

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TROUBLE
WITH
Harry



MYLA JACKSON

TROUBLE WITH HARRY
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TROUBLE WITH HARRY

Myla Jackson

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Prologue

Zagros Mountains in the Kingdom of Iraq 1924

Harry Taylor brushed his hat against his dust-crusting trousers and knelt in front of the sarcophagus. Pry bar in hand, he paused. Within the heavy coffin lay the culmination of five years searching, studying and digging in the driest of deserts near the base of the Zagros Mountains.

"Are you going to open it, or what?" William Prater, Harry's assistant and friend, stood on the other side of the stone platform, sand and sweat streaking his blond devil-may-care looks. "Whatever you do, hurry it up. You never know when those tomb guards will show again."

"Or the meddling British, for that matter. Give me a hand with this thing." Harry jammed the pry bar between the lid and the casing and leaned hard on it. A crunching, scraping noise accompanied the incremental movement of the cover as it rasped across the top, revealing the treasure within.

A glint of light reflected off a shiny surface inside and a squiggly line of carved snakes appeared beneath Harry's arm. Adrenaline spiked in his system, sending blood racing to his heart. He'd done it! "William, my friend," he said in a reverent whisper, "we've found the tomb of Vashti, daughter of Azhi, the Devil Shah of ancient Persia."

"A princess, huh? She was probably daddy's little girl and completely spoiled. She better be loaded is all I got to say." Will leaned his shoulder into the lid and it slid to the side, where it teetered for a moment then fell with a resounding whomp, shaking the sandy floor of the tomb.

"I think we've hit pay dirt, Will." Harry straightened, tossing the pry bar to the ground, excitement bubbling up in his belly at what lay before him. A smile stretched his lips across his face, and he flipped his hat in the air. "Do you realize what we've found? Do you have any idea?"

Will stared down at the mummified remains of an ancient woman surrounded by decayed woven baskets and several unscathed decorative bottles. He frowned, his lips twisting in a lopsided grimace. "A mummy and some old bottles?"

Harry laughed, his voice echoing off the chamber walls. "Will, look past the dust and decay. Don't you see the details in the finely woven gown she's wearing? Look here, the embroidery is still intact. These symbols are those of the ancient lovers, Vis and Ramin. See the stone with the carving of a two-headed dragon lying over the mummy's head?"

"So, it just looks like a big dumb rock to me." Will shrugged. "Big deal."

"William, my man." Harry draped an arm around Will's shoulders. "Beneath that

layer of dust is the most mystical stone known to man. Kings have fought wars to possess it, but it was lost long ago. Heinrich Schliemann himself couldn't find proof of its existence."

Will's chest puffed out. "But we did it, eh?" He gave Harry a skeptical glance. "So, why's it so damn important?"

"Because of the legend." Will's lack of enthusiasm irritated Harry. He began to wonder what Will thought he'd been searching for all these months. "The legends say that whomever touches the Stone of Azhi will have great powers. Powers to change the world as we know it. Powers to make every wish come true."

"My wish right now is for a ten-pound steak and a woman to share it with." Will licked his lips. "Suppose it might be worth something back in the States?"

"It's priceless—if only for its historical significance. But there are many men who would pay a king's ransom for its professed magical properties."

Will leaned over the mummy and reached for a dusty bottle. "I wonder what the bottles are for?"

"Probably contained the princess's favorite perfumes. Never mind them. It's the stone we want. No one's gonna pay for old glass when they can have all that power."

"Shit, I've been three long weeks without the comfort of a woman." Will waggled his eyebrows. "Does it have the power to grant me a woman?"

Harry was glad Will had finally understood the importance of their find. He slapped his friend on the shoulder. "Why settle for one? You could buy a dozen women with the money we'll make."

"Hell, I might even buy you one."

"No thanks." Harry lifted a bottle from the collection at the mummy's feet and brushed the dust from it. The blown glass reflected hues of deep sea green and blue, and was rimmed with gold bands.

"You aren't still mad about Fiona, are you?"

"Not in the least." He set the ornate container back in the sarcophagus.

Will lifted another of the glass bottles and tossed it lightly in the air, catching it one-handed. "Good, she's not your type anyway."

What was his type? Someone willing to follow him on wild chases across hostile continents? What woman in her right mind would do that? Harry didn't know and really wasn't too interested in finding out. Last one, Fiona, had tried to hem him in with ultimatums.

Had he stayed, he'd have resented her. Leaving her had been the only answer.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a steak the size of Cleveland about now." Will grabbed for the stone at the same time as Harry.

"Wait, Will. We need to be careful." What if the legends were true? Could the stone be dangerous? When his fingers felt the smooth points of the two-headed dragon, tingling spread from Harry's hand up his arm and into his chest. The tingling turned to

a burning sensation.

“What the hell?” Will staggered backward, his forehead creasing into a frown. He stared down at his hands and shook them.

The floor trembled and the walls around Harry and Will shook. Dust rose and filled the air until Harry couldn't see the hand in front of his face, much less his friend. “Will!”

“Harry! What's happening?”

“I don't know.” Harry's heart raced and his breathing came in short gasps, his lungs filling with sand. “I feel like I'm on fire.”

“Let's get the hell out of here!” Will called out.

But the doorway remained shrouded in thick dust.

The burning intensified until Harry felt he'd been seared by the sun. He gagged and choked on the sand rasping against the lining of his throat. Giant stones fell from the walls and ceiling.

What a way to go. Just when he'd discovered the stone of Azhi, he'd die in the mummified arms of the devil king's daughter.

The dim light from the torches snuffed out and blackness engulfed his tortured body. As if picked up by a tornado, he was jerked off his feet and sucked toward the sarcophagus, spiraling like a puff of smoke filtering through a tiny opening. His body screaming in pain, he could hear Will's terrified cries echoing his own. Then a loud thump ended the storm, sealing him in darkness. Harry drifted into oblivion, wondering what the hell had happened.

Chapter One

Present

"You'll never take me alive, you filthy pirate!" Edie held the sword in front of her, her feet planted wide.

"Ah, but I will, my pretty." The black-haired blackguard flicked his weapon, deftly sending hers skittering across the ship's wooden deck.

Stripped of her sword, Edie backed away, desperately searching for a way to escape this evil man. "I will not be your slave. I'd rather die than suffer your hands on my body!" Her back made contact with something solid, the heavy oak of the ship's main mast.

The captain of the ship, Black Bart, the fiercest pirate in the Caribbean, nodded to his men. Edie's arms were caught on either side and quickly tied behind her to the mast.

"Seems you'll be doin' me biddin' after all." The bare-chested captain, bronzed muscles rippling over his chest, stepped closer and trailed a finger down Edie's cheek. "Ummm, ye smell of flowers. I would taste of yer nectar." His finger trailed lower to skim the top of her bosom bared by the low cut of her gown.

All air left her lungs and she teetered on the edge, the lusty captain's magnetism drawing her nearer like a potent spell.

His mouth hovered over hers, his breath warm against her skin.

If she lifted her face just a fraction, their lips would touch. Despite her claim to the contrary, she longed for a kiss from the legendary pirate. Ached for the weight of his swarthy bare chest pressed against hers. He nudged her bodice lower, exposing one breast, its nipple pebbled into a hardened peak.

"Ah, the flower's petal is ripe fer pluckin'." Black Bart leaned in and flicked the tip with his tongue and stood back, his arms crossed in front of him, a twinkle in his bottomless black eyes. "What think ye, lass? Shall I pluck ye, or walk away?"

Her sensitive skin quivered when the cool air kissed her moistened breast. Fear had transcended into blood-searing desire. "Don't tease," Edie whimpered, ashamed of her body's fevered response. She'd said she'd die before he laid a hand on her body, but she knew in her heart, she'd die if he didn't. With a frustrated sigh, Edie rose on the balls of her feet, straining to press her breast into the pirate's mouth. She wanted more.

"It's a different tune ye be singing now, wench."

"I don't care. Touch me, Black Bart. Make me yours!" God, how she'd always wanted to say that.

"Edie!" A harsh voice echoed off the high ceiling of the museum warehouse.

Edie's arm jerked, and she dropped the ancient sword she'd been holding, the metal clanking against the cement flooring. Damn, he'd caught her daydreaming again.

"Yes, Mr. Baumgartner." She scooped up the weapon and stuffed it in the padded crate she'd been unpacking. "I'm coming!"

In her sensible pumps, Edie hurried across the crowded warehouse floor to Mr. Baumgartner's office. Before she stepped in, she paused a moment and smoothed the dust from the apron covering her khaki skirt and plain white oxford shirt. She wrinkled her nose. Her clothes were just like her, plain and dowdy, her only outstanding feature being her flaming red hair.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, Edie." Her father's words echoed in her mind. He'd said them often enough, they must be true.

Her father. Edie tried again to think of a reason to be sad she'd moved out on her own, but couldn't. Since her mother died, her father hadn't had anything nice to say to her, about her or anyone else for that matter. When her mother was murdered in a dark alley, the father she'd known and loved died with her.

"Woman, get in here!" Mr. Baumgartner yelled.

With a start, Edie jumped across the threshold into the dimly lit office. "Sir."

Mr. Baumgartner sat at his desk, scribbling into a ledger. "We got a crate from that dig in the Zagros Mountains. I want you to open it and catalogue everything inside it. Supposed to be some dead princess or other. If you need help, get the janitor to assist. I expect the sarcophagus will be heavy."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Edie," the man gave her a narrow-eyed look over the top of his reading glasses, "if you find anything interesting, let me know." His attention dropped to the ledger on the cluttered desk.

"Of course, Mr. Baumgartner." She hesitated in case he had more instructions.

He looked up again, a frown denting his uni-brow. "Whatcha waitin' for? An invitation? Go on!"

"Yes sir." Edie dashed for the door. She didn't like it when Mr. Baumgartner yelled at her. He reminded her too much of her father. If only she had more of a backbone. If only she didn't get cold feet at interviews and go all tongue-tied. If only she had a little encouragement, she'd leave this morgue of a museum and find some adventure. Travel, see the world.

If only.

Edie trudged through the aisles of crates and cartons carefully stacked on shelves and racks in the warehouse. When she reached the overhead doors at the rear of the museum where delivery trucks deposited new arrivals, she found the box marked "Zagros Dig, Iraq".

"This must be it." Pulling a crowbar off the wall, she began the laborious task of stripping the wooden slats from the crate. She'd do as much as she could by herself

before she asked for help. She didn't like to ask anyone for help, because that would mean actually making conversation with someone besides her boss. A shiver ran down her spine and her stomach burbled.

In her imagination, she was strong, fearless and desirable, capable of speaking to huge gatherings of people without a problem.

But reality had a way of showing her for her true self—doormat, Edie Ragsdale. Scared of her shadow, dowdy as a dishrag, Ms. Ragsdale. Destined to be alone.

Edie sighed. She couldn't change who she was, and why should she? She'd still work in this musty old museum, she'd still live alone. Who could possibly find her interesting?

When the boards were cleared away, the carved stone sarcophagus stood in solitary dignity, out of place in the modern cardboard and foam-peanut world of the warehouse.

Edie wondered who this person was to have such an intricately carved casket. The likeness on top indicated a female. Etched over her head was the shape of a two-headed dragon, its body tangled over the woman's head as if protecting or imprisoning her.

Was she a great queen of some legendary kingdom? Or had she been the wife of a cruel ruler, who beat her to death for some imagined infraction. Perhaps she was the lover of a man who'd worshiped the ground she walked on.

Whoever she was, Edie suddenly couldn't wait to get the lid off and see what, if anything, was inside. She ran to find Ernie, the janitor.

"Don't know why ya gotta open old smelly caskets," Ernie mumbled. "Some things are best left in the ground where they belong." Within minutes, Ernie had the lid off and carefully placed to the side of the sarcophagus. As quickly as he'd come, he left, muttering something about cleaning toilets in another part of the vast museum.

The mummified remains of the woman smelled like dust and old bones. Edie had seen her share of mummies, each telling a story of its own. Tucked next to the mummy's feet was a bottle, coated in the dust of perhaps thousands of years.

Curious, Edie carefully lifted the bottle and rubbed the sides with the soft cloth she kept tucked in her pocket.

The floor shimmied and thunder rumbled outside.

Edie set the bottle back in the sarcophagus and strode to the dingy window. Was it going to rain? She hadn't brought an umbrella and she'd be walking home soon. Damn. *Why didn't I bring an umbrella?*

What little bit of sky she could see between the buildings looked as it had that morning, although the gloom of dusk cast long shadows into the alley. No clouds skittered by, no hint of rain. Then why had she heard thunder? Maybe it was a garbage truck dropping a dumpster onto the pavement. Sometimes they made enough noise she'd mistake it for thunder.

No matter. The skies were clear and, as soon as she cataloged the items, she could

go home. With a shrug, she turned back to her work only to stop dead in her tracks.

A tall, naked man stood next to the ancient coffin, stretching as if he'd just woken from a long sleep.

Eddie gasped, the only sound in an otherwise silent cavern. This man very much resembled the pirate in her daydream. Dark-haired, suntanned. Her heart skittered erratically, her pulse banging against her throat. He was naked. Totally naked. Her gaze skimmed—okay, slowly perused—from the top of his shiny black hair and over his angular face, continuing downward. She panned the wide expanse of his smooth brown chest tapering to narrow hips. Nestled in the dark shadow of curly hair, his penis hung flaccid, but still most impressive.

Ohmigod! Eddie's face heated. She'd been staring at his privates. She'd never stared at a man's privates before. What would he think? Then again, what was a naked man doing in her warehouse? Perhaps he was crazy. Maybe he was a sexually perverted lunatic out to deflower lonely virgins. Eddie sank to the floor and gathered up a loose slat from the crate she'd dismembered.

If he was going to rape her, she wasn't going down without a fight. She stood, her hand gripping the splintered wood. "Who are you and what do you want?"

The man rubbed his eyes and blinked, before he straightened and looked directly at her. "Who are you? And where the hell am I?"

The woman standing before him brandished a wooden slat in his face. "I asked first."

Harry stepped back and, for the first time, realized he was completely naked. "Holy Jesus." He leaned over to grab a board but the sharp corner of a board poked his chest. Reflexively, he crossed his hands over his groin.

"Don't move, or I'll scream." The woman poked him again. "What are you doing here? And more importantly, why aren't you wearing any clothes?"

"Look, lady. I don't know what's going on here, but I do not have designs on your person." He reached to push the point off his ribs, baring his groin, again. "If you'd quit jabbing me with that stick, I'll cover myself."

Eddie tried really hard to keep her gaze above his shoulders, but some things were just too noticeable to be ignored from the corner of her eye. "Oh." Her cheeks burned and she stepped back. "Yes, of course."

He leaned down again to reach for a board.

"Not with that!" The sharp edge caught him in the throat this time, puncturing the skin. Warm liquid oozed down his neck.

He straightened, his hands rising to rest on his hips. "How am I supposed to cover myself with you trying to stab holes in me?"

“Here, use this.” She struggled with one hand to untie the strap around her neck and waist while maintaining her grip on the board. Then she tossed her canvas apron at him.

Harry deftly caught the apron in a single hand and held it like a fig leaf over the lower half of his torso. Had he drunk himself into a stupor last night? And where was he? Obviously, not in the desert. And why was this woman waving a stick at him. Had his performance in bed been that dismal?

“Go ahead, put it on,” she said, her face flaming, her voice shaking like dry leaves rattling in the wind.

“A lady would look away while a man dressed himself,” he grumbled.

“Look, buster, I’m not turning away for a second, so don’t even think about jumping me.” Her words sounded tough but her hand shook.

She was scared of him.

Come to think of it, a naked man in the presence of a woman would be cause for alarm in anyone’s book—unless, of course, they’d already shared a passionate night together. Although by the look on her face, that probably wasn’t the case. “All right, but could you at least look at my face, instead of staring at my—” He cleared his throat and glanced down. Damned if he wasn’t hardening. Good Lord, and the woman wasn’t his usual long-stemmed blonde beauty.

Will would have a good laugh over his reaction.

Will. A lead weight settled in Harry’s gut. Where was his friend? Had he ended up in as peculiar a situation as he had? Or was he still back at the tomb, possibly buried in the sand?

Feeling downright silly, Harry tied the apron around his waist, creating a distinctive tent in front while cool air continued to brush his naked backside. “Perhaps we could start over. I’m Harrington Taylor from America. I don’t really know what I’m doing here. And you are?”

“Not buying it.”

“Excuse me?” What the hell did she think he was selling? “I’m not selling anything, if that’s what’s got you worried.”

“I may not be very worldly, but I know a con when I see it.” She shook her board at him. “No sane man shows up in the back of a warehouse in New York City naked unless he’s crazy or out to rape some unsuspecting female.”

“New York City? Warehouse?” Harry staggered backward. “What the hell are you talking about? And why would I want to rape you?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’ve heard about your type. Preying on lone females. I have a good set of lungs on me. I’ll scream if you try anything.”

Harry’s head spun, his mind grasping for answers. “Let me get this straight, I’m not in Iraq? I’m back in America?”

The woman rolled her light green eyes. She'd almost be pretty if her hair wasn't pulled back so severely. And her skin was translucent white sprinkled with a dusting of freckles, complimenting the amber tint of her eyebrows and the thin wisps curling around her ears. "No and yes."

"How the hell did I get here?"

"That's my question."

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the fog. "One moment, Will and I were opening the sarcophagus—"

"Who's Will?" The woman darted a glance around her.

"My assistant on the dig." Harry looked around too. "And apparently not here."

"So you're one of the men from the Iraq dig?" Her hand wavered for a moment, then she shifted the stick to the other. "That still doesn't explain why you're here and without clothing."

"I told you, I don't know." His head ached, and the damp of the warehouse seeped through his bare skin into his bones. He shivered. "I don't suppose you have something more substantial than this apron for me to wear?"

"You're the one running around without clothes in the middle of a cool snap."

"Nevertheless, I am a bit cold." He reached behind him to try to close the edges of the apron to stop the breeze cooling his backside.

She didn't budge. "So you're telling me you were at the archeological dig in Iraq, and you don't know how you got here?"

He scrubbed his hand through his hair and smiled sheepishly. How strange he must look. "All I can remember is touching the stone of Azhi and the rest is a blur."

"Huh?" Her eyes narrowed. "What's the stone of Azhi?"

How much should he tell a complete stranger? He'd spent so much time searching. "Does it matter?"

"You really don't know what happened?"

"Honest."

"And you were at the dig in Iraq?" The stick bobbed and lowered an inch.

"Yes." How could he make her believe? "I'd been working on that site since nineteen."

Her head tilted to the side. "Nineteen what?"

"Nineteen nineteen."

"You didn't answer my question. Nineteen what? Since you were nineteen?"

"No." What was her problem? Didn't she understand English? He spoke in slow, deliberate words. "The year nineteen nineteen."

"You mean nineteen ninety-nine."

She'd accused him of being a lunatic only now, Harry could swear she was the crazy one. "No, I meant nineteen nineteen."

"The next thing you'll tell me you're, what..." Her eyes tipped toward the ceiling. "...one hundred years old."

"No, I just turned thirty."

The stick leveled off, chest high. "What year were you born?" She shot the question at him, her words brisk and clear.

"1894," he answered without hesitation.

Her mouth dropped slightly, her eyes widening for a brief moment. Then she glanced around the warehouse. "Oh, I get it, this is a joke." She laughed out loud, a smile curving her lips, softening the tight lines of her face. When she allowed her features to relax, she could almost be considered pretty.

"What's so funny?"

"You. This situation. Whoever put you up to this charade? Which one of my colleagues? Who was it?"

"What charade?"

"You either have a really bad memory, can't add or are pulling the hell out of my leg." She shook the fractured board at him. "Which one is it?"

Feeling more confused by the moment, he snapped, "I've always been very good with my numbers, and I have an exceptional memory."

"That leaves pulling my leg." She poked his chest. "I'm calling the police."

"Why, what year were you born?"

"Nineteen seventy-five. Which, I suspect is about when you were born, give or take a few years."

"Nineteen seventy-five." Harry snorted. "This game has gone on long enough, woman. When I woke up this morning, it was the year of our lord nineteen hundred and twenty-four. I know I couldn't have been out for very long. What is today's date?"

"March fourteenth, two thousand and five. Now, as you so eloquently put it, I'm tired of playing games. Who are you and why are you naked in the warehouse of the New York City Anthropological Museum?"

Two thousand and five? Was she out of her mind? That would mean he'd been asleep for over eighty years. His vision blurred, and he staggered backward until the backs of his bare legs brushed against the cool stone of the sarcophagus. He turned to stare down at the mummified remains of the princess Vashti. Where was the stone? He reached down, digging alongside the petrified remains until his fingers connected with a cool smooth surface.

"What are you doing?" The woman behind him asked.

"I told you, the last thing I remember was touching the stone of Azhi. And this..." He lifted the stone out of the coffin and held it up for her to see. "This is the stone." The

last time Harry touched the stone, strange things happened. This time, nothing. He stared at the object in his hand turning it over. Why all the commotion the first time and not now?

“Put it back.” She jabbed the stick into his side.

“You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do. You’re trying to steal what belongs to the museum.” She poked him again. “Put it back.”

“Edie!” A voice echoed off the exposed beams.

The woman jerked back, her gaze darting from him to the end of the aisles.

“Look, I’m not here to start trouble.” Until he knew exactly what had happened, Harry didn’t want anyone else to know about him or the stone. “You have to believe me.”

“Why?” she whispered, her gaze darting toward the source of the voice.

Why, indeed? “Because, you’re the only one who knows I’m here and apparently I need your help.”

“Edie!” Mr. Baumgartner called out again.

Edie jerked around. “That’s my boss. I should turn you over to him.”

“But you won’t, will you?” he said, his voice soft and persuasive.

He sounded sultry and dangerously sexy, very much like the pirate in her daydream. And his wickedly black hair hung down to his shoulders, just as she’d envisioned. Shoulders so broad, she longed to run her hands across them to see if they were as hard as they looked.

“Edie!” The voice moved closer, blocked from view by several high rows of crates and boxes.

Damn! What should she do? The proper employee would report the naked stranger to her boss. But the man’s deep brown eyes pleaded with her. She’d seen similar tactics used by puppies in the pet store window. Her stomach knotted. Should she or shouldn’t she? Her boss was only a few steps away, and Edie couldn’t decide. “Oh, I wish you’d just go back to wherever you came.”

The floor beneath her trembled and a sudden gust of air lifted the hem of her skirt.

“Uh-oh,” the naked man said. “It’s happening again.” His body shimmered and dissolved into a transparent image. The apron drifted to the floor and the stone slipped from his fingers to land among the apron’s folds.

Before Edie’s unbelieving eyes, the man turned to smoke and was sucked into the blue-green bottle at the foot of the sarcophagus. Edie stared at the apron and back to the sarcophagus. What the hell? Had she been daydreaming again? Or had she slipped over the edge and gone into nutso lunatic land? She squeezed her eyelids closed, counted to four and opened them again. Still no man, only the apron on the floor.

Chapter Two

“Edie, where the hell are you?” Mr. Baumgartner’s voice was sharp and nasal. The nasal sound being more pronounced when he was highly irritated.

For a very brief moment, Edie stood in stunned silence, unwilling and unable to digest what had just occurred. When she pinched her arm through the white cotton of her blouse, her nerve endings sent pain messages to her brain. She wasn’t asleep, nor was she dreaming. A naked man couldn’t have disappeared before her eyes, could he? *Obviously, Edie Ragsdale, you’re suffering from terminal Virginitis.* Why else would she imagine handsome pirates everywhere?

“Hide the bottle and the stone,” the missing naked man called out.

Edie jumped. She knew she wouldn’t find him, but she darted a glance around the sarcophagus. Nope, he wasn’t there.

“Hide them, Edie,” a tiny voice called out.

“Edie, is that you? There are too damn many rows in this warehouse.” Mr. Baumgartner groused, still out of sight, but his footsteps indicated he was nearing the end of the rows and would be within view momentarily.

“Please, Edie,” the man hissed. “Hide the bottle and the stone.”

Edie snatched the gold-banded bottle out of the sarcophagus, scooped the apron, stone and all, from the floor and shoved them behind another stand of boxes. Just as Mr. Baumgartner stepped around the end of the row, she brushed her skirt down and tried to appear natural. “Mr. Baumgartner, what can I do for you?”

“Answer me when I call, for one.” Lyle Baumgartner strode straight for the sarcophagus. “Just got a call from a collector about this find.”

“You did?” Edie’s stomach churned. As hot as her cheeks burned, she knew her face had to be a case study in guilt. Could Mr. Baumgartner tell she had something to hide?

“She asked if there was a stone in the case. Have you seen anything resembling a stone?”

If she said yes, she’d have to produce the stone. If she said no, she’d be lying. “What stone?”

Mr. Baumgartner leaned over the ancient sarcophagus, his nose wrinkling. “Old dead bodies still smell like dead bodies. Disgusting. The woman said something about a stone in the shape of a two-headed dragon over the mummy’s head. Did you see anything like that?”

“The lid to the sarcophagus had a carving in the shape of a two-headed dragon. Does that help?” She wasn’t lying, exactly. But she sure felt like it. The tips of her ears

burned. Had her father been standing in front of her, he'd have known immediately. Thank goodness, Mr. Baumgartner wasn't quite as observant.

Eddie shot a glance toward the stack of boxes concealing the stone and the talking bottle. Could this day get any more bizarre?

"I'm certain the lady meant a jewel or stone of some kind, although she only said stone. I'll have to call her back for clarification. She seemed quite excited."

The shipment hadn't been in the warehouse more than a day, and someone was already inquiring on it. That stone must be more important than even Mr. Baumgartner knew. "What's so special about the stone?"

"I don't know, but it's worth researching. In the meantime, make sure you review this mummy with a fine-tooth comb and catalog everything, down to the length of her fingernails."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Baumgartner dusted his hands off. "Well, I don't see anything to get excited about. Let me know if you find anything. You can reach me on my home phone."

With that, her boss left. No "See ya tomorrow" or "Have a nice night", just the usual departure without pleasantries.

She followed Mr. Baumgartner to the end of the row and watched him until he disappeared through the office door. With a sigh of relief, she turned back to fish the bottle and the stone out of the hiding place between boxes.

"Hey, naked man. Where did you go?" She stared down at the items in her hand and then around the empty warehouse.

"I'm in the bottle."

Eddie almost dropped the beautiful blue-green bottle. She'd seen him transform to smoke and disappear into it, but she didn't want to believe it. "No really, come out where I can see you."

"I don't know how."

She stared down into the bottle, but really couldn't see anything. "Good grief. I covered for you. Hell, I practically lied to my boss. I wish you'd come out before I get really mad and call the police."

The bottle shook in her hand, and a wisp of smoke grew into a six-foot high cloud. The naked man materialized next to her, no longer smoke, his body solid flesh and bone down to the musky male scent.

"Yow!" he yelled, shaking back his hair. "I was inside that bottle." He stared at the colored glass in her hand. "Did you see that?"

"Yes, but I'm not believing it." She touched his arm. The warmth of his flesh seeped through her fingertips, sending sparks along her nerve endings. Hell, she was standing within touching distance of a naked man. How often in her lifetime had she been this close to the opposite sex, in the flesh?

Try never.

With a shaking hand, she set the bottle back in the sarcophagus, afraid that if she didn't, she'd drop the thing, shattering it into a million pieces. She clutched the apron and the stone to her chest like a shield.

Apparently unconcerned that he was once again standing buck naked in front of her, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Why do you let your boss talk to you that way?"

"Huh?" The question startled Edie. She hadn't expected it, considering all the issues she had about smoking bottles and his naked self. Edie shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"You're a smart woman. He should respect that."

His words stung. How often had she told herself the same thing? Yet, she did nothing to change the situation. "Assuming you really are from the past, that's a surprisingly unchauvenistic comment."

"Unchauenistic?"

Edie allowed a little grin to curve her lips. He was good playing the part of a man from the early twentieth century.

The naked man reached up and brushed a thumb across her mouth. "You should smile more often."

Despite the roughness of his skin, the caress was gentle and to Edie's hard-core virgin sensitivities, sensual.

Her breath caught and she fought to keep from leaning into his touch. If she wasn't careful, she might actually touch *IT*.

After an involuntary glance downward, heat rose up her neck, into her cheeks and to the tips of her nose and ears. She shoved the apron into his arms. "Put this on while I go see if there's something more substantial you can wear."

Edie raced for the janitor's closet. To hell with the fact she'd just left a complete stranger alone in the warehouse with millions of dollars of valuable artifacts. She had to get away from his overpowering maleness and her illogical reaction to him.

Edie ducked into the closet and flipped on the light switch. She slammed the door behind her and collapsed against it, sucking in air. After several moments, her cognitive skills returned, and she remembered she was in the janitor's closet for a reason. To find something to cover all that bronzed and buff body, especially the part she wouldn't let herself name. She just wanted *IT* covered so she wouldn't constantly be aware she shouldn't be looking *THERE*. But Lord, she'd never seen anything quite so...impressive.

Hanging on a metal hook was a faded, navy blue coverall with the name Ernie on it. She snatched it down and grabbed a pair of rubber boots leaning against the mop pile.

Items in hand, she had no other excuses to remain in the closet. She had to go out and face the naked man.

Good Lord, she had to find out what his name was. Calling him "the naked man" ...well, she just didn't feel comfortable. Okay, so she had to vacate the tight, safe

confines of the janitor's storage room. "On the count of three. One, two, three." She couldn't go back through the door. He was...too much.

"Edie? Are you okay? Are you going to come out of there?"

Blast! She couldn't hide forever.

Edie fumbled for the door handle and shoved the coverall and boots out first. "I found these..." Holy cow, he filled her vision. Nope, a minute of sensory deprivation hadn't dulled his impact to her senses. "Aren't you going to get dressed?" Her voice squeaked and her cheeks heated as if they were ovens on broil. Could she be any more subtle? Perhaps she could drool a little for a more pronounced effect.

