the erotic
currency of desire and a smoldering change of fate.
Magical temptation erupts into fiery,
intimate seduction. Fate. Destiny. Chance. All
demand the passionate fee of surrender.
Temptation's Price leads unsuspecting lovers down
the path to sensual, irresistible adventure.*

CHAPTER 1

Patrick Spencer watched Riley Hathaway battle the grief threatening to overwhelm her. Even with makeup, pale freckles stood out against her otherwise porcelain skin. Freckles...the curse of every redhead he'd ever known. Of the three he'd had to deal with in the last month, he was ready to throw two of them into the Pacific Ocean with lead boots. The third one...well, it was hard to believe she was related to the other two. And he would have done anything to spare her this pain.

He'd known Fiona Hathaway since he was a boy filing pocket parts in the *California Code Annotated* at his family's law office. Who would've guessed he'd be the one to handle

GYPSY FIRE

her estate now? She'd been old then at seventy-five. Now approaching one hundred, her time left was measured in hours. She'd outlived everyone in her family except her three great-granddaughters.

When it came right down to it, her active lifestyle was what had brought her down. One misstep as she rushed out the door a month before had sent Fiona tumbling off her front porch when she hit a spot weakened by termites. Riley had called the exterminators that very day to have the place inspected and fumigated. Fortunately, they caught the infestation at the beginning—only that one spot would need to be replaced.

Unfortunately, Fiona had hit her head and broken her hip on the flagstone walkway. At some point pneumonia had set in and refused to leave, despite the regime of antibiotics the doctor had placed her on. She'd been fighting hard, but losing fast. Her periods of awareness had been few and she'd been barely coherent during them, each breath more labored than the one before it.

When his grandfather and father had asked, Patrick didn't hesitate to take the lead in seeing her affairs ran smoothly during this time. He'd helped Riley settle her at home with a visiting nurse so Fiona could pass in peace in her own bed as she'd wished, and he was at the house almost as much as Riley. Once he realized what opportunistic bitches Heather and Jillian were, Patrick made sure he was always there when Riley was not. No one was going to take advantage of Fiona. He remembered her laughing blue eyes, sharp wit, quick

GYPSY FIRE

smile, and the peppermint pillow mints she always carried for “good little boys and girls.” Riley had all of those qualities, too, even the mints in her purse.

Her sisters, however, were a piece of work. Even now they paced the corridors outside Fiona’s bedroom, waiting like vultures for the old girl to draw her last breath. Part of his job was to see they didn’t pick her apart afterward, or rather her estate. Fiona’s instructions had been clear. He was here to help carry them out.

While Heather and Jillian Hathaway were greatly inconvenienced by Fiona’s lengthy stay on earth, Riley was heart-sick over her inevitable demise. She spent as many hours as possible by her great-grandmother’s side, holding her hand, tracing the blue veins showing through Fiona’s paper-thin skin, talking and reading to her, kissing her wrinkled cheek, falling asleep in the chair beside her. He’d caught Fiona’s smile focused on Riley more than once. Just as quickly as it appeared, it would fade as her body pulled back inside itself.

As he thought that, Fiona’s eyelids fluttered open. His breath caught in fear this was her last. He wanted to wrap his arms around Riley and shield her from the pain. To bury his face in her thick, red hair while he dealt with his own grief at the passing of one hell of a woman. So far he’d fought the urge to touch Riley in more than a casual manner, trying to keep a professional distance out of respect for her and his family’s business. But Patrick was losing that battle, just as surely as Fiona was losing the one she waged. He wanted to kiss her, slow and sweet, easing his way in and then pulling

GYPSY FIRE

her tight against a body that had been hard as a rock since the second they'd met. He wanted their naked flesh burning against each other's, fire whirlpooling around as they touched, tasted...

"Hi, Gram," Riley said softly.

Patrick snapped his thoughts into place. Unfortunately, his perpetual erection wasn't so easily tamed when it came to Riley. He ordered it to physically subside, then did his best to ignore the throbbing monster.

Riley combed her fingers through Fiona's silver-white hair. She'd kept it brushed and neat for her. Fiona had always been meticulous about her appearance—a trait all her great-granddaughters inherited. Heather and Jillian might be bitches from hell, but they dressed to understated perfection, just as Riley did—not too much, not too little, just right for whatever the occasion might be. On this late fall day, when southern California could be extra warm or cold depending on the minute, that was a thin sweater with slacks for the older sisters, a skirt for Riley. A skirt he desperately wanted to get under.

"Sweetheart, you look so tired." Fiona's voice was breathy, hard for her to get out. She slid her gaze from Riley to him. The sparkle in her blue eyes had dimmed. Patrick admitted not seeing that glint of life scared him. "You, too," she told him.

Her thin hand shook as she reached for the pendant that rarely left her neck—a silver coin with a silver chain threaded through a hole drilled at the top. She grabbed the coin too

GYPSY FIRE

tightly, cutting her finger on the thin edge.

“Gram, here, let me help.” Riley’s hand shook as much as Fiona’s. “What are you trying to do?”

“Give to you. Yours now.”

“Oh, Gram.” A tear slipped down her cheek. The pain of her loss—his loss, too—knifed through Patrick’s heart.

“Take it,” Fiona told her.

Riley snatched up a tissue from the box on the bedside table and blotted the blood from Fiona’s hand. The injury looked like it was no more than a bad paper cut. Riley plucked up the necklace and gently turned it around until the clasp was at the front. Her hands still shook too much to unlatch it.

“Here...let me.” Patrick’s hands replaced Riley’s, brushing hers briefly in passing. Sensation like liquid warmth slithered up his arm.

He thought he caught the semblance of a smile on Fiona’s lips as he unhooked the clasp. Once it was free, he cupped the pendant in his palm and let the chain slither down on top of it. Blood remained from Fiona’s cut. He watched the small spot settle in his heart-line.

Fiona wrapped her thin fingers around his wrist. Her grip was feather-like. “You’re holding gypsy fire. Once you’ve been kissed by gypsy fire, there’s no turning back. The quicker one accepts their fate, the happier they’ll be.” Her chuckle was swallowed by a coughing spell.

He and Riley tried to prop her up to clear her lungs. When the fit had passed, she sagged into the pillows. “Send those other two in here. I want to speak to them alone.”

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“Fiona—”

“Alone, Patrick. Riley needs some fresh air. See she gets it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He offered a smile and plumped her pillows behind her as Riley smoothed the bedcovers in place. She added a kiss to Fiona’s cheek, blinked away a rush of tears, and let him lead her from the room.

Patrick liked how she fit beside him—the right height at his shoulder, the right pace with his, the right everything, whether she wore flats like now or heels. He’d taken to having that proprietary touch of his hand to her back when he escorted her through doors. She’d never so much as flinched. In fact, he’d swear there were times she leaned into his touch. That action always made him feel omnipotent, like he could conquer the world.

Her rust-colored sweater was tucked into a matching shin-length skirt, and he couldn’t help wondering if her skin was as soft as the sweater. With every step they took, her skirt brushed against his leg, distracting him all the more. He watched the way her shoulder-length hair kissed her neck and longed to pull it away and do the same, letting his lips memorize every inch.

Her sisters pounced on them when they walked into the hallway. Their gloomy presence could dim a supernova. They certainly dulled the light in this otherwise bright old house. In the month he’d known them, Patrick hadn’t heard Heather or Jillian utter a kind word about anyone...unless it was a man they were interested in impressing. Both had tried over-the-top

GYPSY FIRE

flirtations with him on that first day—hookers were less bold—then moved on to other fishing grounds when they learned he wanted nothing to do with the bait they tossed out. It didn't take a genius to see these women were always looking for the easiest way, felt the world owed them a favor, and were out to get anything and everything they could grab. These were not nice women, a fact that detracted from their hot-as-hell looks.

That's what made it so difficult to believe they shared the same genes as Riley. The older two had already blown through two trust funds and an inheritance and now circled, waiting for more. Riley had gotten a business degree, opened her own craft store, and tucked the rest away for the children she planned to have one day. And took care of Fiona, making sure she had whatever she needed.

"Gram wants to see you," Riley told them. When Heather darted past her to go inside, Riley grabbed her arm and yanked her to a stop. "*Don't* upset her."

Heather's always-icy blue stare chilled a few more degrees. She didn't bother with a response, just jerked free and swung open the door. Jillian hurried to catch up.

"That goes for you, too," Riley told her.

Her middle sister ignored her and shut the door in her face.

"Come on." Hand at her back, Patrick turned her away. "Let's walk around the garden." It gave him peace when he did so, and he was sure it did Riley, since he'd found her there on more than one occasion.

Riley glanced at the door over her shoulder, then placed

GYPSY FIRE

her hand against his chest, right over his blue-striped tie. Could she feel the thump of his heart beneath it? Could she sense he wanted her hand lower, pressed against yet another erection, just as she pressed against the silk tie? On impulse, he wrapped his fingers around hers and squeezed.

“I need...” She paused, lips parted. She focused on his mouth, then shifted her gaze to their locked hands. He realized he still had Fiona’s necklace in his palm.

“I believe this is intended for you.” Patrick folded the pendant into her hand.

Smiling, Riley closed her fingers around it. “I never thought I’d see the day it came off her neck permanently. She would’ve raised holy hell if she found out the staff had removed it at the hospital when she was admitted. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve it before she regained...” She gave a light laugh. “I guess I can’t say she’s ever fully regained her senses.”

Patrick touched the silver chain that dangled from her hand. “She was aware enough to know it was still around her neck. Imagine her upset if she’d found it gone.”

That brightened her smile. “True.” She rubbed the thin coin between her fingers.

“It was as much a part of her as the peppermints she carried in her purse. When I was a kid, I asked her if it was pirate treasure. She said...”

