

Handle me with Care

Please
Loose Id

Diane Charles Linford

Praise for the writing of Diane Charles Linford

Handle Me with Care

Diane Charles Linford's writing style is superb and captivating, the attention to detail is excellent. The author held me in suspense throughout the book. I hope to read a lot more from this author.

-- Sheri Gilmore, author of *Maslow's Needs* (Loose Id)

This is not an easy book. These are not easy characters, or easy situations. Just like real people, Ulyssa and Stephen frustrate you, make you roll your eyes and want to scream at them, at the same time as they make you root for them. Everything here, from the characters to the course of their love story to the hint of Lovecraftian mystery on a cosmic scale behind it all, is not quite what you expect. It keeps you constantly off kilter and leaves you wanting to know more.

-- Ally Blue, author of *Forgotten Song* (coming soon from Loose Id)

A beautiful tale of a sexy older woman and a hot younger man from different worlds. They find that they have more in common than they think through their dreams. Diane Charles Linford writes a haunting tale that will keep the reader riveted from the first to last word.

-- Eve Vaughn, author of *Blood Brothers: GianMarco's Muse* (Loose Id)

Sensual and compelling, *Handle Me With Care* strikes just the right balance of mystery and romance. I was glued to the page from start to finish.

-- Stephanie Vaughan, author of *Jumping the Fence* (Loose Id)

HANDLE ME WITH CARE

Diane Charles Linford

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:

 SCORCHING

For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some violence.

Handle Me with Care

Diane Charles Linford

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © May 2005 by Diane Charles Linford

Excerpt of *James Dean and the Moonlight Madness Sale* copyright December 2004 by Beatrice Brooks

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-073-7

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Jill Shearer

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin



www.loose-id.com

Prologue

Marlene's Note #1:

She left me a sticky note stuck to the computer monitor, asking me to comment on each incident as she put it down on paper. In the note, she told me that everybody else thought this might be the most workable idea, since nobody could count on me to tell the absolute truth. As usual, she took their side. She reminded me that I have a history of prevaricating whenever I'm confronted directly. And if I knew someone else might be listening, then I'd intentionally distort my perception of reality. Well, fuck her. She could never have accomplished any of the things she's done without me, and she knows it. Even though the rest of those self-important assholes don't want her to admit it, she needs me. Period.

Besides, there are things that I know instinctively about what she's been through. For one thing, I'm not afraid to confront the dreams or the images inside the land of dreams or even the human sharks lurking in reality. And, as much as they might think I'm a liar, I'm not afraid to pursue the truth, either.

So, yeah. I'll be happy to comment.

Marlene.

Chapter One

“It’s all a matter of priorities. Word of mouth said that on one drunken evening my ex-husband admitted that I was a far better fuck than his new wife. Of course, word of mouth couldn’t give him the children he so desperately wanted.” -- From the introduction to *Behind the Lace Curtain* by Ulyssa Kincaid.

Wouldn’t it be marvelous if the truly important and worthwhile people in your life gave off some sort of aura? For example, what if you could walk into a room and see a glow surrounding someone? Then you’d be instantly assured that this person would hold great significance for you. My writing seminar at the local community college should have contained one such telling moment for me. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize it until it was far too late. At the very least I might have identified the person responsible for the craziest, funniest, and sweetest evaluation I’ve ever received.

Let me explain. I used one of those end-of-the-seminar forms where the participant rated the instructor’s performance by marking it from excellent (5) down to poor (1) scale. Then, the form leaves a brief space for personal comments.

One particular comment I received that day threw me totally off balance: “Personally, I enjoyed your friendliness, your smile, and the way you presented your material. Without a doubt, you have the biggest, most splendid tits and shapeliest ass of any of the seminar lecturers we’ve had all week. But as much as I loved watching your ass move and your tits bounce, I truly enjoyed your writing. Thank you for coming.”

I checked with the seminar facilitator to find out whether she saw the student who turned in this evaluation. She laughed when she read the comments, but had no idea who might have written them. I asked around for the next few hours or so, trying to compare

names and faces from that afternoon to a single piece of paper. No luck. I couldn't get a read on an attitude or a telepathic communication or even divine guidance.

A song from the '80s played on one of the classic rock radio stations as I packed up and wandered down the hall toward the parking lot: "I've been fobbed off, and I've been fooled. I've been robbed and ridiculed. In day care centers and night school --"

That sounded like *Handle With Care* by the Traveling Wilburys -- one of my favorite '80s tunes. Symbolic of good times and a bright future. Jeez, I hadn't heard that song in ages.

I went about the business of my routine and, eventually, forgot about the evaluation.

But as fate would have it, I met Stephen Dryor through a letter in response to a personal ad I'd placed as a sort of experiment for an article on dating services I'd had in mind. I put my ad on one of those dating services that have the double blind security of both ordinary mail and an Internet dating screening. Of course, I had to go through all the rigmarole of an extensive biography and personality analysis, but I figured the research would be worth the effort. Anyway, I decided to respond to Stephen.

I had enough sense to be cautious. He'd sent me several long letters, and I'd sent him my picture with one of my replies. The photo was from last year. I was at my thirty-year-old best: brunette, blue-eyed, smoothly skinned, I glowed with a strong European background that stressed my light porcelain skin. Stephen sent me back another letter -- period. He probed me about my life and my family -- whether I had any children, or if I even wanted them. But it was a few more emails and even a phone call or two before I began to badger him about sending me his picture. I enjoyed our conversations; he was articulate, soft spoken, and lots of fun, but I still couldn't quite guess what he looked like. Finally he mailed out his picture.

My mind's eye had imagined him totally wrong. Stephen Benjamin Dryor, Jr., was young, well-dressed, professional-looking, and very, very black!

In the letter he enclosed, he asked me to call him as soon as I received his photograph. I called him immediately.

"So, Lyss, are you shocked?" he asked.

"No." Then I realized that he'd know that I was lying. "Well, yes. I don't know -- maybe a little." I hesitated. "I should've suspected something like this might be the case when you delayed sending me your picture for so long."

"So what are the chances that you and I can still go out on a date together?"

I laughed an embarrassed little laugh, and took a deep breath before I answered him. What could I say? *Absolutely not, Stephen! This was just research for an article.* No, I couldn't be that cold. Besides, it still counted as research if we went on the date.

"I guess our chances are still okay."

"Good! Let me pick you up tonight before you change your mind."

I was a jangle of contradictions that evening. Take my dress, for example. Fitted at the waistline, the cut really flattered my figure. The dark blue skirt, with its sexy, uneven hemline trimmed in ribbons, flowed with my every move. I looked great, but why was I going to all this trouble for this date? It didn't make sense.

I sat in front of the mirror trying to put on my make-up. I'd placed Stephen's picture against a bottle of skin lotion so that I could gaze at his image periodically while I primped and powdered. My hands trembled. *Damn*. It took my full concentration just to apply my lipstick, let alone pencil in anything around my eyes. *Stop it, you fool!* I told myself. *This is just a date. It's not like you're going to go back to his place to fuck him after it's all over.* I took a deep breath. Then I took another. Okay, ready. *I hope.*

In his letters, Stephen told me he was six feet three inches tall and twenty-five years old. Although he turned out to be as tall as I expected, he barely looked twenty-one, which as it turns out was closer to his actual age. I found out later he was still just twenty. Though he was quite good-looking in person, Stephen had the most cruelly handsome features I'd ever seen. He was handsome to the point of being pretty, yet his mouth and flattened, exaggerated wide nose kept him out of the Hollywood kind of pretty. Stephen had a fascinating sense of irony, which he substituted for a sense of humor. *Tall, dark, and cruel?* Actually, he turned out to be fun to hang around. Yet, first and foremost in my mind, I kept coming back to the fact that Stephen Dryor was probably more than ten years younger than I was -- and black.

I was thirty-one, closing in on thirty-two; five-foot-six, an average height for a woman; and attractive enough considering I was probably nine or ten pounds on the wrong side of the scales. I'm not particularly worldly, even considering my background, and, yes, I'm very white.

Dinner was a subtle form of hell, though exciting, because I'd never been able to afford to go to the Bacchus Room. I felt like every other customer in the restaurant stared at us, and that made me nervous. And the more nervous I became, the more paranoid I felt.

The wait staff was courteous and extremely polite. I told myself that would make up for the customers' glares and frowns. It didn't, but I almost had myself convinced.

Since my bust line extended far enough forward to overlap the edge of the table, any bits of salad I inadvertently dropped landed on my top, or worse, got trapped down in my cleavage. I'm sure I must have turned beet red half a dozen times.

At least he didn't laugh when I finally told him how nervous I'd become. He merely nodded. Since I had both a deeply religious background and a frustrating sexual awareness of what seemed to be going down between us, every other thing about our first evening together told me that Stephen wasn't right for me. *I've met his kind before*, I told myself. Which was a lie, of course; I'd never met anyone like Stephen. Ever. I might have *seen* someone like him, but --

“Wait a minute!” I stared into his face as if for the first time. “Stephen, did you attend the writing seminar at the community college a few weeks back?”

He nodded and smiled. “I took it for course credit. I haven’t graduated yet. I’m still working full time for the Dryor Trust, so the best I can manage right now is part time.”

Sudden enlightenment hit me. During my presentation of the writing seminar, I’d been asked what sort of research a writer might need to do to build a marketable article. So I mentioned my Internet dating ad as an example of the kind of article I had in mind. Though I’d mentioned several other possibilities in my portion of the writing seminar, I must have put a little extra emphasis on the pursuit of that story. Apparently, someone else had not forgotten.

I think my eyes might have sparkled. “Did you write an evaluation about how great my tits looked?”

“Guilty. Of course, objectively speaking, I was absolutely right.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “Seeing as how the rest of the seminar lecturers were men in their forties and fifties and dear, sweet Ellen, who’s got to be over sixty, I can see where I might have the best tits and ass of any other presenter.”

“You don’t get out of it that easily.” My companion smiled. “You had the best tits and ass in the whole lecture hall. I know. I’m a connoisseur. That’s why I found it so hard to believe when I read in your letter that you didn’t have any children.”

“It wasn’t for lack of trying.” *Shit! Why did I tell him that?*

He chuckled. “Glad to hear that.”

I glanced up and winced. A couple of familiar figures stood in the entrance. If there was anyone I didn’t want to run into that night, it was my ex-husband, Myron, and his new wife, Cherise. They paled when they saw me. Both of them stood with their mouths open so wide I could see imaginary flies buzzing in and out of them. Thinking quickly, I stood up and started to drag Stephen over toward the happy couple as if to introduce him, but they waved me off with a quick remark about reservations for the wrong restaurant, and leaped out of the entrance lobby, probably on a dead run for the parking lot. Wrong restaurant, indeed. If I knew Ron, he’d be taking his brand new bimbo trophy wife out to McDonald’s for their special night out together without their new baby. Given half an excuse, he’d go cheap.

I looked back at Stephen, taking in his puzzled frown. It was all I could do not to break out laughing. As it was, I bit down hard on the inside of my lower lip.

He looked at me for a second and then asked, “What just happened?”

“That was my ex-husband and his new wife.” But the more I tried to keep from falling into hysterics over my ex’s reaction, the more difficult it was to maintain control. Finally, I couldn’t hold back my laughter any more. I had to tell Stephen my take on the preceding events.

Impulsively I took his hand, and we started back toward our table. "I suspect Ron's just gone into shock. First, that I might be dating anyone, and second, that it's someone that looks like -- like you."

"You mean someone who's black?" He kept a straight face, but when he looked at me, I giggled again.

"Oh, yeah," I snickered. "It's killing him."

We sat down at our table again, and Stephen ordered another round of drinks.

I don't know why the impulsive move to share something so self-indulgent and petty made me feel better, but it did. Now that my nerves had steadied, the night had to go uphill. For some reason, I felt compelled to share some of my adoption agency experiences with Stephen. "You know, I almost had Myron convinced to adopt a Korean baby."

"Is that so? Somehow from what you've indicated about your ex, I just don't imagine that happening."

I nodded and sighed. "In the end, he'd decided that the time wasn't right."

Stephen caught my gaze and nodded sympathetically. He looked as if he was about to reply, when he glanced to our right. He frowned. "Uh-oh."

A moment later, a white-haired older gentleman walked over to the table. He offered Stephen his hand. "Mr. Dryor."

Stephen stood. "Professor Laban. How nice to see you."

I could tell by his voice that Stephen was only being polite. He didn't like this man, and wasn't pleased to see him at all.

"Professor Laban, this is Ms. Kincaid. Lyssa, Dr. Laban specializes in the study of ancient artifacts. He's with the university."

"Dedrick Laban, Ph.D., consultant to several universities, actually," the professor said.

I shook his hand and discovered a damp coolness clinging to his skin. Large and broad-shouldered, the professor had a great shock of white hair that fell down over his wrap-around dark glasses. Something told me the glasses were not an affectation, but I wasn't sure why he required them. Diabetes, maybe?

"Have you thought some more about accepting the museum consortium's offer? We may not have money of the private collectors but we do have museum facilities to maintain it."

"It's not really my decision to make," Stephen replied. "It's the Dryor Trust's -- which makes it my mother's decision. Quite frankly, I don't think she's ready to part with it yet."

"Yes, your father told me it would be something like that."

"You've spoken to him?"

"He made my quest sound somewhat hopeless."

"Yes, he would," Stephen replied.

"I guess I was hoping I'd fare better with you." Professor Laban seemed to stare down at me from behind his glasses. "Ms. Kincaid, I wonder if we don't have another person in common."

"Really?"

"Christiana Yee, the psychiatrist."

"Of course, Dr. Chris," I replied. "I was a patient of hers."

"I know. You were one of the patients she recommended for my dream study."

"I didn't know that was your study," I said. "Sorry I couldn't participate. I was still going through the throes of my divorce back then."

"I understand. She did refer another patient to me who looks amazingly like you. Marlene Moody. She could be your twin."

I shivered and looked away, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. "Yes, people say ... we look alike."

"You know what they say, 'Everyone has a doppelganger.'" The doctor chortled. "Edgar Allan Poe even wrote one of his great tales about that. Somewhere out there is a double for each of us."

I smiled weakly and nodded.

"Well, if you see her, say *hola* for me," he said.

Unnerved, I merely nodded again.

The professor pulled a business card from his jacket pocket. "And, Stephen, you know where to reach me, if you or your family changes your mind."

"Yes, I do." Stephen extended his hand again. "Thank you for your offer."

"*Adios*," the professor said, waving. He moved quickly for an older man. I watched him fade into the milling throng waiting at the front exit of the restaurant, and then he disappeared.

Relieved, I offered Stephen a small smile. "Well, that was disturbing."

Stephen nodded. "He's a persistent man. Who's Marlene Moody?"

"Someone I'd just as soon not discuss." I quickly changed the subject. "Does he mean what he says about purchasing this artifact from your family?"

"It's worth far more than his people are willing to offer."

"Does he always wear those wrap-around sunglasses?"

Stephen grinned. "To my knowledge nobody's ever seen his eyes."

"You're kidding."

"Yeah, I'm kidding. I really don't know. *I've* never seen them though." The waiter brought us our bill. As Stephen paid it, he asked, "Say, would you like to see the artifact we've been talking about?"

I smiled and nodded. "Actually I would."

"C'mon then, it's at my place."

I still don't know what possessed me to accompany Stephen Dryor home after we finished dinner, but I told myself it was more research. After all, I'd never seen the inside of a ritzy uptown condo.

His family's apartment was on the eighth floor of Hurley House, a restored historic building in the heart of the uptown district, exciting, yet somewhat seedy at the same time. The whole area was yin and yang; so nobody seemed to be too surprised when a slightly busty white woman timidly accompanied a strutting young black man into the Hurley House lobby. I could hear the echoes of my heels tapping on the wood parquet floor of the lobby. The hair on my arms stood up as I followed him inside.

The security guard buzzed him through to the inner entrance, and Stephen said a few pleasantries to the officer, and introduced me while we waited for the elevator. "Sam, this is Ms. Kincaid, the writer."

God, did he ever know the right words to say. *Ms. Kincaid, the writer*. I melted.

Stephen led me into the elevator and punched the button for the eighth floor. He turned, facing me, and gently seized my arms. His touch felt chilling and warming at the same time. I groped for something to say. All I could come up with was an awkward murmur. "This is the first time I've ever ... uhh ... dated someone I-like you."

"I guessed that." He cautiously moved his dark hands up to caress my face. "I hope it doesn't stop us from seeing each other again."

"Again?" I thought aloud. "My God, this is crazy."

"Not too crazy, I hope. Listen, Lyss, just stay for a nightcap, and then I'll take you home, okay?"

I nodded. I didn't dare move away as his lips hovered close to mine. He smelled clean and sweet and, not surprisingly, rather masculine. As our lips slowly came together, the elevator doors opened. I pulled back from him, and he sighed. Leading me down the ornate hallway, my high heels rat-tatting on the classic hardwood floor, Stephen held onto my hand until it came time to unlock the door.

Once inside the condo, Stephen went straight to the kitchen, while I walked around the living room and looked at things I knew I couldn't afford on triple my pay as a freelance writer and proofreader. "This is a beautiful place."

"It's belongs to my family. I'll tell them you think so," Stephen called back from the kitchen.

"Don't tell anyone that! They'll think you brought me up here to -- you know -- to party."

"Really? Yeah, good point. That's exactly what they'd think."

I heard a lot of busy rustling sounds coming from the kitchen. God only knows what some men do in there.

Then I saw the painting hidden behind a surprising array of security devices. No, wait. Not a painting, more of a bas-relief. A statue of a woman or an image that looked like a woman stood guarding a great carved staircase that descended into a vast area. More than vast, it seemed almost limitless. And floating out into space over it was an octagonal shape. *The Seventy Steps of Light Slumber*, the work was called. But I didn't see a signature.

I knew this scene. "Who's this by?"

"What?" he answered from the kitchen.

"*The Seventy Steps of Light Slumber*. Is this the original?"

"Before the original," he said from the other room.

"Now, what's that supposed to mean?"

"That's a bas-relief that pre-dates the Sumerians. Technically the trust owns it, which in reality means that my mom's family owns it."

"Sumerians? Are you sure? It looks so -- so modern."

"We've had it appraised by art historians and authenticators. It's the real deal. That's what Professor Laban's consortium wishes to buy."

I cleared my throat. "So ... um ... If you don't mind my asking, what's it worth?"

"It's a museum piece. It's priceless."

"P-priceless as in over a couple hundred grand?"

I heard him laugh. "Let's just say it should start at about a million-two. The museum people, represented by Professor Laban, are offering less than eight hundred thousand. The family won't accept that unless we get a really great tax deal."

I continued to stare. The painting was fascinatingly complex, busy, almost baroque, but the woman depicted was -- I don't know -- wrong. She was genuinely sensuous, curvaceous even, yet -- I didn't know exactly how to phrase it, but the bulges representing the train at the bottom of her chiton looked less like cloth and more like -- what?

I reached up and traced the folds of the tunic with my fingertips.

"Tentacles?" I muttered. "That can't be right."

"What?"

"This silver octagonal thing hanging in space," I asked, while trying to shake the tentacle image out of my head. "Is it supposed to be a flying saucer?"

"Actually, it's a legendary lost relic," he said, pushing through the kitchen door. "Sort of a pre-historic Holy Grail."

Stephen returned to the living room holding two wine glasses -- one for each of us. He acted as if the sudden change in his appearance was perfectly normal. But, as he walked over to hand me my glass, I paled.

“Well,” he said, “I hope this is to your liking.”

Stephen was totally nude. He was six feet three inches of muscular slimness and had a very calculatingly innocent look on his face. I couldn’t help myself, the first thing I did was look down.

Besides possessing every possible positive attribute of both size and grandeur which a certain part of a man’s torso could exhibit to a woman, Stephen displayed that sort of smug self-confidence with the rest of his physique that athletes and body builders have. But he didn’t exhibit the broad musculature of the thighs, arms, and back like so many pro body builders. Still, I could tell that he was both comfortable in his skin and with the way his appearance affected the opposite sex.

“I-I’m stunned,” I whispered. Still, I kept drinking in the sight of his nakedness while I gulped at my wine. “That was a-a --”

“Very impetuous and unfair thing to do to someone I’ve just met,” he responded.

I swallowed a thick lump in my throat and shrugged.

The telephone rang. He acted as if he’d let the answering machine get it, but suddenly, after glancing at the caller ID, he changed his mind. “This is Stephen Dryor.” There was a pause. “I see. Lyssa, did you touch the painting or come in contact with any of the security devices?”

I raised my hand to my mouth and nodded.

“That’s okay,” he said into the telephone. “No harm done. The control word is Dagon. D-A-G-O-N.”

Then he chuckled. “No, thank you! I’m very glad you were on the job.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “I didn’t know.”

“It happens,” he said with a shrug. “Did you finish your drink already?”

Only a drop of wine remained in the bottom of my glass. Absentmindedly, I nodded. Immediately he provided a refill. I stared into the amber depths for a moment, then tipped my glass up to my mouth. Another hit couldn’t hurt right now.

My gaze locked with his. Stephen seemed to emanate some ungodly knowledge of what lay in the back of my mind, for as I finished my second drink, he said softly, “Take your time with the wine, Lyss. We have all night.”

He lifted his wine glass. “Here’s to us,” he said, touching my glass with his. “And to whatever the future may hold.”

I think I mouthed the word *cheers*. But I emptied my wine glass all the same. Forcing myself to break eye contact with him, I found myself staring at his semi-erect penis, which totally complimented the near perfection of his body. “Wh-what does Dagon mean?”

“It’s not important.” He smiled at me as he saw where my gaze had landed. “Ulyssa, would you agree that one of us is probably overdressed for the occasion?”

“I-I’m n-not sure what you --” I stammered. “I intend t-to remain dressed, if that’s what you mean.”

He moved a step closer than necessary to refill my glass. “Really?” he replied. “That’s just fine with me.” But he placed the wine bottle on a nearby table, and then his hands went matter-of-factly to my dress hooks. His nimble fingers were quite proficient. *Quite an expert*, I suddenly thought. His aroma, though stronger, was still quite intoxicating. And that upset me more than anything. This was so *not right*! I should feel so turned on. Still, I allowed him to continue to finagle with my clothing for about twenty or thirty seconds before I stepped back.

I stared hard at the brash young man for a moment. Then, taking a deep breath, I brought my own hands up to my dress. I continued to undo the hooks, even as I backed away from him. “I don’t know why I’m doing this.”

“It’s probably the wine.”

No, it’s the scenery! I thought, as I glanced at his dark, well-built body once more. As Stephen reached out, running his open palm along my now exposed ribcage, just missing my bra by mere millimeters, I studied the startling contrast of his dark hand against my own pale flesh. Even in the subdued light of the living room, the contrast was a starkly forbidding one.

He looked at me as if he’d read my mind, and smiled. “Don’t you think every woman should have a black knight in her life at least once?”

I answered him slowly. “What I think is that I’m a convenient woman on a night when any female will do.” Yet, I continued to disrobe. I dared not move for fear my body would tremble in fear. A steady hand reached out to lie gently upon my hip.

“Tell me, did your grandparents immigrate to the city?”

What? I stared at him in disbelief for a moment, and then I answered his question.

“Back in the 1920s.” I looked at him, still puzzled by his question. Why had he asked? But then I continued. “Both of my grandparents’ families came from an area that was probably thirty or forty miles away from each other at most. Although my parents met here, they could just as easily have met in the old country.” Then I turned my back to him and whispered. “Undo my bra.”

“You have only to ask.”

It took him but a moment. Then his hands slipped down my spine until they pressed and rolled against my hips. He used his thumb, firmly working a few of the vertebrae along my spine. A nerve back there zinged with electric intensity. I yowled in surprise.

“Amazing where the body stores tension, isn’t it?” Sliding his hands southward he caressed my ass. “My father’s ancestors came from the old Gold Coast of Africa, I’m told. Of course, that was nearly a hundred and eighty years before I was born.”

As I turned back around to face him, I gulped. Naturally, I’d had men stare at my breasts before. But there was something so warm and appreciative in his gaze, I didn’t mind

that I stood in Stephen's presence totally open to his fixed attention. His cruelly shaped mouth suddenly began to close in on my lips. I stood nearly naked before him, still fighting the inevitable, and suddenly we were kissing. The scent of naked masculine flesh filled my senses, telling me sweet pheromone tales about how men and women throughout the ages discovered wondrous things about each other. The scent of his body spoke right to the core of my being. Even if he'd been lying, my body would have sworn that he was telling me the truth.

"Lyssa, stay here with me tonight. We've both come thousands of miles on a life journey that has led us right to one another." Stephen held out his hand. "Come with me, and let me make love to you."

I shook my head. "Too sudden." But a sudden gush of wetness swept through my loins. My panties saturated to such a point, a tiny trickle began to drip down the inside of my thigh. Still I forced myself to confront him. "Stephen, why would someone like you go through all of this trouble just to fuck a woman over a decade your senior? There have to be a thousand girls out there more suitable to your needs."

"No, there aren't." He walked over to an end table and picked up a familiar-looking paperback book. "You see, I've read your work."

"What?"

"Sure. You didn't think that I only knew your stuff from on-line, did you?"

Oh, my God, a naked black man stood before me clutching a copy of *Behind the Lace Curtain*. I'd used my divorce settlement to self-publish the first decent book I'd ever written. Of course, everybody I knew told me it was a waste of money. Sure, maybe it was impetuous, maybe it had been merely a way to pad my résumé, but, damn it, it was mine.

"I read this even before I attended your seminar at the college," Stephen continued. "That's one of the reasons I went!"

"You've read it?"

"Of course, I have! A lot of people recognize that your short stories stir the loins," he murmured. "But what you've written in here touches the heart and mind. Who knows? I think it may cut to my very soul."

Could he be serious? I stood there half-naked and totally dumbfounded. Even as I persisted to hold back from him, Stephen continued to hold out his hand to me.

He liked my book? He liked my book!

Suddenly without reservation, I stepped into his embrace. I met his lips with mine and after a brief faltering moment, I caught the agitation of his tongue working against my mouth. Opening to receive his probing urgency inside, I capitulated. Giving in hesitantly at first, I began cultivating each sensation of his intimate kiss. He tasted sweet! A cliché, I know, but true nonetheless. One kiss and then another, I briefly allowed the pleasure of his lips to bond to me at this point.

“Is that really your objective opinion?”

His kisses stopped for a moment while he curled his fingers under the elastic waistband of my panties. “I couldn’t possibly remain objective thinking about you.”

Slowly, he rolled my cotton panties down over my hips. He released them, and they dropped to my ankles. I could feel their dampness as I stepped out of them. I didn’t feel as proud of my body as Stephen obviously felt of his, and yet, I knew that tonight we’d find each other enticing. One glimpse down past the flat planes of his abdomen showed me what he thought of having me near. His thick black dick pointed at my belly like a dowsing rod straining to reach refreshing moisture.

A glance at the glans, my punning mind quipped. Stop that!

“Stephen,” I whispered. “I’m Catholic. Do you know what that means to me?”

“I don’t know, Lyss. What does it mean?” He actually sounded sincere.

“It means that I’m not prepared f-for any of this. It’s easier to follow the church’s official doctrine about birth control when you’re not --” I stalled for second, and then I asked him, “Do you have a condom?”

“I’ll look and see if maybe there’s one left in the bedroom, okay?”

I sighed. “Fat chance of that.”

“Does that mean you want to stop?” Stephen asked me. But my chivalrous gentleman stood forth with his saber erect, saluting my honor. We both knew the answer to that question already. Hell, I was standing here naked in front of him. I sighed and shook my head. I realized there was no stopping us now, but I hated having to count on my body’s rhythm.

“Stephen, aren’t you afraid of disease?” I had to ask him for my own sake. “Doesn’t that scare you?”

“Do you have some sort of exotic disease, Lyssa?”

I shook my head. “But you don’t know that.”

“Well, I’ll tell you a secret,” Stephen whispered. “I just had my blood tested about three weeks ago for a doctor’s examination. The test came back fine. Besides that, I haven’t had sex since -- well, since last year.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really?” I paused for a moment. “Aren’t you afraid of pregnancy?”

He smiled, and then simply shrugged.

I looked into his dark eyes again and saw his reply. *No, of course he wasn’t concerned about pregnancy.* Now I wanted to laugh as I quietly padded stark naked behind this naked man; my pale hand held in the hand of a naked black man headed deliberately for his bedroom. Suddenly I laughed out loud in the hallway of the condo as well as the corridors of my mind.

Of course *he* wouldn't be afraid.

Well, I told myself, *one time shouldn't really matter*. I didn't think we'd ever see each other again, anyway. Besides, it had been a number of months since I'd gotten laid. One time wouldn't hurt, would it? Something enticed me to stay close to him while we walked silently to his bed. Not the least of which was the possibility that as a potentially fertile woman, I should have feared the worst. I was taking quite a chance. Why was I agreeing to this?

Because every now and then, a girl deserves a good fuck!

Things actually happened between us much faster than I would have thought. Stephen and I became simplicity itself in a very short time. More than just someone who looked like a body builder, he was a keg of pure testosterone from the broadness of his nose and large lips to the bulky protuberance of his unbelievably thick cock.

Impetuously, Stephen rolled up over me, carefully positioned himself above me by kneeling in between my thighs, and then gently pried my legs apart with his hands, knees, and thighs. I soon discovered that he wasn't as gentle and innocent as he tried to put on. His first attempt to breach the gap between us turned out to be rougher, more primal than I'd expected. He dropped down snugly against my torso and balanced himself right on my hips. Then he placed his hands on my shoulders while I carefully attempted to wrap my legs around his buttocks.

Reaching down, I grabbed hold of Stephen's rigid penis and guided him straight into the beautiful, warm, slick vise of flesh that would tell this young man I was his for the night. I was both glad and relieved I'd gotten so wet. He penetrated me slowly for the first few strokes, cautiously slipping in the circumcised head of his cock, and then, once we'd established our hold on each other, he shifted into a steadier rhythm. We soon learned how far we could trust one another.

"Lord, you feel so beautiful, Lyssa," he murmured. "Thank you for this."

He said I felt beautiful!

I'd never felt my cervix bumped during lovemaking. I think my eyes must have popped wide open from the sensation. It didn't hurt; it was just so different from anything I'd ever encountered. From that time forth, every few thrusts would touch me more deeply than I'd ever have expected.

I can't help it; I'm a moaner. Stephen obviously loved that about me. The more I moaned, the more urgently his bulging, pulsing cock pushed and retreated within me. I tipped my whole body upward to meet his jutting motions as if I could use his smooth thrusts to quench an inner fire. The more he prodded into me, the more I opened up underneath him.

As he made love to me, Stephen ran his hands all over my body from my mouth to my tits, abdomen and ass. He made some unintelligible noises, but all of them sounded ecstatic. For my part, I felt as close to fulfilled as I ever had before. Joining this young black man sexually had transported me to a place where everything felt exciting and meaningful, and,

yes, still frightening. I felt incredibly vulnerable, but I didn't want to give up a single one of those feelings -- not even the fearful ones.

Stephen pulled me tightly against him and kissed me again, exploring me with his lips and tongue. I met each languid stroke, gently sucking and then playfully sparring, then deepening until I had to pull back to catch my breath.

"Someday, beautiful, I'm going to taste every square inch of your body," he murmured.

My answer was lost in a loud moan.

Damn, how easy to let my body open up beneath him. He pushed so deeply into me, I thought he might have lodged someplace under my ribs. I moaned again. Naturally, that turned him on even more. I began to rub the beads of sweat right off his back as he thrust down inside me again and again. I clenched my muscles, grabbing hold of his cock to draw in every last inch of him.

"Am I everything you expected?" I asked, panting through my moans by this time.

My little query must have broken his concentration. He stopped for a second or two. "Everything!" Stephen groaned. "And more."

I could almost believe he meant it. Then there was a change in his hardness -- his tip lodged a little deeper than before, even while his shaft continued to move in and out of my vagina. I watched the small muscles play across his face. His eyes opened and closed, his mouth set in a contorted grimace.

Unfortunately, neither Stephen nor I could last much longer. I placed my hand against his head and pulled him down into the curve where my shoulder met my throat. He nipped at the nape of my neck, and I heard a rush of air suck hard into his lungs.

Clasped firmly between my legs, moving his hips with singular insistence, Stephen began trembling. I could feel his erection swelling even more as he pressed inside me. I'd coaxed him right up to the point of climaxing. To further complicate matters, I was about to come, too.

"Unnghh! No." I gasped. I recognized the soft tingling beat that pumped against my vaginal intruder. Stretched tightly around his thick erection, I suddenly felt the whipping nerves spasm and a warm gush of liquid from deep within me washed around Stephen's blunt presence. *No, wait, please, don't come inside me!* I wanted to cry out, but I couldn't speak.

My strong climax seemed to trigger something in Stephen. He increased his pace, touching my face and pushing back my hair to place his broad lips onto my gasping mouth. I could barely breathe, but Stephen pushed and retreated faster and faster, so I lifted my legs to allow him a better angle, an even deeper penetration. His dick thumped the very bottom of my vaginal well over and over and more -- What was I doing? Could it be considered a voluntary action? After all, this wasn't something that a woman could just bail out from under. Sure, I'd consented, but I hadn't exactly volunteered for what was about to happen. I

was partially responsible, yes ... well, half responsible. After all, the excitement and the novelty of the situation had a lot to do with it. I had to admit that part of me yearned deeply for this experience.

But the other half of my current situation was totally out of my hands -- out of my hands? Yes, but not out of my cunt! I probably should have put a stop to his actions, but I figured that it wouldn't be all that consequential. After all, I thought, what difference would a few more seconds make? So I placed my hands around his head while we continued to kiss, and I greedily sucked on Stephen's tongue as he thrust into me. My pussy made loud moist sounds from the pressure of the large cock inside me. Slurping noises that I figured could be heard all through the condo and probably the whole eighth floor.

Now that my naked body and open loins lay splayed and ploughed by the length and breadth of his cock, a few more moments of Stephen Dryor's plunging became a treat of pure delight. His chest and body convulsed. He inhaled as if his life had been pushed beyond the edge, and he might never catch his breath again. My nerves marveled at the electrifying way his body screamed out with lust and desire and need. Soon those few seconds that shouldn't have made much of a change between Stephen and me took on monumental importance. I came again, moaning with pleasure directly into his ear. And all the while I continued to let this young black man fuck my brains out.

Sensing both the tightness in his muscles and his renewed efforts to keep pressing inward, I had no way of anticipating how enduring this happenstance was to become. Stephen's endeavors to prod deeper and longer into my supple vagina shouldn't have been a surprise to me. I mean, I could tell his mind was in high gear. After a convulsive grip of tension, a rousing surge sparked through my mind and body. Stephen clung to me, we clung to each other, our bodies melded together as one. Then with a dim sense of foreboding, I knew all too well where all this intimacy was leading us. With a curious squeal, Stephen gasped.

Now it really was too late to bail out. I closed my eyes and silently mouthed a single word: *No*.

Too late.

The heated spray of his first climactic gush of semen burst forth from Stephen's system, spewing out from his erect shaft. I felt his wet, prolific seed splashing hot against my cervix, and that both startled me and jolted me into coming again.

Damn it, I thought, this wasn't supposed to feel so good! Nothing in my marriage had prepared me for this moment. The reality of Stephen -- the reality of us together -- intoxicated me. Perhaps this was just the thing I needed at the moment to go forward with my life. Maybe now I could put my divorce behind me.

Stephen clamped down against my open mouth, and I drank in the taste of him. My nerves tingled wildly behind my belly button and where my flesh enveloped his. I'd squeezed my eyes tightly shut, when suddenly he lifted his head.

“Ohhh ... yessss,” Stephen Benjamin Dryor, Jr., grunted out in full release.

Quite by nature’s design, Stephen unleashed long sprays of semen that splashed out in hot, prolonged intervals of creamy wetness. His ravishing climax bathed me totally with his moist, sticky juices, which oozed quickly out of my vagina and onto the bed. Immediately following were several more seconds of a moderately steady, pumping stream of consistent release, his liquid passion slowed to a dribble, and the puddling flow of semen that cached into my loins for another half a minute swam frantically, urgently seeking to complete the single-minded mission of such specialized cells.

I was never so frightened and never so turned on.

I’d locked my hands around the back of his neck, and I held on as he slowed the speed of his strokes. *God, please, I don’t want this to stop!*

Clinically, the culmination of twenty-plus minutes conjoined together turned quickly into a mere fifty to fifty-five seconds of ejaculatory climax on his part.

But, wow! What that twenty-plus minutes had done to my mind and body! To say I wasn’t prepared for this was an understatement. So, I lay there quietly. So much had happened to me. My impetuous thirty-one-year-old Caucasian body had taken a new man -- a young man, barely twenty -- a handsome stranger -- an African American man whose semen now flowed within me; a man whose elongated length I’d enveloped until it had completed its biological function and then softened.

I’d never done such a thing with any man of color ever before. All my life I’d been taught that it was wrong. Funny, it didn’t feel as wrong as I’d been told. *But this was a one-time thing*, I told myself. I had no reason to do it again. One time was more than sufficient.

Sure it was.

* * * * *

He ran ahead of me along the dark and tilting landscape. Quickly passing the life-sized carving of the womanly statue guarding entrance to the stairs; he’d almost sprinted out of my sight. I wanted to call to him, beg him to wait for me, but I didn’t. I slowed down to examine the statue, instead.

The sculpture of the woman wore ancient-style armor, like some sort of fantasy painting on a sword and sorcery paperback book cover. Her form-fitting armor was more notable for what it didn’t cover than what it did. And what it didn’t cover was a belly pouching out slightly as if she were in the earliest stages of pregnancy.

Her face looked familiar somehow. I felt compelled to lift the sculpted folds of her lower tunic and see if she had tentacles underneath, but I knew I had to follow my young black man down those steps.

Stephen took the steps quickly, sometimes two at a time while I followed after him. They were slippery with a viscous liquid, and I slid a few times, nearly losing my balance.

How did Stephen do it? Was he wearing any clothing? I knew I was naked, but I didn't care. I had to know what was down below. I had to know why he was running so fast down these steps. I had to know.

A cavern stretched out in front of us, but the setting kept moving. I kept feeling that flowing, tilting turmoil that kept my inner ear off balance. In the very center of the cavern, a huge undulating pillar of flame that started under the floor and billowed upward, burned in a column past the ceiling. Stephen stopped here and began talking with a man; at least I think it was a man. He seemed to be late middle age, but he was muscular and sinewy. Bronze-skinned, the man was dressed rather like an Egyptian priest, only more exotic. With leather armor, an elaborate neck adornment, and a tall Middle Eastern style headdress with cloth covering his ears, he seemed to belong to another era -- another eon!

I suppose he fit into the magic of the place, but I'd never seen anything like him before.

Suddenly a second man, dressed similarly, stepped out to confront me. "You belong to him, don't you?"

I stumbled over my words. "B-belong? I-I don't think I belong to anyone."

The man standing before me smiled. "I am one of two priests here at the Cavern of the Pillar of Flame. We are here to help you on your journey. Your friend has been here before, and he is almost prepared. But you are not yet ready."

"If it has to do with my clothes, I'll put --"

"Clothes or no clothes, you are not ready."

It was then I heard a muted sound, mewling softly, eerily as if from tiny human lungs. I glanced at Stephen. He smiled. Did he hear it, too? I looked to the right of the priest of the pillar of flame and moved, as if to side-step him as one might try to slip past a guard in a basketball game, yet I could see nothing beyond him.

"That sound comes from down below. It is part of your destiny here in the dream dimension," the priest said, as he continued to block my way.

"Then I need to go see what it is!" I insisted.

"It is not your time yet."

* * * * *

I woke up sweaty and shivering at the same time. Where the hell was I? I turned to my right and saw the dark, muscular body of a naked man lying beside me.

A naked black man! Oh, shit!

Down below, down where it counted, I was newly sore with a stretched feeling that I hadn't experienced in months. Stephen Dryor snored fitfully next to me. But something besides Stephen's snoring had awakened me. A feeling that had been very troubling woke me.

He had been in my strange dream! I wanted to wake him and ask him a million questions, but I held off.

Besides, I had to pee.

* * * * *

Marlene's Note #2:

Does she think that I don't remember how she wandered around the apartment the next morning in a total daze? I sensed exactly what she was going through. We both were raised pretty damned Catholic when it came down to the sensations in life. You know, those contradictory combinations of brazen and demure, careful and unmindful, hesitant and shameless that girls develop as we grow up under the heavy constrictions of the church culture. I had a feeling Lyssa wanted to talk about something important, but she absolutely refused to say anything to me.

I listened to her shower twice that morning. Twice! Not that any of her after-the-fact cleansing would make any difference in the least, but she probably felt it was necessary.

A while back, we'd bet each other that we could quit smoking, but I'd hidden an unopened pack of menthol cigarettes in my underwear drawer. That morning, Ulyssa searched through my things until she found those cigarettes. She had them open and lit one in a matter of moments. Did she ask me? Did she even beg my pardon? Nope.

She probably smoked close to five of them, sitting in only her tee-shirt and panties perched next to the telephone. She stared at the clock, then switched to the telephone, and then back to the clock. I never saw anybody watch a phone so intently while waiting for it to do something. When it finally rang, she jumped two feet in the air, and her hand hit the ashtray. She dislodged her burning cigarette and nearly set fire to last night's newspaper.

Marlene.

Chapter Two

“Hi, how are you?” Stephen asked me over the phone the afternoon of the day after he’d seduced me. I looked at my clock. He said he’d call me right after noon. The time read 12:01.

“Sore and tired,” I said. “Frightened ... and happy, and probably a thousand other emotions running at breakneck speed through my mind.”

“I told you I’d call you first thing in the afternoon. It’s now exactly two minutes after. I couldn’t wait to hear your voice again,” he said softly. I didn’t expect that.

“I must say, Stephen,” I murmured into the mouthpiece. “I’m a little surprised to hear your voice.”

“Why’s that, Lyss?”

“I figured that once you carved my notch into your gun, you’d be off like a shot after somebody new.” I waited a few seconds, and then I added, “Somebody younger.”

“Younger? Oh, I see”

“Stephen, am I the oldest woman you’ve ever --” I choked on that last word.

“Frankly, yes, I think so.”

“Am I the only white woman you’ve ever had?”

“No. No, you’re not.”

“So how do I compare?”

“Don’t be silly. The other women in my life can’t possibly compare to you.”

I laughed. “Liar.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to go out with me again, Lyss?”

I stayed quiet on the phone for a long time. Did I really intend to go through all that social discomfort again? I think not. Better to put an end to this right now, I thought.

"Lyssa, are you there?" His deep voice sounded almost plaintive.

"I'm here." I'd made my decision. I'd have to work out a way to let him down gently.

"Will you let me see you tonight?"

"Yes," I replied. "I think I'd like that." *Oh, Christ, what did I just say?*

"Good! You are the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me."

Can you believe that? What a storyteller. I had to get one thing off my mind though, so I took a deep breath and spoke. "I want you to know, Stephen, that I'm very upset with you for the way you conned me into your bed last night."

"I didn't con you."

I fought off a tremor in my voice. "Well, don't expect it to happen ever again."

"Not ever?"

"Never." I placed my right hand across my abdomen and gently began rubbing it. The memory came back of Stephen's warm dark fingers softly caressing me, right in that same spot after we'd made love that first time. There was no commitment behind my voice when I repeated the word. "Never."

"All right -- never." He paused. "Say, that reminds me, Lyss -- would you mind letting me know when you go into your fertile time?"

"Would I what?"

"That way I can make careful plans for that evening."

"Plans?"

"Yeah, I thought we might go bareback riding."

Bareback riding? Then realization hit me. "You are incorrigible." I laughed. Then I hung up the phone. Christ, what a joker.

* * * * *

Stephen was to pick me up at my apartment around six-thirty. But, I'd taken most of the day off from work, and by that time I'd made a really sumptuous dinner of jerked chicken Jamaican style with wild rice and a leek salad to show him how well I could cook. When I let him in my apartment door, my level of arousal rose instantly. The intense stare from Stephen's dark eyes made me shiver, and suddenly my nipples hardened against my cotton blouse. He leaned down to give me a kiss, and I politely accepted. As I became more and more aroused, I realized that I'd set myself up unintentionally by forgetting to wear a bra. Stephen not only noticed, but his trancelike stare tried to burn a hole right through my blouse.

Two things happened at once. My mind jumped back to the events of last night, and Stephen did a double take as he stared at my complexion. "I ... uhh ... hope you realize that whatever you're thinking about now, Lyssa, has got you blushing."

"Wha--?" Oh, yeah, good articulate response there.

"C'mere." As he clutched me to him, I lay my head on his chest. Stephen's easy smile and knowing look caused my impressionable pussy to begin to seep, dampening my silken panties. He touched my flushed cheek. I could just imagine the pheromone-laced scent I must be releasing.

Oh, yeah, this ought to send him the right signals about how last night was a fluke. Sure it will.

"How 'bout a kiss?" he asked.

But I broke loose and went over to the stove to check on my jerked chicken. He followed me and put both of his hands on my hips. His touch made me shiver as he nuzzled the back of my neck at my hairline.

"Smells wonderful," he murmured, kissing my shoulder. "Chicken smells good, too."

"You be good, young man," I said. "Or no dessert for you. I'll have to send you to your room."

"How about sending me to your room?"

"Stop it," I whined in reply. "Now behave."

"Very well, if you insist." But he left his hands on my hips for a few more minutes, and when it came time for me to turn around; he stood right there with his face in close proximity to my own.

"Now, how about that kiss?" he repeated, while I stared at his lips as he spoke.

As if the whole thing were a hypnotic suggestion, I gave in. Though my mind was telling me that I needed to formally break off this relationship, my body kept demanding a little more closeness from him.

"See," he murmured. "Was that so bad?"

I swallowed back a small lump. "Dinner's ready. Sit down, and I'll serve you."

I brought our plates to the table. Then I went over to open a bottle of wine. I poured some into two glasses and with a big smile on my face, I gave one to Stephen, before taking the seat across from him. I raised my glass. "To a blossoming friendship."

He clinked his glass against mine. "To us."

Thankfully, I'd handled the dish with an epicurean's touch. Stephen hedonistically inhaled the aroma of my jerked chicken.

"I think I walked down the seventy steps of light slumber to the cavern of flame last night," Stephen announced, staring at his plate. "Ummm, this even smells terrific."

"What did you just say?"

"This smells terrif--"

"No. About the seventy steps -- did you dream about the painting?"

"Why would I dream about the painting?"

"You just said you walked down the seventy steps of light slumber to the cavern of flame." I responded. For some reason, even though the apartment was warm, I felt the hairs on my arm stand up as if a sudden cold breeze had blown through the room.

He looked askance at me. "Did I?"

I took a bite of chicken and then slowly answered. "Don't tell me I'm hearing things?"

"I think the painting affected you far more than you'd care to admit."

I shook my head. "No. Not the painting."

"You don't think so?"

I took a deep breath. "If anything affected me, it had to be ma-making l-love to you last night."

"What a sweet thing to say," he replied. Then a curious expression crossed his face. "However, the next time you're confronted with the staircase, no matter where you find it, follow the steps down."

I stared at him. He had to be doing this on purpose. "What did you just say?"

He stopped eating and looked at me. "Huh?"

"About the staircase?" I whispered.

"Why do you keep asking about the staircase, Lyssa?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. You brought it up."

"I did?"

I nodded, and he shrugged. "Are you sure?"

I didn't get it. Why didn't he remember his own words? We sat in silence for several minutes, staring into each other's eyes.

I sighed. "Eat your dinner."

He nodded, and went back to his plate. "This is really good. I like the way you blended the spices."

"Thank you."