His gaze swept over her face. "I will, if you'd let me in that room to change."

Mortified, she scurried out of the way, allowing him to enter the closet.

As he passed, she couldn't help sneaking a peek at his tight, bare buttocks. Had they turned up the heat in the warehouse? "I don't like lying to my boss," she said through the metal door.

"Technically, you didn't."

"You heard what I said? Even from inside that bottle?" *Good Lord, the man had been in a bottle!* "How did you do that changing, shrinking thing? That...whatever you call it?"

"How'd I get in the bottle?" His voice was muffled by the door, but she could hear him clearly. "I'm not sure, but I think it has to do with that stone."

"Oh yeah, the stone." Edie ran back to the stack of boxes to retrieve the stone. The space stood empty. Her heart leapt into her throat. Then she remembered the stone had been safely tucked into the apron she'd shoved mindlessly at the naked man.

Images of skin and tight curly hair filled her head. Damn. A name—the naked man had told her his name, but she couldn't remember, her brain was in a complete meltdown.

When she turned back to the closet door, the man stood framed in the doorway. He'd pushed his hair back from his face, exposing his angular features, but the coveralls barely fit, straining over his shoulders. The front gaped open because there wasn't near enough material to cover his chest.

"Now what?" he asked.

Edie closed her drooping mouth with a snap. "You know my name, but I'm sorry, I missed yours in the confusion."

"Harrington Taylor the third. But my friends call me Harry." He shrugged. "Or at least they did."

Even his shrug made her heart skitter past a few beats. What was it about him? "Harry." His name rolled off her tongue. "Harry, assuming all you said is true, and I'm not saying I'm convinced, you can't stay here."

"I've got nowhere else to go." Harry's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "My life is back in 1924."

"That's not entirely convenient." Edie paced in front of him, pulse racing, edging toward panic. What did she do with him now? He was making a considerable dent in her normally ordered existence and she didn't like that one bit. It made her feel off balance. And why was that? She didn't exactly fear the man, she just couldn't control her body's reactions when he was around.

He raised his hands. "I didn't make the rules."

"We need to get you out of here." But what could she do with him? A few unwarranted ideas sprang to mind involving the hot, passionate sex Edie had only read or dreamed about. "The security guard will come through on his rounds in less than an hour."

"I could manage to hide in here. There's enough stuff here to conceal an army."

"That would be just fine, except Carlos brings a dog with him."

"I could find a park bench outside for the night?" His face wrinkled in distaste. "Although, it might be a little too cold for a man fresh from the desert." He used that puppy-in-the-window expression again.

Edie knew she was a fool, but she couldn't think of anything else. "You can come to my apartment." There she'd gone and done it. "But only until I can figure out what to do with you." The statement gave her another slew of ideas a lonely virgin shouldn't be thinking.

"No, I couldn't." He shook his head. "That would be inappropriate. What would your family think?"

Her father would be livid and he'd know within minutes. "I live alone."

"What would your neighbors think?"

"Harry, this is the new millennium. No one cares what the neighbors think. Half the time, you don't even know who your neighbors are." Although her landlady, the busybody and direct link to Edie's father, would probably have a cow if she found out Edie was shacking up with a man. Maybe she could sneak him in. "Come on, it's getting dark." What would the night guard do if he found Harry in here with her? Shoot him? She didn't want to wait around to find out. They might accuse him of stealing. "Oh, shoot! The stone!" She ducked around him and rushed into the storage room. When she grabbed the apron, she could tell it was empty. "Crap, I could've sworn I left it wrapped in the apron."

"I have it," Harry said from behind her.

She walked out of the room and held out her hand. "Let me have the stone. We can't take items that belong to the museum."

"Look, Edie." He patted the bulge in his pocket. "It's not safe to leave it here. I'm not sure what effect it'll have on anyone else who touches it. Look what happened to me."

"Then put it back in the sarcophagus." Her hands twisted together as she glared at Harry. He didn't look like he was going to let go of the stone. She'd never forgive

herself if she gave this man refuge only for him to steal something from her place of employment. "I can't take items home that belong to the museum."

"We can't leave it here." Harry stepped closer, his bare chest only inches from Edie's nose. "What if someone finds it? They could turn to smoke too. I know it has something to do with why I'm here. The stone could also be the key to finding my assistant Will. We have to keep it with us."

Years of being responsible and ethical warred with her common sense. His argument was extremely persuasive. But Edie didn't like removing artifacts from the museum. "It doesn't feel right."

"Do you think I feel right smoking in and out of a bottle?" He grabbed her hands. "This stone holds the key to what happened to me and to Will. If someone else gets hold of it, I'll never find my friend or figure a way out of this strange state."

His warmth chased away the chill in Edie's fingers, spreading fire up her arms and down to her belly. With that one touch, Edie, the repressed museum worker who'd been living in her imagination, fought and won the internal war about breaking the rules. With a deep breath, she stuffed all her upbringing and all her father's lectures about playing it safe into the back of her mind. But she couldn't completely shake the icky feeling filling her stomach like a heavy wad of guilt. "Very well. Until we figure out what's going on. But don't try anything funny. I'm keeping an eye on you...and the stone."

"Fair enough. I'm completely at your mercy. Let's go." He limped a couple steps and grimaced. "These boots are about two sizes too small."

Edie grabbed the blue-green bottle from the shelf, and pulled her purse from a nearby locker, stuffing the bottle into its voluminous depths. "Maybe I'd better hold on to this. You seem to have some connection to it." And, if she was going to walk out of the museum with one pilfered item, she might as well take two. The numbers wouldn't get her fired, the act of stealing would.

As they neared the exit, she realized something else. "You know a lot has changed in eighty years. You're in for some major surprises."

"Honey, I don't think I could be any more shocked than I was as a Lilliputian at the bottom of that bottle."

She snorted softly. "You haven't been on the New York subway."

"As a matter of fact, I have."

"Not this one." She smiled. "It's changed since 1924."

Thirty minutes later, outside Edie's apartment in Brooklyn, Harry shoved a shaky hand through his already mussed hair. "You don't do that trip everyday, do you?" With eyes still wide and kind of glassy, he watched a girl in skimpy shorts race by on a pair of roller blades, the music from her MP3 blasting through her headset loud enough for everyone within ten feet to hear.

"Every day."

“Are you crazy? Is everyone in this city mad? And how in hell did they manage to construct buildings even higher than the Eiffel Tower? And for what purpose?”

“Because they can?” Digging past the bottle, papers, pens and the little can of mace her father insisted she carry in her purse, Edie surfaced her keys, laughing. “Look, Harry. A lot has changed.”

“Especially the people.” Harry frowned as a teenage boy swaggered by, baggy shorts barely hanging from his hips, SpongeBob Squarepants boxers plain to see above the waistband.

“Yeah, but underneath the mohawks, piercings and micro-shorts, they’re still the same.”

A door creaked open and steps sounded on the lower landing. “Edith Ragsdale?” A shrill voice called up the stairs.

“Speaking of the same,” Edie whispered, “that would be my nosy landlady.” Never before had she invited a strange man to her apartment. What would Mrs. Bartelli think? With a stubborn frown, Edie decided she didn’t care.

“Will she have issue with you letting a man into your apartment? I don’t wish to damage your reputation.” He tugged at the gaping lapel of the coverall.

Edie touched the key to her chin. Her landlady didn’t scare her, but— “She does know my father.”

“And will report back everything she sees or hears?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Bartelli would be sure to fill her father in so fast the phone lines would smoke. After all the years of trying to please her father without success, what would it feel like to shock him? Could Edie the Mouse be so bold and do something with the sole purpose of shocking someone, maybe even dear old Dad? A shiver of anticipation crept across her skin, blossoming into butterflies in her stomach. “Just once I would like to surprise the hell out of Mrs. Bartelli.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, I wish I could have a man make passionate love to me in the hallway. That would show her.” And her father that she wasn’t so ugly she couldn’t attract a man, and that she had a life of her own and didn’t need her landlady or father butting into it. Thunder rumbled as a surge of power swelled up her chest and made her cheeks burn. She’d spilled her guts to a complete stranger. Homely Edith Ragsdale had just wished out loud for a man to make love to her. Ohmigod! The feeling of going from Edie the doormat, to super Edie in sixty-seconds flat, made her head spin. Then reality set in. “I know that’s foolish, and I’d never find a man willing. I mean really, look at me. It’s a dumb idea.” She jammed her key in the lock, missing the first time.

“Edith, your father called wondering where you were.” Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Countless times her father told her she wasn’t as pretty as her mother. The framed magazine covers of her mother posing in designer gowns decorated the walls of her

father's apartment lending credence to his hurtful words. All her life, Edie lived in the shadow of a spectacularly beautiful woman, a woman she couldn't measure up to. What man would want to bed much less kiss her when they could have a prettier partner? And she couldn't even bring herself to hate her mother, because she'd been as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside.

When Edie's eyes filled with tears, her mortification was complete. She was a pathetic virgin spinster in a time when sex was more or less an accepted form of recreation. A pastime she'd been too insecure and shy to participate in.

Harry's hand pressed against her shoulder, turning her around to face him. His finger tipped her chin upward. "I think you're beautiful."

Edie's gaze riveted on his full, sensual lips. Lips hovering lower until they pressed against hers.

"Edith!"

She heard Mrs. Bartelli's cry as if in a distant tunnel, but she couldn't respond. Suspended in time, her mind could only focus on Harry.

His lips claimed hers in a slow dance of feathery-soft pressure, increasing until his tongue pushed past her teeth, delving deeper to claim hers. Edie's eyes widened, her vision blurring around the edges. So, this was what all the fuss was about. Had she known all the fabulous sensations a single kiss could inspire, she might have broken through her shell long ago.

Edie's hands pressed against Harry's chest, skin against skin. She'd never felt a man's muscular body. Electrical pulses skittered across her nerves sending molten blood throughout her body to collect at the juncture of her thighs. Liquid fire pooled in her loins, throbbing so hard she thought she would spontaneously combust. And she didn't care.

Harry was kissing her like she'd never been kissed before. Well, she hadn't.

His hands snaked up her sides, tugging her white cotton shirt from the waistband of her khaki skirt. The cool air against her naked skin served as a reminder she was standing in the hallway.

What was she doing? How could she let this complete stranger take such liberties? But with her traitorous body responding, how could she not?

He teased her lips, tugging at them with his teeth. Nipping and kissing along her jaw line, he paused with his nose against her neck and inhaled. "Umm. You smell like a fresh field of wild flowers." His tongue flicked her earlobe and he sucked it into the hot moistness of his mouth.

A shiver started at that earlobe and quivered all the way down her spine to the tips of her toes.

She should stop him from this craziness, but she couldn't. He filled her world and touched her body in ways she'd only dreamed.

Warm, rough fingers found their way beneath her shirt, sliding up her bare skin to cup the swell of her breasts. His thumbs circled over her hardened nipples through the lace of her bra.

She leaned into his hand, her head dropping back against the wall, exposing more of her neck to his lips and tongue. Awash in a sea of carnal delight, she forgot where she was. Her sex throbbed, aching for more. She'd seen x-rated movies before, when she'd been brave enough to rent them. The mechanics of sex were elementary. But the raw sensations were something new. Her body physically cried out to be filled by him.

He shoved his knee between her legs.

With her thighs clamped tight around his knee, she rubbed her dampened crotch against his leg. Now, she knew what Mrs. Fettermine's poodle felt when he humped old Mr. Fettermine's leg. Instead of the animalistic urge shocking her, it only made her wetter, hotter, more needy.

The hard ridge beneath his fly pressed against her belly. Edie reached down and cupped him, amazed at the solid length extending past her fingertips. Again, another move she'd only seen in the erotic movies or in her even more erotic dreams. Now she knew how it felt. Oh God, she wanted him inside her. Now!

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Mrs. Bartelli cried out.

Over Harry's shoulder, Edie could see the shock on the older woman's face.

Harry's hands smoothed down her belly to the slide beneath her skirt, the other woman's presence not affecting him in the least.

More than anything, Edith wanted to continue what they were doing, explore to completion, but Mrs. Bartelli stood watching, her face a study of horror.

"Stop." Edith pushed against Harry's chest. "I wish you'd stop."

Thunder shook the narrow hallway and immediately, Harry's hands stilled.

Mrs. Bartelli plunked her hands on her ample hips. "Edith Ragsdale! What would your father say?"

Chapter Three

The urge to fulfill her wish had swept over Harry with such compelling force, he couldn't resist. He had to comply, had to make her dream come true.

Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed a woman. Hell, if you counted all the years between the dig and now, it was over eighty. No wonder he hadn't been able to drag himself away. The fire behind her dowdy clothing flared at his touch. He'd reached up behind her and tugged the tie out of her hair, loosening the silky, burnished copper strands.

Where her fingers touched his chest his skin had seared, scorching a fiery trail of need across his nerve endings, joining with the blood in his veins. His loins tightened, filling his cock to a capacity that strained against the thin fabric of his over-tight coveralls.

When Edith told him to stop, his hands, lips, tongue—everything—had stopped as if they were controlled by someone else. All the tension and need to fulfill remained, but he couldn't make himself continue. Why?

"Edith Ragsdale, you should be ashamed!"

The woman's voice sounded on the landing behind Harry, jerking him from his mindless desire. Hell, what had he done? He'd overstepped his bounds with Edie. The woman that, despite good sense, had taken him in during his time of need. "I wouldn't blame you if you slapped my face," he whispered against her ear before he stepped back and faced the irate landlady. "Ah, you must be Mrs. Bartelli." Harry held out his hand.

Mrs. Bartelli's mouth opened and closed like a fish, but she took his hand as if in a daze.

Harry smiled using all the charm he could muster. "Harrington Taylor the Third. It is a pleasure to meet you, ma'am." He bent to kiss her knuckles.

As soon as Harry's lips contacted the wrinkled skin, Mrs. Bartelli jerked her hand back. "Don't think you can smooth-talk this old lady. I saw what you two were doing. I don't put up with sleazy shenanigans in my building, do you hear me? You should be ashamed, attacking a young lady on her own doorstep in broad daylight!"

"The sun set hours ago, Mrs. Bartelli." Edie stepped up beside Harry and slipped an arm around his waist. "This is my...er...boyfriend, Harry."

"Boyfriend, my Aunt Fannie!" Mrs. Bartelli backed away. "You haven't dated in the two years you've lived here. You've hired this man for sex, haven't you?"

Edith stiffened beside Harry, her arm tightening around his middle. "And if I had, it's none of your business."

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me, young lady. I could kick you out of this building so fast your head would spin.” Mrs. Bartelli drew in a deep breath. “We’ll just see what your father has to say about this.”

“Edie didn’t hire me, Mrs. Bartelli,” Harry said. After his indiscreet actions in the hallway, he felt the need to straighten things out for the woman he’d practically mauled.

But the woman didn’t want his help. She held a hand up. “I wish you’d just keep quiet for a moment while I handle this.” Rumbling thunder rattled the doorjamb to Edie’s apartment.

He’d been about to say something else, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. He couldn’t push a single word past his lips.

With a deep breath and squared shoulders, Edie leaned toward the landlady. “Mrs. Bartelli, you have the right to rent to anyone you wish, but nowhere in my lease does it say I can’t have guests over. And I choose to have Harry as my guest. If he spends the night, that’s my business – not yours or my father’s.”

Bravo, Edie! Harry wanted to say, but he couldn’t get his vocal cords to function. He raised a hand to his lips, opened and closed his mouth several times, but nothing came out. What the hell was going on?

“Well!” Mrs. Bartelli propped her hands on her hips and pushed her ample bosoms out. “Your father is not going to be happy.” She spun on her black, rubber soles and marched back down the steps.

Edie grimaced and turned back to Harry. “I bet she’ll be on the phone before her door closes.”

Afraid his voice still wasn’t working, Harry opened his mouth and tested. “Hello.”

Edie tilted her head to the side, a small frown wrinkling her smooth brow, while her lips twitched as if she fought a grin. “Hello.”

“It worked.” Harry heaved a relieved sigh and smiled.

“What worked?”

“My voice.” His smile dropped into a frown. “Something strange is happening.”

“You’re telling me.” Edie’s cheeks reddened. “Let’s go inside. I don’t feel like performing an encore, even if it does get Mrs. Bartelli’s goat.”

When Harry stepped into Edie’s apartment he was assailed by the warmth of colors and tasteful furnishings. Rich cherry tables, an overstuffed sofa in soft rose strewn with colorful pillows in red, orange and yellow beckoned him to sit and stay awhile. Her home was a complete contrast to the woman. Here she used color with abandon, while her clothing remained drab and uninspiring. Why the two different sides to this complex woman?

She set her brown leather purse on the counter and turned toward him, her gaze wary. “What was that all about out there in the hallway? I’m not sure I should let you stay here if you think you can do...” she glanced away, her cheeks blooming with color,

“you know...*that*...to me anytime you like.”

“I tried to tell you out there, something strange happened.” He pushed his hand through his hair. “One moment I was standing next to you, the next I couldn’t stop myself from kissing you.”

“If you can’t control your actions, I can’t let you stay here.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you were the one who wished for a man to make passionate love to you in front of Mrs. Bartelli.”

The red in Edie’s cheeks deepened. “I know, but that doesn’t mean I wanted you to be the one to do it.”

“Like I said, I couldn’t stop myself. And then for some reason, I couldn’t talk while you were...er...explaining things to Mrs. Bartelli.” He grinned at her. “By the way, you were impressive.”

“I was?” Edie ducked her head at his unexpected compliment. “Thank you. But, what do you mean you couldn’t talk?”

“After you said you could handle it, no matter what I tried I couldn’t get words to come out of my mouth.”

Edie pressed her fingertips to her temple. “Too bizarre. I wish I knew what the heck happened.”

Thunder shook the windows and the floor vibrated beneath Harry’s feet. “The Stone of Azhi gave me the power to fulfill your wishes since you were the one to wake me from the bottle. Anything you want, I have to grant.” The words came from Harry, but he couldn’t remember thinking them before they came out. What the hell was happening? Why were words coming out of his mouth he hadn’t put there? Once again, his body and brain acted without his consent, as if he were nothing more than a puppet on someone else’s strings. Edie’s strings.

Edie sank down on the arm of the couch. “What did you just say?”

“I don’t know. The words just popped out.” He felt around in his pocket for the stone and pulled it out. “It has to be the stone.” With care, Harry turned the rock over. “Maybe if we clean it up a bit, there’ll be some kind of inscription on it.”

“Bring it into the kitchen. The lighting is better in there, and I might have something to scrape off the dirt.”

Harry followed Edie into the kitchen. Only this was different from the kitchens he was familiar with in 1924. Instead of a white, enamel wood-burning or gas stove, this kitchen sported smooth-topped black and metal surfaces. “Where’s your stove?”

“Behind you.” She pulled a dishtowel out of a drawer and laid it on the counter. “Put the stone on this. I’ll see if I have an old toothbrush we can use to clean it.” Edie disappeared around the corner.

Harry glanced behind him at a shiny black surface. No cast-iron grills jutted from the surface. He pressed his hand to the smooth top. Cold. The words “Right Front”, “Left Front”, “Right Back” and “Left Back” were written in red across the back. Harry

touched his finger to the one marked Right Front. A sharp beep startled him and he stepped back. The black surface glowed red in the shape of a circle on the right front of the stovetop. Cautiously, Harry waved his hand over the glowing circle. Heat warmed his fingers. "Amazing."

"Cool, huh?" Edith strode back in the room, her shirttail neatly tucked back into her skirt. "And easy to clean." She held up a toothbrush. "Do you want the honors, or shall I?"

"I'll do it." He snatched the toothbrush from her fingers. "Like I said, this relic could be dangerous. I'd rather you didn't touch it at all."

Harry wrapped the stone in the dishtowel and carried it to the small table in the middle of the kitchen, where he bent over the task of cleaning the artifact. Gently, he brushed away centuries of dust and dirt exposing the true exquisiteness of the finely etched carvings on shiny black obsidian.

"It's beautiful," Edith breathed over Harry's shoulder.

Her nearness sparked his body to life, a jolting reminder of his poor behavior in the hallway. Determinedly, he tamped down his baser urges and immersed himself in what he loved, learning about past cultures, solving ancient puzzles.

The rounded stone with its intricate carving of the two-headed dragon could have been any artifact from ancient Persia. Harry flipped it over and worked at the other side where dirt encrusted every groove. "Do you have something a little more sturdy, like a knife? I think there's an inscription on the back."

Edie dug around in one of the drawers and brought him a paring knife with a plastic handle. "Try this."

With the patience of a sculptor, Harry cleared the grooves of crud symbol by symbol, revealing a message in ancient Persian.

"What does it say? Can you read it?" Edie's short syllables and higher pitched voice reflected the excitement Harry felt.

Although he'd studied ancient Persian, he wasn't sure he could translate it. "I don't know." He ran his finger across the engraved swirls and dots. "I believe this is the symbol for give or grant." Harry shook his head. "I don't think I can translate this without some reference material."

"Damn." Edie sat down in the chair next to Harry and cupped her chin in her palm. "I don't want to wait for a library to open. I wish you could translate it now."

Thunder boomed outside and the floor trembled.

"Uh-oh." Edie's gaze darted around the room.

As if someone else controlled his body and mind, Harry leaned over the stone and read. "Men beware. If you touch the image of Azhi, you will be forever captive in a gilded bottle. Should a female awaken you from your prison, you are destined to grant her every wish." When he uttered the last word, Harry sat back once again in control of himself.

"Ohmigosh! You're a prisoner to that bottle?" Edie ran to the other room, returning with the blue-green bottle with its slim bands of gold. She sank into the chair opposite him and stared across the table a frown wrinkling her brow.

"I guess that would explain why every time you wish for something, it happens. Since you woke me from the bottle, that means you own me." Harry wasn't so sure he liked the idea of being owned by anyone. He was footloose and fancy-free Harry, not a slave to another's whims.

"Don't say that. Nobody owns you." Edie shook her head. "This whole thing is like a page out of the Arabian Nights stories."

"Only worse. I'm the genie trapped in the lamp." Harry dropped his head into his hands and groaned. "What a mess." Then a thought occurred to him and he looked up. "Will touched the stone as well."

"Then why wasn't he in the same bottle?"

"I don't know. Wait." He thought back to that day over eighty years ago. "When we opened the sarcophagus back in 1924, there were at least a half-dozen bottles."

"I only found one, today."

"Only one?" Damn. Where the hell was Will? Had his bottle been stolen or broken? "I wonder what happens if the bottle breaks?"

"Maybe there's more information on the sarcophagus. We can check tomorrow." Edie's eyelids dipped and she yawned. "For now, all I want to think about is food and sleep."

"I'd give all the camels in the desert for a bath."

"I can do better than that." A secretive smile curved her lips. With her hair hanging in soft curls around her face, the smile softened her features. When she allowed herself to be unguarded, Edie was a truly beautiful woman. "Wait until you see the shower." Her eyes were the shifting colors of the sea, one moment aqua-green, the next moment slate gray.

Harry could fall into those eyes. But beside his nakedness of earlier that day, he still had the sands of the desert coating his skin. "Shower? Like in the fancy houses?"

"Yup. Only, just about every house has one, now. Follow me." She rose gracefully from the table and stepped out of the room. Having shed her serviceable pumps, she padded around in her bare feet. With her long coppery waves hanging down her back to her waist, she looked like a little girl or a helpless waif. No. Make that like a goddess rising from the sea.

Harry could still feel the silky smoothness of her skin beneath his fingers, the weight of her breasts in his hands. Even though he hadn't really instigated the lovemaking of his own accord, he had appreciated every moment, rising to the occasion, stimulated by her body not her wish.

Maybe she'd wish for him to do it again. His cock sprang to attention in ardent anticipation.

* * * * *

So, his display of affection hadn't been stimulated by desire for her body. Then again, it hadn't been inspired by pity either. Prior to the heavy petting in the hallway, Harry had been nothing but a gentleman despite appearing in the nude. Damn, why couldn't he be a little less gentlemanly?

Edie wanted to continue the kiss where they'd left off and follow through to consummation. Who knew when she'd get another opportunity? Twenty-nine-year-old women who looked like her didn't have sex. They dreamed about it.

With a sigh, Edie walked into cream-colored bathroom, digging her toes into the soft bath mats. What would it feel like to lie naked on a rug like this and do it until her eyes popped out?

The word was fuck.

Fuck. She'd never used that word before now. Something about Harry must bring out the worst in her...or maybe the best...or perhaps the correct word was lust.

Leaning through the sliding glass doors she adjusted the water to a pleasant temperature and spraying pressure. "You should like that."

"I'm sure I will." His voice rumbled next to her ear.

When she turned back to Harry, he stood so close she had to tilt her head back to see into his eyes. The janitor's coverall stretched open exposing that chest Edie would die to touch again.

Her heart fluttered and she backed up a step. All those automatic responses to his earlier foreplay leapt back into place. Her skin became positively charged, ready to ignite at the barest stroke.

Space. She needed space between her and that torso.

"I'll leave you to it." Edie scurried out the bathroom door, damning her voice for the desperate squeak she'd managed to get out. Why did she act like a scared virgin running for her virtue?

Chicken shit. That's what I am, a chicken shit.

Here she had a gorgeous man in her apartment, had already seen him naked, and she couldn't be within one foot of him without wanting to run. *What's wrong with me?*

"Looks aren't everything. You can make up for it with brains." Her father's words echoed in her head.

She stared at herself in the mirror. Too bad she didn't have her mother's confidence and her creamy clear complexion, coal-black hair and eyes the color of sapphires. *No, I had to get stuck with carrot-red hair and freckles and I'll probably die a lonely old lady with an apartment full of cats. Who could love a woman with this mop?* Her fingers touched a fiery ringlet.

"Edie, do you have a towel?" Harry called out from inside the shower stall.

Oh God. Harry needed a towel and there weren't any clean ones in the bathroom. Edie abandoned the mirror, ran to the linen closet and grabbed her biggest, best towel.

Now what? How the hell was she supposed to give it to him?

With her back to the bathroom door, she listened to the sound of running water.

She could wait until she heard the water go off and hand it to him when he asked. But then he'd have to drip across the cold tile to get to the door. If he slipped and fell he might knock himself out. Then she'd be obligated to administer first aid to his wet, naked form.

Edie's breathing quickened until she felt a little dizzy. If she weren't careful, she'd hyperventilate.

Perhaps she could toss the towel in while his head was under water and he'd never know she'd been there.

On the count of three. "One, two, three." With a deep breath, she shoved the door open and dashed in to hang the towel over the rail of the clear shower door.

Harry stood with his face under the spray, water running in rivulets down his back.

With the towel clutched to her chest, Edie froze in place.

The man was gorgeous. Broad shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist and a firm yet perfectly rounded –

"Want to join me?" Harry turned to face her giving her a full frontal view through the clear glass shower door. His penis stood at attention, thick and proud.

Caught staring, Edie's face burned. "I b-brought you a towel."

"Thank you."

Edie tossed the towel on the rail and lunged for the door. Her foot hit a wet spot and she fell flat on her back. Pain shot from the base of her skull to her temples.

She laid still, all the air jettisoned from her lungs. Edie tried to inhale but nothing worked, except her hearing.

The water shut off and the swishing sound of the shower door sliding in its tracks echoed off the walls.

Breathe, stupid, breathe.

"Edie!"

Stars spun in her vision, and her head throbbed.

Then Harry was there, leaning over, dripping water into her face.

Why did she have to be such a klutz? With her mouth open, she tried to tell him she was all right. But nothing would come out. The wind had been completely knocked out of her.

"Edie!" He lifted her shoulders.

When his fingers touched her skin, her lungs woke up and she wheezed in air. "I'm...all...right. Really." Her breathy voice didn't sound very convincing, so she pushed against him trying to disengage herself from his embrace. But her hands pushed

against his wet, hairy chest. Her fingers threaded into the springy curls. The smell of her soap on his skin and his own special male musk assailed Edie's nostrils.

None of the x-rated videos had done this for her. Scents and textures were so much more potent than two-dimensional sight and sound.

Her hand spanned across his solid muscles, reveling in the strength packaged in warm skin. Harry was a god compared to her dweebish, boring self. What was the use? Be practical. The man couldn't be interested in her. "You need clothes." Edie wanted to push against him for real this time, but she couldn't bring herself to touch him. She didn't fear what he would do, more afraid of her own reaction. With his help, she sat up.

Harry stood and looped the towel around his waist. Then he reached his hand out and helped her to her feet, steadying her with an arm around her shoulders. "You should be more careful on slippery floors."

Stepping away from his embrace, she armed herself with anger. "You shouldn't go flashing your-your —"

"Manhood? Penis?" He smiled. "What do they call it in the new millennium?"

"The same things." Averting her gaze from the tent he'd made of the towel, she strode toward the door, ignoring her lightheadedness. But damn it, she must have swayed. It didn't help she couldn't manage to breathe like a normal human being around this man.

Harry was beside her in a second, his bare arm circling her waist. "You sure you're all right?"

His nearness cleared the fuzz from her brain. "Yes, yes. I'm going to run next door to see if I can borrow some clothes. Don't go anywhere."

"Like this?" He held his arms out wide. The bright white of the towel created a stark contrast to his deeply tanned skin. With his dark hair wet and slicked back from his forehead, he looked like the pirate from her dream.

"Good point." As soon as she said the words, her gaze dropped to his point protruding against the towel.

Harry chuckled, a deep throaty sound.

Edie ran.

She didn't stop until she stood outside the door to her nearest neighbor. With a few deep, cleansing breaths she calmed her racing heart. Ever since she'd discovered Harry, she'd felt like she was in a long-distance marathon unable to stop and let her lungs catch up with the rest of her body. She was utterly exhausted.

