



Carnal Devotions

Kate Willoughby

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

To Kim and D'Anne, whose friendship and support I value more than I can say. Thanks to Kristin, my swimming expert, and last, but not least, to my generous husband, Jeff, and my two sons, Josh and Brian, for giving me the time to pursue my writing dream.

Prologue

Heedless of the blood spatters on her tunic, the goddess Cybele handed the ceremonial knife to a slave who took it away to be washed. Her newest disciple lay unconscious on the stone table, his face still twisted in a mask of pain and ecstasy.

She sighed. Around her the horde of celebrants engaged in orgiastic pleasures, some conventional, some depraved. Ordinarily she would be amongst them, sampling whatever form of gratification caught her fancy. The celebration would last as long as there were those still willing to exert themselves, yet while she was tempted to join in, she did not.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the acolyte at the edge of the dais. Ah, yes. He had tried to gain her attention earlier, but she had wanted to complete the ritual first. Even now his body trembled with tension; his message was obviously important. She snapped her fingers at him and he leapt forward to prostrate himself at her feet.

“O Mistress, he is found!” The disciple’s voice vibrated with the joy at bearing such propitious tidings.

Cybele froze, afraid to believe it. “Truly? You are certain?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Cybele stormed into the man’s mind, too impatient to endure even the few moments it would have taken for him to tell her what she needed to know.

Amarantus’ issue had been found. She saw an image of the young man, strong and pleasurable to look upon, a fine physical specimen, of course, with dark hair and even darker eyes that she longed to see blaze with lust for her as they once had. Yes, the resemblance to her beloved was faint, but undeniably there, especially in the cocksure smile.

With a brief touch on his shoulder, Cybele granted her disciple a physical reward.

“You have done well.”

The slave shuddered as the pleasure washed over his body, but Cybele had already turned away from him.

At last, the waiting was over. She forced back the excitement that threatened to overwhelm her. Her loneliness would soon be at an end. They had found the one whose rightful place was at her side. One in whose veins flowed the fierce blood of her beloved Amarantus, dead these endless centuries.

Now all that remained was to show him what could be gained as her consort—the power, the pleasure. Once he realized what was within his grasp, he would be hers.

She smiled.

How could he choose otherwise?

Chapter One

When the package arrived, it appeared harmless. In fact, Nathan didn't even notice it among the pile of junk circulars and bills he tossed on his kitchen table. His attention was on the petite blonde he watched from his second-floor apartment window. She struggled to carry a heavy box. He wondered if she was moving in to the recently vacated apartment across the hall.

Always alert for chances to impress the fairer sex, Nathan opened his window and called out, "Hey, you look like you could use a hand!"

She peered up at him, and he waved.

"No, thanks. I can do it," she called back.

"Are you sure? I'd be glad to help."

She shook her head then, obviously concentrating on navigating the stairs at the entrance of the complex. From the look of it that box was heavier than she was, and if she was moving in across from him, she still had another flight of stairs to conquer. He doubted she'd make it.

When he opened his own door, she was just starting up the stairs.

"Come on, let me get that for you," he said as he trotted down.

She gave him a look of exasperation that quickly turned into something else. Her eyebrows shot up above her sunglasses and her cheeks flushed pink. Her mouth dropped open but she didn't say anything.

"Are you all right?" he asked, taking the box from her. It weighed a ton, but he attempted to make it look like it was light as a feather.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

"I'm Nathan. Nathan Somerset."

She made a squeaking noise.

"You sure you're okay?"

She nodded.

"Are you moving in to 209? I'm in 208, across the way. We'll be sharing the landing there."

"Yes, 209."

Nathan waited for her at the top of the stairs where the door to his apartment still stood open. She edged past him to open her own door. She had trouble with her keys, fumbling with them for a few moments before finding the right one. She pushed open the door and then turned to take the box from him.

"Well, thanks a lot," she said, darting inside her apartment. "I can handle it from here. See you around."

"Wait, I don't even know..." She shut the door. "...your name," he finished.

Nathan stared at the door for a moment and then, even though he'd only showered an hour ago, he checked his armpits. They smelled fine.

He decided he was losing his touch.

* * * *

Annie Prescott lurched toward the kitchen and practically dropped the heavy box onto the table. She removed the detachable shaded lenses from her glasses and sank into a chair.

It wasn't fair. This was supposed to be a brand-new start for her with nothing but a bright future ahead. She should have known that Fate just couldn't resist throwing one wrench into her plans and bonking her on the head with it.

She went back to the door and peered out the peephole. The landing was empty. He was gone, thank God.

She leaned against the door and glanced at all the unpacked boxes cluttering the floor. No, it was too late to find another apartment, especially in Santa Monica. She'd been darn lucky to find this one. Even more importantly, moving back home would mean enduring pats on the back and the sympathetic looks of her parents. Her mother would murmur something like, "Oh, Annie, I'm sorry it didn't work out," but she would also be relieved that her baby was home again, safe and sound where she could be watched over like an invalid.

Annie realized that she was faced with humiliation either way, but if she stayed here, at least the humiliation wasn't a certainty. Nathan didn't remember her. She hadn't seen even a glimmer of recognition in his eyes.

Annie delved into the box that held her high school memorabilia. After finding her freshman yearbook, she found Nathan's senior photo. He'd looked more mature just now, or maybe that was because of his sexy five o'clock shadow. His thick dark hair was a little shorter, styled with a little gel, his voice deeper than she remembered. He seemed more solid too. She supposed that daily swim team practice had kept him really lean. Not that he was out of shape now, not by a long shot. He just seemed like a grown man, that was all. Not a kid anymore.

Sighing, she flipped to her own picture and studied it. She hadn't really changed that much in seven years. She still wore her long blonde hair up in a ponytail more days than not. She still wore glasses, and she'd never been much of a fashion maven, so her wardrobe remained plain and traditional.

No, Nathan hadn't recognized her because she had never really registered on his radar. What happened with Nathan had been the most embarrassing event in her life, but obviously he didn't remember it at all.

She wasn't sure whether she should be grateful or insulted.

A knock at the door startled her.

"Who is it?" she called, praying it wasn't Nathan.

"It's Deb Cochran and my best friends, Ben and Jerry!"

Annie peered out the peephole and this time saw a smiling face flanked by two pints of ice cream. She opened the door.

"Hi. I'm Deb. I live downstairs in 109. Welcome to the building."

"I'm Annie."

Deb wore torn jeans with decorative silk cuffs and a tight black T-shirt that said, "I LEAVE BITE MARKS." Her auburn hair was cut boyishly short with spiky sideburns that echoed her sharp features. Annie liked her immediately.

As she walked in, Deb said, "I know neighbors are supposed to bring cookies or a casserole or something like that, but I don't cook."

"Me either, but I love ice cream. I don't know where my spoons are just now,

though.” Annie gestured to the numerous unpacked boxes.

“That’s okay. I brought some just in case.” Deb pulled two plastic spoons from her jeans pocket while Annie cleared some boxes off the hand-me-down couch her brother had given her.

Deb held up the pints. “Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia?”

“Cherry Garcia.”

The lids came off and they dug in.

“So, tell me all the important stuff about you. Like, do you throw parties?”

“I’ve never thrown a party in my life, but if I do, I promise to keep it quiet.”

Deb made a face. “Oh, I wasn’t worried about that. See this?” She pointed to her T-shirt. “Party girl. You can have all the loud parties you want, as long as I’m invited. I’m a great bartender, indispensable at a party. Where do you work?”

“The Book Mark.”

“I work at Kiki’s Closet on Third Street. Do you know it?”

Annie took a bite of her ice cream and shook her head.

“Well, you’ll have to come by. They have the cutest stuff, all the latest style. I get an employee discount, and I’m sure you do too. We can share! How’s that?”

“That sounds great,” Annie replied, uncertain as to whether she’d find anything to suit her at Kiki’s. Her taste ran more toward L.L. Bean, but she didn’t want to rebuff Deb when she was being so friendly.

* * * *

Two days later Nathan finished his swimming workout and slumped onto a chaise lounge to catch some California sunshine. It was pure coincidence that in order to face the sun he also faced Annie’s window. If his new neighbor happened to look out said window she might catch a glimpse of his muscled torso. Not that he was trying to get her attention or anything.

As luck would have it, she came down the stairs only a few minutes later. She hopped down the steps, whistling something cheery. Nathan sat up with a grin.

“Hey,” he called, “remember me? I’m Nathan from across the hall.” He flashed a smile at her and wondered if his skin looked sweaty.

The moment she saw him, the whistling ceased, her shoulders hunched over, and she averted her head like a celebrity who’d just been busted for possession. She put a hand to her sunglasses nervously and walked faster toward the stairs leading to the garage.

“Yes, I remember,” she said. “Love to chat, but I have to go.” Again, she seemed to be in a hurry to get away.

“Well, then maybe we could have coffee sometime?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Bye.” Then she practically leapt into the darkness of the stairwell leading to the underground parking.

Hell.

Nathan flopped back on the chaise and cursed aloud when the back of the lounge collapsed, causing him to bang his head on the metal frame. He sat up and fixed the chair, testing it before reclining again.

It wasn’t as if she was the first woman who’d ever rebuffed him. Far from it. But damned if it didn’t bother him that she treated him like a pariah. What had he done to make her so skittish? Maybe she’d been relocated as a federal witness and was wary of

all strangers.

No. Nathan quickly dismissed that outlandish idea. Yesterday he'd seen Annie chatting it up with Deb from downstairs and Leo who lived in 102, but when Nathan approached, Annie had made excuses and fled. No, it was him, all right.

Women had never been frightened of him before. On the contrary, he usually had no trouble making female friends. So what was the problem with Annie? He thought about it a few moments more before deciding he was being ridiculous. So one woman didn't find him interesting. Big deal. He was certainly confident enough in himself to blow this off. It wasn't like she was anything spectacular anyway.

When Annie returned half an hour later, Nathan buried his nose in his book about gladiators. He resisted the impulse to ask her if she needed help with the groceries she toted. He wasn't going to give her a fourth chance to reject him. Good thing too, because from behind his sunglasses he saw her glance over at him and hustle up the stairs to her apartment like he was a bum waiting to ask her for a handout.

"Nathan, I baked cookies this morning. Would you like me to bring some by later?"

Mrs. Waller, the building manager, scuffled toward him in her house slippers, pushing her trusty custodial broom ahead of her. She was a mother hen who watched over her tenants like they were her chicks. Unfortunately her cookies could pass for petrified wood.

Nathan grinned. "I can never say no to your cookies, Mrs. W. What kind this time?"

"Oatmeal chocolate chip. Did you meet your new neighbor, Annie?"

"Yes, we met the other day when she was moving in."

"I think she'll make an excellent addition to our little family here at Sunset Gardens. Much better than that hell-raiser, Craig. Thank goodness he moved out. Took me a week to air out the place." Mrs. Waller leaned close and whispered, "Marijuana! Took six doses of carpet deodorizer to get rid of the stench."

"From the looks of things," Nathan commented, "she'll certainly be quieter. Or course, anyone would be quieter than Craig."

"Oh, yes. She seems like the model tenant...what's this?"

Mrs. Waller looked past the pool toward the entry where a woman and a man had been buzzed in. The woman repeatedly checked a small scrap of paper in her hands as she strode past the apartments toward the pool. The man followed, weighed down with four grocery bags.

"Can I help you?" Mrs. Waller asked.

"Yes," replied the woman. "We're looking for apartment 209. My daughter just moved in there."

Mrs. Waller beamed. "You must be Mrs. Prescott."

"Yes."

"I'm Tina Waller, the building manager. May I say that your daughter is just delightful. I'm so glad she moved in."

Nathan watched as Mrs. Waller chatted it up with Annie's mother like they were old friends. Mrs. Prescott introduced her husband, and in no time they'd arranged an impromptu potluck to which Mrs. Waller was going to bring cookies, probably the very cookies she'd just offered Nathan.

Then, without another word to Nathan, the building manager took her broom and went to her apartment. Annie's parents went right up to her place. And Nathan sat there

feeling like a bench-warmer at a Little League game. That sensation was as unfamiliar as it was unwelcome.

Later that night after a dinner by himself in front of the TV, Nathan eyed the mountain of mail that had piled up over the last week. The day had been warm, so he had his windows open to the evening breeze. His ears pricked up when he heard voices on the landing. So the party was breaking up now. Feeling petty and looking for an excuse to avoid opening the mail, he went to his front door and listened. The landing at the top of the stairs echoed like a cave, and Nathan heard them pretty clearly.

"You be sure to call if you need anything at all," a female voice said.

"I will, Mom."

"And you have Dr. Baumgartner's pager number just in case."

"Yes, Mom. I'll be fine. I know what to do."

"Well now, remember you've never been away from home before except for vacations. And don't think I didn't notice your apartment is directly across from the stairwell to the garage. God knows what kind of pollutants are going to funnel right up to your place. Daniel, you make sure you come and change those filters for her every month."

"I said I would, dear."

"Thanks for coming, Mom. Thanks for all the food."

"I know how much you like my chicken and dumplings, Annie. Now you have enough in your freezer to last you a while."

"Come on, Marta. We've stayed long enough."

Nathan heard Annie's door shut and then her mother's voice again.

"I should never have let you talk me into allowing her to go. Did you see how small that bathroom is? She can barely turn around in there. And the carpeting! Twenty years old if it's a day..."

Their voices trailed off as they went down the stairs and Nathan went back to his kitchen table. He stared at the pile of mail and sighed. It wasn't getting any smaller. He made a pile of junk and bills, opening the bills just enough so he could see how much he owed. With any luck he'd have enough left over to...

Something in the pile caught his eye. A bubble envelope? Suddenly he remembered the silly thing he'd ordered off the Internet two weeks ago.

Even now he was amazed at how easily he'd been sucked in by the slick advertisement. His screen had gone completely black. Not even the menu bar had remained. Then, one word at a time slowly faded in as if written by an invisible hand. The letters glowed red in a script that seemed foreign but wasn't.

Explore your wildest fantasies.

Then he'd gotten a glimpse of a dark corridor, but the image had faded away before he could register more details.

Delve into the exciting world of your own mind.

The corridor showed again, this time for longer. A flickering light seemed to be getting stronger at the end of the passage, as if someone with a torch was approaching the corner and would soon come into view.

Experience pleasure as never before.

Finally, a stunningly beautiful woman emerged from the shadows to crook her finger at Nathan. It looked like she was nude, but no matter how hard he stared, the shadows

made it impossible to see anything clearly.

In a husky voice she said, “Natanaél, I have been waiting for you.”

Nathan was surprised that technology had come so far that they could personalize a pop-up ad like that, even if she did pronounce his name strangely...Na-tahn-EL. The way she stared directly into his eyes was eerie yet titillating, but by that time, he’d been ready to buy whatever she was selling.

Now, the item had arrived.

Gripped with a strange excitement, he tore open the envelope. Inside a second protective layer of bubble wrap he found a circlet of polished stone, maybe an inch and a half in diameter. The inside of the circlet had raised bumps on it, and something was written, perhaps in Latin, on the outer perimeter between some inset crystals or jewels.

A note had fluttered to the floor. He picked it up.

In your hand you hold the key to erotic pleasure such as you have never known. The pursuit of physical delight should not be fettered by common inhibitions and obsolete notions of goodness. Wear My ring. Escape society’s constraints and claim what you have been denied. Discover My world, where no discipline or rules exist, no superficial judgment or frivolous values. Fantasy can be real. I can be real. Join with Me, if you dare. Cybele.

Nathan chuckled. Whoever this Cybele chick was, she made fantasizing sound positively admirable.

He examined the ring again. It was far too big for any of his fingers, or even his big toe, and too small for a bracelet. He then realized with chagrin exactly which part of his anatomy it had been designed for.

He twirled it around on his index finger, laughing to himself. Twenty nine bucks for a friggin’ cock ring. He hoped he wasn’t the only horny sucker out there who had fallen for this. His first impulse was to dump it in the garbage, yet part of him was still bewitched. He remembered the eyes of that woman in the ad—enthraling, challenging.

Nathan read the note again.

If you dare...

He smiled, tossed the note on the kitchen table, and reached for his belt. He could never resist a dare.

Although the ring felt strange, like having a shoe on the wrong foot, he settled it in the brown nest of hair. When he realized it was loose, he tried not to be affronted. Maybe he was supposed to be hard first.

With a shrug, he tucked his genitals back inside his pants, grabbed himself a Coke, and flopped onto the couch to channel surf.

When he got to MTV, Johnny Paloma was twitching his hips to his current hit, “The Sex Bomb.” Nathan watched, fascinated when the cameras swept across the audience of screaming women. Even if the guy was gay, he was adored by millions of women, some of whom ripped off their panties and threw them on the stage.

Nathan’s groin tingled, and a strange buzzing sound hummed in his head. Too much caffeine, he thought, setting his Coke on the table.

On TV, Paloma flipped his hair back and gyrated like he was channeling Elvis and one of the Backstreet Boys at the same time. The women loved it. In fact, Nathan supposed the guy could have his pick of women every night. Ah, the endless variety.

As the song came to an end, Nathan realized the buzzing was getting louder. He also

began to feel lightheaded.

Wiggling a finger in his ear, he stood up and then sat back down. Whoa. Definitely dizzy. The periphery of his vision went alternately blurry and sharp, and the background of his apartment shimmered like a mirage. He smelled something burning and thought it might be his pants, because now his balls felt like they were on fire. He squinted, trying to focus, but his vision flickered.

And then, just like that, his apartment disappeared.

Chapter Two

Nathan's arm shot out to snatch a pair of panties from the air just as his last set ended. The audience went wild. He held his pose for a moment and then brought the panties to his lips and kissed them. The audience shrieked even louder.

After an exaggerated bow, he jogged offstage. The tumultuous screaming and applause continued as he stood in the wings. Nathan let the sound wash over him. The adoration energized him, made him feel like he could conquer the world. He chugged a bottle of water, then returned to do his encore.

As he sauntered center stage, the audience convulsed into an even louder frenzy. He held his arms up in an effort to quiet them down. As expected, it didn't work.

So, raising his eyebrows and grinning wickedly, he shouted into the headset, "You want more?"

The response was so enthusiastic he had to force himself not to cover his ears. He held his hands up again and did a double take at the panties dangling from his thumb as if surprised they were still there. As a fresh chorus of feminine screams erupted, he smiled slowly and, tossing the panties to a stagehand, he signaled his band to start the music for the love ballad.

The lights went down except for a spot on him, and the screaming faded away as he began singing, "If Only I Could Get You Alone." The suggestive lyrics flowed with the sinuous Latin beat as he tried to convey every sexual yearning he'd ever felt through his singing and movements. Then, when he could almost smell the moist arousal of the women, he went down into the audience, preceded by a cameraman. His eyes scanned the women who reached out to him, touching his arms, his shoulders, his chest, even his ass.

Nathan spotted her on the aisle. She had blonde hair, a studious pair of eyeglasses, and a clean and simple beauty. He approached, maintaining eye contact until he stood before her. In contrast to the hysterical women around them, the woman he had singled out stood transfixed.

He now directed his singing solely to the blonde, caressing her face, gazing into her eyes. She looked up at him, and the tremble of her lower lip made him want to kiss her right then and there. But he didn't; there would be time enough for that later. He satisfied himself with bringing his lips within a hairsbreadth of hers, so it seemed like he was singing into her mouth.

Then, with a reluctant expression on his face, he drew away from her and made his way back to the stage, leaving his hand outstretched toward her in a gesture of farewell.

When the love song came to its bittersweet conclusion, the band kicked into one of his earliest hits, "Countdown with Me," and then the more recent, "Crazy Girl, My Girl." Finally, after two more encores and numerous bows, he left the frenzied applause behind and headed for the exit where his limo waited. He knew one of his assistants had pressed a backstage pass into the hand of the blonde. Even though the night was bitterly cold, a crowd milled around his car. The biting wind felt refreshing to Nathan, still sweaty from his exertions on stage. Members of the stage crew cleared a path through the outstretched hands.

"Hi," he said to the blonde as he got inside the car. "I'm glad you agreed to meet

with me. I wanted to thank you personally for letting me fool around with you during the show.”

She stared at him, star struck for a moment. Under her open down jacket, she wore a pale pink sweater and jeans. Then she seemed to get a hold of herself.

“Are you kidding?” she exclaimed. “That was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me! I’m Annie, by the way. Annie Prescott. We met once before. I don’t expect you to remember, but I’m president of your local fan club.”

“You were the one who made giant magnets out of my CD covers and put them on your car, weren’t you?”

She beamed. “Yes! That’s me! You do remember. We had lunch together.” She smiled wryly. “It was a publicity thing. Probably one of hundreds for you.”

He chuckled. He actually remembered quite well.

“I really want to get to my hotel and take a shower. If you don’t mind, I’d like it if you came with me. We can have a drink or something. My driver can return you here to the amphitheater later.”

“I guess that’s all right,” she said hesitantly. Then with more conviction she added, “Yes. That’s fine.”

As always, Nathan’s suite was sumptuous. Three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a full kitchen, wet bar, dining room and sunken living room. From the twentieth floor, the view of the L.A. skyline was spectacular.

After fetching Annie a drink, Nathan said, “I need to take a shower, but I’ll be right back. Make yourself comfortable.”

She had already taken a seat on the couch that faced the windows. Stifling a yawn, she nodded. “All right.”

After his shower, he toweled his hair dry and put on one of the hotel bathrobes. When he emerged from the bathroom, he wasn’t surprised to find a naked woman in his bed.

But she wasn’t Annie.

“Who the hell are you and how did you get in here?”

“I am anything you want me to be.” The strange woman’s voice hummed low and tickled a dark desire inside him. In the shadowed room only the light from the bathroom illuminated her. She arose from the bed, her body a Playboy centerfold in the flesh, but strangely indistinct, as if her airbrushed figure couldn’t make up its mind about what shape to take.

Angry that she’d gotten past security, he said, “I don’t know how you got in here, but you have to leave now.”

She smiled. “You do not remember, but there is such pleasure to be had. Things you have only imagined. Things you are afraid to think about too long...”

But Nathan wasn’t listening. He was busy looking for her clothes. She couldn’t have made it up here stark naked. “Where are your damned clothes?”

As soon as he said it, he noticed a gown on a chair. He picked it up and tossed it at her.

“Put this on and get out. I don’t want to call security, but I will. If you just leave, I won’t press charges.”

The woman laughed as she slipped into the dress with the grace of a dancer. The semi-transparent fabric settled over her curves, emphasizing all, yet revealing nothing.

The jewels that adorned her gown glittered in the darkness like the eyes of predators.

"As authoritative as always. I should have remembered that you always enjoyed the chase as much as the capture. Very well. This time I will allow you to win, but do not draw out the pursuit too long. My patience runs thin."

Great. Another sicko fan who thought that memorizing the lyrics of all his songs and following his career meant she knew him. Nathan strode to the door leading from the master bedroom to the elevator hallway.

"Thanks for coming by," he said tersely.

With a smile hovering on her full lips she paused before him and reached up to touch his face, but he grabbed her wrist before she could.

Her smile deepened and she laughed again. "I do adore you so." And with that, she left. He watched to make sure she got in the elevator and then shut the door. He'd have some harsh words for security in the morning. What kind of shoddy operation were they running?

In the living room he found Annie asleep on the couch. Good, he thought as he dimmed the lights. That meant she probably wasn't aware of the disturbance with the groupie.

Standing behind the sofa, he leaned over and murmured in her ear, "Annie?"

"What!" She started at the sound of his voice.

"Easy, easy, sweetheart. It's me, Nathan. Remember?"

"I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep."

"That's perfectly all right."

"I guess I'm still a little nervous being around you," she admitted. "I still can't believe this is happening. I mean, my friends think I'm nuts with my magnets and my fanzine, but look at me now." She twisted her head a little and gave him that girl-next-door smile.

"Annie, you shouldn't be nervous. Just relax." He bent over and brushed a soft kiss against her neck. "It's just sex."

She stiffened. "Dear Lord, did you have to go and say it out loud?" She covered her face with her hands.

"Shhh." Hoping to soothe her fears, he stroked her hair slowly. "Would it help if I told you that I arranged for you to get that aisle ticket tonight? At that publicity luncheon, everyone else got tickets farther back. Only you got one so close."

She made a rude noise. "You expect me to believe that? Why me? There were some really beautiful women at that lunch."

He thought about it for a moment, a little baffled himself. He usually went for knock-outs with an obvious enthusiasm for sex. His fame allowed him to bypass all the niceties of dating and get right to the good stuff.

"I really don't know why," he answered honestly.

She looked at him a moment and then turned her back again. She seemed to be considering what he'd said. She was probably weighing the opportunity to make love with her idol with the damage to her self-esteem.

"Come on, Annie. Have some fun with me. Please. I've already made love to you with my voice. I only want to use my body now. What's wrong with that?"

She frowned and said quite seriously, "Well, I don't love you. I mean, I love you as a singer, of course, but I don't *love you*, love you."

Nathan managed to stifle his laughter. Besides the inanity of her statement, he found it humorous that she turned to look at him with a worried look on her face, as if she was afraid she had hurt his feelings.

“Annie, honey, these days you’re allowed to have sex without marriage or love.”

“Don’t lecture me on the obvious. What people are allowed to do and what they choose to do are two different things.”

“Hey, no one’s forcing you. If you don’t want to, don’t. Love and marriage are great, I’m sure, but sex for fun doesn’t hurt anyone. It’s just fun, Annie, that’s all. Just two people having fun together. Try it. What’s the worst that could happen? You’d regret it afterward? Big deal. I have lots of regrets, and I’m sure you do too. You learn and move on, right? Now, come on. Just give it a try. I’ll stop if you say so. I swear. Don’t leak this to the press, but me and my hand have been acquainted a long time.”

A giggle escaped her and Nathan smiled.

“Plus,” he added, “I’m not about to jeopardize my career with a rape scandal. No offense, but I don’t want to make it with you that bad.”

She laughed then, and when she tilted her head to the side in invitation, he knew he’d won.

He stayed behind the sofa, thinking she might need that barrier between them right now. Slowly, he bent down and rubbed his cheek against her hair. When he inhaled the fresh scent of summer peaches, he sighed deeply.

“You smell good,” he murmured into her ear.

Very slowly he bestowed a series of soft kisses along her ear and the side of her neck. The pace of her breathing changed, from deep and relaxed to shallow and short. He tasted her skin with his tongue.

“Your skin is so soft,” he murmured into her ear. “I want to feel more of it. Let me, please. Let me touch you.” He slid his hands down and lifted the hem of her sweater over her head, giving her ample opportunity to say no. She didn’t.

With nimble fingers, he flicked open the front clasp on her bra then cupped her breasts. She drew in a sharp breath and covered his hands with her own. For a moment, he was afraid that she was going to pull his hands off her, but again, she didn’t. Instead, she guided his hands in circles on her breasts and leaned her head back giving him greater access to her neck.

He wrapped his arm beneath her breasts and lifted her up to sit on the back of the couch, still facing away from him. After he slipped her bra off and let it drop to the floor, she leaned back against his chest with a breathless sigh.

“Do you want me to stop, Annie? Have I gone too far?” He was coaxing her nipples to attention, pulling on them with his fingers as he longed to pull on them with his lips. Annie panted in his arms. Her body arched and she gave him every indication that she was ready for him to go even farther.

“I want to touch you here, Annie.” He slid one hand down over her jeans and cupped her. Her hips moved as he rubbed her through the denim. “Will you let me? Please?”

She drew in a ragged breath and said, “Y—yes.”

Smiling in triumph, Nathan unbuttoned her jeans, slid the zipper down, and slipped his hand under her white cotton panties. She squirmed a little in his arms like she wanted to wriggle away, so he clasped her more tightly against his chest. Looking down he could just see the curls of her mound. They were the same rich color as her hair, like ripe

wheat. He delved deeper. His fingers encountered wet heat within the folds of her soft flesh, and when he felt her arousal, he kissed her neck with more ardor.

He stepped away from her and moved around the couch. Annie sat on the back of it with her feet on the cushions. Bare-breasted, with her jeans open and a few tantalizing inches of her cotton panties in view, she watched him come toward her. This time he didn't ask permission from her before taking off her enchanting little canvas sneakers and socks. He kept his eyes on hers when he took hold of her jeans, tugged them off, and tossed them on a nearby armchair. Then, he hooked his fingers under her panties and pulled those down with agonizing slowness. Bit by bit the tuft of honey-hued curls sprang up as her beautiful mound was exposed. He drew the scrap of white cotton down her long legs and off. She looked nervous, but was naked at last.

He pulled her to her feet. Cupping her face in his hands, he bent his head and kissed her—softly at first. She stood shaking, her arms at her sides, as if overcome with stage fright. With great patience, he increased the pressure and intensity of the kiss until when he pulled back she gave a soft whine of protest.

“Shhh, we have all night,” he murmured.

He circled around until he stood behind her and again plied her neck and shoulders with wet kisses.

“Oh, oh, my...,” she said.

She gasped when he opened his robe and pressed his hot erection against her. With a particular position in mind, he reached around to cup her breasts as he drew her back down on the couch again. This time she was on his lap. Planting both feet on the floor, he scrunched down on the couch so that he almost reclined. With gentle pushes, he got her to spread her legs until her thighs flanked his own and his throbbing cock pointed straight up between her legs. She now sat more on his stomach than on his lap.

“Lean back, sweetheart.”

He kneaded her small breasts and she moaned. Almost ready, he thought. Keeping one arm wrapped around her so he could tease her nipple, he slid the other hand down between her spread legs. She was so wet that his fingers glided between her buttery folds until he found the tiny nubbin he was looking for. A focused combination of neck kissing and petting soon had her writhing in his arms.

“Come for me, Annie,” he whispered in her ear. “I want you to come for me first.”

She didn't answer; she didn't need to. Nathan used all his expertise to push Annie toward climax. He read every gasp and moan she uttered, every twitch of her body to help him know what she liked. It wasn't long before she gripped his wrist and let out a soft cry of release. There was no sweeter sound in the world than that of a woman having an orgasm.

When she finished, he got her to lie down on the couch. She was the picture of satiation. Her hair was messed up, her eyes were heavy-lidded, and her lips tilted in a half-smile. He caressed her knees and her legs fell apart. God, the plump lips there looked so slick and pink that he couldn't wait to sink between them.

Bracing himself with his arms, he moved into place. As her glazed flesh touched the tip of his cock, he gritted his teeth. He was painfully hard now, and every cell of his body screamed at him to pound her hard and fast, but he didn't. He watched his shaft gradually disappear into her tight body and groaned aloud at the pleasure of it.

“Oh, Annie, that's good.”

After a few slow strokes, he stopped to lever her ankles over his shoulders. This position gave him access to that fabled spot deep inside. When he moved again, her sharp gasp made him grin. Her eyes flew open in surprise, and he held her gaze as he slid in and out again and again. The knowledge that he was the one responsible for her panting moans and the desperate grip she had on his arms jacked up his own pleasure.

When he could stand it no longer, he increased the pace and force of his thrusts. His shoulders started to burn from the effort of holding himself over her, but he refused to buckle. He had to see this through. He'd coaxed her into this and he was determined to make good on his promise that this was going to be fun. He wanted it to be more than fun. He wanted it to be goddamned amazing.

By this time he was grunting with the effort of his frantic pace. He could feel the sweat on his back, and a tremor threatened his arms. The pressure was building in his groin. He knew he wasn't going to last much longer. *Come, Annie*, he thought. *Come, goddamn it!*

At last, she squeezed his arms with a force that didn't seem possible from such fragile hands. Her mouth opened and a keening cry escaped her lips. *Thank God*. At that sound, Nathan let himself go. The familiar rush zeroed in on his groin and then erupted in a nova of satisfaction.

* * * *

With a sharp jolt, Nathan found himself back in his apartment, still in the throes of one of the most powerful orgasms he'd ever experienced. It seemed to last forever. His cock erupted inside his pants; his body twitched as he was hit by blast after blast of concentrated pleasure. Clutching the cushions of the sofa, he couldn't stifle his grunts of satisfaction. When it was over, he tried to catch his breath.

What the hell had just happened to him?

One minute he was watching TV in his living room and the next he was this arrogant rock star on a stage in front of thousands of screaming fans. It was as if he'd really been there. He had felt everything, smelled everything. The funky chemical smell of the stage smoke, the cool clear water he'd chugged offstage, the heavenly scent of Annie's secretions that still seemed to linger in his nostrils. His whole experience had been so real that he felt a keen disappointment. He had been looking forward to holding Annie in his arms afterward, basking in the satisfaction of her obvious enjoyment and making sure she didn't regret making love with him. But she was gone. The penthouse suite was gone. None of it had really happened.

He sat on the same old lumpy, threadbare couch. His TV blared some discordant metal music and the lights of his living room hurt his eyes. God, and his throat was as dry as dust.

At that moment, another orgasm rose up and swept through his body. He felt so confused by what had happened that he almost couldn't enjoy it. After it passed, he undid his pants and with some difficulty pulled the ring off his dick. Whoever sent him this thing must have coated it with a powerful hallucinatory drug. That was the only logical explanation. What a goddamn mess. He looked down at his pants. Literally.

Chapter Three

The next morning Nathan was exhausted, even though he'd slept a good eight hours. A little dazed mentally, he lounged around the apartment, avoiding the various chores that needed to be done. He checked his email, surfed the web a little. The publisher's sweepstakes envelope came and he spent a few minutes preparing his entry.

After flopping onto the couch with a bag of chips, he noticed the ring on the floor where he'd thrown it last night, and the memories of his mental liaison with Annie came flooding back.

He found himself wondering why, out of all the women in this world, his mind had chosen her. He pictured Annie in her typical conservative slacks and sweater set, her gold-rimmed glasses perched on her nose, hair up like a schoolmarm's. How messed up was that? He had fantasized about a girl who could be typecast as a librarian. Why hadn't he thought about Nicole Kidman or Catherine Zeta Jones?

Maybe he *had* hallucinated the whole thing. A man couldn't be responsible for his state of mind when he was influenced by drugs, could he? Or maybe the ring constricted the blood flow to his brain somehow and caused a black out. Or maybe he had just fallen asleep watching what's-his-name on the TV and dreamed the whole thing.

But, Christ, he hadn't had a wet dream since he was fifteen and he sure as shit wasn't multi-orgasmic.

After a little more deliberation, Nathan decided that the whole incident was the result of a drug, and he'd never find out which particular one because he refused to go to some chem lab and ask them to run tests on his funky little sex toy.

Looking at the ring again, he suddenly remembered the African mask at his aunt's house. As a kid, he'd always avoided walking past her bedroom by himself because that damned mask gave him the creeps. And now, ridiculously enough, he felt the same apprehension about the ring. He tried ignoring it, but that didn't work. Even inert on the floor its supernatural potential seemed tangible, like Pandora's Box. Eventually, he picked up the ring and thrust it in a kitchen drawer, out of sight, out of mind.

* * * *

Annie was at work straightening up the children's book section when she saw Deb stomping toward her wearing a frilly dress, about twenty bracelets, and boots that looked like they'd survive a nuclear war.

"Hey, neighbor!" Deb exclaimed. "Ready for lunch?"

"You bet," Annie replied, re-shelving one last book. "I even have my purse here already."

As they walked out of the store toward a nearby cafe, Deb said, "Michelle Pfeiffer came in today and bought a top, the cutest little number with beads on it. I actually talked to her. She is so nice."

Annie and Deb had discovered they both shared a goofy fascination with the world of celebrities. As a teen Annie's bedroom had been papered with movie posters and both she and Deb regarded Oscar Night with as much excitement as Christmas Eve.

At the café, the two young women got their regular lunch orders and sat down. Deb poured dressing on her salad. "I still can't get over how much you can eat."

Annie had the kind of metabolism that other women coveted. She had always been able to eat as much as she wanted and not gain a pound. This didn't help when making friends. For some reason it made other girls want to band together against her, as if Annie had control over how her body converted food to energy. She usually ate lightly when in the company of women and saved her big meals for later. Deb, however, seemed like one of the few women who didn't hold her metabolism against her. Plus, she liked having a regular lunch companion and hadn't wanted to feel restricted every day about what she could eat.

"I thought you said it wasn't a big deal to you." Annie looked at the large pastrami sandwich and french fries sitting in the plastic basket.

"It isn't. I mean, I have to admit that I'm a little jealous, but really, it's okay. You eat as much as you want. I'll get over it. What I really want to know is what's with Nathan in 208?"

Annie swallowed a bite of her sandwich and said as nonchalantly as she could, "Him? Oh, nothing."

Deb gave an indelicate snort. "Come on. I'm not blind. When you first moved in, he like had the hots for you, and you were avoiding him like an STD. What's up with that? Don't you think he's cute?"

Annie could feel the blush on her cheeks. "Sure I do."

"So why are you holding him at arm's length? He's a nice guy. Plus, I've seen him in the pool. With that buff body, I'll bet he's got stamina up the wazoo. I'd do him in a minute."

"Deborah! Dear Lord, not so loud!"

"Well, then tell me."

Deb took a bite of salad and waited for Annie to speak. Annie took another big bite to avoid replying, but even in the couple of weeks that she'd known Deb, Annie knew her friend wasn't going to let this topic fall by the wayside.

"Come on," Deb prompted. "I'll weasel it out of you eventually anyway, so you might as well tell me now."

Annie fidgeted. In the space of two weeks she and Deb had already shared so much with each other.

"All right," Annie said, after a fortifying sip of soda. "I'll tell you. But only if you promise not to tell another living soul, especially him."

"Him who? Nathan?"

"Yes. Him. You have to swear on your autographed picture of Russell Crowe that you won't breathe a word of what I'm about to tell you."

"This must be serious." Deb put down her fork.

Annie wiped her mouth with her napkin and talked in a low voice. "It all started with a silly letter..."

* * * *

Annie had been bored to death in English Lit. She knew *Othello* backwards and forwards and whizzed through the multiple choice comprehension test in ten minutes flat. Now she had nothing to do. She looked out the window and there he was. Nathan

Somerset.

He was talking with one of the teachers in the quad. It was a blustery day, and the wind had left his dark hair adorably tousled. His easy smile made her sigh. Even from a distance he was so gorgeous. And so out of reach.

Annie had no chance with him. He was a senior; she was a freshman. He had his choice of any girl in the school, and Annie was well aware that she was neither beautiful nor popular. Good Lord, there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't have at least three zits on her face. But that didn't stop her from longing for him with the melodramatic intensity that only a teenaged girl can muster.

Sitting there in English Lit, she imagined that if she could just talk to him without anyone else around, he would realize that she was right for him. He would recognize how witty she was, how much fun she could be, and they would become high school sweethearts, get married, and live happily ever after.

But that would never happen. He was always surrounded by his friends or by other girls. Plus, Annie knew she'd probably flub it up by being incapable of speech or talking about something stupid like the weather. She had never been very good at idle conversation. No, she decided, if she was going to impress him, it would be more likely to happen on paper.

Without really thinking about it, Annie pulled a fresh sheet from her binder and began writing a letter to Nathan. In her big loopy handwriting, she expressed all her deepest feelings, how much she admired him. In her mind she concocted scenarios of happiness that were as unlikely as they were frivolous, yet she described them in all their idyllic detail.

She was so engrossed in her writing that when the bell rang, it took her by surprise. Hurriedly, she tucked the letter into her purse and got up to leave. She had biology during third period, and as luck would have it, she had another test to take. Teachers seemed to like giving tests on Fridays. However, her lit teacher kept her behind to compliment her on an essay she had written, and by the time he was finished she was late.

Annie ran. The science building was across campus, and Mr. Krall was a stickler for promptness. More importantly, Nathan had chemistry for third period, and they sometimes passed each other in the hall. The wind kicked up again, stirring up dust and leaves. Before she was even halfway there, Annie started wheezing. She knew she should stop and walk and just be late, but she was struggling for an A in biology and she didn't want to upset Mr. Krall.

By the time she got to the science building, she knew she'd made a serious mistake. She could barely breathe. Holding her books with one arm, she fumbled in her purse for her inhaler, but couldn't manage to find it. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone come toward her.

"Hey, are you okay?"

She was unable to take a decent breath and couldn't reply. She dropped her books, knelt on the ground, and dumped out her purse. The moment she spied her inhaler, she snatched it up and sucked in the medicine. By now a small crowd had gathered.

"Somebody get some help! Are you okay?" A guy squatted next to her.

Annie gasped when she saw it was Nathan. Her eyes wide, she inhaled another dose. He was looking at her with such concern, she felt dizzy. A group of curious students surrounded them. As the pressure in her chest receded, a teacher shouldered her way

through the crowd.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” she gasped. “I’m fine. I had a little asthma attack, but I’m okay now.” She tried to gather her stuff and put it back into her purse as quickly as possible. Especially the tampons. To her mixed mortification and delight, Nathan helped by handing her her wallet and keys.

“Why don’t I take her to the health office?” he said, picking up her books now. “She should probably see the nurse.”

“I agree,” said the teacher.

“But I have a test in Mr. Krall’s class,” Annie protested.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Krall,” the teacher said. “You can make it up. Now go. The rest of you go on to class. The excitement’s over.”

And so, overwhelmed with the prospect of several blissful moments alone with Nathan, Annie forgot all about her letter. This was a dream come true. She walked as slowly as she could, cursing the fact that the halls were empty and that no one would see them together.

When they arrived at the office, Nathan returned her books to her and shrugged.

“Okay, well, I have to get to swim practice.”

“You’re not going to get in trouble, are you?” she asked.

“Nah.” He gave her a sheepish smile. “Coach likes me. See ya.”

And he was gone.

* * * *

“So, he found the letter, right?” Deb wiped her mouth with her napkin. Their lunch hour had nearly slipped away.

Annie shook her head. “No, but his friends did.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. See, they thought it would be funny to publish it in this underground school newsletter. And everyone thought it was hilarious. Even Nathan.”

“Double ouch.”

“I saw him laughing over it the next day. That newsletter was the most popular topic on campus for a week. Thankfully there was this picture of the swim team mooning in the same issue, so a lot of the attention fell on them.

“The problem was this girl I knew recognized my handwriting. She thought it was funny to keep threatening to tell Nathan that I had written the letter. She probably never did. Nathan graduated three months later, and she was a freshman like me. But I’ve never really been sure.”

“So, my burning question is, do you still like him?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” Annie shrugged. “He still seems like a really nice guy, but the whole thing is just too embarrassing. Every time I see him, I feel like a teenager again. And what if he remembers? That letter was so gushy. I think I said stuff about us being ‘forever lovers until the end of time and beyond.’” Annie closed her eyes and shuddered. “I’d rather just leave all that in the past where it belongs.”

“But what if you were meant to be together? What if it was a sign that you two are soul mates? I mean, don’t you think it was strange that he was the one to ‘rescue’ you that day?”

“A sign?” Annie laughed. “Are you on drugs?”

“Honey, I stick strictly to alcohol. Now answer the question.”

“No, I don’t think it was any type of sign. It was just bad luck. I told you he had a class in the same building.”

Deb shook her head dubiously. “And just more bad luck that you happened to move into the apartment across the hall from him, right?”

Annie frowned.

“Aha! See? It *is* a sign. You’re destined to be together. Annie, I’m serious! This is your second chance. You have to take it, because you might not get a third.”

“That’s ridiculous, Deb.”

“No, it’s not. I believe things like this happen for a reason. What day did you move in? I’m going to look up your horoscope for that day, and I’ll bet cash money it foretells big things for you that day.”

“Yeah, it probably says something like ‘Stay home if you know what’s good for you.’”

“Do not mock what you don’t understand. I’m telling you something’s going on here.”

Sure enough, the next day Annie had to work the evening shift, and around dinner time Deb cornered her in the self-help section of the bookstore where she worked.

“I have it.” Deb waved a scrap of paper under Annie’s nose.

“You have what?”

“I hate to say I told you so, but I have your horoscope for the day you moved in. And you won’t believe it.”

“What does it say?”

Deb read aloud, “A new world awaits you. Embrace your future, but don’t discount the past.” She beamed as if she’d just discovered a way to eliminate menstrual periods.

Annie smiled. “I’ll admit it’s interestingly related to my situation, but it doesn’t really prove anything.”

Deb threw her hands up in the air. “You are so stubborn! What will it take to make you believe that you and Nathan are a matched pair? A visit from the angel Gabriel?”

“Look, Deb, why does it matter so much if I believe or not? If it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen regardless, right?”

“Because things will happen more quickly if you’re not interfering or resisting.”

To placate her friend, Annie raised her right hand and said, “I promise not to interfere with Fate.”

“Good idea. Even so, I’m going to keep this little scrap of paper, and when you and Nathan get married, I’m going to bring it to the wedding reception and make you acknowledge in front of everyone that I was right.”

Annie laughed. “I have no problem with that.”

“Now that that’s settled, will you buy these for me and I’ll pay you back?” Deb held out a couple of books.

“Sure. I’ll bring them home with me tonight.” Annie glanced at the titles. She was surprised Deb had chosen some challenging nonfiction. She didn’t seem like the type of person who was interested in world politics or the state of fine art in America.

“You’re a pal,” Deb said. “Gotta go. I have a date with Handel. He’s in a band.”

