



**Presents ...**

# **Fantasies**

## **volume II**

**four tales of erotic romance by ...**

**Will Belegon**  
**Petula Caesar**  
**Sarah Dickson**  
**Stella & Audra Price**

*Will Belegon, Petula Caesar, Sarah Dickson, and Stella & Audra Price*

# **Fantasies II**

Four Tales of Erotic Fiction

by

Will Belegon, Petula Caesar, Sarah Dickson,

and

Stella & Audra Price

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# **Mixed Blessings**

**by Will Belegon**

## ***Also by Will Belegon***

with Alessia Brio

*Amichu*  
*ArtiFactual*  
*San Diego Sunset*  
*Switch*

# Chapter One

For the first time in my life, I welcomed the distraction of turbulence. As the plane bumped and bounced, I told myself the rough ride was a metaphor for the last five years; that I was getting off at JFK with all the other passengers, and that I hadn't lost my mind.

"Are you alright, sir? Can I get you anything?"

The flight attendant's kind words caught me off guard and drew me out of my introspective daze.

The apprehension must have snuck through to show on my expression. By itself, this was evidence of how unsettled this trip had me. I wasn't nervous about the bumpy ride. After years in the business, my fear of flying had long since faded into a more general annoyance.

"No, thank you, I'm fine. It's not the turbulence on the outside that has me worried."

"Oh? Something at our destination? That surprises me coming from a man like you." She gave me a look that wasn't about coffee or tea. "Well, if you need me, please let me know... right away."

The way she said it would normally draw a flirty response from me. I am completely incorrigible in that regard. On that day, I was too distracted; too worried about finally meeting one beautiful woman to flirt with the one right in front of me. I couldn't quite get over the chance I was taking.

I was on my way to meet Angie. She and I were introduced at a time when I was completely unmotivated to flirt with even the prettiest of girls. My agency was working on a deal to purchase an out of state vacation home. Angie was the paralegal acting as lead for the seller through a large New York firm. When things began to bog down on the details, my client asked me to get personally involved. He was a valuable client; I couldn't refuse.

Her attitude and competence impressed me immediately. She was so helpful that after we finished the deal, I sent her a bottle of wine and a

card asking her to stay in touch. At first it was just about having a contact in the city. I hated New York and avoided it at all costs. The more people I know there, the better.

I started using Angie's firm to do business in the area. The only stipulation was that she remained my contact. She was the team leader as far as I was concerned, even when people technically her superiors were handling the actual transactions. At first it was because she knew her job and was able to roll with the punches inherent to my line of work. As time went on, our relationship continued because I grew to trust her. So did my clients. She had qualities that put them at ease. Soon, they were the ones asking for her.

The other reason was subtler. Indeed, I didn't notice it consciously.

One day, I put the phone down after a conversation with Angie and walked out of my office to get a cup of coffee. The expression on my secretary's face stopped me short. I gave her my best *quit-fooling-around-and-earn-your-money* stare, and it just created a wider grin. So I gave her my meanest scowl. She burst into laughter. Not the reaction I had been looking for.

"Gabrielle, what are you laughing at?"

"You, boss. I've never seen you like this before. I like it."

"Just what the hell are you talking about?"

"I've never seen you happy before."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just shook my head and went to get my coffee. Sitting at my desk a few moments later, I reflected on Gabrielle's words. She had been with my agency five years. Five years and she had never seen me happy? That couldn't really be true, could it?

I focused on the last times that stood out as "happy" to me. It didn't take much for me to see the pattern and to realize that they all featured one thing. They were all times I spent with Kim.

A thousand times I'd told myself I was over her and a thousand times I'd lied. It wasn't just that she left; it was the way she left. I had always been one of those guys who felt that the whole concept of closure was overrated. I considered it part of my personal rebellion against sentimentality; the same rebellion that kept me with her for ten years without ever feeling the need to get married. That had backfired big time.

What I believed an example of the strength of our relationship, Kim had apparently come to view as evidence that I was unwilling to place



limits on my freedom. Sure, we discussed the reasons not to get married a million times: my travel schedule, the hours I kept, the lack of desire for children on both our parts, and the advantages of keeping our incomes and assets separate even after we had been living together for several years. I thought that we were in complete agreement on the matter. Like so many other things with Kim, the truth had several layers.

One night, five years ago, I sat at LAX and waited for a ride that never came. We'd gone over my itinerary one last time just two days before, with her confirming that she would be there when the plane landed. My first hint should have been the message that her cell number was no longer in service, but I just figured there was something wrong with the network. After three hours, I hailed a cab.

Our house in Malibu was dark when the cab pulled up the circular driveway. I dragged my bags out and, after giving the cabbie a generous tip, he helped carry my things to the door. The only light in the foyer was the blinking red from the answering machine. Four messages, which by my count meant they were all me.

"Kim? KIM! Baby, are you here?"

I knew she wasn't before I called out. I knew what I would find when I entered the bedroom, before I saw the empty closet. I should have known by the fact that I had been home more than thirty seconds without the damn cat tripping me up.

I tore through the house, looking for anything that would tell me this wasn't happening. A note, a letter. A phone number scrawled on a piece of paper or the receipt from a travel agency. I found her cell phone and the garage door opener. Her car was gone, as was the Coach luggage. She had been so thrilled about getting it before our last trip to Paris. There was one phone number I didn't recognize. I dialed it and listened to the Salvation Army's recorded message for its 24-hour donation center. That was when it really hit me. She was gone.

I went to the liquor cabinet, pulled out a bottle of 18-year-old scotch and started drinking it like it was iced tea. Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning the alcohol entered me faster than I could sob it out. I passed out on the couch, her phone in one hand and the bottle in the other.

The next morning, I crawled to the shower. When the hot water ran out, I steeled my nerve and began taking a more detailed inventory.

She had been methodical. Pictures that didn't have me in them were

gone from our photo albums. Keepsakes that she had been fond of were missing. *Our* past was still here, but *her* past had disappeared. And no place was there any hint of where she had gone.

It took six weeks for her to contact me. Six tortuous weeks, during which I worked through every possible scenario. I checked every hospital and rehab center within a hundred miles. I called in favors with the police department and talked a broker friend into running a credit check on her. I never actually sat up at night and called hotels, but I thought about it.

Gabrielle was hired during those six weeks.

Because of the timing, and because our ways of treating each other were forged during that time, Gabrielle had become something unique in my life: a woman that I neither flirted with nor lied to. She was almost my conscience. She kept apart from my games and offered advice on my romantic life only when asked.

It wasn't like I had been celibate going on six years. After ten years in a town and a business that threw sex around like devaluing currency, I finally starting spending. In all the time Kim and I were together, I never sampled the forbidden pleasures that were thrust at me. A few months after she left, anger and a twisted sense of revenge pushed away that reluctance. Suddenly, I wanted to taste it all. But none of the crazy things or gorgeous women I tried came close to Kim. She blew them all away.

It wasn't that Kim had been prettier or more adventurous. True, she had first come to my attention as a model. But Kim and I had something I had never found with anyone else: a chemistry, a need. We couldn't be alone in a room together without finding a corner to make out in, even after ten years. No other woman affected me that way; not even any two or three. That powerful, raw desire was lacking. Among other things. I didn't invest any of my self in them.

It was like a wall had been erected between the places in my psyche. A weekend in Vegas? Sex in a limo on the way back from the Staples Center? Sure. Touch my heart? No fucking way.

So when Gabrielle said that I was different after talking to a woman I had never actually met? From anyone else, I would have blown it off as pure fancy. But not from her. I took a deeper look at my own behavior.

It didn't take me long to concede that she was right. When I picked up the phone and it was Angie, my voice changed. It got lower and

softer, like I was in no rush to finish *that* conversation. We wrote teasing little emails. I knew when her birthday was. I sent her bracelets from Catalina and shared jokes I heard on the radio. Little things, but telling.

It took me a few weeks to gather the courage. It was, after all, a step I had not taken in a long time. But one morning, I went for it.

"Gabrielle, would you get Bristol, Greene & Schmidt for me?"

"Angie? Certainly, Mr. Roberts. But we don't have anything going on in New York this month, do we?"

I could hear the smug little smile in her voice; see it right through the office wall. I tried to keep that knowledge out of my reply, but I know she heard it anyway.

"No, Ms. Wilson, we do not. Is there a problem with that?"

"Absolutely not, sir. No problem at all."

Like I said, I heard it in her voice.

When Gabrielle put the call through, I heard Angie's voice with a new clarity. We chatted for a moment before I moved on to the purpose for my call.

"Angie, I have someone flying into the city next weekend and it's very important to me that he get the right kind of reception. I want to know its being handled by only the very best. Limo. Reservations for dinner. No expense spared. The most trusted hotel, all of that. I know it is a little outside your normal area, but I need someone I can trust. I'd want you to handle it personally."

"Well, okay Jim. I can do that. After all, it's not that far outside some of the things we usually do for clients. But it would take away from some of my regular work and I will need to justify it to Mr. Bristol. Got any magic words for me?"

"Billable hours."

Laughter. Sweet gentle peals that immediately warmed the chill shadows left in my heart. Now that it had been pointed out to me, it was easy to recognize.

"Yep, those are the ones. I'll get right on it. Who's the client?"

"Let's just say you'll recognize him from pictures."

"No hints? Just for lil' ol' me?"

"Not this time, Angie. But do things up right, okay? It'll need to be places that are used to being discreet. All the Hollywood insider type crap, ya know? Fake name on the registration and everything. And not just the places that have a reputation. Things *you* love about the city,

things *you* would enjoy. Personalize it."

"Okay. For how long?"

"He'll need to be back in L.A. by Monday afternoon."

"Alright, consider it done. I'll take good care of your high roller for you. But Jim, why me? There are plenty of places in this city that specialize in this stuff. I'm used to closing a real estate deal for you or something, not this."

"Like I said, I need this personalized. You're the only one in that god-forsaken place I really trust."

"Okay, but it's gonna cost you extra."

"Oh?"

"Yes. If I take care of your special case and make sure he gets his nice quiet weekend away from the limelight, then you owe me the same thing. Deal?"

"Angie, I promise. If this works out, I promise I'll fly you out to L.A. and show you around personally."

"I'm gonna hold you to that, Jim."

"Good. Because I will."

"Okay, Mr. Persuasive. I'll call you in a couple days."

"Thanks, beautiful. I promise I'll be less of a stranger. I just had some stuff on my mind the last couple of weeks."

"If you say so. I'll talk to you Thursday then?"

"Count on it."

After saying our goodbyes, I put the receiver down with a smug little smile of my own.

"Why you sneaky little son of a bitch!"

Gabrielle stood in the doorway, hands on her hips and the mock tone in her voice completely betrayed by the wide grin and flashing eyes that adorned her face.

"Ah, Ms. Wilson. Did Fed Ex deliver anything for me? I'm expecting a package."

"No, your silly old gun isn't back yet. Don't change the subject."

"Silly? SILLY? Wyatt Earp owned that gun! At least, Tom said so when he gave it to me. Once they've restored it and fired it, they will compare the firing pin 'thumbprint' and we'll know for sure. How could you say a piece of history like that was *silly*? Not to mention the financial value of the..."

Gabrielle stopped me with a glare. "I said don't change the subject,

boss."

"Alright, you caught me. Could you book a flight to New York for me for next Friday and returning Monday?"

"Boss, for once it will truly be a pleasure."

The next ten days flew by in no time. It was a crazy time of the year for me, and I had plenty to keep me busy. All the same, I found myself struggling not to call Angie because my voice would betray me. I didn't trust myself not to give the game away. The times I did speak with her, for legitimate business reasons, I apologetically kept short.

Friday morning, I almost cancelled. My nerves were running high, and I second-guessed myself to the point I actually started unpacking. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that if I backed out, I was going to have to face Gabrielle. Angie I could put off with a story about the irrationality of celebrity. But Gabrielle would kill me. So I went to the airport and got on the plane.

I was pulled out of the fog of memory by the double-ding that preceded the Captain's voice over the cabin speakers announcing our descent into New York.

We were well ahead of schedule. I was actually going to have extra time on the ground to let my anxiety build. The irony was not lost on me. Glancing at my watch, I realized I had at least an hour before Angie would arrive, even if she were early. *Okay*, I told myself, *you can do this. Just stay out of the bars*. In that frame of mind, I wouldn't have noticed if I drank too much until it was too late.

For once I wished I wasn't flying First Class. But I would have hated waiting as all the whole plane of people filed by worse than I feared waiting in the terminal, so I got off first with the rest of the *we-actually-had-leg-room* set.

As I walked into the noise and bustle, I found myself distracted by one of those special scenes you only see in airports. The couple had obviously been apart for awhile, going at each other like that in the middle of a crowd. No shame, just pure joy. A voice cut through my observations.

"You bastard!"

Angie's hands were on her hips and her head was cocked to the side. Her shoulder length brown hair bounced with the angry tapping of her foot. But even the indignant posture and the tone of her voice couldn't outshine the surprised sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

"Actually, they got married just before I was born. Um..." I hadn't blushed in over a decade, but I felt my cheeks flush. "Hi?"

Of course, she'd called ahead to see if the plane was on schedule. I should have known. Her attention to detail was one of the things I respected about her. I walked forward and stopped in front of her, letting my carry-on fall to the floor beside me. I gave her my best mischievous smile before saying, "You're not really angry, are you?"

"No, no...how could I be? Oh Jim, what a wonderful surprise! It is you, isn't it? I'm not dreaming this and you don't have an evil twin playing a joke on me?"

Angie reached to touch my shoulder. As she touched me for the very first time, her mock glare dissolved into an uncertain grin. The awkwardness took over. She hesitated, her hand just resting lightly on my jacket. After all, how do you greet an old friend you've never met?

I put my hand over hers and pulled her into a hug. The stiffness left her almost immediately.

"I know. I feel it, too. We have talked about this, joking about what we would do. Now here I am and we have to think about all the things we've said and promised, even those things that could be taken certain ways, ya know? Don't worry. We're just gonna get to know each other, with no expectations."

"Oh, right. No expectations. Jim, a girl knows that when a guy takes her out and wines and dines her there is, at the very least, hope for more. Some guys even go beyond *hope* and consider it an obligation. You just flew all the way across the country for me. I think you may at least have some expectations."

"Well, why don't we just leave it at my having hopes for now? C'mon, let's go get my bags."

It just seemed natural to reach out and take her hand as we turned and headed toward the baggage claim area. I did it without thinking about it. A good thing, because if I had stopped to think, I would have hesitated. She allowed her hand to rest lightly for a second before letting her soft fingers curl between mine.

As we left the immediate area of the gate and moved through security, a limo driver the size of an NFL lineman approached from my left.

"Miss Montgomery? Do we only have the single person to pick-up or will we still be waiting?"

"No, Sean, it is only Mr. Roberts here. I know we expected a lady as well, but it seems I have been...*misinformed*." She said it with a teasing hint of rebuke, inviting images of playful retribution to come.

"Very good then, ma'am. Mr. Roberts, if I may get the claim tags for your bags and a description of each piece? I'll collect your luggage while you make your way to the car."

"Thank you, Sean. I'd appreciate that."

"No problem, sir. Would you like me to take the carry-on as well?"

"No, I'll keep it. Thank you."

As Angie and I moved through the never-ending crowd, I felt some of my earlier disquiet returning. It would take a few minutes for Sean to accomplish his task. Our first bit of privacy. She didn't make any effort to extricate her hand from mine. Quite the opposite: her thumb gently caressed my palm and fingers. She stayed quiet though, not making conversation or voicing casual thoughts. Her silence fueled my nerves.

"This one," said Angie, approaching one of a dozen identical stretch limos at the curb. She punched an access code into the keyless lock and opened the door for me.

"Oh, no. Ladies first."

She gave me that look. I had only imagined it before, but had always known it existed. The expression with equal amounts of amusement at my gallantry, assurance that she could handle it, and affront that I would dare to question her will. How a woman of this incredible charisma was not a full partner at her firm was a mystery I had not pierced. She allowed her look to morph into a grin before speaking again.

"Just get in and slide across, will ya? I'm not sitting in front on this ride, even if I might have considered it before knowing who the passenger was."

I did as directed, ducked my head in, and slid across the smooth leather to the opposite door. I looked back as Angie followed. *Those legs!* My imagination had failed me there. The pictures we had exchanged were from the waist up. I found myself thrilled that she had a real woman's hips and strong legs to match. Angie slipped into the seat and closed the door, isolating us behind the tinted glass. She slid toward me.

The slap of her hand against my cheek was a complete surprise. Her fingers moved around to grasp the hair at the back of my head on the

follow-through.

"Son of a bitch. That was a dirty fucking trick to play."

Any outrage I might have felt was lost as she followed the expletive by melting into my arms and fiercely assaulting my lips with hers. I kissed her back with passion, remembering afternoons of teasing comments and what ifs. Her tongue darted into my mouth. I caught her waist and pulled her hard against me.

"I...wanted to... surprise you...and get a real...reaction," I said between kisses. "I was so afraid that you would turn out to have only meant the hints and the plans from a distance."

"Oh, Jim. How could you think that? Sometime you are just so dense." Her laughter fit perfectly with her face. The smile was just as I had seen it in photos, but even more alluring when animated.

"I'm just careful, Angie. I learned that lesson a long time ago."

"Well, the lesson I learned a long time ago was never to waste an opportunity. Now shut up and kiss me."

I did as I was told. For the next few minutes nothing existed except her. I memorized the feel of the tip of her tongue, drank in her desire and finally released some of mine. I ran my tongue along the edges of her teeth, feeling the slight variations. It made her laugh like I had tickled her. All too soon she pulled away, her teeth grasping and pulling my lower lip as she settled in across from me, her back to the driver's seat. She released my lip from her gentle bite and pushed me back against the leather seat just before our driver arrived with my luggage.

Sean folded himself into the front seat and lowered the glass partition. "Any changes in the itinerary, Miss Montgomery?"

"No, no changes. Except for the hour. Hmm. Sean, take us on a bit of a drive. A tourist's special over to Battery Park where we can see Lady Liberty; that kind of thing. I have reservations, but the plane came in far ahead of schedule. Waste some time."

"Absolutely, Miss. No problem." The glass slid up with an electric whirl and Angie's eyes focused on me as the limo pulled away from the curb and into traffic.

"I still can't believe you're here. I mean, obviously you are, but you *did* surprise me. I never thought you would fly here for me. I'm nothing special compared to what you must see in L.A. All those girls out to make it big in movies?"

"Angie, I can honestly say that you are the equal of any of them."



"Really? Go on, tell me."

As she said it, she picked up a pitcher of ice water and a glass. Even the deliberate way she poured herself a drink seemed fraught with potential in the tense atmosphere.

She took a sip, ice clinking in the glass as she did so. Her eyes found mine as the glass left her lips. Running a finger around the rim, she then dipped it and moved the wet finger to her mouth. She traced the tip across her bottom lip before it slipped inside. Those full lips pursed around it and sucked away the moisture. It made a small pop as she released the finger and smiled. I suddenly realized I had not said a word in reply.

"You? Speechless? Surely not."

I couldn't speak. I just sat there with a stupid grin on my face, wanting to play it cool and knowing I couldn't. Not then, not with her. Not when she had just done that. My mind flashed back to conversations we had indulged in, things said behind closed doors when no one else could hear.

"Remember what we said about hopes and expectations a few minutes ago? We covered yours, but what about mine? After the things we've shared by phone and the way you've made me feel, don't you think I might have some expectations? Or did you really think I was inviting myself to Los Angeles to stay in a hotel?"

She ran that finger around the edge of the glass again. As I watched, she let her finger slide back into the water. Her other hand slipped to the neckline of her dress and pushed it aside, then slipped inside the black lace of her bra and pushed it down. Placing the water glass aside, she pulled her nipple into view as she brought the water on her finger to it.

A single drop fell from her fingertip onto the pink of her nipple, and Angie's breath caught at the chill of it. The glistening drop snaked around the rapidly hardening tip and I stared, transfixed.

"Do you like what you see? Do you really think I'm letting you get away with only hopes?"

"Thankfully, it doesn't seem so." It sounded trite, but it was all I could think of to say. I tried to hold it together, to maintain my calm. I realized that the driver couldn't see what she was doing, but he could see me just fine. The mischievous look in Angie's eyes was confirmation that she knew it and was deliberately using it to tease me.

Angie pinched her nipple hard between thumb and forefinger, her

jaw dropping slightly, eyelids fluttering. Her legs uncrossed and parted slightly as she followed my gaze, and my hand moved to her knee without thought of consequence. She quickly glanced at that hand before dipping her finger into the cold water and circling the nipple again. Releasing the dress, she slipped across the limo to lean against my side and offer the wet finger to my lips. I greedily sucked it into my mouth, bringing out the laughter I had always treasured so much over the phone.

"So, where are we headed tonight?" I said it mostly to get her talking, to try and keep my mind from imagining my mouth covering where her finger had been a moment before.

"Hmm. I'm considering changing the plans I originally made. The classic dinner and a show seem to be an awful lot of time before I can get you alone and have my way with you. But I'll manage, if only because you need to be paid back for knowing this was coming."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

Angie leaned further over and whispered in my ear, "That means that by the time we get back to your hotel tonight, I'm going to have you so fucking turned on that I'll have to open the door. Your hands are going to be shaking with need so much that you'll never get the key in the lock."

I closed my eyes. The words she was whispering in my ear sent a shiver down the back of my spine and into my legs. Angie's hand squeezed my thigh as she felt the tremor and knew what it meant.

"I mean it, Jim. I'm going to fulfill every single little dirty thought you've ever had about me. What's more, I'm going to fulfill every one I've had about you. You may still be able to walk tomorrow, but I'm not gonna guarantee it."

Angie's tongue reached out to tickle my ear while I fought the urge to pull her onto my lap right there in the limo. My lust for her warred with my sense of propriety and with the clear desire that she was showing for me. It was almost surreal. For some reason, I had built into my mind an idea that the wantonness of our occasional teasing sessions on the phone was an illusion that would vanish in the sunlight of each other's presence. Yet Angie obviously knew what she wanted. I was the one that was scared. I was the one doubting the truth of what was right in front of me. I found myself paralyzed. Not literally, but in the sense that I couldn't make the kind of move I knew she would welcome.

If some budding starlet I managed to coax into a cab had stuck her

tongue in my ear, I would have responded far more aggressively. But with Angie, there was more than a few pieces of clothing to be lost. There was our friendship. Yet there was another side as well...if I didn't respond, she might think I didn't want her. That thought finally broke through my indecision.

"Let's head for the hotel now. We can skip the evening's festivities. I think I'd just like to stay in."

"Certainly you don't think I'm going to allow that. What would Sean think? I've known him for years, and I wouldn't want him to question my virtue. No, we'll have dinner, as planned. Only I'll have to drop you off while I run home to put on something more...interesting. I'm not letting you off this hook so easy, mister."

Angie leaned across me to flip a switch that lowered the glass between us and the driver. "Sean, I've changed my mind. We need to take Mr. Roberts to his hotel now, and then I'd like you to take me to my place."

"No problem, Miss Montgomery. We'll have just enough time."

Angie thanked Sean and closed the window, settling back into her seat.

"I'm not giving you an opportunity to back off. I know you better than that by now. Even though you flew all the way to New York, if I let you have time to analyze, you'll come up with all the possible negatives and make schemes to protect against them. You'll be aggressive up to a certain point, but then you'll get all conservative. That's the thing that makes you so very valuable to your clients; how you get all you can but know when the risky stuff starts.

"No, I'm not letting you play your cards that way here, Jim; not with me. I won't settle for a wonderful weekend of kissing and teasing and dinners and a Broadway show, all capped off with a promise of how great it will be when I visit you in L.A—a visit that will remove the risk for you; you know I won't get on that plane unless the answer is *yes*. Well, I'm telling you now, the answer is *yes* already."

Outside, the city was moving with its normal bustle, but my entire focus was inside that limo. As we rode toward Manhattan, Angie leaned against my shoulder. She seemed content for the moment simply to be there with me, her hair tickling my ear and the tips of her nails drawing gentle circles on the back of my hand as she held it in her lap.

I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer that I would not wake up

and find myself still on the plane.

The limo pulled up to the Roosevelt Hotel on Madison and 45<sup>th</sup>, and the doorman swung the door open. I stepped onto the curb and extended my hand for Angie. She just smiled at me and shook her head.

"Oh, no. I'm not making this easy for you. I told you, I have to go change...and I suggest that you do as well. We'll be back in an hour to pick you up."

"Sir? This way please." Sean directed me through the front doors and handed me a room key. "You're in the Presidential Suite, sir. Joe at the concierge desk will see to your things. I've already arranged it. By the time you get up there, your luggage will be waiting. If you feel the need for a...jolt of courage, the bar is up the stairs and to the left of the lobby."

"Thank you, Sean. I just may take advantage of that."

"Very good, sir. And if I might add," Sean looked back to see if Angie was listening. She was on her cell phone. "That's the biggest smile I've seen on her face in three years. That pleases me. So understand that I say this with the greatest respect. If you break her heart, I'll make very goddamn sure they never find your fucking body."

I tried my hardest to keep my face calm. I've had guys worth millions screaming obscenities in my face, so I think I pulled it off. But none of them were near as intimidating as those half-whispered words. I simply nodded and headed up the marble stairs into the lobby. By the time I reached the top, I decided that jolt of courage wasn't a bad idea, and I turned left into the bar.

## Chapter Two

An hour later, I stepped back into the limo. As the doorman closed the door behind me, Sean spoke from the front seat, "Miss Montgomery, I'm going to head down Madison to avoid Times Square and this mess."

"Yes, that will be just fine. Thank you again, Sean."

"It is truly my pleasure, Miss Montgomery. I'll have you at the Tavern in just a couple of minutes."

"The *Tavern On The Green*? I thought I said places without a rep?" My words were firmer than my tone, which betrayed my amusement. I couldn't resist teasing her about being predictably cliché.

"No, you said places that knew how to be discreet...not places without a rep. Don't worry. The Tavern definitely knows how to be discreet. Also, it is very 'New York' and one of the things I love about the city. I seem to recall a directive to personalize things."

"You're right, I did say that. But still, I don't picture myself sitting next to a glass wall where I feel like a pheasant being presented for dinner...despite the tux."

"Silly man...I forget that you dislike my city so much you are almost never here. There is more to the Tavern than the Crystal Room. We will be dining at a corner table in the Park Room, and I think you will be surprised at how private it is." Angie looked me up and down like I really was that pheasant. "I like you in a tuxedo."

Thus began the longest evening of my life and one of the most enjoyable. As Angie promised, the Park Room seemed very private. Dinner was wonderful, although I have no recollection of what we actually ate. My attention was focused entirely on her.

Angie was wearing a silken black dress that clung to her like a lover. In the gentle light of the night, it seemed to always shimmer at just right place to tease about the curves hiding beneath it. The thin straps always seemed about to slide off, but they never did. It hid everything...and nothing. Over it she wore a lace jacket that appeared closer to

lingerie than evening wear, and yet was perfectly appropriate.

I struggled to maintain an outward cool, but knew that I was failing miserably. At least to her. To the casual observer, I may have appeared confident and suave. But Angie wasn't fooled. She saw my slight hesitations, caught me licking my lips and tapping my fingers. She knew I was closer to the edge.

Through dinner, she managed to stay aloof and calm. But as Sean circled around to get in the car after closing the door, a chink appeared in her armor. She turned, kissed me and collapsed against my chest.

I held her tight. She snuggled in, then tilted her head up to kiss me. I willingly followed the unspoken directive. We continued the kiss while the car moved into traffic, finally pulling apart to breathe. As I opened my eyes, I found Angie staring intently.

"Tell me this is real."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm no fool, Jim. Just because I never finished law school doesn't mean I'm stupid. I know a lot about you. I work for an old established firm. We have plenty of contacts in L.A. I made some calls way back. You're a player. No attachments, but always seen in the company of this pretty young thing or that. I'm ten years older than your usual date, and without any self-flattering bullshit, I know I'm only half as pretty."

"I'll take issue with that, Angie."

"Fine, whatever. My point is that you have no reason to fly across the country to get laid. I want this Jim, I really do. You're not one of these stuck-up lawyers I habitually shoot down when they hit on me. But I want to know why you're here."

"Because you make me feel like I haven't felt in years. Because after I talk to you I smile for hours. Because I find myself catching my breath when I see a woman on the street whose hair and shoulders look like yours, praying that she'll turn around and it will be you. Because you make me feel healed."

"One of these days you need to tell me what happened that hurt you so badly."

"I will. I promise. But not tonight, not this weekend. I want tonight to be about us, not about the distant past. Deal?"

"That's a deal, sexy. Now kiss me again so I know I didn't fuck things up by asking."

I kissed her all the way to the theatre. We went to see *The*

*Producers*, and for once I was thrilled to see a show I already knew. It meant that I could still follow what was going on despite my need to glance to my right every few seconds. It meant that the times I caught her looking at me we could just keep looking, without ruining our understanding of the show.

Halfway through the first act, I took her hand. She tickled my palm with her fingernails for a second, then returned my grasp. As the lights came up for intermission, she quickly stood.

"Will you get me a glass of wine? I need to take care of something."

"Of course I will. Red or white?"

"Whatever you're having."

"I'm having a scotch. I need it to strengthen my resolve, to keep from interrupting the play by attacking you in the dark."

"Okay, then get me scotch. Because I feel the same way."

"You got it, gorgeous."

She gave me a smile that seemed to say she was happy that I was starting to relax, then headed up the aisle quickly while most people were still rising from their seats. I made my way to the lobby, positioned myself in the rush for drinks, and waited.

The lights flickered to announce the impending start of the second act just as Angie's arm snaked around my waist from behind and slid into my pocket.

"Sorry! There were shorter lines for lifeboats on the Titanic than there were to get into that restroom. Just in time for us to go back and sit down."

"Still want this?" I asked, holding the scotch and water up.

"Absolutely." Angie knocked it back like a longshoreman at a bar rather than a beauty in an LBD. The hand in my pocket pulled me closer as she sat the empty glass down. "Shall we make our way inside?"

As we walked down the aisle, Angie was forced to remove her hand from my pocket to slide between the other theatergoers. She didn't leave the pocket empty.

When the lights dropped, I slipped my hand in. The feel of lace brought a smile to my face that made me fear being mistaken for a stage light.

As the play continued, I fought the urge to pull them out, or to run my fingers up Angie's thigh and slide them under her dress to confirm the obvious conclusion. The shivers my fingertips elicited every time

they dropped to her leg confirmed the wisdom of my decision. The anticipation grew more delicious with each passing moment.

Just as the finale's last notes rang out, I lost my patience. I let my hand slide up, and I heard a gasp as I found the edge of her stocking and brushed bare flesh. Quickly, I slid my fingers along the moist heat of her pussy before the rising lights forced me to withdraw. The air felt cool on the tip of my fingers while I clapped.

We made our way through the crush of people exiting the theatre, and for the first time, I was glad for Sean's size and intimidating presence. He stood above the crowd and people gave him a respectful amount of personal space. That allowed us to more quickly get into the privacy of the limo.

Angie ducked in before me, and as I leaned over she caught my arm and pulled. I sprawled across her. Her fingers twirled in my hair as the door shut behind us. Then she spoke.

"Damn you! Why did you wait? I didn't stick my panties in your pocket at intermission so you would wait for the curtain to touch me."

"Sorry. I was...well, I was nervous. I wanted to earlier, but..."

"Oh please! I've seen you take risks so big they would intimidate the most...Hey! You're serious, aren't you? Look at me. You are. Oh, Jim, that's the sweetest thing I think I've ever heard."

As Angie's tone began to soften, I realized two things. The first was that I was blowing it. Everything was going as perfectly as it possibly could. Here she was throwing herself at me and I was holding back. The second was where my hand had ended up.

I'd like to say I'm this incredibly intuitive lover. I'd like to say I realized at that moment that I needed to take a more direct approach. I'd like to say that my extreme intellect realized that the risk had been so mitigated as to become non-existent. The truth is much simpler. When I felt the wet warmth of her pussy against the hand I had slid up her dress, my hunger for her took over. I lifted up, pushed my tongue into her mouth and pushed the two of us into the corner. My fingers circled, then slipped inside her wet lips.

The heat of her pussy was so intense that for a moment I thought my hand would be burnt. Surely if I held my fingers in a candle's flame that is what I would've felt. Then all I felt was liquid silk. Soft, wet, and warm. I slid them in further and was rewarded with a squirm from Angie and a relaxation of the tension in her shoulders. I kissed her harder,



sucking her tongue into my mouth while I began a slow rhythm of sliding my fingers in hard and fast, then pulling back slowly. I shouted down my goal-oriented impulse to try and find a pace that would drive her towards orgasm. Instead, I focused on building her anticipation. Angie's fingers caught in the hair at the back of my head and she pushed her lips against mine with bruising force, but she never interrupted the pace of my fingers.

I withdrew regretfully as the limo arrived outside my hotel. I kept my eyes locked on hers as the door opened, then stepped to the curb and took her hand to help her up. My other hand raced to give a bill to the young man who had opened the door for us. I never have figured out whether I gave him a five or a fifty, so absorbed I was in Angie.

I pulled her up the lobby stairs beside me. The hand she held was the one that was still slick with her juices and she giggled softly while she rubbed my fingers between hers.

Her heels clicked on the marble tile as we rushed to the bank of elevators and sighed in relief that there was already one waiting at the ground floor. Neither of us wanted to face the unbearable torture of an extra forty-five seconds before we could attack one another.

As the elevator doors closed, I threw her against the wall, pushed the button for my floor, and once again took possession of her tongue. We kissed until the doors opened, then Angie laughingly ducked under my arm, around the matronly woman who had been waiting for the elevator, and took off barefoot down the hall, laughing over her shoulder at me as she went.

Barefoot? I turned back to the elevator. The woman's smile as she held Angie's heels out to me was full of memory and wistful longing, but no condemnation. I smiled gratefully as I accepted them, then rushed down the hall and around the corner. I caught Angie just as she was turning back to find me.

"No key," she said with a blush. I pulled the key-card out of my inner jacket pocket and reached past to slide it into the slot. Angie's hands went to my belt. As the door lock clicked, she spun around and opened it. My belt went with her, sliding through the loops of my slacks with a fabric hiss. It went flying across the room with a flick of her wrist, smacking onto the glass top of the coffee table with a metallic ring and sliding across to fall between the table and the small couch.