"A large cavern with a gigantic pillar of flame is the first-level stop."

"Stephen."

"It can seem very intimidating the first time you reach it, but there are helpers on this level that allow you to understand the way --"

"Stephen!"

-- down the seven hundred steps to the gate of deeper slumber."

This conversation scared me. Not only did Stephen seem convinced of the reality of this dream icon, but something about the way he described it, made me want to believe him, as well.

I think he saw the discomfort in my face. "What?" he asked.

I blushed and looked down at my plate.

"Well, let's not ruin a delicious feast talking like this." He smiled. "Let's enjoy dinner."

The mood slowly lightened.

"Can I change the subject?" I said.

"Sure, why not?"

"One of the adoption agencies that Ron and I had been with for over a year and a half had a three-week-old baby -- white mother with a black father. You know that butter-brown color?"

Stephen nodded. "I most certainly do."

"Well, to me he looked like caramel or maple cream. This little fellow was gorgeous, and I just thought he was precious."

Stephen grinned. "I'll bet you did at that."

"Nobody else in the immediate area was interested in adopting him. So I figured we could have him in due time. After all, we'd been close to the top of the list for a few weeks. Do you know what I mean?"

I waited for him to nod and give me a grunt of assent before I went on.

"When Myron found out the little guy's mother was white, he cut loose a tirade you wouldn't believe. 'What kind of two-bit whore would carry some nigger's child and blah-blah!' Anyway, that was the end of that."

"What an S.O.B.," Stephen said in sympathy. "Of course, it really didn't matter, did it?"

"What do you mean?"

"He would have found some other reason, even if the father was white and the mother wasn't. He just needed an excuse."

"I guess you're right. I really had my heart set on adopting that little boy. Day after day, I'd stop by to play with him. I'd sing to him, cuddle him, change his diaper -- I was really ready. Now, it's all just memories, I guess."

"I'm so sorry, Lyss. I think that was a terrible thing to do to a natural mother like you." Something about Stephen's expression changed as he looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head and smiled. "I always knew you were a special lady. I just didn't know how special."

I blushed. To cover my embarrassment, I got up to pour some more wine. Since he so thoroughly enjoyed my cooking, I invited Stephen to stay for dessert.

“Wonderful,” he said beaming at me. “What have you got?”

“How about hot fudge over peaches and cream,” I answered, coming back to the table. I took his plate and placed it in the sink, and then I walked back behind him again. Without thinking, I put my hands on his large shoulders and gently massaged his muscles. Against my small hands, the rippling muscles under his shirt seemed massive.

“Have I had that combination before?” he asked, and I heard the smile in his voice.

I grinned in response. “Maybe.”

I bent low, finding his lips with mine. I cupped his face, deepening the kiss, and suddenly we were all warm and wet and eagerly exploring each other’s mouths. Our actions became an accurate expression of what had happened between the two of us the night before. I think Stephen was taken by surprise by my passion! I could tell he was stimulated by the way his pants stretched against his now bulging crotch. What a startling reminder of the gentle ardor of our closeness and the mesmerizing dalliances of the time we’d shared together last night.

I suddenly realized that we were wasting time. “Forget dessert,” I said. “Let’s fuck.”

“God. Who knew you could be so persuasive?”

Okay, what you’ve got to understand is that our second time somehow turned out to be pretty much my own doing, or was it my undoing? I’m the one who invited Stephen to my place for dinner. I’m the one who somehow managed to undo every single button on that young man’s shirt in the time it took to complete two or three kisses. I’m the one who encouraged him to carefully remove my clothing while I hurriedly continued to take off his. God, he smelled delicious. He smelled like ... like passion, only different -- sweeter maybe.

I guess what the girls at my high school used to say is true: “If you rip your clothes off in front of a man, there’s a damn good chance that you’ll end up on your back under him.” Yeah, well, okay, so that’s rather obvious. But for some unknown reason, I was pursuing Stephen intimately once again. I led him back to my bedroom. We had carried each of our drinks into the bedroom. I carefully balanced my wine glass in one hand, while I unbuttoned Stephen’s shirt with the other. He kissed me, pulling back only long enough to help me by taking my glass. He placed our drinks on the nightstand, and then reached, caressing the outline of my nipple under my blouse.

Undoing my blouse buttons, he gently began massaging my tits. I closed my eyes and let my head tilt back, trembling under his knowing caress.

With a bold move, my hands went to his belt and pants. I felt as if I were someone else watching my fingers undo his slacks. I undid his zipper and his pants slid down his dark legs. He slipped out of his shoes, and his pants followed. He stepped clear of them and kicked them off to one side.

I moved my hand over his head, pulling him closer to my tits, as his tongue swept across my nipple. Forget about sucking; Stephen feasted on my breast like a man half-starved.

With light nips and long, languid tongue strokes, he worked his way up my neck until he reached my parted lips. He captured them in a possessive kiss that stole my breath and left my heart thumping in my chest.

“Lyss,” he whispered, nibbling the corner of my mouth, “I prayed for this moment to happen between us again.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of this as a religious experience. But I wasn’t going to let you leave tonight without getting another piece of you.”

“That’s something else we have in common,” he replied. “We think alike.”

Stephen kissed me again as I reached down and groped the tempting flesh of his hip, stroking my hand up and down his muscular legs. He stood totally naked in front of me now, as our lips met again and remained locked for several moments. My tongue met his, as his cock pushed into my tummy. I broke the kiss; glancing down, I drank in the sight of his enormous shaft, pressing so intimately against me. Cautiously, I placed my hand around its thickness.

“Put both of your hands around it, Lyss. Hold it tight. Feel the veins, sweetheart. Rub your hand around the head.”

I took a sharp intake of breath, and did as he suggested. I slowly moved my hands around its giant mushroom-like head, and played along the bottom of his shaft with my fingertips.

“Remember how it felt last night deep inside your pussy.”

I groaned an incoherent response.

“Your fingers are trembling,” he murmured. “I hope that doesn’t mean you’re afraid of me.”

“No, I’m trembling because I want you.”

I felt as if I’d slipped into a trance, as Stephen sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me down on top of his lap. I straddled his legs while his cock pointed straight up between us.

Stephen cupped my breasts, lightly balanced each one as if he were weighing them against each other. He bent down to lick each nipple as I placed my hand on the back of his head to hold him close.

He stopped sucking my nipples long enough to kiss my lips again as I urgently threw my arms around him. Ferociously, I worked my tongue inside his warm mouth. When I broke free, both of us were breathing heavily.

“Wow,” I gasped. “That was sensational, baby.”

“A powerful, magical word, that one,” he murmured.

“What?”

But he answered me by kissing me once again.

Breathing hard now, I gyrated my hips, moving my ass around his lap while keeping up our passionate kiss. I took his dick in my hand, pumping it lightly. Suddenly, Stephen fell backwards, pulling me down next to him on the bed.

"You just keep thinking of that powerful, magical word, while I move on to what I want." He rolled me over to one side and kissed me again.

"Wha--?" I dropped my head back on the pillow, as he cut off my words with a kiss.

After a moment, he pulled back. "I need to taste your pussy, sweet-pants." His dark hands descend my pale belly and I stared, hypnotized by the contrast. "I want to tenderize those luscious loins with my mouth and tongue." Stephen smiled an engaging smile. "This will be an experience neither of us will ever forget."

I think my eyes went wide. My ex-husband hated anything to do with cunnilingus so I hadn't experienced that particular pleasure in years.

"Climb on top of my face and hold onto the headboard."

"Ooo -- nothing like a subtle hint." I kissed him one more time before I slid forward, positioning my ass above his face. His warm tongue gently probed around the opening of my pussy, and I shivered. Lost in a haze of pleasure, I moved, riding his skillful tongue. He teased me mercilessly, flicking my clitoris gently along its tiny head, and my body tensed. I had to lean forward and hang onto the headboard to maintain my leverage and my balance while I moved my torso above Stephen's face. He kept working his tongue diligently into my cunt, licking here and probing there.

"Oh, yes!" I panted, grinding my hips in rhythm with his talented tongue. My body shook violently as I cried out. "Oh, Stephen! I'm-I'm going to ...!"

Stephen had to hold on to my ass to keep me from falling down on top of him when I came. As it was, I thought my thigh muscles would collapse from the effort of this extended squat.

He steadied me, gently licking my cunt in a much more soothing way, and I slowly began to relax. Although we were silent for many minutes, our naked bodies conversed in a profound and delightful manner.

Suddenly, strong hands gripped my waist, lifting me and flipping me over on my back. Stephen moved between my legs, stifling my surprised gasp with a kiss. As his lips met mine, my legs spread wide apart, my hips swung upward to allow free access to his straddling body, and my pussy opened easily under his fierce erection. He pushed deep inside me, and I wrapped my long legs around his back, circled my arms around his neck and held on for dear life.

"Take me, Stephen," I murmured. "Make me beg for more."

"You don't have to beg, sweet-pants," he murmured. "You only have to ask."

Stephen lingered marvelously within me. Pulsing in and out, faster and faster, his erection stiffened even more as my warm, wet, sheathing cunt caressed and engulfed him in

flesh-bound excitement. He kept up his prodding motion until neither of us could hold back our need for release from his probing demands.

Yearning for release, I quaked with a tawdry, shuddering moan right into Stephen's ear. When I came, my body's wet juices surged forth over his cock like a warm geyser.

I gasped into his ear. "Stephen, what magical, powerful word?"

He chuckled. "Why, *baby*, of course!"

I shifted beneath him, clenching my vaginal muscles. Pulling me even tighter against him, he gasped loudly over me. I gazed up at him, watching as an exquisite, almost triumphant expression cross Stephen's face, and then he came, filling me with his hot, thick seed.

The long and lusty pooling of our juices together drenched my sheets and comforter. But I didn't care.

* * * * *

Darkness surrounded us. I glanced to the sky to see if the flying saucer from the painting hung over the horizon. It wasn't there.

We were naked together in the dismal gloom of the staircase, each of us in a hurry to get down the first flight to the next level. Once again, the landscape around us revealed little of our surreal surroundings. Stephen held tightly to my hand as he pulled me deliberately down the steps. Suddenly, through the tilting haze and dreary mist, I could see the glow from the pillar of flame flickering below us. The priests spoke in hushed voices, strange guttural sounds that made me shiver as I moved downward.

But this time, I could hear that distinct soft crying in the distance before I'd gone further than a few steps. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes," Stephen replied. "I hear it."

Something deep inside of me told me that this was a baby who needed a mommy -- who needed *me*.

"We've got to find that baby," I said to Stephen. "We've got to find him and rescue him."

"It's farther below us," he said. "Beyond the seven hundred steps to the gate of deeper slumber. They may not let us go that far."

"They couldn't be so heartless," I whispered. Every fiber within me responded to the child's forlorn cry.

"We'll do the best we can."

Funny, even though he was stark naked next to me, I didn't feel the impulsive need to be a sexual creature for Stephen as much as I wanted to rescue that crying baby. Our feet landed on the platform where the pillar of flame burned ever so brightly.

The priest who spoke to Stephen last night rushed forward to meet us. “Do you have the key?” he asked. I had the strange feeling that he hoped that we did have it.

“Which key?” Stephen asked. Obviously, neither one of us were hiding anything in our non-existent pockets, for we stood nude before the priest.

“You must go back and get the key.” The priest spoke in urgent whispers. “We cannot help you down below. And you’ll need the key to continue.”

He knelt down and drew an octagonal pattern in the rock. For a second, it glowed like white-hot phosphorus burning its way into the surface of the chiseled stone.

I had no idea what it could be, but when I glanced at Stephen, I saw a look of recognition cross his face.

The baby cried out again. I looked past the pillar of flame to the darkness below, and I started to run for the stairs. Leaving both the priest and Stephen behind, I dashed across the carved stone landing. If only I could make the flight of stairs --

* * * * *

I woke up. My loins were sticky with drying semen. *Damn it*, I thought, as I closed my eyes once more. I wasn’t going to let this happen again.

* * * * *

Marlene’s Note #3:

Don’t let that little prissy’s last sentence fool you. Lyssa kept Stephen in her bedroom for the rest of the night and for well over an hour after they woke up the next morning. That allowed her to indulge in her little indiscretions at least three more times before sunrise. I’m sure she would have lamented that she hadn’t expected any of them to happen, either. By sheer accident, she just happened to make love to him four different times.

I managed to spy on them. By looking in the bedroom mirror, I could see the two of them snuggled together atop the bedclothes. She was absolutely right when she described Stephen as tall, muscular, and seething with testosterone. I found myself disappointed that I wasn’t able, from my position, to see his cock. Since Lyss always blushed whenever she spoke of him, I figured there must be some verity as to how well endowed he might be. He’d fallen asleep, and Lyss lay spooned against him with her back tucked into his front. Stephen’s body looked incredibly lean and well defined. He didn’t sport the layers of body fat that a couple of thirty-plus-year-old broads like us carried around. But he held possessively onto Ulyssa. One of his dark hands drooped over her white arm along her ribs, cupping the soft flesh of her breast. I could see from the contented look on her face that no matter how she might try to tell herself that Stephen was some passing phase of her mid-life, post-divorce syndrome,

she'd developed a real need for him -- an addiction, probably. Hell, from where I stood, they appeared to be addicted to each other.

Cue Robert Palmer parody: "Might as well face it, you're the dick that she loves."

She opened her eyes and looked up into the mirror right at me. Then she smiled, and shifted her buttocks back against his mid-section. Reluctantly, I retreated. I genuinely wondered what her young man was like in bed. Ten minutes later, I heard the two of them fucking again.

Marlene.

Chapter Three

The days passed quickly. I couldn't believe that Stephen and I were going into our second week together as a couple. Not just any couple, mind you, but a sexually active, mixed-race couple. Never in my dreams as a young girl did I think I might even *date* a black man, let alone allow him access to the most intimate avenues of my body. I kept thinking to myself that I should be fitted for a diaphragm or maybe see if there was a different chemical make-up to one of the newer birth control pills that wouldn't cause a reaction. But, I kept putting it off. After all, I'd gone over six years without bearing any children.

The first three or four times I woke up next to Stephen, I continued to delude myself that this would be the last time. Finally, I figured out that I was in denial. We both generated some kind of amazing chemistry. I found myself thinking of him at unexpected moments of the day.

I should have been worried that Stephen was such a "hunk." I mean, some other woman should have set her hooks into him long ago. Yet, he was brashly confident about his relationship with me. Like I said before, we had chemistry.

I once stumbled upon a little notebook journal he kept around Hurley House. I probably shouldn't have snooped, but I couldn't help myself. In Stephen's handwriting, I read:

Scrutinizing her carefully, I saw the curve of her shoulders turn with a mottled pink and tan patina that suggested too much concentration of the sun on her neck and shoulders, and not enough thought about the care of her delicate skin. But once her blouse dropped from her shoulders, the full essence of the woman became most apparent. Her two full white breasts, which kept some individuality in comparison to each other, also symbolized the

world in miniature -- halved reflections of a globe. Paired together, they might complete a gracious orb of the Earth itself -- warm and loving, nurturing and fertile.

Ulyssa Kincaid was to be my personal amusement park for the night. My eyes descended the length of her belly and slid around her hips to her inner thighs -- a mad roller coaster ride straight to the mysterious intimacy of her warm tunnel of love. Or maybe I'd mount an expedition to climb up a set of legs whose sheer, impressive lines draw the eyes, the hands, and the mind straight up their firm sleekness always ending back at the lure of the warmth of the cavern womb. Whatever the outcome, I was glad I wouldn't have to stand in line to buy a ticket.

Something about his text made me smile.

Over a period of a few days, he'd given me some very pretty trinkets, a nicely exotic Egyptian ankh necklace, an arm band and two golden ankle chain bracelets.

"Do you know the meaning behind these?" Stephen asked on the evening he gave me the ankle bracelets.

I shook my head. "No."

"I'd like you to wear them both on your left ankle."

"Why?"

"Well," he grinned as he spoke. "Mostly because I'd like you to."

"Really?"

He smiled and nodded.

I shrugged. "Okay."

But, most important was the special gift that came a day or two later. He brought me a lovely octagonal brooch and matching heavy silver earrings. I recognized them at once.

"These could be from --" I stopped speaking. I looked up into his eyes to see if he understood what I was about to say.

"The painting -- or the dream?"

"You know about my dream?"

He nodded. "You know we have the same dream. You've hinted around about it often enough."

"But I was never really sure."

"As soon as I saw these, I knew I had to have them," he said. "I hope that they're similar enough to be useful."

"Useful." I dangled the brooch and earrings in my hand. "Like a key?"

He shrugged and then nodded. "I've never met anyone who has shared my dream journey before."

“We seem to be on the same wavelength.”

“Anybody looking at us wouldn’t see how much we have in common.” He pointed one finger to his heart and touched my left breast with his other hand. “In here. They’d only see our physical mismatch.”

I continued to dangle the octagonal earrings in my fingers, quietly clinking the metallic medallions together. “Who knew?”

Of course, as the days went on, I repaid him for his gifts in kind, so to speak. If the date went particularly well, we celebrated by making love. If the evening turned out to be just so-so, we compensated by going to bed together. Once or twice we skipped our evening plans altogether and went right to fucking. On this particular night, the two of us stood on the rooftop garden of Hurley House condos overlooking the busy city traffic. He’d wanted to show me the charms of the garden under the stars, while I agreed to allow him to undress me out in the open air.

It was a warm May night, so I’d worn no bra under my white summer dress, but my tits were covered by a jaunty pattern of purple flowers which, though they showed my nipples straining against the thin material, managed to cover my deep pinkish brown areola. I knew I looked really sexy in that sheer, cottony, one-piece summer dress. For what I thought were obvious reasons, Stephen took me into his arms. He’d very carefully taken the straps of my gown in his hands and then slowly untied the simple bow knot that held the shoulder strap in place on my left arm. Once the strap on the right arm had followed, I pressed my body against him and we kissed. His possessive demeanor suddenly said volumes to me about where our relationship was headed. I let the halter of my gown fall from my breasts, calmly presenting myself topless to him. I’d become much more comfortable with how I looked to Stephen, and in another moment or two, I stepped out of the dress entirely.

Let me back up and tell you how this happened.

We’d had several eventful evenings together. For all you nosy bean counters out there, we’d made love probably fourteen times in six days. There were nights when we hit the symphony or a museum and other nights when we skipped all the preliminaries to go off together to exchange bodily fluids. Stephen and I had gone to a civic theatre musical earlier that evening and during intermission something happened to me that I hadn’t expected.

“Never in my previous experience would I have thought that two people like us would belong together,” I’d said, as I handed him one of the drinks I purchased at the bar. “But I’m really glad I came with you tonight, Stephen. Isn’t that funny?”

“Funny?” He took both glasses out of my hands, and set them down on a ledge. “No, it’s wonderful.” In the middle of the busy lobby Stephen took my face in his dark hands and brought his lips down close to mine. “I love you. Lyss. I’m thrilled you’re here with me.”

Periodically, I was still confused, bothered, and excited by his presence. Usually when he tried to kiss me in public, I couldn’t help but pull back a bit. But that night in the middle of the civic theatre lobby, I not only returned his kiss, I suddenly went very wet in the

crotch of my panties. Although the effect of his nearness may have been just as wrong as ever, I craved his attentions at that moment. A familiar ache washed through me.

"Oh, my God," I said aloud. "I don't believe it."

"What's the matter?"

"I can't go back in there, Stephen." I leaned close to his ear. "I've just gone totally wet in my underpants."

You wouldn't have believed the full-blown smile that covered his face. "I have the perfect solution for your problem. Let's go someplace where you don't have to sit down in them."

"Forget that," I replied, looking back up into his deep, dark brown eyes. "Let's go someplace where I can take them off completely."

"It's a deal."

"Ulyssa?" a man called out. "Is that you?"

I cringed inwardly. One of my father's oldest friends stood in the lobby, blocking our exit. He looked surprised to see me, but no doubt pleased to have caught me doing something of which my parents would strongly disapprove.

"Hello, Mr. Blakeley. Enjoying the play, are you?" I tried to maintain a friendly expression. *Damn! Of all the people to see us, it had to be Mr. Blakeley.* Well, as long as *she* wasn't around, it would be all right. Mrs. Blakeley made her husband look like a flaming liberal.

"It's Chekhov." He shrugged. "Every time somebody does Chekhov, they have to play *bittersweet comedy* in quotes. Pounds the life out of the lines with a sledgehammer."

Stephen laughed. "Thank God," he said. "I thought it was just me. The pacing is incredibly slow."

"Chekhov is marvelous literature. Especially in the original Russian," a thickly Russian accented voice said from behind us.

Speak of the devil, I thought. She'd probably been trolling for souls during intermission.

"You can't act literature, Svetlana," Mr. Blakeley said. "It's not something tangible like -- picking up a stinking fish."

"Ulyssa dear, you must introduce us to your friend," she said, turning to Stephen. "I must say I've never heard your mother speak about this man."

Like an idiot, I said the first thing that popped into my head. "My parents haven't met Stephen, yet. We just started dating." *Shit!*

I introduced the Blakeleys to Stephen. I might as well have introduced Mr. and Mrs. Blakeley to the stinking fish the former had mentioned. Oh, well, what's the good of

attacking your friends' daughter's character, if you don't know who she's with? I hoped Stephen could see me subconsciously checking my back for knife wounds.

But, with years of practice in mixed company, Stephen was a far better actor than the people on stage. We were polite. We were charming. We were patient. Finally, the second act started, and both the Blakeleys went inside to take their seats.

"Well, that upset you," he whispered, as he opened the theater door for me.

"I wanted to tell my parents in my own way," I replied. "In my own time."

"I think you'll discover the world is totally unconcerned about your timetable. You won't be able to put it off any longer."

"Damn." I muttered.

"Well, you could always stop seeing me."

I paused for a few moments. "No," I said truthfully. "No, I won't do that."

Although he took me back to Hurley House, we didn't go straight to his family's condo as I'd expected. We took the elevator to the top floor, climbed a flight of stairs, opened a bottle of wine, and ended up talking, kissing, and petting up in the outdoor roof garden. Darkness had wrapped up the city by now, as it was after ten o'clock, and, since Stephen's family turned out to be one of the few who had a key to the rooftop garden, nobody else was up there.

Stephen's next suggestion was totally audacious, but for some reason, I agreed. And that's how I ended up on the roof of Hurley House Condominiums with my naked white breasts bathed by the pale glow of downtown neon and the reflected radiance of a long row of yellow-bulbed streetlights.

Once he'd removed my dress from around my torso and hips, he knelt before me, slowly peeling my soaking panties down over my thighs. When they reached my ankles, I stepped out of them and he tossed them aside. At this point, all I had on were my nylon stockings, my high heels, and the golden ankh necklace and ankle bracelets that he'd given to me to wear earlier that evening.

"God, you're beautiful, Ulyssa," he murmured appreciatively. "You literally take my breath away."

As I stood nude in front of him, Stephen rose to his feet, gliding his smooth palms up my legs and over my hips. He pulled me into his embrace and kissed me again. After a moment, he pulled back. "Stand perfectly still," he said. "For the moment, here in the pale glow of the moonlight, you are a beautiful white marble statue -- the centerpiece attraction of this garden. And I want to inspect you."

At first, all he did was stroll round and round me, raking every inch of my naked body with his heated gaze. "You have such lovely porcelain shoulders and your neck is an open invitation for a man to bring his lips close to your face." I thought he was going to kiss the back of my neck, and his thick lips came ticklishly close to my hairline, but, he moved on.

For another minute or so, Stephen continued circling me slowly. My nipples grew hard, pointing out toward the glowing skyline like two little sentries standing guard. Stephen had noted before that the ordinary ideal of half-dollar-sized areole was not part of my make-up. Mine were more the diameter of a tennis ball.

"Take your nylons off, Lyss. Hand them to me."

Without hesitation, I did exactly as he asked, and then he took my nylons, my panties and my new summer dress and tossed them all over the edge of the building and out into the city.

"Stephen!" I shrieked. "That dress cost me over eighty bucks!" At least he didn't toss my shoes off the roof. I slipped them back on.

Did I neglect to say Stephen had a streak of the perverse? Standing right there, his face in front of mine, he commanded. "Silence! I'll get you a new one. Now, don't speak."

"I liked that dress," I whimpered.

Then, when I thought maybe he'd bark at me to be quiet again, he put his fingers to my lips and said, "Shhh. If you can stand perfectly still, Ulyssa, I'll take you safely back downstairs to the condo."

I gulped and nodded, as he continued to circle and stare at my naked body in the dim light of the rooftop. He pressed his index finger quite lightly into the crevice between my breasts. "Soon your breasts will be changing -- swelling up so they can do the job they were designed to do."

"Hmm?" I sighed. "What job would that be?"

"Nursing children."

"Stephen, stop talking nonsense."

"Shush!" He brought his lips firmly to my mouth and encouraged me to kiss him wholeheartedly. That was much easier than I thought after several days and nights of intimately exploring each other. Then the bastard began fingering my pussy. Sure, he was oh -- so -- gentle about it, but how could anyone stand perfectly still for that? I was so hot, he nearly made me come just standing there being French kissed and having my labia and clit manipulated. I went weak-kneed and wanted to break away from him, but for some reason I held on for a few minutes more.

"The protagonist in your book dreamed of having ten kids," Stephen murmured as his fingers explored deeper. "I remember I was surprised, not so much that it was well written, but because it told the experiences of a well-educated, professional white woman who was evidently very passionate and who had so desperately wanted a large family."

"Wh-why does that surprise --?" I gasped, as his finger lingered on a particularly sensitive spot.

"It's totally contrary to my image of a married professional woman." He allowed his fingers to do half his communication. "Particularly a white woman."

“What?” I inhaled, finding it hard to catch my breath.

“You know the drill,” Stephen said. “Too busy for sex. Very stingy about letting their husbands make them pregnant, never agreeing to more than two-point-five children.” Stephen smiled. “Personally, I want a beautiful, well-educated, professional wife, but also a passionate woman with whom I can make lots of babies.”

I giggled. *That was him, all right.*

“Never in a million years did I think I’d find a white woman to fit that description.” Then he moved his hand. “C’mon, we should go back to my place,” he said finally. “Let’s take the stairs.”

“Stairs?” I wanted to cry. Stuck in high heels, wearing absolutely no clothing and he wanted me to take the stairs!

“The elevator will be busy this time of night,” he pointed out. “The stairs are your best bet for getting down unnoticed.”

“How many flights?” I asked.

“Just five.”

“Five!”

“Hurry, we can do this.” Stephen took his suit coat and threw it over my shoulders. The lights in the stairwell glared with an incredible harshness once we’d stepped inside. Flight by flight we descended quickly. I hurried down the stairs as fast as my feet could carry me, but I felt as if I’d forgotten how to walk in heels. Every step seemed to leave me right on the brink of toppling over.

“You owe me big for this one, Stephen,” I said, just as a group of five or six partiers from the floor above us loudly entered the stairwell. We were only a single turn ahead of them, but Stephen’s jacket came down to the middle of my hips; so, from overhead, I figured that all the partiers could really see was that my legs appeared to go all the way up to my waist. The problem was, I couldn’t keep my balance and hold Stephen’s coat closed at the same time.

“Stephen, wait! I have to take off these heels,” I said as I stopped for just a second or two for each foot. But as I went through the motions of removing my shoes, I had to bend over totally, so that Stephen’s coat flipped up and displayed my naked back, my naked butt cheeks, and my naked upper thighs on down.

“Hey! Look,” an excited male voice shouted from above us. “The lady’s not wearing any clothes down there.”

“That’s no lady,” another man replied. “Look who she’s with.”

Stephen growled, made a fist and started to turn back up the stairs. Suddenly he had a wild look in his eyes. “How dare they?” he snarled. “They don’t know anything about us.”

“Stephen.” I grabbed his arm. “Come on. Just get me home.”

The first man, a balding, blond guy in his early thirties, jumped three steps down to reach our level. "C'mon kid, why don't you share the wealth with your newfound friends from the thirteenth floor? Somebody needs to be taught a lesson in manners."

By now, the rest of the group, four more guys of various ages, descended quickly, swarming like ants all over the stairway.

Stephen turned to confront them.

"Don't do it, Stephen." I grabbed his arm. "They're not worth the trouble."

"You heard the lady, Stephen," a slightly older, paunchy dark-haired fellow added. "No need to get your panties in a twit."

That's twist, you moron, I thought. But wisely, I kept my remark to myself. "Get me home, please," I repeated.

"No," a man in a dress shirt and tie said. "I think you should stay out here with us."

A man in a bright Hawaiian shirt echoed the last sentiment. "Sure, honey. So what if you're wearing a *blacks only* badge. How 'bout givin' the rest of us a private showing? What do you say?"

The youngest man of the bunch looked rather skinny, but there was a hardness in his eyes as he closed in on me. He also wore a *Semper Fi* tattoo. "Why don't you just date your goddamned dog and get it over with, bitch? It's all the same in the end."

"Anyway the city don't need no more mongrel puppies," balding blond added. I could see these two were related. Brothers? No. Maybe cousins. I could just make out his own Marine Corps tattoo, as he pushed his way up into Stephen's face. "Maybe we should have these two spayed and neutered. Am I right, boy?"

"Since it's none of your business, I suggest you back off," Stephen answered calmly. Something unexpected permeated the tension surrounding us. Stephen stood alert, yet calm in their midst. He came off quietly, like some big cat watching a pack of hounds barking and circling. Of course, I had enough fear for both of us.

"Step back behind me, Lyssa," he ordered.

"I think not." Hard-Eyes reached out for me, but I twisted out from his grasp. I thought for certain that Stephen would grab for me, but he didn't. He let Hard-Eyes follow me forward. However, the young white man lunged directly into an elbow smash that put a startled, skinny Marine down on the concrete.

As the balding blond bent over to see if his brother (maybe his cousin) was all right, his dark-haired companion dropped his head down like a human battering ram and charged forward. Stephen pushed me toward the exit door, and waited only for a split second as he sidestepped dark hair, before he drove his fist into the man's paunchy belly. The middle-aged man doubled over and sank to his knees.

"I think there's been enough of this, don't you?" Stephen asked quietly.

Stephen and I looked over at Hawaiian shirt and the man in the shirt and tie. They were backing up the stairway, retreating the way they had come.

"Stephen, let's go," I shouted.

His clenched fists loosened. Cautiously he held onto my shoulders as we descended. But the concrete stairs suddenly felt cold and unyielding beneath my bare feet. As we ran down the stairs, I happened to look back to see the balding blond man running full tilt toward us.

I couldn't get a vocal warning out in time, but something in my face must have prepared Stephen for the man charging at us from above. Baldy's forceful impact catapulted the two of them off the landing and through the air over the downward steps. Clamped by Baldy's desperate grip, both Stephen and his attacker pitched forward toward the unforgiving concrete landing below. Somehow Stephen twisted them in mid-air, wrenching the weight and momentum of his attacker around to position the other man beneath him. Still screaming in rage while in flight, Baldy's voice quickly turned to a cry of pain when he crumpled back-first onto the hard cement and iron-rimmed steps.

I caught up to Stephen as he untangled himself from the battered-looking bald man. He turned to me and handed me his key ring. "Here, Lyss, take these and open up my door." Then he turned and shouted up the stairwell at the bald man's companions. "Your friend's gonna be all right! He's just had the wind knocked out of him."

As I swung out through the eleventh floor exit, a little Hispanic lady opened her apartment door just in time to see me race down the hallway, legs pumping like crazy, breasts bouncing under the open flapping lapels of Stephen's coat, and a shoe gripped in either hand. What a circus, she must have thought.

Key in hand, I had Stephen's door open just as he hit the exit. In a few moments, he followed me into his apartment.

"I need a drink," he muttered. He went directly to the small bar in the living room.

"I'll take whatever you're having."

"Are you all right?"

"No!" My hands shook as much as my heart fluttered. "No, I'm not."

"I told them that if they take their friend to emergency and say it was an accidental fall, the condo association's insurance would pay for it," Stephen said.

"What if they press charges?"

"That's their right, I suppose. But, I think building management is going to make their life a living hell, if they do."

"Why's that?"

"As half-owners of this place, my family pays building management. Still, it'll be our word against theirs. If they press charges, it'll be a *lose-lose* situation for them and me," he muttered. "I'll have to offer to settle out of court."

“What about the fact that there were five of them?”

“Overwhelming odds?” He shrugged. “That might work in our favor.”

Still breathing heavily, I perched my naked white ass on the plush upholstered arm of Stephen’s couch. I decided to take off the coat that he had given me before I said what I had to say. I stood there in my bare feet wearing only his golden ankh necklace and the two ankle bracelets as I turned to whisper to him. “I had no idea you were so -- so well trained.”

“It’s very sad that I have to be,” he said matter-of-factly. “I hate it when stuff like that happens.”

“I think I’m much more frightened now, than I was when it all happened.”

“Don’t worry. That’s normal. It’s an adrenaline thing kicking in.”

“I’m -- I’m very proud of you, Stephen.” I tried to use the lowest, most seductive voice I could think of -- sort of a sultry imitation of Kathleen Turner. “I could see you were doing everything you could possibly do to keep from confronting those morons.”

“No, Lyssa, I apologize.” He quickly tossed back more of his drink. “That entire rooftop affair was egoistical nonsense on my part. If I hadn’t made a stupid assumption, none of this would’ve happened.”

Slowly, I set my drink down and slipped my bare arms around his neck. “But it did happen. You knew I needed you to keep me safe, and you tried to protect me. I love you for that.” I initiated a deep-felt, very loving kiss, and conceded to his tongue the right to probe and reach for everything my mouth had to offer. His smell and his taste augmented the incredible excitement of his touch. What had happened to me? Why did every nerve in my body feel supercharged in his presence?

When we finally ended the kiss, I whispered, “What did that man mean when he said I was wearing a ‘*blacks only*’ badge?”

Stephen looked down at my ankles and sighed. “That was stupid on my part, too. That’s what those two ankle bracelets on your left leg mean, sweetheart. I guess I was showing you off. It’s sort of a street code. I’m sorry. I meant to tell you earlier.”

I looked down at the two gold chains wrapped around my bare ankle. Subtly, I’d been marked as a black man’s property. I was confused, and yet, as I looked back up into his dark brown eyes, I softly murmured. “Make love to me. I want to spread my legs for you -- now and forever.”

“Now and forever sounds rather permanent to me. Are you absolutely sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“What about that other thing?” he asked, bitterness slipping into his voice. “The possibility of us starting that litter of mongrel puppies they were growling about.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “Well, it’s ... it’s not any of their business, is it?”

Without any further warning my handsome young black man threw his arms around me and lifted me from the floor. "Let's see what a little *now and forever* feels like, shall we?"

Stephen carried me down the hallway toward his bed. After he laid me back against the mattress, I watched him finish undressing. Even though he was as trim and muscular as ever, it was the first time I'd seen him remotely self-conscious about his body. First, he went over to the light switch to turn it off. I didn't remember him ever doing that so quickly. He seemed different -- maybe more diffident -- a young man who'd had to handle something that most of us never have to think about. I didn't know if I was more impressed with his gorgeous body or the memory of how that body had moved in an attack posture about twenty minutes earlier.

He put his large hands on my thighs. They trembled just a bit, and I smiled. "Adrenaline?"

His slow, answering smile made my heart skip a beat. As he spread my legs wide and climbed between them, pressing his big cock against my pussy, I gasped.

"You know, we definitely aren't using any protection again," he whispered.

"Since when do you care?"

"I wanted to make sure my good Catholic girl knew what she was doing."

"Oh, thanks, Stephen. Now you're putting the decision back on me. You know, I'm never quite sure just what I'm doing." I giggled. "So, you go right ahead, young man." I wrapped my long legs around his back, my arms around his neck and held on for dear life. "Show me how much you want me."

With those words echoing in the room, he slowly started to inch his way into my eager, wet pussy. Centimeter by tantalizing centimeter, he fed himself into me. He pressed so slowly into me, I wanted to beat against his dark, muscular ass with my heels to hurry his forward motion. I whimpered beneath him. Nothing comprehensible, nothing understandable, just pure emotionally charged whimpering.

Then, without warning, he swiftly and powerfully pummeled his long cock all the way in, halting at a right angle to my cervix.

"Yes!" I screamed out at the unexpected intrusion. Trembling with arousal, I'd nearly climaxed, but Stephen just stopped -- holding himself perfectly still inside my clasp vagina. Out of control, I shivered through waves of tiny, pre-climactic tremors. When my pulsing pussy finally calmed, I let out a long breathy wheeze.

"I had no idea that my needs were so strong," I panted into his ear.

"Adrenaline will do that to you," he murmured, his breath hot against my neck.

"So will love."

"Lyssa, this is the first time you've ever used that word."

"I-I guess it is," I whispered.

“Do you mean it?”

“Yes.”

Before my affirmation had fully left my lips, Stephen began pumping into me again. I clutched his back with my hands and tugged at his buttocks with my bare heels, encouraging his assault, arching forward and up against him, drawing him as deep as he would go. Lord, what an exciting young animal my black stud had become. He held me so close that he had me whimpering; kissing and licking all over his face and mouth, wanting to devour him with my lips and tongue. I moaned with the pleasures of the imposing experience of his huge dick stretching me so fully.

“I am so thrilled to be here so deep inside you, Lyss.” Stephen hissed out my name at the end of a sharp exhale of air. “Sssooo thrilled.”

“Oooo!” I moaned under him. Stephen lowered his head and kissed me on the lips again, but I couldn’t hold my breath long enough to kiss him back. I tossed my head to one side and gulped deep draughts of air. Then, with a swirling ache writhing through my loins, I came, slowly, yet deeply gratifying. More intense than anything I’d experienced before.

Picking up his pace now, he fucked me harder and faster as I loosened up under him. I came again, this time screaming out an earsplitting orgasm, wailing and moaning, riding a sexual high I hadn’t expected. In what seemed less than five minutes, I’d had two orgasms. I didn’t know if I’d died and gone to heaven, or if my mind had led me into a frenzied madness. Euphoria or delirium? All the while, he continued gripping me tightly and thrusting deeply into me. Our gazes met, locked, and I trembled at the intense emotions I read in his eyes.

“Am I pleasing you, Lyss?” His voice held a note of anxiety I’d not heard before.

I gazed up at him incredulously. Of course, he was pleasing me.

Then I sensed that familiar tensing begin, as Stephen’s lust ripped into high gear. You know, I wish there was some sort of alarm in a woman’s brain that could tell her when the moment’s right for conception. All I knew was that Stephen was ready to climax inside of me again, and I might well be fertile this time. I wasn’t about to back out though. Something *tribal* in my brain, indeed something *primeval* told me that I owed this to him. It was as if I belonged to him.

“It’s okay, love.” I whimpered into his ear, pausing to kiss his neck passionately. “Let go.”

He thrust quickly into me twice more, and then jammed himself deep as he came, gushing out streaming chains of cum. I moaned. My own delicious orgasm climaxed in sync. I’d never had this experience with my ex-husband. As I felt his heated spurts splash and flow deep into my womb, I realized, not only was I not using any protection, but it no longer mattered.

Where a modern woman's intellect might gauge her success by her ability to fend off an unwanted pregnancy, any anthropology textbook will tell you that a woman's reptilian brain might continue to strive for the *successful failure of getting pregnant*. It didn't matter what the brain wanted, it was the body that counted.

The successful failure of getting pregnant! Omigod!

We rested, tightly conjoined together, his body still balanced atop of mine. Naturally Stephen waxed eloquently about our newfound relationship. "I've dreamed of watching your belly swell up, Lyssa," Stephen murmured. "Knowing that it was my baby growing inside you day after day -- week after week."

I panted hard, still trying to catch my breath.

"Stephen!" I gasped, feeling like some pedigreed bitch who'd just been bred by the young new champion in order to propagate a prized litter. "Enough talk about babies and bellies already!"

He slowly withdrew his still semi-rigid cock from my pussy, and gobs of his milky white semen spilled onto my thighs, and slid down the crack of my ass onto the bed. To make matters worse, while I dozed in and out of consciousness, Stephen continued rambling on about his fantasy. "Ulyssa. I plan to watch over you for the entire thirty-six weeks, and then be with you in the delivery room, so that we both can know the joy of our baby pushing out into the world from between your long beautiful legs."

As much as I loved being so close to Stephen, I was exhausted. I wanted to tell him that most pregnancies lasted more than thirty-six weeks, but I didn't have the energy to contend with his particular fantasy right then. "Go to sleep."

* * * * *

I didn't want to call my mother and tell her. I don't know; call it normal mother-daughter ambivalence. Call it cowardice, if you like. Eventually, I knew she'd bring up my father's heart condition. Long ago she'd decided that she didn't need the carrot to induce me to follow her way of thinking. She merely used Daddy's heart condition as the stick.

Finally, after much waffling, I decided I'd better get it over with. It had to be done -- kind of like a tetanus shot.

A familiar male voice answered the phone so I automatically tried to put a disarming smile into my voice. "Daddy, what are you doing home?"

"Lyssa, is that you? Thank God, you called. I've been worried sick about you. How come you haven't called me these past few weeks?"

"Well --" Hedging, I made up an answer. "I've been rather busy."

"Too busy to call your parents?" His query was more of a growl. "You know, there's nothing more important to me ... to both of us than your well-being. You could at least check in once and a while."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. Things have been a little ... uhh ... hectic around here." Oh, yeah. There was nothing like being straightforward and above board. "You're feeling all right, aren't you?"

"Me? I'm fine. I just wanted to take the day off today."

"Listen, could I talk to Momma a minute?"

"I'll go find her," he said. "You know, honey, ever since that jerk Ron left you, I've been worried about what kind of people you surround yourself with. I need to know you're okay, that's all."

"I-I'm fine, Daddy, really. But thank you for caring."

"All right, sweetheart, here's your mother."

All my life, my mother had tried to make my father into the disciplinarian ogre she needed to back up her authority. But like any typical child, I'd soon learned the dynamics of how to play one of them off against the other. Still, there was no denying that my father did suffer from cardiac arrhythmia, and I wanted to be careful with his health.

"It's about time you called." My mother loved to catch people off-guard. Her favorite tactic was to say something cutting in a syrupy-sweet voice.

"Hi, Momma, it's good to hear your voice, too."

"Your father's been worried sick. You know what stress can do to his heart."

I'd heard that particular guilt trip before. "Momma, there's something I have to tell you."

I casually went through all of last night's events at the Civic Theatre. Of course, I left out many of the details of the aftermath of last evening.

"He's what?" she barked over the phone.

"Don't be like that, Momma. Stephen's really sweet."

"He'd better be sweet like those fashion people on TV or your father's going to have a fit! Tell me you haven't lost your mind."

"Oh, for God's sake, I've been seeing him off and on for a week or two, that's all."

"That's all!" I had to pull the receiver away from my ear. "Ulyssa, you're a divorced woman!"

"Oh, Jesus, are we back to that?"

"Besides insulting the church for what you did to your marriage vows, everyone knows that young men only want a divorced woman f-for --" she sputtered. "Well, for you know what!"

"Mother, please. Just give him a chance."

"All right, I'll give him a chance. Is he at least Catholic?"

"I honestly don't know." Of course, I winced as I said it. I was glad that we were on opposite ends of the phone, because if she'd seen me wince, she'd have immediately chalked

this conversation up into her *win* column. Still, I knew that her follow-up question would be point, match and game for her.

“Well, if you had to guess, missy, what would your answer be?”

I took a deep breath. “Probably not.”

“Hah, just like I said!” And then she threw out her topper. “You know this is going to break your father’s heart.”

God, I hate being psychic.

Chapter Four

Madame Zerina -- Dream Interpretations and Tarot Readings, read the delightfully carved calligraphy on the sign fronting an old store window on Buchanan Street. Its delicately archaic printing and message was -- well, for lack of a better word -- inviting. Although Madame was busy with another reading, there appeared to be no one else queued up inside, so I figured I wouldn't have to wait too long for service. I felt anxious. I wished I hadn't emptied the cigarettes out of my purse during my last attempt to quit smoking. I fidgeted as I sat in the little chair in her waiting room.

A good-looking brown-eyed brunette, with little spider webs of gray along her temples, stepped into the lobby area. "Hi! I am Zerina."

I introduced myself, and she looked thoughtfully at me. After a thorough scrutiny, she reached into a desk drawer.

"Here." She offered me a pack of Marlboro Lights with maybe three or four cigarettes left in it. "Somebody left these behind. You may keep them. But please don't light up until after your reading."

I smiled. *Impressive!*

She told me a little about herself, as she led me into her reading room. "I left my homeland of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war. I've been here since the early nineties, when Catholic Social Services sponsored about forty of us."

"Were you raised Catholic, too?"

She shook her head.

The most surprising thing about the walk-in-closet-sized reading room where Zerina sat me down, were the number of Christian artifacts surrounding us. Burning candles and incense lined a rim of small shelves in the room. Exquisitely carved crucifixes, tiny Pieta statuettes, and figurines of saints lined shelves and table and walls. A small painting,

mounted in a shadowy corner, drew my attention, but the low, flickering light obscured its details from view.

Onto the dimly lit table, Madame Zerina dealt out an initial card of her own choosing from the tarot deck. "This is your significator card, Ms. Kincaid -- this is your tarot identity - - ahh!" She pulled out a lusciously hand-painted, oversized card depicting a beautiful woman seated on a throne. The woman's clothing barely covered her voluptuous figure and she sat holding a large, delicately filigreed cup. "The queen of cups -- the tarot has chosen this symbol for you."

I caught my breath. In spite of her lighter-colored hair, the woman on the tarot card looked a lot like me -- richly endowed with curves, expressing what the painters and photographers usually referred to as bedroom eyes.

"A woman like this looks to nature for her pleasure, rather than to manmade enjoyment."

I must have smiled. *Why not both?* I thought.

As if she read my mind, Madame Zerina answered. "What you really like about men, my dear, is that which comes most natural from them."

Although I had to smile at her remark, the atmosphere in there was getting pretty spooky.

Zerina dug out a small pad of paper and a ballpoint pen. "Now I want you to write your question down on this paper. Make it very specific. If you ask something general like 'Am I doing the right thing?' the cards may decide that since you ate a well-rounded breakfast, you have done the right thing. Do not show me your question. I won't see your question, unless you wish to show it to me when the reading is over. Do you understand?"

I nodded and wrote down a few words pertaining directly to any potential long-term relationship with Stephen. I stared at the paper until my vision blurred. This was the first time I'd tangibly confronted the uneasy feelings I'd been enduring for the past couple of weeks. Sensing Madame waited, I finally looked up. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Place the sheet of paper with your question on your lap, and pick up the tarot deck." I did as I was told. Madame Zerina allowed me to warm the deck by shuffling it in my hands for a couple of minutes while she meditated in her chair and prayed over her rosary beads. The whole preparation process took about four or five minutes.

"Now, place the deck on the table." Once I'd done so, Zerina said, "Divide the deck into three piles -- Wait! Use your left hand only. Good. That will do it. You and the tarot have actually done the real divination -- all I need to do is to interpret the cards." Carefully, she put the deck back together. "It will be necessary for you to come and sit on this side next to me."

"This display is called the Celtic layout. It probably seems funny that someone who arrived here from Sarajevo several years ago prefers to use the Celtic read, but that's the way it is. Your card goes in the center. Do you consider yourself an imaginative person?"

I nodded. "Yes, I like to think so."

"Good! Well, well -- the empress! This card is directly related to you." She placed the card immediately over the queen of cups. "Your next card may be in opposition or in harmony."

She placed the next card crossways on top of the empress. "The knight of pentacles? Hmm?" She sat the card beneath the central cards. "Card number three represents the foundation of your life. The eight of wands -- reversed. Number four is an incident which just happened in your life -- the two of cups."

"What do they mean?" I asked.