With a devilish smile, Deb flounced off toward the exit, leaving behind the faint

smell of patchouli incense.

“Hi, Annie,” a voice said.

Annie turned around to see Todd Soltis, the owner’s eighteen-year-old nephew. Annie usually worked alone, but Todd had needed a job for the summer.

Todd pointedly watched Deb saunter out of the store. “It takes all kinds.”

“What do you mean by that?” Annie hugged the books to her chest. Todd couldn’t know they were for Deb, but Annie didn’t want him looking at them anyway.

“I’ve never seen anyone who dresses so...uniquely.”

While Annie couldn’t see herself wearing any of Deb’s avant-garde outfits, that didn’t mean she was going to allow Todd to insult her friend. Besides, Todd’s idea of fashion was to dress like Opie Taylor.

“I think she’s got style. Besides, she’s a friend of mine.”

“Oh!” Todd regrouped. “I didn’t know you two were...I mean, of course she’s got style. You misunderstood me. I was just saying that she’s unique. Unique doesn’t mean bad, you know.”

Todd patted his sandy blond hair with his hand and the gelled spikes didn’t even bend. Then, with a smirk on his lean lips, he leaned his elbow on the counter.

“Say, I was wondering if you wanted to catch a movie next Friday.”

Then, revealing the silver glint of a retainer, he smiled at her. Not a sneer, which was his default expression, but a real smile. It changed his whole face from disdainful to, well, almost normal.

“How about a romantic comedy, something like that? What do you say? Next Friday? You and me?”

“I’m too old for you, Todd,” Annie replied. “Besides, I have plans.”

She and Deb were catching a retrospective of the movie *Grease*. Along the lines of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a local theatre owner was encouraging people to come in costume and sing along with the movie.

“Maybe some other time,” he said, ignoring her age difference comment. “I think we’d have a great time together. Maybe if I give you more notice.”

In lieu of a real answer, she shrugged and started reorganizing the promotional bookmarks that sat on the counter. Todd stood there a moment longer, and then apparently figured out that their conversation was over. Annie sighed with relief when he walked away. She decided to go over to the bestseller section, which always needed straightening. She hoped keeping busy might distract her from the fact that on top of the Nathan problem, she now had to deal with Todd’s inept and unwanted attention.

It was enough to make a girl want to believe in Fate.

Chapter Four

The next day, Nathan trotted down the stairs on his way to work, and Deb Cochran almost barreled into him. Wearing a loud flowered T-shirt over chartreuse pants, she popped out of her apartment like a flamboyant jack in the box.

“Hey, Nathan! Off to work, I see,” she said.

Nathan glanced down at his uniform—white shirt and black pants, vest, and bow tie. His apron was stuck in his back pocket.

“Yeah. Haven’t won the lottery yet.”

“Where do you work again?”

“Chiara West.”

“That fancy restaurant on Main?”

“Yeah, near Fifth.”

“Do you have a set schedule, or does it change around? You know, in case I wanted to come in sometime...”

Baffled by her interest in his work he answered, “My schedule is complicated. I don’t really have time to explain right now.”

Nathan started to walk away since he was running a little late, but Deb said, “Hey, did you know I work at Kiki’s Closet just a mile or so away? What a small world.”

“Is that right? Well, I have to...”

“Did you know Annie works nearby too? You know Annie. She lives across the hall from you. Cute blonde with the glasses? Anyway, she works at the Book Mark, you know, that book store with the red canopy. You should go there sometime. Annie’s nice, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Look, I really have to go. I’m late.”

As he finally made his escape, he wondered if Deb had developed a thing for him. She sure was acting strangely.

* * * *

Looking back, Annie should have known that, even though destiny’s wheel had supposedly been set in motion, someone as straightforward as Deb Cochran couldn’t resist giving it a shove in the right direction. Annie severely underestimated her friend’s knack for underhanded kindness and by the time she realized her error, she found herself an unwilling participant in Deb’s scheme.

Clue number one that Deb was up to something: When she showed up at the Book Mark at closing time, she didn’t want to borrow Annie’s employee discount.

“What’s up?” Annie asked. “I was about to go home.”

Deb’s shoulders slumped. “Things aren’t going well with Handel.”

“Oh, Deb, I’m sorry.”

“Can we go somewhere to talk? I need some chocolate in the worst way.”

Annie immediately felt for her friend. “Of course. We’ll go wherever you want.”

Clue number two: Deb took her to an intimate restaurant with valet parking, an embossed leather reservations book, and real flowers on the table.

Annie read the sign out front. "Chiara West? Isn't this place expensive?"

Deb shrugged. "They have this killer chocolate soufflé. Come on. It's only dessert. Now brush your hair and touch up your lipstick."

Clue number three: The woman who seated them seemed a little strange, like she was auditioning for the part of the vivacious hostess.

"Right this way, ladies. I think you'll find the service at this particular table outstanding. Yes, indeed."

Annie settled herself in the booth, laid her napkin on her lap, and when she looked up, there stood Nathan Somerset, devastatingly handsome in formal waiter's garb.

"Well, Deb, long time no see," Nathan said.

Deb piped right up. "Hey, Nathan. You remember Annie, right?"

Annie recovered enough from her surprise to kick Deb under the table.

"Ooof. From the building, I mean."

"Sure. Hi, Annie."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Nathan gave her a crooked smile. Annie's heart started thumping.

"We're just here for dessert," Deb said.

"You've come to the right place." Nathan replied. "Everything on the menu is superb. I recommend the chocolate soufflé or the crepes flambé."

"That's what we'll have," Deb exclaimed. "One of each and we'll share. Coffee too, decaf. Is that okay, Annie?"

Annie raised an eyebrow. "Why not? This is your show, Deb."

Nathan left to put their order in and Annie slowly turned to stare down her friend.

"What!" Deb exclaimed with mock innocence. "This is just a harmless outing. Two friends out for dessert."

"Things aren't going well with Handel'?"

"If you think I was lying, I wasn't. At least, not technically. He only made me come two times last night instead of three."

Annie laid her forehead on the table. "What am I going to do with you?" she said into the tablecloth.

"You're not going to do anything with me. It's Nathan you need to concentrate on. You can't fool me. I saw how pink your cheeks got when he smiled at you."

"That's not the point. Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is? You might as well tape a sign on my back that says 'Desperate.'"

"You're exaggerating. All he knows is that we're here visiting. We're neighbors, after all. Nothing suspicious."

"He's going to remember me, and I'll have to live through the humiliation of that stupid letter all over again and it'll be all your fault."

"Look, Annie. I grant you it was probably really ugly back in high school. Even the smallest things can seem like life-threatening ordeals when you're going through puberty, but trust me, it's, what, seven years later, right? That's a long time. You have to get over this. You were a kid then. You're a woman now. Even if he remembers, you can blow it off as a joke. A sleepover party game, something like that. Now, put a smile on your face. Here he comes."

Annie blindly obeyed, regretting ever having told Deb about any of it.

"Here's your coffee, ladies."

Nathan arrived with a tray. The coffee was served in delicate china cups. Deb picked up one of the wooden stirrers and showed Annie the crystallized sugar on the end.

"Fancy," she said.

"The soufflé will take about thirty minutes," Nathan said. "They make them from scratch."

Special sugar sticks. Soufflés made to order. Annie wished she'd examined the dessert menu before agreeing to Deb's choices.

"Next time you come, come for dinner," Nathan said. "Everything is fantastic. Alphonse, the chef, is a master."

"I think it's probably out of my price range," Annie said. "I'm living on a tight budget."

"Yeah, me too," Deb said. "This was just a spur-of-the-moment thing."

"Well, keep it in mind for a special occasion, like a birthday."

Nathan noticed Stefan, the owner, signaling to him. Nathan nodded at him.

"All right, ladies, I'll leave you to your coffee and be back shortly with the desserts."

What could Stefan possibly want now? Nathan joined Stefan in the kitchen.

Stefan stroked his goatee. "You were standing there quite a while talking to those women. I understand that flirting with the female customers gets you bigger tips, but don't cross the line. Our service here should be restricted to dining, and your personal life should be just that, personal. Is that clear?"

Nathan gritted his teeth. "Yes, sir."

He realized that atmosphere was important to the restaurant business, but his boss took things too far. Tonight was the perfect example. It started when he was a little late reporting for work. Being late always deserved the requisite lecture. Then Stefan pointed out that Nathan's shoes looked dull, and the crease in his pants wasn't sharp enough to slice a friggin' tomato. Nathan's only consolation was that Stefan was an equal opportunity jerk; the entire wait staff got the same nitpicky treatment. He swore if he ever found himself in a management position, he'd treat his employees with more tolerance.

Nathan escaped into the quiet alley behind the restaurant. As usual, Alphonse was there smoking a cigar.

"The special was good tonight," Nathan said, in an effort to forget about Stefan and his fascist management techniques.

Alphonse, a stocky man with a large moustache, nodded and blew out a stream of smoke. He spoke with a French accent. "Yes, but next time I might add wild mushrooms to the sauce. Or try maybe some lobster mashed potatoes. What do you think?"

"Knock it off. I'm getting hungry again."

Laughing, Alphonse replied, "Someday your appetite will get the best of you. Wait until you are my age, then you will see." He patted his slightly rounded paunch.

Nathan chuckled. Alphonse enjoyed characterizing himself as older and wiser, but despite the prematurely thinning hair, Nathan knew he wasn't more than thirty.

"If you'd only exercise a little..."

Alphonse waved his cigar around dismissively. They'd had this conversation many times before.

"I am surprised you are not inside wooing those two young women. Are you ill?"

"They're my neighbors. We live in the same building."

"It seems to me that would only make liaisons more convenient."

“Ah, but I can’t ‘cross the line,’ you know. At least that’s what Stefan says.”

Alphonse chuckled. “Now remember, Stefan has a personal stake in the success of his restaurant. It is his reputation on the line when things don’t go right.”

“Yeah, whatever. He treats you with kid gloves, because he can’t afford to lose you. The rest of us he treats like slave labor. Catch you later. I have to pick up an order.”

Nathan straightened his vest and fetched the desserts and the flambé cart.

“Here we are. One soufflé,” he said as he returned to Deb and Annie. He placed the dessert between them with two spoons. With a third spoon, he cracked the crust and drizzled a chocolate sauce over the steaming confection.

“That looks like heaven,” Deb exclaimed as she scooped out a bite. With her mouth still full she said, “It *is* heaven. It’s a chocolate orgy inside my mouth. I changed my mind, Annie. I’m not sharing.”

“Ah, a woman with taste,” said a voice.

Nathan turned to see Alphonse give a slight bow. With a chuckle, Nathan made introductions.

“What goes into a soufflé, anyway?” Deb asked Alphonse.

While Alphonse crouched down next to Deb to explain, Nathan turned to Annie. “I guess these crepes are for you.”

Nathan lit the gas flame of the flambé cart. He enjoyed this part of his job. Preparing desserts tableside always impressed the customers and garnered higher tips. Plus, he liked lighting the food on fire.

He melted the butter and brown sugar, added the crepes and a splash of Grand Marnier, using a little more flourish than usual. With a deft shake of the pan he ignited the liqueur as if by magic, and voila. As expected, the women oohed and ahed as the flames died down. He plated the crepes and added some berries and a sprig of mint.

“How do you do that?” Annie asked. “You didn’t even use a match or anything.”

“When I shake the pan, the alcohol splashes over and catches fire from the flame.”

She tasted the crepe. “This is absolutely delicious.”

He was used to customers praising this particular dish, but for some reason as he wheeled the cart away this time, he felt like swaggering.

When he brought them the bill, Deb said, “Hey, Nate, me and Annie are going to that *Grease* sing-along at the Rex next Friday. You want to come along? It’s going to be a blast. Tell him, Annie.”

Annie looked at Deb, surprised. “Yes, by all means. If you want to come, you should. But if you have something going on that night...”

Deb gave Annie an exasperated look. “Never mind her. She wants you to go. I know she does. Now, listen, everyone’s supposed to dress up in fifties clothing. I think there’ll be some vintage cars, and best of all, Jeff Conaway and Didi Conn are gonna be there. Remember them from the movie?”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Nathan admitted. “My mom had a real thing for John Travolta back in the eighties. She played that soundtrack so many times, I can’t get into a car with her and not think about that movie.”

“So, you’ll come. That’s terrific!”

“Yeah. I’ll come. I’ll even dress up, but no singing. I’m not gonna sing.”

* * * *

That Friday, Nathan walked to the front of the building to meet Deb and Annie. He wore jeans and a white T-shirt with a borrowed pack of smokes rolled up in the sleeve. He'd slicked his hair back with loads of gel. To his surprise another guy was there with them.

"Nathan, this is Handel," Deb said. "I didn't think you guys would mind if he came along."

Handel had his arm around Deb's shoulders in a proprietary way. There went Nathan's idea that Deb was making a play for him.

"What do you think about the job I did on Annie?" Deb asked.

Nathan looked at Annie. A voluminous turquoise skirt swirled around her legs, fluffed at such an angle that he wondered what she had under there that made it stick out so much. Her hair was up in a perky ponytail and she wore some eccentric glasses that seemed to echo the fins of those classic cars.

"Annie, you look fantastic," he said. "You look like you came right out of the movie."

She glanced down. "We found everything at a secondhand store. The saddle shoes are actually a little small, but they'll be all right for tonight. I'm not so sure about these glasses. They're already giving me a headache."

"Just wear them until the movie starts," Deb said. "Then you can switch to your regular ones." She was wearing hot pink pants that only came to her knees and a matching fuzzy sweater.

"How did you get out of coming in costume?" Nathan asked Handel.

Handel shrugged. "Not my style, man."

Tattoos blazed on each of Handel's scrawny biceps. He boasted multiple silver earrings in his ears, and his unshaven face had the gaunt, detached look of a male fashion model. He wore all gray, a monochromatic counterpoint to Deb's flamboyance. Apparently opposites did attract.

"Not my style!" Isn't he funny?" Deb said.

Yeah, Nathan thought. A regular laugh riot.

When they arrived at the theatre, cars from the period cruised the street like parade floats. The vivid costumes and the enthusiasm of the crowd created a jovial mood as contagious as laughter. In fact, once the movie started, Nathan found himself singing along with the rest of the audience before the opening credits were even finished.

A couple of hours later, they walked out of the theatre laughing and breathless from twisting in the aisles to the tune of "We Go Together."

Annie and Deb split the air with ear-piercing shrieks when they saw Jeff Conaway signing autographs off to the side. As the two star-crazed women ran to join the throng, Nathan stood aside with Handel.

"That was more fun than I thought it would be," Nathan remarked.

Handel leaned against a column and lit a cigarette. "That's not my kind of music."

"What kind of music do you like?"

"Metal." Handel exhaled. "I have a band. Maybe you've heard of it. Rat Race Underground."

"Can't say that I have. Hey, look." Nathan laughed. "Deb's practically pulling the guy's arm off! I think she's trying to kiss his cheek."

"I wish she wouldn't act like such a complete idiot. It's embarrassing."

Nathan frowned. "They're just having fun. It's not every day you meet a movie star."
"Whatever. It's still degrading. Have some self-respect, you know?"

Nathan was about to tell Handel a thing or two about respect, especially for his own date, when Annie and Deb returned, breathless and excited.

Their girlish babble made Handel roll his eyes. He took a long drag on his cigarette before interrupting with what he probably thought was an important announcement.

"I'm hungry."

"Me too. Let's get a bite to eat," said Annie. "That movie put me in the mood for a vanilla shake. And maybe a patty melt."

"There's that diner on Adams," Nathan suggested. "We can even walk."

"We'll keep it a completely themed evening," Deb exclaimed. "I'm going to get a cherry Coke."

Nathan and Annie fell into step behind the other couple. Deb chattered away at Handel, clinging to his arm, but he didn't pay much notice. He treated her more like she was a fashion accessory than his date. Nathan's opinion of the guy fell another notch.

"Did you like the movie?" Annie asked Nathan, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Yes, but I think it's funny how they expected us to believe those people were in high school. Hell, Stockard Channing had to be in her early thirties."

"You have to suspend your disbelief and use your imagination."

An image from the rock star fantasy flashed in his brain—Annie naked and moaning beneath him as he thrust into her pliant body. He laughed.

"Oh, you'd be surprised at my imagination."

"Sometimes I wish things were more like those days," said Annie. "Didn't life seem simpler then?"

"Seems to me that every era has its problems," Nathan replied. "I mean just the idea of twin beds in a master bedroom is enough to give me nightmares."

Annie laughed. "Leave it to a man to think about that aspect."

"Hey, you two, what's so funny?" Deb asked.

"I'm just living up to my Y chromosome," Nathan replied.

Handel coughed and tossed his lit cigarette into the gutter. "Babe, you know, I could really use a beer. Why don't we go for pizza instead?"

"Hey, man, what about the diner?" Nathan said. "Annie had her heart set on a vanilla shake and Deb wanted a cherry Coke."

Annie touched his arm lightly. "It's okay. Pizza's fine."

"Handel, don't be a pain," Deb said.

Handel pulled Deb close for some whispered words and then a kiss. A long one. Annie and Nathan averted their gazes. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, Nathan cleared his throat. "Listen, it's cool. You guys go for pizza. I'll take Annie for her shake."

"Okay, well, I guess we'll see you later," Deb said as Handel nudged her back the way they had come. His hand slid down over her ass as they walked away, and Deb's insipid giggle floated behind them like a helium balloon.

"You didn't have to do that," Annie said as they resumed walking to the diner.

"Yes, I did," Nathan replied. "That guy is a loser. All he cares about is himself. I'm surprised Deb is dating him. I'm surprised anyone dates him."

"I think he's only temporary."

"Let's hope so."

At the diner they got seated right away. After ordering, Annie said, "Bet it's nice to be on the other side of the order pad."

"Waiting tables isn't too bad, especially at a place like Chiara West."

"Getting rich then?"

"Nah. Just enough to maintain my lifestyle." Nathan leaned back. "I just take life as it comes. You never know when your time is up, so I just try to enjoy every day to the fullest. That's the way to go."

"You don't have any goals? Nothing you want to attain?"

"Do you?" he asked, a little perturbed.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I think the owner of the store I work at, the Book Mark, is going to retire soon. He's only forty-six, but his wife has money, and he says he wants to take up golf. So, I'm saving up to buy the business from him. If possible, I want to get a loan to expand the store and add a coffee bar."

"That's quite ambitious."

"What about you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Waiting tables is good money. Plus, I've never found anything I really wanted to do."

"Yeah, I don't suppose there's much call for professional swimmers."

He sat up straighter. "Hey, how did you know I was a swimmer?"

"Oh, I, ah...you know..." She shrugged and waved a hand in the air.

"You must have seen me working out in the pool."

"Yes! That's it, of course."

He chuckled and leaned back. "I was on the swim team in high school. All City, three years in a row."

"I never learned how to swim."

"You're kidding."

"Yeah, imagine being born and bred in California and not knowing how to swim. I always wanted to learn but just never did. My parents were a little overprotective."

"You're in more danger not knowing how to swim than actually swimming. What if you slipped and fell in the pool one day? You should really learn. It's not that hard. I could even teach you."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not supposed to overexert myself. I have asthma."

"Asthma-shmazma. I'm not going to make you do the five hundred or anything. I'd just teach you enough to be safe in the water, that's all. Bet we could do it in a weekend, no problem."

The rest of the evening passed with pleasant conversation, but once they arrived at the stairs leading to their respective apartments, their steps slowed and they fell silent. Neither of them seemed willing to end the evening. He was just about to ask her to come in for a drink when he became aware of some unmistakable sounds coming from Deb's place.

Nathan laughed. "Sounds like they're having a good time."

Annie listened for a moment and then flushed red. "Oh, Lord." She started up the stairs immediately. Nathan laughed some more.

"Thanks for asking me to come along tonight," he said, following her up.

"I'm glad you came," Annie said a little loudly, perhaps to drown out the escalating sounds of passion. "If you hadn't, I'd have been the very awkward third wheel."

At the top of the stairs, Nathan stepped close for a good night kiss. The rough sounds of Handel and Deb going at it aroused him, and though he doubted he'd get too far with Annie, he thought she was cute in a Pollyanna sort of way.

She was so stiff he felt like he was kissing a mannequin. His male pride tweaked, he tried harder to get a response from her with several soft brief kisses around her mouth. Another moment passed, and then suddenly she gasped as if snapping out of a trance. She threw her arms around him and kissed him back with an ardor that startled him. Luckily his body reacted with more alacrity than his mind. He took her into his arms and pressed himself up against her. That damned frilly skirt stopped any real contact below the waist, but not so the sweater. The sensation of her soft breasts against his chest sent desire surging through him.

Nathan probed the crease of her lips with his tongue and opened her mouth almost at once. Maybe he'd been chasing the wrong women all this time. Maybe the prim ones had so much passion saved up that it literally exploded when given the proper encouragement.

She was enthusiastic, but obviously inexperienced. He reined in his own ardor and slowed things down a bit. The quick stabs he'd been making with his tongue turned into slow, long strokes. He held her head with his hand and brushed his thumb over her hair. Blissfully she melted into his arms as if she were made for them.

Just when he decided to ask her if she wanted to continue this inside his apartment, he became aware of a distant feminine wail steadily growing in volume and pitch. Both he and Annie froze as the passionate cry hung at the apex of the scale, turned into a warbling series of hoots, and then fell into silence.

Nathan smiled against Annie's lips. "That Deb sure has a nice set of lungs."

Annie pulled away, flustered. "Lord, I did not just hear that."

"Yes, you did. The whole building heard it." Nathan laughed. "That wasn't the worst I've heard. She usually sets off at least one car alarm."

"Nathan, behave!"

"I won't. In fact, I have my heart set on *mis*behaving. Let's go make out in my car. We can pretend we're Danny Zuko and Sandy like in the movie. Come on, it'll be fun."

"No! No, I can't possibly."

"Come on, Annie..."

He leaned toward her intending to pick up where he'd left off, but her ponytail swiped him across the face as she turned around and pulled her keys out.

"I'm sorry. I have to go now. Thanks so much for the food. Good night."

Before he knew it she was inside her apartment and he was staring at the dull brass numbers on her door. Damned if she wasn't as elusive as a hundred dollar tip.

He let himself into his own apartment. As he walked to the kitchen to toss his keys on the table, he pulled open the button fly of his jeans and adjusted himself. He was as hard as granite. How did women do that—turn their desire off at will?

A cold beer would be better than a cold shower, so he pulled a bottle out of the fridge, but when he opened the drawer to get the opener, he spotted the ring. His cock pulsed, as if it remembered what had happened last time and wanted more of the same. He didn't blame it.

After that rock star fantasy he'd experienced a long series of orgasms. With little warning, they just hit him like grenade blasts, fast and hard, buffeting his body with their

force. He hadn't even touched himself, and still he came, as if each subsequent orgasm was connected by a common fuse. He was helpless to resist, not that he really wanted to. All he could do was lay there and let them run their course. The climaxes gradually diminished in force and frequency, but continued for at least two incredible hours. It had been both the most thrilling, yet disturbing, experience of his entire life.

Now, at this moment, the memory of the unparalleled gratification and the coarse excitement raised by Annie's kiss overcame his trepidation about the ring. Time had passed, making it easy for him to scoff at his own fears.

He put the beer back in the refrigerator and picked up the ring. If it was drugged, maybe there was still enough left for one more trip. After all, he'd lived through the week with no ill effects.

By the time he'd stripped off his clothes and grabbed a towel, his erection had subsided enough for him to get the ring on. The moment the stone touched the skin of his penis, he heard the humming sound. Much more quickly this time the reality of his bedroom flickered and was replaced with the interior of a cherry '57 Chevy...

Chapter Five

“I don’t know. This looks a little scary, Nathan.”

Nathan wanted to laugh. Didn’t Annie realize that was why he picked *Revenge of the Creeping Algae* in the first place? He was hoping that neither of them would see the last half of the picture.

He lit a cigarette and smiled at his date in what he hoped was a debonair manner.

“Don’t worry. I’ve seen this one before. The algae looks like Jell-O. It’s actually pretty funny.”

“I hope so, because I’ll have nightmares if it’s too scary.” Annie pushed up her wing-shaped glasses and gave him a pointed look.

God, the way she pursed her lips made him crazy. Annie Prescott—member of the Pep Squad, the Glee Club, and Recording Secretary for the Student Council—was the sexiest girl at Carver High School. Like teen-idol Sandra Dee, only better, because she was sitting here within touching distance for the next two hours. He wanted to make out with her so bad he could taste it.

“I swear. Just trust me.” He almost put his arm around her, but he decided it was too soon.

Nathan took a short drag on his cigarette and desperately suppressed a cough. This was only his third cigarette. His friends assured him that smoking was very cool, but Nathan wasn’t sure if the burning pain was worth it in the long run. He decided to just hold the butt for a while and then toss it out. A lit cigarette might get in the way later anyway, because during intermission he was going to ask Annie to go steady with him and then give her his varsity jacket.

Well, maybe.

He still hadn’t decided to do the jacket thing yet. He got a thrill from wearing it around school, seeing the little freshmen eye him with envy. On the other hand, if Annie wore it, everyone would know she was his girl. That might be worth the sacrifice. Especially if giving it to her meant she’d fool around.

He flicked his cigarette out the window and reached for the heavy metal speaker. While he was at it, he checked his appearance in the side mirror. Yeah, his dark, slicked-back hair still looked good. He cracked a wide grin. Nothing in his teeth. Everything a-okay.

A drop of water fell on his arm. Craning his head, he saw in the dusky light that the sky was a dull, pewter gray. If fate decided to smile on him, it would rain. Hard. This drive-in was real popular during storms because of its many potholes. He hadn’t been lucky enough to get stuck in the mud yet, but God, he thought as he attached the speaker to the window, if there was ever a perfect night for that, it was tonight.

For the next half hour or so, all went according to plan. Annie watched the movie while Nathan pretended to watch the movie. When the creeping algae first showed its malevolence in the professor’s laboratory, she covered her eyes and peeked through her fingers. When Annie got scared, her nipples got hard. Nathan’s penis throbbed inside his jeans as, dry-mouthed, he stared at her nipples until they went soft again.

When the algae crept up on its first victim, a lone fisherman, Annie gave a little

whimper and leaned toward Nathan.

This is my chance.

Ready to snatch it back at any moment, he carefully lifted his arm and laid it on the seat behind Annie. She didn't even flinch. When the fisherman realized he was about to be eaten, Annie whimpered again and scooted closer. That's when Nathan touched her shoulders. And when, in a frenzy of undulating green slime, the algae finally ate the poor guy, Nathan tightened his arm around her and she turned her face into his chest. Damn, he could feel her hot breath through his shirt, and her hair smelled so good. Like summer peaches.

Fifteen minutes later, the algae, using the strength it had gained from feasting on a family of campers, took over the lake. Intermission arrived. The moment the cartoons came on, Annie pulled away from Nathan and shot him an accusing glare.

"You said this wasn't scary!" She sounded mad.

Nathan panicked. If she was really angry, he was sunk. No going steady, no wearing his jacket, no kissing—nothing. Not even nipple-watching. He turned down the volume.

"Come on, Annie. It's not that bad, is it?" He grabbed her hand in his sweaty one. "I mean, I'm here, after all. You know? It's not as scary if I'm here, right?"

She hesitated, and Nathan held his breath. *Oh, please God.*

"I suppose..." She pursed her lips again at him, a slight frown on her face. "I suppose it wasn't as scary when you had your arm around me before. I felt a little safer that way."

Nathan heaved a sigh of relief; everything was all right again. "Sure. Of course," he said with a little chuckle. "You mean, like this." He scooted over and draped his arm around her.

Annie shimmied her shoulders and said, "Yes. Like that." She giggled a naughty kind of giggle that made the hair on his arms stand up.

For a moment they just watched the silent cartoon figures on the screen.

This is it, he told himself. Now or never. Do it like you practiced at home.

Nathan turned toward her and cleared his throat. "Um, Annie?"

"What?"

"I, um, really like you a lot."

"Thanks. I like you too."

She laid her head on his shoulder, which he felt was a good sign.

"You're the peachiest girl at Carver, and I really mean that."

Nathan knew he was scoring big, because she giggled again and pressed her cheek against his collarbone. He wondered if she could hear his heart pounding like the drum in the marching band.

"And even though there're a lot of other girls that I could go out with, you know, Janie Ditmeyer, or Rhonda...what's her name? Oh, Lopshire. Even Vicky Panata. She makes eyes at me sometimes in Geography."

Annie's head popped up from his shoulder. "What?"

Uh-oh. She was mad again.

"I don't make eyes back or anything! I swear!"

When Annie rolled her eyes dramatically at him, he realized what he'd done.

"Jeez! I mean, I don't want to go out with them! That's my point!" he blurted with more force than he'd intended. "Not when there's you, Annie. You're better than ten

Rhondas put together. Or even a hundred! You know what I mean?"

He sighed, staring at the roof of the car, searching for the words that would fix everything.

"You're so beautiful, and smart, and you sing good. I just feel so cool when you're with me. I mean, I can feel all the other guys looking at me—you know, like when I'm carrying your books for you or walking you home—and I just know they're jealous. I know it 'cause that's what I felt when you were going out with Ronny Carstairs."

"Oh," she said with a quiet sigh. "Ronny. You don't hang around with him, do you?"

"No!" Nathan exclaimed. "Not after the way he treated you."

"What do you mean 'the way he treated me'?"

"I used to think he was a good guy, but jeez, the way he dumped you at the Valentine Dance for what's-her-name—Phyllis, right? What a lamebrain. I heard he didn't even tell you he was leaving with her, that you found out later when the dance was over."

Annie didn't say anything. Behind her he could see it had started to rain. Even as he watched, the drops spotted the glass with greater frequency.

"Well, if you were my girl and we went to a dance together, I'd stick to you like glue. Except when you went to the powder room, you know." He laughed, but it sounded more like a giggle. *Damn!*

"What else?" She didn't seem to have noticed his stupid giggle.

"Oh, well, I'd, ah, I'd walk you home every day. And if it rained, and you didn't have an umbrella and I did, I'd let you have mine."

She sighed and laid her head back on his shoulder. "Go on."

Nathan wracked his brain. "Okay, okay. Let's say we were in Shevick's Marriage and Family class together. You know, the one where he makes you pretend you're married and all that junk and you have to make a budget?"

"Yeah, I've heard of that class."

"Well, if..." Nathan suddenly lost his courage. "Oh, never mind."

She lifted her head again and said, "No, come on, now. Tell me what you were going to say. I won't think it's stupid. Honest."

She looked at him with those big blue eyes, all dreamy and beautiful, making him feel like he could say anything to her, even things that his friends would laugh at. Like how he had no desire whatsoever to screw Shirley Lester, the class slut. When the other guys boasted about scoring with Sure Thing Shirley, he laughed and pretended he was eager to get his own turn. If his friends knew the truth, they'd think he was nuts. Maybe he was. Still, nobody turned him on like Annie. Of course, he couldn't come out and say that.

"Come on, Nathan. What about the Marriage and Family class?"

Nathan couldn't believe it when she placed her hand lightly on his chest and rubbed it. His heart started beating a zillion miles an hour and he got another boner.

"If we were in that class together, I'd..." He gulped hard and took the plunge. "I'd volunteer to be your husband."

Annie didn't say anything for what seemed like the longest time. Nathan held his breath. What if she thought he was stupid for saying that? What if she told everyone at school what he'd said? He'd be a laughingstock. He'd never be able to live it down.

Nathan started making plans to act sick all day tomorrow, so that come Monday, his mother wouldn't think twice about letting him stay home.

“Nathan,” Annie whispered. “I think that’s the sweetest thing anybody’s ever said to me.”

When he turned his head to look at her, she had tilted her face up to him, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to kiss her.

He felt nervous and unsure; he didn’t even close his eyes. Their mouths moved against each other’s with awkward hesitancy. The rim of her glasses bumped his face, but he ignored that. Her wet lips against his were the best thing he’d ever felt. He turned his body in the seat and pulled her closer, trapping one of her arms between them. He didn’t want it there. He wanted to feel her boobs smashed against his chest.

Feeling daring, he gave her arm a little tug, and bingo, she shifted, then twined both arms around his neck. He was able to pull her closer until he felt the cushy give of her breasts against him. His chest tingled, like an electric current flowed from her body to his.

In the background he could hear the rain, coming down hard now, and the scratchy soundtrack of the movie. But he was far more interested in getting to first base than he was in seeing the algae eat the local sheriff.

Gathering his courage, he opened his mouth a little and licked Annie’s lower lip. Was that a moan? He did it again. And heard it again. Annie had definitely moaned. *She likes my kissing!* That knowledge made Nathan even bolder. Breathing harder now, he pushed his tongue between her lips. Knowing that a part of him was going inside a part of her made him hot, like he was burning up from the inside, and when she touched her tongue to his, his penis came to attention like a soldier.

A little devil voice in his head said, *It gets even better, Nathan. Go ahead and touch her tits, feel those goddamn nipples. She’ll let you. She hasn’t said no yet.*

Not wanting to find out if an angel voice was going to disagree, he put one of his hands on her waist and let it rest there for a while. Annie didn’t seem to mind, so he ever so slowly inched her blouse out from under the waistband of her skirt. When Annie shifted her arms, he froze, but when he realized she was threading her hands through his hair, he smiled inwardly. She wasn’t stopping him.

Do it. Feel her up. Second base, Nathan, take the base...

He slipped his thumb under her blouse and stifled a moan when he felt her smooth skin. Still kissing her, he slowly stroked that area just under her ribs. Once his thumb was under her blouse, getting the rest of his hand inside wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be. He felt her stiffen, so he moved his hand around to her lower back, hopefully a safe enough spot. She still didn’t stop him. It seemed like she was panting as hard as he was.

They broke apart to catch their breath, and Nathan buried his face against her neck. Wisps of her hair tickled his cheeks as he bathed her throat with kisses.

“Oh, Nathan, oh, Nathan.”

The way she was gasping his name made him more excited than he thought possible.

“Annie, I want...” He licked her under her ear and she shivered in his arms. “I want...”

“What, Nathan? Tell me.”

She looked at him with those big round eyes of hers again, and he was tempted to say what he really wanted. But if he did, it would sound ugly and crude, and she would never let him.

Nathan gathered his courage and said, “I want you to be my girl, Annie. I want us to

go steady.”

She sat up straight and screamed.

Nathan panicked again.

“Nathan! Oh, yes! Yes, I’ll go steady with you!”

She screamed again.

He clapped a hand over her mouth. “Shhh! People’ll think I’m hurting you!”

She pulled his hand away. “I don’t care!”

Twisting around, she rolled down the window, got up on her knees, and stuck her entire upper body out into the rain.

“Nathan Somerset and I are going steady!” she shouted. “And I don’t care who knows it!”

He pulled at her skirt frantically. “Annie! For God’s sake, stop it! It’s raining!”

She was laughing like a loon. His dad’s car upholstery was getting spattered by raindrops. “It feels great! I feel great!”

“Come back in, Annie! Please!” He grabbed her by the hips and tugged, and she ducked back into the car. As she took off her glasses and wiped the wet hair off her face, her sweet laughter bubbled up like the fizzy overflow on a root beer float.

* * * *

Cybele sensed the exact moment her beloved came into contact with the artifact again, and dismissed her slaves with a wave of her hand. Then focusing her attention on Nathan, she used the ring as a conduit to enter his fantasy unseen.

She saw him inside an automobile with a young woman. Looking closer she recognized the same female he’d conjured up the first time. Cybele realized he must be fixated on this particular mortal. Curious to see what he would do on his own, she watched for a while. The tentative advance and retreat between them amused her. The female was laughably naïve and inexperienced. And such elation at his promise to be true to her! Foolish twit. Men often had the best of intentions, but their primal nature always got the better of them. Some took longer than others to succumb, but they always did. It was one of the few absolutes in the world.

Cybele decided the time had come to manipulate the situation to her own liking. She had to be cautious or else Priapus would discover what she was up to. That fool was always prattling on about neo-humanitarianism. Bah. Anyone with a glimmer of intelligence could see humans needed supervision. Even her beloved.

Especially her beloved.

She’d allowed him his illusion of freedom when he pretended to be the musician, and so she would again. Males did not thrive unless they believed they were in charge. However, this time she intended to be the focus of his attention. Judging from his behavior, the poor thing did yet not remember all that he should. Her elixir would remedy that. He also needed to be reeducated in the art of depravity and Cybele decided his schooling would begin tonight.

Preparing herself for the supreme effort it would take to appear sexually virtuous, she took the place of the female known as Annie.

* * * *

“You’re nuts!” Nathan said, laughing. “Absolutely nuts.”

He reached across Annie to roll the window back up. When he was done, he looked over at her and his eyes bugged out. The rain had rendered her blouse almost transparent. Through the thin fabric he could clearly see her bra and those goddamn nipples. For something like the umpteenth time he got hard. God, when he got home he was going to have to jerk off at least twice before he got any sleep.

Annie put her glasses on the dash and leaned back against the door of the car. She had a kooky glitter in her eyes and she looked like a different person.

“I know what you are staring at,” she said in a low voice.

Nathan jerked his eyes away from her chest and hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not be sorry. I like how you look at me. It makes me feel...warm.” She wore a strange, reckless expression on her face.

He gulped. “Yeah. I know the feeling.” If he got any warmer, he’d spontaneously combust.

“Nathan,” she said so softly he could barely hear her, “look at me some more.”

“What?” Nathan blinked in disbelief. His ears must be clogged up.

“Look at me.”

The devil voice hissed, *What are you waiting for, idiot!*

He tried to answer her, but all that came out was a dry, raspy sound. He cleared his throat. “Okay.”

Nathan let his eyes wander back to Annie’s reclining body. Her head rested on the door just below the window where the rain flowed down the glass in wandering rivulets. Incredulous, he watched her reach for her blouse. Her dainty fingers worked the top button open, then went for the next, and the next, until they were all undone to her waist. He could just make out her bra through the gap in the middle.

“Oh, God,” he murmured. His penis was so hard and so hot it felt like a branding iron. He rubbed it a little and hoped she didn’t see.

“Now it is your turn. Unfasten your shirt.”

Without taking his eyes off her chest, he undid the buttons on his shirt and ripped it loose from his pants. If he’d known this was how she’d react to going steady, he would have asked her a long time ago.

“What now?” he asked.

With a feline smile, she glanced at the back seat.

Nathan didn’t wait for the little devil voice this time—he scrambled back there as fast as he could. Annie followed him and knelt on the floor of the car. As she pressed on his shoulders until he lay flat on his back, she gave him a smile that made him break out in goose bumps. He had no idea what she had in mind, but he was pretty sure he was going to enjoy it.

She put her hands on his chest and let them flutter over his skin like butterfly wings. When her palms brushed over his hard nipples, he sucked in a breath. Annie glanced at him and then, amazingly, she bent her head and sucked one of them into her mouth. Nathan’s body arched up off the seat.

“Oh, Jesus!”

The pleasure shocked him. His penis throbbed in his pants. She continued to lick and kiss his nipple, seemingly amused by the way he couldn’t keep still. He wasn’t sure it was cool for a guy to like what she was doing, but it felt so incredible.

After a little while, she lifted her head, and Nathan stared goggle-eyed as she shrugged off her blouse. She knelt there, her eyes closed, and let him look. This was the first time he'd ever seen a bra with a girl inside it. Before he had a chance to savor the sight of her without her shirt, she reached behind, unhooked her bra, and slipped it off her arms.

I am in heaven right this very minute, he thought. *I am in the holy presence of Annie's naked fucking tits.*

They were perfect. There weren't any boobs in the entire world better looking than these. From all the talk, Nathan knew that most of his friends liked big ones—the kind that could eclipse the sun—but Nathan liked Annie's, which were small, like baseballs, but much softer, of course. Her blush-pink nipples were small too, tight and hard, like miniature rosebuds.

Annie shivered and her breasts jiggled the tiniest bit. Nathan bit his lip.

"Is it—is it my turn again?" he croaked.

She nodded and leaned over him. One tiny pink nipple hung over his face, and he lurched up to capture it in his mouth. He clasped her by the shoulders and held her immobile as he licked and sucked.

"Oh, Nathan!"

He switched to the other one, loving the feel of her hard nipple against his tongue. He nibbled with his teeth and she gasped and arched toward him. *That was good*, he thought to himself. He did it some more, pulling on it, stretching it out. When the nipple sprang free, he kissed it soothingly. Annie's breathing was rapid and heavy.

"Nathan, oh, that feels very good. Please continue."

Feeling more devilish than ever, he sat up and pulled her with him so she was straddling his thighs. Her voluminous skirt spread over their legs. On the big screen the town rallied its defenses against the creeping algae. *Forget that!* Nathan thought. *The algae can take over the world for all I care.*

He squeezed her soft mounds gently and she closed her eyes, moaning. Nathan couldn't believe it. Twin handfuls of perfection in his grasp. Grinning, he bent his head and sucked on her again, hard. She grabbed his head and moaned some more. Encouraged by this, he put his hands on her waist and pushed up with his hips so his erection rubbed her through their clothes.

"Annie," he gasped hoarsely.

The heat and friction felt so good. Again and again he thrust against her in a desperate effort to relieve the pressure. That only made it worse.

Gasping, he let go of her and let his head fall back onto the seat. Annie squeezed his shoulders with her hands. She was panting too, and still rocking against him.

God, please don't let me cream in my pants.

Her skirt had ridden up so that he could see almost all of her thighs. He wanted to fuck her so bad, he felt like he would die if he didn't, but he didn't have any rubbers, and there was no way in hell he was going to risk getting Annie pregnant.

Then it came to him—the perfect solution.

His cousin was nine years older than Nathan, and he had told him once that girls liked it when you licked them between their legs. He had called it "eating a girl." At the time, Nathan had been ten and thought that was both hilarious and disgusting. Nathan remembered almost busting a gut when his cousin had told him that, but right now, he

thought it sounded like something he wanted to try.

Annie's eyes glittered at him in the semi-darkness. "Kiss me again. Kiss me hard, Nathan."

He licked his lips and did as she asked, pushing his tongue inside her mouth almost immediately. He figured it was all right for him to do that, since they were going steady now and all. After only a couple of minutes, he broke the kiss, took Annie's face in his hands, and looked into her eyes.

"Lay down," he ordered.

To his surprise, she did. He put one knee between her legs and left his other foot on the floor of the car.

"I want to kiss you some more, Annie."

"Yes, kiss me." She smiled and reached out for him.

He pushed her skirt up out of the way and she gasped.

"What are you doing?"

"Just trust me, okay? I promise you'll like it."

He feasted his eyes on her pink polka-dot panties. His heart pounded as he rubbed her stomach. Nylon had never felt so heavenly before. Right over her panties, he pushed his index finger into the indentation of her belly button, then traced a path down to her cushy mound. He could feel her bush through the underwear, and his dick throbbed again. Above the soothing patter of the rain on the car roof he could hear Annie's excited breathing. The windows had fogged up. He let his finger slip into the slit and down, and when he found that her panties were hot and wet, he got really excited because that meant she was excited too.

"You're so wet, Annie," he whispered.

She covered her face with her hands. "Your talk is improper, Nathan!"

"My talk is improper? Jeez, *you're* the one talking funny tonight." He pushed his finger inside her a little, stretching the underwear. She panted harder and moved her hips up to his hand.

Holy cow, she's really liking this. He pulled her underwear down. Thankfully, she straightened her legs to make it easier, until they got tangled up with her saddle shoes. A little extra effort and they were off. Nathan let his eyes glide up her legs and swallowed hard when he got his first glimpse of her pubic hair. Her interlocked fingers defended this secret place. He could see wisps of golden curls caught in the crevices.

"Please, Annie," he murmured, as he touched her fingers, stroking them. "You're so, so beautiful. Please let me..."

In the confines of the car it seemed like all he could smell was the sweet feminine aroma that wafted up from between her silky thighs. He never imagined that girls smelled so good down there. Drunk with her scent, he felt a little dizzy. He imagined the steamy heat she was guarding, and knew he absolutely, positively had to taste it tonight.

"...so beautiful..." he croaked as he leaned down to kiss her hands.

She squealed. "Nathan! You must not!"

"Shhh. My cousin says girls are supposed to like this."

He licked the flaxen hair that peeked out from between her fingers.

"I swear," he said, "everybody does it."

"I do not want to be a...a bad girl."

"If you don't like it, I promise I'll stop."

She mulled this over. Nathan prayed.

Finally, she removed her fingers. Nathan let out the breath he was holding. He pried her thighs apart, inch by inch, until she lay open and vulnerable to him. He felt an incredible sense of power, knowing that she trusted him enough to show him her most private place and let him do what he wanted. He promised himself she wouldn't regret it. He vowed to make her feel so good that she would be glad she let him go this far.

Starting slowly, he just pressed his mouth against her pouty lips and kissed her there. Annie didn't do anything. She lay as rigid as the statue of George Washington Carver that stood at the entrance of their school.

What was it his cousin had said? Something about a button, a special place that made the girls go crazy? Shit. He should have paid more attention. He flattened his tongue and licked her a couple of times.