She slipped her fingers in the waistband and pulled me inside. As

the door to the hallway closed behind me, I let my jacket slip off my shoulders and fall to the floor. We walked toward the bedroom, pausing as our kisses became rougher, then remembering our goal and taking a few steps before we became distracted again. Eventually, we made it into the dimly lit room and stopped just inside the door.

As Angie's fingers were working the button and zipper at my waist, I pulled roughly at the tie around my neck. When the tie was loosened, I went after the buttons at my collar and down. As soon as enough were undone, tie, shirt and undershirt all came over my head and were tossed aside.

The button on the inside of my slacks was defeating Angie, the first sign of nervousness she had shown. I took her hands in mine, kissed the inside of her wrist and moved her hands to her sides. I reached up to her shoulders and slid the spaghetti straps of the little black dress off them.

The dress fell to her waist. As I suspected, she wore no bra. Her hard nipples called for my attention. Reaching down, I pushed the silky fabric of the dress off her hips and lifted her off the floor. I brought her arm around my neck so that I could take a nipple into my mouth. I sucked at it harshly. No circling of my tongue, no delay. Straight into the back of my throat, as though I could draw sustenance from it.

My other arm was hooked under her knees, the fabric of the stockings she still wore rubbing the inside of my elbow. I took a few steps forward, released the suction lock upon her breast and tossed her on the bed.

Angie shrieked as she bounced on the bedspread. Before I moved within her reach, I kicked off my shoes, reached down to pull away my socks and undid the button inside my slacks that had troubled her. She immediately pushed both slacks and boxers off my hips and down my thighs until they fell off me onto the carpet.

My cock bounced in front of her before she caught it in her hand. She pulled at it, bringing me onto the bed. Looking up at me, she took the head of it in her mouth. A moaning sigh left me as her tongue circled the ridge dividing head from shaft. Slowly her lips moved down until I felt her throat pressing against the tip of me.

The intensity was too great. I knew I couldn't allow her to continue unless I was prepared for the too-quick result. I attempted to rock back, but she followed me. I reached down and stopped her shoulders with my hands. My cock pulled out of her greedy mouth with a wet pop. She

made an imploring sound of despair at the interruption, but I was determined.

I pushed Angie back and crawled up her body to kiss her. After a few moments at her lips, I began to retrace my path. I stopped at the pink of her nipples, playing at them with my tongue, nibbling at them with my teeth, the rock-hard points rubbing back and forth between my lips. Then I kissed my way down the front of her.

Her pussy was bare and smooth save for a small stripe of soft curly hair just above. I pulled at that hair with my teeth while I followed down the road it pointed out. I stuck my tongue out at the end and pulled down so that it ran across the outer edges of her folds. At the bottom, I stuck my tongue in as deeply as I could, the stubble on my cheeks rubbing against the soft skin of her thighs as they closed about me slightly. The sweet tang of her coated my tongue as I wiggled it inside her.

I lapped at her pussy and sucked the lips into my mouth. I did my best to capture all her moisture as though I were parched. I flattened my tongue and ran it up to the top, or curled it and thrust while I shook my head side to side. Every trick I had ever tried or heard of used to fuel her pulling at my hair and the pounding of her hips into my chin.

Finally, as I took the hard button of her clit into my mouth and sucked hard, her legs locked. The hand in my hair pulled down mightily and her hips drove up. I held my breath as she battered me.

When her cries ceased and her convulsions slowed, I pulled her up. I spun her around and lifted so that her ass was in the air facing me, struggled up onto my knees, and slipped my cock inside her. I didn't hold back or attempt to slow myself. I hammered my need upon her backside with my hips. Angie's breathing quickened again, this time joined by mine.

She struggled onto her extended arms and I took advantage by reaching beneath her and cupping her tits in my hands, pulling and pinching her nipples between my thumb and index finger. Angie found a rhythm with me, thrusting to meet me without pulling away at the wrong moment. All too soon I began to feel what was coming. I reached my hand down to her clit, hoping to push her over the edge again before I exploded. Angie began a guttural cry that was lost as she buried her face in the pillow, and the walls of her pussy tightened around me with what I hoped was another orgasm. But orgasm or no, I could hold back no longer.

As my own climax overtook me, I pulled away and watched the thick jets arch onto her ass and back. When they ceased, my legs gave out and I collapsed sideways onto the bed beside her.

For a few moments we both just lay there, dazedly lost in the intricacies of the dark ceiling. The light from the window illuminated us on one side, the light I had left on in the bathroom earlier a bright intrusion from the other. Dark shadows surrounded the bed, for we had been far too eager to bother with anything as mundane as a light switch.

Angie slipped sideways into the crook of my arm and let her head collapse on my shoulder, snuggling in with a contented sigh.

"Why did you do that? Pull out, I mean. I didn't want you to."

"I didn't know. I just realized I had no idea. We never talked about it. We never talked about such things like they were really going to happen."

"I'm on the Pill. It's okay."

"Your wish is my command." I kissed her forehead. Suddenly, the long day and the flight caught up with me, and I yawned.

"Bored with me already? Men! Get one thing..."

"Shush. It's a long flight, and I didn't sleep much last night. Will you really mind if I nap a little?"

"No, not really. I'm tired, too, and we can always...Jim?"

She told me later how my eyes were closed and I didn't respond. I woke to find my arms bound tightly behind me. As my eyes adjusted, I found Angie leaning over me with a wicked grin.

"I seem to have found a use for the nylons I never took off. You were *really* tired. I thought you would wake up and stop me, but you barely moved. Now it's too late. Now you're at *my* mercy. You won't pull me away this time." With those words, Angie straightened up and put her hands on her hips.

A single lamp lit the hotel bedroom; a soft glow that surrounded her and warmed her skin. Her brown tresses lay upon her shoulders like chocolate drizzled over gold as she extended a single finger and ran the tip of the nail up the inside of my leg. I shivered in anticipation as she reached the inside of my thigh. Teasingly, she circled around where I most wanted that finger to go. She traced around and up across my stomach, then began to circle my chest.

"I've always been told that men's nipples were underexploited. A resource that few women really use. What do you think? Is that the

truth?" As she said it, Angie took one of my nipples between her thumb and index finger and rolled it gently.

"Umm. It feels good, baby. But it's not like it is for you, I don't think."

"Really? How about if I do this?" She leaned over and took it in her mouth, sucking in while her tongue circled it. It was the first time a woman had ever done that to me. It felt great, although it still wasn't anything like if she had done the same thing a little lower.

"I like it. A lot. But it's more the way I would like it if you nibbled my neck or sucked on my ear." Angie raised her eyebrows at me when I said that, but she kept sucking on my nipple. It did feel pretty good, really. I was thinking that I could get used to it when she bit me! Hard.

"Ow! Hey, what was that for?" My first instinct was to rub it, but I had forgotten about my arms. All I managed to do was roll on my side. Angie laughed while she pushed my shoulder back down to lay me flat. It brought her nipple close to my chin, so I tried for revenge. But she was either waiting for me to try it or she sensed what I was up to at the last second. My teeth clicked together only an inch or so away from her as she snatched my target away from me.

"No, no. Mustn't bite me or I might bite you back." She took the hard shaft of my cock in her hand as she said it. I let out an involuntary moan as her fingers closed around the rock hard center of me. She smiled wickedly.

"It really does feel that good?"

"Yes," I replied through clenched teeth.

"And this?" Angie began to stroke her fingers up and down. "Oh, look at your face. I think I like this. Maybe I should just do this and watch your face. But I really had my heart set on sucking your dick. I don't think I could really be happy if I didn't feel it pulsing in my lips and taste the hot come as it hit the roof of my mouth and fell onto my tongue."

"Oh, god. Please?"

"Please? Please what, Jim? I'm not sure I can understand you when you try to talk through your teeth like that. Could you repeat the question with your mouth open?" She grinned mischievously down at me, enjoying the control. Her hand never paused, gently stroking me while she enjoyed my attempts to control myself.

""Please do it. Please suck it."

"Please suck what, Jim? Do you mean you want me to suck your big, hard cock? I want you to say it, Jim. I want you to ask me to make you come. I want you to ask me the way you said you would over the phone that one day. Do you remember that? I thought I would come at my desk when you actually said the words. Now I want to hear them for real." As she talked to me, Angie's other hand stole between her legs and I watched as two of her fingers slipped inside.

Angie's rhythm faltered as she began to finger fuck herself. She still held me, but she couldn't concentrate on both places well enough. I watched her fingers and licked my lips, tasting a slight remnant of what I had tasted earlier. Angie's eyes widened as my tongue ran across the lower one.

She pulled her fingers out of her pussy and offered them to me. "Here, lover. You want another taste?" I answered her by greedily sucking at them, pulling her fingers into my mouth and licking around them, sucking to get every hint from her knuckles. As my head fell back, her eyes lit up again.

"Oh, watching you do that. Watching my fingers slide out like that. Ask me one more time."

"Please, Angie? Please suck my cock?"

"Yes, sir."

Angie kissed her way down my chest and across my stomach, quickly. When her lips touched the tip of my head, I was almost glad my arms were tied. Had they been free I don't know if I could have resisted the urge to push down. As it was, I lifted my hips off the bed sharply. She was ready for that. My cock slid effortlessly across her lips and into the warmth of her mouth.

Angie let out a half moan, and I felt the vibration of it in her throat. I watched in the half-light of the single lamp as every bit of me disappeared and her lips rested against my body. Her eyes were closed, in concentration and perhaps in something else. She had told me how much she liked this, but it is in the nature of a man to doubt. All the years of it being joked about as a chore or something a woman stops doing after marriage added up in one's mind.

Angie was enjoying it almost as much as I was.

I struggled to keep my head up so I could watch. It was a battle I often lost. I wanted to watch as my cock vanished, as she ran her mouth over the sides of it and licked it like a Popsicle. Watch as she left just the

very tip in her lips while her hand stroked me. Three times she took me to the very limits and I gasped. Every time she heard me make that sound, she slowed or pulled away and made eye contact with me. She gave me that grin. Then she waited while I lay there, unwilling to struggle enough to break the nylons; fearing that she would stop for more than just a few moments.

Angie smiled up at me and took my cock back in her mouth. As I approached that edge again, it was almost painful. Maybe that was what made me put it together. It should have been so obvious after the same thing only a few moments prior. As I once more teetered on that edge, I asked.

"Please, Angie, please don't stop."

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at me. She ran her tongue around the tip, maintaining eye contact the whole time. "Don't stop what?"

"Don't stop until I come."

"You mean you want me to let you come in my mouth? You want me to keep sucking your dick until you can't hold back and you lose all control? You want me to swallow your come, Jim?"

"Yes, please."

A smile crossed her face and then her eyes left mine. My head fell back to the pillow. This time, when the gasp came she didn't stop. Her fingernails dug into my sides as she fought to keep her position. My legs locked straight out, and although I tried to cry out her name, my throat locked as well. Soundlessly, I lifted up and with a strangled sigh, finally fell.

Angie rested her face on my stomach, and for a few moments we just lay there. Then she got up, retrieved her purse from the desk, and pulled out a knife that I would never have suspected her of carrying. No glorified nail clipper, but four inches of Buck Knives high carbon steel. I rolled onto my side, and she cut the nylons away. Rolling back, I winced as the blood rushed back into my arms.

"Hey, it's a rough city sometimes. A girl has to carry something to protect herself."

"That's not an Avon Special pepper spray, Angie. That's a good blade."

"Yes." I could tell she didn't want to talk about the knife anymore by the way she quickly folded it and put it back in her purse. She didn't

make eye contact again until it was hidden. "How are your arms?"

"I can feel them. You surprised me, just like in the limo. I thought I was the one doing the surprising this weekend."

"I guess I have a flair for the dramatic." Angie lay down beside me and rested her head on my chest for few minutes, then kissed me on the forehead and sat up. "I need to go home for a little while."

"I should go with you."

"Why? I'm coming right back. I just need other clothes. I should have thought to bring enough for the weekend with me last night, but I was too focused on what I wanted you to see and feel during the evening. You stay here, sleep some more. You'll need it." Angie grinned, her eyes laughing with hidden plans and the sure promise of more adventure. She pushed down gently on my chest, urging me to stay in bed.

"I don't want to be separated from you—even for this short amount of time."

"Silly boy. Sleep. I'll be back in a couple hours. The sun is barely up, and for you this is more like three in the morning than six. I'll be back before you have time to miss me, we'll have a late breakfast, and we'll go for a walk in the park. Get some more rest."

I watched as she turned to pick up the silky black dress from the floor at the end of the bed, where it had lain these last few hours. She lifted it in her arms and allowed it to flow down her body, coming to rest against her hips. The bare curves of her ass were still visible as she leaned down again, this time to reach into my pocket and remove the panties she had placed there hours before. She stepped into them as I felt and fought the urge to reach for her again.

She was right. It did feel like the middle of the night to me, and I could do with more sleep. I again resisted the urge to grab her and hold her tight. I fought the fear that she would not come back even as I remembered its source.

As Angie sat at the edge of the bed by my feet and slipped the straps of her heels about her feet, I raised my body onto an elbow and gazed at her. Her soft brown hair lay against her shoulders. The slim lines of her body and the definition in her arms screamed for my caress even as a part of me urged that touch simply to reassure myself it was not a dream from which I would all too soon awaken. I memorized the moment, the way the shadows played across her skin and the scent of her



perfume mixing with the sweat and sweet smells of our exertions.

"What?"

I shook myself. The question from her required an answer, but I was too lost in my own thoughts to form words. She smiled at me and asked her question again.

"What is it?"

"You're beautiful."

Angie laughed. "And you're still exhausted. Sleep, silly. I'll be back soon enough. Get your rest. You're gonna need it." She leaned over, kissed my forehead again, then slipped out of the bedroom. I listened to her soft footsteps until I heard the outside door open and close behind her.

I lay my head back down on the pillow, closed my eyes, and didn't reopen them until her return woke me.

\* \* \* \*

The next two days were a blur of good food, great company and sheer exhaustion. Sleep was something we avoided. It was a waste of our already limited time. We would walk in Central Park, come back and make love, sleep for twenty minutes and be back out the door for a private tour of the UN. I kissed her on the observation deck of the Empire State Building until a matriarch from Oklahoma covered her kid's eyes and walked off in a huff. We had pesto and pasta in Little Italy, brought Chinese food back to the room and fed each other with our fingers. We visited Strawberry Fields and the doorway where Lennon got shot, and Angie was smart enough not to notice when I cried.

Monday morning came, and the city I hated was the one I never wanted to leave. We spent ten minutes in the lobby not wanting to walk to the curb, and when I did get in the cab I rolled down the window to hold her hand until we drove away. It felt like a movie. I almost told the cabbie to drive past Tiffany's so I could wave to Audrey Hepburn.

When the flight was delayed, it was a nightmare. Every agonizing moment felt three times as wasted because I knew it was time I could have spent with her. We talked on the phone until I was almost out of battery, then we gave it up so I'd have enough juice to let her know when the flight finally left. I texted Gabrielle, too, asking her to have the house ready and explaining why I would be later than planned. Her reply made no sense, but before I could respond they finally let us on the plane. The office could manage without me one more day.

## Chapter Three

I let Angie know when the flight landed, but I didn't feel any need to call Gabrielle. I knew she didn't keep the late hours I often did, so I just grabbed a cab.

The lights were on when I got home.

I paid the cab driver and pulled my keys out of my roller before I walked up the path. Gabrielle must have decided to wait for me. I'd think that was odd if it weren't for the stunt she had just pulled to get me to recognize what I was feeling for Angie. I was glad she was there. It meant I wouldn't have to wait to call her.

As I turned the key, I realized there was music playing inside. Sinatra. How appropriate. I walked in with a smile, ready to tell her all about it, my cell phone opened to display the weird message so I could tease her about being cryptic.

The Razr made an ominous sound as it impacted the hard tile of my entryway, the ringing of my dropped keys a metallic cymbal counterpoint. The door behind me closed with an understated snick before I ever moved.

"Well don't just stand there, gorgeous. I know I'm a site for sore eyes."

She rose from the leather couch, the blue of my favorite silk tie falling in between her bare breasts. It was a good choice, the deep royal color a dramatic counterpoint to the paleness of her skin, the deep pink of her nipples, and the strawberry blonde of her hair, both the shoulder length surfer girl cut and the patch just above a place I never thought I would view again.

"Kim?"

Of all the stupid fucking things to mutter! Of course it was Kim. Until a couple of weeks before, I would have given almost anything to see her naked body, to see her hips swaying as she walked toward me, to once again see the small rose tattoo above her heart.

"Hi, Jim. It's been far too long."

She wrapped her arms around me. I was too stunned to do anything, even when I felt her lips on mine.

"Come on now. It's really me. I'm back. I know you still love me, Jim. I've been talking to Mike for a couple of weeks. He told me everything."

My first thought was that I was going to wrap a five hundred dollar Callaway driver around Mike's fat fucking neck when I saw him on Thursday. Only then did I start thinking about the fact that the woman I had spent most of the last five years pining for was naked in my arms.

Kim's fingers ran through my hair, caught and pulled me into her. Without thinking, I began to open my mouth, to return the kiss. For just a moment, I was lost in my memories, lost in how badly I had missed her.

I pulled away roughly, putting my hands on her shoulders to hold her at bay.

"What? Jim, what's wrong? It's not a dream, baby. I promise."

I just stared at her. The words wouldn't come.

Kim wasn't used to being resisted. She stared back, clearly at a loss that I was doing anything other than ravishing her. But it just wasn't in her to doubt herself for long. I saw the decision to brazen it out in her eyes just before she did the little hair flip that I had once found so endearing.

"Okay, listen. I know this is sudden. We haven't seen each other in a very long time. But I missed you so much. The longer we've been apart, the more it hurt. I made a mistake. A very big fucking mistake. But I'm back. And you missed me, too. I can see that."

Kim cocked her shoulder so that it slipped beneath my arm and pressed herself hard against me once more. The heat of her body, the smell of her hair and its softness against my cheek was intoxicating. She turned her head and gave me a nibble on the neck. Then her warm breath was on my ear.

"More importantly, I can feel it..."

Her hand ran down my side to grasp the shaft of my erect cock.

I thrust her away again, rougher than I intended. She stumbled back a few steps, the surprise plain on her face. I found my voice.

"Knock it off, Kim. Just because I'm hard doesn't mean a goddamn thing. I walked in the fucking door and found the woman I've always

wanted more than anything naked except for a tie she gave me a few weeks before she walked out. It doesn't mean shit."

"Yes, it does. Come here and let me show you."

"No." I squared my shoulders. "No, the first thing we're going to do is put you in a bathrobe or something so I can think a little straighter. Then you're gonna explain to me how the fuck you got into my house."

"With my key."

"WHAT?"

"You never changed the locks. Didn't surprise me. It fits you. I was gone, but you knew that I wouldn't just give the key to someone. What's more, I'll bet everybody tried to talk you into changing them. But not my Jim, with his suit of armor and white stallion. I know you better than you know yourself. You wouldn't change the locks, because I might come back in the middle of the night and be locked out in the cold. Then, after enough time passed, it became a point of pride. You wouldn't change them because it meant you were giving up. Eventually you just forgot that they were still the same. Am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Yes. Damn it, you're right."

"Of course I am. Not just about that either." Kim advanced me again, looked me straight in the eye. "Kiss me again and let me prove it. No one has ever made me feel like you do and no one has ever had your number like me."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. Come on."

I grabbed her hand and pulled her after me at a brisk pace toward the master bedroom. Kim giggled and shrieked as I dragged her and then burst out with a sexy, playful laugh as I whipped her around to sprawl on the bed.

"That's more like it! That's the man I know, the man I... Hey!"

Her cry of indignation originated beneath the silk kimono-style robe I quickly pulled from the closet and tossed over her.

"I wish I had an old grandma robe to put you in. Maybe then I could concentrate. That'll have to do. Put it on and come back to the living room so we can talk. I need coffee." I turned around and marched down the hall. Behind me, Kim was using every expletive a sailor ever thought of and some they had to learn from the Marines.

I paused and waited for her to take a breath.

"And take off my fucking tie!"

## Chapter Four

I stood in the kitchen and watched the coffee drip into the carafe, wishing it would go faster and desperately trying to keep my attention off the liquor cabinet in the den. I knew if I started on that path I wouldn't stop, and I also knew that if I got drunk I'd end up in bed with Kim.

I asked myself what the hell she was doing there. Why then, of all nights? I had shown Kim a very controlled façade, but inside I was in turmoil. I didn't know whether to be angry or thrilled.

A year before, I would have been thrilled. Three weeks before, I still would have pulled her to the bedroom, and maybe I would have stayed there. Probably would have. Not then.

Funny that she brought up Mike. Maybe that was why his voice was in my head that night. Telling me that I was insane. Beautiful brunette in New York, gorgeous blonde in L.A. All I needed was a redhead in Chicago and I would have really been living the dream. But even though that scenario had plenty in common with how I had lived my life the prior few years, I knew that wasn't going to happen. I told my inner Mike to shut the fuck up.

I wanted New York. I wanted Angie. Yes, Kim was as beautiful as ever. And yes, the spark, the inexplicable physical chemistry that had always existed between us was obviously still there. Angie had exhausted me in New York and yet, speaking on purely physical terms, I could easily have taken Kim into my arms and done exactly what she was hoping I would.

Angie had more. There *was* the powerful physical attraction, the need. I had only ever felt it with Kim before, but there was no denying it was there with Angie as well. But there was more. I knew Angie. Over those last few years I had seen her in pressure situations, I had given her every chance to disappoint me. Both on a business level and, sometimes, on a personal one. She had never let me down. She had failures, sure.

There are always failures to offset the successes. But Angie had never given anything but her best in any dealing we had ever had, and she had never lied to me.

Kim, on the other hand, had rarely missed a chance to give me heartache. At least one of the reasons we had never married was that I not only saw advantages to keeping our assets separate, I saw great disadvantage in letting her have full access to mine. Kim had made quite a bit of money in her days as a model. By the time we had been together a few years, her savings were gone.

It wasn't just her savings. She lost jobs, wrecked cars. Lost entire weekends to drugged-out hazes when we were younger, although she did leave that destructive habit behind after a particularly disturbing trip to Las Vegas. Through it all, I often wondered why I stayed with her.

Until we would have one of *those* times. Sometimes it was a single night, sometimes days. Once it even lasted a month. When Kim and I clicked, there was a transcendent joy that infused our lives. One that made all the struggles worthwhile. Nights where we just stared at the reflection of the moon in each other's eyes. A day at Magic Mountain where we rode the same roller-coaster until we were so battered and laughing that we had to lay down on the grass and try not to puke while giggling incessantly.

In all my years, all the girls I had known, all my experiences, nothing had ever come close to Kim and me at our best. Until that weekend with Angie.

I grabbed the coffee pot, poured myself a cup and took a sip, burning my tongue. Too much, too fast. I fought the impulse to hurl the cup at the wall. I set it down and curled my fingers into as tight a fist as I could make.

"I've seen those knuckles white like that before. Did you burn your tongue again?" Kim walked into the kitchen, stopping at the refrigerator to pull an ice cube from the freezer and a Guinness from the fridge. "Here, I'll trade you the coffee for these."

"Thanks," I mumbled. I'd like to say Kim looked less tempting after I put the thought into it, but that would have been lying.

"You're welcome. Whose robe? It's not mine, and I know you haven't had anyone living with you. Like I said, I checked."

"No, something I bought for the occasional overnight guest. Must say, I never expected to see you wearing it."

"I guess you wouldn't have at that. I don't understand, Jim. I thought you would be thrilled to see me."

"Your timing sucks."

"Ouch. That's awful harsh. Not that I don't deserve a lot of harshness from you. I do. I know I do. But I sure didn't expect you to turn me down tonight. Baby, we've always had that. No matter how mad we were at each other, we always had that way to make each other happy."

"Not right now. I'm confused enough."

"And here I thought I made my intentions so incredibly clear."

I laughed. It wasn't really that good of a joke, although she had delivered it well. But the absurdity of the situation was overwhelming. When my anger had faded, there were only two ways I could respond to such a thing. Since I would be damned if I were going to let her see me cry, I laughed. The only problem was it made my tongue hurt. I stuck the ice cube on it and gestured to the living room.

Kim preceded me as we walked to the couch.

"Tell me why you're really here. I know you didn't come all the way from Atlanta to get laid."

"Chicago, actually. I lied to you about Atlanta. I've been in Illinois the whole time."

"Okay, that's another time you've surprised me tonight. This is getting old. I don't understand. Why lie to me about it? Didn't you think it was enough to leave me the way you did?"

"That wasn't easy you know! You think it was easy sitting there while my mother talked to you on the phone? You think she didn't tear into me the moment you hung up? If somebody gave her the choice she would've picked you over me nine times out of ten. Still would, probably. Both of them always liked you. Especially Dad."

"I like them, too. Felt like visiting them a couple of times in the last few years, but I just never knew how to bring it up. I mean, once we weren't a couple anymore...and it's not like..."

"Like we were married."

"Yes. One of my bigger regrets. Not every guy is able to say he gets along with his in-laws. I think they sense it, too. Every time we go to Wrigley Field, your Dad busts my chops about it. I miss those afternoons with him. I never got to do that with my dad. Wheelchairs were harder to accommodate back then, and of course every time we went anywhere, he

was always worried someone would start up with the crap about being a baby killer or something. He was gone before public opinion changed enough to start being proud of the Vietnam vets. Going to the Bears or the Cubs with your Dad always..."

"Can we stop talking about my parents, please?"

Something in the way she said it. I knew. "Tell me."

"Dad died last year."

"Shit."

"He loved you, did you know? He pushed for me to call you. Especially when the cancer was getting bad. He made me promise to get back in touch with you. He made me promise to...well, to fill you in, I guess. To tell you the whole truth."

"I'd sure love to hear it. You weren't exactly forthcoming."

"What was I supposed to say? Marry me or I'm going back home?"

"Better than leaving me stranded at the fucking airport after an international flight! In the middle of the night! Jesus, Kim! You can't really expect me to act like you're the victim here. You left me, not the other way around. I never wanted you to leave."

"You weren't exactly spending a lot of time ring shopping."

"No, but you never complained about it either. And don't even try to pretend you weren't just as fond of the way things were as I was for a long time."

Kim leaned back, sipping the drink in her hands. The thin tendrils of steam caressed her cheeks and curled around her eyelids. She closed her eyes and luxuriated in the warmth for a moment, and I felt again the stirrings from the chemistry between us. Lust and the memories of years together warred with the ache in my legs and the vision of Angie in the afternoon sun in Central Park. A little devil in the back of my mind tried to convince me that no one would ever know.

"You're right. I was content. I felt like you would never take me for granted if you knew I could just up and walk out."

"Just like you eventually did."

"That was a low blow. Yes, I guess I did. Something changed. But it wasn't whether or not I loved you, damn it! I always did. I still do."

"I find that awful hard to believe."

"I'm here, aren't I? Remind me, who was sitting here naked waiting for you to come home an hour ago?"

"Sex isn't love, Kim. We both know that."



"This isn't some one-night stand. Do you really think I would fly all the way out here and sit and wait for you to come home like that without the very best of reasons? I'm not here for the sex. Not that I'm against the idea. And I don't believe you really are either."

Kim slipped one leg up on the couch, and the robe parted to show her inner thighs before continuing.

"We were together for ten years."

"And we've been apart for five!"

"Yes. Five years that I've missed you, five years since someone touched me in quite the right way. My body remembers the feel of your fingers all too well."

"Stop it, Kim."

"Damn it! Why? I sat here playing with myself for hours, waiting for you. I'm fucking horny! It's not like you're with anybody."

"You're wrong."

"No, I'm not! I told you I called ahead and asked. And don't try to tell me you're doing that secretary of yours either, even if she does have a key. A woman can tell. She may want you, but she hasn't had you yet! Even with what I.." Kim stopped, a look filled with intuition and deduction hardening her eyes and creasing her brow. "No. That's not the secret she was hiding. But look at your face. I know you better than anyone on the fucking planet, Jim Roberts! Tell me. And you can start with where you really were this weekend."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I really was in New York."

"No you weren't. You hate New York. Every time you come back from there you're frazzled and frustrated. You were relaxed and smiling until you saw me. And you're tired. I can see it in your eyes. Shit! You weren't there on business, were you?"

"No. But speaking of business, I repeat; that's none of yours. Not anymore. Where are your clothes?"

"Hanging in my closet. Why?"

"It's not *your* closet. Because I'm putting you in them and sending you back to your hotel."

"I don't have a hotel."

"What?"

"I can't afford it. I didn't come here for money, I promise. But that doesn't mean I have a lot of it, either. I was kind of planning on sleeping with you."

"Plans change." I got up, fully intending to march to the closet that had once been hers, get her stuff, and call a cab.

"Jim, I'm serious. I can't afford a hotel. I don't have the budget for it."

"I do."

"Please don't do this."

"I have to."

"I'm sorry. I swear. Please, don't make me go to a hotel. There are four extra bedrooms in this house and unless I miss my guess, not a single one of them has been touched by anyone but the maid service in months."

"Kim..."

"I promise I won't sneak into your room in the middle of the night. I promise I'll behave, at least just as long as you do. Please? You're tired, I can tell. You're snapping off one-word sentences and your hands are on your hips. You don't really want to wait for a cab and all that. Please?"

"I don't think... Oh, fuck it. Alright, take the corner guest room."

"That's all the way at the other end of the house!"

"Exactly. I do believe you'll keep your word about not sneaking into my bed but I want plenty of space to talk myself back into sanity if I try the same thing."

Kim smiled at that, and I wanted to kick myself for not repressing the urge to be cute and flirtatious. It didn't help that every word of it was true.

Kim stood, the robe falling in such a way to give me a glimpse of something that I really didn't want to see. She knew it too, although I wasn't sure if she did it deliberately. She shook her shoulders and head so her hair settled, took the coffee cup and the empty bottle of Guinness, and walked back to the kitchen.

"By the way, what's her name?"

"Whose?"

"Don't even fucking try it, big boy. I'm not that dense. There's no way I'd be sleeping at the other end of the house if it weren't for her. You haven't changed that much in five years, I'm sure. So spill it."

"Her name is Angie."

## Chapter Five

I slept, although I'm not sure how. Despite feeling there was no possible way I would be able to sleep, I did. What I should have done and didn't was turn off my alarm.

So, too few hours later, I was awake again. I stumbled into the shower, shaved, did the normal morning routine. Just like it was any normal day. It wasn't until I got to the kitchen that I consciously remembered why I was so tired.

Kim was reaching for the sugar on the top shelf in the pantry. The way her hands stretched over her head made the normally knee-length robe ride up to a point that woke me faster than any caffeine could.

"Obviously you still don't use sugar in your coffee, or this wouldn't be up so high. Good morning. Although I'll be damned if I know why you're up and dressed. You can't seriously be going to work today."

Kim smiled, grabbed a mug, and poured me a cup of coffee. She held it out to me and lifted her own

"Yes, I'm going. I have things to figure out, and not just about you. Why are you up? You were up just as late as me."

"Maybe. But this doesn't feel like seven a.m. to me, either. More like nine. Besides, I'm used to being up by now."

"Since when? You were always one to stay in bed as long as you could. I can't remember you getting up with me more than once a week, or even being awake when I left. How is it you're awake and chipper this early in the morning?"

"Some things have changed." She didn't look at me as she said it, and I made a mental note to bring that up later.

"Well, thank you for making coffee. I appreciate it."

"Here. Take this, too." Kim handed me something wrapped in a paper towel, and I noticed that the coffeemaker was not the only appliance that had been used that morning. The scent of bacon and eggs wafted from the small parcel. I unwrapped a corner and peeked in at a

bacon, egg and cheese sandwich on a bagel.

"Alright, who the fuck are you and what have you done with my ex?"

She laughed. "Like I said: some things have changed. Go ahead, go to work."

"Oh, and I should just leave you here alone?"

"I was alone when you got here. Relax. If I wanted to clean out the house, I could have done it any time in the last five years. Keys, remember? Honestly, I'd rather you were staying here so we could catch up. Since you're not, go do what you need to do and hurry back to me. We still have a lot of talking to do."

I walked into the front entrance hall, grabbing my keys and phone off the hall table. As I backed my car onto the road, I pulled out my phone and flipped it open to link with the Bluetooth.

There was a long crack across the face of the screen, and the Motorola showed a distinct disinclination to power up.

"Damn it!"

I turned the radio to the loudest, angriest music I could find and cranked it.

When I got off the elevator and walked into the office, Gabrielle's eyes got as big as saucers. Clearly she hadn't expected me. I crooked a finger at her and walked into my office. She hurriedly locked her computer screen and followed.

"I'm surprised to see you. Why didn't you call?"

I pulled the broken phone out of my jacket pocket and slid it across the desk. "We have insurance on these things, right?"

"Of course. Okay, let me explain."

"I think that would be a very good idea. You can start with explaining why you didn't warn me that Kim was there. Damn it, Gabrielle! You need to say something other than that I 'really need to call' you before I come home."

"I couldn't, boss."

"Why the hell not?"

The question had an odd effect on her. She actually seemed to relax at the intensity of my inquiry.

"I'll tell you someday. It's really not that important right now. I'm sorry I wasn't more direct. What happened?"

"Where? In New York or on the set of *Days of Our Lives* at my

house?"

"Whichever one you want to tell me about first."

I sighed and sat back in my chair. "Jesus, where do I begin? How much time do we have?"

"You have no appointments. I cleared your schedule. I didn't expect you today. Did you want me to get you some coffee and breakfast?"

"Only if it's for you. I already had some." Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "No wait. Actually, I would love some more coffee. If you don't mind, that is."

As Gabrielle left to grab us some liquid energy, I decided to bite the bullet right away. One thing the business had taught me was that the longer one waited to reveal a surprise, the more impact it had. Positive or negative. I grabbed the phone and dialed New York.

"Bristol, Greene & Schmidt."

"Good morning, is Ms. Montgomery in?"

"She is, Mr. Roberts. One moment please."

It only rang once.

"I miss you."

"Hi, Angie. Hey, I need to talk. Something crazy has happened."

"Yes?"

"I got home last night and... Well, how do I say this? She's not my ex-wife because we were never married, but she might as well be. Kim was waiting for me."

"I've heard the name before, but I don't think you ever referred to her quite that way."

"Yeah, well it ended rather painfully. It's her that I was talking about when I said I didn't want to mess up the weekend by talking about it. You know, the thing that hurt me so bad?"

"I remember."

Gabrielle came back and walked quietly into the room, setting two cups of coffee down. I saw her eyes glance at the caller ID display on the phone, and then she leaned in and kissed my cheek.