Now to explain to her neighbor, Mitch Gallagher, why she needed to borrow men's clothing. After everything else she'd been through that day, this little effort should be a snap. And maybe Mitch could help her get her grip back on reality. She knocked firmly on the solid wood door.

Mitch, the resident ladies' man, worked as a stockbroker on Wall Street. He'd always offered her a friendly smile and she'd actually spilled her guts to him on one embarrassing occasion. But his revolving door was forever swishing through a parade of lovelies. After a few moments, he answered the door wearing a wrinkled white dress shirt over boxer shorts, his normally neatly combed sandy blond hair stood on end. His gaze ran the length of her from toe to tip, stopping when he got to her face. Denim blue eyes twinkled as his lips lifted in a slow sexy smile. "Edie! You look absolutely delectable."

Edie snorted. As if he really meant those flowery words. "Save the flattery for one of your girls, Mitch. I know you don't mean it."

With a silent shake of his head, Mitch asked, "Then how might I be of assistance?"

After months of watching him through her peephole, Edie should have been drooling over his muscular legs and go-to-hell good-looking smile. But she had bigger fish frying in her pan back at her apartment. "I need to talk to you. Quick!"

Mitch's face lost its sleepy, sexy look, and he straightened away from the door. "Come in, come in."

After a swift glance at her door, Edie ducked into Mitch's living room. "Mitch, I need your help."

Mitch leaned out into hallway, looked both ways, shrugged and closed the door. "What's wrong?"

Edie stood in the middle of the foyer, her arms hugging her middle. "Nothing. Everything." She flung her hands in the air and paced a short distance from Mitch. "Oh, Mitch, I'm so confused."

Standing with her back to Mitch, Edie didn't realize he'd walked up behind her until he grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Why don't you tell ol' Mitch all about it."

Where to start? "I opened a sarcophagus. I rubbed the dust off the bottle. Then I heard thunder and when I turned around, there he was. I stole the stone and the bottle. He's in my apartment. Naked! And everything is so messed up, I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"Whoa. Slow down." Mitch chuckled. "Who's naked in your apartment?"

"Harry!"

"He's hairy?" Mitch dropped her arms and scratched his head.

"Yes, no. Oh good grief!" Edie grabbed Mitch's arms and shook him. "He kissed me!"

Mitch leaned back, his brows rising into the hair dipping down over his forehead. "My Edie had her first kiss? And here I tried for months." He shook his head, the gleam in his eyes teasing. "This is serious, very serious."

When Edie realized she was still clutching Mitch's arms, she dropped them and stepped away. "Oh, Mitch, you know I'm not your type."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Mitch frowned. "And what type is that?"

"You're a magnet for the gorgeous, outgoing, fun types." She rolled her eyes. "My basic nightmare."

"And who says you aren't all the above?" Mitch cupped her cheek in his hand. "Excluding the nightmare, of course."

"Be real. I know my limitations." She stared down at her bare unpolished toenails. Her father had pretty much nailed it. She wasn't beautiful. She wasn't even merely pretty. And who wanted to go out with a woman who dealt with dusty bones and old relics?

"As far as I'm concerned, someone's fed you a line of bullshit." Mitch tipped her chin until her gaze met his. "You could be beautiful, if only you'd see it in yourself." He touched his hand to her loose hair. "I like your hair down. You should wear it this way more often."

For a long moment, Edie considered Mitch's words. If only he was right. But wishing to be beautiful wasn't going to solve her larger-than-life problem next door.

"Mitch, he kissed me. *Now* what do I do with him?"

"Kiss him back." Mitch tapped her nose and smiled.

"I did!" Edie clapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes widened. "I kissed him back." Her vision clouded again and she staggered backward to collapse on the couch. "I don't even *know* this man."

"Yet he's in your apartment and he's naked?" Mitch sat in the chair beside the couch. "Interesting. And all this time I thought you had a terminal case of virginity." He whacked her on the back, chuckling. "Edie, my girl, there's hope for you yet."

"This isn't a joke." Edie sat forward and placed a hand on Mitch's knee. "And there's more. The man can smoke in and out of the bottle, and he has to grant my wishes."

"Whoa!" Mitch raised his hands. "Wait a minute. What's this about bottles and wishes?"

"That's just it. He kissed me, not because he liked me but because I wished it." Edie chewed on her lip. "Harry has to do everything I wish because he touched the stone, and I happened to be the lucky girl that woke him from the bottle."

Leaning forward he rested a hand on her shoulder and stared into her eyes. "Edie, are you on drugs? 'Cause if you are, I want some of what you're having."

With a huffy sigh, she shoved his hand aside. "I've botched this. Let me start from the beginning. You're never gonna believe it anyway."

Fifteen minutes later, Mitch's eyebrows had settled into a deep frown. "You really believe this, don't you?"

"I didn't want to, but I can't deny what I saw."

"And he's in your apartment, as we speak?"

“Yes. Or at least I hope he is.” Edie sprang from the couch and strode toward the door. “I need to get back in case he decides to take off with the stone.” She spun around. “Oh yeah, and I need some clothes for him. He can’t go around naked all the time. All that skin is too distracting and I can’t think.”

“Now that’s something I can relate to.” Mitch clapped his hands together. “I’ll get the clothes, but I’m coming over with you.”

“Good. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll wait.” Armed with backup, Edie would be only slightly more prepared to face Harry.

Mitch ducked into his bedroom and returned with a handful of assorted items. “I don’t know what’ll fit, so I brought a selection of loose-fitting and tailored items. Let’s go meet your genie.”

Chapter Four

"Thank God you're back." Harry met Edie at the door grasping her hands in his. "I thought you'd left the country or something, you took so long."

A blond-haired man stepped up behind her. "You must be Harry." He held out his hand, but his eyes were narrowed as if checking Harry out. "Name's Mitch."

At a definite disadvantage, being covered only in a towel, Harry accepted the hand. "Harrington Taylor the Third."

When Mitch's grip tightened into a bone-crunching vise, the friendly handshake became a battle of strength. Harry gave as good as he got, forcing a smile to hide the strain on his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mitch," he said through gritted teeth.

"Likewise, Harry." Mitch didn't try as hard to hide the effort. Finally, he loosened his grip shaking Harry's hand free. "So, what's this I hear about you smoking in and out of bottles?"

Harry shot a glance at Edie.

She nodded and walked the rest of the way into the room. "I told him everything. Mitch and I have been friends for two years. I trust him."

"That black thing on the table made beeping sounds while you were out." Harry waved at the offending machine.

Edie smiled. With her hair down softening the angles of her cheeks and jaw, the simple gesture lit her entire face. "That would be the phone with the built-in answering machine."

Harry made a note to himself, make Edie smile more often. He also noted Mitch staring at her as if seeing her for the first time. With a frown, he made another note to punch the bastard as soon as Edie was out of the room. Why, he didn't know, but his body urged him to do so. "I could hear a voice but I couldn't find the man talking." He shrugged. "He said he was your father."

As if the lights dimmed in the room, Edie's smile faded. "My father, huh? Great."

Mitch shoved a stack of clothing into his chest. "You might want to go put some clothes on."

Harry almost considered putting on Ernie's dirty coverall as opposed to wearing anything the bone-cruncher, Mitch, might provide. But one look at Edie's nervous countenance convinced him to take the damned clothes graciously. "Thank you." Although he itched to, he'd hold off punching the man to save Edie additional grief, having caused her sufficient amounts already.

Carrying the clothes Mitch gave him, Harry walked back into her bedroom and pulled the door almost shut, leaving a little bit of a gap. If Mitch and Edie talked, Harry

wanted to listen.

"He doesn't look like a genie," Mitch was saying. "Where are his harem pants and gold wristbands?"

"I told you, he got sucked into it because of the stone," Edie's voice was almost too quiet to hear.

Harry leaned his head closer to the door's opening.

"Where's the stone?" Mitch asked.

With one foot in a pants leg, Harry paused. Maybe Edie would show Mitch the stone, he'd touch it and the idiot would be confined to his very own bottle. Jamming the other leg into the blue denim pants, another thought occurred to Harry. Or maybe since the only gilded bottle available was Harry's, Mitch might get confined in the same space with Harry. Ye Gads! He'd left the stone on the counter in the kitchen.

Shirt in hand, Harry threw open the bedroom door.

Edie and Mitch were shoulder to shoulder, leaning over the counter in the kitchen.

A pinch of annoyance whistled across Harry's nerves. Although why he should be aggravated with Mitch and Edie being so close together, he couldn't fathom. He'd sworn off lasting relationships since his fiancée had ditched him for someone more "settled". If Mitch made Edie happy, more power to him. Why then did the thought stick like a bone in his craw?

"I wouldn't touch that stone if I were you," Harry warned.

"Don't worry. I have no desire to be the prisoner of a bottle or at a woman's beck and call." Mitch's lip curled up in a wicked smile. "I prefer to have my women cater to my wishes, thank you very much."

Edie jabbed Mitch in the stomach. "Leave him alone. He didn't choose to be cursed by the stone."

Harry's stomach tightened. How embarrassing to have a woman defending him against another man. He opened his mouth to say as much, but Edie beat him to the punch.

"I know someone who might be able to help us." Edie reached into her purse and pulled out a small black book with the word "addresses" written in gold letters on the surface. "Perhaps Professor Johansson can help us."

"What does this Professor know?" Harry asked.

"He's an expert on Persian and Arabic history, and he's my friend. Maybe he can find more information about the stone." She thumbed through the black book until she stopped on a page. "Who knows? He might tell us something about the dig you were on in 1924. He has access to all kinds of historical files, books and records."

"Good, maybe he'll help us find my partner, too." Harry slipped into the shirt.

Edie made her call, giving the professor a full description of the stone, its carvings and just enough information to make his inquiries without telling him the entire story. When she hung up, the telephone beeped again.

"There, that's the sound I heard." Harry pointed at the black box.

"That's how the telephone rings, Harry." Edie punched a button. "Hello. Oh hi, Dad." She grimaced and walked to the other side of the room. "Yes, Dad, I was kissing a man in the hallway."

Uh-oh. News of their kiss must have made its way to Edie's father. He hoped she didn't take a lot of grief over one little kiss. Mostly, he hoped Mrs. Bartelli hadn't noticed that he'd had his hands up Edie's shirt.

"Yes, his hands were up my shirt and no, I'm not a slut." Her angry whispers grew louder.

"Frank Ragsdale is a complete asshole," Mitch said. "He's always putting her down."

Harry wanted to take the telephone away from Edie and give the man a piece of his mind. "Why does she put up with it?" For the first time since he'd met Mitch he felt a connection to the man, he couldn't fault Mitch for caring about Edie. Someone needed to.

"She insists that she's used to it and it doesn't bother her." Mitch's lips tightened. "But it does. You can tell."

"Dad, it's none of your business who I sleep with," Edie said. "I could sleep with the entire team of the New York Knicks if I wanted to. No, I'm not trying to embarrass you. I know I'm not beautiful, and he's probably just after the sex, but maybe so am I. Look, Dad, I don't want to die a virgin. If paying for sex is the only way I can get it, maybe it's not such a bad alternative. I'm sorry, Dad, he's waiting for me in my bed. I have to go have raunchy sex before my money runs out." Edie punched a button on the phone and slammed it down on the table.

"Hey, you go, girlfriend!" Mitch raised his fist in the air.

Edie stood with her back to Harry. She was so still, she appeared frozen in position, then her shoulders began shaking. Was Edie crying?

Harry strode across the room and gently turned Edie toward him.

Instead of tears, she was laughing so hard she didn't make a sound. Then she inhaled. "Oh my god, I can't believe I said that to my father!" She clutched her stomach and doubled over, her eyes glistening. As quickly as the weather shifted in New York City, her laughter changed to sobs and the tears Harry had expected spilled down her cheeks. "He couldn't believe a man would want to kiss me."

He pulled her into his arms, leaning his chin against her hair. "I did."

"Only because I wished it!" Edie sniffled and rubbed her nose on her sleeve.

With his finger and thumb, Harry tipped her face up to his. "You're not wishing now." He dipped down and claimed her lips. This time he felt the difference. The invisible puppet master wasn't making him do anything he didn't want to do. And boy he wanted to kiss Edie.

He tasted her, running his tongue along her full bottom lip, delving in for more. Harry wanted to lie naked with her, making love through the night, showing her with each touch and stroke just how beautiful she was.

Soft hands crept up to circle his neck, and as Edie pressed her body against his, the scent of spring flowers seeped into his senses. Heat burned a path from where her breasts rubbed against his chest downward to fill his groin. This woman was going to kill him.

"Ah-hem." Mitch cleared his throat noisily behind them. "You do have an audience here. Not that I mind. But if you'd like more privacy, I'll leave."

Edie broke off the kiss and pushed out of Harry's arms, her face flaming red. "No, no, don't leave. I was just about to do something. I just can't seem to remember what it was." She laughed and hiccupped all in one.

"You already did. You called Professor Johansson about the stone," Mitch said, a wry smile twisting his lips.

Harry leaned against the wall, feigning a nonchalance he didn't feel, his hands making a fig leaf over that part of his body that wanted to continue on where he'd left off with Edie.

"You know, Edie?" Mitch said, pacing across the room. "While you and genie-boy were sucking face, I was thinking."

If Edie's face could get any redder, Harry feared she'd likely explode. Her embarrassment was sadly painful.

"Enough with the teasing, Mitch." Harry glared at the other man.

He held up his hand to Harry. "Hold on, you've got a part in this." Mitch smiled at Edie. "If he really can grant your wishes, why not?"

"Why not what?" she asked.

"Why not make a few wishes?" Mitch said. "What can it hurt?"

Harry didn't like the direction Mitch was heading. "I'm not sure about this. I don't seem to have control over how the wishes are granted."

"Are you telling me you're a genie, but you can't control your own power?" Mitch's eyebrow rose in challenge. "Tsk, tsk. No control." His glance lowered to Harry's hands.

Harry frowned, ignoring the unspoken insult to his inability to tamp down his raging sexual urges where Edie was concerned. "I never said I was a genie."

"Leave it alone, Mitch," Edie said. "I don't want to wish for anything."

"Nothing?" Mitch grabbed her hands. "In all your life, you haven't dreamed of anything? You haven't wanted to change anything?"

"No," she said, then her head tipped to the side. "Well, maybe..." Edie stared off into the space over Mitch's shoulder. "Yes." Then her gaze shifted to Harry.

A shiver of awareness snaked across Harry's mind. Why was she looking his way? Did she want to change something about him? Oh, no. "Edie, think about it."

“Do it, Edie!” Mitch said. “Here’s your chance.”

She shook her head, still staring at Harry, a flush creeping up her neck. “I don’t know...”

“Sometimes you gotta say ‘What the heck’.” Damn, Mitch and his careless advice.

Harry wanted to punch Mitch in his big fat mouth. Instead, he stared across at Edie and willed her not to make the leap. But like a sapling in the face of an approaching avalanche, Harry could do nothing to stop her. “Don’t do it, Edie,” he whispered.

Her words came out in monotone syllables. “I wish I were the most desirable woman in the country.”

Thunder rumbled and the floors shook.

The walls of the apartment wobbled like an unfocused spyglass. Harry reached for Edie but instead of grabbing her, he pawed at the air where she’d been. Edie had disappeared.

When the room settled back into place, Mitch yelled, “Wow! That was incredible! Holy shit, where’s Edie?”

Without missing a beat, Harry balled his fist and punched Mitch in the eye.

* * * * *

Hot lights shown down on Edie, their intensity blinding her. Where was she? What happened?

“*Baby Likes it Hot*, scene two, take two,” a man’s voice said.

Edie’s vision cleared. She was in a cavernous room with lights mounted on extension poles, pointing at her from all angles. Her hands slid across smooth fabric. Red satin—as in red satin sheets. Where the hell was she? Leaning up on her elbow, she surveyed her surroundings. Dead center in a large round bed, she was covered in red satin sheets with a white faux fur throw tossed over her body.

“That’s right, Edie, let the blanket fall a little exposing your breast.”

“Huh?” She lifted the corner of the furry blanket and peered beneath. Holy crap! She was completely naked!

“Come on, baby, come for Daddy.” An equally naked man with a very hairy chest and shoulders lunged onto the bed, landing between her legs. He tugged the fur blanket. “Don’t be shy, show us a little tit.”

Edie’s eyes widened and she held tight to the fur, refusing to let it down even an inch.

“This isn’t in the script, but if you want to play that way, I can start from the bottom and work my way up.” The man lifted the bottom of the blanket and pressed her thighs wide. “Are you getting this, Seymour?”

A camera rolled closer, clearly pointing at Edie’s crotch.

When she tried to close her legs, the man on top of her held them still with his

hands. "Feisty baby, are we? Want to play it rough?" He smacked her thigh, the sound louder than the pain.

"No, I want you off of me, now," she whispered loud enough for him to hear. What kind of nightmare had she landed in? Where was Harry?

"So you want me, do you? I'll make you sing like Shirley Temple." The man rubbed his face in her pubic hairs and came up. "Nothing like a little pussy to make me meow. Come on, baby, cum for Daddy." The hairy guy draped her legs over his shoulders and wiggled his tongue while glancing sideways at the camera.

"No," she screamed. No, he couldn't do this to her. Didn't he realize she was a virgin? No man had ever touched her privates with his tongue. Eve squirmed against the hands that held her, fighting desperately to get away. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. All these years, she'd saved herself for someone special. Her first time was supposed to be with someone she cared about...someone kind and gentle...someone like Harry.

Just as the man leaned into her, Edie squeezed her eyes shut. "I wish it were Harry."

* * * * *

As Mitch started to pick himself up off the floor, Harry clenched his fist and prepared to swing again. "Why the hell did you encourage her to wish again? Didn't I tell you I couldn't control what happens?"

Mitch paused, sitting back on his haunches, staring up at Harry's fists. "Why the hell did you hit me?"

"You deserved it." Harry had never punched a man over a woman before. And the urge to do it again nearly overwhelmed him.

Mitch rubbed his eye and winced. "Damn, I'm gonna have a black eye. Did you have to punch me in the eye?"

"I shouldn't have stopped with the eye." Harry's fists bunched, ready to swing again.

With a hand held up to block Harry's next attack, Mitch scooted backward on his butt. "Look, I didn't think she'd disappear."

"Yeah, well she did." Harry couldn't stand still – he had to do something. Edie was missing and he felt like it was all his fault. With a snort, he turned and paced across Edie's apartment and back to stand in front of Mitch. "Now what do we do? I have no idea where she went."

"Didn't that bottle and this whole genie thing come with an instruction manual?"

"Hell no!" Harry loosened a fist and shoved the hand through his hair. "Where the hell did she go?"

"How bad can it be?" Mitch eased to his feet his gaze narrowed, wary, as if tensing for Harry's next shot. When he made it all the way to his feet without another attack, he pressed a hand to his eye again. "Ouch!"

"Serves you right, goading her into the wish like you did." Harry's muscles bunched, automatically. Maybe he would punch the bastard again.

Mitch's eyes widened and he raised both hands in front of him. "Enough with the hitting. Sheesh! Taking it out on me isn't going to find Edie."

"Maybe not, but it'll make me feel better." Where was she? New York City was filled with millions of people, how could he find her in its vastness? Assuming she was even in New York. Harry glared at Mitch.

"We need a clue as to where her wish might have taken her." Mitch waved a hand at the room as if searching for the answer among the throw pillows. "What exactly did she say?"

"Something about being the most desirable woman."

Mitch snorted. "Like she needs a wish to make it happen."

"Why the hell does she think she's undesirable?" Harry asked. In all his travels, he hadn't met a more tempting woman than Edie. All that beauty and those luscious curves hidden behind frumpy clothing.

"Her father tells her all the time she's ugly." Mitch sighed. "Apparently, her mother was a model and drop-dead gorgeous. Unfortunately, she did drop dead and left Edie's father bitter. He took it out on her."

"But Edie is an attractive woman."

"She doesn't think so." Mitch rubbed his jaw. "Didn't she say she wanted to be the most desirable woman in the country?"

"Yeah. I think so. But how is that going to help us find her?" Harry's chest tightened. Never one to stand around and just think, he needed action.

"Maybe she's morphed into a model like her mother, or a singer or actress. Has to be somewhere in the United States, since she said 'in the country'."

"Great, that narrows it down to about a million people. How are we supposed to find her?"

"Keep your shirt on, bottle man." Mitch laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. "I'll just peruse the Internet and see if we can find her."

"Then come on, let's go." Harry headed toward the door, anxious to begin the search.

Instead of following Harry to the door, Mitch pivoted in a circle, scanning the small apartment's interior. "Harry, we aren't going anywhere."

"Then how the hell are we supposed to find her?"

Mitch shook his head. "You've got a lot to learn about the twenty-first century." He strode to the desk in the corner of the dining room and sat in front of a black box with a

gray screen. When he placed his palm over a device the size of a hamster, the black box in front of him lit up with a picture of a sandy beach.

Despite his worry over Eve, Harry couldn't help being lured into the beautiful lights and colors of the box. It was like a photograph, only it was all in color. "What's that?"

"A computer."

"How is looking at pictures of beaches going to help us find Edie?" Harry paced behind Mitch, his concern for Edie growing with each passing minute. Yet he was completely fascinated by what the other man was doing. The beach picture disappeared replaced by a picture of a lot of words. "Google? What's a google?"

"Technology has come a long way in the last eighty years, Harry. If you could just pipe down while I surf the web we might find something." Mitch pressed the little buttons on a board that looked like the letters from a typewriter. "Edie Ragsdale" appeared in a red box in the middle of the white picture.

Then Mitch sat back.

"This is a waste of time. We should be out there looking for Edie." Harry swung away from Mitch. "If you won't go look, I will."

"I wouldn't leave yet, if I were you. I found her."

With his hand on the doorknob, Harry turned back to Mitch. "Where?"

Mitch shot a look across the room to Harry. "Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles! That's clear across the country!" How the hell had Edie gotten to Los Angeles? It would take days by train to get there.

"And it's worse than I thought." Mitch stared down at the picture on the black box, his face set in grim lines.

"What?" Harry hurried back to look over Mitch's shoulder. There in vivid colors was a picture of Edie sprawled in the middle of a huge round bed, her fiery red hair spread out on royal blue satin sheets. And she was completely naked from the tip of her head to the garishly red polish on her toenails. Every pale inch of her skin glowed like a beacon and her eyes beckoned to the viewer, a sinful, sexy smile curled her lips. Harry's cock rose in immediate response.

Mitch shook his head. "She's a fuckin' porn star, Harry."

Chapter Five

Trapped in the act of making a porn film, Edie fought to keep the tears from slipping through her clenched eyelids. She could only blame herself and her misplaced vanity. Hadn't she wished herself into this situation?

The bed shimmied beneath Edie, thunder rumbled in the distance and the lights behind her eyelids dimmed momentarily. Then a warm wet tongue lapped her folds, laving her tenderly.

Too late.

She'd been licked by a stranger. Her first time was with someone she didn't even know, in front of cameras and a room full of people.

She wanted to curl up in a ball and die.

The teasing tongue stopped. "Edie?" Harry's voice drifted through her misery. "Where the hell are we?"

Her eyes popped open and she stared down at Harry nestled between her legs. Magnificent, naked Harry. He'd been the one to initiate her into the beauty of oral sex, not the crass stranger.

"Oh Harry, my wish turned out so wrong. I wanted to be the most desirable woman, but not this." Too stunned to move, she waved her hand at the lighting, cameras and audience of technicians.

"Edie, don't you see what I see?" Still between her legs, he smoothed a hand over her flat stomach. "You are a very desirable, beautiful woman."

"I am?" She sniffled.

"Yes, and you taste like heaven." His gaze met hers as he dipped down to tongue her clit.

The crude setting faded away and all Edie could see was Harry worshiping her with his mouth. His fingers slipped between her folds finding the little sensitive nub she'd only stimulated herself on the few occasions she'd tried her hand at masturbation. The warm, moist texture of his tongue touched her, sending fire blasting through her blood and her pulse throbbing against the walls of her vagina. Liquid lubricant oozed from her, preparing her body for his entry.

He touched her sweet spot again, teasing, tasting and tempting her.

Edie arched off the bed, grasping his hair, crying out almost in pain but mostly in ecstasy. His strokes sent her spiraling upward until she thought she'd explode in the bombardment of sensations. She'd never felt like this—like she was shattering into a million pieces at just the touch of a man's tongue.

But not any man.

Harry.

When she drifted back to earth, she pulled at Harry's hair, tugging him up her length. The fake fur fell to the side exposing her body to his.

Harry crawled between her legs, his torso sliding up her belly, his chest hairs tickling Edie's breasts.

Tears leaked out the corners of her eyes and she wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face against his chest. She wanted him. Wanted him to fill her to completion, ram his cock inside her until she screamed. Harry brought out the whore in Edie, the greedy, needy nymphomaniac she didn't know existed inside. She wanted him to fuck her. Fuck her hard.

She opened her legs wide, drawing her knees up until she could hook them with her palms.

Harry pushed up on his arms, poised over her, his cock pressing against the entrance to her pussy.

"Fuck me, Harry," she whispered, loving the carnal sound of the word on her lips. Suddenly empowered by her incredible orgasm, she wanted more of this fabulous man. "Fuck me hard."

Harry frowned down at her. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him into her. When his cock hit the barrier of her hymen, Edie gritted her teeth and tightened her legs forcing him past the thin layer.

Pain was swift and bittersweet. Soon, Harry was moving within her in long, tender strokes, easing his sex in and out of her tight pussy.

Within seconds, the pain subsided and Edie matched his rhythm, pushing harder to deepen the connection. She wanted him to crawl inside her, become a part of her and hold on forever.

The strokes grew more frantic. Harry pushed up to his knees and held her hips in his hands, his balls slapping against her buttocks, the smacking sound accentuating the erotic fervor.

Edie draped her legs up over Harry's shoulders and clutched at the satin sheets with her fists. Her body tensed again as she shot to the top and spasmed into a second, full release.

Harry rammed into her again and held her steady as his body shuddered. His eyes clenched shut, while the hands gripping her hips squeezed so tightly, Edie knew she'd have bruises. Then Harry collapsed over her gathering her into his arms, while he dragged air into his lungs.

"Cut!" A voice shouted beyond the bank of lights. "That wasn't in the script. You call that foreplay? Where's the foreplay? People pay for hours of foreplay. The public wants porn, not a quick fuck. Fuckin' hell, we'll have to start over. And we'll need clean

sheets.”

Oh geez. She and Harry had just performed in front of a freakin’ camera. Had she completely lost her mind? Their lovemaking would be on celluloid for all to view. Including her father!

“Oh Harry, what have we done?” Edie said against Harry’s chest.

He tipped her head back until he could see into her eyes. “We just made love.”

Edie laughed and hiccupped on a sob. “I know. But here?”

“It’s as you wished.” He drew the sheets up over her nakedness and ran a thumb over her lip.

Kissing the tip of his tongue she whispered, “I wish we were back in my apartment.”

The light shimmered again, and the satin sheets changed beneath her into the comforting brushed cotton sheets of her own bed. When she opened her eyes, her favorite print of a Golden Retriever stared down at her in the dim lighting. A heavy weight pressed against her from her breasts to her groin. And someone’s penis filled the space inside her.

“Harry?”

* * * * *

“I’m here, Edie.” Harry pushed up on his forearms and stared down at Edie. Her warmth surrounded his cock, the tight walls of her vagina making him hard again. What had he done? “Good lord, Edie.” He jerked backward, sliding out to the end of his shaft.

But the woman beneath him gasped and clasped his naked buttocks before he could free himself of her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even think.” He leaned on one elbow and trailed a hand over her cheek. “Did I hurt you?” Then he slapped his palm against his forehead and groaned. “Oh God, you were a virgin!” Again, he tried to pull out of her.

But she didn’t let him. “So?”

“So, I’ve ruined you and in front of witnesses.” He dropped his head to her breasts. “Oh, Edie, I’m so sorry.”

“Are you really?” Her voice shook.

When he lifted his head, Harry could see the tears glistening on the edges of her eyelashes. “I’m not sorry I had the pleasure of your body, but I’m sorry I took your virginity. Hell, I can’t give it back.”

“Did I ask for it back?” She raised a hand to his face, her soft fingers caressing the stubble on his jaw. “Thank you, Harry.” Her words were humble and he could tell they were spoken from her heart.

“For what? I’ve ruined you.” This nightmare was going from bad to worse for this

gentle, sweet woman. How could he have let this happen?

She smiled a soft, secret smile and her face glowed with her beauty. "I always thought I'd die a virgin."

"This was a huge mistake, I should have had the wherewithal to stop when I realized you were a virgin. This is all my fault."

"Edie? Harry?" Mitch's voice called out from the other side of the bedroom door.

Before Harry could react, the door flung open and Mitch raced in.

"Edie! Thank God! We were so worried and then Harry disappear—" Mitch's words and feet ground to a halt and his jaw dropped. "What the hell?"

"Mitch, I can explain—" Edie started.

But Mitch's eyes narrowed and his lips firmed into a hard line. He marched up to Harry, grabbed him by the arm and yanked him off Edie. "You dirty son of a bitch!"

Harry, struggling to get his feet beneath him, didn't see the fist until it connected with his jaw. Pain shot through his head and he staggered back falling across the bed and Edie.

"Mitch!" Edie screamed and lunged over Harry, her naked body covering his. "Are you insane?"

"He had no right to take advantage of you." Mitch shook his hand and rubbed the top of his knuckles. "No right. Yee-ouch!"

Harry peered beneath Edie's breasts dangling over his face. Despite the ache radiating throughout his face and head, he couldn't help staring at the pearly white orbs sprinkled with delicate freckles and tipped with rosy brown nipples.