"Patience. We're not there yet. There are six cards to go. Oh, the ten of pentacles reversed and the eight of cups -- this one is also reversed. These cards are a part of your future."

She built a tower of cards, moving upward on their right. At the bottom sat the three of swords. Then the king of cups fell into place -- reversed. "Another cups card!" Over that she placed another cups card, this time the nine.

"So many cups. Tell me, does your question have to do with emotional issues like love, family, or children?"

"Yes!" I let my eyes widen. "Yes, it does."

"I see." Finally, as Zerina placed the ace of wands into the tenth position, she smiled. "Oh, my goodness." She stared at the cards for a moment. "Give me a moment to decipher this puzzle of yours."

I looked around the little room while I waited for her to continue. Miniature paintings representing all the Stations of the Cross hung from the walls of the intimate little room. Strategically placed candles illuminated each station. I felt uneasy about asking the question I'd asked in a place enshrined by the traditional symbols of abstinence.

"Your queen of cups is topped by the empress," Madame said. "Here the card of marriage, fertility, and contentment sits atop another fertile card. This is the card of imagination and feeling -- the seeker of gentle pleasures. However, you must watch out for the tendency to become preoccupied with your sensual self. How many children do you have?"

"None."

"Oh?" She looked up at me as if my answer were an extraordinary surprise to her.

I shrugged. "Not yet."

"Well, the knight of pentacles represents a young man -- I think younger than you -- a dark man with black hair and black eyes. Is this your husband?"

I shook my head and smiled. "No, he's not."

"However, you know who this man is, don't you?" Zerina waited for me to nod. "He appears to be acting in the role of husband. He's trustworthy, this dark one -- a good man. Careful, considerate, and loving." She smiled.

Oh, yes, very loving.

"He's young and occasionally brash." Here she paused. "Would you like a clarification?"

"A clarification?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"I can bring out another card to help you understand the meaning of this particular card," Zerina explained, dealing out another card. "Hmm. Six of cups. Could it be that this man is a bit *too* young?"

I smiled and spoke. "If that card represents whom I think it does, he's very young."

"In spite of his opposing position on the table, this man is not in opposition to you. Although he may represent forces in opposition to you, I think you'll discover that he wishes to remain in harmony with you. You both share a love of art and culture, family and --" She stopped and looked at me. I think she nearly blushed. "Well ... natural things."

I held back my laugh. *Natural things!*

"Now we come to the eight of wands reversed. These are arrows of jealousy. Either you are feeling betrayed or you have given cause for another to think so of you. Family strife and quarrels seem to have come into play in your life recently. The king of cups, but reversed. Someone very powerful has been ... umm ... dealing double. This person is afraid of scandal -- maybe, something worse."

Pointing at that card, I said, "Now that almost looks like my ex-husband. Could he be the one?"

"No. It doesn't mean that he's the source of your problems," Madame Zerina replied. "This is merely the nature of your troubles ahead."

I think Madame Zerina saw the puzzlement in my eyes, because she stopped and said. "Would you like another clarification?"

I nodded, and she flipped over a new card. "That's odd. The two of swords. Are you a twin, perchance?"

"What?" I asked. "No."

"Here I see another woman who is very close to you. Your age. She stands in opposition to your young man with the dark hair and dark eyes. Interesting, right here is the three of swords -- the lovers separate -- stormy weather for the affections. And yet, the two of cups right here indicates the beginning of a new and fruitful relationship."

Fruitful? Unintentionally, I snorted out a scared laugh. My mouth dropped open. "What kind of relationship?"

Madame Zerina raised her eyebrows. "Look here. The ten of pentacles reversed shows unstable family matters -- possibly a loss of honor to the family. This matter has been bothering you -- no! -- someone close to you for a long time, hasn't it?"

I shuddered. "Yes. How can you see something like that?"

Continuing to look at the cards, Zerina dismissed my remark with a shake of her head. "Once again the eight of cups reversed shows the possibility of a new attachment on the horizon, while the nine of cups brings you both material well-being and a renewal of love -- even sensual pleasure. This is a good card for you. It means that you, as the seeker, shall get your wish."

I raised an eyebrow at the possibility of that. "Really?"

Madame Zerina placed her finger on the next overturned card. "The ace of wands," she said. "Now this is the card of creativity. Are you an artist? Maybe a sculptor, or a painter?"

I shook my head. "No, not really."

"How about a clarification?" she suggested.

I shrugged. "Okay."

"The star reversed," she said, dealing out the next card. "Feelings of insecurity and disquiet -- that's strange." She muttered under her breath. "Would you say that something about a painting seems to have been bothering you?"

I gulped. But I answered falsely. "No. I don't believe so."

She looked at me sharply, as if she caught me in my lie. This time Madame Zerina dealt out her own clarification card. "The devil means fear of change or maybe fear of making a commitment."

I think I paled. "Oh?"

"Hmm," she replied. I could tell she wasn't convinced. "Still we do have a card which shows creativity."

"I-I'm a writer."

"I see," she said tenuously. "Would you agree that you enjoy painting with words?"

"Well, when you put it that way, yes!"

"Good!" Her mood lightened. "Something special might be happening with your writing."

Now I was excited. "Like what?"

"It's not clear, although your writing has already touched many people -- some of whom you know and some you don't." Madame Zerina shrugged. "All the cards that have gone before reflect upon your potential creativity. So whatever you've been working on lately may reflect the themes we spoke about."

Then she paused briefly. "However, you also need to know that some of these very same cards tend to indicate a birth in the family."

A birth in the family! Suddenly, I envisioned myself stark naked on the bed next to Stephen, and once again a backflow of what felt like several quarts of very potent white semen leaked from between my thighs. How in God's name did he manage to turn a complete stranger around to his way of thinking?

Once I stepped outside of her door, I lit one of the cigarettes Madame Zerina had given me. Leaving her storefront, I pondered on how the Bosnian woman's words seemed to follow the clutter of conflicting thoughts that had been plaguing me lately.

Your writing has already touched many people -- some of whom you know. However, you also need to know these very same cards tend to indicate a birth in the family.

Although I spoke to her daily, I hadn't seen Momma for almost a week. Since I'd taken the day off anyway, I thought I'd drop by and see how she was doing. In the meantime, I tried to re-examine the content of Madame Zerina's cryptic words as I drove back out of the city toward Momma's place.

Damn! She'd answered my question all right. I pulled out the piece of note paper on which I'd jotted down the question: *Is my relationship with Stephen going to be permanent?*

So, when I took the freeway exit at the only Greek Orthodox Church in the city, I wondered just how far we'd gone to cement the relationship between us. Why hadn't I been honest enough with myself to ask the tarot cards the one question that really haunted me?

Was I really going to allow Stephen Dryor to impregnate me? As far as society was concerned, it was as if the cards were stacked against us.

But since when did Stephen pay attention to what society thinks?

As I drove over the freeway and past the city proper, I noticed an elementary school off to my left. I had learned to drive at sixteen, and finally I'd gotten my license by the age of seventeen. Looking out across the playground, I was reminded of the twenty-year-old black man I had in my life now. How could either of us have known that as a high school driver's education student, I might have driven passed the grade school Stephen attended at least a dozen times without ever realizing that my future lover was a first-grader running around on the playground enjoying his recess.

When I finally pulled up to my parents' home, I tried to put Stephen and this morning's revelations out of my mind. So of course, when Momma asked me what I'd been doing, I answered, "Oh, you know, pursuing one of those self-help things in one of those new-age places."

As a devout Catholic, Momma hated anything that smacked of Eastern new-age philosophy, so I knew she'd let the subject drop.

"And how are other things in your life doing these days?" she asked. Even though she'd been living here in the U.S. since she was young, she still had some of the rhythms and accents from the old country.

"I'm doing quite well, thank you."

“Uh-huh, and are you still seeing th-that uptown boy of yours?”

Here it comes again.

“Yes, Momma. I’m still seeing Stephen.”

“A woman your age should know better, Lyssa. Your father and I didn’t raise you to throw away your reputation on some --”

We were interrupted by my cell phone ringing within my purse. *Oh, good*, I thought, *a reprieve*. I pressed the talk button.

“Lyssa?” His quietly familiar masculine voice at the other end of the phone sent a shiver up my arms. “Pack a weekend bag. I’m going to pick you up in about twenty-five minutes, and we’re going to spend the entire weekend away from the city!”

I must have smiled at the warm hint of excitement in his soft voice. “Well, that certainly sounds promising,” I answered, keeping the smile in my voice. “But we’ll have to meet at my place in about thirty-five minutes or so. I’m at my mother’s house right now. Say, where are we headed?”

“Just wait. It’s a surprise.” Then, with an audible click, he disconnected.

Feeling suddenly secure and warm in my anticipation for the weekend’s prospects, I smiled to myself, not realizing that Momma had tuned in to my side of our telephone conversation.

She snapped, “Ulyssa, I can tell by your face that you’re going out with that damn nig--”

“Don’t say it, Momma.”

“I can say what I want in my own house! That old snoop Svetlana Blakeley stuck her snooty nose into my house just the other day. She had the gall to ask me what my daughter was doing out in public alone with some young colored buck. I was so embarrassed; I thought I’d wither up and die right then and there.” Momma vented her anger venomously. Her face had reddened into a grimace of pure indignation. “So has he turned you into his ghetto slut yet?”

“I’ve told you, Stephen’s not like that, Momma. I’d hoped you’d understand.”

“All I understand is that when it becomes time for me to be a grandmother, all I’m liable to get is some half-black little mongrel bastard.”

“That isn’t likely to happen, Momma.” I sighed. *Oh, Christ, was that a lie? After all, Madame Zerina told me the cards could indicate a birth in the family.*

“Bullshit! The way I see it, there’s nothing to stop you.” She nearly snarled out her last words. “The way you carry on -- going off with that boy for a whole damned weekend. I doubt that the two of you bother with separate beds when you spend the night at his God-damned, ultra-ritzy downtown Hurley House Condominium.”

“Momma, please.” I wanted to scream, but I lowered my voice. “Don’t start anything.”

“I’m not the one who started this, Lyss. But I’m certain I’ll have to be here to help you pick up the broken pieces of your life later on. God knows these affairs never last. Once he’s got you pregnant, he’ll be off corrupting some other white woman.”

My mother made sure that she always got in the last word; so, rather than pursuing the discussion any further, I gave her a dutiful kiss on the cheek and left.

Of course, I knew what Momma’s problem was. When I was married to my so-called high-school sweetheart for those six and a half years, we never had any pretty little blond children. Once my *ex* knocked up that petty little slut from his office, it was a simple matter for him to bail out of a childless marriage. For the last year and a half, my mother felt my ex-husband’s loss far more keenly than I did. Never mind his betrayal of me; Momma mourned the loss of her pretty little white-skinned grandchildren.

I’d fallen so deeply under the spell of my own thoughts that I almost didn’t see the stoplight suddenly jump from yellow to red. The piercing sound of horns brought my mind around, and I screeched on the brakes. *Jesus! That was close.* I drove the rest of the way home a lot more prepared for traffic. I hoped it wouldn’t take me long to pack for the weekend.

Chapter Five

He was waiting for me in the parking lot when I got home.

“Okay, Stephen, why the mystery?” I asked.

He laughed, and then he took a moment to kiss me. “I’ll tell you on the way there.”

Stephen followed me inside my apartment, where we packed and kissed, and then kissed again before we finished packing.

As I put my overnight bag into the back seat of his car, I noticed a few of my neighbors’ curtains ruffle as they peeped out their windows. Even I couldn’t help noticing how amiss we must have appeared in comparison to each other. He was hardly twenty years old, while I was approaching thirty-two. His family was part of the growing new middle class of black professionals, while I came from a working class right at the poverty line background. He’d been a college-level tennis competitor, while I couldn’t stumble through three sets of lawn tennis if my life depended on it. Besides all that, of course, were the obvious disparate dissimilarities in our racial heritages.

Did that constitute a double negative, or did it just feel like one?

I saw another set of blinds flutter. Shit, let ’em look, I decided. Let ’em all wonder if our double negative made for *positively* incredible sex.

Stephen drove approximately an hour and twenty minutes west of the city out to Beech Haven and the University Apartments complex at Michigan Dunes State University. I’d worn a nice informal khaki combo skirt and blouse set which must have shown off my legs more than I realized, because Stephen’s eyes were constantly leaving the road to glance down at them.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said after about the fifth time we crossed the center line into the oncoming traffic lane. “Either I drive, so you don’t have to keep your eyes on the road, or we work out a deal so that all your ‘looking’ is done in Braille. What do you say?”

"I wouldn't mind going for the second option, if you'd be so kind as to slip off your panties," he answered with a wide grin. "Just so I can get a truly accurate Braille reading, you understand."

"Panties?" I replied. "What panties?"

Stephen's head jerked around, and the steering wheel came with it. The Acura swerved onto the highway's gravel shoulder and fishtailed as it tried to regain traction.

I smiled. *Gotcha!*

"So why'd you bring me all the way out here?" I asked a few minutes later.

"I want you to meet some people, gorgeous." He smiled. "And I want those people to meet you -- my cousin, Thomas, and his wife."

"I've been wondering how long it would take to for you to get up the nerve to introduce me to the rest of your family. Hey, didn't you tell me that your father works for the university?"

"Yeah, but forget about my father." Stephen smiled broadly. "This is supposed to be a pleasure trip."

"Uh-huh," I patted the dark hand that rested upon my thigh. "And what kind of pleasure did you have in mind?"

"Don't worry. You'll find out." He laughed. "Seriously, I think you're really gonna like the people we're visiting today."

"Tell me something, Stephen." I cautiously phrased my next question. "Have you been bribing the rest of the world to follow your party line lately?"

"What? I don't get it."

"It's okay. I don't really get it, either." I paused for a moment. "You know, I never asked you about how you found me after the seminar."

"Through the personal ads, of course."

"Yeah, I know that. But how did you know it would be me?"

"I remember that day in the seminar lecture hall when I watched you for those five unforgettable hours. You wore that linen skirt, showing more leg than you could possibly know, and that purple print blouse of yours that couldn't begin to hide your expansive breasts. As a healthy male, I was in voyeur heaven." He glanced over at me, but I signaled him to keep his eyes on the road.

"Even though I knew that you were an older woman, I wanted you more than anyone I'd ever wanted in my life," Stephen continued.

I snorted my disbelief. "Be serious."

"I am serious. Right then and there, I daydreamed that I'd be the man in your life some day. Fucking you, making you moan in ecstasy while I held you close."

I looked at him with new awareness.

"You discerned all this from seeing me in my seminar?"

"You know, when you mentioned that article about the on-line dating service, my ears perked up to your every word."

"Really?" I asked softly.

"My mind began to work overtime on how I might be the one who'd meet you for your *research*." Then he chuckled. "Bless your heart, you spelled out your personal ad right there in the seminar. I copied it word for word, and for days I looked up every damn dating service until your ad appeared."

"Omigod, did you really?"

"Do you know that I actually responded to two others before I hit upon yours?"

"No!"

"They were nice ladies, too, but they weren't you. Of course, since both of them were white, they would have been truly scandalized if I'd sent them my picture." He shook his head. "My heart leaped out of my chest the day I recognized your name on the envelope. Of course, you know the rest."

"It was supposed to be research for an article," I said sighing. "Nobody said anything about actually finding a partner." *Or having his baby.*

By then he'd pulled his Acura into a cul de sac at the university housing complex. "All right. We're here!"

In a cramped lower-level apartment in the very center of university married housing lived Stephen's cousin, Thomas Dryor; his wife, Rona Uebelhor Dryor; and their growing family. As soon as I met Rona, I understood why Stephen wanted me to meet these people. For, as her Swiss-German name indicated, Rona was as white as I was.

"Stevie!" A handsome black man in his mid-twenties yelled out. "All right!"

"Stevie?" I snickered.

"Don't say it."

"Haven't seen you in a coon's age, cuz!" Thomas looked to be over twenty-five years old, but not much. Stockier than his cousin, but lighter skinned, Thomas had very even white teeth, and a lovely smile. "And I take it this is the young lady you spoke about so glowingly."

"Tom, this is Ulyssa Kincaid. And Lyss, this is Rona, one of my all time favorite ladies."

Tom Dryor's wife was a short, plumpish woman with pale skin, light brown hair, and a cherubic face. At twenty-three or twenty-four, she was also much younger than I was. I had to wonder what they thought of someone as young as Stephen dating someone my age.

My age! Unexpectedly, I felt like some foolish old matron trying to recapture her lost youth. Even though I understood why this particular branch of the Dryor family might accept the both of us as a couple, I couldn't help wondering whether Stephen was initiating

me into some sort of secret society. Now I sounded like my mother. But at nearly thirty-two, I felt uncomfortably middle-aged amidst all these twenty-something college students.

"Come inside, Ulyssa," Rona said as she opened the apartment door. "I never could understand why the Dryor men have this obsession about hanging around outside in the heat all day."

Although their apartment wasn't air conditioned, there were a lot of fans pointed in different directions.

"Binky!" A small child called out as I walked through the door.

"Kari," Rona said, as she reached down to try to pull the pacifier out of the toddler's mouth. However, Kari quickly darted across the room. "Hey, is that Randi's binky?"

"She give me binky!" Kari's light brown mottled mop of curls and waves effervesced off of her head like bath bubbles in a full tub. She had her father's nose and the classic brown-eyed beauty of any munchkin moving out of her terrible twos into her obstinate threes.

"Yeah, I'll bet she did," Rona replied, as she grabbed her daughter's arm. "Give it here."

After Rona had handled the tiny crisis, she introduced me to Randi, the baby. A year old at best, the little girl had her father's darker hair, which she'd obviously frosted with fashionable streaks of baby cereal and bottled formula. Both Kari and Randi had the maple-cream, caramel-colored skin, a lovely mix of their parents' complexions.

It's funny -- intellectually a person understands the genetics that the mixing of races engenders, but until you see the results with your own eyes, your body and soul don't quite make that final adjustment. Happily, my mind saw two beautiful children who happened to have skin the color of café au lait.

For two hours I watched the girls play as I tried to listen to the dreams and daydreams of the Dryor household. As I sat down close to her on a rug on their living room floor, little Randi became all flailing arms and laughter when it came to clutching at toys and reaching for people. Obviously, shyness was alien to their nature and both girls took to me right away. The toddlers' smiles were nearly as infectious as the ones their parents gave in return.

When the two handsome black men walked back into the apartment, Stephen's eyes seemed to glow as he swept me with his gaze. I could imagine how I looked, sprawled on the floor with little Randi climbing over me like I was some soft, full-sized pillow. Knowing the way his mind worked, I figured he'd made the logical connection: woman with child.

He stopped and silently stared at the baby and me for a long time. Since my skirt had ridden up well past my thighs, I figured he just wanted to enjoy the view for a few moments. Or maybe he'd just remembered what I told him about my panties when we were in the car. Stephen opened his mouth, as if he were about to speak, but Thomas chose that moment to hand out cans of cold beer.

“Steve, I saw your dad discussing something with Professor Laban a couple of days ago by the folk art museum parking lot,” Thomas said. “S.B. looked as irascible as ever. Glad I never decided to take any classes from him.”

“Did you tell him I was visiting you?”

“Nope. Didn’t want to interrupt them.” Thomas shook his head. “All three of us just waved cheerfully to each other as I passed.”

Stephen nodded quietly. “Good.”

“You’ve gotta stop this nonsense and talk to him, Steve. He’s your dad after all.”

“Let’s change the subject, okay?”

“Okay.” Thomas shrugged his shoulders. “When are you two getting married?”

I’d just taken my first sip of beer at that very second, and I choked, coughing up a spray of beer spittle all over poor little baby Randi. “Wha--!” I didn’t think it really bothered the baby until she saw how I’d made a big fuss about it, and then she started crying.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.”

I scooped Randi up in my arms, while Rona hustled a dry towel over to wipe the baby’s face, neck, arms and legs. As I patted her dry, I saw the stark contrast between my white skin and the smooth caramel hues that shown across Randi’s naturally brown skin. I looked over to see Stephen grinning. For that split second, I could tell exactly what he was thinking, and in that same split second, we both may have been thinking the same thing -- *what if I gave in, and we had children?*

“In spite of his card’s opposing position on the table, this man is not in opposition to you,” Madame Zerina had told me. *“You both share a love of... natural things.”*

As the night wound onward, we soon steered our grown-up discussions toward the rocky detour that we’d chosen to follow, and how our deviation from the straight and normal road of love would put strains on both of us that no one else could imagine. Rona and Tom Dryor were the first people ever to point out to us that interracial couples often needed to socialize with other interracial couples.

“It’s a little bit like a support group,” Rona stated. “Life can be pretty trying when you feel like you are the only ones out there struggling.”

“Alex, I’ll take ‘identify the psych major’ for two hundred dollars.” Thomas Dryor grinned at his wife.

“Families have to learn to adapt to your life, too,” Rona said. “It’s hard on them. Thankfully it didn’t take long for my parents to come around. For reasons beyond my comprehension they actually like Tom, and they really enjoy having the girls.”

“In fact, the girls are going to Rona’s parents’ tomorrow night,” Thomas said. “Rona and I have planned a special evening just for the four of us.”

I stayed quiet. No way could I share my mother's thoughts on the issue. Some things were better left unsaid.

* * * * *

Later on, as I helped her prepare the kids for bed, Rona confided in me. "I can't tell you how happy I am to have the two of you here visiting."

"I'm glad we came."

She powdered and diapered the youngest little imp; all the while, baby Randi squirmed playfully under her mother's fondling. "Seems as if we meet people one time, and then they start to make excuses as to why they can't come to visit us again. At least, family is forced to visit us periodically, so the girls have gotten to know both sets of grandparents."

"That must get very lonely," I replied.

Rona shrugged off my comment. "I'm way too busy for that." Then she smiled at her girls. "You'll find that out, after you two have kids of your own, Ulyssa."

For some reason Rona's remark triggered a shuddering spark of tension that ripped through my underbelly like an electric current. "Well ... uhh ... we haven't really ... uhh ... planned whether or not we're going to have children." *Liar! It's a good thing Stephen didn't hear that.*

Rona laughed out loud at my remark. "If Stephen's anything like Thomas, it won't matter a tinker's bell what sort of plans you two have made. I can guarantee you there'll be children."

Later, Stephen brought out his 35mm SLR and started shooting photos of everyone and everything. He even asked Thomas to take a picture of us, but Tom backed down, saying that Rona could handle a camera six times better than he could. So she shot several candid portraits of Stephen and me together.

"Word is that the university's thinking of exploring one of the blue holes again," Thomas said.

"Which one?" Stephen asked softly.

"The one off the Yucatan peninsula."

"Not the same one, is it?"

"No."

I started to ask for specifics, but Rona signaled to me with a solemn look and a shake of her head. Obviously, this was something she felt I shouldn't pursue. The conversation trailed off. Indeed, a little later when I started to ask Rona the same question, she shook her head again. "Not now. Some other time."

I sensed that this was a very sore subject with her, but damn, my curiosity was piqued. I thought about asking Stephen, but, in deference to the three of them and to keep the mood of the night light, I decided against it.

The night wound down, and once Rona and Tom had put the girls to bed, we were invited to spend the night on a foldout hidden in their living room couch.

After we'd been left alone in the living room of their apartment, Stephen and I found ourselves enjoying the evening prospect of a wonderfully inviting, although less than double size mattress, coupled with a strong yearning to be in each other's arms.

Soon the living room carpet was strewn with discarded clothing, and we quickly scampered for the intimacy of the little sofabed.

As was his stead, Stephen had stripped down totally before he opened up the sofabed. "I hope you don't mind," he whispered. "But I've been planning all day on exactly how I'm going to minister to your needs." He held up the jauntily patterned sheet, which showed off his black body in contrast to the lighter, pastel-colored bedding.

"Really," I answered as I walked over to stand next to him. "And what needs are those?"

Quickly he reached out for me. "C'mere, you."

Since I wore nothing against an unexpected evening chill, I moaned with a combination of both frustration and satisfaction as his warm dark hands ventured across my breasts.

"What are you ...?" Suddenly my mouth was pinned by Stephen's lips and his tongue hungrily met mine. I gulped loudly, trying to catch my breath. For a second, I even thought about turning him away. "Stephen!" After giving into his kiss for a little while, I turned my head. "Don't! Your cousins will hear us."

Stephen laughed at normal volume. "Did you think they wouldn't guess, Lyss?"

Although I hadn't expected to eavesdrop, I realized that we could hear Thomas and Rona beginning to take physical advantage of their time alone in their bedroom. Their soft moaning, giggling, and panting wove an intoxicating tapestry of sounds over an incessant hypnotic background of bouncing bedsprings. I giggled as my own nipples began to harden with the extra stimulus.

Let's face it, there's nothing like the intoxicating sounds of someone else's lovemaking to raise your own arousal levels a hundredfold. Now the tiny little ache lurking behind my bellybutton signaled a subtle change in my own desires.

"In that case, I suppose they won't mind," I whispered, concentrating on the feel of his hands fondling my breasts.

Stephen bent down to an exposed nipple, moistening the tip with his tongue and then softly drew on my raised flesh with his lips. I caught my breath. The odd combination of irritation and too much saliva made my nipple tingle with a brand new excitement. Instead

of pushing at him, I stood quietly as his hands and lips examined my skin from hip to shoulder and in a straight line from my sternum right down to the pelvic mound. Suddenly, I lost my balance, and my body tilted as Stephen pushed me back, positioning me on the thin mattress of the foldout couch.

“Careful.” But even as I said the words, I started to squirm lovingly beneath his touch.

“It’s all right,” Stephen answered. He parted my knees as he used his body’s angular momentum to move between my thighs. “You’ll see.”

Still keeping his body wedged between my legs, Stephen threw back the top sheet, allowing it fall to the floor. Letting a breathy sigh escape, I could only stare at his erection, jutting freely perpendicular to his stomach muscles. Sighing again as his weight descended up and over top of me, I didn’t protest his attempts to position himself over me.

My soft brown pubic hair was now brushing against his kinky black pubes, and the lips of my pussy were broached by his large probing penis twice, thrice, and yet again. As if in a dream state, my muscles stiffened under him, allowing my thighs to arise unbidden by my mind. As we cautiously moved together in the living room of their apartment, I overheard more of the soft moaning echoes of Thomas and Rona’s passions drifting out from behind the closed door of their bedroom. The sounds in that little apartment had become intensely arousing.

I, too, voiced an excited moan as Stephen penetrated me. “Aaughh!” I gulped as he pushed deeper.

“Jesus, you feel good.”

“Jesus has nothing to do with it,” I murmured, and we went on carefully moving together for several minutes.

“Oh, Lyssa,” Stephen gasped when he thrust his flawless erection easily into my vaginal depths. “You’re still willing to take me in, even after what you’ve seen today?”

“What are you talking about?” I whispered, irked at being distracted. I didn’t want to deal with questions, I wanted to make love.

“You got a taste of what mixed-raced couples are all about.”

“What I saw was a nice young family trying to make it as best as they can.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” he responded, breathing heavily into my ear. “You saw the girls.”

“The girls! How could I miss them? They were all over me, although not quite as much as you’re all over me now.”

He pushed inward with a strong steady movement, and every part of my being seemed to stretch as he pressed his thick cock forward. Despite the resistance from my inbred inhibitions, I permitted him to slide sharply inside. All that natural lubricant I’d produced over the course of the evening acquiesced to his dick as he fucked me, slowly, deeply. Stephen’s intimate presence felt like a perfectly natural occurrence.

Why did I even doubt our affinity for each other? My lungs exhaled a soft moan while my toes curled involuntarily as the entirety of Stephen's erection slithered through my parted labia and up into the enfolding moist heat of my supple cunt.

"Randi and Kari were one of the reasons I brought you out here in the first place," he said, sliding his cock into my natural wetness, matching the rhythm of his speech with a totally different rhythm.

I sighed. "What are you talking about?" *Stupid question.*

"I'm saying we might end up whipping up a little baby batter ourselves and you could end up carrying a little one who looks a lot like Kari or Randi -- a child who's only half white."

"I see, and that's supposed to scare me off?" I moaned, barely able to hold up my end of the conversation. My abdomen fluttered as the laughter reflex echoed a tweaking pull in my vagina all the while I hoarded Stephen's slithering blunt penis down deep. Once again there was that noticeable thump deep down against my cervix.

"Maybe it should, Lyss. My own happy hang-up has a lot to do with dangling my dick inside a beautifully naked porcelain-skinned princess like you," he panted slowly between spoken phrases. "As far as I'm concerned, I belong inside your cunt, and I want to continue lingering in here for as long as I live."

"Oooo," I purred. "I like the sound of that."

When his lips clamped onto mine once again, I couldn't refuse him. I hesitantly reached up and around his neck, and I held him close. Again and again I drew the entire length of his cock deep within my body. Adapting to the sweet experience of his blunt penetration had left me inwardly anxious, yet outwardly calm. What I demanded from our loving here and now was far more important than my concerns over the future.

Conceding hungrily to Stephen's hard-pressed kissing, I felt him growing and strengthening inside of me while his long thighs and dangling testicles anchored themselves just beyond my open flesh.

Stephen moaned. His soft muffled groan excited me, and my legs grew rigid against his hips. Thrusting my abdomen upward, tightening my vaginal muscles around his cock, crying down deep for even more, I dug my fingers into his naked brown back, my arms trembling with the tense exertion we now shared.

This wasn't supposed to be happening, those doubts in the back of my mind exclaimed. *It's all wrong. There's no room in my life for this kind of complication.* But with Stephen Dryor's strong arms clasped around me and his weight pinning me under his dominant thrusts, my controlled breathing soon transformed into unmanageable gasping. Continuing to arch my back to make my hips rise, I let my head sink into the soft cushions of the sofa. I didn't even wonder any longer if maybe it wasn't time for me to bail out -- to call a halt to the whole thing.

No, not yet, my body demanded. Don't let it end yet!

Our conjugal pistoning played out a pure pleasure where I allowed him sweet access. After all, his lengthy, bolstered presence was intimately gratifying. I'd enjoy his diverting embrace for several minutes more and then try to calm him down before the two of us became too loud inside the little apartment.

Suddenly Stephen quaked, his massive body trembling above me. My mind and body answered him, and I shuddered as he growled out his release.

Clutching me close to him while he balanced atop my thighs, Stephen came, spurting hoards of wet, heated, surging semen from deep within him. His orgasm seemed to go on forever, and I held on tight while he continued to move slowly within me.

Several moments later, I managed to speak. "That was foolish. I can just imagine the mess we've made on Rona's couch."

"It was the right thing to do. I've wanted you all day."

We'd stayed conjoined for all this time, and now he slowly became erect once again. "Why did you choose me, Stephen?" In spite of my desire for him, some perverse thing in the back of my head made me ask the question.

"It's totally because of who you are, Lyss."

"Really? And who am I?"

"Somehow I knew that you hadn't figured that out for yourself yet."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It has to do with love." Stephen chuckled.

"It does?"

He didn't answer me. Soon he was thrusting and lunging within me, meshing with me again, bringing my body back to the brink of eternity until my nerves stopped me from going over the abyss by submitting to a marvelous climax of my own.

As my mind returned to my body, Stephen pushed himself up on his arms for a moment, caressing with his heated gaze. Then he frowned.

"Look, Lyssa. I know how your mother feels about us -- about any children we two might have."

I let out a sigh. "She's not able to face up to the fact that any baby I might have with you won't be too subtle a mixture. What about your family?"

"They'll be okay as far as the race thing goes, I think. All you have to do is to look at Tom and Rona's girls. My people have been accepting children of mixed races for as long as we can remember. Mulattos, quadroons, octoroons -- they are all acknowledged as part of who we are. But I doubt that many of your people can say the same thing."

"I can only speak for me, Mr. Dryor," I whispered. "But if I didn't have some idea of what you and I meant to each other, we certainly wouldn't be in the middle of all this -- again -- would we?"

Stephen dropped down close to me -- very close, his wiry chest hairs brushing against my breasts, his strong thighs pressed against mine. His hard cock filled me to perfection.

"Let's make a baby together, Lyss."

"Stephen Benjamin Dryor the second," I whispered. "You listen to me. I love you. I enjoy making love to you. But that's something we do for pleasure. If and when I decide it's time for me to have a baby, I might just find myself making that baby with you. Do you understand that?" I saw the intensity of his passion reflected in the taut muscles of his face as I continued to speak softly into his ear. "Have I made you wear a condom, ever? Of course, I haven't. Not that you would anyway. But that doesn't matter. Why? Because I love you -- because I love sex with you -- I even enjoy having your big dick dallying inside me for long minutes on end!"

Stephen moaned, rolling his hips against me.

I fought to keep a clear head. "When the time is right, maybe I'll get pregnant. But until that time, just be patient."

He sighed, and started to say something else. "Uh-uh!" I interrupted him, placing a finger on his lips. "Can we please just get on with it?"

Sliding one hand under my body, Stephen twined the fingers of the other into the long golden ankh necklace he'd bought me, and then he scraped the delicate chain over my stiffening nipples. Beneath him, I whimpered, my body succumbing to his needs, as he pushed his long, hard cock in and out of my pussy. He possessed me totally and utterly, subjugating my flesh to his desires. My chest heaved and my breath came in sobbing gasps as he pounded my body savagely without respite. My head slammed against the back cushions of the couch as his thrusts picked up speed.

"You know," he gasped. "Someday I'm going to have you walking bow-legged from carrying my children, Ulyssa Kincaid. I'm going to keep your belly full of my babies until you're too old to get pregnant anymore. Now, wouldn't you like that, my lily white love?"

"Ooh. Is that a threat?" I giggled.

Suddenly, Stephen became very serious. I mean he didn't scowl, but that playful look that he always had disappeared. "I'd never threaten you, Lyssa. I don't ever want to do anything to lose you. But you understand that this baby of yours will be born only half white."

I snickered. "Sure, as long as you understand that your baby will only be half black."

Whoops! I was guilty of operating my mouth without engaging my mind again.

"Oh, Lyss." Stephen panted over me. "Oh, Ulyssa, I love you so fucking much."

"And I love fucking you so much," I murmured, adding a bit of a purr to my reply.

Suddenly I quaked, moaned, and cried out in an unbearably strong orgasm. I clutched his body close to me as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me. Stephen's huge cock quivered, swelled and erupted, still buried deep within me, exploding, throbbing, jerking and pulsing, the hot potent liquid spurted forth, splashing hot cum inside me, spraying his virile seed into the very depths of what I dreamed was my fertile, unprotected womb. My cunt was throbbing, pulsing, contracting and clenching around his cock as he filled me with his thick, white-hot juices.

I squealed and then moaned sweetly -- if somewhat loudly -- over and over again. Stephen held me close, making soft, comforting noises as he stroked my hair, until finally I caught my breath.

"So, lover." I grinned and kissed him under his chin. "I take it that was precisely what you wanted to hear."

Stephen gasped out an exhausted affirmation. I suspected he was too physically spent to speak.

"Mommee!" A young girl cried out. A series of muffled sobs followed her wail.

"Oh, no," I whispered, as the second child began to wail. "We must have woke them up."

"Don't mind me," Rona called out as she dashed from her bedroom into the girls' room next door. "Just passing through."

Stephen quickly reached down and grabbed the bed sheet, although I think it was more for my benefit than his.

Sighing, I leaned my head onto Stephen's shoulder, and we snuggled together for the fifteen minutes or so it took for our hostess to settle her children back to sleep. I'd nearly dropped off to sleep myself, when one final surprise lit up the darkness.

"Say 'cheese!'" Rona called out. Suddenly a burst of piercing light flashed through my half-closed eyelids. Though I was covered from the waist down, both of my breasts were exposed to the night air.

Rona grinned. "God, I love candid shots."

* * * * *

We huddled together in the darkness. I could barely see, and I clung to him for safety. Suddenly, a blazing stream of light filled my vision.

"What the --?" I said. *Another flash bulb?*

No! The Pillar of Fire. We stood on the landing between the flights of stairs. The two priests approached us, coming quickly out of the shadows.

Stephen held something up in the darkness. I recognized my octagonal earring.

"I brought a key," Stephen said. "I wish to descend the seven hundred steps."

One of the priests shook his head. "Do you believe that it will work?"

Stephen nodded. "I believe it will."

The other priest slumped slightly. "I suppose it's worth a try. Go ahead."

I followed Stephen closely. A gloomy wind blew up from below, and I didn't want to lose him in the dreary murkiness of the stairway. Up ahead, I spotted a pale figure descending in front of us. Someone had preceded us down the seven hundred steps.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Stephen answered. He looked over the staircase railing. "It's a woman. She's dressed in a tunic-like gown and descending the stairs extremely fast."

"Is it the guardian at the top of the staircase?"

He shook his head. "No." After a moment, he added, "Damned, if it doesn't look like you."

I could barely keep the far-off figure in focus. "Can't be! I'm here with you."

"I know," he replied. "It's baffling."

I heard the soft, distant cry of a baby rising on the twisted breezes. Hurrying along, Stephen continued to lead the way down the seven hundred steps to the gate of deeper slumber.

"Do you think we can find the baby?"

"All we can do is try."

At the bottom of the stairs, the landscape spread out in all different directions. The baby's short, sobbing cries came from our left. Stephen turned in that direction, and we began to move carefully toward the sound. The path was sandy for the most part; so it wasn't too hard on our bare feet.

We stumbled forward a few hundred yards, until we came to a sheer cliff wall. The ground beneath our feet felt different -- as if littered with hundreds of thousands of pebbles. Granite gray and foreboding, the cliff side gleamed in the darkness. We approached slowly, and my eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom. Suddenly, I could make out the image of a cavern cut into the rock face.

"Is that natural, or did something carve that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Stephen answered. "But whatever it is, I think the baby's crying may be coming from in there."

I gulped audibly. "Let's find out if you're right."

We stepped into the darkness. Suddenly a burning torch appeared set into the cliff side. As it burst into flames, the torch illuminated a huge octagonal shaped door. Directly in front of us, anchored into the cliff face, was the floating shape from the bas-relief on Stephen's condo wall. .

Something about a painting seems to have been bothering you.

“My God, it’s here!” Cautiously, Stephen reached out his hands and began to examine it. “Do you see anything that resembles a keyhole, Lyssa?”

“N-no, not yet.” I was stunned by the sheer size and majesty of the octagonal doorway. It appeared to be some alloy of both gold and silver or possibly some metal I didn’t recognize. I could tell that it was thick and probably enormously heavy.

“Ah-hah!” Down toward the right side, close to the ground, was an octagonal indentation. “Keep your fingers crossed.” He took my octagonal earring and placed it into the indentation in the wall.

Nothing happened. The earring was too small for the keyhole.

“Damn.”

The crying burst out into loud wails once again -- tugging at my heart strings, bringing choking sobs into my throat. “Oh, Stephen, no.”

Then the crying split into an echoing stereophonic sound. “What the --?”

I awoke. We were still huddled together on the foldout sofa, but both of Rona’s babies were sobbing in the night.

Chapter Six

The next morning I felt a little groggy. Sore and drained, and rather embarrassed about waking up the children in the middle of the night. I dressed and went to apologize to Rona.

“C’mon,” Rona said, taking my arm. “Let’s put the girls in the car. There’s nothing like a little shopping to help straighten the kinks out after a hard night on a foldout bed.”

I snickered, and followed her out the door.

Rona and I put the kids in a couple of strollers at the nearby super-store. She took Randi, and I pushed Kari, and we tried to do some basic shopping. I didn’t think much about it at first, until I saw the stares that we seemed to get. I mentioned it to Rona.

“You get used to it,” she said. “It seems for the most part either you’re ignored by white men and tolerated by black women, or else it’s the other way around.”

Though I didn’t entirely comprehend what she said, I nodded.

“Beech Haven is a pretty parochial town,” Rona said. “It’s not one for change. Hell, they tried to fight off opening a McDonalds here for several years because they didn’t want a restaurant open on Sunday.”

On the other hand, we got quite a visual going over from young black men and, surprisingly, by other white women.

“Black women aren’t happy that you may have taken the prize educated guys out of the available gene pool, while other white women wonder if their sex life is as good as yours is. The guys have to go through it, too, but they’re not as likely to complain as they are to keep it to themselves.”

“Really?” I responded calmly.

“Seems to be that way,” she said. We rounded the baby diaper aisle in the store. “So, what kind of birth control are you using?”

“Whoa! That came out of left field, Rona.”

“Figured it was worth a shot,” she said. “You two weren’t exactly subtle last night.”

I sighed. “I went for almost seven years with my husband and we didn’t have any children. I had two miscarriages. For a while, I was doing all I could -- like seeing a fertility specialist. You know, having my plumbing checked, so to speak. But Ron refused to be tested.” I paused. “Then he knocked up Cherise, and that was all she wrote.”

“I’m sorry.” There was a pause. “So what are you using with Stephen?”

“Umm. Nothing.”

She laughed out loud. “Oh, my God! Tell me you didn’t just say that.”

“Why not?”

“Do you think just because you and your husband couldn’t have children, you’re safe from one of the Dryor boys?” Rona laughed again. “Oh, Lyssa, the world is never as neat and clean as we’d like it to be. Sometimes *things* just happen.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me simplify this one,” she said. “I’m as in love with my husband as any woman could be. But love’s not enough. So our families are supporting us while Tom finishes school. Stephen’s luckier, in a way, he’s got a real knack for antiquities, but that’s because he’s been exposed to them since he was a child. Give him his druthers and he’d play tennis or go scuba diving. Something with adventure in it.”

“What are you getting at?” I finally interrupted as we entered the next aisle.

“That young man’s in love with you.”

“I think he’s just infatuated,” I replied. “He thinks he wants me to have his baby.”

“And how are you controlling the situation?” She grabbed a couple of boxes of cereal off the shelf. “You’re not, are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re just leaving yourself wide open to getting pregnant, right?”

I flushed. “I don’t know what I’m doing. But I just don’t believe I’m going to get pregnant.”

“Uh-huh.” Rona nodded. “And I believe in Santa Claus.”

I sighed and then chuckled. What was it Madame Zerina said yesterday? *Or maybe fear of making a commitment*. Maybe I wanted my body to make that commitment for me.

“Did you see the way Stephen looked at you with my two kids crawling all over you, yesterday?” Rona asked, as we approached the checkout lane.

I nodded. “I suppose so. He seemed quite pleased.”

“Pleased?” Rona laughed. “Oh, Lyssa, you were like a banquet to a hungry man.”

* * * * *

When we returned to the apartment, both men were poring through old books as if their very lives depended upon it. We started bringing bags and kids in from the car. “Hey,” Rona yelled. “Aren’t we going to get some help?”

“It’s all legend,” Stephen said. “Or incredible coincidence. Two different ships sank over the same ocean anomaly -- that’s like a bad novel.”

“I’m telling you, the manifest of the Spanish cargo carrier *Nuestra de los Axarquia* noted that it had it in its cargo hold and the patache sent to rescue it, possibly *La Maria de Patache*, sank trying to bring up the treasure,” Tom said. “I don’t care if the early translation was done by some half-educated French monk on Hispaniola. I think the translations and the Aseneth drawings are close enough.”

“Help, please!” Rona repeated, as I placed Kari down on the floor.

“You’ve only got Laban’s word, and that’s not good enough,” Stephen said.

Rona sputtered as she walked back out the door to the car. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. I’ll get them myself. If I wait on you guys, the eggs will fry in this heat.”

Intrigued by the bits and pieces of conversation I’d overheard, I hung back a moment. Instead of following Rona to the car, I picked up Kari and made a show of checking her diaper. She wriggled in my arms, providing ample time for me to eavesdrop a few seconds more.

“Even if the wreck of the *Nuestra de los Axarquia* is located off the Yucatan Peninsula and then *La Maria de Patache* did sink right next to her,” Stephen continued. “Do you know how much it would cost to outfit an expedition to that area?”

“That’s why we let the university pay for it,” Tom replied. “Dr. Laban would --”

“Shit!” Stephen interrupted. “Don’t tell me that Laban’s consortium would pick it up.”

“Laban’s got the credentials, Stevie. If he tells the university that he needs to outfit an expedition to the fuckin’ Emerald City in Oz, they’ll do it for him.”

“Language!” Rona called out as she brought some more bags of groceries back through the door. “Watch what you say.”

“Whew! Somebody’s wet. What are you two talking about?” I asked, juggling the baby on my hip. I leaned over and laid her on the couch so I could take her shorts off and change her diaper.

“We’re arguing over a cargo that doesn’t exist, sunk inside one of two legendary ships,” Stephen answered. “So, naturally, Tom wants to go find it.”

“What’s in this cargo?” Rona asked. “Money, I hope.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Tom muttered.

Rona’s face hardened. I suddenly sensed a feeling of tension cut through the air.

“Thomas Dryor, you’re holding out on me,” she said, testily. “What is it?”

“Dagon’s Octangle,” Tom answered very, very quietly.

"Oh, Tom, no!" Rona replied. "Let it go."

"I don't understand," I said to Stephen.

"The octagonal shape in the painting -- we-we saw it last night in our --" He didn't say *our dream*. He didn't have to. I understood.

"Really?" I murmured. I'm sure my mouth dropped wide open.

"You saw it yourself."

Did I? Did I really see it?

"Stop it, you guys," Rona interrupted, her mouth twisted in an angry line. "This was supposed to be a fun evening. Let dead legends stay dead."

"You know academics, Rona," Thomas replied, his voice light. "The battles fought are so fierce because the stakes are all so trivial."

"Bullshit!" she said, breaking her rule about swearing. "We both know about Laban's damn obsession with the legend of Dagon's Octangle. He almost got your father killed. And we both know the poor man's never been the same since."

"Rona, that's not fair!" Tom yelled back.

"No, it's not fair," she replied. "You've got to let somebody else do it, Tom. The girls are too young to realize that their grandfather's not quite right in the head, but I want my babies to have a full-time father."

"Rona," Stephen said quietly. "We all know whose fault it is that Uncle Adam's afraid of the ocean now. Tom's not making that dive without me, and I don't plan to give Professor Laban the satisfaction."

"It's not that simple, Stephen, and you know it!" Rona growled.

"Look," Tom said, pacing the room, "I think Dedrick Laban's going to outfit this expedition in the future whether we're involved or not. Let's be part of it."

I looked at all three of them. A certain bitterness tinged the air around us. I needed to know more. "What happened?"

Nobody answered me.

"I didn't know you felt that way about my father." Tom cast Rona a sidelong glance.

"Now you stop that! You know damn well I love your father! But I don't want you to go through the same thing he's gone through."

"Stop it, both of you." Stephen jumped in. "This argument and speculating isn't doing anyone any good. We all know who's responsible for Uncle Adam's problems. Now let's just drop this for now, okay?"

"Show them the drawing," Tom said quietly.

"Drawing?" I echoed.

"We have a photocopy of some old drawings from the fifteen-hundreds," Stephen said, as he leafed through some papers. "This sequence! They're called the Aseneth drawings."

Stephen handed me a few pages, the uppermost showing an ink drawing of an octagon. For the most part it was just an assembly of unintelligible lines. But along the edge were sketches that looked familiar to me. How could that be? I looked closer, running my finger across a set of octopus or squid tentacles that reminded me of something totally different. Different like the lower folds of a long tunic dress I'd seen on a Sumerian bas-relief, or the markings we saw on the octagonal door in our dream. Then I flipped the page and saw the next drawing.

"Oh, my God!" I muttered. "Is this --?"

"A representation of Dagon's Octangle," Stephen answered.

I looked at him, but did not say the words: *this was the image of the shape we saw last night!*

"Wait a minute," Rona said, examining a different copy of the drawing. "Did you see this creature in the lower corner?"

We all looked at the fuzzy photocopy of the original Aseneth drawing. There was the faded figure of a sea-demon -- a shark-like humanoid swimming close to Dagon's Octangle.

