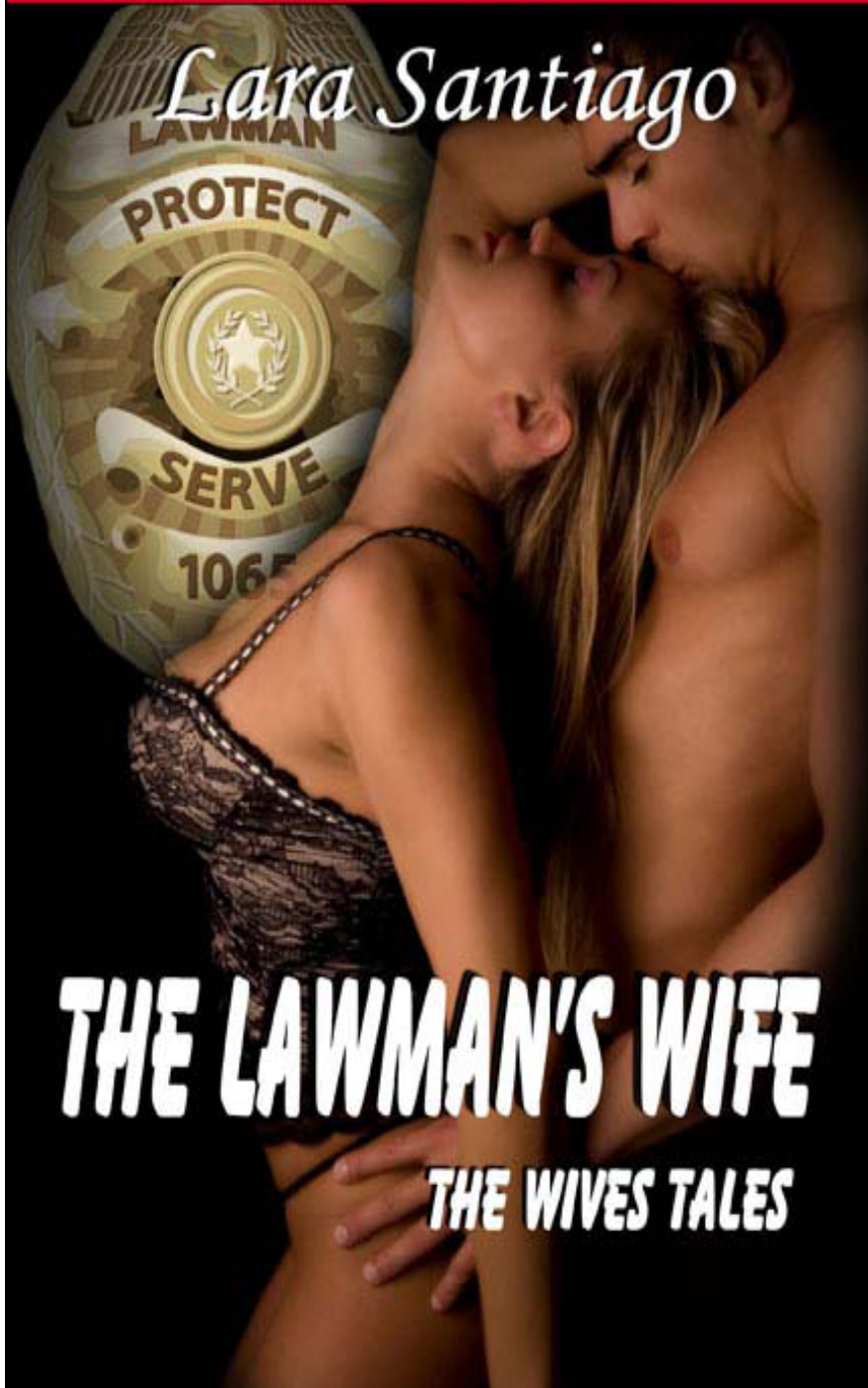


SIREN PUBLISHING

Lara Santiago



THE LAWMAN'S WIFE

THE WIVES TALES

The Wives Tales 3 The Lawman's wife

By

Lara Santiago

SEX RATING: SCORCHING

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SIREN SEX Rating

SENSUAL: Sensual romance with love scenes comparative to most romance novels published today

STEAMY: Heavy sexual tension; graphic details; may contain coarse language

SIZZLING: Erotic, graphic sex; explicit sexual language; may offend delicate readers

SCORCHING: Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

SEXTREME: Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

Lara Santiago

The Wives Tales, Book 3

The Miner's Wife : The Executive's Wife : The Lawman's Wife

The Executive pays a fortune to wed, the Lawman pays a pittance to marry, and the Miner fights an enemy for his bride. Three women auctioned off to genetically bred strangers in separate venues are uniquely destined to discover love in unusual places.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

"With intriguing plots, sassy heroines, scrumptious heroes, and scorch-your-fingertips sex, Lara Santiago's Wives Tales books should be on every reader's must-have list." —Leslie Kelly, Award Winning Author

The Lawman's Wife

In 2078, two years after the Tiberius Group's take over, women are adjusting to the new laws that make them virtual property of the men who marry them.

Grace Maitland desperately needs to be bid on at the public auction to avoid losing her daughter Emma, the only thing that matters in her life.

Interstellar Federal Lawman Jonathan Brent never expected to marry. However, seeing the troubled young woman who has haunted his many dreams up for bid at an auction makes him overrule his common sense. He buys a wife for the pittance of ten dollars.

Having a ready-made family is surprisingly heartwarming after the life Jon has led, but Emma's biological father, a sexual vampire released from prison after the testimony of his only accuser Grace is overturned, now demands custody of a child he's never seen.

Jonathan puts his impeccable Lawman's career at stake and goes on the run to protect Emma and keep Grace safe.

Sensuality Rating: Scorching Genre: Futuristic Length: Novel (53,000 wor

THE LAWMAN'S WIFE

The Wives Tales, Book 3

Lara Santiago

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book to my mom.

She is the perfect model from which all moms should be created. She's the template on which I based by own theories of motherhood: sacrifice, support, and most important of all...a great sense of humor.

Thanks, Mom, for always being there for me. Thanks for always being glad to hear from me. Thanks for understanding I'd rather write romances than mysteries.

Love you.

L

August 29, 2006

The Lawman's Wife
The Wives Tales, Book 3
By Lara Santiago
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Prologue

Earth, 2075 One year prior to the Tiberius Group takeover of the U.S.

Grace Maitland was petrified. She wondered if her heart would stop beating from sheer fright when she entered the tiny dark space...*if* she

entered. That pivotal move remained in question as she stood before the brushed silver doors waiting the deathtrap's arrival.

She lingered in the first-floor lobby of the archaic justice building, having been denied the stairwell access due to a fifty-five gallon drum of wax on the landing between the first two floors. Stairs were her single means of travel in buildings taller than one story, particularly in tall buildings with ancient elevators.

What was the stupid wax barrel doing in the stairwell in the first place? This was the twenty-first century, for pity's sake. And furthermore, why did they still wax the floors by hand instead of installing maintenance-free synthetic shine tiles?

"I can tiptoe," she told the maintenance man, who looked at her as if she were off her medication.

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"It's a safety risk," he insisted and directed her away, adding an exasperated "Just take the elevator!"

A riskier endeavor. She glanced one last time

at the slick, wax-coated stairs. The janitor closed the door and locked it, shutting off the pungent turpentine scent of the wax.

“Why do justice buildings always have to be a hundred years old with rickety elevators?” she asked the empty lobby as she waited for the elevator she wasn’t sure she possessed the courage to ride. She wasn’t due in the courtroom for an hour, but she was expected to arrive early to go over her testimony. They all wanted to know what she would say, what truth she would reveal. Actually, she wondered too.

Lights on the display indicated the elevator was rising from the basement parking garage, which was another dark place she would just as soon avoid.

The district attorney knew she didn’t want to testify. He’d threatened to send lawmen to ensure her attendance. She’d begged her way out of that inflammatory scenario. She had enough to worry about with the man she lived with, Danny, being perpetually pissed off and her sweet daughter, Emma, waking up so slowly in the mornings, without the added stress of lawmen to deal with too.

A sudden ping heralded the wretched elevator's arrival. The doors slid open in invitation. Grace's heart pounded. Dark wood paneling lined the car's interior like a casket. She tried to gather the courage to step forward. The space in the car wasn't deep, but looked fairly wide. Wasn't a wide, shallow elevator car safer to ride than a long, narrow one?

Her heart wasn't convinced.

She stuck her hand between the closing doors and they retreated.

"It's just an elevator, for pity's sake. People ride them successfully every single day. You can too, this one time," she said out loud and tried to build up some guts, but her bravery danced around her ankles, nowhere to be found.

The doors closed again, bouncing off her outstretched arms. They were waiting for her in the criminal division on the fifth floor. She closed her eyes, inhaled a deep breath, and squeezed her lids shut in primal fear.

Maybe, she thought, she could keep her eyes shut for the entire trip. Then she realized that was foolish since she'd yet to push the fifth-floor button. Admonishing herself for not having

learned Braille, she stepped forward and winced as her foot landed on the metal rails, where the elevator doors threatened to crush her in their steely maw.

The gaping crevice between the landing and the claustrophobic interior of the elevator car glared at her. She scrunched her eyes shut again at the thought of slipping through the space her foot spanned.

“In or out!” said a deep, irate voice from the inside of the elevator car.

Grace shrieked and jumped at the sudden realization she was not alone.

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“I beg your pardon.” She opened her eyes to a tall, dangerous-looking lawman she hadn't noticed ensconced in the space she was valiantly trying to enter. He leaned forward from inside the car. Gorgeous. The warm, soft gray of his eyes almost drove away her fear.

All she could think of now was sharing the tight, dark space with a lawman. A big one. One she had already angered with her foolishness.

“Listen, lady, this isn't the morning to

overcome your phobias. I need to go. So, in or out?” He gestured for her to make a decision.

“Of course you do. In. I choose in.” She nodded, but still hesitated. She wondered if she might overcome her fear of small places by riding with a hulking, six-and-a-half-foot lawman. A quick study of his stern face negated the thought.

He huffed out a long sigh and offered his hand. “Allow me to help you aboard.”

The look in his eyes said she should be grateful.

She put her hand in his, closed her eyes, and stepped onto the elevator. Once inside, she resisted the urge to pat herself on the back for the monumental task of getting on without screaming in tortured fear. The lawman’s hand was not soft, of course, but not rough either. She liked the texture and held on. He didn’t let go either, thankfully.

“What floor?” he asked. Her eyes popped open in time to see the doors close. She sucked in a breath as the elevator lurched upward and became momentarily distracted by the lawman’s spicy scent.

“I...what?” A second inhalation came with

the scent of his intoxicating cologne, and she was seriously unfocused by how attractive he was.

“I’m going to seventeen. If you want to stop before then, you’d better tell me now.”

The mere thought of being suspended seventeen floors over a shaft of air made her queasy. “Five. I need five,” she panted. Her courage darted back down to her toes.

The lawman stabbed the fifth-floor button with his thumb, and as he did, the elevator car shuddered to a screeching halt. Her eyes widened and she gasped.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” the lawman grunted, leaning forward to study the panel of buttons. “Damn ancient elevator.”

“Why aren’t we moving?” she wheezed and then realized she was still gripping his hand tenaciously.

“I pushed the button for your floor at a bad time. These old elevators are touchy.”

“Touchy?”

“Yeah. I should have pushed the button before we were passing your floor.”

“Now what?”

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He exhaled. “We give it a minute and try again.” He winked at her as if he went through this every day of his life. Perhaps he did.

She inhaled slowly and then let the breath out. “Maybe I can get a grip too,” she whispered to herself. She silently thanked the lawman for not freeing his hand from her bone-crunching grasp.

A hollow, grinding noise rattled above them. Her stomach shot to the floor as she and the lawman both looked toward the ceiling.

“That can’t be good,” she squeaked. Her desperation sounded like nails on a chalkboard. She wanted out of here. Now. She heard a high-pitched, whistling noise and was embarrassed to realize it was coming from her. She clamped her free hand over her nose and mouth as if she could contain the panic by cutting off her own airflow.

The lawman looked bored or perhaps irritated that the elevator wasn’t moving, at least until he heard her whimpering and glanced at her. He offered a comforting smile and then turned to the panel beside the door.

He punched a couple of numbers. Ten and twelve lit up, but the elevator didn't budge. He pushed the 'open doors' button a couple of times, which resulted in a new grinding noise that only unleashed more acid in her already nervous stomach.

She stepped closer to the lawman. Nothing short of a cattle prod to her wrist was going to make her release his fingers. Another ugly, protracted noise erupted, followed by loud thudding. She wished she could faint and end her misery.

Then the lights went out.

Grace released a prolonged, high-pitched scream and propelled herself into the lawman. She clawed at his chest one-handed until her free arm wound around his neck. Shaking, she buried her face into his throat.

The lawman bent slightly, pulled her against his chest, and whispered comforting words until the single tiny back-up light came on, barely qualifying as illumination. It sent spooky shadows around the small space.

"Are we going to fall?" She was crying now. "We're going to fall, aren't we?" Her voice

sounded as hysterical as she felt.

“No,” he said calmly, his voice muffled by her hair.

Ignoring the warm fuzzies his voice gave her, she wailed, “It really feels like we’re about to drop!” She climbed up on him further and wound her legs around his hips. Several metal things on his belt shifted as she tightened her legs around him.

“We won’t fall,” he said calmly. His arm squeezed her waist and he lifted her off what she thought was his gun, but she was too preoccupied with her life flashing before her eyes to care.

“Please don’t let go. Please don’t let me fall.” Grace clutched him as hard as she could one-handed. He curled their entwined fingers tightly and brought them into their

4 The Lawman’s Wife embrace.

“We’re not going to fall, and I won’t let go of you.” She let his deep, calm voice soothe her. She relaxed enough to release his hand from her death grip so she could promptly send it around his neck to squeeze him closer.

“We’re going to die, aren’t we? I’m going to die without ever getting a decent kiss!” She sobbed at the realization and buried her face in the lawman’s neck, inhaling his mouth-watering scent.

Seeing her life’s brief flashback had prompted her to remember the list of things she hadn’t accomplished. She hadn’t experienced a decent kiss. She hadn’t had sex since her daughter’s conception. And Emma was four. She lived like a monk with a man who pretended to care about her but was in fact mean, spiteful, and mired too deeply in his own self-worth to worry over her long list of things not yet done.

Grace worked three part-time jobs, kept Danny’s house clean, took care of her daughter, and nursed her sickly aunt. She rarely had the time or the inclination to search out a worthy man for a decent kiss. Now, she was going to die having never known what one felt like.

The lawman, to whom she was suctioned like a vacuum cleaner to a throw rug, felt very nice under her grip. Good gracious, he smelled good enough to eat. With her mouth pressed under his jaw, she was tempted to lick his face and take a taste. Her fear morphed into a very salacious

attitude. Before she plummeted to her death, she wanted one decent, soul-searching, tonsil-licking kiss.

She deserved it.

“Please. Please.” She pulled back enough to place her lips on his cleanly shaven jaw. “Please.” He cleared his throat, but didn’t stop her when she kissed his chin.

She planted her lips on the corner of his mouth, and her tongue darted out for a little taste of him. Delicious.

“Listen, maybe we should...”

“Shh. Please. I only want one, before I die.” Grace placed a hand on his face gently. She put her lips to his and counted silently to three. She risked rejection by parting her lips with utmost care and licking the seam of his scrumptious mouth. He didn’t move, but a heartbeat later, he twisted and slid his mouth over hers. They were a natural fit. He swirled his tempting tongue into her mouth to delve and explore. He teased her tongue with his stroking until she couldn’t resist, and soon they were wildly tangled together.

She inhaled him, tasted him, and as he fulfilled her wildest dream, craved more of him.

They shared a wicked dance of lips and tongues and promises in the near dark. His hand traveled up her spine from her mid-back until his fingertips plunged into the hair at the nape of her neck.

She ran her fingers along the closely cropped hair near his collar, loving the neat,

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clean line of his regulation haircut. His hair was soft and silky beneath her exploring fingers.

During the lip-licking, exceptionally worthy kiss being delivered by the lawman, whose name she didn't even know, it occurred to her if she didn't die, this might be a little embarrassing. But that flash didn't last long. Lawmen had always fascinated her. She loved their uniforms and their swagger. Her anxiety level dropped at the realization that the lawman would naturally protect her. That was what lawmen did. They protected people.

She was also in the frighteningly inky darkness, kissing a stranger as if they were long-parted lovers about to be separated again by circumstances beyond their control. The next item on her list of things not accomplished surfaced

like a blinking neon sign in her lust-filled mind. Sex. Sex. She wanted sex.

If she was hell-bound on this death car, she didn't want merely satisfactory sex—she wanted amazing sex. Unlike her first time. While her second experience had been ultimately horrendous in its aftermath, she had put the bad memory from her mind to focus on the good from it—conceiving Emma, and moved on.

However, she'd never felt the heights of ecstasy like the kind she read about in stories by her favorite author, Cinnamon O'Tingle. Her best friend, Marissa, told her over and over again that sex could be fabulous and amazing...with the right guy. She wanted fabulous and amazing sex. Just once, before she died.

If his kiss were any indication, the lawman attached to her knew about the heights of ecstasy. Her legs tightened. His tongue swirled decadently with hers and made her wet in places usually Sahara desert dry. Her new mission became getting the lawman to take her to fabulous heights so when they plunged to their deaths, she could go without regrets.

The lawman's other hand ran down her back

to her butt, and another pulse of moisture shot between her legs. His warm fingers branded her skin through her slacks. She quivered with the anticipation of experiencing sexual delights with this man

If his kiss could make her lose her fear of tight spaces and the imminent plunge to her death, sex with him might cure all her foolish fears.

She loosened her legs from around his hips and lowered them to the floor, sliding her body seductively against his all the way until her toes touched the floor. She pulled his torso down with her until she was kneeling. He bent over in half before he released her mouth.

“What are you doing?” he asked, and she noted he sounded slightly out of breath.

“I thought perhaps since you kissed so well, you might be amazing at sex too. I haven’t had any in almost five years, and since I’m about to die anyway...” She stopped talking and attached her lips to his once again, trying to express with her mouth what she was too nervous to say out loud. He squatted in front of her and braced a hand on the floor, and for a moment, she thought she had convinced him. Anticipation coiled

around

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her spine and sent an electric charge to the space between her legs now ready, willing, and able to be pierced with the heights of ecstasy and pleasure.

He broke from her desperate take-me-now kiss and promptly doused her plans for sex in the deathtrap.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'm not having sex with you in this elevator."

"But why not?" Grace was surprised. Her overriding urge to have sex with a gorgeous stranger evaporated quickly, replaced by anger. How dare he turn her down?

"This is a public elevator. I just hope the camera in the corner stopped recording when the lights went out."

She swiveled her head in the direction he was pointing. Then she stood up, squinting at the camera she could barely see. He straightened as well, towering behind her.

The lights came back on, and the elevator

moved slowly for a moment or two before there was a ding and the doors opened on the fifth floor as if nothing interesting had transpired.

“Your stop, I believe,” he said in a quietly amused tone.

Humiliation heated her cheeks. She was such a fool. A fraidy-cat fool who had accosted a lawman, no less, because of her fear of a stupid elevator. If it had been up to her, they’d be writhing on the floor half naked right now.

Thank heavens *he* had some control.

“Thanks,” she said in a whisper and lowered her head to exit.

He stopped her with a hand to her shoulder. “My name is Jonathan Brent,” he offered, leaning in closer. “I hope you won’t be afraid of elevators anymore.”

She shook her head. “I’m not afraid of elevators. I just hate small, dark places.”

He nodded and smiled. “Thanks for an interesting ride.”

“Sure.” She stepped off as supreme embarrassment engulfed her.

“What’s your name?” he asked as the doors

started to close. She turned her head, gave him a smile over one shoulder, and shook her head. He didn't need to know her name. He knew far too much already. He grinned boyishly as the doors closed. Jonathan Brent, the tall, gorgeous, dark-haired lawman with soft, gray eyes, fabulous kissing abilities, and a path she wished she could have followed.

"There you are! We've been waiting," said an impatient voice in the hallway. It was one of the men who worked for the district attorney.

"The elevator got stuck," she murmured and followed along behind his clipped stride, trying to keep up.

* * * *

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"What took you so long?" David Elliott asked when Jonathan Brent made it to the courtroom on the seventeenth floor. Elliott was another lawman and Jon's immediate supervisor. An evil beast named Andrew Nelson was about to go free unless the D.A.'s surprise witness provided strong enough testimony to put him away.

"Elevator got stuck," he murmured as the

salacious memory of the mystery girl licking his mouth slammed into his mind. “What’s happening with the witness?”

“The D.A. has her in his office going over her testimony. If she testifies Nelson raped her five years ago and the judge believes her, then our old friend Andy will be going away for a long while.”

Jon nodded. “Good.”

“Sorry we couldn’t get the evidence to put him away for Kevin and his wife.”

Jon winced as the final image of his former partner covered in blood slid uncomfortably into his mind. Andy Nelson had raped and murdered Kevin’s wife, and when Kevin had caught him in the act, Andy had butchered him. “As long as he rots in prison, I don’t care what puts him there. Why didn’t they have this witness during the earlier part of the trial?”

Elliott shrugged and sat behind his desk. “Didn’t know about her. She brought the very first complaint against Andy, but her case got postponed and never brought back up. Plus the idiot D.A. back then decided it was a family court issue and dropped the case.”

“Why?”

“She got pregnant from the incident.”

Jon felt regret for the poor girl even this many years later. “Who was it?”

“A sixteen-year-old girl he knew from his high school. A member of her family found her handcuffed in a small basement room after he violated her and left her there. He only cut her once. He didn’t have time to butcher her like the others.

“The parents brought him up on charges of aggravated statutory rape, but the case was postponed when the parents died in a car accident a year later,” Elliott read from a file on his hand-held computer.

“Poor kid.” Jon hated violence against women and instantly thought of his two older sisters. He made a mental note to call and make sure they were safe.

They discussed a few more details of the case until it was time to leave for the hearing down the hall. Jon sat at the very back of the courtroom. The defendant, Andy Nelson, was brought in with his sleazy lawyer. The D.A. stood opposite them at his table and shuffled papers until the judge

entered.

“Have you brought your witness, Mr. Warren?” the judge asked the D.A.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“I renew my objection to this witness, Your Honor,” the sleazy defense lawyer

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said. Jon didn't usually hate lawyers so adamantly, nor did he think of them all as sleazy, but Andy Nelson's lawyer was the very definition of sleazy and the very worst of ambulance-chasers.

“Noted,” the judge replied curtly. He nodded to the D.A. “Call in your witness.”

A bailiff opened a side door and called out, “Mrs. Grace Maitland Cox.”

Jon, glad this unseen witness had been able to overcome the horrible trauma of her youth enough to get married, silently applauded her resilience.

The witness entered the courtroom and Jon's breathing stopped. The mystery girl from the elevator took the witness stand, placed her hand on a bible, and swore to tell the truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but the truth, so help her God.

He didn't hear her testimony, the weight of which actually swayed the judge enough to put Andy Nelson behind bars where he belonged for twenty-five years. The only fact reverberating in his head was that she was married and thus unavailable for him to pursue.

Which was a damn shame, since she was the first woman ever to have any impact on his usually dormant sexual desires.

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Chapter One

Earth, 2078 Tiberius Justice Center Two years after the Tiberius Group takeover of the U.S.

“What’s my first bid for this fine-looking little lady?” the auctioneer asked from the podium centered on the small stage.

“*What* fine-looking little lady?” someone called from the audience.

The auctioneer glanced at the empty spot where Grace was supposed to be standing, and frowned. She didn't want to go out to the stage. She didn't want to be bid on like last year's

merchandise now on sale at bargain basement prices. She wanted her daughter back.

They'd taken Emma into custody yesterday morning pending the outcome of today's auction. Danny had promised he would be out in the audience to rescue her today, but she was afraid to step onstage and find him absent from the proceedings. It wouldn't be the first time he had let her down, but after today, it might be the last.

"Come on out so they can get a look at you." The auctioneer motioned her over again, and she reluctantly shuffled out to the big X marked on the stage. X marked the spot for her final destruction.

"Let's start the bidding at a hundred dollars," the auctioneer announced to the small room. The rows and rows of folding chairs were maybe a fifth full, Grace noted. Not a big turnout today. That wasn't necessarily bad; she didn't want her bidding price to be driven higher than they could afford.

Once positioned on the X, she searched the darkened room for Danny and

breathed a sigh of relief when she saw him sitting next to his friend Walter in the last row. The stage lights above warmed her face. It made seeing the audience difficult, but at least she didn't have to worry any longer. Danny was here, just like he'd promised.

She would have to be especially nice to him tonight. He would certainly demand it after going out of his way to do this huge favor for her. A shiver of revulsion coursed through her at the thought of what he expected. He'd get his handcuffs out again. She put the ugly thought away for later. Instead, she concentrated on her only reason for continued existence: her daughter, Emma. Once Danny bid on her, she would get Emma back. Nothing else mattered.

Last night they had discussed how much money could be spent on her auction price, and Danny had calculated that a hundred dollars—the auctioneer's starting price—was the top end of what they could afford. She'd hesitated to tell him about the two hundred sixty-three dollars she had squirreled away for emergencies. She'd consoled herself with the knowledge that if the bidding went higher, she'd call out to Danny and tell him about the hidden money.

“Do I hear a hundred dollars for this fine young lady?”

The room was dead silent.

Grace knew that sometimes men simply raised a hand or finger or twitched their nose to bid. The auctioneer would then point into the audience, and the bidding would continue. Something was wrong, because the man at the podium stood silent. His finger remained still.

“Come on, men. A hundred dollars is the price of a fast food meal for four. Besides, we only have twelve women for auction today. I see more than thirty of you out there. Now, what’s my bid for this lovely young girl?”

The silence in the room bore down on Grace. Why didn’t Danny say something?

“All right then, maybe a hundred dollars is a bit rich for the first bid today. Does anyone have a bid? Any amount at all. Just call it out.”

Some whispering ensued. She frowned as the sound of snickering laughter came from the direction of the man who was supposed to rescue her. She’d spent years supporting him. Danny had finally graduated from college only because she had killed herself to pay for it. Now he was

supposed to return the favor and save her. What on earth was he up to? She'd been worried about him getting off his lazy butt to show up at all here today, but not that he would snicker and refuse to bid. He knew what was at stake: Emma.

The door at the back of the auction room banged opened, and a bright shaft of light from the outside hallway of the justice building silhouetted a tall form in the doorway before it shut, blocking her view. Grace couldn't see who'd come in, but she had deeper concerns anyway.

"Danny?" she called out in his direction.
"Why won't you bid?"

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"Hush now, little lady, you aren't allowed to speak during the auction."

"But..."

"But nothing. Quiet down now." The auctioneer turned back to the audience. "This is your last chance, gentlemen. So what's my first bid?"

Again the silence slammed into Grace, and she fought the urge to scream at the unfairness of it all.

The auctioneer heaved a long sigh and announced, “Well, I’m going to take a guess that you men out there want to see *all* the women before you start bidding. So I’ll send this first little girl back now and bring her out again one last time after you’ve seen all the other women available. You’ll see she’s a rare find for a man.”

The auctioneer motioned her back offstage. Grace heard more snickering and a bark of laughter in her wake. She paused and took one last look over her shoulder as she exited the stage. The next woman marched out to the big black X. Before the auction had started, Grace had heard the woman say there was someone out in the audience waiting to bid on her.

Grace had thought the very same thing, only she had been wrong.

She wanted to go out in the audience, punch Danny one, and demand to know what he was thinking. He could have bid twenty dollars so this humiliation would be over, and Emma would be saved. She closed her eyes, realizing for the umpteenth time that she wouldn’t even be here if someone hadn’t tattled on them.

Two days ago, a member of the Tiberius

Group Family Planning Center had shown up demanding to see their marriage license and adoption paperwork. The representative informed them an anonymous call had been received about a bogus marriage arrangement. Unfortunately, the proper paperwork didn't exist because she and Danny hadn't ever been married.

Danny had told her years ago that they were technically married because they had shared the same address for more than a year. He'd quoted an archaic rule called common law marriage, which he had read about in one of his college classes. She'd believed him, like an idiot.

The Tiberius representative said common law was invalid and cited them for living in sin, outside the bonds of marriage. Danny promptly told them he and Grace had never participated in any sexual activity. This information made the representative even angrier, and he asked where her nearest male relative resided. When he found out she didn't have anyone, he filled out an electronic form on the clipboard he held. He informed Grace in no uncertain terms that she would be participating in an auction in two days' time as an unattached female charge of the state.

No amount of arguing or uncontrollable

weeping had changed the pious bully's mind.

Thus, here she was, awaiting her fate and wondering what she had done to

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deserve this. Oh yes, she remembered. Once, a long time ago, she had made a terrible error in judgment. She'd been attracted to a good-looking boy from school who turned evil after she gave in to his advances. Grace realized once again the full extent of that blunder. Would she ever stop paying for that mistake?

She glanced at the auction house security guards. There were five of them to keep the twelve women up for auction subdued. If she made a run for it, they would shoot her like a rabid animal and deposit her in the nearest trash receptacle. Someone *had* to bid on her today. If she remained single after today's auction, her new home would be the Tiberius Institute for Orphaned Women. Worse, they'd take Emma away forever.

Once at the Institute, she'd be farmed off to a work camp to do menial tasks. Then, every three or four months, the Institute would put her up for

auction to the poverty-stricken hoards of men looking for sex partners. The Institute paid men a stipend to take women off their hands and marry them. The longer a woman remained in custody, the more the stipend went up.

At her last job, Grace had seen a couple of women who'd been purchased at auction from the Institute. Hunched over in perpetual acquiescence, they'd had a haunted look. Perhaps they were grateful not to be at the Institute any longer, but Grace thought the circumstances of their daily lives were only a small step forward. Until yesterday, she'd never imagined facing the same dilemma.

When Grace went back out for her final chance at auction, she'd have to beg someone to bid on her. She wouldn't lose Emma only to face a fate worse than death directly afterwards.

* * * *

Jonathan Brent entered the auction room on a mission: to find a scam artist named Walter Dennis. As scam artists went, he was fairly low-rent, but a couple of days ago he'd conned a magistrate's elderly mother out of some money and had consequently elevated his arrest status.

Elliott had gotten the heads-up from an anonymous call that Walter would be present at today's auction at the Tiberius Justice Center, so he'd sent Jon to pick him up. If Walter was there and Jon made the arrest, the caller would get a reward sent to a private account. All snitches were graciously protected under Tiberius rule, especially the anonymous ones.

Jon signed the electronic registration sheet, and the clerk handed him a bid number. If he wanted to, he could kill two birds with one stone and acquire a wife today as he slapped handcuffs on Walter. He let out a disgusted breath at the way women were treated with regard to marriage. He had the utmost compassion for them, having grown up with a very loving mother and two tolerably pleasant older sisters. But even if he did find the perfect woman here today, he would never bid on her.

Career lawmen didn't have time for wives, in his opinion. He was away from home four to six months a year chasing scumbags across the galaxies, and being a

lawman's wife was not the lonely life he wanted to subject a woman to.

Besides, he thought, he'd never found a woman who stirred him enough anyway. That wasn't entirely true, he knew. He still held a fond memory of a certain scorching kiss in a darkened elevator. He had been reminded of it earlier when he'd passed that very same elevator. As he entered the auction room, his mind filled with the memory of the dark space where she'd sizzled his lips with the most erotic and satisfying kiss Jon had ever shared.

He hadn't pursued her because he'd found out she was married. Plus she was the mother of a child sired by Andy Nelson. It was a hard fact to get past since the serial rapist had violated and murdered his partner's wife in cold blood right before murdering his partner, Kevin, for attempting to save her. It had been the single bloodiest night of his life and the worst case he'd endured to date.

He was interrupted from his morose reverie by a woman's voice echoing passionately from the stage. His eyes hadn't quite adjusted to the darkness in the room. For a moment, he thought he recognized the voice, but he was more

intrigued by the fact that she'd spoken at all. Jon hadn't thought the women up for auction in this venue were allowed to speak. Then the auctioneer berated her. *Poor girl*, he thought, and then dismissed her from his mind to search the room for Walter.

"But nothing. Quiet down now." The auctioneer said to the woman, then turned back to the audience. "This is your last chance now. So what's my bid?"

Jon scanned the dimly lit room. Even with his secretly enhanced vision, he couldn't see a damn thing. He closed his eyes again momentarily in a meager attempt to help them correct.

The auctioneer spoke again. "Well, I'm going to take a guess that you men out there want to see all the women before you start bidding. So I'll send this first little girl back now and bring her out again one last time after you've seen all the other women available. You'll see she's a rare find for a man."

Jon felt immediate sympathy for the poor woman who hadn't been bid on. She was destined for a much worse fate if she ended up at the Tiberius Institute. He opened his eyes and saw the

unauctioned female shuffle off stage. She looked vaguely familiar, and when she paused to turn her head to take a glance over her shoulder, he got an unexpected punch directly to his gut. The girl from the elevator. Grace Maitland Cox. What on earth was she doing here?

Shaken for a moment at seeing her again, Jon paused as his eyes fully adjusted to the absence of light in the room. Perhaps he'd stay and find out why Grace was up for auction. Or perhaps his genetically enhanced eyes were playing tricks on him. Maybe it wasn't Grace, but he was intrigued enough to stick around to find out for certain.

He spotted his target, Walter, in the back row of chairs and strolled over to stand behind him. Walter, a seriously skinny man with long, stringy hair in his mid-twenties, was currently engaged in a whispered conversation with another man seated next to him.

1 4 The Lawman's Wife

Jon listened in easily, even standing several feet away.

“Did you see her face, Danny? You really made her mad,” Walter was saying to his friend.

“She’s going to be more than mad at the end of this auction. I can’t wait to see the surprise on her face then.” Walter’s friend, Danny, looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy, only taller—but not by much. He was soft and out of shape and looked like a lazy couch potato.

“Are you sure this’ll work?” Walter whispered as the next woman went up for bid.

“Of course. I researched it. When nobody bids on her today, she goes to the Tiberius Institute. At the end of a year, you can go and get her and they’ll pay you three hundred dollars. It’s a great deal. And the best part is you won’t have to worry about raising her brat either. No one wants to raise a psycho prisoner’s kid.”

Jon straightened up. It was too much of a coincidence for the woman *not* to be Grace. The opportunity to see her once more became very appealing. At the very least, he could rescue her from the life of bondage she would endure at the Institute. He’d love to get her alone in a dark elevator one more time. All he had to do was make a single bid.

The memory of her sweet lips kissing him in the dark three years ago danced in his mind, forcing

him to take a deep breath to calm down. He tried to keep in mind that he was in the room to catch and arrest a criminal, not to find a wife. No matter how luscious the thought of a wedding night with Grace might be, he was here on business.

“Well, what if somebody gets her before the year is up?” Walter whined. It shook Jon out of his lust-filled reverie of a honeymoon with Grace.

“Who’s going to want a woman who can’t have any more kids and is so terrified of sex she faints when it’s suggested?”

“No one at this auction,” Walter said, and together they snorted in laughter and did a quiet high-five.

Jon concluded the two idiots must have spread word about her past around the small auction so the others in attendance wouldn’t bid either. Well, Jon would have to bid on her now. His new personal mission was to thwart these two morons. He couldn’t wait to see their faces when he offered for Grace. He had several thousand dollars at his disposal should he need it. Now more than ever, he was determined to save her.

“But when she’s mine to do with as I please, I’ll do what you said. I’ll tie her down and fuck her so she won’t be afraid of sex or faint anymore.” Walter looked a little too excited at the prospect of tying Grace down so he could ‘fuck’ her. Jon wanted to cuff him in the head for the foolish, vulgar remark, but didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

First, he’d secure the high bid on Grace, and then he’d arrest Walter’s sorry ass.

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“No. You have to handcuff her and make sure the room is pitch-black. She needs to relive the experience from her past that terrifies her before she can move on to a better life. I’m a counselor with a college degree now, so I know,” Mr. Playdough said pompously.

“How come you didn’t handcuff her and fix her a long time ago?”

“I tried once, but she dropped like a rock when I snapped the first cuff shut. Besides, she never did anything for me sexually. My dick only gets hard for Sadie.”

Jon fisted his hand to keep from punching the

soft man Grace had counted on to rescue her. He wished he could let her know she wouldn't go to the Institute. She was probably in the back, worried sick about her fate.

"Are you going to marry Sadie now?" Walter asked.

"Probably. But first I have to make sure Grace and her brat are out of my place for good. I only kept her around because my parents said she needed a place to stay once her aunt got sick. She helped a little with finances too. Her old biddy of an aunt is dead three months now, and once Grace and her kid are gone, I'll be a totally free man."

"You sure were lucky. How did the Tiberius Group find out you and Grace weren't married all this time anyway?"

"They got an anonymous call." Danny snickered again. Jon had no doubt as to the identity of the 'anonymous' caller who had sealed Grace's fate.

Jon seethed as he listened to their conversation. He figured Danny was probably making lots of anonymous phone calls. Wouldn't Walter be surprised to find himself in jail later today? What a bastard.

Grace hadn't been married three years ago when she'd kissed Jon. Interesting. It put a whole new spin on those few minutes he'd spent in the dark wrapped around a woman who made him forget who he was and where he was.

Back then he wondered why she'd been so forward since an hour later he'd found out she was Mrs. Grace Maitland Cox. He'd dismissed her as unavailable and very frightened of the dark, nothing more. He'd done his good deed and hadn't taken things too far, but it had been very difficult to turn her down. He'd cursed himself more than once for not having taken advantage of her intriguing offer.

"You're so smart, Danny," Walter whispered. "An anonymous phone call was a great idea."

Jon knew part of his motivation was curiosity about Grace, but he couldn't wait to put a big wrench in their plans. He'd wait to arrest Walter until after Grace came up for bid the second time. When they didn't bid on her, he would. Not to keep her, of course, but to rescue her from the Institute. He'd take Walter to jail and then help Grace relocate with her child. It was all in a day's work, and besides it would be great to see her again. He could kiss her once after the ceremony

before he let her go. He closed his eyes in reverent contemplation. It probably wasn't a good idea to get his lips anywhere near hers

1 6 The Lawman's Wife

if he planned to let her go. Did he want to let her get away?

The next woman out was quickly sold for a hundred and twenty-five dollars. The next four women also went quickly. If this pace kept up, he'd have a wife in less than twenty minutes. The thought of Grace being his wife, even for a short time, forced his libido into overdrive and spiked his lust. He'd thought about her many times in the past several years. Especially when he'd been lonely or whenever he entered an elevator. His unguarded thoughts would conjure up that first lick of her tongue across his lips. His cock stirred with this train of thought, surprising him.

Jon had controlled needs that he relieved infrequently, but couldn't remember the first name of any women in his sexual past, with the single exception of hers. Mostly, he used a synthetic injection to quench his desire, but he still needed an actual sexual experience once

every year or so. The requirement angered him because it made him feel no better than Andy Nelson. Unlike the evil beast who'd killed his partner, Jon would never force a woman to assuage his needs.

He'd rather die.

Jon could be married to Grace for two days before they would have to consummate the marriage to be permanently wed. Forty-eight hours to think about all the sexual delights he *wouldn't* be participating in. His long dormant libido reared up suddenly to seduce him with a licentious visual of him and Grace and his oversized bed. It wouldn't be the first time he'd pictured her there. It wouldn't be the last either, especially not after seeing her today.

Jon inhaled deeply, knowing he would never have sex with Grace. His only intent was to save her from the Institute, then find her another husband. Someone who wasn't vile, like the man she lived with or his scam artist friend, Walter. The thought of finding a husband for Grace made his gut tighten for some unfathomable reason.