"Good grief, Harry. Can't you turn it off? The woman's had enough." Mitch leaned closer. "Edie, you're bleeding. For chrissakes, let me at him." Mitch reached down to pull Edie off Harry.

Edie stood on her knees pressing her hands against Mitch's chest. "It's okay, Mitch. Harry didn't hurt me." She glanced back at Harry. Her blush spread from her cheeks down to her milky breasts. "Really, he didn't hurt me."

"Then what the hell happened and why was he fucking you?" Mitch crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze running the length of Edie and lingering on the blood staining her inner thigh.

Guilt warred with anger filling Harry's chest. He shouldn't have forced himself on Edie, but the other man had no right to stare at her like that.

"Mitch, let us get some clothes on and we can talk," Edie said.

Harry sat up. "Yeah, we need to talk." He didn't want to talk, he wanted to punch Mitch, and then throw Edie back on the bed and make love to her some more. Her smooth body loomed next to him smelling of sex and wild flowers.

"Shut up, you bastard." Mitch shrugged Edie's hands off and brought his fists up again. "And don't ever touch her again. She deserves better."

"And you think you're better?" Harry pushed to his feet, at a distinct disadvantage with all his body parts exposed, but prepared to take on Mitch.

"Yeah, I do." Mitch's chest swelled out and he stepped closer.

"Enough." Edie shoved in between them with a hand on each man's chest. "Both of you get out of my bedroom."

Harry hesitated, not ready to back down.

Mitch held his ground.

Then the telephone rang, that odd chirping noise Edie had assured him was one of the ways they sounded in the twenty-first century.

"Fine. You can kill yourselves for all I care." She yanked the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around her as she dove for the phone on the third ring. "Hello? Mr. Baumgartner? No, you're not calling too late. No, I wasn't doing anything important." She shot a frown at the two men.

Harry focused his attention on Edie and her conversation. Why was her boss calling her at home? Instinct told him her boss's call was for more than curiosity.

"No sir, I told you what I knew back at the museum. No sir, I didn't stay much longer. I'll start work on it as soon as I get to the museum in the morning." Edie grimaced. "Early? How early? Yes sir. I'll be in at seven-thirty sharp. Yes, sir. Good night, sir."

Edie punched a button on the phone and set it on her nightstand. "How odd."

"What did he want?" The confused look on Edie's face made Harry's skin crawl.

"He asked me again if I found anything in the sarcophagus." Edie's gaze connected with Harry's. "He never calls me at home. And his voice was jerky, like he was nervous."

"Why would your boss be nervous?" Mitch asked.

"I don't know." Edie answered. "He had some woman call today about the find, but he didn't seem nervous then."

"Why don't you get your clothes on? I'll do the same." Harry didn't like the feel of this. He strode to her bedroom door and waited for Mitch to follow before he stepped into the living room and grabbed the clothes stacked on the couch.

Edie closed her bedroom door. "Something has to be making him nervous," she called through the wooden panels.

"Yeah, but what?" Harry wondered out loud. He slid his legs into a pair of blue denim jeans and pulled a stretchy shirt over his head.

"Hey, I'm gonna jump in the shower," she said. "See if you can find something to eat in the fridge."

"Fridge?" Harry looked across at the other man.

"Man, you are pathetic," Mitch grumbled, and jerked his head to the side. "Come on, let me acquaint you with the art of twenty-first century cooking."

Despite the mystery surrounding Mr. Baumgartner's call, Harry's stomach rumbled. "I guess I am a bit hungry. You sure you aren't going to poison me?"

"Much as the idea appeals to me, Edie would kill me if I poisoned you. When was the last time you ate?"

With a snort, Harry followed Mitch into the kitchen. "Over eighty years ago."

"Dude, you must be hungry."

"Yeah a little." He patted his flat stomach. "All that activity."

Mitch turned around. "You want me to punch you again?"

"Try it." Harry cocked an eyebrow, beginning to enjoy how easily Mitch rose to his bait. "I'll be ready this time."

* * * * *

Edie stood beneath the spray, letting the hot water soak into her sore muscles. Making love was a workout. Familiar with the treadmill and exercise bicycle, she hadn't realized sex worked an entirely different muscle grouping. She rubbed soap into her pubic hair and downward. Her labia and the entrance to her vagina were swollen and tender, a throbbing ache to remind her what she'd done.

Regret should have set in by now. But Edie couldn't regret Harry. He'd done her a great service saving her from a fate worse than death. Terminal virginity. She giggled out loud at her own silly musings. The sound echoed against the shower walls. She hadn't laughed much and giggling wasn't something an educated woman normally did. But it made her feel so good. Her mother had filled the house with laughter before she was murdered.

Thank God for the miracle that brought Harry to her. She would have gone all her life without ever knowing the wonder of mind-blowing copulation. And if he disappeared tomorrow as easily as he had appeared?

Edie's hand stilled over that special place. The spot he'd teased with his tongue—her own little point of pleasure. Could she replace that world-altering sensation by masturbating? Silently, she shook her head. Masturbation was no replacement for Harry.

But Edie had to get a grip. Would Harry have made love to her without the wish? No. Harry wasn't interested in her. The gorgeous hunk got wished into laying the poor ugly virgin because she couldn't get a man on her own. Good God, he must think her dismal.

Unexpected bile rose in Edie's throat. Did he pity her? Edie rinsed the soap away from her crotch, scrubbing and scrubbing until no trace of Harry or her lost virginity were detectable.

How could she face him? How could any woman face the man who'd "serviced" her because of a wish? He wouldn't have done it without the magic. He'd even said she was beautiful. But wasn't that also part of the wish?

Eddie knew her physical limitations. She stared at them everyday in the mirror. Her body was ordinary with slightly overlarge breasts and too-pale skin because of her cursed red hair. With her plethora of freckles, she'd never been beautiful like her mother had been, with her flawless olive tones and her jet-black hair. Roxanne Ragsdale had been the beauty in the family. Eddie had been some freak throwback to a distant red-haired grandparent. Damn genetics.

Ducking her head beneath the shower, Eddie stood with the water pummeling her face, washing away the tears she knew she could never shed in front of Harry or Mitch. She had to get tough. Face her humiliation with a smile, or at least with her shoulders back and her chin up. Okay, so a smile might be pushing it.

With a flick of her wrist, Eddie turned off the shower and dried her face and eyes with a clean towel. She'd help Harry find his friend. Then he'd leave and she could get back to life as usual.

The thought didn't settle her stomach and fresh tears pooled in her eyes. She blinked them away and pulled on her best defense. Drab clothing. Something truly boring to hide behind. Maybe Harry and Mitch wouldn't see her heart breaking if they couldn't see past the boring khaki and oxford cloth. She'd blend into the walls again like she had before Harry came into her life.

Eddie stepped into her room and stared down at the skirt and shirt she'd laid out. Yes, indeed. She was a drab sparrow next to Harry the swashbuckling, pirate-of-her-dreams peacock. She didn't stand a chance. Even if she offered him sex for free, she couldn't possibly interest him for more than a day. She didn't know how to please a man. Harry was the only man she'd known.

Doomed by looks. Doomed by experience. Two strikes against her. What was her third? No use borrowing trouble. She had enough trouble from that blasted green and blue bottle to generate a lifetime of sorrow.

Fortified in her shield of ugly clothing, Eddie stepped out of her bedroom to face her humiliation.

The room was empty.

Chapter Six

"So, what happened?" Mitch jabbed his fork into the blob of meat he'd insisted was Salisbury steak from what he'd labeled a TV dinner.

Harry wasn't so sure the lump was a steak of any kind. He cut a chunk off his and chewed, giving himself a chance to phrase his answer. "You were right. Edie wished herself into a bad situation."

"And you being there made it better?" Mitch slammed his fork on the table and pushed his chair back.

"What's your interest in Edie, anyway?" Harry took another bite of the gravy-soaked steak, ignoring the other man's posturing.

"I've known Edie for two years, you've known her a total of what?" Mitch glared at Harry. "Half a day?"

"You didn't answer my question." Was Mitch stalling with his answer? Did the man really have feelings for Edie?

"She's a nice girl...and naïve, and possibly gullible. I thought you'd gone out to save her, not rape her." Mitch shoved away from the table and stood.

Simmering anger flamed to rage—rage at Mitch's accusations and his own lack of control with a virgin. Harry slowly set his fork down on the table and, without looking up said, "Take it back."

"She doesn't know men." Mitch planted his hands on his hips.

"I didn't rape her." Harry lifted his head, his teeth clenched so tight enamel ground against enamel.

"Last week she was crying to me that she was still a virgin." Mitch said. "A moment ago you were all over her, what do you call it?"

"Making love." Harry held on to his calm, when he wanted to reach out and shove a fist in Mitch's face. "Not that it's any of your business. And in my time, men didn't discuss a lady in such a manner."

"And you expect me to believe you fell in love with Edie at first sight?"

"Is the idea so farfetched?" Harry asked without stopping to think about what his answer would be. Perhaps he was avoiding the question. "Or do you see Edie like she sees herself?"

Mitch's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Someone has made her think of herself as ugly and undesirable. Was that you?"

“No way.” Mitch shifted and stared off into a corner. “I told you, her father is constantly telling her she isn’t as pretty as her mother. In Edie’s mind, that translates to ugly.”

“It baffles my mind.” Harry shook his head, a vision filling his thoughts of Edie’s pale skin against the red satin sheets, her burnished copper hair fanned out on the pillow.

Mitch scrubbed a hand over his chin. “Got to admit, I haven’t seen her like she was tonight.” His eyes got that faraway look, as if he too was envisioning Edie naked.

Harry didn’t like that look one bit. “This food is vile.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “We still have a problem.”

“We do?” Mitch jerked his head side to side as if shaking off the effects of too much alcohol. “And the problem is?”

“I’m subject to living in a bottle for the rest of my life and at any moment, Edie might inadvertently wish for something else she can’t quite handle.”

“I think we need to get back over there to keep an eye on her.” Mitch strode to the door. “She should be done in the shower by now.”

The thought of Edie naked under a shower’s spray stood Harry’s cock at attention. For a moment, he hesitated, unable to step forward until he adjusted the crotch of his borrowed trousers. How mortifying to be instantly hard simply by the mention of Edie. Well, and the shower.

Mitch opened the door and held it wide glancing back at Harry. “Come on Casanova. Only this time, keep it in your pants.”

Uncomfortable talking with another man about Edie or his own lack of control, Harry refrained from responding to Mitch’s warning. He wanted to get back to Edie. She was his anchor in this crazy world he’d fallen into. And as much as he hated the thought, she owned him, and she wasn’t any more pleased with the idea than he was.

More frightening was what would happen next. He had no control over the granting of her wishes, but he knew he couldn’t deny her. Had she made any more wishes and he hadn’t felt them? Suddenly, he couldn’t wait to see Edie.

Mitch reached her door first and raised his hand to knock.

Before his knuckles contacted wood, the door swung open.

She stood there in much the same clothing Harry had seen her in the first time they met. A far cry from the vixen in the film studio. The only difference now was that her hair wasn’t pulled back into a tight knot. The silky strands hung loose in auburn wet waves over her shoulders and down her back.

“Oh good, I was just coming to look for you.” Her gaze skimmed right past Mitch as if he wasn’t standing a foot away from her nose. She looked beyond him to Harry.

A distinct sense of satisfaction filled Harry’s chest and the hotter, more primal feelings tugged his cock back to full staff. Edie was looking for him. Not Mitch.

The phone rang in the living room behind her.

"Come in while I answer that." Edie dove for the phone, her face a darker shade of pink than a warm shower could account for.

Had she been as affected by him as he was by her? Harry stepped past Mitch, allowing his smile to spill across his face.

"Don't push me," Mitch growled.

* * * * *

"Miss Ragsdale, this is Professor Johansson I found something interesting."

The strain in the older man's voice made the hairs rise on the back of Edie's neck. "What did you find?"

"I'd rather not say over the phone. Could you come by my office tomorrow at lunch?"

"Certainly," she answered when a million questions raced through her mind.

"Miss Ragsdale?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Does anyone else know about the existence of the stone?" His voice was lower, almost a whisper.

A prickle of something like fear shivered down Edie's spine. "Two other people that I know of."

"Do you trust them?"

Edie's gaze traveled from Harry to Mitch and back to Harry. She'd known Mitch for long enough to trust him, but Harry? "Yes, I do."

"Don't tell anyone else, at least not until you hear what I have to say."

"Yes, sir." Whatever he had to say must be important. Edie had never known Professor Johansson to withhold information about a find. "Are you all right, Professor?"

"Yes, yes." Now the man sounded distracted. "Protect the stone at all costs. Do you understand? Hide it. Steal it if you have to."

"What?" Edie's heart rate increased. Could he know she'd already "borrowed" the stone from the museum? But she never expected the professor to suggest she steal it. "What is this stone?"

"I'll fill you in tomorrow. I have to go."

Before she could say more, she heard a click on the other end of the line. Professor Johansson had hung up.

The clock on the wall chimed ten times, a quiet reminder of how late it was getting. Damn. Where had the day gone?

Her pulse still hammering in her veins, she turned to the two men and shrugged as casually as she could. No use getting anybody else upset. "Professor Johansson said he found something interesting about the stone."

Mitch's eyebrows rose. "Interesting?"

"Did he say what?" Harry looked incredible in the faded jeans Mitch had provided. A white New York Yankees T-shirt stretched tight across his chest and upper arms bulging in all the right places, emphasizing well-defined muscles. With his bare feet and shoulder-length hair, he could set any woman's heart on fire.

Especially Edie, who couldn't drag her gaze away. "No, he didn't. But he wants me to come by his office at lunch tomorrow. Speaking of which, I have to be at work by seven-thirty tomorrow morning. I need to get some sleep."

"What about the stone?" Harry asked.

"It'll keep until tomorrow."

"What about him?" Mitch jerked his head toward Harry. "You want me to put him up for the night?"

Edie shook her head. The mere thought of Harry leaving her immediate vicinity left her feeling cold and incomplete. "I'd rather have him close. For some reason, I feel responsible for him."

Harry leaned against the wall, his face impassive. "I don't want to be a bother."

"Too late," Mitch piped in. "Edie, I'm not sure about him staying here with you. You barely know him."

"That's right." Harry maintained his position against the wall. "I could be a murderer for all you know about me."

"I'll take my chances." Edie couldn't look away. For some foolish reason, she trusted Harry. And after what they'd shared, she was reluctant to let him out of her sight. Perhaps for selfish reasons, but she liked to think because he needed her in this strange new world he'd landed in.

"Do you want me to camp out here to be sure?" Mitch asked.

"That won't be necessary." Edie wanted Mitch to leave. But how could she say it nicely when he was trying so hard to protect her? She had to go against her nature, be blunt like her father. "Go home, Mitch. I'll be okay."

"I don't like it." He edged toward the door. When he moved past Harry, he glared. "Hurt her and I'll rip your heart out with my bare hands. Understand?"

"Go home, Mitch." Harry let a small smile curl his lips. "You don't scare me."

"I swear, I'll rip you apart."

Edie couldn't believe the way Mitch was acting so protective. He'd never done that before. What had gotten into him?

"I'm not going to hurt her," Harry said. The words were for Mitch, but he stared at her.

Warmth filled her chest.

“Call me if you need me, Edie.” With one long, last look, Mitch left, closing the door behind him.

Which left Edie alone with Harry.

Her heart rate jumped from normal to overload the minute the door clicked shut. Now what was she supposed to do?

She knew what she wanted to do. Edie Ragsdale wanted to make love with Harry. Just like they had in front of the cameras. Only this time, alone, in the privacy of her bedroom.

A glance around the room left other suggestions in her mind. The couch, the rug in front of the gas fireplace, the top of the dining table.

Her cheeks burned.

Harry pushed away from the wall and strode across the floor to stand directly in front of her. “I could go stay at Mitch’s, if it would make you more comfortable.”

Comfortable? Nothing about Harry was comfortable. When he was near, she itched all over – itched to be rid of her clothing – itched in a place she’d barely known existed prior to Harry’s expert tongue.

If he left now, she’d itch even more. If he stayed at Mitch’s, Edie wouldn’t have to feast her gaze on him every time she turned around. But she’d be up all night kicking herself for letting him out of her sight.

She spun away and pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks. What did she know about initiating sex?

Nothing!

Warm, solid hands clamped over her shoulders. She was pulled against a broad chest, her backside fitting snugly against the faded cotton of his jeans, the solid line of his zipper pushed against her bottom.

He was as hard as the stone of Azhi.

For her! Edie. Her heart banged against her rib cage. What should she do? She didn’t know how to be sexy. Hell, she’d missed the teenage lesson on suggestive flirting. Would she be too bold if she suddenly stripped down to her birthday suit and said, “Come on, baby, I’m all yours”?

Harry’s hands slid up her sides to cup her breasts through the cotton of her pinpoint oxford shirt.

Her nipples peaked into tight little beads. Did men like pointy nipples or was she better off with the full rounded areolas? Edie’s thoughts scrambled as Harry loosened each round, white button, one at a time.

When he reached the waistband of her skirt, he tugged the shirttail loose. Then he stopped.

To keep from wailing and gnashing her teeth, Edie held her breath. Had he changed his mind? Gotten bored with the game? Or, heaven forbid, come to his senses?

"Tell me no, Edie." His breath stirred the drying tendrils of hair, tickling the back of her ears.

Edie shivered.

"Tell me no, and I won't go any further."

No! Edie almost shouted, but swallowed the one word that could make her dream end. Instead, she forced air past the tightness in her chest, past the lump in her throat. "Don't stop."

There. She'd said it. Part of her wanted to spin around and see his face, read his thoughts in that wickedly black gaze. The other, less assured part of her wanted to close her eyes to keep from waking up. Alone.

With agonizing slowness, Harry eased the blouse from one of her shoulders, pressing a kiss to her bared skin.

Edie wiggled, hoping to dislodge the other side so the shirt would slip completely down her back. She wanted to be skin to skin with Harry. Not in a few minutes. Now.

But she wasn't experienced and didn't know if he'd like her flying out of her clothes. Maybe he wanted to take it slow, build up anticipation for himself.

Holy hell, Edie was already so tightly strung, she didn't know whether she could hold out much longer. She might explode and do something out of character like jump Harry's bones and force him to make love to her if he didn't speed things up a bit.

Harry's hands slipped beneath the underwire of her bra. Her head dropped back against his chest, as wave upon wave of hot pulses drummed downward to pool at the center of her sex. Her pussy wept her gratitude for Harry's magical hands.

Obviously her body knew how to react but Edie stood paralyzed, unable to move from the spot. She was afraid he'd stop what he was doing as soon as he figured out she didn't have a clue how to please a man.

Harry sighed and turned her around.

With her heart lodged in her throat, Edie was sure Harry's hesitancy was a bad sign. She was afraid to look into his face and see the boredom. "Oh, Harry, I know I'm not beautiful. You don't have to make love to me." She buried her face in the New York Yankees T-shirt. "I won't wish it this time, so you can back out anytime you want."

"What?" Harry's hands gripped her shoulders and pushed her away from him.

Cool air shocked her bare belly. Still, she refused to look into his eyes. "You heard me."

With a single, crooked finger, he lifted her chin. "I heard, but I can't believe what I heard. Why?"

"You don't have to make love to me this time. I won't wish it." She pushed his hands away from her and stepped back.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You only made love to me last time because I wished it.” Tears pooled in her eyes. She shrugged back into her shirt and pulled it tight over her chest. “I don’t want to force you to do anything against your will.”

“Oh, Edie.” He reached out again.

Edie took another step backward, her butt hitting the edge of the couch. “I may be less than desirable, but I’m smart.” Her chin raised a notch. “I have my PhD,” she said as if throwing a barrier in front of Harry.

“Your intelligence is only one of the reasons I find myself attracted to you.” He stalked toward her, his eyes narrow, calculating.

Without room to maneuver, Edie braced herself, trapped by the couch and the intensity of Harry’s gaze. “Why don’t you go away?”

“I can’t.” He took another step until he stood an inch away from her.

“Can’t?” Her lungs labored to suck in tiny little breaths in an attempt to fill the void his nearness created. She could feel the heat from his body without actually touching him. But she wanted to touch him, feel his skin beneath her fingertips. She wanted to lace her hands through gorgeous black hair and feel him between her legs, filling her, loving her.

“Don’t you remember?” Harry lifted a hand to brush a stray hair back behind her ear. His fingers paused against the pulse beating in her neck. “You own me. Besides you’d have to wish me away.”

“Oh that?” She cast her gaze around the room, disoriented and slightly giddy from lack of air. When his words sank in, her focus returned. “Oh yeah. You’re supposed to please me. It’s part of the curse.” Her head tilted back and her lips pinched together. “Rest assured, I won’t wish you to make love to me, again. You’re free to make love to anyone you choose. In fact, I’m sure you can find a much more attractive candidate. And more power to you!” What was wrong with her? Had she gotten diarrhea of the mouth? Didn’t she know when to shut up? Did she really want Harry to go out and find someone else?

Hell no!

“Oh Harry, this situation is impossible. I wouldn’t blame you if you ran screaming from my apartment. If you want to go stay with Mitch—”

Harry placed a finger over Edie’s lips stemming her unending flow of words. “Shut up, Edie.”

Her eyes widened. The rough texture of his finger stirred erotic heat in her blood and lusty thoughts in her mind. Gathering her nerve, she stared into his eyes and kissed the finger covering her lips.

Harry moaned and stepped closer.

When he ran his finger across her lower lip, Edie captured it with her teeth and sucked the tip into her mouth. Holy smokes, she’d never done anything so brazen.

And she liked it.

His nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply. With his other hand, Harry parted her blouse and trailed a knuckle over her belly and down to the button of her khaki skirt. With a single flick, the button loosened and Harry's fingers continued their descent, catching her zipper and tugging it downward.

When the zipper reached the bottom of its track, the skirt hung low over Edie's hips. A single yank and the skirt fell about her ankles.

Edie gasped as cool air smoothed over her warm thighs. The only barrier between her and Harry was a tiny scrap of silk bikini underwear.

Harry dropped to his knee and lifted first one of her legs, then the other, pulling the skirt aside and tossing it to a far corner of the room. He set her foot down, parting her legs enough to slide his hand up the inside of her calf, tickling the sensitive spot behind her knee.

Edie's skin was on fire and her pelvis rocked forward wanting him there. Anticipating the warm moisture of his tongue lapping at her sweet spot.

He pushed her legs farther apart and continued his journey up over her thighs. When he reached the edge of her panties, he glanced up into her eyes.

"Please," Edie moaned, completely humbled by him. She was willing to take him any way she could, her pride laid bare by the expectation of Harry shoving his cock deep inside her.

He dragged the lacy bikini over her hips and down her thighs. "You're beautiful, Edie. You're skin is so pure and white."

Like a freakin' ghost, she wanted to say, but at this point, she wasn't going to argue. She chose to keep her mouth shut in hopes he'd continue on with his lesson on sex.

"Your freckles are like little sprinkles of rich spice, begging to be tasted." He touched his tongue to the inside of her thigh and trailed it upward.

With the care of a master sculptor, he eased his hand over her hips, across her belly and down to part the folds of her labia exposing her to his view. Then he blew a tight stream of air over her pulsing clit.

"I can't stand it anymore." Edie widened her legs and laced her hands through Harry's ebony hair. "I want you."

"And I want you." Harry licked her.

Raw bursts of electricity flicked through Edie's nervous system and she moaned louder. "Oh, Harry, you're killing me."

"I want you, Edie, because you're beautiful, sexy and smart." He flicked her clitoris repeatedly with the tight tip of his tongue.

Edie rode high on a wave of desire, Harry's words a mere glimmer on the edge of her consciousness. "Ohmigod, Harry. This feels like heaven." She burst over the edge, her thoughts tumbling like the flecks of colorful confetti in a kaleidoscope.

He kept her there by laving her over and over until the pleasure was almost painful. Then he rose to his feet.

Eddie collapsed against him, gasping for air and a return to this galaxy.

Harry wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, then he tipped her chin and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth.

The taste of her on his lips reminded Eddie of the wonder of his ministrations. She ran her hands over his chest and realized he'd never shed a stitch of clothing. Here she was in nothing but an open shirt and bra, and Harry was completely dressed. For a moment she felt deliciously naughty. Then she felt embarrassed and inadequate.

Wasn't she supposed to have undressed him? She slid her hands down over his chest, across his flat stomach to the metal button of his jeans.

There, his hand stopped hers. "You don't have to."

"But I want to please you like you pleased me." That he'd stopped her, took the wind out of her sails, the confidence out of her actions, but she forged on, increasing pressure against the rivet. With a huff of frustration, she struggled against the rivet, not quite able to undo the damned thing.

With a kiss to the top of her head, Harry grabbed her wrists. "I don't think we should do this. You'll be sore from earlier."

"But—" Eddie stared up into his face. Then she snapped her hands away from his jeans, suddenly feeling like a gawky teenager on her first date. All her misgivings returned.

Was this his way of telling her he wasn't that interested in what she had to offer? All Eddie's doubts raced back in place. Harry didn't want her. She wasn't desirable enough. Hell, he was a man. Wouldn't all men take any screw they could get, even if he had to bag her head so he didn't have to stare into an ugly face? Maybe that was it. She needed to be bagged.

Dropping her chin to her chest, she backed away clasping her hands together. "It's okay, besides, I'm tired, I need to get some sleep...work and all...you know."

"Eddie..." Harry reached out to her but she evaded his hands and darted for the doorway.

"No really, I'm exhausted. But let me get you a pillow and blanket." She dashed into her bedroom, snatched a pillow from her bed, a blanket from the closet shelf and ran back into the living room. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Before Harry could say anything, she'd closed the door between her bedroom and the living room. Not that a solid wood door would provide enough separation between her and Harry—not when he permeated every one of her waking thoughts. The guy would probably fill her dreams as well. The sooner she got him out of her life, the sooner she could get back to her normal, safe existence.

Chapter Seven

Harry tossed on the narrow couch until the beeping sound in Edie's room signaled the end of an interminable night. Every time he'd closed his eyes, he could see Edie's pale, freckle-dusted skin against red satin. Then he'd get hard and frustrated and no way he could sleep after that.

Sounds of feet hitting the floor and running water drifted through the wooden panels, and he could imagine Edie preparing for work.

Strained and exhausted from lack of sleep, Harry gave up, tossed the blanket off and lumbered to his feet.

The telephone chirped on the table next to the couch and Harry practically jumped out of his skin before he realized what it was. Who would call this early in the morning? Where had manners gone in the last eighty years?

The water was still running in the bathroom and the telephone continued to chirp. Should he answer or leave it alone? He hadn't actually used the telephone since he got here. They looked a far cry different from the ones he'd seen back in his time. But they basically functioned the same.

He lifted the handle he'd seen Edie talk into and pressed it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Edie?" a man's voice said into Harry's ear. "No, this is Harry."

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

"No, Edie's in the shower. Is there something you need me to tell her?"

Quiet created a void in Harry's ear and he almost thought he'd lost the connection.

"Are you the gigolo my daughter's shacking up with?" the man demanded.

So this was Edie's father, the man who'd made such a beautiful woman feel ugly. The hackles rose on the back of his neck. If the other man were standing in front of him, Harry would be hard pressed not to punch him. Since he was a guest in Edie's home, he refrained from saying what he thought and concentrated on answering the man's question. Although a little confused by the older man's phraseology, he'd gotten the gist. "If you mean am I staying here, yes."

"I thought so." Another long pause. "Tell her to call me back." The words weren't a request, they were a command. The line clicked and a solid bell tone filled Harry's ear.

"Was someone on the phone?"

Harry swung around at the sound of Edie's voice.

Wearing a blue-green robe her hair wrapped in a towel, she looked young, fresh and entirely too kissable.

Harry's cock stirred before she spoke again, his body too quick to react to her presence. He hoped she didn't notice the way his zipper bulged out in the jeans he'd slept in. "It was your father."

With her auburn eyebrows wrinkling, she bit her lower lip. "What did he say?"

"What is a gigolo?" Harry asked.

Eddie rolled her eyes. "He never gives up. It's a man who takes money for sex."

"Like a whore?"

"Yeah, a male whore, I guess you could say."

A smile curved his lips. "I think I've been insulted."

"Yes, most likely, knowing my father." A lopsided smile slid up one side of her cheek.

Harry wanted to kiss her even more. "He wanted you to call him."

She pulled the towel from her hair and rubbed at the damp tresses. "Did he say why?"

"No."

Eddie pulled the telephone from Harry's hands.

When her fingers brushed against his, shockwaves passed up his arms and straight downward to his groin. The fresh scent of the floral soap she used in her shower drifted beneath his nose. He should be ashamed of his thoughts. As Mitch had pointed out, Eddie had been a virgin only yesterday and Harry had taken that away from her. Now, all he wanted to do was take her again and again.

His fists tightened as he repressed the urge to reach out and take her in his arms. Damn it, what did he have to offer her? He didn't have a job in this century nor did he have a place to live. And he'd run into the same issues he had with his former fiancée – he liked to live a life of adventure in faraway places and austere conditions definitely not a place for a woman as refined as Eddie Ragsdale. She'd probably never even been on a campout.

Eddie punched at the numbers on the telephone and chewed on her bottom lip.

"What's he still doing there, Edith Ragsdale. I know I taught you better." Mr. Ragsdale's voice blasted so loud, Harry could hear every word he shouted at his daughter.

With a sigh, Eddie held the phone away from her ear tapping her toe as the man continued his tirade. When the shouting died down, she pressed the instrument to her ear again. "Why did you call, Dad? Just to ream me out about having a man in my apartment?"

Harry couldn't hear his response this time and he tried hard not to eavesdrop, but he couldn't help it.

Eddie's face paled. "What did you say?" She listened, gripping the phone until her knuckles turned white. "You heard this on the morning news?" She sank onto the couch. "I don't believe it. And the security guard? Will he live?"