He laughed lightly. She’d said then what she’d told them minutes before. *It’s gypsy fire. Once you’ve been kissed by gypsy fire, there’s no turning back. The quicker one accepts*

GYPSY FIRE

their fate, the happier they'll be. Never forget that, young Patrick.

Riley held the silver up between them. Age had worn the impressions on it to bare visibility and made it blade-thin. “Gypsy fire. That’s what she always called it.”

“I remember.” Patrick touched the surface next to her thumb. “It’s very old.”

“Centuries...if you believe the tale.”

“I don’t think I ever heard that one.” Though Fiona had spun other stories for him when he visited the law office. She knew how to capture a child’s imagination. Even at the ripe “old age” of thirty-two Patrick still liked to hear them.

Riley’s eyes held some of the mischief he’d seen in Fiona’s. “Ages ago a necklace was forged over a campfire by a gypsy man for his gypsy love—”

“Over a gypsy fire.”

Riley giggled. “Exactly...and don’t forget this was in days of yore.”

He gave her a nod. “Of course...continue, please.”

“He forged each coin from the finest silver, infused it with love. The hole in this one was drilled by his hand when he drilled the others to link. No one knows how many coins the necklace held, but it’s believed to have been a small fortune. On the night he was to give it to her, he found her ravished by another. He used the necklace as a garrote and strangled the man. It broke, scattering coins everywhere.

“Our love-struck couple gathered as many as they could find and fled from the kingdom, for to stay meant certain

GYPSY FIRE

death for one and banishment for the other. No one knows what became of them. Some say they lived happily ever after. Some say evil was attached to the coins once the man was killed. The coins are still found every so often, part of the gypsy fire, for there were so many on the necklace, the couple couldn't take them all. One thing everyone does agree on is—

“Once you've been kissed by gypsy fire, there's no turning back. The quicker one accepts their fate, the happier they'll be.”

“Yes. Gram always told us, too, that whoever holds gypsy fire holds the key to riches beyond imagination. It is a powerful ally and a dangerous foe. Choose wisely.” She laughed. “Rather like in an Indiana Jones movie.”

This was the happiest he'd seen her since they'd met a month before. God, he wanted to kiss her. Those bright blue eyes so filled with life looked into his right then. Patrick couldn't breathe, much less think straight. Their fingers were still locked around the coin. Bound, some part of his mind said. Her lips parted, soft, inviting.

Time slowed as he bent toward her. He felt her breath become part of his. He was hot. *Gypsy fire*.

Their lips touched, froze together. A sigh settled them into the tender caress. Then, in unison, their tongues reached out, became one. The kiss deepened. His mind folded in on itself. He felt the touch of her chest to his, then her pelvis. But the coin locked them as one, not their arms. More sure, he kissed her harder, but it was Riley who demanded it of him. He

GYPSY FIRE

wanted to feel her flesh, the heat of it, the silk of it, inside and out.

The bedroom door whipped open, shattering the moment. Still, they didn't jerk from the kiss, merely pulled apart.

"Where the hell is it?" Heather demanded. She zeroed in on the coin clasped between their fingers. "Give me that. I'm the oldest. It's rightfully mine."

She snatched it away before they could stop her. The edges sliced through Patrick's fingers like a razor. Riley's gasp mirrored his. She'd been cut, too. He caught her hand and pressed his wounded fingers over hers while he glared at Heather.

"Fiona gave it to Riley."

"Don't." Riley lifted her uninjured hand. "It's not worth fighting over. All that matters is Gram. I have all I could possibly want or need."

"I don't." Heather held up the coin. "But I'm going to."

"Then I hope you enjoy it." Riley slipped free of Patrick's hold and walked away.

Heather's smirk of triumph led her back to her great-grandmother's side.

CHAPTER 2

Riley blessed the wide halls and doorways in Gram's house. She might have bumped into them otherwise in her rush to get outside. She needed air...fast! Dizzy and hot, she found her way more by her memory of the house rather than from actually seeing it. Finally, she'd reached the back door. Her fingers slipped on the knob, reminding her of the cuts sliced into her pads. Sucking in a gasp, she clutched her fist to her chest and used her other hand.

Fresh, cool air poured into her lungs when she pulled the door open. She stumbled into the daylight, face turned up to capture the hint of ocean in a rare day of clear Los Angeles air. The scent of the sea calmed her racing heart, but not

GYPSY FIRE

enough. Only one thing would do that—the man she'd left standing outside Gram's bedroom.

She clicked the door closed and followed the pebbled path to the garden. A walk along the winding path might help clear her foggy brain. She couldn't say this was her favorite place since there was so much to love about her great-grandmother's old house. But the garden, with its fairytale-like qualities, did make real world worries seem far away.

Riley sighed when the first bend in the walkway blocked her from view of the rambling four-bedroom house. No one could see her here among the mix of roses, herbs, flowers, and small trees. As a child she thought the garden trail was miles long. It really just folded back and forth on itself, but the foliage was too thick to notice the path a few feet away. Stone benches marked a couple of the curves. Patches of thick grass held court on the others and roses were everywhere you looked. Here she'd sit with Gram, entranced with stories of fairy kingdoms and gypsies, dragons and knights, pirates and Vikings, anything her great-grandmother's fertile imagination came up with. The garden itself became a place transported from days of yore. Riley smiled. Days of yore was a common theme with Gram.

She hurried to the farthest end of the garden and sank onto an old marble bench. A dip was worn into the stone from years—centuries, Gram said—of family butts sitting on it. Riley had always liked the feel of it. So had her sisters and they, being older, normally won the right to sit there, if only by sheer intimidation. But they weren't kids anymore. Heather

GYPSY FIRE

and Jillian knew she couldn't and wouldn't be intimidated now. Being the money-grubbing bitches that they were, they resented that loss of power. They were going to resent it a lot more when they realized they'd only have each other to battle when Gram's estate was distributed. No, the war had already started, with Heather snatching the pendant from Riley.

She glanced at her fingers. The cuts burned like fire for a wound that was little more than superficial. Two red stripes marked the pads where the coin had sliced them. It *was* older than dirt and less than sterile. Riley made a note to wash and disinfect when she went back inside.

Odd for it to feel so hot. And not just her fingers. Warmth migrated up her arm, over her shoulder, then spread everywhere. She wondered how Patrick was doing. He'd been cut, too. Then they'd touched, their blood had mingled, become one.

In the days of yore...

Riley shut off the beginnings of the rambling tale. She'd become fairly adept at weaving more than a few stories of her own. But nothing could help her explain why she was lusting after that hunk of an attorney while Gram lay at death's door.

She'd been snared by Patrick the second she'd laid eyes on him, the moment his hand had slipped into hers in greeting. It'd been all she could do to relinquish the hold, and every ounce of willpower she possessed not to grab it and him back. He had big, brown eyes with full lashes a woman would kill to have. His dark hair was thick and looked incredibly soft. At night when she had trouble sleeping, she thought of him—how

GYPSY FIRE

soft his hair would be, the feel of his hard body on top of hers, his lips pulling at her nipples. She'd make herself come, then be ashamed of her lapse, when her every sense should have been on high alert for Gram.

In her heart Riley knew Gram would forgive her, even encourage her attraction. That helped lessen her guilt, but made her wish Gram were coherent enough to talk to about Patrick. Instead, Riley kept her secret to herself and treasured even the smallest of touches from him. Her insides quivered every time he'd place his hand against her back. She'd leaned into the touch and wanted to turn into his arms, his comfort, his strength.

She pressed her fingers against her lips. *God, kissing him was magnificent.* Her heart had beat so hard she'd been sure it would explode—a good parallel to the swelling between her legs. She bet his mouth would feel like heaven against her pussy. A man who could kiss like that knew his way around a woman's body.

Riley crossed her arms over her chest. Her nipples ached for his touch. Every part of her did for that matter. She couldn't control the feeling before they'd kissed and she sure as hell couldn't control it now.

She shoved to her feet, intent on pacing it off, and crashed into Patrick. He caught her elbows to keep her from falling. Her stomach hit that sweet erection she longed for, the one she'd glimpsed swelling his pants more times than not. The thought made her smile—he'd wanted her, too. The hard-on was for her!

GYPSY FIRE

A slow gaze traveled up his chest. She bet he was yummy under that shirt-and-tie demeanor. His chest felt like granite beneath her hand—carved hard and smooth by the sands of time...from the days of yore.

Laughter erupted of its own volition. Instead of looking puzzled, he smiled.

“We came close to annihilating each other there, didn’t we?”

Riley dropped her fingers over his biceps. She was annihilated the second they’d met. “Pretty close.” The flex of muscle beneath her hands demanded to be touched. She traced the cut of his biceps with her thumbs, then jerked away. “Oh! I’m so sorry. I forgot. I got blood on your shirt.” A small dot of red marred the powder blue long sleeve.

Patrick didn’t bother to look down. “Here...I brought you a wet paper towel to clean up.” He cupped her hand in his and pressed it against her fingers. “Just like my cuts, I can barely see them.”

He was right about that, but... “I sure can feel them, though.”

“Hot? Like a burn inside?”

A frown pulled her eyebrows closer as she looked up at him. “Yeah, weird.”

Those big, brown eyes locked onto hers. Riley was forever lost. His hand spanned her back, lifting her even as she stretched on tiptoe into him. She slid her hand up that broad chest, over his neck, until her fingers could drift into the thick hair scuffing his collar. Eyes closed, she melted into his kiss.

GYPSY FIRE

He pulled in a sharp breath through his nose and tugged her close. His hand on her ass anchored her to him. She glided her tongue with his, imprinting the taste and texture on her heart. The world around her as she knew it ceased to exist. It was just the two of them, wrapped in the wonder of bliss. In the same heartbeat, they deepened the kiss, kneading each other's lips. The hand on her butt grew hotter. The other one raked up her neck and burrowed deep in her hair. Riley sagged into him, wanting everything he could give, wanting to crawl inside the haven of his arms and never leave, wanting him deep and hard inside her body.