His communicator vibrated silently on his belt. A DC-5 message from Elliott, his boss. DC-5

was their personal code for red-hot emergency. Jon noted the time and exited the room quietly. Out in the hallway, he called headquarters to see what the Damned Chaos to the Fifth Power message was about.

“It’s Brent. What’s up?”

Jon heard an urgent, angry voice instead of Elliott’s usual drawl. “I just got a notification bulletin for a new trial review on Andy Nelson. The Tiberius Group is reevaluating his case.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. Why?”

“They’re going through all old cases where the testimony of a woman was the predominant factor used to put a man in prison. Lots of cases have been overturned in the last few years. Perhaps you’ve heard mention of it?” Elliott was being sarcastic.

Jon knew several big-name cases had been overturned in which the word of only one woman had put a man away. Cases involving rape were particularly susceptible to

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this trend.

“Yeah, so what? They’ve only overturned cases with power names. Nelson isn’t a prominent name.”

“Well, they’ve been busy reviewing any and all cases with single female testimony convictions. It’s just taken a couple of years to get to Nelson’s. We knew this would come up, Jon.”

“He’s a sexual vampire. They have his paperwork.”

“He’s been using a synthetic medication called Zanthacorth to temper his sexual urges while he’s in prison, where he’s been a model inmate, by the way.”

“You know as well as I do, if he gets out, he’ll rape again. He likes it. No amount of medication will stop him once he’s free.”

“I know. That’s why I used DC-5 to get your attention. Go dig up the old case file and find anything that will lead to evidence on any of the other victims. We need to find something and soon.”

“We don’t even know how many victims there are. We only identified two cases for sure, and both victims died from their injuries before they could testify.”

“Do the best you can.”

“How much time do I have?”

“Less than a week. You need to get moving on this now.”

Jon closed his eyes and wondered how on earth he'd find any evidence on a cold case for which he'd looked at every conceivable angle the first futile time. Andy Nelson had been as good as released when the D.A. had stumbled across Grace Maitland Cox to testify.

Oh, no. Damn it. Grace. The auction.

Jon looked up at the closed-circuit camera feed on the monitor outside the auction room. It was showing the part of the auction he'd momentarily forgotten he'd planned to participate in. On the silent screen, he could see a tearful Grace onstage, crying out what looked like “Please, someone, bid on me!”

He snapped his phone shut in mid-conversation with Elliott and bolted toward the auction room, hoping he wasn't too late.

1 8 The Lawman's Wife

Chapter Two

Grace haltingly re-entered the stage. Every other woman ahead of her up for auction had fairly flown off the stage. She couldn't figure it out.

She was in serious trouble if she wasn't attractive enough to get a single desperate guy to bid. Even with her nearly non-existent pride, she had hoped for more than one offer besides Danny's today. But she hadn't even gotten *him* to bid. And he'd laughed when she'd exited the stage the first time. She'd know that whiney nasal snicker anywhere.

As each subsequent woman was snapped up, Grace formulated a plan to beg. She didn't care if she wasn't supposed to speak. She wanted her daughter back. Once they found out about the identity of Emma's father and her inability to have any more children, she'd have a hard enough time keeping any other man interested. She'd deal with that when the time came.

The auction was all she could manage for now.

"Here is the last female we have up for auction today. So you'd better get her while you can. Now, what's my bid for this lovely, young

girl?”

Again, every man became mute. Grace couldn't help the angry tears tumbling over her lower lids. Emma's forlorn little face at yesterday's tearful separation swam in front of her eyes.

“Surely one man among you is willing to bid on this female. Look how pretty she is.”

Tears fell copiously, and she sniffed loudly at the very moment everyone was supposed to see how pretty she was.

“Please,” she whimpered. “Please.”

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“Little lady, you can't speak. I told you already. Now why won't anyone bid on this sweet little girl?”

“Because she's frigid and terrified of sex. Plus she's got another bastard's kid already, and she can't have any more children. She's completely worthless. Give it up. No one's bidding on her,” said a callous voice from the audience Grace didn't recognize.

How did the man in the audience know all her secrets?

Grace squinted through her tears to search for Danny. He smiled in that superior way he had, making her feel small and valueless as a human. *He* apparently had made sure no one would bid on her today. She should have known. Now when she went to the Institution, they would pay him to marry her, but Emma would be gone to her forever. She fought the urge to run into the audience and strangle him.

“Please, someone, bid on me!” she screamed in anguish, not caring that she wasn’t allowed to speak.

“Hush now. No more talking,” the auctioneer admonished her again and then turned to the audience to seal her fate.

“No one willing to bid on this female? Not anyone in this room? You are all a bunch of damn fools.” The auctioneer shook his head and raised his gavel to seal her fate as an institutionalized female. She covered her ears to muffle the sound of her doom.

The doors to the back of the room burst open and bounced off the interior walls. Grace lowered her hands. A huge lawman strode through the door and shouted, “I bid ten dollars over the

standing floor bid for this woman.”

“Sold to the lawman for ten dollars,” the auctioneer said, not missing a beat, as if he’d expected the bid all along. He banged his gavel to complete the deal. Grace bent over in grateful disbelief. She was sold. Thank heavens. She didn’t care if it was the devil himself who’d just bought her. She could have Emma back. She straightened quickly and looked to see who owned her. Her future husband would not be Danny. She found that a huge relief too. She didn’t know what her future husband would want, but she knew exactly what Danny expected.

“Wait, I’ll bid twenty dollars for her,” Danny’s friend Walter called out.

“Too late,” the auctioneer said, “You gave up the right to bid when I asked the room.”

“Well, the other guy was in the room earlier too, and he left. He shouldn’t get special privileges.”

“I’m a federal interstellar lawman. I was called away momentarily on official business. What’s your excuse for not bidding the first time?”

Walter snapped his lips shut, pressing them

flat, and gave the lawman a sullen look, as if he were the one being treated unfairly.

Grace listened to her savior speak, and a tingle of recognition brushed against her

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memory. She put a hand up to her brow to block the floodlights above her and to get a glimpse of the lawman soon to be her husband. He looked vaguely familiar.

“What’s your name, Lawman?” the auctioneer asked.

“Jonathan Brent.”

Grace sucked in a breath.

“Well then, this little lady is about to become a lawman’s wife.” He banged the gavel again.

“Sold for ten dollars to the lawman, Jonathan Brent.”

Walter started to protest again, but Grace ignored him, still stunned at the name of her intended husband. Jonathan Brent.

He was the lawman in the elevator from three years ago. Not a single day had gone by that she hadn’t thought about his strong body hugged close

to hers. The initial brush of his firm lips sliding over her mouth in the dark had crept into her dreams more than once.

She wiped the tears from her face and prepared to face him. Squinting into the dim light, she saw he was even more gorgeous than she had remembered. He exceeded six feet by several inches. His dark hair looked wiry and coarse, but she knew from personal experience it felt very soft sifting through her fingers. She couldn't see his eyes from this distance or in this light, but knew they were a comforting gray.

Grace waited onstage for him to come fetch her, but instead he crossed to where Danny and Walter were standing. She looked over at the auctioneer, who motioned for her to greet her soon-to-be husband. She wiped her face again, took a deep breath, and went to face her future. It was the first moment in a long while that she wasn't absolutely terrified. Grace's new-found courage lasted only until she saw her future lawman husband pull a set handcuffs off his belt.

She paused, waiting to see what he was going to do with them.

Was he about to handcuff her?

“Walter Dennis, I have an order from a magistrate to bring you in for criminal activity.”

“What?” Walter looked at Jonathan as if he’d only just noticed he was a lawman and then turned to run. The tall, menacing, yet gorgeous Jonathan clamped a hand on Walter’s arm and stopped him. He had the handcuffs around Walter’s wrists in no time. She brushed away the dread that came with her fear of being handcuffed and started moving toward her now bright future.

“How did you find me?” Walter asked.

“Someone ratted you out and called in an ‘anonymous’ tip as to your whereabouts. I wonder who knew you’d be here today?” Jonathan asked.

Walter turned to Danny. His big, goofy face turned red. Grace wasn’t the least bit

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surprised. She’d be willing to bet her last two hundred and sixty-three hidden dollars it was Danny who had ratted her out to the Tiberius Family Group too. She wanted to smack Danny, but decided she had already expended too much effort on him. It was time to move on to a better life as the wife of a federal interstellar lawman.

She smiled for the first time in two days.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” Grace said to Jonathan, stepping close to him once she realized the handcuffs he brandished weren’t for her.

“Sure. Listen, I hate to do this to you, but unfortunately, Walter will have to accompany us to the wedding ceremony.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m so grateful you bid on me. You saved me—again.”

Jonathan Brent tilted his head and gave her an engaging smile. “Come on. I need to get going.” She wanted to throw her arms around him and bury her face into his throat. She knew she would be safe in his arms. He was a lawman. That was what lawmen did. They protected people.

“Wait a minute. Don’t you want to know what you’re getting for a wife? She has serious sexual problems, and she’s got a kid too.”

“Danny, shut up. You have no right to say a word.” Grace operated under the hope that Jonathan didn’t know all of her secrets. He hadn’t entered the room until after the loudmouth in the audience had announced her life story. Perhaps she still had a chance to keep him.

The tempting and wicked thought of sex with him already danced around her brain. She remembered begging him for amazing sex in the elevator. He had turned her down then, but perhaps not because he wasn't interested. Perhaps her future husband had bid on her today so he could take her to some quiet place to make fabulous and amazing love to her. A buzzing sensation vibrated her long-buried sexual arousal wide-awake. It was about damn time for some amazing sex in her life.

Jonathan turned a ferociously lustful gaze toward her and winked. "Believe me, I know exactly who I'm getting for a wife." Grace smiled and held his stare. She relived the kiss in the elevator as if it had happened a minute ago. Her tongue slipped out to wet her lower lip. She couldn't wait to get him alone.

"But she's frigid." Danny insisted, as if Jonathan were too stupid to understand his brilliant analysis. Grace frowned at him, willing him to shut his fat face and leave her be.

"Not with me, she's not." Jonathan averted his gaze from her and scowled at Danny. "I know everything I need to know about her. You, on the other hand, are trying my patience. Get lost."

“Don’t come crying to me when she won’t have sex with you. I’m warning you, you’ll have to handcuff her to a bed to cure her sexual deviance.” Danny put his hand on his waist as if to suggest the lawman was the most obtuse human ever.

2 2 The Lawman’s Wife

Jonathan frowned at him. “You’re one sick bastard, you know that? Trust me, I won’t cry to you for anything. She’s not frigid. I suspect she told *you* that so she wouldn’t have to endure your soft, clammy hands. Back up.” Jonathan took a menacing step in Danny’s direction, dragging Walter behind him. Danny frowned and took a shuffling step away.

Jonathan turned to her. “Ready to go?” She nodded and fell into step behind him. He had earned her eternal gratitude for telling Danny off the way she had wanted to for years, but couldn’t. In her position as second-class citizen, she had put up with loads of crap and endured years of biting her tongue to keep silent. She enjoyed giving Danny a smug smile on her way past him as she followed her delicious future lawman husband.

They filled out the paperwork, and a few minutes later, for the pitiful price of ten dollars, she was married to a man who made her heart pound in her chest. A cheap hamburger at a fast food joint cost more. Ah well, it didn't matter.

Her new lawman husband held onto Walter during the ceremony, but she didn't care. She could get Emma back, which was the only important thing. She'd get a honeymoon, which was another thing gathering importance low in her belly. A heart-pounding vibrancy radiated through her at the thought of a real honeymoon night. Sex with Jonathan would certainly be the pinnacle of her sexual experience, as long as he didn't handcuff her or hold her arms down. She spoke her vows to love, honor, and—most importantly to the Tiberius Group—to obey her new husband. She wondered what he might require of her in the bedroom. They were pronounced man and wife. *Thank heavens.*

“How are you going to fulfill the forty-eight hour consummation dictate, Grace?” Danny asked.

Danny lingered several steps away, approaching her only after the marriage vows had been spoken. “You know the minute he snaps the

handcuffs tight you'll faint. You should have let me cure you a long time ago..."

She didn't have time to answer. Jonathan pulled the regulation-issue weapon off of his belt, checked the load—presumably to make sure it was ready to fire—and gave Danny a positively satanic glare. His wicked-looking gun was pointed at the floor, but the threat was unmistakable. Grace wondered if Jonathan was going to shoot him.

"I've heard enough out of you. Grace and I will be at your residence later on to pick up her things. I don't need a reason to shoot you. Quit trying to give me one. Grace is my wife. She was never yours. I suggest you leave. Now." He tightened the grip on the gun's handle.

Jonathan radiated an aura of anger she could stick a fork through, and even she could tell he was trying to calm down and not kill her ex-roommate.

Danny gave them both a sour look and retreated, finally figuring out he shouldn't aggravate a grumpy lawman.

Jonathan promptly leveled the gun at Walter's chest. "Don't move, or I shoot to

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kill. Do you understand me?” At Walter’s fearful nod, Jonathan wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her close before she realized his intent. His firm lips landed on hers in a passionate kiss. Even this early in the morning, he had a tantalizing five o’clock shadow on his face. His delicious scent wrapped around her with his sizzling, warm body pressed close.

Grace melted into him as her knees weakened. Her hands went to his chest first, then circled around his neck and anchored herself to his strong warrior body. She ran a hand up the back of his head, through his silky hair. Unlike the vigorous, eager kiss in the elevator, this one was lazy and thorough. He kissed her tenderly, stroking his tongue slowly and methodically against hers as if he had all the time in the world to make love to her mouth. She sagged in his arms, unable to hold herself upright any longer, and heard moaning.

Oh God, she was moaning!

He didn’t stop his sultry assault of her lips, even at her noisy response. Several long moments later, he released her mouth, then kissed her

chastely once or twice more before releasing the clench they shared, as if he hated to let her go. Grace didn't want to let him go either. She held onto his free arm while instructing her legs to work. Jonathan winked at her, turned his head, and gave Danny a satisfied smirk.

"Thank you so much," she whispered before peeling away.

"You're welcome. Come on, I need to go. We've got to drop off Walter at division headquarters, pick up your things, and then I imagine you'll want to get your child back."

Grace was so overcome by joy at his understanding of the situation, she couldn't speak. Mouth opened in shock, she recovered to throw her arms around his neck, pulled him back down, and buried her face in his throat. She trembled against him as silent tears of gratitude fell onto the sleeve of his gray and black uniform jacket.

"Thank you so much," she said as another tremor of gratitude shook her voice. He patted her back as she got her emotions under control again.

Thank heaven's she was the lawman's wife. A nagging voice reminded her she wasn't his wife permanently until they consummated the union.

Apprehension and longing vied for attention at the thought of the conjugal rights he could now demand.

She couldn't help the wicked smile that shaped her lips in contemplation.

* * * *

Jon held Grace's soft body and wondered what in the hell he was doing with a wife. But then, she had cried and thanked him after he'd mentioned picking up her kid. She wanted her child back, understandably enough. He didn't fool himself about her ultimate motives, but kissing her a moment ago had been very gratifying. When she'd moaned into his mouth, it was all he could do to stay vertical. He wanted her desperately, just as he had in the elevator during their first kiss.

2 4 The Lawman's Wife

The memory of her request for sex on the floor of the small, darkened space slid into his mind. He knew her demand was fear induced because she thought she was about to die. He'd almost done it too. His hand had gone to the fastener on his trousers, his libido ready, willing, and able to comply with her wishes. He imagined

how exceptionally good it would feel to plunge his cock into her soft, grateful flesh. How volcanically amazing it would feel to take her with him to heights he'd only experienced a very few times in his own past. It would be paradise to share his life with a woman he wanted more than any other. He'd be able to forgo the injections and allow his sexual urges free rein.

Kissing Grace was inherently more satisfying than the whole of his past sexual encounters combined. The vision of her trusting face popped his bubble. He shook his head and told his libido to calm down. He wasn't having sex with Grace Maitland. He'd find a better man for her. Someone stable, who didn't jet off at a moment's notice to fight crime across the interstellar galaxy. He ignored the longing that erupted at the thought of losing her. Grace deserved a better life than he could provide.

He planned to discuss this issue with his eldest sister Sophie's husband, Matthew Westland. Matt ran his own import-export business and employed thousands of men. Surely he knew a stable junior executive who wanted a wife. He ignored the pain pinching his gut at the thought of Grace submitting herself sexually to a stable low-level

businessman from Matt's company.

He hustled Walter out of the Justice Center with Grace following them. Jon shoved Walter into the back of his Interstellar Lawman's Thorium-Z cruiser, also known as his IL T-Z cruiser vehicle. Every lawman had one issued to him. It was a standard sedan with a clear, synthetic laser-resistant and bulletproof partition between the front and back seats. The outer windows were equipped with similar protective glass, and like all government vehicles, it ran on Thorium-Z, the clean-burning replacement for fossil fuels.

He opened the front door for Grace to get in and then circled to get in himself. By the time he slipped behind the wheel, she already had her seat restraint on. He regretted having to drag her along to the Law Enforcement Detention Center before they could proceed.

"Once we get to the LED Center, stay close to me."

She nodded and smiled warmly. He had no doubt she'd do anything he asked. He tried to tamp down his libido. He didn't get to keep her. A temporary marriage would not include

imminent sexual activity. His lust, unfortunately, was not convinced, and he knew he'd have to find a way to inject himself with medication to control his now rampant urges. He would usher Grace and her child into his spare bedroom right before he locked himself securely in his own room.

Jon punched the vehicle start code on the numbered pad and pressed his thumb on the biometric print reader, turning the vehicle's engine over. He put his foot on the pedal and revved the engine a time or two, listening to the satisfying roar. Thorium-Z was a

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great replacement for gasoline vehicles from days long past.

Jon flipped the sirens on and sped toward the LED Center. He loved to drive fast and took every opportunity to do so. He loved being a lawman. It was all he'd ever wanted to do.

Twenty years before his birth, in the mid-2020s, the U.S. government had made a surprising yet decisive move and combined all law enforcement under a single command hierarchy. This served to eliminate with one fell

swoop not only redundant efforts by law enforcement in general, but also all jurisdictional in-fighting among the different federal and state agencies. Thus, “the lawman,” a single entity comprised of all police and law enforcement in the country, came to be.

Lawmen all wore the same black, charcoal gray, and red uniforms; the only distinction involved a delineation of experience and departmental level. A lawman could be at a local, state, federal, or interstellar department level. The patch his shoulder signified that he was at the top of the experience hierarchy. Jon had earned his stripes quickly before becoming a federal interstellar lawman five years ago. At this juncture in his career, he enjoyed the most flexibility of all his fellow law enforcement brotherhood and took pleasure in the freedom accorded to him. The downside was that he traveled—a lot. He was on the road more than at home.

The National Defense Bureau came about directly after the Tiberius Group took over and replaced the previous courtroom trials with a new arbitration system. Years later, everyone was still getting used to the new system. The Tiberius

Group didn't like lawyers and were particularly intolerant of frivolous lawsuits. Ultimately, they denigrated much of the entire justice system, along with several parameters of his job.

The predominant outcome was a disintegration of women's rights. He and his fellow lawmen had spent the first several months trying to keep women from going out alone. Jon had kept his opinions to himself with regard to the new status of women. He knew several men who had spoken out and ended up in jail, missing, or worst of all, dead.

The ruling voice of the Tiberius Group would not be stifled or stopped. They told everyone the changes were necessary and promised a better system of justice in time as the laws were amended and rewritten. Jon only knew he had been very busy since the takeover.

In two short years, they had changed the greater part of judicial law to arbitration under the magistrate core. Defendants and plaintiffs stood alone against each other these days, which meant a significant reduction in work for lawyers. The district attorney's office was the last and best place left as a career option if a man wanted to be a lawyer. Otherwise, they were at the mercy of

the dwindling private sector.

The private sector consisted of the rich who were still able to afford private lawyers, and many kept an attorney on retainer for consultations during significant magistrate hearings. However, those plum jobs were few and far between and the

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turnover rate was very high especially if a case was lost. There were still many hearings, but the frivolity of the past had given way to only serious offenses being heard by magistrates.

Technically, the charge against Walter Dennis was a minor one, but because his crime had been directed against the loved one of a magistrate, Jon didn't want to be in Walter's shoes for the upcoming hearing.

Grace remained silent and stayed on his heels as he processed Walter and turned him over to LED officials for his hearing.

"Where do you live?" he asked as they exited the center. She told him the address and grabbed his hand as they headed for his vehicle.

"After we pick up my things, are we going to

go to your home before we get Emma?” she asked in a quiet voice as she stared at her feet.

“Emma?”

“My daughter.”

Jon hadn’t even known the gender of her child until this moment. He found a daughter inherently more palatable as the spawn of Andy Nelson than a son. Either way, it shouldn’t matter. He would never blame the sins of the father on an innocent child. His own dad hadn’t been much to brag about, but he and his sisters, Sophie and Hannah, had turned out just fine growing up without him.

“I thought you’d want to pick her up as soon as possible.” Jon told her.

“I do, but...” Her cheeks turned a beautiful shade of pink.

“But?”

“But I know we need to consummate the marriage within forty-eight hours, and I’d feel more comfortable if Emma weren’t...”

“We aren’t going to consummate this marriage,” he said curtly. His groin ached at the loss. His libido wasn’t too happy either.

“Why not?” Grace turned to him, releasing his

hand. Her face was no longer embarrassed, but surprised and fearful. Her clear, aqua-green eyes drilled down to his soul, asking him for a reason.

“I didn’t bid to keep you, Grace. The Tiberius Institute is no place for a woman like you.”

She stared at him as she digested his honorable intentions. After a moment, she stepped back. The hurt registering on her face confused him.

“Why don’t you want me this time? It won’t be on a camera,” she said in a heartbreaking voice. Her eyes glistened, boring into his with unshed tears, waiting for him to answer.

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“It’s not personal. I just don’t lead the kind of life favorable to permanent marriage.” The truth sounded lame to his own ears. His libido told him he was an idiot and promptly sent a scandalous picture of what Grace might look like in the throes of passion, back arched in ecstasy—*Stop it.*

He wished they could go someplace private to discuss his true motives, both personal and work-related. Unfortunately, he didn’t trust

himself to be alone with her. With her current let's-hurry-and-consummate-the-marriage attitude, they'd be rolling around on his living room rug before the front door closed behind them.

Convinced he wouldn't be able to resist her if she instigated things the way she had in the elevator, he took a mental step away.

“What does that mean?”

He sighed deeply. “Could we discuss this in the vehicle instead of in front of the detention center?”

She looked around as if only just noticing they were still in public. Her face softened and she nodded. Taking her hand, he led her to his cruiser, opened the passenger door for her, and circled slowly to his side, trying to think of something that might placate her, but his mind was blank.

He slid inside and as soon as his door shut, she jumped on him. She twisted her body to face him, pinned him to his seat, and planted her warm lips on his before he took his first breath inside the vehicle.

God Almighty, she tasted good. He surrendered to her exuberant kiss because he couldn't help himself. His libido told him he was

a fool not to take advantage of her offer. Her tongue slipped between his lips and he sucked it further inside his mouth to tangle with his own. His arms wound around her torso, crushing her closer before he devoured her mouth the way he'd wanted to since he'd known it was her on the auction stage.

She was so soft and she kissed like an angel. She was his own personal angel. As if it had a mind of its own, one of his hands slipped around to cup her breast and knead it, making his fingertips tingle in delight. Her sultry response was a sweet moan of mirrored pleasure and acceptance. He flicked his thumb over the peak of her nipple, which rose under his palm. He slipped his hand underneath her shirt to test the softness of her skin. His exploring fingers found it even more satiny than he'd expected.

Stroking her breast, he inhaled deeply at the softness he told himself he couldn't really feel through her lacy bra. Her unique scent captured him as she pressed closer, giving his body no choice but to respond. His pants tightened painfully across his dick. His libido won as he realized he wanted her with a single-mindedness he could no longer subdue. Jon plucked her

nipple once again, and the sound of her moan ripped through him. He would take her and make her his permanent wife. She could be his family, his partner in life. He'd finally have someone to welcome him home with enthusiasm from his exhausting trips.

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A vehicle horn sounded on the street, breaking his lustful romp with her in the front seat of the cruiser. What was he doing? He pushed her away, breathing hard, and stared at her now very moist and swollen lips. His cock was fully erect and ready to go. If they'd been alone in any sort of private place, he had no doubt she would already be his wife in the most intimate sense.

His permanent bride.

Her hand slipped from his shoulder, trailing slowly to his lap. He jumped when her fingers slid over his throbbing cock, caressing it through his uniform.

"I think you want me after all," she said in that low, husky, passion-filled voice.

"I never said I didn't want you." Jon thought his voice sounded sort of satanic, it was so deep in

tone.

“Then why won’t you make me your wife”—she gripped his erection and stroked her hand down the length of it—“in the flesh?” The scent of her skin, laced with the musky undertone of her arousal, pounded his senses.

He couldn’t stop the growl when he responded, “I’m a lawman. I travel. A lot. I leave the country regularly, and I go off-world even more. I wouldn’t be here to take care of you or protect you.” *But I want to.*

She smiled at his confession, as if relieved. “I can take care of myself. I have for years. I want to be your wife. Please, take me and make me yours permanently. I’ve wanted you for so long.” Her hand squeezed him as if to punctuate her need.

Her aqua eyes mesmerized him. Her hand, stroking rhythmically up and down on his cock, ultimately convinced him. Or at least it won over his lust-filled libido, which then forced him to nod at her in complete acceptance of her plea. He needed to calm down before they got to his home...and the privacy it would offer him. Otherwise he’d have to think of a way to protect her whenever he was forced to leave to do his

job.

And who did he trust to protect his unexpected new wife while he was away?

The short answer was no one.

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Chapter Three

“Put your restraint on,” he told her in a tight voice. His gray eyes had darkened a shade. His lids lowered halfway. Grace hoped it was from undeniable passion, but suspected not.

She nodded and removed her hand from his very impressive erection. She’d be lying to herself over the idea that she wasn’t terrified of having sex. She’d egged him on more for her own sake than his, which was easy to do in the light of day. If she riled him up enough, he’d simply take her and she’d be powerless to stop him. The thought of him entering her with his very impressive cock excited her as much as it frightened her. She did want him. And besides, she needed sex to secure her future. She wanted a protected life with her daughter once and for all.

She migrated slowly to her side of the vehicle, avoiding his gaze. Whenever he looked deeply

into her eyes, she got lost. Was she stupid to want him so desperately? He was a big, powerful lawman and he could demand she perform any number of sexual acts. Marissa had told her about quite a few of them.

If she had enough courage to endure a single sexual experience with him tonight, she'd be set. Even if he got rid of her later on, they'd have to let Emma stay with her. If he were gone a lot of the time in his job, that would be fine with her too. He seemed like a decent man, but she knew firsthand how men and their promises and attitudes could change. Danny had been a huge mistake and not even her worst one, but she'd made it through the gauntlet of horrible men littering her past.

One single sexual experience stood between a life of fear, with the constant threat of being ripped away from Emma, and one of security, married in the flesh to a lawman. A big, gorgeous, sexy one.

They were headed to her soon-to-be-former residence, and she needed to grow

3 0 The Lawman's Wife

some courage. She knew Danny would be in attendance to watch every single thing she touched to make sure she didn't cheat him by taking something he considered his. Danny considered pretty much everything in the apartment his.

Jonathan drove toward the residence she had spent the better part of the last several years secluded inside, like a prisoner. The six apartments above the small grocery store where she worked had been her home and only refuge since the Tiberius Group takeover. She worked twelve hours a day, six days a week in the mini grocery store with the round-the-clock deli for the customers who frequented it. The only women she ever saw, besides the ones residing in the apartment complex, were the ones who had to be accompanied by the significant men in their lives. The word 'nuisance' came to mind whenever she thought of the Tiberius Group.

In addition to her meager salary, her boss, Alvin, had given Danny a break on his apartment rent as partial compensation for all her hard work. Alvin and his wife, Betty, had also thought she and Danny had been married all these years. After the anonymous phone call and the subsequent

horror of the Tiberius Group representatives dragging Emma away through the grocery store for all to see, Alvin had promptly fired her.

Soon after the takeover had forbidden women to travel alone, she had applied for and received a special license to work. The license that had arrived by mail one day had been an oversight on the part of the new government. It had been issued to her as if she were married to Danny. It was very much to her advantage since she did not possess a male blood relative or a legal husband. With the citizen DNA database readily available to all lawmen, any man she traveled with could be tested with the wave of a wand to determine a blood relationship. Otherwise, she had to possess valid marriage papers.

She had given up her other two jobs across town once she wasn't allowed to travel alone. And because she didn't have authentic marriage paperwork to travel with Danny, he hadn't wanted to risk getting caught out in public. She knew she was fortunate to have the one job and had merely increased her hours there to make up for the loss of income at the other two places.

Grace worked a grueling seventy-two-hour week in her grocery store job before she spent her

remaining waking hours working in the apartment like a slave. Danny made it clear she was lucky he allowed her to stay at all since she had so many faults, in his opinion.

She'd spent the majority of her time away from her job taking care of her keeper, lazy-ass Danny. She cooked, she cleaned, and she did mountains of laundry. She shopped downstairs for their food. She managed to get a whopping five or six hours of sleep each night, and she babysat for her best friend, Marissa.

Marissa worked the twelve-hour shift opposite to Grace's for her grueling seventy-two-hour work week to support *her* lazy husband. For years, they'd traded friendship and babysitting since the men in their lives didn't tolerate female children. There was her sweet Emma, who made being a mom easy. Up until six months ago, she'd also cared for her sickly Aunt Fiona, who'd been her refuge along with Emma after the

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death of her parents.

Danny could barely be bothered to be civil.

Usually, the only words out of his mouth were to scold her because she wasn't working hard enough to put his dinner on the table on time. He went to school full-time and spent all of her hard-earned money on whatever he wanted. She couldn't say a word because he held her life in the palm of his hand. A hand which had promptly crushed her the minute he didn't need her.

Grace wondered what her new husband would expect—if he even kept her. She knew life as a lawman's wife would certainly be an improvement over the one she'd led these past years hiding out in the apartment like a criminal. She would simply seduce Jonathan and remain his wife. She relaxed into the thought of his arms around her. It had been easy to let herself go and kiss him passionately moments ago because they'd been in a bright, public place, but also because he warmed her insides whenever she touched him.

The minute she was in a dark room, she got nervous. She needed to speak to Marissa in private before leaving her former residence. Her best friend would know exactly what to do to seduce him quickly, so he'd be unable to stop himself from taking her and thus be forced to keep her.

Once her life with him was set, she'd do everything in her power to make him happy. She wasn't worried about him traveling. When he was present, she'd enjoy getting outside regularly again. Emma hadn't seen the light of day, except from their small balcony, since she'd been a baby.

Marissa would know what Grace could do to entice her new lawman husband into keeping her permanently.

"Are you ready to do this?" Jonathan's voice sent a vibrating electric pulse of desire through her. She looked up and realized they had arrived at her former apartment.

She stared at the ground floor grocery store dubiously and said, "I guess."

He exhaled deeply. "If Danny's inside, you don't have to speak to him. Gather your things. I'll be right there with you."

She nodded and gave him her best smile. Danny wasn't the only thing she was worried about. She also had to walk through her former place of employment to even get to the dreaded apartment waiting above the stairs. Letting her gaze linger on her husband a moment gave her

strength. It would be okay. Jonathan would be there to protect her from Danny and whatever threats he thought up. He would walk beside her through the grocery store gauntlet too.

“Do you have any furniture?”

“No. It’s just a few personal things. Not too much.”

“I have some boxes in the trunk, if you need them.”

“Do you think I could...” she stopped, shook her head, and decided not to finish her foolish question. It wasn’t fair to ask for any further favors from the man who’d

3 2 The Lawman’s Wife

literally saved her life today. It especially wasn’t fair to Jon since Grace wanted the time to glean from her friend the best way to seduce him into keeping her forever.

“What?”

“Never mind. It’s foolish.” She turned to open her door.

“Oh? What foolish thing do you want?”

She paused for a moment and then said, “I’d

like to say goodbye to my friend Marissa. She and I worked in the grocery store together. She's my best and only friend. Her daughter, Lily, and my Emma are like sisters."

He made a face that suggested she shouldn't even have to ask, but then sobered. Perhaps he remembered the pressures she was forced to live under. Women had so few rights, and any simple request they made was often construed as shrewish and demanding.

"I'll make sure you have some time alone with her before we leave, to say good-bye." He gave her a compassionate glance.

She nodded and offered him a tight-lipped smile in return, too choked up to thank him yet again. He was being very kind, so she made it her new personal mission to make his life perfect. Grace would do anything to make him happy, right after she tricked him into having sex to trap him into a permanent marriage.

They exited the vehicle, crossed the sidewalk, and entered the grocery store. She made it two steps inside the place before Alvin, her former boss, blocked her way to the apartment stairwell. She tilted her head up at him. He was a big man

and he'd been angry when he'd found out she wasn't married to Danny. He'd called her a liar...and worse.

Grace took a steadying breath, staring at his wiry, steel-gray hair. It always looked like an unruly steel wool pad perched on his head.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, crossing his arms over his white butcher's apron.

"I've come to get my things from the apartment."

"Are you lying again?"

"Please let me pass," she said, wishing for once she didn't have to fight for every step forward she took.

"You know what you've cost me by pretending to be married to Danny all that time? You know how hard it is to get help these days. How am I supposed to replace you? Huh?"

"Step out of her way," Jonathan said from behind her.

"Lawmen don't scare me, so save your breath. I already know she's headed for the Institution. Why are you here?"

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Grace gave Alvin a curious stare, wondering why he thought she was headed for the Institution. Danny must have told him.

Jonathan stepped in front of Grace and leveled a grim look at her former boss. “She’s my wife. Stand aside.”

“You married her?” Alvin uncrossed his arms.

“Yes. And when we return from getting her belongings, I’ll expect her final wages ready for me.”

Alvin took a sharp deep breath and snarled, “I owe her nothing!”

“Then prepare the paperwork to show me you’ve paid her salary to date.”

Alvin chomped his cheap dentures together and grimaced. Grace knew she was owed almost two weeks’ worth of wages. If she’d gone to the Institute, her unpaid wages would have been forfeited, but now that she was married, her new husband could collect them.

Jonathan wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders and secured her to his warm body. They edged past a fuming Alvin to the stairwell

leading to her former apartment. Jonathan motioned her to go first, glancing over his shoulder once before following her.

She entered the code in the keypad lock, hoping Danny hadn't had the foresight to change it. The door clicked open and she stepped inside warily, looking around for him. She hadn't seen his car parked outside in its regular place, but her anxiety level at being here was in the red zone.

"I don't think Danny's here," she said and breathed a sigh of relief. Tip-toeing across the room, Grace headed to her designated room. She opened the door to the small space she shared with Emma. It was stripped and empty.

"No! Where...? How...?" Grace was incensed at the violation of her bedroom. Jonathan joined her and stared into the empty room. The bed was stripped of linens. All of her own and Emma's meager belongings were gone, as if they had never existed. She flung the closet door open to find her clothing missing and only empty hangers dangling from the rod.

The front door banged open and Danny marched inside. He waddled over to her room and stood in the doorway with a smirk on his soft, fat

face.

“I took the liberty of cleaning out your things, Grace,” he said with far too much satisfaction. “I was certain you wouldn’t be back for them since I wasn’t planning to bid on you. I didn’t expect anyone else would want you.”

Grace tried to keep her voice under the level of a shriek. “Where are my things, Danny?”

He smirked. “I threw them out with the garbage this morning,”

3 4 The Lawman’s Wife

“You had no right!”

“I had every right.”

Grace put her hands to her face to stop the scream already forming in her throat. The money. Surely he hadn’t found her hiding place. She strode to the cheap curtains sagging miserably at the single window in the room. She tore at the hem, and resting exactly where she had left it was her precious nest egg. The two hundred and sixty-three dollars she’d carefully squirreled away for emergencies was intact.

With shaking fingers, she pulled out the

tattered bills from her hiding place in the curtain's hem and clutched the treasure to her chest. Cash was rarely used these days, but it was still available and could be spent.

"What do you have there?" Danny asked angrily.

"None of your business."

"Everything in this apartment is mine. Hand it over." He took a step in her direction, obviously forgetting in his zeal to steal her last few dollars that she wasn't alone. Jonathan blocked his path. Danny bounced off Jonathan's body.

"That money is mine!" Danny shouted into Jon's chest.

"Actually, it's mine," Jonathan uttered in a calm, rational voice. "If it had been yours, you would have already taken it when you cleaned out the room." Jon turned to her and held out his hand, indicating he wanted her money.

Grace gave him a petulant look until he winked at her. He snapped his fingers loudly, as if in irritation. She scrunched her eyes in confusion, but handed her precious savings over slowly. He crunched the prized dollars in his hand and slid the cash into his front trouser pocket. He grabbed

her hand and pushed past Danny, seemingly on a trajectory to the front door.

“I’ll bill you for the rest of her belongings you discarded without cause,” Jonathan said to Danny over his shoulder as he opened the front door.

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before you get a single dollar from me. No magistrate will hear the case. I know how things work.”

“Then I’ll make certain there is a stop payment put on the snitch money you got for all the anonymous phone calls you made.”

“You can’t do that!” Danny screamed, his doughy face turning bright red. Jonathan put a hand on his gun and gave him a glare. Danny retained his sullen expression, but stopped his approach toward them.

Jonathan hustled her out into the hallway, slamming the door on Danny’s looming tantrum. Grace blinked a time or two, trying to take in her new spite-filled reality. The clothes she had on her back were the only ones she now owned.

“Where does your friend live?” Jonathan asked. She pointed down the hall to

Marissa's door. The dejection on her face had to be apparent, but he put an arm around her waist, squeezing her once, and walked her to Marissa's door. She knocked quietly. The door opened after only a short pause.

"Madre de Dios! Grace," Marissa said with obvious relief. Her arms opened in greeting and Grace flew into them, unable to stop the tears.

"Come inside," Marissa said.

"I'll wait out here." Jonathan crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

Grace pulled back in time to see Marissa giving the large lawman an appreciative once-over. She took a step back and ushered Grace into her apartment. The question in her eyes remained until the door closed.

"Is he the one taking you to the Institute?" Marissa asked, her face full of regret.

"No. He's my husband."

Marissa's eyes widened with a twinkle. Her suggestive smile was infectious.

"Lucky girl. I'm jealous."

"I need your help." Grace quickly explained the situation and her plan to seduce Jonathan

Brent, her new lawman husband.

Marissa smiled even wider at the request for a step-by-step seduction plan. “I know exactly what you need to do!”

She whispered a plan describing every touch, kiss, and lick Grace should use to secure her husband permanently. Grace easily pictured every scandalous act with Jonathan.

“I guarantee he won’t be able to resist you.”

“Thanks, Marissa. I’ll miss you so much.” Grace threw her arms around Marissa one last time.

“Don’t worry, my friend, we’ll see each other again, you and I. And now you’ll be able to get outside with Emma. I’m happy for you, Grace. You always deserved better than Danny.

“Oh, and speaking of that ass, I was able to retrieve some of your things from the trash this morning.” She crossed the room and pulled a box out of the coat closet. It had many of Emma’s favorite toys, a few pictures, and a several other personal belongings Grace held dear.

“Thank heavens.” Grace smiled and grabbed the box.

After a loud wage dispute with Alvin on the way out, Grace's spirit lifted at the prospect of shedding her old life. Perhaps it was just as well Danny had thrown everything else out. She had nothing to remind her of the prison-like existence she'd endured these past few years.

3 6 The Lawman's Wife

"I need to stop at my home for a few minutes before we go to pick up Emma, okay?" Jonathan asked.

"Sure, whatever you want." *All the better to seduce you in private, my dear.*

"Oh, one more thing. This is yours." He leaned closer and extended a closed hand over hers. The tattered bills once hidden in her bedroom curtains fluttered into her palm.