"Jesus!"

"What?" Angie exclaimed.

"It's just... Well, I swear I will never figure out the female of the species!"

"Would it surprise you to know that we feel the same way about men?"

"No, I guess not. Anyway..."

"Jim, I have a confession to make, too."

"Oh?"

"Gabrielle and I have been talking about this already this morning. She's very worried about you, and she's very protective of you."

"I guess. So, what do you know?"

"Probably less than you think. I know you were together ten years, and I know how it ended, although she doesn't know why. Says you never talk about it."

"I don't really *know* why."

"What?"

"She never gave me an explanation that rang true. The most I've talked to her in the last five years is in the last five hours."

"So, what now?"

I could hear the hesitation in Angie's voice.

"I... don't know. I guess I'll at least get the answers to some questions that have bugged me for a very long time."

"Jim, I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to do it directly. I have to know. Do you want to get back together with her? And...not that it will change how I feel about you...but did you sleep with her?"

"No! God, no! That's the last thing I need. I'm already freaking out. I mean, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted. Besides, you severely under...um...well, I think you get the idea. I'm getting a very weird look from my secretary right now." The laughter that echoed through the phone was both very real and very relieved.

"I can imagine. I think you better talk to her. I have a lot to accomplish this morning, and I'm three hours further into my day than you are. Jim, I have to say this. I wouldn't blame you if you had slept with her...but I'm glad you didn't. I know I don't have any right to say that; we haven't talked about anything of that nature. But, it's true. Do what you need to do. I won't get angry. Not in that way, at least. Thank you for being open and honest with me. You have no idea how important it is. What you do with your head is far more important to me than what you do with your... um, other head. And, Jim..." she took an audibly deep breath. "I know it's awful early to say something like this, but... I love you."

My heart smiled. "I love you, too, Angie."

"As long as we keep that in mind, we're gonna be fine. Talk to Gabi."

She really is worried. Call me later, okay?"

"I will."

I looked up at Gabrielle, who had a worried expression on her face. Rightfully so. I didn't say anything, just looked at her. No mean expression, no words, no gestures. I wanted her to respond without me having to give the hint.

"I have even more to explain now, don't I?"

"Yes. Yes, I would say you do."

Gabrielle fidgeted for awhile, then gave a slight shrug of the shoulders and made eye contact with me. A torrent of words began to pour from her.

"I didn't know what was going to happen and I needed to talk to someone and then when Angie called to see if you were going to come in, we started talking. She was worried because you weren't answering your cell and she doesn't have your home number and she just thought it was odd that you hadn't contacted her and then I started telling her and..."

"Whoa! Slow down! I'm not angry. I haven't got room in my head to be angry. Too many crazy things going on. Let's start with how you found out Kim was back."

"I went over to the house on Sunday. I was just checking up on it. I do that sometimes, you know, when you're on trips. I mean, I know I didn't have to go before Monday, but I just wanted to be ready."

"Got it. You know you can stay there anytime you want when I'm gone. We've covered this before. And?"

"Well, the house seemed... out of sorts. Things were out of place, and the bed hadn't been made. It seemed odd, but I just figured you had been nervous. So, well, I started straightening things. Then Kim walked in. I didn't hear her car. We were both pretty surprised to see the other. I think we both had interesting conclusions at first. She was very...aggressive towards me."

"You mean she treated you like we were lovers, don't you? That would fit with Kim."

Gabrielle blushed immediately. "Yes. She acted very indignant and demanded to know my name and business and told me she was your wife. So I told her I knew better and that she didn't belong there anymore and she needed to leave. There was some...negotiation. At length, she convinced me that it was best for me to keep quiet and let her surprise

you. I started second-guessing myself on it immediately, but then it was too late to do anything about it."

"I really do wish you had warned me."

"I would have if you would have come to my place or called when you landed—like I told you to!"

"I was tired."

"Yes, I gathered that. Based on just the little bits Angie told me, I'm not surprised. I doubt you slept much last night, either"

"A little. But I couldn't stay there once I was awake. It just seemed like the walls were collapsing on me. So I walk out to the kitchen, and she's being all domestic and stuff. I don't get it. The Kim I lived with for ten years burned water! Coffee was a challenge. It was almost a bigger surprise than her being there to begin with."

"Speaking of which... Did you...?"

"Did I what? No! Damn, I thought you overheard that already."

"Then why is she still there? Why didn't you send her to a hotel?"

"I don't know. I tried... but we have a lot of history and... Well, it *is* nice to see her. I just wonder what would've happened if she had shown up two weeks ago."

"Would you have gone to New York?" Gabrielle's look was intense, as if daring me to downplay its significance.

"No. No, I don't think it ever would have come up. At least, not for a while."

"Then I'm glad she didn't show up two weeks ago. Boss, listen to me. You've told me a lot of things over these last five years. Your friends and clients have told me more. And you have been a completely different person since you decided to fly to New York. It's like the person you were when you were on the phone with Angie expanded to take over the rest of the time. Everybody's noticed."

"What do you mean *everybody*?"

"Everybody. Clients, associates, even the UPS guy. You have a different demeanor."

"And you're bringing this up to me why?"

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. She started to speak three times and stopped. She looked like she knew what she wanted to say but was afraid to say it or was looking for a way to say it differently. I decided to force her hand.

"Just say it. You're afraid I'm going to end up back with Kim now."



"Yes, damn it!" Gabrielle had never raised her voice to me like that before. "That is *exactly* what I'm afraid of! I never saw you when you were with her, but I saw how you were in the aftermath of her. I dealt with it for years! I've heard all the stories...and not just *your* stories, either. I've heard stories from plenty of other people. I know what she did to you, and I know how she acted. Do you really think she's changed that much because she figured out how to make breakfast?"

"I'm not going to go back to Kim." I interrupted, but the words kept rushing out of her.

"Big deal, she figured out how to handle a frypan and the difference between Mr. Coffee and Starbucks. It doesn't turn her into Betty Crocker. She's still the self-centered little witch who left you stranded at the airport in the mid..."

"I'm not going to back to Kim."

"Then why is she still in your house?"

"I'm neither a blushing virgin or an oversexed nineteen-year old, Gabrielle. I can handle having her in my house. And since when did you become my mom, anyway? If I recall correctly, you're not that much older than me."

"Six months. Thanks for the reminder. I won't let you screw this up, Jim...I mean, *boss*."

"Oh, come on now. I didn't say it like that to pull rank on you. Look, I know you're worried and I know you approve of Angie and not of Kim. Don't worry. Yes, I have to admit I still feel things for her. But I'm not blind to her faults like I once was."

"Promise you won't fuck her."

"Gabrielle!"

"Well? Can you promise me that?"

"I'm in disbelief here. I don't believe what I'm hearing. Do you know that in five years I've never heard you say that word before? No. I'm not going to promise that, because I honestly don't know what is going to happen in the long run. But I promise you I won't be doing it anytime soon."

"I don't trust her, boss."

"I don't trust her either. Something isn't right. Something other than the things she told me. I just have this feeling that she's hiding something. She's acting weird."

Gabrielle snorted at me. "You mean, other than showing up and

letting herself in five years after leaving you stranded at the airport? Other than waiting up to pounce on you after you finally got together with a woman of quality instead of some twenty-one-year-old blonde bimbo with a shampoo commercial and a Miss Tropicana title?"

"Gabi! Yes, other than all of that. For one thing, not only did she lie to me about her whereabouts, she got her parents to do so as well. That surprises me. Losing them as in-laws was almost as bad as losing her. We always got along. Even being supportive of their daughter, I don't understand why they never told me. I stayed in touch with them for a couple of years after she took off, you know. Remember the... What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You never called me that before. It's always been Gabrielle."

"I'm sorry."

She reached out and rested her hand lightly on top of mine for just a moment, then shook her head as though to clear cobwebs out of it.

"Don't be."

"Okay...Gabi. I won't. You said you cleared my schedule?"

"Yep, sure did. You really should still be in bed. Alone."

"I'll sleep later. Right now, let's figure this out."

"We'll work on it until noon. Then I'm ordering in Chinese, and you're laying down on that nice big leather couch you never use and taking a nap. I don't want your judgment impaired by fatigue when you head for home."

"Like I said, since when did you..."

Gabrielle's hand covered my mouth.

"That one I don't want you to say again. Please?"

"Okay. I won't."

"Thank you."

"So this is what doesn't ring true to me. When I got home last night..."

## Chapter Six

The sounds of raised voices and a door being slammed snapped me from sleep.

"I told you, I'm not letting you in there. Mr. Roberts' life has been turned upside down quite enough by your sudden arrival. I may be at a disadvantage elsewhere, but not here!"

Gabrielle's voice wasn't loud, but her tone was somewhat less than professional. It didn't take much thought to figure out who her opponent was. I mean, it could have been an over-aggressive Xerox rep, but I felt the odds were against it.

"You're gonna move out of the way and shut up, bitch!"

Ah, the dulcet vibrato of Kim in action mode. The memories that brought back were... well, disturbing.

"No, not here, I'm not. I don't know what your agenda is, but I'm not going to allow it. You're leaving. It's up to you whether you do so by yourself or with a security escort, but you will leave."

I sat up and tucked in my shirt. I had no idea how long I had slept, but Gabrielle had been right about needing it. Standing up, I headed for the door, intending to prevent the confrontation from becoming physical. I didn't get there before it was thrust open and Kim stormed in to my office with Gabrielle right behind.

"Hey baby. Hard day at the office?" Kim glanced at the arm of the couch where my suit jacket and tie were draped. She walked further into the room.

"Just trying to recover from someone showing up uninvited and keeping me up all night, if you must know."

"Mr. Roberts, I'm sorry. I did try to prevent her from coming in."

"I know, Gabi. It's alright. How long was I out?"

"It's coming up on five o'clock, actually. I was going to come in and wake you soon."

"Anyone come by or call?"

"Other than *her*?"

"Nice manners." Kim's voice dripped with the sarcasm she reserved for people she believed to be the doomed competition.

"Mr. Johnson called, but didn't expect you to be in. He was just making sure you were still on for golf on Thursday. I assured him that part of your calendar was unchanged. Ms. Montgomery called twice, but said not to disturb you, that she would call back. Then *she* showed up and..."

"I'll take care of it, Gabi. Thank you for everything today."

"And just how much does he have to thank you for, sugar? Hmmmm? Is that why he was so tired? Tell me, Jim, is this the same couch that..."

"Enough!"

Gabrielle's face had hardened as Kim continued, and she blanched a bit at the last reference before I cut Kim off. I gave her a sardonic smile to indicate that I could handle it. Gabrielle's arms crossed and her head tilted. You don't work with someone for five years without picking up on certain danger signs. I braced myself for what I felt was coming when the phone began to ring. Gabrielle shook her head crossly and returned to her desk to get it, leaving the door open.

"Kim, what *are* you doing here?"

She ignored me for a second, looking at the office like she had never seen it before, lingering on things familiar or new. She stopped when she saw the new display box for my favorite collector's piece.

"Hey, is this the same gun that you got from the guy that was married to that fat actress? You had it cleaned since I saw it last. Did they ever prove it belonged to that Tombstone lawman?"

"Wyatt Earp. Yes, it's been authenticated. Even the bullets in the belt are the correct date and manufacture. I asked what you were doing here."

"I wanted us to go out for drinks and dinner. We have so much to catch up on, and I thought it would be perfect. I really want to spend the time and the effort. I thought you were going to come home early so we could talk?"

"I didn't say that, you did. Kim, you do understand that my feelings about you being here are extremely conflicted, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. I can see that they would be. But you know I always get what I want in the end. And what I want right now is you."

Kim moved closer to me and slipped her arm around my waist.

"Excuse me."

I used Gabrielle's perfectly timed interruption to extricate myself from Kim's grasp. "Yes, Gabi?"

"That was Michael Johnson. He said that he and Tracey would meet you at the Brewery. He also said that Jack was definitely coming and that Rob and Emily were a strong maybe."

"Thank you, Gabrielle."

"You're welcome, *boss*." She closed the door behind her this time. I frowned at the tone, but needed to deal with someone else at that moment.

"Uppity little wench for a secretary, isn't she?"

"Knock that crap off, Kim, and I mean *now*. Gabrielle was the wall I leaned on for a long time after you pulled your little disappearing act, and I won't stand for you to badmouth her. Got it?"

"Okay, okay." She smiled that sneaky little grin of hers, the smug disconcerting one that usually got me in trouble. "Are you mad that I called all the old gang?"

"A little. I'll also admit to being a little impressed by your savvy. You knew there was no way I was going to take you out solo."

"Yes."

The phone on the desk rang once.

"Well, I never said you weren't a sly one. Very dirty trick, Kim. But you were right... I would blow off just you, but I won't blow off everybody."

"Then my plan worked perfectly. "

Gabrielle stuck her head in the door.

"It's Ms. Montgomery calling back."

"Thank you, Gabi. Please put her through." I picked up the phone at the first hint of sound.

"Jim?"

"Hi, Angie. How did your day finish up?"

When I said her name, Kim's eyes went wicked. She began to walk towards me with an all-too-familiar roll in her hips.

"I've been pretty distracted. I called a couple times earlier, but when Gabi said you were sleeping, I wanted to wait instead of having her wake you. Have you had any more complications with your wayward ex?"

"You could say that. You could say that I'm having them as we

speak." Kim went down on her knees in front of me and reached her hands toward my belt. I slapped them away.

On the other end of the phone, Angie broke into laughter. "Actually, Gabi warned me she was there right now. I'm sorry, I couldn't resist teasing you. Is she giving you the evil eye?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, like I said this morning, I trust you. Don't get overly worried. I'm not going to judge you on her actions. I can't say I like the situation, but it's not nearly as disturbing to me as it is to you. It doesn't change anything that happened between us. Listen, I was thinking of booking a flight out there so I could come weekend after next. I need to book now in order to save on the ten day advance...but I thought I should double-check with you, all things considered."

I spun around to get Kim's fingers away from my zipper. Unfortunately, she responded by grabbing my ass in both hands.

"Please, Angie. I really would like that very much."

"Done. I'll book a flight for next Friday. Oh, and Gabi told me about Kim's little set up for tonight. Don't worry about me, okay? Go out. Maybe she'll let some new information flow when you get her around a big group. I'll talk to you in the morning?"

"I'd like that, but my cell is broken. I can call you when I get here."

"Angie said Verizon dropped off a loaner." Apparently, the women in my life knew more about that life than I did.

"Oh, great, then I'll call you as soon as I get moving tomorrow."

"I look forward to it. I miss you already, lover."

"I miss you, too. You have no idea."

"Have fun, stud!"

I started to say that was entirely unfair, but Angie had already hung up. So, I turned to the woman at my feet and said the same thing, with a markedly different attitude.

"That wasn't fair. And it wasn't very funny either, so you can quit laughing."

"Oh, but it *is* funny. Very funny. If you could have seen the expression on your face..."

"Yeah, well it's not exactly something I was expecting to have to deal with. Why are you doing this to me? Why are here?"

"I told you, baby, I missed you. I missed everything about you. I sure as hell missed the way your dick feels as it slides in and out of my

mouth."

"Stop it, Kim."

"Why? You're not married to her. Even if you were, she's a couple of thousand miles away. I love that you were sleeping on this couch today. Remember when you first put it in the office here? Remember the day I came in to meet you for lunch and you insisted that we christen it? You sat on the couch while I crawled between your legs and you wrapped my hair around your fingers while I..."

"Damn it, Kim, I said to stop!"

"What the fuck! What happened to the devil-may-care adventurer who didn't care where we did it? What happened to the guy that wanted to taste it all, and do it with me?"

"His girlfriend left him stranded at the airport in the middle of the night while she ran away. He changed after that. Answer your question?"

Kim sighed. "I really am horribly sorry about that. If I had everything to do over again, you have to believe that I would do it differently. I never wanted to hurt you. It killed me to think how much you must be hurting. But in the frame of mind I was in at that moment, I didn't feel like I had a choice."

"Of course you had a choice. Don't play that card with me. For one thing, you could've talked to me about things instead of just taking off."

"No. I really believed that I had to leave, and if I had given you a chance to talk me out of it you would have. That's why I left when I did, the way I did. I never stopped loving you though."

"Listen, maybe we should blow off this outing after all."

"No, I don't think so. I think it's important for you to see that we can still have fun together. Especially since you aren't letting me touch. I can't figure that one out. I can see it in your eyes, Jim. You want me. That hasn't changed."

I groaned. "Of *course* I still want you. That's not the point."

"Yes, it is."

"No, really, it's not. You're beautiful, Kim. Sexy, alluring, dangerous. Every man you meet wants you."

"And you have me—right here for the taking. Say the word and I'll strip for you. I'll throw you down on that couch and ride you. I'll..."

Kim's cell phone rang at that moment. She stopped mid-sentence and looked to see who was calling. The momentary tension that had appeared in her shoulders eased. A decision passed across her face

before she answered the call in the *'everything is wonderful'* falsetto honed to perfection during her modeling years

"Michael! What? I thought you two were going to meet us there? Okay, no problem... We'll be right down." Kim hung up and crooked her finger at me.

"C'mon, sexy man. It's party time for us." Kim flounced out the door, glancing over her shoulder to make sure I was following.

I was. I followed her out the door, turned to Gabrielle's desk and reached for her arm. "We're right behind you!"

"What?" Both Kim and Gabrielle spoke in unison.

"Oh no, she's *not* going. I didn't invite her. She's not part of the group and never was." Kim's voice and the way her fist rested on her hip revealed her feelings about my sudden decision.

"For once, I'm in agreement with *her*. I'm not prepared for this. I have no desire to go." Gabrielle's eyes drilled holes of disapproval through me and out the back of my skull.

I used my eyes to plead with her to change her mind. For a moment our gazes met and warred with one another. Neither of us gave ground.

"James, why would you want to bring little miss killjoy along? Let her go home and attend to her knitting. Or whatever it is she does with her hands to pass her lonely nights."

The glare that Gabrielle shot at Kim was full of malice. "Let me get my purse. I'd love to join you."

\* \* \* \*

The Brewery was hopping for a Tuesday night, the result of a local radio promotion. The music, louder than usual, made conversation all but impossible, requiring us to shout even to order.

Kim thrived in that environment. The strong rhythms echoed in her hips and shoulders. Twice she drug me out to dance, and there were moments when I caught myself forgetting the years that had passed and remembering the way she had looked the night before. Remembering those times when we stayed out all night while vacationing in Mexico, stumbling back to our hotel room at dawn. Making love as the night faded from the skies and falling asleep in each other's arms.

Once again her hands snaked over my shoulders as a Latin beat came over the sound system. "C'mon, baby. Let's move." Kim ran her fingers lightly across the back of my neck.

"Actually, I promised Gabi," I said quickly, catching my secretary's



hand from the table and pulling her up with me.

"About time you remembered, boss!" Gabi yelled over the music.

I thanked the stars again that she was so quick-thinking, although I had never imagined that it would be to my advantage in that kind of a situation. Kim's eyes flashed in the darkness, but there was little she could say without coming off as a total bitch.

I led my secretary onto the floor, and spun her around. The loose black skirt she had worn to the office flared up around her legs and then settled back. She caught my other hand and pulled me in.

I smiled as Gabi's hips began to move, and I realized that she knew what she was doing. Dance lessons from long ago surfaced in my mind, and I responded to her energy. We quickly fell into step together, my hand on the small of her back. We *danced* together. Not the gyrating near each other that is often called dancing together, but two people responding and moving as one.

Just as we made a great team in the office, we made one on the dance floor. She responded to my smallest signals, our hips together and our feet in sync. No need to push at her, just a flick of my wrist or a meaningful glance.

The music ended before I was ready for it. The syncopated Latin sound was replaced by a looped seventies sample with a hook and monotone lyrics. Unremarkable, at best. I could tell Gabi felt the same way from how she broke out of step. I smiled at her, and she beamed back. Our moment of escape from the reality of the evening was over. Reluctantly, we headed back to the table.

Even from across the room, I could see that Kim was fuming. The spell she had tried to cast all night had been shattered by one dance with Gabi, and we both knew it. A detached part of me wondered how she would react, while old instincts tried to tell me to comfort her and show her she was still the one. Yet a third part was resisting the urge to glance down at Gabi's ass while we walked. I wondered what Angie would think of my predicament and was instantly sure that her first reaction would be a mixture of sympathy and amusement.

I watched Kim's face as we approached and saw her cycle through possible reactions. Her face settled on a slightly bemused look, and I somehow felt sure that a wickedly sarcastic comment was coming when we sat down. But just before we got there, puzzlement replaced it and she picked her phone up from the table. Although we couldn't hear a ring

over the music, it had been doing a merry little dance as the vibrate function worked.

Kim stood while we were still a couple tables away and headed toward the lobby.

Gabi leaned in to my ear. "Okay, the vixen is leaving for a moment. Does that mean your bodyguard can use the little girls' room?"

"Sure," I shouted back. "Go for it." Gabi smiled at me and dashed off.

I sat down and took a long pull at my beer before looking at my companions. Tracey was shaking her head with a smile on her face. The other three were deeply involved in some kind of half-shouted conversation of their own.

Michael was just looking at me and grinning.

"What? What are you grinning at?"

"Don't you know? I swear, man, most guys would kill to be you right now. I guess your karma is finally turning, man."

"Tracey, what the fuck is he talking about?"

"Nothing. You know what Michael thinks with most of the time. Personally, I don't envy you at all."

I looked at her with confusion. "Alright, you two. Obviously you know something I don't. You want to explain what that is? Seriously, I..."

Kim grabbed me and pulled me around to face her, jerking me from my train of thought. "C'mon, let's go!"

"Huh? Why? This was your idea and now that I'm actually starting to enjoy myself, you want to leave?"

"Yes."

I looked at Tracey and Michael. Michael was trying to avoid looking at us, probably thinking he was being subtle. Tracey mouthed a silent admonition not to worry about them and waved at the front door.

"I can't just leave Gabi here, Kim. It's rude at the very least."

"You invited her, not me. I told you it was a bad idea, too!"

"What is your problem? I'm not leaving."

Kim eyes rolled skyward as Gabi's hand came to rest on my shoulder. "It's okay, boss. Get out of here. Get some sleep, too. You should actually try to work tomorrow."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm leaving anyway. I already called a cab." Gabi slipped past

me and said something to Kim that I couldn't hear over the music, but from the tone and the expression on Kim's face, it wasn't something she cared for at all. The only part I caught was the very end:

"...because if you don't tell him, I sure as hell will!"

Gabi grabbed her purse and stalked off, clearly upset about something.

"What's going on here?"

"I'll tell you at home. Let's go."

We said our goodbyes rather quickly, with all the promises about getting old friends together that normally turn out to mean you'll see them at the next wedding or graduation, and left. I tried to get Kim to talk on the drive home, but she was quiet. For the first time in the whirlwind of the last two days, she didn't try to seduce me, either.

I wasn't certain what that meant, but I knew that whatever it was had changed Kim's plans and that Gabi had somehow figured it out. It had to be related to the fight between them. That was when everything changed.

I parked the car. When we walked inside, Kim went directly to the liquor cabinet and pulled out the good scotch and two glasses. I hung up my jacket and watched somewhat bemusedly as Kim poured.

"For someone who usually avoids the hard stuff, you're pouring an awful large helping for yourself. You do realize how potent that is, don't you? Twenty-five years may make it smooth but it doesn't make it less intoxicating."

"I need it. You will, too."

"So tell me what's going on."

Kim sighed dramatically. "I'm not ready for this! Why did that bitch have to chose *that* moment to come around the fucking corner?"

"What did I tell you about badmouthing her?"

Kim took a big swig of her drink as she handed me mine and turned to walk into the living room. "Whatever."

I couldn't figure out the change in Kim's behavior. I followed, trying to figure out what could be going on. She settled herself on the couch and tried hard to look like she was ignoring me. I stalked around her, deciding how to approach this situation.

"Alright, tell me. Whatever it is, Kim, I think you'd better just say it."

"I didn't want to tell you this way. I wanted it to wait. I wanted to

get to know you again; to make sure. You're just going to leap to the wrong conclusion now. Listen, Jim. I want you for *you*, do you understand?"

A suspicion began to form in me, one that I had five years ago and had dismissed because I had never found any evidence of it. A guy assumes certain things when a woman just leaves him all of a sudden. True, we hadn't been married, but we had been committed to each other for ten years. Leaving without saying why has to have more of a reason than the ones she gave me.

"Then that nosey little secretary of yours came around the corner just when I was saying goodnight to him. She heard me say I loved him, and she started right in on me. Now she says if I don't tell you all about Noah, then she will."

"You mean that all the time you're pulling this shit you've got another man back in Chicago? Jesus fucking Christ, Kim!" I should have been happy to hear it. I didn't want to get back together with her anyway. There was my escape route. There was the reason I could turn her away and not feel like I was betraying all the things I had felt the previous five years. There was the way I could stay true to myself and still have Angie.

"He's the reason you left me five years ago, isn't he?"

"Well, yes. Absolutely. After all the things we had talked about for so many years, everything you had expressed to me. I knew you would be mad at me, call me irresponsible and who knows what else. So I left. I'm sorry. I really am. I mean it."

"And yet now you want me back? After five years of pain, you think you can just waltz back into my life and turn back the clock and make it like you never left? And you're still with the man you left me for?"

"Oh, Noah and I will always be together."

"But you greet me naked except for a fucking tie? What the fuck?"

"Jim, Noah is our son."

## Chapter Seven

"Did she tell you?"

"Damn, Gabi! Can I put my keys down and take off my jacket?"

I walked past her into my office and threw my jacket on the couch. I sat at my desk, fired up the computer, and leaned back, ignoring the tapping sound of Gabrielle's foot as she impatiently waited for me to respond. When I was done logging on, I opened Yahoo! to the photo album I had made Kim share with me the night before.

"Well, come here. Come see the pictures of my son."

Gabi gave a little squeal, betraying the fact that she was as excited for me as she was mad at Kim. She rushed over and together we browsed through the two-dozen pictures of a blonde little boy playing catch with his grandfather and chasing the dog.

"Oh, Jim. He may have her hair but there is no doubt he has your eyes and your chin. I'm just so.... Jim, we never talked about... I mean... How do you feel about finding out you're a father?"

"You know, if you would have asked me a month ago if I ever wanted children, I would have told you absolutely not. Somehow, this is different. The rational part of me still sees all the same reasons not have kids, but I look at these pictures and all I want to do is meet him and tell him I'm his Dad."

For the second time in two days, after never having done it before, Gabi kissed me on the cheek. "You're gonna make a wonderful father! When will you see him?"

"Oh, it's gonna have to be a couple weeks. I can't be taking another sudden cross-country trip. I haven't done any work in five days. I need to get my backlog taken care of and then work ahead a little bit so that I can stay for more than a weekend. Plus, we have to find a place for them out here. Mother of my child or not, I'm just not comfortable with having Kim move back into the house at this point."

Gabi straightened up at that and moved around to sit in the chair

across from me. "Hold on now, boss. I can understand you're excited. But you can't seriously be considering helping Kim stay out here? I understand about Noah, but his mother is another story."

"Gabi, a child needs two parents, not one. I should know."

"This isn't the fifties and you are certainly not Ward Cleaver. I know that you have a lot of regret over the times you never got to spend with your father. Having him die so young. I absolutely want you to get to know your son, to spend time with him and take him to Disneyland. If I don't miss my guess about your ex-whatever's income level, I also think that you're going to be spending a fair amount of money. You'll want him to have the things you didn't have when you were a boy. I understand and agree with all of that."

"Then you'll understand that we need to help Kim get established here. A place to stay. If it were certain that Kim and I were going to be together, I would just rearrange the house. As it is, I just don't like the messages it would send to a four year old when his mom and dad are living in the same house but with bedrooms at opposite ends."

Gabi got back up and started pacing in front of the desk, clearly agitated. "Jim, when did the possibility that you and Kim were gonna get back together come up?"

"I have to think about this, Gabi. A child deserves two parents. It isn't the same as it was before I knew this."

"Of course it is."

"No, it isn't. There's another person involved now. I want my son to grow up in a normal family environment. Maybe that means I have to make some sacrifices."

Gabi paused in her pacing to give me an exasperated look.

"How normal do you think the environment is going to be if Dad is always bitter or unhappy? Or do you expect me to believe that this changes the way you feel about Angie?"

I could feel the blood rush to my face. "Of course it doesn't change how I feel about her. But it might change the way she feels about me, and it most certainly changes the way we're going to have to proceed from here on out. I have a family now. I have to make decisions based on what is best for everybody, not just for me."

"You getting back together with Kim is not best for *anybody*!"

"Who said I was getting back together with Kim? Did I say that? Angie will be here a week from Friday. I'm not changing that, and I'm

sure as hell looking forward to it just as much as I was twenty-four hours ago. Maybe more. Don't you think you're overreacting a little bit here?"

She was silent for a moment, giving it real thought instead of just shooting back defensively. It was a trait I had always admired in her. "Okay, maybe a little bit. A minute ago, when you said that it wasn't a sure thing that you would get back together with her, it sure sounded like you were considering it. It seems to me that when we talked last night it was a lot closer to making plans to get rid of her than it was about helping her stay."

"Last night, it was. The situation is just more complicated now."

"I see it as pretty simple."

"How do you figure?"

"I don't agree that being a father to Noah means you have to be anything more to Kim than you already are. There are a lot of divorced parents out there. It's not like he's gonna be the only kid in kindergarten whose parents aren't together. It's not even uncommon, and it hasn't been for a long time. My parents got divorced when I was seven."

"I don't want my son to grow up seeing me once every six months, Gabi. I'm gonna buy a place where they can live out here. I want him to be close. It won't be all the time. Among other things, I don't want to take him away from his grandmother. With both my parents gone before Noah was ever born and with Kim's dad passing last year, she is the only grandparent he has left."

"That's understandable."

I relaxed slightly with the agreement from her. I could feel some of my tension leaving.

"So I'm thinking that we'll have him and his mom come out during school breaks and things like that. At least for the next few years. But probably for the next couple months, they'll both be here. Kim needs to be able to pay her own way. She's going back to school, finishing her degree. I've decided I'll help with that."

"Out here or back in Chicago?"

"Here."

"Don't you see what she's doing?" Gabi sighed and shook her head. "It's not going to stop. I know enough women like her. She'll keep at it. She'll keep pushing, and one of these nights she figures she'll succeed. She'll have you right where she wants you."

"That's not going to happen. I know *what* I want—and *who*. I

promise you, Gabi. Kim is not it. I just found Angie. I'm not letting her go."

"Good. Because I don't trust your ex. I think Angie is the best thing to happen to you since I've known you, and if I have to beat you about the head and shoulders a few times to make you recognize that, then I will."

"Oh? Going to beat me now, are you? How do you know I won't like it? Tell me, Ms. Wilson, how long have you owned that riding crop and leather corset?"

Gabi went bright red. As soon as I realized what it was I had actually said, so did I.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. That wasn't very professional. I apologize."

"It's okay, sir. We don't exactly have a formal relationship in the office anyway."

"No, but we've always respected certain boundaries."

"Stop apologizing already. It's fine. You just... caught me a little off-guard." Gabrielle turned and headed for her desk. For the second time in twenty-four hours I caught myself letting my gaze travel down before I focused back on her head, just in time to make eye contact. "Should I dial Ms. Montgomery?"

"No, I talked to her on the way in, thanks. I told you, I'm not letting her go."

"And?"

"And she's very excited for me and maybe a little shocked. But she's not nearly as worried about this as you seem to be, I must say."

"She's worried. She just found the man of her dreams and then his ex-whatever shows up naked in his house. Just as soon as she has a day to recover from that, she finds out he has a son he never knew about. Now her new man is making plans to put the ex through school and buy her a house so they can stay close to him, even though she's all the way on the other side of the continent. Angie is many things, but she certainly is not a fool. She's worried, boss. She just figures you have enough to think about without adding her feelings to the mix. Sound right?"

I had to agree, it sounded exactly right. I knew how calm Angie was when something went wrong in a business deal, and I had no reason to believe that just because this was personal instead of business she was going to react differently.

"Yes. I guess so."



An evil-minded look crossed Gabrielle's features. "You want me to call and snoop out her real feelings on the matter, boss?" Gabrielle grinned and the mood was lightened considerably by the reminder of a deal that had nearly gone sour a few years back until Gabrielle and the client's wife got together behind our backs and saved both he and I from making big mistakes.

"No, I think this one is best handled above board. Although I suspect you're going to be talking to her anyway. You two have gotten quite close, haven't you? Just what exactly have you been discussing behind my back?"

If they needed a picture next to 'poker-face' in the dictionary, they could have done far worse than a close-up of Gabrielle at that moment.

"Why, nothing. Nothing at all."

"Sure. I believe that. Okay, how about we get some work done?"

\* \* \* \*

Over the course of the next couple days, I threw myself into work. The best way to avoid Kim was to be at the office. It also helped me catch up on things that had fallen to the side over the course of the last week, things I needed to get done with an upcoming visit from Angie and a trip to Chicago in my near future.

I canceled my golf date with Mike and the guys for the first time in years. They squawked at me about it a bit, and Mike made several jokes about me being "too tired from swinging at home," but it was worth it to avoid an afternoon of questions about Kim. By Thursday night, I had reduced my paperwork pile to a manageable mountain. Thankfully, a steady stream of client meetings and conference calls kept Kim out of my office. She conspired to be in my shower when I got home on Wednesday, and she showed a penchant for walking around in sexy underwear that didn't quite fit with my memories, but for the most part, I was safe.

I considered myself lucky she hadn't realized what the sexiest outfit I ever saw her in was. It used to drive me insane when she would wear my dress shirts around at night. If she had remembered, I might have been both more tempted and short on clean shirts.

Oh, I was tempted. The physical attraction that had always been so compelling had not lessened. However, my resistance to it had grown, or rather my ability to deny short term rewards for long term gain. Even so, Kim was still something akin to a drug to me. I couldn't be in her

presence without part of me wanting to throw her down and ravish her. So I did everything I could to keep her busy. We looked at the area for condos and contacted a couple of real estate agents. We made plans for her to look at places with one of them for the weekend: Friday evening, Saturday morning, Sunday afternoon.

Kim was happy I was being so active in trying to help her find a place, but the truth of it was that I wanted her out of there before the following Friday. I didn't want to go through the argument when I kicked her into a hotel while Angie was visiting. I figured that if we could find a place quickly enough, I might not have to go there. I explained my plans to Angie before leaving for home on Thursday afternoon.