Nathan reeled from the taste of her, so sweet, like slightly salty baked apples. Who would have thought that licking a girl was like having dessert? He grinned and lapped at her with a little more enthusiasm. By accident he found a flappy bump, tucked in just under where her lips met at the top. This must be the button his cousin had talked about! Just to make sure, he rubbed his tongue over it, and Annie gasped. When he drew away, she moved her hips toward him like she wanted more. So he gave it to her.

He stroked the bump with his tongue over and over, and Annie moaned again. Every so often, she would give a little shudder and gasp, "Ohh..." Her hips were moving around, making it hard for him to keep track of the magic button, but he stayed with it.

The hot interior of the car, the steady sound of the rain outside, the enveloping darkness—all of it made it seem like there was no world out there. Just him with his face buried between Annie's smooth thighs. Her sweet juice oozed out and made the vinyl seat under her cheeks all slippery. He thought about pushing his tongue inside her, but he was afraid to leave the button because she seemed to like that so much. Before long those shudders and gasps came more frequently until she cried out.

Then, she pulsed against his chin, gasping and writhing on the car seat. *She must be coming*, he thought in amazement. *I just made Annie come!*

Nathan sighed, stuck somewhere between bliss and agony. Finding out about eating girls was almost worth the most painful erection he'd ever had. Almost. He sat up and tried to adjust himself, but it was no use.

Annie stretched, a satisfied smile on her lips. "For one so young, you are surprisingly masterful."

Nathan couldn't stop a cocky grin from spreading across his face. "Huh. Masterful."

"What next?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the floor. She gingerly touched the bulge in his pants, and Nathan drew in a sharp breath. "Are you in pain?"

"A little, yeah."

"I cannot allow that. No, no. What can I do to ease your pain? Tell me what to do."

She was drawing little circles on his chest with her index finger. His skin tingled. His balls ached.

In a shaky voice, he said, "T-touch it."

"With what?" she asked with a strange little smile.

"Touch it with your hand. Take it out."

She bit her lip and rubbed her hands together. "Very well. If that is what you want..."

Nathan unsnapped his jeans and pulled down the zipper. She was going to touch it. This was the single best night of his entire life.

Annie gave a little gasp and said, "Is that it?"

He looked down. The head of his penis was poking out of his boxers. Before he could answer, she touched it—a quick touch, like she was testing an iron to see how hot it was. She giggled and felt him again. A little longer touch this time.

"Oooh, it is hot...and soft."

On the contrary, his prick was so damn hard that it could scratch glass.

Unable to wait any longer, he pulled the waistband of his underwear down and his penis sprang free. Annie leaned back a little in surprise and stared at his dick like it was an exhibit at the Science Fair. Her face was close enough so that he could feel her breath stir the hair on his balls.

Finally, she wrapped her fingers around it. Nathan's eyes rolled back in his head at the absolute bliss. He wasn't sure how she knew, but she moved her hand in just the right way, the way he did it himself when he was alone. He was all ready to enjoy his first hand job but made the mistake of looking at Annie's face. Her lips twisted into a knowing smile and for a split second she looked like a freaky robot from a sci-fi flick. An unholy crimson glow flashed from her eyes. He almost screamed when she bent down over his penis. But as soon as her lips wrapped around his prick, the pleasure overwhelmed him. He forgot all about the weird vision he'd just seen as his brain turned to Jell-O and he abandoned himself to the exquisite torture of her sucking mouth.

* * * *

Priapus, a minor deity, ignored the ripple of disturbance as long as possible. He disliked having his rest cycle upset. Minor discord often erupted in the rhythms of the universe, and usually these things corrected themselves. But as time passed and the ripples increased into tremors, he realized he would have to act.

After rousing himself enough to attend to the matter, he discovered Cybele had again succumbed to her need to be adored. She'd been told time and time again not to meddle in the affairs of humans. He wondered if she would ever learn.

Resigned, Priapus gathered the energy necessary to attain a physical state. Blending in with humanity required that he take on human form, a bothersome chore, one for which he was out of practice. As he re-familiarized himself with the routines and short-cuts of moving between various forms, he searched for Cybele.

She usually lured human males to her by offering them metaphysical pleasure. There was always an abundance of males willing to risk possible physical and mental damage in exchange for sexual delight. Priapus didn't blame them. Mortals led comparatively miserable lives with few diversions. Cybele had only to train them so that they craved sex more than food or drink. Eventually she found the ones who gladly sacrificed free will completely and existed only to please her in order to receive their dose of satisfaction.

Luckily for Priapus, there were only a few mediums that enabled humans to enter the metaphysical state that Cybele required. He would search for those particular conduits. When he discovered the specific enticement she employed this time, he would find the man who had stumbled into her trap, and then trace him to her. He only hoped she hadn't created too much of a commotion among the fragile humans. He always disliked repairing the trail of damage she left behind.

Chapter Six

Early the next morning Annie awoke to a strange animal cry. Thinking Deb and Handel were at it again, she reached for the extra pillow to pull over her head, until she realized the racket came from just outside her bedroom window. She got up and pried open the blinds to see a cat in the tree. The animal seemed to understand that she'd seen it, because its yowling got louder and it took a tentative step toward her along the branch.

"Thanks for waking me up, cat." She glanced at the clock. "Darn it, it's six-thirty and I have the day off," she said to it through the window. "Go home, kitty."

She let the blinds snap closed and thought about going back to sleep, but the cat continued its obnoxious early morning serenade. Might as well get breakfast. While she cut up a banana and poured some cereal, the cat stopped yowling, but started up again just as she sat down to eat. This time it sounded like it was on her doorstep. Sure enough, she opened the front door to find the cat sitting on her welcome mat.

Annie knelt down and searched in vain for a collar as the cat continued vocalizing its needs.

"I told you to go home, kitty. This isn't home. Now, be quiet..."

The door to Nathan's apartment flew open, startling Annie flat onto her butt.

"What the hell is going on out here? It's six-thirty in the goddamn morning," Nathan blurted.

"I'm sorry. It's not my cat. I was just trying to get it to be quiet." The cat jumped onto her lap and started rubbing itself all over her, purring. "Go home, cat."

Nathan sighed and rubbed his face. "Christ, I'm sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night."

That was an understatement. His fifties fantasy and the subsequent orgasmic cycle had lasted into the wee hours. Afterward, he lay in his bed pondering why Annie Prescott kept slipping into his dreams like a song he couldn't get out of his head. His subconscious was obviously trying to tell him something. He usually avoided shy girls. Their devotion to chastity frustrated him. He learned a long time ago that it didn't pay to wait out a girl's reluctance when there were so many others willing to have fun. And yet he couldn't deny that the fantasies he'd experienced with the dream Annie had been exhilarating, even though both times she had resisted his advances.

So, last night, as the last ripples of pleasure ebbed, he'd decided to give things a try *again* with Annie, see what came of a date or two. And now, she appeared on his doorstep like a present, all wrapped up in nothing but a skimpy T-shirt.

Rubbing at his unshaven chin, he grinned at her and stepped out of his apartment. "Nice outfit."

Annie shoved the cat off her lap and scrambled to her feet.

"I think it's a stray," she said. "It doesn't have a collar."

She retreated over her own threshold, attempting unsuccessfully to look nonchalant. Nathan looked beyond her into her apartment.

"For a stray, it's sure making itself at home then."

Annie turned around and saw the cat leap onto the kitchen table to slurp milk from her cereal bowl.

“Hey, you little thief!” she exclaimed, hurrying into her apartment. “That’s my breakfast!”

“It really is a gorgeous cat,” Nathan said, following her inside. “Look at that fur. It’s the color of burgundy wine. I’ve never seen a cat that color before. It almost doesn’t look real.”

Annie snatched the bowl away, while Nathan petted the silky dark red fur. He picked up the cat, who nuzzled him under his chin, purring loudly.

“It sure is affectionate.” He lifted it in the air briefly and said, “It’s a girl. That figures. Females can’t resist me.”

Annie laughed. “In your dreams.” But the cat rolled around in Nathan’s arms as if to confirm his claim.

An idea came to him. He remembered her hearty appetite at the diner last night and took a chance.

“Say, Annie, since the hellcat here ruined your breakfast, why don’t you have breakfast with me? If you think my crepes are good, you should taste my omelets.”

“Really?” Her stomach growled loudly.

“Yeah. Portuguese sausage, onions, tomato, Gruyere cheese...I think I might even have some fresh basil.”

“That sounds awfully good.” Annie had to admit that an omelet sounded much better than cold cereal. Especially when cooked by a hunk wearing only a pair of sweatpants.

Grinning at Annie, Nathan whispered into the cat’s ear, “See? Females can’t resist me.”

The cat batted at Nathan’s chin.

“So it’s agreed,” he said. “I’ll whip up some breakfast quick before you have to go to work.” He turned around and petted the cat’s head as he strolled past her wall of family photographs, peering at each one in turn.

“Breakfast sounds terrific, but there’s no hurry. I have the day off.”

“Really, hmmm...” He sounded distracted.

“I’ll just put some clothes on and then I’ll be over.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, then suddenly shook his head as if coming out of a trance.

“What did you say?”

“I said let me put some clothes on and then I’ll be over.”

With a disarming grin he said, “Don’t go to any bother. You look fine just the way you are. If anything you’re overdressed—hey!”

The cat leapt out of Nathan’s arms and made a beeline underneath the couch. He turned around to fetch her, but Annie said, “I’ll get the cat. You should go cook breakfast. I’m starving.”

“All right, all right,” he said, crossing the landing to his own apartment.

As she went to the bedroom to get dressed, Annie knew she’d made the right decision. Like Deb said, the incident was seven years ago. Ancient history. And while she wasn’t too much more experienced in the dating arena, she was older and hopefully had better judgment. Besides, this was why she’d moved out. So that she could finally live a little, without the clinging influence of her family.

After brushing her teeth and putting on some mascara and blush, she grabbed some eggs and put them in a bowl so she wouldn’t come empty-handed.

Nathan answered the door in a tank top and shorts.

"Hey, eggs! Thanks. Come on in." He took the bowl from her and walked to the kitchen. "I hope you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry."

His apartment was the mirror image of her own, but decorated a la bachelor. Worn out furniture that had to be from the eighties. A palm in the corner with one sparse frond. A bookcase displaying, not books, but what seemed like a collection of rocks. A general disarray that suggested he didn't really have a place for everything.

"Food's almost ready. Have a seat. I poured you some orange juice."

Annie came to the counter and sipped her juice.

"That smells wonderful. Did you learn to cook at the restaurant?"

"Yeah, I've picked up some pointers here and there from Alphonse. My mom taught me some too. She didn't have any daughters, so she made me and my brother dust and clean and help with meals. As you can see from my apartment, only the cooking stuff rubbed off."

He slid an omelet out of the pan. "This one is for you. There are forks in that drawer," he said, pointing with his elbow.

As she opened the drawer, he said, "I saw that graduation picture of you on the wall. We went to the same high school. Good old Adams High. Did you know that?"

The forks slipped from her fingers onto the floor. She bent to pick them up and then banged her head on the open drawer.

"Ow! Oh, damn it all to hell."

"Hey, are you okay?"

Annie rubbed the place on her head where she'd banged it. For one wild moment she thought about pretending to faint.

"What year did you graduate?"

She told him.

"Three years behind, huh? You were coming in as I was going out."

Annie attempted a smile, but suspected it looked more like a grimace.

"What's wrong? God, I'm an idiot. I forgot you hit your head. Let me get you some ice."

"No, no, it's okay. I'm all right," she said. "But you know, gosh, I'm not as hungry as I thought I was."

Nathan turned and grabbed her hand as she tried to escape. "Oh, no you don't," he said, "You're not running away from me again."

"What?"

"When you first moved in, every time I said hi to you, you acted like I had the plague. You'd dash down to your car or into your apartment, and I kept wondering what I had done to turn you off. Then last night, everything was going great—at least it was for me. The movie was fun, the diner was fun, and the kiss... well, that was fantastic. Then, boom, before I know it, you disappear into your apartment. I'm sorry if I moved too fast for you. I didn't mean to. But don't run away again. Please."

He caught her with that puppy-dog gaze of his and she wavered.

"Please, Annie. I have a big appetite, but even I can't eat this much."

Annie glanced toward the door and then back at him. He immediately waved his hand to waft the aroma of the omelet toward her.

“See? Smells good. You know you’re hungry.”

She smiled slowly. “All right,” she said, as he pulled out her chair. “I’ll stay.”

The food tasted as good as it smelled, and Annie ate every last bit. She kept waiting for him to make a comment about her finishing off a three-egg omelet, but he didn’t. When she was done, he looked satisfied.

“You liked it.”

“Oh, yes. It was so much better than cereal.”

“Don’t you cook?”

“Not really. My mother considered the kitchen her sole domain. She didn’t like anyone in there with her while she worked, not even to help.”

“I remember seeing her come in a couple of weeks ago with a load of food.”

“Yes. As a result, I’m a whiz at reheating.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair. “Now typically, I’d ask you to do the dishes in payment for your meal. I’m in the restaurant business after all. But today I have something else in mind. Today you’re going to learn how to swim.”

“What? Oh, no. I couldn’t. I won’t.” She shook her head vehemently and got up from the table.

“Oh, yes. You can. You will.” He followed her to his door and opened it for her.

“It’ll be easy. I promise. Don’t you trust me?”

Again with the puppy-dog eyes.

Annie resisted them. She walked across the landing and opened her own door.

“Hey,” he said, “‘Man who cook good omelet make good swimming teacher.’ I read that in a fortune cookie once.”

She laughed again, noticing that when he wasn’t getting his way, he resorted to humor. Of course, realizing this didn’t really strengthen her intention to refuse.

“Get your suit on and meet me at the pool in ten minutes.”

Chapter Seven

Nathan waited in the pool for Annie. Twenty minutes had passed since breakfast. She couldn't possibly be putting on makeup or doing her hair. And unless he missed his guess, she didn't have it in her to refuse him after he'd cooked a meal for her. So what was taking her so long?

He had just heaved himself out of the pool to investigate when she appeared. She had a huge Garfield towel wrapped around her like armor and she approached the pool with obvious misgivings.

"I was beginning to think you stood me up," he said.

"I'd never do that," she said, apparently offended by the thought. "I couldn't find my bathing suit."

"Then let's get started."

"Well, see, I was thinking that maybe you could just explain the basics first." She lingered a couple of feet from the edge of the pool, still clutching her towel. "You know, before I actually got in the water."

Nathan considered her reluctant demeanor and swiftly revised his original plan. He judged the distance between them. He glanced at the pool.

"That's an interesting idea," he said, taking two casual steps toward her. "But not exactly what I had in mind."

Without warning he lunged and grabbed her, towel and all.

"No, now, wait a minute!" she protested.

"Nope. It's always best to just get the bad stuff over with."

As he sidled to the rim of the pool, Annie continued to voice her objections. He aimed for chest-high water and jumped. They hit the water together, and he held her firmly until she got her feet under her, then released her.

"Well done," he said with a broad smile.

She gaped at him and stepped back, sputtering, "I can't believe you did that! Look what you did to my towel!" It hung from her shoulders, a sodden cape of pink and orange terry cloth.

"Don't worry about your towel. You can use mine."

As Annie waded to the side to plop her wet towel on the concrete, Nathan eyed her god-awful bathing suit. Sheesh. It looked like it came from Matrons-R-Us. The leg openings were practically horizontal. The pallid green color reminded him of cooked cabbage, and he couldn't see any cleavage at all. She was practically sexless in that thing. Yet despite that disaster of a suit, he still desired her. Tempting little snippets of his fantasies with her kept flaring up in his mind—the feel of her nipples hardening against his lips, the perfection of her small breasts in his hands, the way her whole body shook when she came. He realized with surprise that she could be wearing a factory worker's coverall and he'd still find her sexy.

He surreptitiously brushed a hand against his cock and found it wasn't as hard as he would have expected. Still, good thing he was already hip deep in cool water.

Annie gave her towel a little shove and turned around. Her face was so pinched he thought she was going to tell him off—that she'd been fussing with her wet towel so that

she could think of some really prime names to call him. She waded over to him with a determined look on her face and he thought maybe she wasn't the name calling type. He braced himself for a slap.

But instead of slapping him, she said, "You know, you're right. Let's just do it. Today I'm going to learn something new—do something I've never done before."

A relieved grin spread across his face. "That's the spirit! Grab life by the..." He faltered. God, he couldn't say 'balls.' What was the female equivalent? "—by the, ah, hair, and don't let go."

"The hair." Annie smiled. "Right."

He splashed her.

"Hey!" She laughed and flicked some water his way. "I want you to know this doesn't mean you're off the hook. I'm still gonna pay you back for that little stunt just now. I don't know how or when, but I will."

"Bring it on, baby. I can't wait." He held his arms out to her and said, "Now, let's start with kicking."

* * * *

Free to explore now that the humans had gone, Cybele maintained her feline guise as she prowled the utilitarian domicile. Ugliness abounded. She saw no friezes or sculpture, no art anywhere. The furniture seemed designed only for function, with no attention to detail or ornamentation at all. Her slaves lived in quarters with more style. How could Natanaél be content in a world where abodes like this were the rule?

In the sleeping chamber Cybele found the female's clothing—another travesty. Nothing in the wardrobe accentuated the body, the most valuable weapon in a feminine arsenal. The creature seemed completely untutored in the ways of women. Wondering if she had grown up motherless, Cybele felt a mixture of disdain and pity, but not enough to deter her from her objective.

The goddess had searched too long to find her beloved Amarantus, and while his ingenuous temperament surprised her, she felt confident that his truer nature would eventually reassert itself. Like a dormant seed, it needed only to be encouraged to grow. Her tutelage and the promise of the power that could be his would trigger long-buried memories, and once again she would have a consort worthy of her attention.

Cybele leapt to the windowsill to gaze down upon the human pair. Her tail twitched. He appeared to be teaching the creature how to swim. How quaint. Men were so gullible. Making them feel superior was a ploy that women had used for centuries. Perhaps the female wasn't as witless as she had first suspected.

Cybele observed the smiles and the laughter, how they already seemed comfortable touching each other's bodies. A low growl rumbled inside her cat body, taking her by surprise. She suppressed her displeasure and dismissed the prickling of fur along her shoulders as a natural consequence of taking an animal form. Nothing would come of this afternoon of silly frolic.

Deliberately, Cybele turned her back to the scene below to groom her thick burgundy pelt.

No, the heir would never find this timid mole of a girl worth much of his time. Not when he could dwell in the heart of a goddess.

* * * *

"Not much to it, is there?" Annie said, eyeing the skimpy fabric covering the mannequin's private parts, if a mannequin even had private parts. She and Deb stood at the window of Pacific Beachwares.

"That's the idea," Deb replied. She grabbed Annie's arm and pulled her into the store. "A bathing suit is for revealing, titillating, provoking. It's man bait."

Inside, Annie saw the inventory was clearly aimed toward daring customers. The tiny bikinis, bright shreds of material joined by string, hung from rods like wanton fruit. Where were the modest suits? Annie felt like she'd entered a foreign country.

"I don't know about this," she said, lingering near the door as if contemplating escape.

"Look," Deb said, "he's giving you another lesson tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, in the morning."

"Then, come on. What are you, a seven?" At Annie's nod, Deb grabbed a hanger at random, checked the size, and thrust it into Annie's hands. "Grow a spine and try this on."

"I'll just look stupid. Like I'm trying too hard to be sexy."

Deb faced Annie. "Don't take this the wrong way, okay? I'm saying this as a friend. But that suit you showed me? Looks like you're trying to *repel* men."

Annie's shoulders slumped. "I know, I know. That's why I asked you to help me. I'm afraid if I buy a new suit on my own, I'll end up with another version of the same thing."

"Then get in the dressing room and try that on. Go on."

Annie closeted herself into the cubicle. With a big sigh she stripped down to her underwear, put on the bikini, and steeled herself for a look in the mirror.

"Well?" Deb called.

"It's...not horrible."

"Come out so I can see. The place is empty. I'm not sure anyone even works here."

Annie crept out of the safety of the dressing room. Deb beamed.

"That looks great on you. Look at those legs! Whoo-hoo!"

Annie rolled her eyes. "You know, I was thinking in there. A one-piece might be..."

"Oh, no, sweetheart, let me help you!" A middle-aged saleswoman finally hustled over. "Please! This suit is meant to ride high on the hips. Like this!" She hooked her fingers under the hip straps and yanked them up high. Then she proceeded to tuck Annie's panties out of sight under the suit.

Annie gave the saleswoman a look and pulled away, annoyed that the woman felt free to adjust her personal clothing at will.

"You gotta admit, it looks better that way, Annie," Deb commented.

Annie looked in the mirror. The suit covered everything that was supposed to be covered, yet it felt like she was looking at someone else. Her legs looked longer and shapely, her hips curvy in a way they'd never seemed to before.

The saleslady reached out. "If you let me adjust the top, honey, your bosom will look bigger too."

Annie quickly crossed her arms over her chest. "That won't be necessary, thanks. This looks all right, but I want to look at your one-pieces."

"Honey! Why cover up that gorgeous figure? You're only young once. You should

enjoy it.”

“The one-pieces, please,” Annie repeated. “I don’t want to worry that my suit is going to come off when I swim.”

The woman waved her hand toward the rear of the store. “Over there.”

Annie started to go over, but Deb held her back.

“You go inside the dressing room and take that off. *I’ll* find you some one-piece suits.”

Annie obeyed once again, and in no time Deb’s fist appeared over the door shaking a selection of suits.

“Try these.”

Annie did. Deb had done a good job choosing them. None of the suits had floss in the back or ultra-revealing holes cut out. Except for the consistently high-cut leg openings, Annie found she could live with any of them.

By the time she had settled on one and emerged from the dressing room in her regular clothes, Deb was at the counter, trying to pay for a suit of her own.

“I don’t understand,” Deb said. “Try the card again.”

“What’s wrong?” Annie asked.

“She says my card is maxed out. I didn’t think I was that close to my limit.”

The little credit machine beeped a discordant tone.

“Sorry, honey,” said the saleswoman, handing Deb back her card. “Do you have some other form of payment?”

“I’ll write a check.”

“It’s probably just a mix up,” Annie said.

They both paid for their purchases and left the store. As they walked down the street, Annie reassured her friend.

“I’m sure that credit thing is all some mistake. Like they received your payment late or something like that.”

Deb said nothing. Annie wondered if she was having financial difficulties. They continued walking along the promenade of the outdoor mall in silence, an unusual state for Deb.

Knowing that Deb liked to solve problems, Annie mentioned, “Say, do you remember that cat I told you about? I still can’t seem to get rid of her. Every time I try to catch her, she runs under the bed, which is just big enough so that it’s easy for her to stay out of my reach.”

That seemed to snap Deb out of her funk.

“Have you tried luring it out with food? Like a piece of raw tuna?”

“No. That’s a good idea. I put out dry food and water for her, because I don’t want to find a dead cat under my bed, but she doesn’t seem to be eating it.”

“Take away the dry food for a day and then try the tuna thing. If that doesn’t work, call Animal Control.” Deb touched Annie on the arm. “Hey, I have to go in here and get some beer for Handel before we go home.”

“You’re still seeing him?”

“Yeah.” Deb pulled a six pack out of the refrigerator and walked it up to the cashier.

At the register, Annie said softly, “I think you could do better than him.”

She immediately regretted saying it, but Deb didn’t seem to have heard her. She was busy with her wallet.

“What the—? Damn it!” Deb exclaimed. “Now, I don’t have any cash.” She shoved her billfold into her purse and said, “Forget it. Let’s go home.”

Deb left the beer on the counter and pushed out the door of the liquor store. Annie hurried after her, wondering if she should offer to lend Deb some money if she was having trouble making ends meet this month.

Suddenly, Deb burst out, “What do you mean I could do better? Like you’re such an expert on men.”

“Deb, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I never said I was an expert on men. I just think that Handel...”

“Hey, just do me a favor and let me run my own life, okay?” Deb tucked her shopping bag under arm and stepped up the pace toward the parking lot. “By the way, did you sleep with him yet?”

“What?” Annie stopped in her tracks.

“Have you gone to bed with Nathan yet?”

Shaking her head, Annie resumed walking. “For goodness sake, we’ve only really gone out once.”

“And your point?”

“Deb, we barely even know each other.”

“Like I said, and your *point*?” Deb scowled. “Look, Annie, I’m proud of you for having gotten over the whole, ‘I’m afraid he’ll recognize me’ deal. You overcame your past, but now you have to get with the present. It’s the new millennium. Women are allowed to have sex whenever they want, regardless of the length, or even the existence, of a relationship, just like men. It’s not slutty. It’s...it’s exercising your right to equality.”

“Exercising my...” Annie blinked. “I’ve never heard it put that way before.”

“Well, it’s the truth. Nathan’s a sweet guy, a real catch, and if you hold out too long, he’s gonna go find what he wants somewhere else. Men don’t wait around anymore. They don’t have to. You’re better off nabbing him right off the bat, having some fun while you’re at it, and then getting rid of him later if he doesn’t work out.”

“But, I don’t want a man who doesn’t want me unless I have sex with him.”

“Would you rather be alone?”

“If the choice is between a shallow man who only cares about sex and no man at all? Yes, I’d rather be alone.”

“Really?” Deb blew out a breath, obviously annoyed with Annie’s naïveté. “Well, fine. If that’s how you feel, fine.”

Deb stopped walking and jerked on her jacket. The afternoon had grown cool and the wind had kicked up. “Look, it’s not that far back to the apartment. I’m going to walk home. I’ll see you later.”

Chapter Eight

The two bathing suits, old and new, sat side by side on Annie's bed. She looked at the worn out green one and remembered the many swim parties at which she'd sat on the sidelines. Her asthma back then was so severe that any exercise had been forbidden. She'd been forced to watch her classmates frolic in the water, always on the outside looking in. A couple of friends usually sat with her for a while out of loyalty, but inevitably the lure of the laughter and games drew them away.

Determined to leave her past behind, Annie snatched up the green suit, stalked downstairs to the garbage chute and flung it into the depths of the dumpster. There. That was what she thought of sitting on the sidelines.

When she hurried back up to her apartment, she met Nathan coming down. He had his trunks on and he grasped the ends of the towel that hung around his neck.

"Nice outfit," he said with a grin. "This is becoming a habit for you, meeting me in your pajamas."

Her robe hung open to show her T-shirt and bare legs. Blushing, she pulled it shut.

"The lesson's not off, is it?" he asked.

"No. I was just...taking out the garbage."

"Okay, good. See you in a few."

Annie hurried inside to put on her new suit and found to her dismay that the cat had made her bed on it.

"Get off, cat."

The cat just looked at her, not even twitching a whisker.

"Look, just get off my suit and you can have some nice yummy tuna. That's right, delicious fish. Now, just let me..." She reached for the suit, and the creature actually hissed at her.

"Well, of all the..." Annie glared at the cat. "You can't have that. I need to put it on. Nathan's waiting for me."

Annie clapped her hands sharply at it, and the cat leapt away, startled. She examined the suit for damage before pulling it on. Luckily it seemed snag-free.

She had opted for a deep purple one piece somewhere between modest and *Sports Illustrated*. The cut emphasized her legs, yet she didn't think it would ride up when she swam. The bra portion covered her breasts adequately. The rest of the suit, however, defied Annie's usual comfort zone. Gauzy Lycra exposed her midriff and a good portion of her back. At the store, having fabric actually covering her skin seemed like the perfect compromise between bare and boring, but now with Nathan downstairs waiting to see her, the sheerness made her feel more naked than she'd anticipated.

She pushed aside her anxiety and went to the kitchen. Yesterday she'd bought a chunk of raw fish as Deb had suggested. After the bathing suit stunt, Annie was reluctant to reward the beast with food, but she had no choice if she wanted the animal out of her apartment.

She unwrapped the tuna, put it on a paper plate, and sought out the cat.

"Kitty, where are you? I have that yummy tuna for you. Yummy, yummy, come and get it."

Annie found her under the bed, as usual. She pushed the plate toward the cat and moved it back and forth. The cat's eyes glowed in the deep shadow of the bed, but she made no move toward the tuna. The animal could have been made of stone, for all she seemed to care.

"Well, you have to be hungry. You haven't eaten anything for a day. Wait a second! I think I've got it."

She went back to the kitchen and cut the tuna into bite sized chunks. Surprisingly, the cat followed her. Maybe it was true about cats' curiosity. Annie grabbed her towel and draped it around her neck so she had her hands free. Then, leaving her door open, she placed a bit of tuna on her welcome mat.

"Here, kitty," she called with mock sweetness. "Here's a nice tender morsel for you. And another...and another."

Annie left a trail down the stairs, one piece on each step, calling to the cat in a cajoling voice all the while.

* * * *

Nathan had just entered the pool when he looked up to see Annie backing down the steps. She wore, not the wilted cabbage bathing suit, but a purple see-through thingamajig that made his male chromosomes stand up and take notice. She kept bending over to put something on the stairs. Each time he got a winking flash of her curvy behind and a little bit more.

Thank you, God.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, he said, "Wow, Annie. Now, *that's* a nice outfit."

She whirled around. "Oh, you scared me!"

"That a new suit?"

She gave a little laugh and said, "You noticed? Yes, well, that other suit was about ten years old. I thought it was time to get a new one."

"It's, ah, very nice."

Being openly admired by a man was a new experience for Annie, and the look on his face went straight to her head. Perhaps this called for more shopping expeditions with Deb.

"What's on the plate?" Nathan asked. "Is that...ahi tuna?"

"Yes, it is. I'm trying to lure that darned cat out of my apartment."

Nathan leaned to the side and looked up. The stairwell was empty.

"She doesn't seem to be going for it."

Annie sighed. "No, she doesn't. I don't understand it. She has to be hungry. I took away the dry food yesterday." She crossed her arms in frustration. "I also don't understand why she wants to stay in my apartment. She hates me."

"Well, she loved me."

Annie narrowed her eyes at him. "That's right. She *did* love you. Maybe she'll come if *you* call her."

"All right, I'll give it a try."

He hoisted himself out of the pool, took the plate from her, and walked dripping over to the bottom of the stairs.

Annie watched him raise a hand to his mouth and call up, "Here, kitty, come here,

sweetheart. Come to Nathan. I have something good to eat...”

As he continued to croon to the cat, Annie noticed the wet trunks clung to his tight buttocks. Dear Lord, he was gorgeous. Someone like Nathan could never be interested in a mouse like her.

No. She shoved that thought into a closet in her mind and shut the door. She had gotten a look at herself in the mirror before coming down with the tuna. She looked hotter in this bathing suit than she had in her entire life.

“Psst! There she is!” Nathan hissed.

Sure enough, there at the top of the stairs the cat padded onto the landing to daintily take up the first piece of tuna.

“Talk her down,” Annie whispered. “Keep sweet talking her. When she gets to the bottom, I’ll run up and shut the door.”

“Hey, there, beautiful. Come on down. There’s more where that came from.” Nathan beckoned the cat with a gentle tone.

Annie held her breath as the cat came down another step and lapped up the morsel there. *Come on, baby, come on...* Annie started edging to the side, out of the cat’s angle of vision. She felt ridiculous as she flattened herself against the wall like a TV cop.

“Give me a signal,” she whispered to Nathan.

He nodded and kept talking. “Come on, beautiful. That’s it, keep coming.”

Finally, Annie saw the animal at the bottom. She looked to Nathan. He shook his head.

“Let her clear the stairs,” he said softly.

Slowly, he put the plate with the rest of the tuna on the floor about three feet away from the stairwell. As the cat approached it, he flicked his fingers at Annie.

Annie turned the corner and hustled as fast as she could up the stairs. She lunged for the knob and yanked the door closed.

“Ha!” she crowed. “No more kitty!” She felt like dancing in triumph. Nathan’s laughter came from down below.

“She didn’t even bat an eyelash,” he shouted up the stairwell. “I don’t even think she even thought about following you up.”

Annie returned to the pool level and Nathan was petting the cat’s silky fur.

“She already ate the tuna. Every bit.”

“The gluttonous little demon.” Annie tossed her towel on a lounge chair. He handed her the paper plate and Annie tossed it into the trash. “I don’t think I could have gotten her out without your help. Thanks a lot.”

“It was nothing. Like I said before, females...”

“Can’t resist you. Yeah, yeah, I remember.” She chuckled.

“That’s right. You’re learning!”

He dove into the water and Annie got in by the steps. They met in the shallow end.

“Now, let’s see your freestyle,” he said, flicking the hair out of his face with a toss of his head. “Remember, arms stretched out, legs loose but straight, like scissors, and don’t forget to breathe like I showed you.” He demonstrated twisting his head to the side.

Annie nodded. She tried to keep in mind all his instructions as she swam. She took a breath. Pretty good. She tried another. Even better. When she arrived at the other side, she grabbed onto the lip of the pool.

“Looking good, Annie! You’re a natural.”

“Come on, you’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not. Really. You’re picking this up amazingly fast.” He sounded sincere. “You’ve got floating down pat. Treading water, no problem, and your free stroke is really coming along. All that only after, what, five lessons? Give yourself some credit.”

“Okay, okay!” she exclaimed. “I’m the greatest swimmer since Esther Williams!”

“Esther who?”

“Esther Williams. She was a star from the forties. Like Gene Kelly, but in the pool. Her movies were big swimming extravaganzas. Fireworks, towering fountains, the works.”

“No kidding. That’s pretty funny.” He chuckled and jumped in. “Okay, Esther, let’s work on your backstroke.”

As he demonstrated, she found it difficult to resist being hypnotized by the splash and flow of the water over his muscled body, the way the sun glinted on his slick hair. He made everything look so effortless and fluid.

“All right,” he said. “Your turn.”

Determined to succeed, she pushed off the wall and swam. When she reached the end, he nodded. “Not bad. Remember arms straight, like this.”

As she set off again, he hopped out of the pool and walked along the edge following her.

“Arms straight! Arms straight,” he called with a laugh. “Some lifeguard from the beach is going to see you with his binoculars and come a-running!”

Laughing, Annie abandoned her stroke to tread water. “Hey, I can’t swim and laugh at the same time. Now be quiet!”

“All right, all right.” He chuckled. “Just remember, arms up, not out. Reach for the sky, pardner.”

When she finished her lap, he said, “That was better. Again.”

And so it went, lap after lap. The time flew by as Annie enjoyed a sport for the first time. Throughout girlhood she’d been relegated to the role of “teacher’s helper” during P.E. She’d found other pursuits to fill her time, until a lack of exercise became normal, even after her health finally took an upswing. Now, with Nathan’s help, she discovered how exhilarating it was to immerse herself in physical activity. When Nathan pointed out her mistakes, she found herself anxious to improve, wanting to do more.

“I want to learn how to do those somersault turns I see them do in the Olympics,” she told him.

“Whoa, I don’t know if you’re ready for flip turns.”

“Come on, I’m a natural, remember? Please? It can’t hurt to try, right?”

“No, it can’t hurt, I suppose. All right.”

Nathan explained and then demonstrated how to flip underwater and push off the wall to begin another lap. He made it look so effortless that she felt hopelessly spastic during her first few attempts. She got all turned around in mid-flip and ended up facing the wrong way. She began the flip too soon and was too far away from the wall or sometimes began too late and didn’t have enough room to flip at all. Nathan remained patient throughout. He made her laugh at her own bungling antics without making her feel stupid. And when she finally succeeded and swam to the shallow end, she emerged from the water to be swept up into his arms.

“That was perfect. Perfect!” he exclaimed, visibly elated at her success.

Annie laughed, thrilled at her accomplishment and his praise, but she quickly realized that they were in each other's arms. He seemed to notice too. His broad smile faded and his eyes went soft.

"That was perfect," he repeated in a low voice as she slid down his chest to land lightly on her tiptoes. He didn't let go of her. Her heart pounded as he leaned closer. Just when Annie felt certain he was going to kiss her, the sound of a door closing startled them. Clearly, Annie thought peevishly, Fate had changed its mind.

"Oh, hi." It was Deb. "How are the lessons going?" she asked sullenly.

"Fantastic," Nathan replied, stepping away from Annie. "She's gonna be a pro in no time. She just did the most perfect flip turn."

"Hallelujah," Deb said in a flat tone.

"Hey, and I wanted to thank you for the tuna idea, Deb," Annie said. "It worked. Nathan and I got the cat out just a little while ago."

"Double hallelujah, then. Say, I gotta go. Catch you later."

After she left, Nathan turned to Annie. "What's with her?"

"Oh, she's mad at me. I told her I thought she could do better than Handel."

Nathan blew out a breath. "Damn right. The guy's a jerk, and she knows it. She just doesn't like that you know it too."

"You know, Deb's got a lot of spirit. She should hook up with someone who shares the same enthusiasm for life that she does. Not some guy who thinks it's the epitome of effort to just fucking breathe—pardon my French."

"If I knew anyone suitable, I'd introduce them, but I don't," Annie replied.

"Let's call it quits. I'm starving. What do you say to some grub? Remember Vic's hot dog stand? Did you ever go there back in high school?"

"I love Vic's. Those Monstrosities they have are the best. Let me just go get changed."

They walked up the stairs together, and Nathan teased her, "If it takes more than ten minutes for you to get ready, you're buying."

"Oh, don't worry. I've seen you eat. That could cost me a fortune. I'll be out in five." Annie turned the knob to find her door was locked.

"Well, that's just great. The cat is out, but I am too. I locked myself out."

Nathan laughed. "Don't worry. Mrs. Waller has a master key."

But Mrs. Waller wasn't home. Annie ended up having to borrow some of Nathan's clothes, a T-shirt and some drawstring shorts, cinched up tight. Shoes were another matter. The only thing that worked were some flip-flops. Feeling foolish in sandals that stuck out behind her heels a good three inches, she shuffled along as best she could.

They were about to leave when Nathan turned back and grabbed some envelopes from his coffee table.

"What's that?" Annie asked.

"Oh, just some sweepstakes entries. I want to drop these off at the mailbox before we go."

"I always throw those away. I never win anything."

"Well, of course you never win. You can't win if you don't enter. I enter everything. That way, there's always a chance."

"Have you ever won?"

Nathan frowned. "No."

Annie laughed.

“But I will someday. There’s always a chance.”

“Yeah, like a zillion to one.”

“Oh, hush up, Esther, or I’ll make you do five extra laps tomorrow.”

There was a line at Vic’s, as expected. The dilapidated hot dog joint was a neighborhood icon, quite a contrast to Chiara West. No valet at Vic’s. Rather, the tiny parking lot was crammed with cars, and Nathan had to park half a block away. Instead of Berber carpeting, Vic’s boasted painted cement floors. The menu listed only four selections: The Plain, the Chili Cheese, the Kraut, and the Monstrosity. Customers could see right into the busy kitchen where the workers slapped orders together with practiced skill.

Nathan and Annie bought two Chili Cheeses and two Monstrosities and found a table tucked into a corner. Although giving lessons didn’t require him to do much swimming, Nathan was still famished. At his first bite, he groaned aloud.

“God, I haven’t had a Vic’s dog in at least a year.”

“It’s delicious,” she agreed.

“Just the smell of this place this brings back memories. We used to come here after meets,” Nathan explained around a large bite. “Vic was a sponsor of our team, and he’d feed us for free if we won, but his rule was one dog at a time. We’d all be starving, and by the time the last guy on the team got his, the first guy was finished and in line for seconds.”

As they ate, he regaled her with funny stories about the jokes he and his teammates used to play on each other, peanut butter in the swimming trunks, frozen towels, and the like. She laughed at everything. He liked her easy laughter.

He was just finishing his second hot dog when he turned his eyes to the unusual graffiti that Vic’s customers had scrawled on the walls over the years. Various witticisms like bumper stickers gave him a couple of wry chuckles. Then something small caught his eye.

“Hey, would you look at that!” Nathan exclaimed in surprise. “Isn’t your last name Prescott?”

“Yes.”

He pushed aside the ketchup bottle and pointed. “Someone wrote ‘N.S. plus A.P. equals love.’ Isn’t that funny?”

Annie choked on her soda, and Nathan had to slap her on the back.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded as her coughs subsided. “Yes, I’m fine. It—it just went down the wrong pipe.”

Nathan rubbed the drawn heart on the wall. “What are the odds that two people would have the same initials as you and me?”

“A lot better than you winning a sweepstakes,” she said rather quickly. “How about another hot dog?”

“Oh, no, that one’s yours. Two’s my limit.”

She pulled it toward her and took a large bite. God love her, the woman had an appetite.

“Is that you, Nate Somerset?” A thin elderly man in a white cap and apron approached their table.

“Vic!” Nathan stood up and shook hands with the man.

“Annie, this is Vic. Vic, my friend Annie.”

“A pleasure, young lady.” Vic took off his cap and smiled to reveal a mouthful of crooked teeth.

“The pleasure is mine,” Annie replied. “I adore your hot dogs.”

“I was just telling Annie about how you’d feed the team after we won a meet.”

“Those boys ate like their mothers starved them. Five, six dogs some of them.” Vic laughed. “What a wild bunch.” Vic slapped Nathan on the bicep with the back of his hand. “Hey, I still got that mooning picture of the team, you know.”

Nathan grinned and looked around the room. “Where? I didn’t see it.”

Vic chuckled. “My wife made me take it down. She said it might offend people to have it hanging in the dining area. Something about sexual harassment.”

“That’s ridiculous. Our bare asses on your wall would have brought customers in!” Nathan joked.

“That’s what I told her!” Vic exclaimed.

“I don’t know where mine is,” Nathan said. “I think my mother stole it and threw it away. She was outraged when she saw that picture. ‘I did not raise you to parade around like a naked Chippendale’s dancer!’ she yelled. When I pointed out that Chippendale dancers wore g-strings, she grounded me for a week for mouthing off.”

“Let me give you my copy, Nate,” Vic offered.

“I couldn’t,” Nathan said.

“Sure you could. It’s not doing me any good stuffed in a storage box. Let me go look in the back.” Vic hustled away, jamming his cap back on his head.

Nathan leaned back in his chair. “You ever see that picture, Annie? It showed up in that underground newspaper. Remember that? The Adams Apple?”

Annie nodded. “Sure, I remember The Adams Apple.”

“That particular issue was a double whammy for me. See, the guys cooked up this fake love letter addressed to me and published that too. God, I got teased for weeks about that.”

He chuckled, but Annie wasn’t laughing like she had at his other anecdotes. She put the remains of the hot dog back in its paper tray and wiped her mouth.

“What, you’re not finished are you?”

Annie nodded. “I’m...not as hungry as I thought.”

Just then, Vic came back with the famous photograph in a cheap frame. “Here. Enjoy,” he said, handing it to Nathan. “Just don’t show your mother.”

Nathan laughed. “Thanks a lot, Vic. I owe you one. You ready, Annie?”

She nodded and said good-bye to Vic. On the way back to his car, she scuffled along with her head down. Maybe she was concentrating on keeping his big shoes on her feet.

“Yeah, the guys swore up and down that the letter was real. Steve Viceroy kept saying, ‘You think we could make up stuff like this?’ But I didn’t believe them until my mom said the same thing. She didn’t think they had the writing skills.”

Nathan rested his forearms on the roof of the car and faced Annie. “So I reread it to see if I could find some clue as to who might have written it, but I never found out who she was.” He shrugged and got into the car.

Annie didn’t.

He looked out the passenger window and saw her pacing. She was talking too, but

couldn't make out what she was saying. He wondered if she was going to puke. She'd looked a little green around the gills earlier.

He was just about to get out and check when she opened the door and got in. A worried expression pinched her face, her lips compressed in a straight line.

"Are you feeling all right? I can run back to Vic's and get you a cup of water..." He twisted in his seat to see if he had a towel in the back seat to clean up if she got sick in his car.

Annie pressed her fists in her lap as a useless jumble of "if onlys" continued to crowd her mind. If only the swim team hadn't mooned for the camera. If only she'd taken longer to complete that test. If only it hadn't been windy that day.

She told herself to knock it off. Sitting around speculating and whining got her nowhere. Hadn't she already learned that?

It was action that got results—like agreeing to have breakfast with him, taking swimming lessons, buying a new bathing suit—and wearing it. The past was irrelevant; she needed to focus on the future. If she and Nathan truly had a chance at something special, she didn't want to have secrets between them. She'd read her share of romance novels. Those secrets always grew to monstrous proportions and threatened everything that had occurred until their disclosure.

"Nathan-I-wrote-that-letter." She said it in a rush, so it seemed like one word.

He turned around from rummaging behind the seat. "What?"

"I wrote that letter, not your buddies. Me. You helped me one day when I was having a bad asthma attack. I lost the letter when I dumped out my purse looking for my inhaler."

He studied her for a moment. "Holy shit." He blinked and flopped back in his seat. "Holy shit. I remember that."

Embarrassment scalded Annie's cheeks, but her hands felt like ice. Tears threatened to spill out like the confession she had just made. At least she had nothing left to hide. Everything was out in the open now.

Nathan's warm hand slipped under her hair to caress the back of her neck. "Annie, look at me."

She shook her head slightly. She kept her eyes on the giant flip-flops. She couldn't bear to see any pity on his face, pity for a sick wallflower with foolish pipe dreams.