Her eyes watered at the gesture. "Thank you," she said in a small voice and looked out the window so he wouldn't see her tears. He was probably sick of seeing her cry.

Grace settled into her seat and worried about what would happen when they were alone. She rode in silence, giving her willful fears a stern lecture. A sexual experience with Jonathan

wouldn't be like the last time she'd had sex and even if it was, she only needed to stay conscious until he was done with her. She could do that. She wouldn't worry about the handcuffs if he required them.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Then why is your face ashen? Are you afraid of me?"

"No. Of course not." She turned to him and shot him a quick grin. *Buck up*, she told herself. *Time is running out, and this is the last chance to make certain Emma stays, so don't freak out.*

Jon laughed slightly and shook his head, as if he didn't believe her. She would have tried harder to convince him, but he pulled into the driveway of a small, well-kept house and parked the vehicle. He shot out of his door without saying a word and quickly came around to her side of the car. Her heart pounded in her chest. *This is it. Do or die.* She found she couldn't relax.

Her door opened. "Come on," he said tersely.

Had she made him angry already? She focused her attention on the belt of his uniform, specifically where his handcuffs hung at her eye

level.

She stepped out of the vehicle. He put his arm around her and slammed the door shut. She stiffened at his touch, but he didn't seem to notice and marched her to the front door. The midday sun caressed the top of her head as they walked the short distance. Grace wanted to lift her arms and absorb the rays of warmth to gain strength for what she was about to do, but didn't want to anger him by pulling away. Jonathan unlocked the heavy, solid-looking door and pushed it open. She noticed the absence of light and stiffened in fear at her inability to see further than a few feet into the interior of his house.

"Go ahead," he said, motioning her to enter first.

Grace took a deep breath and took a small step forward, but not enough to cross the threshold. She stopped inches from the yawning darkness. Swallowing hard, she wondered how she could overcome an eight-year fear of dark spaces in the next few

3 7 Lara Santiago
seconds.

“In or out.” Jonathan’s whispered words by her ear took her back to the first dark space she’d shared with him.

She jumped, startled at his words, before turning to see his easy smile. He leaned closer. She thought he might kiss her, but instead he snapped a switch right inside the door and turned the lights on. His living room was furnished with chrome and black furniture. Further in, she saw a small dining table.

Jonathan leaned close to her. “Nothing inside there will hurt you, including me.”

“I know.” She turned to gaze into his eyes, trying to sound light, but the words sounded muffled exiting around the cotton in her mouth. She was about to be all alone with her six-and-a-half-foot-tall lawman husband.

Grace took a breath and stepped all the way inside. Once she got through the small foyer and into the living room, she stopped dead a few steps away from another dark room to her left.

It was his bedroom. The bed was *in there*. The imminent sex, amazing or otherwise, would take place *in there*.

“Don’t worry,” he said mildly, as if reading

her fearful mind. “You can have the guest room.” He slid past her toward the dining room.

“No!” Grace reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him. “Please.” She licked her lips and tried her best to relax. “I want to be with you. I do.”

“But you’re frigid and afraid of sex unless I handcuff you or some nonsense. Care to explain why your idiot ex-...whatever he was...felt you needed to be handcuffed down in a dark room to have sex?”

“Not really,” she said regretfully. He nodded with an understanding look and turned to move away again. She couldn’t allow him to leave. He was her last and only chance. “But I will. Please give me a chance to explain.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me. I promise you, I only bid on you so you wouldn’t have to go to the Tiberius Institute. No one deserves to go there.”

She didn’t try to hide the puzzlement in her tone. “What are you going to do with me?”

Jonathan looked her over from head to toe slowly before answering, “I’ll find someone for you.”

Grace crossed her arms. “Who?”

“Someone you’ll like.”

“I like you. Why won’t you keep me?” The small, sullen voice that emerged was almost unrecognizable to her own ears.

3 8 The Lawman’s Wife

“Because I don’t want to be responsible for you when I’m gone for my job. It wouldn’t be fair to you or your daughter.” Jonathan’s gaze traveled over her body again.

Grace gave an exaggerated shrug. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t have any direct male relatives to escort you about as Tiberius law requires. I only have a brother-in-law.” He looked up at the ceiling a moment. “I have two of them, actually, but neither one is a blood relative. While I could get a special license if they were to agree, ultimately it’s a big imposition on them whenever I leave at a moment’s notice, which happens frequently.”

Her head dropped in dismal failure. “I see.” Grace stared at the space between their feet. He thought of her as a big problem. He’d only

married her to do a good deed: rescuing her from a fate worse than death. She appreciated his selfless action but was disappointed at his lack of desire to teach her wild, amazing sexual things.

In retrospect, she was the one who had accosted him in the elevator. While he hadn't fought her off, she had instigated it. The only kiss he had instigated with her was immediately after the wedding, but that could have been for show. She was such a dope. Grace's whole body sagged in frustration. Her wicked feelings were apparently one-sided.

Jon closed the distance between them in one half-step. His finger brushed her chin and lifted her face to gaze at his. "It's not because I don't ache for you, Grace. I do. But please understand, you deserve a better life than I can give you." His quiet, sincere tone seeped inside her muddled mind. His gorgeous gray eyes, with their piercing intensity, made her almost forget her fear of dark places.

Grace wanted him. They were alone. Nothing was stopping her from taking him...or persuading him, as Marissa has suggested. It was time to act and secure her future. She leaned into his personal space. He took a deep breath but didn't move

away.

Grace drilled her best sultry look his way and whispered, “Prove it, Jonathan. Prove that you ache for me.” Her arms wound unhampered around his neck. Having accomplished this much, she pulled his mouth to hers. She licked the seam of his lips, wanting desperately for him to desire her.

She wanted to taste him and love him and make a life with him. Everything about Jonathan Brent said he was safe and good and exactly what she had always dreamed of in a man. Grace desperately needed safe and good right now.

She deserved it. She wanted it. She needed him. She had earned at least a small taste.

As soon as his lips brushed hers, he lost whatever resistance he had exhibited before entering the house and melted into her completely. He slid his mouth sideways across hers and devoured her as if he’d been holding back for years and only now could kiss her as he wanted. It was so very easy to let him do as he pleased. The taste of him pervaded her already heightened senses and an electric charge stormed down her body, diving between her legs.

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He grabbed her up in his arms, one beneath her back, the other under her knees. Two seconds later, he'd carried her over to sit on the soft sofa. Grace landed across his lap, never releasing his lips. One of his strong, muscular arms wrapped around her back, clenching her close to his frame. The other shifted from beneath her legs to stroke her thigh. The buzz from his touch sent warmth radiating across her limbs, making her relax. She leaned away, pulling him down to half-cover her. All the while, she kept the electric connection of his lips firmly attached to hers. A moment later, his fingers shifted from her thigh to brush across her breasts gently. She wanted to feel his hands on her bare skin.

As if reading her mind, he unbuttoned the top button of her pink blouse.

One button at a time came undone as more and more skin was revealed. His lips distracted her. She wasn't afraid, but rather, very aroused. He popped open the front closure of her bra, freeing her breasts and exposing her bare flesh. Warmth and a sexy vibration of sensation suffused her from head to toes, focusing between her legs.

Increased moisture coated her core and made her wish his hand would travel lower. His lips and tongue mesmerized her with soft, coaxing licks. She heard herself whimpering in need.

Grace wanted Jonathan to teach her about amazing sex. He cupped one bare breast and her nipples reacted, hardening. He flicked one until she moaned, then plucked it, making her hips twist in desire. She felt the bulge of his erection dig into her hip. She wanted him to make love to her. Soon. Now. *I'm yours. Take me*, she wanted to scream.

His hand trailed from her breast to her belly and then lower to the pulse-pounding desire between her thighs. The knit skirt she wore already bunched above her knees. His fingers slipped below the hem, and the tingle of his touch on her quivering, bare thigh was exhilarating. Her legs fell open to accommodate him. She ground her mouth into his for encouragement, wanting him to stroke her on that one spot she'd never had a man touch before.

Please touch me, she silently begged him.

Chapter Four

Jon's libido had taken over his conscious mind. The glimmer of rational thought to keep Grace pure for her next husband had gone straight to hell the minute she stepped into his sensory range.

He'd stopped to pick up the Andy Nelson files and to somehow relieve his sexual desire for her. He'd planned to masturbate in his bathroom so he wouldn't be tempted to do exactly what he was doing right now: stroking her amazing body with the intent of fucking her. Administering the other alternative release for his rampant desires was not as appealing when his fingertips slid across satiny skin.

His new wife overwhelmed all his senses. Grace looked like all the sexual delights he had ever dreamed of in his perfect woman. Her dark, silky hair begged to be touched, her lips begged to be kissed, and her body begged to be stroked. But it was her unique fragrance that put him over the edge. A scent of pure, intoxicating sexual delight poured over his senses. His body refused to guard against her any longer. He relaxed and gave in to her sweet embrace, allowing Grace's seductive feminine power to override his foolish

honor.

Jon would figure out a way to make this marriage work. Later. He wanted her. Now. He wanted to keep her. Forever. Taking her was inevitable. The urge to resist slipped away when he heard her sensual sighs as he touched her.

Grace kissed him as if she might devour him alive if he dared pull away. His cock had never been this marble-hard before. She moaned, and as if it had a mind of its own, his cock pressed against her soft body. He savored the anticipation of driving his shaft deeply. His desire wouldn't be quenched in any other way. Giving in to the inevitable was the first step, but he wanted to get Grace ready. He knew his cock was big, and he didn't want to hurt her.

4 1 Lara Santiago

His hand skimmed along her bare, smooth thigh on a path to her panties. He ran his thumb along her clit, which was already drenched through the fabric. She bucked once at his touch before sucking his tongue in her mouth, hard. Her sweet whimpers of arousal made him hurry along his seduction. Jon pulled her panties off and

tossed them away. She didn't resist. He ran his hand up the inside of one thigh before inserting two fingers directly inside her creamy, wet pussy. He curled his fingers inside as his thumb stroked her clit with firm attention. He broke the seal of their kiss to trail his lips down to one smooth, creamy breast. Covering the center of it in one mouthful, he pulled back enough so that her stiff nipple was trapped between his teeth and tongue. He sucked to the same rhythm he used to stroke her clit below.

Grace's gasps and pants of pleasure egged him on. He released her peak and moved over to the other one. She tasted better than anything he'd ever had in his mouth. Her vocal cries of pleasure throbbed through his ardent body. Her hands pressed firmly on his head, pulling him closer to her breast as if he weren't sucking quite hard enough to please her. He closed his teeth around her peak in a gentle bite. She sucked in a deep breath the instant he bit down, and shuddered in his arms. Jon licked the tip of that nipple to soothe it. He shoved three fingers deeply into her wet, tight body, still stroking her clit with his thumb.

With her next inhalation, Grace arched back

and a long, steady, breathy cry emitted from her lips. A wave of pleasure washed over him at her release. He felt her vaginal muscles clamp down on his fingers. He shoved them deeper inside and back out again several times as she climaxed. She shook as sultry moans of orgasm came from her lips.

Jon released her nipple and kissed his way to her face. With a look of supreme wonder in her shining eyes, she kissed him deeply, her tongue plunging inside his mouth as she convulsed on his fingertips, which were still buried. The pleasure radiating from her wrapped around his spine as she kissed and sucked on his mouth. Her climax had washed over him as if he'd experienced it with her. Afterwards, as she trembled in his arms, he knew it was her first climax ever. A climax virgin! It was as if he'd climaxed for the first time too—almost.

When she stopped shaking and released his mouth, he kissed a path to her breast, resting his face there. He wondered whether she was ready for his big, granite-hard cock to penetrate her.

Some part of him worried about her past experience. He didn't want to frighten her, but he needed to come. His impatient, regularly

drugged-up libido had waited a long time for real live female flesh. He needed her and knew for certain that a shot of medication to settle his sexual urges wouldn't be nearly as satisfying. Nor would a self-induced hand job since her unique fragrance and the additional scent of her musky gratification wafted up to taunt him. He took a deep breath, and the scent of her arousal moved him to action.

Time to fuck, said his vulgar libido.

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Kissing a path to her face, he glanced into her eyes to assess her fear level. Grace wore a satisfied look. She smiled at him and ran her fingertip across his lips. Jon decided she was ready. Or maybe it was his randy cock that made the decision. It didn't really matter. He needed to release. It was time. He straightened up to loosen his zipper. Grace scrambled close, surprising him by kissing his neck ardently as she reached for his pants. She brushed his hands away from the task, released her lips from his sensitive neck, and bent her head forward to reward his impatient cock.

He forced himself to relax and let her do what

she was comfortable doing. His cock said she had better hurry up or Vlad the Impaler was going to rise up and conquer her cunt in a trice.

Grace kissed his jaw once and then trailed her lips to his collarbone. Her fingers brushed the closure to his pants. His cock sprang forward, ready to be pleased when she unzipped him. He almost lost it when her fingertips touched his tip. Her soft hands stroked him tenderly. Jon did his best not to leap up, throw her down, legs open, and drive his cock directly to her womb. He should let her get accustomed to him. He forced his body to relax and enjoy her gentle caress. His cock told him he was a big pussy not to grab her by the hips to thrust deeply and repeatedly until...

“Is it okay if I put my mouth on you?” she whispered. He cleared his throat, realizing his eyes had closed in anticipation of her touching and stroking his cock. The seductive visual of her head in his lap, her tongue licking him while her lips surrounded and sucked on his dick, slammed into his sex-starved mind, nearly making her request redundant. His cock then informed him he’d made an excellent selection for a wife and bobbed once in hearty approval of her breathy

suggestion.

“Sure,” he managed to utter in a gravelly voice. He was proud of himself for not having climaxed in her hand as he spoke.

She smiled as if relieved and shifted to kneel between his legs, bending over his long-deprived and now insanely happy cock. She licked him first, and he couldn't stifle the hiss between his lips as he felt his cock bob again in utterly delightful anticipation. She closed her lips over his head, and he didn't care if he died right then. He'd die happy. She sucked him with her wide mouth, her sexy, bee-stung lips completely surrounding his cock. She slid him back out again slowly. And back in again. And back out again. He wasn't going to last four more seconds.

Jon brushed a hand down her dark, satiny locks to disrupt her before he embarrassed himself. She pulled almost all the way off, her lips resting on his very moist tip. She looked up at him from between his thighs. The sincerity of her expression made him pause. Removing his cock from the warm space between her lips, she promptly frowned. “Am I doing it wrong?”

Jon almost laughed at the insanity of her

ability to blow him wrong. There was no wrong way. He tempered his mirth. “No. I just don’t want you to get an unexpected surprise. It’s been too long for me to...uh, last an extended time.” He could hardly speak. He wanted her to continue. His raspy voice told him how close he was to exploding,

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whether or not she touched him again.

“I’d prefer it this way for this first time if it’s okay with you.”

Jon found he could no longer speak. He nodded. She held his gaze and inserted the over-swollen head of his cock in her luscious mouth again. Her tongue darted around to lick the sensitive spot underneath as her aqua gaze locked with his. She dropped her head down, breaking his gaze, suctioning tighter as she went to finish him. She sucked his cock deep. Her small hands slid over his uniform slacks, along the seam over his inner thighs, and the next rapturous suction she exerted on him was all it took to make him climax.

Grunting deeply in appreciation as he

released, Jon lost awareness of his surroundings for a moment at the diabolically greatest oral experience he'd ever had. It was exponentially superior to what he'd intended when he came home. His head swam in the pleasurable climatic afterglow.

When he finally came back to reality several moments later, her face was resting on one of his thighs. Her hand stroked his other leg slowly.

He brushed a hand down her face and buried it in her hair. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Are you?" she countered, her tone amused.

He chuckled, "Not sure yet, give me a minute."

"Okay. Thank you."

"You've got to be kidding. What are you thanking me for? If I'd known you could do that, I would have let you take me in the car."

The trill of her laughter caught him off guard.

"Well, I was frightened when I entered your home, but now I'm feeling much more secure. So thank you."

"I was impossibly horny, but trying to be

honorable, when I entered my home. Now I'm supremely satisfied. So thank *you*," he replied, twirling a lock of her hair between her fingers.

"I guess the Tiberius representative won't scan my throat to see if I've been consummated," she said in a wistful tone.

He laughed at the comical visual. "No. Unfortunately, the scan equipment only looks below the belt."

"Guess I'll have to gain some courage then. I don't want to be afraid, but I confess I am...a little nervous."

"I promise to do whatever I can so you won't be afraid. I would never hurt you, Grace."

"I know." She took a deep breath and asked, "Can I handcuff you to the bed

4 4 The Lawman's Wife
before we have sex?"

* * * *

"What?" His head shot up off the sofa. "Can you do *what* before we have sex?" His angry, surprised tone told her he hadn't counted on her requesting *he* be handcuffed down to tamp down

her fears.

“Don’t be mad at me.” She used her pleading voice. She hated to be so needy. For heaven’s sake, he was a lawman; of course he wouldn’t consent to being handcuffed down to allay her foolish fears. She’d have to be strong. Maybe it would help to leave the lights on.

“I’m not mad, but I’m not handcuffing myself down either.”

“Okay. I understand.” She hoped she wouldn’t faint or that if she did, he wouldn’t stop until she was...a consummated wife. Marissa had told her a man would be hard-pressed to shy away from a woman who ‘gave good head,’ as she’d crudely put it.

“Do you understand?” He sat forward, piercing her with a sharp, stormy gray gaze. “I put handcuffs on other people—not on myself.”

“Yes. I understand.” Grace dropped her stare as a tear escaped and ran down her face.

He grunted, and she hoped she hadn’t angered him. She needed his cooperation, but he deserved better than to be tricked.

“I should explain about my past before you’re trapped with me. I don’t want to lie to you. I need

you to understand about my daughter. You see, the reason I don't like to be pinned down is..."

"I already know who you are. I know that Andy Nelson is your child's father and that he raped you. I was the lawman who finally brought him in, and I know you're the only reason he is incarcerated."

Her gaze shot to his weary expression. "How do you know about that?"

"I was in the courtroom when you testified at his trial. I recognized you from the elevator. I didn't identify myself or pursue you because I thought you were already married."

"Oh." A secret thrill rose inside. He remembered her. He might have been interested if she hadn't been wasting her time with Danny.

"Here's a question for you: if you are so traumatized by sex from your...violation, how come you were all over me in a public elevator years ago and then again in my car? And while we're on the subject, how were you able to then give me the best fucking blowjob I've ever had, before telling me I need to be restrained for further sexual encounters?"

"I gave you the best blowjob you've ever

had?” Grace smiled at the compliment.

4 5 Lara Santiago

“It was my first one.”

Jonathan lifted one dark eyebrow into a perfect arch.

Her foolish question only delayed the memories and disgrace of her past. Humiliated by being dumped after her first sexual encounter with Andy, she’d confessed her sorrow to her mother. Her mother had told her father that Grace had lost her virginity. She’d been grounded. Two months later, after returning home early from her father’s annual company Halloween party, her parents had discovered Grace naked and handcuffed in the basement.

The second encounter with Andy had resulted in Emma’s birth.

Grace’s parents, especially her father, had barely spoken to her during the last year of their lives before the accident that killed them. They died believing she had unnatural female urges. Her mother’s head hung in perpetual shame whenever she looked at Grace, even after Emma was born, and this was worse than her father

ranting all the time about her being a whore.

After they had died, she'd gone to live with her Aunt Fiona, and the subject of her 'urges' was never brought up again. Grace and Emma had lived peacefully until her aunt's illness forced their move. Fiona lost her job and couldn't keep up the payments on her large home any longer. Danny's parents lived next door to Aunt Fiona, and he reluctantly offered to let them stay at his apartment in the city...for a price. He wanted money to attend a school that his parents didn't think worthy.

Grace had worked three jobs to provide the funds for his counselor's degree. Danny knew about her past with Andy from the newspaper accounts and from his parents' gossip. Danny said she was a freak, but soon after, he wanted to 'cure' her. He agreed that she had unnatural female urges and as a counselor-in-training, he said he knew exactly what to do to cure her. He told her she should relive the experience and face it, or else it would haunt her forever. When he'd pulled out the handcuffs and clicked the first one shut, Grace had blacked out.

They never tried his *cure* ever again, thank goodness.

Marissa was the only friend who understood and had informed her she had very natural urges. Grace wondered if her new husband would understand, but was afraid to test him.

“Do you have some multiple personality disorder I should know about?” he asked in the wake of her silence.

“No.”

“What then?”

“I’m not traumatized by sex, just by dark places. I don’t like having my arms pinned. I never said I was violated. My parents did. They said it was statutory rape because of my age at the time and their supreme embarrassment over my being such a whore.”

4 6 The Lawman’s Wife

“You aren’t a whore.”

Grace nodded, eyes closed. She knew the truth. “I thought Andy was attractive. I chased after him. The first time I...we...you know...” *Had sex the first time*, she couldn’t seem to say. “Andy told me...I was awful. He told me I was a terrible lay. I told him I’d do whatever he wanted, but he broke up with me and went back

to his old girlfriend.

“The night my mother found me in the basement, Andy had come over to tell me what it would take to get him back. I agreed to do it because I desperately wanted to be his girlfriend.”

Jon leaned back on the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. “But he handcuffed you to a bed down in a dark basement room and raped you instead.”

“No. He didn’t rape me. Let me finish telling you what happened. I led him down there. I got on the bed. I...I asked for it.” She lowered her head as tears slipped down her face.

“You did not ask for it! He’s a monster. He would have taken you regardless.” Jon leaned forward suddenly encircling her.

On some level, Grace knew Jon only meant to comfort her, but even the thought of being pinned down panicked her. She fought him off like a wild thing until her arms were free. The look of hurt in his eyes grieved her even more as she got up and stumbled away from him.

“I’m sorry. Please understand.” She was fine if she could slide her arms around his neck so she

could get them free. Otherwise, she freaked out. She took another step back and out of his reach, staring down in shame as Jonathan leaned forward on the sofa.

“I understand. He abused you.”

“No. It wasn’t bad the first time. I sort of liked it...a little.” But not like she had enjoyed having Jonathan’s hands stroking her and kissing her and nibbling on her. The memory of that blissful feeling of orgasm washed over again. She shivered and wondered if it would always be magical.

The thought of his very large cock shoved between her legs deeply inside made her perspire with sheer longing. She wished they could go have sex now. Gazing at Jonathan’s troubled face brought the vile memory of the basement slamming into her mind. She would scream and fight him in utter panic if Jon got on top of her, even with the knowledge that he made her scream in pleasure. She took another step away from him.

He stood from his perch on the couch, suddenly towering over her. “Do not take another step away from me. I’m not him. I would never

hurt you, or fuck you if you didn't want me to."

"I know. I get nervous in the dark, and the mere thought of you getting on top of me initiates a panic attack I can't control. The second time in the basement..." Grace trailed off, unable to articulate through her fear.

4 7 Lara Santiago

"Andy Nelson had genetic implants placed in his body. It made him a rapist. The second time, he raped you. Trust me. And if he didn't...well then, he would have."

Grace shook her head. "No. It was me. I led him into the basement for privacy. He told me to get undressed and get on the bed. He told me he wanted to handcuff me to the bed, and I said okay. He got on top of me and stuck...*it* inside of me. He told me to say how much I loved it. He made me repeat it over and over...so I told him how much I loved having..." She hesitated only a moment in embarrassment before finishing her thought. "Having him 'fuck me hard.' I screamed it."

"Stop. You don't have to..."

"Yes, I do. You need to understand. He didn't

rape me that night. I wanted him to do what he did. I was desperate for him to...”

Grace halted her impassioned speech momentarily and decided she must be crazy. She couldn't stop herself from being a complete and utter moron by explaining a humiliating sexual encounter with a psycho ex-boyfriend in vivid detail to her new husband.

Moronic, because she and Jonathan hadn't consummated this marriage, and she might still lose everything. Instead of mouthing off, she should be bowing, scraping, and agreeing with every word he said in order to keep that which was most precious to her.

Emma had come from that sexual encounter in the basement and not from her first time seven weeks before in the back of Andy's car. She remembered seeing the spot of her own virginal blood on Andy's back seat after he'd removed himself from her and told her to hurry and get dressed. She hadn't pointed it out then, certain it would only anger him further. He was not impressed with her pitiful effort to have sex with him. He told her she had been a waste of his time and he was going back to his regular girlfriend, Cindy Wells.

Grace remembered crying bucketfuls at Andy's rejection, fearful she gotten pregnant. A humiliating trip to the doctor had relieved her mind. She wasn't pregnant, but by her parent's edict, she was forbidden from ever seeing Andy again. It wasn't as if it mattered—he thought she was worthless anyway. When he'd come to give her a second chance on the only night her parents were gone, she'd eagerly jumped at the opportunity, not noticing Andy's aggressive manner until it was too late. There were more than ghosts and goblins roaming around that Halloween night. Monsters were on the loose.

"I understand perfectly. You wanted a boyfriend, and he took advantage of your infatuation with him to violate you," Jon said, bringing her out of her trip down memory lane.

"No. It was my fault."

"You didn't climax with him." Jonathan's matter-of-fact tone made her look at him.

"What?"

4 8 The Lawman's Wife

"He never made you scream in pleasure." Jon closed the distance between them, giving her a

lustful look. “You know, like I did a few minutes ago when I had my fingers deep inside you.”

Grace, shocked at his words, could only stare at him and relive the vibrating sensation of release he’d brought her to. She shivered in memory.

“How did you know?”

“I felt the waves of pleasure radiate from you. That was your first orgasm, right?”

She squinted, wondering where this was leading. “Yes, but...”

“I’m the first man to stroke you until you screamed in climax. You can’t ever take that away from me.

“I don’t care what you did or didn’t do with Andy Nelson when you were sixteen. He’s a sexual vampire. If you had said no to him, the same thing would have happened. The illegal genetic implants he had installed don’t work correctly after puberty. Now he requires sex, and he’ll take it by force if it’s not freely given. I’m actually surprised he only fucked you the one time.”

She stopped to consider the events directly after she’d been ‘fucked’ by Andy in the basement. Grace vividly remembered the squeak

of the mattress springs protesting as he got up, crossed the room and turned the lights off. She hadn't panicked until the door slammed shut cutting off the slim shaft of light from outer basement room.

When she saw his eerie, orange-rimmed, iridescent irises in the dark...coming for her, she'd started screaming. When she realized she couldn't move her arms, her agonized screams became shrill, but Andy only taunted her. When he told her in a hissing, slithery voice that he was going to make her bleed, she'd fought the handcuffs as her heart thundered in her chest. When the blade of his unseen knife cut an icy, wet path across her belly in the pitch-black room, she'd wondered how she was still conscious. All the while she struggled against the handcuffs, unable to free her arms and prayed for the pain to end quickly.

The maniacal laughter as that sinister voice told her all the other wicked things planned for her. "I'll cut you a pretty design." Those were the last words the monster spoke before the blessedly wonderful sound of her parents coming home unexpectedly. Those words also echoed in her mind for years to come and helped make her final decision to testify against Andy in court after her

parents were gone.

Grace stifled a scream and shook her head to dispel the vivid memory. She knew why he had only taken her once. “My parents came home from the Halloween party early. He didn’t have time.”

“Andy Nelson needs sex,” Jon repeated. “He will always take it by force because of the implants. On some level, I’m glad you agreed to the first encounter. I’m certain it was less traumatic for you, but make no mistake about what kind of animal he is.

4 9 Lara Santiago

Besides, it’ll always be a rape. You were sixteen.” He paused and then whispered, “What happened wasn’t your fault.”

“I don’t understand...” Her eyes narrowed. It was still her own fault, wasn’t it? She’d always blamed herself for that night. Her parents, especially her father, had drilled that single truth into her head over and over as her belly had swelled in pregnancy.

“Sure you do. He’s bad. You didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t *ask* for what

happened to you.”

“I wish I could believe that,” she whispered to herself.

He stepped into her personal space but didn’t touch her and spoke in a low, sultry tone.

“Believe this. The sound of your utterly delectable climax will forever make my cock rear to attention.”

Grace heard Jon’s passionate response, but still reeled from the possibility that the worst experience in her history wasn’t her fault. She wanted to believe him. His seductive gaze meant to convince her of his belief made her consider the forceful way Andy had looked at her on that fateful Halloween night.

She remembered her first reaction had been to turn Andy down because of the fear her parents would find out. She also remembered that Andy didn’t really ask her so much as told her what would happen between them, if she wanted to be his girlfriend. Had his persuasive attitude been because of the genetic implants?

“How do you know about his implants?” she asked. Grace was now recalling other differences between her two experiences with Andy.

In his car that first time, he'd been in a hurry and his attitude had been swaggering and conceited. In her basement the second time, he'd been different—more intense—and she'd admitted only to herself that she was frightened. Her only thought was of being Andy Nelson's girlfriend, whatever it took. She wanted to walk the halls of school on his arm and be accepted by all the popular kids. They were such childish desires in retrospect. She'd paid such a high price.

Jon cleared his throat. "There were several mutilated bodies discovered. The knife wounds were the same on each of the bodies. The victims had to be identified by dental records from the few teeth remaining. There was a phone call from a private medical center when a third victim fitting the description profile came in. The identity of key evidence led us to Andy Nelson. The woman died from her injuries before she woke, but they lifted some DNA that made Andy Nelson the primary suspect. Unfortunately, the evidence inexplicably disappeared during the trial. Andy was set free on bond.

"The lawman on the case tried to monitor him legally, but Andy was able to rape several other

women while the court order was lost in red tape. These rapes were not allowed to be included in the case against him. Andy's defense attorney argued that the profile was different since the later victims weren't killed. It was assumed Andy had purposely refrained from killing them for that very reason. The raped women couldn't identify him or pick him out of a lineup. We didn't know the true victim count. The ones

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who came forward all had the same story—handcuffed to a bed, ugly knife wounds—but in the end, we couldn't get a positive ID. Andy was smart. Before the trial ended, the few women who came forward ended up dead from accidents. Andy was in custody, so he couldn't be charged. The D.A. argued he could have paid someone to kill his victims off, but the judge wasn't convinced.”

“Were you the lawman on the case during his trial?”

“I was one of them. My former partner was one of his victims. He and I were state-level lawmen together when Andy Nelson broke into

my partner's house and raped his wife.

“Kevin showed up unexpectedly and caught him, so Andy killed him. Then he finished raping Sarah and killed her too. I was waiting in the patrol vehicle during the murders.”

The buzz of a communicator on his belt halted further discussion. He flipped open the device and said, “This is Brent,” before he continued in a low voice. She couldn't hear what he said before he moved into the kitchen.

While he was distracted, Grace glanced at the clock on the wall. She caught his eye and motioned that she was going to the bathroom. He nodded and went back to his phone call. Her time was running out. She needed to submit to him. She knew she'd be nervous, but she should grow that elusive courage fast. At least he wouldn't handcuff her. Maybe he would let her get on top of him the first time. Marissa had suggested the sexual position as an icebreaker so she wouldn't be afraid. Would Jonathan let her get on top? Time to find out.

* * * *

“Another DC-5 message, Elliott? You keep using it and I won't think it's a red-hot emergency

anymore.”

“Where are you? We got cut off before.”

Jon cleared his throat, nodded at Grace, and moved to the kitchen for privacy. He zipped his pants up, thinking about his suddenly complicated life. “I’m at home. I was about to dig out my personal files on Andy Nelson’s case. Why?”

“I just got some interesting information from a snitch. There is a woman who’s fleeing the country tonight to escape Tiberius persecution and her sadistic husband. Her name is Cindy Wells. She was Andy Nelson’s girlfriend in high school.”

“What does she have on Andy?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe you could go to Eastlake City and find out for me,” he said with characteristic sarcasm. “Get your ass going.”

“You want me to leave right now—tonight?”

There was silence at the end of the line, and Jon knew he’d screwed himself. He never ever said anything to Elliott except “Where to?” If Elliott directed him to go

somewhere, he went—no further discussion required. But now he had a wife to consider. Eastlake City would involve a flight. He couldn't take Grace with him. It was forbidden. Probably because it would make lawmen look like pussy-whipped cowards.

Leaving tonight would mean abandoning Grace. Jon wouldn't have time to secure a special license so that Matt Westland, his sister Sophie's husband, could be an escort for Grace. Jon wouldn't be granted a special license until he fucked her anyway, so it was a moot point. He didn't even have time to contact Matt and ask if he'd be willing to be Grace's escort.

Jon still needed to take Grace to pick up Emma at the Tiberius Family Center, unless she would be willing to wait for three more days to see her daughter. He imagined the answer to that was a resounding "No way in hell." What a royal mess he'd managed to land himself in for the sake of a wife. A wife whose wicked mouth made his cock rear in readiness even now.

"What in the blazes is wrong that you can't leave right now?" Elliott asked lethally. "And keep in mind the only acceptable answer has to do with your impending death."

“I got married today.” Jon closed his eyes and waited for Elliott to explode.

“Married?”

“Yeah.”

“That might actually qualify. Damn it, what were you thinking, Brent? You said you’d never get married. Did someone put a gun to your head or something?”

“No. I.... Listen. It doesn’t matter. I got married less than two hours ago, and I have some things I need to take care of before I can resume my round-the-clock duties.”

“Six days, Brent. We only have six days, and they review Andy Nelson’s case before they let him go because a single female testified against him to put him away. You know ninety-five percent of the cases like it have been overturned.”

“I know,” he barked. No one needed to remind him of the stakes.

“You also need to track down that female witness, pronto.”

“The female witness?” Jon asked as a grim feeling landed at the pit of his stomach. The

witness in question was certainly very female and was currently freshening up in his bathroom.

“Yes, you remember the only witness in the case, don’t you? Grace Maitland Cox. We need to get her in here. Let’s hope she’s strong enough to testify again. Since the case was pre-magistrate core, we’ll have to get her husband’s permission this time.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Oh? And how do you know that? Did getting married make you clairvoyant?”

“No, I married her today.”

5 2 The Lawman’s Wife

There was silence for a moment, and Jon figured that either Elliott hadn’t understood or he’d blown a vein out of his forehead in a stroke-induced fury.

“You married Grace Maitland Cox, the only witness in the Andy Nelson case? Are you fucking out of your mind?”

“Maybe. But she is alive and well. As her husband, I can give permission for her to testify.”

“I don’t even have words, Brent. Do you

know how much fucking trouble you're in right now? The magistrate will throw the case out for any reason, and you just gave him a very prejudicial one wrapped in a bow."

"The fact that we're married doesn't mean she was lying. He still raped her, Elliott. She was barely sixteen." Saying the words out loud hurt him more than he'd imagined. Poor Grace. He glanced at the living room doorway to make sure she was still in the bathroom.

"And you married her! Have you screwed her yet? There still might be time to have her married off to someone not involved with the case."

Jon took a deep breath and resisted the urge to shout that he wasn't marrying Grace off to anyone.

The problem was he cared about her. He'd been lying to himself about finding her another man. He wanted her. After what had just happened in his living room, he wouldn't let her go. She touched a place in his core he'd never considered reachable before, the empty part of his soul. The lonely place where he wanted to find his soul mate...someone to love and care about. The sudden epiphany was not something a superior

lawman's commanding officer would understand. Jon remained silent.

"I sense by this long silence that the deed is done and you've screwed not only her, but this case too."

"Shut up, Elliott. I hate to be the one to tell you, but it's none of your business what I do in my personal life. Let me take care of her. I'll leave first thing in the morning to talk to your witness."

"I have you booked on the seven o'clock flight tonight. It's the only IL flight headed to the east coast for the next five days. You'll have four hours to get any and all pertinent facts about Andy Nelson, high school prick, before Cindy is gone for good. Your return flight is at seven o'clock the next morning. You miss that flight tonight, and your ass is fired. Do you feel me?"

"Yes," Jon grated out, managing to sound almost sincere.

"Call me after you talk to Cindy Wells." Elliott hung up without saying another word.

Jon glanced at the clock and calculated he had less than an hour to find a place for Grace and pack before he'd have to leave to catch the

domestic air shuttle flight. The

5 3 Lara Santiago

return flight wouldn't arrive until twelve hours prior to Grace's scheduled Tiberius body scan...assuming it wasn't delayed. Air flight delays were common enough to be planned for.

What were his options? Do her, and take her someplace safe before the satisfaction melted from their faces. Leave her here, and hope he made it back in time to do her, so he could hear her climax again. His cock throbbed at the thought of seeing her face in the throes of gratification. If he didn't make it back in time, what was his backup plan? He'd take her to Matt and Sophie's and explain the situation to Matt. He could set up a husband for her...just in case.

"Grace?"

"I'm here. I'm ready. I'm sorry about all the things I said before. I shouldn't have told you..."

"I have to go."

"What? Right now?" Her tone sounded as incredulous as he felt.

"Yes. I told you. I'm a lawman. I believe I

explained my obligations to you earlier. I'm leaving on a domestic shuttle for the east coast"—he glanced down at his watch—"and I need to leave soon to make the flight."

"What about Emma?" The color rose in her cheeks. "And what about...you know?"

"I'm sorry. Both will have to wait until I get back." He thought about delays and how long he could afford to be gone. He knew he couldn't just fuck her and leave. He didn't want their first time together to be hurried and frightening for her.

"Will you make it back here in time? Will you even try to?"

"Yes. Of course I'll try. I should be here by tomorrow night. There'll be plenty of time for us then."

"What happens to Emma and me if you don't make it back in time?"

"I don't know. I'll think of something. Perhaps I can get an extension due to my job obligations." Jon knew there was no way in hell Elliott would sign the paperwork to extend his forty-eight-hour consummation order. He'd married the only witness in the Andy Nelson case. Elliott was on the warpath. Given the chance, he'

d shoot the plane down himself to keep Jon from making it back if he found out they hadn't consummated the marriage yet.

“Let's do it right now. Please. I won't faint, and I promise not to scream.” She threw her arms around his neck, kissed his jaw, and pressed her curvy body into his.

“Grace, I don't want it to be rushed and scary for you.” He peeled her away so he could think rationally and backed up a step.

“It won't be. Could I...um...”

5 4 The Lawman's Wife

Jon tamped down the visual of them copulating naked that danced in his mind. “Could you...what?”

“Get on top so I won't be pinned under you?”

* * * *

Jonathan's eyes closed halfway even as his pupils widened, darkening his expression. A sexy, dark, lust-filled look was what he gave her. Marissa was right. Some men apparently liked having women on top, if the volcanic look he now

wore was any indication.

“If we do this...we won’t have time to get your daughter before we leave.”

“But when you get back, we can get her, right?”

“Yes.” His eyes darted up and down her body with a sizzling, undeniably sexual gaze. Predatory.

Grace darted a look to the darkened bedroom doorway. Would he let her get on top *and* leave the lights on?

He strode closer and pulled her against his chest. Her arms wound around his neck. He twisted so his shoulders leaned against the wall as his hands slipped down to pull her hips into his groin. His fingers traced downward until he gripped her thighs, pulled her legs apart, and rubbed her sensitive clit against his very large cock through the material of his uniform.

Grace sucked in a deep, sharp breath as the quivery, needful arousal enveloped her. She wanted to feel that magical orgasm. He lifted her against him as moisture shot between her legs in gushing readiness. Her clit slid down his rock-hard cock again. The sensation was electric

even through the layers of their clothing.

She had no doubt that once they were naked, she'd be shrieking and moaning in no time. Not all of this was about securing her future. Jonathan Brent had always intrigued her. He had since their first kiss in the justice center elevator. He was the only man to ever make her wet and tingly below with merely his delicious scent.

Grace kissed the spot on his chest where his uniform opened at the neck. He slid her crotch against his cock again, adding a little extra grind of pressure. She might climax before any clothing came off. Jon shifted and pushed into her clit again and again. The rhythm and pressure he exerted sped up. She was fast coming to a pleasurable pinnacle. A wave of delight pulsed across her body from the epicenter of her clitoris in unexpected orgasm.