"Jim, you're never going to get her moved out by next week. The woman and I are going to have to meet sometime. We could shock you, you know. We could actually like each other." Angie's smirk was clearly revealed by her words and tone.

"Sure, like that's gonna happen. We'll pick you up at the airport, go to dinner at Medieval Times and then come back to my place and all fall in bed together. We can even film it and sell it on the internet. Hey, maybe I can get Spielberg to direct. He's a friend of a friend; he might go for it if we cut him a share of the profits."

Angie giggled into the receiver. "Okay, okay. You don't have to be so melodramatic about it."

"I'm sorry, baby. This whole situation is driving me batty. It's absolutely unbelievable. So much has happened in the last six days. When I'm talking to you I feel like we've been together for years, but we never even touched until last Friday." I began to put my things away, straightening up my desk for the night.

"That's only true on the surface. We've talked about this for years. It's been more than flirting for a long time. How many of our conversations over the last eighteen months hovered on the edge of phone sex? I don't even want to count how many times I've fucked myself thinking about your voice. I was beginning to think I was going to have to hit you upside the head with a baseball bat to get you to wake up. Sweetie, we may have never kissed until last weekend, but we've been lovers for years."

"I agree. I'm just amazed that I didn't see it for so long."

"I always figured you would see it when you needed to. I surprised myself with that self-invite a couple weeks ago. I guess I finally decided

I was finished waiting. It was perfect when you had the same thought."

A couple of rusty gears in my head clicked when she said that. "Too perfect. Angie, I have to ask this: did you put Gabrielle up to getting us together?"

"No. I really didn't, Jim. As a matter of fact, it's one of the ironic twists in this whole situation that I still haven't gotten over. When you told me that she bluntly pointed everything out that morning, it surprised me. Not in a bad way. There are just some things I would really like to talk to her about."

"Yes, I have questions I want to ask her, too. Right now isn't the time, though. I'm all done here for the evening. It's time for me to head home and see which high school seduction game is being tried tonight. I'm still shocked you aren't mad at me about this."

Angie gave the same response she had the last few days: "It makes no sense for me to be mad. You didn't create this situation, and there's next to nothing I can do from here to change it. Besides, even if she did manage to trick you into bed, it wouldn't change the way things exist between us. Not in the long run. How many women have you slept with since we started talking about non-work issues, Jim? Ten? A dozen? Have I ever shown a shred of jealousy?"

"Never. I don't understand why though."

Angie sighed heavily. "I'm not sure you ever will. But a girl can hope."

"If you say so, lover. Okay, I need to switch to the cell phone."

"Oh, I can't. Mr. Greene's assistant came down with the flu bug from hell. I have to go to court with him tomorrow. I'll have to spend the last couple of hours before bed getting ready for the morning. I'm sorry, baby. I won't be able to talk in the morning, either. By the time you get up, we'll already be in session."

"Damn. What about the afternoon?"

"Court never lasts past five. I would say that by two o'clock, I'm all yours."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"Please do. I know exactly where you can hold me."

I smiled as the memory of Angie's naked body in my arms jumped to the front of my mind.

"Alright, I'll talk to you tomorrow afternoon. Goodnight, gorgeous."

I set the phone down with a sigh. Time to hit the road. I wondered

what Victoria's Secret special was going to be Kim's wardrobe that evening. For a woman that claimed to be nearly broke, she sure spent a lot of money on underwear.

## Chapter Eight

Gabi looked up at me with a smile as I entered, but her expression instantly changed to one of concern.

"Wow, do you look frustrated. I don't have to ask who's responsible, but what did she do to cause it? Seriously, Jim, you look like you could shoot someone without a touch of remorse."

"I don't want to talk about it." I walked past Gabi into my office. Being Gabi, she followed.

"Oh, no you don't! I know you didn't talk to Angie this morning, and I can see you have something you need to vent. I can't let you carry it around all day. We do still have work to do around here, and there is no way I'm sending you into a morning meeting with Mrs. Blake with it on your shoulders."

"You really want to know?"

Gabrielle just glared at me. If she had a whip handy, she would have cracked it. As it was, the pencil in her hands was in mortal danger of being snapped in half.

"I woke up, and she was in bed with me."

"Boss, you didn't..."

"Of course not! Don't you think if I was going to do that I already would have? No, I distinctly remember hitting the snooze button at six, and she wasn't there. I fell back asleep, and when the alarm went off again at half past, I rolled over and her tits were in my face! Stop laughing, it's not funny!"

My admonition only made her laugh harder. "If you could see your face when you said that." Gabi tried to say more but she couldn't get it out. She was laughing so hard; she tried to reach for the back of a chair and missed. Falling to the ground only increased her mirth. She rolled on her side, gasping for air. "What...what...what did you do?"

I could feel the blood rushing to my face. "I kind of pissed her off."

"How?"

"I called her Angie."

She lost it again. I waited patiently and tried to control my own laughter, which was threatening to break through.

"Better now?"

"Much. How about you, boss?"

I couldn't help but smile. Then, I was grinning. Then a chuckle escaped me. "Yes, okay, I admit it. It's a little funny. But Kim didn't think it was."

"She wouldn't, now would she? How did you get hooked with this girl anyway?"

"It's a long story that involves dancing in Tijuana and a cheap hotel room, and there is no way we have time for it now. How long do I have before Blake gets here?"

"An hour if she's on time...so you really have an hour and a half. Then you have two conference calls and lunch with Murdoch at the Yard House. It would be best if you were back here by one so we can discuss your afternoon schedule. You okay now?"

"Thanks to you. Someday I'm going to actually pay you what you're worth."

"I'll believe it when I see it, boss."

Gabi returned to her desk and I booted my computer.

\* \* \* \*

At five minutes 'til one, I got off the elevator and strolled back into the office, a smile to reflect my successful morning plastered to my face. Gabi looked up as I opened the door.

"I like what I'm seeing. Does that smile mean what I'm hoping it does?"

"Pshaw! You doubt me?"

"Never had a need to, boss."

"Wow, what a morning. Gabi, I feel like I got a whole week's worth of things done in just a few hours."

"That's good boss, because you needed to. That trip to New York and your upcoming one to Chicago have us in a bit of a crunch, even with how hard you've worked the last couple days."

There wasn't anything I could really say to that. Gabrielle stood as I entered and grabbed her purse, pulling out her keys.

"Leaving?"

"Yes, but I'll be back in about forty-five minutes. Catch up on your

email. I'm going to be in and out of the office running errands all afternoon. I do more than answer phones and keep you in line, in case you forgot." Gabi smirked at me as she walked toward the elevator.

I went into my office and started cranking through my emails, voicemails and a couple files Gabi had left on my desk. After about a half hour, the phone gave the double ring that meant someone was calling on my private line. I glanced at the clock, realized it could be Angie and snatched it up.

"Hey, baby! Whatcha doing?" The wrong voice came through the receiver.

Despite my attempt to seem pleasant, I'm sure Kim recognized the disappointment in my voice upon hearing hers. I told her the morning had been a success.

"Of course. Did you remember to print out those two listings I wanted to show the realtor?"

"Damn! I forgot. Tell you what; I'll do it right now, okay? What time are you meeting up with her?"

"Around three. I'll swing by and get them on my way. Are you going to be busy or can you come along?"

"I've got a pretty busy schedule today. You know, Friday and all. I can't talk now. Call me later, okay?" I hung up the phone and made a mental note to ask Gabi what I could be doing around three that would keep me out of the office. I really didn't need to see my ex that afternoon. I printed out the two condo listings she wanted and put them in a manila folder with Kim's name on it, which I tossed to the corner of the desk and erased from my mind.

A few minutes later I heard the door open. "Gabi? You back already?"

"What do you mean, already? It's ten minutes to two. I brought you a surprise."

"I hope it's something intoxicating." The door to my office opened as I finished the last detail on a press release and initialed my approval in the corner.

"You seemed to think so this time last week."

I couldn't believe my ears. I looked up quickly, certain my hope had deceived me. It was true. There in the doorway stood Angie. I leapt from my chair and rushed to her. She met me in the center of the room, leaving her bright red rollaway by the door.

My lips found hers and everything else faded for a while. I remember dropping her equally bright shoulder bag on a chair, the taste of cinnamon Altoids on her breath, and a smothered giggle from Gabrielle. But I couldn't tell you the order in which I noticed them.

"God, I missed you, Angie."

"Um, I can tell. I think my lips are bruised. Has it really only been four days?"

"It feels like years. I want you. Now."

"Right here in the office? I like that."

"Good." I let my hands drop to her hips and spun her around to lean against my desk while I renewed my attempt to purple those red lips. My tongue found hers, and they wrestled for a bit before I took control and pushed hers back into her mouth, following it and pulling her as tightly against me as I dared. Her breasts pressed into my chest, and my hand was snaking around to grasp her ass when I felt it hit something. I moved to nibble her neck while I glanced down.

It was the folder with Kim's name written across it.

"You know what? I've changed my mind. This isn't fair to Gabi. Come to my house. I want to make love to you in my bed."

"How about you fuck the shit out of me instead?"

"That, too. Come on. The sooner we get there, the sooner I can get you out of these clothes." I reached past her, grabbed the keys off my desk and pulled her to the door, catching the handle of the rollaway as I walked by. Angie laughed and grabbed it from me.

"Aren't you even going to say thank you?" Gabrielle stood by her desk; arms crossed fiercely and foot tapping. But the broad smile gave her away.

I let go of Angie long enough to grab her and wrap her in a bone-popping hug. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said. "Very welcome. I like seeing you happy." Gabi leaned over to kiss me on the cheek, squeezed my hands in hers, and smiled before moving over to hug Angie.

They held each other tightly for a moment, then Angie ran her fingers lightly down the side of Gabi's face and mouthed the words, "Thank you." Gabi just kept looking from me to Angie and back. Her smile spoke volumes.

"Okay, enough. Go on, you two. I've got errands to run, and I'll be in and out of the office. Call my cell if you need me. Not that I expect to



hear from you for awhile."

I dragged my giggling girlfriend to the elevator. When the doors closed, I pulled her against my chest and reached down to hike up her skirt.

"Why would you wear a skirt on an airplane, Angie?" I asked, hoping I knew the answer. She smiled.

"So I can do this, of course." She took a step back from me, reached beneath the skirt and slid her panties off. She folded them neatly and teasingly tucked them in my shirt pocket before straightening my tie. "And this time you better not wait to get me home to take advantage of it, either. Hmm, blue tie. It's not the same one as..."

"Yes. I can't let her win by ruining my favorite tie for me."

"Maybe I can help with that." Angie loosened the tie and slipped it over my head and down around hers, tucking it under the collar of her button-down white blouse. "How's it look now?"

"Beautiful." I crushed her in my arms again.

I didn't wait to touch her. As we sped through the early afternoon traffic, I pushed her skirt up. Every time we hit a stretch where I could pull a hand off the wheel, my fingers found first her lips and then mine. I loved the taste of her. Angie smiled halfway there and reached into the back seat where I had tossed her bag.

"Oh, damn! I had something special for this moment, and now it's not here." Angie pulled out her cell phone. "Call Gabi," she spoke into it. I heard the ring and the sound of Gabi answering. "Hey, it's Ang. No, nothing like that. Listen, baby, we forgot my carry-on at the office, and I had that little surprise in there. Yes, that one. Could you be a doll and bring it by later? Thanks, gorgeous. You, too." Angie hung up and smiled at me.

By the time we pulled into the driveway and I parked, her shirt was unbuttoned and pulled out, as was mine. As the car stopped and we stood, she let it fall back off her shoulders and threw it at me. I ducked and it sailed past to land on the steps.

Angie laughed and ran to the front door. I retrieved the shirt and tossed it inside while I opened the door and shut off the alarm. Angie's shoes soon joined it on the tiled entryway.

"Which way?" she asked, and I pointed down the hall. She backed down it, her eyes focused on me as her bra came off her shoulders to fall on the floor. The skirt soon followed. She stopped, standing before me in

thigh high stockings and the tie. I kicked my shoes off and started down the hall. I pulled my own shirt off to match her, grabbed the undershirt and pulled it over my head. She wore only her stockings and my tie. Her brown hair framed her impish smile, and the sparkle in her eyes was more than I could bear. I leapt forward and caught her in my arms.

I kicked open the door and threw her onto the bed, then slid my slacks and boxers off and dived after her. She tried to hit me with a pillow, but I caught it and threw her beneath me. I pinned her arms and attacked her breasts with my teeth and lips, sucking and nibbling while she shrieked and struggled.

I wrapped my arms around her and slid the head of my rock hard cock up against the wet opening of her pussy. I sucked her tongue into my mouth as I pushed inside of her.

Angie's eyes closed and a long moan escaped her. I pushed forward until I could go no further. Letting go of her, I propped myself up. I wiggled my hips, and she sighed as I moved inside of her.

"Remember how you made me ask? Remember how you made me say *please*?"

"Oh God, Jim, you can't..."

I smiled and pulled back, slamming into her as hard as I could. Angie's mouth opened and her head went back. The air rushed in and out of her lungs as I attacked her with a ferocity that surprised even me.

"I'm gonna fuck you until your thighs are sore from the pounding, and then I'm gonna take you over my lap and spank you for that." I punctuated each word with another thrust, holding myself above her and watching her breasts shake as our hips connected. Each time I dropped into her she moved back a little until the pillows stopped our progress. The bed shook under our assault.

Angie's hands reached under my arms to my back, and her nails dug in. She wasn't clawing me. She was bracing for the impact. Her fingers tightened, and I could feel the edges of her nails. I wondered if she would actually draw blood, but I didn't care. All that existed was us. The way the muscles inside her clenched my cock, like they would never let it go. The incredibly loud gasps for air that both of us made. The strong, wet silk of the place where we had become one.

Her pussy gripped me greedily as I pulled back, and her arms strove to pull the rest of me inside her as I let myself fall, sliding my cock into its natural sheath. I dropped to my elbows so that I could kiss her and

awkwardly turned my neck until I could capture a nipple. Taking it in my mouth, I bit down as hard as I dared and was rewarded with a cry of surprise and pleasure. Her hips leapt off the bed to meet my next thrust.

I continued to rock my hips while I leaned forward and sucked her tongue into my mouth. She savagely struggled to take it away as I continued to hammer her. When I tried to pull my head back, she locked her teeth around my tongue. I changed my rhythm and gave three short thrusts to surprise her, but she wouldn't let go. I reared back and pounded her as hard as I could, and she gasped and released me. I leaned over and locked my own teeth on the side of her neck, around the blue silk ribbon of the tie she still wore. Something within her let go, and she wailed her joy into the ceiling. Her legs locked around mine, her ankles pulling against my calves, and then the fingernails deep in my back raked down as her orgasm surged through her.

I continued to rock inside her as the waves calmed and then captured her tongue with mine again. Her hands left my back to curl into my hair, and she pulled my lips hard against hers.

My urgency backed off enough to allow a bit of teasing. "I thought you couldn't come from just straight missionary?"

Her eyes looked up at me intensely as she very clearly said, "Fuck you."

"Yes, you just did. Well? Care to explain what just happened?"

"You've been playing with me in the car for half an hour. You figure it out. Now, come here." Angie pulled me to one side and I rolled over, but she rolled too, so that she was on top of me when we finished. "I want to ride you until you come, until I come again. My god, I missed you. I missed your hard dick inside of me where it belongs. Missed it in my pussy. Missed holding it in my mouth while it pulses." Angie began to rock back and forth on top of me, lifting up and sliding down. The head of my cock never quite left her pussy, the tip of it rubbing against the front wall behind her clit and the folds grinding against the thick hair that surrounded the base of my hard dick. Blue silk hung between her breasts and tickled my abs.

Angie's eyes never closed as she built her rhythm. She called my name several times, and I could tell she was approaching another orgasm. I bit my lip in the struggle to hold back. She saw it and knew what it meant. Knowing I was about to come seemed to turn her on more. Her strokes came faster, and I could feel the effort in her thighs

and see the slight tightening around the corners of her eyes that meant she was going to come soon. It was a playful race we were both determined to win.

Angie didn't play fair. She leaned back down and put her head next to mine and bit my ear. "Fill my pussy with your come, Jim. Then I'll suck you back hard, and you're gonna fuck me in the ass."

That did it. I lost the race. My legs locked and my mouth opened and called out her name. As the first shudder ran through me, I felt it answered in her and knew that it had been a close race. Our bodies shook in each other's arms. She collapsed against me, and we said nothing for a while, just kissing and being there. Finally, her eyes flickered and she opened them to stare into mine.

"Don't forget, you owe me a spanking."

"I won't. Why did you leave this on?" I wrapped the tie in my fist and used it to pull her face to mine.

"Like you said. We can't let her win."

Laughing, I rolled over and kissed her again before I stumbled to the bathroom. I twisted the cold water on, filled the cup and gulped some down before plunging both hands into the stream.

"Oh my god, baby, that was awesome. I missed you so much!" I splashed water on my face. The cool liquid trickled across my shoulders as I ran my wet fingers through my hair and straightened up. I shook my head and let the droplets spray against the mirror. "C'mon and take a shower with me, and we'll figure out where to go and get some dinner. I don't know about you but I'm..."

My thoughts fled as a scream shattered them. I spun away from the sink to the doorway of the bathroom and came face to face with the business end of my 1889 .41 caliber Colt Navy. I wondered if Wyatt had ever seen it from that angle.

"Kim, put the gun down!"

"You son of a bitch! How could you?"

I glanced quickly over at Angie. Despite the scream, she looked much more controlled than I felt. She was inching her way across the bed toward me, a pillow clutched in front of her—a pillow that would do no good against a bullet.

Kim stood at the end of the bed. The antique revolver was pointed at my heart, held one handed like she was an actress playing a gunslinger. The weight of it clearly surprised her, as the muzzle was

swaying wildly. Her shoulders shook with sobs, and her face was stained with mascara from her tears.

"How could you do this to me? How can you be here with this... this slut when I've been throwing myself at you all week? Aren't I good enough? What does that bitch got that I don't?"

"Kim, look at me. LOOK AT ME! I do care about you, Kim. Do you think I would be spending all this time and effort to find you a place to live otherwise? But we're not like that anymore. You left me, remember? You left me, and you never even told me why. I didn't even know we had a son until a few days ago. Put the gun down, Kim. Please." I put my hands up to try and hold her attention.

"Tell me why I shouldn't shoot you. Tell me why I shouldn't blow your fucking brains out." The hammer began to move back as Kim's finger tightened. In panic, I tried a new tactic.

"Kim, stop! Kim, listen to me! Are those the bullets from the case, Kim? The ones from the leather belt? Kim, those bullets are over a hundred years old. They could as easily blow up in your face and kill you as hit me. Don't do this."

A second of hesitation flitted across the other emotions on Kim's makeup-stained face. I tried pressing my advantage. I stepped forward haltingly.

"Don't do it, you asshole! I'll shoot your girlfriend!" The gun swerved to point at Angie.

"Kim, NO!"

"Why not? I'll just shoot the bitch, and then you'll have no one to love but me."

"Listen to me, Kim. If you shoot her, I won't love you. I'll hate you. I'll never forgive you. You'll go to prison, and you'll never see me again. I'll go get Noah, and you'll never see either of us again."

"Fuck you, Jim! Leave him out of it." It worked. Kim swung the gun back to point at me.

"We can't. What if you shoot me? What if you kill me? You'll go to jail, and Noah won't have a father OR a mother. You don't want that. You don't want to shoot anybody."

Kim's eyes glazed, and the blood in my veins froze as I saw the decision in her face.

"You're wrong. She dies."

As Kim swung the gun around again I did the only thing I could

think of: I dove for her arm, trying desperately to botch her aim, to somehow cover the six feet that still separated us in time. In slow motion, I watched the hammer come back and fall forward as I reached out. With a sickening feeling, I knew that I was a split second too late.

There was a small pop and a hiss of escaping air, but no bang of smoke and powder; no whine of a bullet. My hand reached the gun and pushed it toward the ceiling as I realized that it hadn't fired.

Behind me, I heard Angie scream my name as though she were miles away. I struggled with Kim, trying to wrest the gun from her. I held her arm up and lifted my other hand to pry it away. Then, disaster. My foot slid. The cold metal of my belt buckle skidded beneath me, and I found myself stumbling backward. I lost my grip on Kim's arm. I caught my balance on the bed, my back to my assailant. I saw the fear in Angie's face and tried to turn around.

Just as Kim's hard blue eyes came back into focus, they were obscured.

An explosion of sound and smoke filled the room as something punched into my left side and spun me through the air to land against the far wall. The sharp pain and the shocked look on Kim's face told me what had happened even as my left arm began to go cold. Angie was suddenly next to me, her eyes full of tears. She looked down at me, and I followed her eyes to see the red flowing from shoulder and chest. Something went hard in her. She stared at Kim.

"You bitch! You really shot him!"

"Yes. And you're next. I'll teach you to steal my man, you slut!"

I saw the tightening of her finger again and then a red blur from the doorway whizzed by, knocking Kim sideways. There was a loud bang as the gun blew apart with a crack of split metal. A spray of plaster from the wall above our heads rained on us. Gabi followed the piece of carry-on luggage through the air. Her fist knocked the remains of the Colt from Kim's bloody hand. My tiger secretary tackled Kim and sat on her chest while Kim screamed in pain, clutching her mangled fingers.

I heard Angie screaming for the phone as I slumped against the wall. The last thing I remember was Angie crying into the phone that an ambulance was needed. Then everything went black.

## Epilogue

"Are you alright, sir? Can I get you anything?"

I hadn't realized that my groan had been so audible. I'd been trying to put my tray table back and slipped, jarring my shoulder.

"Yes, honey, are you okay?" Angie took my hand and looked at me, her eyes filled with love and concern.

"Thank you, both. I'm okay, really. Just a little bump."

"Well, ring me if you need anything. We've got about fifteen more minutes until we land at O'Hare."

"Thank you. Are you really okay, Jim? Do you want another pain-killer?"

"I'm okay, baby. I just slipped. No more pain pills. I don't want to meet my son in a drug-induced haze. He's got enough to deal with; his mom's in jail, and the father he's never met is about to walk off the plane bearing the evidence that put her there. Jeez, maybe we should have waited."

"I think five years before meeting his dad was long enough." As usual, Angie got right to the heart of the matter. "I'm glad you're not waiting. His mom's been unstable for a long time. He needs a better parental influence in his life."

"I still can't believe it. I have a son."

"A dream come true?"

"I had a lot of dreams come true recently, baby. Maybe a couple too many. I didn't need the nightmares to come true along with the good ones."

The mischievousness came back into Angie's eyes, evicting the worry over my slowly healing shoulder.

"We're going to make a lot more of the good ones come true—just as soon as you're strong enough. I have plans. But we will make at least one come true on this trip."

I winced as the jet hit a batch of rough air and jolted my shoulder. "Baby, maybe we should wait on that. I don't want to sound like I'm

taking you for granted already, but certain, um, appetites of yours might be a mixed blessing over the next few weeks."

The clear, ringing laugh that had been the first part of her I fell in love with filled the airplane cabin.

"Not that, silly man. We'll be careful. I was talking about you taking your family to Wrigley Field."

I took my fiancée's hand and looked into her eyes. "That we can do."



**Rebirth**  
**by Petula Caesar**

無くなった情熱を見つけること

*Will Belegon, Petula Caesar, Sarah Dickson, and Stella & Audra Price*

## ***Also by Petula Caesar***

*Lipstick and Other Stories*

Our marriage wasn't in bad shape. We had just become used to each other. We were complacent in that dangerous way that could easily be misconstrued as dislike. We were busy with our jobs and our lives. She was a pediatrician, and I was a reporter for the local newspaper and did some freelance writing on the side. Sometimes her work days were twelve to fourteen hours long. When I was on assignment or had multiple deadlines, I was in my office at the back of the house for hours at a time. We didn't always make time to nourish our relationship.

It wasn't that we were foolish enough to think it was self-sustaining, but there was nothing horribly wrong with it. We didn't argue or fight or anything like that. I had no desire to leave our marriage. My wife is meant to be my imperfectly perfect partner in life, and I've known that since I met her. But like anything else that you do for a long time, even if you do it well, our marriage had become tedious, predictable. We try to spice things up, sure. But even those attempts take on a sameness after a while—the same types of new lingerie, the same types of candlelit dinners. Even our freaky, special occasion sex came to be the same set of activities and positions and toys. Not like when we were younger.

Most people don't consider secrets good for a marriage, especially if the marriage isn't doing as well as it should. I guess most people have the idea that if you feel the need to keep something from your partner, the thing you're keeping must be something that would be detrimental to the relationship. And some people just think spouses should share everything with each other—even the secrets they may be keeping for others. But sometimes revealed secrets can help a marriage. Sometimes secrets help you recall things you need to remember. Sometimes life makes you so crazy and has you running so fast in so many directions all at the same time you don't even have time to review the mementos your brain has collected throughout your life and enjoy them. Sometimes that is exactly what you have to do to make a love last a lifetime—to remember the beginning that drew you to a person, and connect the past with the present. If you do it right, and if your partner hasn't become someone impossible for you to connect with, it can breathe life back into something that might have been dying right before your eyes without you even noticing it.

The resuscitation began one night after dinner.

Koko was clutching the letter in both hands to her chest, tears quietly running down her face as she handed it to me. It was a thick sheaf of papers written in Japanese. I hadn't read any Japanese since college twenty years previously, and as I scanned the characters, trying to pick out what I could decipher, my wife's voice interrupted me. I couldn't concentrate on the letter and listen to her at the same time, and just as I was about to ask her to let me read the documents myself before we talked, I found a word I actually knew.

I looked up at my wife. "*Danna?*"

She nodded her head, and sat down next to me. Hands outstretched towards the papers, she reached for several at the back of the pile. She pulled out the English translation of what I had been trying to read and put it on top so I could see it. I allowed her to do this as my brain tried to wrap itself around the meaning of the one word I had recognized. *Danna* meant *husband* in old Japanese, but was not used in that context as much as it was used to mean the patron of a *geisha*—a man who had entered into a regular, ongoing, presumably sexual, sometimes even romantic relationship with one of these special women.

"Koko, what is this about?"

She shook her head slowly as she lowered her eyes. I was terrified that she was going to tell me something that would rip our world apart. "My mother," she whispered.

I continued reading from the English version of the letter. It was from a law firm representing the estate of her late mother's *danna*. I felt a tightness around my chest. I looked up again, long enough to see that my wife was crying. I felt tears well in my eyes, not just for her pain, but for mine too. I know all those old jokes about husbands who don't like their mothers-in-law, but that was never the case between me and Aki Ishikawa-Hardiway. I had always loved Momma Aki, meaning *autumn*, as I had come to affectionately call her, if for no other reason because she was partly responsible for creating the woman I adored. When her husband Sam died, Momma Aki had come to live with me and Koko. Six months later Momma Aki passed away, too.

I couldn't speak, so I continued to read. The letter went on to explain that a Mister Harishimo Narisoto had bequeathed much of his estate to Momma Aki many years earlier, and Momma Aki had asked that it be held in trust until she died, then distributed equally among her

heirs and their families. My wife Koko had been her mother's only child, so she had received this letter. There were still a lot of blanks that needed to be filled in, and Koko would have to fill them in for me.

I put the papers down, and looked at my wife. She still would not look at me. "Momma Aki... a geisha?"

"Yes."

"Did you know?"

Koko paused. "A little, yes. Not all of the details."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing. I was hoping Koko would find a way to begin to talk to me about what was going on without me prompting her.

"My mother did not think you would understand. This was how things were in the *Yoshiwara* of that day. She didn't really want me to know, but this same lawyer sent her a package when her *danna* died a long time ago. My mom wasn't home that day, and I signed for the package. That was when she told me what little she told me, and she made me swear to never tell anyone, even you."

I tried to understand that Koko was only respecting her mother's wishes, but I felt bad that as close as I had felt to Momma Aki, she had never shared anything with me. I knew she was very private about her days in Japan with everyone in the family, but I still felt Mamma Aki should have known I would have understood. Koko should have definitely known I would have understood. Back in college, Koko and I had studied Japanese together for two semesters; it was how we met and started dating. I certainly wasn't a prude or a person who would be disdainful about the practices of other lands.

"What can you tell me?" I asked as gently as I could. I went back to reviewing the letter as she spoke, and her words explained much of what I was reading.

"Before my mother came to the States and became a successful business woman, she was a geisha in Tokyo. She was part of the *Yoshiwara* community." I remembered reading about it in college—*The Nightless City* it was called.

"The *ukiyo*," my wife continued, "the 'floating world' of pleasure and entertainment, was where my mother worked, how my mother survived and supported herself, and where she met the man that became her *danna*, a successful, well-to-do, married business man. They were together for a good while before the war began, and even after."

I nodded, remembering my history. When World War II ended the United States occupied Japan for a number of years, flooding the nation with GIs. My wife took a breath and went on.

"My mother became concerned for her future when the soldiers came. She was in her twenties by then and though her *danna* had always been more than generous with her, she was afraid that the American occupation might force him to give her up since Tokyo was becoming a different place."

"They stayed together?"

"Yes. They remained loyal to each other, staying together through those years of the occupation and even beyond. My mother said they both needed something familiar to hold onto while the world around them was spinning out of control.

"But my mom always assumed her *danna* would leave his wife and marry her one day. It wasn't a very uncommon thing for a *geisha* and her *danna* to wed. She told him how upset she was that they had yet to be married, and he suggested that she might want to pursue an education someplace far away, where she could re-invent herself since he might never be free."

I tried to imagine how this must have hurt my mother in law.

"Her *danna* mentioned studying in London or Paris or Moscow. He also thought that she might enjoy seeing the United States, and my mother was fascinated with the States. She'd read books about American customs and culture even before the war. Once the occupation began, she even learned English so she could better understand and interact with the Americans. She eventually taught her *danna* English, and she made American friends.

"My mom realized that she was an intelligent woman who was not getting any younger, so she agreed to leave Tokyo. Her *danna* contacted business associates he had in California, and he purchased a small house for her in the Valley. He also provided her a small allowance, and she enrolled in college. She studied business, and when a local tea house was looking for a hostess, my mother applied for the job. And you know what happened then..." her voice trailed off.

What had happened was that ten years later Momma Aki owned that restaurant and had opened nine others throughout California, one in New York and one in Las Vegas, all appropriately named *Ukiyo*. She had also married Samuel Hardiway and given birth to Kohana "Koko"

Hardiway. Momma Aki had become a well respected, prosperous, and prominent woman.

I watched my wife's beautiful, pained face as she unfolded the story bit by bit. I found myself staring into her deep water-filled eyes, imagining lotus blossoms floating in them. My wife had always been secretive. I accepted that about her when I married her—that part of her would always be a mystery.

Now I knew it was a family tradition. Many years ago it had been part of her charm. I had been drawn to Kohana, which means *little flower* or *flower child*, by her exotic strange beauty. The coupling of her Japanese mother and her African American father had produced a café au lait girl with long, coarse black hair, dark almond shaped eyes that were seductively tilted at the ends with endlessly long lashes, a pointed chin, a full lipped seductive mouth, a smattering of pale freckles across her nose, and unabashedly voluptuous, rounded curves mounted on a moderately-sized frame.

She possessed a softly lilting voice and an infectious giggle that I would occasionally hear when I would run into her in the quad, surrounded by her girlfriends. She was as remarkably different from those other girls as a calla lily is from a dandelion. I managed to compose myself enough to introduce myself to her and ask if she would be willing to go out with me. She politely told me no, saying she was dedicated to her studies and her plans to become a doctor. There seemed nothing I could do to shake her resolve to avoid dating me, or anyone else for that matter. This went on until we were seniors, when we both turned up in a class called "Japan—The Language and The Culture". It was a course that ran for two semesters.

Sharing a class with Koko gave me an excuse to get to know her a bit better, and it was then that I learned about her mixed parentage. I asked why she was taking the class, and Koko explained that her mother had lived in America for years and that she was satisfying her own curiosity about the side of her heritage that her mother seemed unwilling to address.

Koko had grown up considering herself African American; she lived in a black middle class neighborhood, had spent summers with her father's family in the South learning to cook soul food dishes like fried catfish, collard greens with ham hocks, blackeyed peas with neckbones, and honey glazed ham. She had a deep and abiding love for classic soul

and rhythm and blues music, and I found artists like Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, and Patti LaBelle in her music collection. Koko and I soon became best friends. She shared with me how she was incessantly teased as a child, called a mutt, a half breed, and a mongrel. She was even beaten up once or twice for being so different from the other black kids.

When she became a teenager, young men would pursue her thinking she might offer some kind of wild combination of sexual stereotypes. They wanted their own little combination of video vixen and exotic erotic Oriental girl toy Koko explained. Koko laughed when she told the stories of the crazy things these besotted young men would do to get her attention, but I could only sigh to myself. I guess she really didn't understand that any human male would want to be close to her—to wind his hands around her fragrant hair and press his lips against the softly scented flesh of her neck and shoulder, and perhaps if he was lucky, see the taut tenderness of her nipples and experience the fleshy suppleness of her breasts, her thighs, and her *koshi*.

Even with her presence distracting me mightily, I managed to learn to speak and read basic Japanese over those two semesters. It wasn't a difficult language to learn to speak. It was made up of five vowel sounds, and even when you added the consonants you got very similar sound patterns. The reading and writing were another matter. The lessons about Japanese culture were very eye-opening. Learning about the Way of Daoism was a shock to my Judeo-Christian system because it incorporated sex so naturally within its beliefs. There was no guilt when it came to sex for recreational purposes. There seemed to be an acceptance of the inescapable weaknesses of lustful human nature that comforted me in a strange yet uncomfortable way. We learned about the Daoist philosophers who strongly advocated active sex lives for people of all ages to ward off all kinds of mental and physical illnesses. There was even a direct correlation drawn between the levels of violence in certain cultures and societies and the levels of sexual inhibition that existed in those societies.

Learning about Shintoism with the penis as a symbol of sexuality and fertility amazed me, too. We read about the shrines and festivals that featured carved and polished models of penises made from wood and stone, sometimes standing at least six yards high. Women hoping to bear children would stroke the models or would buy small replicas of the



penises from Shinto priests. To this day, Shinto shrines have these festivals featuring oversized penis replicas that are pulled through the streets while the watching crowds cheer.

Koko and I would laugh as we tried to mentally picture these 'penis parades' as she called them. Watching her luscious lips break into smile and hearing her joyous laugh made me fall in love with her and want her more than any woman I had ever known. We did an extensive research project together on the history of the symbolism of the penis in Shintoism, which led to long nights in the library staring at phallic-shaped objects of all kinds.