"Come on, sweetheart. Please."

His fingers gently rubbed her neck, coaxing her to lift her gaze. When she wouldn't, he bent his head close and kissed her. The soft touch of his lips soothed her anxiety like snowfall quiets a forest. His arms crept around her and she yielded to him as all her insecurities melted away. It seemed as if he were trying to tell her something with his kiss that he couldn't say out loud, for when he drew back, she saw an almost unbearable tenderness in his gaze.

After a period of silent communion, he finally said, "I'm glad you told me."

Chapter Nine

When Nathan woke to a drizzly morning, he resigned himself to a boring day. Because of year long temperate weather, Southern Californians suffered from what he called a low rain-threshold. At the slightest drizzle, Storm Watch graphics resurfaced on the local news. Meteorologists hogged the television spotlight, and everyone on the road drove twenty miles below the speed limit. What Nathan hated most was that rainy days meant scanty tips. He'd only waited on four parties during lunch, and it was two o'clock already.

One of the women at table five waved her fingers at him. He strode over to her, straightening his apron as he walked.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

The blonde smiled at him and handed him a slip of paper.

"I was wondering if you could deliver this and a drink to that gentleman over there. The one with the blue tie."

Nathan glanced over and recognized a familiar patron, a high-priced lawyer who often came here after court to discuss the next day's strategies with his associates. As usual, he was dressed to the nines—Armani suit, gold cufflinks, Bruno Magli shoes, the works.

"Of course, I'd be happy to."

As Nathan walked over to the bar, he surreptitiously read the note. "Call me some time," with her name and phone number.

Nathan watched as the attorney read the note, smirked, and approached table five with a confident swagger. He was invited to join them, and after a few minutes of conversation, he and the woman left together.

When Nathan's shift was over, he wandered into the busy kitchen. People hustled about, completing the multitude of chores necessary for the evening meal. Alphonse was dicing celery.

"What are you doing grunt work for?" Nathan asked. As head chef, Alphonse usually supervised the prep work instead of performing it himself.

"Feeney is sick with the flu. If you have half an hour or so, I could use the help until Martinez gets here. Chop those onions there. Quarter inch dice."

"You got it."

Nathan washed his hands and got to work. As he peeled the first onion, he told Alphonse about the lawyer and the blonde.

"Some guys have all the luck," Nathan concluded.

"That was not luck, Nathan. That was power. Women love powerful men."

"So schmucks like us haven't got a chance? Is that what you're saying?"

Alphonse continued dicing celery, manipulating the knife with swift precision. "No. For men like you and I to succeed, we must rely on other things. Skill and charm. Me, I use my accent. Women love it. Also, cooking a meal for them always makes them a little soft for me. I don't know why."

Nathan chuckled. "You got that right. It's funny how even in the new millennium, women are always astonished that a man can cook. Remember my neighbor, the one that

came in a few weeks ago? I made breakfast for her..."

"Breakfast? You Casanova." Alphonse set down his knife and held up a hand for a high five.

Laughing as he obliged, Nathan shook his head. "It's not what you think."

He filled his friend in on the recent happenings with Annie and her revelation.

"What is it they say?" Alphonse said, slicing carrots now. "Life is stranger than fiction? What is next? Is she your long lost half sister, given up for adoption at birth?"

Nathan laughed. "God, I hope not."

"Do you still have the letter?" Alphonse stacked the carrot slices and sliced them into a julienne. "If I were you, I'd want to read it again in context, knowing it was she who wrote it."

Nathan shrugged as if he didn't care that much about it, but he'd actually spent a couple of hours digging through his closet for that ancient issue of The Adams Apple. As he searched, memories resurfaced.

He remembered the tone of the letter had seemed hilariously melodramatic at first. But during that boring week he was grounded he'd begun thinking it might not be a hoax after all. He'd been flattered and touched that some girl out in the world somewhere might really feel that way about him. For a while he'd even been obsessed with finding out who wrote the letter. Every girl he knew came under suspicion. He surreptitiously compared handwriting for weeks. He devised clever questions designed to flush out the admirer, but to no avail. He never considered a girl three years his junior and eventually gave up.

Now that he knew it was Annie, he couldn't find his copy of the letter. It was probably buried in his parents' garage somewhere, but at least the mystery was finally solved.

Alphonse waved the knife in the air. "If the letter was as fervent as you say, I would wager that her feelings are still strong. Maybe even more intense after all this time, like good balsamic, eh? If I were you, I'd put fresh sheets on the bed and buy an extra toothbrush. Heh heh heh."

"I don't know about that. I have a feeling she's not going to just fall into bed with me. So far she's been really unpredictable. Liable to bolt at the slightest little thing."

"Give it a little more time than usual. She might be worth waiting for."

Nathan stopped chopping, aghast. "What are you talking about? Whatever Feeney's got, buddy, I think you caught it. Either that or you're getting soft on me, man. No entanglements. I thought that was your motto. Besides, you don't even know her."

Alphonse wiped his hands on a towel. "I met her that night she came in with her cute friend."

"Oh, and from that ten minutes you've divined that she and I should ride into the sunset together?" Nathan laughed.

"Dismiss me if you like, but I have a feeling about her."

Martinez entered the kitchen buttoning his chef's jacket. "A feeling about who?" he asked.

"Just a girl I know," Nathan replied as he scooped up the last of the diced onions and put them in the metal container with the rest. "Great timing. You get here just as I finish the onions."

"Better you than me," Martinez replied jovially.

"I'm outta here," Nathan said.

"Nathan, wait a moment," said Alphonse, wiping his hands on the towel that hung from his waist. "Martinez, start on the lobster reduction. I'll be right back. And watch Rooney with that loin. He cuts them too thin."

Alphonse steered Nathan toward the dining room. "Thanks for the help."

"Anytime," Nathan said.

"I meant what I said. Do not make light of your situation. To tell the truth, my friend, I envy you. To find out that a lovely woman admired me for years?" Alphonse nodded sagely.

Nathan shook his head. "You're blowing this out of proportion. She had a crush on me a long time ago. I'm sure she hasn't been holding out for me all these years."

But he remembered the awkwardness of her kiss and wondered.

* * * *

Later that evening, Annie knocked on his door. For once she wasn't wearing her pajamas. Still, in jeans and a polo shirt, she presented a tempting picture.

"Hey, Esther." He noticed a surgical mask around her neck. "Wanna play doctor?"

"No!" Annie shook her head and smiled. "And I told you to stop calling me Esther."

"How about Post Office then?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Do you think you can rein in your hormones long enough to help me move my bed?"

"Right now?"

She nodded.

"Sure. Redecorating? Painting?" He left his door unlocked and followed her into her apartment.

"No. My mother's coming over tomorrow for lunch and she'll have a hissy fit if she finds cat hair."

"She have something against cats?"

"No. She still thinks I'm on the verge of an asthma attack twenty-four hours a day and I just don't want to hear her lecture me about reducing the amount of irritants in my environment. I know her and she'll be inspecting every inch of this place. The cat spent most of its time under the bed, so I want to make sure I vacuum under there."

"Your mother will look under the bed?"

"Trust me, she'll look. If you could just hoist it up and lean it against the closet."

He eyed her double bed and had a hard time not thinking about her sleeping there, her hair in disarray, her lower body exposed because her T-shirt had ridden up.

"Any time now," she prompted.

He smiled wryly. The image disappeared, but his reaction to it remained. Fortunately, not enough to necessitate covert hand-in-the-pocket adjustment.

As he moved the bed he asked, "Is your mother bringing food again?"

"I told her not to. I was just going to make frozen pizza or soup or something."

"If you want, I could teach you how to whip up something really amazing to surprise her."

Annie's eyes gleamed. "Something easy, or she'll never believe I made it."

"You got it. Let me go take inventory while you vacuum. Then we'll cook, eat some for dinner just to make sure it turned out all right, and save the rest for Mom."

In her kitchen he found little to work with in the refrigerator. Not much in the cupboards either. She seemed to live on convenience food—microwaveable dinners, frozen pizza, lots of stuff in cans. He was trying to figure out what he had in his own kitchen to augment her meager ingredients when the phone rang.

“Annie, the phone!”

Then he realized with the vacuum going she probably wouldn’t hear it, so he picked it up.

“Miss Prescott’s residence,” he said. “This is her personal chef Nathan speaking.”

A man’s voice said, “What? Is Annie there?”

“Let me see if she if she is taking calls. One moment. Who is calling?”

“Uh, it’s Todd Soltis.”

Nathan pushed the mute button and took the phone to the bedroom. He wondered who the hell Todd Soltis was. The guy had a voice like a baboon.

Nathan shouted, “Annie, phone!”

She turned off the vacuum and pulled her mask down. “I didn’t even hear it. Thanks.”

“It’s Todd Soltis,” he said as he pushed the mute button again.

Annie looked baffled as she took the phone. “Todd?”

Nathan knew he should give Annie some privacy, but he wanted to find out who this Todd character was. He picked up a rag and made a show of dusting her dresser.

“My personal *chef*?” Annie said into the phone, with a hard look at Nathan.

He feigned an innocent expression and kept dusting.

“No, he’s a friend. What? Oh, really? That’s nice. That’s Frank for you. He’s such a sweetheart.”

Who the hell was Frank, now? Shit! He grabbed wildly at a little china figurine he’d almost knocked off the dresser. It was a child with eyes disproportionately large for the rest of its body. It looked like a sad alien humanoid with wispy hair.

“Oh, gee, there’s the timer. I’m making cookies and I have to go get them out of the oven. Nice talking to you. Bye.”

As Annie hung up the phone and put it down, Nathan decided Todd wasn’t serious competition. She’d wangled her way out of the conversation too early to be interested in him.

“That was a guy from work.”

“He must not know you very well if he believes you were baking cookies.”

Her chin came up a tad. “I bake cookies.” When he raised his eyebrow at her, she admitted, “Okay, they’re the kind that come in the tube, but they’re still cookies.”

“Barely.”

“You told Todd you were my personal chef?”

“Let me see,” he said, holding up one finger and then the other. “First there were the crepes and then there was breakfast the other day...”

She laughed. “Well then, chef, what’s for dinner? I’m starved.”

“You don’t seem to have much I can work with in the kitchen. If you’re done under the bed, I’ll put it back and go get some stuff from the market.”

A couple of hours later Nathan watched Annie polish off the last of her sandwich. He’d shown her how to make a simple curried chicken salad on foccacia bread and a salad of baby greens with a homemade vinaigrette.

“This is great! My mother won’t believe it.”

“Well, it took you half an hour to cut up two breasts of chicken, but you did cook it yourself.”

She took his teasing in stride. “How come you’re not in the kitchen at Chiara West? You’re a wonderful cook.”

“Me? A chef?” He laughed.

“Why not?”

“I never really thought about it.”

Out of habit he picked up the plates and brought them to the kitchen.

“You know, I just sort of fell into the restaurant business by accident. I got a job waiting tables while I took business classes at Valley College, and by the time I graduated, I was making great money in tips. Better money than an entry level job anywhere else.”

Annie brought him the glasses and flatware. “Maybe you should think about continuing your education and going into cooking. Ask your chef friend about it. Albert?”

“Alphonse.”

As he finished the dishes, she found the bag he’d set aside.

“What’s this?” she asked, peeking inside. “You’ve got to be kidding me! You rented an Esther Williams movie? ‘Dangerous When Wet,’” she read, laughing.

“I thought we could watch it together. See if we could pick up any pointers.”

“That would be great. The problem is, I have loads of microwave popcorn, but no VCR.”

“My place then. Bring two bags of popcorn.”

* * * *

About an hour into the movie, a bevy of bathing beauties performed a synchronized water dance to the music of a full orchestra. If Annie had been alone, she would have been fascinated at the graceful athleticism these women displayed. Having just learned how to swim, she knew firsthand how difficult it could be to stay afloat, and the swimmers in the movie made it seem as if they had antigravity devices installed in their swimsuits.

But she wasn’t alone. Nathan sat next to her, his thigh against hers, his arms resting on the back of the threadbare couch. He seemed outwardly relaxed and genuinely amused by the aquatic antics. Once in a while, he would burst out laughing. Annie, on the other hand, couldn’t pay attention to the movie at all. His nearness had her senses on edge. If he moved his body in any way, she noticed. Every so often she’d realize that she had her hands clenched as if watching a high-suspense thriller instead of a sweet MGM musical, and she’d have to consciously relax her fingers.

Nathan shifted and she went on alert again.

He leaned his head down and murmured in her ear, “You know, Esther Williams is a helluva swimmer, but honestly, I’d rather be kissing you.”

Then she felt his lips on her neck and a shiver chased through her. He turned toward her and bestowed a series of gentle kisses up toward her ear. In the background she heard the movie orchestra gearing up again, but then he reached her mouth and nothing else registered.

The kisses came slow and easy. His lips caressed hers in an indolent exploration that left her relaxed, but edgy with anticipation. When his tongue probed her lips, she parted them and he slid inside her mouth slowly, deliberately, as if he were savoring the very taste of her. Every inch of her skin felt tingly and she thought, *this* is what it's supposed to be like.

Nathan drew back and she opened her eyes slowly. He smiled down at her, his eyes smoky with desire.

"Let's just get rid of these," he said, taking her glasses off and laying them on the table. "Unless you want to keep watching the movie..."

"Oh, no!" she said a little too quickly. "I mean, ah, not unless you do."

"Nah. I like kissing you better."

"You're good at it." Which was the understatement of the year.

"Oh yeah?" he said with a boyish grin. "So, I'll bet you're sorry you didn't make out with me the night we went to the diner, huh?"

Annie laughed. "You'd like to think so, wouldn't you?"

"I don't hear you denying it."

Nathan lowered his head and kissed her again. This wasn't normal. Kissing usually produced only a moderately pleasant sensation, akin to the sun on her face in the wintertime or a hot shower. And full-on sex? She could take it or leave it. She'd long ago come to the conclusion that she hadn't been born with a passionate nature and that the best sex she'd ever have was the vicarious kind she got from novels.

But Nathan was swiftly breaking apart those notions. Liquid heat pooled between her legs as his tongue delved into her mouth. She marveled at the fearful excitement that surged through her veins and how her body hummed. She'd never felt so aroused. When she felt his hand tug at her shirt, pulling it from her jeans, she realized how badly she wanted to feel his hands on her bare skin.

His hand inched up toward her bra, and breathless with impatience, she silently urged him to hurry up and touch her. When she heard the click of her bra as he popped the front clasp one-handed, she actually panted in anticipation of his caress. Then his warm hand brushed aside one of the lace cups and covered her breast, squeezing gently. As he thumbed her nipple to hardness, arrows of pleasure zinged through her. She heard moaning and realized it was coming from her.

Nathan broke the kiss and drew back. Keen disappointment swept through her as he pulled his hand from beneath her shirt, but then she looked at him. His eyes had gone warm and dark, like an evening in the tropics. She couldn't seem to look away, and when he grasped the hem of her shirt and lifted, she raised her arms so he could remove it completely. A moment later her bra was tossed aside.

As he looked down at her bared skin, he licked his lips. Her breasts tingled and she felt her nipples grow taut. *Oh yes*, she thought, *please...please...I want to feel that too.*

Then, just as she reached for him and he lowered his head, a crashing sound from downstairs startled them both.

"What was that?" Nathan asked, frowning. He reached for the remote and muted the television.

Angry shouting came from the apartment below Nathan's—Deb's apartment.

"That sounds like Handel. I think something's wrong," Annie said, picking up her shirt and quickly putting it on. "We have to see if she's okay."

Nathan nodded. Annie headed for the door and Nathan followed, but not before grabbing an aluminum baseball bat from his hall closet.

At the bottom of the stairs, Annie pounded on the door. The shouting stopped immediately. She heard a muffled conversation and then the door opened just wide enough to reveal Deb's tear-stained face.

"Oh, hi, you guys." She attempted a smile.

"Deb, what's wrong?" Annie asked, trying to see around Deb into the apartment. "We heard the shouting..."

Deb opened her mouth to reply but Handel's bellow cut her off. "Tell whoever it is to fuck off!"

When Deb flinched, Annie immediately thought the worst. She searched her friend's face for any sign of injury, but didn't see anything to suggest Handel had hit her.

"I'm not going anywhere until I know you're all right," Annie said loud enough for Handel to hear. She welcomed Nathan's reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Do you need help, Deb?" he asked in a low voice. "You want me to get rid of this creep?"

At that moment, the door was yanked open and Handel loomed behind Deb like a snarling animal. "I said, fuck off. Me and Deb are having a private conversation that doesn't concern you."

"If you're just talking, then what was that crash?" Annie asked.

Handel's lip curled up in a snarl as he zeroed in on Annie. "None of your fucking business, I told you. Now leave us alone. Why don't you go back to your apartment and knit a sweater or whatever it is you do, Betty Crocker?"

"Like I said," Annie replied, scared to death but too angry to back down, "I'm not going anywhere until I know my friend is all right. So, why don't *you* go home and torture a puppy or whatever it is *you* do, jerk!"

Before Handel could reply, Nathan moved Annie aside and casually hefted the bat onto his shoulder. Deb edged away from the doorway.

"Look, Handel," Nathan said calmly. "Annie's right. You should probably just go home. I don't think Deb wants your company any longer, do you, Deb?"

Annie glanced at Deb, who gave a slight shake of her head.

"No," Deb said in a small voice. "Not really."

"Not really? *Not really?*" he roared into Deb's face. "Well, fuck you. You are such a worthless bitch."

With that he turned and disappeared into the apartment. Deb darted out the door as Nathan tightened his grip on the bat and flexed his knees a little. Annie grabbed Deb's hand and together they backed up the stairs a little way. She wanted to give Nathan some swinging room if it came to that. Her heart had never pounded so hard. Her throat felt constricted and she tried to take deep breaths.

Handel reappeared abruptly and Annie almost screamed, terrified that he'd gone to get some type of weapon. But he only carried his jacket and a half finished beer. Seeing Deb cowering on the stairs, he sneered.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to count on you. Shit." He downed the rest of his beer. "You know, you're gonna be sorry it came down this way. When me and the band are on the top of the charts and raking in the cash, I'm gonna think of you and laugh. When that happens, you just remember if you'd have come through for me when I needed you,

you'd have been living like a queen. But now?" He laughed harshly and tossed the empty bottle on Deb's carpet. "Forget it. I'm gone."

With that he shoved past Nathan and walked away.

"I'm going to make sure he really goes," Nathan said.

Deb covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. "Oh, God, Annie. I'm sorry," she sobbed.

Annie hugged her friend and tried to suppress her coughs. She needed her inhaler, but couldn't leave Deb so distraught.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. Shhh, don't be sorry," Annie said soothingly. "He's gone now, and that's all that matters."

Nathan returned and said, "He drove away. Let's go inside."

Coughing, Annie pulled Deb to her feet and guided her inside. She looked around, trying to figure out what the bastard had broken. It took her a moment to notice the plaster littering the floor in the dining area. The table was shoved up against the wall, trapping a chair.

Deb sniffled and said, "He kicked the table, and the table made a hole in the wall. Mrs. Waller is going to have a shit fit."

"Don't worry about Mrs. Waller right now," Nathan said, looking in Deb's cupboards. Annie wondered what the heck he was doing until she saw him pull down a box of hot chocolate mix and a bottle of rum.

"Maybe my dad or one of my brothers can come fix it," Annie said. "They're pretty handy around the house. Just don't worry about that right now. We'll figure something out."

She made Deb sit down on the couch while Nathan put some mugs of water in the microwave.

Deb grabbed a tissue and slumped back on the couch with a shuddering sigh. "You're probably wondering what happened."

"I think I can guess," Annie said. "That day you couldn't get your credit card to go through and all the cash was gone from your wallet. He took it, didn't he?"

Deb nodded. "He never had any money. I always had to pay when we went out. He took my credit card numbers and maxed out my accounts. All of them. God, it's always the money," she exclaimed and blew her nose.

"What a lowlife," Nathan said, bringing three steaming mugs of cocoa to the living room. "Listen, if he bothers you again, you pound on the wall and I'll come running."

"That goes for me too," Annie said.

"And I'll leave my bat here in case we're not here and you have to break his arms yourself," Nathan added.

Deb's eyes welled up with tears again. "You guys are so great. I'm sorry I put you through this."

"You didn't put us through anything," Annie insisted. "This wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. You tried to tell me the other day, but I wouldn't listen. I should have listened. I should have known a Pisces would be trouble for me."

"Well, we all make mistakes," Annie said.

"At least he doesn't have a key. Thank God I was smart enough not to give him a key."

As they drank their hot chocolate, Nathan listened as Annie and Deb proceeded to

verbally trash Handel. Between them they compiled a long list of Handel's physical, emotional, and behavioral defects. Nathan wondered if women always did this after a break-up as a cleansing ritual. They held nothing back and apparently everything was fair game. In fact, Deb's cutting observations about Handel's sexual shortcomings shocked him. If he hadn't witnessed Handel's offensive outburst himself, he might have felt sorry for the guy. Nathan began wondering if any of the women he'd broken up with had passed judgment on him like this. The very thought made him wince.

At last, around midnight they seemed wrung out. Deb again thanked them profusely. She even called Nathan her hero.

He shook his head. "I didn't do that much," he protested.

"Awww, and he's humble too," Deb said to Annie.

Annie rolled her eyes and said, "You don't know him like I know him. He's only pretending to be humble."

Nathan laughed.

He walked Annie up the stairs, wondering if there was any chance they could resume where they had left off, with her half-naked on his couch. From the drag in her step, he doubted it.

Damn.

"So, I guess this is good night," he said, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice.

She turned to him and smiled wearily. "I'm pretty tired, and I need a dose of my medicine."

"Is that why you've been coughing?"

She nodded.

"You should have said something. I could have come up and gotten it for you."

"I'm fine. My chest just feels a little tight. The medicine will fix me up in a jiffy."

"All right. Well, good night." He put a hand on her shoulder and they stepped toward each other. She came into his arms so naturally, that it seemed as if they'd been lovers for years.

He intended to keep the kiss brief—she wasn't feeling well, for God's sake—but he just couldn't help himself. The sweetness of her mouth with the hint of rum and chocolate, and the way her body pressed against his had him reacting on pure instinct. In a few short moments, passion flared again, this time even brighter than it had before. His tongue twisted against hers in a fervent attempt to convince her that they needed to be in bed together tonight. He slid his hands down to her bottom, pulling her against his blatant erection. *Come on, Annie, give in.*

But when they came up for breath, she placed her hands on his chest and pushed him gently.

He reluctantly got a hold of himself, took a deep breath, and sighed. "Okay, I can take a hint."

Coughing again, she smiled an apology. "Thanks again for dinner and the movie. I'll let you know how my mom likes the lunch."

Nathan went into his apartment, disappointment rounding his shoulders. He knew Deb hadn't orchestrated her dramatic interruption, yet he couldn't help resenting her for screwing up what had promised to be an evening of hot sex.

He spotted Annie's bra on the floor near the couch and went to pick it up. Fingering

the delicate lace cups, he remembered how she'd looked—her small breasts bared to his gaze, her eyes half-closed, her face flushed. He felt a strong throb in his groin. He'd been so close. So damn close.

As he walked to his bedroom, he foolishly imagined what it would have been like. He pictured himself peeling off her jeans and panties, gazing on her naked body, touching her everywhere and making her writhe with pleasure.

Bad idea. His jeans now felt six sizes too small. If only he didn't have such a vivid imagination. He tossed Annie's bra on his bed, stripped off his clothes and threw them near the hamper by his closet. When he looked down, his erection pointed at him as if accusing him of wasting its time.

"Christ, you'll get yours," he told it, then immediately felt even more idiotic for talking to his penis.

Resigned to some routine self-gratification, he got into bed with a hand towel. He had just wrapped a hand around himself when he suddenly remembered that he had a much better alternative.

Chapter Ten

Cybele felt the connection with Natanaél purr with activity. He was using the ring again, but she could not join him. Priapus had gone on alert and she could not risk the exposure of entering the fantasy as she had done before. Even merely observing her beloved's sexual reverie represented a gamble she could not take.

Frustration gripped her like a rabid hound. She had expended the effort to spy upon that insipid female to better emulate her, and all for naught. She looked around the bedchamber for something to destroy, but the slaves had wisely made themselves scarce. Narrowing her eyes, she snatched up the wand and struck the gong.

If she could not couple with her beloved, then at least she could receive the incessant adoration of her pledged disciples. A dismal substitute to be sure, but the only one available at present.

Within a few moments a young lad scurried into the room to prostrate himself at her feet.

"Prepare for a devotional at once," she ordered.

"Yes, Mistress." The youth fled to arrange the ceremony.

Cybele waited impatiently for the men to ready themselves and assemble in the courtyard, watching from the balcony as slaves skittered about lighting torches and setting up the requisite aphrodisiacs and accessories. As word of the impending ritual spread, she felt the excitement of her followers build. Their zealous anticipation emanated from them like heat from a bonfire, stirring within her a familiar arousal. Her waning energy found a welcome renewal, but when at last she descended the stairs to greet them, she wondered if this oft-experienced homage would be enough this time.

* * * *

Nathan loosened his tie as he entered the corporate aircraft. He'd spent the day in an endless parade of business meetings, and now he faced a long, transatlantic flight. At least he was the only passenger. Wealth and power had its privileges.

His personal flight attendant, Annie Prescott, greeted him with a bright smile and took his briefcase. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Somerset. I'll get your beer."

He and Annie had flown together often in the past few months. She knew his habits and was good at anticipating his desires.

Most of them, anyway.

He walked through the main cabin, shucked his jacket and tossed it on one of the leather chairs. Annie reappeared with a bottle and a frosted stein. She poured his beer and handed it to him.

"We'll be taking off in about fifteen minutes, sir."

"Annie, when will you start calling me Nathan?"

She shrugged. "Probably never, sir. You're my boss, and I'm old-fashioned."

"Too old-fashioned to sit with me until we take off?"

She gave him her reserved, indulgent smile and took a seat. "Of course not. Sir," she added.

He chuckled and they settled into their customary conversation. He traveled quite a bit for business, and over the months Annie had been working for him, they had developed a unique relationship. During their flights together they engaged in lively conversation, with topics ranging from politics to religion, popular music to classic movies. From time to time, she'd concede to sharing dinner with him, even though it was breach of protocol. All things considered, she made his flights seem too short, and lately he had been devising flimsy reasons to fly somewhere just so he could be with her.

After dinner, Nathan decided to help her clear the dishes. Perhaps by accident, perhaps with unconscious intention, their hands touched while reaching for the same plate. Both of them froze for an instant. Instantly, Nathan was hyperaware of her nearness, her scent, the quickened cadence of her breathing. Flustered, she grabbed the plate and retreated into the galley before he could say a word.

Nathan sat back. For perhaps the hundredth time he toyed with the idea of pushing their relationship beyond proper boundaries. Hell, the jet had a built-in bedroom, and God knew he felt a powerful attraction for her.

But Annie worked for him. Making a pass at her could result in a nasty sexual harassment suit. Not to mention the fact that he disliked the idea of putting her in a position where she had to weigh her job against fooling around with him. And would it be fooling around? Or would it be something more substantial?

He'd recently come to the conclusion that he was sick of dating brainless bimbos who gushed ego-stroking compliments, or babbled incessantly about trivial matters. These women only cared about what he could give them or buy them. They got off on the fact that he was a powerful CEO and failed to see him as a simple man.

Annie was different. With Annie, he was able to cast off his mantle of responsibility and be himself. Despite the fact that she called him 'sir' and maintained her professional distance, she seemed to know him better than anyone, even his executive assistant.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that when something bothered him, Annie was the one he went to. It was Annie's approval he sought when he accomplished his goals, and it was her gentle censure he feared when he made mistakes.

He glanced out the window, seeing little, but knowing that they winged over the Atlantic. His business took him to Paris this time. He'd been there countless times before, but always for business. Perhaps the time had come for him to enjoy the city's charms with someone who mattered to him. Perhaps he'd sown his last wild oat and was ready to settle into a more stable lifestyle. And perhaps good, honest, down-to-earth Annie was the right person to do that with.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and sought her out. He reviewed all the logical reasons why going out with him in Paris wouldn't interfere with her job. He even prepared a couple of employment options, complete with a raise in pay, should she feel uncomfortable working directly for him after this.

But all his emotionless rhetoric flew out the window when he saw her.

He watched her for a moment as she tidied up the galley. She moved with a natural grace that always drew his attention. Her hair was up as usual, baring her neck, and she wore no stockings today. As he enjoyed a leisurely visual tour of her body, he thought about kissing that neck. Ditto the dimples behind her bare knees. His groin tightened as desire overcame reason. Instinct demanded action.

He approached from behind and placed his hands on the counter to either side of her.

She gasped softly. Up close the scent of peaches wafting from her hair made him want to nuzzle her just behind the ear.

“What’s for dessert, Annie?”

He leaned close enough to press his entire body up against her back, but not quite. Her shoulders lifted slightly as his breath caressed her neck.

“What did you have in mind, sir?” Her voice trembled.

“I was thinking about something sweet and hot, like a soufflé...” Nathan brushed his lips against the soft skin of her neck and she shivered. “Unless you can think of something I’d like better.”

As they encountered some slight turbulence, the dishes inside the latched cabinet clinked against each other and then settled as they passed the rough patch. Her derriere brushed against him, sending a bolt of lust through his body.

“Mr. Somerset, I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“Nathan. My name is Nathan.” He pressed his lips against her skin and his mind hummed with desire. “I want to hear you say it, Annie.”

He waited. His body tensed in anticipation.

“Say it.”

At last, she turned her head and breathed, “Nathan.”

When she uttered his name, he heard surrender. He covered her neck with wild kisses. Her scent was intoxicating, inducing lurid images of the two of them naked. An urgent need to take her right now surged through him, but he curbed it.

“I shouldn’t be doing this with you,” she gasped.

“Then tell me to stop.” He pressed the full length of his body against her back and cupped her small breasts in his hands. Their sublime softness filled his palms. Annie’s breath came hard as he thumbed her nipples to a state of excitement.

“I can’t,” she breathed. “I don’t want you to stop.”

Triumph swept over him as he moved his hips against her buttocks, teasing them both with a rocking motion. She arched back in response, thrusting her breasts into his hands and her ass against his groin. He groaned.

Wild with desire, yet wanting one last confirmation of her willing consent, he grasped her shoulders and turned her around so that she was facing him.

“Are you sure you want this, Annie?”

Her eyes glittered with excitement as she nodded her head. “Yes, Nathan. I want this. I want you.”

He looked into her eyes and smiled as he reached under her skirt. The expression on her face as he cupped her heat with his hand sent a hot swell of desire through him. Inside her wet panties he tangled his fingers in the crisp curls around her nether lips which were plump with sticky heat. As he explored her feminine folds, their breathing became labored, and she shifted against his hand, wordlessly asking for more.

He obliged, pushing two fingers into her wet depths and kissing her hard. Her response was ardent and immediate; she opened her mouth under his, inviting him to deepen the kiss. He slanted his mouth over hers and plunged his tongue inside. He pumped his fingers until she squirmed and his hand was basted with her musky secretions. When she was on the verge of orgasm, he pulled his fingers out and drew back.

She moaned in protest, her eyes glazed and her breathing ragged.

He brought his fingers to his nose. The scent of her caused the blood to pound in his skull. Desire drove him to a feral state of hunger. He pulled her panties off and flung them aside, lifting her leg so her knee was level with the counter. Then at last, he delved between her sleek thighs with his tongue. She clutched his head as tiny whimpers escaped her lips. Her oasis belonged to him, and he drank and lapped, sucked and swallowed. Then, all at once, she exploded against his face. Her body stretched taut as she pulsed against his lips.

“Nathan, yes!” she cried, arching against his mouth.

The gush of her tangy syrup on his tongue was so indescribably good he could have lived on it. Each gasp and sob she made inspired him. He wanted to pleasure her like this all night. With one last lingering lick, he stood.

“I want to be with you, Annie. All the time.” He kissed her hard. “Stay with me until I’m done in Paris and then come with me to Italy.”

“What?” She looked dazed and unsteady on her feet.

“I want to make love to you on a balcony in Florence.”

“Dear Lord, you’re crazy.” But she was smiling.

Taking her by the shoulders, he backed her out of the galley toward the dining area. “Say yes.”

Her legs bumped against the dining table.

“Yes. Yes, Nathan, I’ll make love with you in Paris, in Florence, in Hoboken, for goodness sake. Wherever you want.”

Nathan grinned, grasping the neckline of her button-front blouse. “Look at me,” he ordered.

When their eyes met, he ripped her blouse open. The pearl-white buttons shot out in all directions, skittering across the table and onto the carpet. Annie gasped and clutched the edge of the table. A delicate white bra covered her small breasts, and through the lace he could see her nipples, taut and rosy, just begging for him to suck on them. His mouth watered.

He had planned to take his time and draw this out until they both were desperate for fulfillment. The problem was he felt that desperation now. The exhilaration of ripping her blouse had sharpened his lust for her and the look of excitement on her face compelled him to act, and act quickly.

“I want you now, Annie.” Nathan snapped her bra open, pulled it off her arms, and threw it aside. “Hard and fast this first time, right now...”

“Yes.” She reached out and fondled him through his trousers. A rumbling groan came from his throat and his urgency burned like the sun inside him.

Even more eager now, he groped her breasts again with one hand while with the other he unzipped his pants and pulled out his aching cock.

“I can’t wait...” He pushed her backward until she lay on the table, her legs hanging off the edge.

“Neither can I. Lord, hurry!”

Nathan positioned himself at her glistening entrance. Taking hold of her hips, he entered her. No preliminaries, no inching, no nudging. Just one hard, powerful thrust. A concentrated wave of pleasure surged through him. God, that initial entry was always so intense. It was almost his favorite part of sex. But this was different. The fact that it was Annie intensified the sensations.

Eager for more, he withdrew and slammed back into her—again and again, launching a frantic pace right off the bat. He couldn't slow down; he needed to pound her hard and fast. She seemed to want it too. Her urgent cries of passion came in time with his rapid thrusts.

“Oh—oh—oh...”

He was thrusting into her so vigorously that he had to seize her hips to keep her from sliding up the table.

“Oh, Lord!” she cried.

“Come, Annie!”

She did. Her muscles contracted and she arched upward. Her cry of ecstasy was so provocative that he lost control; he couldn't hold back anymore. With one last mighty thrust, he came. Vibrant explosions of color and light flashed across his vision. His nerves sang as he erupted inside her. Each pulse of his cock proclaimed an emotion he'd never felt before and even if they hadn't been 30,000 feet in the air, Nathan would have felt like he was soaring.

Moments later, his strength gone, he leaned against the table for support. Annie smiled up at him and he smiled back. Thinking about the future with this vibrant, wonderful woman made him more content than he'd ever been before.

* * * *

As Priapus wrestled with the question of how to deal with Cybele once he found her, he felt a slight disturbance on the earthly plane. He tried to pinpoint the origin of the disturbance, but wasn't completely successful. Although she had been subdued for a while, something told him this metaphysical ripple was connected to her. He knew if he was patient, she would reveal herself eventually. She always did. So, he continued to monitor and wait.

* * * *

When Nathan woke up the next day, his tongue felt like a swollen mothball, and every muscle in his body was stiff. Except for his penis. Strangely, his usual morning hard-on was absent. Glancing at the clock, he supposed that was because it was two in the afternoon.

Moved by a powerful thirst, he reached for the glass he kept by his bedside only to find it empty. It figured. He shuffled over to the sink and guzzled down two full glasses of water. He must have gone overboard on the salt yesterday. Yet, he didn't regret the erotic foray into his imagination. How could he? The orgasms he'd achieved with the ring far surpassed any he'd ever gotten with his hand.

He'd given up wondering how it worked. Probably some psychological suggestion or maybe a subliminal message he'd gotten when he'd seen that online advertisement. At this point, the mechanics didn't matter. The ring was a godsend.

Chapter Eleven

Only a few patrons browsed the shelves at the Book Mark. Sometimes during perfect weather the beach lured customers away from the stores. Normally Annie envied anyone who could be outside to enjoy the fresh ocean breezes and crisp sunlight breaking through the cloud cover, but not today. Today, for an hour, she would be one of those people.

Nathan was meeting her for lunch. They planned to grab some take out and bring it to an area near Ocean Avenue with picnic tables and a nice view of the boardwalk.

The hours until lunchtime dragged so much she felt like a kid anticipating a birthday. When the designated time approached, she dashed to the bathroom to check her appearance. Thanks to Deb, today she was wearing a new outfit. Deb knew all of the hole-in-the-wall shops at which to find stylish bargains and she and Annie had scoured them all, trying to spruce up Annie's drab wardrobe. Determined to put most of her money in savings, Annie couldn't buy much, and besides, a lifetime of boring clothes couldn't be purged all at once.

Today she wore a muted turquoise to bring out the blue in her eyes. Instead of her loafers, she wore her new cheap strappy sandals. She regretted the heel now after standing all morning, but refused to change shoes until after Nathan got a look at them.

In the sci-fi/fantasy section she continued rearranging the shelves to accommodate some new releases. The newest addition to a series she'd enjoyed in the past caught her eye, and she paused to read the back cover blurb.

"Pardon me, miss, do you work here?" It was Nathan. He set the picnic basket he had brought with him on the floor.

She assumed a neutral expression, even though excitement streaked through her.

"Why, yes, I do. How can I help you?"

"I have this little problem. I haven't been kissed in almost thirty-six hours."

"I see," she said, putting the book back on the shelf. With mock seriousness, she went on, "Perhaps I can direct you to the self-help section."

He stepped closer, crowding her. "That's no good. I need a kiss from you. A nice juicy one."

Annie glanced to both sides of the aisle. She didn't want her boss, Frank, to see her fooling around. "Okay, game's over. Now stop that."

Nathan chuckled and put his hand on her waist, sliding it around to her lower back. "But you look so damn sexy. Come on, just one little kiss."

"No, really, I mean it..." She pushed him gently and ducked her head to avoid his lips.

"Excuse me, sir!" a voice exclaimed. "Take your hands off her immediately!"

Annie quailed to see, not her boss, but Todd striding toward them. His face flushed, he brandished his clipboard and ball point pen like a weapon and shield.

Good Lord, he thinks he's defending me.

"I need you to please leave the store," Todd demanded.

Nathan gave a slight chuckle and faced Todd with his arms outspread in a gesture of goodwill. "Hey, kid, you've got this all wrong."

“Todd,” Annie said, “it’s okay. This is a friend of mine.”

As Annie made introductions, Nathan realized that this was the baboon-voiced guy who had called her the night of the Handel episode.

Todd must have recognized Nathan’s name too, because his eyes narrowed. “The chef guy?”

“That’s right. Only now I’m her personal trainer too,” he said. “I’ve got her on a fairly rigorous swimming regimen, and as soon as I can convince her, I have another, entirely different workout I want to try with her.”

When she realized what he was talking about, Annie gave a little gasp and sent him a pointed look, which he pretended not to see.

“What kind of workout?” Todd asked. “Aerobic? Weights? I’ve been doing a little weight lifting.” With a glance at Annie, he raised his clipboard like it was a barbell.

“Well, this kind of exercise can sometimes really get your blood pumping.” He looked at Annie and let his lips curve up in a wicked smile. “Other times, it’s better to take it slow and really work your body. Either way, it really gets those endorphins flowing.”

Todd frowned suddenly. “Oh, I get it.” He sneered. “Very funny.”

“Oh my, look at the time!” Annie said a little too brightly. She took Nathan’s arm and tugged. “We’ve got to go. Bye, Todd.”

Nathan snatched up the picnic basket and they walked toward the door. She scolded him under her breath as they went. He loved seeing her so irate with him, admiring the cute little line between her eyebrows as she scowled at him.

Just as they reached the door, a portly man lumbered toward the store, flagging them down with a sheaf of papers.

“Great, my boss,” Annie muttered.

Todd hustled over to join them.

“Hi, Uncle Frank,” Todd said as the man entered the store.

“Hi, Todd.”

Annie introduced Nathan to her boss, Mr. Soltis, as her “friend.”

“How ya doing? Say, Annie, before you go on your picnic, lemme ask you a question. I thought you mentioned some ideas you had about arranging the bestsellers in a different way.” He hitched up the waistband of his pants. It slipped right back down under his gut.

“Yes. I have a ton of ideas.”

“Good. Why don’t you work on it this afternoon? I won’t be here. I got another appointment with the doc and I hafta go, but I’ll take a look at what you did tomorrow.”

“I will,” she replied.

Annie’s boss walked off. Todd hesitated a moment, looking as if he was going to say something to Nathan, but he apparently changed his mind and hurried after the store owner.

“Uncle Frank, why didn’t you let me do it?” Todd whined. “You never give me a chance.”

Without breaking his stride, Soltis pointed a finger at him and warned, “Don’t friggin’ start with me, Todd...”

* * * *

Dodging wide-eyed tourists, rollerblading residents, and the occasional panhandler, Nathan and Annie crossed the main drag to a picnic area. The marine layer had just about burned off, allowing the sunshine to come through. The ocean breeze brought with it the sharp tang of the sea and in the distance sailboats of various sizes and shapes drifted across the horizon like a painted landscape come to life.

Knowing the importance of presentation, Nathan made a big show of snapping out the tablecloth. As he unpacked the food, he arranged it on her plate with the greatest of care.

“Prosciutto with melon, homemade lemonade, and shrimp salad sandwiches on the flakiest croissants this side of the 405 freeway,” he announced. “Oh, and cookies—real cookies, not from a tube—for dessert.”

“You’re spoiling me,” Annie exclaimed, taking hold of one of the giant sandwiches. “Look how huge this is.” She took a bite. “Ohhhh,” she moaned. A look of ecstasy came over her face.

He grinned, wondering if she was as vocal and responsive in bed.

“In case you’re wondering,” she said, “Handel hasn’t called or shown up at all, thank goodness. We think he’s moved on to find some other bimbo to fleece. Not that Deb’s a bimbo.”

“No, of course not.”

“I think her whole problem is low self-esteem. She doesn’t think someone will like her for her.”

“I know someone who likes...” Nathan broke off. “Never mind.”

Annie raised a brow. “No, come on now. What were you going to say?”

With a sigh, Nathan said, “Remember when you and Deb came to the restaurant for dessert?”

Annie thought a moment, and then her eyes lit up like she’d just been offered one of Vic’s Monstrosity hot dogs.

“Oh, yes! Alphonse. He talked with Deb for quite a while. They’d be perfect for each other.”

“Now, wait a sec. Don’t forget, Deb’s on the rebound,” Nathan protested. “She’s probably still raw from breaking up with Handel.”

“I don’t think so. She’s definitely not raw. I actually think she’s relieved. She hasn’t talked about the actual numbers, but I think he really messed up her finances.” She leaned forward with narrowed eyes. “Does Alphonse manage his money well?”

“As a matter of fact, he does. But that’s not the point. I don’t like meddling in people’s love lives. Besides, Alphonse likes to play the field. He’s not interested in long-term entanglements.”

“For God’s sake, we’re not planning a wedding. We’re just introducing them.”

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea.” He nudged the last slice of melon toward her.

She shook her head, so he popped the fruit into his mouth. “Speaking of weddings, I think Todd has his eye on you.”

Annie closed her eyes and groaned. “I know. He’s only eighteen, but he’s been trying to get me to go out with him for weeks. He just won’t take no for an answer.”

“Just tell him you’re not interested in gullible ass-kissers.”

“Nathan!”

“Well, that’s what he is.”

“It would be nice if I could tell him what I thought of him, but I can’t. He’s Frank’s nephew and I can’t afford to alienate him.”

“Then tell him you’re involved with me.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Nathan wished he could suck them back in. *Involved?* The word “involved” implied a relationship level that gave him the willies. Being involved with someone meant limitations, a loss of freedom, possible monotony—everything he always tried so hard to avoid. Never mind that in his erotic fantasies he’d asked Annie to go steady and even settle down. That was just fun and games and had nothing to do with real life.

With nausea rumbling in his gut and the weight of implied commitment on his shoulders, he looked at Annie. Her pleased and—damn it—somewhat surprised expression confirmed his suspicions. He was doomed. He had no one to blame but himself.

He had inadvertently, but undeniably, condemned himself to being a boyfriend.

Chapter Twelve

Deciding that he shouldn't be the only one burdened by relationship pressure, Nathan passed Deb's phone number to Alphonse. When Annie confessed that Deb orchestrated a couple of their meetings, Nathan agreed that turnabout was fair play.

Alphonse remembered Deb right away. He pocketed the phone number.

"She was the one that looked like a cartoon, eh? Bright clothes and an even brighter smile?"

"That's the one."

Alphonse and Nathan stood in the alley one evening after the dinner rush had passed. Alphonse smoked his cigar and Nathan sipped a soda as he related the story of Handel.

"A man like that should be shot," Alphonse declared. "How can he live with himself knowing he relied upon a woman for his keep? Pathetic." Alphonse spat in contempt.

"Do not worry about this Deb. Leave her to me. I will treat her like a *princesse* and make her forget that bastard."