Rona scowled and shook her head. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd swear this monster was Dedrick Laban."

The remark should have been funny, but no one was laughing.

* * * * *

Marlene's Note #4:

I looked carefully through the card file. Did I still have it? There was a card from the Morgansterns Fertility Clinic and one from my old psychologist, Dr. Christiana Yee. Yes! Here was the card I'd been looking for -- Dedrick Laban, Ph.D. Hola! The great manipulator! It was like having a card from God -- well, maybe a Fijian shark-god.

Why did I get in contact with him in the first place? Why indeed. I was one of his first psychiatric recommendations for the dream survey. Dream survey? Why would a man who specialized in fossils, artifacts and ancient cities study dreams? Nobody could be sure of his motives.

He was obsessive like a child, and what he wanted he tried to get.

He wanted my dreams. Can you believe it? My dreams were vivid nightmares which Dr. Laban's associates chronicled, tabulated and dissected like so many small lab rodents. I must have filled dozens of legal pad note pages over a three or four week period; all under the direction of Dedrick Laban, Ph.D.

Dr. Laban was a hateful, cold, unfeeling scientific genius. The genius part was simple; all a person had to do was ask him. He worked very hard to coordinate projects that appeared

to be unrelated, sometimes even contradictory. But that was his genius. He saw logic in great, unwieldy leaps. A dreamer under observation might lead to a useful study concerning a lost artifact or a city lost in time.

I was sent to see him concerning my nightmares, which were very specifically located in the plane of dreams. Since my psychiatrist, Dr. Christiana Yee, was big into dream interpretations, she tried to make sure that at least one of her patients was involved in Laban's study.

To Professor Laban's delight, I had envisioned both the seventy steps of light slumber and the landing with the great pillar of flame. I even knew of the seven hundred steps to the gate of deeper slumber, and of the land of dreams beyond it. Dedrick Laban never treated my dreams like a joke, and that opened me up to trusting his instincts. His strength was that he made you believe that he believed. He had a way of convincing the world that his way of looking at the subjective had somehow turned into objective fact.

When he believed, Dedrick Laban's beliefs colored the academic world through a legal mechanism of his own devising: the Collegiate Museum Consortium. Of course, anybody that really knew the Consortium knew that it was the scientific, political, financial, and spiritual body of Dedrick Laban, Ph.D. And whenever Laban wanted something, suddenly the Consortium wanted the same thing.

He earned my trust. Then like the proverb of the frog and the scorpion, he'd stung me at a vital moment. Adios!

Marlene.

Chapter Seven

I'd made Stephen promise to bring me along on his next appraisal trip to make up for the multi-night trip he took to Minneapolis a few weeks earlier and for the scare of a lifetime that happened to me while he was gone. I'd been forced to stay home and freelance proofread some work for an independent publisher those two and a half days, and until I actually experienced Stephen's absence, I had no idea how much I'd miss having him next to me in the night.

I'd gone to Hurley House to water the plants and make sure things were shipshape. And I had this other idea, as well. Stephen had one of those digital cameras that delayed taking a photo for ten seconds or so. I had this wonderful idea for a fantasy *Missing You* e-postcard.

The first thing I did was to take a gentle herbal hair depilatory and carefully remove the hair from my entire pubic area. It was time-consuming, but not all that difficult. After I removed all the hair from my genitals, I set the timer delay and shot several pictures of my newly denuded pussy. Finally, I transformed the shot into a jpeg, then added text on top of the photo.

Then, I added the attachment to the *Missing You* e-postcard message and sent it to him. Of course, I'd bet anything it was the attachment that really startled him. Over the medium close up of my newly bare cunt, the text read simply: *Wish you were here, Love -- Lyssa.*

I thought it was a wonderful prank-slash-statement-of-love, and I was pretty proud of myself. Giving the condo a quick once over, I got dressed again, and decided it was time to leave.

When I opened the door to the hallway, two white male figures hustled me back inside.

"Where you off to, sweetheart?" a man I recognized as Hard-Eyes, the Marine from the other night, asked me as he pushed me back through the door. "Meeting your black pimp out on the town?"

The other man grabbed one of my arms.

I twisted in the two men's grasp. "What the hell?"

"Hang onto her," Hard-Eyes said. "I'll see if she's got any other little playmates hidden in the place."

His balding friend with the *Semper Fi* tattoo on his upper arm grabbed me tighter, as his companion let me go. "You know what I think, bitch? I think that maybe you're gonna give up your tricks for the night and be nice to me and Darby instead. Isn't that right?"

"Shut up, you idiot," Darby said from down the hall. "I told you no names."

"Let go of me," I shouted, hoping to attract attention. But they'd shut the front door already, and I knew that the condo was sound-proofed.

Darby darted back across the room and slapped me hard across the mouth. "Uh-uhh, that's not very nice, lady. After all, we're your guests."

"That's right, and you need to pay us back for all the little slights we've been dealt since the other night. Ain't no way five Marines coulda been stopped by no nigger boy," Baldy said. "No way in hell."

Denial is a wonderful thing, I thought to myself. I twisted a few more times, trying to get free from Baldy's grasp. He whirled me around the condo like a revolving door. I honestly didn't care if I could get free from him; I just wanted room to maneuver.

Apparently, some great spiritual being took pity on me. Baldy waltzed me over toward the display case where the painting was hung. I twisted in his hands, pulling away from the display, so that in his anger he'd pull me closer to it.

Oh, God, thank you! I prayed as I twisted away from his grasp for a moment. Then I stuck my free hand quickly into the laser's red gleam.

It didn't take anything for Baldy to grab hold of me again, but I'd already broken the link to one of the security laser beams running in front of the painting. For a second, I closed my eyes in relief. Now, I hoped I could handle the worst of it.

His friend came strutting up the hallway. "Nobody else is here. Get her into the other room. I want to see just how big her tits really are."

"Sounds good to me," Baldy replied. He grabbed a handful of my shirt, as he steered me back toward the bedroom. For a follow-up act, he ripped the buttons off my blouse. "Jesus, this bitch has huge tits!"

"Name's not bitch." I growled. I started to bring my heel down on his instep, but serendipity saved the sonuvabitch, and he knocked me off balance instead.

He twisted my arm behind me. "You didn't answer my question."

The telephone rang.

"Shit!" Darby yelled out.

"Let it ring," Baldy said.

After four rings, the answering phone kicked on. Stephen had left the speakers up so that he could hear incoming calls.

"Mr. Dryor, this is Jim at Action Security. Are you home?"

"What the fuck?" Hard-Eyes swore. "Security company?"

"Mr. Dryor, you've triggered a silent alarm again," the answer phone broadcast. "Are you all right?"

Goddamn it, Jim! Why don't you just follow procedure like you're supposed to do?

"Shit!" Darby grunted. "Here, pick up the phone, you, and no monkey business."

"Monkey business," Baldy echoed. "That's funny."

"Shut up, Gil!" Darby yelled at his friend. "Talk to the security people, bitch."

My face reddened. I picked up the receiver. "Hello, Jim? This is Ms. Kincaid. I'm staying at Mr. Dryor's place."

I could hear my own voice being played back through the speaker.

"Oh, Miss Kincaid, we heard the silent alarm go off and we needed to check on the security devices."

I knew I should stall for just another minute until the recorder shut down.

"Oh, that's all right, Jim I understand per--"

A mechanical voice blurted out from the recording devise, "Tuesday. Eight-oh-six p.m."

"--fectly," I continued. "You have to do your job."

"I wanted to make sure everything was okay," Jim said.

"Of course not!" I answered cheerily. "My friends and I understand perfectly."

"Miss Kincaid, are you all right, ma'am?"

"No-no," I said. "I'm so sorry to trouble you. There's certainly no need to call the police. We know how hard you must work."

Darby began to fidget. He made a *wrap it up* signal with his fingers. Gil quietly pounded his right fist into his left hand.

"Uhh ... Miss Kincaid," Jim said. "I'll need you to verify the password to log this call in."

"Of course, Jim," I said into the phone. "Everybody here hopes the rest of your night goes just as smoothly."

"Miss Kincaid, the password ..." With those words ringing in my ears I hung up on Action Security.

"There better not have been any tricks," Darby snarled.

Or what, Bozo? “You heard what I said. It was all perfectly innocuous.”

“We heard what you said in your in-nok-yus, but we didn’t hear his in-nok-yus,” Baldy retorted.

“It’s okay,” I replied petulantly. “He’s even dumber than you.” *God, I hope that’s not true.*

Both men grabbed me by my arms and dragged me back into the bedroom. Moving almost as one, they threw me across the bed.

“Get her slacks, Gil. She ain’t gonna need ’em tonight.”

“Bout time you felt what a real man’s dick is all about, bitch.”

Hard-Eyes Darby wrestled my arms down next to my sides, pinning me under his weight. I was only three-quarters on the bed. Balding Gil, still standing by the bed, ripped my pants down from my legs so that he could get down to the bare skin of my hips and abdomen. With a rent of fabric, he tore my pants away.

“One thing I gotta say for the nigger boy,” Gil said, and snickered. “He’s got damn good taste in big-titted whores.”

“Only thing I don’t understand,” Darby said, “is why would anybody want to chance having a baby the color of shit?”

Goddamn him! He sounded exactly like one of my mother’s racist friends.

Darby pushed the crotch of my panties over to one side so that he could stick his fingers into my hairless slit. “Jesus, ain’t you a pretty sight.”

Gil started to wriggle out of his pants and underwear, standing close to the bed. With every bit of strength I could muster, I lashed out with my shoe and solidly connected the heel of my sandal to Baldy’s penis and balls. He screamed, a beautiful sound -- just like a cry of pain from Hell. I twisted out of Darby’s grip and leapt from the bed. Running full speed, I headed toward the front door. Halfway there, I heard Darby yelling at Gil, who was still screaming in pain. *Only a few more feet.* My legs pumped as fast as they could. Five feet to go to the front door. *Please God, open. Please, God!*

Darby lurched out the doorway and up the hall.

I turned the latch, but it jammed. *Damn!* I twisted it again and again. The upper latch, I thought. Maybe I could get that open. I tried both of them at the same time. I think the upper one may have given way just as I started to pull at the door.

Darby slammed into my side, bowling me over as I tried to leave. I rolled on the floor, sprawling on my ass. “Nobody said you could leave, bitch! We ain’t finished yet.”

“Hold her for me, Darby,” Bald Gil howled out in rage as he hobbled down the hall holding onto his balls. “I’m getting her back for what she done to me.” He snatched up a priceless vase, and hefted it up to his shoulders. “Yeah, this should do the trick!”

"Do you think you're just going to get away with this? Rape and assault?" I yelled. The unlocked door was still closed, but I yelled as loudly as I could. "You're gonna have to kill me first, because when this is all over I'm running straight to the police."

"The police!" Darby snarled and fell on top of me, straddling my body with both of his lean arms and pinning me down. "Don't be stupid. You think the police are gonna believe some nigger-lovin' cunt over a couple of ex-Marines?"

"Lemme at 'er, Darby." He hefted the weight of the vase over his head. "She's gonna wish she'd never been born."

I thought I heard the sound of a key slipping into the lock. Suddenly the front door flew open wide.

"Freeze right there!" A young cop had his gun out pointed right at Bald Gil.

"Shit!" Darby swore, as he twisted around to confront the lone officer who'd entered the condo.

"Now I suggest you put that vase down nice and slow, before you break something you shouldn't." The cop kept his gaze and his gun trained on Baldy.

Baldy stared at him for a moment. His face reflected total disbelief.

"Put it down!" the police officer repeated.

"Jeez, I'm glad to see you, officer," Darby began jabbering. "It seems this nigger-lovin' whore invited both of us in here to have sex with her, and then she assaulted my friend there, and she was about to assault me."

A second officer followed behind the first, gun also drawn. From the stripes on her uniform, I could tell she outranked the first, but it was just my attacker's luck that she was a black woman. She trained her weapon on Darby.

"Nigger lover, eh? Sounds pretty suspicious to me," the sergeant said, as she stepped in behind the first officer. The female cop took the vase out of Gil's upraised hands, and then began to handcuff him. "So the big bad lady was out to make trouble for you two Boy Scouts, eh?"

"Stand up," her partner said to Darby, gesturing with his pistol. "Yeah. And I suppose she gave herself these bruises."

"Bruises?" Darby looked confused and pretended to be innocent. "What bruises?"

The white policeman began to snap handcuffs on the hard-eyed thug.

"Those contusions and fresh cuts on her chin and her arms," the lady cop pointed out.

"S-self-in-inflicted!" Gil piped up. "That's what they were."

I sobbed on the floor. I was a wreck. I couldn't find the energy to move, but I managed to roll over and show the two of them my ripped blouse. "What about the ones on my back? Were they self-inflicted, too?"

“Miss Kincaid! Oh, my God,” Sam, the downstairs security guard said, as he took his passkey out of the door lock and stepped into the condo. He sprinted over to me. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. I was never so glad to see anybody in my life. “Sam, could you help me up?”

“We got the distress call from Action Security,” the female police officer said. “We decided that since Sam was already on duty, he’d let us in to investigate.”

“Just in time, too,” Sam said, as he bent over to extend both hands.

“I think you’d better come down to the precinct and file a report, ma’am,” the male officer said, after he cuffed Darby.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I’d be happy to.”

The police decided to take my torn blouse, slacks, and panties as evidence. Luckily, I had a few clean, but un-ironed outfits hanging up in Stephen’s closet. Somehow it didn’t seem to matter that they weren’t pressed at the moment.

It took me well over an hour to file a formal complaint. Did I want to press charges? Hell, yes! Even if it was just my word against theirs, I’d press charges. One of the officers reminded me that it was much more than my word against theirs as we had three different witnesses against them -- four including the security service tech, Jim, who’d been on the phone.

Both men were charged with indecent assault and battery and locked away for the night.

I’d taken my purse and my cell phone so that I could call Stephen’s hotel from the police precinct. Flustered and angry, he promised to book a return flight home from Minneapolis immediately. When all was said and done at the police station, I went back to my place to shower and change clothes. I wanted to erase every single one of their grimy fingerprints from my body. As I headed outside, I tucked the experience away as good research material, I felt -- I don’t know -- vindicated.

I’d told Stephen I’d be heading back to my townhouse to change into fresh clothes, but then I wanted to sleep in our bed at Hurley House. I wanted to ease his mind that I was okay, but I didn’t have the energy to go to the airport to pick him up. I ached too badly from the several blows I’d taken on my face and body. Finally, after a few hours, I dozed off.

* * * * *

Furiously, I ran toward the steps. I walked cautiously past the guardian statue. Again something about her eyes looked more like someone I knew from my past rather than the portrait I remembered from the Sumerian painting.

Someone I knew? I shook my head, putting that thought out of my mind, as I continued to hurry down the steps. Something told me that he was down here -- Stephen was here in the land of dreams.

Spread out before me beyond the staircase, spiraled marvelous towers and what appeared to be intricately designed ziggurats from an undulating, misty landscape. Everything seemed to be of mythic proportion. Vast mountains, seas, and plains stretched every which way as far as the eye could see. But the buildings below were mere impressions of buildings. Queer angles and large monumental architectural features made the structures all appear larger than life, and yet entirely -- for lack of a better word -- wrong.

Wrong in the way that tentacles sprouting from the bottom of a tunic looked wrong. Wrong in the way that the guardian statue bearing eerily familiar eyes felt wrong. Wrong! I'd come a long way for a woman in my abused physical condition. I laughed. It was a frightened laugh, I knew. But I hadn't come this far to turn back. Stephen was down here. He'd be waiting for me.

I listened for the cry of the baby, as well. Strangely, for the moment there was merely silence. Then something caught my eye ... something imbedded in the cliff wall.

Oh, my God, was that it? Inlaid into the side of the cliff, Dagon's Octangle seemed to glow with quiet phosphorescence. I approached it slowly, almost reverently, for this was the object capable of swallowing the lives of everyone around me. My God, it was huge. An imperfect octagon, Dagon's Octangle was segmented into eight triangles -- four of them equal to each other, the other four significantly different. The more I tried to look at the curious patterns engraved in the octagonal shield, the more they didn't quite match up. One moment a section of the piece would bend forward as if inviting you to step forward, but the next second it reversed its invitation making you think that it didn't want you to come close at all.

My conscious mind should have reminded me that I was dealing with dream logic. My conscious mind obviously didn't know shit.

Where was Stephen? If the Octangle was here, he should be here! Where was he?

Down in front of the Octangle, wet human footprints left a trail behind them. Stephen's? *Of course!* I followed them quickly, trailing them along the rocks and soil of the land of dreams until they started to fade. Damn! The path split, but I thought I could see his tracks leading off to the right. I followed in that direction for a while to no avail.

"Oh, Stephen," I cried out. "Where are you?"

Silence answered me. Mist began to roll quickly in from the sea. It was much harder to see the distinct features around me.

"Where are you?" Tears welled up in my eyes. "Where are you?"

"Lyss." A comforting hand shook my shoulder.

Startled, I looked behind me into the bleak darkness. "Where are you?"

"Lyss," the voice repeated. *Stephen!*

I opened my eyes and sat up.

“Lyss, you were yelling in your sleep.” Stephen had his hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“You’re home!” I threw my arms around him. I broke down and started to weep. “You’re home.” I drove my nose into his jacket and the masculine aroma I knew so well assailed my nostrils; wonderful pheromone odors that screamed of Stephen Dryor’s closeness and his loving affection for me.

“I’m right here with you.” He took hold of my arms and looked at the bruises. “I should have never left you.” Pulling me close, he held me tightly against him.

“You’re back now,” I sobbed. “That’s all that’s important.”

“You’re a mess. God, are you okay?”

“I am now,” I answered. “With you here.”

“Let me look at you.”

“No! Not yet!” I shook my head. “Don’t let go of me.”

I clung to him, needing him close for my own sense of well-being. He felt like protection and comfort and a thousand other little things all at once.

“Take off your clothes,” I whispered. “Please?”

“My clothes?”

“Please, make love to me.”

Life seemed so simple right then -- Stephen wanted to fuck me, and I wanted Stephen to fuck me. Without wasting any more time he undressed and clambered up over me, sandwiching me between his body and the bed.

I suddenly had a strange thought. Stephen had wanted me to be his woman -- but we’d become more than that -- almost like newlyweds. We were so addicted to each other’s passions that we found ourselves spending every waking moment building up to the climax of each new day’s desires every time we found ourselves together. For weeks now, we were like some newly married couple; we simply couldn’t part company without making love. What if, at some moment in the next few days or weeks, Stephen got his wish? What if the two of us mixed up a batch of baby batter? What if I were to become the mother of his child?

As I asked myself that question, Stephen pushed his thick cock solidly, forcefully into me. He slowed his pace and began moving cautiously within me. Then he whispered into my ear. “Ulyssa, open your eyes.”

I did. He brought his face down close, kissing my ear and then my cheek and then lifting his head a little to stare into my eyes -- the jet-black pupils centered in his brown-black eyes riveted on my watery blue-gray ones. He brought his hand up to tease my hairline at the temple. “Look at me, Lyssa. Do you know what you are seeing?”

I stared up into his rather cruelly countenanced features, but I so enjoyed that devilish look lurking so close to me that I murmured, “Yes, I see the face of my lover.”

“I think you see more than that.”

I stared back, losing myself in the reflection of his deep, dark eyes.

“I’m serious,” he said. “For the entire flight since I left Minneapolis, I’ve been worried sick that I’d never see you again.”

“But, I called you and told you I was all right,” I told him.

“I know, but I had all that time to think on the plane. I’d die if I lost you.”

I sighed and then I brought my mouth up close to kiss him. We stayed with the kiss -- long and lingering, wet and exploratory for both of us. He had me anchored securely in two different places; his tongue probed my teeth and tongue while his dick delved deeply into my pussy.

For the next thirty-plus minutes, we melded in an unbroken and unprotected embrace that held us spellbound in each other’s clasp until it was only that final wet exhaustion that forced us apart. Soaked by perspiration and by so many other fluids, I perceived something new had begun between us. Some power had brought two single lonely people like us together.

The most wonderful thing about having a young man tied to you can be summed up in the release of all that pent up energy. I figured that I’d let him release all that excess energy somewhere very intimate and personal as many times as he liked that evening. *Besides*, I thought, *we have to make up for over two days of lost time*.

Turns out both Darby and Gil were friends of the man in suite 1304. Their names, descriptions and photographs were circulated around all the building’s guard desks, and they were considered *persona non grata* at Hurley House Condominiums from that point forward. Mr. Lyons in 1304, the man who’d been dressed in a shirt and tie that night on the staircase, was actually just a casual acquaintance of the two men. He had no qualms about keeping both of them out of the building.

Chapter Eight

“When I was in Minneapolis, I learned of the existence of some octagonal medallions found along the coast of the Yucatan. Possibly pre-Mayan,” Stephen told me the next day. “As soon as we get some time free, I want to look into it.”

“Pre-Mayan?” I asked.

He nodded as he held his fork over the salad. “A couple of thousands years old. Priceless antiquities, but more importantly, one of them may be the *key*.”

I nodded. *The key to our mutual dream -- the key to the puzzle we shared.*

“I’m going over to the research department at the trust to see what I can find out,” he said. “Do you want to come along?”

“That’s okay. I don’t think I’m quite ready to go out in public yet.”

I had a few bruises and black and blue marks along my arms. I figured it would take over a week for me to begin to look less like someone who had been tossed into a garbage compacter, and more like some lady who might have taken a spill on the kitchen floor.

A couple of hours after Stephen left, I got a phone call. The caller I.D. said it was the Dryor Trust. I answered on the second ring. “Lyss, I have some news. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Can’t you tell me now, over the phone?”

“No. We have to talk in person. However,” he said. “I want you to pack a few things for a trip.”

Now I was intrigued. “A trip?”

“I don’t want to tell you any more on the telephone,” he said. “I won’t be long.”

Hesitantly I threw a few things into a suitcase. I really didn't feel like traveling anywhere yet. I fixed a couple of light salads for lunch, killing time and trying to keep my nerves at bay. As I placed the bowls on the table, the front door opened.

"I want you to go up north with me," Stephen said without preamble.

"Up north?" I asked. "Back to Minnesota?"

"Sault Ste. Marie, Canada," he said, sliding into a chair. He picked around the lettuce. Stephen tended to eat any of the other vegetables on his plate with that single exception. "Some of the researchers at the trust think we've found it."

I was puzzled at first -- *found what?* Then it hit me. "You think the key to our dream may be in Sault Ste. Marie?"

"I think so," he replied. "It looks like there may be more than one of them in the hands of a reputable collector."

"And you want to leave today?"

"As soon as possible."

"Except I look like hell," I reminded him. "I can't go."

"I can't leave you here alone."

I sighed as I thought about it. As much as I didn't want to leave looking bruised like this, I didn't want to stay home without Stephen, either. I supposed I could go back to my apartment, but I really didn't want to do that.

I thought about my job, and decided that I wasn't really on deadline, either. I knew I could proofread for the publishing house just about anywhere. I shrugged and then sighed. "Can we wait an extra day or two?"

"All right, we'll put it off. But that's only because I'm worried about you."

"We'd better stop by my place tomorrow," I said. "I'll need to pick up some more clothes."

* * * * *

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

We'd crossed over the bridge between Sault Saint Marie, Michigan and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and I sniffed the wonderfully refreshing air flooding into the car through the open windows. I'd reveled in the cool aromas of breezes off the Great Lakes for as long as I can remember. Especially since both Lake Superior and Lake Huron meet at such a narrow strip of land as the Soo Locks. Sure, there's that fishy odor mixed with the smell of engine oil and diesel fuel, but the crisp, fresh breezes rushing in from Canada right over the middle of the lakes make for an almost idyllic experience otherwise.

I glanced at Stephen. He and I had gotten a few stares from other cars as we went through customs, but, other than that, getting into Canada remained uneventful.

The pink clouds of sunset slowly transformed themselves into an image of some sweet goddess of twilight -- illuminating the streets of Sault Ste. Marie. Where mere minutes before, shirts and sheets flapped in the wind, strung out along clotheslines by harried housewives, or swearing amateur auto mechanics re-tuned a half-dozen car engines, there now spilled out scores of evening players. Windows were thrown open to the new cooling breezes of a summer's evening, and the scent of the mists from where Lake Superior met Lake Huron surrounded the teens, college students, and young people who took to the thoroughfares for a thousand and one delightful nighttime activities. Ironically, most of their activities were directed at reaching out once more for what Stephen would probably call that most elusive of prizes -- *perfect sex*.

That evening, while Stephen was in the shower, I happened to glance at his journal, which he'd left lying on the bed.

Thursday, June 11 --

As I was lucky enough to have achieved my perfect prize for the evening already, my own thoughts turned back toward a fascinating thirty-one-year-old white woman named Ulyssa Kincaid. A very pretty brunette with blue eyes, shoulder length wavy dark brown hair, and a dynamically old-fashioned hourglass figure. Lyssa's about five feet six-and-a-half inches tall with healthy-sized succulent breasts that seem to bounce with her every step. The skirt she's wearing today isn't short, but it shows enough of her shapely legs to make any man's mouth water. Her hips and butt are comfortably wide. Let's face it; I like that in a woman. She looks to me like the kind of lady any normal guy would go out of his way to make lots of babies with, but I suppose that's purely subjective. On the other hand, I may be prejudiced. Apparently Lyssa's ex-husband was the exception to this rule. He'd had the opportunity to knock her up for over six years, and it never happened. His loss.

I'm fairly tall and used to be heavily into bodybuilding and martial arts. Now it's mostly tennis and (thankfully) sex. I'm also younger than my companion -- over ten years younger, to be precise, as Lyssa seldom fails to point out to me. She takes her role as the older woman in our relationship quite seriously. But I think she falls short of wanting to be the mother figure.

Of course, my ultimate plan has to do with making her figure more motherly.

I'd known since the very first time I met her that I was passionately in love with this woman, and, tonight, settled into a hotel in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, I intend to make love to her like never before. Perhaps it's because I realized the joy and passion we'd experienced together over these last few weeks were about to culminate at an arousing new level.

You see, once again this weekend, I've made plans to impregnate the woman who has become my dearest friend, my greatest love.

I've never wanted anyone or anything so badly in my life. Sure, it may not be a conscious wish on Lyssa's part; after all, she's denied that she's pledged herself to me from day one. But, as far as I'm concerned, right down at the primal level, Ulyssa is destined to be the mother of my child.

I'd done some counting on the calendar at home beginning a couple of weeks back from her period, and I know that over the next two or three days our timing will be crucial. I told her that I wanted to treat her to an exotic weekend up north. That may or may not have been the reason she accompanied me on this little trip. In fact, I'd like to think that deep inside she too understands the significance of my little check marks on the calendar.

When we'd driven over the International Bridge from the U.S. into Canada together, we went through a cursory border inspection. In my mind the conversation at the border had gone like this: "Length of stay?"/"Just the weekend."/"Purpose of visit?" I point to the sexy white woman sitting next to me in the car. "To get her pregnant." The customs guy looks Lyssa over, and then nods appreciatively. "Welcome to Canada. I hope you have an enjoyable stay."

We'd arrived too late in the day to conduct any antique business. So we checked into our hotel.

There wasn't a bellboy available so the hotel concierge showed us to our room. As we talked between ourselves, I wondered whether the concierge could begin to fathom how absolutely right Lyssa and I were for each other. Could she see that we were so perfectly matched, in spite of the fact that I was black and much younger, while she was neither? No, I doubt that our hostess even wanted to try to see past the obvious differences between Ulyssa and me.

Lyssa's bruises and cuts were just mild discolorations now, but I still felt guilty every time someone noticed them. Did they think I did it? Did they even care how or why she was injured? I had to put those feelings out of my mind, or I'd go crazy with recrimination.

I smiled. After all, I get such a kick out of reading Stephen's side of the story.

Stephen strolled from the bathroom and I caught my breath. Naked, he seemed to be a virtual fertility fetish of a young man sculpted from pure mahogany -- slim, muscular, moderately tall in height, soft of voice, luxuriant dark brown skin, black hair, and richly endowed in stature.

As I removed my clothing, a thought occurred to me. "Do you know, Stephen, in all the time we've been together, you've never asked me to suck you off?"

He shrugged. "I'm not a big fan of it."

"You're kidding."

"An ex-lover of mine once told me that I was too much," he replied as he threw back the bed covers. "I guess I'm not the sort of size and length that can be taken easily into a woman's mouth."

Smiling, I reached down and took hold of his shaft. The subject came up once again -- non-verbally.

"Is that right?"

"Besides, I don't want to waste a single sperm cell until I know I've gotten you pregnant."

"They won't go to waste," I said. "Lie down on your back."

Never one to be put off by what I was told I could not do, I encouraged him to lie patiently still. I slid my fingers down the length of his abdomen. I brushed my fingertips once, twice, then repeatedly against his up-surgng erection. Cautiously I encircled and carefully grasped his cock, softly stroking from base to head. Blood engorged veins stood out like finely sculpted lines along the rigid length. I bent my head, running my wet tongue slowly up the musky underside of his scrotum, then higher, kissing the silken flesh along the entire length of his penis.

Stephen gasped, shuddering as I repeated my movements. After a number of quick strokes, I stopped at the tip of his cock, and, instead of pulling away; I closed my lips and moved cautiously around the pronounced knob of flesh mushrooming at his groin. With no wasted movement, I lowered my wet mouth carefully, until I had a sufficient portion of his cock wrapped by my lips, wetted by my tongue. Then, very calculatedly, I applied my teeth with just enough pressure to distract Stephen from the intensity of the pleasure that my warm, mobile mouth and tongue initiated.

"Lyss, it doesn't do the same for me as it does for other men."

"Really," I replied. "Sounds like a challenge to me." Stephen hadn't reckoned with how my own needs could affect my stamina.

I dipped my head, taking in a few centimeters more, and then slid back up with just the faintest tooth-marked indentations to remind his body of my presence. I repeated the motion, and repeated it, and again, and once more -- building a pattern of thrills -- a veritable mantra of motion. Kneeling over him, I let my jutting breasts form a voluptuously visual frame for my small, dexterous hands as I dropped my mouth down to ring the elongated mahogany wood main-mast which shot up perpendicularly from his body -- *his ship of state*.

"Ohh!" he moaned softly. "I had no idea ..."

I let my mouth and tongue vibrate a long "Mm-hmmm" over his prominent erection. My little hum brought forth a shudder that seemed to make his whole body respond. He moaned again, and I could tell he was holding himself back.

I removed my mouth from his cock in order to lick the underside of his penis. After a couple of long slow licks, I murmured, "You're fighting me."

"Gawd! I haven't experienced anything like this ever --" he gasped, and breathed in deeply. I could see his abdomen shaking as his diaphragm twitched with each new pant -- each new inhaled gulp of air.

I went back to my carefully controlled bobbing and sucking motion using my mouth and both of my hands to their full capacity. I looked up into his face and saw that he was twisting his head in ragged time to my movements.

Breathing regularly and controlled, moving with a steady, meditative pace, I sensed each new prelude shudder for what it might mean, as a sort of flash tugging at my young lover's brain.

Finally Stephen groaned, "I can't hold back!"

Good! I ran my hand up his smooth, dark thigh. His muscles rippled and tightened beneath my palm. He arched his back, and a grimace of pure unconstrained delight crossed his face.

Stephen moaned and grunted. Then his cock jerked up, fighting against my mobile lips and teeth which held him fast, flooding my mouth with hot, salty cum.

Every so slowly, he grew soft. I glanced up, taking in his strange expression.

"You look disappointed," I said, easing away from him, and crawling up by his side.

"No, not with you," he replied. "Never with you. I think I'm disappointed with how superficial the act always turns out to be."

"You're kidding," I said. "My ex-husband used to think that fellatio was pure heaven."

"Oh, believe me, I understand its allure. It's wonderfully addictive, almost frightening while it's happening, but -- I don't know -- it wasn't you!"

I laughed. Then I made it a point to wipe few beads of pearl-colored drops from my mouth and chin with top edge of the bed sheet. "I don't know who else it could've been."

He sighed. "Let's just say that while it's pure sexual release, I really missed the lovemaking part. When we're together, there's more than just the two of us."

"Good Lord." I groaned, adding a small giggle. "Are you going to start that again?"

He laughed as well. "You'd be disappointed if I didn't."

I shook my head. "Tell me something, Stephen, what is it you really want?"

"I want to change the way things have been going in my life. I have to find some totally enthralling woman who's willing to get used to the way I do things. I'll ask her to be the mother of my children, and to take my name. Of course, she'll have to be very beautiful indeed before I could consider leaving you for her."

"Flatterer."

"Not at all," he murmured. "From the first time I saw you in that seminar, I knew that you would be the most beautiful mother I'd ever see. I can just imagine those gorgeous nipples of yours naturally feeding a hungry little infant mouth."

I caught his glance. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I would have thought that was apparent."

Playfully, I let my hand slide down Stephens's stomach and abdomen. My fingers encountered a new and expanding firmness at his midsection which I hadn't expected just yet. "Hello! Someone else wishes to add his two cents to this discussion."

"I resent that!" Stephen said with mock indignation. "He'd probably add at least fifty dollars' worth of input to our little debate."

"I dunno," I said, as I continued to stroke the dark, responding flesh. "What with inflation and all, fifty dollars isn't much anymore."

"C'mere!" He reached for me. "I'll show you inflation." He gave me such a long, deep, soulful kiss that I lost my breath from his exertions.

He lifted his head, capturing my gaze. "Oh, sweetheart, how beautiful you're going to look encumbered by big swollen breasts with huge, dark pigmented nipples, and, of course, your round belly large and distended from carrying my child."

"Now that's a frightening picture," I said.

"It's a beautiful picture," he insisted, as he slipped onto his knees. He bent his head, planting a kiss right on my stomach. "One day soon our child will be growing right down here."

"On the bed sheets? I think that's just yeast."

"C'mere, you."

In just moments, Stephen moved sweetly, deep inside of me, and my body quaked with the sudden tension and energy with which he began to thrust and withdraw, forcefully compelling himself deeper with every stroke. I lifted to meet each thrust, clawing at his shoulders and pulling him close.

Together. I silently mouthed the word. We'd become extraordinarily normal. For well over seven weeks we'd been together intimately, and yet, somehow now it was different. *Together?* My mind echoed. Together we'd become more than just a woman and a man connected at the hips. Although we were lovers, our relationship wasn't merely about the simple desire for sex anymore. It had evolved into a new emotional joining. We shared an intense need for each other, and now that need had blossomed into something bigger than both of us combined. I sighed softly as I looked back up at Stephen. *Together.* Why did heaven deem it necessary that I should find myself here under this young man of a totally different race and color physically complying with his fondest wish? Hell, maybe -- our fondest wish.

"Stephen, have you -- I mean -- your life has been so --" A moan from deep in my throat temporarily interrupted my question. "So exotic from what I grew up with. Have you ever thought --" To top it all off, I was gasping with the incredible physical exertion we were putting forth. "That we're not right for each other"

"Never," he answered. "I knew I wanted you from the first moment I saw you in the seminar."

"But --" I paused. "But you might find someone --"

"I have found someone," he said. "And when you're ready, you'll be my first lover ever to carry my baby."

"I'd better be your last lover, Mr. Dryor. Period!"

He laughed. "Actually, since I failed last month, I've been trying to keep you from getting your period." There was a momentary lull in our communication. Then his face became very serious. "Are you afraid, Lyss?"

"I'm terrified," I replied. "If anyone had told me seven weeks back that I'd let a black man who was eleven years younger than I was fuck me, I'd have laughed in her face."

So many things had changed. A million questions flashed through my mind starting with: Would I allow myself to get pregnant? If so, how would I tell my family, my friends, my co-workers, or even people on the street? A baby would anger my family for sure, but that didn't matter, not really. I had to admit, I'd felt invigorated by all the incredible attention I'd gotten from Stephen over the past weeks. I felt desirable again, and very womanly. Was that so wrong? Was it wrong for me to jump feet first into the throes of life again, or was I just flinging myself at his cock with legs spread and toes curled?

Should I feel guilty for enjoying his body so much? I'd never come so close to passing out from a climax in my life as I had these past weeks. Hell, sex certainly hadn't been that good even when I'd managed to climax under my ex-husband. And nobody ever ejaculated so strong or spewed so damn much raw semen into my open body as Stephen did.

Deep down inside, my sixth sense told me that I'd probably get pregnant sooner rather than later. I had been close to my fertile period after a little more than three weeks into our relationship, but I'd continued to fuck the young black man in spite of the potential for inopportune timing. After those first weeks, I could almost feel the changes -- the preparations going on inside my body.

If I got pregnant, I knew I'd have the option of getting an abortion, but I'd never do that. I'd miscarried before, and this would be a baby, a human life. Throughout my seven years of marriage, I'd wanted a child more than anything else. Yet, genetically, this child would belong to a twenty-year-old African American man -- hardly more than a child himself.

"Of course," he murmured in my ear. "This is going to cause an unbelievable stir between us and our families. Hell -- even in the delivery room. I mean, wait until the

attending physician sees that dark skinned baby push forth from between your milky white thighs.”

“Now, stop it. Don’t say things like that,” I grunted. A number of untoward emotions which I found I wasn’t prepared to handle flared up inside me.

“It’s the truth. I mean, I can imagine the looks on your mother and father’s face when they see our baby for the first time.”

Oh, no. “Don’t! Stephen, stop it!” It was one thing to be so caught up in sexual excitement when I didn’t have to think, but it was something else entirely to be forced to think about my friends and family dealing with the resulting fruit from allowing my body to be sown with Stephen’s seed.

Something deep inside of my head began to panic, and consciously I began to resist him. I couldn’t do this! I pushed at his chest with my hands. But Stephen stiffened and without any fanfare he suddenly grunted, bucked and shot that first load of pure wet teeming sperm out through the aperture of his black penis. Damn it! His sperm had nowhere else to go except into me.

Rocking from one side and then to the other, I tried to throw the weight of Stephen’s ejaculating body off of me. “We can’t do this, Stephen.” I began pounding his shoulders and back with the sides of my fists. “I can’t have my family hate me and my baby!”

“Lyssa! Ulyssa. Stop it! It’s going to be all right, love,” he rasped out at me, trying to hold my body in place under his thighs and hips. However, his spurting penis never dislodged from its position deep inside me. “They’ll love you. The whole world will love you because your baby will be so beautiful -- so very beautiful -- everyone will love your baby.”

Gradually I stopped fighting beneath him. My loins and my abdomen quivered uncontrollably, and then, unexpectedly, my whole body quaked, suddenly shaken by wracking convulsions. *It couldn’t be an orgasm!*

My father and mother were about to disown me for conceiving a black baby, and my stupid body had taken my shame and turned it into a damned orgasm.

“Shhiit!” I hissed as my body’s paroxysms robbed me of all my energy.

“Lyss!” Stephen murmured. “Lyss, it’s all right.”

“Fff-fuck!” My trembling wouldn’t quit. I was still shuddering very, very hard under the proddings of a giant, fully organic, natural seed sprayer modeled in basic black. As usual, we’d used no protection. Stephen’s semen spewed madly into my womb. Millions upon millions of thick, white translucent baby-making sperm swam searching for an egg to mate with -- each seeking to guarantee itself a form of immortality. But the whiteness of his sperm was merely a guise, for I understood that any baby we made would be only half white. Still the very idea of Stephen’s baby growing inside of me brought on such a jarring total climax that I nearly lost consciousness.

“Don’t worry, Lyss,” Stephen murmured. “You’ll be fine.”

“Nooo.” That word came out like a slow moan. “No, I won’t.” Now that my tears had blurred my eyes, I saw a hazy vision of a big, beautiful black man’s face staring seriously back down at me.

“Of course, you will.” Stephen became very solicitous.

Gasping for breath, I pulled his head down close to my face so that he couldn’t look into my teary eyes. Sexually, his bloated presence was still dilating my vagina and his wet heat continued to flow inside me, but at least he wouldn’t see the fear and shame reflected in my eyes.

He murmured almost inaudibly. “Would you like to know why?”

I didn’t want to answer him, but I responded timidly. “Why?”

“It’ll be so very, very special to all of us, Lyss, because it’ll be your baby.”

“No,” I gasped. I was so drained of energy, I could hardly talk. I could barely catch my breath.

“Yes,” he responded. “Yes. This little one will be your beautiful little baby.”

“No, Stephen.” Still panting, I finally looked up into his black eyes. They were genuinely worried. I could see the concern reflected in his face. I shook my head. Deep inside I knew I would love this baby no matter who the father was, and in spite of my protests, I loved this young man. “No,” I corrected him. “This’ll be our baby.”

The relief in his eyes brought a new softness to his facial features. He tightened his arms around me, holding me tightly against him. Surprisingly, he whispered, “Praise the Lord!”

We clung together in silence for several minutes more.

A hallway door slammed. I know I quaked in his grasp, but I’d gripped him so tightly to my body that I’m sure Stephen figured it was another open expression of my love for him. Besides I was afraid to let go of him. The rolling clatter of what I figured was a maid’s cart lurking outside our hotel room caused me to shudder as much as my unexpected climax with Stephen had.

* * * * *

The next day, we drove through Sault Ste. Marie trying to make his nine a.m. appointment at a curio dealer’s shop. If you head east on Wellington Street and then jog northeast on Breton, you’ll reach an intersection of no notable importance. It’s an area known as Walkertin Alley, and, at first glance, there’s absolutely nothing there.

“Don’t be misled.” Stephen pointed to a building that seemed to hold no special interest. Even with limited parking, we were able to get a spot up close. “This place is a veritable treasure trove to someone like me.”

I followed Stephen inside Glover's Emporium to an incredible shop, which looked like half a pawn shop and half a collectibles shop. The owner glared at us when we walked in together. He carefully stepped behind the pawn shop glass.

Stephen turned on the charm. "You would be Mr. Glover's successor, Mr. Chevrier, am I right?"

The man behind the glass blinked. "That's right."

"Sir, I am Stephen Dryor of Dryor Trust International." Stephen smiled politely.

"Oh, my God, Mr. Dryor, forgive me for this -- I didn't expect you to be --" Mr. Chevrier stumbled over his own words. Quickly, the man hurried out from behind the glass encasing. "Please, step this way."

"This is Ms. Kincaid," Stephen said, pointing to me. "She's been assisting me."

Mr. Chevrier shook both of our hands. "You've come to see the pre-Mayan Yucatan medallions?"

"That is correct. We're hoping that we can make sufficient arrangements to purchase them, if they are the real thing."

"Real? I've had them certified by some of the best antiquities experts in North America," Mr. Chevrier stated. "They've even put a bid on them!"

"A bid?" Stephen stiffened. "That wouldn't be the Collegiate Museum Consortium, would it?"

"Why, yes, Dr. Dedrick Laban himself flew in yesterday just to see the medallions."

"Yesterday?" Stephen asked. "You saw him yesterday?"

"Indeed, I did. Curious fellow, though, not once did he take off those dark glasses, but still I understand that he's a very busy man, and so we were honored he made the trip."

"Yes." Stephen nodded. "He seems very dedicated to his work."

"Please, come this way." We walked behind Mr. Chevrier to his back office. "I've got them sealed up in my time-lock safe; that's why I told you to come now. There's a thirty-minute window. Fifteen minutes later would put us back another twenty-four hours."

"I understand." Stephen nodded.

He quickly began to punch in the safe's combination. We stood back a respectful distance and waited.

"Here they are," he said, his voice filled with awe. "Medallions fashioned at least two thousand years ago -- probably earlier, according to the professor."

I looked down at them. "They're beautiful." I could see the tentacular markings on the octagonal medallions. There was a bright burnish of silver filigree, yet there was a complex, even baroque quality to the carvings. The first thing I noticed was they were significantly larger than my octagonal earrings.

“Stunning,” Stephen agreed. He looked at me, and I sensed his thoughts. *This is the key.* This was precisely what the priests had been referring to in our shared dream. “Absolutely stunning.”

“The woman I purchased them from had to be talked out of drilling holes in them so that she could wear them as earrings,” Mr. Chevrier said, as he handed Stephen one of the medallions.

The irony of the earrings wasn’t lost on either of us. Stephen shook his head. “She obviously had no idea of their historical importance or their worth.”

“Not a bit,” the shop owner replied.

Very carefully, Stephen handed the coin-like medallion to me. It was cold ... far colder than it should be, coming out of the controlled climate of the safe. There didn’t seem to be any refrigeration unit in the security area. Why did it feel so cold? And it was heavy. As if he’d read my mind, Stephen commented on its weight.

“It’s heavy. Would you say that it has a gold-and-silver mixture?”

“Yes,” Mr. Chevrier said. “That would be my guess.”

I couldn’t get past the chill that permeated my fingers. I handed the medallion back to Mr. Chevrier.

“So how much did the museum consortium say these were worth?” Stephen asked.

“They’re offering three hundred thousand dollars American for each one.”

Stephen nodded. “I see. Have they put their bid in writing?”

“No. I only have Dr. Laban’s word.”

I noticed the look on Stephen’s face hardened. “I’ll have to go back before the board of the Dryor Trust to see if we can match or beat their offer. In the meantime, please take my card and call me if the consortium changes their bid or withdraws their offer.”

We waited while Mr. Chevrier put the medallions away. After shaking his hand and saying our good-byes, the two of us left his shop. On the way out, Mr. Chevrier smiled and called out, “*Hola!*”

I felt a wave of confusion hit me for a moment, and then Stephen smiled and answered, “*Adios.*”

The wave of confusion faded. “Well?” I asked.

“Hungry?” he replied. “There’s a good restaurant not far from here.”

I started to ask again, but he signaled for me to hold my question until we both got into the car. “What was that all about?”

Stephen shook his head and directed me to put on my seat belt. “Laban offered him almost double what they’re worth on the open market. His people won’t hold to the bid, but he’s locked us out of the running, for now.”

“Why would he do that?”

"As leverage to get the *Seventy Steps*, probably," Stephen said, as he put the car into reverse. "It all seems to come back to the *Seventy Steps*. Unless he wants something else."

"But how did he know we were coming after the medallions?"

"I don't know -- Tom, maybe?" Stephen thumped his hands on the steering wheel. "I think sometimes Tom doesn't even realize that he's an academic pawn in Laban's game."

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember either of us telling Tom or Rona about this trip," I said. "Couldn't somebody else have tipped Laban off?"

"Well," Stephen said. "Some of the staff at the Trust, I suppose. The only other person who even knew I was inquiring about the coins is in Minneapolis ... Of course ..." He stopped.

"What?"

"He's an acquaintance of my father's."

"You don't think?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

* * * * *

We sat in a nice restaurant adjacent to our hotel. For a while, we talked quietly, not really saying much. I looked at him as if I was seeing him for the first time. I noticed the way he kept his hair trimmed, and how his new mustache was just a bit wider than pencil thin. It fit his face, I guess. I didn't mind that it tickled when he kissed me. That was just part of who he was.

I sensed he was trying to put the episode with the medallions out of his mind.

"Do you know how many days we've been together?" Stephen suddenly asked.

"Have you been counting?"

"Yep," he answered. "Fifty-nine. Close to two months. Minus the forty-eight hours I was in Minneapolis."

I shook my head in disbelief.

"Do you know how many times we've made love?"

"Don't tell me you counted those, too," I said, as I spread my napkin across my lap.

"Actually, I have no idea," he replied. "Easily twice the fifty-nine days, don't you think?"

I smiled. I waited for a moment, and then, shaking my head I blurted out the one thing I didn't expect to say. "I love you."

"Really?" He grinned. "I was rather hoping you'd come to that conclusion."

"Of course, I am certifiably mad," I added. The waitress brought our soup, and set it down before us. "So are you."