“Ohmigod!” Grace climaxed and her legs clamped together reflexively against his hips. She fell limp for a moment but came to her senses quickly. Her legs dropped to the floor as her hands went to undo his pants. She had his cock in her hands in seconds. He groaned and closed his eyes as she stroked him. She released it to slide her panties off under her skirt. She placed her

hands on his shoulders, ready to climb onto his huge cock.

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Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Someone was pounding on the front door.

“Brent?” A muffled voice shouted.

“Fuck.”

“Who is it?” Grace whispered, startled. She released her grip on Jon to grapple for her dropped underwear. She pulled her panties back on in a blind panic.

“My boss.” Jonathan gave her a sorrowful look and fastened his pants as the pounding on the door continued.

Jonathan glanced over his shoulder at her once before he wrenched the door open to a tall man with pale blond hair and icy blue eyes. The stranger, who looked familiar, strode inside as if he’d been invited. Grace noticed he had a wicked scar running down one side of his face. The weapon used had barely missed his eye as the scar ended at the outer corner of his soulless baby blues.

“Sorry to interrupt your wedded bliss, but I decided to give you an escort.”

“I’m fully capable.”

“I wonder about that sometimes.” The stranger eyed her a good long time. He looked up and down her body slowly, as if he found her lacking and unsuitable as a wife. “Get your stuff. Let’s go.”

“I’ve got to take her to my sister’s house while I’m gone.”

“Fine. I’ll wait while you get ready.” The blond stranger crossed his arms and rested his hip against the door he’d practically pounded down to enter.

“Wait outside.” Jonathan huffed.

His eyes rounded, and so did his mouth, as if a sudden realization had hit him. “You haven’t fucked her yet, have you?”

“That’s none of your...”

“Good. Now we have a case again.” The stranger stood. His face registered a stubborn mask she didn’t mistake. Grace was screwed.

“The case isn’t everything.”

“Surely you know I’ll do everything in my

power to make sure our interests are maintained.”

* * * *

“Jonathan. Please.”

Grace’s agonized voice registered in his mind, smothering the fury he felt from Elliott and his crass behavior. Jon turned away from Elliott to comfort her.

“Emma. What about Emma?” Grace put her hands to her face which mirrored her alarm.

5 6 The Lawman’s Wife

“Grace, you’ll always get to keep her. I promise you.”

“Not if I end up with someone else who changes the rules. Men always change the rules.” She glanced at the new stranger in the foyer. “I won’t risk it. When you get back, promise me you won’t do another thing until you come and make me your permanent wife. Promise me!”

“Grace. I...”

“Please.” Her pleading voice registered deeply in his consciousness. How could he ever give her up? How could he ever sell her to someone else? “Okay. I’ll keep you and make you

my permanent bride...just as soon as I get back from this assignment.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Elliott piped up.

Jonathan gave Elliott an evil look. Grace threw her arms around his neck and planted her mouth on his to seal the unholy bargain he'd agreed to. Elliott was going to kick his ass. Or fire him. Or both.

“I promise you'll never regret keeping me. I won't be a bother, and neither will Emma. She's used to being quiet. You'll see.” Jon didn't tell her he already regretted it, not because of anything she had done, but because of his crappy life in general.

“I'm going to take you over to my sister's house for tonight. I only returned home last night. There's no food here, and I can't leave you alone, anyway. My sister Sophie is married to a rich executive with his own business. You'll be safe there.” He released her reluctantly as Elliott watched and put in a call to Sophie.

The phone rang and rang. He got worried at the lack of response. Usually there was at least a maid or butler hanging around to take messages.

If Sophie was out for the evening, where else could he take Grace tonight?

Elliott gave him a rude stare, tapped his watch with his forefinger, and motioned for him to hurry his ass up.

Jon grimaced as Sophie and Matt's phone continued to ring. A newly formed bad idea occurred to him as he listened to the endless ringing. He closed his eyes and cursed as the only other person available to him entered his mind.

Thomas "Brutal" Blackthorn, his *other* brother-in-law.

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Chapter Five

Jon dialed the home of his other sister. Hannah and her husband, Brutal, had moved back to Earth from their off-world mining property less than six months ago. That was, after they'd finished mining the biggest Thorium-Z find in the history of the fuel discovery to date. He listened to the phone ring, praying silently that Hannah would answer rather than Brutal.

"Yes," growled a voice that was definitely not Hannah's. *Damn it.*

Jon didn't waste time on pleasantries or greetings. "Do you know where Matt and Sophie are?"

"Yep."

Since Brutal didn't offer the location, Jon gritted his teeth and asked, "Where are they?"

"Why do you need to know?"

"I'm a lawman. I don't explain my needs. Where are they?"

Brutal remained silent for a full fifteen seconds before answering, "Italy."

"What are they doing there?" He tried not to sound sulky, but probably didn't carry it off in his tone.

Another fifteen seconds went by, making Jon want to reach through the phone line and pistol-whip him, before Brutal sighed and answered, "Vacationing."

"When will they be back?" This time, Jon let the petulance in his voice have free reign. When Sophie and Matt traveled, they stayed gone for long periods of time.

"Why the fuck do you have a need to know, again? Or is this simply brotherly concern?"

5 8 The Lawman's Wife

"I need to speak with Matt on an urgent matter," he said and didn't know why he stopped without adding, "As if it's any of your fucking business." "Do you know when they're coming back or not?"

His black sheep brother-in-law sighed deeply and responded sarcastically, "Well, since they let me in on every intimate detail of their itinerary, I'd say they won't be returning until their travel visa expires in twenty-seven days. That's just a guess, though."

"Twenty-seven days? Fuck, are you sure?"

"Did I stutter?"

It was Jon's turn to sigh deeply. He closed his eyes and said, "Listen, Brutal, I need to ask for...a favor." Home surgery to remove his spleen with a rusty razor and his bare fingers would have been less painful than asking Brutal for a favor, but he didn't have a choice. With Matt and Sophie gone, he had to find a place to take Grace.

"Oh? I can't wait to hear this."

"I got married today, but I'm on a flight at

seven tonight for the east coast until at least tomorrow night. I don't want to leave my new wife alone." Jon let out another deep breath to make his request. "May I bring her to your house for the evening and pick her up tomorrow?"

"You got married?" Jon had never heard Brutal laugh before. He had a deep, rich voice that women probably found intriguing, but Jon found it a gratingly annoying noise.

When he caught his breath, Brutal asked, "Was there a gun pointed at your head at the time of this wedding?"

"Save it. Yes or no, Brutal."

"Definitely yes. I want to meet the woman who intimidated the mighty lawman Jonathan Brent into marriage."

"Fuck you."

"No thanks. Besides, you should probably save yourself for the new little woman in your life. Wives can be very demanding in the bedroom, in case you didn't know."

Jon ignored the sexual reference, especially since it applied to his sister. "We'll see you in an hour," he said through gritted teeth.

“Can’t wait. I’ll leave a light burning for you, lover boy.”

Jon ended the communication by hanging up without saying good-bye.

“Who was that?” Grace asked.

“No one important,” he responded and wondered how he had gotten to this desperate place so quickly.

This exact same time yesterday, he’d been on a shuttle return flight back from Europe. When he’d entered his home last night, he’d gone straight to the bedroom and

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slept on top of the covers of his bed without changing clothes. This morning he’d showered, put on new clothes, and acquired a simple new assignment to pick up a common criminal named Walter.

Less than twenty-four hours later, he had a wife, a stepchild, a pissed-off boss hovering over him, and a brother-in-law whose existence he barely tolerated about to do him a huge favor. Not to mention a looming consummation he wasn’t sure he should participate in upon his return with

a new bride who was skittish about sex unless he was immobilized. He raised his eyes to the ceiling momentarily and wondered what celestial shit list he'd managed to land on and what he'd ever done to deserve being put there.

He knew he was crazy to think any of this would work out to his advantage, but then Grace put her arms around his neck and buried her face in his throat in gratitude. The scent of her never failed to arouse him or convince his logical mind he would be worse off without her.

He'd be damned, if it wouldn't be worth every excruciating moment if he could pull it off.

* * * *

"Jonathan, is it really you?" Hannah shrieked after answering the door. She launched at him in greeting. He caught her up in his arms and hugged her close as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Brutal hated when they did this, which was why Jon encouraged it.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were still out of the country," she said, her voice now muffled in his collar.

Jon looked up into Brutal's amused eyes. He stood just inside the door. Amused because he

apparently hadn't mentioned Jon's call.

"I got back last night. I called a few minutes ago. Brutal didn't mention it to you?"

"I didn't want to ruin the surprise." Brutal arched an eyebrow up and smiled an evil smile.

"What surprise?" Hannah released him, slipped down back onto her feet, and finally noticed Grace standing behind him. "Who's this?"

"Your brother got married today. I think that's his new wife," Brutal informed her with a grin. He knew it would throw Hannah off guard and she'd take her reaction out on Jon.

Hannah punched Jon in the chest with her fist. "You got married? When were you going to tell me?" Then she ignored any response he might offer and pushed past him to greet Grace. "Hi, I'm Hannah. Don't mind them. They're men. They spend the bulk of their time marking their territory around each other, and still they barely get along. Come on into the house." Hannah grabbed Grace by her arm, led her toward the door, and asked, "What's your name?"

“Grace.” She responded evenly, but perhaps slightly warily. Jon couldn’t blame her.

“Grace. Nice name. Don’t stand there, Jon, come inside.” Hannah led Grace into the large foyer.

“Are you staying for awhile, Jon?”

“I’m leaving in ten minutes. I asked Brutal if Grace could spend the night here. I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“Of course she can stay. Come on, I’ll show you the guest room. You two be civil or face my wrath.”

Hannah sucked in a deep breath—to berate him some more, Jon was certain—but then Brutal leaned down and whispered in her ear. She kissed his cheek and turned to escort Grace out of the foyer.

Grace smiled, glancing over her shoulder as she was led away by his sister, who was still yammering away. Jon watched Grace leave as if it would be the last time he ever saw her. He nearly gave in to his irrational fear. He wanted to stop them from walking away, but he didn’t.

This left him alone with Brutal in the silent entryway. He came to his senses quickly, realizing

Brutal was suddenly watching him like a hawk. Jon loved his sister. Hannah always cheered him up. She was a pistol and had met her match in her husband. Brutal, on the other hand, made him livid. It wasn't that Brutal was a bad husband. Jon simply hated the circumstances under which he and Hannah had met and married.

A couple of years back, immediately after the Tiberius Group took over, Hannah had been sold into mail order bride slavery by the moron in her first brief marriage. She had been shipped off to one of the moons of Mars, where Brutal had bought her after fighting another miner.

Jon would never admit it, but after spending time with Brutal, he knew with utter assurance Hannah could have done worse. Especially after he'd met the man Brutal had fought to win her at the mining colony auction. The competitor for her hand in the mail order bride marriage had been Erik Vander, a sadist murderer currently in jail for killing another mail order bride. Jon had brought him back to Earth and put him away with no regrets.

Brutal gave him a smug smile and then motioned him to a door off the foyer. "Let's talk in here." Brutal motioned him into what Jon knew

was the study. He followed behind, hating to not have Hannah available as a referee.

“What did you need with Matt?” Brutal asked. He crossed to the massive desk in the corner of the large room. The two connected walls framed behind his desk were filled floor-to-ceiling with enough paper books to make any modern-day librarian unquestionably giddy. The rare smell of wood pulp with ink assailed Jon as they got closer.

6 1 Lara Santiago

Wood pulp paper products were no longer allowed to be produced. Books published now were placed on computer disc or synthetic paper. Museum libraries were the only place you could see them on display anymore. And private collections like Brutal’s.

“I wanted to ask him something about his business, but it doesn’t matter,” Jon said distractedly, looking at the books over Brutal’s shoulder.

“I’m his chief security consultant. Maybe I could help.”

“I’m shocked that Matt would stoop to

nepotism. You must have begged.”

Brutal stepped behind his desk and said, “Yeah, because I need the money so bad. Try me. Ask your question. I know things.”

“Do you know anyone at Westland Industries I can get as a husband for Grace?”

Brutal stared at him a moment before arching one eyebrow up in obvious surprise. “No, my duties don’t include pimping husbands for women, just straight security. Why did you marry her in the first place if you were going to find another husband for her?”

“Her kid. She was up for auction. No one bid. She would have gone to the Institute and lost her child. So I bid on her.”

Brutal cocked his head to one side, smiled, and nodded, but Jon could tell he knew it wasn’t the complete story. “That was certainly nice of you. You know, to go so far out of your way for a stranger. Or did you know her already?”

“Not exactly.”

“Uh-huh. You’re full of shit. Where did you meet her, and why get rid of her now?”

“None of your fucking business. How about

that?”

Brutal sat down behind the desk and tipped back in the chair. He crossed his arms and said, “Since she’s going to be living under my roof for the next twenty-four hours or so, I’d say it’s my business.”

Jon paced in front of the desk, trying to think of something to tell Brutal. He didn’t want to get rid of Grace and definitely didn’t want to explain his romantic feelings to his black sheep brother-in-law.

“I met her once a long time ago during the case involving the murder of my partner. She helped put the guy away. That’s it. No big deal.” He decided not to share the interlude in the elevator in deference to Grace. He convinced himself it was because he was the kind of guy that didn’t kiss and tell. But truthfully, he didn’t want Brutal, of all people, to know how deeply he cared for Grace, especially if he didn’t get to keep her.

“She’s kind of cute. Are you sure you want to find another guy for her?”

“If I stay married to her, I’ll have to bring her and her kid either here or to Matt and Sophie’s

anytime I leave town, which is frequently. You don't want that

6 2 The Lawman's Wife

responsibility, do you?"

Brutal shrugged. "No skin off my ass. This is a big house. It would give Hannah another female to talk to."

"I'd have to get a special license to assign you and Matt the permanent rights of a blood relative. I don't know that I want you as a blood relative. Did you want me as one?"

Brutal gave him a smirk before saying, "You could get yourself reassigned to a local law enforcement post instead of traipsing around the universe on someone else's whim."

"Purposely get demoted? There's no way in hell I'd ever do that, not for anyone."

"Marriage changes things, Jon."

"Not for me."

"You say that, but I don't buy it. You fairly radiate a lethal, protective aura around Grace. It made you uneasy to watch her walk away with your own sister. Imagine it's some strange guy

from Matt's company leading her away to consummate her next marriage."

"Shut up." Jon lunged over the desk at him, but Brutal bounced out of the chair, well out of reach. Jon lost his balance and landed stomach-down on the desk. Unfortunately, he could picture that scenario all too well, and it infuriated him beyond all reason.

"You've already displayed one of the two signs of attachment."

"What sign?" Jon straightened up from the desk, brushing a piece of rumpled synthetic paper off his shirt.

"The first sign of attachment is the inability to allow even the thought of her to be with anyone else. The very idea of another man touching her crushes your soul because you know that no one will love her as much as you are trying not to. Plus you'd rather beat the crap out of someone than admit it."

"I'd rather beat the crap out of you."

"Yeah? Picture your life without her and say you aren't attached."

"Why?" But Jon knew why. He'd rather die than lose her. He knew it, and apparently Brutal

was reading minds, because he had a smug expression.

“The second sign is the incapacity to imagine your future without them. In case you were wondering.”

Jon straightened and drilled a smug look of his own at Brutal. “Remember back on the moon of Mars when you left to go back to your mine without Hannah?”

Brutal arched one eyebrow questioningly. “Yeah?”

6 3 Lara Santiago

“I *let* Hannah sneak out to meet you. Did you know that?” Jon had seen the look on Hannah’s face when she’d come back down to dinner to find Brutal gone. Before he’d left, Jon had thought Brutal might shed a tear or two of his own at leaving Hannah behind.

“I figured as much.” Brutal chuckled. “What kind of interstellar lawman lets his own sister escape so easily?”

“The kind who recognized you weren’t what I thought you were at first glance—or punch, in our case.”

“Genetically enhanced, you mean?” Brutal made a scoffing noise, “Well, it takes one to know one. That sucker-punch when we met clued me in immediately.”

“No. I mean I knew you weren’t a sexual vampire.” Brutal stiffened as if Jon had clocked him one on the head at the mention of the word ‘vampire.’ But then Brutal’s remark registered in Jon’s mind, and he asked, “What do you mean, it takes one to know one?”

Brutal crossed his arms as if trying to keep his calm. “For starters, I’m *not* a sexual vampire, and I can tell you’re enhanced because I am. I figure it’s a big secret, you being a lawman and all, but don’t worry. I probably won’t rat you out.”

Jon stared unbelievably at one of only three people alive in the universe who even suspected he might be enhanced. One was his privately funded personal doctor, the man who’d been responsible for the very secret enhancements that had begun before he was eight years old and the current supplier of his sexual suppression medication.

The other was the man who’d paid for the enhancement all those years ago: a senile,

ninety-one-year-old man who resided in a private nursing home. Jon's genetic abilities were courtesy of his mother's former boss. He didn't need Brutal to be the third charm in his super-secret, genetically enhanced life.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not enhanced," Jon said with practiced lightness.

Brutal's gaze drilled into him. "Denial doesn't become you."

Jon shook his head and forced a benign smile. "I'm not in denial. I'm not enhanced. What makes you think I am?"

"Guys like you and me are rare. We were given our 'enhanced cocktail' before puberty. Many of the older test subjects...ended up vampires.

"You have the ability to sense the others too, like I do. That's why I'm the security officer for Matt. He had a vampire working for him and didn't know it. *Him* I ratted out. I sensed him easily when Hannah and I visited Matt's company. The degenerate vampire I encountered in the john had a wife, but had gotten tired of the same woman day after day and had begun to stray. I do what I can to help out when I find sexual predators

loose.

6 4 The Lawman's Wife

“But I’m curious. If you require sex, as I suspect you must, how come you never seem to be looking for women? Ever! I almost convinced myself I was mistaken about your proclivities, but I got such a vibe off you tonight that I knew I was right. Grace walked past you and your pupils dilated until you had no color left. Then they snapped back as if nothing had happened. That’s how I knew.”

“Nice fiction, Brutal. But you’re wrong. I’m a lawman. Lawmen aren’t allowed to be genetically enhanced. They run endless and repeated tests to make sure.” Jon leveled him with a look that said he never wanted the subject brought up again and made a mental note to speak to his doctor. He’d never noticed the pupils of his eyes changing for any reason, sexual or not. His eyesight had been imperfect of late. He’d noticed the problem at the auction while adjusting to the darkness. He’d never had more than a nanosecond of adjustment time in the past. Maybe he was sick.

Brutal tilted his head to one side as if he didn’t

t quite understand, but then nodded and said, “My mistake. Grace will be safe here. I promise.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back late tomorrow night, but I’ll need to pick her up no matter how late, okay?”

“Sure. Whatever.” Brutal shrugged. “Have a safe trip.”

* * * *

Grace entered the study at the direction of Hannah’s huge husband, Brutal. “Are you leaving already?” Grace adored Jon’s sister. She was a chatterbox, but she was friendly and completely accepting of a total stranger being in her home because her brother said it was okay.

“Yeah. I’ve got to go. My flight’s in exactly an hour, which is how long it will take me to get to the airport. I’m running late, but I promise you’ll be safe here.”

“I know. I like your sister. She’s funny.”

“Yeah. Hannah’s a good egg. Don’t let Brutal scare you. He’s big, but fairly harmless.”

She shook her head to let him know she wasn’t afraid of being here. She was more fearful Jon wouldn’t make it back on time and then she’d be

in trouble again. She shrugged and smiled at him. “Hannah doesn’t seem to be afraid of him.”

“No. He’s good to her, but I’ll never admit it to him.” He winked and changed the subject. “I’m sorry we didn’t have time to pick up your daughter.”

“It’s okay. Once you get back tomorrow night, we can...you know, consummate things...and then go get her, right?”

“Right.”

Grace wished they’d ‘consummated things’ before leaving his home. Did they have time to accomplish the deed now? Elliott waited outside. She suspected that if Jonathan took too long, he’d simply come and beat the door down.

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Then again, what did she have to lose? Grace threw her arms around Jonathan’s neck and kissed him, sliding her tongue between his startled lips. He twisted her around and pressed her against the desk. The edge dug into her ass as he kissed her the way she wanted him to—as if he wanted her desperately.

Her arms were wrapped around his neck in a

death grip. His hands burned through the fabric of her skirt. She felt his cock grow against her belly. He ground into her. She moaned, licking his mouth. She leaned back toward the surface of Brutal's desk, pulling him with her. He seemed to realize what she was trying to do: allow him to take her on Brutal's desk. The rush of desire overwhelmed her.

She wondered briefly whether the library door was locked and decided she didn't care.

Jon broke the kiss and gasped, "Oh God, Grace, do you know what you do to me?" He clenched her tightly.

"Don't stop. Please, Jon." She clenched him tightly, too.

"I'm sorry. I can't..." He had to pry her off slowly. He checked his watch and cursed.

From the doorway of the study came an acerbic voice. "Do I need to turn a hose on you two?" Jon's creepy, angry boss stood at the now open door. "Let's go, Jon. We're late."

Jonathan steadied her against his body. "I'll meet you in the car."

"No. We should have left five minutes ago."

Jonathan separated from her, pulling away as if with great reluctance. She knew he needed to leave. She knew he wanted her. He took several deep breaths and released her.

“I’ll be back tomorrow night to continue this,” he whispered.

“You’d better be.”

Jonathan strode away from her, never looking back. Elliott gave her a dirty look, then a smug smile of victory. Grace understood that if he had anything to do with Jonathan’s return, she’d be back up for auction before she could say, “Fucking Tiberius Group.”

* * * *

Thoughts of Grace filled his mind constantly for the next several hours as Jon jetted his way to the east coast. As the flight soared eastward, he knew he wouldn’t feel at ease until he had her in his arms again. He wouldn’t find another man for her. Brutal was right about that too. He’d rather cut his beating heart out of his chest with a spoon than see her with anyone else.

The image of Grace came into his mind again—the one of her waving from the

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door of Hannah's house, and he smiled. Even when he slept, he dreamed about her. It was a wonder he didn't walk around with a perpetual hard-on. She seriously engaged his libido.

Jon hoped this meeting with Cindy Wells wouldn't turn out to be a big waste of his time.

"I don't know what I can tell you about Andy Nelson," Cindy began. "He was my high school boyfriend, but we didn't stay together after graduation. I heard he got implants, and I was already staying as far away as possible. He was an asshole."

"Did he ever threaten you?" She got a distant look in her eyes, and Jon knew she was holding something back.

"Tell me what he did."

"Why does it matter? I won't stay to testify. No matter what you do or say."

Jon gave her his most serious stare. "I want him to stay in prison."

"So do I, but nothing I say will help you. Trust me." She gave him an annoyed look, then softened. "He dumped me right after I had sex with him the first time, okay?"

“Was this before or after he had the implants?”

“Before the implants. He wasn’t satisfied with my efforts. He was a shit-heel as a boyfriend, but he didn’t do any freaky stuff to me like what I heard he did to that other girl.”

“Grace?”

Cindy nodded. “He dumped me to go pop her cherry because I wouldn’t have sex with him. He bragged about ‘fucking’ Grace in his car after he took me back, which pissed me off, but what could I do? Andy was a great catch back then, and I was a foolish high school girl.”

“Did Andy ever try to contact you after he got the implants?”

“Not exactly.”

Jon pushed out an exasperated breath. “What exactly?”

Cindy shrugged and replied, “I went to Europe for vacation, but one of the maids at our house said Andy showed up a week before I returned with a blood-red rose to give me.”

“A rose?” Jon felt a familiar tickle of elusive memory scratched at his mind, but he couldn’t

grasp it.

“Yeah. She said he was pretty pissed because I wasn’t home to receive his gift. Like a single rose would have made me spread my legs for him. What a jerk!”

“Do you remember when that might have been.?”

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Cindy shrugged again. “I’m not sure. It might have been around Halloween. I got back to the states in early November. Listen, I wish you well, and I’m sorry I can’t help you, but you wasted a trip. I need to get going.”

“If you remember anything, will you send a message?”

“Sure. Whatever. But don’t count on me coming back to this fucked-up country to testify. At least not until they get rid of the Tiberius sons of bitches. I’m sick and tired of being a second-class citizen. It sucks to be a woman here. My psycho husband would kill me if he ever found me, and the shame of it is that no one would care. You know?”

“Sorry, ma’am. The changes are definitely

challenging.”

“Challenging, my ass. They suck.”

“I appreciate you meeting with me.”

“Whatever. You wasted a trip. I told that Elliott guy everything I just said. I don’t know why I needed to repeat it to you.”

Jon knew why. If he hadn’t been sure of it before, now he knew his boss had set him up.

* * * *

Jon headed back to the hotel and slept fitfully, dreaming of Grace until he awoke with an erection so painful he had to give himself an injection. The next morning, he arrived at the airport in plenty of time to catch his return flight home. Unfortunately, the delays he experienced were saved for his return flight. The aircraft sat on the tarmac for two hours while his nervous stomach ate at his patience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sorry to have kept you waiting. Either we will be on our way in a few minutes, or we’ll have to spend another night here and be on our way early tomorrow morning.”

An hour later, he stood in the airport with a hotel voucher and a sincere urge to kill Elliott for

sending him on this wild goose chase.

The scheduled return flight leaving the next day would arrive at the airport less than an hour before his forty-eight hours to consummate the marriage were up. Brutal's house was over an hour away, even if he drove his cruiser with the sirens blazing. He wasn't going to make it back to her.

He checked the possibility of taking a train, but they were less reliable than flying. Driving was out of the question due to the distance. Even if he could persuade Brutal to risk traveling with Grace across the country, it was too far, with too many checkpoints.

With a heavy heart, he called to let Grace know. The thought of losing her was almost more than he could stomach.

“Hey, Brutal. Let me talk to Grace.”

“Where are you? I thought you'd be back by now. Grace is...well...to put it

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mildly, freaking out. Do I understand you haven't fulfilled the forty-eight-hour consummation requirement yet?”

“Yeah. And I’m not going to make it back in time either. I’m stranded.”

There was a long silence on the phone. “Guess you should have done her in my office before you left. I would’ve tackled your boss in the foyer if you’d warned me.”

“Yeah, hindsight’s twenty-twenty, but I was always a fool for romance. The ambience in your office while you, Hannah, and Elliott listened out in the foyer wasn’t conducive to my seduction plans.”

“Yeah, ’cause I have nothing better to do than listen to your sexual proclivities. When does your flight come in, Romeo?”

“About ten minutes before time runs out, if I’m lucky. Unfortunately, you live an hour away, even if I use my sirens for the trip.”

“Too bad we didn’t take the time to become blood brothers before you jetted off. I could bring her to you.”

“Yeah. I guess it wasn’t meant to be. Fate, you know.”

“Want me to break it to her?”

“No. I’ll do it. Put her on the phone.”

The sound of Grace's voice made him want to crawl through the lines and wrap himself around her. "Hi. Are you at the airport?"

"I'm stranded in Eastlake City. I already tried to get an extension from Elliott. It was denied, of course." Elliott had yelped in joy. The case was back on track, and Elliott had mentioned a promotion. Jon had told him to go fuck himself, but Elliott had been gleefully unmoved.

"What will happen now?" Grace asked in a dejected tone he echoed silently.

"I'll find someone for you so you can keep Emma."

"No. Please, I don't want anybody else. Why don't you want me?"

"I *do* want you, Grace. Believe me. I can't physically make it to you, not even if we met halfway in vehicles."

"But..."

"I'm sorry, Grace. I truly am."

"I should have made you do it before we left your house. I shouldn't have wasted my time spouting off about my past."

"Don't torture yourself. It's my fault. I'll find

a good husband for you. I'll find someone who will let you keep Emma. I'll do a private sale, no auction, okay?"

"Fine." She slammed the phone down in his ear and broke his heart. He was a

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lawman. He was trained to kill without remorse if a criminal was in violation, and yet at this moment, he was surprised to learn he had another side.

He discovered a sentimental side long buried in his macho job. It was the emotional one he'd long since ignored in favor of his career, never believing there was a woman for him to love.

But there was. Her name was Grace and she was about to become his lost love.

* * * *

Jon spent a miserable night all alone in the hotel. He dreamt of Grace and thought about how stupid he was not to have done whatever it took to keep her. He should have left Elliott pounding at the door until he'd finished making her his wife. His foolish honor in trying to keep her fears at bay would cost him very dearly.

Jon boarded the first return flight the next morning. He drank about five cups of bitter, burnt-tasting airplane coffee on the flight to stay alert from his lack of rest the night before.

The pilot informed them they were ahead of schedule, and Jon stepped off the airplane and into the jet-way tunnel with thirty-seven minutes to spare on his forty-eight-hour time limit. The hour-long trip to Hannah's home was the only thing standing in the way of his continued marriage to Grace.

It seemed wickedly unfair to lose her because of only a few minutes. He thought once again about who he could sell her to, but he knew of no one. He was only acquainted with lawmen. If they weren't already married, they had the same life he did. His disturbing thoughts were interrupted by a commotion ahead of him as he exited the jet-way into the noisy airport. There were lots of people waiting on either side of two velvet roped areas for the plane passengers to disembark. Jon followed the marked trail which promptly opened into the main section of the terminal.

He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Brutal with his big, meaty hand wrapped around Grace's forearm, dragging her along as he yelled

at her over his shoulder on a direct path to him.

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Chapter Six

Brutal gave Jon a quick smile of recognition and then his expression changed into a stern serious visage. He announced in an overloud voice, "Here's my sister. She's your problem now, Lawman."

He thrust Grace forward, whirling her to fall right into Jon's waiting arms. Jon held her to him as her delectable scent wafted around his unbelieving senses.

Grace turned her back to Brutal and said, "I hate you. I have since we were kids, you big bully."

"Back at you, princess. Good riddance. You're lucky I didn't whip you for your sassy mouth. I'll leave that to your husband because as a lawman, he's got better equipment for the job."

Jon forced his lips not to shape into a grin. The Tiberius-friendly men in the surrounding area smiled and nodded amongst themselves, obviously satisfied that yet another female was being put in her place.

“You’ve got your own transportation home, right?” Brutal asked quietly, leaning close.

Jon nodded and added sincerely, “Don’t know how you did it, but thanks, Brutal.”

“Uh-huh. Airport workers don’t check licenses very closely if you give them a little drama for their ho-hum lives. I put my thumb over Hannah’s picture and flashed her I.D. when I dragged Grace kicking and screaming through the first security point. Nobody even noticed.” Brutal glanced down at Grace and then smirked. “Now, I expect you to treat my little sister with respect. Don’t force her to do anything carnal, at least until you find a less public place.” He winked once and then turned to walk away without saying another word.

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Grace tightened her grip on his arms. “It’s way past time to make me your wife, don’t you think?”

“I do. Any thoughts on a private place for some carnal activity?” he asked jokingly.

“Otherwise, we’re going to my IL cruiser in the public sub-basement parking lot. The back seat is

very small and uncomfortable. How can you resist?”

“The back seat of a car wouldn’t be my first choice, as enticingly cozy as it sounds. Marissa told me about a broom closet by an old jet way that she and her husband used once. She said it’s out of the way and no one can hear what’s going on inside.”

He laughed and glanced at his watch. “Okay. Let’s go. We need to hurry.”

They headed for the quiet space of the broom closet to consummate their marriage. Luckily, it was early in the morning and the airport was still fairly quiet. They arrived at the door to the janitor’s closet...which was locked from the inside. Loud sexual noises already emanated from behind the closed closet door. Grace’s disbelieving face spoke volumes as she blushed.

“Popular spot. Marissa was wrong. You can too hear what’s going on inside.” Jon tried not to laugh out loud and searched for the nearest bathroom to find some privacy.

“Now what?”

“Let’s try the bathrooms. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find one closed for cleaning.”

Jon spotted an arrow directing them to the restrooms. Along the way, they passed a freight elevator. Jon stopped and pushed the down button. The doors popped open, as if waiting for them to come aboard.

“What do you think? And keep in mind we are seriously running out of time.” Jon glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

Jon stepped into the elevator, turned, and noticed he was alone. Grace stood before the doors, and as they began to shut, she put her arm in and the doors bounced off. Jon stepped into the doorway again and held out his hand.

“In or out?” he asked, smiling.

“In. Definitely in.” She hesitated. “I still don’t like elevators though.”

“I thought I cured you of that years ago with a kiss in the dark.”

“Oh, you did. Unfortunately, the cure didn’t last beyond that one time. If only you’d been available whenever I needed to ride an elevator.”

Jon smiled and touched her shoulder. “I’ll be right here. I promise not to let you fall.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes and took a step. Jon wrapped his arm around her

7 2 The Lawman’s Wife

waist and led her inside. He turned to the panel and hit the down button for the sub-basement garage, where he’d parked his vehicle. He hit the stop button and waited for a blaring noise to ensue, but the elevator was silent. He took that to mean no one cared about the freight elevator, who was on it, or what anyone did inside it.

Grace opened her eyes and looked around at all four corners of the ceiling space.

“What are you looking for?”

“Cameras.”

“If there are any, I don’t see them. Come on. By my calculation, we have less than thirty minutes.”

She turned back to him. She looked apprehensive, to say the least.

The reality of what they were about to do sunk into his conscious. Jon was delighted that fate had stepped in and allowed him to keep her.

“Let me hold you a minute.”

“Okay.” Her voice trembled. She was frightened and hated small spaces, but they didn’t have time to go anywhere else. He’d calm her down and coax her gently. Technically, this was their honeymoon. She deserved whatever tenderness he had time to offer. Jon pulled her close and brushed the knuckles of one hand along her jaw.

“Remember the first time we met?” he asked. The visual of them melded together in the near dark skated across his frontal lobe. He felt his dick thicken and lengthen, ready for the anticipated carnal action.

“Yes.”

“I accept your offer to have amazing sex in the elevator.”

Grace’s hands lifted to rest on his chest. Her touch burned through his shirt. “Did you think I was a loose woman back then?”

“No, I thought you were frightened and beautiful. I cursed myself regularly afterwards for turning you down. I should have said to hell with the camera and gone for it. ”

“But we would have gotten caught.”

He shrugged. “Most things worth doing at all have some risk involved, especially sexual ones.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

Grace blushed. She then nodded and slid her arms up, hooking them behind his shoulders. This put her kissable, bee-stung lips right up next to his. His hands went to her waist. He needed to break the ice.

7 3 Lara Santiago

A lip-licking kiss was certainly in order. He kissed her hard, twisting his lips sideways as she breached his mouth with her tongue. She kissed him like she meant it. Lust surged through his body. He hadn’t participated in lots of sex, settling instead for medication to take the edge off his ferocious sexual desires. He was anxious to have a willing partner for his sexual proclivities. Grace was the icon he based his fantasy woman on. She had been ever since he’d kissed her in the elevator.

It would be nice to have someone to come home to. Giving up his injector was yet another bonus of this marriage and yielded the eradication

of monthly shots he endured to tame his libido.

Grace ground her lips and made a sexy, mewling noise, forcing his neglected cock to spring forth in his uniform trousers with an erection of epic proportions. He wanted to sink into her deeply and knew he'd come quickly, like the last time they were together. He vowed to make this up to her. Once they were done here, he would take her home and spend some time making sure she knew he could last longer than three strokes every time they were together.

She wore a skirt similar to the one she'd had on the day he married her. He reached underneath it, sliding his hand from her silky thigh up to the apex of her sex planning to remove her underwear. She wasn't wearing any. He rubbed her ass, shocked by her lack of under things. Grace moaned in his mouth as he stroked both bare cheeks.

He broke the seal of their lips. "I hope Brutal didn't know you were going commando."

"He scared the pants off me," she said in utter seriousness before smiling.

"Funny."

"Of course he didn't know. I was just glad

there weren't any strip searches coming into the airport."

"Me too. Because I would hate to miss this." He slid his hand between her legs from behind and directly into her pussy to assess her readiness level for his epic cock. She was drenched. He stroked her clit a couple of times, letting her creamy moisture coat his fingertips. He inserted two fingers inside her pussy again as she sucked in a deep breath and squirmed. Jon watched her pupils widen as he circled her clit several more times until her eyelids dipped and she moaned.

"I've waited so long. Make me your wife, Jon. I promise you I'm more than ready." Her breathy, stilted voice caught every time he ran his finger across her small, sensitive flesh.

He kissed her again and loosened his pants and zipper, one-handed. He flipped her skirt up in front, lifting her thighs up and over his cock, which desperately strained to connect intimately. She climbed up on him, positioning herself. She reached a hand down to grab his cock and slide it into her wet opening. Jon shut his eyes at the contact of her soft hand on him. The head of his cock was now inserted and poised for his first thrust inside. He held her legs, shifting to make

his move. She kissed his mouth as he lowered

7 4 The Lawman's Wife

her onto his cock, feeling his way inside her very slick, warm pussy.

Paradise surely wouldn't be as good as this. She moaned, kissing him passionately as he thrust inside her slowly for this first time. She was tighter than he expected for having given birth.

Doing his best not to bruise her legs with his grip, he lowered and raised her several more times, his cock straining to pound inside. He broke from her insistent mouth to whisper, "Am I hurting you?" but didn't stop thrusting. He couldn't. His libido was on a mission now. She didn't answer, but moments later, she stiffened.

Grace's loud response to his question washed over him. She tilted her head back and climaxed, moaning. "Ohmigod. Ohmigod," she repeated over and over. He could feel her clamping on him, surprisingly enough. He gripped her legs and surged up inside, pumping as best he could for the awkward position he was in. She was tight and slick and Christ Almighty, he was ready to let loose his own orgasmic release. He thrust inside

harder and deeper several more times as she clamped on him blissfully, finding his own volcanically fantastic fulfillment inside her tight slit moments later. He spewed forth his seed deeply inside her as his legs went weak from the aftermath. Braced against the wall, he pulled her close, his shoulders pressing back to keep him from falling on his ass.

Leaning against the elevator wall with Grace still wrapped around him in post-sexual bliss, he finally caught his breath and checked his watch.

They'd consummated the marriage with fifteen minutes to spare.

Now to race to his home to catch the Tiberius Representative so he could verify it. He felt like he was living his life on the run. Common criminals probably didn't have to sprint like he had to for the sake of amazing sex in an elevator.

"That was remarkable. I can't wait to finally get you into a bed." He felt her stiffen a moment before she melted back into him and sighed.

"It was amazing sex."

"When I can move my legs again, we need to get back to the house. We're late."

Grace leaned down and kissed him

passionately and thoroughly, her soft tongue sliding lazily around his mouth. He felt his cock spring back to life, still embedded inside her. But they didn't have time for another round of amazing elevator sex.

She released his lips. "What happens when we're late for the body scan?"

"I don't know, maybe a fine. I'll use my out-of-town trip as an excuse. Don't think you get to escape me now." He laughed and hugged her, so grateful for the opportunity to share his life, such as it was, with her. Elliott would be only his first obstacle. The magistrate reviewing Andy Nelson's case would be next in line, but he didn't care. They could all go to hell. He got to keep Grace as his wife, and the rest would work out.

"Thank you, Jon."

7 5 Lara Santiago

"For the elevator sex or the permanent marriage status?"

"Both. Either. I feel secure for the first time in a long time." She gazed deeply into his eyes and said, "I promise you won't regret it."

"I already don't regret it. We'll figure

everything out together, right?”

“Right.”

They rushed back to meet the Tiberius representative, who promptly did the scan. He approved the permanent marriage papers, but not before giving them a disapproving look. He knew by the reading on his scanner that they had only recently completed the consummation.

Jon gave him a ‘fuck off’ look in return and pulled Grace inside to spend the day making it up to her. He’d been looking forward to the first taste of her for three long damn years. It was time. As soon as the door closed and locked, they slammed into each other, kissing and pulling pieces of clothing off while they shuffled their way in the direction of his bedroom.