* * * *

A week passed and Annie's swimming improved by leaps and bounds. Her lithe body sliced through the water with a minimum of effort, arms and legs moving with fluid grace. No matter how much she denied it, she had a natural ability. If it had been ten years earlier, Nathan would have encouraged her to try out for varsity.

They fell into a daily routine of early morning swimming. Side by side they worked out, lap after lap. He'd give her pointers, and she'd modify her form accordingly. More likely than not, he'd then prepare breakfast for them both. He'd never cooked so many breakfasts for a woman that weren't post-coital. A couple of times she offered to help, but she was so inept in the kitchen that he laughingly relegated her to pouring juice and setting the table.

The more time he spent with her, the more his curiosity grew. In the fantasies he continued to indulge in, he and Annie enjoyed an ever-changing banquet of sex. With the ring he was only limited by his imagination, and he had never suffered from a lack in that area. Each out of body experience brought new positions, deliciously daring settings, and the thrilling feeling that he was the most skillful lover to ever enter a bed.

Yet reality offered much less. In the smattering of instances that they'd made out, he'd only managed to get as far as a hand under her shirt. The night they'd been interrupted by Deb and Handel remained the high-water mark of physical intimacy between them, and the memory of that one glimpse of her breasts tormented him. His fantasies had even begun to focus on breast play. If he didn't get her in the sack soon, he thought he might just go insane.

And yet, would he be disappointed in the end? Had he built her up in his mind so much that she had no chance of living up to his expectations?

* * * *

Annie rapped fiercely on Deb's door. "Deb, it's me, Annie!"

“What? What’s wrong?” Deb answered the door, and Annie was surprised to see Alphonse behind her.

“*Bonjour, Annie.*” He wore a loose pair of warm up pants and no shirt. He was also brushing his teeth. If Annie hadn’t been so agitated with her dilemma, she would have been delighted.

“Deb, I need your help. I have a fashion emergency.”

Deb looked her over. “I’ll say.”

Annie wore no makeup and her hair dangled in damp, bedraggled clumps. Around her neck hung the bright orange and pink towel, which contrasted with her vivid purple bathing suit and neon green rubber pool shoes.

“I was having breakfast with Nathan, and he saw this ad in the Sunday paper about an exhibit at the county museum, and then he just asked me to go spur-of-the-moment with him, and I don’t have anything to wear!”

“Whoa, slow down. The museum? Going hoity-toity on me?”

“Deb, this is serious! I’m supposed to be ready in half an hour and look at me!”

“All right, all right. Dr. Deb to the rescue.” Deb turned to Alphonse. “You don’t mind, do you?”

With his lips covered by toothpaste foam, he grinned and mumbled, “Whaevah oo waa, Eb. I’ll make breakfah.”

Deb beamed. “I adore you, you darling man.” Deb blew him a kiss and shoed Annie out with her hands.

“Thanks, Alphonse,” Annie said and hurried up the stairs.

“Giving a woman half an hour to get ready for a date should be punishable by death,” Deb declared as she followed. “It would serve him right if you showed up on his doorstep like this.”

Annie opened the door to her apartment and they went inside.

“Nathan wouldn’t care,” Annie said. “He sees me like this all the time and he never complains.”

Deb laughed. “Listen to her. ‘He never complains.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Men are visual. They like to look, and it wouldn’t hurt your situation any if you made yourself lovely to look at.”

“That’s why I need you. To make me lovely. Now hurry up.”

Once inside Annie’s bedroom, Deb pointed to something on the bed.

“What is that?” she asked with a look of horror.

“That’s one of the things I was thinking of wearing. It’s the museum! I can’t just wear jeans and a nice sweater. What do you think?”

“I think it looks like someone threw up pink satin all over your bed. Is that a bridesmaid’s dress?”

Annie wrung her hands. “That’s all I have! Everything else is from my grandma wardrobe, and I don’t want to go back to that. What am I going to do?”

“For starters?” Deb pointed at the dress. “Burn that.”

“Deb!” Annie wailed.

“Okay, I’ll be serious. Now, relax. Just relax. Tell you what, you go get in the shower and I’ll put something together for you to wear. I might have something in my closet that’ll do.”

Ten minutes later, Annie stood in her bra and underwear, frantically twisting her hair

up into a tortoise shell clip.

"Please tell me you found something." Annie said, setting down the hair dryer.

"How's this?" Deb held up a stylish white dress fastened in front with square black buttons and topped with a sharp black collar. A matching retro handbag completed the outfit. "My mother gave the dress to me for Christmas last year and I've never worn it because it's just not me. But I think it would look great on you. I saw those black and white pumps you had in your closet, and it reminded me of this outfit. It's fully lined, and," Deb coughed. "It's Valentino."

"Valentino?" Annie stopped in the midst of checking the size. "Good Lord, Deb. Your mother buys you Valentino?"

Deb glanced away and shrugged. "You gonna wear it or not?"

Annie gave Deb a brief hug. "I knew I could count on you."

"Now do your makeup. I'll be right back."

Annie quickly applied mascara and whisked some blush on her cheeks. She took the dress off the hanger, stepped into it and buttoned up. Examining her reflection, she found the dress fit fairly well. In her bedroom, Annie slipped on the shoes and hooked the purse on her arm. Deb looked at her appraisingly.

"You look *magnifique*!" Deb clasped her hands together and held them to her heart. "Just like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* when she goes to the polo match. You just need one more thing."

Annie glanced down. "Pantyhose?"

"No, this!" Deb waved a tiny piece of fabric in the air like a checkered flag. "I found it in your lingerie drawer. I knew you had to have something slinky in there."

Annie gasped when she realized what it was—a thong she'd received as a party favor at a bachelorette party a year ago.

"Oh, no. I can't."

"Hey." Deb held up her hands. "I'm not going to force you, but let's say things go well, and he tries to feel you up later..."

"Deborah!"

"Listen, Annie, Boy Scouts aren't the only ones who have to be prepared. You never know what's going to happen. You can't possibly want him to see you in those Pollyanna underpants you have on."

"But..."

Deb shook her head and said, "I know what you're going to say, but just hear me out. I gave some thought to what you said before about not wanting a man who's only out for sex, and..." She sighed heavily. "I think you made a lot of sense. But I don't think you should go through life avoiding sex either."

Annie nodded. "I'm not avoiding it really. I'm just..." She sat on the corner of the bed. "Well, I've never really seen what the big fuss was about."

Deb sat down next to Annie on the bed and took her hand. "Oh, honey, is Nathan just not lighting your fire?"

"No! Actually, he's...he's..." Annie searched for the words to describe how wonderful Nathan made her feel.

"You don't have to tell me. I can tell from the look on your face. So, what makes you think he'll stink in bed?"

"It's not him that will stink. It'll be me. I'm the cold fish. I'm sure he's gone to bed

with loads of women. He's probably used to women who know all the best techniques, and I know practically nothing."

Deb looked thoughtful. "Honey, I could teach you things that would blow his mind, but there's just not enough time. Besides, I'm telling you, he's a guy, and all guys care about the first time you go to bed together is that you're in bed with them at all."

"I guess you're right. I should just do it and get it over with."

"Shit, Annie, you sound like you're getting a filling."

"Oh, you know what I meant."

Annie sighed and then, having made her decision, held out her hand. Deb squealed faintly and slapped the thong into Annie's palm like it was an instrument needed for surgery.

* * * *

Annie shaded her eyes as she gazed at the banner that hung across the entrance of the museum. *In the Shadow of Vesuvius*, it read.

"Why are we here again?" Annie asked Nathan, wrinkling her nose. "To see petrified people? Isn't that sort of sickening?"

"If you don't want to go in, we can do something else. It's just that ancient civilizations are sort of my hobby. I took Rosenberg's class on the Fertile Crescent and found it really interesting. Did you ever take that class?"

"No, I took Home Ec, though. That's pretty ancient."

"Well, ever since then I've been trying for a while to assemble an antiquities collection of sorts."

"Is that what those rocks are on your bookshelf?"

He rubbed his chin and chuckled wryly. "Those are not *rocks*. The bigger chunk is from the quarry where they supposedly got the stone for Khufu's pyramid. A friend of mine got it for me. Another one is something I got myself from the Parthenon."

"You defaced the Parthenon?" Annie asked, appalled.

"God, no. The whole place is falling apart because of the smog and one of the steps crumbled when I walked on it. I just took the biggest piece and put it in my pocket."

"Thank God. I thought I was going to have to turn you in to the authorities," she joked. "All right, let's go in. Just remember, you can't take anything home with you."

Once inside, Nathan looked at every display, read each printed tag, and longed to handle the various items. He tried to interest Annie in the historic value of the site at Pompeii and how it offered an unparalleled glimpse into ancient Roman life, but she remained edgy about the gruesome death of the victims.

During an animated video depicting the eruption, he had to admit that even though the figures were computer generated, watching the volcanic debris gradually engulf them wasn't pleasant. The music and the narration intensified the drama, and Nathan couldn't help imagining what it must have been like to be trapped in the city and unable to escape the death that dropped from the sky. At one point, Annie looked away from the macabre scenes. Without thinking, he put his arm around her shoulders, and when she hid her face in his shirt, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The similarity between this and his fifties fantasy was spooky.

When Nathan came upon the final display, he waved Annie over and gestured toward a long glass case.

“Did you see this?” he exclaimed. “They’re having a ‘Name that Relic’ contest. The grand prize is a trip to Italy. I’m going to enter. I think you should too. That way we’ll double our chances.”

He tore an entry form from the pad and handed it to her. The glass case held fifteen items to identify, each marked by a number. They both walked around the display and circled their answers on the cards.

“It figures that the last question is a ringer,” she exclaimed, frowning at an item in the case.

When he looked at the item in question, dread curled in his gut. There, upon a satin pillow, he saw an exact replica of his cock ring. The choices on the label next to it read, “A: Napkin ring, B: Jewelry, C: Candle ornament.”

“Did they even use napkins?” Annie asked.

When Nathan didn’t answer, she peered at him in curiosity. “Nathan, what is it?”

“It’s not any of those,” he said in a low voice.

This was impossible. Nathan’s mind seethed with questions. Was this one magical too? If the ring he had at home came from ancient Pompeii, how the hell had he gotten hold of it? Maybe some tourist had pinched it from the ruins. *I should have the inscription translated.*

“I don’t see an inscription, Nathan,” Annie said, squinting at the ring again.

Nathan realized he had spoken aloud. *Shit.*

“Why would a napkin ring have an inscription anyway?”

He looked closer at the artifact himself. She was right. This one didn’t have any writing on it. Nathan had just assumed the ring was like the one he had at home.

“Well, what do you know,” Nathan said. “Must be a napkin ring after all.”

* * * *

Annie was glad to leave the museum. The macabre array of victims made her skin crawl. She knew firsthand how frightening it was to not be able to breathe, so the manner in which those people died affected her acutely.

They picked up some food at the grocery store and brought it back to his apartment. After a simple dinner, Nathan asked, “So, do you have to get back home or can you stay a while?”

Annie saw that half-lazy, half-cocky smile that she’d come to interpret as an intention to kiss her. When he reached for her glasses and tugged them off, she knew she was right.

Nathan leaned close and brushed his lips against hers. Her eyes fluttered closed. He sprinkled kisses that sent ripples of anticipation through her body, over her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead. His breath, all warmth and tenderness, caressed her face, and a sigh shivered out of her like rustling silk.

“Oh, Nathan.”

His fingers moved restlessly against the nape of her neck. He started teasing her closed lips with his tongue—light, coaxing touches on the fullness of her lower lip, in the crease, at the corners until Annie parted her lips. Without hesitation, his tongue stroked inside.

When he moved over her, pressing her down onto the couch, she let one of her legs slip off the couch, and with a rough groan, he moved between them.

“Annie, yes...”

Breathing heavily, he pushed himself up against her. The rigid heat of his erection seemed to burn her as he moved, thrusting, rubbing, as if they were already naked. She shuddered with the relentless pleasure of it. The demanding pressure of his lips, the slashing of his tongue, continued until she was desperate for him. Desperate to feel more, to feel it all, to take him inside her.

But Nathan broke the kiss, and they stared at each other gasping.

“Please stay, Annie,” he said, his voice rough with passion. “I want to make love to you tonight. I need to make love to you tonight.”

Her instinct was to say no. Once they crossed this line, there would be no going back. Despite her belief that love should matter more than sex in a relationship, she still feared that if she didn’t make love with him soon, he’d find someone else who would. And whoever it was would probably be good at it too.

Annie hugged him and said into his neck, “Nathan, I—I want that too, but I’m...” She took a shuddering breath. “Really nervous.”

He braced himself with his arms so as not to crush her. “Hey,” he said with a reassuring, but eager smile, “nervous is for giving speeches and going into surgery. This is just you and me having fun, that’s all.”

“You make it sound like we’re going to play Monopoly or something.” Her stomach felt like a clenched fist.

He chuckled. “No, not at all. I just meant that I don’t think there’s anything to be nervous about.” He paused, then said, “Unless...”

“Unless what?”

He got off her and knelt on the floor next to the couch. His expression was so tight that she got worried.

“What? What is it?” she asked, pulling the crumpled dress back down over her thighs.

“I won’t be your first time, will I? I mean, it’s okay if I am. I don’t mind.” He winced and then said quickly, “That didn’t come out right. I mean, I’d be...well, I’d be honored if you want me to be your first.”

Annie felt her breath catch. To have him on his knees this way, expressing how he’d consider it a privilege to take her virginity melted her heart. At that moment, she finally accepted the fact that Nathan wouldn’t care if she made love like a beginner. He would just teach her. She knew from experience how patient he could be.

“No,” she answered softly. “You won’t be my first time.”

Nathan’s head dropped and a great breath rushed out of him. “Thank God. For a second there I was scared out of my mind,” he confessed. “I don’t think I’ve ever been anyone’s first time. I’m not sure I ever want to be. That’s a lot of pressure to be really good.”

“Great,” Annie said, “so the pressure is off you, but it’s back on me.”

“What do you mean? I didn’t mean to pressure you.” He cleared his throat and then admitted, “Well, maybe I did a little. But if you don’t want to make love tonight...,” he said in a choked voice.

“No, it’s not that. I want to.” Annie grabbed a throw pillow and covered her face with it. “It’s just that I’m not the most experienced person on the planet,” she said, her voice muffled.

“Is that all?” He tugged the pillow gently out of her hands. “Hell, I don’t care. All I want is to make you feel good. Don’t worry about me. Really, I’m easy to please.”

He stood up, took her hands in his, and drew her to her feet. “It’ll all be good, you’ll see.”

Chapter Thirteen

Once inside his bedroom, Annie asked if they could keep the lights off. Nathan would have preferred to have them on so he could look at her, but if she wanted them off, he wouldn't argue. Ambient light from the hall enabled them to see each other well enough.

"I have fantasized about this so often," he said as he took her hand and led her toward the bed.

When he turned to face her, he ran his hands over her arms, from her shoulders down to her fingertips, then back up again. She closed her eyes as he caressed her shoulders, slid his hands around the back of her neck. Tendrils of her hair brushed his knuckles.

Taking a step closer, he rubbed a stray lock of her hair between his fingers. Annie reached up to remove the clasp, but he said, "No, let me."

He removed the clip and laid it on the nightstand. His hands moved through her hair, loosening it until it fell in soft waves. God, her hair was so silky. It slid between his fingers like threads of liquid gold.

Annie sighed. "Is that what you fantasized about? Taking my hair down?"

He wrapped his arms around her and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." There, that was truthful.

"Will you tell me about your fantasy if I tell you one of mine?"

"You've fantasized about me?" He drew back in delighted surprise.

"Zillions of times when we were in school. Since then, oh, once or twice."

"Tell me."

She hugged him around his waist and breathed deeply. "Remember that time when you—oh, Lord, I can't believe I'm telling you this."

He kissed her temple. "Please..."

"Well, that time at the restaurant, I thought about untying your bow tie and using it to pull your head down so you'd kiss me."

Nathan waited.

She didn't say anything else.

"That's all?"

She hesitated and then nodded against his chest. When he laughed, she jerked her head up and almost clipped him on the chin.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Oh, Annie, that's—I'm sorry I laughed." He held her tightly against him. "It's just that I was expecting something, well, more involved."

"Oh, really?" She pulled back and scowled at him. "Why is that?"

"Because my..." He broke off. "I think if I tell you about one of my fantasies, you'll understand."

"All right," she said. "Now you've got me curious."

He took her in his arms again, and she relaxed, leaning into him. He marveled at how familiar it already felt.

"Not too long ago," he began, "I fantasized about us in a private jet."

He reached for top button and worked it open, pressing lingering kisses on her

temple and cheek.

“I was a rich and powerful corporate bigwig and you were the flight attendant.”

Annie giggled. “Was I wearing a uniform?”

“Yes. You looked great. More than great.” He paused and traced his fingers along the gap of her open dress, up and down in a soothing, repetitive motion.

“We had this long-standing relationship,” he continued, grasping the edges of her dress near the top and easing the fabric down over her shoulders. Her dress bunched up at her waist, leaving her upper body bare to his gaze. When he saw her dainty, white lace padded bra, he smiled. How very like his prim and proper Annie. Nothing but sensible underwear for her.

“I’d been your boss for quite a while, but we were more like friends. On this particular flight I made the decision to cross the line between employee and employer.” As he spoke, he unfastened her bra. He hoped she didn’t notice that his hands were shaking.

“After dinner I came up behind you in the galley and...and...” He faltered because her bra fell away and he was finally able to look at her breasts again.

Nathan inhaled deeply; his brain needed oxygen. Her breasts were perfect in shape and size, just enough to fill his hands. He cupped them, and when her nipples hardened against his palms, a pleasurable shock shot up his arms and down into his groin. He let one hand roam over her back, memorizing each rib, each sinuous curve, the sharp angles of her shoulder blades. She sighed and shivered in his arms, a responsive, delicious bundle of femininity. When her dress slid to the floor and puddled around her ankles, the faint rustle of it stirred his blood. He dragged his thumb down her spine to where the cleft between her cheeks began, and he heard a quick intake of breath when he touched her there.

He realized that he could feel a surprising amount of skin. His heart beat a rapid tattoo as he confirmed it with another caress. No doubt about it, there was nothing but a thin strap that disappeared down between her cheeks.

“Jesus,” he rasped. “What are you wearing?”

With her hands bunched up in his shirt, she mumbled against his chest, “A—oh, Lord—a thong.”

“A *thong*,” he croaked. “Jesus Christ.”

He wondered just how much blood was rushing to his groin right now, because judging from the sudden dizziness he was experiencing, it had to be pints. Nathan stepped back to look at her, and when he did, he swore he could feel the beads of sweat pop out on his forehead.

Without her glasses and blushing like a maiden bride, her vulnerability touched his heart. Her arms twitched, as if she fought the urge to cover herself. Thankfully she didn’t. Her flaxen hair flowed over her shoulders to just brush the tops of her bare breasts. Petal-pink nipples tilted slightly upward, like flowers lifting their faces to the sun. Lower, two thin white ribbons of lace came up over her slim hips, plunging down into the deep vee of white satin over her mound. Pale wisps of curling hair escaped around the edges, hinting at the tempting tuft beneath.

He sat down on the bed and reached out for her, brushing his thumbs against the lace.

“Do you always wear this type of thing under your clothes?”

“No, I’ve never worn anything like this in my entire life.” She gave him a timid smile and her cheeks flushed.

Nathan pulled her closer and kissed her stomach, just above her navel. “You wore it for me, then. God, that’s incredible.”

Knowing that she’d thought about, or even planned for him to see her slinky underwear galvanized Nathan into action. As he slid his hands around her hips to her derriere, squeezing it firmly, he was astonished to find she smelled like she had in his fifties fantasy, like tart apples.

When he tried to kiss her mound, Annie pressed her hands against his forehead, pushing him away a little, but he just as insistently pressed his face forward, until he had his lips against the white swatch covering her mons.

“Oh, Nathan, I don’t know about this,” she said, her palms exerting pressure against his head.

In response, he nibbled at her mound, then slid his tongue along her slit right through the satin. She gasped and gripped his head.

“Oh, Lord.”

Nathan grasped her leg behind the knee and lifted it until her foot rested on the low bed. When he knelt, his face was at the perfect level. Although she still wore the thong, he pictured the full pink lips of her pussy opening to welcome him. Nathan breathed deeply, drunk on her aroma and dizzy with longing.

He kissed her raised leg, from the knee all the way to the sweet hollow of her inner thigh. He flicked his tongue all around her pouty lips, tracing the edge of her silky underwear, working it under the fabric to tickle and taste. Her gasps of pleasure heightened Nathan’s excitement.

“Oh, Lord,” she moaned again.

“No one’s ever kissed you here before, have they?” He pressed his mouth against the wet satin, making her shudder.

“No, never.”

Nathan got to his feet and cupped her face in his hands. “So I am your first. This way anyway.”

She flushed red. “Dear Lord, do we have to discuss this? The truth is, I’m really not very experienced in anything but—but the basic act. You know, intercourse,” she added in a whisper.

Nathan suppressed his chuckle. Her discomfort with discussing sex was irresistible. A bit of the boy in him still enjoyed seeing her squirm and blush; however, the man was compelled to lean close and cup her womanhood with one hand.

“I’m going to make you come, Annie,” he whispered in her ear.

“Nathan! Don’t!”

“You don’t want to come?” Smiling to himself, he nuzzled her neck.

“No! I mean, yes!” Annie buried her face in his shirt and shook her head. “Oh, never mind! Can we just get on with it, please?”

“I’m just teasing you,” he said. Taking her face in his hands, he made her look at him. “I’m going to make you feel very, very good, Annie.”

Gazing at him with wide, trusting eyes, she nodded, and he was pleased that her breathing came unevenly.

He pulled back the covers of his bed and arranged the pillows for her. With

endearing awkwardness, she climbed across his bed and lay on her back. She seemed unsure of where to put her hands and ended up resting them on her stomach.

Nathan pulled the sheet over her and explained, "I'll be right back. Just give me a quick minute." She nodded again and Nathan sprinted to his bathroom.

He scraped a razor over his face with record speed, not wanting to abrade her tender skin. After a mental pat on the back for not nicking himself, he shucked his clothes and pulled on a fresh pair of briefs. Because of her lack of experience, he didn't want to make her any more nervous than she was. Even though his erection had waned quite a bit, a little bit of clothing might be a little less shocking than if he walked in stark naked.

While Nathan was gone, Annie wondered for the umpteenth time if she should babble some lame excuse and flee. She was still weighing the pros and cons when he came back. She smiled nervously at him. He had taken off all his clothes except for his underwear, and she wondered what he looked like underneath. She had seen very few naked men. Her father had taken to shielding himself from her view when she was about nine-years-old, and her brothers, once they hit puberty, never appeared with less than a towel. Oh, there'd been Doug, the guy who had taken her virginity. Of course, she'd seen him naked, but she hadn't been particularly impressed.

"I'm back," Nathan said as he joined her on the bed.

"I'm still here," she replied.

After drawing the sheet back, he nudged her legs apart and knelt between them. His hands moved in small circles over her nipples, which puckered into tight pink buds yet flared with pleasure, like sparklers. This surprised her, because her nipples hadn't been particularly sensitive with Doug. Nathan moved over her and put his lips on her, drawing the nipple into his mouth. She gasped as he sucked her, pulling her flesh into his mouth with a wet sound. The immediacy of her response stunned her.

"Oh, Nathan, oh, Lord." She ran her hands over his shoulders and arched into his mouth. She didn't want him to ever stop.

He lifted his head and turned his attention to her other breast. If it was possible, that felt even more intense. The place between her thighs throbbed. The skin of her breasts seemed to tighten, and her breath came uncontrollably fast. When his lips pulled on her nipple, unfamiliar bolts of desire streaked through her body, making her thrash and moan with the wonder of it all.

"Take it easy, there." He pressed a firm kiss between her breasts and chuckled. "Really, I'm not that good."

Giggling, she tried to catch her breath. "Says you. I've never felt this wonderful in my entire life."

He gave her a rakish grin. "Then just wait."

He hooked his fingers under the ribbons of her underwear. "We need to dispose of this. It's not that the sight of you in this thing doesn't drive me crazy, it's just that I don't want anything between my mouth and your sweetness."

Involuntarily, she closed her hands over her genitals, wondering about her smell down there. What if her crotch smelled like a garbage can in the back of a fish market?

"Wait, Nathan! I changed my mind."

He kissed Annie's fingers just before he pried them loose with his hands. "Too late."

"No, really. You don't have to do this," she said as he firmly placed her hands on the bed.

“Yes. I do.” He laughed softly. “I really do have to do this.” He moved back into place and Annie braced herself.

“Try to relax.”

“I can’t. I think I have something like lockjaw, except it’s lock-everything.”

Nathan chuckled. “Now you’re being selfish.”

“What do you mean ‘selfish’?”

He stroked her pubic mound with reverence. “Don’t you understand how much I want to do this? I’m doing this for my own pleasure as much as yours.” He caught some of her hairs between his lips and tugged on them. She giggled nervously.

“As soon as I got my first whiff of you, I knew I had to taste you here.”

“Are—are you sure?”

He answered her by lapping with the flat of his tongue. She blinked. *That felt nice*, she thought.

He did it again, slowly dragging his tongue along her outer lips. The more he licked, the more the pleasure began to seep through her. Her hips started moving of their own accord. Her hands found their way to his head.

“You taste so good, Annie,” he murmured. “I could lick you for hours.”

While she registered the fact that she was tasty, he dipped his tongue between her lips and dabbed her tiny button. She gasped and clenched her fists in his hair.

“Do you like that?” he asked, his voice muffled between her legs.

“Y—yes!” He had licked it again, causing her voice to catch. “Oh, Lord. Do that some more.”

Nathan did. He did it a lot more. Annie had no experience with this onslaught of sensation. Every touch of his tongue coaxed a moan out of her. She couldn’t help it. When he pushed his finger into her and began moving it in and out, she wanted to beg him not to stop. She clenched fistfuls of his hair with white-knuckled hands, feeling the urgency build inside her more and more, until she felt like she was going to burst into a million pieces.

And then, she did—she came. Her body felt electrified. Every nerve ending fired repeatedly, bombarding her with bursts of pleasure. Dimly, it registered in her brain that she had a death-grip on Nathan’s hair, but she didn’t care. She was coming. Her body arched off the bed and Nathan stayed with her throughout, prolonging her climax with his sucking mouth.

She had almost relaxed her grip on his hair when he started up again. Her body responded. Not even a full minute passed before she came again. This time she sobbed out his name as the exquisite waves crashed over her. Her whole body was still quivering from her climax when, unbelievably, he made her come one more time by pushing two of his fingers deep inside her and flexing them against the top of her inner wall.

At last, the explosions inside Annie’s body subsided, leaving behind the sensation that she was shimmering in the dark like a star. When she finally let go of Nathan’s hair, she heard his muffled sigh of relief. He moved up and planted a wet kiss on her stomach.

“Christ, you come hard, Annie. I think I need a dose of Rogaine.”

“I had no idea that it could be so wonderful,” she murmured.

“And so,” he said with a chuckle, “you finally understand why women can’t resist me.”

She looked down at him, his arms folded across her tummy and his chin resting on

his hands. "I cannot believe that Deb honestly thinks you're humble when your ego is actually the size of Texas."

"All right. Seriously, now. I'm really glad you enjoyed it." Chuckling, he came to lie beside her and pulled her close. "Really, really glad. Talk about performance anxiety..."

She smiled then as she rested her cheek on his furry chest. Knowing that he might have been just as nervous as she was comforted her.

After cuddling for a few minutes, she wondered if that was going to be it, if Nathan was satisfied with giving her three orgasms. She wanted to look down at his shorts to see if there was a bulge, but at the same time she was afraid to find out that there wasn't. What if she wasn't desirable? Maybe that was why he'd kept his briefs on. Maybe he regretted asking her to stay the night.

"Are you sleepy?" he asked, rubbing her shoulder.

"Not at all."

"Good." With a gentle shove on her shoulder, he pushed her over on her back and pinned her to the mattress. There was a devilish gleam in his eye. "Because I'm not either."

Annie gasped and felt a renewed pulse of desire between her legs. Her fears about not turning him on vanished. Even through the underwear, his penis scorched her like a branding iron. She wanted very much to touch it but felt apprehensive about taking the initiative.

Get over it, Annie, she told herself. You're a woman who wears thongs! Start acting like it.

Gathering her courage, she reached down and ran her hand over one of his buttocks. She felt it tighten.

"Mmmm," Nathan murmured, "I like that."

Encouraged, she fondled him a little more firmly. She marveled at the solidity of his muscles and how they bunched up under her hand as he flexed. Growing bolder, she pushed her hand under the waistband of his briefs and felt his naked buttocks. Nathan growled and clamped his mouth over her breast in response. It was thrilling to know she could affect him just as much as he affected her.

"Take them off," she blurted. "I—I want to see you naked."

"Your wish is my command."

As he rolled over on his back and obeyed, Annie sat up. She decided there was nothing but her own shyness stopping her from getting a good look at him. She noticed that he was grinning.

"Wipe that smirk off your face, Nathan."

"Yes, ma'am."

But he didn't. He lay there with a self-satisfied smile, his erection now in plain sight.

She didn't blame him for being proud of himself. He was magnificent. Not that he was huge. He wasn't. It was more a matter of what his firm sex embodied. The power inherent in that thick column of flesh made her tremble, and yet just below hung the most defenseless part of his anatomy.

Annie put her hand on his thigh, working up the courage to touch him more intimately. Inching her hand upward, she brushed her fingers against his testicles. His penis flexed, surprising her. Again, she delighted in seeing his reaction.

"Do you like that?" she asked, tickling his balls some more.

“Oh, yeah.”

She bit her lip, took them both in her hand, and squeezed them like he had squeezed her breasts.

“Aaah!” Nathan arched up like someone had jabbed his back with a spike.

She jerked her hands away and shoved them behind her back. “Oh, Nathan, I’m sorry!”

He blew out a long breath. And another.

“Annie, honey, it’s all right. You don’t have to stop. You just have to be real careful, that’s all. Here, give me your hand.”

Annie placed her hand in his, and he guided it to his testicles again.

“Now, *gently*.”

She caressed him very lightly, and he said, “Yeah, that’s right. Oh, yeah, that’s good. You can roll them around a little too, like that, yeah.”

He moaned and Annie warmed to her task. Dividing her attention between watching his facial expressions and her fondling she embraced the power she had over him. Pressure here and he would moan, a tickle with her fingernail there and he sucked in a hissing breath.

Finally she let her fingers brush against his penis. When she touched it, he gasped, his eyes riveted on her hand. She let her fingers curl around him, astounded by the contradiction of the spongy head compared to the steely shaft. As she caressed him, she realized he hadn’t been fully hard. Now his penis rose erect from the nest of dark hair on his groin and a drop of moisture glistened at the tip like a shiny opal. Annie glided her hand along the length of it, wrenching a groan from Nathan, a curious mixture of agony and pleasure.

“Oh, Annie, if you keep that up, I’m gonna lose it.”

“Really?” This delighted her. “Are you telling me that I could actually make you lose control just with my little old hand?” She teased the head with her thumb and Nathan gasped.

“Christ, yes!”

From some unknown place came the sudden urge to take him in her mouth. She knew about blow jobs, but had never, ever even considered letting Doug put his penis in her mouth. She wasn’t so sure he would have been keen on the idea either. During the two months she had dated him, sex had always been a perfunctory event, even for him. But Nathan’s penis looked positively appetizing.

Annie cast back in her memory for a conversation she’d overheard at work one day. She had been tidying up the shelves and heard two women snickering over a sex manual. She seemed to remember them saying to suck it like a Popsicle.

Annie had sucked on plenty of Popsicles. How hard could it be?

“What are you thinking about, Annie? I’m not sure I like that crafty look on your face.”

“Just lay back,” she ordered.

He raised his eyebrows, but did as she said.

Positioning herself between his legs, she leaned over, her hair spilling in a cascade over his hips. Taking him in her hand, she closed her lips over the silken skin of the head and sucked.

Nathan uttered a rough, low sound.

I must be doing it right.

Keeping her lips around him, she pulled back, just like she was eating a Fudgsicle. Nathan stared at her with unbridled lust on his face. She heard his labored breathing as she moved up and down on him.

“Holy Christ, Annie,” he gasped. “I thought you were inexperienced!”

“I’ve eaten my share...” When he gaped at her open-mouthed, she added, “...of Popsicles.”

He laughed and let his head fall back on the pillow. “Thank God for Popsicles.”

Annie smiled and sucked on him like he was a cherry-pineapple Big Stick. She licked the mushroom head like she would a melting ice-cream cone, with long, slow swirls of her tongue. She even nibbled on him with that hesitant quickness she had heretofore reserved for biting frozen treats, making his penis jump and twitch with need. It wasn’t long before Nathan suddenly jackknifed into a sitting position.

“Stop! Oh, God, that’s enough. I’m gonna lose it if you keep doing that, and I don’t want to come yet.”

With a carnal flush on his skin and the rough breathing of a man on the edge, he yanked open the drawer on his nightstand and grabbed a condom. He ripped the wrapping off and flung it aside.

“Annie, this is it,” he said roughly as he rolled on the protection. “I have to be inside you now.”

“Yes, Nathan,” she replied breathlessly, “I want this so much. I want you.”

A pained smile touched his lips. He pushed her onto her back and settled himself between her thighs. Annie couldn’t take her eyes off his sex as he nestled it between her nether lips. She ached for him with a physical longing so intense that she could hardly bear it. Her inner thighs were slippery with her secretions, and the flesh between felt full and plump, ready for the force of the thrusts yet to come.

With his arms braced on either side of her head, Nathan pushed the head inside her and pulled it out. He rocked his hips, torturing them both with much less than full penetration. In and out, again and again. Annie reached for his hips, needing more of him, all of him. The orgasms he’d given her before now seemed insignificant. What she craved now was this more intimate connection between them, the sustained sharing they could achieve in only one way.

“Nathan, please,” she cried, unable to say more than that.

“Look at me, then.”

Annie pulled her gaze up to his. The moment their eyes made contact, he stroked deeper. Annie shuddered in relief. Each time he went farther, filling her, building the sensations in layers. *Yes*, she thought, her eyelids drifting downward. *More. I want everything that you will give me.*

Nathan steadily increased the tempo, and somehow she managed to move with him in time to his thrusts. She was awkward at first, but soon got the hang of it. Her hips lifted to meet his. Her legs clamped around him with a strength she never knew she had. A hurricane of sensation built inside her, whirling faster and faster.

“Don’t close your eyes, Annie,” he said gruffly. “I want to see your eyes when you come.”

His breath came out in great gusts as he labored over her. Over and over he stabbed his cock into her like a piston until at last the rush of her climax arrived, and Annie

turned her face into his arm, abandoning herself to the pleasure pulsing inside her. Nathan reached his peak a split second later, and she delighted in that almost as much. The guttural sounds he made sent fresh spasms of satisfaction through her. In those brief moments their connection seemed inviolate, an illusion Annie gladly embraced until the time came for them to separate.

Still panting, Nathan withdrew and rid himself of the condom so he could lie next to her. Annie was glad to see his gratified expression before she crept into his arms.

“That was incredible,” he exclaimed, hugging her close to kiss the top of her head.

She sighed, floating on the wings of bliss. Her cheek rested on his chest, her palm on his far shoulder.

“It was so cute how you couldn’t look at me at the end. You’re so shy.” He took up a lock of her hair and twirled it around his finger lazily. “I’m gonna have to work on that.”

Annie smiled, glad he’d assumed modesty was what had prevented her from meeting his gaze. The truth was, she was afraid. Afraid to see in his eyes that this was just sex.

This is just you and me having fun, he’d said. Obviously he thought of sex as just another activity, like swimming. She knew the danger of expecting him to feel more for her now that they had been to bed together, so she tried to trivialize it too. But trying to mute the quiet joy of being in his arms was like trying to keep the sun from rising. The realization that she still loved him dawned with stiff dose of fear. When the novelty of sleeping with her wore off, he’d surely go find someone new. To him, sex wasn’t a commitment. It was a pleasant way to spend the time.

Chapter Fourteen

When Annie got home the next morning, she hung her keys on the rack by the door. She checked her messages, and Deb's voice blasted out of the tiny speaker, "It's one a.m., and you're not home! As soon as you get this message, call me. I mean it!"

Annie dialed and Deb answered sleepily. When Annie identified herself, Deb perked up immediately.

"Was it wonderful?"

"Yes, amazing. More amazing that I expected," Annie admitted, glowingly happy.

"The thong?"

"He about died when he saw it."

"The orgasms?"

"Earth shattering."

"How many?"

"Seven or eight. I lost count," Annie quipped.

"Holy shit."

* * * *

At noon Nathan strode into the Book Mark, looking for Annie. The bell tinkled as he entered the store. Annie looked up from what she was doing behind the counter.

"Nathan! What are you doing here?"

To his delight, Annie glanced around, dropped the books she was holding into the box, and kissed him hard, clinging to his neck and pressing herself against him. Her exuberance caused his own body to respond; his cock pulsed hard, and she gave a muffled squeal.

"I couldn't stay away," he confessed.

"I know what you mean," she said, stepping back and trying to right her skirt and blouse. "It seems like all I can think about today is, you know...sex."

Nathan almost laughed at the way she whispered that last word. Then he got a wicked idea.

He went behind the counter and grabbed a pencil and a scrap of paper. On it he scribbled "Back in ten minutes."

"What are you doing?" Annie asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said as he taped the note to the front door. "Give me your keys."

She tossed them to him and he locked the door.

"Nathan..."

"Shh. Come with me."

He led her to the back of the store.

"Let's do it."

Her eyes went wide. "Here?"

"Why not? A quickie. Please?"

He gave her his best hangdog look.

When she hesitated, he covered her neck with kisses.

"I need you, Annie," he said between kisses. He reached down and cupped her bottom, then slid one hand down, lifting her leg so her thigh rested on his hip. "I need you right now."

"Oh, Lord, we'll have to hurry..."

"That's my Annie," he said, undoing his belt buckle. "Take off your panties."

"I'm not wearing any," she said breathlessly, and immediately desire flared hotter. His cock felt like a branding iron.

"Christ, come here." He snaked a hand under her skirt. "You're dripping, Annie."

"I can't believe we're doing this," she gasped.

He just grinned as he dealt with the condom. In his haste to roll it on, he wondered why they couldn't invent a package that was easier to open. Then, not caring anymore, he lifted her up in his arms. She clamped her legs around his waist as he adjusted position and shoved inside.

Primed with lust, he pinned her up against the bookshelves and pounded her hard and fast. Annie braced her arms on his shoulders. With each thrust a little cry of pleasure jounced out of her.

He shook his head, breathing hard. "God, I can't—almost..."

Nathan gritted his teeth and tried to hold back, but he couldn't. The feelings built up too fast and he exploded. His balls clenched. Forceful spurts shot out of him and he groaned, grinding his pelvis against her. His brain pulsed inside his skull. Damn it!

"I'm sorry, Annie," he panted. "I couldn't hold off."

He set her down on her feet and withdrew. Her face was flushed with passion and she had a smile on her face. "It doesn't matter. I still feel wonderful."

"No, it does matter. It matters a lot."

He tried to catch his breath in vain, cursing his lack of control. Whether it had been the immediacy of the act or the slight danger of doing it here at her workplace, Nathan detested the idea that he'd failed to bring Annie to orgasm. The last thing he wanted was for her to assume he was inadequate.

"I'll make it up to you next time, I swear."

"It's all right, really. I told you I feel wonderful."

He searched her eyes and although she seemed sincere, he still felt ashamed.

"Okay," he said one more time, "next time will be better. I promise..."

He was cut off by the sound of a key in the lock.

"Oh, Lord, it's probably Todd!" Annie hissed, yanking down her skirt.

The door opened. The bell tinkled. "Annie?"

Nathan heard someone approaching. He stuffed himself back in his pants without bothering to take off the condom. He still had three buttons to fasten on his jeans when Todd rounded the last bookcase. Nathan quickly turned toward the shelves.

"Well, well, well," Todd said.

Finished with his pants and hoping to God the condom wouldn't leak, Nathan turned around.

Todd stood there, his arms crossed. "Am I interrupting something?"

Annie clasped her hands together and cursed the incriminating flush that seared her cheeks.

"Not at all, Todd," she said, trying to play it cool. "I'm glad you're here. Can you watch the shop while I go grab a bite to eat?"

“Not so fast.” Todd shook his head like a disapproving parent. “Don’t think I don’t know what you were doing, Annie. I can smell it.”

“Now, Todd...”

“I don’t think Uncle Frank would like knowing that you closed the store and frittered away company time screwing your little boyfriend.”

“I’ll show you little,” Nathan growled.

Annie reached behind herself to stop him, but Nathan ignored her. He shouldered past Annie and took two large steps toward Todd, who, to his credit, didn’t back down. He spread his arms out as if to say bring it on.

“Nathan!” Annie cried. She was familiar with this type of situation. Her brothers glowered at each other like this just before they started pounding on each other. Annie shot Nathan a harsh, back-off stare as she put a hand on his arm. He was so tense, his bicep felt like granite. She stepped between the two men, facing Todd.

“Look, Todd, I’m going to lunch. If you feel you have to tell Frank about this, I can’t stop you, but personally, I don’t think this is a good time to bring up problems. If you know what I mean.”

Frank had been acting strangely in the past week or so. Usually he was easy-going, but lately he’d been irritable and preoccupied. Annie was gambling that Todd had noticed.

He had, because he broke eye contact and exhaled sharply. “I’ll let it go this time, Annie. But only because I like you.”

Even though it killed her, she said, “Thanks,” and grabbed Nathan’s sleeve. She pulled her erstwhile champion toward the door before he could say something they’d both regret.

“Why didn’t you let me pound his face in?” Nathan demanded once they were outside the store.

Annie didn’t answer.

Nathan paced furiously, trying to work off some of his aggression. “I swear to God, if he goes running to his uncle about this...”

“If he does, he does. I’ll just have to deal with it.”

Nathan blew out a breath. “Hell, I’m sorry, Annie. That idiot just pushed me too far.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said.

He looked at her over the roof of the car. “You know Todd will put the worst possible light on what happened. I can’t let you get fired. Let me talk to Frank. I’ll tell him it was my fault.”

“No, you won’t. I don’t think Frank will get too angry. I’ve never given him any trouble before. I’m never late and I never complain. He won’t fire me.”

* * * *

Frank’s going to fire me, she thought the next day.

He’d left a note for her, asking her to stop by his house after work for a meeting.

She walked up the steps to Frank’s front door, knowing she deserved at least a reprimand. She’d been wrong to make love with Nathan in the store, even if no harm had been done. Her desire for Nathan caused an unusual lapse in judgment, and she resolved not to let passion get the best of her again.

Frank invited her inside. She was surprised to see Todd sitting in the living room, a

can of Coke in his hand and a sneer on his face. If Todd had been an actor, Annie imagined he'd have gotten all the smarmy parts, like the prison guards, sycophantic sidekicks, and psychotic serial killers. Unfortunately for everyone, he didn't have to act; he was just naturally loathsome.

Annie prepared herself for what would surely prove to be the most humiliating moment of her life, but when Frank saw her, he smiled. Because Frank wasn't the kind of guy who enjoyed firing someone, Annie relaxed a little.

"What's up, Frank?" she managed to say calmly, ignoring Todd.

"I have good news and bad news. Whatcha wanna hear first?" There were shadows under Frank's eyes and he seemed tired.

"The bad news," Annie said at the same time Todd said, "The good news."

Frank chuckled. "I shoulda known you two would counterdict each other."

Frank had an endearing habit of making up words, and if she wasn't still apprehensive about what he was going to say, Annie would have smiled.

"The bad news first, then," Frank declared. "I'm goin' under the knife. My plumbing's all messed up. The doc says he's gotta take some of my colon out."

"Oh, my God, Frank. What can we do to help?" Annie asked. She glanced at Todd, who looked upset.

"I'll get to that. Lemme tell you the good news first. You guys know Michael Dumas, right?"

"Everyone knows Michael Dumas," Annie said. "Everything he writes makes the bestseller lists."

"Well, he's an old buddy of mine, and he's coming here two weeks from tomorrow for a book signing," said Frank.

Todd leapt to his feet with a whoop. "Yeah! Let me be in charge, Uncle Frank. Please, let me be in charge."

Frank shook his head. "Settle down, Todd. Not so fast."

Todd took his seat, but his jiggling leg made it obvious he was still hyped up.

"Two weeks? That's not much notice," Annie commented.

"When you're Michael Dumas, you can pretty much call the shots. Now, like I said, Mike's a personal friend. We go way back, so I want to do this right. Really roll out the red carpet. Partly out of friendship, and partly because this could bring in a load of business."

"Come on, Uncle Frank, let me do it. I swear I'll do a good job. Give me a chance."

"Well, I've given this a lot of thought, and here's what we're gonna do. You guys both present a plan for the Dumas book signing, and whoever comes up with the better plan gets to run the show."

"Fair enough," Todd exclaimed, jumping to his feet again.

"How does that sound to you, Annie?" Frank asked.