Harry abandoned his pretense of not eavesdropping and stood in front of Eddie his gaze intent on her face.

"Dad, I need to go. I've got to call Mr. Baumgartner. Yes, I'll be careful. No, I'm not kicking the gigolo out. I know, I could get diseases or pregnant. I know gigolos sleep with hundreds of women." Her lips pressed together for a moment and finally she burst out. "Goodbye, Dad." And she clicked the button marked "off".

"What happened?" Harry sat beside her on the couch.

Staring straight ahead, she shook her head side to side in a slow, dazed motion. "There was a break-in last night at the museum." She turned to him, her eyes widening. "They killed Carlos and his dog. I knew them. Carlos had a family, two girls and a boy. Oh God, why did this have to happen?" Eve buried her face in her hands, and sobbed.

Harry pulled her into his arms and rocked her back and forth, smoothing the hair from her face.

When she'd spent her tears, she looked up at him. "I have to call Mr. Baumgartner."

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

"Yes, yes. I need to find out what happened." She pressed the numbers on the telephone, yanked a tissue from a box on the table next to her and dabbed at her nose. "Mr. Baumgartner, this is Eddie." With a frown denting the skin above her nose, she listened for a few moments. When she said her goodbyes and hung up, she turned to Harry. "I'm not going to work today since they have the warehouse closed to all traffic until the police complete their investigation."

"What did Mr. Baumgartner say about the break-in?"

"Nothing was disturbed but the sarcophagus."

"Damn." Harry had hoped to go back there today to search for clues about his friend Will.

She walked away from him and back. "What do you suppose that means?"

"I'll bet my last dollar someone is after the stone of Azhi."

"But why?"

Harry paced across the floor, raking a hand through his hair. "The stone is supposed to grant great power to whoever commands it."

"But it only works for the woman who frees the man in the bottle."

"We know that now, but only after experiencing it."

Eddie stared around her apartment. "I'm at a loss. What do we do now?"

Harry stopped pacing. "When do we meet with Professor Johansson?"

"At noon." Eddie snatched another tissue from the box and blew hard into it.

"Any chance of going earlier?" It wasn't like Harry to stand around and do nothing,

he needed action.

"No, the professor teaches classes at the university in the mornings."

Perhaps they could learn more about the stone on their own. "Is there a library we could go to?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is." She strode to her room calling out over her shoulder, "I'll be just a minute."

Ten minutes later, she emerged wearing a moss-green sweater dress that hugged every curve of her body in the most enticing way.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. "Wow. You look terrific."

"This is one of the dresses my mother left me." Edie brushed an imaginary speck from the skirt. "She was a model, but I don't look anything like her."

"I'm glad." He wanted to pull her into his arms and run his hands over the smooth lines of the dress and her hips.

"Why?"

"Because then you wouldn't be who you are." Harry grasped her hands in his and lifted them to brush his lips to her fingertips. "And I think you're beautiful."

Her pale skin blossomed a deep rose, and her green eyes sparkled. "You say the darnedest things, Harry Taylor."

"Nothing but the truth, madam." Harry slid the light jacket Mitch had provided over his shoulders. It fit tight against his muscles, but he didn't have anything else. The loafers were another matter altogether. Mitch's feet were slightly larger, making them slip off the ends of Harry's heels as he walked, slapping noisily behind him. Oh well, beggars couldn't be choosers. "I really detest being beholden to you and Mitch for room, board and the clothes on my back. A man should be able to provide for himself."

"It must be tough, coming from another century. I wish you were more comfortable with money and clothes of your own."

Harry's skin tingled and he waited for, and wasn't disappointed, when thunder rumbled and the building shook. He braced his feet to keep from falling.

Edie grabbed onto the back of the couch, her eyes wide, one hand clamped over her mouth. "Uh-oh. What did I do?"

When the rumbling quit and the earth stood still once again, Harry stared across at Edie. At least neither one of them had disappeared. But what had changed? She'd made a wish.

"Ohmigosh, Harry!" Edie pointed at his chest, her mouth trembling before she burst out laughing.

Harry glanced down at himself. Instead of the jeans and the too-tight jacket, he wore a pinstriped suit of the kind he would have worn back in his time. Black-and-white patent-leather shoes fit his feet perfectly and he felt his head. A hat! A very large grin spread across Harry's face. "Clothes!" He patted his breast pocket and unearthed a wallet stuffed full of money. "Baby, when you wish, you do it right."

She darted a look around the room. "I'm waiting for the axe to fall."

"What do you mean?"

"The last wish I had didn't quite turn out the way I'd imagined."

"True. But this one was right on target."

"You may think so, but those clothes are what people nowadays wear to costume parties." She shrugged and smiled. "But who cares? This is New York City."

"Where people dye their hair blue and wear earrings in their noses. I should fit in fine." He offered his elbow to Edie. "Ready to go to the library?"

She smiled and slipped her arm through his. "Why not?" She'd worn her hair down in a loose knot at the back of her neck. Flyaway strands curled around her chin, the auburn tresses a beautiful contrast to her pale skin.

Harry leaned over and kissed the end of her nose.

Edie dipped her head, blushing. "Why did you do that?"

"Just because." That little peck was only the tip of the iceberg. He wanted a whole lot more, but was afraid he'd scare the fool out of her. Besides, when they solved his little problem with the bottle, where would that leave them? He'd go on to other, more adventurous pursuits and Edie would stay in her safe little museum, where she couldn't be stung by scorpions, threatened by bandits or ravaged by him. As much as Harry wanted to toss her to the carpet, ram his cock deep inside her, and love her until sunrise, he needed to remember Mitch's advice and keep it in his pants.

* * * * *

Edie strode along the streets of New York with her chin up holding the arm of the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen in her life. People stared at her and Harry and actually smiled. Not the smirky grins she'd expected, but real smiles. Wow. This must be how it felt for her mother walking down the streets of the city being admired by thousands of people.

Sometimes Edie really missed her. When she was alive, she always brought the sunshine into any room she was in. When she'd died, the light had gone out in Edie's life, but mostly in her father's. He'd worshipped the ground her mother walked on and the blow had been too much for him to recover. Edie didn't blame him for taking it out on her. She was the closest one to him.

The warmth of Harry's arm brushing against her breast pushed her morbid musings to the side. He was so tall and gorgeous, other women stared as they passed by. When he shortened his stride so that she could keep up, Edie felt treasured and utterly feminine. By the time they'd reached the library, she was in a full lather of desire. What was wrong with her? A simple walk down the street shouldn't have that effect on her. When they stepped through the doors, her gaze scanned every aisle, searching for a little privacy. Maybe he'd kiss her again. Maybe she'd kiss him.

Her heart fluttered. Could she be so bold? Would he reject her again? Please God,

no. Did she have the nerve to initiate a kiss in as public a place as the New York Public Library?

Her breathing quickened to the point she thought she might hyperventilate if she didn't get a handle on her sex drive and quick!

"Let's check for new information on the legend of Azhi." Harry stood in the middle of the lobby. "Wow, this place is huge. Where do you suppose the card catalog is?"

"Right here." She led him to a computer kiosk and keyed into the search box, "Azhi." In the blink of an eye, twenty lines displayed identifying the names of books, authors and locations. "Looks like they're all in the research section. Come on."

Edie led Harry up to the research floor and past several aisles until she came to the one indicated on the computer. "Here we are." As early as they were to the library, the floor was empty and this aisle of reference books was perfect for her to initiate a little kiss. She walked to the end of the row of books and turned toward Harry.

He had stopped halfway down the aisle and was reading the bindings. "I think this is one of the books." He pulled the tome from the shelf and held it up for her to see.

Instead of taking the book, Edie wanted to stomp her feet. He was half an aisle away and not paying the least bit of attention to her. How was she supposed to have her way with him if he wasn't even close? She unbuttoned one of the buttons at her neckline exposing a little more cleavage.

Harry thumbed through the book in his hand. "See here? It says that the Azhi symbol is the two-headed dragon. He's considered to be evil, the devil."

"Is he?" Edie dropped her voice into a low and, she hoped, sultry tone. "Is that all you see?"

Her double meaning was completely lost on Harry. His nose was firmly stuck in the book.

Edging closer, Edie unbuttoned another button, this time revealing the lacy edge of her bra.

"Look, Edie. It says the stone was thought to be located in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains of Iraq," Harry read aloud from the book. "In 1924, a team of anthropologists sent word to America that they'd found the tomb of Vashti where rumor had it the stone was buried. After that report, the team was never heard from again and their location remains a mystery." He looked up, his brown-black eyes shining, a faint flush spreading into his tanned cheeks. "That was my team."

Edie's body was practically on fire and Harry didn't even see her. What did she have to do to attract this man, tie a twenty-ounce steak around her neck? She didn't know how! With a ragged sigh, she reached up to refasten her gaping neckline.

Harry's hand stilled her fingers. "Don't."

Her breath rasped in her throat. Afraid to look up, but more afraid not to, Edie raised her head.

"It was a dumb idea," she whispered.

“No, I’m just sorry I didn’t think of it first.” He pressed her hands to her sides and raised his to caress the swell of her breasts. “You set my soul on fire, Edie.” Harry bent to press his lips to the pulse beating out of control in her neck.

With a moan, Edie arched her back and pressed into Harry. Yes! Her heart rejoiced. She was exactly where she wanted to be and Harry wasn’t rejecting her.

His lips slid downward until they skimmed across her collarbone and lower still. When he touched his tongue to her breast, Edie couldn’t stand it anymore. She had to explore her own talents at this sex thing.

Pushing aside his suit jacket, she rested her hands on his hip and dug her fingers into his waistband. With her breath caught in her throat, she slid her fingers around the front to the large round metal button of his fly. Did she dare unfasten it? Could she? Struggling with the finicky button, she twisted and tugged to no avail. With impatient movements, she jerked his shirt loose and tried to dislodge the button again. Where her fingers tucked into his pants, she could feel the springy hairs of his lower torso. He wasn’t wearing underwear.

Edie’s heart skipped a beat and quickly made up for the lost pressure by ratcheting into over a hundred beats a minute. Her panties dampened in a second. Ohmigod. She wanted to make love with him, here. Now.

Harry reached down, and pushing her hands aside, released the button and lowered his zipper revealing a distinct lack of briefs or boxers. Harry was going commando.

Freed from the tight confines of the zipper, his cock sprang free into Edie’s waiting hands. He angled her back into a corner so that anyone approaching from behind him wouldn’t see their clothes were open.

Her fingers closed around the velvety smooth skin, his heat warming her chilled fingers.

With a moan, Harry pushed one of her bra straps off her shoulder and the lacy cup down to fully expose her breast. “I can’t get enough of you, Edie.”

“Oh, Harry.” She ran her hands over the length of him, regretting that they weren’t in her room, naked and dancing in the sheets.

Moving over the gentle swell of her breast, Harry dropped his head to suck the beaded tip into his mouth.

Edie moaned and cupped his balls, kneading the flesh. She leaned close to his ear and whispered something she never thought she’d whisper to a man, “I want you inside me, now.”

His head jerked up and he stared into her eyes. “Here? Now?”

A thrill shivered down Edie’s spine. She’d never done anything so daring before in her life and the exhilaration she felt with her hands on his cock in a public place was her undoing. “Yes.”

Harry backed her down to the end of the aisle as far from prying eyes as he could

get her. He bent to kiss her full on the lips delving deep into her mouth, warring tongue against tongue.

Eddie felt naughty. Even more naughty than she had on the set of the porn film. There, the audience expected them to be naked and fucking. Here, she was supposed to act with the decorum of a proper citizen. And she wasn't. A little devil on her shoulder urged her on. She lifted her skirt, hooked her hands in her panties and slid them down to her ankles, kicking them off.

Harry dragged in a ragged breath, cast a furtive glance around the end of the bookshelves, then closed in on her. He backed to the end of the aisle up against a table and reached beneath her thighs to lift her onto the edge. With a steady look, he said, "We can stop now, if you want."

Eddie shook her head and spread her legs, inviting him in. His cock pointed upward, pulsing with his need. He was excited by the thought of fucking her where anyone might discover them at any moment, and that made Eddie all the more determined to make it so. If only she knew what the hell she was doing? The last time they'd been together, he'd performed all the foreplay. Eddie wanted to reciprocate, and drive him wild with passion. But how? What did a man like? What made him crazy with need? Okay, even crazier than his hardened cock already was? Eddie had no idea.

"I wish I had more experience at lovemaking," Eddie said, aloud.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and the table beneath her shook.

"Oh, Eddie, what have you done?" Harry's voice floated away from her as darkness engulfed her world.

Chapter Eight

“Step aside. Move yer bloody arses!” A dirty man with blackened teeth, a scraggly beard and breath that could make a camel retch, pushed a line of equally repulsive men out of the way. Then he leaned into Edie’s face and breathed a putrid stench against her lips. “As the first mate, I have the right to go first.”

The fog and darkness immediately left Edie’s mind. Just like in her dream, she was stripped of her clothing and tied to the main mast of an ancient pirate ship. Around her a hundred bloodthirsty pirates leered, their tongues hanging out of their mouths as if drooling over that twenty-ounce steak Edie thought she’d have to tie around her neck to attract a man. So, she’d been wrong. She could attract a man, or men, just by standing in front of them naked.

Tugging at the ropes chafing her skin, her arms strained against the bindings. “What do you want with me?” Duh, dumb question.

“We be wantin’ to give ye that experience ye was wishin’ for, missy.” The first mate grabbed both her breasts in his meaty hands, squeezing as if they were office stress balls.

A cheer went up through the mass of males.

“I’ll be next!”

“Then me!”

“You’ll have ta wait yer turn!”

One man punched another in the eye.

Edie winced and jerked to the side in an attempt to dislodge the pirate’s grip. “Keep your hands off me, or I’ll—”

“Or ye’ll what? Call out the British navy to save yer pretty arse?”

The first mate grabbed her thighs and shoved her legs open. Then he cupped her ass in his hands and rammed his trouser-clad cock up against her pussy.

As he struggled to untie his britches, Edie got a foot between them, braced her back against the hard wood of the mast and shoved with all her might.

“What the—” The pirate sailed backward into the throng of men knocking six over before he came to a resounding crash on his backside, his head connecting to the hard, wooden deck with a dull thunk.

Edie, breathing hard, had no time to spare. Other pirates moved in as the first mate stumbled to his feet.

While more hands pawed at her breasts, Edie squeezed her eyes shut and said, “I wish Harry were here to save me.”

At the first familiar rumble of thunder in the distance, Edie opened her eyes. Just then, the ship lurched to the side. Pirates tumbled across the deck, a few falling overboard. If not for the ropes holding her to the mast, Edie would have been thrown to the deck, as well.

When the ship leveled in the water, only rocking with the gentle swell of the ocean, some of the pirates fished their mates out of the water while the others circled around her once again.

This time, the first mate wasn't leering. He rubbed at the back of his head. "You'll pay fer the lump on me head, wench." He struggled to open his britches.

Edie forced herself to laugh out loud, even while her stomach flip-flopped and she fought her gag reflex. Maybe if she humiliated him, he wouldn't be able to perform. "You aren't serious are you? Why you're probably so inconsequential the rest of the men will laugh."

The first mate scowled down at the strings he fought to open and paused. He looked as if he had some doubts.

Edie almost crowed with her minor victory.

Then the pirate's jaw hardened and he moved closer. "You'll suck me cock until it grows as big as me fist, do ye hear?"

A sword swished by Edie's face to halt with its point lodged near the first mate's groin. "Touch her again, and I'll slice off yer bullocks and tie them to the crow's nest for the gulls to feast on." The warning was delivered in a low, even, blessedly familiar tone.

Edie's pulse jumped.

Harry stood beside her bare-chested, his gleaming muscles tanned and rippling in the warm salty air. Long dark hair hung down to his shoulders, capped by a flamboyant black hat turned up on one side with a long white ostrich plume dipping over the top. Black, skintight pants hugged his crotch, emphasizing the swell of his magnificent cock. The spitting image of her imaginary lover, Black Bart, Harry was glorious.

The filthy pirate gulped, his hands dropping to his sides. "I wasn't gonna do nothin' to hurt the wee lass. Honest, Capt'n."

With a deep scowl, Harry flicked the tip of the sword, piercing the man's skin enough to draw blood. "Next time you touch my woman, I'll not threaten. Now get out of my sight."

"Aye, aye, Capt'n." The first mate and all the rest of the ship's hands scurried off to the far corners of the vessel.

Which left Harry and Edie alone together at the center of the craft.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Edie said. "The wish just slipped out."

Harry turned his brown-black gaze onto her, skimming her from the tip of her flyaway red hair to her red polished toenails. "I've a mind to teach ye a lesson." His voice washed over her in the singsong pattern of a pirate. The tip of his sword pointed between her breasts and drew a faint line down her belly, over her navel to the edge of

the rust-colored curls covering her womanhood.

A thrill of anticipation ran the length of her spine, settling in her lower belly. The cold steel didn't cut her skin, but the promise it implied lay open her desire. She wanted him more than she'd wanted anything in her entire life, more even, than her father's approval.

Creamy cum oozed from her pussy as Edie strained against the ropes. "Please, Harry, don't tease me," she begged. "I'm on fire. Untie me, please."

"I'll untie ye, all right. Only if ye do as I tell."

"Anything!" Was she really that desperate for him? So desperate she'd beg?

Hell yes!

He stepped behind her and, with his sword, sliced through the ropes holding her wrists, one by one.

Once free of the restraints, Edie sagged against Harry's chest. "Thank you, Harry. Thank you for bailing me out once again."

"We're not through yet. I've a wish to grant, and you have a promise to keep." He spun her out of his arms and slapped her ass. "March, woman!"

Unwilling to leave his side and be fully exposed to the gazes of the hundred men again, Edie hesitated. "Where to?"

"My cabin, of course." He slapped her other butt cheek with enough force she lurched forward.

Leers and murmured remarks accompanied her naked march across the decks of the ship. She couldn't believe Harry would make her walk naked in front of the rest of the crew. Where had the kind stranger gone?

Anger straightened Edie's shoulders and she tossed back her hair. She'd be damned if she shrank away from these men in front of Harry. If he wanted to parade her around on the deck in front of all these pirates, she'd show him. As far as she was concerned she was on a modeling runway, just like her mother—proud, beautiful and unconcerned by all the people staring. Although her mother had worn a few more items of clothing on her body, the theory was the same. Edie could do this.

She forced one foot in front of the other strutting like a model, her hips swaying suggestively from side to side. Maybe she'd get a rise out of the lofty captain while she was at it. When she reached the door leading to the captain's quarters, the men on deck were in a full lather, wolf-calls, whistles and crude comments rising into the air. Edie paused, swiveled at the hip to flash a full round breast, winked and blew a kiss to all of them.

Feet thumped the wooden planks and the shouting rose to a raucous crescendo.

Her point made, Edie strode into the captain's cabin and turned to face her rescuer, or perhaps he was her new captor. The little confidence she'd gained on her march naked across the deck led her into the next action.

Harry tossed the sword on a desk and turned to lock the door behind him.

Eddie used the time he had his back to her to snatch the sword from the desktop and move in close.

"I don't know what you were trying to prove out there—" Harry turned, his words freezing on his lips when he realized what she had in her hands. "What's this?"

"I want you, Harrington Taylor the Third. And I mean to have you." She pointed the sword at his britches. "Take them off."

"Be careful with that thing." He crossed his hands over his groin. "It can hurt a man."

With her head tipped to the side, she feigned a look of one who was cool, collected and completely in charge of her body and possibly his. "Precisely. So, are you going to take them off or am I going to cut them off?" A step closer and the tip of the sword snagged the fabric of his trousers. She hoped he wouldn't move the wrong direction. She didn't want to hurt him unintentionally.

"I'll take them off!" He untied the string holding the pants up and slid them down over his hips to the floor. When he straightened, he stood straight, naked and incredibly handsome in nothing but the hat with the crazy plume. "There, are you happy? Now will you put that down?"

"On one condition." Eddie was having a hard time breathing, much less making her mouth form actual words. If she sounded a little breathy, oh well.

"Which is?"

"You tell me what pleases you and you let me...perform." There! That wasn't so hard. Eddie held her breath and awaited his response. Would he reject her?

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Is that what all of this is about?"

"I want to please you. But I don't know how." She set the sword back on the table, her cheeks flaming. How embarrassing to have to ask a man to teach her how to please him.

Harry grabbed her arm and turned her slowly to face him. He tipped her chin up until she looked him in the eye. "If that's all you wanted, why didn't you just ask while we were back in the library?"

"I didn't know how. I just wished I already had the experience."

"So you wish yourself into a situation where you're almost raped by a hundred pirates? Eddie, Eddie, Eddie." He kissed the tip of her nose, her cheek, her chin and finally her lips.

Eddie swayed toward Harry, craving the feel of his skin against hers. Her hands slid up to tangle in the hair at the nape of his neck.

Harry leaned back, sucking her lip between his teeth and then letting it go. "Although, I must say I was proud of the way you held your own with the first mate."

Her breasts swelled with his praise. Or were they swelling with her desire? Who cared? Now, she wanted to learn more about what could make him as horny as he made her. "Okay, where shall I begin pleasing you?" She slid her tongue across his top

lip and then snagged his bottom lip between her teeth. When she released his lip, she leaned back. "How's that?"

His brow raised a notch. "Good for a start."

She nipped his chin and twirled her tongue along the solid line of his collarbone. "Am I getting warmer?" With her thumb and forefinger, she pinched the hard brown beads of his nipples. Did it feel as good to him as when he played with her breasts? Then she followed with her tongue, tasting one then the other, the salty flavor of sea and man igniting her own fires to fever pitch. She licked a trail down to his belly button, bending at the hip to get to it.

Harry reached around and curved a hand over her ass to slip a finger into her pussy.

Eddie straightened, her eyes wide. She'd been concentrating so hard on Harry, she'd forgotten about her own needs.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, without removing the finger.

"No." She considered the sensation of him entering her from the rear and her pleasing him simultaneously. "Actually, it feels good." She bent to her task of trailing kisses and little nips down his chest toward his belly button. When she almost tipped over, she dropped to her knees in front of Harry. This angle opened her mind and her mouth to an entirely different set of options.

His penis stood erect, the veins laced back and forth across the shaft to the purplish-red tip. Directly in line with Eddie's face. She reached out to explore its length, savoring the velvety softness of the rounded head, pausing to trace the opening with her fingernail.

His cock jerked acknowledgement and a drop of cum squeezed through the top.

Eddie stared up at Harry. "Do you like that?"

He moaned. "Oh, yes. I do indeed."

She leaned forward to taste his essence.

Harry laced his fingers into her hair and pulled her back. "You're killing me, Eddie."

A smile curled the corners of her mouth. Although she was on her knees in front of this man, a surge of power washed over her. She had control of this lovemaking session, more than she'd realized. And she didn't need a sword. Her hands would do. And her tongue. And...

Caressing the rounded swells of his scrotum, she ran her tongue up the length of his shaft from base to tip. "What about this? Does it make you tight?"

Harry threw back his head, his fingers convulsing in her hair.

She did it again, this time swirling from side to side on her path upwards.

Another drop of cum oozed through the hole.

"You like that?" Eddie didn't recognize her own raspy voice. And she couldn't resist taking his cock full into her mouth. He was big and she had to flex her jaws to

accommodate his width. How far could she take him in? She reached around his firm buttocks and pulled him into her mouth until his cock touched the back of her throat. Pulling back, she licked the tip again, then swallowed him into her mouth. This time he added pressure to the back of her head and he pushed his cock in.

She liked how hard his cock was and the salty, musky taste of him sliding in and out of her mouth. But she wasn't satisfied; her cunt ached for his touch. Edie circled his shaft with one hand, and slid her other down her own belly until she found her clitoris, flicking at it to stimulate her own need.

"Let me." Harry pulled away from her mouth, hissing when his cock slid free. He dropped to his knees cupping her pussy in his hand.

"But I want to please you at the same time." She reached out to circle her hands around his warm, moist cock.

"Honey, you're pleasing me so much I'll burst before you've had your fill."

"In that case..." Edie pushed to her feet and strode across to the bed. "Let's get comfortable."

She sat on the side of the bed and, tentatively at first, spread her legs. "Would you like it if I talked nasty?"

Harry's eyes widened and he clambered to his feet. "I don't know, I've never had a woman talk nasty to me."

Rubbing her fingers between her labia, she pulled at her clit like she'd seen done in the x-rated videos. "Not in all your travels?"

"No. Just a lot of heavy breathing, moans, groans and a few ear-splitting screams, but no colorful language."

"Then come over her and..." she inhaled deeply, and then breathed, "fuck me." Before Harry, Edie had never even considered saying the f-word. Now, she wanted to use it all the time. She wanted him to fuck her all the time.

But her command had no effect on him. Instead, Harry crossed his arms over his chest and stood like Mr. Clean, bulging chest muscles, wicked smile on his face, only naked and very sexy. "I'm the captain here, just who's giving the orders?"

Edie recognized the teasing in his voice and quickly joined his game, marveling at her own wantonness. "I suppose you are, but what kind of captain lets his captive remain untouched?" She dipped her fingers into her creamy cum and trailed it up to her clit, spreading her nether lips to expose the hard little nubbin of pleasure.

Harry's eyes widened and his chest heaved in and out, his breathing rasping in his throat. Finally, he dropped his arms from the arrogant pose and marched over to the bed. "You're absolutely right. What kind of pirate doesn't fuck the pretty lady? Wrap yer legs around me waist, wench!" He adopted the pirate lingo again.

Continuing to stroke herself, Edie raised an eyebrow at him. "And if I don't?"

"I'll be forced to punish you."

A shiver skimmed across Edie's skin, raising gooseflesh. This teasing was new to her, and she liked it. Liked it a lot. Their verbal sparing was more adventure than she'd had in her entire life. "Will you spank me?"

"Aye." Without blinking an eye, he flipped her onto her stomach, her hips draped over the edge of the bed.

Edie squealed and fought to turn over. The unexpected movement caught her off-guard and she fought on instinct, not fear.

"Be still, wench!" He slapped her bare ass, the blow stinging, yet not too painful.

Her skin burned where his hand had left its mark.

"Spread your legs, woman," he commanded.

When she hesitated, he slapped her other cheek. Edie quickly spread her legs wide. A little shy about having her ass exposed to him, she pressed up on her hands attempting to stand.

With a gentle hand, he pushed her back to the bed. "I'm not finished with ye, lay down and do as yer told." Then he leaned over her, cupping her backside with his front. Molding his skin over hers, his cock pressed between her cheeks, and he nibbled at her neck. "There are ways to please a man, Edie," he whispered into her ear.

"Show me."

"That I will, pretty lady. Or me name ain't Black Bart." Sinful laughter filled the room.

Blood pulsed its molten way downward to swell in Edie's vaginal walls. She was ripe, ready for his entrance, craving his release inside her.

When he straightened away from her, she backed up until the crease between her buttocks nudged against his hardened shaft. She wanted him to mount her, like a male dog humping a bitch. To pump her hard and fast. "Please, Harry, take me," she moaned.

"Not yet, I want to prepare you." He leaned his thighs against the backs of hers, his coarse hair causing friction to her sensitized skin. Then he slid his thumbs between her cheeks, and parted them to expose her anus to the air. He drew a line with the tip of his finger from the tight round hole to dip into her weeping pussy.

Edie moaned, and pushed back against his fingers. Coated in cum, his fingers continued downward to stroke the folds of her labia sliding between the lips to the swollen clit screaming for attention. Edie's legs shook, her knees threatening to collapse beneath her. How much more could she take before her body shattered into a million pieces?

Then Harry lowered to his knees to replace his fingers with his tongue. Twirling around the tight opening of her anus, he followed the same path as his fingers, dipping into her vagina to lap at her nectar. He flicked his tongue deep inside her and wrapped his lips around her sucking her.

Eddie tensed, silently wishing she could watch his journey, while savoring every wild sensation he was generating in her cunt. Harry moved lower and sucked hard on her clit.

A cry escaped her and Eddie gripped the bedclothes in her fists, fighting to contain her orgasm, wanting to prolong the ecstasy. Alas, she lost the battle and plunged over the edge, falling into a chasm of brilliantly flashing lights and shards of pleasure piercing her pussy in pulsing spasms.

Still, Harry tongued her clit stretching the pain, the wonder for as long as she could physically stand it. Finally, she cried, "Uncle!"

"Uncle?" Harry ended his onslaught and stood, leaning over her. "Uncle?"

"Yes, uncle," she wept into the sheet. "I couldn't take any more."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Yes. No." Eddie managed to push herself over onto her back. "As you put it before, you're killing me."

"Good, that's what a pirate is supposed to do." He leaned over her and pressed a kiss to her throat, his cock nudging against her cunt, slipping in to fill her. He pushed deeper until he was buried fully within. "Now, I can have me way with ye." With a nip to her earlobe, he straightened and wrapped her legs around his waist. He held her hips in his hands and pumped in and out, raising her, yet again, to the lofty heights of mindless orgasm within seconds of the last.

Just as she reached the top, Harry jerked to a halt, his chest thrown out, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He held his breath while his seed spewed into her, his cock pulsing against her inner walls, while her inner muscles clenched milking him for every last drop.

His hands squeezed her buttocks, the muscles across his chest rippled in the dim light filtering in through the windows. Harry collapsed over her, pressing the air from her lungs. Without pulling free, he lifted her up, sliding her across the mattress until they lay side by side, his cock still buried in her.

He reached across and smoothed her hair from her face, the touch oddly endearing after the wild ride he'd just given her. She liked the pressure still inside her, the hot, sticky heat between her legs. Eddie leaned into his hand, pressing a kiss to his palm and sighed. "I could fall for a pirate like you, Harrington Taylor the Third."