One night as we sat in the library reviewing some photos of Shinto shrines, Koko laughed and said, "Two of my dad's brothers went into the Navy and they lived all over Japan before they came back to America. I would eavesdrop when they'd come over to visit my dad. Sometimes I'd hear them talking about how they would come across these things..." she pointed to the model penises pictured in the book, "...in the countryside from time to time. They thought it was just so crazy."

I laughed. "You were sneaky like that? Eavesdropping on adults?"

She laughed too. "Well, yeah. They had been to Japan, and my mom never would tell me much about what it was like. And she forbade them to tell me anything, so it was the only way I could find out anything. It was funny, they never talked to my mother about their travels, but everyone in my family knew she didn't talk about her days in Tokyo."

I looked back down at the photos. She laughed again and said, "It's nice to see you so comfortable looking at the male genitalia."

"I wouldn't exactly call it *comfortable*," I said as my more nervous laughter joined hers. "But I'm trying to keep it in perspective."

"They're so beautiful," she said in a low tone, looking down at the book also. "They look powerful. You can almost feel the...the...life force in them. The electricity. The juice." She looked up at me. "Do you know what I mean?"

Even if I had not a clue what she meant, my penis seemed to understand perfectly. It was getting harder by the minute. I was becoming lightheaded at how quickly the blood left the head on my shoulders to occupy the other one.

She continued to look at me with a steady gaze. Something began to flow through me, and I gently but forcefully took her hand, eased it away from the book, and placed it against my dick, squeezing tight. "Is this

what you mean," I asked.

My boldness caught me off guard, but not Koko. When I pulled my hand away her hand remained, still squeezing. It began to stroke my hardness through my jeans. I glanced furtively around the library, but it was deserted. I slumped down in the chair a bit and closed my eyes so I could fully enjoy her ministrations to me, and then I heard a strange sound that was dangerously close to us. As I sat up to look around I felt something stop me. Now she was kneeling before me, her face in my lap, her hands reaching for my zipper and giving my dick the freedom it so desperately wanted.

I didn't hesitate. I raised my hips, and unbuttoned myself. She slid my jeans down my hips and took my underwear along the way. My *bokii* leaped forward and reached for her, and she brought her face close to it. She stared at it, just stared, saying nothing. Then with the most sexy and loving touch I had ever experienced, she said, "It's perfect."

She bent down and placed her tongue against just the tip of it, rubbing her tongue precisely and luxuriously across the top of the head. My head fell back and my eyes closed. I felt the sides of her lips close around the head, sucking as she continued to lick the tip. I groaned deep in my throat as she sucked, then moved my dick a bit deeper into her mouth, still sucking and moving her tongue across the tip at the same time. I groaned again, and felt my hands involuntarily rise up into the air, clutching the empty space, wanting to grab her head but not sure if I should.

She pulled my dick out of her mouth ever so slightly, then moved it back a bit more deeply than before, and soon I had handfuls of the long black hair between my fingers, spilling out of my clutches and covering my hands. She sucked a tiny bit more forcefully, and it took all I had in me not to cram myself into her mouth. Almost as if she knew the sensations were becoming overwhelming, she eased the suction and moved me deeper into her mouth, then pulled me out, then moved me back in, then pulled me out.

I sighed at the shift in momentum—it still felt so incredible, like I was floating on a cloud of *feels so good*. I released my grip on her hair, only to re-clasp it when she slid my dick into her mouth to the very hilt, and with all of my penis filling that space, she began to suck again.

I came into her mouth with a gut wrenching, totally unsexy sound that filled the room. I was embarrassed. I had never come from a blow

job before, and had never come with such force for any reason. My ears clogged up for a few seconds as I ejaculated as if I was in an airplane. She eased back and my dick slid out of her mouth slowly. My ears popped as the pressure released itself and lessened.

When there was nothing but the tip left in her mouth, she sucked and lapped at it as I sighed and released her hair. Once I had, she completely extricated herself from my lap and sat back in her chair. I felt like a limp dishrag. When I found the strength to sit up, opened my eyes and looked over at her. She was smiling shyly. I pulled up my jeans and re-fastened them. I beckoned to her, and when she moved her face directly in front of mine, I kissed her. We packed up our things and left the library, spending the rest of the night in my dorm room.

I shook myself from my reminiscence and continued reading the letter. Mr. Narisoto had been dead for a very long time. He had been much older than Momma Aki, and had not seen her after she left Tokyo. He continued to support her until she finished college, when she wrote to him and asked that he stop. When Mr. Narisoto died, the executors of his vast estate contacted Momma Aki. His wife had died years earlier of pneumonia and they had no children. Momma Aki had arranged to have the estate held by the executors and given to her children after her death.

I looked up from my reading. "Why do you think Momma Aki wouldn't take the estate when he first offered it?"

"My mother was proud of her independence," Koko responded. "She never felt guilty about being a *geisha*, but it was just a part of the past. She wanted it left behind in Tokyo."

"Do you think that's why she didn't marry him once he became a widower?"

"I think by then she had met my father."

"Oh," I responded. I continued to read, and it was quiet for the next half hour.

She finally broke the silence by saying, "I guess we'll need to contact an attorney."

"Yes, it definitely looks that way," I said. "And it looks like your Momma and her *danna* left us a vacation home they shared many years ago."

"Really?" Koko said. "Wow. That's amazing."

"He must have loved your mother very much," I said to Koko.

"I bet he tried to win her back once his wife died, but knowing my

mom, she wasn't having it."

"Plus, like you said, your dad was in the picture by then."

"Yes. I think one reason she loved my dad so much was because he was so different from anything she had ever known. Everyone used to always comment on how total opposites they were, but they were happy together."

"Sort of like you and me, especially back when we were in school. Remember?"

"Yes. I do remember. People always thought you were so loud and crazy acting, and I was so quiet and studious and reserved. If they only knew."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

We laughed together, and I thought back to the romantic and sexual times of our courtship days. I remembered how once we became intimate all of her shyness and reticence fell away. We consummated our relationship in every way imaginable at every opportunity, and I finally got to fully experience her *ai-no izumi*; her fountain of love. We were firmly in love, heart and soul and mind and body. Our growing sex lives became intertwined with the Japanese we were studying.

In an attempt to bring sex and education together and to amuse ourselves, we would sometimes look up Japanese words and phrases related to sex, or read about Japanese sex habits. It only made sense, especially since our Japanese study sessions tended to end with us fucking anyway. One of the first things we discovered about sex in the Japanese way was that you did not 'come' when you climaxed—you would 'go', which was *iku*. So, back in those days, when either of us came, we would call out derivatives of that word. I remember thinking even as a young man, how fortunate I was to have found this woman. She was my *hatsu-koi*, my first love. I was so happy with her; she turned out to be my last love, too.

As I thought about the idea of being happy with the one you loved throughout your lifetime, my eyes fell to the collar of her loosely wrapped robe, admiring the hint of brassiere and cleavage I could see. I wanted to touch it with my fingers, and then my tongue. I felt the warm shifting in my pants, and my face grew hot.

I was mildly shocked at myself that I was thinking of her in a sexual way in that moment. Koko was still sexy to me, but it wasn't something I really thought about in a constantly conscious way as I once did. In that

moment, I had been admiring her breasts as if I did not know her and could never have her.

I put the pages down on the dining room table and stood. "We can talk about this more tomorrow. I'm getting tired. Or do you want to talk?"

"No," Koko replied. "This whole thing has worn me out. But there is one other thing. The lawyers sent a box also. I haven't opened it. But we don't have to open it now."

We walked into our bedroom, me leading the way. There was a box pushed into a corner. Curiosity tugged at me, but exhaustion drowned it out, saying "tomorrow". Koko took off her robe as I went to the dresser to find a pair of pajamas to put on. By the time I got in bed, Koko was asleep. She had not bothered to dress for bed—the robe was thrown carelessly over a chair, and she slept peacefully in her underwear. Wanting to wake her but not wanting to wake her at the same time, I slid into the bed carefully. I tossed and turned a bit, fighting with my desire before I finally took her into my arms spoon style and drifted off to sleep very uneasily. Her warm skin against mine kept me halfway aroused all night, even in my sleep.

When the sun rose, I was still holding her. I felt her moving in my arms, and I released her. She rolled over and turned to face me. She began to kiss me, morning breath and all, something she had not done for a long time first thing in the morning. I responded to her kiss, enjoying her tongue in my mouth. When she pulled back she murmured into my lips in a playfully questioning sort of way, "*asappara kara no sekusu*."

The phrase jogged a memory from our college days. It took a moment, but finally I remembered. I could see Koko and me together in her bedroom, pressed closely together, naked, with no cover over us. On her desk was a small dog-eared spiral notebook. It had lists of Japanese words and phrases related to sex in it—lists we had put together. It was part of our sex play. I focused my mind on the list itself and suddenly I remembered the meaning. I replied, "Did you just say 'morning sex'? Or something like that?"

She smiled and nodded. I was already more than willing. "Well, since neither of us has any place to go for a few hours..." I replied, happy to oblige. My *bokii* was at full attention.

"You remember that list then?" she asked.

"Oh yes, I do. That phrase was number eighty eight."

"Why did we stop playing that game?"

"I don't know. We got old and busy, I guess."

"Let's play that game now. Each of us will name something from the list, and the other will have to perform the act."

I laughed. "Will we remember enough of the words? Will there be a penalty if one of us can't remember the correct meaning of the word?"

"Hmm..." she said laughing. "Maybe."

"You first," I challenged her.

"*Ai-name*." She paused, and then said it slightly differently. "*Rokuju kyu*."

I closed my eyes so I could conjure my list and review it. As soon as I remembered I said to her, "lie down."

And she did, eagerly. I watched as she did, replaying the words in my head.

Once she was prone upon the bed, she raised her legs into the air, sliding her panties off her *ketsu*.

I watched her legs rise, then fall. They were still beautiful to me. She would complain when I would look at her legs too closely, asking me to stop being a "cottage cheese voyeur". But I never understood why she complained. I had always loved her legs. I maneuvered myself between her legs as she opened them, and faced her. She looked up at me, smiling. "Don't you need to take off your pajama bottoms at least and turn yourself around so I can reach it," she said inquiringly. "Or did you misunderstand the word?"

"Oh, no, I got it," I replied. "But if it is all the same to you, *name-name suru* to start." I lay down on my stomach between her legs, and gently placed one leg over my shoulder, then the other.

"What if I wanted something to do?" she said, sitting up on her elbows and pouting playfully.

"You want something to do?" I asked. "*Tanoshimasu*. Enjoy." It was suddenly coming back to me.

She nodded and lay back down. "That I think I can do."

Her pussy was still amazing. The wiry dark chocolatey hairs were trimmed short, just like when we were in college. *Shita*, 'down there', she was a faint rose color, and her clit a moistened bud held between the hot molten pale petals. I closed my eyes and reverently kissed it, as gently as my longing would allow me.

As soon as I felt my lips make contact with it, I rested them there

for just a moment, pressing my lips against it, then pulling back to watch the response. It seemed to pulse before my very eyes. I moved back toward it and kissed it again, but for a longer spell this time, then I pulled back. When I kissed her clit a third time, my tongue darted out of my mouth and caressed it from the top to the bottom, then moving my tongue for a quick second into her cave, then back across her clit with my tongue, then kissing it again, almost as a thank you.

She arched her back in appreciation.

I kissed and tongued her clit, thinking about the days when this was the only place I cared to be. My entire mouth filled with the taste of her; it slid across my tongue to the back of my throat, thick and slippery and so richly sweet like chocolate. Her scent enveloped my nostrils. My eyes filled with tears for some reason, and I swallowed hard so the taste and the smell would be in the very core of me.

I dipped my tongue into her pussy, deep, deeper, and deeper still, and I felt her thighs clench around my head. I pulled my tongue back across her clit, licking and kissing everything I came in contact with along the way. I traced tiny circles with my tongue across her clit as I licked it. When her hands reached for my head and grabbed my hair I started to suck her fragrant and drenched bud.

Sounds came from Koko, but they were indistinguishable. I felt her bud swell between my lips, and when I released it, I went back to her pussy, and I thrust my tongue in more deeply than I ever had in over twenty years. I started tracing circles against her lips and the walls of her pussy.

I spoke to her pussy in Japanese, murmuring "*anata ga hitsuyo desu*"—I need you—into her *ai-no izumi*. I increased my circular motion and then planted my mouth over her clit, pressing my tongue against it as forcefully as I could. I rubbed and rubbed, using the pads of my fingers to play with the rest of her pussy. I heard my wife cry out "*itchao*"—I'm going to go!—in a voice that I hadn't heard in ages as my face nearly drowned in her pleasure.

"*Hai!*" she called out as I lay my face down inches away from her pussy, admiring its damp embracing beauty and continuing to kiss it.

I managed to wiggle out of my pajama bottoms and underwear and push them over the edge of the bed as I continued to kiss her pussy lips. Then I sat up and lay down next to her on the bed. As soon as my back touched the mattress she reached for my dick, which immediately grew

hard again at her touch. I hadn't recovered in such a short time in years.

"I've changed my mind about what I want," she said as she rubbed my hardness.

"No *rokuju kyu*?" I stammered.

She shook her head no, and she sat up, continuing to stroke me, and threw a leg across me. She raised her hips up, and I reached for her breasts.

"What does my lady want of me?" I asked, as I played with her nipples. I sat up to lick one, and then the other as she angled my dick at her pussy, rubbing the tip of it against her clit. I lay back down as my dick got harder, feeling her clit grow against it. Then she rubbed my dick against the outer lips of her pussy, and I could feel the heat pouring out of it. She let a mere centimeter of my dick enter her, then pulled me out.

"Do you remember this?" she asked.

"*Chausu*," I said. My dick was aching for her. "Woman on top."

"Precisely," she said. "An excellent memory. And for your reward..." She lifted her entire body up, and placed the head of my dick in her pussy. She reached for her own breasts and began to play with them. She threw her head back, and the long hair flew away from her face as she lowered herself on me. I watched as I penetrated her little by little, the curling pubic hairs rubbing against the glistening flesh of my penis. Then I felt myself inside her, and her insides were growing smaller and smaller, molding themselves around me and making my path of entry tighter and tighter and wetter and wetter.

Soon all of me was in all of her, and I felt her walls clutch onto my dick as if only I could save them. Then the walls released me ever so slightly, and before I could catch my breath, the walls clutched me again, moving against my dick. Koko looked down at me with a positively wicked smile, then threw her hair back again and arched her back, pressing my dick against the front of her pussy. She raised herself up slightly, then lowered herself slightly, then up, then down, then up and down and up and down.

She was rubbing my dick with her pussy, sucking it from the inside out. She suddenly came down on my dick with a hard thrust and when she was sitting on me, I felt the juice trickle out of her and down my balls.

As she pressed her pussy onto my shaft, she grabbed my chest, and bracing herself, she began to grind on me. She moved her hips



sensuously from side to side, and continued to let her walls work on me, squeezing and releasing. I was so entranced, the words would not come, though I soon would. No, I would not come. I would *go*. As my eyes closed and my mouth fell open, suddenly the list was floating before my eyes, number one hundred seventeen. "*Kinchaku! Hamauri!*"

Koko looked down at me, wide eyed in amazement. She began to laugh heartily as she fucked me, and I could feel her laughter as it contracted her pussy and the sensation made me reach for her hair. "You remembered snapping pussy!"

"You squeezed the memory outta me," I managed to respond. "Oh, damn it, Koko, I can't hold it anymore."

As soon as I said it, she began grinding faster. "Say it," she said. "Say it. I want you to. Please, baby?"

Now it was my turn to call out "*itchao*".

A couple of hours and one long nap later-we're not college kids anymore, after all-we decided to play hooky for the rest of the day. We both cancelled our respective appointments. I changed the sheets on our bed and restored it to its normal state. Koko went out to the grocery store. She asked me to go ahead and open the box while she was gone, so I did.

I found a padded manila envelope first. I opened it immediately. In it, I found a framed copy of a poem written by great Japanese lyric poet Kakinomoto Hitomaro. It was in English, fortunately.

*When she was still alive  
We would go out, arm in arm,  
And look at the elm trees  
Growing on the embankment  
In front of our house.  
Their branches were interlaced.  
Their crowns were dense with spring leaves.  
They were like our love.  
Love and trust were not enough to turn back  
The wheels of life and death.  
She faded like a mirage over the desert.  
One morning like a bird she was gone  
In the white scarves of death.  
Now when the child*

*Whom she left in her memory  
Cries and begs for her,  
All I can do is pick him up  
And hug him clumsily.  
I have nothing to give him.  
In our bedroom our pillows  
Still lie side by side,  
As we lay once.  
I sit there by myself  
And let the days grow dark.  
I lie awake at night, sighing till daylight.  
No matter how much I mourn  
I shall never see her again.  
They tell me her spirit  
May haunt Mount Hagai  
Under the eagles' wings.  
I struggle over the ridges  
And climb to the summit.  
I know all the time  
That I shall never see her,  
Not even so much as a faint quiver in the air.  
All my longing, all my love  
Will never make any difference.*

I read the poem three times before I gently placed it aside. It was so melancholy and painful and beautifully sad. I felt bad that the poem moved me as much as it did, and to shake off the feeling I started to remove the cellophane wrapped packages in the box. I unfolded one. Inside was a *kimono*. I could tell even by looking at it through the clear wrapping that it had been carefully preserved. I smiled to myself. I carefully removed the *kimono* to examine the beautiful rich wine-colored silk. It was embroidered all over with tiny flowers. "*Kohana*," I said to myself smiling. "Little flowers."

The first time my wife wore the kimono for me was when we went to Tokyo so she could sign the papers to take possession of the estate. Then we traveled to a small house near Kujukuri Beach to observe the tiny sandling birds there and rest. I read the poem to her in fluent Japanese on that beach. We had reclaimed our second language in

preparation for the trip. We added hundreds of new words and phrases to our list in Japan, and put them to even more frequent use when we got back home. I guess you could say we found our lost passion.

\* \* \* \*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: While I consulted various sources to create this work of fiction, I must give a very special thank you to Boye Lafayette De Mente and her book *Sex and the Japanese*. Without her book and its invaluable information, this story could not have been possible.

# **Love's Fortune**

**by Sarah Dickson**

***Also by Sarah Dickson***

*Wind*

## Chapter One

The wood crackled in the nearby fireplace, warming the small restaurant, one of only two in the small town of Roven's Peak.

Calvino, who was dying of lung cancer, sat at his favorite table, opposite Adriana.

He extended his palms upwards. "I made a mistake working so hard, but I had to. When I came here after the war, I had nothing. Anton doesn't need to be so obsessed with work. He has more money than he'll ever need."

"But he is obsessed," Adriana said. She knew a lot about Calvino's son. Heir to a property development fortune, Anton was a looker all right. She had perused the front covers of several magazines, and dark bedroom eyes seemed to be just for her, causing her heart to skip a beat. Not so the women photographed beside him. None of them lasted more than a month.

It had been one thing that had piqued her curiosity. What did they do to him that made him discard them so readily?

Calvino lowered his hands. His dull eyes sparkled for a moment. "What are you thinking?"

They had met every week for a year now, and one of the things she had learned was how observant he was. At times she wondered if he could read her mind. "The different women Anton is photographed with."

"Oh that! He doesn't trust anyone. That's his problem. Whenever anyone gets too close, he leaves them. Lack of commitment, if you ask me. I never had that problem. Maria was my first love and my last."

Relationships didn't seem to last too long these days, not like they did in the past. After two thousand years, she had seen a lot of changes. Despite that, a few things remained the same, love or the desire of it being the main one.

It was certainly true in her case. Adriana had had her fair share of

men, but none had ever come close to making her want to lose her immortality.

*Ok, there was one but...* She had forgotten all about him, until now.

Adriana quashed that thought. Nothing could be gained by dwelling on his treachery.

"Emma's told me what's going on. It's the only way I ever find anything out about Anton."

Emma, his daughter, was a totally different person. Married, had a hand in the business as an accountant, but most importantly, knew when to take it easy. She didn't have commitment or workaholic issue.

It intrigued her how two people in the same family could be so different.

"I should call Anton," Calvino said.

Now they were getting somewhere. Adriana had pressed for him to do so for some time. While she would finally meet the elusive womanizing son, her concern ran deeper. She cared about Calvino and didn't want him to continue lamenting that his son didn't care.

"Anton would never live with the guilt if you..." She left the remainder unsaid. She knew Calvino understood what she implied.

Calvino picked up the glass of brandy, drew it to his lips, and sipped. "I've had so many remissions. I'm sure he no longer believes I'll ever die."

A poor excuse, but she didn't tell him that. She had already done so, many times before. "The results aren't an indicator of remission. If anything, it shows the cancer is returning, and more aggressively."

"I know." He sipped more brandy, coughed as he did so. "I shouldn't even be drinking this."

Adriana sipped her wine. What was the point of avoiding the little pleasures of life at such a time?

"Anton needs to spend whatever time remains with you. Not a quick half-day visit," she said.

"He only stays for such a short time because I lecture him about not having a balance in life."

"Maybe you shouldn't..."

He snorted.

They had been down this path as well.

"You're right as usual." A slight smile formed on his lips, and he placed the glass down. "I'm thinking of when we first met."

Adriana smiled as well. She remembered the day very well. Five years ago she had moved to Roven's Peak. Calvino had arrived a year later. He had told her that regardless if his cancer disappeared or not, he'd take it easy. A year later, he went into remission, and of course, it didn't stop him tinkering in what he knew best: property development.

"You couldn't resist redeveloping some of the older buildings into luxury accommodation. I made you see sense," she said.

"Restoring the buildings was by far the wisest choice, and I have to thank you for that. If it wasn't for your advice, the town would have tossed me out." He patted her hand. "I'm trying to imagine Anton staying here for a few days, maybe a week. He hates the place."

"Don't give up on him, especially now."

He nodded slowly. "I've decided Anton should meet you. You listen a lot and come up with sensible suggestions. He needs a practical woman in his life."

*Whoa. He was moving way too fast.*

He gave her the familiar wink, which always meant he had one up on her. "You think I'm blind. I see how your eyes light up at the mention of his name, and how you hang onto every word when I talk about him."

"As a relationships counselor, I'm sure I can help..."

"Tosh! I sure when he meets you he'll realize that not all women are after his money."

Adriana hadn't known that. "Is that why his relationships never last long? I thought it was due to him being a workaholic."

"Both. He works too hard and picks the wrong type. I've sure you've looked at their backgrounds. Well-to-do most of them and used to the public eye."

She had, and more than once wondered why he kept making the same mistake.

*Just like you do, Adriana. Something about rich, bad boys makes them impossible to resist.*

"What he need is a woman who likes the simple life and is down to earth."

While that was true, Adriana didn't think she had a chance. "I'm not his type."

"You aren't opportunistic and don't like being in the public eye. Heck, you even hide from photo shoots for the local paper."

That made her smile. The good thing about the townsfolk of



Roven's Peak was how easy going they were. You could become involved as little or as much as you liked.

"With so little time left, I can't see the harm in stating what I truly feel." He tapped the table. "And you, my dear, need a man who is headstrong and difficult. Anything simpler and you'd not enjoy the challenge."

He was right, but Anton? "You can't possibly consider me."

"Why not?"

"I'm not into anything Anton is. I hate parties and the tediousness of business functions. I don't even have a TV or radio. I don't know or care what is happening in the outside world."

Again the wink. "But you do read all the magazines and papers."

He had her there.

He pressed his fist lightly on the table. "You'll meet Anton, and that's all I'm saying on the matter."

"Please. Don't." *Don't make me hope after so long that there might be even a chance.*

True, she needed a companion in her life, and while Anton made her pulse race, he could never be that man. It just wouldn't work.

Silence fell between them. Adriana sipped her wine, and looked around the restaurant. Thanks to Calvino, it had been restored then painted in soft colors, which complimented the plainly-made timber tables and chairs. She doubted Anton would even have stepped inside such a restaurant. Fancy places were his scene.

"I'll soon meet Marie."

The sudden shift in conversation caught her unawares, as it always did. Calvino had mentioned seeing Maria in his dreams every week.

As if on cue, his wife appeared beside him. Initially as a shadowy form, but in recent times, she had become more defined. While she acknowledged Adriana with the merest hint of a smile, her gaze fixed on Calvino. The love in her face made Adriana turn away. Such moments were too intimate to be shared.

When she looked back in Calvino's direction, Maria had gone.

Longing filled his gaze, and then he blinked. He turned back to Adriana. "She was here, wasn't she?"

Adriana nodded. She had told Calvino about her ability to see Maria. The sight had been with her all her life.

His expression became wistful. "Dying isn't all that bad, knowing

she'll be there waiting for me."

Adriana tried to imagine facing death if she ever became mortal. Every day would have to count, yet so many people never did this. Only when they were dying did they appreciate the value of life.

Once she had dared to risk mortality, but had seen sense at the last moment. That had been early on, when she had been only thirty years old. In those days she had been young, in love and willing to let death embrace her.

Not so now. Centuries had taken their toll. So used to the endlessness of living forever, she wondered if she could even contemplate growing old.

*You would for the right man. Perhaps,* she replied to her inner voice, *but it sure won't be Anton.*

The last of the guests got up and headed for the exit.

Adriana looked at the clock on the nearby wall. Ten o'clock. They really should be going as well.

Jake, the owner, wandered over. "Do you want to stay longer? I'll put the fire up a bit more for you if you do."

Calvino looked up at him. "We'll go."

Jake helped him to stand with his free hand. "There is a blizzard arriving tomorrow afternoon. I'd stay inside if I were you."

The blizzard wasn't entirely a freak of nature. Adriana planned to give it a helping hand if Anton arrived. He'd be stuck for days, unable to leave his father at his convenience.

At the entrance, he grabbed his walking stick. "I plan to call Anton tonight."

"Good. Who knows how long the blizzard might last."

"Not weeks, I hope. I'm not sure I could tolerate him *that* long."

"Send him to me if you can't." *Oh dear, why did I say that?*

He grabbed his coat. "I'll arrange dinner for the three of us after he's arrived."

"Surely you'd want time together..."

"I can guarantee after an hour, I'll be desperate for other company."

Why not see him? If she fancied a bit of fun, why hesitate? Anton wasn't the type for commitment, and as long as she kept any notions of anything longer term locked away, there wouldn't be a problem.

After she helped him slip on his coat, she donned her own.

Outside, Calvino shivered in the cold, still air.

"Look up there," she said, pointing to the star-filled sky. "Tomorrow night, there'll be snow for sure."

"How can you tell that?"

*One of the many skills I acquired due to being immortal.* "I just know."

He gripped his walking-stick. "Right, I'm off."

"I'll keep an eye out for Anton tomorrow, just in case the weather turns bad sooner."

He paused and turned to face her. "Not one of your crazy wanderings while it's snowing. How you don't get lost amazes me."

She had some quirks that the town officially overlooked. Since she never got lost, their initial concern had changed to bemusement.

"Pray the blizzard does set in, once he's arrived safely of course. Anton doesn't cope being out of his comfort zone," he added.

*I can arrange for him to be stranded at my place initially.* As soon as she considered it, the idea held a certain appeal. She could get to know Anton a bit, before sending him to Calvino.

She lightly touched his elbow. "I'll walk you to your home."

"I can do it myself. Thank you."

No matter how many times she'd offered, Calvino always refused. Since he preferred to go at his own pace, slow, she waited until he reached his rambling house fifty yards away. Only after he opened the front door and was greeted by his nurse, did Adriana leave.

She walked home as she did most nights when she came into town. At least it wasn't snowing. Not yet anyway. What the townsfolk didn't know was that Adriana had no problem with the cold. She could walk barefoot and not be affected.

Occasionally, she wandered around naked when she was sure no one about. Centuries of habit were hard to break.

The air was absolutely still, save for the crunching of gravel beneath her boots as she walked.

Looking skyward amongst the trees, she imagined the view from her home in ancient Rome. Her parents once lived there, in a large villa just north of the city. Nothing remained of it now.

Adriana recalled one of the last conversations she had had with them. And as usual, it had centered about matrimony.

"You're still restless," her mother had said.

"You need a husband," her father had said.

It wasn't like she hadn't been trying to find a companion. Two thousand years ago, the one man she had loved had his own personal fortune but preferred to use her inheritance to shore up his political position. A mistake that had cost him his life. Her father, a highly positioned senator in Rome, had a lot of influence and no-one questioned the man's sudden *accident*.

From that point onwards Adriana had vowed that resolution would be her method of sorting out issues. She had decided on the role of counselor, as it reminded her of what had happened. A good thing her father couldn't see her now. He'd have been horrified. Dealing in shades of grey wasn't his thing at all. Her mother had been glad. She knew the dangers of offering one's mortality for love.

"Take care when you choose your true mate for the shift to mortality is irreversible," she had said on her deathbed.

Her mother had been immortal for a century when she'd found love. Adriana had not been so fortunate. Centuries, since the young man who had deceived her, and had she learned?

*How the years blur together, and I'm none the wiser.*

Adriana looked around. Being so deep in thought, she'd gone past the driveway to her cabin.

She rubbed her forehead. "I'm getting old."

Chuckling at the comment, she made her way towards the door of her timber cottage. Warmth radiated from inside. She had stoked the fire a little, giving the place some heat. As it was, the fire in the main room had reduced to a pile of glowing embers. If Anton came here, she would have to make sure the temperature was a lot warmer.

After tossing her coat on the nearby sofa, she sat on the floor.

*Should I take a sneak peek of Anton in the flesh?* Adriana rarely resorted to scrying as she tended to leave an impression, one that led to a problem if the man in question was in a public place.

*Why not? I'll be quick.*

Slowly the embers faded, revealing a beach. It seemed deserted. Staring harder, she saw two men at the entrance of a resort complex.

This must be Anton's latest development—a multi story complex for rich tourists. She returned to the beach, and Anton.

*Time to get a closer look.*

He walked along the beach with a woman. They were fighting. She ignored the redhead and focused on him.

*Oh my.*

He was exactly as she had seen in the photos. Dark hair, immaculately cut, as was the designer shirt he wore. Expensive oozed from him. His cream pants hugged his taut ass beautifully.

A slow burning began in her core. She tried to recall the last time any man had sent her body aflame.

Oh yes, the one who betrayed her. Not so the nights they'd spent together, well before his scheming started. Then, he had been a man she desired like no other. His lips had sent her skin on fire and his endurance...

A moan escaped her lips.

Anton's face went flushed.

*Oops.*

She focused on the woman, giving him a chance to recover. Her lips were too big, and she was yelling at him.

*I wonder why she's peeved.* Adriana curled her legs onto the sofa and listened.

## Chapter Two

Anton hadn't anticipated Eve would behave like this. He should have never have invited her to the near completion of his latest beachside resort on the Florida coast.

Fortunately, the grand opening wouldn't be 'til summer.

One thing was for sure. He'd not be asking Eve along.

He glanced back, ignoring the wispy strands of red hair that covered her face. Her steely green eyes were full of rage. The sunset would have been beautiful had she not opened her mouth.

He sighed. Why couldn't he pick the no-commitment fun types? They came onto him as if they weren't interested in more than a fling. It wasn't like they didn't know what they'd be in for. Eve had men before and discarded them as readily as Anton did women.

How could she possibly think things would be different with him?

A fair-haired woman briefly flashed before his eyes, and he paused in mid-stride. An intoxicating scent enveloped him and heat flared to his groin.

*What was this?*

He breathed in the salt air. Did he detect a hint of musk? The indefinable scent of an aroused woman was impossible to misinterpret.

The heady scent faded as did the heat in his groin.

"You're not listening, are you?"

Of course he wasn't. In fact he wasn't entirely sure what *had* happened.

"I said you aren't capable of trusting anyone. I've met so many men and thought you were different. But you aren't. Deep down, you don't want to commit to anyone."

He didn't need this. "You didn't want more. You said that up front."

"I did, but..." Her gaze softened.

Anton's breath hitched. He knew the danger he was in. "Don't even think of wanting more from me."

Eve raised her hand and slapped him across the face. "You are the most selfish egotistical man I have ever met."

*Ouch.* He placed his hand where she'd slapped him.

She stomped back towards the complex. A couple of his employees made way for her. Emma, his sister, shook her head. He could imagine what she was thinking.

*Told you so,* would be her words.

Anton turned on his heel. Emma had picked Eve as the kind who deep down wanted to find Mr. Right. Anton hadn't believed her.

So he'd got it wrong, again.

He sat on the sand and gazed out at the marvelous sunset. Breathing in the salt laden air, he thought about the blond haired woman who had appeared briefly.

What a beauty she was, and most likely something he conjured up in his fantasies. There wasn't any other explanation for it.

"Hi, Anton." Emma sat beside him. "She didn't go well."

He'd half-expected her to come over. "No lecture, please."

She brushed a stand of dark hair from her face. "When a woman says no strings, she means the opposite."

"Not always. I've had some who become too accustomed to my lifestyle. They became demanding."

"Who wouldn't enjoy being seen with you, and of course, some luxury living? It's hard for anyone not to get accustomed to such a lifestyle. I'd have trouble going back to what things were like when we were children."

Anton, being four years older than Emma, remembered those times very well. Living in poor accommodations that were later renovated and sold, each home became progressively better than the last. Finally, his father managed to reach the stage he didn't need to do it so tough.

"I was glad to live in a place that wasn't renovated."

"So was I, but dad had to start somewhere."

He couldn't imagine returning back to those times. Probably the main reason he worked hard to ensure that he and Emma never did.

Her slender hand slipped into his. "You need to look for someone who isn't used to being in the public eye and who isn't a party animal. Find someone totally different."

"A woman who doesn't care about money and prefers to live in a shack," he joked.

"Well, maybe not that extreme."

Anton squeezed her hand and released it. "I might take a break."

Her eyes brightened. "Exactly what I was thinking. Go and see dad. You know he's not well."

"I meant alone and definitely not up in a pokey old house in the middle of nowhere."

"It's beautiful up in Roven's Peak. The views are incredible and the solitude... I'm seriously thinking of buying a place up there."

"Like a little rustic cottage," he said sarcastically.

She swatted his arm. "Keith and I would love such a place. Besides, you should see dad. I saw him a couple of months ago and he's getting worse, not better."

That was news. "He hasn't told me."

"Only because you don't speak to him."

"We don't talk. He lectures me. I get pissed off and leave."