They started in the shower because he wanted to wash his trip grime away. Also, he wanted to see her naked and soapy. He teased her by slathering soap all over the both of them, but didn’t let her climax. He wanted her naked in his bed. He toweled them off and kissed her as he danced her into his bedroom.

By the time they reached the edge of his bed, he was glad they were already naked. He picked

her up in his arms, trying not to throw her down and have his wicked way with her. Instead, he positioned her on the center of the huge bed and crawled on hands and knees over her. She reached up and grabbed two rungs of his slatted headboard as if to hang on for whatever he planned.

He leaned down and sucked leisurely on a nipple until it pebbled in his mouth. Her moans inflamed him. He released the one and then placed his mouth on the other. He snaked a hand down between her legs to play with her clit while he nibbled on her peak. His cock was presently rigid with pent-up desire, but he had plans to introduce her now creamy, moist slit to his tongue. He kissed a path from her breast to her belly and then ran his whiskered face even lower. When she realized his intent, she half sat up, but he buried his face in her curls and licked her lower lips appreciatively. She fell back to the bed, groaning in what sounded like pleasure, so he sucked her clit between his lips to further her satisfaction. The taste of her made his cock want to simply hump the bed and finish up.

Jon brought a hand up to tease her pussy with his fingers as he licked, sucked, and nibbled on

her small, tasty flesh. He looked up to see her fingering her own nipples and had to clench all the way to his toes so as not to shoot off at the sight. He inserted two fingers inside her very juicy body and she rode them, grinding on him, still moaning. Her breathing came in harsh gasps now. He teased her clit with the tip of his tongue and inserted his fingers inside her as deeply as he could until she came in a screaming trembling rush.

7 6 The Lawman's Wife

He felt her orgasm wash over him and squeeze his fingers. She screamed his name over and over before collapsing in whimpering satisfaction. He couldn't wait any longer. He removed his hand from between her legs and grabbed his cock.

"Look at me," he demanded, releasing his cock to lift her hips into position for optimal thrust.

She opened her shining, satisfied eyes and smiled as he directed the swollen head inside her wet and still pulsing sex. He watched her as he drove his cock deeply inside her slick pussy.

He found he was trembling on the verge of his

release, watching her while he pierced her body slowly and repeatedly. He glanced at her breasts and back to her eyes.

“Touch your nipples for me.” Grace’s fingertips slid over to caress her nipples and he growled in appreciation. She brought one forefinger up to her mouth, stuck it inside, and sucked on it until the tip was moistened. She placed it back on her nipple, swirling the moisture around the areola. Desire pounded through his veins.

He powered another thrust deeply and said, “Lick your finger.... Touch your clit.”

She stuck the other finger between her lips, moistening it, and then slid it down until her finger reached the area where he plunged his cock over and over. She circled her clit as he thrust deeply. His eyes traveled to where she pinched a pebbled peak and back down to where she was pleasuring herself. Several strokes later, she arched in another climax. His eyes half closed when he powered his final stroke all the way inside and released a powerfully roaring orgasm.

His legs trembled in the aftermath of his climax. He fell forward, trapping her beneath

him. She caressed his back with her fingernails, scratching a path to his soul.

When they had finally gathered their wits about them, Jon led her back to the shower. He touched her everywhere reverently, as if he still didn't believe he got to keep her. She clenched her arms around his neck and buried her face in his throat as warm water rained over them. He held her tight until the shower ran cool before releasing her. Grace. His wife. His future.

He was the luckiest man in the world.

Doubt about his actions wouldn't seep in until later.

7 7 Lara Santiago

Chapter Seven

It took the rest of the day for the slow process of the Tiberius Group Family Center to bring Emma to the house. Grace made lunch, and after an hour, they'd finally eaten, still waiting for word of when Emma would arrive. Grace made her daughter a plate of food and cleaned up the kitchen to within an inch of its life. She then fidgeted around the house, cleaning here and there.

Jon pretended to read the files on Andy Nelson, toying with the uncomfortable sensation that he was playing with fire. He hadn't spoken to Elliott yet. He didn't know Grace was now Jon's permanent wife. It was a conversation he didn't want to have.

He shifted gears, wondering what he'd do with his regular cleaning service, a husband-and-wife team. Should he keep them on? Would Grace like to have a cleaning service? He didn't know how to live with someone. He hadn't shared a home with anyone since age eighteen, when he lived with his mother. Hannah and Sophie had left for college. He had spent his final year of high school with a mother who was never home because she worked like a slave even eighteen years after their selfish conman father had deserted them.

Jon glanced over at Grace and wondered if she would resent the time he devoted to his career. Amazing sex notwithstanding, he wondered what on earth had ever possessed him to marry her. She glanced over at him nervously, as if she could read his wayward thoughts, and frowned.

Grace paced the floor like a caged, angry

panther ready to spring on the first person to startle her as she waited for her daughter. Jon tried not to be a sourpuss, but on some level knew the dynamic of his household would change dramatically with a child living in it. He barely knew Grace and hadn't lived with her as his wife for a full twenty-four hours yet. Adding another person would be a big change. Especially a small female child.

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"I know what you're thinking," Grace said suddenly. He looked up and realized she had stopped pacing to stare at him daydreaming about the inherent life changes about to occur in his small house.

"What am I thinking?"

"You're kicking yourself for agreeing to keep me as your wife."

"No..."

"Yes, you are. Children change things. I know that. Children who don't belong to you change things in a big way."

"I'm sure it will be fine." Christ Almighty, she *could* read his mind.

“I promise Emma is very quiet. Danny wouldn’t tolerate her speaking or making noise.”

“Don’t bring up that idiot’s name again. It pisses me off. I’m not in any way like your ex-roommate.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

He was being an ass. She was right: he was having second thoughts about turning his life upside down for a wife he barely knew and a child he’d never met.

Jon heard a vehicle enter the driveway to his property. He stood up and peeked out the window to see an official Tiberius Family Center vehicle pull into his circular driveway and park by the door. He got his first glance of Emma Maitland riding in the back seat. She was a beautiful child. Her coloring was exactly that of Grace’s. She turned in her seat, and he saw that she was crying. Mouth open, tears streaming—she must be screaming. That didn’t bode well for a peaceful drop-off. From experience with the Tiberius Family Center, Jon knew a pious crony with attitude would emerge from the vehicle. Clutched in his hands would be a copy of current Tiberius laws freshly printed on synthetic paper. If Jon

were to exhibit any reluctance to Tiberius rule, the man would wave the laws in Jon's face to prove the righteousness of the new regime.

Jon could visualize the drama as it would unfold. Grace would kick the pious crony's ass for making her child cry, and Jon would spend the rest of the day making nice for the actions of his errant wife. He hated to make nice.

He dropped the curtain and turned to Grace. If her child was crying, she wouldn't want to deal rationally with the authorities. Jon didn't want to break up a fight if Emma had been mistreated. He decided to go without Grace to bring her inside.

"Stay here. I'll bring her to you. Do you understand me?" He sounded cross, when he only meant to sound firm. The minute she heard her child crying, she wouldn't listen to him anyway.

Grace gave him a hopeful look and stood straighter. "Is she here?"

"Yes. But I mean it. I don't care what you hear. You stay here. Do you understand

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me?"

“What’s wrong?”

“Probably nothing. Do as I say. Wait inside.”

“Okay.” Grace crossed her arms and began pacing, as if ready to burst into a thousand pieces at the wait she’d already endured.

Jon knew he’d only have her quiet cooperation until she heard her child screaming. Then he hoped not to have to pull his gun to stop a murder. He stepped out of his house, closed the door behind him, and expected the worst: a bratty child about to be difficult to control. Jon smiled in reassurance so his wife, who had up to now had had the worst life in the history of human existence, could have her baby back.

He heard the unhappy shriek of the child just then. The sound drilled into his brain, but when he figured out what she was crying about, he immediately launched a defense for Emma.

“I...hic...don’t want...hic...to live with...hic...Mrs. Brent. I want...hic...my mommy!” Emma Maitland wailed between hiccups.

“You are a spiteful little girl. You should consider yourself lucky the Brents want you at all. Girls like you should be put away.” The matron

turned, and Jon figured she was the ugliest woman he'd ever seen. The ponderous bulk of her frame didn't bother him as much as the uni-brow she sported. It startled him when she turned to face him, but not as much as the big, hairy, misshapen birthmark the size of Texas on one of her fat cheeks.

He tried not to stare, but damn, she was hideous.

"Perhaps if she knew Mrs. Brent was her mommy, she wouldn't be crying," Jon said in a raised voice as he approached the trio now out of the vehicle.

"Mrs. Brent is my mommy?" asked the forlorn little girl, looking up into his eyes with a hope he was pleased he'd provided. He squatted down to her level to speak to her again.

"Yes. She's waiting for you inside. If you let me escort you, she'll think I'm a hero for bringing her little girl back. Do you think you could wait for me to take you inside?"

She looked over at the front door first before looking back at him. She pierced him with her clear, alert eyes, which were the exact color of Andy Nelson's, and nodded once, wiping tears

from her cheek with a small hand. She hiccupped twice after that, but was otherwise silent.

“What do you need for me to sign?” Jon stood again as he asked the two Tiberius Group Family Center members.

“Do you have the marriage documents?” the man asked, frowning. The TG hated when people got along with each other. They seemed, in Jon’s opinion, very small-

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mindful and only happiest when strife and fighting broke out in the course of their duties. Drama as entertainment.

“Yes, and I also have the adoption papers. I’d like to begin the process today.”

“It’s very civilized of you to offer to adopt the child. As a lawman, you probably see the worst of humanity. The Tiberius Group is making life better for everyone each and every day.” The man puffed out his chest. Jon hoped he wasn’t about to preach.

The woman with the uni-brow and birthmark nodded rigorously in agreement. Jon remained silent. He didn’t think the world was a better

place with Tiberius control. He was surprised they were still in power after two strife-filled, politically strong-armed years. It had been a difficult adjustment and one he hoped was short-lived.

“The child is an innocent. It’s the least I can do,” Jon said gruffly. Emma smiled up at him.

“Well, still it’s good of you to accept into your household this child of Satan. She’s the bastard child of a monstrous criminal, you know,” the woman told him in an overloud ‘confidential’ voice. Spittle collected at the corner of her mouth as she spoke. Jon was repulsed by her attitude more than her appearance, but both were atrocious.

“I know she is innocent of any crime.” Jon took and signed the electronic pad the man held out to him, thus taking custody of Emma. He then signed the application to petition the magistrate core that he might adopt one Emma Maitland. The fate of her life would become his ultimate decision someday, but her quiet countenance made him believe things might work out.

“How long until the papers are final and the adoption is complete?”

“Well, the prison warden will have to affirm her biological father is still incarcerated. Once that is determined, then the paperwork will go before a three-member panel of magistrates assigned to the Family Center’s law section to determine whether you are worthy of fatherhood. They’ll check to make certain you are an exemplary citizen in good standing in the community. I’m sure a lawman will have no problem.”

“Fine.” Jon returned the electronic clipboard and reached a hand out to Emma. “Are you ready to see your mom?”

“Yes, please,” she responded and placed her hand in his. He hoped he would make a good father figure for her. He had to be better than Danny, the lazy bastard she’d lived with these past several years. With her small, soft hand trustingly wrapped in his, Jon knew if he ever found out Danny had mistreated Emma, he’d find a way to kill him.

Jon opened the door to Grace, who was still pacing at her post near the front door, and ushered Emma inside. When mother and daughter saw each other, both squealed in delight and hugged, crying and talking at the same time.

“I’ll leave you two alone to settle in.”

“Thank you so much, Jon. I mean it.” Grace grabbed Emma up in her arms.

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Emma even pulled her little face away from her mother’s to nod at him, smiling.

“You’re welcome.” Jon went back to his files, happy in the knowledge he’d done a good deed today. Perhaps being married with a child would agree with him.

* * * *

Grace clutched Emma to her as if she were dreaming. She had been worried about ever seeing her again. She owed Jon absolutely everything.

“Mommy, I’m so glad to see you.”

“No one hurt you, did they, baby?”

“No. But they shook their heads and frowned a lot when I told them I wanted to see you.”

“Well, we’re together now, and nothing can separate us ever again.”

“Where is our room, Mommy?”

Grace had dreaded this question. She had

always slept in the same room as her daughter. Her aunt, who'd taken them in when her parents died, only had a two-room apartment. While living at Danny's, Emma, Grace and her aunt had shared a room until her aunt had died in a medical center last year. Now Emma would have the spare room all to herself. Grace would sleep with her delectable lawman husband. The thrill of this warmed her.

“You, my darling, will have a room all to yourself. Won't that be exciting?”

“But why, Mommy? I want to stay with you.”

“Because the nice man in the next room is my new husband. Remember when we talked about my marrying Danny?” Emma nodded as uncertainty creased her features. “Jonathan is better for us, I promise. He's going to be your new dad. Mommies and daddies sleep in the same room, and children sleep in a different room.”

“What if one of us gets scared?”

“If you get scared, you call for me and I'll come to you. But you need to get used to sleeping alone, Emma. It's the way it has to be. I love you more than anything. We are so lucky to be here. Please be a good girl about this.”

“Okay...but can't you stay with me tonight, Mommy? Please? Just this first night.” Emma's little, pleading face sent shards of guilt into her soul. How could she abandon her daughter tonight after all she'd been through?

* * * *

After seeing Emma securely in Grace's arms, Jon entered his bedroom and settled the idea in his mind that he would be sleeping alone. Grace wasn't going to abandon her daughter this first night in favor of his bed.

Damn, he wanted her again too. The interlude in the elevator had been a mere

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appetizer to the dinner portions of sex they had shared in his bed. Making love to her so many times earlier had only made Jon want her even more. He had a new outlet for his sexual proclivities, and her name was Grace.

He eyed the place in the bathroom wall where his secret panel of medicine resided. The place from which his customary sexual relief came. The Zanthacorth injection would be a poor substitute for sexual satisfaction after a flesh-and-blood

woman. He wondered if he would ever be able to take a shot again as he relived the exquisite feeling of burying his cock into Grace and thrusting repeatedly.

The more he thought about it, the harder his dick got, until he started thinking of ways to lure her away from the guest bedroom for a quickie. Then he remembered Grace as she clutched her precious daughter, and banished any predatory sexual fantasies for tonight. He could wait. She and her daughter deserved to spend some quality time together after their separation. It wouldn't be forever.

He took a deep breath instead, trying to calm his libido with promises of future regular sexual activity. The door to his bedroom opened, and he wondered if his cock had psychic abilities when he heard Grace enter his bedroom, then close and lock the door behind her. A glance at her face made him think she was slightly pensive. When she turned from the door, Jon decided her expression was more wary. Once she saw him through the open bathroom door, startled fear shone on her features before a timid smile registered. His cock throbbed a greeting and bounced against the counter where he stood.

Jon turned without thinking of his ardent physical state. Grace's eyes fell to below his beltline, and she witnessed firsthand his lust for her.

Eyes widening, she glanced back up to his piercing stare.

“Did you need something?” he asked, surprised he had the wherewithal to merely speak and not growl or, worse, act on his rampant fantasies. He wouldn't win her over by leaping onto her right now like a feral dog after a bitch in heat.

“I need...” She stopped speaking and forced his rabid libido to fill in the blank. *She needs you to fuck her repeatedly*, it said. Almost without any thought, Jon advanced into the bedroom, his lusty cock leading the way for him.

“You need...what?” He was fast losing the battle with the reptilian part of his brain, which was pulsing with lust and about to override his single conscious gentlemanly thought of abstinence.

“I need a place to sleep,” she said, smiling warmly, and glanced sideways at his bed before staring back to his surely lust-filled eyes . He

cleared this throat to think.

“You aren’t going to sleep with Emma?”

“No. My place is with you. I’m your wife, Jonathan. For better or worse and everything.”

“Grace...” He wanted to tackle her to the bed and thrust deeply until they both screamed in release.

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“Please.” She stepped closer, and he smelled her. “I want to be your wife, in *every* sense. There hasn’t been a night since I met you three years ago that I didn’t relive that kiss in the elevator. I belong with you.” Her lovely face seemed so determined to convince him she wanted him. Was it gratitude or desire?

“And if Emma wakes up...?” His eyes darted in the direction of the other bedroom.

“She won’t. She sleeps soundly, like a rock, I promise. Please let me stay with you.”

He took three steps closer without having remembered his legs moving. He was driven and controlled by his desire.

“I need you, Grace.” He didn’t explain the

utter truth of that statement. “I’ll always make a place for you in my bed.”

Once she found out about his pervasive sexual needs, she might be frightened. He would do well to keep that tidbit close. He allowed one last momentary thought of his hidden medication. The original plan for his dismal satisfaction this evening, at least until his wife showed up looking for a place to sleep.

He smiled at the visual of his medication gathering dust in the secret compartment as he moved on to gain sexual satisfaction from an unexpected marriage. He approached her slowly.

“Good. I need you too,” she said as he stepped closer still. The scent of her always knocked him on his ass. His impulse was to pounce on her, but instead he took a deep, cleansing breath and motioned her to come to him.

“I don’t want to scare you, and if I make any further movement toward you, I may be too aggressive.”

“I don’t mind aggressive.” She stepped closer, and the unique fragrance of her filled him. His cock pulsed with the desire to fuck blindly, but he

strangled the thirst to take her.

He knew without a doubt she wouldn't stop him if he laid her down and slammed inside her until he was gratified. But she deserved to be gently wooed and tenderly made love to until she climaxed over and over before he should allow another orgasm for himself.

She had serviced him on the living room sofa for their first intimacy as man and wife. This was followed two days later by a quickly consummated union in an airport service elevator just so they could remain together, for Christ's sake.

This morning in his bed had been phenomenal but also frenzied. He had expected her to be less aggressive and mostly tolerant of his advances, but instead she was feisty and sensual in a vibrant way he hadn't expected from someone with limited experience.

While she had climaxed all the times they'd been together, Jon wanted this

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unexpected night to be unhurried. He wanted to show her tender love-making instead of rushed

sex within a time frame to meet the initial dictates of a new frigid society.

Also, he wanted to taste her again. The vision of her legs spread before him, inviting him to taste her luscious, creamy pussy, lips, and clit forced his eyes closed in anticipation. That was what he was going to do first, once he got her undressed.

Her hands reached up to his chest, and she pulled his face to hers for a kiss. He put his hands to her hips as her tongue entered his mouth. He groaned in sexual delight. He pulled her hips forward to rub against her soft, willing body, nearly letting his lust loose at the sensation of warmth she radiated.

Grace's arms slid up until they hooked behind his neck. She stroked the back of his head, massaging his scalp and drawing him closer. Her breathing increased, her lips consumed his, and he decided he could climax without intercourse if she released another throaty moan.

Jon turned and danced them backwards, guiding her along with him until his thighs connected with the tall platform bed. He sat down hard on the bed, his face now level with her lovely breasts. Spreading his legs, he drew her

between them, his hands now securely fastened to her ass and grinding her into his eager, insatiable cock. He let himself fall into the warm sensations of the new life he couldn't believe was his.

After pulling her shirt up to uncover her breasts, Grace broke the kiss only long enough to pull it off and fling it behind her. Jon bent to taste the tip of one peak that thrust forward. Her moan electrified him. She peeled her remaining clothes off, pushing her skirt slowly down her legs and kicking it aside. She was completely naked. He kissed her ardently and made a plan for her seduction. Slowly. He vowed to go slowly tonight. He tried to go slowly. Grace wasn't interested in slowly.

She pushed him back to the bed and climbed on top of him. Holding his arms down, she slid her soft body languorously over his until their hips were aligned and her breasts pressed against his chest. She shifted her hips and ran her slit along his cock until her clit rubbed against the sensitive tip. A flick of her hips, and his cock slipped inside her pussy an inch. Before he could take a breath, she impaled herself, slamming down until his balls rested between her thighs. Her tight grip wrenched a moan from his lips. Her hips lifted,

releasing his cock from delicious confinement before she slammed down on him in the very opposite of slowly. She fucked him. Hard.

Jon slipped his hand between them to finger her clit as she rode him with ferocious intent. After several moments, Grace stiffened above him in mid-slam and whimpered. He felt her pussy clamp down on him and fought the urge to come. Her hands were on his shoulders. She slowed down, still whimpering her release.

Jon rolled them over, flipping her underneath him, and pounded inside her. He grasped both her hands in his, their fingers entwining. His forearms pressed and trapped hers to the bed as he powered inside of her body. Her legs soon wrapped around his hips like a vice, egging him on. Her eyes popped open, and the look of wonderment and love

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she gave him filled him with pleasure.

A smile played around her lips before she whispered, “You feel so good inside of me.” He thrust once more, deeply, and the explosion of his climax made his heart skip a beat from sheer

pleasure. Every time with her felt like his very first orgasm all over again, except that it got better each time. Every rapturous time he climaxed with her helped justify his choice to keep her.

He could love her. She was quite possibly the one. Perhaps they were meant to be together. Jon collapsed on her, clenching her fingers tightly. His breathing came in gasps hard enough that he couldn't speak. He had her pinned to the bed. She couldn't move her arms underneath his, but she didn't seem to notice. Or maybe she'd fainted in fear. He lifted his head and kissed her cheek. She kissed his in return.

"You're even better at this than Marissa said you might be," she said in a breathy whisper.

He laughed and kissed her throat. He was glad she was so distracted by his lovemaking that she didn't notice her arms were pinned down.

She turned her head and kissed his face again tenderly. He felt himself slipping into unconsciousness from the blissful gratification. They lay together with fingers entwined, both breathing deeply.

"I love you, Grace," he whispered sincerely

and promptly dozed off, still pinning her arms down. She still didn't seem to notice.

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Chapter Eight

The next morning, Jon awoke early, wrapped around a warm Grace. His first thought was about sex, but his second thought was that his time was running out on the Andy Nelson case. Elliott was going to blow that ever-present vein out of his forehead when he learned Jon and Grace were permanently married. He glanced down at her sleeping form. The only witness keeping Andy Nelson in prison was peacefully trapped beneath him.

The recollection of the previous night forced him to take a deep breath to calm down. Grace was, quite simply, perfect for him.

He got up, quietly extracting himself from her—slowly, so as not to wake her—and then slipped some sweatpants and a t-shirt on and padded to the kitchen to make coffee. He decided pancakes were in order, since they were the only kid food he knew how to make. He made the batter and was flipping the first batch to cook on

the second side when he heard the pitter-patter of little feet enter the room behind him.

“You can cook?” Emma’s astonished voice came from the doorway of the kitchen. He turned away from the stove to see her clutching a battered, one-eyed, floppy-eared stuffed dog as she watched him.

“You bet. Have a seat. Do you want milk or orange juice?”

She shrugged and said, “Danny said I could only have water.”

Jon made a mental note to go punish him for having been such a bastard to Emma and Grace while they had lived with him. “Well then, I say that you should have both this time. Then tomorrow you’ll know which one you’d like better.”

She nodded with a little smile and slid into a seat at his kitchen table. Her chin barely came up to the edge. He’d have to find something for her to sit on.

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“Danny never cooked,” she said in a solemn, awe-filled tone.

“He didn’t, huh? What did he do?”

“He yelled at Mama to hurry her butt up and put food on the table or else.” Suddenly Jon could see Danny’s pudgy face turning red as he squeezed the bastard’s throat between his hands. He needed to calm down.

“Maybe we should make some breakfast for your mom for a change. I think she’s earned a break. Don’t you?”

She nodded again, smiling her agreement. Her smile was so much like Grace’s, it pulled his heart into a melted puddle. He knew he would do anything and everything in his power to keep this child safe, as if she were his own flesh and blood, no matter what.

“Danny didn’t ever hurt you, did he?” Jon couldn’t seem to help asking the question, although he was more afraid of her giving a positive answer. If Danny had so much as harmed a hair on her precious head, he’d be unable to control his anger. Emma and Grace had been treated abominably by the new Tiberius Group rules, and Danny had been a total bastard too.

“Well, he hurt my feelings. He told me I was ugly because my real father was a psycho. What’s

a psycho anyway?”

“A psycho is a bad man, but it doesn’t matter who your father is. It still doesn’t make you ugly. You are your own person.” Jon flipped two pancakes on a plate for her and pulled the syrup out of a pantry next to the refrigerator. Then he brought her a glass of milk and another with orange juice in it. He grabbed a stack of kitchen towels for her to sit on and reach her food.

“I like both of them,” she said after taking a sip of each beverage in front of her.

“I guess you’ll have to have both each morning then. You have some catching up to do.”

She giggled and started in on her pancakes. “These are the best pancakes I ever ate in my whole life,” she said after one bite.

“Surely they aren’t better than your mom’s?”

Emma looked over her shoulder in the direction of the bedroom doors and back again quickly. “Let’s not tell her, okay?”

“Okay.” Jon watched her take another bite and poured more batter on the griddle.

“Do you like your room?”

“Yes. Mommy said I get to have it to myself.

But if you don't want to share your room, I'll let her sleep with me."

"You deserve to have your own room. You've shared long enough. Besides, I'd be lonely without your Mom."

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She shrugged and smiled, "Okay."

Jon heard Grace get out of bed. She stumbled by the kitchen doorway to enter Emma's room, then she shouted Emma's name and ran to the kitchen, then stopped abruptly, as if she had difficulty taking in the scene before her. She was half-dressed and looked half-asleep. Sexy as hell. Jon gave her a long, careful stare from head to toe and back again. He wanted *her* for breakfast.

"What are you doing? Why did you let me sleep? I would have made food."

"Mama, he made pancakes for you. Jon can cook! Can you believe it?"

Their utter surprise and shock at what were actually his meager cooking abilities brought a grin to his face. Having a ready-made family was kind of nice.

The phone rang, interrupting his happy family fantasy. He stepped away from the table, running a hand down the back of Grace's silky head and letting her hair slip through his fingers as he passed her.

Picking up the cordless phone, he answered, "Yes."

"Brent, it's Elliott. Are you still married?"

"Yes."

"I guess you made it back in time to consummate your ill-advised marriage. Damn your incredible luck."

"Yeah. No thanks to the wild goose chase you sent me on to talk to Cindy Wells."

Elliott didn't confirm or deny the trip as a ruse to thwart him. He just asked, "Why her? Out of all the women available in the world, why did it have to be the only witness in this case?"

"It must be fate. Get over it. It's a done deal now."

Elliott emitted a noise which sounded like a growl of frustration before he changed the subject and asked, "Why did you agree to adopt her kid?"

Jon frowned. “How do you know about that?”

“The paperwork you started yesterday to adopt one Emma Maitland, who also happens to be Andy Nelson’s biological kid, made record progress in the cycles of government through the wee hours of the night. It is currently sitting on the desk of the magistrate who will be hearing Andy’s case. Guess what?”

“What?” But Jon already knew what. He’d jumped from a flaming inferno into the molten lava of a volcano.

“Andy Nelson’s hearing was just moved up to tomorrow morning, instead of the end of the week.”

Jon tipped his head back closing his eyes. “Damn it.”

“We meet bright and early with the D.A. Come prepared to sign a document

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giving your permission for Grace Maitland Brent to testify for the magistrate’s review.”

“What if I don’t want her to testify?”

“Then I kill you with my bare hands, and Andy Nelson goes free immediately. You have twenty-four hours to find something—anything—that will keep Andy in prison. I’m not counting on your ‘wife’ being able to pull it off this time.”

“There’s nothing to find, short of convincing Andy to confess. Unfortunately, Grace is all we have.”

“You do understand what will happen at the review, right? She has to face Andy Nelson alone. The D.A. won’t be allowed to object to anything Andy asks her within the scope of the event which transpired, resulting in the birth of a child nine months later. You should prepare yourself to be silent or stay out of the courtroom.”

“I’ll be in the room, Elliott. I refuse to desert her because it might make the case look bad.”

“You could appoint someone. You don’t want to hear all the gory details, do you?”

“I won’t abandon her. She’s my responsibility.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m going on record as saying I think it’s a colossal mistake. But you’re already aware of my feelings. See you bright and early.” Elliott hung the phone up.

Jon leaned his forehead against the wall and closed his eyes at the thought of Andy Nelson being let loose to do the evil things he knew how to do so well. For the present, he thought it might be prudent to have an ally in court tomorrow, especially if the worst happened and Andy was released.

He speed-dialed a number that he spent too much time calling lately.

Brutal picked up on the first ring and barked, “What?”

“I need another favor,” Jon said without preamble.

“I told you I’d be your blood brother. Stop whining.”

“Shit, I forgot about that. We need to do that today. But never mind that now. I need something else.”

“What else do you want?” he growled, but Jon could tell he wasn’t put out.

“I need you to do some investigative work for me on the sly. I don’t want anyone to know what I’m up to.” Jon was thinking of the worst-case scenario. If Andy was let loose, he wanted someone to help keep tabs on the monster.

Brutal chuckled mirthlessly. “Does it involve the slime you put away for your partner’s murder?”

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“I won’t ask how you know that, but yes. Andy Nelson needs to be watched.” Jon was surprised he knew details.

“Like I told you, I know things. I’m in. Andy Nelson is purported to be in a class by himself where sexual vampires are concerned. ”

“He is...and Grace has to go head-to-head with him in court tomorrow morning after the D.A. presents the original case to the magistrate. I ’d also like for you to be in court with us. I can’t testify as to his depraved sexual nature, but you can since your genetic enhancement isn’t a secret.”

Brutal sighed. “I’ll be there. Anything else?”

“I’ll pick you up and drop Emma off. Hannah will watch over her, won’t she? It’ll just be while we’re in court.”

Brutal laughed. “Of course. I’m certain she’d love to meet her new niece.”

Jon forced himself to utter, “Thanks, Brutal.”

“Uh-huh.” Brutal snorted. “Whatever. Try not to break down into tears.”

“I’ll pick you up this afternoon to get the license.”

“Right.” Brutal laughed again. “You’re so whipped.”

* * * *

“I can’t believe I agreed to let you testify,” Jon told Grace the next morning as they waited outside the courtroom for Andy Nelson’s release review to begin. They’d left Emma and Hannah together for the day. Elliott hadn’t even wanted Jon to be in the same five-mile radius as Grace, let alone the same building.

The magistrate was the one who required his presence even over Elliott’s veto. Jon was listed as the arresting officer.

Jon had arrested Andy Nelson on a charge of aggravated rape resulting in death. Before the Tiberius Group takeover, that charge had been considered murder. Their initial case was based on DNA evidence and his being found in the immediate proximity of the victim. At the time of his arrest, Andy had told Jon he’d simply found

the woman battered and tried to help her. He was naked and his whole body was covered in her blood, including his dick. He laughed maniacally when Jon pointed out the obvious. Andy was out of control and had become high on his own power in the wake of evading the law.

The rose on the ground next to the victim had convinced Jon that Andy was the serial rapist killer, but he had also sensed something evil emanating from Andy. Jon had to concentrate completely so as not to be detected by others who were genetically enhanced if he didn't move physically away. He had the early radar warning system, as he called it, but it only worked in close proximity. It hadn't helped him as he'd sat outside while Andy had murdered Kevin and his wife.

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He'd always blamed himself for not accompanying his former partner into his home that fateful night. He'd have known about Andy as he entered the house. His guilt had eaten at him for years after. He hadn't been close enough to sense Andy the night of Kevin's murder. There had been two roses in the house when Jon entered, the length of Kevin's absence finally

sending him inside. One rose lay on the bed next to Sarah's bloody body, and the other was still clutched in Kevin's hand.

Andy Nelson was pure evil. He craved the screams of his victims. He loved to hear them plead for mercy while he tortured them until they wanted to die. Then he would oblige them.

Grace had helped put Andy away long ago. However, Jon didn't think today would be a justice-rich day. He dreaded so many things he couldn't begin to count them.

At the first trial years before, the defense attorney hadn't been allowed to ask whether Grace had asked to be tied down by Andy Nelson. Grace had been told it didn't matter whether she had consented or begged for him to do what he did; it was still rape because she was only sixteen. The age of consent had been unilaterally changed to age eighteen across the States back in 2027.

Things were dramatically different today before a member of the magistrate core in the pre-trial review for Andy Nelson's release. This time, instead of lawyers debating the facts, the only two people allowed to give testimony would

be Andy and Grace. The magistrate would be the one to discern the truth and react accordingly.

Jon didn't hold faith that Grace's testimony would keep Andy in prison this time. The magistrate for today's trial was exceptionally unsympathetic to women. Magistrate Silas was notorious for overturning rape cases in which the testimony of the victim had been the only factor in conviction. It would be disastrous if Andy were let free.

Of the ninety-one percent of previously convicted rapists Magistrate Silas let go annually, eighty-five percent committed crimes again against the convicting witness within the first twenty-four hours of release and were put back in prison. No one was allowed to bring this fact up to the magistrate core, though.

Brutal had agreed to sit in the audience and wait for Andy's arrival.

The magistrate entered the room even before Andy made it to court. Bill Warren, the district attorney who had tried the case the first time, when Grace's testimony had been critical, was still the D.A. Warren called Brutal in officially to verify that Andy Nelson was a sexual vampire

who required medication to temper his urges. Warren tried valiantly to explain to the magistrate that Brutal had the ability to recognize sexual vampires due to his genetic engineering. Magistrate Silas was so far unimpressed with his statement that Andy was dangerous to society.

The magistrate looked down his nose at Brutal and said, “You also are a sexual vampire, as I understand the definition.”

“No, sir.” Brutal barked, “I most certainly am not.”

9 2 The Lawman’s Wife

“Don’t you take medication to alleviate your sexual needs?” the magistrate asked absently, not looking up from whatever he was reading.

“No, sir. I do not require medication. It doesn’t work for me,” Brutal grated out.

“Then how do you keep from sexually accosting women?”

“I imagine the same way you do, Magistrate,” he said and smiled as laughter broke out in the room.

The magistrate looked up, red-faced and

angry at being made the butt of a joke. “My personal life is not in question here!”

“Neither is mine. I don’t understand how my sex life is any of your business, Magistrate, for the purposes of this trial. I’m here only to testify as to whether Andy Nelson is a sexual vampire and how deep his sexual proclivities run. You wouldn’t want to unleash a sexual vampire into society, would you?”

“How will you know whether he’s a sexual vampire or not, if you aren’t one too?”

A clerk of some sort leaned in at that opportune time and started speaking earnestly to the magistrate, so Brutal didn’t have to answer.

“The prisoner is being brought in now. You may be seated, Mr. Blackthorn.” Brutal remained standing. He was waiting to sit until Andy Nelson was brought into the room. Jon knew he wanted to get a sense of how deeply disturbed the prisoner was as he walked by. When Andy got within six feet of where Brutal stood, they both flinched as if in recognition.

Andy Nelson hissed in a deep breath that whistled between his teeth, stopping in his tracks three feet away from Brutal. He brought his

handcuffed hands up as if in defense, but they rattled and caught against the chain that was attached to his leg shackles.

Jon watched Brutal clench and unclench his hands a time or two. Jon remembered the utter blackness that oozed from Andy's soul as it encountered his, back when he'd arrested him. Andy was the worst and vilest rapist he'd ever encountered. Thankfully, Brutal was here to voice this for him so that he could keep his career as a lawman.

"Mr. Blackthorn, sit down or you will be held in contempt."

Brutal turned to face Magistrate Silas. "This man is a sexual vampire, Magistrate. It's deep-seated."

"You, sir, still haven't explained to my satisfaction how you are not one of these predators. I don't like genetically altered men." He wrinkled his nose. "It's unnatural."

Brutal opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off with the rap of the magistrate's gavel and a distasteful glare. He gave the magistrate a dirty look in return, then seated himself. Jon noticed he held himself rigidly. Jon caught his eye, and

Brutal nodded slowly, grimacing.

9 3 Lara Santiago

The clerk recited in a clear if monotone voice, “The parents of Grace Maitland filed a complaint against Andy Nelson after they came home early from a company Halloween party. They had tried to call home, but Grace had not answered. They became concerned and returned home unexpectedly. Grace was discovered nude and handcuffed to a bed in the basement guestroom. They discovered a bag in the room left behind with Andy Nelson’s prints on the contents. The list of items found in the bag includes surgeon’s knives and several other torture devices.”

The clerk continued reading from the previous court trial transcripts. “Grace, under pressure, had told her parents what happened. The boy they’d forbidden her to see because of a previous sexual encounter nearly two months before had come over unannounced and invited himself in.

“According to Miss Maitland’s statement, at Mr. Nelson’s insistent request, she led him to a more private room in the basement of her home, where he handcuffed her to a bed and had sex

with her. Shortly thereafter, her parents came home unexpectedly and found her naked and bleeding from a knife wound to her lower abdomen. The D.A. at the time was convinced Miss Maitland would have been disfigured in the same way other victims had been.”

Andy stood, rattling his chains. “Objection. What other victims? There is only one person who ever testified against me. The slut is sitting over there.”

“Because you killed all the others,” countered the D.A. “We have testimony from several medical examiners that several victims had the same cuts inflicted.”

“That information is irrelevant, Mr. Warren.” The magistrate broke in and gave both stern looks. “There is only one witness account on record.”

“Be that as it may, we still have the bag and contents. I’d like to re-enter them into evidence today to show what Miss Maitland was saved from by the early return of her parents that night.”

“I object to that.” Andy stood again. “I found that bag on my way to Grace’s house. I looked

through it, and so of course my prints were on the items inside. Just because I looked doesn't mean I used them. Did you find any blood in there?"

"You know we didn't because you bleached them and degraded any blood samples. Why did you bring the bag into Grace's house if you didn't intend to use the contents?"

Andy smiled and shrugged. "I planned to sell the items and didn't want to leave them for someone to steal."

"Like you stole them?" D.A. Warren smirked. "Isn't that funny—"

"Stop, both of you. I'm not inclined to allow this evidence, Mr. Warren."

"Magistrate Silas, sir. I must strenuously object. You are required to consider the original evidence. Mr. Nelson denied having been at Miss Maitland's house upon first questioning." He turned a nasty glance at Andy, adding, "Which was a lie."

9 4 The Lawman's Wife

"I had recently turned eighteen," Andy countered, shrugging again. "I was considered an adult even though I hadn't graduated from high

school yet. I admit I didn't want her parents to find out about us. They called and threatened me the day after they discovered I'd popped her cherry."

"That is vulgar, Mr. Nelson," the magistrate huffed.

"But it's the truth. Vulgar or not, she wanted me to fuck her, and I did. So what? Doesn't mean I'd want to do it again. If you asked me, would I do it today? My answer would be of course not. I was a boy then."

"And now you are a man? Is that it?" The D.A.'s tone was sarcastic.

"I'm a man who has spent years incarcerated because of the testimony of one woman. I didn't do the things I was accused of. I shouldn't be in jail for doing what *she* asked me to do."

"So you want this court to believe that a sixteen-year-old whose 'cherry' you admittedly popped only weeks before suddenly found an interest in bondage and dominance. That you inherently sensed this newfound sexual awareness and happened to stop by when Grace's parents were gone. She was alone for the first time since you were allowed to rape her..."

“Objection...” Andy cut in.

“I’m sorry,” Warren continued. “I meant to say, to ‘comply with her wishes.’ You are insane if you expect anyone to believe this fiction.”

“I can only tell the truth. That’s exactly what happened.”

“Why did you get genetically enhanced? You knew it was against the law.”

“I did it on a dare. You know, boys will be boys.”

Warren huffed out a disgusted breath and turned to Magistrate Silas. “I contend the same things I did before, Magistrate. Nothing has changed. He raped her. He denied being at her house until nine months later, when a child with half his DNA was born. He admitted he lied. We can’t believe he isn’t lying about everything.”

“Why was the original suit dropped?” The magistrate asked, shuffling some papers in front of him.

“My predecessor felt that because our courts were so overworked, it would serve justice to send it to family court. It was dropped into the family court judicial level so the DA could pursue child support.”