A chill swept over her skin as Harry's cock slid free.

Had she really spoken her thoughts aloud?

"Eddie." He turned her to face him.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I can't seem to keep my big mouth shut." Was this the rejection she'd expected all along? Would he pull the age-old fuck-n-dump on her?

"It's okay. You didn't say anything wrong. It's just that I'm not the guy for you."

"Why, Harry?"

“You need someone who isn’t tied to a bottle, a stone and a curse. Even if all that wasn’t a current part of me, I don’t have anything to offer you.”

“Did I ask for anything?” Tears welled in her eyes. This really was the brush-off. Her first lover, and he was already pushing away from her.

“No, but a man has the obligation to provide for his woman. A home, an income, a house with a white picket fence.”

Brushing a tear aside, Edie fell back on the only weapon she could muster. Anger. “I don’t want a home, I’ve already got an income and an apartment. Why should a man feel like he had to provide for me?”

“It’s his duty. And I’m not cut out for that kind of responsibility. I’m an archeologist. I’ll always be searching for another treasure, roaming distant continents in very unsavory conditions. A man can’t expect to take his woman into such an environment. It’s not fair to her or him.”

“Is that how you see our relationship? A duty. An obligation?” Edie pushed away from Harry and stood up beside the bed, yanking furiously at the bedsheet. “Fuck you, Harry. I don’t want your obligation or your duty. All I wanted was a little roll in the sheets. I’ve gotten that, now you can get the hell out of my life.” She hated that her voice crumbled into a pathetic whisper, tears choking off her words. With a desperate yank, she pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her body, covering herself from shoulder to toes, her back to the man who was well on his way to breaking her heart.

“Edie?” He stood behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Leave me alone, Harry. I’m not your obligation. You’re not responsible for my happiness. I’m a big girl. I don’t need you.” She shook free from his hands and walked across to the small windows.

“Ships ahoy!” Muffled shouts sounded through the walls of the ship. A loud boom split the air and the entire ship shuttered.

Fists pounded against the door to the captain’s cabin, rattling the sconces on either side. “Captain, we’re under attack, we’re under attack!”

Another boom rent through the shouts outside. This time the floor beneath Edie’s feet shook so hard she dropped to her knees. A loud crack sounded outside the door.

“She’s going! The mains’l is hit!”

Harry’s eyes widened and he leapt to cover Edie’s body with his, smashing her to the floor.

With barely enough breath to keep blackness from consuming her, Edie managed to say, “I wish we were back in the library.”

The crashing sound of the huge mast smashing through the ceiling above, mingled with the rumble of thunder. Edie closed her eyes, hoping she hadn’t made her wish too

late. Splintered wood fell around them, glass from the nearby windows exploded sending lethal shards flying through the air.

With a grunt, Harry's body jerked above her and he went limp, his weight resting fully on Edie, cutting off the remaining airflow from her lungs. As blackness consumed her, she thought, what happened to Harry?

Chapter Nine

A faint glimmer of light entered the inside corner of Harry's left eye. Not much, but enough to prod him awake. When he shifted to stretch, sharp pain laced across his shoulder. He winced and moaned. What happened? That's when he realized the soft form below him wasn't a bed, but the blanket-clad body of Edie Ragsdale. They were back in the library lying on the carpeted floor between rows of reference books.

He rolled to the side ignoring the sore shoulder and hovered his mouth next to hers, feeling for breath. His own caught in his throat until a faint, warm puff of air tickled his upper lip. Thank God! She was alive. He ran his hands over her arms looking and feeling for any wounds or broken bones. Her skin was so cold.

Why was she so cold? He chaffed her hands between his, trying to rub warmth back into her fingers. How long had he been laying on top of her, smothering her to death with his body?

Cool air wafted across Harry's backside, reminding him he had less on than Edie in her blanket and perhaps in just as much trouble, although of a different kind, since they were back in the library. Then he remembered the incredible passion he'd spent with her, the crazy games they'd played and her willingness to try new and exciting things. All to be shattered by an attack on the pirate ship that almost got her killed.

Damn this magic! How could he keep Edie safe if she kept wishing herself into impossible situations? What if she got herself into a bad spot and couldn't wish him there to bail her out? He'd have no idea where to look or even when. This wishing thing was insane and had to end before Edie got hurt.

A pale, slender arm, sprinkled with a light dusting of freckles, reached up and a hand cupped his cheek. "Why so serious?" Edie's sleepy smile warmed him from the inside out.

He turned his face into her palm and kissed her. "In case you haven't noticed, we're back at the library."

"Ummm..." she stretched, her back arching like a satisfied cat, her breasts falling free of the blanket's edge. Halfway through an incredibly large yawn, her eyes widened and she sat up straight, tugging the blanket up to her chin. "The library? The New York City Public Library?"

"Uh-huh." A grin slipped across his face.

Her astonishment made her green eyes sparkle and a soft, rosy flush spread up her neck into her cheeks. Damn Harry's eyes, Edie was beautiful and her father should be horsewhipped for telling her anything different. Of course, her father hadn't seen her like Harry had – all of her.

She leaned to the side, peering down the long aisle of books to the main corridor and dodged back behind the end. "There are people on this floor," she whispered.

"More than likely. I believe the time is now ten o'clock in the morning."

"Holy crap!" She clapped a hand over her mouth. "You're naked!"

"So are you, my dear. Deliciously so, although you do have the comfort of a blanket to ward off the chill in the air."

"Where are our clothes? My dress!" Edie lumbered to her feet, tripping over the blanket into Harry's arms.

When Edie grabbed his shoulder to brace herself, Harry winced.

"What's wrong?" She spun him around and gasped. "Omgod! You're injured."

"Can't be that bad, it only hurts a little." He attempted a shrug but it turned into a cringe, belying his words.

"You've a gash on your shoulder. We need to get you to a hospital."

"I'd rather not at this point." The longer he stood naked, the more conspicuous he felt.

"Why not? If you got it on that pirate ship, no telling what kind of hideous germs you picked up. That place was disgustingly filthy."

"You didn't seem to mind so much." He circled her waist with his arm and pulled her to him. "Still mad at me?" With the thin blanket the only barrier between him and Edie, Harry's body reacted immediately.

For a moment her body stilled. Then, eyelids drooping over gray-green eyes, Edie leaned into him and rubbed her thigh up his leg to nudge against his hardened shaft. "Did you enjoy your little snack? Want to continue on to the four-course meal?"

With a groan, Harry leaned over to nibble on her neck.

Edie placed a hand in the middle of his chest and shoved. Hard.

Harry stumbled backward, his injured shoulder crashing against a bookshelf. "Yow! What did you go and do that for?"

"I don't need you, Harry. I don't need you to save me from every mess I land myself in, and I don't want you to keep assigning yourself as my unwanted bodyguard. I'm not your obligation, and I didn't ask for picket fences. Things are a little different in the twenty-first century than they were where you come from. Women don't have to wait for a man to tell them when they can blow their nose. We've got a take-charge and don't-fuck-with-me attitude. So leave me alone!"

Harry was totally taken off-guard by her attack and just as completely turned on by her conviction and determination. The fire in her eyes practically lit the shadowed corners of the library. "How would Mitch say it? You go, girlfriend!"

Edie's breasts rose and fell beneath the thin blanket, her mouth skimmed into a tight line.

“Excuse me, but would you mind holding it down? We are in a lib— Oh my!” A gray-haired lady in orthopedic shoes blanched white and staggered backward.

Startled by her appearance, Harry turned to face her, giving her a full frontal.

“Oh my!” The older woman clapped a hand to her mouth her white face suddenly flooding with mottled red splotches. Her gaze went from his chest to his groin and she gasped. “Oh my!”

Edie jerked her arm sideways spreading the blanket wide to cover Harry’s vital parts, only to expose her own. Caught in a battle of open-close-open-close, Edie finally gave up and wrapped the blanket around herself, darting a withering glance at Harry.

As if she couldn’t turn away, the lady backed slowly in the direction she’d come. “We don’t allow naked people in the library, sir. You’ll have to wear clothes or—” she glanced down at his cock, again. “Oh my.”

He couldn’t win. With nothing but his hands to cover himself, Harry jerked a book off the shelf and opened it in front of his groin. At least the old lady wouldn’t get another look at his puckering penis. If she said “oh my” one more time...

“Oh my.” At the end of the aisle, she darted a look both directions. “I’m afraid I’ll have to report this to security.” And then she raced away.

“We have about two minutes before somebody shows up to throw us in jail. Come on, we have to get out of here.” He reached a hand out to her.

Edie shook her head. “You’re on your own, buster. I wish I were back in my apartment.”

“Edie!” Harry shouted as thunder rumbled, the lights dimmed and the floor beneath his bare feet shook.

When the lights glowed back to life, Edie was gone, and Harry stood naked in a public library with nothing but a book to cover him.

The old woman’s voice drifted through the stacks of books. “They’re just around that last bookshelf.”

A male voice answered, “Don’t worry, Miss Peabody, I’ll take care of them.”

His heart leapt into his throat. Harry had to get out of there before someone decided to throw him in jail for exposing himself in the library. Surely, even in as strange a place as New York City, they didn’t allow naked men in public places. As the security guard neared the end of his aisle, Harry slipped back the way from which the guard had come.

“I don’t see nobody back here,” the guard called.

Harry leapt to the end of the next set of shelves and ran halfway up the aisle toward the center walkway. He stopped and listened.

“Oh my!” Miss Peabody stepped across the end of the row a hand fluttering to her throat, her eyes shifting downward. “Oh my! He’s—” Her voice squeaked and she cleared her throat. “He’s over here!”

Booted feet thumped across the floor. Harry didn't wait to see his pursuer. Spotting a red, lettered sign with the words EXIT written in large bold print, Harry spun in that direction and took off at an all-out run.

"We've got a stalker on the third floor. I repeat—" the security guard was shouting.

Harry slammed into a metal door. He didn't stop long enough to read the warning sign. As soon as the door cracked open a piercing screech rent the air, warbling over and over. Great, he'd set off some alarm.

Every security guard in the building would be onto him before he had a chance to make it to the bottom floor. How many security guards did a public library need? But then they would expect him to go down. Harry hesitated only a moment and then took the stairs upward two steps at a time climbing one floor after the other.

When he reached the fourth floor, he collapsed against the door and pushed. The heavy metal didn't budge, locked from the other side. Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs below, pounding their way upward. Harry dragged a deep breath into his lungs and sprinted upward.

A door burst open on the seventh floor when Harry was halfway up the fifth flight of stairs. Black boots and the blue-gray uniform of a security guard appeared between the stair rails.

Harry spun and ran back to the fifth floor door, hoping it wasn't locked like the last one he'd tried. He shoved hard.

Damn, it was locked.

Now he had three choices, he could go up the stairs and plow into the guard coming down, go down the stairs and use gravity to knock his pursuers over or he could give up and go along quietly, be thrown in jail and have nobody to bail him out. He braced himself and prepared to take on the least of the evils.

"Hey freak! We have you surrounded."

* * * * *

As soon as she got her bearings in her own bedroom, Edie dropped the blanket she'd grabbed aboard the ship and slid into her blue-green silk robe. Then she paced her bedroom floor chewing her thumbnail, still angry with Harry. When her nail came off between her teeth, she spit it across the room. Damn! She hadn't chewed her nails since she was thirteen. And it was all Harry's fault.

Had she asked him to be her protector? Well, she'd wished him to save her twice from dire circumstances. But that didn't mean she wanted him to feel *obligated* to take care of her. Ever since her mother died, she'd been taking care of herself. She sure as hell didn't need a man to provide for her. And she wasn't afraid of adventure. Was she? She picked up the pacing again, nibbling on another nail.

On her fifth pass in front of her warm comfortable bed, she couldn't help envisioning Harry standing in his birthday suit in the cold aisles of the library, the shocked librarian running for assistance.

He had helped her out of more compromising situations. But Edie had deserted him when he needed her most. So, he didn't care about her as much as she did about him. And yes, she did have feelings for the jerk, but that was beside the point. He didn't owe her anything, but she sure as heck owed him two times over for saving her ass. Her mind tumbled over her dilemma—should she save Harry or let him fend for himself?

At that moment, she noticed her perfumes were tipped over on her dresser. What the heck? She hadn't knocked them over and Harry had left with her. She pulled her drawers out one by one. Underwear and bras lay in a tangled mess unlike the usually color-coordinated rows. Edie raced to her closet and flung open the doors. Hangers hung askew, dresses and skirts were piled on the floor.

A loud thump shook the floor beneath her feet and rattled her closed bedroom door. Holy shit! Whoever had been in her bedroom was out there in her living room. Buried in trivial personal problems she hadn't noticed the disturbance outside the haven of her bedroom.

Her heart leapt into her throat when she realized her telephone was out there. She couldn't call the police without it. Inching toward the door leading to the living room, Edie pressed her ear to the wooden panel. She wanted to wish Harry back to go out there and chase away the bad guys. But damn it, then she'd be depending on him yet again. When she wished him back, she'd do it to save his butt, not hers.

With her breath frozen in her lungs, Edie pressed her ear to the door. The heavy wood paneling muffled the crashing sounds of furniture being overturned, shattering glass and deep rumbling voices muttering curses. With another nail sacrificed to the nerve gods, Edie stood wringing her hands trying to decide whether to hide in her closet or make a mad dash through the small living room to the outside door. She'd be a fool to place herself in danger. The closet looked like her only choice until the men either found what they were looking for, or left.

Once more, she pressed her ear to the door and listened. No sounds came from the other room. Had they gone? Dared she go out and use the phone to call the police? Maybe they could get here before the criminals completely disappeared. Her hand hovering over the doorknob, Edie hesitated, then inched the door open and peeked through the crack.

She gasped. Son of a bitch!

Couch cushions were tossed across the room, slashed down the middles. Kitchen knives were left stabbed into the backs of her wing-backed chairs. Her best butcher knife was buried in the front door with a note wedged beneath.

Her heart beating like a tom-tom in her chest, Edie threaded her way through the mess, a cold shiver snaking down her back. She leaned down to pick up a broken photo frame with the only picture she had left of her mom, dad and herself when she was six

years old. Thank God the picture was still intact. But the rest of her stuff was a shambles, completely ruined.

What did they want? Why had they destroyed her apartment and everything in it?

A thick arm clamped around her throat, a meaty hand shutting off the air to her mouth and nose. Edie's heart stopped for a moment then beat wildly against her chest. Oh damn. How quickly her perspective changed from worrying about things to worry about her life!

With the prospect of suffocating a very real possibility, Edie erupted into a crazed frenzy clawing at the dark-skinned arm holding her against the wall of a man behind her. Her feet flailed, landing blows against his shins. But the man didn't budge and her bare feet made no difference to the vise over her mouth.

Soon, her vision blurred and her struggles ceased, blackness creeping around the edges of her vision. No. She couldn't pass out. Perhaps, if she cooperated, they'd let her go.

Her head spinning into darkness, Edie went limp.

"That is better," a low voice said against her ear and he loosened his hold on her nose.

With the desperation of a dying woman, she sucked air through her nostrils into her burning lungs, replenishing her oxygen-starved brain cells.

"Where is the Stone of Azhi?"

All this—she stared around at the ruins of her apartment—was about that stupid stone she'd found in the sarcophagus at the museum? Her life had been turned completely upside down by the Stone of Azhi? Some days it didn't pay to get out of bed.

"Where is it?"

And she was supposed to answer with a hand clamped over her mouth?

The hand loosened enough she could move her mouth. Blood flowed into her lips. "I don't know where the stone is." And she didn't. Harry had it last.

"You will give us the stone or your boyfriend will die."

Harry? Edie's gaze bounced off the corners of the room she could see around the suited arm. Harry wasn't here. He was comparatively safe back at the library where she'd stranded him. She was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the door to her apartment burst open and another burly man with the dark, swarthy skin of a Middle Easterner pushed Mitch in, his hands bound behind his back, a slash of silver duct tape over his mouth. He was barefooted, his normally tailored khaki slacks were wrinkled and his polo shirt hung loose from his waistband.

"Mitch!" Edie surged forward only to have the arm around her throat tightened and pull her snug against the goon's, curry-scented body. "They haven't hurt you, have they?"

Mitch shook his head.

Edie noticed a dark bruise and a lump above his right temple. He'd been hit but he was putting on a brave front for her. Her stomach ached with dread. These guys meant business and probably wouldn't blink an eye over killing her or Mitch.

"Now, are you going to give us the stone? Or do you want us to kill him?" The man she had as yet not seen said behind her. His arm tightened, making breathing difficult.

"I told you, I don't know where it is." With as deep a breath as she could muster beneath the iron clamp over her neck, she prepared to launch her wish for Harry to return and save the day.

But, before she could get a word out, the man's hand clamped over her mouth again. "Well, you better find it, and quick. If you don't bring the stone to the alley behind the museum at 11:00 p.m. tonight, without the police, your friend dies."

Oh no, not Mitch. She shook her head violently beneath the man's clutch. *Please don't take Mitch.*

"We're going to leave now. If you scream, he dies. If you call the police, he dies. If you don't show up with the Stone of Azhi, precisely at 11:00 p.m., he dies." The man squeezed tighter around her throat. Again, the foggy edges crept around her vision and she thought she would really pass out this time.

Just as her knees wavered and started to buckle, her tormenter released her and disappeared with his partner and Mitch through her apartment door.

Edie slipped to the floor, her legs giving up the struggle to hold her up. She tilted her face upward, fear twisting in her gut and tears trickling down her cheeks.

They'd taken Mitch and they might kill him.

Pushing to her feet, she raced to the door and peered down the deserted hallway. What could she do? Who could she call, if she couldn't call the police?

Then she remembered her ability to wish. Quick, before they could hurt her friend, Edie closed her eyes. "I wish Mitch were here and safe."

She listened.

No thunder. The floor remained steady beneath her feet. What was wrong? Every other time she'd made similar wishes they'd come true?

The stone and the bottle. Maybe they had something to do with the magic. Where had Harry hidden the stone and the bottle?

Edie spun in circles wondering where to start looking. If the bad guys had torn her apartment to pieces and hadn't found the stone, how was she supposed to find it? Harry must have hidden it good. She had no other choice but to bring Harry here to help. But only because he might know where the stone was, otherwise she could have handled this kidnapping herself.

Right? Wrong. She hated to admit it, but she'd feel a whole lot better if Harry was around.

"Harry, much as you torment me, I wish you were here with me now."

Chapter Ten

The ensuing rumble of thunder ignited her nerves and she scanned the room, barely able to breathe.

When Harry appeared before her, he was crouched in a defensive stance. He swung at her, catching her on the chin. Edie jerked backward stumbling over the upside-down coffee table to land on her backside, all air forced from her lungs.

"Edie!" Harry knelt beside her and gathered her in his arms. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I thought you were one of the guards."

Edie smiled up at him. "I guess I deserved that for leaving you behind." She rubbed her chin, flexing her jaw back and forth. "Did you really call me sweetheart?"

"Of course I did. I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No," she lied past the ache in her jaw. She'd have a bruise for sure, later.

As he helped her to her feet, he looked around. "What happened here? Do a little redecorating?"

Still rubbing her jaw, Edie's lips trembled and huge tears welled in her eyes, spelling out the corners to trail down her face. "Oh, Harry. This whole situation is a mess. The stone, the curse. What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean? I can help you clean up the apartment. These are only things." He gathered her into his arms and wiped the tears from her face with the edge of her silky robe. "I'm here now. Everything will be all right."

"No it won't," she sobbed and sagged against his naked chest.

"What more could be wrong, darling?"

His hand slid up and down her back, soothing, comforting and incredibly sexy. "They took Mitch." Edie's voice caught on a sob and more tears fell, wetting the curly, stiff hairs tickling her cheek.

Harry's hand stilled in the small of her back, his grip flexing until she was pressed firmly against him from hip to shoulder. "They want the stone, don't they?"

With her hands flat against the wall of his muscles, she pushed back and stared up into Harry's face. "Oh God, Harry, they'll kill Mitch if they don't get it. What are we going to do?"

"Can't you wish him back here?" Harry's hands covered hers, warm and reassuring.

"I tried." Edie shook her head. "Nothing happened."

"Try again, with me here."

With a deep breath, Edie closed her eyes. "I wish Mitch were here with us." Once the wish was made, she opened her eyes and stared around the room.

Harry tilted his head as if listening. "No thunder."

"And the room isn't shaking." Edie chewed on her bottom lip. "It didn't work."

"Now is not a good time for the magic not to work." Harry found what was left of the clothing Mitch had brought over and slipped into a pair of sweats.

A startling twinge of disappointment tweaked at Edie. She liked it when Harry was naked, and the more he was naked, the more comfortable she was with all those exposed muscles and... Well, comfortable might not be the exact word. Openmouthed drooling closer fit the description. Completely horny and turned on probably summed up how she felt around a nude Harry. Even now, with Mitch's life on the line, she was unable to turn away from the tempting view of the smooth curve of Harry's buttocks as he bent to place first one then the other foot into the legs.

"We know so little about the magic's limits or power," she said to break the silence and her concentration on his fine fanny.

"What can we attribute to it so far?" Harry slipped a T-shirt over his head pulling it down over his flat stomach, covering all that distracting tanned skin. *Get a firm grip, Edie*, she admonished herself. A man's life is at stake. "I seem to be able to wish myself to and from different places."

He planted his fists on his hips, his feet spread wide. Even in sweats and a T-shirt, with his hair curling wildly about his forehead, he looked like a dark god, ready to wreak havoc on mortal females. "And you're able to wish for me to go places and do some things," he said.

Like make mad, passionate love to her? She nodded, temporarily mute with her mouth going bone dry. A vision of bright lights and red satin sheets imposed itself on her mind. She forced herself to push the memory to the back of her thoughts. Not an easy task. "Is it limited to the two of us?"

"I'd say so. Try someone else?"

Not that she wanted him here at this time, but Edie said, "I wish my father was here."

No thunder, no earthquake-like floor shaking. Edie's gaze met Harry's and they both shook their heads.

"When are we supposed to meet up with the kidnappers?" Harry asked.

"Not until eleven o'clock tonight." A long time, and no telling what they were doing to Mitch. She hoped he was all right. He was in this situation because of her.

"And what time is it now?"

"Almost noon." Edie clapped a hand to her forehead. "The professor! We're supposed to meet him at noon in his office. Maybe he'll have some information we can use to figure out the situation."

Eddie picked her way back through the mess into her room and snatched clothing from the floor of her closet. She tossed her robe onto the bed and dug in her drawer for underwear, cringing that someone else had had his filthy hands on her intimate apparel. When she got back, she'd have to wash everything.

"You want me to close the door? Or do you always dress in front of gentlemen you've only known a day?"

In the process of sliding a pair of black, lacy panties up her thighs, Eddie froze, her attention shifting to the man filling her mind and the only exit from her small bedroom.

Harry leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, his bare feet crossed at the ankles. He'd raked his hair back from his forehead, but it hung in waves down to his shoulders, giving him a rakish air, like one of the models on the cover of a historical romance novel.

Awareness swelled low in Eddie's belly. But the professor had news for them, and she still wasn't totally over her being mad at Harry. Close, but not totally. She couldn't deny her desire for the man, but she didn't want him to feel obligated toward her. Nor could she blame him for shying away from commitment, after traversing almost a century in time. And getting popped in and out of the present and the past, he didn't have any sense of normalcy to offer a woman.

Come to think of it, what exactly did she, Eddie Ragsdale, want? Over the past twenty-four hours her life had changed and despite the dangers and craziness, she didn't want to go back to the way it had been before Harry smoked out of the bottle.

Okay, so she'd cut him some slack. But not much. And while she was at it, she could dish out a little of the torment he'd treated her to while dressing in front of her. "I don't mind you watching. You're not going to stick around anyway. Why should I care?" With slow deliberation, she slid the panties the rest of the way up her legs. Her hands continued upward to cup her naked breasts, tweaking the nipples. If she'd been told a day ago she would be standing in front of a stranger, trying to entice him by playing with herself, she'd have laughed herself into a heart attack.

She wasn't laughing now. But she was getting a rise out of her intended target.

From beneath her lashes, Eddie could see the tent Harry was making out of the stretchy fabric of his sweats.

He stood straight, his eyebrows furrowing low on his forehead.

Eddie grinned, tossed a sweater over her head and pulled it in place over her braless chest. She never went braless. A little more endowed than many woman, going without restraint was entirely too conspicuous and Eddie had made a life out of being invisible. What was coming over her? Had she lost all sense of propriety that she'd consider going out in public unleashed? Hell, she'd been naked on the film set of a porn movie and also in New York City's Public library, why not? And why should she worry about dressing in appropriate clothing? A man's life was in danger. Her state of undress was low on the totem pole of importance. Eddie sighed, as much as she wanted to tease Harry, Mitch's life could depend on what the professor had to say.

She pulled on a pair of corduroy slacks and shoved her feet into tennis shoes. "Come on." Brushing by Harry, she inhaled his musky scent and almost had second thoughts. The man tempted her. When she reached the middle of the living room, she planted her hands on her hips and stared around at the mess, without seeing the amount of work it would take to clean up. "Where's the stone?"

Still leaning in the doorway to her bedroom, Harry's gaze had followed her the short distance through her apartment. "Hidden in Mitch's apartment. Do you have access to his place?"

"Yeah." Edie strode across the littered floor to the kitchen, opened the freezer and retrieved Mitch's key from beneath a package of frozen chicken.

Harry grinned.

Before Edie made it back across the room, the phone rang. With everything turned upside down, it took her and Harry several rings to locate the handset.

"Hello," Edie said.

"Miss Ragsdale?" The voice was familiar, although thin and raspy as if the man was gasping for air.

"Professor Johansson?" A chill prickled along the fine nerves over her spine.

"Don't come," a gurgling cough erupted over the line. "She already came by."

"Who came by? Professor Johansson, are you all right? I'm calling 911."

"Too late." Another racking cough.

Oh shit! Oh shit! Dread filled her belly, threatening to consume her in a huge panic attack. "No, it can't be." The nice old man couldn't be dying. He was her friend. One of the only friends she had in this huge city filled with people.

"Need to know about the stone." The professor hacked into the phone. Each cough grew weaker and filled with a burbling sound.

Tears welled in Edie's eyes. Professor Johansson had been her mentor for all the years she'd known him. He was a smart, gentle man who wouldn't hurt a soul. And Edie knew without seeing him, he was slipping away. "Let me get help for you," she begged.

"The stone."

"To hell with the stone." How could he think about the stone when he needed a doctor? Wanting to hang up and dial 911, Edie held on, afraid to let the professor go. Afraid he wasn't going to make it anyway.

"No...must protect it from her."

"Her?" Edie couldn't make any sense out of the professor's words. "Who are you talking about?"

"Can't break...curse until you have all ...pieces back together."

"What pieces?"

The wheezing grew weaker. "Bottles and stone must be returned to Vashti before spirit can rest. Don't let Danorah get the stone. Too dangerous...in wrong hands."

"Who the hell is Danorah?" Edie asked. "Professor Johansson?"

No answer.

Edie's heart lurched in her chest and banged against her rib cage. "Professor?"

At first she thought he'd hung up, but she could hear the fading sound of his breathing until even that fell silent.

She hung up and dialed 911. "My friend needs help."

"May I ask who is speaking?" the dispatcher asked.

"Edie Ragsdale. But it's Professor Johansson who needs help."

"And where are you calling from?"

"He's not where I am, I think he's at the university and he needs help, now."

"Where are you calling from, ma'am?"

"Oh, never mind." She hung up and called Professor Johansson's secretary. "Mrs. Gladson, please send someone to check on Professor Johansson. I think something terrible has happened to him. Please hurry."

When she hit the off button, Edie walked straight into Harry's arms. "I think he's dead. Whoever has Mitch probably killed the professor. Just like they killed Carlos. What are we going to do?"

Harry held her close to him for a few moments, smoothing his hand over her hair and down her back. Then he bent and scooped her up in his arms. "Until it gets darker, we can't do much. We need to take some time and think about it."

"I don't even have a chair to sit on!" Edie wailed, snuggling into Harry's shoulder, her arms looping around his neck. In his embrace she felt protected, warm and safe.

He strode through the tiny apartment to her bedroom and sat down on her bed with her still in his arms. "We'll find Mitch and everything will be all right." For a few more moments, he rocked her holding her like a baby. Then he set her on the bed beside him. "Stay here and relax. I'm going over to Mitch's to get the stone and the bottle."

When Harry tried to stand, Edie grabbed his wrist. "I want to go with you." She didn't want him out of her sight. People she knew were dying all around her. She didn't want Harry to be one of them.

"I'll be fine. I'll be back in two minutes."

"Promise?"

He kissed the end of her nose and nodded. "Promise."

While waiting for Harry to return, Edie finished off the remainder of her fingernails and wore a spot in the carpet beside her bed. And that was only after the first minute!

As soon as she heard the doorknob jiggle, she flew through the bedroom, leapt across the disaster she once called her living room and barreled into Harry's arms.

Subtle? Maybe not. Did she care? No a single iota. Harry, with his too-long hair and brown-black eyes, was back.

And he wasn't pushing her away, despite his commitment-shy comments. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and held her close until her body quit shaking.

"I was only gone a minute or two." He laughed into her hair pressing a kiss to the tip of her ear.

"Three," she grumbled into his T-shirt.

"Okay, three." Harry's hands slid beneath the sweater she wore. "Did you think I wasn't coming back?"

"The way things have been going, I didn't dare think." Warm tingles spread across her belly where Harry's hands crept upward. Edie had difficulty remembering what Harry was saying. When his fingers reached her bare breasts, thinking no longer was an option. All Edie could do was experience the sensations Harry induced.

"Does this mean we have a truce?" he whispered against her hair, pressing his lips to the side of her neck.