"Please. I have a feeling he won't this time. He's made friends with this very nice lady who used to do relationship counseling."

"Dad seeking counseling? Not likely."

"Dad has a lot of respect for her and she's..."

"Probably after his money."

"She isn't like that."

"How do you know?"

"I can read people very well and so can dad. You're the only one who has problems."

"That not true."

"Ok. Let's confine it to women, excluding me of course, and mum when she was alive."

Despite the tongue in cheek comment, Emma had a point. When he fixed on a woman, he gave her his full attention. Only when the lust waned, did he finally wake up to the fact he'd blown it again.

"Please, go see dad."

Anton's mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. Removing it, he checked the number. It was his father. *What was he calling at this time of night for?*

His voice sounded so soft that Anton could barely hear him. "The treatment isn't working."

*Hell. This couldn't come at a worse time.* And chastised himself a heartbeat later. *How can I be such a jerk?*



"What do you mean not working?"

"The tests show the cancer is back stronger than before, and it's everywhere." The slight rasp in his father's voice made Anton flinch.

*How could this happen. He's only sixty.*

"You better come up, and please, don't make it a flying visit."

Anton clenched his jaw and tried to swallow. It was as if someone had shoved a fist down his throat. His father was really going to die this time.

"How long?" he asked in a strained whisper.

"Doctor says I have six weeks to three months on the outside."

Anton gripped the phone to stop it falling out of his hand. Scenarios raced throughout his mind. The current deal didn't need attending to right this minute.

"I can come up for a week."

A sigh filled his ears. "It's been too long as it is."

This was a lecture he didn't need. His father never wasted an opportunity to remind him of how infrequently he visited or that he worked too hard.

*Don't be an ass. He's really going to die.* "I'll fly up first thing tomorrow and hire a vehicle."

"I'll be waiting for you."

The breeze began to get chilly. It was time to head back.

Emma's face paled after Anton told her what had happened. "Go. I'll come up in a couple of days."

He tried to control the growing knot in his stomach. "Surely we can go together."

"As much as I'd like to, you should go up and see him first. I'll come later. I'll tell Keith what is going on."

Keith could manage things for a few weeks. It wasn't like there was anything urgent to attend to.

"Okay."

"Good. I'll meet you up there." She briefly hugged him.

Anton watched her receding back. This trip was going to be difficult in more ways than one.

## Chapter Three

Anton approached the snowcapped ranges of the Smoky Mountains. He didn't like snow, or the cold or the long windy road to the ridge-top. The road was certainly a risk in an ordinary car, one reason why he'd hired a SUV. At the moment the sky still looked clear.

After an hour on the road, his mood eased. The sky still looked good, too. He should make it to Roven's Peak in plenty of time.

A strange sensation washed over him, not entirely unpleasant. In fact, it was becoming too pleasant. The feeling he's experienced the other night returned, as did the scent of musk.

It must be the fair-haired woman he'd glimpsed the other night.

A gentle brush over his lips sent a burning sensation throughout his body, congregating at his groin.

*Didn't get any sex last night which is why you're fantasizing. She's not really here.*

Despite his inner reasoning, the feeling refused to go away. Lips traveled over his neck.

He brushed his hand over his neck to get rid of the sensation. At the same time, his SUV moved in a sickening sideways motion. The squeal of tires came to an abrupt halt in the side of the road.

"Whoever you are, can you back off until I get to my destination?" As soon as he said it, it sounded ridiculous.

The searing heat in his groin faded. Rather than digest exactly what had just happened, Anton maneuvered the SUV back onto the road. As he sped up, the sky grew progressively darker.

The visibility plummeted. A sinking feeling struck him as he looked further afield. A menacing mass of dark clouds moved towards him. He might not make it to Roven's Peak after all.

*Just great. No cell phone signal existed out here either.*

*Emma knows where you are. Yeah, and by the time she figured I might be in trouble, I'll probably be dead.*

Anton checked the fuel, nearly full. As long as he kept the engine running, he'd be fine—and warm.

A pea-soup fog descended, sending visibility to twenty feet. The pine trees took on ominous shapes. He turned on the fog lights, which made little difference.

*Concentrate on the road, and you'll be fine.*

He slowed down to a pace almost as slow as a fast walk. With an effort, he forced himself not to press the accelerator.

Then it began to snow.

He put the gear in low-range. Starting the wipers, he inched the SUV forward. Be damned if he was going to get stuck out here and die.

Snow began to cover the road, making it difficult to see.

Slowly the SUV began to veer at a sharp angle. He righted the wheel.

Cursing, he went through his options. Walk and be assured of freezing to death, wait it out until he was rescued, or keep going as far as he could. He figured he was about half an hour away from Roven's Peak. Even if he got stuck here, it wouldn't take long for a search party to find him.

Like they could even see where they were even going in this weather. Nope. He was on his own. Anton inched the SUV forward.

The snow slowly built up on the hood.

His heartbeat drummed throughout his head. *Time for a distraction.*

Anton turned on the radio.

"The blizzard looks set to stay for the night," the announcer said.

He groaned. *Great.*

Anton stopped the SUV. There was no point in going on unless he wanted to go over a cliff. Rather than up the heat and fog everything up, he leaned over to the back seat and grabbed his coat. Slipping it on, he readied himself for a long wait.

The sky grew even darker.

*Shit.*

What if no one came to look out for him?

What if it just got colder and colder, darker and darker and he would die out here?

What if the engine failed?

"To keep your mind off the chill, here is some music that is guaranteed to get you feeling warm," the radio announcer said.

A slow tune came on, one that he'd never heard of. Country and Western, both he hated with a passion.

"And when you think it all dark and hopeless," the woman sang, "true love will come to your side."

"Pleease." He turned the radio off.

"Now, now, that's not nice," a sultry voice said.

He looked around. The snow almost covered the windshield, but not the side windows. A shape moved past. He caught a glimpse of pale blond hair.

*You have hypothermia and are in a delirium.* Not that he recalled actually getting hypothermic. *It can come on slowly so you don't even notice.*

He rubbed his hands together then touched his face. His fingers didn't feel cold. Nope. Not hypothermic yet.

A knock on the driver's window made him jump. He peered outside and saw a face, obscured by a scarf and a thick furry hat. Pale long hair fell past her shoulders. Her skin was as pale as the snow.

*What was she doing out here?*

Worried she could be in trouble, he pressed the control to wind down the window.

She tightened the collar around her neck. "Can I get in?"

Her accent sounded unusual. Was she from Italy? If so she was very pale.

Anton leaned over and opened the door on the passenger side. As she climbed in, he got a good look at her face. Her skin was so pale to be almost translucent. He wanted to reach out and touch her cheek to see if she were real. Breathing in, he smelt the familiar scent of musk.

Was this the woman he had imagined? It was crazy, and yet she seemed familiar. Her coat masked any idea of what her body might be like.

Anton quickly drew his gaze back to her face. Her pale green eyes held him captive. With an effort he lowered his gaze to her lips, pale pink and very kissable. The need to possess her became overwhelming.

\* \* \* \*

Adriana wanted to run her fingers through his dark hair and tousle it all up. In the flesh, Anton was heart stopping to look at.

To her acute sense of smell, she could sense his arousal from here. His masculine scent filled the cabin. Exhilaration raced over her. The

way men reacted to her presence never ceased to amaze.

While Anton's bulky coat hid anything of interest, she was sure that would change, especially once she got him back to her cabin. The moisture between her legs surged as she imagined taking him for the first time.

*Wait up, woman. This is a man who can break your heart. Don't even think about sleeping with him.*

Sense returned as she closed the door. So much for luring him to her place. What had she been thinking?

The burning in his eyes waned. "Can I ask how you got here?"

"I was at a nearby lookout and heard the motor." Adriana searched for the seat belt lock, but in the process accidentally brushed his hand. A surge of energy raced over her fingers, up her arm, and straight through to her core. She quickly retracted her hand and looked ahead. The snow was piling up against the windshield. It was time to get out of here. "I'll guide you to Roven's Peak."

"How? I can't see a thing out there."

The thick snow was no hindrance to her at all. She wasn't afflicted with such problems as seeing where one was going with no visibility.

It was easier to tell a white lie. "I know this route with my eyes closed."

Disbelief crossed his face. "You are kidding, right?"

She placed her hand over his. "You'll have to trust me."

Again, the jolt of electricity. He looked at her hand then back to her face. A sly smile formed on his lips.

*Boy, he moves fast.*

"We best get moving, don't you think?" she said quickly.

The smile fled as he looked ahead.

"I'll drive," Adriana said.

"Are you sure?"

"We could stay here, but it's not a good idea."

Still he hesitated.

"Relax. I won't get us lost—or killed." Adriana re-opened the door and got out. She was glad Anton did the same. They bumped into each other as they passed in front of the SUV. His hands caught her waist, and despite their bulky coats, she felt hot, too hot.

*Rein it in, kiddo. He's danger to you.*

Anton eyes widened briefly, narrowed again before he let her go.

After adjusting the seat forward on the driver's side, she closed her eyes briefly, imagining the way ahead. The visibility was getting worse and the last thing she needed was to be stuck here with a man she was having great difficulty in ignoring.

Adriana pressed down the accelerator.

"Who are you?"

She kept her gaze fixed on the road. "Adriana. And you?"

"Anton."

Briefly she turned to him. What a strong jaw line. "Anton Levy?"

He turned to face her full on. "That's me."

Didn't he like being noticed? Not so his father. Adriana didn't hide her affection for the old man. "Your father is the only famous man we have in Roven's Peak."

Concern filled his gaze. "You've seen him recently? How is he?"

The shift in his gaze took her off guard. Anton really did care. She'd not expected that. Her father had pictured him as self-absorbing and work obsessed. He never makes time for anything, he had lamented. This was a side of Anton she never expected to exist. That it did made the decision to not take him back to her cabin, harder to enforce.

*Why not get to know him, with no strings attached. No sex, just talk. Surely that would be ok?*

"How long are you planning to stay?" she asked.

"A couple of weeks. I might not..." The words trailed off.

"See him again," Adriana finished.

He nodded.

"He's very ill."

Tension arched along his jaw line. "How did you know I was coming to see him?" Anton raised his hands in exasperation. "Of course, a small town would have no secrets."

Silence fell between them. With her enhanced sight, the snow had covered the road. Her decision whenever to take him to her cabin or not was no longer in her control. They simply weren't going to make it.

A lone road appeared out of the gloom on her left.

As she turned the SUV into her driveway, Anton said. "Where are we?"

"My place. It's just outside of town."

"Why can't we continue? Surely it's not that far from here."

Perhaps not, but it was further than she was prepared to risk. "It's

snowing in case you haven't noticed. Not even I would continue to risk driving in these conditions."

He cursed.

After cutting the engine, she opened the driver's door. "Come on. You'll freeze if you stay out here."

He leaned back, grabbed his bag from the back seat and climbed out.

Adriana opened the door to her cabin. Warm air flowed across her face. She removed her fur coat and hung it on the rack inside. Removing her boots, she placed them on a mat.

Anton dumped his bag beside her boots. "Where's the phone. I'll call dad to tell him where I am."

She moved the bag closer to the wall, or else she would've tripped over it. "I'm afraid I don't have one."

His expression became one of utter incomprehension. "You what?"

"I don't have one."

"Everyone has a phone!"

She indicated the living room to her right. "After you've removed your coat, come in and warm yourself by the fire."

He removed his coat and roughly placed it on a hook on a nearby rack.

He was peeved, but she could do nothing about the weather.

*Liar.* Adriana could force a break in the storm and send him on his way. The road would be difficult, but with visibility he'd be ok.

Her gaze strayed to his jeans, the way they hugged his thighs. *What a gorgeous body.* He worked out all right.

Anton inclined his head and smiled.

"Like what you see?" he said.

Damn her roving eye. "Please. We'll go in here."

The flash of desire in his eyes waned as Anton walked into the living room. The way he curled his lower lip in disgust at the size and décor was to be expected. She had heard Anton preferred the finer things in life and this cabin wasn't it by a long shot.

The look shifted to one of—*Oh well, it's only for a short while. I can live with it.*

"It's rustic," he said politely.

"I like simplicity." She did a double take. Even the timber furnishings were basic. A small coffee table and two chairs took half of

the room up while the cream sofa took the remainder. Between the table and the fire was a large burgundy rug, long enough for her to lie on. It *was* pretty basic, but she liked it. It was better to live a simple life than wealth. She had tried the latter for a while but had met too many gold diggers. Having the fortune well hidden was far more sensible. Nobody had any clue that she had money stashed away. Not all that hard to do when you have two thousand years to invest.

She glanced up at Anton. Why did her breath hitch as she turned his way?

Dammit. She wasn't going to have him stay after all. Tearing her gaze from him, she knelt beside the open fire and tossed in another piece of wood in from the nearby basket. She'd stop the storm so he could leave. It had been a mistake bringing him here.

Unfortunately, it would take a little time.

Adriana rose to her feet. "Would you like a drink?"

Anton hesitated before answering. "What do you have?"

*Fussy aren't we?* He'd be in for a surprise there. Calvino had told her what Anton preferred. "Merlot."

"What year?"

"I bought it a week ago in town. It's not out of date or anything."

Amusement showed in his eyes. "I meant the vintage."

"I'll pour it and you can guess."

Out of sight, Adriana closed her eyes briefly and imagined a break in the storm. She wouldn't be able to hold it for long. Altering a storm once started could make it worse when it resumed.



## Chapter Four

The nuance of the female species was one Anton knew very well. With Adriana, he read contradictions. One moment she wanted to bed him, the next she backed off.

*Whatever.* If she were willing, he'd not say no. She had the looks and body of a TV goddess, and a sexy Italian accent to boot.

Did she talk during sex? He'd like it if she did.

Heat tore through to his groin and his jeans became impossibly tight. To quell his ardor, Anton looked outside the large window. The SUV was barely visible. If he took ten steps out there he'd be totally lost.

In effect, he was trapped here.

The burning sensation waned as a question came to mind. She said she'd been passing by and heard the motor. That was fine, but how did she drive with zero visibility? Perhaps she did know the road with her eyes closed, as she said.

He heard footsteps. Adriana carried a tray containing two half-full glasses and a bottle of wine. Placing the tray on a nearby table, she picked up a glass. "You may as well relax. You won't be going anywhere for a while."

The way she bent over the tray sent his cock to full attention. Her blue pants were tailor made, designer from the look of it. Whatever reason she used to play the simple life thing, she dressed expensively.

Perhaps she had money but blew it all. Maybe this was all she could afford. His father would know.

*Like I'm going to see him any time soon. I hope he isn't going to fret.*

Adriana sat beside him on the sofa. The scent of musk returned with a ferocity that sent his senses reeling. He willed his cock to settle. It did, only by a fraction.

He picked up the other glass as his gaze raked over her pale pink cashmere sweater. Nice breasts he could cup with his hands.

Her smile broadened. Here we go again, the *come on* look.

"Try the wine," she said in a low, seductive tone.

Running the glass beneath his nostrils, he breathed in the contents.

"This is a fine Merlot."

"You like it?"

*Focus on the wine.* He sipped the red. "You normally wander out in the snow?"

"It's a strange habit of mine."

Wandering in the snow was pretty crazy and, needless to say, dangerous. "And you don't get lost."

"No. I like the cold."

Anton shivered. "Not me. Give me warmth any time."

"Are you cold at the moment?"

He gazed at her face. Those lips looked so kissable. "I'm fine." Anton leaned closer and breathed in her scent. Slowly he glided his hand over her thigh.

He paused. *What am I doing? I should be asking about getting word to dad.*

Adriana removed his hand. "I don't think so."

*Just as well someone was showing sense.* "Look. About dad."

She rose. "With a bit of luck there might be a break in the weather."

*Fat chance of that happening if the falling snow was any indication.*

Anton needed space. Her presence was distracting him way to much. Not that it helped wearing these jeans. They were becoming too tight.

"Where can I freshen up?"

Adriana inclined her head towards the door. "Go to the left and you'll see stairs. The bathroom is first on the right. The light is just inside the door."

Anton climbed up the steps. The separation from her presence eased the heat in his groin. Any remaining ardor quickly waned when he set foot in her bathroom. The sloping roof made the small room feel claustrophobic. Glancing at the bath, he wouldn't be able to fit into it. The washbasin was equally basic.

He recalled Emma's words. *You need to look for someone who isn't used to being in the public eye or is a party animal. Find someone totally different.*

Someone who liked rustic and lived in a shack?

*It's only till the blizzard eases off.*

He took a peek in her bedroom. Hopefully there would be more room in there to swing a cat. There was, but only just. The window, opposite the far end of the bed, was large. There was no view to speak of, save the falling snow. He checked out the dressing table against one wall. Aside from a mirror, the top was plain and bare. No perfumes or the other clutter women usually left around. Maybe she didn't use them.

He glanced outside and did a double take. The snow was easing off. Maybe he could leave here sooner than later after all.

Anton returned to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. Looking in the mirror, he patted his face dry using a nearby hand towel. Not a gray hair in sight. Not so the puffiness in his eyes.

*Too many long hours working*, his father would say. *You need to slow up.*

He shrugged at the mirror. "To make money, you have to put in the time."

After replacing the towel on the rack, he took in a deep breath. His ardor quelled for the moment, he returned to the room below.

Adriana hadn't moved from the sofa.

The heat in his groin returned. Dammit, he needed a distraction. He glanced at the mantelpiece above the fire. No ornaments there either.

He looked around. Asking why she didn't have any memorabilia wouldn't be a tactful way to begin a conversation.

"Is this your place?"

"Yes. It's cozy and simple."

"No one chooses to live this...frugally. You don't even have a phone."

She shot him a hostile glare.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so rude," he said.

The edge of hostility in her eyes began to fade. "No problem. It's who I am." She seemed about to add more, but stopped herself in time.

Anton picked up his glass and sipped more wine. "What do you do?"

"I'm a relationship counselor."

So *this* was the woman Emma spoke of. "I believe you know my father quite well."

"We catch up from time to time."

"Does he look...bad?"

Her sympathetic gaze surprised him. She really did care about him,

it wasn't pretence. "Yes, but he's handling what time he has left well."

"I see."

"You can talk about it."

*Here we go.* "I don't need any counseling."

"Don't you? I said relationships, which can cover family, business..."

"Let's get one thing straight. I'm here to see him and it's none of your business as to any unresolved issues that we might have." *Where had that admission come from?*

"I only offered." Adriana climbed off the sofa and wandered to the window. "I'll not ask again."

Her figure cast a fine sight against the darkening sky outside. He imagined her naked. His cock stirred back into life as he imagined peeling off her sweater.

She turned around. A hint of pink showed on her cheeks. "You normally undress a woman with your eyes?"

"Usually," he said, feeling the heat rising in his cheeks. Why was he becoming self-conscious all of a sudden? Could it be her knowing his father?

*Nah! It's a small town. Everyone knows everyone and helps each other out.*

Adriana shook her head. "Men are so transparent."

He regained his composure quickly. "I don't have a problem with that, and from the signals I'm getting from you, neither do you."

Returning to the sofa, she picked up her glass and ran her finger over the lip. "As long as they don't let them get too close to you. Can I ask why that is?"

He was about to retort when it occurred to him that she was right. In truth, he'd never allowed any woman to stay around long enough to take the risk. It didn't mean he had to spill it out.

To deflect the focus from him, Anton asked. "What about you?"

Wine spilt from her glass. "Once," she whispered. "And I nearly lost a fortune over him."

That wasn't entirely a surprise. The way she walked, dressed and spoke just didn't stack up with her current environment. Now he was really curious. "What happened?"

Her gaze shot upwards, hitting him so hard he nearly reeled from the pain he saw.

\* \* \* \*

"It was a long time ago." *Like two thousand years*, but she could hardly admit that.

"Go on."

"I met a man, but my father disapproved of him."

"You're kidding? What kind of old fashioned..." He cleared his throat. "Sorry, go on."

Adriana sat on a nearby chair. "He used me for our family fortune, but fortunately my father got rid of him."

"Smart man. Too many gold diggers about, I can tell you. So, what happened to the money?"

"It's gone," she lied.

Disappointment registered on his face.

*Probably thinks I spent it willy-nilly.*

"Where is your family?"

"My parents died long ago."

Anton seemed to go deep in thought. Finally he said. "Were you on good terms with them?"

*What an odd question. Yet, it wasn't, not really, not when his father was so close to leaving this world.*

"Yes, I was."

Anton placed the wine on the table. He took a deep breath and leaned back. "How sick is my father?"

"Very. You'll soon see for yourself."

A light shudder raced over his body.

"You're worried about seeing him?"

"Yes... and no. You see, we didn't see eye to eye on a few things. I suppose he told you what they were."

"He did."

Anton's gaze shifted to the fire. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"He cares about you," Adriana said.

He turned sharply back to her. "If he does, then why the lectures on how I don't need to work as hard as I do? The irony is he became ill before that *particular* revelation struck him."

"But he learned in the end."

"I've never introduced any of the women I've met to him. Did you know that?" He appeared surprised at the words.

"Not suitable?"

"None of them. It must be me looking for the wrong type."

"What do you look for?"

"Smart, sexy, good conversationalist, well dressed but most importantly, trust. The last is where they fall down every time."

"Every one of them? Surely there's more to it than that." *Oops. Not a smart thing to say.*

"Look, I'm grateful that you found me but let's leave it. Ok."

There was so much she wanted to explore about him and not all of it involved sex. True, she wanted him with a need she hadn't experienced in a long time, but it was more than that. This man, the other Anton, was one she had been looking for all her life.

Right now he needed space. More importantly, his father needed to know Anton was safe and well. "I think there's a break in the weather."

Anton glanced outside.

The late afternoon light brightened as the clouds began to dissipate.

"What a stroke of luck. How long it will last is the question."

"I'd say not long. It's about a five minute drive. Do you want me to..."

"I do know the way."

Why did she offer? It was clear he just wanted to get out of here.

"See you later."

Anton slipped on his coat, grabbed his bag and left.

Adriana closed the door and leaned against it. Controlling her libido had nearly driven her crazy.

He had fought his desire for her as well, but she knew lust was what drove Anton, and when that waned, he moved on.

She was falling in love with him and as much as Adriana wanted to have those lips all over her body, and... more, she couldn't, not until he felt the same for her, and she couldn't see that happening.

## Chapter Five

Anton couldn't believe how much he had told her about his feelings about women. Fortunately, he caught himself in time before he'd told her more. He had to admit she was good. Very few got much out of him at all, except Emma.

To top it off, Adriana was one hell of a looker, and desirable. Had he had more sense, he could have ended up in an entirely different situation right now.

*Think of your own gratification while your father worries about where you are.*

What other women had called him flooded back. Names such as egotistical, selfish, rude, mean, were just a few he had been called by the women he'd ditched. Thinking about how he was torn with wanting to stay with Adriana instead of trying to reach his father made him realize that some of those comments could be true.

Anton tossed the bag in the back of the SUV. After clearing the snow from the windshield he checked the driveway. He'd make it if he took his time.

He turned on the motor and inched out. By the time he reached the town, the light had begun to fade. More clouds formed over the mountain ranges. It was going to snow again, and soon.

Anton reached his father's house up the road and parked outside.

After cutting the engine, he got out and made his way towards the closed door. With some trepidation, Anton raised his hand and knocked.

An older woman opened it. "Hello."

She looked like a nurse. Comforted by the fact he had some help, Anton felt more at ease. "I'm Anton."

"I know. He's been expecting you." She glanced to the sky behind him. "You got caught coming up the road?"

"I stopped until it passed." A half truth.

The nurse opened the door right up. "Very lucky is all I can say."

"Hurry up and let him in, Meredith, or he'll catch his death of cold."

Inside, Anton saw the full force of how advanced the disease had taken him. His father leaned unsteadily on his walking-stick.

"Go please," he said to Meredith. "We'll be fine."

"Come this way." His father shuffled down the hallway.

Anton closed the door and followed. The short hallway led into a large room at the back. Books in rows lined one wall. Another had large windows facing out to the mountains. Even with the dark clouds near the peaks, the view was superb. He had forgotten how magnificent it was.

His father sat in a large leather chair. Anton sat opposite.

"Adriana said she would keep a look out for you. I gather you didn't see her."

So she had said, and hadn't believed her at the time. "She found me, and I stayed at her place for a little while. When the weather cleared, I came here."

"Good. Good. I'm glad you're safe and well."

He couldn't stop looking at the sunken eyes and drawn face. Months it had taken to transform his father to a man wasting before his very eyes.

"What do you think of Adriana?"

The question took him by surprise. "I can't say. We talked and then suddenly the weather cleared."

"She has a knack for predicating the weather. Good thing, too. I would have worried if you hadn't turned up."

"I'm here now," he said, already feeling uneasy.

"She had a way of getting you to speak your mind, I bet."

"Can we not talk about her?"

"Why not? I like her directness."

"Well, I didn't," he said, recalling how he had blurted out what he felt about women.

"Looks like she got you fired up."

"Look, dad. Can we just move on?"

"To what? Avoid the tricky situations because you don't like it. Too bad, is all I can say."

While his father looked awful, his spirit certainly hadn't waned. Or his criticism.

He chuckled. The shift caught Anton by surprise. When did his father laugh last? "I'm sure I gave her too much information about



myself, and you."

Anton could guess as much.

"Anyway, her suggestion worked."

"What suggestion?"

"She pressed me for weeks to call you. I hesitated until I was sure about the latest results."

"You should..."

And when his father had called, what had he done? Found a reason to visit for no more than a day, and only when he wasn't busy. The more he looked into the mirror the less he liked what he saw.

"You ok?"

"I'm realizing I've been somewhat self-centered."

His father slapped the armrest with his hand. "I'm so glad you've finally admitted it!"

Anton steeled himself for another lecture.

"We haven't seen eye to eye, and I suppose that's my fault as much as yours. I worked hard, and you followed in my stead. Look, son. As long as we wake up to our less endearing qualities, there is still hope."

Surprised by the candor of his words, Anton could find nothing to say, so he listened.

"When you are dying, you think in a totally different way." He inclined his head to the window. "Look out there. I find great joy just sitting here and looking at the mountains. They never cease to amaze me."

Anton never had time to be still. His holidays were always interspersed with work. Now he planned to stay here for a few weeks, he would have to do a lot of adjusting.

"You plan to see Adriana again?"

Did he want to? Her body was to die for, and the accent. Heat radiated to his groin. Anton crossed his legs. "We didn't exactly part on good terms."

A mischievous glint formed in his eye. "I'm sure you'll sort it out. After all, you are the expert when it comes to women."

"Hardly," he retorted.

"Only because you choose badly. Emma has..."

"Please. Don't. I know she's right, ok?"

"Fine." His father inclined his head. "What do you think of her?"

"Who?"

"Adriana."

Taking away the desire he felt for her, considered his father's question objectively. "I honestly don't know."

"I like her a lot, and she's a good listener. She reminds me a lot of Marie."

Anton didn't like bossy women and at times thought his mother had been overbearing. She used to curb some of Calvino's riskier deals. Funnily enough, after his mother had died, the risks became greater as did the rewards. Anton could well imagine what his mother would think if she could have seen him then. How could he be so reckless in risking their children's future?

Anton didn't have such an impediment, but never dared to tell his father that.

"Let me give you an example. Adriana came up to me when I proposed some redevelopment of the town. She told me straight out that I was over enthusiastic and had to back off. Not only was she right, she even suggested ways of encouraging change without causing ill will." He briefly closed his eyes. "It's how Maria used to manage me."

Anton had to take his word for it. He simply didn't know Adriana well enough.

"Did I tell you I see Maria? She's with me, waiting, in my dreams and when I awake." A tear rolled down his cheek. "I'll be glad to be with her again."

*How he accepts his fate.* Anton swallowed.

"Adriana told me it's common to see loved ones when one is close to death."

That comment broke him out of the deepening lethargy he had begun to experience since arriving. "Look, dad. Are you sure Adriana isn't some clever schemer who is after your..."

"How dare you," his father shouted.

Anton flinched. He really regarded Adriana highly.

The door swung open and Margaret dashed in. Her eyes widened, narrowed at Anton.

"It's ok. We had a disagreement," his father said.

"Can you please not do that again?"

"Sorry," Anton said.

The door closed again.

"All I can suggest to you is before you judge anyone, get to know

them first. Adriana is a good and decent woman. She can force you to look at yourself a little too closely at times, but as far as I'm concerned, that's refreshing."

Anton wasn't going to concede until he saw her again and decided for himself. "What has she told you about herself?"

"She had some money but not a lot. Her family is dead, which is pretty sad. She's a quiet woman who listens to people and gives advice."

"For a fee?"

"Anton. If you continue to think like this, you can get out. It's not my problem you think everyone is after your money."

"So far, that's exactly what's happened."

"Lavish gifts and trips on people, and not be honest in your feelings, what do you expect? You want to have any woman fail before she even has a chance."

He might as well have been struck instead. It was the kind of thing Emma said to him. Unable to bear so many home truths at once, Anton rose. "I need some fresh air."

He made his way out the back door and onto the balcony. While the air was freezing, he needed to clear his head.

The conversation he just had seemed like a million years ago. Or he wished it had. Was he really so blinkered that he refused to trust anyone? If so, what had made him be that way?

"Emma will be coming up tomorrow or the next day, weather permitting," his father said behind him. "She plans to stay here."

As much as he hated to admit it, he asked his father. "Why am I so distrustful?"

"I wish I knew, but I don't. You'll have to find out for yourself."

Anton shook his head. No divorce or ugly childhood memories. His father worked hard, as did his mother. Others came into the business, such as Keith, as well as people employed by him. None of them had tried any stunt such as theft or any dishonest trick.

So, why did he mistrust women?

His father rested his hands on the rail beside him. "You'll find out one day, I'm sure of it. The good thing is you are now questioning yourself. Now, come back inside."

Anton followed him.

His father resumed his seat. "More clouds are definitely on the way." He broke into a coughing fit.

Anton leapt from his seat, but his father raised his hand. The coughing stopped. "It's nothing you can fix."

Anton sat down again. "Are you in pain?"

"At times I am. Margaret will come if I'm in trouble or it gets too bad."

"Anything I can do. Get you a drink?"

"Stop fussing!"

"Ok. I'm..."

"Don't. Please. I need you to be your old self. No tipping and toeing, you hear?"

He would find it hard not to fret. "I'll try."

"Good. Now, I plan to have dinner with you and Adriana tonight. Can you go and get her?"

Going back out in that weather? "Are you kidding? I'm staying here. We can see her tomorrow."

"You're not getting out of it that easily. You are getting her as a favor for me. Now quick, before the weather sets in."

What had gotten into his father? One minute they are finally seeing eye-to-eye and now this.

"Humor me," his father said.

Anton rose. For his father's sake, he'd do as he was asked. If only he could stop the increasing thumping in his heart as he opened the door to go outside.

## Chapter Six

She had really messed up big time. Normally, she listened while others spoke. Normally, she made suggestions with carefully chosen words, yet all she had done with Anton was sound like his father.

*You care too much, that's why.* Fat lot of good it would do her now. She could scry.

And then what? Get disappointed?

*There's no point. He won't be back and I lost my chance.*

At what? Being used, then dumped like the rest.

Before she could rationalize her decision, she returned to the fire, sat on the rug, and focused.

All she caught was the tail end of the conversation. What was Calvino up to arranging dinner with Anton?

She broke contact. He had said he would, and it appeared that Anton was going to be the dutiful son and go and collect her.

Not part of her plan at all. She had meant for Anton to stay long enough for the storm to reform. Since she had already loosened her hold, Adriane didn't dare tamper again. Too much messing about and she would have a real dumping of snow on her hands. Sensing the energy in the air, she predicted the storm would not ease off until at least the following morning.

It meant Anton was going to be stuck here.

She could have laughed at the irony of it all had she not been so uptight at what him staying here meant.

Of all the times, she wished she had a phone.

Adriana quickly re-stoked the fire.

A knock on the door a few minutes later made her jump. Adriana had not heard him return up the drive. She was definitely losing her acute senses.

Opening the door, she kept a steady hand.

His face looked flushed in the cold air.

"Hi," he said.

Was he nervous? She was. She tried to keep her breathing even.

"Hi. I didn't expect you back so soon."

He looked resigned to the fact. "My father insisted you come over for dinner."

"Oh," she said pretending this came as news to her. "Is he..."

"Fine, or as well as can be expected, considering."

Looking beyond, she opened the door further. "Come in for a minute. I'll get a jacket."

He did, rubbing his hands together. "It's freezing out there."

"How did it go?"

Anton removed his coat and placed it on the hook near the wall. "Better than I thought. He... thinks highly of you."

"Are you surprised at that?"

"I am, then again I don't know you." He looked around to where she was staring. The snow had begun to fall.

"Oh hell. You have no phone. Damn."

She tried to keep the nervousness out of her voice. "Don't worry about it. You had time to get here. He'll assume that you are safe."

"You drove in worse conditions than this. Surely this time..."

"I can't. The storm's come in fast." Already the snow fell heavily, much more than before.

He looked outside again. "Geez, that came in quick."

The rebound due to her meddling. "I'm sorry, but I can't risk it." She placed her hand on his arm. The sexual tension sizzled between them. "Trust me. Calvino will assume you are here."

He looked at where her hand briefly rested. His gaze brimmed with simmering desire. "I hope so. I don't want him worrying."

"Do you want something to eat?"

Anton appeared relieved at the distraction. "Sure. Can I help?"

She didn't think he had a clue about cooking. "No. It will only be nibbles."

He looked at her as if she'd said the thought out loud. "I'm not totally inept in the kitchen."

"It's nothing too fancy."

"Where's the kitchen?"

She indicated the small hallway. "This way."

His nose wrinkled as he looked around the small kitchen. "A bit

small in here, isn't it?"

Considering the large wooden table took the bulk of the room, it did look small. "It does me fine."

Anton walked over to the fridge, and opened the door. He began to remove cheeses, and spreads. "You've got a good selection here."

"I always keep a few items handy in case anyone visits." Not quite true. She had purchased a few items just in case he ended up here.

While he busied himself, she sat at one end of the table and watched. "What's your place like?"

"Large. Probably too big, but with all the business associates I entertain, it's ideal."

"Any parties here are at birthdays and not too rowdy I'm afraid."

He glanced up at her. "Very much a sleepy town, right."

"Summer can be a bit busy, but we don't mind. Winter time more than compensates."

He shrugged. "Looked pretty quiet when I came in the summertime, too."

"It's not forever."

He looked at her again. "You don't plan to stay here?"