"It sounds fine, Frank."

At least she wasn't getting fired.

* * * *

When Nathan got home from working the lunch shift, he sat at his desk as always and listened to his phone messages. Annie's anxious voice came out of the machine.

"Call me as soon as you get home. It's important."

Nathan dialed her number. She picked up on the first ring.

"It's me, Nathan. What's wrong?"

"I can't come over tonight."

"What? Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then hold on," he said, crossing the living room. "I'm coming over." He put the phone down.

Just as he was about to knock on her door, she opened it, threw her arms around his waist, and hugged him. Reflexively his arms went about her.

"What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Annie opened her mouth to say something, but was stopped by a voice from the bottom of the stairs.

"Hallo, my friend," called Alphonse, waving a bottle of wine.

"Hey, buddy. You remember my friend, Annie."

"Yes, of course."

Deb opened her door. "Hey, can anyone join this party?"

"There's no party," Annie said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Nathan. I have to work."

"But you already went to work. You have to go back?" Nathan didn't like the slight whine he heard in his own voice.

"I have to plan a major book signing. It has to really be something because it's my boss' best friend."

"I'll help you," Nathan promised. With two of them working on it, she'd get done faster, which meant there might be some time for a romp in bed afterward.

Deb and Alphonse talked softly for a moment, then Alphonse said, "We will help as well. We can all have dinner together."

"It'll be fun," Deb added. "A book signing is like a party with books, right? There's nothing I do better than plan a party."

Everyone filed into Nathan's apartment and while Alphonse and Nathan gathered dinner ingredients, Annie filled them in on the situation.

"This is great!" Nathan exclaimed, pounding the hell out of some boneless chicken breasts. "It's your chance to show up that little creep Todd."

"Nathan, no," Annie scolded.

"Is Todd that smarmy guy who always gives me dirty looks when I visit you at work?" asked Deb as she popped beers for them all.

Annie nodded. "That's him."

"Well, that does it. We *have* to kick his ass." Deb took a sip of her beer.

Alphonse piped up from the kitchen, "You know, Dumas is a big deal. I have seen the movies they've made out of his books. I read his latest is set in Hawaii."

"There's a big fight over who's going to play the male lead," Deb said. "I hope George Clooney gets it."

"Hey, back to business, guys," Nathan said. "Tell us how book signings usually go, Annie, and then we'll start popping off ideas."

Annie talked, Deb set the table, and Nathan and Alphonse cooked. Mouth-watering odors filled the small apartment. Annie asked at least twice how much longer until dinner, and each time the answer from both men was, "When it's ready."

While Nathan tossed the salad, she roughly sketched her vision of the tiny signing area. As they ate, her three friends tossed out ideas of their own. Annie refined the plan, discarding some ideas in favor of others. A creative synergy simmered between the four of them, with Annie directing the flow. After dinner she had Alphonse create some special recipes within the Hawaiian theme. Deb made a call to her mother's caterer and made some arrangements to borrow some of their supplies. Nathan called his friend who was a travel agent, while Annie outlined everything on paper. By ten the proposal was complete. Nathan ushered Alphonse and Deb to the door with Annie gushing her thanks.

Once they were alone, Nathan sat on the couch with the last of the wine while Annie printed out a computer label, stuck it on a folder, and put her proposal neatly inside. Then she laid the folder on the coffee table with a little flourish.

"This is good, isn't it," she said, sitting on the end of the couch. Her smile made him feel like it was his birthday.

"I think it's a winner. If Todd comes up with anything even close to this, I'll eat my hat."

"You don't wear hats," she said laughing.

"Then I guess I'll have to eat you!" he said, lunging across the couch for her.

Squealing, she tried half-heartedly to get away, but Nathan caught her with little effort. "Not so fast," he said, making his way up her body and pinning her to the couch. "I think I deserve something for being such a big help."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. I might even deserve a couple of somethings." He straddled her body and brushed the backs of his fingers against her nipples, which instantly hardened. "Maybe these somethings."

"I think you're forgetting that *you owe me* something from yesterday."

He felt a flush of embarrassment, but tried to cover it with a mischievous chuckle. "Oh, you're wrong. I haven't forgotten."

Nathan had waited hours for this. He needed to prove he could delay his gratification and bring her to orgasm over and over. He'd spent all evening hoping she'd stay over, and while she worked on her plan for Frank, Nathan dreamed up his own plan, thinking about kissing her neck, caressing her perfect breasts, tasting her tangy syrup.

"In fact," he said, deftly unbuttoning her blouse as he settled himself over her hips, "I've been thinking about exactly how I could even things up between us."

"Really? What did you have in mind?"

He leaned down, put his mouth next to her ear and proceeded to tell her in great detail. When he was finished, Annie practically dragged him to his bedroom.

* * * *

After Nathan had skillfully brought her to orgasm with his mouth, he reached for the side table drawer. Annie stopped him.

"Let me get that," she said. "I want to try something. Just lay back."

A curious smile on his lips, he obeyed. "I'm game for anything."

Annie scooted over and pulled open the drawer.

"I can't believe it," she said. "You have one of your own."

Nathan balked when he saw she was holding, not a condom, but the magic ring.

"You have your own napkin ring thing. Where did you get this?" she asked,

examining it carefully.

“Online.”

“You got this off the Internet?” she asked. “Is this from Pompeii too? If it is, it’s got to be worth a fortune.”

“I only paid twenty nine bucks for it, plus shipping and handling.”

Her shoulders slumped as if she was disappointed. “Then it has to be a fake,” she said, scratching at one of the jewels with her fingernail. “Or else the person who sold it to you didn’t know what they had. Maybe it’s a religious relic, an icon or something.” She sat next to him on the sofa. “I could find out some more information for you. I’m pretty handy in a library...”

“No!” Nathan blurted. The last thing he wanted was for Annie to find out what mythical powers the ring possessed and then to deduce what he’d been doing with it.

At her startled look, he said more calmly, “Don’t go to all that bother. I’ll check it out later myself. Like I said, I’m into ancient civilizations. It’ll be fun.”

Annie nodded and handed the ring back. He dropped it on the floor, hopefully to be forgotten.

“Now what would be more fun is to find out what you were going to try on me,” he said.

That seemed to get her mind off the ring. “Oh, yes,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “That’s right.”

She pulled a condom out of the drawer and as she opened it, she smiled in a way that made his skin tingle in anticipation. When she carefully placed the shield between her lips like she was blowing a smoke ring, his heart started to beat faster.

Much later, Nathan lay wakeful and pensive with Annie spooned up against his front. He found it odd that reality turned out to be both less and more than his fantasies. Whenever he tripped out with the ring, he expected and got perfection. To date he’d never been disappointed. In fact, he’d been worried that when he and Annie did finally make love that reality would fall far short of his fantasy. Yet now, in the tranquil aftermath, he realized that he actually preferred imperfection.

For here was Annie, decidedly imperfect. She was breathing noisily through her open mouth and a little drool had trailed down her chin onto his arm. Their gyrations on the bed earlier had left her hair a tangled mess. Yet he found this rumped, comatose version of her much more endearing than if she looked like an airbrushed centerfold.

Annie stirred in her sleep; her bottom shifted against him. *Ooh, this is nice.* His penis twitched and he debated whether or not to wake her. Perhaps just a gentle caress. If she didn’t awaken, he’d let her sleep.

Beneath the covers, he smoothed his hand over the curve of her hip. He had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted Annie. Weeks of waiting had sharpened his lust for her so that she only had to tilt her head a certain way or tap her pen against her lower lip, and his mind lit up with sexual thoughts like a pinball machine.

He slid his hand upward along her ribcage. The exquisite give of her breast severely tested his restraint. The peak tightened into a hard point that seemed to sear the sensitive skin of his palm.

“Annie?” he whispered. “Are you awake?”

No answer. She slept on.

With a soft kiss on her head, he abandoned his idea of some midnight fun. Just as

well. He had the desire, but after thinking about it, wasn't sure about his stamina.

He didn't think Annie noticed; she didn't seem to have enough experience to accurately judge, but he knew his performance was off. Twice he'd had to resort to a death-grip on his penis to stave off an unwanted impending ejaculation. To assuage his wounded pride, he'd withdrawn from her completely and pleasured her with his mouth until she lay limp. Then, once inside her again, he'd only lasted about thirty seconds before losing control. He couldn't understand it. The only explanation he could come up with was that she was simply the most exciting woman he'd ever slept with. Talk about cruel irony.

Chapter Fifteen

When Annie got the book signing assignment over Todd, Nathan was the first person she called, which made him doubly pleased. She sounded so excited on the phone that Nathan pictured her jumping up and down like a Wheel-of-Fortune winner. She described every detail, especially the crestfallen expression on Todd's face, and Nathan listed to all of it without interruption, despite the fact that he was at work and the restaurant was hopping. At one point he covered the receiver and begged a buddy to deliver food to one of his tables. His tips might suffer, but he wanted to share this moment of triumph with Annie.

"And then afterward, after Todd had left to lick his wounds, Frank told me that my plan 'superlatized' Todd's."

"Superla-what?" Nathan asked, glancing at his corner table where the patrons looked ready for the check.

"'Superlatized!' Frank makes up his own words all the time, but I'm pretty sure from his enthusiasm that it meant I blew Todd out of the water!"

"Annie, that's terrific. I knew you'd get it."

"I know. I couldn't have done it without you. Now, I have to get back to work, but I wanted to tell you right away."

When they hung up, Nathan charged about, catching up on his duties and mollifying irritated diners, but he didn't mind. Annie's elation was contagious. Even though Stefan was glowering at him, Nathan almost felt like he'd gotten a promotion himself.

* * * *

The night before the book signing, Nathan awoke at one in the morning with an aching hard-on. Muddled with sleep, he grasped the remnants of a dream involving pineapple, ukuleles, and a topless Annie doing the hula. For perhaps the hundredth time he cursed their conflicting work schedules.

During the last week, Annie had worked constantly—overtime, even. Todd was no help at all, and Frank wasn't feeling well enough to come in to the store. She was on her own trying to put her plan for Dumas' visit into action.

Tonight Nathan's schedule finally coincided with hers. He'd spent his night off helping Annie set up the area where Dumas would be signing his books the next day. When they finished sometime around midnight, Nathan had tried to convince her to spend the night with him. They stood on the landing between their apartments for twenty minutes, making out like horny teenagers.

"I can't, Nathan," she told him, breathless from his kissing. "I have to get some sleep tonight. If I stay over, I'll get next to nothing."

"I swear I'll leave you alone."

She gave him a look.

"After one time," he added. "That's all, just one time. Sex is a proven stress-reliever, you know."

He practically begged, but she'd remained steadfast in her decision. She was right

anyway. He'd never be able to keep his hands off her if she lay in bed next to him.

Now, he rolled over in bed, opened the night stand drawer and pulled out the artifact. While he waited for his erection to subside enough so he could put the ring on, he explored the idea of venturing to an uncharted Polynesian island this time. A moonlit lagoon. A warm trade wind. Annie in a sarong...

* * * *

Nathan was not on a tropical isle. He was in a darkened room lit by an oil lamp similar to those he'd seen at the museum. Painted landscapes covered the plaster walls of the room, making it seem as if he looked out onto a garden.

"Beloved," a voice whispered.

He turned and beheld a woman who looked vaguely familiar. A flowing garment the color of ripe persimmons clung to her body as she approached. Clearly she wore nothing under it. She wore her hair in a tower of dark red curls, and a heavy necklace of gems adorned her neck.

"My beloved," she murmured. "At last."

Then she kissed him, pushing her tongue into his mouth. He pulled back, confused and dazed.

This wasn't right. Where was Annie?

"No," he said. Then again, more forcefully, "No."

* * * *

Lying upon his bed, Nathan focused his mind on palm trees, drinks with tiny umbrellas, and a white sand beach. But the image wouldn't hold steady. The strange woman flashed in and out of his vision, like a sluggish strobe light. He felt a curious suction over his entire body, as if some force held him in the mysterious garden room. Then he was released...

* * * *

The moonlight danced on the water, which lapped against the seashore with rhythmic, gentle grace. A mild breeze came in off the ocean, rustling the palm fronds. Nathan could just make out her figure swimming about a hundred yards away. The thought of her naked body sliding through the dark tropical sea made him hard. With one hand on his erection to keep it from bobbing, he crossed the damp grass to the beach. As he walked, he realized everything looked sharper, felt keener, sounded clearer. He could feel every grain of sand between his toes. He was aware of each hair on his body moved by the breeze. He even felt stronger.

When he reached the edge of the surf, she must have sensed his presence, for though he had not spoken, she turned in the water to face him. She greeted him with an alluring curve of her lips and a soft, hungry look in her dark brown eyes.

"Beloved, come love Me."

Again, she wasn't Annie. Damn it, everything was going wrong tonight.

* * * *

With conscious effort, he willed himself out of the fantasy. When he came back to himself, he found his erection had waned enough for him to get the ring off. He stared at the ceiling, frustrated, and suddenly not even in the mood for plain old jacking off. He turned on his stomach and punched his pillow, reluctant to examine what all this meant.

Chapter Sixteen

Annie could not remember ever being so stressed out. She'd woken at four in the morning, feeling as though she'd mainlined a quart of caffeine. So she lay in bed reviewing the details of the book signing in her mind, to see if there was anything she'd forgotten. Half an hour later she got up and tried to relax by soaking in a hot bath. That didn't work. She just ended up with fingers and toes like wet elephant skin.

She dawdled over breakfast as long as she could, but still ended up at the store at seven, two hours before it opened. She checked the basket of pastries. Thanks to Alphonse and Deb, a good supply of the special macadamia nut scones and pineapple upside-down cake awaited the customers, for a price, of course. The Kona coffee had yet to be brewed. She checked the display of Hawaiian books she'd set up. Then she ran out and bought an additional package of pencils for the Hawaiian vacation raffle table. Finally, with an hour yet to go, she felt like everything was ready.

But did she calm down? Not a chance. Michael Dumas was coming to the store. If the man wrote a grocery list and called it a novel, it ended up on the bestseller list. His work in print took up a shelf and a half. And he was coming here.

Annie broke out in a cold sweat. What if Dumas didn't like the brand of bottled water she'd provided for him? What if they ran out of his books? What if he was an egotistical bastard that couldn't be pleased and he ended up complaining about her? If something went wrong, it would be her fault and Todd would use the disaster to his own advantage. The little weasel had been watching for a chance to point out any insufficiency or magnify any glitch she encountered. Although his summer was almost up and he'd have to go back to school soon, that didn't mean he couldn't stir up some trouble before he left.

Annie was deciding how to spend the last half hour before opening when she noticed that a sizeable crowd had already gathered. One man in sunglasses and a baseball cap was even knocking on the door. Obviously the publicity had worked, but jeez! These people were unreal. She stood there for a moment, wondering how she could clear a bigger area for the line, when she noticed the man in the cap was waving at her and pointing to a piece of paper he had pressed up to the glass. Frowning, she stepped closer.

The note said, "I'm Michael Dumas. I'm early. Can I come in?"

Annie's eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth. Oh, Lord, it was him! She fumbled with her keys, unlocked the door, and as the crowd jostled forward, she struggled to let just the author inside.

"No, I'm sorry! We're not open yet. Please wait until nine!"

Together, she and Dumas managed to shut the door. She locked it and smiled apologetically at the waiting customers. Then she turned to the man responsible for all the hullabaloo of the past few days.

"Mr. Dumas!" Annie pumped his hand. "I'm Annie Prescott. I'm so glad to meet you, Mr. Dumas, and I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you, Mr. Dumas. I'm a little nervous about everything going well." She was mortified at the high-pitched giggle that came out.

"Frankly, so am I. I don't really care for these things. I'm usually up half the night wondering if anyone's going to show up at all, or if I'll be sitting at the table among

stacks of unsold books like some literary wallflower. And please, call me Michael.”

As he removed his sunglasses and cap, Annie saw at once that Michael Dumas was only slightly less debonair in real life as he was in his book jacket photo. He wore his salt and pepper hair cut very short, which complimented his weathered countenance. He was built lean and wiry, and his smile made Annie feel like a puddle of melted butter.

He showed her his open hand. “See? Sweaty palms. The pen will probably slip right out of my hands.” He chuckled.

Annie got a hold of herself. She had a job to do. A job that Todd was anxious to sabotage.

“So I suppose a double espresso is out of the question,” she said.

“I’d prefer a bottle of water.”

“I just happen to have a supply of water for you right this way. I have you set up over here.” Annie led him to the signing area.

When Dumas saw it, he turned to her in disbelief. “This is incredible. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Annie beamed. They had moved a couple bookshelves into storage and set up a grotto in the store. The bamboo canopy that Deb had borrowed from her caterer friend was festooned in silk plants and real tropical flowers. Annie had a soundtrack of ocean waves playing in the background. Mrs. Waller, Annie’s landlady, had some natural rattan furniture, which added to the island atmosphere. At first, Annie had feared it was going to look like something from a second-rate luau, but it didn’t. It looked lush and stylish.

Dumas laughed. “I should have worn a Hawaiian shirt.”

“Well, my assistant was supposed to get you one, but it didn’t end up happening.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dumas said. “I expected just a table and a pen. But this? This is outstanding.”

Annie flushed with pride. “Thank you very much. I had a lot of help. I hope the rest of the day turns out as well. Would you like a macadamia nut scone, maybe?”

“As good as that sounds, I’ll pass. I don’t want to be talking to people with nuts in my teeth.” He flashed that hundred-watt smile at her again. Maybe running this book-signing wasn’t going to be as bad as she thought.

Later, after things settled down, Annie relaxed a little. She had Todd busy selling the food to the people in line. Even if he kept eating the inventory, at least he was out of her hair. Annie ran the cash register, kept an eye on the line, which was all the way out the door, and made sure Michael had everything he needed.

Dumas visited with each person. He wasn’t obnoxious or filled with self-importance at all; on the contrary, he was charming and gregarious. When she suggested he take a break around ten, he declined. At ten-thirty, he stopped long enough to stand up and stretch a little. At eleven, he visited the men’s room, but was back again within just a few minutes. Finally, at noon, Annie insisted that he eat some food.

Michael leaned to the side and gauged the length of the line. He sighed. “Annie, the line is still miles long.”

“I refuse to have you pass out from hunger. Let me order you a sandwich at least.”

“Only if I can work through lunch. Is that okay?”

“I don’t know...”

“I promise I won’t collapse.”

“All right, but I want to make it clear that you can change your mind at any time. I

can easily go break the line and tell people beyond a certain point that they'll have to come back later."

"Yes, ma'am. Understood." He grabbed another book from the stack behind him. "Please pick something I can eat one-handed. That way I can still write."

And so it went. Michael signed book after book and his energy level never faltered. He seemed as fresh for the hundredth fan as he did for the first. Deb and Alphonse stopped by to lend their support, and to meet Dumas. They both left with signed copies.

Around four Annie heard a voice call out, "Hey there, beautiful!"

Nathan stood off to the side waving at her. He was wearing his uniform, just having gotten off work. Annie beamed at him and then leaned down to whisper in Michael's ear, "I'll be right back."

Michael nodded and continued his conversation with an avid admirer.

Annie gave Nathan an enthusiastic kiss. "You made it! Nathan, you were right! Look at this line. They're all talking about the grotto and how great it looks!"

"That's terrific, Annie. I knew you could do it."

"The best part is Michael seems to be happy with everything. He hasn't even taken a real break yet, and he's been here since before we opened! Can you believe that? He's so amazing to meet in person. I've been with him all day and he has the most interesting anecdotes to tell. Did you know he's a certified scuba diver? I've never even snorkeled! Scuba diving is a little too intimidating, but I'd love to snorkel some time. I'll have to introduce you to him. He's so witty and charming and he always seems to know just the right thing to say. Everyone loves him so much!"

"Imagine that," Nathan replied a little sullenly.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?"

Nathan shook his head, frowning. "No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" She glanced at Dumas who was gesturing at her to come back. "Oh, Michael needs me. I have to go. I have things under control if you want to go home and get some rest."

"You don't need any help?"

"I can handle it," she said, feeling a little zing of pride. "Now go home. Maybe I'll come over after it's all over. Okay?"

"Great idea. Come over after the signing and we'll celebrate. I'll make a big dinner and a special dessert."

"Annie?" Michael called. "This woman wants to know if you have copies of *Wrath and Retreat*. Are we out of that yet?"

"Look, Michael needs me. I have to go." Annie gave Nathan an apologetic smile. "Later, okay?" she added over her shoulder.

* * * *

Compelled to compete with Dumas for Annie's attention, Nathan shopped for ingredients—thick filets of beef, Yukon Gold potatoes, some anchovy filets for homemade Caesar salad, a bottle of good Bordeaux, and Annie's favorite dessert, crème brûlée. Simple but rich fare, worthy of a celebration. He knew Annie, and she appreciated good, plentiful food.

When he got home, he put away the groceries and then set the table. A couple of years ago the restaurant had overhauled its image and Nathan had bought some of their

castoff silverware and china. Watching for Mrs. Waller, he filched some azaleas from the bushes outside, put them in a vase, and dug two candles out of a drawer. After that he set about whipping up the crème brulee but with the additional flair of Grand Marnier.

When dessert was finally chilling in the fridge, he looked at his watch. Annie didn't get off work until seven, and she'd need time to wrap things up with Dumas. With a good two hours before she arrived, he decided in a fit of masochism to look at Dumas' hardback. Annie had left it here the other night when they'd worked on her proposal.

Taking a seat on the couch, he flipped the book open to read the jacket blurb, then took a look at the back cover, where he found a black and white picture of the dashing author. Nathan analyzed the photograph.

He always seems to know just the right thing to say.

Nathan frowned, feeling irritated, and yes, a little jealous. What did she expect? The man made his living from words, for God's sake.

She was just star-struck, he reasoned. Dumas was an internationally known writer. Hell, if Nathan hadn't been jealous, he would have asked the man to sign a book too.

Nathan reminded himself firmly that Annie was coming over to his house tonight for an intimate supper. If things worked out, he would convince her to spend the night. A brief image of her, naked and moaning beneath him flashed in his mind. Yeah. Very nice.

That's right, he thought, looking at Dumas' vapid photo. She's sleeping with me, Mr. Big Shot Writer. It was my cock she sucked, my chest she laid her cheek on, and it's my hair she pulls out when she comes. Not yours.

Feeling better, Nathan opened the book to the prologue and started reading. What seemed like only moments later, the phone rang, jolting him out of sleep. As he picked up the receiver, he glanced at his watch. Seven fifteen.

"Nathan, it's me, Annie."

He rubbed his eyes and smiled. "Hey, where are you?"

"At the Four Seasons. Michael wants to take me to dinner to thank me for all my hard work, and I don't feel like I can refuse. Today's sales figures are astronomical. If he's really pleased with the store, then he might come back when his other books come out. This could be really big, especially if I can buy the store from Frank. I hope you understand."

Nathan tried to sound cavalier when he replied, "Of course, I understand."

"I knew you would. You're the greatest!" She sounded so excited, and Nathan wasn't sure whether it was because "he was the greatest" or because she was having dinner with Mr. Bestseller.

"Maybe you could come over afterward," he suggested.

"Hmmm, I don't know. It might be pretty late."

"If I'm asleep, you could let yourself in." After that time when she'd locked herself out, they had exchanged extra keys in case of emergency.

"Gosh, that sounds tempting, but I think I'll probably just go home. Look, I have to go. Thanks for understanding. You didn't go to any trouble for dinner, did you?"

His gaze swept over the table, set with china and fresh flowers, and then to the fridge where the crème brulee was chilling.

"No, no trouble at all."

* * * *

When Nathan woke up alone the next morning, he felt a keen disappointment. He stared at the ceiling, missing Annie more than he had a right to. Even though she told him she'd probably go home, he had thought she might change her mind. He'd put fresh sheets on the bed and fallen asleep hoping that when he woke up she would be there, soft and warm and maybe in the mood for lovemaking. But he was alone.

He decided to call her. He wanted to hear her voice groggy with sleep and thought that an early wake-up call was a just punishment for backing out on their dinner.

"Hi, this is Annie. I'm not around, so please leave a message."

Six a.m. and she wasn't home, he thought, stunned. He considered hanging up, but thinking she could just be screening her calls, he finally said, "Annie, this is Nathan. Are you there? Pick up the phone if you're there..."

Still nothing.

"Okay, well, call me when you get this message."

Nathan's stomach felt like it was filled with lead balls. His eyes fell to Dumas' book, which sat on his nightstand. The man's face taunted him.

She thinks I'm witty and charming and always know the right thing to say. I tell the most amazing anecdotes. I'm incredibly rich. I'm internationally famous.

And I'm fucking your girlfriend right now.

Nathan propelled himself out of bed and stormed into the bathroom to relieve himself. He stood there, his jaw clenched as he pissed. Damn it!

He'd never felt ashamed of his work before, but really, all he did was cater to people, bowing and scraping and trying to please so that when they finished their meal, they'd leave him some money. How the hell could he compete with the potent allure of a renowned writer? He wasn't famous and never would be. Nor did he have any real claim on Annie. They had never discussed exclusivity. She was a free agent. Even so, he felt betrayed.

He flushed the toilet and slammed the lid down so hard that it cracked. The noise of it breaking shocked him out of his rage.

With a heavy sigh, he turned on the tap and splashed his face with cold water. No, he knew Annie better than that. She might go gaga over celebrities, and she might even stand him up for dinner with one, but she would never jump into bed with a virtual stranger. Hell, she hadn't slept with him for nine weeks and four days.

Come to think of it, he was lucky she was sleeping with him at all. He couldn't seem to count on an erection even when he felt turned on, and his staying power in bed had dwindled to the point where he considered consulting a doctor, but the thought of discussing this problem with anyone made him cringe. There were some areas of a man's life that should remain private.

Shoving aside that train of thought, he crossed his bedroom on the way to the kitchen for some breakfast and noticed the ring on the carpet where he had dropped it the night before last. The cold stone circlet sat there like a coiled snake.

Christ, he thought. The ring.

Thinking back, he realized his sexual difficulties coincided with the arrival of the ring. There must be some macabre connection between performing in the fantasy and failing to perform in the real world. If so, he was done with it, twenty nine bucks or not. In fact, he didn't even want the damn ring in his apartment anymore.

After pulling on a pair of shorts, he picked it up, intending to pitch it into the

dumpster downstairs, but the moment he touched it he was wrenched from his world and plunged into another.

Chapter Seventeen

Nathan found himself naked in a shallow indoor pool lined with colorful tiles. The water was almost too hot for comfort. Skylights in the arched ceiling provided a view of a cloudy afternoon sky, while vivid mosaics of sunbursts, cupids, nymphs, and flying deities adorned the walls.

A dark-haired young woman in a short robe approached. She looked to be in her late teens. She held a golden tray upon which sat a colorful chalice.

"Who are you?" he asked her, covering his genitals with his hands. "Where the hell am I?"

"I am Severina, master," she replied with a demure smile. "You are in the *calidarium* of the terrace baths, adjacent to the terrace wing, master."

Calidarium. That rang a bell from the exhibit at the museum. *Calidari*, he recalled, were ancient Jacuzzis without bubbles.

"I have brought some cool refreshment for you while we wait."

She offered him a fanciful goblet filled with a frothy drink. He sipped and found it fruity, like a smoothie, but slightly bitter with a hint of salt.

Severina looked at him questioningly.

"It's good," he said, and she nodded in relief. "What are we waiting for?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she retreated to stand near an open doorway. For the first time, he noticed someone else, a young man, obviously brother to Severina. Wearing a robe similar to hers, he flanked the other side of the entrance. They looked like twins.

Nathan wondered what they were all waiting for. Since he didn't have any clothes, nor could he see any towels, he continued to soak in the hot pool.

Eventually the heat of the water combined with the waiting made him drowsy. The drink was long gone. Its effects were so bizarre he belatedly realized he'd been drugged. Besides a slight dizziness, he had the impression that a portion of his brain was unfurling like a fern leaf. Fragmented images flitted into his mind like dragonflies, only to dart away a moment later.

The sound of approaching bells roused him. He turned his head toward the sound. Severina and her brother had prostrated themselves on the ground, facing the doorway. A mist had gathered, or perhaps it was steam from the hot pool.

A voluptuous figure emerged from the mist.

He recognized her at once. She was the woman from the rock star fantasy who had shown up uninvited in his bed. She was the woman who attempted to take Annie's place on the tropical island, and, he realized with dread, she'd been the model in the pop-up ad on the computer.

Fantasy can be real. I can be real.

Fear flowed through his limbs. This was like an *X-Files* episode come to life.

Her fierce beauty both captivated and terrified him. She wore a red garment made of wide silk ribbons that fluttered about as she walked, exposing the perfection of her nude body beneath. She had white skin, like marble, yet her nipples were dark plum, a startling contrast. Her large breasts defied gravity. Heavy curling tresses the color of red wine cascaded over one shoulder, and within the shiny locks, emeralds hung suspended as if by

magic. Down below as well, her pubic hair was arranged in artful curls and adorned with more jewels.

She raised her arms and said in a throaty voice, "Behold, My true form."

Nathan shook his head in an effort to clear it. He still felt muddleheaded from the drink. "It's about time you got here," he said. "Now maybe I can finally find out what the hell is going on. Let's start with your name."

"My name? I forget that you are not yourself as yet." Her soft laughter irritated him. "Cybele, goddess of fertility, of sexual pleasure, of all that tempts you."

Nathan snorted. "I see nothing here to tempt me at all."

"Ah, give it time. Rome, as they say, was not built in a day." She laughed at her jest and said to the twins, "Attend Me."

The lad removed her gown and Severina pinned up her hair. Once nude, Cybele slipped into the bath with a deep sigh of satisfaction and, leaning back on her elbows, reclined on the shallow steps.

"Do you like the slaves, My love?"

Nathan steadfastly kept his eyes on her face. He didn't know how to answer that. She didn't seem to notice.

"Sesto and Severina are twins, My gifts to you."

Nathan let his revulsion show on his face. "You can't give people as gifts."

Her brows drew together briefly, but then a tight laugh bubbled out of her. "I do what I like. Sesto, some music."

She leaned back and closed her eyes as Sesto played a soothing song on a lyre. Nathan struggled to keep his wits about him, but the effects of the drink remained. He thought hard about getting home, concentrating as if by sheer force of will he could get out of this freakish place, but it was no use.

"Why do you frown, beloved?"

She stood. Nathan couldn't help but notice the water streaming in rivulets off her heavy breasts as she came to him. The plump globes grazed his chest as she leaned close, and he felt an unnatural flare of desire that caused him to gasp in astonishment.

"After the bath We will join Our bodies," Cybele murmured in his ear. "And the glory of it will outshine anything you've ever imagined."

Her voice made him want to cringe, but when she slipped her hand down and cupped his genitals in her palm, he again felt an abnormal shock of lust. He grabbed her wrist and glared at her.

"Get your hand off me," he growled, fighting his arousal even as his penis surged in response.

"Ah." Cybele's upper lip curled in a smile and she slowly caressed and then released him. "That is more like the Amarantus I know and adore."

Nathan wanted to shove her away, but only let go of her wrist. She floated backward to sit on the steps opposite him.

"Look," he said. "You've got me mixed up with someone else. I'm not Amarantus."

"How like a child you are," Cybele said. "So stubbornly convinced that your knowledge is complete, when you actually know very little at all."

"I know who I am. I know I don't belong here."

"You are wrong," Cybele said in a pleasant voice. She gestured with her arm. "This is the one place you do belong. Here is where your darkest desires can be freed without

fear of reprisal.”

“My only desire right now is to leave.”

She cast her eyes downward upon his erection and smirked. Nathan realized with some alarm that he was wearing the ring.

“I’m getting out,” he announced. Steam rose off his skin as he mounted the steps. There was no hiding his arousal, so he didn’t even try.

Cybele sighed. “To the *frigidarium* then.”

She led him to a larger indoor pool. The walls and ceiling were decorated in a shell motif with millions of colored tiles. Even the bottom of the pool bore the shell design.

Unwilling to converse any longer with Cybele, Nathan dove in. The cool water invigorated him and seemed to clear his head. He swam lap after lap, losing himself in the repetitive motions, demanding the most from his body. As he swam he tried to think of a way to get back home, but failed. The best idea he came up with was to remove the ring later when and if he was left to himself. Touching the ring had triggered his journey here, so perhaps separating himself from it would reverse the process.

At last, exhausted from his workout, he stopped. Cybele stood at the lip of the pool, wrapped in a red linen robe. Severina held a similar garment out for Nathan.

“Come, beloved. Enjoy a massage with Me.”

A massage sounded harmless enough, so Nathan followed them to a room furnished with two long cushioned tables and benches that held towels and various glass bottles. Cybele motioned for him to lie upon one of the tables. The slaves anointed them with some scented cream and began to skillfully knead their bodies. Nathan didn’t want to enjoy another woman’s hands on him, but he couldn’t help it. Severina manipulated his muscles with an expert touch. As long as she kept her hands away from his genitals, he didn’t see why he should refuse.

Some time later, Nathan lay on his back. Severina had worked her way down to his feet, digging her thumbs into the soles, leading him into a state of relaxation he’d seldom achieved before. He almost forgot his situation until he heard a low moan from Cybele. Looking over, he saw Sesto’s face buried between Cybele’s thighs. Low grunts of satisfaction came from her lips and she patted the servant’s head like he was a devoted pet.

Nathan tried to look away but couldn’t. Cybele’s earthy scent seemed to trigger a primal longing inside him. His cock filled with blood and rose off his leg.

Cybele turned her head and smiled at him indulgently. Eyeing Nathan’s rampant erection, she waved her hand and said, “Use the slave, beloved.”

Nathan’s eyes swung toward the girl, who stood meekly to the side. The artifact felt hot, as if it had been held over an open flame, and his genitals seemed to thrum with hunger. He’d never felt such a powerful urge before, yet he fought it. He would not take advantage of her servitude.

“No,” he said through gritted teeth. He hated how difficult it was to utter that one word.

“Do not be silly. You have a need. Use her.” Cybele raised herself up on her elbows. “Severina, attend him.”

“I don’t want her,” Nathan insisted, waving a hand at the girl. “I’m fine. Just give me a moment.”

Cybele’s brows slanted with sharp annoyance. “This is absurd!”

She slapped Sesto's head away. He quickly stepped to the side, his head bent in obeisance. Cybele got off the table, crossing the distance between them with hasty strides.

Nathan sat up, tense. She paused to inhale deeply, and when she spoke again, her voice had calmed.

"Beloved, why do you refuse such a simple pleasure? It is unhealthy for you to suppress your fluids. Severina *wants* to serve you."

Cybele raised her arm, and Severina came forward.

"Attending you is her sacred duty as your slave. Is that not right, My darling?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Severina, I believe Amarantus is concerned with your feelings. How do you feel when you see him like this?" Cybele reached for Nathan's still hard penis, but he blocked her hand. Her eyes narrowed briefly, but she withdrew her hand as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"I feel anxious to relieve his pain. I am eager for his approval, Mistress. I want to please him so much."

Nathan studied Severina's face. She seemed sincere, but he couldn't be certain. For all he knew she could have been brainwashed or raised from childhood to believe that her life would only be worthwhile if she served her master well.

Cybele asked one last question. "Will you enjoy pleasuring your master?"

"Only if he is pleased, Mistress."

"There. You see?"

Nathan said nothing.

"Or would you prefer Sesto?" She laughed harshly. "No, I can see by your expression that you would not."

Cybele stood with a hand on her chin, her fingers tapping against her ruby lips.

"Such a conundrum you are. I am trying to understand why you are behaving this way, Amarantus. I go to great trouble to give you a matched pair of slaves who have been trained to the greatest degree of sexual skill. And yet you reject them."

She sighed in exasperation, obviously baffled. Then suddenly, her frown dissolved into an expression of happiness.

"Oh, of course. What a fool I have been. I should have guessed." She hugged herself, her eyes bright with joy. "You want only Me."

Chapter Eighteen

The first day Annie didn't hear from Nathan, she tried not to let it bother her. At work, she went through the motions and tried not to think about him, but failed miserably. In her apartment, she listened for the sound of him tramping up the stairs, but to no avail.

The next day she swam early, hoping at the end of each lap that she'd look up and see his feet on the lip of the pool. Instead, she saw Deb's pedicured toes.

"Annie, you look like a professional in that pool. I can't believe that just two months ago you didn't know how to swim."

"Have you seen Nathan lately?"

"No, but his car's in the garage. I just came up from there."

Annie got out of the pool and towed off.

"What's going on with him?" Deb asked. "Alphonse said he didn't show up for work on Saturday. He had to talk about a mile a minute to convince the owner not to fire him."

"I haven't heard from him either. It's been three days."

Annie marched up the stairs, wrapping her towel around her as she went. She rapped on Nathan's door.

"Nathan, it's me, Annie."

While she waited for him to answer, she heard a man's voice downstairs.

"Will you please direct me to cubicle number two hundred eight? I am looking for Nathan Somerset."

"Well," she heard Deb say, "the apartments are small, but I've never heard anyone refer to them as cubicles. He's up there. Annie! Someone else to see Nathan."

The man wore a strange tailored suit with extra wide pant legs. Walking stiffly, he seemed to have a little trouble managing the stairs.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

The man joined her on the small landing. "I am trying to contact Nathan Somerset."

Annie crossed her arms. "What do you want with him?"

"Your friend is in great danger. It is imperative that I speak with him. Does he have the ring in his possession?"

She realized immediately that he meant the stone ring Nathan had in his nightstand. Her heart raced in alarm.

"W—what ring?" Annie stammered, sidling over to the door to block it. If this man didn't have a warrant, he wasn't getting past her.

Perhaps guessing what she was thinking, he assured her, "I have no interest in punishing him for theft. If those in power wanted him, they would already have questioned him and searched his abode. In any event, that is not the sort of danger I am talking about."

"Then what kind *are* we talking about?" Deb said, coming up the stairs. Nathan's baseball bat rested on her shoulder. Annie shot Deb a look of gratitude.

"I do not want to stand here in the open and discuss this," the man said. "I promise you I have your friend's best interests at heart. You must trust me."

Annie searched his face, wondering if she could indeed trust him. He reminded her

of her father, even though he didn't physically resemble him in any way. There was an aura of strength about this man that made her feel like she was a little girl on her daddy's lap again, like she could rely on him for anything. That was ridiculous, of course, because she'd never laid eyes on this man before in her life.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to come back some other time," Annie said.

The man nodded solemnly. "Yes, I must," he said, and left.

"Who was that?" Deb asked.

"I have no idea," Annie replied, opening her door and going into her apartment. "But I'm going to find out."

She got the extra key Nathan had given her, returned to his door and shoved it into the lock. In moments she and Deb were inside. The house was stuffy and dark.

"Nathan?" she called out.

Nothing.

"Nathan Somerset, where are you?" Deb shouted as she slammed the door.

They found him, clad only in shorts, on the floor of his bedroom. He lay curled on his side, motionless and pale as a cold marble statue. In his open palm lay the stone ring.

"Nathan!" Annie choked back a sob and hurried to him.

As soon as she touched him, she felt a wrenching in her gut and her vision blurred. Someone grabbed her shoulders, jerking her away from Nathan's prone body.

"Do not touch him!" the man shouted.

Deb gasped. "H—holy shit!" She glanced at Annie and pointed the baseball bat at the man. "H—he just appeared out of thin air!"

Annie remained on the floor, staring at her tingling hands. She felt disoriented, because for just an instant she had seen...no, that was impossible. She shook her head to clear it.

"We have to call 911," Annie said, lunging to her feet.

The man stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

She spun about and jerked her arm free. "He needs a doctor! Look at him!"

"You must listen to me."

Annie glared at him. "I'll listen after I know an ambulance is on the way."

Deb handed her the cordless phone. "I've already dialed."

Annie's heart was racing, but she tried to relax as she gave the address over the phone.

When she hung up, she said, "Deb, I need you to go out and flag down the paramedics."

"I'm on it," Deb answered. She handed Annie the bat. "You keep this," she said, and rushed out of the room.

Annie thumped the mysterious man in the shoulder with the bat. "Now start talking. When I touched him just now something really creepy happened and I want to know exactly what's going on."

"The artifact your friend has is used to worship the goddess Cybele. Her male novitiates wear the rings and engage in their sexual fantasies so that she..."

"What do you mean, 'engage in their sexual fantasies'?"

"Cybele is the goddess of sexual pleasure and fertility. Men who want to worship her wear her ring, allowing them to experience their sexual fantasies as if they were real."

"Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that Nathan is an acolyte for this goddess?"

He leveled a stare at her. "Yes, possibly. I cannot be certain yet. Men are lured to Cybele by sex. They lose control. They become addicted to the profound physical gratification. It is irresistible, beyond almost anything they can experience here."

I've been fantasizing about this for a long time. I fantasized about us in a private jet...

Annie tried to think. She had never believed in palm reading, horoscopes, or the paranormal, but it was one thing to scoff at that type of thing in the media and quite another to be confronted with it in real life. The man she loved was caught up in something beyond comprehension. She wanted to reject the whole premise of a Roman goddess seducing men to be her sexual slaves. What a preposterous idea. It sounded like something from a B-movie. Yet, this implausible tale explained Nathan's strange behavior the other night when she'd accidentally found the ring in the drawer.

"I am afraid Cybele wants more than a devotee this time. She wants a vessel for her lover's spirit. She wants Nathan to be that vessel."

If this cockamamie story was true, Nathan wouldn't be Nathan anymore. At least that's the way it always worked in horror movies.

"What can we do?"

"Tell me what you saw in your vision just now."

Annie flushed red as she recalled the image that had flashed in her head when she'd touched Nathan just a few moments ago. "I—I saw Nathan..." She bit her bottom lip, not sure quite how to describe what she'd seen to a total stranger.

In the distance she could hear the sirens. Thank the Lord.

"What was he doing? Was he alone?"

Annie wrung her hands. No, he hadn't been alone, and that was what upset her.

"There were four people in the room," she stammered, embarrassed.

"What else?" he prompted.

Annie shook her head, unable to say aloud what she had seen. A lump formed in her throat as she fought her tears.

"Did you see a woman, very voluptuous with hair the color of fire?"

She nodded, squeezing her eyes shut as if that would banish the image of some other woman's hands on Nathan's naked body.

Just then there was a clomping of feet up the stairs. Deb's loud voice could be heard.

"This way. Hurry up."

In moments two paramedics burst in with a hefty box of supplies. Deb hurried in after. One of the men, a big, bulky guy, crouched near Nathan after snapping on a pair of gloves.

"What can you tell me, ma'am?"

"Not much. I hadn't heard from him in a few days and I had a key so I came in and found him here on the floor."

"This is weird," he said to his partner. He looked even closer at Nathan's face. "He's in REM, but he's not sleeping." He tilted Nathan's head back, then checked his pulse.

"Can't be too bad off. Get a load of his di..." The partner glanced at Annie—"his erection."

"BP, 110 over 65."

The big guy pressed a stethoscope to Nathan's naked chest. "Lungs clear. He's tachin' at 110."

“He might have been here as long as two days with no food or water, but I’m not sure,” Annie said. She tried to stay out of the way but was desperate to see what they were doing.

The blond guy pinched the skin on Nathan’s arm, and it held the shape of the pinch for a couple of seconds before stretching back to normal. “Positive skin tenting. He’s dry. Let’s get him on board and start a line.”

One of the men hurried out. The other inserted an IV into Nathan’s arm.

“What are you doing?” Annie cried. “Is he going to be okay?” She wanted to shake the paramedics to get them to do something more than check his pulse and pinch his skin. Deb took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

“Let’s get him to the hospital first, ma’am. Let the doctors take a look at him. They’ll be able to tell you more.”

Chapter Nineteen

Nathan awoke disoriented and alone in a large, unfamiliar bed. He felt like a torpid grizzly coming out of hibernation.

A squawking sound startled him and he noticed a large, brightly colored bird on a perch near one of the windows. He got up and walked, still naked, to examine it more closely. The bird's head was a beautiful shade of red which blended into a body and tail of vibrant purple. As Nathan approached a crest of crimson feathers flared up and the bird spread its wings as if displaying its plumage for him. Cautiously he held his hand out and it climbed on, gripping with its large claws. It bobbed its head up and down and clucked at him as if greeting an old friend.

With the bird making its way up his arm, Nathan looked around his room and for the first time noticed how ostentatious his surroundings were. Much of the ornate furniture was adorned with gold. The fabrics on the pillows and drapes were richly textured, some studded with gems. He found a majestic collection of togas in an alcove, and a chest of masculine jewelry as well. Armbands, chest plates, thick rings and wide golden belts, all exquisitely crafted from the finest metals and precious stones.

He was just removing a chunky emerald bracelet from the bird's beak when a tinkling chime sounded and Severina entered the chamber. Nathan tossed the bird toward the perch. It flew to roost without complaint. Although Severina had already seen him naked, he felt vulnerable without his clothes, so he pulled a toga from one of the hooks and wrapped it around himself.