She felt herself tilt back and realized through the fog in her head that Patrick was laying her on the bench. Riley clutched at his shoulders and draped one leg around his waist as she did so. He made a sound between a groan and a growl and rocked his pelvis against hers. She echoed the sound he'd made and tossed her other leg around his waist when her back touched the marble bench.

Patrick shoved her skirt up and thrust into her crotch. Riley arched into his rock-hard cock, raking her pussy wantonly over it. Her panties were soaked from her juices. She wanted them gone...wanted him bare, too. Even as the thought came, Patrick was grabbing the elastic waistband. One tug pulled them down her hips, her thighs. She yanked one leg free of the undergarment, then locked her ankles around him.

The tinkle of his belt buckle called to her hands. She fumbled with him to loosen the belt, unzip the trousers. Heat surrounded her palm. She shoved her hand into the opening

GYPSY FIRE

and cupped his throbbing dick.

Patrick broke the kiss on a groan. She dared to explore lower, finding his balls as hard as the rest of him. He groaned again, then snatched her hand away and interlocked her fingers with his over her head. His trousers and shorts were down his hips, and his cock sought entrance with teasing nudges.

Riley lifted her knees and nailed her heels into his butt cheeks, trying to get his penis inside. He shifted and raked the length along her slit instead. Her clit screamed with delight, but it was her lips that demanded, "More."

He moved again with slow, steady strokes. She rocked with him, oblivious to anything else but the heat that boiled between them, welded them together.

She wanted to tell him how good this felt, how close she was to coming. The words wouldn't leave her passion-clouded head. Instead, she nuzzled her face to his, then captured his lips in a hard kiss. Their mouths muffled each other's cries. Patrick shoved one of her hands between them, right to her clit, then thrust his cock deep into her vagina. Riley pushed her clitoris against his dick, letting it ride the strokes he pounded in her while he tried to keep them balanced on the bench. Each pivot made him harder, until she swore it was as hard as the marble beneath her.

Her muscles clamped around him. The crest of her orgasm started to rise. Fingers dug into his back, balling his shirt in her fists. He cupped her buttocks, lifting her into him all the more. Then it hit them.

GYPSY FIRE

Lips froze with bodies as their climax exploded. They ground hard into the other at the peak. Gentle kisses eased them down to the afterglow.

Jillian's shout ruined it all. "Where the hell are you, Riley?"

"Oh, shit," they mumbled in unison.

Riley would have giggled if they'd had the time. She and Patrick had to scramble to put themselves back together. Fortunately, all she had to worry about was her panties and making sure her skirt was down. Poor Patrick's trousers and shorts were around his ankles, his tie was half undone, and his shirt was a wrinkled mess. No doubt what they'd been doing.

She re-knotted his tie, while he stuffed his shirt in his trousers, zipped, and buckled. Jillian darted around the curve in the walkway the second they'd finished. Her narrowed gaze flashed accusations at them. She stood there looking from one to the other, as if trying to decide whether to say something.

"Gram wants to see you." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "She's done with us."

Judging from her sour expression, it hadn't been a pleasant experience.

"Thank you." Riley resisted the need to comb any tangles from her hair and started toward the house with Patrick.

Jillian didn't budge when they passed by. They were forced to do so single-file.

"She's giving me the house and Heather the stocks. You get her jewelry and family stuff. Gram says it's all divided equally," she said. "I don't see how that's possible when

GYPSY FIRE

Heather has the pendant.”

Riley turned to face her. “What?”

Jillian rolled her eyes like a fourteen-year-old. “Whoever holds the coin holds the key to riches beyond the imagination.”

Riley couldn’t help it—she laughed. All this fuss over an old silver coin with a questionable history, that was more likely a carnival prize than forged by a gypsy lover. “Good God, Jillian, grow up.”

Her sister grabbed her arm. Long nails bit into Riley’s skin. “It’s a powerful ally.”

“And a dangerous foe. Don’t forget that in your quest for riches.” Riley allowed herself a smile when Jillian’s blue-gray eyes widened. Then she pulled free and continued on, Patrick’s hand a comfort at her back.

They said nothing as they hurried back to the house. What could they say in the limited time available? Riley wasn’t sorry they’d had sex. It was something she’d wanted from the minute she’d met him. She was sorry they’d gone at it like animals in heat where anyone could have seen them. *Well...maybe not too sorry.* Just thinking about it had her hot and horny again. And *that* made her feel guilty. Her thoughts should be on Gram, not getting laid by Patrick over and over and over...

“Do you want me to go up with you?” he asked.

They were at the back door. She’d been so lost in thought she hadn’t realized it.

“No, I think she wants to see me alone.” In her heart she

GYPSY FIRE

suspected it was to say a final good-bye.

“If you need me, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Riley started to walk away, then stepped back, stretched up, and kissed him. “Thank you.”

His fingers brushed her cheek before she left. The touch stayed with her all the way to Gram’s room.

Gram lifted her hand when Riley walked through the door.

Riley sat down and folded the frail hand in both of hers. “I love you, Gram.”

“You’ve been one of the lights in my life. Your sisters, too, before the world spoiled them. But that’s okay. They’ll learn.”

“Hopefully,” she said with a smile she didn’t feel.

“They’ll learn the hard way, and soon, too.” Gram sighed. “I see Heather took the pendant.”

“It wasn’t worth fighting over.”

“She’ll give it up soon enough.”

Riley shrugged.

“There’s a flush on your cheeks.”

And it probably deepened with Gram’s observation.

“I’ll bet I can guess who put it there,” she said. “I’ve seen how the two of you look at each other...on those rare occasions when I’m awake. There’s no denying that Patrick Spencer is a handsome devil. He always has been. Don’t you agree?”

Riley glanced at the door, caught between hoping he’d come in and praying he’d stay out. “He sure is.”

“Reminds me of his grandfather. Sharp as a whip, that one.

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So's his father. I never regretted hiring them, not for a minute. They helped me a lot when your great-grandfather passed. Seems like your whole being hums when he's near."

She couldn't deny that, not now, not when she was still humming from earlier. Riley pressed Gram's fingers against her cheek. "I want him. I want him so much I feel like fire inside."

"Like gypsy fire?" That old spark of mischief gleamed in her eyes.

Riley laughed. "Yes, like gypsy fire."

"Good, then go get him, sweetness, and never let go."

CHAPTER 3

Patrick watched the creamer make roiling clouds in his coffee. That's how his head felt right now—a big swirl. Until this point in his life, he'd always considered himself a responsible person. He played by the rules, did the right thing, toed the line and all that crap. That man in the garden, the one who'd wadded Riley's skirt to her waist, stripped off her panties, and fucked her in front of the world was a stranger—one who shamelessly wanted to do it all over again.

He couldn't count the number of moral and ethical rules he'd just broken. Hell...he hadn't even bothered to use protection, and he *always* used protection, even during oral sex. A man couldn't be too careful. Apparently his other self

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didn't feel that way. In fact, it mocked him now with an erection just as hard as the one he'd just diminished. It throbbed in time with the cut on his fingers.

Patrick stared at the paper-thin slice across his fingertips. It was barely visible—no blood, no open wound, nothing to indicate it at all...except for the heat it stoked. He wondered if it was infected, then wondered if infection could set in that quickly. That thought drifted into antibiotics, which led to a syringe, that he equated with a needle prick, prick led to dick...and he was right back to thinking of sex with Riley.

He rubbed his thumb over his fingers and stirred the hot from his coffee. It was a damn fine thing he wasn't the executor of Fiona's estate; that job fell to his father. His job was merely to see things went smoothly during this life transition. Still, it might not be enough of a distance if Heather and Jillian decided to contest the will. They could claim Riley had unduly influenced the distribution of her assets. Though that had been set down before he and Riley met—Heather would get all the stocks in Fiona's name, Jillian would get the house and furnishings, Riley would get her jewelry and all family mementoes. Any money remaining after her estate was settled would go to charity. If anyone was getting the short end of the stick, it was Riley.

Fiona had made those decisions years ago for reasons of her own, and her will had been duly witnessed and signed. For all he knew, she'd discussed it with Riley and they'd decided Heather and Jillian had more need than she. It wasn't his place to interfere, and he wouldn't do so.

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Patrick's conscience should be clear, at least his ethical one. His moral one still nagged at him, even while he relived that fiery fuck in the garden. He wondered if it was the kiss in the hallway that had set him off. That's what had started the buzz in his head and the aching throb in the rest of his body. His intentions were still knight-worthy when he went to find Riley, wet paper towel in hand to clean up any blood from her cut. *And then...*

A month of wanting, of walking around more hard than not, of beating off in the shower each night to her mental image, exploded into...wow. Patrick snickered. There was no other way to describe it. Being with Riley was...wow. He definitely wanted to do it again, like for the rest of their lives. It might be nice if he tempered his lust with a little respect for the woman. They hadn't even dated and here he was ready to homestead in her cunt.

And what about Riley? The fever—that's the only way Patrick could think of it—had taken her, too. She was as wildly desperate to have him as he was her. Would she be regretting that now? Cursing herself for going at it like dogs in heat when she'd feel her total focus should be on her great-grandmother? He hoped not. It might just kill him to know she had regrets. Any fault to be had should be his alone.

Patrick glanced at his fingers once more. The heat and throbbing in them had increased. The coin that had cut them was old. *In the days of yore, it was infused with poison to discourage thieves.*

He yanked the Fiona-induced fairytale to a halt. Thinking

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of the stories she dredged up did make him smile though.

“Hand still smart?”

He started at the sound of Riley’s voice as she walked into the kitchen.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Guess I was too deep in thought to hear you.”