“And why was it not followed up at that level?”

“I can only surmise, Magistrate.”

“Surmise then.”

“Miss Maitland’s parents were killed in a tragic accident right before the family

9 5 Lara Santiago

court hearing. She was still a minor, but living out of state with a relative. When the action was rescheduled, I can only conclude that the family courts allowed the case to fall through the cracks of the system. I found her case quite by accident when I cross-referenced all cases with Andy Nelson’s name.”

“I will hear testimony from this witness now,” the magistrate said haughtily.

Jon didn’t want Grace to testify. Why had he signed the consent form? Andy was evil. He would be evil to Grace...again.

Grace stood. Jon rose with her and shot his best demonic stare at Andy over Grace’s head.

“Hello, Lawman,” Andy said, smiling. The bastard would enjoy telling the world about all

the sadistic things he'd done to Grace.

"You will not address anyone in this room but me or your accuser, Mr. Nelson," the magistrate cautioned.

"Sorry, Magistrate."

"Hello, Grace. How's my bastard child?"

"Magistrate!" The D.A. shot to his feet.

"Mr. Nelson, you will restrain your vulgar comments, or I will send you back to prison without further review. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not, Magistrate. I fear the long false imprisonment has damaged my manners. I'll make a concerted effort." He bowed once to the magistrate.

"See that you do. Sit down, Mr. Warren. You may ask your first question, Mr. Nelson."

"Grace, did I *really* violate you all those years ago?"

Grace stiffened, responding in a monotone. "Yes." Her gaze remained on the space of floor between them.

"How did I do this?"

She glanced up momentarily. "I don't understand the question."

“Then let me be specific. Did I force you to go down to the basement? By that I mean, did I drag you down there?”

Grace shrugged. “No, not exactly.”

“Once we got down there because you led us, did I force you to lie on the bed?”

“No. But...”

“Did I ask you whether you wanted to be handcuffed?”

“Yes.” Grace glared at him.

9 6 The Lawman’s Wife

“And what did you say?”

“You told me I had to.”

Andy signed disgustedly and turned toward Magistrate Silas. “Magistrate, she’s not answering my question.”

“Mrs. Brent, answer the question asked.”

Grace took a deep breath and answered quickly, “I told you to go ahead and put the handcuffs on me, but...”

“Did you ever even make any negative response the entire time we were in bed together?” Andy cut in with his next question.

“No, but it doesn’t matter because...”

Andy broke in again. “So let me get this straight. You led me to your basement. I didn’t force you to get on the bed, nor did I force you to be handcuffed. And you never said the word ‘no’ the entire time we were together. How did I manage to rape you?”

“I was sixteen. It’ll always be statutory rape, Andy. My child is proof that we had sex that night. Besides, I did say no to you, later on.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I left you directly after your second pitiful effort at sexual enticement. You’re a lousy lay, Grace.”

“That’s a lie. You turned the lights off and—
”

The D.A. stood and spoke at the same time as Grace, “Magistrate!”

“Never mind that. Are you trying to tell this court, young lady, that Andy Nelson didn’t force you to have sex that night?” The magistrate sounded dangerously angry. His rage was directed at Grace and not Andy this time.

“I was sixteen...”

“It doesn’t matter. In the testimony before this

court, it clearly states you fornicated with him several weeks before the night in question. Is that what I understand from your testimony?”

“Stop talking, Grace.” Jon stood up next to the D.A. to face the magistrate.

“Mr. Brent, you gave your consent for her to testify. You are not at liberty to stop her.”

“I didn’t give consent for her to be abused.”

“‘Abused’ is a harsh term. I believe it’s more important to ensure an innocent man doesn’t spend time in prison because of a promiscuous sixteen-year-old who admittedly agreed to the sexual contact. Sit, Mr. Brent, and do not disrupt this court further.” He turned back to Andy. “Do you have further questions, Mr. Nelson?”

“Yes. I have a couple more questions.” Andy turned back to Grace.

9 7 Lara Santiago

“You wanted me to be tricked into being your boyfriend, didn’t you, Grace? You got pregnant on purpose to try and trap me into marriage.”

“No!” Grace cried out. “I never wanted to trap you. I never wanted to be married to you.”

“You’re a liar!”

“Magistrate...” The D.A. leapt to his feet in protest.

The magistrate banged his gavel and stood up behind his desk with a thunderous look. The room silenced. “I’m through with all the discourtesy. Everyone be silent!

“I will ask the questions in this matter.” Magistrate Silas turned his glare to Grace. “In your previous testimony at the pre-magistrate court trial, you testified under oath that Andy Nelson raped you, but that isn’t true, is it?”

“Yes. It’s true. It was statutory rape. My parents said it didn’t matter whether I agreed.”

The magistrate sat back down and heaved a deep sigh, as if perturbed beyond his capacity for reason. “Did you ever tell Mr. Nelson to stop during the time you fornicated with him?”

Grace raised her head as tears streamed down her face and answered, “Yes. When he was through with me, he got off the bed and turned the lights off. Then he cut me with a knife in the dark while I was still handcuffed to the bed. I screamed for him to stop, but he didn’t.”

“But did you ever tell him to stop the sexual

intercourse before the lights went out?”

“No.”

“Did you ever make any negative response during the time of the sexual contact whatsoever?”

“No.”

“Mr. Nelson, did this witness ever tell you to stop having sexual contact with her?”

“Not once, Magistrate. She said some very wicked things to keep me going. Want me to tell you what she said?”

“That won’t be necessary. Did you turn the lights off in the room after the encounter?”

“Yes, but I only shut them off on the way out of the room afterwards. I heard her parents and decided not to stick around and get caught with my pants down, if you get my meaning.”

“And did you cut her with a knife?”

9 8 The Lawman’s Wife

“How could I? I left directly afterwards.”

“Mrs. Brent, did you or did you not see Mr. Nelson after the lights went out in that basement room? Did you see his face?”

“It was him.”

“How do you know if you didn’t see his face?”

“I saw his eyes in the dark. The irises were rimmed in flaming orange as he taunted me...with a knife. I still carry scars.”

“Yes, well, that’s unfortunate, but what makes you think it was Andy Nelson and not someone else?”

“It was him.”

The magistrate took another deep breath.
“This court is adjourned while I ponder the facts of this case.”

Grace hung her head.

9 9 Lara Santiago

Chapter Nine

Jon knew as well as everyone in the room that the magistrate would rule in Andy’s favor. Brutal had asked to see him after he adjourned to express his sincere warning that Andy not be let loose in society. Now he marched out of the magistrate’s chambers with a solemn expression. “The magistrate is a complete and utter moron. We

should make preparations.”

Less than an hour later, Brutal was proven right.

The magistrate entered the courtroom from his chambers, his robes billowing out behind him like smoke, as if the stick shoved up his ass and rubbing against his bony butt had caused a fire.

“I have come to a decision.” The magistrate spoke ominously after he sat, made himself comfortable, and looked down on the assembled crowd waiting for his decision. His bifocal glasses, so old-fashioned as to be antique, sat on the end of his nose. He adjusted them repeatedly as he studied the papers before him. He placed the fingers from each hand together, as if making a steeple, and began exercising them before speaking again. “The preponderance of evidence before me is compelling. However, I do not feel that the word of one single woman supports the district attorney’s contention that this man should be in jail.”

“Magistrate!” The D.A., red-face and angry, stood up to protest.

The finger pushups stopped abruptly, and the magistrate’s face suddenly turned a particularly

vivid shade of crimson.

“Do not interrupt me!” he thundered at the D.A.

“My apologies.” The D.A. folded the flap of his tie back down and straightened the lapels of his jacket. He cleared his throat, sat down, and focused his eyes on the table in front of him.

10 0 The Lawman's Wife

“I cannot in good conscience allow Mr. Nelson to remain in prison as I do not believe he raped this...woman.” His lip curled as if in disgust. “I firmly believe sixteen is not too young for a girl to entice a man into sexual activity.

“In my opinion, the statutory rape laws were far too lenient prior to the establishment of the magistrate core. I believe the laws were established for girls raped at a much younger age. This woman has admitted the act wasn't against her will. The testimony from her own lips is that she directed him to fornicate with her so she could garner favor with him. This indicates to me she was stretching the truth regarding an actual rape taking place, statutory or not.”

There was a lot of rustling and agitation in the

audience, and an expectant vibe could be felt in the room as if it were a presence all its own.

Jon stood up. All eyes in the room were on him. “She isn’t a liar.”

“Yes, she is. She lied about being married to one Daniel Cox. I have his voluntary testimony in front of me.”

The D.A. stood again. “Magistrate, I was not informed of any additional testimony.”

“I’m not required to inform you, Mr. Warren. Sit down.”

The district attorney did not seat himself right away. He took a deep breath first, shook his head, and plopped down in his chair as if he were a marionette with severed strings.

“I find I must grant Mr. Nelson his freedom today with this court’s sincere apology for his confinement. Mr. Nelson, you are free to go. Do you have any questions?” Magistrate Silas asked.

“I have one. How can I sign up for my parental rights? I’d like to petition for custody of my kid.”

“Over my dead body!” Grace screamed.
“Emma is mine. You never wanted her. Never!”

“Oh, so it’s a girl,” Andy said with amused contempt. “Well, in that case, I want to sign her up for the Tiberius Young Girls’ School. I get money to send her there, right? Then she can marry some Tiberius official someday.”

The magistrate gave Andy a warm smile. “Why, yes, it’s a fine program for young ladies to learn how to cook, to keep a fine, clean home for their husbands, and be good wives for our important future leaders. I think that is a fine idea, Mr. Nelson.”

“No! I won’t allow it.” Grace shot out of her chair. Jon stood too.

“Mrs. Brent, you have little say here.”

“I’m her mother. I’m the only parent she’s ever known and *I* have little say?” Grace asked with disbelief.

10 1 Lara Santiago

“What about my adoption papers?” Jon asked.

Magistrate Silas furrowed his eyebrows as if in confusion. “Now that Mr. Nelson is free, you do not have the authority to adopt your wife’s child.”

“I have another question, Mr. Magistrate,” Andy piped up to steal the magistrate’s attention. “What if I wanted to marry the mother of my kid?”

“That would be over *my* dead body,” Jon said, turning an incredulous look his way. “Not ever going to happen, Nelson.”

Magistrate Silas gave Andy a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, Mr. Nelson, she’s already permanently bound to her lawman husband. And even if he wanted to get rid of her...”

“Which I don’t,” Jon broke in.

“...a period of a year must elapse before an offer to buy is allowed.”

“As I said, that is never going to happen.”

“I guess it’s just my sorry luck then,” Andy said. “I want you to know, Mr. Magistrate, I would have done right by Grace and married her if things hadn’t happened the way they did.”

“You are such a fucking liar!” Grace shrieked and took a threatening step toward Andy’s table. “You denied even knowing me when my parents tried to make you responsible. You hired private detectives and lawyers out your ass so you wouldn’t have to do the right thing.” Jon put his arms

around her to calm her down. The magistrate was not on their side. Grace was making it worse.

“Mrs. Brent, you will refrain from any further outbursts. You are vulgar, and I wouldn’t be referring to Mr. Nelson as a liar if I were you since you seem to have the same propensity. Mr. Brent, you’re a lawman. I know you possess the skills necessary to keep her in line. I suggest you start using them and keep a rein on your foulmouthed wife.”

Jon took a deep breath and responded, “Yes, Magistrate.” Those two words of acquiescence earned him a livid look from the spitfire in his arms. But Grace’s child was in more jeopardy than she understood; it was not a good idea to provoke this magistrate.

“Is there no option for me, Magistrate, not anything I can do to bring my family together now that I’m vindicated and free to live my life? I mean, I never should have been put away in the first place. Must I continue to suffer?” Andy was playing the martyr.

Jon placed his hand over Grace’s mouth. She growled into his hand. He whispered for her to stop before she said anything further. This earned

him another feral look.

“Well, the only thing at all—and it’s a long shot, mind you—is to appeal to a higher member of the magistrate core if you truly want to marry her.”

10 2 The Lawman’s Wife

“She’s mine in the flesh, Magistrate,” said Jon. “Permanently bound to me as my bride as per the laws and dictates of the Tiberius Group.”

“I don’t mean to be vulgar, Magistrate, but she was mine in the flesh long before she was his.” Andy gave them a sidelong glance with a placating evil grin on his face. “Besides, it’s my understanding that after giving birth to my child, Grace became unable to have any further children. She’ll never produce any children for the lawman. Shouldn’t I get some sort of priority over him? I’m only asking for clarification.”

“It is a possibility.” The magistrate put a hand on his chin as if to think the idea through.

“Magistrate, I won’t allow my wife to be taken from me,” Jon said, his voice threatening to become a shout. “Mr. Nelson knew of Grace’s pregnancy years ago. He lied about having been

with her until the DNA from the baby proved him to be a liar. After the test, he fought against taking any responsibility for his child and hid behind his expensive lawyer to escape paying child support. When her parents were killed no one picked up the gauntlet, including Mr. Nelson, to ensure the welfare of the child or the mother. Mr. Nelson didn't even know the gender of his own child until today. His passionate speech over bringing his 'family' together now is suspect."

"I was a young, foolish boy. Now I'm older, and I've spent years in prison thinking that if I only had a chance, I'd make Grace my wife and raise my child the right way..."

"Save the fake speech. I don't buy it for a minute. You will never have Grace. Don't test me on this."

Andy's smile faltered a bit as Jon stared at him, but he perked up again and said, "Magistrate, can I least meet my child? Perhaps I could take her out to a park and we could get to know each other."

Grace launched out of Jon's arms and took a step in Andy's direction. "No! You may not take her anywhere! You may not be alone with her.

You are a monster!” Jon grabbed her.

“Yes.” Magistrate Silas pointedly ignored Grace and answered Andy’s question. “I order you to make the child ready for an unsupervised visit tomorrow. Mr. Nelson, here is the Brent’s address...”

“Do not give my address out,” Jon snarled at the magistrate.

“Mr. Brent,” the magistrate said in a tone that suggested forced civility. “Mr. Nelson deserves the right to meet his child without the shrieking harpy mother standing over him. There is obvious ill will on her part.” The magistrate handed a small electronic programmable map device to a court clerk, who promptly took it to an eager Andy. He smiled and licked his lips as he pocketed the device.

Grace stopped fighting Jon’s hold on her. She put her hands to her face, bent at the waist, and sobbed with heart-wrenching clarity, as if the tears came from her

10 3 Lara Santiago

frightened soul. She shook off Jon’s attempt to comfort her as drops fell from her eyes and

landed on the table. He could read her mind. Men always changed the rules, and now her precious Emma was in danger.

“My ruling is final. You will have the girl child ready at noon tomorrow at your home, or I will throw you both in prison.”

“Magistrate, surely you do not mean to let the prisoner loose on our citizens. Could we at least release a caution bulletin and warn them?” D.A. Warren asked.

“Warn them of what?”

Warren huffed incredulously. “It is a stated fact, as even Mr. Nelson will attest, that his sexual proclivities require him to self-medicate in order to keep his sexual demons at bay. We wouldn’t want him forcing women because of the enhancements he received illegally years ago.”

“Mr. Blackthorn seems to have a handle on his sexual proclivities. I order Mr. Nelson to continue to medicate himself with the drug Zanthacorth as a condition of his discharge. In addition, there will be the monitoring device on his ankle for the first thirty days of his release. I’m satisfied he will take this chance he is being offered to be a true and righteous citizen of this

great country of ours. Won't you, Mr. Nelson?"

"Of course I will. Thank you, Magistrate."

Andy stood and bowed slightly in deference to the court.

Magistrate Silas banged his gavel, stood, and strode out of the room. A roar of whispers erupted in the audience, and the clicking of PDAs recording the news could be heard in the background.

Andy turned to Jon and approached with a cocky swagger in his step. "How do you like the way I broke her in for you, Lawman? Is her pussy still tight after shooting out that brat?"

Jon smiled at him. "Do yourself a favor, Nelson, and don't show up at my house tomorrow. I don't care what the magistrate says. You're not welcome."

"But I so want to meet my little bitch so I can get her ready to sell to the Tiberius Young Girls' School."

Jon had to restrain Grace again. He had no doubt she'd kill him with her bare hands before he could pull his weapon.

Andy Nelson gave Brutal a wary look as he passed him, and went back to speak to the

lawmen who'd escorted him from prison. They still had to remove his shackles.

* * * *

"I'll keep Emma with Hannah and me. If they come after her, then Emma will run far, far away to a very secret place I have on my property where she won't be found until Andy Nelson is in custody or dead," Brutal whispered to them once the magistrate had banged his gavel after delivering his supremely foolish ruling.

10 4 The Lawman's Wife

"Good. Grace and I will collect a few things and take a trip. I won't endanger her. Since the prick magistrate just gave out our address, we need to leave immediately," Jon whispered back. "I don't trust Andy to wait until tomorrow.

"Wait." Grace clutched his arm. "We have to leave Emma? Can't we take her with us?"

"If we get caught with her, any lawman in any state, country, or off-world planet will be able to legally take her from us—by force if need be—to hand her over to Andy. If we leave her with Brutal and Hannah, you can truthfully say you have no idea where she is, not exactly."

“Can I stop and say good-bye to her? Please? She’s been through so much, Jon. I hate to abandon her without a word.”

“I won’t promise. It’s best if we just leave.”

Andy looked over at them and smiled sadistically.

Grace stepped closer to Jon. “Never mind. You’re right. Let’s just go. “Will Elliott give you time off?” Grace asked.

“I’ll ask forgiveness later, when we return, instead of permission now. I think it would be the best course of action.”

“Won’t that fuck up your career?” Brutal asked in a surprised tone.

“Probably, but what else can I do?”

Brutal shrugged and removed himself from their circle to block Andy Nelson before he left the magistrate’s courtroom a totally free man.

“I’ll be watching you, Nelson. Don’t fuck up, because I’ll be there to catch you.” Brutal slapped him on the arm and then pinched his cheek like an old woman greeting her nephew during the holidays.

“Don’t touch me, you heathen. I know what

you are. You're no better than me. At least I can go forth to taste a variety of women. I can tell you've attached yourself to one female. I can smell her on you too. She smells delicious."

Brutal laughed and said, "The last man to make a pass at my wife is now doing twenty-five to life. The next one won't live to have any regrets for his stupidity, and that's a promise, dickweed."

"You don't scare me."

"Then you're overconfident, and it will contribute to your demise."

10 5 Lara Santiago

Chapter Ten

Grace and Jon hurried home to prepare for a sudden vacation. Jon wanted her ready to leave in ten minutes or less. Her only regret was that she wouldn't be able to warn Emma.

She knew Hannah and Brutal would take good care of her daughter, but she hated the life she was about to embark on. Once again, her past had reared up to spoil the happiness she'd found with Jon. It broke her heart to drag him down with her. He didn't deserve to lose his career.

Both he and Brutal had assured her repeatedly it wouldn't matter since Andy Nelson was a threat to others, but guilt ate at her acid-filled stomach while she packed her meager belongings.

Grace moved into the bathroom to grab everything she'd only put in place the day before, grateful to finally have a home to call her own. As she stuffed toiletries into a bag, her elbow connected with the tile wall. When she pulled back to rub the sore spot, she saw the hidden compartment.

Using her toothbrush handle, she pulled open one corner of the small door below the medicine cabinet. The space contained something shiny and silver-white. Tentative fingers reached into the small, dark space as a tingle of apprehension clawed at her nerves. She pulled out the medical mist injector and a bottle with clear liquid. Slowly, she turned the small vial over in her hand to read the label.

Zanthacorth. She recognized the name. It was the medication Andy was required to take for his sexual proclivities. She remembered the magistrate ordering him to continue administering it. What was Zanthacorth doing hidden here?

The lights went out in the house before she could reason out her discovery. Darkness consumed her. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face. Grace sucked in a deep breath to keep from screaming in tortured agony.

10 6 The Lawman's Wife

Her fears of Andy and what he had turned into slammed into her memory as she clutched the glass vile and metal mist injector to her chest. Those orange-rimmed, iridescent irises glowing in the dark like mutant cat's eyes coming for her. A noise from the bedroom forced the air from her lungs in a rush. Clamping down on the urge to scream, Grace turned toward where she thought the door was and recognized a new sound of someone approaching.

"Shit," she heard someone whisper into the pitch-black darkness. It should be Jon. He was the only one here with her, right? She wasn't sure, her terror conjuring all sorts of beasts real and imagined from her subconscious to frighten the bejesus out of her.

She stared, seeing nothing but black nothingness all around her.. Then she saw light

blue, rimmed, iridescent irises glowing in the dark and coming toward her. She unleashed the scream she'd held back.

“Grace?” Jon’s concerned voice came from the direction of the glowing blue eyes.

The lights blinked on once or twice, as if trying to decide whether to return or not. Jon framed the doorway to the bathroom. His eyes were not glowing and blue, but their normal soft gray. He zeroed in on the contents of her still shaking fingers. She looked down in puzzlement, having momentarily forgotten her discovery of the hidden compartment.

“Where did you get that?” he asked chillingly, his gray eyes now stormy.

“I accidentally...I mean...” Grace stopped stuttering, fixed her gaze on his, and asked, “Why do you have this, Jonathan?”

He glanced down at her hands and then back into her certainly fear-filled eyes and sighed. “I used to use it.” The quiet tone of his voice still carried all the way to her trembling self.

“But I thought it was only for...” Her worst fear materialized before her.

Jon lowered his gaze to the floor between

them. He took another deep breath. She watched his chest expand and retract with air. He didn't answer.

“Are you like him?”

“No. But I am genetically engineered.” His confession wrapped around her terror. He *was* like Andy. His eyes glowed in the dark. She was married to...

“Oh, God! It can't be true.” Grace retreated a step backward. She had nowhere to go and was unsure of what to do next.

“Please don't back away from me. You must know me well enough by now to know I'd never hurt you.”

“I...” Her eyes found his harsh, angry features and she wavered.

“Grace...” he dropped his head as if in despair and turned his defeated

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countenance away from her. He deserted her to the other room. She didn't know what to do. The fears she'd held buried all this time rose to the surface of her mind.

How could the man she loved beyond all reason be like Andy Nelson?

The fearful, orange-glowing eyes that had taunted her in her nightmares were no longer a threat. Andy wouldn't get her because she had a husband who loved her. Jon was a lawman who would protect her and Emma from the evil of her past. She knew on some basic level Jon would never hurt her. He had saved her from losing Emma. He had tried to let her go, but she was the one who had hounded him, seduced him, and forced him to keep her.

He had willingly agreed to adopt her daughter without her even asking him. He cooked for her, he treated her like she was the most fragile of princesses, and he loved her—of that she had no doubt.

It was the shock of discovery. The fact that he had used this medication did not make him a monster. She knew Jonathan Brent, heart and soul. Grace took a deep breath and steadied herself to call out and sincerely apologize to him.

“Jonathan?” He didn't respond, but she heard a noise like something had dropped in the living room. Perhaps he had dropped the luggage.

“Jonathan,” she called out again tentatively, “I’m so sorry.” There was no answer from him. Now she’d done it. She had made him angry—or worse, hurt his feelings.

“Please...I know you aren’t like...him. I know you would never hurt me.” He didn’t answer, and a thin line of apprehension slid down her spine. It wasn’t like him to pout. She had fully expected him to have his lips planted on hers and kissing her once she said his name the first time. Her sixth sense sent up a big warning flare, but unfortunately it was already too late to help her.

“He can’t hear you, Grace,” said Andy. He came out from behind the door in the bedroom, carrying a thick metal pipe in one gloved hand.

Grace froze at the sound of his voice. Her limbs refused to move from sheer terror. That slithery voice from her past penetrated and held her in fear. She remembered the pitch-black room and the orange glow of taunting eyes threatening to cut her until no other man would ever want her.

“Jonathan!” she screamed. Andy laughed in the same voice she’d heard in her lifetime of nightmares. He dangled what she recognized as

Jon's handcuffs in the other gloved hand.

"Now it's your turn. Why don't you save me the trouble, Grace? Spread your legs open for me so I can fuck you until I'm satisfied. You know the last time we were together, our little sex party was so rudely interrupted."

"You should be locked up."

10 8 The Lawman's Wife

"No. I will go forth and love women as God intended, starting with you. As I was saying, the last time your parents interrupted us before I could do all the things I promised you. I took great pleasure in killing them, you know."

"You killed my parents?" She didn't know why she was so shocked. Andy was crazy and fully capable of murder.

"Of course. You were knocked up, and they were screaming for my blood. Once you gave birth and the DNA was found to be mine, I was watched very closely. I couldn't go out and spread the joy of my cock as I wanted, so I arranged a terrible accident for the four of you. Mommy, Daddy, She-whore, and Baby. But you didn't go out with them as you were supposed to

did you, Grace?”

“The baby was sick, and I stayed home.” The pervasive guilt of surviving after her parents hadn’t, assailed her momentarily. Her father had been nearly apoplectic when she hadn’t accompanied them that day. They’d been on the way to a party at her father’s place of employment. He’d wanted to embarrass her by parading her in front of everyone they knew as a stupid unwed teenage mother. Emma, so tiny, was vomiting, and Grace begged her mother to let her stay home. It was the last time she had ever seen her mom alive. The lawmen came hours later to inform her of her parents’ death in a tragic vehicular accident.

Andy moved a step closer. “You promptly left the state to live with some relative, and the charges were buried in family court. It was relegated to an unseen file under the heading of ‘Verify Child Support’, thanks to my expensive attorney hiding it there.

“So I reluctantly let you alone since I was busy discovering my prowess and spreading my passion for women. They all want me, you know. All of them. They want to feel my cock buried all the way from their cunts to their throats. They like the feel of my blade too, just like you will.”

Grace had been inching her way to the bedroom door, as they spoke. She was halfway across the room. She chanced a glance and saw Jon's crumpled form outside the bedroom doorway. He wasn't moving.

"Thanks for distracting your lawman for me, Grace. I never could have gotten the drop on him if you hadn't devastated him by outing his secret condition."

"You're vile," Grace spat out and took another step toward Jon.

"Sticks and stones." He took a deep breath, closing his eyes as if in appreciation of the very air around him. "I can smell the delectable scent of your fear. Do me a favor. When I fuck you, then cut you, please scream as loud as you can. It makes for a richer experience. Or is that the scent of your arousal begging me to penetrate your cunt deep and hard?"

Grace edged her way past the corner of the bed, intent on dashing through the doorway to Jonathan. He was wearing his gun. She couldn't believe Andy hadn't relieved him of it when he'd grabbed the handcuffs.

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“Was the lawman’s cock as satisfying as mine, Grace?” he taunted and caught her eye. She remained silent, but laughed uproariously to herself. Men, even in the most psychotic of moments, still needed the assurance their dick was the biggest in the room.

The blatant insanity he displayed gave her strength. For all his crazy talk, she was more furious than scared. She wasn’t going to lie down in fear tonight. Andy was about to find out how hard she was willing to fight for the life she and Emma had stumbled onto with Jonathan Brent.

“No response?”

“Yes, Andy, you are the biggest dick in the room. Is that what your ego needs to hear?” she asked with a smile purposely curving her mouth.

She watched as he hesitated a moment. Did he register her anger and appreciate that she wasn’t going to be threatened one single moment longer? Did he understand her sudden resilience to survive?

Something in Grace’s psyche snapped right then. She was furious. She was around-the-bend livid at being endangered yet again.

Grace was fucking sick and tired of being talked down to, and she was not going to feel small and scared a moment longer. Andy was about to find her a force to be reckoned with, or at least not a Casper-Milquetoast-wannabe victim any longer.

She tensed her body in readiness for the fight of her life. She glanced down at Jon's motionless body, and it fortified her anger. She seethed. The mother bear-like fanatic protection gene she'd always held for Emma sprouted expanding to include her husband.

Andy had struck down the finest man she'd had ever known. If she could only get to Jon's gun, she would fight to the death, regardless of how slim a chance she faced.

"Don't think you can best me! You will lose. Accept your fate."

Grace took two steps forward closer to Andy. The surprise on his face was immediate because he didn't expect a fight from her. His next mistake was sneering at her. His expression said he didn't take her brave approach seriously.

When she planted one foot down and powered the other into the spot directly between his legs

with all the force she possessed, the scorn dissolved from his face. Andy went to his knees as a roar erupted from him, sounding like it came from the dark dimensions of hell. The shock on his face, while satisfying, didn't hold her attention. She turned and dove through the bedroom door, sliding down next to Jonathan in a crouch.

Grace ran her hands down his back lightly and called his name softly a couple of times. He was breathing, but there was blood dripping off his forehead in a line from an ugly wound on his temple to a small puddle collecting and drying on the floor. She traced her fingers over the gun holster.

Wrapping a hand around the grip of the pistol, she pulled as hard as she could, but

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it didn't budge. She chanced a look, but didn't see any obvious snap or other device to release Jonathan's weapon. Andy screamed in agony from the floor of the bedroom. She ran her hand down the holster and tried to pull up on the handle again, but it wouldn't budge, frustratingly enough.

She didn't even know how to use it once she got it out. What was she doing wrong? Cowering next to a gun wasn't the same as pointing it at an attacker as a threat.

"Jonathan, please wake up. How do I get your gun out? Please, Jonathan. Please help me. I love you. I'm so sorry about before. Please, baby. Of course I know you would never hurt me. You're the best thing in my life. Emma and I love you. Please wake up."

"I'm going to kill you!" Andy growled from the bedroom doorway. She turned to look over her shoulder, and he was there, looming, about to strike.

She screamed and tried to slip out of his reach, but she felt his hand clamp on her ankle. She was dragged three feet away from Jonathan in one pull and back into the bedroom. Flipping over, to Andy's obvious surprise, Grace kicked him in the head twice rapidly and screamed like a banshee. He let go of her ankle and put his hands to his head. He rested on his knees, and she hoped his balls were throbbing all the way into his chest.

"You bitch! Don't you know it's useless to

fight me!”

“I’m not the stupid weak teenage girl this time, asshole!”

“I’ll kill you slowly for this when I get you.”

“Bring it on, you bastard. I’ve waited a long time to take out my frustrations on a worthy opponent.” Grace stood up, hands out to her sides, ready to react. She backed through the door back into the living room glancing at a still unmoving Jonathan on her way by.

Andy managed to get to his feet, swaying. He came through the bedroom door with a murderous look. She hoped it paled in comparison to the one she sent him in return.

“I’ll kill our brat next. With my unwanted progeny out of the way, the DNA evidence will be useless. I’ll be free to spread my passion to all women.”

Grace rushed him. It was stupid, she realized. She should have found a large, heavy object to bash him with, but he threatened Emma and she lost control. She placed her hands to his throat squeezing with all her might in an effort to grab his windpipe and yank it out of his neck. He wrapped his hand around her hair and jerked. He

wrapped his hand around her throat and flicked her away from his body as if she were no more threatening than a fly. She still scratched at his neck.

“Prepared to be fucked...”

Boom! The sound made Grace release her finger hold and fall to the floor. Andy retreated a step.

Boom, boom, boom. The sound of a wickedly powerful gun fired and Andy fell to

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the ground at her feet. She scooted backwards away from him before turning to see Jon, smoking gun in hand.

“Grace,” he croaked out once, before his arm dropped and he passed out again.

Bang! Grace turned to the new loud noise bursting in the direction of the front door. Brutal and several lawmen barged through the entrance. Tears of surprise sprang forth.

“He’s hurt,” she said simply and lay down on Jonathan’s back sobbing. Grateful for being rescued, her tear wouldn’t stop.

“Damn it. We need a medic in here,” she heard from above her. It was Elliott, Jon’s boss.

“Are you hurt, Grace?” Brutal said in a low voice, trying to extract her from her husband’s prone form so the medic could work on him.

“I’m fine,” she said, even as tears of relief slipped down her face. Lawmen streamed inside, trampling through the center of the house.

Grace looked through the bedroom door and saw the medication and injector on the floor at the edge of the bed, where she had dropped it sometime during the fray with Andy. No one else tromping around seemed to notice, but she couldn’t take her eyes off it.

“Brutal?”

“Yeah.”

“Look.” She directed her gaze to the problem she knew no one else present should know about. She kept staring at it until she heard him say, “I see it. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

Brutal sauntered into the bedroom and, out of sight of any of the lawmen milling around the house, pocketed the medication and injector. He

grabbed her purse, which still rested on the bed, and returned to her side.

“Why don’t I take you to my house for tonight? Maybe Emma will turn up soon.”

“What?” She turned questioning, then got his reference to Emma ‘supposedly’ being missing. “Oh, right. Emma will turn up. I’m sure she wouldn’t go far.”

“Are you ready to make a statement, Mrs. Brent?” Elliott asked, standing up from examining Andy Nelson’s dead body.

“Can’t it wait until later? Jesus, hasn’t she gone through enough?” Brutal asked angrily.

Elliott ignored him focusing on Grace. “We already know Andy cut the power to the house before he broke in through the back door to the kitchen.” Elliott paused and stared at Grace with raised eyebrows as if he expected her to continue the story.

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“He knocked out Jonathan and attacked me. I fought him off until Jonathan woke up and shot him.”

Brutal flashed his new license to escort Grace around as Jon's blood relative. "Home invasion gone bad. I like it. Can I take Grace away from this now?"

"No." Elliott crossed his arms and shot Brutal a look of attitude. "I need details. What happened after the lights went out, Mrs. Brent?"

Grace took a deep breath and the coppery smell of blood came with it. She shuddered at the scent, but responded in a trembling voice, "The power came back on suddenly. Jon and I were in the bathroom...um...talking...and, um...getting ready to go look for Emma."

"How did the lights come back on?" Elliott's eyes squinted in puzzlement. Grace shrugged.

"Jon has a backup generator system built into his house. It kicks on in a matter of seconds after the power is cut." Brutal supplied this since Grace had no idea why the lights came back on. She'd been distracted by her husband's eyes glowing in the dark.

"Right," Elliott said and then added, "Did you witness Andy bashing your husband in the head?"

"No. But I didn't see anyone else in the house,

and Andy was carrying the pipe, which was dripping with blood. Plus he admitted it right before he told me his plans to rape me and kill my daughter.”

“He threatened you?”

“He wanted to pick up where we left off the night Emma was conceived. He said my parents interrupted our ‘fuck party.’ He told me he planned to find Emma and get rid of her so his DNA would no longer be evidence of his crime.”

Elliott grunted quietly at her profanity while she spoke. She wasn’t sure whether he was offended or not, but she silently dared him to call her on it. The Tiberius Group felt it wasn’t ladylike for a woman to curse, and so there was a law in place against the offense.

Brutal smiled when she said it. She guessed he didn’t care if she used foul language.

“Surely you don’t need any more than that,” Brutal said to Elliott and then grabbed Grace’s upper arm as if he were beyond ready to guide her away from the carnage around them. Elliott didn’t stop him.

“How did you know to come here?” Grace asked Brutal.

“Jon asked me to follow Andy after he was released. He visited Magistrate Silas at his home first in order to get his ankle monitor removed. According to the magistrate’s mother, who witnessed the entire thing, Magistrate Silas refused his demand and Andy pulled out a knife and killed him. By the time I arrived and got out of my car, Andy ran

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out of the Magistrate’s house covered in blood dragging an elderly woman in his wake.

“When I ran towards him he let her go and hopped in a waiting vehicle. I called Elliott who checked the ankle monitor location as being on it’s way to Jon’s home address. I came here as fast as I could.”

The medics had transferred Jonathan to a mobile carrier ready for transport to the nearest medical facility.

“Grace.” She heard the weak voice of her husband as he passed by on the stretcher. She turned to walk alongside the carrier, dismissing everyone but Jonathan. She made the medics halt the carrier, she then bent over and kissed Jon on

the mouth. He moaned against her lips and cracked a smile.

“I love you and I already miss you. So hurry up and get better. Emma and I will be waiting for you at your sister’s house.”

“I love you too. Where did you learn the throat grip you had Andy in before I shot him?

“Brutal taught me a couple of self-defense moves while you were away the last time. Your sister taught me the infamous groin kick she learned from you, as well.”

“Good for her. I’ll see you soon.”

Elliott stood behind her shamelessly listening in on their private chat.

“There will be an inquiry once you’re well enough to face it, but the preliminary is fairly routine. Did you see him?” Elliott asked Jon.

“Yep, just in time to get bashed in the head. When I woke up, he had his hands around Grace’s throat. I drew on him and fired once in the air. When he released her and she fell out of the target zone, I fired three more times into his chest.”

“Clearly this tragedy was the result of a home invasion and was a clean kill since you were

protecting your loved one. It should be an open-and-shut case.” Elliott snapped his small hand-held computer notebook shut and pocketed it. Smiling, he finally walked away.

Brutal approached the two of them and flashed Jon a grin. “God, you’re such a big baby. I can tell from here it’s just a scratch.”

“Thanks,” was all Jon said before the two medics started moving the carrier again.

* * * *

“...So anyway, when I couldn’t get your gun out easily, he managed to grab my ankle and pull me back. I kicked him in the head until he released me. When he threatened Emma, I lost it and grabbed his throat. It was stupid, I know, but I was mad.” Grace sat next to Jon’s bed at the hospital, explaining what had happened after he’d gotten clocked. Once the doctor arrived, he would be released. He couldn’t wait to get home.

11 4 The Lawman’s Wife

“You don’t have a strap lock on your holster, do you?” Brutal asked. He’d accompanied Grace to the medical center while Hannah watched over Emma, who’d been ‘miraculously discovered’ in

their attic crawl space the day before.

Jon smiled. “No, I have a biometric handle. It won’t come out of the holster unless it’s my palm on the handle. It also applies to the firing mechanism. I’m the only one who can shoot it. I had that installed after my return from your mining colony a couple years back. I hate when unauthorized people grab my gun.”

“You are such a sissy. I only grabbed your damned gun one time, years ago on a moon of Mars, in order to threaten another prick, Eric Vander. Remember how he was threatening Hannah? I was completely justified.”

“Maybe, but I hate grabby criminals. My biometric handle is a safety device. You should get one.”

Brutal laughed heartily. “I already have one. And before you ask...yes, it was already on the gun you pressed to my head back at the mining room bar. I was never in any danger.”

“You mean your life wasn’t threatened back then? Damn it.”

“Is your manly lawman pride wounded?” Brutal smirked.

“No.” Jon glanced at Grace once. “And even

if it were, I have a wife to soothe me.”

The doctor arrived to do Jon’s final medical check for release. Grace excused herself to wait outside the hospital room. Brutal edged away from his bed, but Jon noticed he was milling around the door, waiting until the doctor finished. He looked as if he had something on his mind.

When the doctor exited the hospital room to the hallway to speak to Grace about his care, Brutal crossed his arms and sidled up close to Jon’s hospital bed. He glanced at the open door and lowered his voice. “Something’s in the wind. It’s something you should know about.”

“What?” Jon also glanced at the open door, scrunching his eyes in puzzlement.

Brutal pierced Jon with a riveting gaze. “Rebellion.”

“You have my undivided attention. What are you talking about?”

Brutal lowered his voice further. “There is a rumor going around in certain secret circles that there’s a contract murder out targeting top officials in the Tiberius Group. I usually ignore gossip, but the Tiberius Group is taking it seriously. They’re scared shitless.”

“Who set it up?”

Brutal shrugged. “I don’t know. They don’t know either, which is why they’re worried.”

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“It’s got to be someone with money. There are lots of folks hiding around the world waiting for an opportunity to come back if the Tiberius Group is overthrown.. It’s bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Killing key leaders would certainly weaken their regime” Brutal smiled without mirth and added, “I find it ironic since that’s what the Tiberius Group did for years before they took over.”

“What’s that?”

Brutal sighed as if he should already understand the world at large. Jon wanted to hear him say out loud what he knew, or what he thought he knew.