Once again, Severina offered him a drink in a golden cup. He almost refused it, but then thought better. Severina might be reporting back to Cybele. It also occurred to him that he'd already swallowed one dose. According to the ancient Greeks, Persephone was doomed to remain in Hades a third of each year because she'd eaten a few pomegranate seeds. Perhaps as in the myth, the drink obligated him to remain here.

He took the cup and tasted just enough to confirm that it was the same beverage. It was, but it seemed more concentrated.

"Thank you, Severina. This is delicious. A bit stronger this time?"

"Yes, master. She desires to hasten the shift. This is twice the distillation of the other." She knelt beside his bed, but she seemed apprehensive as she pressed her forehead to the cold marble.

There was no way in hell Nathan was going to drink this crap. Whatever "the shift" was, it didn't sound like something he wanted to happen.

"As she wishes, of course," he said, walking toward the bird. After stealing a glance to make sure Severina was still prostrate, he dumped the drink into the bird's water cup. The bird sidestepped over to investigate. It eyed the cup with a cocked head, then dipped its tongue into the liquid, hesitantly at first, but after the initial taste, it scooped the drink up with apparent relish. Nathan hoped belatedly that the thing didn't keel over.

"Master, She expects you shortly for the dancing and evening meal."

"Thank you, Severina."

"I live to serve." Severina still did not look up.

All of a sudden, Nathan felt like he was shrinking, even though he could plainly see

that he was not. A swelling presence seemed to be pushing out from his guts to crowd him in his own skin.

Then a sleepy voice that was not wholly his own came out of his throat. "Ah, a lovely young girl, prostrate at my feet, as she should be."

What the fuck?

Scared out of his mind, Nathan instinctively pushed back against the presence. It gave what seemed like a token resistance and then yielded.

"I was not finished sleeping anyway," the entity said with Nathan's mouth.

Nathan clutched at his chest, convinced that something was going to burst out of it, like in the movie *Alien*.

"What the fuck was that?" he shouted, in control of his own voice again.

"The shift," came Severina's muffled reply.

Nathan stared at her. She had scrunched herself up into a tight ball on the floor.

"The shift! What the hell is the shift?" But she said nothing.

Nathan closed his eyes and concentrated on home like Dorothy Gale.

"I am in my apartment," Nathan said aloud. "On that ratty beige carpet. I'm wearing my blue gym shorts and I'm waking up now at home, in the real world."

He knew without opening his eyes that he hadn't moved.

Severina said, "Master, I do not understand."

Nathan ignored her. Remembering his plan, he tugged at the ring, but it wouldn't budge. He pulled his penis to make it thinner, then spit on his hand and rubbed the saliva on it, thinking he could twist the circlet off. All to no avail. Upon closer inspection he saw the ring seemed to be fused to his flesh, and renewed fear slithered up his spine.

Nathan strode out onto the terrace and gulped down fresh air. His balcony overlooked a wide grassy area. He scanned the horizon, but even as he looked for an escape route, he knew that he probably wouldn't get far on foot. A series of stone arches led from his building to a broad dais where people milled around, preparing for some sort of show. They lit torches, arranged ornate furniture, rolled carpets over a raised dais. It looked like it was going to be quite a party, but one that Nathan planned to avoid at all costs.

Severina followed him onto the terrace. She wrung her hands and knelt at his feet, "Master, please, I am to dress you."

Nathan opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment the entity, presumably Amarantus, unfolded in his mind again like a crouching gargoyle come to life. Nathan's first instinct was to fight it again, but he realized he needed information, something that would help him figure out how to get out of here and back in his real body. Amarantus wasn't that strong. Nathan was fairly confident he could regain control if he tried. So he gave in, sat back in a pigeonhole of his own mind, and let the entity take over.

Once again, Nathan heard his own voice, altered. "Wise choice. Stay back and observe. You'll shortly be unable to do much else. You may as well accustom yourself to an ineffectual state."

"Master?" Severina peered up at him from her kneeling position on the floor.

"I will dress in good time, my tight beauty," Amarantus said, chuckling. "But first I would sample your youthful hole."

He dropped the toga that Nathan had thrown on, then knelt behind Severina and raised her hips.

She flinched and blurted in desperation, “Master! She says you are to save yourself for Her.”

This made Amarantus think twice.

“I suppose you are right, but I do not appreciate waiting,” he said. “Still, I suppose the ceremony will yield its own satisfaction.”

He released Severina, who hurried to fetch fresh garments from an alcove.

* * * *

After the examinations, questions, and explanations were finished, Annie and the unnamed stranger were left in Nathan’s hospital room. Through the window she could see the staff busy at work. Annie closed the blinds.

Nothing was known for certain. As far as she could tell from the jargon-filled speech the doctor had given her, Nathan was in a coma-like state, the likes of which none of the hospital staff had ever seen before. He appeared to be sleeping, but was “non-responsive,” which Annie assumed was a fancy way of saying that they couldn’t wake him up. No one had any idea when, or if, Nathan would ever wake up. As if that wasn’t bad enough, they had told her that if he continued to sport an erection, he might become impotent or even develop gangrene, which would force them to amputate.

Annie stood beside Nathan’s bed. She took off her glasses, laid them on the bed, and rubbed her eyes.

“I feel so helpless,” she said.

“That is to be expected,” the man replied. “Human beings are largely powerless. But you can help him.”

Something in his voice made Annie shiver in apprehension. The man circled around to face her across the bed.

“We must make a journey, you and I, Annie.”

He reached for her hand and clasped it firmly. She felt a peculiar vibration in her bones that moved up from her fingers to her arm and then spread throughout her entire body. She tried to withdraw her hand from his, but his grasp was too tight.

“I d—don’t suppose you’re talking about going to the coffee machine...”

When she looked at him, his eyes blazed golden like a lion’s, and she found it impossible to look away.

“No. We go to your friend. And to Cybele. Now, do not be afraid and do not let go.”

Then, he placed his palm squarely on Nathan’s forehead.

* * * *

When Annie opened her eyes, she couldn’t see clearly. Although everything was out of focus, she could tell she was no longer in Nathan’s hospital room. The dingy gray walls of the ICU had vanished. Instead of the rhythmic beep of the various electronic monitors, she heard music and the raucous sound of people celebrating nearby. The pungent smell of antiseptic had been replaced by the tantalizing aroma of garlic and roast lamb.

She sensed her mysterious ally standing behind her and said in a shaky voice, “I need my glasses,” even as she wondered if she truly wanted to see where she was.

Her eyes tingled for a moment, and then without the aid of corrective lenses, her

vision came into sharp focus. Gasping, Annie realized that she could *really see*. She had to be forty yards from the dais at the end of the path, and yet she could make out minute details of the scene as if they were only two feet away.

A large group of people, dressed in elegant togas and intricate jewelry, stood before a raised stone platform. They drank from jeweled goblets and took food from trays held by servants. The mood was celebratory. They cheered at what was taking place on the dais, and it was this spectacle that made Annie's mouth fall open.

Seven couples were copulating on the stage.

Once she got over the initial shock, Annie was hypnotized by the obscene sexual circus. They utilized positions that required the utmost in flexibility and balance. Like acrobats they contorted their bodies while performing a shocking variety of sexual acts.

To the side of the stage was a devastatingly beautiful red-haired woman who could only be Cybele. She had the kind of lush figure that Annie had always envied. Lounging on a divan, she wore an amused smile on her face as she turned and said something to the man reclining on an adjacent couch.

Annie gasped when she realized it was Nathan. He appeared to be enjoying the show. He stroked himself idly as he observed the orgy.

"I don't want to see anymore. Take me back," Annie said woodenly.

The strange man gripped her shoulders. "He is not himself," he whispered. "Look closely."

"I've already seen more than enough!" Annie cried, turning her face away.

"Child, you love him."

Shaking her head, she felt something wet on her hands, and realized she was crying. Tears spilled from her eyes like winter sleet. She tried to wipe her eyes with the hem of her shirt, but discovered she was wearing a toga like everyone else.

"T—take me back," she stammered. "Take me back."

She felt the man take her by the shoulders and turn her around to face him. Annie recoiled in shock. He wasn't the same man. He was someone else, a giant man—almost seven feet tall—with free-flowing black hair, a full, curly beard, and a forbidding countenance. He wore a toga that shimmered like golden vapor. In fact, the closer she looked at him, the more she realized that he shimmered. His skin—well, it glowed, like an aura.

"Who are you? What's going on?" she gasped.

"I am known to some as Priapus."

"Priapus?" Annie vaguely remembered a fertility god named Priapus. But didn't he...? Yes, a glance downward confirmed a phallus the size of baguette, clearly outlined by his toga.

Priapus guided her down the path toward the boisterous crowd. "Come. The ceremony is about to begin. You must return your lover to his body. I will deal with Cybele."

"I don't understand why you can't just wave your hand and send us back."

"It is not that simple. The bond between them is too strong for me to sever..."

Sharply, he turned his head back the way they had come. Annie looked too but saw nothing untoward.

"What is it?" she asked.

Priapus frowned. "I must return to the hospital for a short while. They grow

suspicious about your inert body. I will return shortly.” Then he disappeared.

Annie stared for a moment at the spot where Priapus had stood a second before. *I’m going crazy*, she thought as she waved her hand through that empty space.

“Hail, golden beauty!”

Annie whirled. A corpulent man waved his goblet at her as he made his way over. He had a strange gait, leaning forward bent at the hips as if walking in a stiff wind. A servant followed him, several hurried steps behind.

“Happy Festival to you, my comely one,” he said cheerily as he took her arm. He shoved his goblet at the servant, sloshing the contents on the ground. “Come celebrate with Sisyphus!”

“Oh, no, I can’t.” Annie glanced back at the spot where Priapus had disappeared. “I’m waiting for someone.”

Sisyphus brushed his rough thumb against her cheek. “No need to wait when Sisyphus is here and ready. Hurry, now. We don’t have much time before it begins.”

“No, really, I can’t.”

“I will be very quick.” He herded Annie with his gut until she felt something hard against the backs of her knees. Glancing over her shoulder she saw a stone bench and realized she was in danger.

“Now, let Sisyphus inside...”

For a fat man, he was quite strong and could move surprisingly quickly. Before she knew it, he had her toga undone and her body exposed to the cool evening air. When she felt his clammy hand on her naked breast, Annie snapped out of her shock and began to fight him.

“Stop it! Get away from me!”

The man chortled merrily. “Oh glory, a struggle! All the better. That makes Sisyphus even happier. Slave, hold her.”

The servant grasped her arms from behind and held her immobile. Sisyphus yanked his toga out of the way and maneuvered himself between her legs. At the sight of the penis protruding from his body like a fleshy thumb, Annie shrieked at the top of her lungs and continued shrieking. She jerked and twisted against the slave’s grip with a violence she hadn’t known she was capable of.

Sisyphus continued to laugh, though he was finding it difficult to get himself in proper position. He jovially cursed his slave’s inability to keep her immobile.

Suddenly a deep voice boomed. “Hold!”

Sisyphus glanced up.

“What now?” he whined, and Annie kicked him in the stomach. He doubled over with a grunt and toppled onto his rump.

“Bring the woman here,” the voice bellowed.

Disappointed, Sisyphus motioned for his slave to take Annie forward while he got to his feet.

The crowd parted as Annie was brought struggling toward the dais. She felt every eye on her. The music had stopped and anticipation hung in the air as she was handed up onto the stage into the arms of two male slaves. These men were well-muscled, and by the time Annie realized her attempts to get free were futile, she was standing before Nathan and Cybele.

Nathan smirked as he circled her, eyeing her as he would a piece of ripe fruit he

wanted to eat.

“Who is this?” he asked, brushing aside the fabric of her toga to better view her nakedness. She was so shocked at Nathan’s imperious attitude that she forgot her toga was open. Annie jerked in the slaves’ arms, reflexively trying to cover herself.

“Nathan, tell them to let me go!”

The crowd laughed.

“Not before I tame your spirit, I think. What say You, beloved? Is she not appealing in a common sort of way?”

Cybele rose from her seat with the grace of a ballerina. When she drew close to Annie, she frowned. Annie squirmed under Cybele’s regard. The woman’s eyes were like stingers.

“No. I find nothing appealing about her. Take her away.”

Nathan laughed, but his laugh sounded different, distorted. “Her face is unfamiliar to me...”

“Unfamiliar!” Annie shouted. “You—you bastard! You l—lying, cheating piece of—of...”

“—yet my phallus is urging me to greet her with great enthusiasm!”

“Stuff your mast in her mouth, stop her blathering!” someone shouted. There was a chorus of agreement.

Another countered, “No! Prune the disciples!”

An argument ensued amongst the members of the audience and Nathan and Cybele watched, their faces touched with faint amusement. A big bird sitting on an ornate perch flapped its wings at the commotion.

“Beloved,” Cybele said, “I think they have waited long enough. Let Us complete the ceremony.”

Nathan laughed. “Yes, as a prelude to my completion with You.”

Annie was just about to stomp on the toe of one of her captors when they dragged her off to the side. The crowd roared with approval as a man lay down on the table. Slaves parted his white robe and the fabric flowed down to either side of the man’s naked body.

“Salute! Salute! Salute!” came the chant.

The man on the table took his penis in hand and stroked himself. Annie dreaded whatever unknown rite was taking place. Her skin prickled at the continued low chant of the crowd. A dozen more men lined up near the table. Each wore the same pristine white robe, belted in the front and trimmed with gold. The torchlight twisted their shadows into misshapen forms that danced gleefully. Where on earth was Priapus? What was keeping him so long?

At that moment, she heard his unmistakable voice inside her head.

Annie, listen carefully. I will show myself in a few moments, so you have little time. Your friend is tightly bound to Cybele. There must now be a physical division as well as a mental one. Amarantus has overtaken his mind and your friend must regain control first and foremost. Do you understand?

She gave an abbreviated nod, looking askance to see if the men holding her had noticed anything. Their attention was on spectacle at the center of the stage. Cybele and Nathan stood to the side, looking like proud parents.

After he is himself again, Priapus continued, you must take the pruning knife, for he

will not be able to do this—

Oh, no, no, no, no... Annie shook her head vehemently. She had an inkling of what he was going to say, and every fiber of her being recoiled from the idea.

While I deal with Cybele, you must take that knife and sever your friend's penis at the base below the ring.

Annie wanted to throw up.

I can't do that. I can't!

If you love him, you must do it, else he will die in your world and live as a helpless parasite in this one. Do not squander the love you share.

At that, Annie's anger resurfaced. *We don't share anything. He doesn't love me. If he did, he wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.*

You are wrong. He loves you. His love for you is hidden. He just has not viewed it clearly yet.

Cybele and Nathan approached the man masturbating on the table. His reddish erection now pointed up toward the night sky like one of the many torches surrounding the gathering. The crowd grew quiet in anticipation.

"Disciple?" Cybele asked, as a slave handed her a gleaming knife. She tested the edge of the blade with her thumb.

"I am close, Divine One," the man replied, still stroking. His face was a bizarre mixture of apprehension and eagerness.

"Beloved, approach." Cybele gestured to Nathan, who stepped close and laid his hands over hers so that they gripped the handle of the knife together like newlyweds. Cybele's eyes seemed to be riveted on the man's genitals. Annie's enhanced vision enabled her to see how the scrotum drew closer and closer to his body, tightening as if cringing from what was to come.

"I am very close, Divine One!" the man gasped.

Careful not to disturb the stroking rhythm, the man used his other hand to seize his sac and pull it away from his body. His harsh panting seemed to thunder in Annie's ears. The tension of the moment was almost unbearable, but Annie was confident that Priapus would interfere before they cut the man.

She was wrong.

As the man cried out in gratification and his penis spurted in climax, Nathan and Cybele severed the man's testicles with savage precision. Blood spouted in a macabre imitation of a male orgasm, spraying Nathan and Cybele in a grisly shower that they did not seem to mind. The crowd erupted in a frenzy of noise and the castrated man flopped on the table like a dying fish. He shrieked when Cybele applied her hand to the wound. His flesh sizzled and smoke rose as his veins were cauterized by her touch and his penis spurted its last.

Sick with revulsion, Annie closed her eyes. She couldn't watch any more of the horrific butchering. The knowledge that she would soon have to perform a similar deed terrified her. She didn't know if she could go through with it.

Where was Priapus?

As if in answer, Priapus appeared with a dramatic clap of thunder. Except for Cybele, Nathan, and Annie, every single person prostrated themselves wherever they stood, including the two men who were holding her. The eunuch lay limp on the table. Cybele glared at this unwelcome intrusion, while Annie almost collapsed with relief.

“You were not invited, Priapus,” Cybele said, her eyes afire with unspoken challenge. She laid the castration knife on the table.

Stay where you stand, Annie, Priapus told her, *but watch the knife*.

Priapus clucked his tongue as if at a recalcitrant child. “You have been manipulating the humans again for your own selfish designs. Are you such a pauper in your own esteem that you must orchestrate a revival of your ancient rites? Even against the warnings?”

Cybele scoffed. “These humans come of their own free will,” she said blithely. “I manipulate no one.”

“You deceive yourself, sister.” Priapus smirked. “Release the human. He is inferior.”

“Look again, brother,” she said, gesturing to Nathan. “This is Amarantus, My beloved.”

Chapter Twenty

Nathan soon learned that Amarantus loved being the center of attention. When he came before the crowd at the start of the celebration, his movements became grander, his laughter more boisterous. He greeted the people with the phony affability of a consummate politician. He even coaxed the purple bird into performing tricks for the enjoyment of the crowd.

Nathan also learned that Cybele was indeed keen to find out if he'd consumed the second more concentrated drink. Early on, Severina had reported to Cybele and given her the empty cup, which brought a broad smile to Cybele's lips. The goddess seemed to relax after this, which only made Nathan more nervous.

In the meantime, Nathan forced himself to remain quiescent. He waited, not knowing what he waited for, but feeling that something momentous was going to happen and that he needed to be prepared. He imagined himself at bat, watching for the right pitch, and when Annie was hauled up onto the dais, he almost swung.

What the hell was she doing here? *How* had she gotten here? Had Cybele pulled her in, or was she only a figment of his imagination? Nathan wasn't sure he could protect himself, let alone Annie.

The two slaves pulled her up onto the dais roughly, and Nathan almost broke out of his corner to take control of his body again and wrest his Annie away from them. But a voice—not Amarantus's—said, *Stay your will, Nathan Somerset. She is unhurt.* Amarantus seemed to be oblivious to this mysterious voice.

And the voice had been right. Annie seemed unharmed, but the need to run to her side raged within him—to smash in the faces of the men who held her, but instinct told him the time was not right. Soon, but not yet.

Then a man lay on the table and started jerking off. Nathan felt embarrassed to be watching such a private act, but his embarrassment soon dissipated as he watched his own hand grip a wicked looking knife with Cybele. The ivory hilt, embedded with jewels and whimsical designs, was shaped like a phallus.

Do not resist, the voice echoed in his mind. *This first one will placate them. Then you may find it easier to fight.*

Nathan quelled the many questions he had, thinking he needed to be clear-headed, if such a thing was possible when your body was possessed by some other being and you were hiding in a closet in your own mind.

So he witnessed the horror of the castration, a ghastly example of deviant sexual mutilation. The hideous feeling that raced up his arm when they made the scrotal cut would stay with him forever. Blood and semen splashed hot on his skin. Knowing that there were eleven more men waiting for the sick privilege of going under the knife made Nathan's gorge rise like back-up from a clogged sink. As if that was not enough, soon the gruesome scent of burning human flesh stung his nostrils. Nathan felt like he was trapped in a twisted Stephen King/Anais Nin novel.

Thunder boomed, and Nathan mentally cringed. A giant man appeared on the dais. Apparently he was Cybele's brother or guardian, Priapus, come to discipline her. His demeanor and the immediate reaction of the crowd marked him as a force to be reckoned

with. When he spoke, his resonant voice carried as if magnified by an amplifier, and Nathan recognized it as the voice that had spoken the warnings.

Oust your intruder now, Nathan Somerset. Draw no untoward attention, especially from Cybele. When you are your own man again, then go to your love. She will guide you home.

Strangely enough, Nathan didn't question the validity of what Priapus had told him. He rolled up his mental sleeves and prepared for battle.

Hey, you, Amarantus. Listen up, Nathan shouted in his head. The party's over, and it's time for you to get the fuck out of my body.

Amarantus laughed with Nathan's voice, and when he spoke, he spoke aloud as if to flaunt the fact that he still had control of Nathan's body.

"You presumptuous insect, are you still awake? How dare you order me!"

From the look of things, not too many people stand up to you, but I am. Now go along quietly and I won't have to hurt—

Nathan's thought was cut off by a blow that sent pain through him like a runaway truck. With a detached part of his mind, Nathan wondered if Amarantus felt the pain too. If he did, the sick bastard probably enjoyed it.

Nathan retaliated. Without understanding how he was doing it, he fought Amarantus. He could not see his opponent to aim his attack, nor was there any physical body to absorb his blows; the battle was waged in his psyche and his only weapon was his will. If he lost, he'd be doomed to witness or even participate in a grisly future of slave rape, ritual mutilation, and God knew what else. So he fought with every ounce of strength he had.

Over and over, Nathan actually succeeded in pushing Amarantus out of his mind, but Amarantus returned every time. It was as if Nathan was a lodestone to which Amarantus was irresistibly drawn, or there was an invisible band of elastic connecting the two of them.

However, Amarantus was tiring. Each time Nathan cast him out, his return was delayed a little longer. Perhaps refusing to drink that last concentrated dose of crap had weakened his hold. In fact, Nathan recalled Cybele asking him at the start of the banquet if he felt all right. Had she been expecting some intense reaction from the distillation?

Suddenly, an idea blazed in Nathan's mind like a rescue flare. Without taking the time to think about the probability of success, Nathan flung Amarantus' consciousness out again.

But this time he aimed for the red-crested bird.

Chapter Twenty-One

Annie glanced at Nathan. He stood motionless next to the still unconscious eunuch. If what Priapus said was accurate, Nathan was fighting for control of his body right now, and she didn't have any idea how to help him.

Cybele had plainly expected Nathan to come to her side, but when Nathan didn't move, except for minute twitches around the eyes, the goddess' confident air had seemed to falter. Now, as if to dismiss him as unimportant, she turned her back on Nathan to face Priapus.

"It is over, Cybele," Priapus said. "Your reign over humans is long since expired."

"You are wrong, Priapus, and so limited in your thoughts. The ranks of My disciples grow as never before. The demand for the pruning rite is so great that I am required to perform it daily!" Cybele's eyes glittered with a bright fanaticism that echoed the splashes of blood on her tunic. "After centuries, humanity has cycled around to re-embrace carnality as a way of life. Before long, hedonism will replace prudence and morality. I foresee a glory that shall rival the golden age."

"You deceive yourself. That will not happen. And there is no glory in coercion."

"Coercion! Bah. I force no one. They come to Me. It is Me they want, it is what I give them that they crave. They leave their wives, their lovers. They abandon their bodies to be with Me. Let them succumb to their weak constitutions, Priapus, and leave Me and Mine alone."

"I cannot do that," Priapus said out loud, but in Annie's mind, he said, *He is about to succeed, Annie. Go to him. Be ready with the knife.*

Annie glanced at Nathan. He was still standing, his expression vacuous. But before she could even take a step, a pair of strong hands gripped her by the waist and yanked her off the dais. She landed on something plump that grunted gustily.

It was Sisyphus. He managed to keep a one-armed hold on her even though she had fallen on him.

"Again we meet, my golden beauty," he gasped, grinning at her. "While the divine ones settle their argument, Sisyphus will take his pleasure of you, yes?"

"No! Let me go!"

"Still fighting, I see. Sisyphus likes that." He chortled with glee as he got to his feet and began dragging her off toward a large tent.

The moment Amarantus' consciousness came into range of the red-crested bird, Nathan felt the pull over his entire face. The feeling intensified and converged, until Nathan thought his eyeballs would be sucked from his skull. His efforts to lean back or squeeze his eyelids shut were fruitless. Just when he thought the orbs would pop out of their sockets, the suction zeroed in to an even finer point, and Nathan felt the gush of Amarantus' departure through his pupils.

In a matter of moments, it was over. Nathan had done it. He regretted foisting Amarantus on the unsuspecting animal, but he'd had no choice.

"No!" Cybele seemed to realize what had happened. She dashed to the bird but was unable to get close, for squawking with outrage, it dipped its head up and down and flapped its wings in a violent fit. A piercing screech rent the air when, in its flailing, it

broke one of its wings against the ornate perch.

“No!” Cybele cried again. “My beloved!”

With tears streaming from her eyes, she smoothed a gentle hand over its feathered back.

At least it won't be able to fly over and peck my eyes out, Nathan thought with satisfaction.

Ignoring the sobbing Cybele, Nathan looked toward Annie, and discovered with alarm he couldn't move his eyes. He couldn't move anything. His body felt numb, as if he'd gotten a giant injection of Novocaine. In the moment it took to quell his sudden panic, his eyes woke up.

He looked again for Annie. She'd disappeared from the spot where she'd be standing. Desperate, he scanned the area, but without the use of his head, his range of vision was frustratingly limited.

Look west, toward the cooking tent.

He strained to move his head as the numbness retreated over his cheeks and jaw, and then finally to his neck. At last he spotted her. A fat man was dragging her across the grass toward the gaily colored pavilion where the slaves had been preparing some of the food.

“Annie!”

“Nathan, help me!” she screamed, struggling to free herself.

Nathan roared with frustration at his inability to go after her. He could see the man intended to haul her behind the tent to do God knew what. A series of gruesome scenarios tormented Nathan as he waited for the feeling to return to his limbs. If that fucker harmed her in any way, Nathan swore he'd kill him where he stood.

Then he remembered the knife. As soon as he could move his hands and arms, he picked it up and gripped its carved hilt with cold resolve.

“You!”

Cybele stood next to the injured bird and leveled a finger at him like a sword. The hostility twisting her face was so intense that Nathan was afraid her glare would turn him to real stone, just like the mythical Medusa's. Unable to move his legs just yet, Nathan turned his head aside and bent at the waist, but Priapus had already moved between them.

“Stand aside, Priapus!” Cybele shrieked. “I would slaughter this despoiler! His flesh and bones will be ground to bits, and the bloody debris scattered on the sea for the sharks. Then, when he is no longer even a memory, I will find another vessel for My beloved Amarantus and start again.”

Astoundingly calm in the face of Cybele's wrath, Priapus spoke. “No, you will not, sister. This man has suffered enough, with more yet to come. He does not deserve your animosity.”

“Priapus, I am warning you...”

“I do not wish to use force, sister.”

“No. *Leave me be!*” she shrieked.

Priapus sighed with deep regret. “Then face the consequences.”

The ground shook then, a violent jolt under their feet. A great boom thundered in the distance and a blast of heated air broke over the throng.

Up until that moment, the crowd had remained on the ground groveling, as if rising might draw the dangerous attention of one of the key players on the dais. But now at the

sudden quake, people leapt to their feet in panic and tried to flee. A shadow swept across the land as the sun was blocked by a bank of dark clouds and a brisk wind picked up.

Nathan was at last able to move his feet. Stumbling, he bypassed Cybele and Priapus, vaulted off the dais, and ran toward the pavilion. Annie's screams spurred him to greater speed, and as he rounded the tent now devoid of slaves, he saw Annie struggling beneath the fat man.

"Oops! Sisyphus missed again! Naughty beauty! You must hold still."

Nathan came up from behind, and with the haft of the knife giving his hand additional solidity, he struck Sisyphus as hard as he could on the temple. Although his knuckles crunched against the man's skull, Nathan found the blow immensely satisfying. Sisyphus fell over like a stone.

Flinging the knife down, he shoved Sisyphus off her.

"Nathan, thank God!" she sobbed.

Nathan pulled her to her feet into his arms. He hugged her in fierce relief. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm fine."

Another tremor shook the ground, stronger this time. Nathan had to grab a hold of Annie to keep her from falling.

"We have to go back to the dais," she cried. "I have to get the knife."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Lord, there it is!"

Annie snatched the knife up, but then gave a little scream when she noticed its phallic hilt. She went pale and she pressed her lips together. She squinted at him as the wind whipped up her hair.

"Priapus says that if you want to go back to your real body, I have to—oh, Lord..." She coughed. "I have to c—cut off your..."

At that moment, Nathan could have sworn that his ball sac constricted so fast that his nuts were forced into his body. His mouth went dry and he actually felt the blood drain from his face.

"M—my balls?"

Annie shook her head, coughing some more. "No, the other."

A clap of thunder made them both jump. Nathan looked up. The sky was a dull gray. The smell of sulfur stung his nostrils and dust was descending from the clouds like dirty snow...

All the pieces suddenly fell together.

"Annie." Nathan ripped a swatch of material from his toga and handed it to her.

"Breathe through this. We have to get out of here, now!"

"I know! I've been telling you that." She put the fabric up to her face so her voice was muffled.

"No, I mean that we're going to die if we don't leave. We're in Pompeii, Annie. Do you understand? This is ash falling from the sky." Nathan ripped off another piece of his toga and held it over his own mouth and nose.

Just then a gigantic explosion rocked them both. Annie screamed as another earthquake, even stronger than the last, knocked them both to their knees. Because the ground continued to shake violently, there was no use trying to stand up. He reached out and pulled Annie toward him.

“Hold on to me,” he shouted. “I’m going to try to get us home!”

Without hesitation, Annie clung to him, her face buried against his chest. Something whizzed past his head. A flaming rock, the size of his fist, lay on the ground. When he looked up, he saw a few more blazing streaks across the sky. So he wrapped his arms over her head to protect her and concentrated. He zeroed his mind in on his bedroom, creating a vivid picture the two of them on his bed, holding each other. Safe. Together. He focused every scrap of his will on returning home. Maybe now that Amarantus was gone, this would work.

Please, please, please.

Annie’s body began to shimmer like a mirage, while Nathan noticed his own remained solid. So be it. If he had to remain here to be buried under the ash, at least she would be safe. After all, he was the one who had indulged in the fantasies; he should be the one to pay the price.

But Annie noticed what was happening and she pulled back and screamed in his face, “No! Don’t you dare! I won’t go without you, damn it!”

She pounded his chest with her fists so hard that she broke his concentration. Annie’s form materialized again and she pulled away, her face streaked with tears. Nathan released the breath he’d been holding.

“I won’t go without you,” she sobbed, coughing hard. She scrambled to her feet. “I won’t.” Dashing the tears away with one hand, she held up the knife with the other. “This is the only way.”

Nathan stood up and looked around. The ash was falling thicker now, and the building where his rooms had been was toppling. The elegant alabaster arches were teetering and careening against each other before crashing to the earth. The air was rife with the terrified screams of slaves fleeing.

Annie dissolved into a coughing fit. She was having much more trouble breathing that he was. His fear escalated as he remembered her asthma.

He walked around in a tight circle, lifting his knees high with each step and shaking his arms out like an athlete preparing for an Olympic event. His heart was beating so hard it felt as if it was going to explode out of his chest. He blew out a harsh breath. And another.

“Okay. Shit, let’s do this.”

Annie nodded her head once in affirmation. “Let’s do it,” she repeated.

She lifted the hem of his toga up, threw the mass of fabric over his shoulder, and grasped his penis gently but firmly. It had shrunk to a mere stub.

“Fuck! Don’t!” Nathan jerked away. “I can’t fucking do this! This is insane. There has to be some other way!”

“There isn’t! Priapus said you were bound too tightly to Cybele. This is the only—
ow!”

Annie clapped a hand to her temple and it came away bloody. All around them the sky spewed burning fragments of rock like fireworks. There wasn’t much time. The next rock could be fatal. He couldn’t let Annie die here because he was too chickenshit to face the consequences of his actions.

Nathan summoned up every shred of courage he had.

“Do it fast,” he urged her.

“As fast as I can, I swear. We’re in the hospital already, so…” she trailed off, but he

understood.

“So hold on to it, in case they can, you know, reattach it.”

“I will.”

Annie grasped his penis again.

This was it. He closed his eyes and tensed as she pulled it away from his body. The ground was still shaking and he was scared as hell that she'd misjudge and gut him instead. Then again, maybe he'd be better off dead.

He clenched his fists so hard his knuckles ached. *Do not faint. Do not faint.*

Annie's arm swept down. Time stretched out so that it seemed as if she was moving in slow motion. The blade pulsed, giving off a stark light from within. Nathan's vision blurred. Just when he was ready to jerk away again and take his chances here, a searing pain overwhelmed him and he blacked out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Nathan came to, he almost decided to close his eyes and fall back into oblivion. Exhaustion overwhelmed him. The fatigue was so oppressive that he wondered if he'd been comatose for so long that his muscles had atrophied. He glanced down to see he was covered with a sheet and a meager hospital blanket. His arms lay on top, looking normal enough. He wasn't thirsty, like he had been in the past upon returning from prolonged fantasies, but then he realized he was hooked up to an IV.

He wanted to find out if he was still a whole man, but he also wanted to prolong his ignorance for as long as possible if he wasn't. He told himself that if the amputation had indeed carried over to this world, there were more terrible fates.

"Nathan! Thank the Lord!" Annie burst into his line of vision from over by the window. She hurried to the doorway and called out, "Nurse, he woke up!"

A young nurse entered. She looked surprised, but then she smiled. "Good heavens! You're awake! Let me get the doctor."

As the nurse went to search for a physician, Annie leaned over Nathan and kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were wonderfully warm and as her familiar scent washed over him, he relaxed just a little.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"I'm fine. Just worried about you," she said, caressing his bristly face. "You didn't wake up right away. It's been almost three days since we got back."

With a glance toward the door, she said, "While you were sleeping, I checked, and everything is still there."

Nathan immediately lifted the sheet to check for himself. Although a tube protruded from the hole, sure enough, his penis, whole and untouched, lay upon his testicles. Profound relief swept over him, and tears of gratitude spilled from his eyes.

"I'm okay. I'm okay!" he cried. He cupped his genitals with both hands, needing the reassurance of their familiar weight. *Thank God. Thank God.*

"I thought it was all over, Annie. That we'd never make love again. What a nightmare. I mean, look at me!" He laughed. "I'm crying, for Christ's sake."

Annie smiled, but her face still looked pinched. His laughter died away like the shout of a man who'd just fallen off a cliff.

"What?" he asked. "What's wrong? I'm okay, aren't I?"

Annie touched his cheek and started to say something, but faltered.

Nathan's hand tightened into a shield over his groin. An icy knot formed in his stomach as the doctor hustled into the room. But after a thorough examination, a three day battery of tests, and resulting prognosis, the cold knot became an iceberg.

* * * *

Annie was miserable. Three weeks had passed since Nathan's release from the hospital, and with every day that passed he became more and more distant. When the doctors told him he might be impotent due to his prolonged erect state, a condition fittingly called priapism, Nathan's tortured eyes had turned to her. She feared that he

blamed her. After all, she'd wielded the knife. Some portion of fault might indeed rest on her, but she'd had no choice. She remembered uttering something optimistic, to boost his spirits, but Nathan had been curt with her and she'd ended up dropping the subject.

Since then every attempt at making love had ended in failure. Annie had used her hands, her mouth, her breasts, her everything on Nathan's penis, trying to arouse him. She'd watched porn videos with him and modeled naughty lingerie, all to no avail. Nothing had worked, not even the prescribed Viagra.

Then, to make matters worse, Nathan told her more and more often that he was very busy with work, too busy to see her. When they did get together, things between the two of them were tense. He set up dates during the day that required them to meet in public places where there was little chance of them finding an opportunity to go to bed with each other.

Annie wanted to be supportive, to give him the time he needed to gather up the shreds of his male pride. She could imagine how humiliated he was each time he failed to get an erection. It was no wonder that he wasn't anxious to repeat the experience. Yet if she didn't try occasionally to excite him, he'd just assume she had given up hope. Catch-22.

The sad part was, she almost *had* given up hope. How much time had to pass before they accepted the fact that his impotence was permanent? A month? A year? And once they did accept it, what then?

Certainly, Annie intended to stay with Nathan for the long haul. She'd marry him today, if he asked her. Her love for him was a constant, the rock to which she'd been clinging during the last three weeks.

But what he felt for her was even more of a mystery now than it had been before. She didn't think about it that much, because when she did, she always considered the possibility that what bound him to her was sex. After all, that's how their romantic relationship had begun; he'd fantasized about her sexually with that damned artifact. And if sex was no longer an option...

* * * *

After his release from the hospital, Nathan went through life on autopilot. Stefan was sympathetic after finding out about his emergency hospital stay—minus the details, of course—and Nathan returned to work. However, he couldn't seem to muster up the friendly banter he'd previously shared with customers. What replaced it was a respectful cordiality that, while adequate, didn't garner the quantity of tips he had once received.

Nathan attributed his lack of enthusiasm to fatigue. One of the repercussions of his condition must be a lack of energy. Why else would he feel so tired all the time? He wasn't working more hours. Maybe he should force himself to eat more; his appetite wasn't up to par either and he was losing weight.

Nathan had continued to see Annie, even though he knew their relationship would end sooner or later. Probably sooner. He wasn't sure how much longer he could bear her strained optimism. His vain attempts at making love to her resulted in disaster. Her well-meaning words of comfort and encouragement made him feel like more of a failure, and afterward, her eyes always swam with pity, which about killed him.

One day, Alphonse knocked on his door. Nathan nodded and let him in.

Alphonse tapped his nose. "I smell trouble between you and Annie."

Nathan scowled and looked away.

"What have you done?" Alphonse said, taking a seat on the couch.

"What makes you think I did something?"

"Please. I am not blind."

A harsh laugh burst from Nathan. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out two beers. Popping the caps, he said, "Ironically, buddy, it's what I haven't done that's the problem."

"Tell her you were wrong."

"That won't work."

"Then tell her you were wrong, beg her forgiveness, and buy her as many flowers as you can afford."

"That won't work either." He handed a beer to Alphonse. "You don't understand."

Taking a deep breath, Nathan took the plunge. "I'm impotent."

Alphonse choked on his beer. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm impotent. I can't get it up anymore."

Alphonse stared at him without blinking for a long moment. "*Zut!* My friend, we need something stronger than beer."

Alphonse took Nathan to a nearby bar where they sat in a secluded booth in the back. Alphonse ordered them both a shot of tequila, and after they tossed back the drinks, Nathan told his story. He started at the beginning with the pop-up ad on the Internet and ended with the near disaster in Pompeii. He told his friend everything, except the intimate details of the fantasies. Alphonse let Nathan talk in a continuous stream, until at last, two hours and as many shots later, he was finished.

Alphonse leaned forward and linked his fingers around his shot glass. "That is the most incredible story I have ever heard."

"You believe me?"

"Of course," Alphonse said matter-of-factly. "Why would you lie?"

Relief flooded Nathan in a warm wave. Up to this moment he hadn't realized how important it was for Alphonse to believe his story, how desperately he needed someone in which to confide.

"Where is the ring?"

"I don't know. I'm not all that interested in finding it."

"I do not blame you in that, my friend. Have the doctors said for certain that this is a permanent condition? Is there no hope at all? Because even if they have, you should get another opinion."

Nathan shrugged. "You know how doctors are. They avoid talking about certainties so they won't get sued if they're wrong. I was supposed to go for a checkup a week ago."

"You did not go?"

"No."

Alphonse laid his palms flat on the table. "That is idiotic. If you were seventy, yes, I can see how it might be tempting to just ignore the problem. But you are too young to dismiss the pleasures of the flesh so easily. There must be something that can be done."

Nathan lined up the four shot glasses in a neat row. He had expected his friend to speak plainly and Alphonse hadn't let him down.

Alphonse went on, "My doctor's name is Charette. Jean Charette. His office is in Marina Del Rey. You speak to him and see what he says. At the very least he can

recommend a specialist. Promise me you will call him, if not for your sake, then for Annie's."

Less than optimistic about the outcome, Nathan agreed to call.

* * * *

Three weeks after his appointment with Dr. Charette, Annie decided to have another go at making love. The doctor hadn't found any physical reason for Nathan's impotence and suggested that they try psychotherapy or just give it some time.

So, one evening Annie managed to convince Nathan to come to her apartment for pizza and a video. She had found out from an erotic website that many men were turned on by watching a woman pleasure herself, and by now she was ready to try something as drastic as that. She'd hardly ever touched herself in her life. Her mother had drilled into her over and over, "Ladies don't touch themselves except for washing, Annabelle Kate." But for Nathan's sake, she was willing to overcome her ingrained reluctance.

Nathan seemed indifferent to her suggestion. "Whatever turns you on, Annie."

Annie forced herself to seem cheerful and encouraging as she put on the recording of Ravel's *Bolero*. After he took off his clothes, she made him recline on one of the sofas, while she performed an awkward, highly embarrassing strip tease. While she peeled her clothes off one piece at a time, she avoided looking at him, afraid to see that detached expression on his face again.

Finally, she was down to nothing but her white thong. The tiny pair of panties had spurred such a breathless reaction that first night so long ago that Annie had worn them for luck, but Nathan didn't show any outward sign that he recognized them.

At that moment, the urge to give up assailed her. He seemed so determined to be unaffected tonight, and the role of seductress was so contrary to her nature. It was as if she was making her way across the rickety bridge to reach him, but he was backing up at a much faster pace.

Doggedly reminding herself of how it used to be between them, Annie reclined in a seductive pose on the armchair opposite. She did her best to seem sexy as she let her hands flutter between her legs. She made what she hoped were husky sounds of pleasure as she stroked herself. Luckily she found that Nathan watching her did make her feel just a little naughty, and it wasn't long before she was dewy with moisture and her fingertips could glide over her button with a stimulating silky sensation. She thought about the first glorious time Nathan had made love to her, reliving each kiss and caress, the gruff noises he'd made, and the moment when he'd lost himself to her in a flood of passion. Her climax broke over her in a wave. As soon as she was finished, she sat up to see if her plan had worked.

Nathan was scowling.

"There you go. I guess that proves you can get yourself off without me."

Annie winced. "No, Nathan. That wasn't the point. I was trying to excite you, not satisfy myself."

"Yeah, well, I loved the show," he said bitterly, gesturing toward his penis, "but we're nowhere near a standing ovation."

"Yes, we are. It looks heavy to me. I think we're making progress."

Nathan glanced down in disgust. "I have news for you, Annie. Heavy isn't going to do the job."

“We have to keep trying,” she said, getting up. She knelt between his legs, intending to take him into her mouth, but he pushed her away.

“Look, this isn’t working!”

When she flinched, he said more softly, “I’m just gonna go home, Annie. I feel like being alone anyway.” He picked up his pants and pulled them on.

“You can’t just give up.”

He glared at her. “Why not? Three fucking weeks, Annie. It’s enough already. I know it and you know it.” He grabbed his shirt and yanked it over his head.

“You’re wrong.” Annie fought the tears that stung her eyes. “Remember what Dr. Charette said? We just need a little more time. Please.”

He stuffed his shirt inside his pants with jerky motions.

“Look, Annie, you don’t need to waste any more time with me. It’s obvious that I’m never going to be the man I was. You should just cut your losses and find someone else. Maybe that hotshot writer guy.”

“Dumas?” Annie was perplexed. “Michael Dumas?”

Nathan threw her a disgusted look as he sat down to pull on his shoes. “Yes, Michael Dumas. The man who knows exactly what to say on every occasion.” Nathan threw his shoe to the ground and leapt to his feet. His eyes ignited with anger.

“I called you, Annie. I called you that morning at six a.m.!”

Annie reeled from the force of his anger.

“I didn’t sleep with him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” he shouted. “After all, he’s everything I’m not. I’m a nobody waiter who lives from paycheck to paycheck, and he’s a zillionaire. Not to mention the fact that he can fuck, and I can’t! Was he good, Annie? Was he a good fuck?”

“Stop it!” Annie screamed. “I didn’t fuck him!” And she burst into tears. “I was driving the man to the airport. That’s all. Just giving him a ride. You of all people should know that I don’t just leap into bed with people!”

He acted as if he hadn’t even heard her. He sliced his hand through the air. “You know, it doesn’t really matter whether you did or didn’t, because I just can’t do this anymore. I’m sick of pretending that we can make it past this. We can’t. I can’t. You need to move on and find someone else, someone who can give you what I can’t. It’s over, Annie.”

Then he snatched up his shoes and his keys and left.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Nathan held his annoyance in check as the customer outlined the exact parameters of how she wanted her meal prepared.

"I want the fish charred only on the skin side, and not dry. If it's dry, I'll send it back."

"Yes, ma'am."

"No butter, no cream, and oil only if it's extra virgin olive oil. Don't try to pass off a second press oil. I can taste the difference."

"Chef Alphonse uses nothing but the finest ingredients, but I will tell him."

"Good. What was that sauce again?"

"The fish tonight is served with a lemon caper beurre blanc."

"Sounds risky. Hold the sauce. And make the potatoes plain."

"You don't want the truffle garlic mashed potatoes." A muscle in Nathan's jaw twitched.

"This isn't that difficult," she said crossly. "No, I don't want fancy mashed potatoes. I want plain mashed potatoes with only a little bit of nonfat milk. If you don't have nonfat, I suppose I can deal with two-percent."

"I'll do my best."

"Good. That's all I ask."