Riley slipped into the chair across from him and rested her chin on her palm. “Look at all this food. If one more person drops off a casserole or cake or...”

It was a lot to eat. There seemed a constant stream of people dropping off food. The refrigerator was stuffed to the max. At least it saved the sisters from having to prepare anything. Everyone picked at it throughout the day and offered it to others who stopped by.

“How’s she doing?” Patrick asked.

“The nurse is with her. Gram told me to scoot.” Riley pushed to her feet and poured a mug of coffee from the pot on the counter. The all-yellow kitchen washed out her skin tone, making her look extra-pale. “Each time I’m sure she’s breathed her last, she rallies her energy and I think...”

Patrick didn’t know what to say. Fiona was one hundred years old. “You know...I want what’s best for her.”

Caught in the middle of taking a sip, Riley’s eyes locked onto his. The wealth of emotion he saw there took his breath away—gratitude, affection, want, maybe even the beginnings of love. Patrick wanted to wrap his hand around her waist and pull her astride his lap. To kiss her until the end of time and beyond. To dig his fingers into her hair, bury his nose in its

GYPSY FIRE

silk. And fuck her. God, how he wanted to fuck her! More so now than ever before, because now he'd felt the heaven between her thighs.

"You...you keep rubbing your fingers."

Had she whispered or was the buzzing in his head drowning everything else out? Patrick glanced at his hand. Hot as it felt, he expected it to be red and inflamed. It wasn't.

"Mine's started to bother me, too," she said. "Maybe we should have the nurse look at it."

"Let me see." He held out his palm.

Without hesitation, she slipped her hand into his. Patrick's body shouted for joy. He pulled her near until he could span her waist with his other hand. Riley straddled his lap and draped her arms around his neck. Her lips were on his an instant later, tongue seeking his. He cupped her butt and hauled her close, wedging his cock against her core. They made a little sound in unison, tightened their hold, and deepened the kiss.

Her breasts squished against his chest, her nipples hard through all their layers of clothing as if begging for attention, as if they couldn't wait to have his mouth around them, suckling deep, twirling them between his teeth. A surge in his groin warned Patrick he was on the edge. He didn't care. He wanted her rocking against him, making him come in his trousers, feeling her own orgasm soak him. He dug his fingers into her ass, fighting the urge to slip them under her clothing and lick her from head to toe. He wanted to kiss her pussy the way he was kissing her mouth, deep and slow, while her juices

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flowed over his face.

They broke this kiss on a simultaneous gasp for breath.

“God, I’m on fire for you,” they said together.

Awareness froze them. There was that emotion again in her eyes. Patrick knew his mirrored it.

“Gypsy fire,” they said in unison and smiled.

The words banked the inferno consuming him, making it more controllable. Patrick didn’t want to move Riley from his lap. Still smiling, she traced her finger around his lips, then rested her head on his shoulder. He dug his fingers into her thick hair and inhaled the fresh-washed fragrance. That’s when he knew in his heart that she was the one.

“Stay with me tonight, Patrick,” she said softly against his ear.

He brushed his thumb over her back in slow circles. Tonight? Hell, he’d stay with her forever. “I’ll need to run home and get a few things. I won’t be long.”

She lifted her head. “Mind if I go with you?”

“If you do, I can’t guarantee it’ll be a fast trip.” The minute they walked into his apartment, he’d be all over her...if they made it that far.

They heard a throat clear and glanced up at the nurse standing in the doorway. The sadness in her dark eyes and her wringing hands said it all. Patrick knew it wasn’t the first time she’d had to deliver news like this, but that didn’t make it easier to do.

“She’s gone, isn’t she?” Riley asked.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Riley,” the woman said. “I’ll let

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your sisters know.”

“I’ll tell them.” Her shoulders sagged from the weight of those words.

Patrick lifted her chin on the crook of his index finger. “I’ll take care of everything. Okay?”

She nodded, pulled in a breath, and left to find Heather and Jillian.

* * *

Riley was expecting Gram to pass, but that didn’t make it any easier to handle it when she did. She was determined not to cry, because that’s what Gram had asked of her—no tears. By her own words Fiona Riley Hathaway had lived a rich, full life, well beyond the stretch of anyone’s years, imagination, and expectations. Her blessings were in her family, especially the three remaining. And even if two of them were disappointments as adults, Fiona still intended to see they got what they needed from the remains of her life.

Riley found Heather in the far corner of the living room. She was kicked back in the recliner, feet up, laptop computer on her thighs. Light from the monitor illuminated her frown, making her look ghoulish. She toyed with the pendant she’d snatched from Riley, absentmindedly rasping the coin back and forth on its chain.

“Gram has passed on.”

Heather’s gaze lifted to Riley. She looked...stunned, for lack of a better word. “I presume the attorney is taking it from here?”

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Riley laughed to herself. Patrick was a nonentity as far as Heather was concerned, and had been from the minute they'd been introduced. Always "the attorney," never by his name. Good only for what he could do for her...and no one else. It was how she treated everyone in her life, especially the men. Since her first marriage at age eighteen, Heather had had six more. The poor men were nothing more than dried husks by the time she was finished with them.

"Yes," Riley replied. "Patrick is taking care of the arrangements. Have you seen Jillian?"

"Outside somewhere. Gram sent her to get you."

Then she'd still be in the garden. "Thanks." Riley turned to walk away, then glanced back at her sister. Heather was grinning and not with joy. Riley half-expected a "bwa-ha-ha" from her. Brushing off her unease, she shored up her energy and left to find Jillian.

She'd moved as far as the garden bench where Patrick and Riley had made love. The phrase warmed Riley's insides. It might have been wild and frenzied, but it was making love.

Jillian was slowly plucking petals off a white rose. A pile of petals surrounded her on the bench, the ground. The spent stems had been tossed behind her. It was a common sight Riley recalled from childhood—Jillian upset and willfully destroying Gram's prized roses. The only difference now was that her sister was sitting on the bench, not hidden beneath one of the bushes.

"Gram just passed away."

She paused, fingers tweezered on a petal. "Now what do

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we do?”

“Patrick is taking care of everything.”

“As good as he’s taking care of you?” She glanced up at Riley from under her eyebrows, her blue eyes cold.

There were any number of responses Riley could have spat back. She chose, “You can be sure of it,” and a smile to go with that.

Defeated in her attempt to bait, Jillian dropped the rose and wiped her hands over her dark blue pants. “Now that we’re alone, what do you really think about what she’s let each of us?”

“I have the family mementoes and am happy as I can be.”

“Well, I’m not,” she said. “What am I going to do with this place? Yeah, it’s paid for but...”

It tied her down, and Jillian didn’t want that. She wanted money to be free to go when and where she pleased. “Then sell it,” Riley said.

Her eyes brightened at the idea. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Riley shrugged. “The house is yours now. It’s not for me to say. I just ask two things of you—let me remove the mementoes first, and please wait until after Gram’s ashes are scattered before doing so.”

She turned away without another word. Those tears she’d sworn she wouldn’t shed now threatened to fall. Any peace she might have found in the garden was ruined by Jillian’s presence. She hurried inside, intent on finding something to keep her mind occupied. People would be calling and stopping by to offer condolences, bringing yet more food. She’d start a

GYPSY FIRE

fresh pot of coffee, make iced tea, put out some of the desserts, dust, straighten, vacuum, change the bedding—

She jerked to a stop when she realized Heather stood in her path, and nearly collided with Jillian who was right behind her.

“Are we supposed to sit with her or something until they take her away?” Heather asked.

Riley wanted to shout out that they hadn’t wanted to be with her when she was alive, why did they want to now? She left it alone. No more turmoil. The glue that had held them together as sisters—their great-grandmother—was gone.

“No, I think we need to stay out of the way,” she finally replied. “I was going to busy myself with a little housework, preparing for condolence calls, then pack my things.”

Jillian frowned. “You’re leaving?”

“There’s no reason to stay. I want to go home.” And it would be too empty without Gram’s presence.

“Are you ladies doing okay?”

They glanced up at the sound of Patrick’s voice. He hovered in the entrance to the kitchen. All the paperwork relevant to their situation was spread out on the table behind him. Warmth rushed over Riley. Her heartbeat quickened.

Go get him, sweetness, and never let go.

I’m going to, Gram. And I won’t waste a single second.

“We’re fine,” she told him. “Just making plans to stay busy for the next several hours.”

“The doctor will be here soon to pronounce. The funeral home will be right behind him. I’ll move things along as

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quickly as possible. If you need anything at all, even if a shoulder to lean on, I'm here."

She expected a smart-ass comment from one of them, but they remained surprisingly quiet. Heather returned to her computer; Jillian to the garden to pull apart more roses.

"I'll be upstairs packing my things." Riley stepped into Patrick's space and pressed her palm to his chest. She loved the strength she felt there—sculpted like the land, warm like the sun, his heartbeat steady and strong like the surge of the ocean. "I still want you to stay with me tonight."

He wrapped his fingers around hers. "It's going to be a long afternoon, sweetheart. You might change your mind."

She stretched on tiptoe and brought her lips to within a whisper of his. "Never in a million years. Even if it's just to hold me in the night, I want you by my side." She kissed him, then left to pack.

CHAPTER 4

The fire was back in Patrick's blood, and so was the buzzing in his head. All from a simple kiss from Riley's soft lips. She'd managed to jumpstart his body the second she'd stepped up to him, but touching him? Now he knew why gorillas beat their chests and swung from trees.

Sucking in a breath, he plastered on his best attorney-face and got back to work. Fiona made that easy to do. She'd planned her final days down to the tiniest detail and then reviewed them each year and made appropriate adjustments. She'd left it up to Spencer and Sons to see those plans were initiated so "the girls won't have to worry."