She couldn't, mainly due to her inability to age. Another big downside to being immortal. She had to start again with friends.

At times it sucked.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Five years."

"And before that?"

She was about to say, around, when it occurred to her that it could lead to a range of questions she might have trouble answering. "I lived in Italy prior to that. Left to see what the other side of the world was like."

"Same as dad. Where about were you?"

"Rome."

"He came from Verona."

"I've been there. There's an amphitheatre where concerts are held." She had watched a few shows there over the centuries.

"Never been there. Rome on the other hand, several times." Anton arranged the cheeses and spreads onto a large tray. "Dad loves it here, god knows why. It's certainly not the same as where we used to live."

"Where was that?" She knew, but wanted to hear it from him.

"Florida Keys, where else?"

The more they spoke the more she realized how different they were.  
"This place is too cold and boring for you, I guess."

"Too right." He looked around. "Got any wine?"

"Sit down. I'll get it." Adriana got glasses, plates and another fresh bottle. After opening it she placed it on the table and sat opposite.

"Calvino likes the peacefulness. If you are sick, peace and quiet is what you need."

Anton shifted uncomfortably. "So he told me."

"It's also a good place to take time out."

He looked past her. She followed his gaze to the window, now blanketed with snow.

"Maybe some time out is what I do need. Been working so much, I've forgotten what it's like not to." He picked up some cheese, placed it on a cracker and popped it into his mouth. "Hmm. This is good."

"Local produce."

"Around here?"

"No. I mean there's a shop that buys specialty foods from nearby producers. We started it when the tourists came but a few of us wanted to have a year round supply."

"How do you fund that?"

It was where some of her money had gone. "I bought the shop."

"You said you had no money."

"Did I?" She had, hadn't she? "I don't tell too many people. I don't want to be taken advantage of," she added quickly.

"Fair enough." He picked up the bottle of wine and poured it into two glasses.

"Dad never mentioned you had a shop."

"Why, does it make a difference?"

"Not at all. It's good to have a business, as long as it makes money. Does it?"

She wasn't sure what he implied by that. "It does ok. I'm not after big bucks, and it's about giving the town choices. Not everything is about profit. Community commitment is more important."

"Maybe I should have a look at it."

"I'm sure the work I do in the shop is nothing like what you do." She shouldn't have told him, but some part of her wanted to be honest with him.

"Speaking about commitment, I wish Emma would be."



"Are you saying she isn't?"

He looked at the food then her last, his gaze level. "To succeed, one had to make sacrifices. Emma doesn't. For example, recently I asked her to work through the financial details of an important deal. She had booked a vacation and promptly told me to find someone else."

Some things were beginning to fall into place. "Not everything is about work."

What do you mean?" he asked, puzzled.

*He has no idea.* "What would you do if you knew you had a few months to live? What would you do?"

\* \* \* \*

He dropped the latest cracker he had placed cheese on. He truly hadn't thought about it.

"I guess I'd have to rethink."

"Why not do that while you are staying at Roven's Peak?"

With time to think? Why not? Maybe he should. Perhaps he did need to chill out.

He looked up at Adriana, *very* aware of her presence. He felt close to her, true, but that didn't ease at all the burning need to possess her. The longer he stared at her the greater became the heat in his groin.

If he was going to do some relaxing, why not start now.

She propped her chin on her hand. "What are you thinking about?"

"You."

Her breath hitched. He could see her nipples pucker beneath the cashmere she wore.

"Adriana," he said huskily.

Her tongue flicked across her lower lip as she gazed below the table. His cock stirred. "You see anything?"

She nodded. "I'm imagining...us, but..."

The *I don't want you* look had truly gone.

Did he want to risk taking their relationship a step further? Before he had time to think about the consequences, he moved from his seat in a flash.

Adriana leaned back, as if about to speak further, but her lips remained in a soundless O.

She turned to face him, drew his lips down to hers. A tremor of exhilaration raced through his body.

Anton devoured her mouth with his tongue, catching her by surprise

if the sudden hitch in her breath was any indication. He ran his hands over her shoulders, drawing her even closer to him.

Shifting his mouth to her chin, he kissed his way down her neck. Tiny growling sounds formed in her throat. Blazing heat raced over his body. A good thing she didn't want him to stop. Anton wasn't sure he could.

He paused, leaned back. Adriana's gaze became pools of desperate need.

"Adriana," he whispered.

"Touch me," she said softly.

She trembled where his fingers slid over her stomach. Slowly he lifted the hem of her sweater. She raised her arms to aid him. As the neck covered her eyes, he paused, obscuring her vision.

"Are you comfortable?" he purred, sending a hot breath over her lacy bra.

She wriggled in the chair. A low throaty growl escaped her throat.

Anton chuckled. He leaned over and suckled one of her nipples through her lacy bra. She pressed her nipple into his mouth but the bra was fast becoming a hindrance.

With one finger he eased the waistband of her pants from her stomach. Widening her legs, he slid his hand inside her panties, cupping her pussy.

With a flick of one finger he teased her mound. A gentle sweep over her clit sent a whimper of protest from her lips. Was she wet!

"Soon," he murmured. "First I want to see you naked." He removed his hand, tugged at her sweater, pulling it completely over head.

Freed of the confines of the sweater, she undid her bra.

Anton remained dressed. She looked up at him, protesting.

"I want to taste you first. Lie on the table," he said.

Standing, she hooked the waistband of her pants and slowly eased them down her legs. Tossing then aside she stood beside him. Anton barely controlled himself when he paused over her firm but perfect breasts before making his way down to the blond curls between her legs.

Chuckling, she lifted herself onto the table.

"Open your legs."

Her clit lay exposed to him as she lay propped up on her elbows. "What do you want Adriana?"

"I want you to suck me senseless."

"As you command."

Widening her legs, he dived into her clit with his tongue. Lapping her juices was divine. She wriggled beneath, letting out soft whimpers.

Thrusting his tongue into her passage sent pre-cum onto the tip of his cock. Her mound was so hard he gave it a tiny nip.

She cried out. "Anton."

He could imagine spending weeks savoring her, all over and in every way.

"Anton. Now!"

Never had he been more aroused. He gripped her legs and drew her to the edge of the table. "Not yet." And helped her to her feet. "Where's that rug?"

## Chapter Seven

Adriana ignored the warning bells in her head. She didn't want to think about *afterwards*, when he'd be with his father and then eventually back to his business back in Florida. While they might have reached a defining moment, the reality would be different. He would go back to his old ways, and she...

Adriana let the thought go.

She watched as Anton removed his shirt. His pants and boxers came off in quick succession.

*What a body.* His chest, covered by a sprinkle of fine hairs, was glistened with sweat. She kept her gaze fixed on his upper torso. His well toned abs were meant for touching, but she refrained.

Her gaze drifted to between his legs. She licked her lips at the size of him and he wasn't even fully aroused yet. No woman would be disappointed with that package.

"Lie down on the floor," she said, indicating the large rug.

"As you command."

Her hormones flew into overdrive. He oozed sex appeal, and from the grin on his face, he damn well knew it.

Grinning more widely, he placed his hands behind his head. Her gaze drifted past his belly button to the few hairs below.

She reached his now erect cock. Her breath hitched.

*Not ashamed to show it off, was he?*

She knelt in front of him, licking her lips. Only then did she become aware that he assessed her body. Her nipples turned to throbbing, hardened peaks. The way his gaze swept over her, he might as well be using his long fingers. Her skin tingled as if he were doing just that.

The grin fled. "You are beautiful, Adriana. And I mean everywhere. Come closer so I can touch you."

Straddling him, she sat on his thighs, barely missing his cock.

"Onto your knees."

Lifting herself onto her knees she watched as his fingers stayed towards her clit. The merest touch sent a bolt of sheer delight through her core, and up her spine.

Sliding his hands up her thighs, he paused at her hips. "In the pocket, put it on," indicating the discarded jeans beside him.

"I don't need them."

"Sorry, but I'd prefer to be sure."

She removed the condom, tore open the packaging and slipped it over his cock.

Using his hands, he lowered her inch by inch. The sensation of him filling her was incredible.

"If you had only one night remaining, how would you spend it?" she asked.

"This. You, for now."

*For now.* Why did those two words tug at her heart so. This was temporary only, so enjoy it.

His hands ran teasingly over her waist, up to her breasts, pausing near her nipples.

*What was he doing?*

Grinning, he tweaked a nipple making her moan softly. His cock swelled inside her.

"Hmm. Do you think you can stand much more of this?"

She gasped softly. "I'll try."

Tiny bolts of sheer wonder exploded from her skin as fingers ran what felt like trails of fire. He paused at her hips. "Your skin is so incredibly smooth."

With his prompting she raised her body and lowered it again, whimpering in delight as she did so. "I keep out of the sun."

"Not your nipples. They are lovely and dark."

The way he looked at her breasts sent her into another delicious shudder.

Trembling slightly, she connected to him as she had when scrying. A hint of longing filled her mind. He was seeking more from her than sex.

That was a surprise. She was sure he wasn't even aware of it.

"Keep moving, Adriana."

She rose up and sat back down. How exquisite it was. She felt as if they were meant to be. A silly notion but she clung onto it nether the

less.

Adriana moved a little faster. Anton helped her with his hands, gripping her hips gently. Again she rose and fell, gasping on each downward stroke. The sensations were way more intense than she's experienced.

The look of adoration on his face could almost make her believe she was the most important woman in the world to him.

"You are wonderful," he said between increasingly labored breaths.

She paused, unable to continue while he looked at her like that.

"What's wrong?"

Why did he have to feel so good? "Nothing. Just savoring all of you." *This is a performance, not how he really feels.*

She eased out partway then plunged downwards. A flame ignited deep inside her. Watching him intently, she rocked with him, enjoying the way their bodies burned to be sated within each other. The glorious feeling of that liquid fire began to stir deep within her. She gripped her legs tighter around his hips, trying to find that elusive spot that would bring her a climax.

Another deep thrust upwards from him was all it took. She released him and arched back.

"Scream. I know you want to."

She was so close. "More."

He stroked her clit. "Need a little help?"

Pushing into his fingers, she fell into freefall. Her lips parted and she cried out.

"Oooooooooo."

Anton groaned long and low.

Warmth filled her, sending her passage into convulsions. Her throat constricted as more cries came forth. She writhed in abandonment as another orgasm crashed over her.

Sleek with sweat, she looked down at Anton. The look of adoration lingered in his eyes.

*It's the afterglow. Don't read anything else into it.*

Stroking her nipples, he whispered. "You are wonderful, Adriana."

She'd not meant to react like this. Adriana eased herself off him.

As Anton climbed to his feet, she knew he wasn't finished with her yet. Not if his growing erection was any indication.

He took her hand and helped her to her feet.

Legs shaking, she forced a smile.

"How about the bed this time? The floor's a bit hard on my back."

"Hard elsewhere, too," she said lightly. Some counselor she was. Adriana decided then and there that she would give up after Anton. No more men and no more pain. Exactly how she would achieve this, she had no idea.

\* \* \* \*

The climax had been incredible. His rigid cock demanded to be buried inside her once more. Anton could hardly believe how desperately he wanted her again.

Adriana was hot, seriously hot. And he planned to enjoy the night with her.

Back in her bedroom, she turned on a bedside lamp. It cast a soft glow across the room. Her taut ass so close to his cock nearly sent him into taking her then and there.

He climbed onto the bed. "Come here, now."

A smile formed on her lips. Her eyes were telling a different story. She seemed suddenly self-conscious. He took her hand and drew her beside him. "You ok?"

"You take a great deal of care to make a woman feel satisfied."

He almost said—*That's what I'm good at*—but stopped himself in time. He didn't want to categorize her with the other women he'd slept with.

Where had *that* thought come from?

He let it go. After tonight, he'd be gone from her home. Did he need to go? After all, his father wouldn't want him around all the time?

Whatever his rambling thoughts were doing, he'd stop them right now.

Adriana seemed to sense his thoughts. "Not that I expect anything more than...this. I mean, this is a wonderful illusion."

He should have felt relief, but didn't for some strange reason.

*Don't pursue it.* Anton didn't need any more heart on the sleeve stuff. All he wanted to do was bury himself inside her again and make her scream.

Tomorrow was still a long, long time away.

"Lie down," he said. Now it was his turn to take control. In one quick movement he slipped on another condom.

She raised her arms above her head and gripped the rail of the bed.

"You like to tease?"

With slow sideways movements she writhed from side to side. Lips parted, she licked her bottom lip then the top. With slow flicks of her tongue she stuck it out and withdrew, retracing her route.

A groan escaped Anton's lips. He'd turn the tables on her.

Separating her legs he eased the tip of his cock to her slit. She felt so slick it took all his willpower not to dive right in.

A gasp escaped from Adriana's lips. "What *are* you doing?"

Finding the need to plunge right in excruciatingly difficult to resist, he backed off. "I like to tease as well."

Knees on the floor, he leaned over and began with light caresses on the inside arch of her foot. Gently, he ran his finger up one of her legs to behind her knee.

"There's a more delicate spot further up."

"All in good time." Widening her legs, he left trails of kisses on each thigh until reaching the curls between her legs. With a single kiss on both her folds, he continued upwards.

"Anton. Do you plan to do this all night?"

Looking up, he grinned. "You're in a hurry to go somewhere?"

She snorted.

Resuming his ministrations he licked her nipples. A low moan escaped her lips. Slipping a finger into her slick passage, he looked up at her. "I definitely see a problem here." And plunged two fingers inside.

His cock throbbed. Watching her buck under him, he knew he'd not be able to last much longer.

She placed her hands back on the rail. "You're in absolute agony. Just waiting to for me to beg for you to..."

"No swearing around here."

"How do .. ooohhh... know I was going to?"

"What were you going to say?"

She clenched her eyes shut and let out a low moan.

"You are great," she whispered.

He'd been told that before, many a time. Other women had called him great but from Adriana it felt...different.

"Why have you stopped?"

He hadn't realized he had. He shrugged the odd feeling aside. "Now. Where were we?"

"You were doing a fine job until you got distracted."



*Time to fix that.* Wrapping her legs around his waist, he went in full. Her ankles dug into the small of his back and her thighs tensed as he thrust again. He went in so deep, withdrawing only to plunge in again, drawing closer and closer to that elusive place he desperately yearned to be.

Her hips ground his as her hands gripped the sheet of the bed. He loved watching her head twisting side to side as she thrashed beneath him.

He lowered his lips to her ear. "Give it your all."

Sweat trickled over her chest. He lapped up a droplet on her nipple.

Stifling a whimper, she looked up at him. Her eyes would shut then reopen as if surprised as to what was happening to her.

Was it him or did she always react like this with men?

Or was it more than that?

The contractions of her vagina were so strong, he couldn't hold back.

"Now," she cried.

The release came, making him gasp with the ferocity of it. With her, he glimpsed heaven before he collapsed onto her. He continued to ebb, panting as he did so. His cock began to soften, thankfully. He wasn't sure if he could handle another bout.

Stroking his cheek, she smiled. "We need a rest."

Adriana turned the light off, and the room fell into complete darkness. He couldn't see her, but her warmth as she snuggled up against him reminded him that what had happened wasn't an illusion, far from it.

She turned her back to him. Sliding his arm around her waist, a sense of contentment filled him. He glanced at the foggy window, the sill building up with snow from the ongoing blizzard. He didn't want the snow to stop falling, for it meant he had to leave her.

The more rational part of him intervened. How many times had he felt like this after a good bout of sex?

*It's a post coital thing. It will be gone in the morning.*

Yawning, he let himself drift into the world of dreams.

"There you are."

White filled his vision. Where was he?

The fog cleared, revealing his mother standing between snow dusted pine trees. A shed, partially falling down, stood on her left.

His heart tugged as he recognized the floral dress she'd died in.

Looking down, he saw snow up to his knees. He wasn't cold at all.

This had to be a dream, a very vivid dream, granted, but still a dream.

Dragging his heart back under control, he waded through the snow towards her. She glided over the snow towards him.

"Mother?"

Her warm, pale hands cupped his. "You've seen Calvino."

How did she know that?

Warmth continued to radiate from her. She smiled, and the smile went to her dark eyes. It was one of the amazing gifts his mother had. Any stranger would be immediately at ease in her presence.

"Calvino will soon be joining me."

"He said that..."

"I visit him in his dreams, and I'm with him when he's awake."

Knowing this conversation was surreal, he couldn't let go of her reassuring grip. His throat tightened. Vision or not, he'd no idea how much he missed his mother, until now.

"I'm seeing dad again tomorrow," Anton said.

She cupped his cheek with her hand, wiped a tear from his cheek. "Time passes quickly, doesn't it? You are getting older."

"Where are we?"

"In your dream, of course."

Doubt filled him. "Are you really my mother?"

The mocking way she looked at him should have confirmed it, but the nagging doubt persisted.

*This can't happen, can it?*

"Adriana can touch the spirit world." She removed her hand, stood back, the smile still on her face.

He tried to keep his heart steady. "Are you saying she... can see the ... dead?"

His mother nodded.

Anton recalled his father's words. *Adriana told me it's common to see loved ones when one is close to death.*

A glimpse of a woman who'd appeared on the beach in Florida then again as he drove up here, briefly reappeared.

*Adriana.*

It had definitely been her, and she certainly wasn't dead. Hot blooded and very much alive in fact

So how did she appear? More importantly why? Was he approaching a life threatening situation?

*And when you think it all dark and hopeless, you true love will come to your side.* The words on the radio came back to haunt him.

*I'm losing it,* Anton thought.

"Goodbye, my dear." His mother faded into the mist.

Anton awoke with a start. The howling wind had died. He grabbed his watch from the side of the bed. Four a.m.

With tiredness eluding him, his thoughts returned to Adriana. What was she?

"You ok?" a sleepy voice said from the darkness.

*How does one ask?* "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"What were you thinking?"

Her closeness made him uneasy. Was he going to die, too?

She began to stroke his back, but he pushed her hand aside. "I dreamt of my mother."

"I know."

"She knew you, which scares the hell out of me."

"Some people can drift from this world to the next. Your mother, I have seen for months."

He tried to think rationally. Some people did see spirits. "What are you? Some kind of medium?"

"I can't explain it. It just...happens."

He pressed on, trying to control the increasing thudding of his heart in his chest. "And you. I saw you in Florida and on the way up to Roven's Peak."

"I was there, yes."

"Am I going to..." How could he say it?

"Die? No."

It was too much. Moving away from Adriana, he bolted from the bed, and fled down the stairs.

Fortunately his clothes were on the floor on the rug near the fire. He dressed quickly then looked outside.

Cursing he sat down again. No way was he going to leave now, certainly, when it was pitch black outside.

## Chapter Eight

Adriana climbed out of bed. Why did she admit the visitations? Why not pass it off as a fantasy. He would have believed it, wouldn't he?

She could have easily convinced him, except that his mother admitted that she knew her.

Did she want to tell him the truth about herself? *I'm an immortal looking for a man who I'd become a mortal for.*

Adriana doubted any explanation on that front would work. He'd go running out the door and into the snow. Her best option was to let him go. After all, he wouldn't be around for that long. Calvino was very close to death's door.

But she couldn't. Adriana wanted to visit Calvino as well.

She slipped on a robe and padded down the stairs.

He sat in front of the fire, glass in hand, drinking the remnants of the wine. Anton didn't look her way.

She lingered at the doorway.

"I can see loved ones near people who are dying."

"I gathered that. What I don't get is how I saw you in Florida."

She took a gamble. "Have you ever heard of scrying?"

"Look into a crystal ball or a fire and see whomever you are thinking of? Yes, it's in fantasy novels. Wizards can communicate with each other over long distances." He kept his gaze steady. "I prefer facts, not... fantasy."

"I've always had this ability. Like when you were on the way to Roven's Peak. I could sense you were coming."

His gaze narrowed. "You do this with everyone you meet?"

"Only those I care about." Too late she wished she hadn't said it.

"Care? We had a nice chat and then we had..." He tore his gaze from her face, rested on her chest then returned to her face. "Sex."

Adriana rose. "You a self-centered son of..."

The annoyed expression on his face made her shut up. He'd been

there before, with the redhead saying those words followed by a slap in the face.

"The weather will clear soon. The road won't be though, so you'll have to walk into town."

He seemed to consider it. "All right. As soon as it's light, I'm gone."

Adriana decided not to do what the other women had done. She sat opposite and decided to tell him a few home truths. If he walked, then Anton would know why he was the way he was.

"Your mother didn't like risk so your father compromised. You saw this as opportunities lost and when you were old enough, you didn't want to end up in the same situation. It's why you don't give Emma any *real* responsibility, and that's why she isn't that committed. You don't treat her as an equal, or Kevin for that matter."

"Wait up..."

"Let me finish. You also pick women and set them up for failure. Regardless of their ambition or lack of it, you don't give any of them a chance." She almost made a reference to the redhead, but managed to stop herself in time. To have him know she could spy on him would definitely send him running out the door.

"I don't care about your money. I have my own. Maybe not in your league, but I get by very well, thank you very much. I don't need yours, nor do I want it. What I do care about is you. Why, I don't know..."

*Liar*, but she wasn't going to tell him that she was falling for him.

"You don't deserve anyone to give a toss about you, but they do."

"You done now?" he said acidly.

Not by a long shot, she wanted to say. "For now."

He rose. "Good. I'm going to find my shoes."

Adriana rose as well. "I'll be in my room, so you can wait 'til dawn in peace."

\* \* \* \*

Anton watched her go. His knees were so shaky, he sat down again. She was right, all of it, and while others had said it to him, with Adriana it finally struck home.

A sharp stabbing ache in his stomach made him worry. It hadn't been the first time it happened. Last time it had been months ago and he had put it down to overworking at the gym.

But what if it was an ulcer, or worse, what if it was a prelude to a heart attack?

He took in deep calming breaths and slowly the sharp pain subsided. Maybe a checkup was a good idea. He'd do it once he got back to Florida.

Anton rose from his chair. This time he felt a lot steadier.

Grabbing his shoes, he slipped them on. It was cold in here and no wonder. The fire had reduced to embers. He grabbed his coat and put it on.

Anton sat down again and thought about not what Adriana said, but her. He had never met anyone like her. She was weird, granted. Seeing ghosts and looking at flames to snoop on others was certainly out there. Oddly enough, he felt very calm about it all. People did have abilities like she did.

Then again, did it matter? She hadn't harmed him at all. Quite the opposite. The words he said about her being wonderful, he meant it with Adriana, especially in bed. She was hot as well and gorgeous to boot, smart, and she ran a business. Not quite the opposite that Emma had suggested, but pretty close.

Did he want to see her again? His father thought highly of her and Anton was beginning to see why. She cared, really cared about his father.

How he knew this, he wasn't sure, but it ran gut deep. As for his own feelings, he tried to imagine not seeing her again.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he muttered.

"What?"

He looked up sharply. He hadn't heard her return. Her hair was still tousled and her robe was tight but it didn't detract from the curves of her body.

Dammit. He couldn't not see her again.

"I may be here for several weeks." Heart thudding against his chest, he rattled out the remaining words before he chickened out. "Will you be staying?"

A silly question in hindsight.

"I don't plan on leaving anytime soon. Is there any reason why I would want to?"

Not the most subtle of answers. Then again, what did he expect? His history of not having a woman long in his life was public knowledge. No wonder she was skeptical.

Anton exhaled; unaware he had been holding his breath.

"You are unsure, so rather than commit to anything, let's see how things go."

Not what he expected either. Normally, he was the one who set the terms. One thing he was sure of. He didn't want her to just walk out of his life.

*Risk it, Anton.* You can do it with business, why not with Adriana.

"After." He cleared his throat. "When I leave here, would you like to come with me to Florida?"

Her eyes widened. "You mean it?"

Never had he taken such a leap before. "If you want to come back with me, yes."

She appeared quite flustered. "This is all quite sudden."

It was, but it felt right, too. "Think about it. After all, I'll be here a while." He swallowed, "As long as dad needs me."

She bit her lower lip.

Was she going to say no? He held his breath.

"How long?"

"As long as you want." *What had he just said?*

A soft gasp escaped her lips.

"I can't promise forever or anything, mind you, having an extra hundred years would be pretty useful."

Her face went very pale.

Perhaps she was surprised at what he'd said. He certainly was.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"No. Go on."

"The thought of living forever isn't what it's cracked up to be."

What an odd thing to say. "Whatever. It's a crazy thought. Nobody lives forever anyway."

"No. You're right."

Her hesitation would have had him believe that she believed it possible. As possible as scrying or seeing spirits? He was still having trouble coming to terms with both of them, even though he witnessed first hand, both situations.

Anton shrugged such doubts aside. Right now, Adriana planned to stay around and that was all that mattered.

"We should go see your father," she said.

Anton could think of doing something else right now, preferably in

her bed.

He looked outside, it was just getting light. A blue sky as well. Who knew how long the break might last for?

"It will be clear for a few hours."

"How do you know that?"

She smiled. "Take it as another of my unusual talents."

He inclined his head. "Next you'll be telling me you can control the weather."

"I can."

Her straight face made him pause to reflect. "You are kidding, right?"

"Of course I am, silly." Her tone of voice didn't quite match her words. "I'll go and get dressed."

After she had left, Anton looked around the room again. Again it struck him as odd why there weren't any photos. None in her room or anywhere else it seemed.

Why not?

Perhaps she had them in a box somewhere? He tried the cupboards in the kitchen but found nothing. Maybe there was a back shed. He opened the rear door and looked outside. He saw a small building near a large pine tree. He did a double take. The scene looked familiar.

*From my mother's dream.*

He took in another deep breath and walked towards it.



## Chapter Nine

Adriana nearly kicked herself for being so causal about controlling the weather. She had to be very careful not to scare him off. After all, it wasn't like she had to rush about admitting her immortality. A pity he had to know through. If only she could become mortal and let no one be the wiser.

Except it didn't quite work that way. The man in question had to know. He might not believe, but as long as she told him, then the transformation could begin.

Her mother had told her father the truth, only for him not to believe her. No surprise there. Her father had taken it as one of her eccentric moments. Only after Adriana began to look the same after turning thirty, did he suspect. So had others, which was why she had hoped to become mortal with the man who later deceived her. He wouldn't have believed her either, but that wouldn't have mattered.

She had been fifty when her father had died, according to her mother by letter. Only then, did she go back to see her father on his deathbed.

He had taken her to be an illusion, but in a lucid moment had said. "Your mother told me the truth, but I didn't believe her. I never saw her as ageless, you see. Perhaps that was a blessing."

Adriana had taken his hand. Her mother had timed her change to mortality after Adriana was born. No one had ever been the wiser.

"Are you blessed or cursed? I will never know, will I?" His hand fell limp, and on the next exhale had given his soul up to the heavens.

So many times since then, Adriana had thought about those words. Was it a curse, or a gift?

With Anton she could give up her immortality, stay with him, and be accepted by others. No more leaving every few years as suspicions grew. All she had to do was tell him the truth, and the change would begin.

Fearing Anton's reaction made her hesitate. Would he run out the door considering her mad, or would he believe her.

Adriana took a shower to steady her nerves. She ran her hands over her body, recalling where he had touched her. Whatever doubts lingered, it certainly didn't in the chemistry that existed between them.

Grabbing a towel, she dried herself quickly. Only then did she sense that Anton was no longer in the house.

Surely he hadn't become impatient waiting for her and had gone on his own to see his father?

She donned her robe and raced to the bottom of the stairs. Opening the front door she looked outside. No footsteps in the snow meant he'd not left in that direction. Frowning, she closed it again and made her way towards the kitchen. He must have gone out the back. She opened the door and footsteps in the snow led towards the shed near a large pine tree. Nobody ever went there, the main reason why the building provided such a perfect hiding place for the small chest containing all her possessions, including photos that went back since the invention of the camera. If he found the chest, she would have a lot of explaining to do.

Perhaps he won't. She had it well hidden.

Adriana glanced at her robe she wore. Did she really want to get dressed and then return to stop him finding it?

A loud thump stopped her in her tracks. What was that? Adriana dashed to the shed at the same time she heard some item being dragged along the floor. She peered inside. A small wooden box, which was near the doorway, had been moved. Anton leaned over another box and was about to move it when he looked up.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He looked up, surprise on his face. "What are you *doing* out here? You've got no shoes on either."

She was about to argue that it was her shed and he had no right to be there.

If only he hadn't stepped further into the shed at that point. A box behind him moved at an odd angle. He spun around and grabbed it. In doing so, he paused at the darkness in the wall.

She could see the badly placed piece of wood from here. It had moved since her last visit. How long ago had it been? Years, most likely.

Anton prized the piece of wood out, slipped one hand into the dark hole and retrieved a small golden box.

"Can we go back inside?"

Anton hooked the chest under one arm. "You bet we are. This is no place to be wondering about barefoot."

By the time they had reached the back door, Adriana discovered she had left it open. *Of all the stupid things to do.*

Anton placed the chest on the kitchen table, turned to face her and took her hand in his. He shook his head. "Your hand feels warmer than mine. That's impossible."

"I don't feel the cold much." Or she hadn't until now. The chilly air began to seep into her skin. Could it be possible she was changing already. If so, how? She hadn't told him, yet.

He removed his coat and placed it over her shoulders. "You were practically naked out there."

"I went looking for you. Might I ask why you went out there?"

Anton rose and walked to the still open door. He paused at the entrance. "I thought I've seen the shed before."

*That was odd. How could he.*

He closed the door. "I dreamt it last night."

"When you saw your mother?"

"Yes."

So Maria had been *here*. Had she planted the idea in his mind to go to the shed? Needing to know, she asked. "What made you go outside?"

"I couldn't find any photos or other memorabilia inside so thought you might have stored it in a shed or similar. Only when I went outside did I notice the shed."

"So your dream triggered your motivation to go and have a look."

"I guess so. Does it matter? I mean you would have shown me this chest eventually, right?"

*Maybe in a year I might have.* "One day, yes."

"Are the photos in there?"

"Some."

"Let's have a look then."

She rubbed her arms together. It *was* cold in here, even with the coat over her shoulders.

Anton whistled as he removed coins, brooches, rings and carvings. "This was from your family?"

"Yes. For generations, we've kept it." She rubbed her arms and shuffled her feet on the cold floor.

He removed several plain golden rings and placed them side by side on the table. "What were these for?"

Her breath hitched. How long had it been since she'd looked at the rings her father had worn on every finger. "They're from my father."

He looked up at her and blinked. "Your *father*." With a shaking hand he knocked some of the rings. They clattered on the table.

*What have I done?* The words had come out with no thought at all to the consequences.

Silence filled the room. Save for the slight trembling in his hands, Anton appeared frozen in time.

"My mother was immortal but became mortal for my father's sake."

*For his sake?* What kind of message was that? She did it because she loved him. Adriana wanted to say the words, but couldn't speak, not when Anton continued to stare at the rings.

Her knuckles were white from clenching her hands. *Say something.* The cold seeped into her. She would have to move soon or she'd not be able to at all. She tucked one foot under the other to stop her legs from shaking.

Slowly he looked up, his gaze unreadable. "So that's why you don't feel the cold, and see the dead and can manipulate the weather."

"Yes."

"What *are* you?"

"A woman who wants to live a mortal life with you." Her breathing became more rapid. *I'm getting cold, too cold.*

"How does it work?" he said in virtually a whisper.

\* \* \* \*

His voice sounded like it was coming from someone else. Anton tried to drag himself back to some level of clarity. First her mother was immortal, and now she implied that she was.

No. Start again. Admitted she was.

*So why is she beginning to shiver?* The coat was a thick one and very warm, but it seemed to give her no protection at all. He leaned over, and looked under the table.

She has no shoes on. Why hadn't he seen that before? His head began to spin and the window appeared to be on an angle.

"Anton?"

He straightened, and the kitchen looked as it should. *What question had I just asked? What was I doing looking under the table?*

"You look about to faint."

*She's got no shoes on and she's shivering. Get your butt out of the chair and help her.* He rose, stumbled as he did so but eventually managed to stand. He reached her side and placed his hand on her shoulder. She *was* freezing.

"Anton. You look about to be sick."

He fought down rising nausea. He'd deal with it later. Right now she needed his help.

With an effort, Anton tossed the coat aside and scooped her in his arms. He carried her up the stairs to her bedroom, amazed at how light she was. So fragile looking with half lidded eyes and trembling lips.

He lifted the blankets and placed her gently onto the bed. Anton discarded his own clothes onto the floor. Naked, he lay beside her and threw the blankets over the both of them.

Anton held her tight. Damn she was cold. He hoped it wasn't hypothermia. You needed to be out in the cold longer for that to set in, right?

His thoughts raced all over the place, especially to what she had told him. Was she making it up? If so, why would she? Let's face it. The ability with the weather, and the dead and goodness knows what else she could do, were proof enough she was different.

But immortal? It was too great a leap to make.

Whatever his doubts, right now she needed him. He held her tight, acutely aware of the skin to skin contact. Slowly she stopped shivering, which was a good thing. Anton was getting quite cold.

What felt like eons later, she began to warm up again. He kissed her forehead, cheeks, and nose. She moved slightly. A soft murmur escaped her lips.

He kissed her gently on the lips, tasted the sweetness he had savored only a few hours ago. Whatever his doubts were, his body wasn't agreeing. The way she molded into him felt right, as did her unique scent. Whatever she'd told him, Adriana was still Adriana. It was crazy to meet someone and feel like this so soon, but he did.

"I feel the cold now. I'll feel other things soon."

He took in a deep breath. "Like what?"

"I'll get burnt if I touch something hot. I'll have to eat more." She looked at his chest, frowning. "There's a lot, now I think about it." Her gaze returned to his. "I was worried you might leave me."

"Me? Leave you? I have no intention of doing so." *What did I just say?*

She looked up at him. "You mean it?"

"I guess I do," he said, and meant it. It then occurred to him what she had chosen to do—to live and die as a mortal. While the revelation of her becoming mortal would take some to sink in, he couldn't disbelieve her.

Accepting what she told him made it easier to move on. "How does it work?"

She smiled. "That's easy. It's the promise of enduring love."

Could he give her that? Had he given her that? "No one can make such a commitment."

"I believe you have, just then, about having no intention of leaving me."

He had, hadn't he?

Adriana turned towards the window. "Look."

The sky remained blue. Amazed that the weather could change so quickly, he asked. "This isn't your doing, is it?"

"I'm afraid not. I'll no longer be able to manipulate the weather, which is a bummer as I quite enjoyed that one."