“The Tiberius Group, formerly Tiberius Security, spent a decade strategizing their take over. It seemed fast, but it wasn’t. For years they carefully eliminated people they knew would oppose them even as they set up good-ole-boys in

key power positions across the nation. After a decade of lining up their ducks they swooped in and took over with little opposition.”

“I never knew you were such a political analyst, Brutal.”

“I wasn’t until I made lots of money in mining.”

Jon lifted his brows in surprise as he stared Brutal down. “Why are you telling me this?”

Again Brutal broke his intense gaze to check the door. The doctor and Grace still talked, not paying them any attention. Brutal’s paranoia was palpable and starting to rub off on Jon.

Leaning closer, Brutal said, “You need to pick a side. One you plan to defend. If this comes to pass, it’ll mean out-and-out war.”

Jon had also heard rumors, but Brutal’s inside knowledge surprised him. “Maybe I already have.”

“What side, Jon? I want to know.”

“You should already know.”

“Enlighten me. I don’t want to assume.”

Jon sighed deeply. “I’m a lawyer. I live my life protecting people under the law. If the laws

change, I'll defend the new laws put in place even if they fail to include the Tiberius way of life."

"What if the Tiberius Group sends you into war? What side will you be on then? Will you fight for them?"

"You know better. I'll choose my family, of course, even if it includes my grumpy blood brother."

Brutal smiled and nodded. "Good. I'd hate for us to be on opposing sides."

11 6 The Lawman's Wife

"Why? Because you know I'd kick your ass?"

"No, because I don't have any siblings of my own, and I'd hate to permanently injure *my* shiny new blood brother."

Jon rolled his eyes but smiled. "Thanks for the warning. I'll keep my eyes and ears open for developments."

"I have travel contingencies in place for all of us if it becomes unsafe. So do Matt and Sophie."

Jon's mind raced at the possibilities. "Good. Thanks for the information."

Brutal nodded. “One other thing.”

“Now what?”

“I got your sister pregnant.” Brutal took a large step back from his bed and grinned. “She’s due in six months.”

Jon inhaled a deep breath as if trying to find strength. “Good thing you already married her, or I’d be testing my biometric-handled gun on you again.”

Brutal rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

Grace walked into the room, interrupting any further posturing between them. He would never admit it out loud, but he was happy for Hannah and Brutal.

Besides, Uncle Jon had a nice ring to it.

11 7 Lara Santiago

Epilogue

One year later

“How can you be pregnant?” Jon tried to digest the visual evidence of the positive home pregnancy test he held. The idea of a child had never occurred to him.

“I don’t know. The doctor who delivered Emma said I was messed up from giving birth so young. He told my parents Emma was the only child I would ever have. That’s the only reason they let me keep her instead of giving her up for adoption.” She glanced back at the test and squinted her eyes as if puzzled.

“Sterility is a temporary side effect of Zanthacorth, you know?”

“But you don’t take it any more.” Grace smiled, as if remembering why he didn’t take it any longer. They had a phenomenal sex life instead.

“Which is probably why you’re pregnant. We don’t often miss any opportunities, do we?”

Grace giggled. “No, we don’t.” The smile slid from her face and she asked, “Are you upset?”

“Of course not. Do you feel okay?” Jon placed the test stick on the bathroom counter and took Grace into his arms for a hug.

“So far.” Her muffled voice came from the area of his chest.

The recent addition of Jon’s nephew and nieces drifted into his mind. “Emma will have a new baby in her own house to play with instead of

visiting Hannah's baby boy or Sophie's twin girls."

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"What do you think Elliott will say?"

"Threats will ensue as usual, but I don't care. It might be all right anyway. His new girlfriend is calming him down some."

Grace giggled again. "Hard to believe Elliott would ever be calm."

"It's a miracle among anyone who knows him." Jon squeezed her again. His life was damn near perfect.

"Maybe we'll have a boy. Would that make you happy?"

"I don't care if it's a boy or girl. I just want us to be safe and happy." Jon squeezed her tighter. "I love you, Grace."

"I love you, too, Jon."

THE LAWMAN'S WIFE

The Wives Tales, Book 3

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO

Lara Santiago always loved to write. However, her pragmatic, analytical side got the upper hand at an early age and informed her she should be getting a 'real' job and not pursuing a creative writing career.

She joined the Air Force and spent her four years of service in Blytheville, Arkansas working nights in Supply issuing aircraft parts to guys working on the flight line. Her husband discovered her there and married her to continue getting his aircraft parts quicker than all the others.

Lara soon earned a degree in the field of Logistics—a word she thinks is very sexy. No logisticians will ever be the bad guy in any of her novels.

After the military, Lara spent many practical years working at a 'real' job, allowing her analytical side total free rein. Then one day, the characters banging incessantly inside her brain simply couldn't be silenced any longer. She bought a laptop with the sole purpose of writing a book to allow her creative side to express itself and to let all those characters out. Her motto...so many characters...so little time.

To those interested, Lara's practical, analytical side is now stuffed in a dark hole and only

allowed out once or twice a month to pay bills.

When she isn't hunched over her faithful laptop, now with half the letters chipped off in her zeal to write as fast as possible, Lara enjoys reading, catching up on all her recorded television shows, and watching movies. Oh, and occasionally, she cooks for her family, too.

She hopes her readers enjoy her stories and looks forward to hearing from them—but only if they refrain from insisting she make anyone in Logistics a bad guy.

**Check out Lara's latest books at
www.sirenpublishing.com/larasantiago**

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www.larasantiago.com**

The Wives Tales

by Lara Santiago

The Miner's Wife

The Executive's Wife

The Lawman's Wife

The Executive pays a fortune to wed, the Lawman pays a pittance to marry, and the Miner fights an enemy for his bride. Three women auctioned off to

genetically bred strangers in separate venues are uniquely destined to discover love in unusual places. [*Erotic Futuristic*]

ELECTRONIC FORMAT

PRINT COLLECTION COMING SOON

STORY EXCERPT

THE MINER'S WIFE

The Wives Tales, Book 1

By Lara Santiago

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“The auction is about to begin,” said a twangy voice trying to sound formal, which was a complete waste of effort in a mining town barroom, Brutal thought.

“Bring out the all the girls,” said a rowdy voice from the back of the room. Thomas ‘Brutal’ Blackthorn agreed with Mr. Rowdy. He was ready to start the bidding. It was already going to take all damn day just to get a woman...he meant a ‘wife.’

Dusty, the auctioneer for today, glanced around the room once, heaved a deep sigh, and

promptly left the stage as if in a huff. He returned a few minutes later with a petite Asian woman dressed like the sordid porno version of a schoolgirl complete with pigtails and knee stockings. Together they walked across the expanse of the small stage as hoots of appreciation and hollering ensued. She was led to the space next to the podium for auction. Brutal thought she looked bored. Not surprising. The women here knew how the auction worked.

Most brides sold themselves into this life because of an addiction to expensive shoes, fine clothes, and unaffordable jewelry. Most just wanted to do their time quickly and return to their credit cards back on Earth. They would take the cash they earned from marrying miners for a short time and then come right back for more. No better than prostitutes for current fashion.

Brutal wouldn't prostitute himself for anything as shallow as fashion, but he understood the reason why. It was perhaps similar to the motivation for his living on this harsh planet in a backbreaking job—the dream of a better life on Earth. However, he worked hard to better himself and wanted so much more out of life than simply fashionable attire.

Brutal had experienced a couple of other auctions when he first arrived here four months ago. He foolishly decided at the time that he wouldn't need more than a month or two to reach his mining goal and secure enough cash to live the good life. He was mistaken.

The landowners he rented his mine from had been less than forthcoming about the rate at which ore could be retrieved here when he signed the contract to excavate. But he

was up to the task as long as he had an outlet for his pent-up testosterone. He needed a woman, thus the reason he was giving up a day at his mine to obtain a regular sex partner...he meant a 'wife.' He needed sex. And he needed it soon.

Today, said his horny libido forcefully.

The original expeditionary party who founded the society on this asteroid almost two decades ago had decided quickly to outlaw whorehouses and drinking establishments right off the bat. They wanted a civilized operation, and to that end, built in lots of social rules early on. No drugs, no gambling, no drunkenness, no loose women or prostitutes.

The word ‘no’ was pretty much the standard answer for everything here.

The founding expedition members knew the value of the Thorium-Z as a replacement for fossil fuels, which was in abundance on this moon circling Mars. But they didn’t want to own a rowdy, corrupt town in space. So if a miner had a woman living with him here, he had to be married to her. A few miners brought wives with them, but the majority opted for temporary wives. Probably not what the owners had in mind originally, but things changed over time.

The miners who had come to work way before Brutal got here found a few loopholes in the laws laid down—the most important being that a marriage didn’t have to be permanent. They decided that marriages could be annulled, or couples could be divorced after their service was no longer required, or if the bride’s previously established ‘time’ was up. The minimum sentence...he meant marriage...for a mail order bride here was six months, the maximum two years.

“Okay, listen up, you miners. I need to make an announcement before we begin these here proceedings. This is important, so pay attention,”

the senior loadmaster for the transport craft said irately. “Now, all the men who had attached wives will still get their selected women, unless you don’t want her anymore. See me if that’s the case.”

“Get on with it, Dusty. I’m horny,” said the rowdy voice from the back of the room. Laughter burst from most of the other occupants along with other grunts of approval.

“Well, keep it in your pants. There’s a slight problem with the unattached females on this run.”

“I know what it is,” said the same rowdy voice. “They’re horny, too, so get on with it.” The room burst with loud laughter once again.

“One of the unattached females...didn’t make the trip,” Dusty said to the laughter dying down. “We weren’t able to revive her from cryo-freeze. That means there is one less female up for auction today.”

Brutal flinched inwardly. He needed to take a woman home today. It was imperative. At this juncture, he’d be unable to continue if...no, he wouldn’t even consider the option of *not* going home with a woman...he meant a ‘wife.’

“So someone’s going back home with a chunk

of wood between his legs today

then,” Mr. Rowdy said in disgust.

“When is the next transport, Dusty?” another voice inquired.

“Well, that’s something else I need to tell ya about. The thing is, there ain’t no scheduled bride transports, at least not at this time.” Loud groans and grumbling ran through the crowd of men.

“Now, wait a minute. It don’t mean they won’t send one later on, but there’s gonna be some changes ‘cause a new group’s in charge back home.” Dusty went on to explain briefly the Tiberius Group’s takeover and the new plight of women at home.

Interesting turn of events, Brutal thought as the auction finally began. He wondered what other changes were going on back in the U.S. since his arrival here.

As the parade of mail order brides were brought out, auctioned off, and dwindled quickly, Brutal felt the first stirrings of true panic. Twenty-five men had appeared today to bid on the available twenty-four mail order brides in the auction. The first twenty-three had been bid for

quickly and contracts were already being drawn up.

Brutal and one other man remained to bid on the final woman available. The bidding thus far had been higher than usual for these events because of the supply and demand issue. Brutal was about to bid against his arch nemesis, Erik Vander. Erik had the distinction of being the only other man at this mining colony who was taller and heavier than Brutal.

“All righty then,” Dusty said. “Here’s the final woman up for auction today. Now, she ain’t much to look at right now, on account of her fainting earlier and one of the other girls throwing water all over her to wake her up, but she cleans up nice. You can take my word for it.”

“Get on with it,” Erik’s chilling voice cut through the din of conversation from the others watching the drama.

“Since all the attached women have been claimed, there’s only one girl left for the two of you remaining. Do either of you want to back out?”

The room was completely silent until Erik said clearly, “Hell, no!”

Brutal merely glared at Dusty, certain the negative response was evident in his eyes, but he shook his head slowly to remove all doubt.

“Buck!” Dusty yelled over his shoulder.
“Bring her out.”

The final mail order bride shuffled out to the podium, her face pointed to the floor. Her shoulders slumped in what could only be described as utter mortification.

She was quite a bedraggled-looking little creature with wet, stringy blonde hair hanging over her eyes. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Brutal figured she was hiding the size of her breasts under the sodden, see-through blouse and skirt she wore. *Too bad*, he thought, but then anticipation rose quickly in him at the pervasive visual of her in his bed without her garments. She looked like she'd just emerged from a pool of

water. He would have loved to see that.

Someone must have thrown five gallons of water on her. Brutal glanced around the room and saw the smirking face of one of the previously bid-on females. He also wished he had witnessed the catfight resulting in the soaked girl dripping

before them now.

“Make her uncross her arms,” Erik said, breaking Brutal’s trance. “I want to see her tits.”

“Eat shit and die,” came the muttered curse from the girl, which was heard by everyone in the pin-drop silence of the room.

“Now, missy, don’t insult the man who might just be your lord and master for the next two years,” Dusty admonished her before turning to the room again.

Brutal hid a smile. He loved feisty women. Erik, he knew, liked women who were downtrodden. This would be his fifth temporary wife, if he succeeded, which he wouldn’t because Brutal wasn’t going to allow that to happen. He was already planning the best way to peel off the sopping wet white blouse and skirt clinging to her trembling body. Then he would help her warm up.

“Now, we have a provision for this unusual circumstance, believe it or not. We can flip a coin, or you two can fight until one of you is incapacitated. That means unconscious or dead,” Dusty explained.

“Fight,” both men said in unison, and each

began peeling off his outer constricting clothing.

“Ask the girl which one she wants,” shouted the rowdy voice from the back of the room.

“It don’t matter which one she wants,” Dusty said in an exasperated tone. At the same time, the blonde girl uttered a resounding, “Neither!”

“Rule number one,” Dusty said, ignoring the ensuing outburst, “either of you two may, at any time, surrender your interest in the female. Rule number two, the two of you will fight for the right to marry this female until one of you is unconscious or engages rule number one as explained. Do you both understand?”

Brutal and Erik both nodded.

“First, I deserve to see what I’m fighting for,” Erik said and strode two steps over to the female, grabbing both of her arms and pulling them away to view her breasts through the translucent shirt. She kicked him in the shin. Erik quickly tightened his grip on her forearms. He then twisted them up, making her cry out and fall to her knees.

“Just the way I like to see my woman,” Erik smiled callously, “on her knees, crying.”

“Enough.” Dusty stepped between them. “Do that again, Erik, and you lose.”

Erik grunted once and released her, retreating with sardonic amusement on his cruel face.

Brutal wondered if this very last mail order bride would root for him to win now that Erik had shown her his good side. She remained kneeling on the floor with her head down and didn't look up.

"I'd like to know the name of the woman I'm fighting for," Brutal said in an even tone. Her head moved slightly, but she didn't look at him.

"My name is Hannah Brent," she finally said, raising her eyes to meet his momentarily before she looked back at the floor.

Brutal stepped over to her and squatted down. "If you want Erik, I'll step out of the fight right now," he said and watched her head snap up as she glared at him.

"Stomp his ass, and I swear I won't give you any trouble," she whispered in a trembling voice.

"As you wish. I hope you're worth the effort, Hannah." Brutal inhaled deeply of her scent before he stood to face Erik.

So Brutal readied himself to fight Erik, the

biggest, meanest miner on the off-world planet, for the right to marry a woman temporarily. He'd fought bigger, meaner men in his colorful past and beaten them easily. It was no competition. Brutal felt confident this battle was already a victory for him, even though both men were spurred on by lust.

Brutal even more so now because he had gotten close enough to inhale her delectable fragrance while crouched next to her. And she smelled incredible, not perfumed up like the others. Possibly due to the unexpected shower she had received, but he caught her natural scent and the light fragrance of her hair.

Need sex today, his libido commented, also responding to her scent.

Brutal wanted her. Soon. Now. He hoped he could wait until he got her back to his mine to take her for the first time. Conjugal rights were the primary reason he was marrying. Just like every other miner here.

"I'm going to knock you on your ass," Erik mocked.

Brutal didn't bother to respond. He pondered his best strategy to ensure he stayed on his feet

before crushing Erik as quickly as possible. He and Erik circled the room twice before they just rammed into each other.

Brutal was at a disadvantage in weight and height but had the edge in natural fighting ability. He'd been a very good fighter in his younger days. In addition, he had been bio-genetically engineered to always win. He never once doubted his ability—or the inevitability of the outcome.

Erik was big, and he fought dirty, too, but Brutal knew the outcome would be in his favor. And he was right. They traded punches for a few minutes as Brutal toyed with

him and pretended to be giving the fight his all, but he wanted this fight over with quickly. She waited for him. He dodged a punch to his face, ducking down before bouncing right back to tag Erik in the stomach once with a solid jab. Then three vicious punches in quick succession to Erik's face sent him staggering into a table before Erik put a hand up on the wall to steady himself.

Brutal followed with lightening speed and pinned him to the wall. He then simply pinched a nerve in Erik's neck, rendering him unconscious

in seconds. Erik slumped to the floor in a heap. Brutal stepped away, brushing imaginary dust off his clothing. He was now ready to collect his prize.

“And the winner is Brutal,” Dusty exclaimed formally.

Brutal looked up and into the horrified eyes of the woman he had just won the right to marry in a mostly fair fight.

“Your name is...Brutal?” she said in a voice laced with fear and promptly dropped to the floor in a dead faint—again.

ADULT EXCERPT
THE MINER’S WIFE
The Wives Tales, Book 1
By Lara Santiago
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After water sluiced over both of them, removing the suds, Brutal found he was as rock hard as the first day he’d taken her. Like he had been celibate for six months and not just a day.

Brutal would never, in a thousand millenniums, forget the gleam in her eyes as she

pressed kisses down his throat. She didn't retreat either. She continued kissing a path down his chest, her hands resting on his hips.

When she kissed him just above his belly button, she also slipped down on her knees in front of him. He made an inhuman noise somewhere between a growl of disbelief and a howl of jubilation when he felt her lips around the tip of his penis. He looked down to see her slip his cock into her luscious mouth, forcing him to brace his arms against the shower walls for balance. All the while, hot water blasted his back.

Brutal knew she had never done it before, but that didn't make it any less erotic to watch. And he watched her. She was careful. Deliberate. She put him all the way in as far as he would fit and then withdrew, sucking until he thought he would lose his mind in pleasure.

He could always last for hours before shooting his load, but one innocent, little temporary wife was about to turn him into a minuteman missile. Brutal felt her suck him back into her mouth again. He realized he had closed his eyes to keep from letting loose.

“Hannah?” he managed to say. He put a hand on her head to pull her off. But God’s wrath, he didn’t want her to stop. She was going to get a really big surprise in a second.

“Hannah!” He was about to burst. She stopped and slid her mouth off him slowly and looked up at him, smiling. He smiled back, like a lovesick puppy, he was certain. She pursed her lips and kissed the end of his rock-hard cock.

“It’s okay, Brutal. I know what I’m doing. I saw a movie once,” she said with utter confidence and put his substantial erection right back in her mouth. And sucked him.

Once he was as deeply embedded as possible, he felt her hands slip around to his ass and grab hold. He felt her fingernails digging in, pulling him closer and further into her mouth until he couldn’t take the seductive power of it any longer. Back and forth she sucked, harder and harder with each thrust, taking him deeply into her mouth. Her tongue darted all around his sensitive, plum-sized head as the suction from her mouth increased.

Steam swirled around him, hot water pounded his back, and Hannah was sucking his cock like a pro. He wanted to watch her, but he knew he couldn't. If he looked down at her luscious, wide mouth on his shaft, her wet hair ticking his thighs, it would be over. But God's wrath, it would feel so great to just let go.

His head dipped forward. His eyes opened, directed by his voracious libido. She pulled him inside her mouth, and that was his last coherent thought.

REVIEWS for The Miner's Wife

WINNER: Ecataromance 2006

Reviewers' Choice Award. "*The Miner's Wife* is a story that will capture your attention and keep it. With an intriguing plot, engaging characters and explosive sex, this story has it all. Hannah's background is almost unbelievable. The quick and powerful rise of the new Tiberius Group has surprised everyone, especially the women. Their antiquated views of

women and their place in society are in direct opposition to what she's worked so hard for all of her life. When she meets Brutal, she expects him to treat her in the same manner that her father and her previous husband did. But he eventually surprises her, showing her gentleness, caring and support throughout the story which she hadn't received from the men who were supposed to care for her. Brutal is a bio-genetically engineered man, who must have sex in order to recharge his batteries. I loved this! Brutal is definitely all man, strong, sexy and a hard worker. Not only does he need sex, he gets a better charge from his partner's satisfaction, and boy, does he satisfy! Hannah and Brutal are highly combustible, enjoying their sexual escapades and explorations. But what I really liked about Brutal was his caring attitude toward Hannah. He allows her the opportunity to work and show her

intelligence and believed in her when no one else would. The pace of this story is just right, telling about their backgrounds then quickly moving to their relationship. With a little danger from Brutal's nemesis and a surprise from Hannah's past, you won't find one minute of boredom in this story. Add this one to your must read list and keep on the lookout for the other Wives Tales! **5 Stars" —Trang, *Ecataromance***

"Lara Santiago has created a wonderful story mixed with futuristic elements, uncertainty of ones emotions, and a splash of danger from an evil miner. Hannah is a feisty, charismatic woman that is passionate and has a personality that readers will love. Brutal, although he can be very deadly, offers readers a possessive and protective man that is honorable regardless of the arrangement between Hannah and him. The

chemistry between Brutal and Hannah is explosive, mind-blowing, and quite tantalizing to say the least. As the plot intensifies, readers will be pleased with a couple of surprises along the way. These surprises will only make the readers love Brutal more and cheer for Hannah to have what she wants. *The Miner's Wife* is a wonderful story about finding love when and where you aren't looking for it. **5**

Angels!" —Jessica, *Fallen Angel* Reviews

"*The Miner's Wife* by Lara Santiago is a great book. I love the premise and plot. I could not put the book down. There is action, suspense, and romance all combined to make a reader's heart race. The well developed characters grow as the story progresses. Brutal looks like a gruff rough miner but he has a heart of gold. His tenderness and understanding towards Hannah started

my heart to fluttering. Hannah is a modern independent woman forced under the new world order's thumb. The determination and strength she possesses helps her succeed in her changing world. The racy love scenes between Hannah and Brutal leave little to the imagination. An instant attraction bonds these two lovers and propels them into a sensual world of desire and passion. I would gladly live on another planet for a man like Brutal. Ms. Santiago has created a vivid futuristic story for the romantic. I can not wait for her next work. **5 Hot Tattoos" —Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades***

"I fell in love with Brutal Blackthorn in *The Miner's Wife*. He was a big ole sweet man who tried to be tough, but once he fell in love with Hannah, she was his whole world and I liked that. It made me all warm and fuzzy inside

that a hero as tough as Brutal would become putty in Hannah's hands. As for Hannah, for having gone through what she did, she was an extremely strong, intelligent woman. She was in control of Brutal without him even knowing it, and I loved that! *The Miner's Wife* is the first book I have read written by Lara Santiago and it will not be the last. The storyline kept me spellbound and the romantic interludes of the characters were extremely erotic. In fact, I couldn't put this book down until I read the last word. Lucky for me, there are two more books in Ms. Santiago's Wives Tales Series, *The Executive's Wife* and *The Lawman's Wife*, that I look forward to reading! If you are a fan of futuristic books, or even if you aren't, *The Miner's Wife* is just a good, all-around read that is totally satisfying!" —**Talia Ricci,**
Joyfully Reviewed

"*The Miner's Wife* will take you into a

future where women are reduced to mere possessions in a male society. Hannah's plight will have you empathizing with her even as you realize how much Brutal truly needs her, and not just for his sexual desires either. They're both wonderful characters who are wronged by the very people who should have cared for them. This story is powerfully moving and truly a delight to read. I can't wait to read the other two books in The Wives Tales series. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**" —**Chrissy Dionne, *Romance Junkies***

"This book is a never-ending adventure, and readers will find themselves wrapped up in the drama that Brutal and Hannah create. Brutal lives up to his name with a dark and sensual air that readers will love. Hannah is a free spirit who finds that maybe all men aren't alike. The love scenes are so hot, the pages almost

burn with the heat. This is the first book I have read by Lara Santiago and Siren Publishing. I can certainly say that I will be on the lookout for more of this author's work in the future. **4.5 Hearts"** —**Angel, *The Romance Studio***

"Lara Santiago has a refreshing and delightful writing style. Not only is *The Miner's Wife* a very creative story but her characters are mature and well developed. I really appreciated that while Hannah did not embrace what happened to her, she didn't place blame on Brutal, which allowed them to have a sweet, fun, and healthy relationship. The humor is perfectly timed, as is the action and adventure. Not only are the love scenes hot but they are also sweet and full of emotion. I highly recommend *The Miner's Wife* and look forward to reading the other books in The Wives Tales series! **4.5 Kisses"** —**Kerin,**

Two Lips Reviews

"*The Miner's Wife* is a science fiction story about a future controlled by a corporation and the archaic laws that they enforce concerning women. It is a novel idea for a story even though I think I would probably be one of the first women to form a rebellion against the nitwits. There was considerable thought up into the universe that Ms. Santiago has come up with. There is a plausible explanation for the new laws and how they affect the female population. Ms. Santiago's characters are believable and very likable or despicable depending on the character. The love scenes for the most part are very, very hot. Brutal turns out to be a very gentle and caring lover when Hannah allows him to be. I am interested in reading the rest of the series to see if the women really do take to these new laws [or] if they rise up and

stomp some bureaucrat's ass. **4.5 Stars**" —**Oleta M. Blaylock, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"Taking us into a world where women are no more than property and sexual tension relievers, this author pens an interesting story of a couple brought together under less than ideal circumstances. Hannah [is] a woman after my own heart even if she no longer has rights in her country, because she still shows spunk when she's not fainting. Her miner isn't half bad either because from the onset, he is willing to protect the woman he initially sees as an energy source and outlet for his needs. After making the best of their situation, these two become ideal partners in and out of the bed. With its action, passion and touching moments, readers will enjoy this [first book in] The Wives Tales Trilogy. **4.5 Unicorns**" —**Rachelle,**

Enchanted in Romance

"*The Miner's Wife* is Ms. Santiago's first foray into the scary world of the Tiberius Group and a glimpse into the future of 'what if'? What if extremism rules the day? What if American women were to suddenly find themselves not even second-class citizens, but little more than chattel? Though her treatment of the love story between Hannah and Brutal was sweet and grew in the appropriate places, it was my interest in the world she creates that really made the story and kept my interest. In future installments, I hope to see characters actively involved in overthrowing the tyranny they find themselves living under. A very enjoyable read! **4 Kisses**" —**Loribelle Hunt, *Romance Divas***

STORY EXCERPT

THE EXECUTIVE'S WIFE

The Wives Tales, Book 2

By Lara Santiago

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Sophie didn't want to die anymore. She was saved. Orin turned around to glare at her. One strand of hair had escaped the confines of the swirl plastered to his bald head and hung limply down the side of his face. The look he gave her after being defeated by Matthew Westland radiated pure waves of unrelenting rage.

Yeah, how dare she allow herself to be bid on by someone with more money, the nerve of her? The lock of greasy hair hanging unattractively to his chin made Sophie even more grateful he wasn't about to be her—what was it the crazy new world order referred to this as?—her *lord and master*.

Orin looked the exact same way as he had on her first day of work. His nostrils flared in righteous indignation at having been thwarted by Matthew...again.

The auctioneer cleared his throat impatiently and motioned her off the stage urgently, as if she should hurry because he'd just made a bunch of money on her. She instead sauntered to the steps, earning his frown. She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him as she passed behind him on

stage.

“If you would step over here, sir, we can officiate the contract,” the Tiberius representative said to Sophie’s future husband at the foot of stairs off the stage.

The contract of marriage these days had a whole different meaning. Promising to love and honor *et cetera* went by the wayside to be replaced by who got what percentage of funds spent for the bride being auctioned off.

Sophie’s worthless scum of a father, a sperm donor at best, got to have a whopping ninety percent. Eight percent went to the auctioneer, and finally two percent went into the coffers of the Tiberius group. A cut they told everyone they earned by officiating the contract and ceremony joining the couple in matrimony. Plus the forty-eight hour body scan done to ensure consummation of each and every union. They certainly didn’t want people getting married to escape Tiberius persecution.

Men being forced to have sex with whomever they married supposedly made them more cautious about their ultimate choices. But Sophie only understood the rules favored men, and they

could do as they pleased regardless of their initial choices. An

uncontrollable and unwanted urge to weep came over her and she fought to stay serene.

The official Tiberius marriage broker stepped up and motioned impatiently for Sophie to come off the stage. It was time to meet the groom. As if he read her mind, Matthew Westland looked up at her, still paused on stage, and smiled lightly.

From behind her, Sophie heard the auctioneer say, “We’ll start the bidding for the next bride at five thousand and see where it takes us.” She paused at the head of the steps and gazed at her groom.

“Hello,” he said warmly and held out his hand.

Sophie remained quiet, fighting tears threatening to spill over burning eyes as she descended the few steps. If she so much as uttered one word, she’d burst into loud, uncontrollable sobbing. Her desolate mood stemmed from the narrow escape with the deviant in the front row along with the general horror of the auction. Unqualified and here-to-date unknown relief now

raced through her, making her very emotional. A single tear slipped out and ran down her face before she could wipe it away.

“Why the tears? Is there someone else you would prefer to marry?” he asked in a low voice, taking her arm.

Sophie reached up and wiped away moisture and shook her head. “It’s the whole auction situation I find disturbing.” She then added quietly, “And if I ever find out who authored the Working Woman’s Auction Memo, which put me up for sale in my own damn company, I’m going kick his balls up his ass.”

Matt’s eyes widened briefly but didn’t acknowledge her response. He simply led her to a room behind the stage where the funds would be paid and the ceremony performed. Sophie could smell his expensive cologne as they stood together, the scent of which sent her right back to last December and the wall she’d been pressed against when he’d kissed her that first time...and then...more.

Sophie watched him out of the corner of her eye. Her whole body vibrated with the memory of the last time they were together. He saved her,

again. Maybe he remembered the kiss at Christmas. Maybe he felt something for her.

“Thank you for saving me.”

His sudden sardonic smile startled her as he whispered, “I didn’t actually do it for you.”

“Then why would you marry a veritable stranger? I can read the papers. I know you have...well, other choices.”

“You aren’t exactly a stranger,” he said, leaning in close, whispering in her now sensitive ear. “I know exactly how you taste, how you smell, and especially how you feel in my arms when you scream in climax. It’s an intriguing combination. One I found I couldn’t pass up.”

Sophie closed her eyes and felt her face go hot in memory of that supremely

gratifying sensation, which had stabbed through her at his assistance long ago, as if she were experiencing it all over again. “I didn’t think you remembered. You never...” Her head bowed and she found she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Neither did you,” he stated coolly as she felt

his arm circle her shoulders.

“You were my boss,” she snapped with accusation in her tone, still unable to look him in the eyes.

“Yeah, that was my excuse, too. But it isn’t an issue any longer.” He squeezed her shoulder once and pulled her closer. “Is it? Are you ready to marry me, Sophie?”

This time she looked in his beautiful blue eyes before answering. “Yes. I would be...grateful to marry you.”

“I don’t want gratitude.”

“What then?” She sounded breathless to her own ears.

He laughed before he said, “Well, for starters, I’d like to finish what we began in the parking garage hallway. That particular experience, while gratifying in many ways, has always seemed a bit incomplete to me.”

The combination of his warm, sexy body pressed up close, his sultry voice caressing her senses, and his decadent I-want-to-fuck-you-this-second cologne wafting all around made another rush of moisture accumulate between her legs in readiness. Sophie’

s heart beat so thunderously in her chest, she couldn't speak. She took short breaths to calm herself, but with it came Matthew's sexy scent, the fragrance of which made her insides quiver in long awaited need.

He leaned in suddenly, right into her personal space. "And then I'd like to do it some more. And then some more after that."

"Oh..." Sophie managed to say as a rush of air whooshed out of her lungs.

ADULT EXCERPT
THE EXECUTIVE'S WIFE
The Wives Tales, Book 2
By Lara Santiago
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"I promise I'll never say this to you again, but please don't make a sound," Matthew said.

Sophie nodded her understanding yet again and felt a blush creep up to her face. No moaning or screaming out loud like she had under the mistletoe.

The only thing worse than getting caught, she decided, was getting caught and failing to succeed in their task to secure their future.

And given the choice, she sincerely wanted a life with Matthew Westland, whatever it took.

Matthew twisted his head and placed his lips on hers, seductively teasing them open with a single lick as his hand moved further up her leg. Nimble fingertips buried themselves quickly under her skirt. His tongue quickly wrapped around hers in erotic plunder. He grabbed her underwear and tugged them down a few inches. She stifled the urge to suck in a sharp breath at his bold actions and concentrated on his lips to forget where she was.

Don't make a sound, don't make a sound, don't make a sound, she chanted to herself.

Matthew had the most luscious mouth. It took all her focus to not react like she wanted to. A moan of appreciation bubbled up in her throat wanting to escape. His fingers niggled their way between her legs and stroked once, the sensation of which sent a sharp longing through her body. She was embarrassed to be wet for him already. She'd moistened up with supreme gratitude upon hearing his deep rich voice say, "one hundred thousand dollars."

Not because she cared about his money. She

honestly didn't. No, she realized right away that with his generous bid, she'd get the opportunity to finish up what they'd started under that sprig of mistletoe. She was about to get her Christmas wish after all, albeit four months later than expected.

Moistening up was not hard for her to do when Matthew Westland said anything.

Besides, it wasn't as if she hadn't longed for him aching through each and every lonely night since the Christmas party months ago. His magnetic presence enveloped her as powerfully now as it had back then.

Matthew kissed a path from her lips to her throat as he pulled the crotch of her panties aside. She felt his fingers slip inside of her very moist aching core, ever so slightly brushing past her clitoris, and she stifled the urge to jump through the tinted skylight she noticed in the ceiling of the limo. She was wet and ready for him, and now he knew it, too.

Should she be embarrassed? No time.

Matthew shifted silently on the seat and prepared to mount her. Her legs were spread as

wide as they would go across the leather seats now caressing her half-naked butt. She managed to relax and opened her legs wider. She opened her eyes and caught sight of the not-distant-enough newspaper in her view. It only made her tense up again, so she turned her face away and buried it in Matthew's shoulder.

She couldn't believe Asher couldn't hear them. Matthew already had his zipper undone and she hadn't heard it. She felt the ridge of his enormous cock resting on the inside of her thigh. Another thrill ran through her at the knowledge she was about to find out if he was as big as she suspected. Her first feel of him was a memory from back under the mistletoe. Those oft whispered rumors of his impressive size were not at all exaggerated...then or now.

"Ready," he whispered. She turned away from his shoulder to look in his face and nodded her assent. She held his sexy gaze until Matthew lowered the lids of his eyes seductively, and pierced her to the hilt with one very deep and very satisfying thrust. She sucked in silent breath of unbelievable pleasure as he quickly stroked inside her again, and again and again. The immense thickness of him penetrated and

stretched her core to the limit with each deep stroke of his cock. Her body accommodated him...barely, but he kept up the pace of his thrusts even as she wondered what his definition of a few strokes was.

Sophie melted into the smooth rhythm of his powerful thrusts, relaxing to allow the pleasure of it to seep into her tingling body. She pushed her hips forward to meet his next thrust and his cock seemed to slide even deeper. Whisper quiet, Matthew drove his cock inside her yet again. The angle of his thrust almost stroked her clit with every other push and the stirrings of a bone shaking climax grew within her.

The combined scent of the leather her half-naked butt rested on with Matthew's unique scent of starched shirt and fuck-me-now cologne tinged with the acrid knowledge of being caught caressed and yet heightened her senses. Thrust. Stroke. Thrust. Stroke. Matthew was about to make her climax. She held back fearful she'd scream like a banshee if the wash of climax took her suddenly. Thrust. Stroke. Thrust.

God, he felt incredible. Better than she ever thought possible. She'd wanted his cock buried inside her desperately. With him driving

repeatedly into her now, sending

bolts of delicious sensation deeply inside her core, she was on the verge of release. Sophie held back even though she wanted to sing, moan, and scream.

Oh, God, did she just make a noise?

Sophie heard the newspaper at the other end of the small space rustle. This was quickly followed by a choked gasp and the sharp thud a brandy glass being dropped hitting the carpeted floorboard of the limo.

“What the fuck?” Asher screeched, trying to stand as his rumpled newspaper fell aside in the center of the limo aisle.

REVIEWS for The Executive's Wife

"Once again Lara Santiago has written an intriguing and engaging story in *The Executive's Wife*. Having waited ever so patiently for this follow up to *The Miner's Wife*, I can honestly say it was worth it. Sophie and Matt have an explosive chemistry which is

immediately apparent. Initially, they are concerned with the employer/employee relationship but once the Tiberius Group institutes its changes, all bets are off. Matt will use any means at his disposal to get the one woman he wants. Sophie's character may seem a little unruffled at first, but it is soon obvious that she's got a will of steel and will do anything in her power to help those that she loves. The premise of this story follows the previous in that Matt is bio-genetically engineered but there are subtle differences. The adversity that they immediately face in their marriage adds an intensity and urgency to their relationship which is revealed in their frequent lovemaking. In addition to all of that, this well paced story also has a lot of suspense and even a few surprising twists in the plot. *The Executive's Wife* is a must read for fans of Ms. Santiago as well as the Wives Tales. **5 Stars" —Trang,**

Ecataromance

"The Wives Tales 2: *The Executive's Wife* was refreshing and scary at the same time. I'm sure someone in the world would love nothing more than to see women's rights taken away and Lara Santiago presented what would happen in detail. The fact that Sophie got the man she always wanted was good fortune, but life did not work out so well for her sister. I'm dying to read [Hannah's] story, but I was more than satisfied with *The Wives Tales 2: The Executive's Wife*. Sophie and Matt were dynamic characters that kept me turning the pages. I wanted to see more of them and the love they shared. Their sex life was stimulating and well earned. Matt's father was obnoxious as well as determined. The man just would not give up on his dream for his son. It was more like an obsession. I had to give him credit for his gumption. Moreover, he made the

story more interesting. After reading *The Executive's Wife*, I am greedy for more. While I wait for the next installment, I plan to read the first Wives Tale [*The Miner's Wife*]. **4.5 Stars/Hot" —Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"Lara Santiago is a very talented author and the men in her books are absolutely to die for. Matt is honest, straightforward, sexy, protective and a loving alpha male that no woman could resist (or would want to). He doesn't hide from his feelings which is very refreshing and even shows his vulnerability to the woman he loves. Sophie is funny, kind, and a wonderful mate for Matthew. The heady combination of these two characters makes the intensely erotic love scenes even hotter. I recommend reading *The Executive's Wife* and look forward reading more pieces written by Lara Santiago! **4.5 Kisses" —Kerin, *Two***

Lips Reviews

"I thoroughly enjoyed this book because there is so much happening in the plot. Two people who love each other finally come together, but Matt's family uses every underhanded trick in the book to split them up. An ex-girlfriend thrown into the mix really doesn't help things. Love scenes are highly erotic with a burning intensity that will leave readers panting for more. This story has everything including deception, passion, mystery and manipulation. Lara Santiago is a great author who has created

a tale that is sure to stick with readers long after it's over. **4 Blue Ribbons"**
—**Angel, *Romance Junkies***

"Lara Santiago once again pens a compelling and erotic drama surrounding the Tiberius Group. Sophie is a strong, determined and

very intelligent woman who is facing a changing world. Her only securities are her wits and soon, Matthew's arms, but even that seems tenuous at best. Ms. Santiago does a phenomenal job in creating a serious and devastating situation, and showing how love is able to triumph even the most depraved and rigid minds. Matthew is honest in his emotions. Almost from page one, he recognizes Sophie as the love he has been waiting for. When they finally are able to express their love to each other, it is wonderful to behold. With a cast of villainous secondary characters ready in the wings to cut Sophie to ribbons, Matthew and Sophie must use their heads and their hearts to find a way to succeed over not only the Tiberius Group, but over the many people determined to keep them apart. *The Executive's Wife* is a fabulous follow-up to *The Miner's Wife*. This is one series that has it all: drama, intense attraction, toad like villains,

and two leads who find that love and survival must go hand in hand in these dire times. **4 Angels" —Sarah W.,
*Fallen Angel Reviews***

"Ever since reading *The Miner's Wife*, I have been waiting for the release of *The Executive's Wife* by Lara Santiago. It was all I wanted it to be and more. Full of highly erotic and emotionally hot sex, I fell in love with Matthew almost immediately. Talk about a true hero in helping a damsel in distress; I love how Matt took care to keep Sophie safe but allowed her wings to fly, even if just in the privacy of their home. I thought Sophie intelligent and unafraid and I found myself more than once cheering her decisions. *The Executive's Wife* ties in and relates to *The Miner's Wife* beautifully. I love how Lara Santiago has written this series and I can't wait for the third installment." —**Talia Ricci, *Joyfully Reviewed***

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The Tiburon Duet

Just a Kiss : Just One Embrace

REVIEW

"Santiago blends sci-fi and steamy erotica in this two-book collection. The stories will captivate readers looking for something imaginative and different. Cleverly written dialogue brings the characters to life in this entertaining read, and the alpha aliens are out of this world. **4 Stars**" —
Romantic Times Book Reviews

STORY EXCERPT

JUST A KISS

The Tiburon Duet, Book 1

By Lara Santiago

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Gabrielle woke up lying on her back. She opened her eyes, looked up at what she presumed was the ceiling of the room she was in, and saw stars flying by. *How odd*, she thought. She couldn't remember where she was at first. A planetarium? No. It looked sort of like an alien

spaceship. Then she remembered.