"Have you thought any more about having my baby?"

"Stephen!"

"Okay, okay! Just thought I'd ask," he said. "No need to get uptight."

I dropped some oyster crackers into my bowl of chowder. I took a sip of soup, but it turned out to be too hot. Not necessarily spicy hot, just hot.

I looked back at my companion across the table. Then I dropped my eyes and murmured, "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

I looked into his dark eyes. "Rona reminded me that no matter what I might be saying to the contrary, the fact is that every time we make love, I've been open season for your magic bullets." I looked away again. All of a sudden, I couldn't look him straight in the eyes. "The fact is that I've been trying to get pregnant for -- well, for some fifty-seven out of fifty-nine days now."

Stephen looked surprised. He fumbled with his silverware.

I took a deep breath. "Every time you come -- every time I feel your semen flow inside me, I wonder if it's going to mean more than just a mess to wipe off afterwards," I said softly. I leaned forward to whisper. "When my period came last time, I realized that I was really --"

I stopped.

"What!?" His dark gaze pierced my own. "Don't stop now! Really what?"

I took a deep breath. "Really disappointed. Maybe not as much as you were, but still --"

"You didn't let it show."

"You just couldn't see it."

"Do you think you might be --?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea. But I suspect tonight will be a repeat of those fifty-some other nights, won't it?"

"I suspect it will." He bit on his lower lip. "God, I love you, Ulyssa," he whispered. "I love you very, very much."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I knew Stephen spoke the truth, so how did I feel about all this? To be perfectly honest, even if I didn't know for sure, at least we were creatures of habit. We went back to the room and made love two more times before we left Sault Ste. Marie.

Chapter Nine

I've often wondered at how a downtown area seems to generate its own emotional intensity, or how a city can have its own sensual form of arousal in spite of its impersonal nature. July had barged in under a sweltering layer of smog and humidity, and the musky smell of the city broiled under the reflected heat of its own masonry as if it were some sort of intricate concrete microwave. But, as always, the downtown area seemed to be pregnant with new surprises and exciting events. I guess what some might call the tawdriness of that excitement felt addictive to me.

It had been well over two months since I'd started seeing Stephen, and I preferred the excitement of a real urban high rise like his plush condo at Hurley House to my own little apartment tucked halfway out between the suburbs. But this particular evening found the two of us trying to hide from the intensifying heat of the late afternoon far away from the centrally air conditioned drafts of Stephen's downtown Hurley House condo. Since his place was undergoing redecorating, we were stuck in my apartment for the night.

To make matters worse, when Stephen drove his Acura up to the parking spot in front of my townhouse, I already had another guest for the weekend.

Wanting a couple of days away from my father, my mother had arrived for a weekend's stay. I noticed a redness creep up Momma's neck. His presence always made her crabby, and this evening was no different. But as Stephen came in the door, he pulled out a large gift box from an expensive boutique.

"What is this?" I started ripping at the swanky downtown shop's wrapping paper, until I finally got it open. "Oh, my God! You bought me a dress?"

"It's called the Suede Superstar," he replied. "Anyway that's what the dress was labeled on the display when I picked it out."

"I can wear this tomorrow!" I exclaimed. His sexy little gift would be perfect for our date to the symphony.

The Suede Superstar! You might say it was the "ultimate little black dress." It was made of soft black suede designed like a bustier with a sweetheart boned bodice and seams that looked like they'd cling to my curves like a second skin. Exactly the sort of gift wrapping that a young man would choose for a female decoration he planned to hang on his arm.

Smiling, I hurried to try it on. "Wow! Stephen," I called out to him. "How did you know my size?"

"I think I know your body intimately enough to make an educated guess," Stephen said, as he walked in uninvited in order to watch me dress.

"I lived with Ron for close to eight years," I told him. "He would never have come close to guessing my size." Incredibly, the dress fit like me as if it had been tailored for me.

"Oh, Momma, come in here and look at this!" The most outrageous feature on my new black cocktail dress screamed that it had to have been designed by a man. The zipper, which went all the way from the daring plunging V in the center of the neckline down to the hem right at the knees, was centered along the front of the outfit. One pull and the dress was totally undone. "I don't believe it -- you bought this just so that you could take it off of me."

I glanced at Momma. Disapproving as usual, and probably a bit embarrassed by our display of intimacy, she bit down on her lip.

"Well, yeah." Unable to see Momma's negative non-verbals, Stephen smiled at my remark. "Well, maybe not just for that reason, but in part, yes."

By now Momma's ears had turned red. Her voice added an uneasy tone to the general conversation. "It's gonna be too tight around the middle, Ulyssa. You'll look like a tramp."

"Beg all you want, Momma," I responded. "I'm still not going to let you borrow it."

"Hummph!" She walked out, leaving us alone.

"I love it." I gave Stephen a great big hug and a long, tender kiss. "It's -- it's scandalous!"

"Listen, Lyss, my decorator said it would take two days to finish up the guest room in the condo. I told him that I'd pay the crew overtime if they'd continue to work on it overnight."

I gave him a look that said, *Is that so?*

"Overnight. Sort of ... tonight." Stephen took a deep breath. "Could I sleep here with you tonight?"

I'm sure I looked astonished as I caught his dark-eyed gaze. "You want to sleep here with my mother in the next room?"

Stephen shrugged. "Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Say, you don't suppose she'd let me sleep with her?"

"No!" I flushed. Then I shook my head in resignation. "Okay, you can sleep with me on the guest sofabed in the spare room. I promised Momma she could have my room tonight. So we'd better refrain from any funny business!"

Stephen gave me an innocent look that just didn't fit him. "Funny business? *Moi?* C'mon, let me pay you back by taking the two of you out to dinner."

When I told Momma, she frowned. "I wanted to have pizza with you tonight."

"Sounds good," I replied. "We'll go have pizza."

"Oh, no, we won't. I'm not going out to a public restaurant with --" She stopped talking for a moment. "With the two of you."

"Momma, it is just dinner. We're not gonna be making out on top of the salad bar or anything."

But she clenched her jaw. "You two just bring me back a sandwich or something." Then she sighed. "I'll eat in."

"We'll all eat in." I told her. "Would you like us to rent a movie?"

"Don't go to any trouble on my account."

I grimaced at those last words. All I could think at the moment was: *What's the penalty for justifiable mommacide?*

Thus went the rest of our evening. Momma pouted for the entire night. Her pizza wasn't made right. There should have been more pepperoni. How come we didn't pick it up from her favorite place? So what if it was forty miles down the highway? Why didn't I remember that she didn't care for the heavy basil flavor in the sauce from this place?

Stephen changed the subject. "Lyss, did I mention that I made an appointment for you at that beauty salon you like?"

"Are you serious?" I caught his look to see if he was joshing me. "Really? That exclusive place out by the country club? Wow! What time?"

"One-fifteen. I ordered the full, first class treatment for you in preparation for our date at the symphony tomorrow night."

Although the two of us tried to continue to keep our conversation light, Momma scowled and pouted for the rest of the evening.

Finally, all three of us gave up trying and went off to our respective beds.

I was so miffed with her attitude concerning my relationship with Stephen that I'd foregone any night clothes, unlike what I'd originally intended. Since he didn't know that Momma was staying at my place for the weekend, Stephen hadn't bothered to bring pajamas with him. How many times had both of us relaxed *au naturel* in each other's presence? Tonight, however, we were made pointedly aware that we were sitting uncomfortably naked together on the thinly upholstered edge of my hide-a-bed.

At Hurley House we shared a gorgeous king-size sleeping ensemble. Here we'd have to make do with a hide-a-bed sofa -- an older model than the one we'd slept on at Tom and Rona's -- equipped with one of those railroad track sized steel girders, which the manufacturer uses to brace the bed, right up the center of its thin mattress.

Naked, Stephen went into my living room to throw all the windows open. God, what an exhibitionist! I think he was hoping Momma was still up so he could shock the hell out of her. But apparently she'd already gone to bed.

Atop our none-too-cozy sofabed, we were anything but cool in the summer heat.

"Funny," he said. "Even though it's hot as hell in here, all I can think about is basking in the luxury of your internal warmth."

"Uh-huh, of course, I have a question," I said, nuzzling his dark, smooth-shaven chin with my cheek. "How am I supposed to pay for tomorrow's full service lube and oil change?"

"You know, that question is so you, Lyssa," Stephen answered, slowly nipping his way up the side of my neck to my ear. He stroked my breasts. "Relax, will you? It's already taken care of."

Dizzy from his soft, tentative touch across my sensitive nipples, I breathed out very slowly. "I suppose in appreciation for this expensive makeover and my brand new cocktail dress, you're going to expect me to endure hot, steamy sex with you."

There was a pause. Stephen looked away from me for a moment, then he looked back into my gray-blue eyes and nodded. "Yep."

"Oh, thank God!" I said, throwing my weight against him on the sofabed. I smiled as I tried to force him down on his back. "I'd wondered if I'd taken off all my clothing by mistake."

"Hey! What about all that stuff you said about no funny business?" he asked.

"This isn't funny," I said flatly, wrapping my hand playfully around his partially erected dick. "Going to bed with you is serious business."

Since I had him on his back anyway, I spent several delicious minutes delicately fingering and minutely examining his cock and balls. I brought my lips down to kiss the large mushrooming glans.

Stephen gasped aloud and I could tell he was enjoying the teasing that my tongue and parted lips gave him. When I began a slow methodical swoop of my mouth down onto the top half of his erection, he let slip a few moaning words mixed with the breathiness of a long sigh. I didn't quite catch what he said, but as it sounded something like "Sweet Jesus."

My truly loving him had required a strong effort to surmount my own inner prejudices, as well as withstanding the obvious disapproval of so many people around us -- sometimes even disapproving people who might be sleeping in the very next room. Sure, it was all probably just pheromones and biological chemistry, and I knew it didn't make much sense to the rest of the world, let alone my family, but oh, how I wanted him, right there and then.

"Teach me to ride, cowboy," I whispered. I both watched and felt him as I straddled his stomach and slowly lowered myself onto his long and hard saddle horn. His dark hands raced along the exposed skin of my thighs and hips, holding me firmly in place while he moved inside of me. Never one for leaving well enough alone, I whispered. "Stephen, how come you don't think I'm too old for you?"

"Don't be absurd," he answered, pushing fully inside me again and again.

Still I pressed him. "But why me?"

"I thought you liked having me around," he answered.

"I love you, sweetheart, but by the time you turn twenty-nine, I'll be forty already!"

"As long as we can still fuck, it won't matter. Look, Lyss, love isn't just blind to the little differences. When a love like we have closes in around two people, each lover's eyesight is knocked cockeyed for at least one lifetime -- maybe more. Now that I've found you here in this lifetime, I'm hoping that we will repeat our happiness over a hundred subsequent incarnations and twice that many children."

I should have known he'd turn the subject to children. "Good grief! You want two hundred children? I'll be worn out before the first thirty or forty lifetimes have passed."

"Why don't we just take it real slow and settle for one at a time?"

"When do you plan to start?" I asked.

Then we both began to giggle softly. That turned out to be all the encouragement we needed. Hot, wet and horny, I trapped him, sliding down hard on his cock. My swollen labia parted over his arching thrusts, and I gave myself over to him -- to the man whom I worshiped in spite of my reservations about how the rest of the world reacted to our love. I bent down and brought my shoulders close to his -- my face right to his lips. Accepting his lusty ingress, my loins soon lapped softly, yet eagerly at Stephen's dark erection, drawing him deeper inside, urging him to loose his flowing masculine excitement.

Stephen grasped my hips, controlling the pace. Slowly, lazily, he filled me, again and again, achingly tender. The atmosphere changed, softened, each movement just one in a series of dreamy new sensations, a feeling of floating, a feeling of being composed only of bright light, warmth, and energy. I felt weightless and yet exhilarated, as if our world tumbled around us or we'd capsized within the wet womb of another world. This time the act was not so much one of sexual release as it was an act of emotional bonding. In the whole world there were only the two of us dancing naked in a vat of warm honey as we moved intimately together. I knew that something spiritual had been pledged between us as his flesh melded into mine.

Once again he murmured, "Sweet Jesus."

As Stephen thrust up into me, I continued to lower myself onto his muscular torso. My bare arms and legs coiled against him, coaxing his soft slams deeper, and deeper still. Flushed, he gasped. Wrenched by the pure tension in our intimate tango, our rhythms matched

closely in the warm breezes that streamed through the open windows. As my young black conductor sucked in a seething gasp of air to signal the crescendo of our duet, his compelling music pulsed with a naked frenzy in the depths of my loins.

Suddenly my door opened, and my mother stepped into the spare room, a long cigarette dangling from her mouth. "Lyssa, do you have a cigarette lighter --?"

For a split second Momma froze as any white mother would do if she'd been standing there staring at her naked daughter squirming ecstatically atop the taut mahogany body of a muscular, young, naked black man. Her mouth fell open, and she turned around just as quickly and rushed back out the door, slamming it behind her. "Oh, my good Lord!"

"Mother, you dropped your cigarette on the floor," I called out behind her.

"Never mind," she called back from the other side of the door. "Forget it!"

"There are some matches in the third drawer down next to the kitchen sink!" I yelled out.

"Forget it!" she yelled back. I heard the muffled sounds of several other words which I couldn't make out, and, after a moment, I calmly commented, "Maybe she's planning to quit."

Stephen started laughing as softly as he could, but every time his body shook with a repressed silent laugh a little bounce from his cock echoed that laughter reflex within me.

In the moments that followed, I opened my eyes wide and looked hard at my lover's rough and rugged features. Stephen grunted. His grasp was so strong that I rose up along with the momentum of his arched back and hips. Totally aware, I held my breath as Stephen clutched me harder against him. When, at last, he came, spurting deep within my velvet recesses, I felt as if he were fusing with me, melting into me, becoming one with me. The music and the dance flourished anew in his white viscous semen. He allowed me no escape from his newfound liquid urgency. As he'd bucked and trembled, his pure wet heat filled me, scorching me with his lust.

Of course, any such escape was short-lived. My warmth and wetness now protected those long, rolling sweeps of liquid life, those hoards of swimming gametes mobbing and searching through the enfilades of my body. This then was Stephen's conscious attempt to pass along his living seed into the melded safety of his woman's naked womb.

Of course, I instinctively discerned what Stephen was hoping -- that I wouldn't be able to distinguish the act that gives pleasure from the act that makes babies.

Any ethnic purity intrinsic to either Stephen's race or to mine had been breached and soiled when his warm murky semen pooled deep inside my Caucasian womb.

When I finally climaxed, I did something that I'd calculated specifically for that moment. "Ahhhhh! There it is -- right there!" I screamed out my orgasmic pleasure at the very top of my lungs. "Stephen! Yes! Right therrrrre ...!" *Listen very carefully tonight, Momma. You might just hear the sound of your precious grandbaby being conceived.*

“Thank God,” Stephen moaned. His own enjoyment was obvious.

Finally, lying quietly over him, holding his still dripping penis warmly sequestered in my cunt, I murmured, “That certainly sounded wonderful.”

Stephen grunted a guttural affirmative. “Wonderful is such an inadequate word.”

After I rolled off of him, Stephen stared up at the ceiling as several minutes passed by. Although his lips were softly moving, Stephen remained silent, allowing only the sound of his rapid breathing to hiss through the waning light of evening. He looked so incredibly far away that I felt the need to see where his thoughts were. “You’re so quiet, Stephen. That’s not like you.”

“I was praying,” he replied.

“That is so sweet,” I murmured as I leaned up on my elbow to look at him. “Are you giving thanks?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “That and I prayed that I’d gotten you pregnant.”

Talk about a one-track mind. Laughing, I grabbed the pillow he’d been laying on and bashed him over the head with it. “You really are impossible.”

Chapter Ten

"Imagine the possibilities of a child." That line from a TV commercial floated through my head the next morning.

Needless to say, breakfast was a rather hushed affair. Momma looked as if she hadn't slept a wink. Although Stephen and I attempted to keep the atmosphere light, Momma wanted nothing to do with either of us. She poked around my apartment searching out little chores that didn't really need to be done.

Tactfully, Stephen left right after breakfast.

As soon as he left, my mother approached me, leaning very close into my face. "Where does he get his money, Lyssa? Does he deal drugs?"

"No, Momma, something about selling national secrets on the black market, I think," I replied. "Who gives a fuck how he makes it, as long as he spends it on me?"

"Ulyssa, if you weren't thirty-one years old, I'd wash your mouth out with soap."

I took a deep, cleansing breath. "I apologize, Momma. Since I have to go to the beauty salon today anyway, why don't I ask one of the beauticians to wash my mouth out while I'm getting my hair done?"

My mother didn't smile. "Why won't you tell me how that boy makes his money?" she insisted. "Do you even know?"

I sighed. "Apparently there's some sort of wealth on his mother's side. He's learned a lot about antique artifacts and statuary from the maternal side of his family," I replied.

"Is there money in that?" Momma asked.

"Stephen can judge an investment with the best of them. His sister, Lorraine, has even appeared as an appraiser on the *Antique Sideshow* on national cable television. She's off

somewhere in the Far East right now, I think. I guess she even asked Stephen to stand in for her on the show, but he declined.”

“Just what kind of money are we talking about?”

“Stephen’s shown me a painting -- a bas-relief in his condo -- which is worth over one million two hundred thousand dollars on the open market, and the family’s got other pieces on exhibit in Europe that are so ancient that they’re literally priceless.”

“This was his mother’s business. What does his father do?”

“He’s curator of the International Museum of Folk Art at Michigan Dunes University.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Have you ever met any of his family?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “We stayed with his cousin, Thomas, and his wife, Rona, and their two kids.”

“Oh, that was the black man with the white wife, right?”

I nodded. “They’re really very sweet, Momma.”

“What about his immediate family?”

“Like I said before, Lorraine’s in the Far East and his mother’s out of the country, as well. He has a brother, Franklin, who also lives with his mother, I think.” I paused before I added the last fact that I knew. “Or maybe it’s his father -- Stephen doesn’t seem to care much for his father. So, no -- I haven’t met anybody else yet.”

“Hmmp!” She sniffed in disgust. “What’s his hurry?”

“Momma, be nice.”

* * * * *

By noon, my mother was ready to go shopping. I made sure she had a key to the apartment, and that she understood I wouldn’t be home until well after the symphony was over. Suddenly, she threw her arms around me and clung to me tightly. “Do you think that boy loves you as much as I do?”

Her question caught me totally by surprise. “You don’t know how alike the two of you really are, Momma.” I choked back a sob, and my eyes teared up as I continued. “And, God help me, you both genuinely want the very same thing.”

“How about I meet you at that ritzy beauty shop in time for a late lunch? Just the two of us, okay?”

I looked at her. “I’d like that.”

“Good,” she said smiling. “Because you’re paying.”

* * * * *

Marlene’s Note #5:

In our therapy sessions, Dr. Christiana Yee would always fixate on the mother-daughter relationship: “Do you think your mother blamed you for circumstances that were beyond your control?” “How did your mother feel about you starting your sex life so young?” “Did your mother yell at you for getting your school uniform muddy?” “Did your mother resent your favorite crib toy?” “Does your mother blame you for any physical weaknesses she developed after your birth?”

We always seemed to be second-guessing my mother’s reasoning for the way I looked at the world. My mother and my dreams. If it wasn’t one, it was usually the other. Dr. Chris probably had a mini-orgasm every time I brought in the details of a dream I had about my mother.

Christiana Yee was the first person to hypnotize me. She told me I was an excellent subject. She must have told Laban I was an excellent subject, as well. He couldn’t wait to use the little pulsing light to induce a hypnotic trance in me.

For a while I wondered if he had tried anything sexual during our hypnosis sessions. Of course, maybe I was curious about his sex life. Hell, maybe I was just curious about his glasses. Anyway, as far as I know, Dedrick Laban was more interested in my dreams than Dr. Chris was interested in my mother.

If I’d ever seen the two of them together, I’d have had to make up a story about my mother traveling to some ghostly city in the dream dimension.

Marlene.

* * * * *

I reached the salon by 1:15 that afternoon. Stephen had booked a hairdresser’s appointment for me, as well as a full formal makeover that included the works -- a formal evening’s styling for my hair, a manicure and pedicure, and a professional evening’s makeup regimen. I looked at all the other yuppie women lounging around the shop, and wondered what they would say if they knew that my ultra expensive, full service treatment was done at the direction of an African American body building, tennis playing, scuba diving antiques expert who was over ten years younger than I was. Would they think that I was his kept woman? Would they wonder if their husbands were as good as he was in bed? The fact that I might out-smug the smuggest of these rich bitches made me smile knowingly to myself.

However, I soon discovered that somehow Stephen had co-opted the rest of the world to assist him in his private agenda. Once I’d verified my name and appointment time, I casually walked over and picked up the only periodical left on the table in the waiting area. It happened to be one of those modern women’s health and fitness magazines that cover a

myriad of important subjects, but the broken spine of its binding caused it to fall open to the following page:

“Conception 101: Test Your Baby-Making Smarts.” *You could be doing more to maximize your chances of getting pregnant.*

“How does he do this?” I cried out. At that point the entire waiting room and half of the people seated in the barber chairs stopped and looked at me. I looked up as nearly half a score of faces questioned me. “Oh, I’m sorry. I-I wish I could explain this. Sorry.”

One after another, I began to read through the *Nine Steps to Getting Pregnant*. The first suggestion was to have sex when you’re ovulating. “Well, duh!” I muttered. *If you don’t know when you’re ovulating, now is a good time to find out*, it reiterated. Again I had to laugh. Timing really is the key to getting pregnant -- your window of opportunity lasts only twenty-four to forty-eight hours per month. Now that fact I didn’t know. On the other hand, a man’s sperm can survive in a woman’s reproductive system for as long as five days. I didn’t know that, either.

Check your basal body temperature and look for changes in your cervical mucus for at least six cycles. “Six cycles! Well, that ought to delay things for a few months.”

When you ovulate, hormonal changes trigger your body temperature to rise between 0.5 and 1.6 degrees, signaling your most fertile time of the month. Also, during the few days leading up to ovulation, you’ll have vaginal discharge that looks clear and slippery, with the consistency of raw egg white.

Okay, this was back to old stuff again. I continued to read on, matching my experiences with Stephen to the dictates of the article: *Stick to the missionary position, with him on top. Save the complicated moves for another time. Though this advice is controversial, some experts say the man-on-top position allows for the deepest penetration and, as a result, places sperm closer to egg.*

I’ve never had anybody who could manage a deeper penetration.

Try going for the big “O.” A few studies have found that women who have an orgasm increase their odds of getting pregnant. Your contractions may carry the sperm farther into the cervix. And one study suggests that a woman retains more sperm when she orgasms after he does.

“Wonderful,” I sighed ironically. “I’m doomed.”

Give up the booze. Studies have found that alcohol affects fertility, and the more you drink per week, the more likely it is to play a role in fertility problems. In one study, women who completely gave up alcohol were 50 percent more likely to conceive.

"That's it! Tonight I'm hitting the cash bar!" *Another study found that men who drink any amount of alcohol daily decrease their testosterone level and sperm count.* Hah! Tonight Stephen's hitting the cash bar.

Kick the tobacco habit. Smoking isn't just bad for the lungs; studies have found that it can reduce a woman's chance of getting pregnant and affect a man's sperm quality.

Maybe I should get some of those little feminine cigars, I thought. No, I'll just borrow a cigarette from Momma.

"Finally," the article said. "Have faith. There's some scientific evidence that praying for a baby can actually increase your odds of getting one. The Harvard School of Medicine is working on a comprehensive study to test this theory. Other experts suggest that being reasonably optimistic also helps when it comes time to conceive."

Why, that conniving little -- how could Stephen possibly have known about this little tidbit? Oh, God, I thought. I have attached myself to a conception intuitive! *"You both share a love of ... natural things."*

My makeover took about an hour and forty-five minutes. When I finally looked at the lady in the mirror, I had this disassociated sense that she wasn't me. Still she looked absolutely phenomenal. My stylist smiled when she finished, and said that the last time she'd had an order for a full treatment like this, she'd been told that her client was supposed to have an appointment for a glamour portrait.

I smiled. "Now that must have been a wonderful experience for her."

"She was so appreciative, that she and her boyfriend spent the rest of the weekend in bed," my hairdresser added. "Now I think she's three or four months pregnant."

The elegantly made-up, thirty-one-year-old woman staring back at me from the other side of the salon mirror looked to be precisely the type to follow suit to a story like that, I figured. Behind her highlighted blue eye shadow-enhanced eyes, I could see her thoughts spinning, thinking about spending three days in bed and coming away knocked up.

I had a sudden flash of a moment from last night. Such was our frenzy at the moment, he must have felt like bucking me off as I rode him, but I had him clasped tightly against me, locked by my hands and my legs. He'd thrust his thick erection up to the root and held himself deeply within, listening to me groan as the envelope of my pussy stretched impossibly around the thick base of his huge shaft. Unable to hold back anymore, Stephen started squirting his potent, baby-making sperm into my body, into my cunt, into my womb -- again and again.

"I'm doomed," I muttered.

"Hmm?" my hairdresser asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

Momma was waiting for me outside the shop. She'd stayed outside so that she could have a smoke. On an impulse, I asked her for a cigarette.

Momma shook her head. "It's a bad habit to start now."

My mouth must have fallen wide open. *What did she just say?*

"You shouldn't be putting toxins into your body."

Momma backed away from me to scrutinize my new hairstyle and make-up. My dark hair was sleekly upswept, teased on top, pulled back and pinned into place by a couple of exquisitely engraved barrettes. My make-up was too formal for our light luncheon, but tonight I hoped to look fabulous. I studied my reflection in the shop window and tried to psychologically settle into my new upscale look.

Momma caught me trying on my evening persona. "Why didn't I see it before?" she whispered.

I looked into her eyes. "See what?" I asked.

But my mother just smiled and shook her head.

We lunched at an authentic mom-and-pop Greek restaurant, the sort of place Momma really loves. So she stayed on her best behavior. I caught sight of a young mother, probably no more than nineteen or twenty, fussing with her baby. The infant had remained strapped into a portable carrier, which the mother had balanced on a wide restaurant chair. I turned back to my mother, flushing under her scrutinizing gaze.

"Ulyssa, do you have anything to tell me?"

Funny. I knew exactly what that question meant. "No," I replied. "Not yet."

"But soon," Momma said.

I stared at her for a second and then blushed. "I don't know that for sure."

She sighed and shook her head again. "Yes, you do."

I cocked my head in surprise. "What's going on in your head, Momma?"

"I'm sorry you and Ron didn't have any children."

I shrugged. "Guess it wasn't meant to be. You know, 'God's will' and all that."

"No," Momma said. "Even when you were newlyweds, you and Ron didn't have the same spark, the same chemistry, or the same passion that you have now with --"

I must have blushed under her gaze. "Wait a second, you can see that?"

"I can read it on your face," she said, and then sighed. "The good Lord help you, young lady, you're in love."

* * * * *

I carefully lowered the Suede Superstar over my head. The bodice was held fast in front by a garish zipper splitting the front into two sides. It had all the subtlety of something from Frederick's of Hollywood, but the exhibitionist in me loved it. At first, I thought I'd try to

touch up my make-up, but I didn't feel competent enough to mess with it, so I left it alone. Finally, I slipped my heels on my feet and buckled the small straps around my ankles.

"What do you think, Momma?" I walked into the kitchen and struck a pose, pointing both hands at the refrigerator. I smiled a bright over-energetic smile. "Do I look as gorgeous as one of those prize models on a television game show?"

"Well, don't quit your day job." Then she smiled and walked over to inspect me.

Momma began fussing over me the same way she had several years back on the day that I'd married my first husband. Somehow, although she'd kept her motherly role, Momma had fallen into her new roles of duenna and confidante, as well. I must have asked her a dozen times if I really looked good, and she told me to relax. "I wouldn't worry about Stephen," she said. "There's no way he could ignore such a totally sensual package like you."

"Really?" I queried for the fortieth time. "You don't think I should --?"

"Would you stop it? If that boy's as crazy about you as I already suspect he is, how could he not think you're the best thing to hit his life since sliced bread? No --" Momma put her face down close to mine. "Make that sliced white bread."

I smiled at her joke, and then as I began to clasp the two gold bracelets on my ankles, I suddenly realized that I needed to tell her something very important. "Momma, you have to do me a big favor. Stop referring to Stephen as a boy. That's a huge insult to anyone who's black."

"Well, I'm sorry!" She threw up her hands and turned her back to me. "I really thought I was being good about this."

I quickly stood up and grabbed her by her trembling shoulders. I turned her around and hugged her very close. "You're being terrific, Momma, and I love you for it. Thank you."

"My natural inclination has been to check my purse," she admitted. "And I still cringe whenever he puts his hands on you. I've often wished that he had more ... well, conservative features."

"What do you mean?"

"I admit it means that I wish his features were a little more ... white," she muttered. "You know, his nose is too wide, his eyes are narrow and so deep and dark brown as to look black. His lips are --" Momma paused. "Damn it, Lyss, there's just no way for Stephen to be considered a white person who just happens to have black skin."

I had to grin. "The funny thing is that I've gotten so used to having him close, that I hardly notice our differences any more."

"You don't have to notice, Lyss. The rest of the world will notice for you."

By six o'clock, my nerves were frayed. I prayed that my own thoughts about my makeover would be echoed by my young male escort. But Momma was right. I needn't have

worried. When his Acura pulled into the parking spot in front of my place, I dashed to the front door. Stephen whistled and grinned as I stepped out onto the stoop.

Momma came out right behind me. Surprisingly, she was the first to speak. "Doesn't Ulyssa look glamorous, Stephen?"

That word sort of hung in the air, and, as I walked through my cloud of glamour, the allure surrounded me like a halo of light. I blushed and posed for him on the sidewalk. "What do you think?"

Stephen climbed out of his car and grinned. "Lyssa, you are a vision of pure delight."

"I was wrong about the dress," Momma said. "It doesn't make her look fat at all."

Stephen looked at me as if to say, *Was that a compliment, I heard?* I mouthed the word *apology* back at him.

By this time, we'd let my neighbors get a really good look at us from behind their shutters and drapes. I'd exposed my white-skinned shoulders, plunging bust line and black stocking-clad legs in a slinky, strapless, shimmering suede cocktail dress, and there stood my date for the evening ... a black-skinned young man in a vanilla-ice-cream-colored dinner suit that probably cost more than two months' rent for any of these apartments.

Let's give them something to look at, I thought. As Stephen came around to the passenger door, I opened my arms and lifted my face, silently encouraging him to kiss me. I opened my mouth, and we held the deep kiss a bit longer than I had intended.

Finally, I pulled away and turned to my mother. "I'll be home --"

"You're a grown woman, Lyssa," she said. "You'll be home when you're good and ready."

I nearly did a double take at Momma's words. Then I flashed her a warm smile.

As Stephen opened the car door for me, he leaned close. "I can't get over how beautiful you look."

My insides glowed warmly. "Why thank you, sir. You look pretty damn inviting yourself." I took hold of his hand before he closed the door, and I pulled him down to kiss him one more time. Reluctantly, I released him, and he closed my door. He dashed around to the driver's side and slipped into the seat, and then we pulled out of the apartment complex.

"Hey, I got a call earlier on my cell phone," Stephen told me. "The decorators have finished my guest room. Want to stop by Hurley House and take a peek? We have a little time to kill before the concert begins."

"Oh, yeah!" I said. "I'm curious as hell as to what you had done to it. You and your confidential, for-your-eyes-only, top secret plans for an ordinary guest room."

"Okay then." He grinned. "Let's go check it out."

As we walked into the Hurley House lobby we attracted a lot of attention. Sam, the security guard, was courteous as always, but this time several of Stephen's neighbors were

gathered in the lobby ready to go out for the night or looking out at the cityscape at twilight. The beautiful colors of sunset seemed to echo the warmth I felt arriving at Hurley House -- arriving home. These people were my neighbors, too, and many of the other occupants of the condo building had gotten used to seeing us together. We got on board the elevator in a wonderfully ordinary, indeed everyday, manner.

But as we entered the eleventh floor condo itself, our nostrils were assailed by the odor of fresh paint, wood cleaners, and other somewhat harsh solvent smells that hadn't dissipated yet.

"C'mon," he said, leading the way. "What do you say we take a look at the finished product?"

When I stepped through the guest room door, I literally felt my jaw drop. I had a difficult time catching my breath, but this time it wasn't because of the heavy odors. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Th-this is the l-last thing I-I'd ever have expected," I stammered.

The traditional guest room had been totally redecorated for a very different sort of guest. Along the walls hung brightly colored border paper, as well as a wall decor set with a familiar set of young children's faces. I walked to the center of the room. A two-drawer enameled white armoire sat to my right, while another smaller dresser with a cushioned pad sat kiddy-corner from the first piece. Framed lithographed pictures of those same cartoon children had been spread out carefully all around the walls. I shook my head in disbelief. Stephen had transformed his entire guest room into *a baby's nursery*.

"Wh-where do I know these kids from?" I asked him as I carefully ran my fingers across the plush fabric covering a changing table.

"They're called *Cherubic Babies*," he replied.

"Oh, yeah, that's it." The *Cherubic Babies* motif was repeated on an expensively embroidered comforter, two crib sheets, a crib skirt, and bumper set which was perfectly coordinated to highlight a white slatted wooden crib with double-drop sides.

"The great thing about this crib," Stephen said. "Is that later it adjusts to become a toddler bed."

"Oh, my God. Look at this," I said, as I walked over to a bassinet and dressing table combination that perfectly matched everything else in the room. Next to that stood an organizer cart that held more *Cherubic Babies* blankets, snapsuit onesies, booties, gowns, little baby caps, and underwear. There was also a sealable hamper designed to store disposable diapers, as well as a pail which was labeled *odorless diaper disposal system* for cloth diapers. "This is just -- just unbelievable," I stuttered again. "It's all so-so elegant."

"Nothing but the best for the mother of my son," Stephen announced. He turned on the switch to a *Cherubic Babies* mobile hanging down over the crib, and a jaunty little tune drifted through the air.

The most notable exhibit in the room hung right in the center of a far wall where a large portrait had been painted of the two of us standing lovingly together. I walked over to stare at the richly done acrylic portrait. On our portrait two words were meticulously inscribed in black lettering highlighted by a gray drop shadow: *Dad and Mom*.

I pointed to the painting and asked, "How?"

"Remember the photographs we had taken at Tom and Rona's place? I gave copies of most of those shots to the artist to work from."

"He didn't see the --?"

"No," Stephen replied grinning. "He only saw the ones rated G or PG."

The memory of a few of those photographs made me swallow to clear my throat. Surprisingly, I also felt a few telltale droplets trickle down the inside of my thigh. "But, Stephen, this is all so overwhelming and expensive!"

"Don't worry about that," he said, bending over a small play chair. "Look, Lyssa, the baby's bath seat swivels."

I looked to see if Stephen was being sarcastic. How could a young man be excited by a bath seat? But his words and actions seemed genuine.

"Here this is my favorite. I really want you to see this." He unwrapped a gift-sized box and pulled out a dinner plate with a hand-painted illustration of an infant angel. I read the inscription on it, printed in hand crafted calligraphy: *If our little angel looks different from what you expected, it's because he's more than just the sum of our parts*.

The smiling face on the angel baby was a careful but imaginative amalgamation of my eyes, cheeks, and chin with Stephen's nose, mouth and the most adorable "little-boy private package" between the legs that I've ever seen. The angel in the picture had brown curly hair with some lighter highlights, and his skin had a color that was sort of a combined maple-cream-yellow and burnt-butter-brown -- significantly darker than my skin and yet so much lighter than Stephen's.

"I had it commissioned as a ceramic glaze portrait," he said.

"Stephen, the plate's beautiful." I shook my head in bewildered wonder. "But why do you think it'll be a boy?"

"I already know."

"But how?"

"I just know! I'll tell you later. I promise."

Curiouser and curiouser, I thought. I continued to walk around the nursery, soaking in all the lovely details arranged just so. My head began to swim under the numerous items that Stephen and the decorator had decided were necessary for taking care of a newborn.

"C'mon, Lyss, we'd better go." Stephen looked down at his watch. "We've got less than twenty minutes before the symphony begins."

"Forget that." I shook my head. "We're not going anywhere."

He stopped. "We're not?"

In a single, sudden movement, I undid the front zipper on my black cocktail outfit, permitting the suede dress to fall away from my body and allowing my breasts to fall freely exposed. The Suede Superstar dropped down to the nursery floor, leaving only my black lace garter belt, black stockings, and black pumps in place. Since I'd worn neither bra nor panties under the dress, it was the fastest, most efficient strip I'd ever done in my entire life, and for those few brief seconds, even Stephen remained speechless.

"Well," I said, holding my hand out. "Unless you're bringing in an outside contractor whose been bidding for this particular part of the job, as well, I suggest we do something about procuring an appropriate occupant for this nursery."

Stephen managed to outdo himself in two ways. First, he broke into the widest smile I'd ever seen in my life, and second, the bulge behind his dress slacks seemed to spring forth so hard that I was glad that his pants were woven of a resilient stretch material. "I love you," he whispered.

"God help me," I replied. "I love you, too."

Then I turned my back to him, and showing him the sleek whiteness of my well-shaped ass, I walked over to the painting on the wall again.

"Dad and Mom." I repeated the words a few times, over and over. I slowly traced my fingertips along the texture of the layered oils. I turned my head to look back at Stephen as he shimmied out of his slacks. Then I looked back at the picture. *Dad and Mom!*

Stephen padded silently up behind me and put his warm hands on my arms. "Shall we go into the bedroom, Lyss?"

I shook my head. "No. I want to make love to you here in the nursery."

"But there's no place to --"

I pulled away from his grasp and plopped my naked butt down on the cold hardwood floor. "Yes, there is."

Keeping the acrylic painting within sight, I rolled over onto my back and spread my legs for my young lover. Stephen's beautiful mahogany body glistened with summer sweat. He moved between my legs, supporting himself on his hands and elbows. I noted the stark contrast of his black wrought iron body crawling steadily up between my white legs.

He smiled, showing me his beautiful white teeth. He leaned forward over me. Opening my mouth under his, I let him kiss me forcefully. Then when he released my mouth, I sniffed his hot breath so close to my face. His breath smelled sweet, as usual, sparking a memory.

"My mother wouldn't let me have a cigarette today." I murmured.

He looked puzzled. "Why did you want a cigarette?"

"That's not the point. Momma knows!" I clutched at his shoulders.

"Momma knows?" He echoed, his voice filled with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"She knows, and she's okay with it." I looked up into Stephen's deep brown eyes as he stared down at me. All I could see were his eyes, and yet I could feel him moving his hand up and down my thigh in big circles softly bringing his fingers closer and closer to my pussy. He felt so smooth all over. It was like nothing I'd ever imagined before. I didn't care about anything outside my immediate surroundings except Stephen and the way I felt in his arms. This time I swallowed a small lump down into my throat like a loving sob.

"She's okay with it?" he repeated.

I nodded. "Yes. I didn't think she'd ever be okay with it, but she is."

After a pause, he spoke again. "Then why wouldn't she give you a cigarette?"

I began to laugh. Clapsed in his arms, finally ready to consummate our physical and emotional relationship, I felt as if I were going to become hysterical. I realized that Stephen didn't have the slightest idea of what I was talking about. "Stephen, Momma's given both of us her approval. She wouldn't give me a cigarette because she doesn't want me to smoke during pregnancy. It'd be bad for the baby."

All of a sudden Stephen's energy zipped beyond his usual superbly capable self. "Bad for the baby! Does that mean --?"

"No." I laughed. "I'm not pregnant. Not yet, anyway, but I suppose we should get started. Let's make that baby now."

Stephen pressed his body forward, slowing his momentum every now and then to allow my pussy to lubricate his cock with its flowing juices. He kept his eyes riveted to mine when he pushed all the way in. My knees and thighs were stretched wide, welcoming his steady, rapid strokes. My gaze strayed once again to that enchanting acrylic portrait called *Dad and Mom*.

"Now just a damn minute!" Stephen slipped out of my pussy and held his cock away from my belly.

I was shaken, totally taken aback. "What's the matter?"

"Lyss, you're not going to have a baby just because your mother gave you permission, and especially not because of my juvenile insistence of forcing a baby on you. If we're going to have a baby, it's because you and I want to make one together for all the right reasons, do you understand me?"

This time I beamed at him. "Do I ever."

"Then what's it going to be, Ulyssa?"

I pulled his head and shoulders back down close to me so that I could murmur into his ear. "I want you to stick that lengthy, lusty cock inside me and spray me with your potent seed." I concentrated on the sensation as he began pressing into my vagina again. I sighed, and reached down to grab his sweaty ass with both hands. "I want to carry our baby to full

term and feel him push out into the world from between the very same legs and the same fleshy lips where you affixed him within me in the first place.” I pulled his cock deeper into me, and then proceeded to further consummate the act by raising my legs and locking them around his back right above his ass.

Stephen’s breathing had become laborious and staggered. Through half-closed eyes, I watched the strain building in his face as every muscle in his torso tightened. His lips moved down close to mine, and I opened my mouth wide to receive his tongue. He explored my mouth for several moments, and then sucked part of my breath away as he lost control of his passion. Suddenly raising himself up on his arms to lock his gaze on mine, Stephen grimaced, obviously teetering on the edge of a climax.

“Your eyesss are ssso gorgeoussss, sssweetheart,” he hissed, arching over me.

I smiled. “It’s the make-up.”

“No,” he gasped. “It’s you.”

Stephen grabbed my knees and pushed them up until they were almost touching my shoulders. He rammed his penis in and out of me like a man possessed. When I felt the first throbbing emanate from his intensely thick cock, I clutched at his shoulder, desperately pulling him as deeply against me as was humanly possible.

“It’s all right, Stephen,” My voice quaked, and I found new tears flowing as I whispered to him. “Let go, sweetheart. I want your baby more than anything.”

When Stephen finally climaxed, he pressed me brutally against the hardwood floor, emptying everything he had deeply into my body. He shuddered violently, and his breath felt hot, raspy and uneven against my neck. Surprisingly for Stephen, he climaxed uncontrollably over me without as much as a single word. I wrapped my legs around him and held on, desperately claiming every last drop of his precious fluid, wanting to keep it as deep inside me as possible. When at last, the internal throbbing had subsided, he lowered himself onto me, crushing my breasts beneath his dark, strong chest.

I felt a peculiar tugging to the right side of my abdomen, and when Stephen finally withdrew from my pussy, the usual pints of spillage didn’t gush out from my loins quite as fast as it normally did. My insides seemed to be pulling his flowing semen deeper into the depths of my womb. An odd sensation, but a very pleasant one all the same.

We lay silently apart for several minutes. I still had my back to the hardwood floor and Stephen had collapsed next to me with his body facing me. Catching his breath, he panted slowly and deeply next to my ear, while I gently reached around to scratch his back and caress those gloriously muscular glutes of his. He took hold of my face and whispered, “I love you, Lyss.”

“I’d say that’s pretty obvious.” I fell back down on my back and slipped my fingers into the pooling liquid warmth deep inside my dribbling pussy. “I love you, too, Stephen.”

He kissed me softly, very sweetly. After our lips parted, I laughed.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Momma may not know it yet,” I said, “but I think she’s liable to have to babysit her first grandchild a whole lot sooner than she expected.”

* * * * *

The landscape tilted and shifted again, as I ran naked in the dreary gray mist. The early autumn wind felt cool against my skin, and I wished I’d dressed in my nightgown. Still, my mind told me, the outside weather really made little difference down here. I hurried through the black velvet darkness that surrounded us.

Us?

Yes, I sensed that Stephen must be somewhere close by. I moved forward until I found the armored woman at the entrance to the stairway. The guardian looked troubled. Why? Of course! Why didn’t I see it before? She was weightier around the middle. I was glad that her armor had stretched with her, but she still looked remarkably uncomfortable. She turned her head in my direction and nodded to me.

As usual, she didn’t speak, and I began my descent. The steps sank before me. Seventy steps ended at the pillar of flame, followed by seven hundred steps to the vast dream landscape below. I followed the same pathways I always took to the great cliff wall set by the endless sea. It went very quickly. Dream time, I suppose, is either quick or an eternity.

Where was Stephen?

The octagonal hole stood cut into the cliff wall before me. I held tight to my dream sigil, the small pre-Mayan medallion probably made by an unknown people. It wavered and morphed in my fingers as I tried to hold onto it.

Beyond the rocky cliff wall stood something new -- the skeletal remains of an ancient sailing ship. It bore two masts, a heavy hull and a rounded stern; yet the ship appeared smaller than I thought it should be. I walked over to get a better look, but I couldn’t decipher the name inscribed on its side.

“It’s a patache,” a familiar masculine voice murmured from behind me. “*La Maria de Patache*.”

I turned to see a young black man dressed in what looked like a rubber vest and rubber shorts. Diving gear was strewn on the beach surrounding him. “Omigod! Stephen, it’s you! What’s going on?”

I ran toward him, but he raised both his hands and stepped back. “Stop there! There’s something terrible hidden in the *Patache*.”

“What?” This time I heard the forlorn crying coming from deep inside the shipwreck. The baby? I dashed forward to explore the coral-encrusted rubble, but the huge rocks made the trek difficult on my bare feet.

“Stop there!” Stephen said. “For God’s sake, don’t go any closer.”

"No! Stephen, we've come so far." The tears began to well up in my eyes, and a liquid ache began to well up inside my heart. "I've got to look!"

He held out his hand. In it was another octagonal medallion. I showed him the one in my hand. He nodded and pointed toward the ship.

Gingerly, I trod over the rocks and then the coral-encrusted wood of the *Patache*. I knew it was in here, but what was I looking for? Wait! I spotted an old metal sea chest and went to inspect it. It was chained with an ancient rusted iron padlock, but something told me that one of the larger rocks along the beach would shatter this lock.

As I opened the chest, I saw hundreds of octagonal coins. They glowed in the dim light. Silver and copper and yes, some were even gold. The inscriptions on them were all similar and yet -- different somehow. My head swam with the whirl of patterns inscribed on the coins; yet one of them stood out from the rest. Why?

I laughed and threw away the fading octagonal sigil I had brought with me -- the one I'd carried so tightly in my hand up to now.

I reached down to touch the silver coins, and then took the fairly large medallion from the chest. Yes, I sensed that this was precisely what I needed. I turned back toward Dagon's Octangle cut into the cliff side and searched for the keyhole. I approached it slowly, almost reverently, for this was the object capable of affecting the lives of everyone around me. My God, it was huge. An imperfect octagon, Dagon's Octangle was segmented into eight triangles -- four of them equal to each other, the other four significantly different. The more I tried to decipher the curious patterns engraved in the octagonal shield, the more they didn't quite match up. One moment a section of the piece would bend forward as if inviting you to step forward, but the next second it reversed its invitation making your mind think that it didn't want you to come close at all.

I placed my octagonal key in the small octagonal hole chiseled into the rock, and all eight of the triangles slowly opened organically like some sort of sea anemone showing its interior bait to a potential dinner. I turned to see if Stephen was going to follow me. He'd disappeared.

For a moment, I thought about going to find him. Then I changed my mind and crawled up onto the metallic portal made by the open octangle segments. The darkness pressed in against me, but I thought I could hear the tiny cry of the baby echoing from somewhere deep inside.

Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?

The interior of the octangular cave was darker and more foreboding than even the murkiness outside along the nightmarish beach. But something was wrong inside, and I couldn't quite place what it was.

I heard a noise, a sound like a cross between a sharp intake of breath and the squeal of a seagull. No, that description wasn't quite right, but it was the best I could do. Whatever made that noise, there were several of them making a huge ruckus in the gloom.