Patrick had never thought the division of assets was equal

GYPSY FIRE

and he certainly couldn't guess at Fiona's reasoning. But Riley seemed content with the choice and that was all that mattered. As for the other two...he hoped settling Fiona's estate would see the last of them. Of course, if he and Riley got married...

He forced away his smile. He was supposed to be serious and business-like in the wake of Fiona's demise, not beaming over the impetuous and much-too-soon thought. He bet the old girl would be having a laugh at him if she were here. For all he knew, she was looking down right now, trying to do a little matchmaking from the other side.

The doorbell finally snapped him back to work. Patrick double-checked the knot on his tie and hurried to answer it. Anger replaced all his feel-good when he saw Heather ensconced in the corner of the room, mere feet from the front door. She rubbed at the pendant she'd ripped from his and Riley's hands, while she frowned at her laptop monitor. She acknowledged his presence in the same manner she did the ringing doorbell—by ignoring him.

Patrick swung open the door and waved the doctor in. The man gave him a polite nod and continued on to Fiona's bedroom. Heather's yelp jerked him back. Blood trickled from her finger.

"Someone get me something," she yelled. "I cut myself on this stupid coin."

Now that was what he called justice. Patrick couldn't help himself. "It is a powerful ally and a dangerous foe. Are you strong enough?"

Her eyes widened, shifted to the monitor, then bugged out

GYPSY FIRE

all the more. She jumped up. The laptop smacked onto the floor, shattering into pieces despite the carpet that padded its fall.

“Where’s Riley?” she screeched as she darted past him.

Before he could answer, Jillian walked up behind the befuddled doctor.

Heather jerked the pendant from her neck and shoved it into her sister’s hand. “You take it. I don’t want it anymore.”

Jillian didn’t hesitate. Her victory smile faded to a glare when she saw the trail of blood drops across the creamy carpet. She did an abrupt pivot and stomped after her sister.

Patrick motioned the doctor on. “I’ll take care of her. I’m sure it’s nothing serious. They’re a little on edge.” Like always, he said to himself.

The doctor nodded and went on. Heather was blubbering, Jillian was yelling, and he was getting the headache from hell. Patrick rushed to the kitchen to forestall any more disasters. Riley beat him to it.

“What in the world...”

Heather whipped around. “It cursed me! The damn coin cursed me!” She lifted her finger. “I think a sliver is in me. It really hurts. Get it out! Get it out!”

Patrick watched Riley fight laughter as she retrieved a pair of tweezers from the kitchen drawer. Holding Heather’s hand steady over the sink, she indeed pulled a sliver of metal from Heather’s finger.

Jillian and Heather kept on talking, each over the other, getting louder and louder.

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Riley smacked the tweezers on the counter. “What the hell is going on? Can’t you two have a little respect for once in your lives? Gram is barely cold in her bed and you’re at each other’s throats.”

“And you’re fucking *him*”—Jillian jerked her head toward Patrick—“in the garden while she was drawing her last breaths. How is that respectful?”

The running faucet covered the silence. Riley’s back stiffened like someone had shoved a rod up her ass. Patrick thought law school, common sense, and life had prepared him to handle anything. He was wrong. At that point he’d gladly welcome their shouting, if only to cancel out the last minute.

“Neither is you tearing apart every one of the roses you know she treasured.” The tension in Riley’s muscles belied her calm tone.

She shoved Heather’s finger under the running water. “Now...what happened?”

“The coin cursed me.” Heather rolled her hand from side to side, washing away the blood. “I checked Gram’s stocks. They were worth two million. Now they’re worth nothing.”

Riley propped her fists on her slender hips. “Then you made a mistake. Checked the wrong thing. Look again. I’m sure you’ll see—”

“I can’t. My laptop is in a thousand pieces all over the floor.”

Tears swam in her eyes. The first real ones Patrick would bet anyone had seen in a very long time.

“I’m telling you it’s the coin.” Her chin quivered with the

GYPSY FIRE

words. “It cursed me because I took it from you. Take it back.” She grabbed for the chain dangling from Jillian’s hand.

Jillian snapped it away. “No way. It’s mine now. I’m not giving it up.”

“Then you’re a fool.” Her sister twisted off the water and shoved past them to the door. The next thing they heard was her car speeding off.

“All mine.” Jillian smirked, tossed the pendant in the air, and caught it with one hand.

Not only did Patrick expect the thing to cut her, he wanted it to do so. The disappointment when it didn’t...

“They’re insane. That’s all there is to it,” Riley said after her sister sauntered away. “I’m adopted. I’ve always suspected. Now I’m sure of it.”

“Stolen by gypsies as a baby? Left on the doorstep?”

“Raised by wolves. Found in a clearing.”

He smiled. “In the days of yore?”

“Something like that. I need to finish packing.”

Patrick watched her walk away. His heart felt suspended in time. Riley hadn’t returned his smile, and he could guess why. Jillian’s words had sliced to the bone and poured guilt into the marrow. He felt it, too, seeping like a virus through his body. Anger was right behind the guilt. For the life of him, Patrick didn’t know who he was mad at—Jillian for sowing her poisonous seeds, or himself for letting them fester.

Riley might have thrown up a wall between them, but he’d be damned if he was going to let anything come between them. Not now, not ever. She was his, and if he had to spend

GYPSY FIRE

the night proving that to her, he would. For now he had his obligations, his job, to fulfill. He wouldn't let her down there either.

* * *

Riley shook as she shoved her clothing into her suitcase. She'd worry about wrinkles later. Right now, all she wanted was to put as much distance between her and—

She sat on the edge of the big canopy bed and hugged the post, pressing her burning fingers into the cool, white wood. What was she running from? Her sisters? The reality of Gram's death? This unquenchable need for Patrick? Or her own shame that she was indeed fucking him in the garden while Gram's last minutes ticked away?

Yet Gram knew what they'd done. She'd seen it in Riley's face, commented on it, and blessed it. *She was also on a lot of drugs.* Maybe Riley had only seen and heard what she wanted to in order to assuage her guilt.

They hadn't bothered with protection. Riley didn't realize that until now, a true testament to how carried away they were. Though she was on the pill, she still took those other precautions just in case.

She tightened her hold on the post, wishing the heat in her fingers would go away and take this unrelenting ache with it.

Gypsy fire.

Riley squeezed her eyes against the sound of Gram's voice in her head. Her imagination was running rampant now, imagining Gram with her, urging her on, stoking that fire the

GYPSY FIRE

coin had sparked. Nipples and clit throbbed with every beat of her heart, damming up blood that singed her veins.

Riley cursed the coin and the tales that fed their ingrained superstitions. She was as bad as Heather and Jillian, believing in the magic of that thin piece of metal. She didn't know which one of them was the most pathetic. Actually, she did. Heather and Jillian were behaving as they normally did. It was Riley who'd shifted her whole personality from respectful and considerate to horny and wanton. Her sole focus should be Gram, not on how wonderful it would feel to have Patrick's naked body on hers. If he walked in right now—

She jumped when he appeared in the doorway. Riley stared at him in dumbstruck wonder. She'd never realized how large he was—not so much in size, but in sheer personality. His presence filled the room...and her heart.

“Mr. Baker is here from the funeral home. It'll be about thirty minutes until they leave with her.”

“Thank you. I'd like to see her out.”

Patrick gave a nod. “Understood.”

To be in his arms, wrapped tight and safe against the world. Bodies sealed. She forced each breath from her lungs.

Go get him, sweetness.

Riley tore her gaze away. “Please shut the door. I need a few minutes alone.”

He hesitated, like he wanted to charge inside and fuck her senseless. God knew she wanted him to, wanted to jump up and drag him across the threshold, throw him on the bed and fuck *him* senseless. Long fingers wrapped around the

GYPSY FIRE

doorknob. Patrick swung the door closed on a soft click. Riley made herself sit there, not run after him. The effort pained her in ways she'd never imagined—ways she couldn't describe to herself much less someone else. But obviously her hand knew the cure.

It slid down her body as if it had a mind of its own. Riley shifted her hips forward, thighs parted. She yanked up her skirt and shoved her fingers into the waistband of her panties. Her clit was swollen and hard, peeking up from the folds that normally obscured it. Riley closed her eyes on a contented sigh when her fingers slid over it. She was slick with arousal and the remnants of their earlier love-making.

She wanted his tongue in her pussy, those broad shoulders shoving her legs apart while he plundered her labia. Riley drew circles over her clitoris and imagined him walking in. He'd storm into the room, fall to his knees before her, and clamp his mouth over her pussy.

Her hips lifted with the fantasy, rocking her back onto the mattress. She dipped her finger inside her cunt. His would have felt so much sweeter—longer, deeper, more adept. He'd know the right places to touch and explore them, all while he suckled her clit to orgasm and beyond, until she was limp from the pleasure. Then he'd crawl up her body, stab his big dick inside her...

Climax rolled over Riley. She clenched her jaw to keep any sound from escaping. Awareness seeped in slowly as the moment faded, and a new wave of shame with it—Patrick stood just inside the room watching.

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The heat rushing her before was nothing compared to her mortification now. She scrambled to tug her skirt down. No explanation in the world could cover the moment. He stood there, hard-on pressed against his pants, hands wrapped around the doorknob behind him, eyes half-glazed as he looked her over. Riley clutched her fists to her chest as if she were naked and trying to hide from view.

“I...” He cleared the rasp from his throat. “They’re almost ready.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

She wished he’d say something, anything—then found herself hoping he wouldn’t. And he didn’t. All he did was duck out, shutting the door behind him.

Go get him, sweetness.

* * *

Patrick paced a short loop in the hall. He rubbed his hand over his face, his head, his neck, everywhere but where he most needed rubbing. God, she’d been a beautiful sight, lying there making herself come! He wished he’d been there the whole time, instead of just those final few seconds. As it was, he’d been frozen in place, as transfixed by the moment as Riley had been.