Oh, crap!

Gabrielle bolted upright and found herself in the exact same place as when she fainted directly after the warriors drew their fierce-looking weapons on her. How long had she been unconscious? Had they done anything to her? Gabrielle ran her hands quickly across her torso and legs, patting herself down looking for...she didn't even know what.

Probes? Recent surgery? An alien baby?

Get a grip, Gabrielle.

She stood up slowly, brushing imaginary dust off her clothes as she took in her surroundings. There was a door all the way across the room, maybe twenty feet from her, and yet the space seemed difficult to measure. If she actually started walking to the door, Gabrielle fearfully imagined it would be like a circus funhouse where the journey never ended, and she would be hopelessly lost traveling the short distance. *Calm down. Getting hysterical won't help anything.* She took a deep breath to still her wild imagination.

The ceiling was a dome of stars, so she figured she was either in a planetarium or flying through

space in an alien craft. *Where are Mulder and Scully when you need them?* she thought, and then jumped nearly a foot in the air when someone moaned.

Gabrielle turned to look behind her and almost fainted again. In the center of the spacious room was a large, rectangular, cubical slab of marble. On top of this sarcophagus-shaped rock was a man lying on his back, eyes closed, arms resting to his side. A gorgeous man.

He was sleeping maybe? Or dead? She stifled an urge to run. He wasn't moving, but she could see him breathing from where she stood.

Okay. Not dead. Good. Better to be with a sleeping warrior alien than a dead body, right?

Better get closer and take a look, and not because he was simply the most magnificent man she'd ever seen. He looked like a Greek God. He was massively built. His thick black hair was short. She wondered briefly what color his eyes might be to complement his angular face. His lips were full and sensuous. His sleek black body armor surely molded to, and barely contained, a very impressive body. No man would look this

good and not have the body to go with it.

He was perfectly formed head to toes, the stuff of her wild, late-night fantasies, and the best Hollywood had to offer. She wondered why his friends hadn't made him comfortable by removing his protective coverings. Perhaps he was a warrior soldier. They all probably slept in their body armor to make a point about how bad-assed they were at all times.

Warriors were a whole different breed. Those in the circle were surely warriors. All of them were tall, too, even the women. Gabrielle looked down at her short, small body. Big men like him hardly ever noticed her. They probably never saw her unless they looked down at their feet.

Gabrielle heard him moan again. Was he in pain? Had he been wounded or something? She looked up to study his face and was startled to see he was staring at her in return. She noted his eye color immediately. He had liquid-silver colored eyes. Exotic eyes. Troubled eyes. He tried to speak, but it was, apparently, too hard for him. He swallowed with obvious difficulty. Gabrielle couldn't stop herself from moving closer to him.

“Please, must kiss...” he said in a barely

audible tone.

“I’m sorry,” Gabrielle said with interest as she stepped even closer to his resting form. She bent down. “Say it again.” She put her ear close to his mouth. Did he just tell her he needed a kiss? Yeah, she wanted to kiss him and make him better all right. She chanced a look at his face.

The gorgeous warrior pierced her with a direct stare, mesmerizing her. “Kiss me,” he whispered.

“Me?” Gabrielle rose to study his face, checking his expression for clarification. His eyes bore into her straight to her soul and deeper still. Yeah, he was talking to her. Was he reading her mind?

Gabrielle glanced around furtively and saw no one around to help him. She’d wanted to kiss him since she saw him helpless and gorgeous on the slab. *What’s the harm, anyway? It’s a meaningless touching of the lips.* She easily convinced herself to kiss this handsome, sleepy warrior before he changed his mind. He had beautiful lips to go with his impressive body.

“Get ready, Sleeping Beauty,” she murmured under her breath.

Gabrielle leaned over him, lowered her face, and carefully placed her lips on his in a chaste kiss. He groaned and shuddered the moment her lips came into contact with his. Her mouth tingled in response to the connection with this injured, dreamy man. She drew back, worried that she hurt some unseen wound. "I'm so sorry," she uttered sincerely as his eyelids fluttered open to regard her with the molten silver gaze.

"I am not, but..." He gave her a scorching, decadent look. "Please...just...kiss me."

"Are you sure?" She looked around again to see if anyone watched her accost this helpless man. His lids lowered in a sexy, sleepy look.

Was he even fully conscious? Should she kiss him? God, he was hard to resist.

Gabrielle didn't want to force herself on the poor, injured man. Well, not exactly. But his lips were so warm and full and so invitingly electric, she dared to take another taste. Besides, he'd asked her to...twice. She was simply complying with his request...eagerly. This time, her kiss was bolder. Chaste gave way easily to carnal as her tongue valiantly traced the seam of his smooth,

full lips.

He moaned deeply in what sounded like pleasure and opened his mouth to admit her impatient and inquisitive tongue. She felt the growl of his approval from the vibration in his throat. He raised a hand and brushed her arm before traveling to her head. His fingers tangled in her hair as he pressed her mouth even closer.

Her warrior seemed to enjoy his requested kiss, but there was a little problem from her point of view. A height-challenged problem.

Gabrielle, on tip-toe, wasn't close enough to this seductive man to give him the kiss she wanted to deliver. She broke from his engaging mouth, and he moaned again as if in pain, but he gave her an approving look when she crawled on top of him. Balancing on all fours, she shifted her body over his to take full advantage of the marble-hard physique. She slithered across his chest on a mission to kiss his hurt completely away. God, he felt great!

She slipped up his body until her face was aligned with his, and her breasts were flattened on his body armor. She touched his face, which was rough with whiskers. Her mouth captured his

hungrily as if they hadn't stopped kissing earlier. Her tongue tangled with his in a dance of desire more satisfying than any she'd ever experienced.

Seductive. Alluring. Sensual. Engaging.

It was similar to a very satisfying sexual encounter, not that she'd ever participated in a very satisfying sexual encounter to compare it to. This experience was what she dreamed of from the reference point of pure mediocrity evident in all her past affairs. This kiss made her feel light-headed.

And yet, it was just a kiss, albeit a scorching one.

After only a minute of locking lips with this seductive stranger, Gabrielle began to vibrate with a need she wouldn't have been able to articulate even if she had been willing

to stop and ponder her feelings. She wasn't going to stop this heavenly tangling of lips and tongues until she was fully satisfied. Not even if one of the others came back right now and tried to pry her off him. Not even if they threatened her with a weapon.

The stranger with silver eyes tasted like a

spicy citrus rum cocktail she sampled excessively on a cruise once. He was just as intoxicating to all her heightened senses, especially the ardent ones tingling between her legs.

Gabrielle registered the stranger's hand press into the small of her back. His touch warmed her through her shirt and sent a prickle of delicious sensation tingling between her legs. The hand tangled in her hair radiated spine-tingling sensation from her scalp down her back. He alternately massaged her neck while silently guiding the angle of her mouth as they kissed.

One of his legs moved beneath her slightly. She shifted to accommodate it between her legs, enabling her to grind herself on him. As if reading her mind, he lifted his leg and securely wedged it between her thighs. She spontaneously clenched them together. A few more strokes of his tongue, and she'd crack the armor on his thigh guard lodged deliciously between her legs. She couldn't help but grind her crotch against the rock hard surface of his thigh as his mouth made love to hers with an intensity seriously lacking in every kiss she'd ever shared. She heard herself making needful, gasping noises.

Gabrielle felt as if some intangible event were

building inside the sensation ridden nerve endings residing in her body.

Something was about to happen. She could feel it.

Something fabulous.

A warm tingly feeling sparked in her stomach and welled outward, rushing an untamed awareness through the very fiber of her weary, love-starved soul. Her heart beat in an erratic fashion, too overwhelmed by emotion to merely beat swiftly during this most intoxicating kiss.

Gabrielle pressed her lips further into his and felt his body go rigid as if on the very precipice of...something extraordinary. The citrus taste of him gave way to a rich, chocolate rush of flavor in her mouth.

Gabrielle could feel her clitoris twitching as if he actually touched her there. Sensation exploded inside her in the next moment. Her hips ground forward into his in the ancient rhythm of love. A rush of heat centered between her legs as an orgasm of monumental proportion washed over her.

Exquisite! Delicious!

And the kiss went on.

The stranger beneath her groaned a satisfied sound. Her legs clenched his thigh as if in a permanent vice mode, the muscles in her body singing in the joy of her climax. Her hips arched forward into his again. This placed pressure against her clit and elicited an

even greater sensation of friction to the already volatile experience she enjoyed.

Gabrielle finally broke the seal of their mouths and slumped onto his body, her exhausted muscles still aching and quivering in pleasure. Her head rested on his shoulder as she tried to catch her breath. She felt like she'd been running. Then she remembered her earlier race from the devil, which led her here and into the arms of pure ecstasy. Gabrielle snuggled up to her warrior and stroked his face as he cradled her in his arms. She closed her eyes in wonder and supreme contentment.

Boneless and sated, Gabrielle remained resting on top of his marble-hard physique, trying to recover from the most powerful orgasm she'd ever experienced. She must be dreaming.

“What just happened?” she asked when she

could finally speak. She lifted her head off his shoulder to gaze into his silver eyes.

“I believe we...touched our mouths together,” he remarked, then promptly lapsed into unconsciousness again as if he’d never been awake at all.

“Did we ever,” Gabrielle said on a sigh. She realized she didn’t even know his name. Too bad. She leaned up on shaky arms to see if he had really passed out.

“Hey, Sleeping Gorgeous.” Nothing. Maybe she should kiss him again to wake him up. She put her lips on his once more and was about to lick his lips open when she heard a noise.

“What in the name of Sultana do you think you are doing?” came a lethally angry voice from behind her. Gabrielle quickly removed her mouth from the warrior she lip-locked.

She wondered herself what on earth she was doing.

She peeked over her shoulder to see one of the warriors from the circle had silently entered the chamber. Much like the man she kissed, this warrior also had black hair, but it was longer. It brushed his shoulders and had a bold streak of

blond running thorough it. Frankenstein's bride had nothing on this guy in the scary hair-do department, Gabrielle thought.

Time to climb off her unconscious love toy and explain. Yep. She'd gotten caught violating a possibly injured man. Gabrielle was still tangled around him. She wished her silver-eyed warrior would wake up and explain to his angry friend with the streak that she had only kissed him. It was an amazing, orgasmic kiss, but harmless.

Incredible satisfaction still vibrated through her as she tried to get her limbs to function. It was amazing that she felt so good. Apparently, she was so starved for affection and passion, she hadn't needed to shed even one article of clothing to experience a body-rocking orgasm of epic proportions. She had never in her life climaxed while kissing a guy. Never.

“Explain your behavior!”

“Well...he asked me to kiss him...and so I did...and well...one thing led to another...and he fainted again.”

“I don't believe you. Remove yourself from him.”

The streak-haired warrior drew his weapon as if to motivate her. The weapon was a big, evil-looking sword bearing foreign carved markings.

Streak, as Gabrielle nicknamed him, motioned for her to climb off his friend. She patted the injured man's cheek in a vain attempt to revive him so he could explain what happened. She herself would like to know what actually happened.

Her legs felt rubbery when she moved. She wasn't sure of their capacity to hold her weight once she tested them.

"I'm a little weak right now..." She remained where she was.

"Get down, or I will help you with the tip of my sword."

"All right! Relax. I'm moving as fast as I can." Gabrielle slowly scooted down the unconscious warrior. She dropped her legs over the edge, near a certain pair of rock hard thighs, feeling for the floor with her toes.

"You are not moving fast enough." The sharp sword point poked her once in the shoulder lightly.

Gabrielle braced herself against the slab of rock holding, in her humble opinion, the best kisser in the known universe.

In the next second, as if silently beckoned, several of the other warriors arrived in the room, stationing themselves strategically around her and the man still dead to the world.

Not good. Gabrielle turned on weak legs to face the assembled crowd of angry people. Streak started speaking, “I found this human lying on top of our injured comrade.”

“Explain yourself!” demanded one of the females. She was a red-head, a veritable, Amazon-sized female. “Could you not tell he needed rest? Why would you do this?”

“Do what? I only kissed him. Big deal,” Gabrielle said without an iota of remorse. “As a matter of fact, I might do it again if he wakes up. What’s wrong with him anyway?”

“This man has suffered a great loss. His wife died on this trip. He is grieving for her.”

Oops. Gabrielle had the decency to lower her head in abject horror. She’d kissed a man who just lost his wife. How could she have known? Why did he ask her to kiss him anyway? Maybe

she looked like his wife. It was the only rational explanation she could invent at the moment. A huge attack of shame crossed her being. What was wrong with

her? Why had she kissed him?

“That’s not even the worst part,” Streak said with utter disdain. “When I first entered the room, I caught her...with her lips pressed to his.”

The sound of gasps from every member in the circle of giants worried Gabrielle as she wondered what they were so bent out of shape about. She hadn’t known about his wife dying. How could she?

“You put your mouth on his?” the redhead spat out as if ejecting a distasteful flavor.

“He asked me to and...” Gabrielle started to defend herself, but no one was looking at her. They were all speaking all at once to each other.

“What will we do when Maura calls?” another female, this one blonde, said to the red-head.

“Who’s Maura?” Gabrielle asked.

“His wife,” the blonde responded in an

informational tone.

“Wife? I thought you said his wife died!”

“One of them died on this mission. Another waits for his return on our home planet,” the red-head informed her spitefully.

“One of them! He has more than one?”

Gabrielle did not like that piece of information one single bit. What was he, a sheik or a sultan or something? The words ‘home planet’ then caught up in her mind. These people were aliens? No. Couldn’t be.

“That’s not the problem.” The red-head was giving her a funny look.

“It seems like a pretty big problem to me,” Gabrielle huffed. “Listen, I honestly didn’t know he was married, so I’ll leave quietly and—”

“No, you may not leave. You’ve touched your mouth to his. You will have to go through a *vita parcere* ceremony with him.” The blonde female’s eyes widened as if her own words scared her.

“A vita what?” Gabrielle thought it did not sound good.

“Life partnering,” Streak said coldly.

“Life partnering! I’m not life partnering with

a bigamist.” Gabrielle crossed her arms.

“Bigamist?” The two females then started yet another quiet conversation and referred to a flat-etched, silver clipboard as they whispered.

“Hello! Bigamist. Polygamist. Whatever. A man with more than one wife.” Gabrielle snorted and saw confused looks echoing all around the group of agitated warriors.

“Why are you harping on his wives? It is not important in this situation at all. You

put your mouth to his for, I’m guessing, a significant length of time. Now, you will have to become his life partner as our laws require,” Streak said in an uptight tone.

“I will do no such thing.” Gabrielle stomped toward the only break in the now closing circle of giants.

“You will,” and they closed ranks on her.

“It was only a kiss,” Gabrielle whined. She looked back at the man these aliens insisted she had to partner with for eternity. He was still no help.

God, he was still gorgeous. No matter. She

was not about to ‘life partner’ with someone who already possessed a harem of wives waiting for him somewhere. Gabrielle simply wouldn’t.

And they couldn’t make her.

ADULT EXCERPT

JUST A KISS

The Tiburon Duet, Book 1

By Lara Santiago

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Her eyes strayed back up. His face, and especially his eyes, displayed his amusement. Maybe he *could* read her mind.

“What are you thinking about? Are you embarrassed?”

“Maybe. I was wondering about your...size,” she admitted.

“My size?” He grinned with question in those beautiful silver eyes of his, trying to get the joke.

Gabrielle felt hot all over. “Your...uh...penis size.” She should check out that area before agreeing to anything further.

“Oh, I imagine it’s adequate enough in size to get the job done.”

“Now, there is proof positive you are not from Earth. All men on my planet think they are massive.”

“Do they now?”

“Yes. So, are you massive, Keller? Would you fill me to the brink?” She felt a sudden rush of moisture gush below as if in preparation for the possibility he might whip out his mighty cock suddenly to test the capacity of her brink and his ability to fill it.

“Do you want to find out firsthand?”

“What? How?” Another gush of wetness released between her legs, and a quivery feeling in her stomach immediately accompanied it. Yes, she wanted to find out.

Keller smiled deviously and uncrossed his arms. “We could try out some Earth-styled—live porno, as you called it.”

He crossed the boundary of her personal space and placed his hands on her shoulders. She sucked in a breath at his touch and closed her eyes to refrain from launching herself at him with her legs open in invitation. She was wet enough to receive whatever he was about to offer.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I can become fully erect and easily insert my—” he paused as if to search for the Earth word “—*cock* inside you without losing control, Gabrielle. You can determine if I am massive enough in size for you to consider life partnering with me.”

“Okay,” Gabrielle said more dreamily than she should have. Her insides were liquefied with sexual need. What was she about to do anyway? She hoped she was dreaming because she would never allow a man to talk her into bed this fast in real life.

Alien or not, he was slick in the seduction department. And now, she was very slick in anticipation of testing their respective...size capacities. She wanted him with an unreasonable need guiding her. She *did* want to know whether he was massive or not. The shy voice inside spouting advice of caution and refusal was summarily overruled by her starved libido shouting, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’

“Come over to the table,” he said, motioning her, “and I’ll show you.”

REVIEWS for Just a Kiss

"On the run from a madman, Gabrielle accidentally stumbles onto the platform of a departing alien ship. Instead of facing death, Gabrielle is faced with a fate much worse, with just one kiss. How much trouble can one chocolate orgasmic kiss be? Keller, the future king of Tiburon awakes from a delirium demanding a kiss. Now life mated to an irresistible earth woman, Keller defends their relationship against the racism and tradition of his people, regardless of the consequences. Amongst orgasmic chocolate kisses and fiery chemistry, you will be totally captivated in the hilariously sweet romance of two people bound together by 'Just A Kiss.' Be warned, you may either laugh uncontrollably or need water to cool you down while reading *Just A Kiss*. **5 Stars.**" —**Suz Smith,**
Ecataromance

"Just A Kiss by Lara Santiago is a

unique view into life on other planets. This witty and romantic tale created laughter and tears as I read it. I could not put the book down. Keller is a powerful man determined to claim Gabrielle as his bride. His sexy charm and rugged looks make him a perfect example of why we should look for life on other planets. Gabrielle is a lonely modern woman wanting something more out of life. The grace in which she handles the dramatic events in her life is amazing. The orgasmic kisses Keller and Gabrielle share are breathtaking. Ms. Santiago captures the raw essence of erotic passion in these kisses. I would love to receive just one of Keller's kisses. The mesmerizing love scenes made my heart skip a beat. The passion this couple shares makes all the hurdles they have to jump worthwhile. I will read Gabrielle and Keller's love story over and over again. **5 Hot Tattoos"**
—Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades*

"*Just A Kiss* is a very unique book that readers will find highly interesting and even funny. Keller is not your ordinary alien and boy, when it comes to sensuality this man has it in droves! Gabrielle gets caught in the middle of a sticky situation. She doesn't mean to get abducted, but when she does, winds up having the adventure of a lifetime. The love scenes are intense and so hot they almost steam up the computer screen. Lara Santiago is certainly an author to watch and I will be on the lookout for more of her work in the future. **4.5 Hearts" —Angel, *The Romance Studio***

"Wow! *Just A Kiss* is a text book example of cultural misunderstandings, or maybe I should say, species misunderstandings. This book has a little bit of everything: action, romance, and hot love scenes. Lara Santiago seems to have a talent for taking a look at a familiar situation

and giving it a whole new twist. In this case, men and women read different meanings into what is said. This is one tale that I recommend when you are in the mood for something lightweight, but romantic. *Just A Kiss* is a perfect read for romance lovers that enjoy humor with their stories. Keep your eye on Lara Santiago. She is showing great promise. **4 Blue Ribbons" — Belle Rouge, Romance Junkies**

"While on the run from a psychotic killer, Gabrielle darts right into the middle of an alien expedition departing Earth. When Keller, an ailing warrior on board, asks her for a kiss, she is happy to oblige. She gets a great deal more than she bargained for,

however—an incredible chocolate flavored orgasm and an education on the differences in language. As it turns out, mouth touching on Tiburon is a life-altering event. Gabrielle is feisty

and genial, and Keller's determination to have her drives the story. *Just A Kiss* is another great story from Lara Santiago—fast paced, hot and with just the right amount of twists to keep it interesting! **4 Kisses" —Loribelle Hunt, *Romance Divas***

"This futuristic novella has a quick pace and remarkable culture diversity. I could not put this book down until I reached the end. The smooth writing kept the plot moving effortlessly, allowing the focus to remain on what was happening and the subtle undertones occurring between the characters. I really liked Keller, who is resilient in his desires and needs. The fact that he is more tenderhearted than your average hero is left me with fond feelings for him. Gabrielle sticks to her guns and even though she could have been cruel and bitchy in certain instances, she didn't lash out as often as I had expected. There were a few

inconsistencies that I had trouble ignoring, such as why a group of aliens who had spent months studying Earth in detail would misunderstand the Earth term "kiss." To treat Gabrielle so cruelly because she reacted the way Earthlings do seems off kilter and unfair. While it annoyed me to a degree, it also intrigued me. The fact that the Tiburon people have so many cultural differences left me looking for all the variations that make them so dissimilar. The sex is sensual and quite loving, leaving me relieved, although it did not strike my passion meter. Overall, if you enjoy books with a futuristic flair and unique society differences, *Just A Kiss* will satisfy you and leave you looking for more novels by Ms. Santiago. I'll be keeping my eye on this author. **4 Stars"** —

Francesca Hayne, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"Lara Santiago's *Just A Kiss* is an

enticing story that will grab the reader from the first page. The chemistry between Gabrielle and Keller burns from their first meeting and just gets hotter. This story is the perfect mix of adventure and romance. I enjoyed that both Keller and Gabrielle were willing to leave their comfort zone in order to be together. **4 Stars"** —

Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

"Ms Santiago has a winner in this story. Gabrielle and Keller are very realistic characters in a difficult situation. The settings on Earth and Tiburon are well described, as are the supporting characters. I laughed at the description of Gabrielle as a "puny Earthling." The plot line was very involving, and I found myself unable to put this one down until the end. **4**

Cups" —**Maura, *Coffee Time Romance***

STORY EXCERPT

JUST ONE EMBRACE
The Tiburon Duet, Book 2
By Lara Santiago
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Ellie managed to knock on her hero's door before losing her nerve. She hugged closer to the doorframe to hide from other nosey tenants who might pop out and catch her. Her ankle was still tender, but she could walk on it without limping. She still trembled from the orgasm she'd experienced in the muscular arms of a total stranger.

He rescued her from humiliation, carried her home, kissed her until she came, and she let him walk out without a word. She hadn't found Gabrielle's new number, so she still didn't know his name. The man who gave her the most powerful orgasm in literally a year walked away after her petulance, and she'd let him go. She was probably a fool to be chasing him, but she couldn't stop herself.

After several minutes of severely berating herself, she'd gathered her courage and trailed him down to her friend's old apartment,. A smart woman would have already tackled him at the front door, hauled his unconscious body into the

apartment, and chained him to the nearest bed.

She raised her hand to knock again, but he opened the door abruptly. His eyes registered surprise. He motioned her inside while grunting brief responses into his cell phone.

Whoever he spoke with on the phone seemed to be doing all the talking. He closed the door behind her and leaned on it, effectively barring her escape should she change her mind.

Ellie pretended serenity and stepped further into his apartment, looking around the austere room. The furniture was sparse and obviously left from the former tenants. She recognized Gabrielle's old sofa. The rest of the space was neat if not full of worldly possessions. This man had 'temporary resident' practically stamped on his forehead. Ellie tried to back off on her judgment of him. She had no right to judge. He'd saved her from the humiliating result of her break up with Brandon, a pompous snob born with a silver spoon crammed in his mouth. The man who'd told her he loved her, and in the same breath, actually expected her to live as his mistress because he needed to marry someone more worthy of his social station.

Ellie glanced around her hero's space again and relaxed slightly. She was here to apologize, not rate him on the austere decorations of his apartment.

His seemingly temporary life only registered because, in some ways, she was reminded of the men who had shared her mother's life on a regular basis. Ellie never knew her *real* father, and her mother never talked about him.

Motorcycles, sparse furnishings, leather, and especially dangerous dark looks encompassed many of the traits her hero shared in common with the men frequenting her childhood in the form of 'Uncles.' If this stranger possessed a tattoo and planned on leaving in the near future, the picture would be identical.

Although she did notice his temperament was less abrasive than any of the men in her mother's past. And he was sexy as hell, too.

He completed his call and turned his ferocious gaze to her. His expectant look filled the space between them. She didn't know who looked more uncomfortable.

"I...um...wanted to say...sorry..."

“Don’t. You owe me no apologies. I’m sorry if I acted inappropriately.”

“No, it was rude of me to chase you off. I don’t even know your name.” She felt a blush warm her cheeks and looked away.

“That’s because when I watch your mouth, I forget what my name is,” he said with self-deprecating humor.

Laughter bubbled through her.

“My name is Crag...Tyler.”

“Crag,” she repeated his name. “That’s unusual. Crag. I like it.”

“Thanks.” He was absolutely, hands down, the sexiest man she’d ever seen.

“I’m Ellie Granger,” she replied, then resisted the urge to stick out her hand to him. If he took it, she didn’t think she’d be able to stop herself from planting her needy lips on him.

Somewhere. Anywhere. Everywhere.

And that wasn’t why she’d come here. Was it?

“Pleased to meet you, Ellie.” He didn’t extend his hand either. The thought of his hands on her, accompanied by a vivid sensual picture,

slammed into her mind, and familiar heat rose in her face again.

“Is your ankle still sore?” His gaze ran down her body to her feet. Ellie remembered his warm hands stroking her calf directly before that amazing kiss. She felt the blush come into her cheeks again.

“No. It doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“Good.”

This man was dangerous to all of her aroused senses. If she were smart, she’d run like the devil was after her and lock herself in her bedroom. But she’d established earlier, she wasn’t smart. Otherwise, this intriguing man would already be chained to her bed. This vibrant thought made her suck in a breath at another very erotic picture now playing on the movie screen of her underfed libido. It was time to change the subject to something more mundane.

“So, I see you haven’t redecorated since Gabrielle and Keller moved out.”

“No, I’m only here temporarily.”

Of course he was only here temporarily. That

left only the tattoo question to be resolved.

“Are they friends of yours, Gabrielle and Keller, I mean?”

“Yes, Keller is my very best friend from childhood.”

“Where are you from again?” He had a slight accent she didn’t recognize. Not Irish, but something European maybe.

“Far, far away.” He smiled as if it were a game not to let her know where he came from. It probably made it easier for him to make a clean getaway. *Jeez*. What was wrong with her? She’d come down to apologize for her rude behavior, not judge him for his apparent drifter lifestyle.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked.

“Sure.” What the heck? She followed him to the kitchen.

“Where do you work, Crag?”

“I teach a class at the college.”

“You’re a professor like Keller?” She knew her voice sounded incredulous. She never had a teacher in college who looked like Crag, or Keller for that matter. Wherever they came from,

the folks must be Amazon-like in height. Both men were nearly six and a half feet tall.

“No, not exactly. I help teach a night class in self defense three times a week.” He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of Snapple strawberry lemonade.

“Is this acceptable?”

“Sure.” Never in her wildest dreams would she expect Snapple from a man like this. She’d been prepared to gag down a sip or two of beer.

“So, if you work part time, what do you do full time? Do you go to school?”

“No, I’m on what you call...a sabbatical from my regular life.”

“Trying to find yourself?” His quizzical look told her he didn’t understand. The acrimonious childhood she’d led with her mother caused her to equate the phrase *finding oneself* immediately to, *I’m too lazy to get a full-time job.*

She twisted the lid off her drink and took a sip. It was sweet and tart, like her attitude tonight.

“No, I recognize precisely where I am,” he

said as though he didn't like it here. She should quit judging him. She didn't know him.

A flash of their earlier kiss and her resulting physical response skated through her brain.

Wouldn't you love to 'know' him though, in the biblical sense? asked a voice from her dark side. That same voice continued to throw vivid erotic pictures into her consciousness.

He wrenched the lid off his bottle and lifted the beverage to his mouth. Tilting his head back, he drank deeply. She watched, mesmerized by the movement of his muscles as he drank.

The kitchen light caught the glint of the blond in his hair, drawing her gaze to his head. What was the significance, she mused, of having the streak of blond in his dark hair? To make some sort of statement? Blatant rebellion? Because it was so sexy? Definitely, door number three.

He lowered the bottle and directed a rapacious gaze her way. She recognized that look. It was just like the one he'd given her earlier before kissing her breathless.

Ellie stepped closer to him as if magnetically drawn. What would he be like in bed? Based on her experience earlier, she suspected she'd need

days to recover from a single night with him. She took a step closer to him, and the true reason she was here lodged in her brain.

She wanted...no, needed to spend a night with a man like this. A man who could give her pleasure with no strings attached. She refused to be a mistress, but she was warming to the idea of a quick rebound relationship right about now. Then she could walk away without guilt.

She wasn't usually attracted to a man such as this, but she certainly could be. She never had the opportunity to meet knights in shining black leather in her daily life. She was the director of a prestigious and very exclusive art and antiques gallery. She'd scraped herself up from nothing to acquire the life she enjoyed.

Rich influential people with surly attitudes surrounded her every day of her life. Why was she so attracted to this dark, dangerous looking man? *Because he saved you after the humiliating break up with Brandon, and because his kisses make you climax,* said the dark voice.

Right.

Why couldn't she allow herself this one night to experience a man simply because she wanted

him? It wasn't like she had to marry him. It didn't make her a slut or a mistress...or like her mother.

She missed the tender loving care of a man who knew what to do with a woman in bed. Had she ever felt that? Fleeting memories from too long ago faded in and right

back out again. It was long past time for a new memory.

If Crag's kiss was any indication of his prowess in bed, well then, she wanted to be able to keep up and not disappoint him. She took a final, determined step, which placed her directly in his personal space. He didn't stop her, just watched her thoughtfully.

"What would you say if I told you I wanted to spend the night with you...tonight," she whispered. Her face heated with her own audacity.

His brows drew together in consideration but not puzzlement. He understood.

"Why?"

"I need..." To...what, feel better about herself? To spend time with a man she wouldn't

have to see again? The inevitable hot monkey love, which would feel so incredible?

“What do you need, Ellie?”

“I need a man who...” she paused to find the right words, “...thinks I deserve to be treated like a queen. Can you understand?”

“Ellie.” He said her name on a sigh as if there were some monumental problem with her request.

“Please, Crag. Don’t make me beg you.” She dropped her gaze to the floor so she wouldn’t start pleading. She would simply die of embarrassment if he turned her down.

Then another more horrible thought occurred to her. What if he didn’t find her desirable and he was only being a decent guy earlier in her apartment? She was the one who requested he carry her inside. She was the one who instigated the first kiss between them. She was the one who practically demanded he kiss her that second, amazing time.

He’d played the knight in shining armor for her all evening, but that didn’t mean he wanted to sleep with her. Just because he seemed like the type of man who wouldn’t turn down a sexual

request didn't mean he was looking to go to bed with *her*. She was so foolish. Of course, he didn't want to sleep with her.

Pin pricks of sensation dotted the tops of her eyeballs, a precursor to the tears that would fall if she didn't get out of his apartment. Right now!

She turned towards the door and her imminent escape. How far to the door? Three seconds perhaps, and she should run for it.

As she prepared to escape the embarrassment she had caused herself, an unexpected thing happened. His arms locked around her, keeping her in place before him. He then hauled her up until her eyes, now stinging with hot tears, were even with his.

"You don't have to beg me, Ellie, but I don't wish to mislead you. I'll be going home soon. It's not likely I'll be back this way again. Do you understand?"

She paused only a fraction of a second before saying, "Yes, I understand." She was about to embark on a planned one-night stand. Her first. "I'm only asking for one night, I promise." His eyes darkened in response to her hopeful plea.

Still clenched in his powerful embrace, she watched as his head dipped to her throat. She leaned back, allowing him access to the spot just below her jaw line. His lips traced a path to the sensitive place below her ear. The sizzle of his warm tongue on the pressure point sent a shudder through her. He held her as if she weighed as little as a feather.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to kiss his lips. He dodged her mouth, which then landed on his whiskered cheek. He drew back, locking his eyes to hers in a heat-filled gaze. His predatory smile said he had other wicked pleasures in mind before allowing her lips to caress his. Ellie hoped she hadn't just bitten off more than she could chew.

Crag carried her, still crushed to his massive chest, into his bedroom. The only piece of furniture was the bed, and it was huge. Her eyes widened in lustful reverie when she saw it. Visions of writhing naked bodies slammed into her mind, courtesy of her libido. *Calm down*, she wanted to say. *I'm letting him seduce me as fast as I can.*

“Don't be frightened,” he whispered.

“I’m not.” Although, wrapped in his arms she better not be scared. She couldn’t move if she wanted to, and she didn’t want to until he fulfilled every one of her most recent lusty fantasies.

“Will you tell me what you like? Or should I explore you with my hands and mouth to find out for myself?”

Another nervous laugh bubbled up. “Both.”

He released his grip on her and she slid down his body until her feet touched the floor. The warmth of him enveloped her. She smelled her own arousal. He whispered something else she missed due to the staccato beat of her heart thumping wildly against her chest.

“What did you say?”

He bent closer placing his lips to her ear, “I said, let’s make tonight last in our hearts forever.”

She thought that was the sweetest thing she’d ever heard and responded with a breathless, “Okay.”

ADULT EXCERPT

JUST ONE EMBRACE

The Tiburon Duet, Book 2

By Lara Santiago

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“Will you show me this optimal position for impregnation, or do I already know what it is?”

Crag smiled. “Well, it would be a complete waste since you’re already impregnated, but if you insist, I’ll show you later on.”

“What if you forget? Show me now. I promise it won’t be a waste.”

“It’s a ceremonial union to create a child. The focus is not on the pleasurable aspects of the act.”

“Perhaps we could make it pleasurable. I’m willing to try. Tell me what to do.” Her eyes were a combination of eagerness and intent. Crag knew he’d deny her nothing.

“As you wish.” Crag motioned her closer. “First, we must undress.”

She stood by his bed and began shedding her clothing quickly. He pulled his uniform off with the speed born of a man who’d waited far too long for his deserved reward.

He approached her stealthily. Reverently. Was she really here or was he dreaming? When he pressed his skin against hers and felt her arms

circle his neck, he was almost convinced she was real.

Her hand slid between his legs to stroke him as he thickened his cock for her pleasure. He brushed fingertips along her shoulders then dipped to cover her breasts. Cupping one in each hand, he flicked his thumb across her nipples as her fingers wrapped around his erection and squeezed.

One of his hands trailed down to her belly and skimmed a path to her core. He slid two fingers inside her slick opening and ran his thumb across her clit. She sucked in a breath and clenched his cock tighter in response.

“I need to lie down,” she whispered. Crag removed his fingers from her and danced them to the edge of the bed.

“Lie on your back,” he whispered. She fell to the surface, her dark silky hair

fanning around her head.

“Now what?”

“Bend your knees and put your heels against your butt. Spread your legs apart.” Crag joined

her on the bed. He knelt before her. “Now, lift your hips in the air.”

Ellie lifted her hips up until it was lined up to receive his cock.

“After I join with you, and once I spill my seed deeply inside your body, you must hold this position for as long as you can. I will hold your hips up against me to assist you.”

“How long do we have to stay that way?”

“Hours and hours.”

REVIEWS for Just One Embrace

"Ms. Lara Santiago has written a sexually charged story of inter-species attraction. Ellie demonstrates all of the qualities of an independent woman faced with unbelievable obstacles, while Crag displays all of the signs of a man in touch with his feelings. I enjoyed their wordplay, and their sexual encounters were out of this world. I found myself cheering for Ellie and felt all of the suspense and drama of the events that befell her in her

quest for the man with the chocolate kisses. **5 Cups" —Kathy, *Coffee Time Romance***

"Lara Santiago penned wonderful characters with real emotional depth in this poignant, spicy read that tugs at the heartstrings. From the opening page, she gives the perfect amount of background information so you can't help becoming emotionally vested in her characters. Her world of Tiburon and the physiology of its inhabitants engulf the reader with each exquisite detail. *Just One Embrace* demands more than just one read! This dreamy book of pure romance and chocolate kisses has earned a definite place on my 'keeper' shelf. **4.5 Kisses" —Shawn, *Romance Divas***

"*Just One Embrace* tells the story of Crag of Tiburon who was introduced in *Just A Kiss*. A powerful man on his home world, Crag had to come to terms with a personal tragedy before

he could find happiness, especially with a woman from Earth. Even after deciding that he was willing to risk his feelings, he and Ellie are confronted with a vindictive woman, out to steal Crag's power. I really liked these two, especially Ellie. Here was a woman who had all of the disadvantages of life, yet still made a lot of herself. I so enjoyed it when she finally stood up for herself with those around her who wanted to put her down and I fell in love with Crag myself when he helped her. This tale actually addressed several different ideas; the fear that Crag and Ellie felt in regard to falling in love, the struggle that Crag faced when deciding just what was important in his life, and the distinctions of different classes and how Crag and Ellie overcame the beliefs of others and finally learning about their different backgrounds and beliefs and how they came to terms with them. Lara Santiago's Tiburon

tales are great stories that I highly recommend, especially for readers who enjoy a little fantasy, a little conflict, and a whole lot of love. **4.5 Stars" —Trang, *Ecataromance***

"Reading about this alien world with its funny and unusual societal rules was great fun. Even the anatomical differences were humorous. Orgasms occur while touching lips and males secrete a chocolate flavor. Could anything satisfy puny human females better than sex with chocolate? Crag and Ellie are perfect mates, but this poor couple had so much to overcome to be together. I couldn't help rooting for them as they bravely went about jumping every hurdle placed before them, knowing success wasn't likely even if they defeated every challenge. They couldn't resist each other sexually and their trysts burned up the pages. The story is endearingly

touching and will leave its imprint on your heart as well as your face, so be prepared to smile 'til it hurts. I was delightfully entertained and undeniable aroused from beginning to end. While it was obvious the first book was about Keller and Gabrielle becoming a couple and undoubtedly contained a lot of world building, I wasn't aware of missing anything while reading this one. Certainly, *Just One Embrace* by Lara Santiago is a book you won't want to miss. **4 Stars"** —**Karen H.,**
Just Erotic Romance Reviews

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