As I moved farther into the void, the interior changed, becoming much softer, much wetter; as if warm waves splashed down against a warm sandy beach. A glow appeared up ahead, and I saw no reason not to follow it. At least, it was beacon of light in the darkness. Humankind always looks to such warmth. Slowly, still trembling, I walked toward the glow.

The noises around me increased -- not only in volume, but also in intensity. There had to be hundreds, probably thousands of creatures squealing those gasping screeches. I hurried forward, hoping to see them in the light.

Something passed by my naked hip, lashing me with a whip-like appendage. A tail? Then another one seemed to soar by my left shoulder, just out of sight. What were they? Another stinger whipped me in the thigh. I gritted my teeth so as not to give my position away. But with the next stinging brush, I gasped out a small cry.

The light was only a few more seconds away. If I could only make it, everything would be fine.

In front of me, the entire tunnel of glowing light suddenly filled with moving bodies. White semi-translucent globules, larger than two human hands put together, swam through the air like flying stingrays, vigorously, determinedly toward me. Each ray-shaped being was propelled by an incredibly long and vicious tail, and the only way for them to get through the tunnel was to go right over me.

I screamed as the first wave of them rolled by. Three and then four and then half a dozen more of them tried to burrow through me. A couple of them lodged into my flesh or hung to my flailing limbs. As they pushed me down against the slimy wet cavern floor, one of the burrowers slashed deep into my flesh.

"Stephen!"

"Lyssa!"

"Help me," I cried.

"Lyssa, wake up!"

Blurry eyed, I looked up to see Stephen bending down over me. I was gasping for air and shivering in fear.

"I knew this hardwood floor was a terrible idea," he said, hauling me to my feet. "You'd better come back to bed with me."

* * * * *

Marlene's Note #6:

I'd gotten rather impatient waiting for Ulyssa to introduce me to her handsome black boyfriend, so I finally took matters into my own hands on a day when I'd arrived back at the apartment ahead of her.

I wore this splashy silk kimono over a colorful silk jacquard corset with matching G-string included, and black thigh-high stockings. Classically styled with contrast piping, Obi-style tasseled belt and wide, kimono sleeves. There was nothing subtle about it. I looked like temptation personified, and I was delighted at my brazenness.

Especially when I saw how Stephen's eyes lit up when he saw me.

"Hi!" I smiled.

"Hi," he replied, smiling back.

I stuck out my hand. "I'm Marlene."

He cocked his head and looked askance at me. "Marlene?"

"Marlene Moody. We have old dark-glasses Dedrick Laban in common, I think."

"You know the Professor?" Stephen asked.

"I was one of his lab rats. Laban used to go through dream study subjects like most people go through toilet paper," I told him. "Once he finishes with you, he wads you up and flushes you away."

"That sounds like the man I know, but it's funny Lyssa never said anything --"

"Are you telling me that for as long as you two have been seeing each other, Lyssa has never mentioned me?"

"No. She-she's never mentioned you before."

"My God, we've lived together on and off since we were kids in Indiana, and she didn't bother to mention me."

"I-I'm sorry," he replied. "This is the first I --" His voice trail off.

"Well, don't stand out there gawking," I said indignantly. "Come in."

"Uhh ... thanks." He stepped into the darkened room, and I motioned for him to sit down on a kitchen chair. I offered him some iced tea to drink, and he accepted.

"So you're the man who's finally gonna give Lyss her baby."

Stephen choked on the iced tea. "I-I don't -- I mean -- I hope so." After a pause, he asked, "What do you think about the -- the idea?"

"Oh, go for it," I said. "She's been mooning over the idea of getting pregnant for over a year -- ever since she lost that prick, Myron, to that little tramp. It'd do her a world of good."

"You really think so?"

"Oh, yeah. She'll never admit it, but Ulyssa wants a baby more than anything. She's using the rhythm method, for Christ's sake. It's just a matter of time."

"She always told me that she --" He cleared his throat. "She couldn't have children."

"She just couldn't have any with that sorry excuse for an ex-husband of hers," I replied. "She miscarried twice for a reason, you know. Myron had weak sperm."

Stephen merely raised his eyebrows at me and nodded.

A heavy silence hung in the air until finally I broke it. "So, you have special plans for the night?" I asked him.

"I haven't got anything scheduled."

"I see." I waited for a moment. Then I made a rather bold suggestion. "So, do you wanna fuck?"

Marlene.

* * * * *

Strangely enough, even though I woke up next to Stephen the next morning, I couldn't remember much from the night before.

Barefoot, dressed casually in sweats, Stephen sat on a chair by the bed. He'd been watching me sleep. Surprisingly, I was sleeping in my nightgown. Quite a change for two people so intensely in need of each other that they'd fuck any chance they could get.

"Good morning, when did you get here?" I asked.

"Last night," he answered.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I thought maybe you needed your sleep," he said, shifting uncomfortably in the chair.

"That's not like you." I stretched to get rid of some of the kinks in my back and shoulders. "Hell, that's not like me! I don't think I've ever slept so soundly that I didn't know you were here."

"Oh, I suspect you knew I was here," he murmured. "It's just that you weren't yourself last night."

"Funny, I don't feel hung over. How much did I drink last night? I can't remember a thing."

"You don't remember last night?" Stephen queried. "None of it?"

"Huh-uh." I rolled slowly out from the bed covers because I knew I'd have to pee, and I wanted to get to the bathroom before my bladder penalized me.

"Nothing at all?" he asked.

I headed for the bathroom. "Stephen, stop playing twenty questions. What are you trying to ask to me?"

There was a pause. "Lyssa, tell me about Marlene Moody."

Shit! I flipped up my nightgown near the toilet, pulled down my panties and sat down. Once my stream of urine began to flow, I called out, "How do you know about Marlene?"

He came to the bathroom door and stood before me with his body backlit by the sunlight behind the window curtains. "Marlene tried to seduce me last night."

“Oh, no! Goddamn her!” I choked back some tears. “Goddamn that bitch.”

“Who is she?” Stephen whispered.

“She-she’s a part of me I hoped I’d lost.” I dropped my head down close to my knees as if I was going to be sick. “I really, really thought she was g-gone forever.”

“Who is she, Lyssa?”

“I always thought of her as a waking dream. I don’t know exactly how it works. Dr. Chris -- that is, Dr. Christiana Yee -- told me she thought Marlene may have been some sort of a manifestation of a physical trauma.”

He waited for me to go on.

“When I was six or seven years old, I got hit in the head with a baseball bat at school. After that, I started to hear voices. They were very soft whispers. Hardly understandable, like an insect buzzing, do you see what I mean?”

Stephen nodded.

“Well, naturally that upset my family very much.” I felt my face flush. “As for school -- forget it! The sisters took me aside and told me that when Joan of Arc heard voices, she’d been burned at the stake for heresy. Did I want to suffer that?”

“Oh, my God,” Stephen murmured. “Did they really tell you that?”

“I don’t think they realized how traumatic that could be to a little girl. So for years I kept the whispering voices to myself so I wouldn’t be burned at the stake. In the meantime, the voices slowly got louder -- more coherent.”

“But you still kept them to yourself.”

I nodded and continued. “Anyway, everything changed around puberty. I didn’t understand the sexual needs that gripped me, and to counter those needs, I went to sleep -- hypersomnia. When I fell asleep, a secret persona calling herself Marlene Moody would take over my body and influence the people in my life.”

“Influence?”

“At first my friends would tell me of these strange things that I did or said. Once they told me that at a slumber party I told a frightening story about some strange woman dressed in a Greek toga and body armor guarding an important staircase that could only be found in dreams.”

“Are you serious?”

“Stephen, I don’t remember telling them the tale, having that dream or even attending the slumber party,” I replied tearfully. “And yet a half a dozen of my closest friends told me that I’d done exactly that.”

I paused. He didn’t say anything as if encouraging me to continue.

“Did you ever wonder about the stretch marks on my belly?”

Stephen nodded, but said nothing.

I sobbed softly. "You were too much of a gentleman to ask."

Stephen came to me, putting a hand on my shoulders and massaging me softly. I squirmed away.

"She-she managed to get us pregnant when we -- when I was in high school. There was a boy she really wanted, and we -- that is, I lost his baby when I was fifteen. I carried the baby for four and a half months. Young Catholic girls don't get abortions, you know, but we do miscarry."

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," Stephen whispered. "Will you tell me about the father, Lyss?"

"No. I mean, I can't." I shook my head. "Not yet. I mean, we both loved him, I guess. Marlene used her wiles on him so that he'd teach her -- teach us both -- how to fuck. Of course, once she got pregnant, I was the one who had live with the pregnancy and the miscarriage."

"I'm sorry," Stephen muttered. "When was the last time you felt Marlene --?"

"Three or four years ago. When I got my new medications, I prayed that she'd stay gone forever." I sniffed back a few tears. "But then Professor Laban said he knew Marlene, and that shocked me."

"Marlene told me he recognized her for what she was, a dream subject."

"A waking dream, rather. Even though we can't see his eyes, he sees beyond the obvious, I think."

"Marlene told me that when Christiana Yee recommended you for Laban's sleep study, and you refused, she went to Laban on her own and volunteered."

"Doesn't it just figure?"

"She said Laban submitted her to a battery of tests and treatments -- everything from EKGs to hypnosis."

"She probably loved all the attention."

"Lyssa, you thought she was gone. What do you think brought her back?"

"I don't know," I answered. "What kind of thing rekindles a nightmare?"

Stephen paused. "Another nightmare."

* * * * *

Marlene's Note #7:

Myron had been so uptight about Ulyssa's inability to have a baby with him that he'd left her emotionally long before he left her physically. He knew she'd conceived with that high school boy and lost that child, but she'd lost two of his babies, as well. I guess that really messes with a man's ego. It's the sort of hurt that drills deep into a man's head and scrambles

his synapses like some sort of nasty probe. That probe was a constant irritation, and Myron felt that he had to scratch it somehow.

Until Cherise came along and scratched that itch for him.

Of course, now I'm restating what everybody already knows. Now that Lyssa's mind has turned the corner about Stephen, her body will probably follow suit. It was merely a matter of time and effort. Effort? Ha! Since when is sex considered effort? Maybe she felt slightly pressured. At almost thirty-two, she doesn't have that much time, or maybe it it's easier for both of them just to redouble their efforts.

Marlene.

* * * * *

There isn't a wife in the world that isn't aware of the maintenance fuck. It's that wifely duty that one partner performs to keep the peace when the other partner begins to become emotionally impossible. I'd had enough of those moments with Ron that I knew all the signs to look for. Strangely enough, in those first months, I never felt that way with Stephen. I'd take off my panties, crawl into bed, and then we'd hold onto each other for dear life. Our nights were predictable right down to the last spill of semen and the final spasms in our loins.

It was as if I were a married woman again, but this time my marriage felt more complete than when I had actually been married. I'd found real happiness this time. Of course, my body used that happiness as an excuse to move on to the next transition.

* * * * *

About two weeks later, I awoke feeling sick as hell. "Oh, God."

I was afraid to look at my face in the mirror because I was certain it had turned green. "Oh, God!"

"Oh, God!" I rocked softly back and forth hugging my bare legs tightly against my chest. I was afraid to move. "Oh, God!"

"Oh, God!" How many nights now had I allowed Stephen access to my body? By my count, we'd known each other for sixty-eight days, and with Stephen's stamina and constant demands, I'd found myself naked, sweaty, and splattered with semen for at least twice that amount.

"Oh, God." I continued to rock back and forth, trying to fight back the malady that flip-flopped in my stomach.

"Lyssa, you don't look so good," Stephen said, as he got dressed.

"I'm fine," I snapped. "Just a little nauseous, that's all."

"Nauseous? Does that mean?"

"I don't know what it means, and I don't care," I retorted, dreaming of turning my nails into claws and my teeth into fangs. "Right now, I'm really, really sick."

He put up his hands defensively. "I have to go to the Dryor Trust building. Will you be all right if I leave you alone?"

"Leave!" I yelled, louder than I intended.

"I-I'll see you later, okay? He leaned over and kissed me good-bye.

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

* * * * *

Marlene's spirit materialized in the mirror, just behind the reflection of my face. Compared to the natural color of her skin, my own complexion showed an almost green tinge. She glared at me from the other side of the room. At least, she'd had the good sense to wait until Stephen left before she decided to let me have it.

"You're not fine." She pointed right at my naked abdomen. "We both know what's wrong with you."

"Oh, God, don't you start!"

"C'mon, the way things have been going, we knew this was going to happen eventually." Marlene smirked at me. "Why deny it?"

"Just shut up, will you?"

"Now there's an adult response."

Why couldn't I get regular ghosts with rattling chains, icy drafts, and foreboding pronouncements? No, I had to get an ectoplasmic manifestation of a psychological disorder that really needed a doctor's attention. "Go away, will you?"

"Fat chance of that," she said. "Besides, you've got a phone call to make."

Another wave of nausea hit me. "Oh, God. Oh, God! Let me sleep."

"Soon, soon. There's just one more thing you've got to do."

* * * * *

Once again we were down at the skeletal remains of the unnamed shipwreck, the one I thought of as *La Maria de Patache*. The ancient sailing ship still seemed to be smaller than it should be. Especially when compared to a large figure like Stephen, who wandered carefully through the ship, examining every inch of coral-encrusted wooden planking for the treasure box that I had found and opened during our previous visit. Surprisingly, the coin box seemed to be missing, and yet, I had a feeling in the back of my mind that it wasn't missing, it had been hidden.

I looked at Dagon's Octangle with trepidation. Yet it didn't inspire the same fear that I felt approaching it the last time. Besides, there was something totally different about this experience. Of course, I thought.

"The sound of the baby crying is gone," I called out to Stephen. In fact, the surrounding atmosphere had changed. Suddenly, the air filled with laughter. A baby's laughter and a happy murmuring emanated from behind the octagonal shield imbedded in the wall.

Stephen placed the octagonal key in its hollowed out slot. The eight triangles making up Dagon's Octangle bloomed open like petals unfolding in front of us. Behind the opening metallic orifice was the figure of a baby, smiling and cooing and reaching out for both of us.

Tears came to my eyes when I saw him -- oh, yes, it was a boy. He was the caramel color of a mixed-race child, bright, dark eyes and grinning with recognition at both Stephen and me.

"My God, he's beautiful!" I ran forward and tried to crawl up into the open entrance to scoop him up into my arms.

"Do not touch him," a voice said with such power that the air, the haze, the very ground around us vibrated. The metallic petals began to fold in on the child -- iris-ing in around him like a sleeping flower.

"No! No, he needs me!" I cried out. "It's not fair!"

"Your time will come later. For now, just know that he's being kept safe."

"Safe?" Stephen asked "Here, where he's alone?"

"He's not alone." A figure came out of the dark haze behind the baby. Although the deep feminine voice seemed ancient without measure, we recognized the armor and garb as that of the guardian statue. But as she came further and further into the illumination of the cliff side, both Stephen and I froze at the sight.

She had my face, but she also had the hard eyes of Marlene Moody.

"He's safely resting inside his mother's womb."

I mouthed the words *his mother's womb*.

She merely nodded. "You don't need the lure of the dream world any more."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"You'll come to understand as the days go on, but right now you must embrace your life. You must both embrace your real life away from the dreaming." She paused, while I continued to tear up.

Suddenly, she disappeared. I looked around, trying to find Stephen, but he, too, had vanished.

A distant voice sighed across the wind. "Now you have a life growing within you."

Chapter Eleven

That morning, I asked Stephen if he'd shared my dream from before, and he replied, "What dream?"

I mentioned that it had been an uneasy dream; not scary exactly, but close. I told him it had left me uncomfortable -- disappointed, to say the least. I stared at him for a moment. Did I really want to go into this?

I started by telling him that I dreamed that we'd met at *La Maria de Patache*.

He acted impressed. "I don't think I've ever seen a patache up close. What did it look like?"

"Like what people think of as the *Mayflower*, I guess." Then, I grimaced. "We learned something very important, as well. Very ... personal."

"Really? What?"

I shook my head. "It'll take too long. However, I'll tell you tonight after my appointment."

"Have you got an appointment for work?"

"Not exactly. I'll tell you all about it tonight," I replied cryptically. "When I know for sure."

* * * * *

Was I surprised when I missed my period that second time? No, not really. In fact, I'd felt an incredible knot of excitement in the pit of my stomach. Let's face it; I told myself, a new life was beginning for me -- in me. Of course, where it would lead I wasn't sure, but I still wanted to make the journey. In the days after my period was late, I went out and bought a home pregnancy test. The results were more than I'd expected -- I tested positive. Not some

wishy-washy slight discoloration kind of positive, either, but a full-blown color-changing ring like I'd never seen before in a home test. My God! I actually felt lightheaded and had to sit down.

Pregnant? I started to say the word out loud, but then I stopped, figuring it was time to go to my doctor to confirm my suspicions. I also didn't want to jinx my chances by being overconfident. "Didn't you see that test color change?" my mind screamed. Then, I smiled. "Wait until Dr. Shelley finds out. Wow!"

Dr. Shelley Morganstern and her brother, Dr. Richard Morganstern, were partners in private practice downtown near one of the medical faculty campuses that the Spectrum group owned. Like many of the Morgansterns' patients I'd fallen into the habit of calling the doctors by their first name. It was a habit I picked up from the office staff. Receptionists, medical records clerks, nurses, and even the physician's assistant referred to both practitioners as Dr. Shelley and Dr. Richard. I'd been referred to the Morgansterns first because they were experts in infertility. Most people think of infertility as the inability to conceive, but the medical specialty also covers such problems as difficulties in gestation and problems with the reproductive system overall.

Dr. Shelley had been working with me during the last two years of my marriage to my ex-husband, trying all types of treatments to induce a successful pregnancy. However, most importantly, I chose Dr. Shelley because I felt that, as a woman, she truly understood. It had been a mystery to both the doctor and me as to why I couldn't carry Myron's children. She'd pressed both of us to get my ex-husband, Ron, tested, but he continually refused. Later, once I'd felt that she'd become more than just my physician, Dr. Shelley acted as both a counselor and confidante. In fact, she'd comforted me on one occasion when I cried because my test results had come back negative for like the sixth or eighth time, and both Drs. Morganstern concluded in consultation that it was probably Ron's problem, as well as mine.

I remember once that she sighed and told me: "Some factors in human reproduction can happen because genetically two people may be too similar. Frankly, you and Myron may be too alike physiologically to be compatible."

At the time, it hadn't made a lot of sense to me, but thinking back on it now, I could see her point.

Later, when I found out that my husband had knocked up his office assistant, I think Dr. Shelley was nearly as angry as I was. Still she tried her best to console me.

When I stopped in to see my doctor, I realized that we hadn't spoken in the entire time I'd known Stephen. I told her glowingly about the monumental changes in my sex life first, including the fact that my baby's father was eleven years younger than me. Although I wasn't about to lie to Dr. Shelley, I omitted one very important fact about my new young lover until I knew for certain whether I was really pregnant. I couldn't hold that little detail back for too long; after all, since she'd act as my ob-gyn, and she'd certainly learn significant details about my baby's father once we hit the delivery room. Dr. Shelley cleared her

schedule and performed her own tests to confirm whether or not I was really pregnant. Her tests were destined to be even more conclusive than mine.

“Lyssa, I think you’d better sit down.” Her eyes smiled as she announced the results. “You most definitely are pregnant.” She walked over to hug me, and, soon, she was sharing in my own tears of joy. “It’s obvious that this young man of yours is physiologically different than your ex-husband.”

Laughing, I held onto her for a bit longer. “You have no idea how different they are from each other.”

“Actually, that’s good,” Dr. Shelley said. “When two people are too much alike, it can make it difficult to conceive children. You say you met this new man here in Grand Rapids, right?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Well, my guess is that you’re going to have a normal, healthy pregnancy.”

“I’ll take the healthy part,” I said, letting my tears flow. “But I’m not so sure about the normal.”

“What do you mean? You’re only thirty-one,” she pointed out. “Things should go very smooth.”

“Dr. Shelley, I think this time you’d better sit down.”

Then, I proceeded to tell her everything about the baby’s father. I’d already told her about our eleven-year age difference; this time I told her about our racial differences. Although she was surprised, I was relieved to discover that my doctor wasn’t shocked. In fact, she laughed. “When you break from tradition, you really go all the way.”

After recovering from her initial burst of laughter, Dr. Morganstern wanted to initiate a serious discussion about my other options: abortion, putting the baby up for adoption, and so forth. Of course, these were just formalities. She also knew me well enough to anticipate that I’d refuse all of these other options. I told her that I was happy, and, in spite of what the rest of the world might think about the race of its father, I wanted this baby more than anything in my life.

“Even more than the baby’s father?” she asked pointedly.

That caught me off guard. I stopped for a moment. “It’s a toss up,” I answered.

“Fair enough.” Dr. Shelley smiled. “Now as far as I’m concerned, young lady, you’re as pregnant as pregnant can be. But I want to take an hCG test to be sure.”

“HCG?” I echoed.

“Human chorionic gonadotropin is a glycopeptide hormone produced by the placenta during pregnancy,” she stated flatly.

Gobblety-gook. “What are you talking about?”

"The appearance and rapid rise in the concentration of hCG in the woman's urine makes it a good pregnancy marker," Dr. Shelley replied. "Usually, the concentration of hCG in urine can run at least twenty-five parts per million units per milliliter as early as seven to ten days after conception. The concentration increases steadily and reaches its maximum between the eighth and eleventh weeks of pregnancy."

"Okay, I'm lost."

"Lyss, if you're pregnant, your placenta has to grow. There's no way around it."

I nodded. "Okay."

"If your placenta is growing, then you're producing a very specific hormone -- hCG. Basically that's all there is to it."

"And we're measuring how much hCG my body's produced?"

"Exactly. The higher the protein count the better."

"Okay, what do I have to do?" I asked.

"Go to the lab, and pee in a cup."

"Now that I can handle," I said.

"Listen to me, Lyssa," Dr. Shelley said. "I already know that your baby will receive all the love any mother could offer. Are you positive the father feels the same way?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"Then all I have to do is go through the formality of meeting your young man, don't I?"

Finally, the doctor congratulated me. She hugged me again, telling me cautiously that I might have a pretty rough road ahead of me. But Dr. Shelley was prepared to offer me all the spiritual and emotional assistance she could provide, and naturally my tears began flowing all over again. We were both quite red-eyed by the time I left her office.

I was so excited about the baby that I wanted to tell Stephen right away. However, I knew that I had to control my excitement; so that I could tell him at the perfect time. I was fairly sure about how he would react. I was pretty certain that he would be ecstatic. After all, he'd made sure that he always matched up the calendar to my bodily rhythms. I swear he knew more about my cycle than I did. And we both knew that from our very first time together, I hadn't bothered to use birth control. Still, I felt a twinge of self-doubt concerning what would happen when the reality hit. So, when I struggled to think of the appropriate time and place to break the news to Stephen, I realized that I wanted it to be very special.

* * * * *

The two of us often had hidden from the late-summer heat by indulging in our nakedness within the cool walls of Stephen's downtown condo. Although we tried to remain cool, I could tell that Stephen was finding himself once again seeking to bask in the deep

warmth of my body. Hoping that the evening heat would reduce down to the saucy familiarity of our internal simmer once more.

But naked or not, I continued to dodge his not so subtle advances each time Stephen brought *it* up.

"Just hang on," I said, stalling him.

About forty minutes after we arrived home, the telephone rang. I yelled out to Stephen that I'd get it, and I literally sprinted to phone by the kitchen counter. I could see him, standing there nude, concentrating on the phone receiver, trying to listen with an intensity that I'd seldom seen in anyone before.

When I hung up the telephone, I threw both of my arms high into the air and shouted, "Yes! Twenty-six!"

"Yes, twenty-six what?" he asked. "What does it mean?"

"It means we can go to bed now," I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him into the bedroom. *Oh, God, how I wanted him right there and then.*

I've often thought there is a direct communication between a man's primal desire and a woman's primal needs that make all other means of communication seem downright trivial. Today Stephen and I shared a prime example of such intimate contact -- for you see, one of the earliest and most accurate definitions included in the word *communication* has always been the term *intercourse*.

"May I have this dance?" Stephen's eager friend seemed to ask me, as it stood pointing a single dark eyelet at my nakedness from its very unique vantage point.

This intimate friend stuck out like an ebony dowsing rod that had just uncovered the wellspring of life-giving moisture.

"I'd like that," the moist warmth deep inside my body answered in anticipation. "But it will have to be a long and slow dance so that we can really come to understand one another."

That agreed upon in our nakedness, our bodies danced intimately together once again.

Waiting patiently on my back, I both watched and encouraged him as he straddled me.

"Stephen, did I remember to tell you I love you?" I whispered as he positioned his erection carefully between my thighs.

"It can't hurt to hear it again!"

I started to laugh, but as he moved subtly forward, I cried out. "Ooh! Wow! You took my breath away for a second."

As he plunged into me, I wrapped myself around his muscular torso. My bare arms and legs coiled, coaxing him deeper. As our rhythm escalated, I undulated smoothly beneath his weight and under the purposeful strength of his lead. This time I knew that the moment was right. As Stephen sucked in a gasp of air, his cock pulsing, I opened my eyes wide to look at his smooth features. His grasp on my body was so forceful that I rose up under him, literally

dragged by his momentum. Lifting his hips, his thighs, almost his entire body off the bed, Stephen grunted over me. Totally aware of what we'd achieved, I held my breath involuntarily as he clutched me hard against him.

Finally, with Stephen lying quietly over me, I asked, "So, did you have any plans for the evening?"

There was a very long pause. Stephen lay trembling over me. He grunted a guttural affirmative. "Mm-hmm -- Monopoly."

"Monopoly?" I giggled.

Stephen shuddered. "I thought we'd buy a house on Park Place, move into it, and make love in every single room. At least until somebody else puts up a hotel."

"Forget the house," I replied. "Why don't we just make love on the Boardwalk until we get arrested? Then we can arrange to have conjugal visits in jail."

We'd shared skin for close to an hour that evening. Sometimes an active couple needs to make love, or sometimes they just want to fuck. Occasionally they're forced to exorcise private demons of pure lust. But every once in a while the opportunity arises to drive away former memories of long nights filled with loneliness. Besides, searching deeply within each other helps people find out new things about themselves, and I had something new that I wanted Stephen Dryor to learn about me.

Flushed and out of breath, dripping with sweat and more potent fluids, I lay panting heavily. After our long, lingering lovemaking had settled into afterglow, I asked, "Do you want something to drink?"

"What do we have?"

"I picked up something special today." I smiled as I swung my legs out of the bed, sliding my feet into a pair of silvery four-inch high heeled satin slippers. I realized that it was pretty silly for me to wear silver-colored spike-heeled slippers when I was totally naked otherwise, but I also knew that men loved that sort of thing. Besides, the heels made me look as if I had great legs. Illogical? Probably. But I also noticed the way Stephen perked up to stare at me as I stood up and walked sensually out the door and down the hallway. Stephen didn't realize it yet, but he was due to indulge in a continuation of a very special night for both of us.

I knew him well enough to know that he'd shift closer to my side of the bed, as if to reassure himself of our presence by examining the wet spot on the sheet the two of us had made together. But in a matter of moments, I'd returned to the bedroom with a tray of sparkling wine chilled over ice, along with two long-stemmed glasses.

"Oh, my, is this special or what?" Stephen asked warmly. "What's the occasion? And what does twenty-six mean?"

"You'll see." I dug underneath a fancy linen napkin. Pulling out a tiny envelope, I handed it to Stephen. "Open it."

Stephen ripped the edge of the envelope and pulled out a cheery little *Thank You for Your Many Acts of Kindness* card. "Aww. This is sweet."

"Read the note," I directed. "Out loud."

"Dear Stephen," he began to read. "I wanted you to know just how special you are to me right now. I wanted to tell you about all the things going on inside me. How I've treasured your caring and your sharing, and how thrilled I am to be in the position I'm in now." He looked up at me. "What's this all about, Lyssa?"

"Go on," I whispered. "Finish it."

Stephen laughed as he read the next part. "As always you'll find a delightful surprise hidden inside a pair of my panties, but I won't be wearing this particular pair. Go check the top drawer of the new white armoire in the nursery."

Grinning, Stephen sprinted out of the bedroom and into our brand new nursery. I followed him, arriving just as he opened the drawer of the white armoire. He pulled a single pair of my best silk panties from the heretofore empty drawer. I'd pinned a note to the tricot front that read: *Look inside.*

When Stephen looked inside the silken panties, he found something unexpected taped there. I'd cut out a picture of a light skinned black baby from a department store catalog. Then I taped the baby picture to a little note that read: *"Our seeds of love have germinated and grown so much over these last weeks, and I now know that they will continue to grow. Congratulations, Dad. I'm carrying your baby."*

He looked up at me, wide-eyed and grinning like a fool. "Are you sure?"

I nodded and smiled. "Oh, I'm definitely pregnant. That last phone call was the formal confirmation from my doctor's office."

Reaching out to grab me in his excited clasp, Stephen nearly screamed out his delight. "Oh, Lyss! That's marvelous!"

"Oh, yeah?" I fell against him as he clutched me close to his chest. "I hope you still think so when I'm all puffed up like some stuffed turkey."

"Are you kidding? I'm crazy about stuffed turkey."

He held onto me for a full fifteen minutes. He led me back into our bedroom, continuing to kiss me, caress me, and run his hands over every inch of my body. Rubbing my stomach cautiously, he grinned like a little kid. He continuously let his fingers dwell on the flesh right under my belly button, periodically pressing lightly. "I can't believe it. This is exactly what I wanted."

"Well," I said, and smiled back at him. "I'm certainly relieved to hear that."

"So tell me how you found out."

I told him the whole story of the afternoon.

"So I waited for her to call me here tonight with my hCG count," I told Stephen. "Twenty-six! My placenta is naturally in place and developing, and that simply means there's some sort of very healthy protein growing inside of my uterus. Dr. Shelley says twenty-six is a good healthy number for any woman, let alone somebody with my history."

Stephen was exuberant. "Have you told your mother yet?"

"Not yet, I mean, I just found out," I answered. "I wanted you to be the first to know."

Smiling his big beautiful smile again, Stephen threw his arms around me. "I've gotta call and tell somebody!" Then he stopped. "No, wait! There's something else I have to do first."

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. Would someone please explain to me why it is that when you tell a man that he's going to be a father, his idea of celebrating the event is to repeat the act which started it all in the first place? Still the inevitable happened, and he quickly straddled my body once more.

All the sweetness was there -- Stephen's gentleness versus my need for closeness. Personally I was feeling selfish and demanding, and as soon as I became filled up with the natural bulk of his penis, I actually felt excited and whole. I looked Stephen over as if the father of my baby were now a totally different person. He hadn't continued his weight training over the month that we'd been together, taking time only to play tennis with an occasional partner and to have a lot of healthy sex with me as his exclusive partner. Still he was the same handsome young man I'd first met. I couldn't say *cruelly handsome* anymore, because I no longer saw that hard sense of severity on his face. Where I once thought I saw cynicism in his eyes, all I could see now was unconditional love. Well, maybe not totally unconditional, since I was carrying his baby. But I'd met his most demanding condition already.

Under his relentless probing, I quaked in Stephen's arms. Feeling both frightened and fulfilled in the same moment, I climaxed beneath him. What ecstasy that final orgasm brought to me! I could literally hear the blood pounding through my temples and feel my taut nerves trembling deep inside where so much of his love sprayed a million teeming, flowing notes from our intimate song together -- a gloriously lovely liquid tribute which he again shared with me.

Afterwards, once I'd caught my breath, I felt very hot, very sweaty, and very, very sticky. Although I've seldom been able to fall asleep right away after making love, this time was different. The top sheet was all wadded up at the bottom of the bed, and I didn't think I'd find the energy to get out of bed and place a dry towel over the huge wet spot we'd deposited here on my side of the bed. Exhausted and intoxicated by the moment, the company, the champagne we'd shared, and my newly discovered delicate condition, I soon fell asleep.

My head still groggy, I awoke to the soft familiar sound of Stephen's voice talking on the phone. I didn't want to open my eyes yet, but my ears were intrigued by what Stephen was saying to whoever it was on the other end.

"No, it's true," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "Lyssa told me this evening. We think she's due in late March or early April. What? Hang on. Let me see if she's still asleep."

I opened my eyes and watched him walk into the bedroom. His wide grin was even bigger than I remembered. "Who are you talking to?" I asked.

"It's Tom. He and Rona want to congratulate you personally."

He handed me the phone. "Hi, Tom, how are your girls?"

"Are you kidding, Lyssa, my girls are just fine," he said. "But it's you we want to talk about -- congratulations, young lady!"

I blushed and giggled. "Thank you, Tom. Your good wishes mean a lot to me."

"You're gonna get a pile of them from this side of the family. Hang on, here's Rona."

There was a bobbling of noise on the far end of the line and then a squealing voice came gushing back at me at full volume, "Way to go, girl! I am so happy for you. And you thought you couldn't have children. This is your first baby, right?"

"Let's hope so," I answered. "I've had three miscarriages."

"Oh, my gracious. We never knew that."

"It isn't common knowledge, sweetie," I replied. "Don't worry about it. Besides, once I gave up on the idea of those blond, blue-eyed babies, the rest was pretty easy."

"How are you feeling? Do you expect any problems?"

"I feel really good," I said honestly. "Very happy right now. Knowing how capable the father is, I'm sure this one will carry all the way to term."

"Oh, you can be certain of that," she replied. "When it's meant to be, it's meant to be! And you two are just that -- meant to be. I'm so happy for you; I'm almost ready to tell that big hunk of a husband of mine that it's time for another baby on our end, as well."

"Thank you, Rona." I suddenly had to fight back tears. "That's so sweet. It means a lot to me."

"What did your mother say? How's your family taking it?"

"I-I haven't told them yet." I couldn't tell her that I didn't know if I was ready to tell them. "You guys are the first ones to know, I think. I fell asleep so I don't know how long the proud father's been bragging over the phone."

"He's a Dryor," Rona replied. "He'll be handing out cigars to strangers on the streets in the next day or so."

Although I'd miscarried two times with my ex-husband and once as a teenager, I felt optimistic about this particular pregnancy. However, as Rona had reaffirmed for me once

again, the seed I now carried drew half of its genetic material from Stephen's young, healthy, chromosomes. This baby would be more likely to survive our nine-month ordeal than any of my previous pregnancies. The embryo the two of us had so recently created would need to use the best of its father's stamina to demand the best from its mother's nurturing.

After I hung up with Thomas and Rona, I took a deep breath and dialed another phone number. When a familiar woman's voice broke in on the far end of the telephone line, I said, "Hi, Momma, it's me."

"Well, it's about time, Lyssa," she said with a dead calm. Although her voice wasn't cold, she seemed irritated with me. "You said you were going to call me as soon as you learned something."

"The doctor's office didn't call me until late. Then I fell asleep. At first, I didn't want to take the chance of waking you, but then I decided that I'd better call you anyway."

Momma dropped her voice so low, she nearly whispered. "What did the doctor say?"

I took a deep breath, and then let the words roll from my lips. "You and Daddy are going to be grandparents."

"I suspected as much." She paused. "I don't suppose there's any chance the baby might not be his?"

"Momma, stop!"

"Just wishful thinking, dear. Look, I'm sure Stephen wants what's best for you and the baby," Momma sighed. "But now we have to find some way to tell your father without triggering a heart attack."

"As bull-headed as he can get, I think you'll find Daddy's a lot stronger than we give him credit for."

"Are you kidding?" Momma asked. "The only person in our family who really comes close to fitting that description is you, Lyss."

What? Who'd have thought she'd say that to me? "Why, Momma, I think you meant that as a compliment."

She sighed over the phone line. "Ulyssa."

"Yes?"

"Congratulations, honey."

I choked back a sob behind my reply. "Thank you, Momma!"

As I hung up, I caught sight of Stephen's concerned expression. "Was it difficult for you?"

I blinked the tears from my eyes, sniffed once, and shook my head. "These are happy tears," I replied, and looking into the foreseeable future for a brief moment, I saw a sucking mouth with warm, violet-brown lips standing out against soft baby skin the color of sweet maple cream. Our infant's prominent lips would contrast darkly to my skin as he nursed

upon my pale breasts. My child would be content to suckle the milk from his mother's breasts, since they ran rich with nature's nourishing lactates. But I realized that more than likely, as with the other Dryor babies I'd met, his caramel color would show up as a yellow-tinged light brown in comparison to his father's deep-blue-brown skin.

Stephen kissed me very, very gently and said, "I love you, little mother." Then he took the telephone away from me. In a moment or two he'd placed an international call to his sister at The Hague via the comsat link. "Lorrie? Hi, it's Steve." He paused for a second. "Listen, Sis, do I ever have news for you!"

Chapter Twelve

I was particularly struck by one cover from a book called *Ask Your Angels*. The angel painting on the cover looked like she might be a twin to me; busty, sensuous, and endowed with both a voluptuous body and bedroom eyes. I looked that painting up. The cover portrait was painted in 1889 by Abbot Henderson Thayer, and the painting was actually hanging in the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. I think I must have chosen that one because the angel was beautiful -- earthy as well as heavenly.

Quite frankly, I think that angel is damn sexy.

-- Excerpt from *Behind the Lace Curtain* by Ulyssa Kincaid.

Marlene's Note #8:

In spite of her pregnancy, Lyssa slipped off to the store and sneaked home a pack of cigarettes. It seemed to be a good idea, she thought, as she often used nicotine to calm herself down. She told herself that they'd help to set her mind straight.

However that particular cigarette pack label had the following message imprinted upon it: Smoking by Pregnant Women May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth, and Lower Birth Weight.

She swore out loud and then left the pack hidden in a bottom drawer.

Marlene.

* * * * *

Even though Stephen hadn't gotten around to asking me formally yet, I'd been searching for just the right dress I wanted to wear for our wedding. I finally found one when I was thumbing through a specialty catalog. Since this was going to be my second wedding, I specifically looked for an outfit in a color other than white. The gown I found was beautiful cream-and-gold spun lace. Strapless, emphasizing both the traditional curves and the curves yet to come, it was absolutely gorgeous. I knew I wanted this one, so I showed the picture to Stephen.

"You surprise me, Lyss," he said. "It looks so simple."

"It *is* simple, but there's one feature built in which is absolutely vital. Can you guess?" I waited to see if he could spot the obvious.

At my insistence, we'd been listening to some oldies music, just because I felt like listening to one of my old tape compilations. There's something about the old songs with their simple two-two and two-four times that makes everything more romantic. I think, for the most part, it has to do with the subtle rhythms of two in harmony.

Like so many men, Stephen was women's fashions impaired. Finally, he just growled. "I give up, what's the secret?"

I laughed. "It's maternity! It'll stretch with me as the weeks go by." I paused; he stared at the picture, and then looked back at me with such a strange expression that I couldn't help but comment. "Um -- your mouth's fallen open."

"How far along will you be?" he queried.

"Even if we could set the date for as soon as possible, I'm starting to show already," I stated quite matter-of-factly. "By the time certain family members return from overseas, and we actually get around to walking down the aisle, I'll be at least three and a half months along, and my wedding dress is going to have to give some around the tummy."

"Oh, my God," he gasped as he spoke. "You'll be pregnant at our wedding!"

"That seems to be how it works. Pregnant now -- pregnant during wedding. Having succumbed completely to our passions, we've fallen victim to the laws of gravid-ee."

"Huh?"

"It's a pun, sweetheart."

"It is?"

I sighed. "Where do you keep the dictionary?"

He waved away my question with a gesture of his hand. "Lyssa, you're pregnant!"

"Yes," I replied. "But I could've sworn I mentioned it to you a while back."

"When my family meets you, they-they'll figure it out."

Somehow, in spite of his age, Stephen looked like an overgrown boy who just happened to turn twenty. Sort of what might have happened in the movie *Big* if Tom Hanks was black and muscular. Even worse, I suddenly felt the entire span of the eleven-year age difference between my baby's young father and me.

"You already told them, Stephen. You told your sister, your mother, your cousin, and his wife."

"I did?" He looked around the room for a second as if trying to verify that statement. "Oh, yeah, I did."

"I suspect your sister has told your mother. Your family knows. My family knows. My mother's cat, Martina, knows. Sam, the security guard downstairs, has been downright solicitous, so I'm pretty sure that by now this entire building has been informed that I'm carrying your baby."

"Wow," he whispered. "My baby."

"Mm-hmm, your baby." I gently wrapped my arms around his neck and slipped down onto his lap. We clung to each other, rocking together in his chair for a moment as the songs progressed. Since I was sitting directly on his lap, I could feel that inevitable bulge growing uncomfortably compressed inside his fashionable form-fitting slacks. Stephen had to slip his hand in behind the zipper to adjust himself.

"Too tight," he muttered.

I laughed. "Funny how something that bothers you men so much when it's constrained is the same thing that you'll spend all kinds of money on in order to fit into an even tighter place." I jumped up and pulled him to his feet. "Dance with me."

As I moved carefully into Stephen's strong arms, the overall atmosphere changed. The emphasis of the songs slipped softly into such classic ballads as Marvin Gaye's *Sexual Healing*, Prince emoting *When Doves Cry*, and the Ronettes with *Be My Baby*. Through those three songs, my partner held me closely.

"You're quite an accomplished dancer, Stephen."

"I'm only as good as my partner." He grinned in acknowledgment. "You know, being told about how your pregnancy is changing your body is not quite the same as seeing it firsthand."

"If I remember correctly, you were there when it happened."

"Lyss, I want to see," Stephen whispered. "Show me."

"Did you forget the rules already?" I held him close to me. "Since I'm going to be a mother, you have to say 'Mother-may-I' and then finish your question."

"Mother, may I see for myself?" Gently Stephen placed his fingers on the buttons of my overshirt.

"Ooo!" I said. "Now there's an offer I'd find hard to refuse. But I'll go you one better. Come take a shower with me."

Stephen grinned. "That's a great idea. Come on." Taking my hand firmly in his own, Stephen led me carefully, but determinedly, down the hallway to the bathroom. "I suppose we need to shower off some of this city soot, and perspiration."

"Nope," I said. "I just want to be close to the father of my baby."

Barefoot and eager, I stepped out of my jeans right outside the bathroom door. Down to my panties and loose top, I began to undo Stephen's shirt buttons. When I had him bare-chested, I peeled my top off. I was braless under my blouse. My breasts were becoming fuller with the changes, tender to the touch and jutting decidedly out from my chest and shoulders in preparation for dealing with their impending new obligation. I think my round jutting nipples and the bulging areole surrounding them enthralled him. Charmed for the moment, Stephen remained silent. As his eyes drank in the sight of my lush, fleshy breasts, I slipped my panties down, as well.

I had grown a rather sparse swatch of pubic hair since the last time I shaved. Stephen continued to stare. Remembering how we were told by a particularly priggish sister at parochial school that our pussies were such an aesthetic eyesore, I wondered how a man could become so mesmerized with the sight, that he couldn't look away. His gaze remained so transfixed on my loins that Stephen seemed to barely notice while I undressed him. Finally I peeled away his briefs, and it was my turn to stare.

Oh, yeah, I sighed, as I gazed lovingly at that long, dark-chocolate cock. Now I distinctly remember how I got pregnant.

After starting the shower, I motioned for him to step into the tub enclosure beside me. Pouring a glob of body wash into my hands, I began to lather every inch of skin surface both up and down into every crevice of his body. Soon, Stephen eagerly followed suit by soaping up my skin, all the while examining my naked body in its entirety. He brought his dark hand right to the base of my navel, and gently pushed his fingers into my flesh. The visual effect was mesmerizing, his dark hand against my pale belly.

"Oh, my Lord," he murmured.

"What?" I asked, surprised by his reaction.

"That little tiny hardness, that lump," he asked. "Is that ...?"

I smiled. "Your child."

Stephen grabbed me, pulled me very close, and pressed his wet mouth against mine. "You're wonderful."

"You're the one who's wonderful," I said, once we'd broken from our kiss. "I'm just pregnant."

"Just pregnant!" Then he laughed. "How can anybody be just pregnant? You're carrying my son."

"Hey, speaking of that, how do you know it's going to be a boy?"

"I've always known." His face got serious, but he began to concentrate on soaping up his hands. "From the first time that we met together in the dream. From the first time we heard the sound of the baby crying at the foot of the seven hundred steps, I've known."

"But how?"

"Turn around." He began to lather my body. "I'm an extremely lucky man. From the moment I saw you, I wanted you. And then I saw the baby behind the dream Octangle --"

"You told me you didn't share that dream with me!"

"I didn't want to frighten you any more than you already were." Back and sides, hips and thighs, and then Stephen rubbed his soapy hands all over my full breasts. "Besides, I knew once I'd had you that you'd carry my child."

"You just knew that." I dropped my fingers down to caress him. Naturally my young lover's involuntary lower response continued to stand out, forcefully aware.

"After you became pregnant with my baby, I knew instinctively he was a boy."

"That's not logical," I responded. But by this time I was lost in the moment. This part of the shower experience was sublime. Each of us caressed and stroked the other while examining the specifics of the other's body.

We kissed each other gently, and then more passionately, as if regaining each other's trust. While I stroked and cleaned his hard cock with my soft, soapy hands, Stephen moaned and awkwardly tried to slip one of his fingers into the slit of my vagina.

"Hey, just let your fingers relax and enjoy this," I told him.

Then while I played with his cock, I leaned limply against his body. Stephen continued to explore the warmth and wetness of the one place he'd always obsessed over, as if I hadn't spoken.

"Hey," I murmured, panting in his ear. "Feel like fucking your old lady?"

"And what old lady would that be?" he replied, with a grin. "I'll tell you what. I will fuck the mother of my child."

Out of the tub in moments, we dried each other off. As I ran the soft, thick white terrycloth towel over his body, Stephen sighed. "Lyss, did anybody ever tell you how gorgeous you are?"

Standing perfectly still, enjoying all the attention, I shook my head. "You're just saying that so you can get in my pants."

"I can't fit in your pants."

I patted dry the droplets which still clung to his neck, back, and shoulders. "Uh-huh. Come into the bedroom. I'll see if we can't make you fit."

I'd brought a different cassette tape that I'd recorded from CDs borrowed from friends and people at work, on which I'd assembled a play list of romantic soul tunes. The songs drifted through the bedroom like so many seductive moans. Husky voiced, Ben E. King

started the set with *Stand By Me*, while I lowered my head, tormenting the sensitive flesh at the tip of Stephen's penis. Then I slowly adjusted the angle of my lips and tongue to take in more and more flesh as he began to breathe erratically under my determined ministrations and unabashed pagan idol worship.

I developed a rhythm, but had to stop somewhere in the midst of the next song. Robert Knight's driving rendition of *Everlasting Love* pushed me too frantically to sustain the beat of oral sex. I simply could not keep up.

"Just relax," Stephen said, as I allowed his hard cock to slip from between my lips. "Lie back."

Placing me prone, flat on my back on top of a couple of bath towels, he slowly guided the blunt tip of his cock inside me.

"Don't push too hard," I said. "Just work your way in gradually." Then slowly, carefully, I clasped him into me, clutching him tightly.

"*Oh ... my love*," Bobby Hatfield's vocal began.

I cannot begin to explain the thrill I experienced coaxing my lover carefully into position, and then pulling him deeply into the clasp of my body while the Righteous Brothers' voices swelled perfectly with those first soaring strains of *Unchained Melody*. In a matter of minutes, Stephen had determined the thrust and withdrawal rhythms which seemed to work best for both of us. I tightened my muscles, holding his cock deep inside, urging him on. Foreigner invoked a serene but potent slow two-four rhythm as Lou Gramm crooned his soulful version of *I Want To Know What Love Is*, while Stephen balanced over my body as if I were a fleshy cushion of softness and warmth bracing his damp, muscular body.