He’d had the sense to close the door, but couldn’t remember doing so. Her coming was the only thing in his head. He’d never gotten a hard-on so fast in his life. Instant erection...not even a blink and it was there. And there it remained. He could walk a groove down to the foundation and

GYPSY FIRE

it still wouldn't go away. That left only one choice—not necessarily the one he really wanted.

He dashed into the nearby bathroom and shut and locked the door. Braced against it, he pulled in rough breaths. He couldn't return to working with a hard-on preceding him into the room by eight inches. Anyone might notice. The other men might ignore it, but Jillian was a ticking bomb. He had a reputation to uphold for himself and his family's firm. Jillian's poisonous tongue would taint it all.

Patrick squeezed the animal in his pants and fought a losing battle for control. A tap on the door almost help him win it, giving his common sense the jolt it needed.

"It's me," Riley said from the other side.

And his cock was victorious again.

Without a word, he clicked open the lock. The knob turned. Riley eased inside, those beautiful blue eyes focused exclusively on him, reaching to his heart. Through a haze of want, he heard the door shut, the lock seated once more.

She sank to her knees before him, fingers making quick work of his belt and zipper. Material slithered off his hips, down to his knees. She licked her lips and parted the tail of his shirt. Patrick's fingers shook as he freed the bottom two buttons to give her better access. He should have been telling her no, insisting they stop. He thrust his cock toward her mouth instead, watching the pearly drop of pre-cum get larger and larger.

Riley's tongue darted out, catching the liquid on the tip. His knees buckled. She raked her nails lightly over his

GYPSY FIRE

stomach, setting off goose bumps and quivers. Patrick combed his fingers deep into her thick hair, urging her to suck him. She flashed her tongue down to the root of his cock and up the underside. He swallowed the urge to groan. A gasp still escaped him.

Warm hands swooped to his ass. She kneaded deep into the muscles and looped her tongue in circles around his glans. He braced against the wall and thrust forward, silently begging for the heat of her mouth. Another flick along the slit sent more fire to his aching balls. He spread his legs as far as his clothes would allow. Riley rewarded his efforts, cupping one hand around his sac, weighing his testicles while her fingers drummed a soft rhythm around them.

She explored further, nudging at the tight hole behind his balls. Patrick's brain shut down. Mindless gasps heaved from his lungs. Riley pressed deeper, determined to breach the sphincter muscle. His cock and balls felt like stone. Weight settled in his pelvis. In one swift moment, her finger plunged against his prostate and her mouth sucked his dick into nirvana. Orgasm seared from him in steamy jets urged on and on by that glorious tongue feathering around him and the finger massaging inside.

Patrick sagged against the wall, brought down to earth by Riley's gentle licks and kisses. His hands were still buried in her red hair. He never wanted to let go. She worked her way up his body until she was standing. He clutched her to him and kissed her hard and deep. He tasted the hint of his jism in her mouth and wished he had the taste of her pussy on his to add

GYPSY FIRE

to it. A sound in the hallway pulled them from the moment.

“I’m sorry, honey. We need to—”

“I know,” she said.

“I’m still going to see you tonight.” It wasn’t a request or a question. Patrick was going to see her tonight and every other night for as long as they lived. Nothing—not her sisters’ ravings, magical coins, or hell freezing over—was going to stop him.

Riley glanced up at him. Long lashes framed the fire in her blue eyes.

CHAPTER 5

Seeing Gram off was harder than Riley had anticipated. Mr. Baker and his assistants were respectful and courteous. Gram had made a good decision when she'd hired their services. Her doctor didn't dash off to the next patient either, giving as much time to Gram now as he would have if she were still alive. It said a lot about the type of woman her great-grandmother was.

Patrick stayed by her side, lending both emotional and physical support—an arm around her shoulder—when she needed. The fire that had consumed her had faded to a warm glow in her belly. In her heart she knew that was because she'd accepted Gram's "edict" and gone after Patrick.

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Whether he felt the same way...

Riley wasn't going to pick apart what he may or may not be feeling. She'd continue to honor this last gift Gram had given her.

"There's nothing more to do today," he said as he pressed a hug around her. "Fiona wanted the official reading of the will done as soon as possible. My father's scheduled that for tomorrow morning."

"That should relieve any concerns Heather and Jillian have." She tried not to snicker.

"I've left a message on Heather's cell and answering machine. If she doesn't show up tomorrow, the reading will have to be postponed. As far as I know, Jillian's still in the garden. I'll tell her before we leave."

"I'll go with you. You'll need a witness, in case she decides to attack or twist your words around later."

Patrick gave a short laugh. "She can twist all she wants. It won't do her any good. She won't get any more or any less than what Fiona has left."

He'd be surprised. Jillian and Heather thrived on disorder, and they could bring a lot of that to everyone's lives.

They fell in step beside each other as they walked out the back door toward the garden. Riley crossed her arms to keep from lacing her fingers through Patrick's. Jillian would have jumped on that in a millisecond.

They found her further inside the garden, on a new perch, with new destruction piled around her. Blood spotted her hand in a dozen places, and she scowled at the wounds as she

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picked at her palm.

“What happened?” Riley asked.

Jillian shot a glance to them. “Damn thorns everywhere.”

It couldn't have happened to a nicer person. Riley didn't bother to offer assistance.

“There'll be an official reading of Fiona's will tomorrow at ten at the office,” Patrick told her.

Jillian returned her attention to her hand. “Good. How soon can the house be mine?”

“Fiona wanted things done as quickly as possible. We'll do our best to expedite matters. Fiona also anticipated a certain transition period for everyone. You'll be allowed to take up residence immediately.”

He was calm, logical, knowledgeable, understanding—all qualities anyone would want in a lawyer. The tone of his voice, coupled with his expression and easy-going body language, made Riley all melty inside.

“Thanks.” Jillian snapped to her feet. “I'm also going to want a full accounting of the hours you bill for this job, just to make sure you don't charge us for the time you spent fucking Riley.”

The attack should have shocked Riley, but it didn't. She clutched her fist at her side and watched the twitch in Patrick's jaw as he struggled to rein in his anger.

“I haven't,” he shot back. “But I did charge double for the bullshit I've had to put up with from you.”

A deep flush mottled Jillian's face. Riley suspected it was more from rage than embarrassment. Patrick didn't see it.

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He'd turned his back on her.

"I'll see you later." He dropped a kiss to Riley's lips, then strode away.

Riley pulled in a breath and tried to stare her sister down. She wondered if shaking Jillian would put any sense into her nasty, little head, and would have done so if she didn't think Jillian would file assault charges against her. She racked her brain for the perfect get-even phrase to hurl her way. Nothing came close to Patrick's comeback.

"I want you out of my house," Jillian said.

Riley smirked. "Not a problem. I'm already packed." She pivoted on the ball of her foot and walked away before she gave in to the urge to pick up a rose stem and beat Jillian with the thorns.

"I want all the family crap she gave you gone, too," Jillian shouted out. "And that gawdy costume jewelry."

Riley flicked her off and kept walking. She'd put as much as she could in her little four-door sedan and pray Jillian didn't destroy what she left behind.

* * *

Riley's heart lurched when she saw Patrick waiting on her screened front porch. He'd made himself comfortable by sprawling on the padded glider swing she had there—so comfortable she wondered if she'd awakened him. Seeing his smile, the way his presence filled the entrance, chased away the residual anger from dealing with Jillian.

While she'd stuffed her little car to the frame with boxes

GYPSY FIRE

from Gram's house, Riley wondered if that last encounter with her sister had made Patrick want to run as far from her family as he could. He had to be wondering when Riley would turn to the dark side like her sisters. Yet there he was, genuinely happy to see her, judging from the joy on his face and the erection in his jeans.

It was the first time she'd seen him casual, and he looked as great in jeans, sneakers, and a red polo shirt as he did a suit. He'd look even better without anything on at all.

He trotted down the five cement steps that led from her house and hurried her way. Heart thumping like a jackhammer, Riley cut the engine and swung from the car.

"I was getting worried and about to call you," he said. "What's all that?" He motioned to her car.

"Let's just say Jillian didn't stop when you left. I took all of Gram's jewelry, photo albums, family bibles, and anything else that would classify as a memento. I focused on the things I thought were most important." She gave a little laugh. "I doubt I'll see any of the other stuff. Jillian's on a full tear."

Patrick's arms wrapped around her. She settled her cheek against his chest and let peace surround her.

"I know I shouldn't have taken the things yet, but please don't give me any legal lectures about it right now."

He dropped his hand to her butt and tugged her close. "I wouldn't dream of it, especially since I'm no longer working on the case."

Riley drew back. *Damn Jillian to hell and back.* She'd had him fired.

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Patrick smiled and rubbed his thumb over the furrow between her eyes. “Relax. I removed myself to avoid any hint of a conflict of interest. Now I can do *this* and no one can say a word about it.”

Riley squealed when he knelt before her and burrowed his head under her skirt. “Just the *neighbors*.” She giggled and smacked him. “Stop that.”

“Are you sure?” His response was muffled, his hot mouth working up her thigh.

“Uh...” Would yes and no work? “I have food in the car that will spoil? And don’t you even say there’s only one thing you want to eat.”

He jerked his head free. His tousled hair begged to be played with.

“Even if it’s true?” Standing, he braced his hands on the car at either side of her, shielding her from the world, nailing her in place with the press of his cock. “What if I toss you over my shoulder, run inside with you, and throw you on the bed?”

“Won’t fumbling to unlock the door ruin the moment? Break the momentum?”

Patrick bent to her neck and inhaled. “God knows I need something to slow me down. I want to take my time loving you. That’s hard to do when all I want is my dick inside you...any and every part of you...coming until I’m dehydrated. I want to suck those hard nipples that nudge at my chest. I want to taste your pussy, to make your clit as hard as your nipples.”