Nathan took her menu from her, wondering why she had looked at it at all if she was going to demand all those changes.

"Oh, and one more thing."

Nathan managed to hold onto his strained smile. "Yes?"

"Make sure none of the food touches. The vegetables cannot touch the fish, and the fish can't touch the potatoes—which I want plain, remember—and the potatoes cannot touch the fish. Nothing touching."

"Nothing touching," Nathan repeated in disbelief.

"That's right."

"Why don't I just bring everything on separate plates?" he asked sarcastically.

"That is a good idea," she said. Her lips curved with haughty satisfaction.

"I'll bring three different forks too," Nathan added. "Because if you use the same fork for the whole meal, you never know. Stray molecules might contaminate the other food."

This time she got the dig. She straightened in indignation and turned to her companion. "Larry, are you going to let him talk to me like that?"

"Now, see here," Larry said to Nathan. "There's no reason to be rude."

"Or better yet," Nathan went on a little more loudly than he intended, "I could rearrange things so you could have each course on a separate table!"

She gasped. "Well, I never!"

"May I be of service?" Stefan arrived on the scene. He didn't look happy.

The woman laid her manicured hands on the table and said, "Are you the manager?" At Stefan's nod, she said, "Good. This waiter is being extremely rude. All I did was give him my order. That's all. I just gave him my order and he shouted at me!"

Stefan glared at Nathan. Conversation in the restaurant stopped. All attention was on the drama surrounding Nathan's table. Even Alphonse stuck his head out to watch.

Larry thumped his index finger on the table. "We are paying customers, and my wife has a right to have her food prepared the way she wants. She also has a right to be treated politely, which means no shouting from the help."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Stefan said, waving at Patrick, one of the other waiters. "I will arrange for someone else to wait on you tonight."

The woman went on, "We have a lot of friends, and we'd be happy to tell them all that this restaurant is not a place they should patronize."

"Please, don't," Stefan begged as Patrick arrived. "I promise you I will do everything in my power to make your evening here tonight enjoyable. Patrick here will take good care of you. I also insist that we pay for your meal tonight."

"I should think so," Larry said.

"That's right." The woman talked through pursed lips as if a hidden drawstring had been yanked tight. "And let me give you some advice. If I were you, I'd fire this man." She directed her gaze at Nathan, who stood fuming. "Clearly he's a menace to your customers."

"A menace?" Nathan sputtered.

Stefan smiled mirthlessly. "Please enjoy your meal, madam. Again, I apologize for everything."

Nathan followed Stefan back to the kitchen. The rest of the crew gave them a wide berth.

"Nathan, I understand that you were recently in the hospital, but this yelling at customers is completely unacceptable. For some time now, I've noticed your service is far below the level that I expect from my wait staff."

Nathan held up a hand. "Please spare me the requisite lecture about your expectations, blah blah blah. I've heard it a thousand times. Let's not make it one thousand and one, because I quit."

Nathan jerked the strap of his apron and headed toward the lockers. Stefan just stood there in shock.

Nathan was stuffing his wallet into his pocket when Alphonse ventured over. "Perhaps you should reconsider, my friend. If you apologize, Stefan might take you back."

"Screw that. I'm sick of his condescending attitude and his nitpicky rules. I'm sick of bending over backwards for people. I'm sick of this nowhere job."

"Perhaps you should consider a new line of work then."

Nathan yanked on his bow tie and tossed it into the locker along with his apron. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you should look into culinary school. You have a knack that you've been wasting."

"Very funny."

"I am serious. I have a friend at the L.A. Culinary Academy who owes me a favor or two. Think about it and let me know if you want me to talk to him."

"Well, right now I'm just gonna go home. Thanks for the offer, though. I'll let you know."

* * * *

One day, not soon after the fiasco at Chiara West, Nathan was heading out for a jog—swimming brought back too many memories—when he ran into Deb. She stopped short and looked at him with a pinched mouth.

“Hey, Deb,” he said automatically.

“You broke her heart, you bastard.”

Pain and guilt stabbed him in his gut. “You don’t have to tell me that. I know it. This isn’t easy on me either, you know.”

Deb snorted.

“Hey, I didn’t have a choice.”

“I find that very hard to believe.”

Deb crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him as if daring him to tell her one good reason why he would break it off with Annie. But damned if he was going to tell her about his sexual inadequacy. He’d heard firsthand how caustic she could be when she and Annie had raked Handel over the coals that night. He had no desire to be on the receiving end of her verbal bullets.

“Look, Deb, I can’t share the intimate details with you, but I swear to you I’m doing it for her own good.”

“Spare me the garbage you’re trying to convince yourself is true. The only reason I’m not making your life miserable right now is because of the Handel thing. I am and always will be grateful to you for that. But I still wanted you to know that I think what you’ve done to her is shitty. Knowing that she had a crush on you in high school and using that to get into bed with her...”

“That’s a bunch of crap. I didn’t...” He exhaled forcefully. “Forget it. You’re determined to think the worst of me.”

* * * *

“That asshole!” Deb shouted as she barged into Alphonse’s house. “What is Nathan’s problem? He dumped Annie! Did you know that? He dumped her!” She hurled her purse on the floor in disgust.

Alphonse calmly poured a glass of wine and handed it to her. “Drink this.”

Deb downed it and held her glass out for more. “What is it with you men? Is he bored already? Doesn’t he know how much Annie loves him? How can you be friends with him?”

Alphonse took Deb gently by the elbow and guided her outside to his patio. “Sit, *cherie*. Relax.”

He had an assortment of finger sandwiches arranged on a plate, and Deb snatched one up. She took her frustration out on the sandwich by chewing ferociously.

Alphonse checked the food he had grilling on the outdoor barbecue and then took a seat next to Deb.

“I understand why you are so upset, but you do not know all the facts.”

Deb arched a brow. “Oh, and you do.”

“Nathan is only thinking about Annie’s happiness.”

“Happiness? Happiness?” Deb screeched. “Annie is the most miserable person I’ve ever seen. What happened in the hospital? Does it have something to do with that? Do you know? If you do, you have to tell me!”

Alphonse pinched the bridge of his nose. “It is a very delicate situation.”

“Is he dying? Oh, God! And I called him an asshole. No wonder Annie’s torn up!”

“No, no, he’s not dying.”

“Then what? What’s wrong with him? If you know something, you have to tell me. If you don’t, I swear to God, I’ll pester you unmercifully until you do.”

“That won’t work, Deborah. Nathan told me things in confidence, and I will not violate his trust.”

“But I have to do something,” Deb wailed. “I can’t just stand by and watch them self-destruct. They love each other.”

Alphonse laid a hand over Deb’s. “I can tell you that the doctor said it might only be a matter of time until his...problem is resolved, but nothing is certain. Personally, I think Nathan is his own worst enemy. If he would just relax and let Annie help him more, I think he could be cured.”

“Well, that’s just what we’ll give him then. Time and Annie.”

* * * *

Annie wondered if it was possible to die from crying.

It had been two weeks since Nathan had stormed out of her life. Most of the time she didn’t feel like a real person, but just a breathing sack of flesh that didn’t know its owner had already died. She still couldn’t get through a day, or even an hour, without weeping. The water she drank only seemed to replenish her supply of tears.

Concerned, Frank ordered her to take some time off, and Todd, happy as a clam, took over while she was gone. Relieved of any real responsibility, she holed herself up in her apartment. Deb was worried sick. Alphonse too. They’d both done their best to get her to go outside and get some fresh air, but she’d refused to go farther than the living room.

This morning her emotions simmered just below the surface, but she thought she might be able to control them. When she emerged from her bedroom she found a note that had apparently been shoved under her front door. It was from Deb.

“(1) Bringing you food tonight after work. (2) Have a proposal for you to consider. (3) Also renting *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (the old one). Expect you to sing along. Love, Deb.”

Annie felt a tenuous smile sneak up on her. Maybe by tonight she might feel like a bite of something. As she brushed her teeth, Annie lifted herself out of self-pity long enough to appreciate what a great friend Deb was and tell herself that she should make an effort to acknowledge that tonight, if only for Deb’s sake.

Realizing she had nothing clean to wear, Annie sorted her laundry, more chipper than she’d felt in days. Until she saw the thong.

Without warning a sob stole her breath and tears stung her eyes like vinegar. Annie stumbled back to her bedroom, curled up on her bed, and howled. She made all the noise she wanted, thinking that the keening wails might somehow cleanse her of the pain. That if she cried herself out, by the time Deb came with the movie and food that she’d be fit company.

Why had Nathan pushed her away? she wondered again miserably. He loved her, even if he hadn’t said so. He had been willing to sacrifice himself to let her go home. That was proof enough for her. And yet, he’d latched on to the idea that she’d slept with Michael Dumas and forced it and his impotence between them like a barbed wire fence.

Did he really believe she'd cheated on him? If she hadn't gone to dinner with Dumas, would things have turned out this way?

The litany of unanswerable questions, self-recrimination, and second-guessing ran its course. A long while later she was empty again. Her eyes felt as big as oranges, and her throat like raw meat. She fell asleep, which seemed the only way to escape her heartbreak.

Hours later, Deb's loud knocking woke her. She scuffled toward the door, groggy with sleep. Through the peephole she saw Deb with a couple of bags.

"Special delivery!" she said.

Annie opened the door and managed a wan smile.

Deb looked her over and stated emphatically, "You need chocolate badly. Good thing I brought plenty."

Annie let Deb steer her to the living room couch. The coffee table became the depository of the smorgasbord of food she'd brought.

"I have your favorite hot pastrami sandwich. I have your extra pickles. I have your basic steak fries. I made a special trip to get you that Thai iced tea you like, and I have seven, count 'em, seven pints of Ben and Jerry's. You can have your pick, but only after you eat the sandwich."

Deb popped open the Styrofoam container holding the sandwich and handed it to Annie. "Now, eat. That's an order."

"I'm not really hungry."

"You? Not hungry? I can't believe it. Look, I want you to eat at least half of the sandwich, because I swear, if you don't, I'll get your mother's phone number and call her."

Annie sighed as she picked up the sandwich. "You're a cruel woman, Deborah."

Deb smirked. "I'm just doing what's best for you."

Annie found that after the first bite, she did feel hungry, and ended up eating the whole sandwich and half of the fries. As she ate, Deb talked about trivial things, carefully avoiding the topic of her and Alphonse. Annie knew they had been dating for several weeks now, and part of her was curious to know how things were going, but she couldn't bring herself to ask. It might be selfish, but hearing about someone else's happiness wasn't something she was willing to bear yet.

When Annie chose the ice cream flavor she wanted, Deb put the rest in the freezer and returned to sit next to her.

"Now, about my proposal."

Annie nodded. "I have to admit being curious about that."

"I think you need some time away. A vacation. I already talked to your boss, and he said it was all right if you took another week off."

"Deb, you know I'm saving my money for the store."

"This won't cost you a thing, except maybe food."

"All right, I'm listening."

Deb twirled her spoon in the ice cream carton. "Well...my parents have a vacation home on Kauai."

Annie blinked. "Now wait a minute. You get Valentino dresses for Christmas and your parents own a place in Hawaii, but you live in a cubicle and you get most of your clothes from thrift shops."

Deb looked uncomfortable. "Remember when you first told me about your high metabolism? How girlfriends would treat you differently? Well, this is the same kind of thing. My parents have lots of money. Lots of money. And when people know that, they get ideas. They start expecting me to pay for everything, and get indignant when I don't."

"That's horrible."

"Besides, I don't like mooching off my parents. My brother does that for a living, like it's his birthright to be pampered. I'm just not into that."

"So, back to the subject at hand," Deb said. "What better way could there be for you to forget your troubles than to spend a week in the tropics with me? No schedules, no demands, nothing to do except lounge around. I've even got frequent flyer miles and we won't have to pay a penny for airfare. What do you say?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'd make very good company."

"Company shmumpany. Don't worry about me. This trip would be about you. It'll be like a sleepover, except we'll be in Hawaii. Come on, Annie, let me do this for you, please?"

"Well, I've never been there before..."

"All the more reason."

"And it would be nice to get away from Todd at work."

"I'll say!" Deb agreed. "There's your number one reason right there, sister."

Annie let a tiny smile curve her lips. "All right. I'll go."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nathan soon discovered that he missed his job. Not because he liked the work, but because it had provided a valuable distraction. Now with unlimited free time, his thoughts homed in on Annie as if she were true north, and along that route lay nothing but regret and humiliation.

Desperate to find a more productive use of his time, he took Alphonse up on his offer. The idea of embarking on a real career had appeal. Alphonse's friend was happy to talk to Nathan about enrolling when the new semester began and promised to mail him material describing the courses of study and how to obtain financial aid. When the package arrived in the mail, Nathan tore into it with unusual eagerness. As he scanned the list of courses, his interest grew. If only the guidance counselors in high school had pointed him in this direction years ago. Of course, that would have required clairvoyance on their part. He hadn't been interested in cooking back then.

The tuition was daunting. Four thousand a quarter, plus materials. Could he manage that? He was busy trying to dig his savings passbook out from the desk drawer when the doorbell rang.

At the door stood a young guy holding a bright bouquet of helium balloons.

"Are you Nathan Somerset?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations! You won the grand prize!" the man exclaimed, thrusting the balloons into Nathan's hand.

Nathan gave him a dubious look. "This is a joke, right?" He poked his head out the door, looking for some sign that this was an elaborate hoax.

"No, sir." The man handed over some papers. Nathan scanned them: a letter of congratulations that included information regarding premium accommodations, a voucher for a chauffeured ride to and from L.A. International, and an airline ticket with Nathan's name on it, destination: Kauai.

"I just need your signature here on the line."

"Holy shit!" Nathan exclaimed as he signed. "This is unbelievable! Everyone said I'd never win! What contest was it? I don't remember entering a contest for a trip to Kauai."

"Ah, well..."

"You know, it doesn't matter what contest it was." Nathan kissed the papers and said, "Thank you! Thank you very much."

* * * *

The next day Nathan couldn't shake the suspicion that the whole thing was a big mistake, so he called the number on the ticket and confirmed that he was indeed scheduled for a flight to Kauai. It wasn't until the chauffeur knocked on his door two days later that he really believed the trip was a reality. After all the terrible things that had happened to him recently, this boon couldn't have come at a better time. Although it was strange that the trip had only been for one person, he was grateful. He wasn't good

company these days anyway. He'd developed the habit of looking at the pessimistic side of things.

The driver put Nathan's suitcase in the trunk while Nathan got in and slumped in his seat. As the long black car pulled away from the curb, he saw people in adjacent cars, staring at the tinted glass to see who was inside. He hadn't been in a limo since he and a couple of other buddies from the swim team had rented one for the senior prom. That ride had been much more thrilling. They had been pumped up about the coming evening and any sexual capers they might be lucky enough to experience later with their dates. Of course, that memory got him thinking about the fantasy limo ride. He could almost see Annie on the other side of the car, bundled in that fluffy down jacket, her eyes shining with adoration.

Shit. He had promised himself he wouldn't think about Annie while he was gone, and here he'd only been in the car for ten minutes and already he was thinking about her. Disgusted with his lack of discipline, he turned to the bar and poured himself a stiff drink. This might be the only time in his life he ever won anything substantial. If he let himself wallow in self-pity, then the whole vacation would be a waste.

* * * *

After the in-flight meal and movie, Nathan settled back into his first class leather seat and slept. He dreamed of a peach tree spreading its blossoming branches over a lush expanse of grass and flowering shrubs. Annie sat at the base of the tree, reading a book. Dressed in jeans and a pale pink sweater, she embodied beauty and serenity.

Nathan, on the other hand, laboriously hauled armloads of debris from a truck bearing the words, "Nathan's Moving." He dumped each load onto a growing junk heap and turned back to get more. Copies of Dumas' novel lay among the garbage. Every once in a while Nathan glanced at Annie with longing, but each time he turned back to his task.

Then suddenly Nathan was no longer hauling trash. He was erecting a thick wall to separate his property from that adjacent garden. Annie was trying to demolish the wall with a pneumatic drill, so he slapped the mortar and bricks together haphazardly. The effect was a teetering structure that resembled the rickety barbecue that Lucy and Ethel had erected in a long ago *I Love Lucy* episode. Above the punishing noise of the drill Nathan heard the red-crested bird. It perched on the wall and squawked, "You're outta here! You're outta here!"

* * * *

Nathan woke with the bird's screech grating in his ears. The ever present hum of the jet engines reminded him where he was. A glance at his watch told him he hadn't slept long at all. With two hours yet to go, he knew he should try and get back to sleep, but he didn't relish facing another dream like that one. Even now he was wide awake, but the disturbing aftereffects of the nightmare lingered like a bad smell.

Nathan reminded himself of the wonderful week ahead. Seven days of first class accommodations and nothing on the agenda except to enjoy himself. A little taste of the good life for Nathan Somerset, and all of it free. And after that, the possibility of a new career, a focus for his life where there had been none before. So much of his future

seemed bright with potential.

Then why did he still feel like he was wandering in the dark?

Chapter Twenty-Five

A man in loose white clothing met Nathan at the Lihue airport. His tanned skin suggested he lived here in the tropics.

“My name is Koamalu. I am at your disposal for the next seven days, sir.”

The air was humid, but not unbearable. Koamalu assured him the cloud cover would burn off later.

“Does it rain much this time of year?” Nathan asked.

“In Hawaii, even our dry season is wet. You will likely see a few showers before you leave us.”

Koamalu drove Nathan to Ahukini Pier, where they boarded a sleek pleasure boat. It didn't take long to putter past the jetty to the open water. Once they were free of the five mile an hour speed limit, Koamalu said, “If you like, you may steer for a while.”

Nathan's eyes lit up. “I've never driven a boat before.”

“It's not hard,” Koamalu replied. He explained how to operate the controls, and then Nathan took over as Koamalu took a seat astern.

Anxious to arrive, Nathan pushed the sprightly vessel to full speed. It skimmed across the sea as the sun came out and turned the water from gray-green to a bright blue. The salty air whipped through his hair and he breathed deeply. Despite the fact that he'd slept fitfully on the plane, he felt more alive than he had in weeks. This change in scenery seemed to be doing the trick. He began to feel optimistic, as if something wonderful was in store and all he had to do was wait long enough for it to happen. He thought maybe it could be the sunset. Surely that promised to be spectacular.

When he drew closer to their destination, Koamalu took over, guided the boat up to the short wooden pier, then hopped off to secure the lines.

“If you would follow me, I will take you to the house.”

They followed a gravel path that skirted the edge of a breathtaking lagoon. The water sparkled with a thousand different shades of blue, so clear that even from the land, Nathan could swear he saw the colorful flashes of tropical fish. Koamalu confirmed the sighting.

“There are many species of ocean life here. Along this shore here is the best place to view it. We have all the equipment you need for diving, snorkeling, or spear fishing.”

The house was large, but cleverly designed to merge into the landscape. Nathan's bedroom was spacious. A sliding glass door opened to the lagoon. Shallow steps led directly to the white sand beach.

The rest of the house was just as grand. Nathan found restaurant quality equipment in the kitchen and a refrigerator stocked with enough food to feed a crowd. Nathan wondered again what contest he had entered. This was some hell of a prize.

Before leaving, Koamalu gave him a tour of the property and a phone number he could call if he needed anything further.

After a meal, Nathan tried snorkeling for the first time and was hooked. The vibrant, changing array of sea life held him spellbound. Some of the fish even dared to come within a foot of him, apparently as curious about him as he was about them. But when he remembered how Annie had mentioned she would like to snorkel some time, his delight

in the activity dimmed. He stared at a yellow fish shaped like a straw with eyes and decided he'd had enough for the day.

That evening Nathan prepared some of the fresh local fish he found in the refrigerator. Afterward, he watched the sunset, even though his earlier desire to see it had waned. He was here in paradise, so he may as well try to enjoy it. Nature did her best, blending the shades from her vast palette of color into a unique vision of peaceful dignity. But as he got into bed soon after, Nathan decided that as sunsets went this one was only average.

* * * *

Nathan dreamt again. In his dream he was his old self. His penis had been restored to its former glory, and he was using it to pleasure Annie over and over. The two of them seemed to flow from one position to another, like dissolving scene changes in a movie.

Annie beneath him, kissing his cheeks and gripping his shoulders as he slowly entered her tight body...Annie, poised above him, breathless and beautiful, riding him with ardent abandon...Annie, her eyes closed in ecstasy, as he thrust into her again and again...

* * * *

Nathan woke up panting amidst a tangle of sheets. His body thrummed with passionate hunger and his mind clung to the dream like a lifeline. Sweaty and hot, he threw back the sheets and went naked to open the sliding glass door. The fragrance of tropical flowers drifted in with the night air.

Unable to resist, he cupped a hand over his genitals. Like the night Annie put on the strip show, his penis was heavy, but not nearly hard enough to be functional. He let his arm fall to the side in disappointment. He felt like an orphan whose hopes for a loving family were repeatedly lifted and dashed. But at one point orphans reached maturity and those hopes had to die. Nathan had doubts that he would ever reach his own point of brutal acceptance.

He rubbed his eyes as if to erase the erotic images still flitting across his consciousness. The dream had been so true to life. Every detail remained in his memory as clearly as if he'd...

Then he realized. The events in the dream *were* memories. In the dream, Annie had been backed up against the wall in the bookstore. He remembered dreaming of the infamous white thong, discarded on the sheets of his own bed. Obviously that had been when he had first eased into Annie's welcoming body. Somehow his mind had summoned up the past for him to relive in his sleep.

Whatever the purpose behind this subconscious foray, he was unwilling to examine it. Instead, he stood for a while, quietly and deliberately replaying those lost occasions. With his arms crossed and his shoulder leaning against the jamb, he sighed as the memories drifted through his consciousness like dandelion fluff traveling on a warm summer wind.

Thus buoyed by memories and irrepressible emotion, Nathan forgot about his impotence for the first time since he'd gotten the news. The ever-present shadow of his inadequacy fled as he allowed himself the luxury of missing Annie and the steadfast,

vibrant effect she'd had on his life. So immersed was he in his surreal reflection that, when he heard her whisper his name and turned to see her in the doorway of the bedroom, he felt none of the anger and frustration that had defined him before. Instead, he felt unencumbered by any force or feeling.

"Nathan?" she said again. She seemed surprised to see him.

Dressed in a rumpled T-shirt dress, she had her glasses off and was rubbing her eyes. Her hair hung in disheveled clumps—in fact, her whole body drooped, probably from a long night traveling.

Nathan had never seen her look more beautiful.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

Annie stood with her arms wrapped around herself. "It's a long story. It was supposed to be just me and Deb. This place belongs to her parents."

Nathan nodded. "I guess this means I didn't win a grand prize after all."

A pause hovered in the air like a fragile hummingbird.

"Do you want me to go?" she asked in a small voice.

Without hesitation he covered the distance between them in three strides and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her with an ardor powered by weeks of self-denial. As her lips parted at the touch of his tongue, his entire being cried out with joy. The omnipresent wrongness of being apart from her was gone.

He broke the kiss to lift her dress up and toss it aside. Her bra and panties quickly followed suit. His hands were all over her, as if he was trying to make up for lost time.

Annie moaned. He hadn't kissed her like this since that time they'd made out in the parking lot the night before the book signing, a lifetime ago. They fell upon the bed together. She welcomed the weight of his body on hers. His frantic kisses over her neck and shoulders and—oh God—her breasts sent shocks of pleasure streaking to her core. Being in his arms again after so long surpassed anything she'd ever felt before. The arid, cracked earth that was her heart rejoiced in this sudden flood of passion.

She was so delirious she didn't realize he had moved down between her legs until she felt his mouth on her. She gasped and brought her hands up to his head. Unbidden, a desperate whimper escaped her as he nipped the tender skin of her inner thigh. He lashed her with his tongue and squeezed her buttocks with his hands. When he delved between to suck on her taut, straining button, her orgasm struck with surprising speed. She arched off the bed violently and she clenched her fists in his hair as her body exploded with bright flares that dwindled into smaller iridescent sparkles.

"Again," he said. "I want you to come again."

He slid up and sucked hard on her nipple. She climaxed again, almost immediately. He moved low again and resumed licking her sex, making her come over and over until she was numb and twitching and unable to move. She finally had to beg him to stop in a feeble voice.

When her breathing quieted, she gazed up at him. He was sitting on his haunches, looking satisfied with himself. There was a life in his eyes that had too long been doused, and she gloried at the sight of his wavering smile.

Flush with contentment, she didn't think before glancing down at his penis. Too late she realized her mistake. She whipped her gaze back up just in time to see the mental door slam shut.

He retreated from the bed and went out onto the broad lanai. Annie let her shoulders

slump with a sigh.

“Nathan, come back.”

She followed him to the edge of the marbled terrace. The night had still not relinquished its hold. Darkness still hung over the island landscape like a damp cloak. The only light came from the quarter moon and the low wattage foot lamps that lined the path to the surf.

“Please, please don’t turn away from me. I love you,” she said. She laid her hand on his shoulder, but he jerked away.

When he spoke, his voice was low and tight. He didn’t even look at her. “God, I care about you, Annie, so much..”

“Then please give us a chance...”

“...but it’s not going to work.”

Annie’s heart started to crinkle up around the edges like the petals of a dying flower. It couldn’t be happening again. Not after he’d made love to her with such passion.

“But you just said you cared about me,” she protested.

There was a long pause, then a heavy sigh. “I do. God, I do. But, I can’t...” He trailed off, obviously ashamed, but just as obviously closed to any caring gesture, be it word or touch.

He tried again, “I’m not able to be everything I should be.”

“Nobody’s perfect, Nathan,” she said lamely.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it,” he replied. “You deserve someone who can make you happy, in bed as well as out of it, and I’m—I’m clearly not that man.”

“What are you talking about? We just had sex! And it was wonderful!”

“No, Annie. I should never have done that. That was a mistake.”

How could he regret making love to her? How, when his touch, his kisses, his caresses catapulted her to a level of existence and happiness that she could only achieve with him? Her chest constricted. All she could do was shake her head in mute denial.

Nathan continued, his back to her. “Let’s say we stay together. We might be happy for a while. But eventually you’re going to want more than I can give you. Couples survive without sex, sure, but they’re seventy-plus years old. Their relationships have evolved beyond that. We barely had a chance to get started.”

“You’re wrong,” she cried, finding her voice.

“No, I’m not. I know you, Annie. You’re a giver. Sooner or later you’d get frustrated with not being able to reciprocate. I can’t condemn you to that kind of life. You’re not a dried up old crone. You’re a young and vital woman who deserves more than I can give you now. It’s over.”

He glanced at the rumpled bed and hung his head. “Believe me, I’m doing this for your own good. I’m not the man for you. I’m not the ‘man’ for anyone.”

Annie had been miserable for so long, that it came as a surprise to her when anger swept through her. Why was she taking this lying down? Why was she letting him make the decision? She was way beyond being the timid girl on the sidelines. It was time she spoke up for herself.

“That is such bullshit.” Her voice cut through the air with the clarity of reveille at dawn.

“What?” He turned around abruptly, startled at her outburst.

She stalked back to the bed and flung the sheets around, looking for her glasses.

“‘I’m not the man for anyone.’ You just expect me to accept that as the inevitable truth, don’t you? Well, forget it.”

Annie spotted her glasses on the floor and picked them up, but before putting them on she stared at them.

“If only I could correct your vision as easily as these glasses correct mine.”

“I have perfect vision.”

“That might be true, but you can’t see what’s right in front of you.”

After putting her glasses back on, she walked to the screen door and shoved it open. Then she grabbed him by the arm and pointed out into the night. The moon’s reflection shimmered on the peaceful water of the inlet.

“Look out there. If you went swimming in that lagoon tomorrow and a shark came along and bit off one of your legs, do you think I would stop loving you?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

“Then you’ll have no trouble making the leap of logic to my next point, my only point. Your penis may not work anymore, but that doesn’t mean that my love for you is gone. I don’t love the individual parts of your body. I love the whole you. But you’re so wrapped up in your own self-pity that you can’t see that.”

He scoffed in indignation. “Self-pity, my ass! You’re the one who can’t see, Annie. I’m thinking about your future, not mine! Your future should include sex. Lots of glorious, wet, mind-boggling sex. It’s your God-given right, and I refuse to be the one who snatches that away from you.”

Annie’s anger boiled up like agitated nitroglycerin to explode right in Nathan’s face.

“You’re such a man!” she shrieked, as if that was the ultimate insult. Tears of frustration sprang from her eyes and she dashed them away with her hands. “It’s not about sex! This isn’t about sex!” she repeated. “Love is more than intercourse. And I don’t need sex in order to be complete. When I’m with you—that’s when I feel complete. That’s when I feel like everything makes sense. And that feeling isn’t there only when we fuck, or because we just fucked, or because we’re going to fuck!”

She shocked herself with her own language but was unable to stop. Nathan stared at her with a stunned expression.

“Now, you listen to me.” She thumped him on the chest with two stiff fingers to punctuate her words. “If this relationship ends here, it will be because you couldn’t handle it. Not me. I have done everything in my power to make this work. I know we haven’t been together for very long, but I don’t need seventy years to know that you’re it for me. I don’t even need one year. There will never be anyone who will mean as much to me as you do. No one who can possibly live up to the standard you set in my heart.”

She heaved a deep sigh and picked up her duffel. Her outburst seemed to have drained all her energy.

“A long time ago, Deb advised me to go to bed with you or lose you. And I told her, if I had to choose between a man who only cared about sex and no man at all, then I’d rather be alone. And you know what? That’s still true.”

Then she turned on her heel and left him naked in the darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Annie's words vibrated in Nathan's ears long after she left the room. The vehemence of her outburst left him numb and detached, unable to think. He needed to dig out from beneath the emotional wreckage she had left in her wake, but right now all he wanted to do was isolate himself from any further stimuli.

An unnatural fatigue settled over him like a lead apron. He had trouble keeping his eyes open. He made his way back to the bed and crawled into it. With the coverlet serving as token armor, he pulled his arms and legs up tight against his body. Thus, somewhat protected, he fell asleep.

* * * *

Nathan found himself in the Staples Center with Priapus. The deity wore a baggy Lakers warm-up suit, which seemed appropriate since he stood about seven feet tall. His jet black hair was tied in a ponytail.

Priapus bounced the ball a couple of times. The sound was small in the vast emptiness.

"So much has changed, and yet so much has remained the same," Priapus remarked. "Here is a grand amphitheater for games of physical skill. While you eliminated the violence, you managed to keep much of the excitement."

Priapus passed the ball to Nathan, who stood at the free-throw line. Nathan caught the ball out of reflex.

"I'm dreaming," Nathan said.

"In a way," Priapus replied.

Nathan looked at the ball in his hands, bounced it a couple of times, then took a careful shot. The ball went in, which amazed him. He stunk at basketball. When Priapus passed the ball back, Nathan tried again. Again, it went in. This went on for a while, with Nathan making every shot, until he decided to miss on purpose. The ball swished through the hoop.

He looked at Priapus. "How about you explain just why I'm here."

Priapus shrugged. His swarthy face was unreadable. "I have a gift for you."

"What? A ball guaranteed to make me an NBA superstar? Nice idea, but I think they might suspect something if I can only perform using this ball."

Nathan turned around and heaved it toward the other basket eighty feet away. It sailed in, hitting nothing but net. The ball bounced beneath the far hoop and rolled unerringly toward Nathan until it came to a stop at his feet. Nathan chuckled without humor.

"No, it is not the ball."

Priapus removed a ring from his finger and offered it to Nathan. The ring was quite handsome. A thick silver band, squared off and inset with a channel of what looked like...

"Diamonds?" Nathan asked.

Priapus nodded. "Five flawless quarter carats, and the finest quality platinum."

“But why?” Nathan asked.

“Sisyphus, the man who threatened Annie, needed to be returned to his task. You helped me accomplish that.”

Nathan slipped on the ring, a perfect fit. The court lights made the diamonds flash with inner fire. He didn’t know much about jewelry, but the ring had to be worth a fortune.

“I took the liberty of imbuing the ring with a power similar to the stone circlet.”

Nathan paled.

“No need to be alarmed. This one is completely harmless. It has no tie to any deity, not even me. When using it, you have complete control over the events, and there is no time loss in your reality. You cannot share it with other people, for it will function only for you, and only twice a day, at that.

“I’ve also arranged for a random female to appear each time. In this way you have an infinite variety of womanhood to sample. A young virile male like you should not be deprived of erotic pleasures. The very idea is abominable. This ring will enable you to enjoy at least a semblance of satisfaction.”

Nathan was speechless as Priapus disappeared. The Staples Center vanished too. He felt a whooshing sensation, like he was riding a cyclone, and then...

* * * *

Nathan prepared to enter the dining room of his restaurant, Vesuvio. It was packed, as usual. Ever since he’d appeared on television to promote his best-selling cookbook, business had gone through the roof. Reservations were booked months ahead. People flocked to this Los Angeles location and the one in Santa Barbara, wanting to meet him personally. He spent more time out of the kitchen these days than in it, and although his chefs had things well under control, he missed the satisfaction of preparing the dishes himself.

One of the waiters snagged him before he went out onto the floor to glad hand.

“Boss, I got another wedding proposal. This one wants the ring in the crème brulee. How am I supposed to torch it tableside without melting the gold?”

Nathan chuckled. “Why don’t they ever want it in the salad?”

“Beats me. I don’t even know why they want to get married in the first place.”

Nathan laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Marty, I’ll get this one.”

“Thanks, boss. Table eighteen.”

Nathan opened the small velvet box that Marty handed him. Inside was a simple solitaire, possibly a third of a carat. Small, but nice quality. After washing it, he inserted it into the chilled custard and covered the top with raspberry infused sugar. Then, he gathered a few more things, donned an apron, and went out on the floor.

He recognized Annie long before he reached the table and managed to keep walking even though he felt like someone had just sucker punched him. It had been years since he’d seen her last, but she looked just as vibrant and beautiful. She sat opposite a man in a navy blazer and tie. They were holding hands. Nathan attempted to brighten his smile.

“Annie Prescott,” he said, “it’s about time you came to Vesuvio.”

Annie looked up, and Nathan felt a sharp ache in his chest when she smiled at him.

“Nathan!” She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “I wasn’t sure if I’d see you. I

thought maybe you'd be rubbing elbows with your TV pals," she teased. "Let me make introductions. Nathan, this is my boyfriend, John Stockton. John, this is an old friend, Nathan."

The two men shook hands.

"Nathan and I dated a long time ago, so I can honestly say I knew him before he was famous."

"What line of business are you in, John?" Nathan asked.

"Nothing as glamorous as being a famous chef and restaurateur. I teach high school English."

"An honorable profession," Nathan remarked as he set down the dessert. "I assume this is for you, Annie. You always did like cr me br lee."

"I told John I was stuffed, but he insisted on ordering this for me." She cast an indulgent look at John.

Nathan gritted his teeth as he busied himself with lighting the torch.

"At Vesuvio," he said, "we like to light things on fire..."

"I know, it's your trademark," Annie said.

"—so, lean back," Nathan warned. "This is a real torch and, believe me, it hurts like hell when you burn yourself with it."

With a flourish he caramelized the top of the dessert. Annie and John oohed and ahed appropriately. After the sugar hardened into a hard shell, Nathan artfully arranged some fresh raspberries and a heart-shaped chocolate wafer on top.

"Enjoy."

Nathan escaped before she could dig into it and find her diamond surprise. John probably had a fine speech prepared, and the man deserved privacy in which to deliver it. Nathan managed to get to the kitchen before he heard Annie's squeal of delight and the pop of a champagne cork. At Vesuvio newly engaged couples always received complimentary champagne. There was even a smattering of congratulatory applause from the rest of the patrons.

Nathan joined in the smiles that always circulated around the kitchen when such an event occurred, but he swiftly made his way to his office and shut the door. Once inside his private sanctum, his smile thinned into a tight, white line, and he resisted the urge to sweep everything off his desk in a fit of jealous anger.

You need to move on and find someone else, someone who can give you what I can't.

He'd uttered those words a lifetime ago with the certainty that he was doing the right thing, and now, at last, she had heeded them. At this moment she was probably making plans for a happy future with John Stockton. In a year or so she'd have his baby—

He leaned against the door with his eyes shut. *Don't think about that*, he told himself. Think about what you've accomplished. You have a lot to be proud of.

He glanced around at the walls. There hung his many culinary awards along with framed copies of rave reviews. A photograph of himself and the President, who had visited eight months ago, occupied the place of honor above his chair. But regret diminished all the good in his life. Everything had changed. No matter how many possessions and achievements Nathan tallied up in his head, it all seemed worthless, because the one thing John Stockton had on his side of the scale outweighed everything else.

* * * *

Nathan woke. An excruciating ache squeezed his chest, causing him to sit bolt upright in bed. Tears of relief sprang to his eyes, as he recognized the room in Kauai. He endured a few moments of shaky paralysis, feeling like he'd just been jerked back from the edge of a cliff. Annie wasn't getting married. There was no John Stockton; he didn't exist. Like the television cliché, it had all been a dream, the most linear, lifelike dream he'd ever had, but a dream all the same.

But in the predawn darkness, the platinum band flashed on his hand, and he remembered the first part hadn't been a dream, but more like a visitation. Had Priapus been telling the truth? Could this ring truly deliver a future of safe sexual satisfaction?

Doubtful and apprehensive, Nathan tentatively thought about the private jet scenario. As if he was a feather floating down to earth, he descended into a fantasy...

An unknown woman in a flight attendant uniform knelt at his feet. Her hand reached for his belt and she licked her lips with a tantalizing slowness that emphasized—

* * * *

Nathan pulled back to see if he could, and sure enough, the fantasy dissipated with almost no effort on his part. The ring worked. It worked very well. Even those few seconds were enough for him to realize that his fantasy self had a hard-on. Indeed, the first thing he noticed was the discomfort of an erection confined inside his pants.

He stared at the platinum band. With it he could have sex whenever he wanted. He could orchestrate every detail and be guaranteed a good time. Getting the clap would be impossible, as would unwanted pregnancies. He would never have to worry about extricating himself from a woman's apartment the next morning, and an infinite supply of partners ensured he would never be bored. There was even a built-in restriction to prevent an unhealthy addiction. This ring was as close to a cure for his impotence as he would ever get.

And yet the idea of wedding himself to a life of mental sex repelled him. Annie was right. It wasn't about sex at all. He took the ring off and put it on the nightstand.

He was looking out the window at the brightening sky when he heard a motor gunning in the distance.

The boat.

Annie!

Panic launched him out of bed. He couldn't let her leave.

Without even stopping to put on clothes, he wrenched the screen open, vaulted down the shallow steps of the terrace, and hauled ass toward the path that led to the dock. Sand flew out behind him in a spray as he dug into it with his feet. He looked ahead and saw that he would not make it in time. He pushed for more speed anyway. He had to try.

"Annie!" he yelled. "Annie, wait!"

"Nathan!"

He almost wrenched his neck to look toward her voice. She stood at the edge of the water not thirty feet to the right. He skidded to a stop and gasped for breath, overcome with relief for the second time that morning.

He ran toward her and pulled her into his arms. He had to touch her. His life had been such a crazy mix-up of dreams and upheaval that he needed physical verification that she was still here.

"I heard the boat," he said, panting. "I thought you left."

"No, that was Deb and Alphonse. Alphonse wanted to check out the catch of the day at the local fish market."

She stood stiffly in his arms for a moment, but then her arms crept up to link around his waist and she laid her cheek on his shoulder. Pink tinged clouds painted the lightening sky and the birds chirped in the dense greenery surrounding the placid lagoon. Nathan reveled in the joy of just having her in his arms. After a few moments, he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Annie, you were right about everything. I was a selfish, stubborn bastard."

Her breath hitched, and she nodded against his chest.

"But I'm a selfish, stubborn bastard that loves you," he declared.

Her arms tightened around his waist and she looked up at him.

"You're the only thing I want," he continued in a rush. "I see that now. I wouldn't trade places with Michael Dumas or Johnny Paloma, or anyone else for that matter. They can keep their fame and fortune, and the procession of easy women that goes along with that. As long as I have you, none of the rest of it is worth anything."

She pressed her lips together as tears welled in her eyes. "What about, you know, your personal, ah, difficulties?"

"As long as you can live with it, so can I." As he said it, he knew it was true.

"I told you before, I love you," she said. "I can live with it forever."

"Good," he said. "Because I want to make things permanent between us."

Annie's eyes went wide. "Wh—what?"

"I love you and I want to marry you, Annie."

With the declaration of love lingering on his lips, he kissed her. With that kiss he tried to convey every hope and dream he had about their future together. Everything he hadn't said, everything he dreamed of sharing with her. How he wanted to drink up all her smiles and bask in the warm comfort of her love until he died. He kissed her cheeks, her chin, every inch of skin he could reach.

At the first pulse of heat in his groin Nathan was afraid to hope. Most likely it was just wishful thinking and a result of the emotional upheaval of the past few minutes. He focused his mind on Annie and the sweet taste of her mouth, the softness of her breasts pressed against his chest. But it soon became obvious that something was happening down there. That small portion of his masculinity, so lifeless of late, cold and gray as ash, was reviving like the mythical phoenix. He felt the rhythmic infusions of blood filling his phallus, could almost hear the bass sound of it rushing in his ears. Annie must have felt it too, for she gasped and pulled back. They both looked down and when he saw his stiff cock jutting out just like it used to, elation flooded him. He was hard—hard as a post, hard as a rock, hard as a fucking pole.

I'll never take an erection for granted again, he vowed. The next time he got aroused in an inconvenient or embarrassing situation, he'd feel nothing but utter gratitude.

With a whoop of exaltation, he swept her up and swung her around in a circle.

"Yeah!" he exclaimed. "I'm cured! Hallelujah!"

"Nathan!" she squealed, laughing. "Put me down!"

She squirmed in his arms like a playful kitten, so he set her back on her feet and gave a merry kiss to each of her pink cheeks.

With one reassuring hand on his cock, he grinned. "There went your best excuse for not marrying me, Annie, so if you want another one, you'd better think fast, because I

want your answer now. Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Nathan, I don't need an excuse. Of course I'll marry you."

He pulled her into his arms again, his erection pressed between them. He yanked up her dress and slipped his hand inside her panties to cup her bottom.

"Good. Because if you said no," he said, letting his hands roam over the twin globes of her derriere, "I was going to make love to you mercilessly until you said yes."

Annie clutched his shoulders and panted as his fingers explored the steamy cleft, stroking her moist folds, priming her for a shared passion they'd been denied for too long.

"God, I love you, Annie. Let me show you how much." He thrust his hips against her and rubbed himself against her stomach. He laughed, still delirious with the vital, pounding energy centered in his groin.

"Yes, yes," she panted, and he swept her up in his arms and strode toward his room. She was no burden, even across the distance from the beach to the marble steps leading to the lanai. He felt invincible and tireless. With each step he contemplated all the things he was going to do to her, all the things he had longed to do in the long weeks since their return from Pompeii. His renewed virility concentrated the possibilities into a tight beam of primal sexual intention.

By the time they reached the bedroom, his entire body was rigid with need. His love and the urgency to express it had built up to an unbearable level. He felt as though he would die if he couldn't pledge himself to her with his body.

Once inside the bedroom, he made short work of her clothes and pushed her onto the mattress almost roughly, but she was just as hungry for him as he was for her. Annie parted her legs and opened her arms. The look of love on her face as she welcomed him into her body was something he'd cherish forever. He plunged inside her wet warmth with a groan that came from deep within him. Their mouths melded, his tongue stroking hers. With each thrust of his hips, he heard her familiar whimpers of delight.

The rapture that engulfed him was absolute. Love magnified the pleasure, and recreated it into a feeling that encompassed not just his body, but also his mind and soul. Their bodies joined in a timeless rite, a covenant of spirit that bound them together more enduringly than their brief physical union.

"I love you, Annie. I love you."

Annie cried out and arched up against him. Her joy propelled his own ecstasy to its peak and he came with a hoarse shout. His once dormant cock spasmed inside her for what seemed like an eternity.

It had been so very long.

As the sharpness of his climax waned into hazy contentment, he let his eyes sweep over her face. In her blissful smile he saw a future of togetherness, and in her eyes was a depth of devotion he felt he didn't deserve, though he would strive to. She owned him. His life was now hers, his heart as well, and he rejoiced because he knew that a real life with Annie was going to be much better than any fantasy.

The End

About the Author:

Kate Willoughby got hooked on romance in the late seventies when she read *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. Inspired, she and her best friend wrote a contemporary love story involving a multi-millionaire and the restaurant hostess determined to cure his drinking problem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), that manuscript has been lost forever.

Fast forward to college, where she took a creative writing course. Kate still wanted to write love stories, but everyone else in the class was composing Important Literature and Thought-Provoking Poetry. A few devastating critiques later, she gave up, discouraged and embarrassed. Eventually, her muse got over the trauma and pestered her to try her hand at writing again. *Carnal Devotions* is her first published book.

Kate resides in Los Angeles with her husband of fourteen years and her two sons. When the testosterone in the house builds up to unbearable levels, she escapes by reading, cooking, and scrapbooking with friends. Readers can email her at kate_willoughby@yahoo.com

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