I grabbed his face and clamped my lips against his, forcing my tongue deeply into his mouth so that he'd follow suit. Beneath him, I cooed and moaned through a series of gasping, breathy sounds while Stephen moved with more and more urgency.

Listening to each other vocalize our desires, I believed that our desires were ignited by the spark of our mutual hungers. We both seemed to acquiesce to that sharp blast of exquisite passion which happens when a woman's body urges a man's reproductive system to act out the pressures of his need. So, as the Supremes performed an exquisitely intimate "*Baby. Baby. Whenever you're near me, I hear a symphony*," I felt my young partner lose control of his frenzied cravings. *Baby. Baby.*

Baby. Baby. The music swept through my head, through my loins, through my entire being.

I dug my nails into his buttocks, clutching his trim young body tautly against my own enfolding heat. Finally, I trembled. My climax was surprisingly gentle. Fulfilling, despite its quietude, I sensed that my orgasm had shaken both me and my unborn baby. *Baby. Baby.*

I squealed in pleasure, and suddenly, Stephen's passion liquefied.

“No,” He cried out, his voice quaking. “Not yet.” Both excited and wracked by violent spasms in the same moment, he spurted forth in an impassioned effort, intimately marking me once again. *Baby. Baby.*

Stephen came, hot cum spewing frantically in a constant stream of passion that left him gasping. Breathing heavily, he fell over me, limp. I held him close.

Diana Ross’s voice faded gradually away.

Running my hands lovingly along his back, I murmured, “Hold still. Rest inside me for a moment.”

“Wow!” Stephen gasped. “What happened?”

“Let’s just say that if I wasn’t a couple of months along already, I’d have sworn you just got me pregnant.”

Chapter Thirteen

Marlene's Note #9:

I wasn't going to say this, but I've thought about it a lot. Everything started to slide downhill from here. Only two things really thrived from here on out. Happily, the first was their baby. Unhappily, the other was a white-haired scorpion in wrap-around sun glasses and a Ph.D. Hola!

It seems that Dedrick Laban didn't want the Sumerian painting as much as he'd said that he wanted it. He gladly traded his hold on the painting and his bid on the Yucatan medallion for something far more important -- the underwater location of La Maria de Patache.

Of course, he'd need a capable, experienced diver who was really good at close quarters. Laban needed someone as good as S.B. Dryor had been in his heyday -- someone like, oh, let's say S.B.'s oldest son. But then how does one manipulate the son of a rival? By using the people that he loves, of course.

There must be a dozen ways to influence people. Especially those people who are easily influenced. For example if you do enough sleep studies with enough specialists, you pick up a few "tricks of the trade." Some of the tricks are as simple as learning hypnosis. Just a post-hypnotic suggestion left behind here or there.

Oh, yes, there are ways that a scorpion can think of while craftily basking under a rock. Adios.

Marlene.

* * * * *

"Stevie, I've got to talk to you." Tom had driven into the city from Michigan Dunes University in a thundershower. He looked past Stephen's shoulder at me standing in the hallway wrapped in terrycloth. "Lyssa, I'm so sorry. I promise I'll be just a few minutes."

Neither of us was dressed for company, but I wasn't worried about Tom seeing me in my bathrobe. "You're soaked, Tom. Take off that coat. I'll make some coffee."

"Why didn't you just call?" Stephen asked his cousin.

"I couldn't." Tom took off his coat. "I didn't want Rona to get wind of this until I talked to you."

I hated eavesdropping, but I figured that if I stayed out of sight in the kitchen and pretended to be making the coffee, the men would discuss Tom's problem without wondering if I could hear them. So I lingered just behind the door.

"Laban has offered me a doctoral candidate fellowship with the Museum Consortium."

"That's great news," Stephen said. "Why would you want to hide that from Rona?"

"That's not it," Tom replied. "You see, there's a condition."

"What condition?"

"I have to join Laban's expedition to the Yucatan peninsula."

"I still don't see the problem," Stephen said.

"He wants to dive for *La Maria de Patache*. He thinks we can find --" Then he paused.

I didn't have to hear the words to know. *Dagon's Octangle*.

"So that's a decision you're going to have to make," Stephen said.

"No, you don't understand," Tom muttered. "Laban's bound and determined to take the most experienced divers he can get. That's part of the condition of my employment."

"Who, my dad? He won't do it! Laban's got no hold over his position at the university."

"Don't play dumb with me, Stephen. We all know who the best close quarters diver is, now that S.B.'s not available."

I heard Stephen's voice change. It lowered in both pitch and volume. "Jesus, Tom, I don't know."

"Stephen, if I get the fellowship, my girls will have something better than second-hand furniture and oatmeal for two meals a day. You don't know what it's like living hand to mouth for months on end. I want --"

The rest sank into an incomprehensible muttering. It was just as well. The coffee was ready anyway. I put on an innocent face and walked out into the living room.

"Coffee for three," I said cheerfully. Funny, I didn't feel as cheerful as I sounded.

"Thanks, sweetheart." Tom picked his mug up. "You're a life saver."

"I bet that rain's pretty cold," Stephen said.

“Definitely seasonal,” Tom answered. Then he turned to me and smiled approvingly. “Goodness, Lyss, pregnancy agrees with you. You positively glow.”

“That’s because you don’t follow me around through grocery stores or restaurants,” I replied. “When I hit anyplace that has a distinctive food smell, I positively glow green.”

Everybody smiled.

“You know, you two,” Tom said. “One child is never enough. You’ll have to have a second one.”

I blushed. “Let’s get through this one first, okay?”

“Well,” Tom said. “I’ve got to get back to the university. Thanks for the coffee, Lyss.” He leaned over to kiss me. “Think about Laban’s offer, Stevie.”

“Wait a minute. Did you mention my quest for the pre-Mayan octagonal coin to Laban?”

“What coin?” Tom shook his head. “This is news to me.”

Stephen just nodded slowly as we walked him to the front door. As soon as Tom left, I spoke up.

“Are you going to do it?”

“You were listening?”

“Well, are you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t like Laban’s methods. He’s using Tom to squeeze me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“The first thing I’m going to do is put the mother of my child to bed.”

“Stephen!”

“I honestly don’t know, Lyss,” he replied. “Damn him! Doesn’t Tom see that he’s being manipulated?”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s Professor Laban’s sneaky way of asking me to join his expedition to the seas off the Yucatan Peninsula,” he said finally. “He wants to dive the blue hole.”

“What’s a blue hole?”

“It’s sort of an underwater cave set on its side. It’s a fairly modern geological feature,” he said, picking up a piece of paper to illustrate his point. “Let’s say you have a coastal cave that’s doing all the normal cave functions. Like this rolled up paper, it’s straight up when it’s formed, but suddenly the cave is folded over on its side by all these geological forces. Then it’s pushed on its back and sinks underneath the sea. Kind of like this.” He folded the paper to show me. “Now you have to dive straight down, but the stalactites and stalagmites come in to meet you as you go down. So you feel like you’re diving into a giant mouth.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

"Well, yes and no. It's dangerous, but not much more than any other dive," he muttered, but somehow I didn't think that even he believed that. "I've talked to -- talked to other divers who've done these dives." He paused and then took a deep breath. "If I do go, I'll have to be gone for five to six weeks."

"Stephen, no," I pleaded. "Not now."

"Don't worry," he said. "I don't plan on going. He can get someone else."

* * * * *

I heard only one end of the conversation, when I walked by Stephen's desk. But what I heard disturbed me to no end.

"You mean you'd let your claim on the coins go for my assistance? Why?"

Oh, no, I thought. I hurried into the bedroom and hoped that this call was on the house phone. "... Far as I'm concerned," I recognized Dedrick Laban's voice. "You have exclusive rights to the bidding."

"Tell me something, Doctor," Stephen asked. "How did you find out about my little side trip to Sault Ste. Marie?"

"We all have our secrets, don't we?" Dr. Laban replied. "Well, are you in?"

Stephen sighed. "I'll give you my answer this afternoon," he said.

"Don't wait too long. Because I might keep Chevrier dangling for months on end. *Adios.*"

Damn, I thought. *He's hooked. This wasn't fair.* I don't know how long Stephen had been involved in antiquities, but I did know that this find had been very important to him. As I walked back out into the living room, I stopped and stared at *The Seventy Steps to Lighter Slumber*. Then I confronted him quietly. I sensed this was no time for the hard-assed approach. "You're going to do it, aren't you?"

He shrugged, and then he nodded. "It wouldn't be for that long," Stephen replied. "The benefits far outweigh --" His voice trailed off.

"We haven't been apart for --" I checked the calendar on the wall. "Seventy-four days. Hardly two days apart. We're expecting a baby. We've got marriage plans to finalize, and now you want to pack up and leave for a whole month! It's not fair."

"Tom and the professor think that the real key is down below in the hole."

"The real key? Stephen, it's just a dream! You don't have to go traipsing off to find your dream."

"I think it's more than just a dream, Lyss. Besides, I'm the only diver with close quarters experience. Look, the professor and his consortium are holding the octangular medallions hostage on the condition that either I convince my mother to sell the *Seventy Steps*, or else I go."

"Damn you, Stephen, aren't you listening?" I cried. "Fuck Professor Laban's Machiavellian machinations. You can't just mark me like some kind of pedigreed bitch, and then run off for whatever reason."

"Lyssa, I love you, but the value of Dagon's Octangle would be priceless," he mumbled. "The proof of its existence will make or break reputations."

But I would have none of his excuses. "Is it worth losing my baby's father over? I think not."

"Damn it, Lyss," he said. "This is important to all of us. Besides if it's really *La Maria de Patache*, this is Tom's chance to make his mark on academic history."

"Tom doesn't have to go down into a *blue hole*!" I snarled.

"Well, actually, he is one of the backup divers."

"Of all the stubborn, self-centered, crazy things you could think of --" I couldn't finish my sentence. I exhaled a huge sigh, and then said, "Why?"

"I wish I knew. I only know that we just have to do this."

I was so angry, I wanted to hit him. "And what do I tell our baby when he or she asks about her father?"

He came in close and wrapped his arms around me. "Tell him to go into the next room, and ask me himself."

I wasn't about to let him off the hook that easily. I remained upset with Stephen that night, and it took him a full two hours to calm me down. Reassuring me to the best of his ability, Stephen listed one safety precaution after another, which they'd promised to take in order to assuage my anger. He even made a phone call to Tom that was designed to reassure me, but Tom was trying to deal with Rona at the same time Stephen dealt with me. Of course, finally he calmed me down, and we decided to make up. And like any almost newlywed couple, when we made up, we made love.

That night, I accepted his decision, but I still didn't feel right about the whole thing. I think I must have worn my feelings on my face, because, for some reason, he seemed hesitant to talk to me for most of the next day.

As I folded the laundry, I found that I had that Traveling Wilburys tune stuck in my head. Roy Orbison's voice echoed over and over inside. "I'm so tired of being lonely," I sang to myself. "I've still got --"

"What's this about being tired of beef-a-roni?"

"Ha-ha," I chided in a monotone. "Very funny." I handed him a pile of underwear, both his and hers, and pointed toward the bedroom. "As Daffy Duck would say, 'It is to laugh.'"

He carried them to his suitcase. "Hey, these aren't going to do me any good clean!"

I looked up puzzled. "What? What are you talking about?"

"If I'm going to pack some of your panties in my suitcase, they should have your juices dried onto them, so I can sniff them and dream."

In spite of myself, I smiled and shook my head. How could I stay mad at a man like that?

The night before he had to leave, I waited for him in the bedroom -- naked. I showed off the bulging lump growing in my tummy, framing it with my fingers. Dr. Shelley had showed me how I could now feel the top of the uterus, also known as the fundus, low in my abdomen.

"Want to feel the baby?" I whispered. Very carefully he put his fingers over mine and smiled. The stark contrast was both sensual and exciting as his dark fingers examined the embryo growing just beneath my white abdomen. He didn't say anything, so I stayed silent, as well.

We snuggled and cuddled for nearly half an hour before the inevitable happened. Our lovemaking was all feeling and tactile, prickly and itchy, distending and demanding. I looked once more at the startling contrasts of his skin against mine as we started to make love.

"Stephen," I whispered, as he slipped inside me. "Thank you for giving me this baby."

"I should be the one thanking you," he said.

Those were the last words we said to each other for quite a while, but we continued to exchange intimate pleasantries with our bodies, and I was very glad of that. When we were finished, I couldn't bring myself to let him go. I clung to him and started to softly cry.

"Lyss, we've been over this," he whispered.

"I know," I replied through my tears. "I can't help it."

Chapter Fourteen

Rona, her two girls, and I all stood teary-eyed and heavy-hearted watching their father and my baby's father check in for the flight to Miami. The whole process was absolutely routine, I knew, but I couldn't get the feeling out of my head that something terrible was going to happen. I'd told Stephen as much the night before, but he assured me that everything was proper and aboveboard, and that he and Tom promised each other that they'd be extra careful and double check everything.

"We're to have first-class accommodations in Miami," Tom said. "And then we'll be taken to Key Biscayne to board the *Telemachus*, the ship the university has chartered."

He bent down low to kiss his wife's light brown hair. "I love you." Then he picked up each of his babies in turn and kissed them. "Augh! Sticky!" he said, as he kissed Kari.

"Stiikkeey," the little girl echoed.

Tom nodded. "Chocolate is sticky." He pinched her cheek away from the chocolate stains.

"Don't I know it," Rona said. Her hand surreptitiously dropped to pat the front of Tom's slacks. "I am so going to miss you."

Stephen touched me and the baby in the same motion. He put one hand around me, and another on my tummy. Then he leaned in close to my ear. "I'll be back for both of you in a matter of weeks."

"Liar," I muttered. "By the day after tomorrow, it will feel like years."

He hugged me. "Love the outfit. Is it new?"

I bopped him on the forehead. "No! That's how important I am to you. You don't know one of my dresses from another."

“Since when do I pay attention to you in your clothes?” he replied. “Seems to me that I spend most of my time trying to take them off.”

I didn’t have an answer for that one, so, I kissed him. People were not staring. That is, they were turning their heads away intentionally or pointedly looking a different direction. I didn’t care. I’d miss the father of my baby something terrible.

Funny, passengers are asked to arrive early so that they’ll have plenty of time to clear security before boarding, but today’s events sped by at breakneck speed.

We hugged, we kissed, we said good-bye, and suddenly, they were gone.

Not long after they left, the sky clouded over in tumultuous waves of grays and blacks. The drive back toward Beech Haven and the university was awash with a downpour of dirty rain and slippery roads. It was so bad that I decided to forego the trip back out to the university and put them all up in Hurley House instead.

That night, both babies looked on confused, as their Mommy and “Aunty Lyss” took turns crying their eyes out.

* * * * *

Letter from Stephen:

September 28

Dear Lyssa and my little niblet,

We were apart less than 72 hours over 78 days. Now I stare out at the water and think to myself what a jerk I’ve been. I could be there watching you get bigger around the tummy instead of here watching the tides swell and ebb. I could feel the warmth of your body holding me lovingly deep inside instead of the scratchy salt spray and the burning sun here aboard the Telemachus.

I could also use that most personal of black pens [that’s pens with an “i”] to mark my viscous signature on my favorite white canvas. Instead, I’m using a black felt marker and masking tape to label diving equipment.

The routine has sunk in as far as the diving goes. First the Telemachus has to be tied down and anchored to the rock and coral far off-shore with makeshift lines tied to the watery equivalent of pitons or metal stakes. Each day, a dinghy carries four of the six of us divers a quarter of a mile or so over the undersea rocks to the mouth of the blue hole.

I’d like to say that we’re making noticeable progress, but that would be a lie. Down below are hundreds of bends and small caves that intersect with the blue hole and each of them has to be charted and mapped. So far we haven’t seen a sign of anything to lead us to

the conclusion that La Maria de Patache sank in these waters, except the endless expanse of coral growths, which may or may not be pointing clearly in the right direction.

So we go the only direction left open for us -- down.

Tom, four other divers, and I take turns diving three times each day to conserve our energy and balance our need for oxygen and nitrogen. We both are being very careful about the prospect of the bends and nitrogen narcosis; so basically, we've been exploring during the daylight hours and charting on paper or comparing notes at night.

We're using neoprene suits; so fresh water scrubbing and careful inspection of our equipment is vital. The thing is that there is an abundance of time at night; so Tom and I go over everything: wet suit, mask, regulator, fins, you name it. Are there any worn seams, do these valves work, is such-and-so damaged?

Of course, I use that time to think of you; so, in a way, it's all good time for me and hard time, as well.

I don't sleep well, as you can guess. I have a tiny bunk on board and, unfortunately, no bed partner worth thinking about. Of course, I have my memories of you. I'm sure Tom feels the same about Rona and his kids, but now that I've got two people waiting for me to come home, I realize how important my life has become. God, I want very, very much to come home and be with you and the baby.

So every morning we look forward to going back into the water. Back into the wetness, and naturally that brings my mind back to thoughts of my little mother waiting at home for me. So, at night, my hand gravitates to my midsection, and, as I think of you, part of me remembers those wonderful moments when I enjoyed the clasped mobility that only you could share with me. The little response I have after a few minutes of imagining that I shared your body is a sad echo of the ecstasy that I once knew with you.

My dearest, I love you and love our baby. I don't remember if I ever told you thanks for carrying my child. If I haven't, shame on me. Thank you very much!

*God, do I want you in bed! All my love,
Stephen*

* * * * *

Long weeks dragged by. Although, Stephen and Tom phoned us whenever they could, our conversations were never long enough. The DSL link aboard the *Telemachus* offered a daily short email, but computer time was at a premium aboard ship. Scientific or university consortium messages had first priority, and the crew had to schedule time to use the system when it was available. Snail mail was delivered three times a week with the supplies by a chartered yacht. If we wanted to say anything of any length, we had to do it in letters.

What the heck. I liked writing to him. I knew I could stimulate him by sending him some good old-fashioned original porn.

I shuffled back and forth between the city and the lakeshore where the university stood. I knew that Rona would put me up for as long as I needed to stay, so I'd move in for some extra long weekends and shared my thoughts with her.

But we had each other to talk about life.

Once Rona told me that she used to work part-time, sharing a cubicle at a local insurance company out of town, a bedroom community away from the college.

"One day I came into work, and the pictures I'd put up of my girls were turned face down," she said. "Naturally, I didn't think anything of it. After all, accidents happen. It could have been the cleaning crew for that matter."

Rona was preparing dinner for the girls, and I was making tea for both of us. I made it for me, because I knew that it would stay down, and I made it for Rona because it was a windy late September day off Lake Michigan, and there was a disturbing chill in the air.

"Well, damned if it didn't happen again the next day and the next. About two weeks of this went by, and then somebody threw a leaf over the wall of my cubicle."

"A leaf?"

"It took me a while to figure it out, too," she replied. "Leaf-eaters. Jungle bunnies -- subtle, huh?"

"What's that make a vegetarian?"

Rona smiled. "Anyway, I decided to complain to my supervisor."

"Did it help?"

"I learned a lot." She finished up with Randi and carried her over to her playpen. "Dave, my boss, took me into the conference room, and said that there wasn't anything he could do about people's attitudes in the office. He was caught in the middle. So I suggested that maybe we could talk to his boss. He smiled and said, 'Did you ever hear of the *Lakeman Courier* spelled with a K?'"

Rona paused. I shrugged, and shook my head.

"Me, neither," she went on. "But it turns out that Dave's boss, the section supervisor, was a recipient of Ku Klux Klan literature, like the *Lakeman Courier*. Thomas was livid. He was all ready to bring in everybody from the ACLU to the NAACP. But I quietly started looking for a new position immediately."

I let out a shrill whistle. "The wholesomeness of small-town America."

When she finished with Kari, I served Rona her tea. I'd put one too many spoonfuls of sugar in my own tea, and grimaced when I tasted it. I sighed.

"What is it?" Rona asked.

"I want to talk to Stephen's father about whatever is causing the bad blood between them," I told her.

"You're very brave," Rona said. "S.B. doesn't care much for me; so, you're definitely the wrong color for Stephen's baby's mother."

"I don't care, Rona, this is something I have to do." I paused. "For the baby's sake. What do you think we should do?"

"I think we should have some more water."

I looked askance at her. "I think there's more tea."

"You shouldn't have more than two cups of tea, Lyssa," Rona said. "Caffeine will dehydrate you. What your body needs is water -- plain and simple."

* * * * *

The Museum of Folklore and Folk History at Michigan Dunes University's director's secretary, Mrs. Rodriguez, was a Hispanic black woman in a tasteful beaded red pant suit. At first, I surmised that she didn't care much for me, although she was absolutely salacious about my comfort now that I looked three months pregnant. She did sigh and tell me that she'd wished I'd made an appointment.

That made her more human.

I showed every sign of having blown up even bigger than most normal women at my stage of pregnancy. Rona had chuckled, saying that it happened like that with Dryor babies.

My outfit was surprisingly more conservative than eighty percent of the women treading through the museum. Of course, I'd just purchased a brand new maternity outfit, and I was very careful to keep the length of my dress erring on the longer side. Plus, I'd picked up a matching duster to cover it. To top it off, it was two different shades of gray. Against all the other outfits in the building, I thought I looked rather drab -- sort of a roly-poly dust bunny. Not to mention that my blooming waistline made most of the women on staff look very svelte.

I waited at least thirty-five minutes. Dr. Dryor's students' needs came first, obviously. However, I didn't hear any voices in his office. His secretary kept a very professional face each time she'd buzz him. But as the afternoon wore on, she'd grimace each time he put me off.

Finally, Mrs. Rodriguez gave me the signal that I was step in and see Dr. Stephen Benjamin Dryor -- the elder. He grimaced when he saw me. He politely offered to shake hands, and then he indicated a chair close to his desk. "So what can I do for you, Miss Kincaid?"

"Dr. Dryor." I took a deep breath and then I blurted it all out at once. "I ... I don't want to seem forward, but what's wrong between Stephen and you? He keeps it locked up inside, like it's some sort of secret in a vault."

"Whatever is between my son and myself is a family matter, Miss Kincaid, and not for discussion with strangers."

My cheeks grew hot. "Dr. Dryor, please. I guess I should tell you, I'm carrying your grandchild."

"You?" He looked at me with astonishment. "You're the one?"

I nodded.

"My own son doesn't bother to tell me," he grumbled. "I had to hear this second-hand from my daughter calling from The Hague."

"I asked him to call you, but he refused."

S.B. Dryor stared at me silently for a full minute. "So you're the woman who should have known better."

"Excuse me?"

"How old are you, Miss Kincaid? Thirty-something?"

I nodded, my mouth dry. "Th-thirty-one."

"Were you ever married?"

"Yes."

"Divorced?"

"He left me," I replied. "And before you ask, we had no children of our own."

"How far along would you guess the baby is?"

"I know exactly how far I am," I answered. "Three months and one week."

"You certainly got big."

Now that hurt. I tried not to show it on my face, but I don't think I succeeded.

"Look, Miss Kincaid, Stephen's all impetuousness and hormones," Dr. Dryor said, shaking his head. "He's always been like that, but you're certainly old enough to know better."

"I-I --"

"About four or five years ago, Stephen thought he got one of the neighborhood girls pregnant. But she was young and inexperienced, just as Stephen was at the time. It was, as they say, 'a false alarm,' but Stephen's mother never forgave the girl. She refuses to this day to believe that he should have been more responsible." He sighed, and pushed his seat back from the desk. "What the hell is she going to think of a white woman who should know better?"

I trembled in my seat; any elation I had left in my expression drooped. This was far more overwhelming than I expected. I took a deep breath before I spoke.

"Dr. Dryor, I came here to see you, because Stephen refused to introduce me to you," I told the museum director. "He won't call you. He won't see you. And now he's gone on this diving expedition off the Yucatan peninsula -- against my wishes, if you want to know."

"Damn! Laban did that, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"He really believes that he's found either the *Nuestra de los Axarquia* or *La Maria de Patache* this time," Dr. S.B. Dryor said. "Of all the stupid, headstrong things Stephen could have done, this expedition comes in a close second to -- to getting you knocked up!"

"What?" I cried. "But Dr. Dryor, that's not fair."

"Life's not fair, Ms. Kincaid," S. B. Dryor replied. "So, tell me, what other good news did you bring me?"

"I-I came here especially to invite you to -- to our wedding."

"Wedding? Wedding! How in good conscience could I bless such a union?"

I let my head drop -- first Stephen leaves, and now I hear this from his father. "You mean, you won't --?" I paused. No matter how much I tried to fight them back, I couldn't control the tears any longer. "I-I'm very sorry you feel that way. I was hoping --"

Funny, I'd waited over a half-hour in a chair outside his office, and our conversation lasted for less than five. I stood up and grabbed my purse.

"Just a minute, young lady. Who said you could leave?"

"I'm not one of your students, Dr. Dryor. You can't ruin my grades, and you don't sign my paycheck, either," I said rather coldly. "So, I'm going to leave, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

"If that's how you feel," he said, slowly standing. "Wouldn't you like a tissue? You look a bit red-eyed."

I stopped at the office door. "What?"

"Come back, please," he said smiling. "Let's see what we can do about fixing your face." He handed me a skimpy tissue. "I wondered if you had the fire to match my son's temper."

"You mean this was some kind of test?"

"Actually, I'm the easy one. Wait 'til you meet my ex-wife, Stephen's mother. She'll be packing a prenuptial agreement in her briefcase and stand before you pen-in-hand."

I smiled weakly. "As long as she promises to take good care of the baby, it'll be okay."

He stood up and walked to the front side of his desk. "You know, I think you have all the makings of a real Dryor woman, and I'd love to show you around the offices, but we can't have my people meeting my future daughter-in-law when she doesn't look her best."

For a second I didn't quite know what to do, and then I rushed over and hugged him.

"Olivia," he called out the intercom. "Is there some place you can take Ms. Kincaid to freshen up a bit? I'm afraid I upset her somewhat."

"That's what you've always done best." Mrs. Rodriguez stepped through the office door in seconds. "Shame on you, Stephen! And here she is pregnant with your grandchild, as well."

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"We have our ways." She waved her finger in his face. Olivia rushed back to her own office to grab a dainty handkerchief. "C'mon, dear." She offered me her hand. "Sometimes men can be such beasts."

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. I met about a dozen people around the museum. A couple of them gave me odd looks, but nearly all of them became friendly and cordial once S.B. let it be known that he approved of me. He told me to go back to Rona's place, and we'd all go out to eat around six-thirty.

* * * * *

That evening we all sat together at a nice family restaurant. There were six of us, although the two smallest were precariously balanced in high chairs brought up next to the table. Rona and I dined with S.B. and his significant other, the aforementioned Mrs. Olivia Rodriguez.

Over dinner, once the gathering had been served wine, Dr. Dryor made a small toast. "You'll forgive a foolish old man for misplacing his priorities, Ulyssa, but -- to my grandchild!"

"Here, here," Rona added.

"Oh, my." I blushed as I raised my glass. I wanted to cry.

"You know," Olivia began later, while we dined. "Many people understand that Caribbean and South American Hispanics have black or Indian backgrounds. But these same people don't realize the extent of Moorish ancestry and influence interwoven into Spanish culture since the middle ages. So a number of white Hispanic families may find quite a surprise in their own background."

Politely, Rona asked, "Like what?"

"Traditionally, everybody from Spain likes to believe that they've got Castilian ancestry." A wry smile crossed Olivia's face. "However, people from the southern half of Spain, especially those from Andaluz, which is the Arabic name for that part of the world, may very well be descended from the Berbers and Moorish Arabs of Northern Africa. In fact, quite a few might be descended from African slaves brought up from the south."

Everybody laughed.

"That little fact is going to upset a lot of white Hispanics," S.B. added. He turned to Rona. "When Lorrie called me, she said that you and Tom sent her pictures of Stephen and Lyssa together." Then he turned toward me. "But you know, Lorrie told me that she'd never seen him look happier."

I blushed. “Really?”

“Lorrie’s always been very good to Tom and me,” Rona replied. “I thought I’d repay the favor. Of course, none of us had any idea that she’d receive photos of the happy couple one week, and then be told she was about to become an aunt the very next week.”

More laughter and then there was another lull in the conversation.

I decided to ask the one question that bothered me the most. “Dr. Dryor, what happened between you and Stephen?”

S.B. looked down at his plate and cleared his throat. “Ouch.”

“Lyssa,” Rona admonished. “Not now!”

“Can’t we discuss this some other time?” Olivia cautioned. Her face, too, had shifted to a concerned frown.

“Am I the only one being kept in the dark here?” I couldn’t control the frustration in my voice.

“No, no. I think it’s important that you know,” S.B. replied. “But let’s wait until after dinner, all right?”

There was a pause and then Rona took some French fries from Kari’s plate, and said, “You’ll forgive the table manners of these two. They’re still looking for the toy surprise.”

That broke the tension.

I apologized. “I should’ve realized that this was far more complicated than a quick explanation would merit.”

“I think it’s odd that Stephen wouldn’t tell the woman he loves anything about our troubles,” S.B. said.

“I think it has to do with his love for you,” Rona said calmly. “He’s not so quick to throw out those old accusations to Tom and me as the years go by. I don’t think he really believes them anymore.”

“Believes what?” I asked.

S.B. took a drink of wine. “That I abandoned my brother down inside a blue hole.”

“Stephen, don’t,” Olivia quietly told S.B. as she grabbed his hand.

“Stephen doesn’t mean it,” Rona added. “He’s just got that damned Dryor stubborn streak.”

Olivia smiled. “Some things never change.”

“What was it, fifteen, maybe sixteen years ago?” he began. “I’d finished my doctorate by then, and I was offered a position if I’d make the dive for Laban’s lost patache, which he was certain had been sunk in a blue hole well south of the Yucatan peninsula.”

“Was this the same blue hole that the guys are exploring now?”

S.B. shook his head. “No, not really. The *Telemachus* was a fairly new ship back then. It didn’t have the submersible nor the computer aided research equipment that it does now,

but Adam and I thought it was pretty state of the art. My brother loved underwater cinematography, and we had a damn good camera set-up.”

“I didn’t realize that his talents leaned that way,” Rona said.

“Adam was a remarkable filmmaker.” S.B. took another drink from his wine glass. “Well, anyway, I developed flu symptoms about fifteen days into the dive. We were about a day and a half off of Belize.” He paused as he swirled his brandy around in his glass. “So I suggested that we wait a day to explore one of the uncharted caves. Besides, there was a real blow -- a tropical squall headed our way in about five hours. I figured we’d batten down the hatches, so to speak, and wait the storm out.”

He stopped and took a long slug of brandy from the snifter sitting in front of him.

“But, we were on one of Laban’s deadlines, and my brother, Adam, insisted that he could handle the dive by himself,” S.B. continued. “He told me that he would descend to number nineteen cave, take a look at what there was to see, and then slowly ascend in less than three hours so that he wouldn’t get the bends. That way we’d still have at least two hours to get out of harm’s way.”

There was a long pause. Finally, I said, “And?”

“Surprisingly, Adam went way too deep. He developed nitrogen narcosis. Jacques Cousteau called it the ‘rapture of the deep.’ Now number nineteen only went down to two hundred and fifteen feet, so Adam figured that at those depths, he was immune to its effects. Trouble is, that’s not always true.”

Something inside my gut sank. Instinctively, I grabbed at my abdomen, cradling the tiny lump in my tummy. “Wh-what happened?”

“He told me later that he got disoriented and took off his mask to see better,” S.B. said.

“Oh, my God,” I said.

“Luckily some *thing* --” S.B. paused. “That is ... something made him put his mask back on.”

We all sat silent.

“As it was, Adam got the bends anyway,” S.B. continued. “He came up too fast and developed an arterial gas embolism. We quickly rendered medical treatment, but it was an old pressure unit, and we weren’t fast enough. There was some residual damage to his brain cells, and though it didn’t kill him, he was never quite the same.”

“He’s a fine and loving grandfather,” Rona said as she reached over and touched S.B.’s hand. “There wasn’t so much damage done.”

“Adam had the potential to be a brilliant oceanographic scientist and filmmaker,” S.B. said. “Now he’s a secondary ed biology teacher who’s deathly afraid of the sea.”

“Rightfully so!” Rona pointed out. “I wish my husband had enough sense to know what the ocean could do to him.”

“Still, I never should have let him dive that day. I can’t forgive myself, and, for some reason known only to himself, my son won’t forgive me, either.”

“Uncle Stephen, you didn’t know!” Rona replied. “If we have to hold a grudge against someone, it should be Dedrick Laban.”

“You two are not making me feel any better,” I muttered. I suspect my face reflected the discomfort I felt.

“Oh, honey.” Olivia patted my arm. “Calm down.”

“That wasn’t our intention,” S.B. replied. “I’ve never seen a more qualified or capable diver than Stephen. I thought I was one of the best, and he’s even better than me.”

“You said something made him put his mask back on. What was it?” I asked.

“Adam swam to the surface with a wild story about some tentacled creature of the deep that forced him put his mask back on and then pushed him back toward the surface. I told him to keep that part of the story to himself, and neither of us ever said another word about the hallucination.”

“So, for whatever reason, this wasn’t the blue hole that Professor Laban was after?” I asked. “It wasn’t the right blue hole.”

“No.” He took another sip of his brandy. “That’s what’s so frustrating. Sure, we mapped out the major caves in that one -- even made academic history, but it wasn’t the hole that Dedrick hoped it would be.”

“The lure of treasure is always stronger than the need for scientific knowledge,” Olivia added.

Chapter Fifteen

Letter from Stephen:

October 13

Dear Sweetheart and my little Sweet Potato ripening on the vine,

There's still no sign of La Maria de Patache. I don't know why that surprises me. But Professor Laban is positive that it's down there. We've sent down the Telegonis submersible to see if we can spot anything in some of the farther-out caves. You should see Tom handle the controls of the submersible. He's almost as good as the technician aboard ship. However, most of the deeper caves have been encrusted over with coral so you can't see shit.

The fact is that I was lying here feeling sorry for myself, because I wasn't where I wanted to be -- home with the two of you. I am looking forward to a real hot shower and then going to bed with someone special. I mean, we stay busy enough during diving, charting, and cleaning hours to push those thoughts of home and family away for most of the daytime and early evening, but then night comes and I can't help but feel lonely.

Of course, I realize that I have no right to feel sorry for myself. In a way I'm the luckiest man I've ever known. I'll never forget that day in the seminar lecture hall when I watched you for those five unforgettable hours. You'd worn that khaki skirt of yours that you said showed a little bit more leg than you intended, which was wrong, of course! It didn't show enough leg in my humble opinion. Then there was that purple print blouse, which couldn't begin to hide your expansive breasts. Blessed be the day when I saw your boobs in all their splendor!

Sorry, sweet-pants, but a lonely man's priorities get all tied up in his most vivid memories.

Funny, isn't it? From the moment I saw you, even though I knew that you were more mature than me, I wanted you more than anyone I'd ever wanted in my life. I kept thinking that if every instructor I'd ever had looked like you, I'd have never skipped a class. I'd even packed my copy of Behind the Lace Curtain in my book bag, in case I wanted to show it off, or maybe ask you to autograph it for me. Would you believe I was shy about approaching you? No, me, neither, but for some reason, I actually let the moment pass. By the way, if you feel like autographing your book now, please do.

I think I told you that I wrote to those two other ladies before I stumbled upon your personal ad? I remember their letters. They seemed to be nice ladies, but, since they weren't you, I knew I wouldn't pursue them. I remember how my heart leaped out of my chest the day I recognized your name on the envelope. I ripped it carefully open and your letter and your picture fell out. I still have that picture, you know? I brought it with me. I have some of your pictures packed in with my stuff, and a few of the ones that Rona took of us that first weekend are stuck inside of a small photo folder. Plus, I have a few that I took that are more intimate. The rest of the crew refers to you as "the chick with the big tits." Of course, they're just jealous.

Honey, I don't know how many guys repeat that crap about "anything more than a mouthful of breast is wasted." I'm here to tell you that I don't believe a word of it. I'll be the first one to give the small breast philosopher his due, and say that it's all in the way you look at it. But, for me, there's nothing quite like an exciting set of huge boobs, and I can say with total certainty that there's been no one in my life quite like you.

Sigh! I want to go home. Can I share my dream with you?

By this time next year, I suspect -- I pray -- that your tummy will be swelling with our second child. God, I hope so. I mean, you need to make up for lost time, young lady. I wish you could see me grin as I write this line, and I wish I could see you smile as you read it.

*I love you both,
Stephen*

* * * * *

Time went on. I got satellite telephone calls and frequent letters telling me of life on board the *Telemachus*. The routine had sunk in as far as the dive. For a while, even I'd gotten used to their routine.

And then it stopped. I waited three whole days, wondering why Stephen didn't call. He hadn't missed a day since he left my side, and I lay on my back on the bed, staring at the

ceiling. I wondered how he was doing all alone down off the coast of Mexico. Then I smiled. He'd better be all alone, I thought.

Who are you kidding? I pressed my hands against my belly. *You're not alone, either. He's left a part of himself behind with you.*

But, I had to admit I was rather concerned that he didn't call me on those three nights, five and a half weeks into the voyage.

I got worried as each new day went by, I'd take hourly walks into the nursery to look around. Was I expecting Stephen to somehow magically appear in the crib or a diaper pail?

Yes, I told myself, someday soon this room would be occupied. I pulled the plate from the nursery shelf and stared at the artist's rendition of our child painted on the surface of the plate. Meanwhile, I felt the squirming and soft kicks stirring within my belly. For some reason the baby's kicks reassured me.

I pulled a legal pad and a pen from my desk and set the painted plate carefully in front of me.

Dear Stephen,

Here's something I wrote for us and for the little one we both made. This is how I envision the future:

To My Dream Babe --

Oh, little one, as I look into my future, my heart is skipping. It's really you, my caramel-colored baby. Here you are, our sweet love child, and I can hardly believe you are real, let alone that you're mine.

Your soft, creamy-mocha skin is smooth and soft as I'd imagined. Is this all still a wondrous dream? The soft brown curls on your head remind me that you must be part of me, but look at those features! How could we ever imagine such a marvelous moment as your birth.

Oh, sweetheart, I've had you inside me for so long, and now you're here with me!

Oh, sweet baby, look at you! Your eyes are so different from mine. Mine are gray-blue and yours -- well, yours definitely reflect your father's heritage. You have deep, dark eyes -- mysterious eyes. What can you be thinking, little one?

Just look at that nose! I just want to tweak it, it's so tiny. Oh, yes, that's my nose mixed with your father's nose. A compromise nose, you've got, little one. Cute as a button, though. And those long little fingers want to go right into your mouth. What a marvelous creature you are.

You certainly have to be Stephen's child; yet, sometimes I think I hardly knew the real man. Then again, I must have known him in the Biblical sense or you wouldn't be here, would you?

I think I'll keep you around for a little bit.

Love, Mother.

"Oh, God!" I re-read my final words: *Love, Mother*. My eyes began to tear up. "I'm going to be a mother."

Still blubbing, I sealed the letter in an envelope and stared at it for at least a quarter of an hour. Then, as part of my daily exercise, I hand-carried it to the post box. The zip code on my letter would take it to the university in south Florida, and then it would be delivered to the *Telemachus* by the same boat that brought them their supplies three times a week.

* * * * *

Finally, after three and a half days, I got a call from an operator who told me to stand by for a ship-to-shore call routed through Central America. I was relieved. They'd probably had some sort of technical problem.

"Ulyssa, it was really there," Stephen shouted into the ship-to-shore phone line. "Just like you predicted."

"What was there? What are you talking about?"

"The old strong box you had in your dream! I'm almost sure that the wreck we've found in the blue hole is *La Maria de Patache*."

"Are you certain?" I shouted back into the phone.

"The old iron strongbox was entirely rusted away except where it had been preserved by calcified coral." This time his voice crackled and broke up with static. It was like he making a cellular phone call from the moon. "But inside were dozens of those coins just like your dream predicted. So even if we get nothing else from this voyage, at least we'll have a box full of ancient pre-Mayan coins to show for it."

"Oh, my God," I said. "Stephen, that's wonderful! Does that mean you're coming home soon?"

"Boy, I hope so!" he replied. By then the signal had weakened again. "Right now, there's nothing I want more than to come home to you -- to both of you."

"Both of us want you home, too, sweetheart," I shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Tom's got to call Rona with the news. I'll talk to you soon." There was a pause. "I love you, Lyssa."

I gushed. "I love you, too, Stephen."

I was ecstatic. The father of my baby was coming home to me. We'd be married soon, and, it wouldn't be too long after that, we'd be new parents.

* * * * *

Later that evening, the telephone rang once more. I'd been stuck in the bathroom, so I didn't get out in time to answer it. I heard the sound of a message blare down the hall from the telephone answering machine. The voice wasn't Stephen's, Momma's or even Rona's, and, since I couldn't leave the toilet, I didn't bother with it in time. In fact, I felt so grumpy, I totally ignored it.

I figured I'd check it later.

Rona and the kids stopped by about ten minutes later. I'd planned to take all three of them to dinner to celebrate our good news. Then we'd all spend an exciting evening together watching the latest Disney DVD.

"Hey." Rona pointed to the answering machine. "Looks like you might have a message."

"Huh," I responded. "Oh, yeah, I forgot all about it."

"*You have one message.*" The robotic voice announced.

There was a pause followed by Dedrick Laban's voice. "*Hola*, Miss Kincaid. Although this has been a fairly successful voyage, I'll still need Stephen's assistance to finish the exploration. By now, Marlene Moody must have awakened, and I need to give Marlene the following instructions. You are to place a call to the *Telemachus*, pretend to be Ulyssa Kincaid, and state that in no uncertain terms Stephen and Tom must stick to the job until we are absolutely certain that this is indeed *La Maria de Patache*. This is urgent and very important. Neither Marlene nor Miss Kincaid will remember any of my instructions. You will awaken as if from a sound sleep, feeling better than you've ever felt in your entire life. *Adios.*"

Rona looked at me. Her mouth had dropped open.

"So, would the three of you like pizza?" I asked.

"Do you know what just happened to you?" Rona stared at me as if I were some sort of alien from outer space.

I blinked twice. Then I shook my head. "What?"

"Just now, it was as if you became a totally different person. I could see the change happen in your eyes."

"I don't understand." I spoke the truth.

Rona sighed and her shoulders droop. "Neither do I, but I can't deny it. Lyssa, who is Marlene Moody?"

"Marlene?" I responded. "Wh-why do you ask?"

"Because all of a sudden, when Laban spoke to you, you became someone else." Rona said. "He asked for Marlene to come out."

He asked for Marlene to come out? "What do you mean? Laban asked for Marlene?"

"Lyssa, didn't you hear the message on the answering machine?"

"Well, yeah. I think so," I said hesitantly.

"What did it say exactly?"

"Something about a telephone survey, wasn't it?" I replied. "Yes, it has to do with calling a number to make an appointment for -- I don't know -- something or other."

"Lord, give me strength! I --" Rona paused. "I'm going to transcribe the message on your machine, okay? Then I want you to sight read it -- no reading out loud -- just sight read the message."

"All right, Rona, but your girls are the ones who are starving."

"This won't take long."

Luckily, Rona had good secretarial skills. She wrote down the gist of the message on the very first playback. When I heard the message voiced again, I remembered thinking that it had to do with calling some number to make a doctor's appointment. However, if what Rona said was correct, maybe I should make another psychiatric appointment with Dr. Christiana Yee.

Rona transcribed the message in shorthand and then wrote it out long hand. Seriously, way too seriously, she handed the paper to me. "I've left out the two words that I think may trigger your hypnotic response words. You should be able to read this safely enough without changing. Just don't read it out loud."

I stared at the words in the message, reading and re-reading them one at a time. "Oh, my God," I gasped. "Marlene may have been the leak all this time."

Rona looked at me puzzled. "Marlene?"

"Suffice it to say that she's been buried in my subconscious for years."

"And Marlene knew --" Rona whispered.

"Everything," I said. "We've got to call Stephen and Tom."

"But that's what he said he wanted you to do."

"I know. I'll make the call to fool Laban. After all he's expecting it; however, once we get them on the phone, we'll have to tell our guys the truth." I picked up the phone and began to dial the *Telemachus's* communication center.

After I put through the call, I handed the phone to Rona so that she could read back Laban's message to each man. Stephen and Tom were incredulous at Dedrick Laban's deceit. I could tell from Rona's face that both men were equally appalled at his blatant manipulation of me through Marlene's hypnotic suggestion.

“Listen to me,” Stephen said after Rona handed the phone back to me. “We’re going to finish out the week aboard the *Telemachus*, but if nothing turns up by the end of the week, I swear to you, we’re leaving.”

“Do you mean it?”

“With all my heart,” he said.

* * * * *

It was late morning, and I couldn’t sleep. Even though I was unbelievably sleepy, this pregnancy seemed to manifest itself with heartburn. Seems like all I wanted to do these days was nap. Maybe that’s because the baby wouldn’t let me. I had my choice between listening to music, watching television, cooking or proofing a manuscript. I decided to try to proof the manuscript, but all that did was make my eyelids heavier and heavier. Granted, I’d popped out of bed at 5:20 to pee for the third time that night, and instead of going back to sleep I made coffee. Decaffeinated. Coffee always smells a hell of a lot better than it tastes, but when I took my first sip, I realized that the acid content of my stomach was about to flare up something fierce.

Should have stuck with water, I thought. Good thing Rona wasn’t around or I’d get a real earful.

Anyway, early morning television merely would have upset my system even more. I didn’t feel much like calling Momma, and Rona was working, so I couldn’t even talk to her. That left me two options: music or proofing. Naturally, either choice led to a deep, deep desire to see the underside of my covers. I thought I could compromise by proofreading the manuscript in bed. Sounded like a good idea at first, but of course my conscious self refused to see the likely results of such nonsense.

Inevitably, I drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

From out of the mists surrounding my night-gowned body on the marble steps of the staircase, I saw two alien figures swimming in a green glow. Aliens? No, not alien -- these were men clad in scuba gear. My God! I smiled, recognizing one of the men. Stephen. And just behind him swam Tom. I watched them for a moment, as they descended into the water. And then, without thinking, I followed down the stairs.

Incredibly, like a dream within a dream, my downward journey paralleled the diver’s deep-water descent. I hit the base of the steps and continued forward, following the two men up the beach. Funny, it felt so real that I swore I could feel the cold wet sand squish between my toes.

Inevitably, I arrived at the wreckage of *La Maria de Patache* and the outer cavity to the lair where Dagon's Octangle stood. Drifting in front of me in my dream were both divers, slowly squirming through a tight hole in the coral to get into the interior cavity.

The breeze that blew in from the sea of the dream lands grew chilly -- no, more than that. It blew cold -- shivering, freezing cold! I was chilled to the bone. Even the baby, protected and warm inside of me, seemed to squirm uncomfortably as if affected by the sudden drop in temperature.

Both Stephen and Tom brushed and scraped the metallic surface of the Octangle. After a few moments Stephen took off his glove. As he carefully placed his bare hand against the curious metallic coating of the Octangle, I shuddered. His movements triggered a terrible series of visions.

As both men cautiously examined the ancient artifact, the eight triangles of Dagon's Octangle opened to Stephen's touch like metallic petals. Both divers backed off, but I could tell that Stephen felt drawn to enter the dark cavity behind the monstrous shield implanted in the cavern wall.

Stephen turned to Thomas and each man gestured for the other to proceed. With a nod, Stephen entered first. Thomas carefully followed. I don't know which man saw the movement, or if through some quirk of fate I was the one who saw it first. But there she was -- or rather something totally foreign that looked like her -- hovering before them.