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She sighed and arched her neck when he nuzzled below her ear. “It already is,” she softly replied. “It needs you. I need you.”

One hand spanned over her back, down to the curve of her buttocks. “I want you naked and writhing beneath me. Us tangled in the covers until dawn. I want to plant my seed deep in you, Riley, then watch you bear our children. I want to be a hundred years old, sitting on the porch swing, watching the hot young couple across the street make out.”

Emotion swamped her. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Some people would tell them it was too soon to be talking of love and planning a lifetime together. But Riley knew—only Patrick could stoke gypsy fire and only he could quench it.

“Help...help me unload the car,” she managed to say. “Once I have you in me, I don’t want anything to interrupt us.”

“I couldn’t agree more, sweetheart.” He sucked her ear lobe between his lips. His arm around her waist was the only thing that kept her upright.

He raked his mouth along her jaw until he reached her lips, then drew them into his one at a time before he butted his forehead against her on a hard breath.

“Okay...I think I can walk now.”

Riley giggled and gave his shoulder a playful nudge. She knew exactly how he felt. Her pussy was so damp it’d squish with every step. A wink and pat to her hip parted them.

He walked to the passenger side of the car and eased

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Gram's jewelry armoire from the back seat with much more care than what she'd used placing it there. "It doesn't feel too sturdy. Your bedroom?"

"One of the spare rooms for now...the middle room on the left will be good. I can take my time looking through things there." She snagged the keys from the ignition, grabbed the baked ziti she'd taken from the dozens of casseroles at Gram's, and headed for the house.

It was a simple layout—the screened porch fronted the house, the door opened into the living room on the right, dining room on the left with the L-shaped kitchen off of that, which connected to the hallway leading back to the living room. Another hallway leading to the three bedrooms and two baths intersected it. Like Gram, she'd kept the walls bright, choosing off-white as opposed to her bright white. Though sparsely furnished, she used bold colors to offset each room—shades of blue, green, gold, red, and purple wherever the mood struck. She treasured Patrick's wide smile when he stepped inside.

"Wow!" He did a quick look around. "It's beautiful...but I had no doubt." He gave her a sheepish grin. "Actually, I never really thought much about it. But it is beautiful, welcoming, and homey. I like it."

She appreciated the honesty and the compliment. They went their separate ways—Riley to the kitchen with the casserole and Patrick to the spare bedroom with the armoire. Then they met back up on their way outside for the next load.

Again to his credit, he showed more respect for Gram's

GYPSY FIRE

things than Heather and Jillian ever had. He didn't just grab the boxes up and plop them anywhere, but took great care in their handling, respecting them for the sentimental treasure they held. Most guys would have rushed and shoved them anyway, hoping the sooner he was done the sooner he'd have sex. Patrick had more class than a thousand men.

"That's everything from the car," he said when he set down the last carton of photo albums. "Do you want to go back to the house and get more?"

Riley shook her head. "I don't want any more sister-drama tonight."

Patrick nodded. "Understood."

Having had more than his fair share of dealings with them, she knew he did.

"I hope you don't mind"—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—"I have my duffel bag with shaving gear and a change of clothes. Okay if I bring it in?"

If he hadn't already captured her heart, that would have done it for him. They'd had animal sex twice, she'd asked him to stay the night, he'd claimed her as his bride and future mother of his children, and he still had the courtesy to ask if he could bring in a duffel bag rather than be a presumptuous jerk about it.

Riley slipped her arms around his neck. "Absolutely. I'll put the ziti in the oven to warm, uncorked a bottle of wine, maybe run a bubble bath."

He wrinkled his nose at the last.

"Too much?" she asked with a laugh.

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“Yeah...I don’t do bubble baths.” From the expression on his face, he acted like she’d suggested he soak in hot lava.

She dotted kisses along his jawline. “Too girly?”

“Too crowded. Someone has to take the faucet side and that’s damned uncomfortable. The water gets too cold, too quick. I like my bath just like I like my women”—he dug his fingers into her ribs and tickled—“hot and wet.”

Riley squealed and half-heartedly squirmed away. Patrick ducked, tackled her around the waist, and hoisted her over his shoulder.

“Careful there, big guy,” she said. “If you throw your back out, the only one writhing on the bed will be you.”

“I’ll have to make sure it goes out when you’re under me then.” He ran down the hallway toward her bedroom.

Laughing hard with every bounce, Riley clutched his shirt in her fists to keep from falling. When they reached her bed and he swung her onto the mattress, she stripped his shirt up and over his head.

“Efficiency.” He grinned. “I like that. But before you have me naked and at your mercy, I need to get my bag. I finally had sense enough to grab a box of condoms. I can’t apologize enough for—”

Riley pressed her fingers to his lips, tracing her thumb over his smooth chin. *Aww, he shaved, too. No five o’clock shadow.*

“I was there, too, and should’ve said something,” she said. “I have condoms in the bedside drawer if you want to use them. I’m on the pill, though, and clean.”

“I’m good, too. I meant what I said...I want children with

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you. But I want a little time for us first.” He sucked her fingers into his mouth, tracing each digit before he eased away and licked a circle into her palm.

Riley’s body tightened. She looped her leg around his hips, trying to bring him up tight to her pussy. He peeled it away with a grunt and stood. His chest was as magnificent as she’d imagined—smooth and sculpted, meant for exploring or cuddling. A faint line of dark hair darted from his navel into his jeans, pointing to the erection that ridged his fly.

He toed off his sneakers as he flicked over the button and jerked the zipper down. “I want to see you,” he said, his voice low and raspy.

Riley tore her gaze away from the promise of seeing his cock and peeled her sweater over her head. Her bra followed as she kicked off her shoes.

“Leave the panties on,” he said when she reached for the zipper on her skirt. “I want to peel those off myself.”

Nipples and clit hardened all the more at the thought. She wiggled the skirt off, then stripped the chenille bedspread down to the foot of the bed and patted the soft, emerald green sheet beneath it in invitation.

“Play with your tits. Give your nipples a taste of what they’re going to feel when my hands are on them.”

“God, Patrick,” she gasped out. “You make me close to coming and you haven’t even touched me yet.”

“Now you know how I feel...how I’ve felt for the last month.”

She squeezed her breasts and flicked her thumbs over her

GYPSY FIRE

nipples. Patrick groaned and licked his lips. The zipper came down, jeans and boxers off. That beautiful penis sprang free and proud at a hard, long forty-five degree angle.

She pushed her breasts into a deep cleavage. “Put it here,” she whispered.

He didn’t argue or hesitate. Careful not to crush her, Patrick straddled her body and plunged his cock into the valley she’d created. Fingers curled around the headboard. Muscles bunched in his arms as he fought for control. A pearly drop of semen oozed from the tip of his penis. She caught it on her tongue, then traced the slit.

“Honey...” He gasped and starting thrusting.

His balls felt like stones against her chest. Riley wiggled into them and pressed her breasts tighter around his cock. With each stroke that drove his glans beyond its nest, she lashed her tongue around it. Eyes closed, lips parted, head tossed back, Patrick looked like he basked in the wonder of it all. She’d done this for him, made him feel...supreme. Riley wrapped her lips around his cockhead and sucked.

“Oh...baby...I...” The headboard rattled as he came.

She drew him deeper into her mouth, taking all he had. Hard pants heaved his chest. His nipples were as hard as hers. He released the headboard slowly, then stretched out on top of her.

He kissed her lips—one, then the other, then both—teasing her with a touch of tongue, but not going deep. Down her throat to trace the well at the base. Over to one ear where the lobe begged for attention. Nipping down her neck until she

GYPSY FIRE

was writhing against him...and then the other side.

She held on to his strong shoulders, letting herself feel it all, arching into him when he seized her breasts in a suckle that pierced pleasure down to her clit. He took his time, kneading one over and over before moving to the next, then starting all over again, until Riley whimpered with the need for attention lower.

Patrick glided down her body. She parted her legs wide, not so silently begging him to take her, to make her come. A new hard-on brushed against her thigh. She wanted it. She wanted it now.

He screwed his tongue into her navel. A moan lifted her hips off the bed. He grabbed the elastic waistband in his fist and yanked down her panties, toyed with the crack of her ass, then hauled them toward her feet.

Riley pulled one leg free. Kneeling before her, he caught it and sucked at her ankle. Soft nips worked his mouth up her calf to the back of her knee, then he eased her leg to the bed and settled there. He urged her thighs apart with deep caresses of his hands. She splayed them apart, desperately wanting what he had to give.

Those fingers found her first, burrowing deep inside and right to her G-spot. Riley gasped and raised higher, offering him another portal as well. He pushed a finger against her tight anus.

“There’s KY in the drawer, too,” she burst out.

“Sweetheart”—his breath touched her pussy—“you’re so wet, you don’t need it for this.” He drew his fingers out and

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smear her juices lower, then breached all barriers as he sucked her clit between his lips.

She grappled for a handhold on her pillow and rode his mouth. His tongue, sucks, and thrusts of his fingers... *God!* Orgasm rushed to the peak. Riley froze and then rolled her crotch into the release. Patrick cupped her hips with his free hand, cushioning her return to earth.

He eased from her slowly and crawled over her body to reach the bedside table. His hard cock traced a trail of pre-cum over her belly. Riley rubbed a lazy hand over it, massaging it into her skin.

Patrick snagged a condom and the lubricant from the drawer. His gaze locked onto hers. "Can I?"

Riley swallowed the knot of lust that rode up. He could only want to use them for one thing. She replied by rolling to her belly, lifting her hips to him, and shoving the pillows under her stomach.

"If it hurts—"

"It won't." She brushed her hand against his thigh. "Not with you."

He kissed her down the spine right to the tip. Her body pulsed from the sound of the condom package tearing open. She sucked in a breath when a generous gob of cool lubricant touched her anus. Patrick worked it slowly, probing with one finger and then a second to relax the muscle. That alone made her clit swell and demand another orgasm. She flexed her fingers into the mattress to keep them out of her crotch.