"Yes." She kissed his chin and stood up on her tiptoes to press another to his lips. "And I won't expect anything from you except a little help saving my friend tonight."

He sucked her bottom lip and nipped at it playfully. "And you won't leave me standing naked in the library again?"

Edie shoved his shirt up to press a kiss to his chest. "Ummm...can't promise that."

"No?" He tipped a one-sided grin at her, his hands sliding up to fully cup her breasts. "No promise?"

Edie closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. As her chest filled with air, her breasts pressed into Harry's hands. "Okay." She opened her eyes and stepped closer. "I won't leave you naked in the library again." Plastering a smile on her face, she tried a little of Harry's magic and tucked her hands down the back of his sweats cupping his bare butt. With a sharp squeeze, she brought his tented front flush with her belly. "We have until dark. Do you want to do it here or shall I wish us onto a pirate ship?"

"No pirates..." He pressed his lips to hers. "No ships..." He nibbled on her chin. "No libraries with security guards..." With both hands on the hem of her sweater, he ripped it up and over her head, tossing it to the carpeted floor. "No magic...except..." His shirt came off and joined hers on the floor. "The magic we create in bed." Scooping her into his arms, he carried her into her bedroom, tossing her onto the mattress.

"What? You don't like a little adventure?" Edie eased her zipper downward.

"I think I've had enough of that kind of adventure in the past twenty-four hours to last me awhile."

Getting into the teasing mode she'd learned on the pirate ship, she pouted and slowly zipped her pants up again. "Too bad. I thought you were more the adventurous type." Feeling a little wicked with the cool air tickling her bare breasts, she realized she

liked exposing her body to Harry. At least he treated her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world, even if she wasn't.

And as she'd expected, his hand stopped her slow progress upward. "Maybe I spoke too soon." He pinched his fingers around hers and dragged her hand and the zipper down again. When it reached the end, he splayed the fly open and slid his fingers beneath her panties to dip into her wet center.

Beyond comprehension, Edie writhed at his touch anxious to be fully naked, pressed to his body, skin to skin.

Unable to wait for him to do it, she wiggled out of her pants and kicked them to the floor. Then she grabbed his sweats and tugged, freeing his magnificent cock.

"In a hurry?" He chuckled and dipped his fingers into her creamy core, drawing it out to paint the folds of her labia with slick cum.

Edie's back arched, urging him on. "Yes!"

"Do you want me inside now?"

"Yes!"

"No."

"No? But I'll die if you don't take me now."

"What did the guy say on the film set? People want foreplay. Lots of it."

Edie's breathing grew shallow as Harry pulled her legs over the side of the bed and spread them wide. He rubbed his cock along her inner thigh, pressed it to her creamy pussy and dragged it along the opposite thigh.

"Do you want more?"

"Oh, please, Harry, yes."

He dropped to his knees and draped her legs over his shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Edie rose up on her elbows, her heart hammering in her chest, desire welling in her belly.

"I'm going to pleasure you. I want you so excited you'll want to scream."

Edie flopped back on the bed. "I'm already so turned on I could scream, how can it get much better?"

Lightly touching his tongue to her clitoris, he flicked it several times then sucked it into his mouth.

"Okay, I get your pooooinnnt!" Edie's voice rose with her ascent up the scale of ecstasy. "Ohmigod! That feels so good."

"Sweetheart, we've only just begun." Harry ran his fingers along the inside of her thighs, slipped his hands beneath her and cupped her ass in his palms.

Edie clutched the sheets and moaned, her moan switching to a gasp when Harry dove tongue-first into her, tickling the inner lining of her vaginal wall. What he did seemed incredibly wicked, nothing like Edie had ever imagined from watching x-rated movies. The movies didn't do justice to the way Harry felt inside her.

He licked a path up to her labia, lapping at the tender folds until he spread them open to tongue her clit.

Edie's bottom rose off the bed and she clutched convulsively at Harry's hair. "I feel—" she gasped, "like I'm going to die if you don't stop. And like I'll die if you do."

He tongued her again, alternating full sensual strokes with light flicking until Edie couldn't take anymore. Her body jerked and spasmed as she toppled over the edge and fell into her orgasm, unrestrained, uninhibited and completely undone.

Before the aura could fade, Harry leapt to his feet and guided his pulsing cock into her ripe pussy. He slid in easily, coated in her cum, until his balls bumped against her ass. Fully sheathed, he hesitated, leaning over the bed to suck a breast into his mouth. Then he began moving to a slow, sexy rhythm, building up the tension inside Edie all over again.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and rose to meet his thrusts.

As the pace increased, Harry stood straight and grasped her hips in his calloused hands. His forehead beaded with perspiration, his gaze focused on where their bodies joined. Before long, he pounded into her, ramming his cock so hard and fast the slapping sounds of skin against skin combined with his grunts and Edie's moans echoed off the walls.

With one final stroke, he plunged into her holding her steady as his seed filled her womb.

Edie felt every pulsing twitch against her inner walls and reveled at how complete he made her. Had she known what she was missing all these years, she'd have...

She'd have nothing.

Harry didn't come into her life until yesterday. And soon, he'd leave.

And Edie didn't want him to go. But what choice did she have? Once he was free of the curse, he'd leave New York City without her.

Harry slid free and lifted her up the sheets to lie against the pillows. Then he nestled in the bed beside her, pulling her into his arms to rest his chin on the top of her head. "Umm, you smell like wildflowers." He pressed a kiss to her temple, his lips warm and sexy against her skin, his breath scented with her passion.

With her face leaning against the wall of his chest, Edie sighed. Although she didn't have a lifetime commitment from Harry, at least she had this moment. She'd store as many memories as she could in the next few days, hours, minutes—whatever time she had left with Harry. He'd made no promises to stay, and as long as Edie understood that, she could enjoy all he had to offer now. What was the saying? Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.

In the comfort of Harry's embrace, Edie drifted off to sleep, safe, secure and more certain of her growing love for this incredible man.

Chapter Eleven

Something pulled at the skin over Edie's mouth as she jerked to full wakefulness. She tried to open her lips to cry out, but they were glued shut and her hands couldn't move.

Edie glanced over her shoulders. What the hell? She was tied to her bedposts with a familiar pair of silk pajamas she recognized from her own collection. And the glue holding her mouth shut was a short piece of the silver duct tape she kept stored in her pantry.

"Hey sleepyhead." Harry sat naked on the bed beside her and ran a hand up her side, stopping to cup her breast.

The warmth of his fingers against her tender flesh ignited the fire in her gut. She pulled against her restraints, reminded she wasn't in a position to enjoy his touch, she should be fighting, screaming mad. But when Edie yelled, "Let me go," it sounded more like the excited moanings of a sex-starved spinster.

His hand moved lower, splaying across her flat belly smoothing downward to lace into her mound of curls. With his fingertips, he parted the folds over her clit and flicked at it until she squirmed.

Her body's immediate surge of response fueled Edie's anger. She arched her back trying to buck his hand away, but he cupped her sex and dipped a finger in to twirl around the hot liquid oozing uncontrollably from her cunt.

"I like how warm and wet you get when you're excited." Harry leaned over and teased her nipples with his tongue until they formed hardened beads. Then he sucked one full into his mouth drawing hard.

Edie planted her heels into the mattress, pushing against the finger buried in her pussy. Despite the fact he'd tied her to her bed and gagged her, she wanted more. She wanted his thick cock buried deep inside her.

As if reading Edie's mind, Harry climbed up on the bed, draping his body over hers.

Of their own accord, Edie's knees fell open, spreading her legs wide for Harry to slide between.

But he didn't enter her. Instead he started at her neck and slid lower, tracing a wet path with his tongue and kisses, over her ribs, into and out of her belly button, all the way down to her sizzling core. Scooping his hands beneath her ass, he lifted her to meet his mouth. The tip of his tongue slid inside her and flicked the thin lips of her entrance, pushing deeper to lap at the creamy moisture coating her pussy.

Eddie groaned and pulled against the silken restraints. She wanted to thread her hands through his hair and pull him closer all anger over being tied fallen by the wayside in this mad wave of desire washing over her.

She clutched the sheets when his tongue trailed its way up to flick against her clit, teasing, tasting and tempting her. Her body tensed, her clit growing hard and ultrasensitized by the incessant barrage of warm, raspy flicking.

When he sucked her clit into his mouth and nipped, Eddie screamed against the duct tape and tumbled over the edge of an exquisite sexual precipice, splintering into a million pieces.

Harry climbed up her body and buried his shaft into her in one long, hard stroke. He held steady while she fell back to the earth, remembering to breathe.

Pushing up on his arms, he hovered over her, sliding out until the broad head of his cock poised at her entrance, smooth and slick with her release. "Do you want more?"

No fair. She couldn't open her mouth to tell him. Her hands were tied, she couldn't pull him close. Eddie wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him to her, hard and fast. She wanted him to fill her with his thickness, pump her until he drained every ounce of strength from her body. Damn him! She met him stroke for stroke, dropping her heels into the mattress, her hips rising to match his thrusts.

Harry's hips worked like a piston, pumping in and out, his balls slapping against her anus with a loud smacking noise. Large, callused hands grabbed her hips and held them in a firm grip as he pumped one last time, exploding inside her, filling her with his cum. Then Harry collapsed against her, the hairs on his chest tickling her bare breasts.

She wanted to tell him how she felt, she wanted to hold him in her arms, to smooth her hands over his tight ass, cup his sex in her fist. Frustration welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Why had he tied her up? Why wouldn't he let her go? How could she have been so wrong about him?

Harry reached out to the ties on her wrists, but instead of untying them he checked to ensure they wouldn't come loose. "I'm sorry I had to do this, Eddie." He kissed her lips and slid free of her pussy. "I couldn't let you go with me to meet with whoever has Mitch. These people are killers as you pointed out, and I don't want you to become one of their targets." With one last kiss pressed between her breasts, Harry climbed from between her legs and stood beside the bed.

Eddie bucked against the headboard, yanking hard on the restraints. He couldn't just fuck her and leave without her. What if he got in trouble? Who would be his backup? *No, Harry!* She shook her head, tears streaming from her eyes. *Don't go!*

"Don't cry, Eddie." He lifted a tear from her cheek and brushed her hair from her face. "I'll be back before you know it. With Mitch. In the meantime, try to get some sleep."

Sleep? Sleep? With the two men I've grown to care about in danger? You arrogant bastard! Writhing against her silken chains, Eddie cursed, for all the good it was doing. *Don't you*

dare leave me!

Lifting the discarded sweatpants from the floor, he slid into them covering his still oozing, stiff cock. "It's getting close to nine. I thought I'd get there early." He leaned over her to kiss her lips.

Edie glared at him and turned her face to the side. How could he do this to her?

A twisted smile quirked the corners of Harry's mouth. "I figured you'd be mad. But don't worry. I'll be back to untie you in a couple hours. And, if all else fails, I left a message on your father's answering machine to come over tonight at 11:30. You'll be okay." He lifted the blankets to cover her naked body and paused.

"You're a beautiful woman, Edie Ragsdale. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." With that, he laid the blanket over her, tucking her in as if she were a child. "See ya, sweetheart." He kissed her averted cheek and left the room.

Edie's muffled scream followed him out the door.

For the next hour she worked at her bonds, the knots only tightening with her effort. Then she tried to get her landlady's attention by banging her head against her headboard. After a while, her head ached and nobody had come to her rescue, despite her efforts and noise. Finally, she collapsed against the pillows, her body completely exposed to the cool night air from having thrashed around in the bed until the covers had slid to the floor.

She couldn't help them. What would happen to Mitch?

What would happen to Harry?

Cold, disgusted and angry, Edie's tears slid one by one down her cheeks.

* * * * *

Harry hated leaving Edie tied to her bed, especially after the unforgettable sex they'd had, and boy was she mad. But in his gut he knew she would have insisted on accompanying him to rescue Mitch and he couldn't let her come. The people they were up against were too dangerous. And tying her wouldn't have been enough. With her ability to wish, she could have wished herself right into the middle of a deadly position. Thus the gray tape he'd pasted over her mouth. He hoped it wouldn't hurt too much when he pulled it off later.

With Edie incapacitated, Harry could concentrate on finding his way to the museum. He hoped to get there early to lay in wait and watch for any opportunity to free Mitch without giving up the stone.

He patted his jacket pocket where the obsidian relic rested against his side. He'd almost left it behind, afraid of the power it might have and the dangers of placing it in the wrong hands.

With the little bit of money he'd borrowed from Edie, he managed the subway, appalled at the cost of admittance. Costs had risen tremendously since he'd last been in the city. Pennies weren't worth anything anymore, and everything and everyone

seemed to move at a frantic pace. Didn't anyone go home at night? He hadn't noticed much difference in traversing the city during the day as at night, except it was a bit scarier at night. Strange people came out in droves.

When he arrived at the museum warehouse he circled the massive building inspecting for every nook and cranny a person could hide. He had to know what he was up against and be prepared for any surprise.

An hour before he was supposed to meet with the kidnappers, Harry settled into the alley, hiding behind a huge smelly metal box, the size of a truck. The stench almost knocked him over, but it was the best he could do to remain out of sight.

He wondered how Edie was doing and if she'd ever forgive him. What made him most concerned was why he cared about a woman he barely knew. Together for almost two days, he shouldn't have felt this close to her. He'd never believed in love at first sight. That was a fantasy for teenaged girls, not full grown men of the world. But he admired her intelligence, sarcasm and determination to stick up for herself. Edie was unlike any woman he'd ever known. And nothing like his former fiancée, Fiona.

Where Fiona was all class and no substance, Edie was solid, determined and fought for what she felt was right. Harry could never picture Fiona out in a desert digging up old tombs, not without a tent, several maids to fan her and provide cooling drinks to make her comfortable. Not Edie, she'd dig in and want to be up to her elbows in dirt if it meant finding a piece of the past or uncovering treasures of years long gone.

Could Edie be his soulmate? Was she the one woman destined to be with him? Did Harry travel across eight decades to find her? And if so, what the hell did he do now? He didn't have anything to offer her. She couldn't possibly be interested in a man who didn't have a job or even any prospects in this century.

The truth of Edie's words struck him. She hadn't asked him for anything. She could take care of herself. If she chose to be with him, it wasn't because he could offer her wealth or a nice house to live in with a picket fence and maybe a swing on the front porch. Edie was a woman secure in her own world, capable of taking care of herself. She didn't need a man to protect her or provide for her.

Having come from the 1920s, Harry had to reconcile the concept of women and independence. The norm for the Twenties had been for women to marry, raise numerous children, and let their husbands provide for their welfare. Only the really poor families relied on both parents working to support their families.

Women had come a long way since then. Edie was a prime example. She lived alone, supported herself and made her own decisions.

Harry liked her independence. Liked her ability to stand up for herself. With the exception of her self-image. She was beautiful and she didn't see it in herself. Her father must be completely blind or mean-spirited.

Beautiful, intelligent, independent and feisty Edie. If Harry were the marrying kind, Edie would be his first choice. Her pale skin and the dusting of freckles framed by that fiery red hair stirred him like no other. Even in this dark, smelly alley he could drive

nails into the wall as hard as he got just thinking about her. But the chill of the night air was seeping into his skin. The sweats he wore weren't much protection against the damp fall air in New York City. And the jacket wasn't doing enough to keep Harry warm.

While rubbing his hands together, he heard the sound of a car engine roaring off the walls of the buildings around him. He froze and inched his way out of the tight corner he'd wedged himself into between the building and the giant trash container.

At the end of the alley, a long black car stood. A fleeting thought to the shape and size of cars floated through Harry's consciousness. How different from the spindly contraptions of the Twenties. He hoped to get to drive one someday, imagining all that speed and power at his control. But for now he had bigger worries to handle. He had to get Mitch back, keep the stone and get the hell out of here without getting himself and Mitch killed. He stood and brushed the dust off his backside, still hidden behind the trash container.

All the time he'd been waiting, he hadn't come up with any other plan than to trade himself and the stone for Mitch's life. As long as he stayed with the stone, he had a chance to steal it away. If they threatened to kill him, he'd threaten to destroy the stone. Simple, right? He prayed his little plan would work. First thing was to find out who and what he was up against.

With a deep breath, he stepped out into the alley. Let the show begin.

A man had climbed from the driver's seat. In the dim light from the street lamps, he appeared to have dark hair and dark skin like a Middle Easterner. "Did you bring the Stone of Azhi?" the man said, his voice heavily laced with a foreign accent.

"I brought it." Harry kept close to the shadows. Standing in the middle of an alley without cover left him open as a target. But he had to get Mitch. "Where's Mitch?"

The guy jerked his head to the side. "In the car."

"Show me Mitch and I'll show you the stone," Harry said.

The man leaned toward the back window. It slid downward exposing another man of the same coloring as the first. They talked in low, hushed tones Harry couldn't hear their words, but they sounded foreign. Then the back door opened, and the other man got out. He reached into the car and hauled another man to his feet. In the dim glow from the light over the back door to the museum warehouse, Harry could see the man had a lighter complexion and pale hair compared to the others. When he lifted his head and stared across at him with light blue eyes, Harry breathed for the first time in the past two minutes.

Mitch stood barefooted on the dirty pavement and wearing the same khaki slacks and pullover shirt he'd been wearing the night before. A large bruise colored the side of his jaw. His lips twisted in a wry smile.

Harry exhaled a long sigh of relief. They hadn't killed him and they hadn't done too much damage. Yet. If he didn't handle this exchange well, they could all end up dead and Edie would still be tied to her bed until her father rescued her. He was glad he'd

left a message on her father's answering machine. Hopefully, he'd check his machine before morning, but not before Harry got through the next few minutes. That's all he needed was Edie to show up in the middle of a shooting. Not that a shooting was the likely outcome of this little tryst. *Think positive, Harry.*

The blond man smiled and winced, reminding Harry of his friend Will. "Hey Harry. About time you showed up."

"Wouldn't have come if Edie hadn't insisted. For some strange reason, she thought you were worth saving."

The two men on either side of Mitch frowned and glanced around at Harry's words.

"You didn't bring her here, did you?" Mitch glared at Harry.

"No, she's safe and secure." Secured to the bed. But Mitch didn't need to know that.

The two men pushed Mitch forward a few steps and stopped. Then a long, slender leg appeared in the car's doorway, the skin as pale as the men were dark. At the end of the leg was an expensive-looking high-heeled crocodile-skin shoe. Another leg appeared and a woman followed, unbending from the back seat of the car. She was tall, lithesome and as blonde as an expensive bleach job could make her. But her eyes were every bit as dark as her male counterparts.

"Enough talk, get the stone," she demanded, her voice laced with a foreign accent her words spoken in the Queen's English as if she'd been tutored by someone from Great Britain. "I want the stone." Hers was not a request, more an order to the two men. Her classic face could have been etched in celluloid on a movie screen in the Twenties. She wore a slim black skirt with a matching jacket, a stark contrast to the platinum blonde hair.

"I take it you're Danorah," Harry said.

Her only acknowledgement was a slight dip of her head.

Mitch frowned. "You know her?"

"No." Harry's eyes narrowed. "But her reputation precedes her in the bloody trail she's left around the city."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Mitch raised a hand to the bruise on his jaw. "She's quite a bit of work."

"I'm not letting go of the stone until I know Mitch is safe," Harry said. "Me and the stone for Mitch."

Mitch shook his head. "Don't do it, Harry. These guys don't play fair."

"How do we know you have the stone?" the woman asked, her tones smooth and deadly.

Harry pulled the object from his pocket and held it up between his fingertips. "Is this what you've been looking for? Or should I say, killing for?"

Her eyes widened briefly like a greedy dog seeing a tasty treat waved before its hungry eyes. Then her cool mask slipped back in place. "What makes you think I can't

take the stone and kill you both?"

"If you shoot me, I drop the stone and it shatters into a million pieces. Are you willing to risk it?" Harry knew how hard the stone was and was fairly certain it wouldn't break even if he took a hammer to it. But Danorah didn't know that and Harry hoped she wouldn't guess and call his bluff. She looked like she wanted it. Bad. *Well, let her sweat a little.* He tossed the relic into the air.

The woman gasped, her gaze following the path of the stone as light from a street lamp glinted off its smooth black surface.

With ease, Harry snatched the stone from the air and held it high, ready to drop it. "What's it to be? Mitch or the stone?"

"We'll shoot him if you run with the stone, so don't try anything." The woman's ruby-red lips thinned and she turned to her henchmen. "Let him have his friend."

When the two men reached out to follow the woman's orders, Mitch stumbled. Before Harry's eyes, the scene turned into chaos. Mitch hunkered over and plowed into the man next to him knocking him off his feet. The goon's 9mm pistol flew from his hands, skittering across the pavement to thunk against a brick wall.

The woman screamed and backed away from the men as they fell to the ground and struggled for supremacy.

With no time to think, Harry tucked the stone in his pocket and launched himself at the other man while his attention was directed toward Mitch.

* * * * *

The clock on Edie's bedside table flickered and changed. Eleven o'clock. Rendezvous time and Edie was still tied to the bed. She kicked her feet against the mattress, and then swung them high to kick them against the wall over her head, yelling through the tape as loud as she could.

Someone somewhere had to hear all the commotion she was making. Hell, she could hear her upstairs neighbors whenever they were making love, why couldn't they hear her when she was whacking against the wall like a lunatic?

Edie banged harder. She had to get to Harry and Mitch. Her gut told her they needed her right now.

What was that noise? Did she hear knocking? Edie stopped yelling and lay still.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Someone was pounding on her door. Thank the Lord.

Edie screamed long and loud, hoping the pitiful attempts could be heard through the tape and through her bedroom, living room and the front door. She stopped to listen.

"Edie!" Her father's voice drifted in to her.

She almost wept in relief. Her father was here. He'd untie her and she could wish herself to the museum warehouse. *Hurry up Dad!* she yelled into the tape.

The sound of the doorknob rattling drifted into her bedroom and eventually was followed by the front door slamming open against the wall. Edie could just see her father through the open bedroom door.

"What the hell? Edie?" Frank Ragsdale stopped just inside the door and scanned the living room's wrecked interior. "Edie!"

"In here, Dad! Hurry!" she cried out, her words nothing but a loud moan. Edie was touched by the worried expression evident on his face. She didn't think he cared enough about her to be worried. She bumped her head against the headboard to make sure he heard her. As many times as she'd done it in the past hour, she was surprised she wasn't unconscious. She'd have a dozen goose eggs to show for her efforts. Just wait until she got a hold of Harry.

"Edie?" Her father leapt across the overturned coffee table and hurried toward the bedroom door. "Oh my God, Edie." When he saw her state of undress, his eyes widened and his face flushed bright red. But he raced in—averting his eyes from her body—to untie her arms. "Edie, Edie. What happened? Who did this to you?"

As soon as her arms were free, she yanked the tape from her mouth and yelled. "Ouch!" Maybe yanking the tape hadn't been such a good idea. That hurt a lot more than she thought it would. Her face burned where the tape had probably ripped the outer layer of skin off. Harry would have hell to pay.

"Was it that strange man you brought home? Did he do this to you? Did he...rape you?" Tears welled in her father's eyes. "I'll kill him if he did."

"No, Dad, he didn't rape me." She leaped to her feet, shaking feeling back into her numb hands.

"Then what happened?" He leaned forward and retrieved her robe from the floor handing it behind him to avoid glancing at her nakedness.

"I'm all right, Dad." She snatched the scrap of silk from his hands. "No one raped me."

"How can you explain this mess? Did he tie you up and rob you blind? That's what happens when you let strange men into your home. You can never be too careful."

"No, Dad." Edie slipped into the robe and raced for her closet and something more substantial to wear. At times like this, she wished she had a Kevlar vest in her wardrobe. "Harry only tied me up to keep me from following him. He wanted to protect me."

"So he tied you up?" Frank Ragsdale strode across the floor and grabbed her shoulders. "I knew you were making a mistake when you let that man into your apartment. Don't you know the dangers a lone woman faces in this city? Do you want to end up like your mother?"

Always, her father compared her to her mother. Edie had had enough. She spun, knocking her father's hands from her shoulders. "Yes, I want to be like Mother if it means feeling loved and beautiful. Yes!"

Her father dug his hands into his pockets. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"I know what you meant, Dad. I just can't go around hiding behind ugly clothes, afraid to date because I might attract the wrong man who'll murder me in a back alley."

Her father winced, his eyes still as haunted as the day the police told him his wife had been found raped and murdered in a dirty alley in the city she'd loved and thrived in.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry Mom died and I'm sorry you're alone. But I can't go on living like I have, afraid to get out, afraid no man will find me attractive. I want someone to think I'm beautiful, and to love me because I'm me, not my mother."

"I love you, Edie." Her father sank onto the side of the bed. "I've always loved you."

"You never tell me." Edie sat next to him, anxious to find Harry, but unwilling to leave her father like this. "Instead, you tell me I'll never be as pretty as her. No man will find me attractive."

"I loved your mother and what did it get me." He buried his face in his hands. "She's dead. She's never coming back."

Edie's chest tightened around the pain her father still carried. With a sigh, she slid an arm around his shoulders. "That was a long time ago, Dad. You have to get on with life. And so do I."

"But it's so dangerous out there." He gripped her hand in his and squeezed so hard he practically crushed her fingers. "Men are predators, they prey on unsuspecting beautiful women."

"Like Mom?" she whispered.

His hand went slack and his shoulders sagged against Edie's arm. "Yeah, like your mother."

"Is that why you wanted me to be ugly and unattractive?"

Her father looked up, his face seemed to have aged ten years. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"But you did." She swallowed the lump choking her throat and forced herself to hold back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. "All the times you made me feel ugly. They hurt."

"I'm sorry, Edie. I just didn't want you to end up like your mother. I couldn't stand to lose you, too."

"Oh, Dad. You have to take chances in life. Sometimes they don't work out, but if you live in fear, you'll never learn to love again. Do you think Mom would be happy knowing you stopped living when she died?"

Frank Ragsdale stared into his daughter's face and slowly shook his head. "She was so alive. So happy with her life and living."

"Yeah, and she wanted everyone around her to be happy, too." Edith gave him a quick hug. "Look, Dad, I have to do something important or I'd stay and talk some more." She grabbed a pair of jeans from the mess on her closet floor. "This conversation isn't over."

"Are you going to that man?" Her father's brows furrowed into a fierce frown.

Edie pulled her jeans up around her waist and zipped. "That man's name is Harry. And yes."

"Are you sure he's the right man for you, Edie?" Her father glanced at the silk pajamas still tied to her headboard. "His methods are a bit unorthodox and, I gotta say, I'm not so sure I like it."

Unorthodox was putting it mildly, considering all that had occurred in the past two days. Edie smiled and turned her back to her father to slip into a black turtleneck sweater. "I think I love him, Daddy." Did she really say she loved Harry? She pushed the thought aside. It was too new to her. She didn't want to poke and prod at it. Not yet. No use getting mired in speculation about Harry.

And how long had it been since she'd called her father Daddy? Since before her mother died. Edie's heart swelled in her chest. She'd needed this talk with her father. And apparently he'd needed it to. For the first time in fourteen years, she felt like her father was back. The father she'd known before her mother's tragic murder.

"The man tied you up for heaven's sake. Are you sure you want to go after him?" The look he gave her made Edie think he didn't want her to be sure. He wanted her to change her mind and give up on Harry.

"I'm as sure as I can be in this crazy world." She strode over to where he still sat on the bed and kissed the top of his graying head. "Now, I really have to go."

"What about this?" He waved his hand encompassing the disaster of her apartment.

"It'll wait. Harry needs me now." Edie headed for the door grabbing her purse from the floor on the way out. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be careful, sweetheart. I love you."

Edie turned back and blew a kiss to her father like she used to when she was small. "I love you too, Daddy."

As soon as she stepped out the apartment door, she closed her eyes and said aloud, "I wish I was with Harry." She'd waited to make her wish out of her father's sight. Already ten minutes after eleven, there was no telling what could be happening to Harry and Mitch and she didn't have time to explain anything to her father.

Edie waited, and wasn't disappointed by the ensuing rumble of thunder. She hoped Harry was all right and that she wasn't going to put him in danger by appearing when she did. But she couldn't stand by and do nothing. She had to know what was happening and help Harry in any way possible. Despite the stubborn, old-fashioned

jerk Harry was for tying her to the bedposts, Edie loved him. Not that she wouldn't give him a good piece of her mind when this was all over.

When the floor trembled beneath her feet, Edie braced herself for the transfer and whatever awaited her wherever Harry was.

Chapter Twelve

“Shoot him!” The blonde woman screamed. “Don’t let him get away! I want that stone!”

Harry hit the man in the gut with his best football tackle and as much force as he could muster in the short distance.

The man’s gun went off, the shot angling wide, ricocheting off the building’s brick exterior.

Momentum carried Harry and the bad guy three feet further before they crashed to the pavement, the foreigner taking the brunt of the impact.

Harry had the advantage of being on top of the struggle, but the other guy had a gun and he wasn’t letting it loose. All Harry’s focus was on making sure that gun didn’t go off in his own face. “Drop it!” He grabbed the man’s wrist in both his hands and slammed it, gun and all, against the pavement. “Drop it!”

The foreigner grunted but refused to release the weapon, bucking beneath Harry trying to dislodge him.

Harry spared a glance at Mitch who straddled the other guy, pummeling his face like there was no tomorrow. At least he didn’t have to worry about Edie’s friend while he struggled for his own life.

“Let go—” Harry slammed the hand against the pavement, “of the damned—” On the fifth slam, the pistol sailed out of the man’s hand. “—gun!”

In the midst of Harry’s sigh of relief, he felt cool metal press against his forehead.

“Move and you die.” A steely feminine voice warned him.

Harry froze, his hands still gripping the now empty hand of the guy beneath him.