She, too, appeared to be painfully pregnant -- possibly as far along as I was; yet, her eyes weren't those of the kindly creature that I'd seen at the head of the dream stairway. She wasn't just foreign or exotic; indeed, this time the guardian appeared threatening. Her eyes had changed to cold glowing objects that were frightfully yellow and demonic. Under her flowing tunic, buoyant in the waters, tentacles surged and swirled with a life of their own.

She grasped Stephen's arm, and he froze. Thomas sprang forward to intercede, but Stephen waved him back. Suddenly, I envisioned a heart wrenching glimpse of the immediate future. I saw a figure of someone who looked exactly like Professor Laban illuminated by a greenish glow in the back of the cavern. He turned his head toward us and revealed eyes which were deep black, wide, and cruel -- like a shark's eyes. The image of Dr. Dedrick Laban also turned toward Stephen and smiled. His open-mouthed smile displayed incredibly long, sharp teeth.

Tom seemed to be frozen, swimming in one place as the vision of the shark-like Laban turned toward the entrance and began to swim deliberately forward.

Although thoroughly repulsed, I wouldn't allow myself to turn away.

The metallic triangles of Dagon's Octangle began to fold back in, closing the entranceway. The shimmering light must have caught Stephen's eye, because he swam forward, grabbing a hold of Tom's arm and pulling him toward the exit. Then the dream guardian did a startling thing. Her tentacles, writhing and as thick as my thighs, flashed out

with unbelievable strength, pushing both men through the closing hatchway with an amazing force.

Quickly Stephen and Tom swam through, before the gripping triangular jaws of the Octangle trapped them within. Subconsciously, I'd held my breath through the entire underwater event. Although both men escaped, the sharp edges of the closing triangular wedges of Dagon's Octangle literally ripped through the strong neoprene of Tom's wet suit and, as he turned to make sure his cousin was okay, the razor-sharp metal caught and damaged one of Stephen's flippers.

As both men retreated, I expected my dream contact to break. Instead, I floated up, through the water, and further still, until I hovered a few yards above the sparkling waves. As I watched, Tom and Stephen returned to the surface and climbed into the rubber dinghy. They slowly rowed back to the *Telemachus*. Still lost in my dream, I followed the boat along, listening to them talk.

"What do you say we pack right after our report, and leave the *Telemachus* as soon as possible?" Stephen asked.

Tom didn't answer right away, so Stephen repeated his suggestion.

Finally, Tom shook his head. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I have to stay to finish the voyage."

"Don't you understand? This may be exactly the same thing that happened to your father fifteen years ago."

"Christ, Stevie, I know -- I mean, I understand, but I'm hesitant to leave the boat yet."

"What do you mean?"

"It-it's for my family's sake."

"You can't do anything for your family as a dead man."

"What if it wasn't real?" Tom replied, as he continued to paddle. "What if it was nitrogen narcosis?"

"The madness of the deep? Sure, except we both saw the exact same hallucination," Stephen growled. "Tom, staying out here is madness!"

"I know," Tom said. "Look, maybe we can still locate the artifact safely. Maybe we won't have to go down again."

"Are you kidding? So what if we don't go down again? Laban will just send somebody else to his death."

"Look, we can determine the exact location of Dagon's Octangle by using the undersea robot camera to reconnoiter. Then he'll have his artifact and the world will have a video record of its existence."

Stephen cocked his head, and I could literally see his mind working. “Do you think he’ll buy it?”

“He’ll have to,” Tom replied. “Besides, both of us are going to warn the other divers.”

“Except for one small detail. Do you think they’ll believe a wild story like that?”

Tom remained silent. Then he shrugged. “Would you?”

I continued following them, floating higher as they neared the ship and were taken on board.

The professor waited on the deck. As the two men approached, he barked one word. “Well?”

“It’s down there,” Tom told.

“Hidden behind some encrusted coral probably hundreds of years old,” Stephen added. “Down in number seventy-eight.”

“By *it*, do you mean Dagon’s Octangle?” Dr. Laban asked.

Stephen and Tom nodded slowly. The rest of the crew quickly assembled at the diver’s staging area as the word spread across the boat that they’d located the artifact.

One of the other divers began to suit up.

“Wait!” Tom said. “I think it might be wise if we used the *Telegonis* submersible to ferry the robot video camera down to sector seventy-eight first.”

Several protesting voices chimed in at the same time.

Stephen spoke up immediately. “We can computer-enhance the video with the equipment we have on board to a certain extent, even more once we get back to the university. Let’s get a record of this before we try to bring it up.”

All eyes turned to Dedrick Laban. He looked suspicious, but he nodded. “All right, let’s see it first -- for the record.”

Once the men had managed to get Dr. Laban’s permission to use the underwater camera, the transmitter was affixed to the *Telegonis*, a robotic “mini-submersible.” They could direct the vehicle downward and see immediate results as a video signal was transmitted to the recording devices aboard the *Telemachus*.

Stephen and Tom directed the submersible’s operator through the coral maze, and the robot vehicle’s nearly vertical dive down through the blue hole was surprisingly smooth and uneventful. I watched the whole thing from above, completely engrossed by the drama unfolding below.

When the camera reached the portal of the cavity where Dagon’s Octangle was interred, the picture quality grew dim. I could barely make out the details, except for the areas lit directly by the spotlight mounted on top of the submersible.

“Is that it?” Laban asked. “It’s hard to tell from this picture.”

"We'll have to enhance this video," Stephen told him. "But I believe that object is Dagon's Octangle."

"This is absurd," Dedrick Laban said. "Without computer enhancement, there isn't a shred of proof here. One of you divers is going to have to go down there with a handheld camera."

"Please, Professor!" Tom pleaded. "Don't do it. D-don't send anyone, yet."

"What's going on?" the professor demanded. "You two have been like a couple of whimpering puppies ever since you came back from your dive."

"I think the artifact might've caused us to hallucinate," Tom muttered. "We saw ... things -- terrible things."

"Things?" Professor Laban bellowed. "What sort of things?"

"The Octangle opened up to allow us inside," Stephen added reticently.

Tom stepped very closely to the older man. "We saw something that looked like -- well, it looked like you."

"Only it couldn't have been, you were up here," Stephen interjected. "This thing had a bluish tinge to its complexion and --"

"And?"

"Very sharp pointed teeth like some sort of shark," Stephen mumbled.

Tom took a deep breath and continued. "Its eyes were black and cold, as well, just like a shark's."

Dr. Laban began to laugh. "Wonderful," he said mirthlessly. "So there's a demonic version of me down below, eh?"

"We shouldn't have said anything," Tom answered. "It sounds pretty silly up here in the daylight."

"Yes," Dr. Laban replied, looking from Tom to me. "So it does."

"Please," Tom said. "Give the submersible camera some more time."

The *Telegonis*, mounted with the high density video camera, crept forward to explore the inside the cavity. Suddenly, something pushed it aside. Something with sharp teeth ... and long, slim tentacles. The creature's wide mouth opened and, with a single bite on the cord, incapacitated the video camera. The screen went to snow, and then the picture went black.

"We lost the signal!" Laban screamed. "The artifact is down is there! I'm sure of it. I'm going down myself!"

He took off below decks. But instead of going to the diving gear storage room, he rushed into his own cabin.

"No, wait, Professor!" Stephen followed him below, and I followed Stephen. "Professor, you don't want to see what's down there. It's something I think even you're not prepared to face."

"Not prepared to face the demonic version of me?" Laban laughed, and then with a sneer, he completed his thought. "You fool, Dryor! Do you have any idea how long I've been searching for my doppelganger? I've known of his existence for decades."

"You knew?"

He'd taken off his shirt and stripped down to his trunks. He began to strap on his diving belt and air tanks. "I've studied the Aseneth drawings for ages. Why do you think I've wanted Dagon's Octangle so badly?"

After he secured his gear, he dropped the volume of his voice. "I always knew that my doppelganger was lurking down there, guarding the Octangle. Waiting -- for me!"

"Waiting for you," Stephen repeated in a daze. "Waiting for you?"

Suddenly, Laban picked up both his flippers and bolted for the stairs. "Now that I've found my doppelganger spirit, nothing can stop us!" At the top of the staircase, he stopped and shouted back over his shoulder. "Do you hear me, Dryor? Absolutely nothing!"

The professor rushed back up the steps to the main deck. Stephen followed him, but Laban moved with a speed I never thought possible from a man of his age. He darted past one of the crew members, and then looked up. He whipped off his wraparound sunglasses and met my gaze.

Dr. Dedrick Laban had the same deep, wide, cruel black eyes as the creature waiting for him below.

Startled, I blinked rapidly. Could he see me? I'd felt certain the others had not known I was here. But Laban stared directly at me! Then Dedrick Laban laughed and dropped his sunglasses to the deck.

Without a word to anyone else, he dove into the water and disappeared.

With a gasp and a muffled shout, I woke myself up. I blinked rapidly in the dreary afternoon light as it drifted greyly toward a sunless sunset -- like a fog that wasn't fog -- like the "myst" in mystery.

"Oh, God," I muttered, shivering from the intensity of the experience. "Please tell me that wasn't real."

Chapter Sixteen

The news reached CNN that evening.

I sat in Stephen's dimly lit condo with my eyes riveted to the television screen. The newscaster, an attractive Hispanic woman, restated the news I'd witnessed firsthand, albeit in my dreams:

"An internationally renowned academic scholar heading an expeditionary voyage disappeared yesterday off the coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Dr. Dedrick Laban is lost and presumed drowned in the depths of a geographic anomaly known as a blue hole ..."

She went on to say that within half an hour of his disappearance at sea, an international rescue effort had been initiated by both the United States and Mexico. Indeed, for the next three days there was an intense search by air and sea rescue units from both the Mexican Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard. By a mutual search and rescue treaty, their search areas overlapped and each team carefully re-checked the other's rescue efforts.

The search was thorough and coordinated, with each party doing everything in its power to find the missing doctor. A team of rescue divers was dispatched down into the depths of the blue hole. But there appeared to be no sign of Dr. Laban.

Although there were some conflicting reports, Tom and Stephen Dryor volunteered very little information about their own dive to sector number seventy-eight, other than the fact that Dedrick Laban was intent on seeing that sector for himself.

The members of the *Telemachus* crew assisted the search effort by suiting up and diving along with the international rescue party. Stephen and Tom had originally pleaded diving fatigue for that first day, but they realized that they needed to retrieve the submersible and the robot camera to help with the search.

Reluctantly, both men went back into the blue hole and began the descent toward section seventy-eight. The *Telegonis* submersible had been jammed tightly into a coral

wedge made up of a calcium carbonate outcrop and nearby branch coral formations. The underwater submersible was damaged and several of its camera cords were shredded as if they'd been bitten and chewed. Slowly, carefully both men began to chip away at the coral formations in order to free it.

Once they were able to get the submersible back to the surface and onto the ship, it took a full day of repairs just to get it into a semblance of working order. It was necessary to replace the camera unit with a back up camera lens and several old cables. Then the submersible operator started to do his initial test run in close vicinity to the ship.

Since Tom was the second most experienced submersible operator, he agreed to assist the ship's operator by taking shifts putting the robot camera through its paces by running a search grid pattern for the professor's body. By the second day of the search, the two of them had put in close to eighteen hours of arduous searching. Finally, the battery power for the *Telegonis* had dwindled so low that they had to spend a good part of the next night recharging the six batteries.

Over the next few days, dozens of undersea caves were searched with each search party checking and rechecking each other's work. Dozens of other caves had been cursorily examined, as well, but to no avail.

Then, on the third day of searching, a rescue diver discovered Professor Laban's abandoned scuba gear -- tanks, fins, mask, and re-breather -- all strewn like so much litter along the sea floor outside the coral barrier surrounding the blue hole.

Normally, the members of the crew told investigators, a diver would take the jetty over the shallow coral embankments to reach the entrance to the blue hole and then begin explorations from there. Such procedures were used to save oxygen in the tanks, as well as the diver's energy. This time the professor dove straight into the water off the deck of the *Telemachus*. His actions had taken everyone by surprise.

Curiously, other than to testify that everything seemed normal up until the professor's frantic descent into the water, none of the rest of crew mentioned the anomalies rumored to exist down in section seventy-eight. Although the Coast Guard temporarily seized all the video taped records from the expedition's files, there was one tape that had been removed from the ship's archives and hidden from the authorities.

As for the body of Professor Dedrick Laban, Ph.D., it was never found.

* * * * *

Rona and I stood anxiously at the gate at the Gerald R. Ford International Airport waiting for the men's flight. Rona had wisely left the two children in the care of their grandmother so she could enjoy the first night with her husband alone.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs often supersedes what the intellect believes it most desires.

There was no subtlety about our methods anymore. Both Rona and I knew that our psyches and our bodies were competing with each other to determine which one was hornier. We also sensed that our guys were more than ready to reciprocate. So we'd planned on sharing the night inside the privacy of Stephen's Hurley House Condominium, since it was the closest suitable location.

"So what does our resident writer have to say about this occasion?" Rona asked.

"I wrote a little note to myself this morning." I murmured softly.

"What did it say?"

"It is imperative that I introduce a large vigorous masculine erection into my sensitive, intimate tissues."

Rona looked askance at me. "That's what you wrote?"

I nodded.

She shook her head. "You get paid by the word, don't you?"

At first, our "best laid plans of horny women" had seemed like a great idea, but I have to admit that I'd begun to get all fidgety and slightly dyspeptic waiting for their plane to land. Even Rona noticed my discomfort.

She looked at me. "You look pale. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm nervous as hell."

"What for? Your man is coming home." She smiled. "Both our men are coming home."

"I wasn't this heavy in the hips or distended in my belly when he left," I whined, trying to keep my voice low. "What if he thinks I'm fat? What if he doesn't love me anymore?"

Rona laughed out loud. "You should know better than that!" She grabbed hold of my arm. "He's a Dryor. Those men go bonkers over pregnant women."

"My stomach's upset," I muttered, lightly rubbing my belly.

"Come on, looks like we still have time to get some bottled water."

Rona didn't automatically reach for a pill when she was upset. She told me that the glass of water used to take the pill probably did more good than the pill did.

Through the experience of her own two pregnancies, she'd taught me that one of the reasons I'd been so sick was because both the baby and I had become dehydrated. So Rona made sure I drank half my weight in corresponding ounces of pure water.

"Eight eight-ounce glasses of water a day is terrific, as long as you weigh a hundred and twenty-eight pounds or less," she told me. "But for someone who's pregnant and, well, a little heavier than that, you need to drink more water."

Rona also advised me to drink a glass of pure water one half-hour before eating, and then drink another glass a couple of hours later.

“Alcohol and caffeine are both dehydrants,” Rona had told me. “That’s the real reason an expectant mother shouldn’t drink stuff that has caffeine. In reality, that old bugaboo about fetal alcohol syndrome is statistically rare. But Christ, why should you allow yourself to feel miserable just because you’re pregnant.”

“Except I have to pee all the time,” I complained.

“Of course you do, Lyssa,” Rona answered. “You’re pregnant. It’s a given. Wait until the little bugger decides to nestle on top of your bladder.”

I had to admit, I did feel better. I’d been less sick, and I learned that water is the best diuretic you can take. Two things were tight for me now: my budget and most of my clothing. I knew that Stephen had a bit of money available to him, but I wanted to take care of myself while I still could. I guess I still felt as if I were taking advantage of his generosity while he was away.

As we approached the waiting lounge, I noticed that a News 8 cameraman and reporter were setting up close to the arrival gate. They represented the NBC affiliate in the area.

“Looks like something’s up,” Rona noted.

I glanced up to see the Channel 13 people arrive.

“That’s ABC,” I remarked.

They were soon followed by the local Fox news team and then CBS based out of Kalamazoo.

“Would you ladies mind moving to one side?” one of the videographers said. “Thanks, we appreciate it.”

“Somebody newsworthy must be coming in on the same flight,” I said.

“You know the news people have been calling me about Thomas since they found out that he was aboard the *Telemachus*,” Rona said. “You don’t think --?”

My pulse quickened as the jet touched down on the runway, and the loudspeaker announced the flight’s arrival. We hurried forward, both of us pressing our faces against the Plexiglas windows. As the jet’s engines spun into reverse, their roar rumbled the glass. The little entity lurking behind my belly button squirmed. I patted my tummy. “You hear that sound, baby? That means your father’s home.”

We waited to meet them in the airport reception area. One look at me, and thankfully Stephen’s face literally lit up with a huge smile. I was worried that since I’d grown so large so quickly in the eight weeks he’d been gone, he might reject me. Stephen’s smile was very reassuring.

“Mr. Dryor!” One of the reporters cried out. Both Stephen and Thomas looked up.

“Mr. Dryor, a word with you!” a different reporter called out. Channel 13 had the sense to send out an attractive woman. Naturally she got the boys’ attention immediately. “Is there any word on Dr. Laban’s whereabouts?”

"Not at this time," Stephen answered.

"Thomas Dryor," another reporter stuck a microphone in Tom's face. "Have they found the Professor's body yet?"

"Not to my knowledge," Tom replied.

"Do you know if they've called off the search?"

"I honestly don't know," Tom said.

"Will they continue the search?" a new voice chimed in. But, before he could answer another microphone got shoved into Stephen's face.

"Do you believe that Dedrick Laban's dead?"

"No." He turned into yet another camera and another microphone. "I mean I just don't know."

"Then you think he's alive out there after three days in the water?"

"We can only hope he's still alive," Thomas announced.

I stepped forward, but a beefy cameraman swaggered in front of me, cutting me off. "Lady, do you mind? We're working here."

"Hey!" Stephen pushed his hand into the cameraman's lens, shoving the eyepiece into the man's eye. "Back off from my fiancée! Can't you see she's pregnant?"

Suddenly all eyes were on me. The terminal got very quiet. Stephen stepped through the mob of reporters and took my arm. He placed his hand on my back to guide me away from the bevy of onlookers.

A voice behind me muttered, "Sorry, lady."

"Christ, what a madhouse!" He began to lead me away from the small crowd leaving Thomas to face the throng of news people. "Let me look at you," Stephen said admiringly while we walked. "You look beautiful."

"More like bountiful," I replied. We crossed through the security gate and then I stepped into his arms. "Wait a second. Kiss me first."

Grand Rapids is a pretty uptight city. So after all that uproar, we got quite a few glares in the airport terminal, but, strangely enough, neither of us cared. Once Thomas broke free from his hangers on, he and Rona were all over each other, as well.

"Whoa, snow! It was over sixty degrees when we left Miami," Thomas shouted, as the two of them approached. "And me without a coat."

"Don't worry," Rona said. We brought jackets along for both of you. Did you eat?"

Thomas shrugged. "Airplane food. A mystery protein substance and paper maché paste with canned gravy, I believe."

"Can you stand to eat some real food with a couple of hungry ladies?" Rona asked.

"Sounds okay to me," Stephen replied. "As long as it's only the four of us -- but, we have to wait for our bags."

"Then you can wait here with your bags," I said grinning.

"Are you kidding? You two gals are the proverbial sight for sore eyes." Stephen stepped in back of me and wrapped his long arms around me from behind so that he could feel my belly. "I should have said you three. Have you been eating for two?"

"Didn't I tell you, Rona? He thinks I'm fat."

"Men!" she said, throwing her arms around Stephen's neck. "I don't know how anybody with such a large shoe size can fit his foot into his mouth so easily."

Stephen grimaced and groaned, while Thomas chuckled. "Stevie, marriage is a long slow lesson on when not to speak."

"You know what they say," Stephen retorted. "In school, you learn the lesson and then take the test. In life, you take the test first, and then learn the lesson."

I took Rona's cue and reached up to give Tom a hug, as well. "Well, I see that the sun didn't bleach your skin while you were down there."

"Oh, a comedienne," Tom said. "Funny lady."

Several cameras caught our various embraces while we scooped up the bags. *Apparently, everybody gets their fifteen minutes*, I thought.

The strip of malls and restaurants in metro-Grand Rapids is on 28th Street just a few miles west of the airport. We decided to dine there rather than drive farther into the city and eat downtown. I was glad, as I was famished. It's funny, I'd felt constantly hungry, since I'd become pregnant, yet I could only eat a little bit at a time.

"Did they ever find Laban's body?" I asked in the quiet interim after we'd ordered. I noted that both Rona and I had ordered water with lemon, while the guys indulged themselves with drinks.

Tom looked at Stephen and then at Rona. He shook his head. "No. No, they haven't found him, to my knowledge."

"I don't think they will," Stephen added. "Not if he doesn't want to be found."

His words sent a shiver through my system. "What about your research assistantship?" I asked Tom.

"Dr. Laban's promise to me was entirely verbal," he answered. "I doubt that anyone else knew. I doubt that anyone else even cares."

"You're wrong there," Rona said. "The entire world read about the discovery of *La Maria de Patache* and the treasure trove of coins. I don't suppose you slipped a couple of those into your luggage?"

Tom snorted a short response. He started to reply, but then the waitress brought all of our drinks to the table.

"You know, I haven't had a decent brandy in ages," Stephen announced, running his finger around the brandy snifter and making it vibrate. "All they had aboard ship was American beer, Mexican cerveza Tecate, which is sort of a sweet lager, or the sailor's old standby -- cheap rum."

Tom watched the waitress until she walked off, and then he lowered his voice.

"They went through our baggage with a fine-tooth comb to make sure that nothing of that sort happened," he replied. "Luckily, no one thought to check the DVD copy of *Richard Pryor Live! In Concert* we brought home with us."

"What do you mean?" I asked, dabbing my mouth with a napkin.

"It's got an extra DVD stowed away in the box," Stephen said quietly. "We made a DVD dub of the last tape shot by the robotic camera. Our copy may or may not have the quality of the original video, depending on whether or not we can get our hands on a sophisticated editing system."

"Where's the original video tape?" I asked.

"We left it aboard the *Telemachus*," Stephen replied.

"Hidden in the engine room," Thomas added. "Where it'll stay, with any luck."

"We should have destroyed it," Stephen said. He took a big swig of his brandy. "There are just some things that should be left alone."

"I don't understand," Rona said. She reached over and touched her husband's arm.

"Stephen didn't want to dub the copy," Tom muttered. "But, I think that history deserves this video record."

"Do you really think that thing is going to make your fortune?"

Everybody turned toward Stephen.

"It might," Tom replied. "It just might at that." He glanced up toward the bar where the five-thirty news was doing a live remote from the Gerald R. Ford International Airport. Suddenly, the station went to the videotaped interview of Thomas and Stephen's arrival.

"Oh, Christ," Stephen said. "Look at that."

A couple of patrons between the dining room and the bar stared at us and then gestured toward the television, as if to say *That's them*.

"That's what I've been dying to tell you, honey," Rona interrupted. "The news people have been seeking out the two of you non-stop since they found out that you were both part of the *Telemachus* expedition. Your fifteen minutes of fame has arrived!"

"Do me a favor, Tom," Stephen said. "Take my fifteen minutes, as well. That should give you close to a half-hour, eh?"

Since we'd taken Rona's sedan to the airport, and since neither of the guys were in any shape to drive, Rona chauffeured us back to Hurley House.

"Are you going to show us the DVD tonight?" I asked as we entered Stephen's condo.

"Absolutely not," Stephen and Tom answered in unison.

Tom gave a shaky laugh. "No. Please, not tonight. Not just yet."

I shrugged, while Rona just nodded. "You know what, sweetheart?" Rona took Tom's arm and led him into the guest bedroom. "Come with me. I want to show you my sleepwear for tonight."

"Oh, did you buy a new lingerie set?" Tom asked.

"Not exactly," she answered as she steered him down the hall.

"Did she purchase a special outfit?" Stephen asked me.

I smiled. "She knows that anything she would have purchased would be ripped off within seconds -- so let's say we both brought along a couple of skintight sleep outfits."

"I see," he said. "So do you expect to sleep tonight?"

"Not a wink," I replied, as I moved in to kiss him again. After a moment, I pulled back. "Stephen, I was there. I saw what happened."

"I know."

"You know? How --?"

"Easy, Lyss. We're connected," he said, taking my hand and placing my palm against his chest, directly over his rapidly beating heart. "Here."

I smiled. One day, we would discuss what had happened there, so far beneath the sea, so deep in my dreams. But not now. Now, I wanted to make love to my baby's father. I took his hand. "Come with me, lover. Let's go to bed."

* * * * *

"You are an amazing woman," Stephen said, as he slowly placed his hands on my swollen abdomen. "I can feel this firm, yet soft and tactile lump of flesh that is both of part of you and part of me."

Lying back on the bed, I grinned. "Ain't nature grand?"

"However, for the moment, you're all mine." He kneeled on the edge of the bed,

I smiled and looked up into his dark eyes. "We're both all yours."

"Just relax, sweetheart," Stephen murmured, crawling up between my open thighs. "Let me do all the work."

He leaned down and put his hands on either side of my hips. "Lift with me a little bit, Lyssa."

Bracing the bottoms of my feet against the bed, I rose when he lifted my hips and buttocks up into the air. Stephen shimmied in even closer between my spread thighs and prodded at my labia with the tip of his erection. He nudged again, this time a little harder.

"Ooh!" I gasped, as he pressed against me. "Oh, I've missed you!"

"I know, sweetheart." He looked past my swollen abdomen to focus on my gray-blue eyes. "I've missed you, too."

Carefully, he pressed the tip and then beyond the tip of his cock into my open pussy. He pushed once, then twice, then again and again. Each time he pressed forward, his dick sank a little deeper.

I moaned and felt my legs start to give way. He gripped me tightly so that his penis wouldn't slip from my intimate clasp. He literally pulled my body onto his erect cock until he bottomed out at the end of my vagina.

"Stay with me now, Lyss."

"Oohh!" I moaned, both of my legs trembling with the exertion of holding myself up.

Stephen took more of my weight into his hands, and he drove his cock in deep and then let it slip back a little bit. The effect of his presence on my body and my psyche was phenomenal.

I caught his dark eyes with my own. I think he could tell I was enjoying every second of our fucking, and I didn't have to tell him that I needed to keep him in the moment, keep us physically attached to each other for my sense of well-being.

Suddenly, I closed my eyes and threw my head to the side. "Oh, God! Oh, Stephen," I whispered, tossing my head from side to side. "Th-thank you for teaching me how to-to love again."

Stephen's gaze focused on the round bulging belly newly ripe with the burgeoning fruit melded from both of us, and he quaked with excitement. "Oh, Ulyssa!" He grunted as he pulled me onto his cock again and again. "Thank you for being here for me."

"Stephen," I murmured. "I'm so very glad you came back to me."

"Me, too, sweetheart."

I shuddered through a climax that shook my whole body gasping like a runner who'd just done a dozen laps at top speed. But I did my best to continue to grip his dick like a rubber glove in warm dishwater, until my own orgasm ignited my partner's passion.

Suddenly, Stephen's pulsing penis hardened even more and straightened and lengthened in an attempt to fulfill itself by filling me. He began to grunt and groan with a shuddering climax. He sweated and trembled over me and the next thing I knew, he went wet and warm and flowing inside of me.

We'd conceived our child already, but he needed to remind me that I also had his love in the most urgent and primordial form that he could give it.

As we rested, the moans from the other room echoed down the hallway.

"She must have decided to wear the same outfit that you did," Stephen whispered.

* * * * *

During the week prior to Thanksgiving, our wedding plans became a veritable whirlwind. That being said, I suppose it was pretty much like anybody else's wedding day: wild, crazy, and unpredictable. Yet completely, utterly unique.

First there were going to be feature reporters at my wedding! Who would have believed it?

It seemed that the television shots of Stephen and his pregnant bride became a sort of *cause celebre* for diversity in the Western Michigan area. Newspaper and magazine photographers lined up to take pictures of the two of us, and, even more exciting, the media had fallen in love with Kari and Randi Dryor. For a short time, those two pixies were well-covered by the local print and broadcast media.

The girls were even offered advertising modeling jobs; so when it was leaked that both of them would act as "unofficial" flower girls for the wedding party -- well, a media circus ensued.

Stephen's mother, Rosalyn; his brother, Franklin; and sister, Lorraine, all flew back into the city for the week of the wedding. As a group, they were courteous and gracious, and if any one of them were even slightly resentful of my race, they managed to hide it well.

My mother-in-law-to-be seemed to have all the makings of a real stuffed shirt, when I first met her. "So," Rosalyn Dryor said when we first met. "You're the woman who's old enough to know better."

My spirits and my shoulders slumped at those words. I was too stunned to let my eyes tear up, but my heart parked itself in the esophagus -- just south of my tonsils.

Stephen's mother broke out laughing. "I'm so sorry, Ulyssa. Lorrie told me that those had been the first words out of her father's mouth." She looked carefully at me, and then she held out her arms. "Oh, come here, honey. It was just a joke -- a very bad joke."

I hugged her back. As the tears began to seep out; I felt a real sense of relief.

"So tell me all about yourself."

Needless to say that took a little while and quite a few tissues.

"Well, one thing's for sure," she said as I finished. "My son is crazy about you. So is S.B., and that old fuddy-duddy doesn't care for too many people. There's only one thing. You shouldn't stay here with Stephen before the wedding."

I took Stephen's mother's advice to heart. Since I'd already forfeited the lease on my apartment, I decided to move back home with Momma and Daddy for the last few days.

Since the third bedroom was filled with nursery items, Franklin bunked with his older brother, while Lorraine shared the guest bedroom with her mother for those last few days.

Franklin, being all of fourteen or fifteen, managed to say four or maybe even five words in the three days before our marriage.

But, Stephen's older sister, Lorraine, more than made up for any lack of loquaciousness on her little brother's part. She was the only other person of color I'd ever met besides

Stephen who could easily slip from inner city street jargon to Wall Street yuppie pretension to a dozen European accents in a matter of moments. Like her brother, when she was on the phone, she could easily make you guess wrong and figure that you were talking to some German fraulein.

Plus, since she was a regular on cable television's *Antique Sideshow*, Lorraine Dryor was yet another reason for the various feature reporters to cover our wedding.

* * * * *

Rona and Lorraine got together and threw me a wedding shower. Mostly it was an excuse for all the girls to get together and get stinking drunk. I had bottled water. Later, as the evening and the ladies mellowed, they all began to give me motherly advice. Like grandmothers-to-be everywhere, both the bride's mother and the groom's mother were eager to tell me everything I needed to know about raising babies.

"I'm dying to find out what that little fellow looks like," Momma announced at one point, breaking a comfortably mellow silence.

I think my mouth fell open in surprise. *Who said that?*

"Me, too," Rosalyn added. "This will be my first grandchild."

I listened for an hour to a number of tipsy ladies telling me all about shaping up after birth and which type of baby powder is best. They asked me what I wanted the most out of my life.

Basically, I told them both that a happy marriage and healthy baby were my top priorities -- to which Rona added: "And good sex."

Mostly I wished I could get high on bottled water. But for the time being, I'd have to stay high on life.

* * * * *

On my wedding day, I glanced at myself in the reflective surface of some mirrored tiles on one chapel wall, and I saw that even wrapped in a beautiful beige and gold strapless lace gown, my belly stuck out a good five-and-a-half-months' worth. Once, as I caught my reflection in the mirrored tiles, Marlene flashed in for a few seconds, smiled and gave me the high sign.

"You all right?" Momma asked. She'd been hovering over me all morning, giving my gown a thorough once over -- for the fifteenth time. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I smiled. "Just nerves."

"Whatever have you got nerves for -- it's not like your honeymoon tonight is going to be a new experience."

“Momma!” I wailed indignantly, while hugging her close. I stayed quiet for a few moments. “Momma, are you going to be okay with this?”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied. “I have to make certain my grandson’s mommy gets married to his daddy, don’t I?”

I broke into uncontrollable giggles.

The groom, too, had gotten surprisingly nervous, as the day went by.

Obviously, Stephen missed life aboard the *Telemachus*, because he treated his tuxedo like a wetsuit by spilling *God-knows-what* all over the front of his jacket before the wedding. Happily, the stream of guests, mostly family with a few friends mixed in, seemed to be on their best behavior: S.B. and Olivia; Momma and, in spite of all of his initial grouching, Daddy; Franklin, acting as his older brother’s best man; his proud mother, Rosalyn, and his sister, Lorraine. I even had a chance to meet Thomas’s parents, Adam and Gina Dryor, as well as the Uebelhors, Rona’s parents. And last but certainly not least, Tom and Rona escorted their darling little girls -- the local media’s darlings for the moment.

Let’s face it. In spite of what might have been implied, the feature reporters weren’t really there to see me. You should have seen the flashbulbs go off when the girls tossed flower petals down the aisle from a basket held between Rona, who carried Randi in her arms, and Tom, who held onto Kari. I noted the impish grins on the girls’ faces. Not only did the grown-ups not punish them for making a mess in church, they were applauded for it.

The rest of the ceremony seemed to be a blur. Except for the part when Daddy escorted me down the aisle. He smiled at me when he announced, “Her mother and I give this woman to be wed to this man.”

Then he leaned in close and whispered. “No matter what she’s told you, we both still love you very much and want what’s best for you.”

I teared up immediately. But brides have every right to cry on their wedding day.

Finally, I heard the priest announce, “What God has joined together let no man rip asunder. You may kiss the bride.”

There’s nothing like a handsome, young, black man kissing a pregnant white bride to set a chapel full of flashbulbs off again.

Like I said, my wedding was one wild and crazy affair -- pretty much like anybody else’s, only different.

Epilogue

On a Tuesday night, about four months later, as I was lying down, I noticed I had some fluid leaking. It wasn't a gush; it was more like a constant seepage. Since I'd drained my bladder already, I was pretty sure I wasn't wetting the bed.

"Stephen," I said to my sleeping husband, as I turned and poked him gently on the arm. "I think we'd better call Dr. Shelly."

Now on television dramas, pregnant women always break their water in the middle of a crowded room just as they are going into labor. Well, it turns out that those membranes rupture unexpectedly in less than fifteen percent of pregnancies, and when it does happen, the baby's head tends to act like a cork at the opening of the uterus, thus keeping the fluids from gushing out.

I called Dr. Shelley right away. She told me two things. One, go ahead and take my bags and my butt to the hospital, but, two, it may be hours before I felt my first contraction. However, Dr. Shelley said she'd call ahead to let the staff know I was coming.

We stayed together at the hospital for six hours, frittering away in my bed, before anything remotely resembling a contraction occurred. Mostly, I waited. Uneasy. Uncomfortable. Periodically soaking wet, and totally bored.

Oh, the tales I planned to tell that youngster when he grew up. "Did you know you kept your mother in labor for two hundred and eighty-five hours straight?"

Dr. Shelley looked in on me. She examined my vagina and cervix to see if I was crowning at all, and then she frowned. "I'm going to admit you, Lyssa. Since your water broke, there's a high chance of infection if we don't keep you in a sterile environment."

I didn't want to send Stephen home, but he was getting restless. I figured it'd be easier on both our nerves if he went home for a while. At least we could both sleep.

My doctor was back by mid-morning, and she gave me another exam. “Well, it hasn’t changed much from last night, but your skin color has a tinge of jaundice.”

I told her I felt all right, but still she frowned. Although she assured me that my body would continue to produce more amniotic fluid until the baby was born, Dr. Shelley decided to play it safe and induce labor in order to reduce the risk of infection. Besides, at thirty-seven weeks, I’d gone full term.

I was close to sixteen hours in labor. I think that should be sufficient enough time to work up a good motherly guilt trip. Ten pounds and one ounce that little boy was! That’s only forty pounds short of the fifty pounds I swear I’d gained during my pregnancy.

All gowned up, Stephen and one of the nurses carried my little boy to me right after his birth.

“Look at this little guy, Lyssa,” Stephen said. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

“He-he’s red!” I croaked. My voice had been used up with panting, crying, and groaning, as well as the aftereffects of an anesthetic block.

“He was just born, honey,” the nurse replied. “Newborns always look red. His skin will turn its normal color as the days go by.”

He had a shock of black hair and the widest black eyes I’d ever seen, but there was a little dark bruise on his bottom.

“What is this ... this discoloration?” I asked. “Is he hurt?”

“That’s commonplace in instances like this,” Dr. Shelley said, stepping into the room. “It’s a temporary birthmark. That often happens whenever the parents are of two different races. It’ll fade with time.”

Then she shook hands with Stephen. “Congratulations, Mr. Dryor.”

I smiled weakly. “Then he’s okay?”

Dr. Shelley grinned. “He’s a perfectly healthy little boy.”

“Have you two picked out a name?” the nurse queried.

“Benjamin,” I answered.

“Really?” Stephen asked. I looked up to see the surprise on his face.

“Benjamin Stephen,” I added. “That way we don’t have to put up with all that Stephen Benjamin the third nonsense. Besides I like it.”

Stephen shrugged. “Then it works for me. You look tired.”

“I am tired.”

“Well, it’s time to entertain the grandmothers and aunt brigade.” He kissed me, and that was all I remembered for seven straight hours. As it was, the nurses had to wake me up for my pain medication. Happily, I slipped back to sleep almost immediately.

* * * * *

Marlene's Note #10:

Our body had been stretched out of shape by her pregnancy. Let's face it, Benjamin was a huge kid. Over the last few weeks, Lyssa had insisted over and over again that this would be her first and only pregnancy. Just this one and no more! Of course, I don't think she was fooling anybody; she was just trying to create an atmosphere of disturbance so that she'd keep Stephen and the rest of the family off balance.

Nobody actually believed her. It was merely her hormones announcing their high-strung presence.

I knew she could no more stop wanting another child -- indeed more children -- than she could become celibate and go off and live in a convent. She was too traditionally Catholic for the first and not Catholic enough for the second.

Naturally, Dr. Shelley was very attentive to Lyssa's needs -- even more so to baby Benjamin's needs.

Like all babies, Benjamin was a big hit with the family. S.B. Dryor handed out cigars to every person in the smoking lounge, and even though her father hardly said three words, rumor says everyone saw him smile at the baby. Besides, he'd never pass up a free cigar.

Little Benji even managed to endear himself to each of his grandmothers. Surprisingly, Lyssa's mother doted on the little tyke, but the fact was, that if he could've gotten his inoculations and his passport then and there, Grandma Rosalyn Dryor wanted to take him back to Europe with her -- not Lyssa or Stephen -- just the baby. Both parents suggested that her idea might have been a trifle premature.

We both felt that it was no longer necessary to go to a shrink to reconcile our differences. So subconsciously, we bid farewell to our memories of psychiatric sessions with Dr. Christiana Yee.

And last, but certainly not least, we bid farewell to all of our nightmares featuring Dr. Dedrick Laban. Good riddance to him -- black shark eyes, sharp teeth, and all. May he rest in peace and leave the rest of the world alone.

Marlene.

* * * * *

About a week or so later, I remembered being asleep and hearing the sound a baby softly crying in the distance. *Was it really in the distance?* I thought. When I focused my eyes in the darkness, I saw the roiling mists and churning horizon that told me that I had once again entered the dream realm. But I understood there was no longer any urgency about rushing forward. I inhabited a dream at this point, but it was *that dream*. I was moving

deeper into the dream state dressed in my nightgown, and I knew that I carried my son wrapped in a receiving blanket into the murky depths of the dark and tilting landscape.

I approached the seventy steps of light slumber with some trepidation, for there stood the life-sized carving of the womanly statue wearing the ancient armor and guarding the entrance to the steps. I slowed down to examine the familiar features of the statue. Her head moved as she leaned in to take a look at the tiny squirming bundle I held in my receiving blanket.

Her face looked all the more familiar now.

"Marlene?" I queried, as I recognized the features hidden under her sculpted helmet.

She smiled. "He's a beautiful baby. Ya done good, roomie."

"D-do you really think so?"

"I know so," she said. "And I know it's time for you to move along."

I think my mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You've got your own life to live now." The eyes and mouth beneath the helmet brim broke into a smile. "You don't need me anymore."

"Need you?" I started to argue her last point, but I was interrupted when the infant in my arms squirmed. Sticking his fist into his mouth, Benji let out a squeaky cry. I sighed as I tried to calm him. Then I looked back at her. "I like the outfit."

"You know, this is a pretty decent gig," Marlene added. "Give me a leather bustier and a javelin any day! Tits and armor -- kind of sexy in a fetish-ee sort of way, don't you think?"

I giggled and shook my head in amusement. "It's definitely you."

"Besides, I like it here." She made a gesture as if to threaten me with the spear. "Go on, get out of here. If you need me, you know where to find me."

I woke up slowly, dragging myself back to consciousness, and found Benjamin asleep by my side clawing hungrily at my breast. Then I heard another stifled squeak and then a faint series of familiar toots that a mother learns to recognize instinctively.

In-stink-tively was right, I thought. Ben had been engulfed by a very distinct aroma.

"Uh-oh, baby," I muttered quietly, as I patted his bottom and sensed the very non-dreamlike, mundane odor of sulfur gas and natural excreta. I peeked carefully under his receiving blanket.

"Oh, Benj, you've filled your diaper." I sighed, and, with those words, I looked over at the drippy mess running down the baby's legs squirming beside me. My little boy had indeed loaded up his pants.

I sat up to assemble the various ointments and cleaning cloths. When I finally got the diaper tapes removed, he had a substantial gift all ready for me.

"Eeeuuww! Benji -- biological weapons of mass destruction!"

For some reason, the words to *Handle With Care* by the Traveling Wilburys crept back into my head: “I’ve been uptight and made a mess/But I’ll clean it up myself I guess.”

Then, as I peeled the soiled diaper back from his dirty bottom, the odor hit me in full. “Oh, the sweet smell of success!” The strong aroma forced me to sing off-key.

I smiled at him, took both his hands in mine as if to dance with him. Then I finished singing the lyric: “Handle me with care.”

 THE END 

Diane Charles Linford

Spending her early years as professional student, Diane Charles Linford attended Western Michigan University and Purdue University for her Bachelors Degree, as well as doing Graduate Studies at Michigan State University. There she taught student teachers in the field.

She has worked as a teacher, a business writer, and a welfare office caseworker, but she still managed to find time for four children and a dresser drawer full of notes for stories and novels. Her love of words and writing has often kept her up late nights and into the early morning.

Diane is a four year survivor of breast cancer. She supports American Cancer Society activities on both a local and national level and Hospice who she tells us was always there for her family.

She has a lot of expertise in forestry, having put her first husband through the forestry program at a major university. Her current husband is an advertising copywriter.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

James Dean and the Moonlight Madness Sale

by Beatrice Brooks

Available Now from Loose Id

James Dean and the Moonlight Madness Sale

The blonde woman's cobra tattoo writhed sinuously as she thrashed about on the bed. Rumpled sheets didn't hide her ample breasts, nor her trimmed tuft of dark pubic hair.

A naked man hovered above her. His ears, nostrils, and bottom lip were pierced. Well-hung, his body boasted more tattoos than a wall of gangland graffiti. He possessed a shaven head. A gold ring graced his left nipple. And, as the blonde woman watched, he cleaned his fingernails with the sharp blade of a hunting knife.

Momentarily, her eyes widened. With fear? Anticipation? Desire?

Her expression changed. Her blue-shadowed lids drooped until she looked like Debbie Boone singing "You Light Up My Life." As she parted her legs, she looked bored. Then, as if she knew she looked bored, she grinned like a freaking Cheshire cat.

The man carefully placed his knife on the pillow, blade turned away from the woman's fanned-out hair. Then he climbed onto the bed and thrust his head between her slack thighs.

The woman's breasts would have jiggled, had she not cupped them tightly with her hands. Her index fingers lightly stroked her nipples. Her mouth formed an O.

Her fingers pressed her nipples harder, as if she were bearing down upon the frets of a guitar. The man raised his head, then his torso. On his knees, he wended his way up the woman's legs. Grasping her wrists, he guided her hands between her thighs. As she parted the outer lips of her sex, he sank his length into her.

She arched her neck. She moaned. Her upper body swayed from side to side in a mesmerizing rhythm of continuity. Her tattooed snake writhed convulsively.

Another man entered the bedroom. Heavy gold armlets squeezed his biceps. Bare-chested, he wore a gladiator's "diaper" -- a piece of cloth wound round his waist and passed between his legs. His head was shaven, too, and he could have doubled for the drop-dead-gorgeous black giant in the movie *Spartacus*.

The pierced, tattooed man withdrew from the blonde and found the floor with his bare feet. As the blonde lay motionless, her legs still parted in an upside-down V, the pierced man reached across her face and grabbed his knife.

With the lithe grace of a panther, the black giant evaded the knife's thrust. He pressed his thumb against his attacker's wrist-pulse, forcing him to drop the knife. It fell to the floor. So did the attacker.

As the stunned tattooed man lay on the floor, his pierced face and nipple hidden from view, the giant shed his loincloth and turned the blonde over. Somewhat roughly, he sculpted her body until she was positioned on her knees. His foreplay took less than three seconds.

After several thrusts, he withdrew and flipped the blonde onto her back, like a turtle.

The pierced, tattooed man leapt to his feet, looking none the worse for wear. Once again, he climbed onto the bed. This time, he straddled the blonde's shoulders.

As the black giant plunged his face between her thighs, the blonde began to thrash about and moan. But her squirming and moaning stopped abruptly when the tattooed man, cradling the back of her head with his hands, began to ram himself down her throat.

A nurse slithered through the doorway. She wore a short, too-tight, white uniform that molded her breasts and butt. Her long, licorice-black Cher-hair framed Cleopatra eyes and lips that looked as if an overenthusiastic cosmetic surgeon had injected first collagen, then cherry Jell-O. Decades earlier, her lips would have been cloned in wax and sold at candy counters.

Both men left the bed and stood like statues, as useless as two pieces of display furniture.

The blonde, still on top of the bed, opened her arms wide. The nurse with the waxy balloon lips sauntered toward her and --

Lucy hit the PAUSE button.

She wasn't into women fucking, even though she knew that her all-too-infrequent bed partners were.

Come to think of it, when was the last time she'd had a bed partner?

"Noah was getting ready to ferry his ark," she murmured.

Or, more likely, it was when the TV reporters were predicting that Al Gore had won the 2000 presidential election, even though Florida hadn't checked in yet. That afternoon, election day afternoon, Lucy had literally bumped into an attractive bald man after casting her vote inside the elementary school's gym, her polling precinct. The bald man taught at the school. Gym teacher? English teacher? Math? Did it matter?

He bought two bottles of red wine on the way to her apartment. The bottles had caps rather than corks. One hell of a cheap lay, she had thought. On the other hand, she knew for a fact that teachers didn't earn much money. If she had bumped into a lawyer, she'd have insisted on a cork.

Parched, almost dehydrated, she had slugged down the contents from the first bottle.

Woozy, she had sought the couch, landed on the floor.

With the TV blaring in the background, the bald teacher had undressed her, poured red wine from the second bottle over her breasts and clitoris, then lapped the wine like a thirsty dog. But all Lucy could remember, clearly, was the sensation of his head between her legs. It had felt like a somewhat squishy, microwaved bowling ball.

With a sigh, she erased the memory and looked at the TV. Should she fast-forward or rewind? She clicked the remote. Slithering backwards, the waxy-lipped nurse exited the bedroom. The pierced, tattooed man removed his engorged cock from the blonde's mouth.

Lucy hit PAUSE.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

James Dean and the Moonlight Madness Sale

This has to be the funniest book I have ever read... Beatrice Brooks has the flair for dramatics, which clearly can be seen in Lucy's adventures.

-- Suz, *Coffee Time Romance*

Miss Brooks does a superb job in hooking her readers from the very first sentence and entertaining them until the very end. This reviewer will always keep an open spot on my bookshelf for any of Miss Brooks' future releases.

-- JoAnn, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Beatrice Brooks have woven an enchanting and sometimes chilling tale of the magnitude that is our self-image...Masterfully told, you will never look at a Midnight Madness Sale in the same way again! Spellbinding!

-- Katherine J. Turcotte, *The Road to Romance*