Patrick traced the head of his dick along her slit from clit

GYPSY FIRE

to anus, then slowly pressed into that tight ring. It breached the passage easily and he froze to give her time to adjust—or maybe it was he who needed time to do so.

“If I thought I could stand it, I’d take that dildo I saw in the drawer and plunge it into your pussy,” he said. “But the feel of it vibrating... I’d come in a nanosecond.”

Groaning at the thought, Riley pushed against him, seating him deep.

“Aw, shit,” he said on a rush of breath. “You make me want to do that anyway.”

Arm braced around her waist, he reached over and fumbled in the drawer until he grabbed the dildo. The soft buzz set her body on alert for sheer pleasure. She wiggled her hips against him.

“Stop that.” He smacked her butt cheek.

Riley’s giggle morphed into a moan when he touched the tip to her clit. She sucked in a gasp and tossed back her head. He eased the toy inside, groaning loudly at the contact. Slow thrusts eased him in and out. Sensation rolled outward from deep inside. Somehow he kept the vibrator seated and still managed to flick his thumb around and around her clit. Her climax built quickly, as Riley knew it would. Nothing could make her come quicker than anal play.

She squeezed hard, wanting him to come with her, and instead yanked her own orgasm front and center. Delicious waves pooled out. She sighed and moaned and rocked against him. His body shook with the tension of holding back. She wiggled again, determined to make him come.

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Patrick jerked free, pulled out the vibrator, and jumped from the bed. Long strides carried him to the bathroom. He returned seconds later sans condom, hard as the proverbial rock, and headed right for her. He rolled her to her back, tossed her legs over his shoulders, and stabbed his cock deep. Grabbing the dildo, he flicked it back on and pressed it against her clit.

Riley arched into him. “God, Patrick, just fuck me!”

He did. Hard, fast, deep, long...while the vibrator pulled one orgasm after the other out of her. He felt like a log of fire in her, getting harder and hotter with every thrust.

“I should take that dildo and put it up your ass,” she said.

He swallowed hard. Eyes closed. Jaw tensed. Cock harder still.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she whispered. “Me toying with you. Sucking you, while I fuck you with it. You’d be mine forever then.”

“God...sweetheart...I already am.” He plunged deep and came hard, growling as it spewed from him.

* * *

Soft kisses on her forehead pulled Riley from a contented sleep where she dreamed of little children with Patrick’s smile. He lay beside her doing just that—smiling. The scent of baked ziti drifted to her.

“You cooked dinner.” She rolled into him, wrapping her arm around his torso.

“Technically, I warmed dinner,” he said. “It’s ready and I

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have the wine uncorked. But...you need to see this.” He swung from the bed and pulled her to her feet. “I thought it was heavy for jewelry, but figured the armoire was made of real wood and that explained the weight. That wasn’t the case. Moving it must have jarred something. The bottom fell out. I can fix it, no problem, but...” He grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the room where they’d stored Gram’s things. “Come, look.”

She didn’t know whether she was afraid to do so, or so curious she couldn’t stand it. His excitement was contagious, and she craned her neck for a look before they crossed the threshold. One step in and she stopped. Papers were scattered across the floor; all contained Gram’s neat, flowing script.

Patrick squatted down and picked one up. “In the days of yore’...she wrote down the stories, honey.”

She knelt beside him and picked up one of hundreds of pages. The bottom of the drawer had popped out, dumping its contents. “She always loved using a fountain pen. Said she loved the feel of it gliding across smooth paper. It’s been harder and harder to find ink for hers.”

“Do you have it?”

The question implied he’d go back and fight Jillian for it if he had to. Riley was loving him more and more with every second.

“Yes. It was in her wooden lap desk and I made sure that came with me.”

Patrick fanned the pages farther apart. “Look at this.”

She tore her gaze away from the story she was reading and

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saw a necklace of silver coins lay hidden beneath the papers—three rows with one coin missing from the center of the top strand.

Tears Riley swore she wouldn't cry burst out. Patrick folded his arms around her, then sat on the floor with her cradled in his lap. He rocked her without a word, rubbing circles on her back, brushing kisses to her forehead.

"I'm going to miss her, Patrick."

"I know. But she's only as far as right here." He tapped her temple. "And here." He pointed to the stories she'd painstakingly recorded. "And here." He pressed his fist to his chest.

Riley hugged him tight. "It's definitely a rich legacy. Can you imagine the joy in our children's faces when they hear these?"

"Yes, sweetheart." He kissed her forehead. "I can imagine it very well."

CHAPTER 6

Riley was surprised Heather and Jillian had managed to show up for the reading of Gram's will. One, because they both already knew the contents, and, two, because they both looked like shit. Heather's eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed by dark half moons—like she'd been up all night crying. Jillian's hand was swollen from the rose thorns, some of which were still embedded. Her left ankle was wrapped in an elastic bandage and red welts dotted her skin.

Riley swore she wouldn't ask them what was wrong, but curiosity got the better of her. "Bad night?" she asked Heather.

Her sister stared at the forest landscape painting on the opposite side of the waiting room of Spencer and Sons. "I kept

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checking the stock all night. Nothing's changed."

"They don't update those things constantly. Plus, I think you must have misread. Gram's stock was never worth two million dollars. It was two hundred thousand at its highest."

"That's what it was this morning and yesterday," Heather admitted.

"Then it *is* possible you misread?"

She closed her eyes as if considering it, then shook her head. "No, it was two million. The coin made me see it wrong, made me think I was getting something I wasn't."

Always someone or something else was at fault, never Heather.

"Don't get me wrong." She grabbed Riley's arm. "I'm more than grateful for what I've got."

At least that was a change. Time would tell how long she'd manage to make her inheritance last. Riley hoped she used it to get back on her feet and stay there.

She turned to her other sister. "And what happened to you? You look like you got into a fight."

Jillian shot her a glance from the corner of her eye. "I feel like I did...with the house. Those termites found a new section of the front porch...so did I. When I fell, I hit the wall and jarred a nest of hornets loose from the eaves."

Riley wanted to laugh so badly, but the last thing she needed was a full-scale skirmish at Spencer and Sons. "The exterminators fumigated and cleared the house. It couldn't be termites. Maybe you tripped on"—*your own two feet?*—"on a loose board. The contractor who did the repair suggested it

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would be a good idea to rework the entire porch.”

Jillian shrugged. “I think the house hates me. It creaks and groans. Branches from the trees scraped the windows and roof all night.”

Riley frowned. The trees weren’t close enough to do all that. But she kept her mouth shut.

The door to Joseph Spencer’s office opened, and he and Patrick walked out.

“If you ladies are ready...”

Patrick motioned them into the adjoining conference room. Though he’d removed himself from the case, he would still sit in on the reading to assist his father and them with any questions that might arise. He was more familiar with things that had occurred the last month with regard to Gram’s affairs than his father or grandfather.

They walked into the small conference room in single file. Carafes of coffee and water sat on a smoky gray glass table. Cups with saucers, spoons, and already-full glasses of water were at each of their seats, with packets of sugar and creamer within easy reach.

“Please, help yourselves,” Joseph said as he slipped into one of the three seats at the end of the table. Patrick sat beside him and Riley took the first side chair next to him.

She saw in Joseph Spencer the same compassion, consideration, and knowledge she’d seen in Patrick. Their children would have that, too, one day. The thought made her smile. She laced her hands on her lap, instead of reaching for Patrick’s—another attempt to prevent a skirmish.

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Heather's hand shook as she poured out coffee. Somehow she managed to hit the cup and not the table.

"Good morning, ladies." Joseph gave them a warm smile. "I know this has been a difficult time for all of you."

More difficult for some than others, judging from her sisters' battle-weary appearances.

"Fiona wanted to advise you all of the contents of her will, and I understand she managed to accomplish that wish prior to her passing. Correct?"

They nodded and followed up with a soft, "Yes."

"She made all her final arrangements years ago, as you all know. She wanted no memorial service, wanted donations made to favorite charities as opposed to floral tributes, and opted for cremation. Her remains will be available for scattering in six to eight weeks, and she asked that they be troweled into her rose garden."

Jillian actually jerked from that announcement, then winced. Riley pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. *It served her right.* That ought to stop her plucking the roses apart.

"As you know, the disposition of her assets is as follows—please understand this was what she wanted—her stock goes to Heather, house and contents to Jillian, jewelry and all family mementos and heirlooms to Riley, including the item known as 'gypsy fire.'"

Jillian yanked the pendant off her neck and tossed it toward Riley. "Take it."

The chain slithered free as she picked it up. Riley smiled

GYPSY FIRE

and rubbed the worn metal. It warmed her fingers. She couldn't wait to put it in the necklace with the others, where it belonged.

"I wasn't exactly finished yet, so please bear with me," Joseph said. "Riley is to receive the item known as 'gypsy fire' only after everyone has had what Fiona called 'a taste of it.' I presume that's the item." He pointed to the coin.

Again they uttered a small, "Yes."

He nodded. "I've always been a little confused by her wishes, but agreed to abide by them. She said to ask you all these questions and I would know by your responses if it was ready for its final home. She said you'd have no problem understanding. So...have you had a taste of gypsy fire and have you had enough? Heather?"

"Yes, take it. I never want to see it, hear of it, or touch it again."

Riley had never heard her more subdued.

He nodded again. "Jillian?"

"More than enough," she snapped. "Superstitious piece of—"

"And Riley? Have you had a taste of gypsy fire and is it enough?"

She smiled, her heart smiled, the world smiled. "Yes, I've tasted gypsy fire." She locked her gaze with Patrick's. "No, I'll never tire of it. It's found its final home...and so have I."

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* * *

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