Slim fingers slipped inside his pocket and snatched the stone. When she had it in her hand, Danorah quickly backed away from Harry holding the 9mm revolver trained at his head. “Now that I’ve got what I came for, I don’t need any of you anymore.”

She lowered the weapon to point at Harry’s heart.

The low rumble of thunder echoed off the buildings of the alley.

Oh, no! Harry lunged forward grasping for the gun he’d shaken loose from the other man’s hand.

Just as Danorah pulled the trigger, the ground shook and she teetered on her shiny, black stiletto heels.

Bang!

The shot missed Harry, but hit Danorah’s hired thug. He grunted and clutched the hole in his chest as blood oozed out staining the white shirt beneath his black jacket.

Harry missed the gun and rolled to his back to face his attacker while reaching his hand out for the weapon.

When the earth steadied, the blonde aimed for Harry's chest.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you." Edie stood behind Danorah, holding something up against the woman's temple.

Harry couldn't see what Edie held in her hand, but it didn't look like a gun. "Edie, be careful, she's got a gun!"

"Drop it, bitch or I'll shoot." Edie's voice held quiet determination.

The hammer clicked.

Edie jerked her hand in front of the blonde's face and a shooshing, spraying sound erupted.

Danorah dropped her weapon but not the stone. With her empty hand, she clawed her eyes screaming at the top of her lungs. "What have you done to me? I can't see! I can't see!"

Edie kicked the weapon into the shadows and then turned toward the disoriented woman. "Then you won't be needing this." She grabbed for the black stone.

But Danorah wouldn't release it. Tears streaming from eyes squeezed tightly shut she held on with all her might, shoving against Edie, beating her back with the stone in her hand.

"Edie, look out!" Mitch yelled.

Danorah raised the stone and smacked the side of Edie's cheek.

Staggering backward, Edie fell to the ground, her head bouncing off the pavement. She lay as still as death.

Anger swelled in Harry's chest. Was she all right? He couldn't see her well enough to know whether or not she was breathing.

His anger boiled up into rage. Danorah's greed could have caused Edie's death for all Harry knew. Now, he was okay with being shot at, beat up and tormented, but when it came to Edie—enough was enough. Danorah would pay.

Harry threw himself at the blonde, knocking her to the ground. The stone flew out of her hand and through the air.

Mitch made a flying leap to catch it before it hit the ground.

"No, Mitch!" Harry yelled.

Too late.

Mitch made a clean catch and stood with the stone in his hands, a grin on his face. "Don't worry, Harry. I caught it. The stone's okay."

The ground rumbled.

"Hey, my hands are tingling." Mitch looked up at Harry and Edie, the smile slipping from his face to be replaced by a frown. "What the hell's happening?"

"You shouldn't have touched it, Mitch." Harry stood with his hands at his sides. He could do nothing to stop what was about to happen to his new friend.

"But Danorah touched it and nothing happened," Mitch said. "Oh God. I feel like I'm on fire!"

"Danorah's a woman." Harry shook his head. "If a man touches the stone, he disappears into a bottle."

"Holy shit! My entire body feels numb." He reached out with both arms toward Edie. "Edie?"

Edie lunged for Mitch grasping for his hand only for hers to pass through him. "Mitch!" She caught the stone as it dropped from his fingers and Mitch disappeared. "Mitch!"

The bad guy Mitch had been fighting lurched to his feet and dove toward the car, taking Danorah with him. He shoved the blonde woman into the backseat, slamming the door without checking to see if she'd cleared. Then he jumped into the driver's seat. The car leapt to life and spun away from the alley in a spew of loose gravel.

"She's getting away!" Edie cried.

"Let her go. We have bigger problems."

Edie stood next to Harry, the stone in her hand. The only thing left as a reminder Mitch had been there were a pair khaki slacks and a pullover shirt, pooled in the spot where he'd disappeared.

Harry shook his head. "I came to save Mitch, and now he's gone too."

Gathering up the clothing, Edie asked, "What are we going to do?"

"Not we. Me." Harry sighed. He had to undo this mess he'd started back in 1924. But he didn't want Edie in the middle of it getting hurt. But how could he break it to her that he was going and she wasn't? "Let's go to your place."

* * * * *

A glance at Harry's face sent a lump plummeting to Edie's belly. Not we? Was this it? Was this the end? She didn't have the heart to take the subway back to her place. Her gut feel said, Harry's time with her had come to an end and she didn't want it to. "I wish we were back at my place."

The familiar thunder and ground shaking was only slightly reassuring. Before she could blink, Edie and Harry stood in the shambles of her apartment. Tears pooled in her eyes. She wouldn't let him see her cry. She wouldn't. She stepped away from him and strode through her apartment. "Dad?" The apartment was a big empty mess, except for Harry and Edie. How long could she avoid looking at Harry? How long would it take to dry the tears? A long time, if she let them start falling. Edie knew once she started crying for Harry, she couldn't stop.

"Your father's here?" Harry asked.

With a gulp, Edie swallowed the lump rising in her throat. She tossed her head back and faced Harry. "He was when I left." Edie squelched her growing feeling of loss, determined to fight depression with anger. She shoved his chest. "Which, by the way, was how I was able to get loose to save your butt. I don't appreciate being tied up and left to beat my head silly against the wall." She shoved him again.

"You would have been in the way. You could have gotten hurt." He grabbed her shoulders to keep her from pushing him again. "You saw how dangerous it was out there."

Just like her father, Harry had taken the decision out of her hands. Well, to hell with that! "I'm a big girl. I can make up my own mind. I don't need you or my father telling me how to live my life. I can stand on my own two feet, thank you very much!"

For a brief moment, sadness passed across Harry's face to be replaced by a slow, sexy grin. "Do you know you're beautiful when you're mad?"

"Don't change the subject, Harrington Taylor the Third. I'm picking a fight with you and I won't be disappointed." Her voice caught on a sob. "I hate you, Harry." She swatted at him with very little force and buried her face against his chest. "And you almost got yourself killed." Her words were muffled in his jacket as tears streamed from her eyes. Damn! And she didn't want him to see her cry. Harry was going to leave her. She knew it. How could a man as gorgeous and adventurous as Harry stay with a pathetic, ugly spinster like Edie Ragsdale?

He tipped her chin upward and kissed the tip of her nose. "But I didn't die, did I?" His tongue snaked out and licked a tear from her cheek. "Salty. Just like you. I love the way you taste, Edie. Here." He sucked her earlobe into his mouth and nipped. "Here." Pushing aside the collar of her sweater, Harry's mouth moved down to press a kiss against the base of her throat.

Edie groaned, her hands sliding up to lace in his hair. Wasn't she mad? Didn't she have a bone to pick with this man? Why couldn't she remember when he was doing wicked things to her? "Shouldn't we be more concerned about finding Mitch than making love?"

"We will—soon. Most likely, he's somewhere in a bottle, and he'll keep for the moment." Warm callused hands slid up her waist beneath her sweater to cup her breasts.

The embers fanned to flame between her legs and Edie pressed into Harry's body, her thighs opening to fit one of his between them. She rubbed her cunt against him wanting more.

Harry grabbed the hem of her sweater and ripped it up and over her head, tossing it to the corner.

Edie stood in front of him naked from the waist up, basking in his heavy-lidded gaze. The way he looked at her made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the entire world. And she wanted to be beautiful for Harry.

"You have too many clothes on." She shoved the jacket from his shoulders.

He let it fall to the floor.

While he slid the sweat jacket off his shoulders, Edie's hands followed the increasingly exposed skin running upward from his tight abdomen to the crisp curls sprinkled across his bronzed chest. "God, you're beautiful, Harry."

He laughed and tossed the jacket aside, pressing his chest against her bare breasts. "Men aren't supposed to be beautiful." Holding her close, his hands pressed against her lower back, sliding downward inside her jeans to cup her ass.

"Maybe not, but then how do you explain yourself?" She leaned forward and sucked a hard brown nipple into her mouth and bit down gently. Ripples of desire fanned out across her nervous system sending surges of excitement southward to pool in her groin. How much longer could she wait before she begged him to take her?

"I make it a point never to explain myself." Harry reached for the hard metal button of her jeans and flicked it open. With deliberate slowness, he slid her zipper down the backs of his knuckles skimming against the mound of curly hair at her crotch.

Edie moaned and pressed her body against his trapping his hand between them. "Are you going to stand there and play with my zipper or are you going to play with me?" She slid her hands behind him and into the elastic waistband of his sweats, pushing them downward until they fell loose around his ankles. His cock pressed like a hot poker into her belly, the iron rod encased in velvety soft skin teasing her into a frenzy. She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and lower herself over him until he filled her with his thickness.

But first, she wanted him to be so hot he couldn't leave without her. He'd want her by his side no matter what.

Remembering all she'd learned over the past two days, Edie stepped away from Harry, a slow smile curling the corners of her lips. She dropped her eyelids to half-mast and shimmied out of her jeans.

"What happened to the shy Edie I met a couple days ago?" Harry laughed and reached out for her.

Edie stepped backward out of reach. "She no longer exists." She ran her hands up from her waist to cup her own breasts. "The new, improved Edie is here to please you."

"Ummm, then come here and please me, vixen."

"In a minute. First I want to build up a little anticipation." Her heart in her throat, Edie swiveled her hips in a silent dance, her fingers massaging her breasts, teasing the tips to hard little points. She hoped she didn't look stupid, not when she felt so wicked and sexy. Then she swept her hands down her sides and across her abdomen to thread into the hairs over her pussy. "Does this do anything for you?"

"Oh, baby, does it ever." Harry's cock stood stiff and straight, pulsing in his need. "But I don't know how much more I can take. I need to touch you."

With a shake of her head, Edie turned her back on him, spread her legs wide and touched her toes, giving him an open view of her ass and her pussy. She'd seen a porn

flick where the girl had done that in a stripper bar and remembered how turned on she'd been just watching. Hopefully, it would have the same effect on Harry.

Coarse hands grabbed her ass from behind. "You're too much." Harry pulled her hard against him, sliding his shaft into her cunt all the way to her womb.

Eddie grabbed for the back of the couch to steady herself, reveling in the rough treatment, loving the feel of his thick cock fitting tightly inside her. "Harder, Harry. I want you to fuck me like there's no tomorrow." Quite possibly there wouldn't be for Eddie and Harry. She wanted all she could get tonight.

He pounded into her, his belly slapping against her butt cheeks, the in and out motion making slurping sounds to the accompaniment of their moans.

Eddie reached between her legs and parted her nether lips, drawing some of the lubricant from her pussy to her clit. She flicked and teased herself, adding to the growing tension in her belly and much lower.

When Harry's pace reached maximum velocity, he shoved hard into her and leaned over, cupping her breasts in his hands.

Eddie's muscles contracted around his shaft, milking his cum, holding him firmly inside her. Her legs shook and, if Harry hadn't been holding on to her, she would have sunk to her knees on the carpet.

He slid out of her turned her to face him, a smile stretching across his face. "Your turn." Without preamble, he scooped his arm beneath the backs of her legs and swung her up against his body.

Eddie squealed and held on to keep from falling. Before Harry, she'd never had a man carry her anywhere and the sensation was exhilarating and very, very sexy. Especially when she and the man were naked.

He carried her across the living room and into the bedroom where he tossed her on the mattress. The silk pajamas tied to the bedposts hung as limp reminders, not of being tied, but of the lovemaking in bondage of several hours earlier. Eddie's pussy quivered in anticipation of what Harry had in mind. She leaned up on her elbows, her knees falling open, exposing her cunt to his view. Her fingers found their way downward to toy with the entrance to her sex.

The light in Harry's eyes flared. "Stop teasing. I already got mine. Like I said, it's your turn." He stalked toward her, his hands grabbing her ankles. He yanked hard, sliding her bottom to the edge of the mattress. Then he dropped to his knees and draped her legs over his shoulders. "I'm going to make you scream."

"Takes a lot to make me scream, Harry." Her words held as much false bravado as she could muster. She was already as close to screaming as she could be without actually making a sound. The nearness of Harry's mouth to her pussy was enough to make Eddie scream without even a touch. She knew the magic of his lips, his tongue and his fingers and her vaginal walls wept in anticipation. "Shouldn't we discuss what to do about Mitch?" she asked, weakly, trying to diffuse her rising desire.

“No.” The word was clipped and followed by his attack on her control. He traced his tongue along the inside of her right thigh, until he reached the crease between thigh and buttock. Harry inhaled deeply and swiped his flattened tongue across her pussy like he was licking ice cream from an ice-cream cone. When he reached the outside rim of her entrance he paused, sharpening the point of his tongue to tickle the sensitive inner lips around her vagina. He traced a path to her anus and prodded the tight opening with the tip of his tongue.

With a gasp, Edie leaned forward. What was he doing? Then she relaxed, confident Harry knew exactly what he wanted and what would please her.

His fingers slid up her thighs to part her cheeks, his thumb sliding into her asshole at the same time three fingers pushed into her pussy.

Edie squirmed, the added pressure on her asshole accentuating the sensations on her cunt. Pleasure spiraled to her core and she pressed upward wanting him to lick her clit. Dare she ask? Hell yes! “Please, Harry, lick me, too.”

The coarse stubble of his beard rubbed against her labia when he bent to the task of lavaging her clitoris, the additional abrasion an added bonus, pushing Edie to the edge.

Another flick and a long slurping suck catapulted her to another dimension, where bright lights flickered sending pulsing electrical shocks cascading through her senses. Edie screamed, clutching Harry’s hair, pushing him away, but pulling him back, the sensation so intense she couldn’t decide if it was pain or pleasure.

When she tumbled back to earth, she heaved a huge sigh.

Harry crawled up beside her and pulled her into his arms, warming her now chilling skin.

“I wish—” Edie’s words were cut off when Harry’s finger pressed over her lips.

“Don’t.” He dropped a kiss to her temple. “Wait until morning. There’s time enough for wishing tomorrow.”

She snuggled against him and yawned. All the worry and wrestling with the bad guys had finally taken their toll on her. “You’re not going to tie me up again, are you?”

“No, Edie,” Harry said, the sound rumbling against her ear. “I’m not going to tie you up.”

“Promise?” She buried her nose in his chest hair, inhaling the scent of her soap and sex. Ummmm.

“Promise.” His arm tightened around her shoulders and he pulled her to him for one last deep kiss that seemed like it could go on forever.

“Promise me you’ll stay?” she asked, another yawn practically splitting her jaws.

“Go to sleep, Edie.” He settled the blankets around them and tucked her into his arms.

“I love you Harry.” As Edie drifted off to sleep, a niggling sad thought skittered through her mind. Harry had promised not to tie her up, but he hadn’t promised to stay.

Chapter Thirteen

Harry hovered over Edie at seven o'clock the next morning. Her alarm clock wasn't set to go off until seven-thirty, still every fiber of Harry's being wanted to touch her, love her, drive deep inside her and stay forever. Yet, he couldn't shirk his responsibility to Will and Mitch. He had to find and free them from the mess he'd gotten them into when he'd discovered the tomb of Vashti. With a reassuring pat to the ill-fated stone in his pocket, he considered all the trouble one little black rock had produced and wished he'd never found it. He had to take it with him to avoid letting it fall into anyone else's hands and to help him undo the curse plaguing himself and his friends.

In order to find them, he needed Edie to wish him to their location and possibly time, otherwise he would have left in the middle of the night, slipped out while Edie slept. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't take her with him. His mission was too dangerous to bring her along. So he had to do something he really despised doing—more than tying her to the bedposts with the silk pajamas that still hung there.

He had to convince her he didn't love her and didn't want her with him. This would be the hardest thing he'd done in his life because he had committed the ultimate folly. In just a few short days Harry, the incurable adventurer, had fallen deeply, madly and irrevocably in love with the intelligent and passionate Edie Ragsdale.

Her courage, tenacity and red-haired beauty fired longing in his soul. When he was with her, he never felt more alive. How ironic that the person who owned his body should also be the one to own his heart. Fate or God's will had played him into Edie's hands, dragging Harry across eight decades to find her. And now he had to leave her behind.

Angelic in sleep, her pale skin framed by auburn curls, Edie was stunning. The sheet fell below her bare breasts, her soft rosy areolas shone smooth and full.

Harry's mouth watered and his jeans grew uncomfortably tight as his cock strained against the fabric. With a gentle touch, he smoothed his fingertips over the curve of one plump circle.

The velvety nipple puckered and hardened into a tight, round bead and Edie rolled to her back, a moan escaping her lips. "Ummm, Harry?" Her hand patted the empty bed beside her.

"I'm here, Edie, but I need to leave."

Her eyes flew open. "Already?"

"I need to find Mitch and Will before something terrible happens to them."

"Was what happened to you so terrible?" She pushed aside the sheet exposing the lush curve of her waist, the flare of her hips and finally the soft red curls at the juncture

of her thighs.

With Edie lying naked before him, Harry almost lost his resolve. But the memory of Will and Mitch's cries for help as they disappeared pushed Harry to do what he had to do. He concentrated on a spot just above Edie's head and inhaled a fortifying breath. "No, what happened to me was a nice interlude."

Her brows crinkled on her forehead. "Interlude? Is that all I am to you, Harry, an interlude?"

"I told you from the first, I work alone. Always have and always will." He lifted his hands palm upward. "It's the way I am."

"Yes, you did tell me." Edie's eyelids drooped and she gathered the sheet back around her body. "I guess I thought we'd come to mean more to each other. Silly, huh?"

The hitch in her voice was almost Harry's undoing. He wanted to gather Edie in his arms and hold her there forever. But he couldn't stay and he couldn't take her with him. "I'll always think of you with fond memories, Edie."

She snorted. "But you can't love me? Is that it?" She tossed aside the sheet, and rose from the bed to stand beside him, curvaceous, beautiful and sexy as hell in her hurt and anger. "You can take my body but not my heart. I guess I should be thankful to you for taking my virginity. Now that I know how, I can go out and find a man who will love my body and me. Not some one-night stand, good for a roll in the sheets and gone." She strode across the room and snatched her turquoise robe from the hook on the back of the door. "My father was right. Men only want one thing. Sex. I should have listened to him, he was probably right about everything else as well."

Harry stood where she left him wanting to refute her words, to tell her that he loved her for her mind as well as her gorgeous body. If things had turned out differently, he'd have considered staying with her in New York City. He'd have found a job and built a house with a picket fence. But Will and Mitch needed him and he couldn't turn his back on them.

Then why are you turning your back on Edie? The devil's advocate in Harry's conscience prodded him.

"If you're going to go, you might as well leave. I don't care much for long goodbyes." Her back was to him as she tied the robe around her middle.

"I need you to make one last wish for me, Edie."

"You mean you need me, Harry? But only for a little free sex and my ability to get you to different places in a hurry, is that it?" She spun to face him and flung an arm wide. "Name your place, Harry, and then get out of my life."

"I need you to wish me to wherever Will and Mitch are."

"Fine. I can do that." Her words were strong, but her bottom lip trembled and tears welled in her eyes. "I can wish you out of here so fast your head will spin." The tears tipped over the edge of her eyelids and trailed down her cheeks. "I'm only crying because I'm happy to be rid of you at last."

Harry's heart was breaking along with Edie's. He couldn't stand what he was doing to her, but he couldn't live with himself if she were hurt because of him. He had to do this for her sake. Harry walked across the room and stood in front of Edie, tipping her chin upward. One last kiss. That's all he wanted to remember her by.

But when his lips joined hers, he couldn't hold back. His tongue delved between her teeth to tangle with hers, his hands strafed the length of her body, cupping her ass, fitting her against him in a tight hold, her heat warming him from breast to hip.

Edie's arms circled his neck and dug into his hair, tugging him closer. The salt of her tears made the kiss even more bittersweet and difficult to end.

Harry's cock strained for release from the tight confines of denim, but he knew he couldn't unleash his lust. Not now. Not when he must leave. With all the willpower he possessed, he shoved Edie away from him, unable to hide his own ragged breathing. With a forced smile and a crumbling wall around his heart, he said, "Thanks for a good time, Edie. Now be a good girl and wish me to Will and Mitch."

She stepped back as if he'd slapped her in the face. The tears stopped instantly and she flung back her shoulders. "If that's the way you want it." She closed her eyes and said. "I wish you were where Mitch and Will are." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her eyes flew open.

Tingling began in the tips of his fingers and spread across his nerve-endings. "Goodbye, Edie."

The last thing he saw was Edie reaching out to him, tears streaming down her pale cheeks. "I love you, Harry," she said, her voice wavering as her shimmering, precious face disappeared.

Finally, Harry's world went blessedly black.

* * * * *

Edie collapsed on her bed and buried her face in her hands, her heart shattering into a thousand pieces. "He's gone. Harry's gone." She crawled across the mattress and buried her face in the pillow Harry had used. It still smelled of Harry, the scent knocking another hole in Edie's gut. Tears flowed until Edie fell into a troubled sleep where Danorah and her hired thugs chased her around the desert, threatening to kill Harry if she didn't give them the stone.

A sharp rapping on her door, coincided with the shrill beeping of her alarm clock, jerking her from her grief. Could he already be back? Edie forgot how to breathe as she slammed the off button on her alarm, leapt from the bed and raced across her living room to yank open the door.

Her heart plummeted into her stomach. Her father held out a bag of donuts and a cardboard holder with two cups of coffee. "I wasn't sure you'd be here, but I risked dropping by anyway." He peered closer at her, a frown knitting his brows together. "What's wrong, Edie? You've been crying."

She turned away and strode into the kitchen. "You should be happy. Harry's gone." Her voice was dull and flat like her life without Harry. Edie reached into a cabinet and removed two plates setting them on the table. She wasn't hungry but she needed something to do with her hands.

"I'm not happy, if you're not happy. And by the red, puffy eyes I take it you're not ecstatic about him leaving." Her father set the bag and coffee on the table and pulled Edie into his arms. "You love him, don't you?"

"Oh, Daddy." She fell against her father and wept into his jacket, the tears falling in torrents for the next ten minutes.

When she slowed, her father handed her a tissue. "Blow," he said, just like he had when Edie was a little girl.

After a good blow and several more tissues to wipe her eyes, Edie sank into the chair across from her father.

"I know I don't deserve your confidence, but if you feel up to it, maybe you could tell me what happened."

Tell her father about all her wishing, shooting and lovemaking? She'd just got her father *back*, she didn't want to scare him away again. But she found the whole wonderful, sordid story pouring out of her in a soggy torrent. "He said I was just an interlude, that he didn't want me with him anymore."

"I'm sorry, baby." Her father pulled her hand into his and patted it gently. "Sometimes things don't turn out the way we planned or hoped. I didn't want to lose your mother when I did and for a long time I let it get me down, pushing away the only family I had left, my sweet and beautiful daughter."

"Why, Daddy?" Edie wanted to feel empathy for her father, but anger rose more quickly. "Why did you push me away? I needed to know someone loved me after Mamma died. But you weren't there for me. Why?"

"I think I didn't want to love you. I loved your mother so much and I thought my love jinxed her. After I lost your mother, I was afraid to love you because I didn't want to lose you too. We men have a funny habit of doing stupid things to protect the ones we love and to protect our hearts from breaking."

Edie digested her father's words. Men did stupid things to protect the ones they loved. Like Harry tying her to the bedposts to keep her from following him. Her blood heated as she recalled how excited she was when he'd made love to her while she was tied and gagged, the frustration she'd felt because she couldn't touch him.

Tying her to the bedpost had been a pretty stupid thing to do. On a scale of one to ten, Edie gave it an eight. Had Harry tied her up out of love? Did he care enough about her to want her to stay out of harm's way, or was he more concerned about her interfering with his plans?

"All these years," her father went on. "I pushed you away when all I really wanted was to be with you. But I was afraid." He squeezed her hands, a tear slipping down the side of his face. "I was wrong to push you away. I see that now. I wish I could go back

and undo all the awful things I said. But wishing won't change the past or the way I feel about you." He stared up at her, his face aged and haggard. "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes, Daddy, I forgive you." Could she forgive Harry if all he was trying to do was to protect her? Hell, yes! "Daddy, I love you very much, and I'm glad we had this little talk. It's really helped me see what I have to do." Wishing might not change the past, but it sure as hell could change her future. If she didn't try one last time, she'd never know how Harry really felt about her. "Daddy, I have to go."

"So soon? I'd hoped we could spend the day together." Surely you don't have to go back to work so soon. I'd expected the police to continue through today in their investigation."

Edie was already up out of her chair and halfway to her bedroom. "I'm not going to work, and I can't talk now, I have to see a man about his stupidity." She'd need clothing, her credit cards, and sturdy shoes. What else? Maybe the 9mm she kept loaded in her nightstand. Just in case. As her fashion model mother would say, a girl could never have too many accessories.

Chapter Fourteen

Harry crouched in the dark behind the burned-out hull of a heavy metal vehicle painted in desert drab colors, waiting for his chance to steal closer to the building. Across the street, inside the bullet-pocked walls of the compound were Will and Mitch. They had to have gone in with the truck that went by about the time Harry arrived in Iraq, care of Edie's wish. He'd quietly searched the surrounding streets for any other possible location of the men or the bottles they might be trapped in, all the while feeling like he was searching for a needle in a bombed-out haystack. But this was where Edie's wish had landed him. The men and their bottles had to be close by.

Other than the crumbled walls of former Iraqi homes, the only remaining semi-intact structure was the walled compound. Somehow he had to get inside and find them. But how? He'd been watching for the past hour as men with rifles and machine guns drove in and out through the guarded gates. Hell, how was one man, an American at that, supposed to penetrate such an impregnable fortress of hostile Iraqis to free his friends?

"American!" A shout sounded behind Harry. He jumped and rolled to the side as bullets sprayed the position he'd just vacated. Keeping low to the ground, he dove for the side of a building and hunkered down in the shadows, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He held his breath and listened for approaching footsteps but the only sound he heard was a low rumble of thunder.

"Harry?" A familiar feminine voice called out from the darkness behind him. His heart lurched in his chest and rose to block his throat. "Edie?"

A hand crept into his and Edie's pale face appeared beside him. "Hey, Harry. I thought you could use a little company." Her smile was tentative and hopeful.

"Jesus, Edie!" He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Someone just tried to kill me and still is, as far as I know." He pulled her into his arms for a quick hug, and then set her away again. "You couldn't have picked a more dangerous time to show up. What the hell are you doing here?"

Her teeth glowed in the darkness as she smiled. "I had to ask you a question."

Harry leaned around the corner to see if the guy who'd shot at him was still there. Movement around the gate and the growl of heavy truck engines firing up could be heard behind the thick walls. But he didn't see his attacker. "Can't it wait?"

"No, Harry, it can't." Edie pulled him back into the shadows. "Why did you tie me to the bedpost, Harry?"

"What?" They were in the middle of hostile territory, surrounded by bloodthirsty murderers totally unsympathetic to Americans, and Edie was asking him why he'd tied

her to the bedpost?

"Why?" Edie repeated. "And why did you tell me I was just an interlude?"

"Edie, now isn't the time to go into it."

"Why, Harry?" she insisted. "I need to know."

"Because," he answered. "All right? Now go home."

"That's not a reason, Harry."

"I told you already. What the hell do you want from me?" He'd tried to shut her out, push her away, yet here she was. "Can't you just go back to your apartment and your nice, safe little world?"

"No, Harry." She placed a hand on his sleeve. "I can't because I love you."

Her words sank into his heart and warmed him in the cool night air. "Oh Edie." He hauled her into his arms. "It's not safe here. Will you please go home? Please?"

"No." She kissed his lips and stared into his eyes. "You can't keep me from following you. Now, I want an answer. Why did you push me away?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair and glanced worriedly toward the corner of the building. "Edie, I did all those things because I don't want you hurt. I want to know you're safe at home, out of harm's way."

"Because you love me?" Edie looked up at him from beneath her lashes, light from the half-moon shining in her eyes. "Do you love me, Harry?"

"Oh God, Edie." He crushed her to his chest and held tight. "I've loved you from the first time you poked that jagged board into my chest. You were so determined, sassy and altogether too sexy, even with your hair pulled back and wearing those dowdy clothes. I love you, Edie, and I need to know you're safe. Being here with me will only distract me from what I need to accomplish."

"Bullshit." She cocked her head to the side, her lips pressing together in a thin line. "You and my father have to quit thinking I'm fragile and let me make my own decisions. I'm here because I love you and I want to help. So, get over it."

"Edie, we can't discuss this here." Was she crazy? What could a girl do in the male-oriented society of Iraq? "I told you a man just tried to shoot me."

"That one?" Edie stared over Harry's shoulder, her eyes widening in the moonlight.

Harry spun around on his heels to look up into the barrel of a rifle. A rifle pointed directly in the middle of his forehead. "Uh, yes, that would be the one."

The dusky-skinned Iraqi on the other end of the trigger motioned for Harry to move away from the wall by jerking his weapon to the side. He spoke in sharp tones. Although Harry didn't understand Farsi, he knew he'd better move if he didn't want to be shot. But what about Edie? If she were captured, what horrible things would they do to her? "If ever there was a time for you to wish us out of here, now would be good."

The Iraqi clipped Harry in the face with his elbow and shouted.

His cheek stinging from the blow, Harry reluctantly climbed to his feet and moved

in the direction the man indicated, all the while his heart alternated between singing and cringing. Edie loved him enough to chase after him into the desert, a place no normal woman would want to be. And now she was in the line of fire because of him. How was he going to save her and carry on with his mission to save his two friends? Sweet, courageous, stupid Edie. God, he loved her!

Edie stood as well, moving close to Harry, nudging him in the side. "Can you use this?" Cold steel slipped between his fingers. She'd brought a gun. Edie Ragsdale had brought a gun. Of all the—

"Sweetheart, I could kiss you for this."

"Get your priorities straight, Harry. Shoot the man first, then kiss me. And hurry it up. There's a couple trucks leaving through that gate over there, and my gut tells me our boys are on it."

The End

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