He chuckled at her sense of humor. *How I seem to accept the impossible.*

"No, but I can tell you it will snow later on this morning, and for some time. Two to three days I'd say." She wiggled out of his embrace. "We should go and see your father while the weather holds."

He would have preferred to stay naked but she was right. Anton pushed the blanket back and got out of bed. He grabbed his clothes from the floor and put them on.

Adriana rubbed her arms. "Whew, it's cold. That's going to take some getting used to."

"I can warm you up again."

She smirked before turning to her wardrobe. Adrian watched as she dressed. Nice view too, of her white skin, gorgeous butt, and pert breasts. All too soon her beautiful assets were hidden by jeans and a sweater.

Adriana slipped on socks and boots. She stood up and looked back in his direction. "Enjoying yourself?"

He was definitely warming up, in one place in particular.

She glanced at his lap. "It's a good thing you're dressed."

Anton strode across the room and swept her in his arms, leaned over and kissed her on the lips. He glimpsed heaven and didn't want to leave. He deepened the kiss, but hands gently pressed against his chest.

He let her go.

Adriana's face was flushed. "No more or I'll have trouble controlling myself."

"Me, too."

Adriana walked down the steps to the front entrance.

At the bottom, she turned around. "Did you know that Calvino tried to match make me with you?"

He recalled Emma mentioning how much his father regarded Adriana. Had he imagined he would find the woman to spend, hopefully, a very long time with?

Not then, not by a long shot. "Looks like dad had a better idea of my ideal woman than I did."

"I'm glad I met him, or I'd have never met you."

For the first time in his life, he looked forward to seeing his father, and was glad he had a chance to do so before he died.

The thought of his father about to die soon made him swallow.

Adriana cupped his hand in hers. "It's easier to think of death as a natural end to a good life. Your father is ready to be reunited with Maria. Look at his parting like that, and be glad for him."

Anton wished he could, and maybe over time he would. For now he vowed to make sure that every day counted, and as much as possible, spend that time with Adriana.

He took in a deep breath and opened the front door. It was a beautiful and sunny day, even if it was bitterly cold.

No matter. It was perfect weather to meet his father and show off the woman he believed he'd never find.

**Lady Luck**  
**by Stella & Audra Price**



***Also by Stella and Audra Price***

*Wishes*  
*Glamour*

## Chapter One

Nina walked off stage and shook her head, looking in the mirror above her dressing table. A fifteen minute set shouldn't wear on a dancer so hard, but the lights were a bitch. Her make up was cakey, her eyeliner and mascara were running. *Waterproof my ass*, she thought as she cleaned up the runs and reapplied. At that point she was thankful to get out of the close scrutiny she endured while on the stage, especially from the side corner table.

He was here again, watching her, and this time, the thoughts didn't bode well. Was he stalking her? Did he know who and what she really was? Possibilities swam through her head as she got ready to go back out, applying fresh make up and looking for her blue, tie-dyed micro mini and tube top. She was stacked, and perfect physically, and she used her body to her monetary advantage. She found the costume she wanted, and her mind fluttered back to her admirer.

At first, she had enjoyed it, him coming in every night for her sets, watching her as she worked the floor, just sitting and never asking for anything, never speaking to her. For a long time she wished he would, instead of merely staring at her with his intense blue eyes. But that would ruin the fantasy.

Nina was not a woman to take work home with her, but in the early daylight hours she would think about him, while in the shower, or her lonely bed, wondering about him, feeling like he was there with her. The highly erotic fantasy sessions would always end the same, her vibrator smoking from overuse, her body panting and sated as she settled for the second best thing, and would continue to do so as she was not in the habit of dating the guys that came in to watch her jiggle her tits for cash.

She never saw him enter or leave the club, but each night he'd be sitting there, at his same shadowed table. She'd walk by when she was working the floor, wink, linger, wait for him to ask for a dance, leer, or make a lewd comment like the rest of the patrons at the club, but he just

sat back and watched her. It was getting on her last nerve.

Tonight she was going to end it, break the silence in which her watcher was indeed comfortable. He was fantastically sexy—the bright eyes, short sandy colored hair, scruffy stubble perpetually there every time she saw him. He had taste, too. It was a shame she hadn't met him someplace else, her fantasies were getting rather old. She was almost at the point of breaking her personal rule and hitting on him, taking him home, and riding him till dawn.

As she walked the floor, the catcalls began. Men offered up anything for her to sit on their laps and gyrate, but she was polite, making small talk and promising she would be back around, her sights still on the hottie in the corner.

"So, baby? I wanna watch your ass shake." The guy next to her said as he ran his hand down her arm.

*Fucking asshole*, she thought as she put on her best smile and turned to him. "Now, sugah, no touching remember? I'll be back soon, and you'll get your dance, but I have an appointment to keep. Don't you go anywhere." She winked at him. The man momentarily cowed and sauntered over to the side table, her target sitting back, one arm thrown over the chair back, the others fingers around his drink stirrer, twirling it through the brown liquid. She stopped just in his sight line and cocked her hip, her hands resting just under her waist.

"Now I know you like what you see, or else you wouldn't be watching me every night. So tell me, what I can do for you?" Her words were brazen, and bold, straight and to the point, but she figured if this was going to go anywhere, she would have to be.

He smiled at her and licked his lips, but didn't say anything. His silence irritated her. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Cat?" He shook his head and tipped his beer, taking a healthy swig, "No cat here that I'm aware of, unless you're changing your stage name... Nina."

His voice was like crushed velvet, and her body reacted in a most provocative way. She cocked her hip and smiled. "No stage name here. I don't believe in hiding. You, on the other hand, seem to. So, let's not beat around the bush, shall we? Why the hell do you insist on watching me every night?"

He shook his head. "I enjoy the show. I know you enjoy my presence here. I would have left if I weren't welcome. I don't stick

around where I'm not wanted."

That was interesting. "Do you now? Any reason why you choose to remain thoroughly ensconced in this shady corner and not bother to ask for a dance?"

"I don't believe in paying for something that should be given freely." He grinned. "And paying for something that I can get for free is against my principals. As for my choice of location, it's the best seat in the house."

She frowned. "And just what do you think you can get for free?" She asked the question while licking her lips.

"Peaches, you can get anything for free... if you know how." The guy smiled, kicking out the chair opposite to him and motioning for her to sit.

Nina smirked. The guy had balls, and seeing as he wasn't trying to touch her or do anything funny, she figured it was quite harmless. After all, his arrogance amused her and his voice set her body on fire. She wasn't leaving him if she could help it, so she sat, crossed her legs, and leaned forward.

He stayed where he was, his gaze never leaving her face. "So why here? What is it about this place that takes you up on stage every night? It sure ain't the crowd." His eyes flickered briefly behind her to the prick she'd promised a dance.

He was candid, asking an honest question and not doing it while she was gyrating on his lap. She looked him over again: well worn jeans, just tight enough, fitted T-shirt with some obscure reference to someplace back east that looked completely fetching on him, just giving the outline of a well-kept torso, the leather jacket draped just behind his chair. The man was seriously sexy and he knew it.

She smiled at him. "Now, I don't answer questions like that unless I know a man's name. You got a name, sport?"

"Suppose it's only fair, me knowing yours and all. Call me Jake."

"Jake, eh? That a real name, or the guy you play on TV?" she asked and leaned back. If he wasn't going to be real with her, well turn about was fair play.

"Oh, it's all me, I promise you." He tipped his beer again. "I have no reason to lie to you."

"True. Well to answer your question, I like Glitter. It's one of the only joints on the strip where I don't have to turn tricks."

He nodded, seemingly accepting the answer. "Then why do this? You have so much more potential. You could do great things. Unless you like getting felt up by down on their luck bums?"

It was an argument she had with herself on a regular basis. Hearing someone else voice her deepest, darkest dislikes about the job was not something she cared to do, but to humor the hottie sitting across from her, she decided to play along. "It's the only drawback. I like dancing. I like to be up there knowing eyes are watching me, only me, even for a short time." She grinned. "And I like to know one of those pairs of eyes are yours. So I deal with the pawing. It beats backroom prostitution."

"I don't have much experience with back room prostitution, so I'll take your word for it. As for my eyes, you don't have to sleaze yourself up here for them. Peaches, you can have them on you anytime you want." He finished his beer, setting it down. "Everyone else's? That might take some doing, but I'm sure we could work something out to accommodate that," he told her, shrugging and sitting forward. "Personally, I think you're just in this for the thrill of it all. With your looks and talent, you could snag yourself any rich old bastard in this town."

She laughed. "What fun is a rich old bastard?"

"Exactly my point. Baby, you need something with a bit of life. Trust me, once you get outside this rat pit and into the big real world, you'll discover that this place is deader than Elvis...and that's pretty damn dead. This is a place folks come to bury themselves, and you're far from dead. You're wasted here on these freaks. All they wanna do here is fuck you dry, and I'm sure you'll agree that that is a waste of your true abilities." He smiled, his eyes flashing with amusement and heat. "Not that it wouldn't be a ride to die for."

His voice, again, set her body to feel things she didn't know she could. Coils of lust slipped around her limbs and nestled low in her belly. "And just what are you suggesting? I give up my livelihood? Start hooking? 'Cause this place might be a pit, but at least it's honest. I'm not playing the virgin and fucking like a whore behind the scenes."

He raised an eyebrow and his next words came out in a whisper. "There are many ways to earn an honest living that don't involve this. Then again, anything that involves risk taking is far from honest. That is what you crave, isn't it? The thrill? The do-or-die moments that make everything better? Heightens all your senses to the point of ecstasy?"

Makes everything feel more real as your heart pounds in your chest so loudly you think everyone else can hear it. When every move you make determines whether you live or die, fly or fall. Peaches, I can take you to places that you were born to be in, environments that you'd not only live comfortably in but thrive on. You can live that high all day and all night and never have one of these low life scum grope you again."

Mesmerized, she licked her lips and looked at him. "And just how do you plan on doing that?"

"Well, first we need to get out of this place. There's nothing but deadbeats here. We can't fly with the eagles if we're surrounded by turkeys, if you know what I mean."

She grinned. "I do. My shift isn't over for another half hour," she said, curious as to what he was offering, but not ready to give up her job and safety net.

"Fair enough, then. Go back and jiggle for that loser over there, then come back to me. I'll give you a taste of what I'm promising once you finish and if, by morning, you're not convinced, then you'll never have to see me again."

She stood and smoothed down her outfit, looking him over again. She then glanced back to the fuck head who'd groped her, then back at Jake. Seeing the sexy man in front of her as the lesser of two evils, even if he was a deranged killer, she quickly made her decision. "On second thought, how do you propose getting me out of here without that dipshit approaching me again?"

He smiled coolly, sitting back from her and eyeing the guy. "Simple." He patted his lap for her to sit.

Ah, so it did come down to his hands on her. She realized that it didn't bother her really. Hell, Jake could fuck her right there and as long as he was speaking to her, she wouldn't give a rat's ass. Not that she was against sex in public places, but here...

*Ah, fuck it.* Looking over her shoulder one last time at the waste of skin sitting at the bar, she took the three steps to his waiting lap and grinned as she straddled him, her short skirt riding up. "This okay?"

"It'll do for now." He placed his hands on her waist, pulling her towards him so his lips hovered inches from his. She could feel his heat seeping into her. "Now, close your eyes."

She shivered, his hands sending heat through her skin, and closed her eyes like he asked.

His soft lips touched her own as he kissed her gently. He deepened the kiss, using the gasp it drew from her to slide his tongue into her mouth. His body felt good against hers, hard and soft. She suddenly felt the cool night air on her face, she opened her eyes and he moved back from her, steadying her as she stood in the shaded alley way next to the club.

She looked about cautiously. "How the hell?" She looked back at him and touched her lips, still on fire from the kiss. "Just what in the ten hells are you?" she asked and backed up towards the alley's mouth.

"Nothing dangerous, or I'd have walked you clean out of there instead of that." He told her breathlessly, resting against the wall.

"Nothing dangerous? You just teleported me out of a fucking building. So spill it, or this little seduction ends now," she said with her hands on her hips, her nipples puckered and peaking through the flimsy material of her top.

"Show me yours and I'll show you mine." He winked, lighting a cigarette.

She looked down at her body and cocked her head, smiling. "Um...I would say I'm showing you a hell of a lot right now, Jake."

"I agree, but shadow walking more than myself any distance is tricky, so you'll have to let me catch my breath first."

She gasped. *Shadow walking? Can't be.* "Shadow walker? You're a Demon? Shit, only royals can do that, can't they?" She moved closer. "And that statement wasn't an invitation."

He slumped further down the wall, taking a shaky draw. "I'm in no condition to be taking advantage of any invitation just yet. I'm not a royal demon, but I'm powerful enough. And if you look at the building, I only moved us through the wall."

She noticed he was right, but it was still damn impressive. "Okay, well Jake, what do we do now? Do you have a car? Or do we take mine? 'Cause I gotta tell ya, you look like shit."

He chuckled, grinding out the cigarette on the gravel before straightening. "I'll live. I've way too much to show you tonight to pass out. We'll take your car."

She nodded and waited for him to move toward the end of the alley where the parking lot was located, just behind her. They walked to the bright area of cars, and she motioned him towards her Pathfinder SUV. The one thing she truly splurged on, the truck was a lease and she loved

it. "You want to drive, or should I? Cuz either way, I really need a change of clothes and a shower."

"You drive. We'll go to yours. You'll need to change anyway. Club stripper is not the look we'll be going for on this trip." He smiled over at her, looking for her reaction.

She supposed she should be offended at the comment, but as it was exactly what she was, she didn't take any offense and shrugged. Getting into the driver's seat and peeling out of the lot, she set off down the strip toward her apartment.

Minutes later, they emerged from the car and walked up to the second floor condo where she lived. After she let him into the foyer, she entered behind him and locked the door.

All bells and whistles in her body were going off, telling her to attack him, rip his clothes off, and see if he was as perfectly made as he seemed. It really had been too long for her. finally she had the man at her place, and she was wet and aching for any kind of contact.

She shook her head to remove the thoughts of the odd demon lifting her and sinking into her heat, and instead of sinking to her knees to beg him to take her, she simply told him to make himself at home. "I'm going to hit the shower," she said and mumbled, "a cold one," just under her breath. "If you're inclined, there's beer in the fridge."

"I'm always inclined. It's a nice apartment" he told her as he moved through the apartment.

She left him as he snooped through her living room. She got in the shower, letting the spray attempt to wash thought of her new and mysterious friend from her. She wasn't sure why, but she did trust him. He didn't try to hurt her, and though he stole a kiss, it wasn't like she didn't want it. The man's lips were pure sin, and goddess if he didn't know how to kiss. Her lips still tingled from it, and the memory set her body back into overdrive. All those nights fantasizing about him, all the lurid and fantastic sex they had had in her head, those memories were not helping now. Resisting the urge to satisfy the craving herself, she was certain that anything this guy did would be twenty times better than what she could come up with. He just had that way about him.

Showered and clean, she stepped from the stall and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around herself, and walked into her bedroom.

He was lounging on her bed reading an out-of-date magazine. He'd changed since she last saw him, though how he'd managed it, she didn't



know. He was now wearing dark slacks and a pale blue shirt which helped bring out his eyes. There was no tie, but he still managed to look somewhat formal and absolutely edible. Even his hair looked better, less scruffy and more controlled. He looked up at her and smiled.

"You look better when your face isn't caked in make up." He stood fluidly and motioned to a pile of her clothes, which he'd arranged neatly at the foot of her bed. "We have a dress code to adhere to. I hope you don't mind, I picked out a few things I think you'll look just perfect in."

While the thought of him rummaging through her closet disturbed her a little, she managed to smile. "Not at all." She looked over the selections he had made: a black slinky wrap dress, a red summery kind of frock, and a black and purple Japanese knee-length dress. She smiled. They were some of her favorites from her closet. She turned to him. "I see you didn't pull out lingerie."

"I'm not that much of a pervert." He grinned, making her think that he was maybe lying. "I'll let you accessorize. You have any pets?"

"Pets? Not unless you count the beta in the tank next to my bed. Name's Harvey." She smiled but inwardly pouted, the thought of him rifling through her lingerie drawer spiking her temperature again. Jesus, he hadn't even touched her, and she was going to need another cold shower.

"Good, feed him before we leave. You never know where we'll end up." His gaze met hers, causing her to flush. "I'll let you dress alone. I've leered at you enough the past few months. I'm not sure my control would survive a situation where I could actually touch you and carry out my dirty little fantasies." His tone was light but carried a dark, heavy edge to it. He winked then turned his back, leaving the room without another word.

## Chapter Two

Jake was feeling good about tonight. Nina was in the bedroom changing into something much more suited to her. She was hot, smoking hot, but a chick with her body and grace should never be found in the dive where he'd picked her up. Sure, he didn't have a problem with a woman using her assets to feed and cloth herself, but Nina had so much potential. She wasn't using it, and that rubbed him the wrong way. He had used every bit of cunning he had, and even then some, to get where he was. Hell, he'd sold his soul for the opportunity. Nina, however, was floundering in that place, and he had appointed himself as the person to show her what she was worth.

He knew his motives weren't entirely altruistic. He'd been down on his luck since his last partner had grown tired of the game, but that was her problem. Shade was a royal Demon, and they grew tired of things easily. Not Jake, though, this was Vegas. It called to him, needed him to stay. He needed another partner, and he needed to keep doing what he loved most: playing the cards.

Jake had always loved cards. Being a natural born gambler, he'd been winning and losing money all his life. Mostly winning, he was always proud to boast despite the truth behind it. He'd always known how to work the cards, the crowd, and he'd never been too proud or honest to palm a card or two when it suited his advantage.

Shade, the beautiful demon he bargained his soul to, was a card counter. She had natural talent for watching the cards. It could have had to do with the fact she was a royal Demon, but maybe not. He showed her the game, and she'd loved it. They'd made their way around the word, betting big and living the life of the high rollers. Vegas called though, and when she decided to leave, he'd needed to stay.

Nina wasn't the only thrill junkie around. The high was just too great for him to give up. Vegas was in his blood, and he couldn't leave her. So, he'd stayed and waved *adios* to his partner. The two of them had

accumulated enough money to keep him living in relative comfort while he tried to come up with something to bring back his former glory. He'd never be a card counter, or at least not one as good as Shade.

He'd been barely breaking even on the blackjack tables when he'd found out exactly what he needed to fill the gap that Shade had left. He'd been sitting at the back room of Eddie's playing his monthly game of poker when Eddie began regaling them with his stories. Nobody really paid attention to the tales the overweight old man had to tell, nobody but Jake, who knew only too well that the world wasn't always as it seemed, and even then everything the old man had to say could only really be taken very lightly. This one night, however, he spoke of something that caught Jake's attention. He talked of the other races, most of whom Jake was very familiar with, being half-Demon himself.

Eddie's drunken mumblings had taken a turn to the wish races, of the three that Eddie spoke of, one in particular caught Jake's interest. The first two were all wishes and carpets, interesting on their own but not what Jake was looking for directly. The third was a race of genie called Jenai, primarily women. If this wasn't interesting enough, they were like a walking good luck charm; any man they were with had instant good luck. Every gambler needed good luck, and so every one needed a Jenai. That night after questioning old Eddie a little more, Jake set out to snag himself a new partner.

Surprisingly, it hadn't been too hard to find the woman in the room next to him. A few calls to different people and he had her name, along with a short list of others. Nina, being already in Vegas, had been the first one he'd looked at, and boy did he get an eyeful. She was perfect for his needs, hopefully *all* of his needs, and he knew she'd be receptive to him. After all, he was offering her the chance of a lifetime.

He grinned, checking himself in the mirror before sitting back down on her couch. He was getting antsy, beginning to sense his nerves like a tight ball in the back of his stomach. He loved that feeling, and it never went away, even after a thousand games of cards. This was living on the edge, and he loved every moment of it.

He pulled a deck of cards out of his pants pocket and expertly shuffled through them. It was an old habit, but he found that it helped calm him and made the wait till he was at the tables pass more quickly.

Nina walked in wearing the tight sexy Japanese number and a pair of thigh high, smoke grey stockings with the ends of her garters peeking

from under the skirt as she moved. Her heels were high, spectator pumps, and she stalked toward him and did a twirl, careful to make sure her hair stayed up in the chopsticks and knots in which she arranged it. The dual color of her hair, chestnut brown and wine auburn, suited her, and the outfit gave her a refined look. Her eyes were covered in smudges of kohl and her lips glistened with sheer gloss. She was ready for the evening.

He smiled appraisingly at her, fighting to keep his body under control and his hands off her. This was a business arrangement before it was anything else, and he wasn't letting his cock mess up any of this. "You look stunning." He grinned, slipping the cards into his pocket.

She smiled. "I'm glad you approve. So, what's the deal, Jake?"

"I think it's better if I show you." He stood, moving towards her. "You need to live it, Peaches, not hear it. Information can never beat experience."

"Maybe, but knowing is half the battle, and my trust only goes so far."

"What? You don't trust me?" He mock pouted.

"I just met you, Jake, and this is all very mysterious. I'm as wild as the next girl, but...I need something to go on, dig?"

"And if I say it's a surprise?" He checked his watch. They had plenty of time, but he'd been away from the cards for so long. His initial plan had been to take her to the casino and show her, let her feel the thrill of winning for herself. Even let her pick her own game, something they could score big at together, but he needed her cooperation first and foremost. "You're a big girl and I'm sure you could protect yourself from little ol' me. I've no intention of hurting you or selling you to some slave camp...you're being silly."

She put her hands on her hips. "I suppose you're right. Where to?"

His smile widened. He was sure he'd lost her after his slave camp comment, although where that came from, he had no idea. Old Eddie's stories were beginning to seep into his brain, which could only be a bad thing. "The strip, where else would you want to be?" he told her, unable to keep his excitement out of his voice. "Come on, grab your coat. We'll drive over."

She shrugged and grabbed a fitted black jacket out of the closet and her small purse. "Ah, the strip. And here I thought you were going to be original."

He laughed at her. She'd understand soon enough, then she'd be as hooked as he was. "This is the strip, Peaches, just not as you've ever lived it before. This is the life, the only life worth living." They left the apartment and moved down toward the car. " You wanna drive? I'll direct. It's not hard to get to. Just follow the lights."

She threw the keys at him. "Nope. This is your excursion, I'm just along for the ride." She slipped into the passenger seat and her dress rode up just enough for Jake to see that her garters were silver and black and matched the dress perfectly.

"Fair enough. Make sure you buckle up." He got into the car and started the engine. Adjusting the seat so he could drive and the mirror so he could see the length of her beautiful body, he reversed the car out of its space and squealed away in the direction of the strip.

She leaned back, moving her chair as she did, and the action exposed more of her leg. The tops of the thigh highs were completely out, and her pale flesh was a stark contrast. She stretched, oblivious to it, and closed her eyes.

He slowed the car down, allowing him time to enjoy her longer. The car in front of him braked hard, and he had to veer into the next lane to avoid hitting it, jolting them both. Ignoring the screech of horns from behind him, he beat at angrily at his own. "Fucking prick wasn't even looking where he was going! Where the hell do they learn to drive anyway?" He shouted, shaking his fist at the guy before passing a few cars and cutting back into his original lane.

Nina giggled and shook her head. "Wow, on the fist shaking! Who taught you that, some dirty old pervert?" She giggled again and watched him drive.

"Ah...no, sorry." He ducked his head down, embarrassed. "I actually came up with it on my own. Spur of the moment thing, I'm afraid." He watched the road intently, the urge to glance in the mirror strong but held in check. They drove for a few moments before reaching their location: The Victoria, or 'home,' as he'd began to call it these past few months. It was in the perfect location and had everything you could ever want. Every luxury that you could think of was already included in the room's price which, he had to admit, was a little steep. But, he could afford it. Or at least, he could afford it come tomorrow. "We're here, Peaches."

He got out the car, threw the car keys to the red-jacketed boy, and

took the valet ticket, moving around the side of the car just in time to see Nina being escorted out of the car. "Welcome to heaven." He grinned at her.

"Heaven? It's a casino. Come on now, Jake, heaven is a lot of other things. It isn't a casino."

"It's a hotel, too." He pointed out as he held his arm out for her.

"Ah, well a hotel, too? Why didn't you say so?" she said sarcastically as she took his arm, making sure she was very close to him. Her body draped against his sweetly, and she smiled. "A casino isn't my idea of a good time."

He laughed. "Well, then you've obviously never been in one. Let me help you out with that." He opened the door and smoothly escorted her inside. "See? Now that's much better, I'm sure. Despite your earlier doubts, you'll soon come to realize that this is indeed a holy place, for inside these very walls you can have anything you want. Rule number one: the casino loves people who spend money."

He guided her over to the cash booth. "Rule number two," he told her as they waited in line, "the more money you spend, the more the casino will love you, especially at first, no matter how much you win. Because they always know they're going win it back. They just have to keep you here long enough, and to do that they have to spend their own money. It's all about odds."

"You just described a brothel, Jake. At least there I know I'm getting fucked, and the odds are in my favor."

He shook his head. "You'll see. Have a look around and see if there is anything you wanna give a shot." He moved up to the booth, cashing enough money to last them the night into chips. Taking his tray, he halved the amount onto a tray for her, then turned and handed them to her. "There you go, that's your front. Now, have you seen anything? Or is there anything you know how to play already?"

Nina smiled at him. "I have been in a casino before, Jake, but other than slots, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. So, that's what I stick to."

"A simple *no* would do, and slots don't count." He slipped his hand around her waist enjoying the feel of her tight body against his. She smelled so good. He led her to the gaming room and stood surveying the tables for a moment. "Choose one. That's blackjack, and over there is craps, roulette." He mentioned several more, pointing to their respective

tables. "And the poker rooms are way over there, but we'll have missed the sign up for the games. We'll hit them tomorrow."

"Plan on keeping me here then, Jake? Well, you lead the way, Mr. Shadow Demon. I don't know the difference."

"You can cut the 'mister' out right there, Peaches. Shadow Demon will do just fine." He smiled, the excitement bubbling within him. He still wasn't one hundred percent sure this was going to work. "Tell me, can you count to twenty-one?"

She gave him a stupefied look. "Um, yeah, and I can walk and chew gum at the same time too, Jake. I can also fuck upside down. What the hell has counting to do with anything? I mean seriously?"

He laughed. Upside down? Well that was something impressive. "Gotta show me that some time, love. As far as serious goes, I think we'll start at blackjack. All you have to do it make twenty-one or closest. You'll be a natural."

"Yeah, that's what the talent scout said when he tired to get me in porno a few years back. At least I have clothes on this time. Lead the way, Jake...and I'm not showing you anything."

"We'll see. I'm a betting man, Peaches." He chuckled to himself as they made their way over to a free table and sat themselves down. Jake faced the dealer, waiting for the current hand to be played out.

She sat next to him and watched everything, then looked over at him, waiting patiently.

He placed a small bet as the dealer cut a fresh deck and slipped the cards to him and the two other players. He briefly explained to her the rules of the game. She watched him blankly as he did, giving him the impression that she wasn't entirely listening to him. She didn't seem to be as interested in gambling as he'd hoped, not that her lack of enthusiasm worried him. It wouldn't take much to bring her over to his way of thinking. He just had to wait until the cards started hitting.

They'd been dealt a nine and a two, not a bad hand to start with. In fact, it was a great hand. Not the best that they could have gotten, but it meant they couldn't get busted by the next card, and a ten would give them twenty-one. He leaned over and whispered that to Nina, and she nodded politely. The dealer was showing a four, this was also good, and ideally his next card would be high, hopefully busting him. A bust dealer paid out for all players still in the game, and the good thing about a four was that if the dealer's face down card was a ten, then the dealer couldn't

stick. Fourteen was too low a number. He had to have sixteen or higher.

The next card they were dealt was a seven, giving them nineteen. He motioned to stay his hand. He felt confident that they could win with that. Blackjack wasn't the same as poker. It didn't incite the same thrill and rush that the latter did, but it had its good points, and it would be a perfect starting point for Nina.

The dealer hit a ten and stuck, immediately showing his cards.

He had twenty-three, busting him. The player next to him cheered and clapped him on the back as the dealer paid out.

Jake added the chips to his pile and motioned to Nina. "So, do you want a shot? It's fairly simple."

Nina shook her head and smiled. "No, I think you're doing pretty good on your own. I'm not very good at this sort of thing," she said with a fidget and smiled again, putting her hand on his shoulder.

He rolled his eyes at her in mock exasperation. "Don't be a wuss. What's the worst that could happen? You lose a few bucks? There's plenty more."

Nina frowned and shook her head. "Look, why don't you do it? I'm perfectly happy watching."

"You come off as a hands-on person, love." He grinned until he saw her face; she really wasn't having fun. "Come on, just give it a shot. If you don't like it we can stop, move on to something else."

Nina removed her hand from Jake's shoulder and sighed. "I don't want to. I said I would come and I said I would hangout, but I didn't once say I would gamble. You know what? Forget this. I don't have the time or the energy to be coerced into doing this. Thank you for an

interesting evening. Jake. Goodnight." She turned on her heel and stalked off the gaming floor, leaving an astonished Jake at the table.

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't believe him. That's what she got for going out with a guy she knew nothing about, and coming to a casino of all places. She knew it was going to end badly when they walked into the place, never mind the luscious way the man moved in his jeans. Well, this was the last time she was going to think with her sex drive. All it did was get her into trouble, and the fetching piece of man probably thought she was crazy.

She wasn't, however. As a Jenai, she knew how powers backfired. Losing every hand she played was not any way to endear herself to a



seasoned, hardcore gambler. Not that she should care about the rogue, but he spoke to her, seemed to really get her.

To disappoint him like that, well, it was better that he thought she was crazy than for him to know the real reason. It was killing her to walk away, after meeting and being in the presence of such raw maleness. Jake was pretty much the physical embodiment of everything she though was sexy: powerful, calculating, sexy, eyes and lips that sin had a hand in creating, a body that made her drool, and a carefree look at life. He was everything she couldn't be, everything she reigned in because of her nature, and it called to her with neon lights. Jenai were lucky in being able to choose who they used their powers for; no carpets ruled their powers. Except for a few minor rules, like not using their powers for their own ends, Jenai had it the best out of the Wish races. Jake was the kinda guy she could choose, could make a very rich man indeed.

But, his insistence in her doing exactly what her powers dictated she not do was a little unnerving. It was like slipping down a flight of stairs on prom night. As a gambler's companion one had to be seen as good luck, but something as embarrassing as losing a large sum of money, something any great gambler didn't do, was akin to relationship suicide. Not that she ever thought to have a relationship with a gambler before, but Jake was different. Jake was meant for something better then the tables; he just didn't know it.

A relationship wasn't what she had in mind, anyway. Though any other Jenai would argue that Nina had wanted to belong to a gambler, else why would she be living and working in the biggest gambling town this side of Monte Carlo? *No, no that wasn't it. I needed to get away from everything*, she told herself as she reached the palms just before the bank of elevators they passed on the way in. *Why else have I abstained from the casinos and fast talkers till now?*

The answer was simple: because none of them had sought her out. This one had and he wasn't old and overweight. He wasn't really mean or callous, either. He found her and was intent on showing her a good time, Vegas style. No doubt any normal woman would have jumped at it. She sighed and shook her head as she realized that her freak out was not what other normal women would do, and she probably just blew her chances on what was probably the most sincere guy she had met since she moved there.

*Fuck that; don't feel sorry for yourself, Nina! If he were worth it he*

*wouldn't still be sitting at the table, probably laughing at you.* That thought brought her ire back to full strength. Serves her right for thinking a night out would be harmless to her ego or her person. It was when she felt the hand on her upper arm that she turned, ready to knock out whoever was unlucky enough to touch her.

Jake let her arm go, holding his empty hands up in defense. "Whoa there, Nelly! Don't just run out on me; it was just a game of cards. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"Then don't push me. If I say *no* I mean no," she said with a definite edge of anger in her voice. She was excited that he came after her, but she wasn't going to let him off easy. "Or is it that you don't hear the word *no* often enough?"

"Oh, I hear it often enough. Generally it doesn't apply to me though." He smiled jokingly. "I just have a problem understanding why anyone would be so against gambling. You're not one of those weird types, are you?"

"I have nothing against gambling, Jake. I just don't want to do it myself, okay? Can you respect that?"

"I guess I could. Do I get a reason?"

"I just don't want to. Take it as that," she said quietly. "Look, I ruined your evening, I'm sure. You didn't get in a playing groove, so I guess it wasn't like I lost you money due to concentration. I'm just going to go."

"You don't have to go. We can do something else. I'm just having a hard time figuring out why you wouldn't want to gamble. I mean, it wasn't like it was your money to lose. If somebody gave me a free pass at a casino, you wouldn't see me for dust. I just don't see what kind of enjoyment you can get from watching me play. As fine as I am, you might want your own bit of glory." He looked put out.

She was going to have to play it right if she was going to salvage anything of this evening, a thing she wished for desperately. "Haven't you ever seen James Bond? The women that sit and watch, behind their man, looking pretty and demure, distracting the competition?"

"I'm no Bond, Peaches, and this is real life."

"You could be Bond, and who's to say a woman sitting behind you wouldn't give you the edge? I mean, not to sound full of myself, but I'm not a wallflower."

"Oh, yeah? And how is that?"

"A beautiful woman captivates men. Hell, the older and balder a guy is, a woman just has to bat her eyelashes and she's got his full attention. I'm a stripper, Jake. I know how to work men."

He nodded thoughtfully, then smiled. "And just how would you work me? Not that you don't already have my full attention."

Nina faltered. There was something in the way he said it, something that screamed to her, not just her body, but her soul. "I..." she stammered and then recovered quickly, not wanting him to see how he affected her. "Well, you're not an overweight, middle-aged balding down on his luck guy, are you? That's who I usually ensnare with my considerable charms."

He shrugged, a graceful movement of his shoulders. "I could be considered down on my luck...by some." He took a step closer to her, and she watched his tongue slide along his bottom lip.

"Hardly, Jake. You have the airs of a man who's up and coming."

"I suppose we'll have to see about that." He smiled, clearly pleased by her statement.

"I suppose. I shouldn't keep you. Enjoy your night, Jake. I know you'll win big."

"And how would you know that?"

"Call it a hunch," she said and winked. She touched his shoulder, and knew as she did that a little of the power governing her race slipped to him in the process. After sex with her, he'd own the tables, own anything he chose to do, but the touch was enough for the evening.

His hand snaked out and grabbed her waist, pulling her small frame towards him while keeping her hand on his shoulder. "And what if I'm done with cards for the night?"

She shuddered in his embrace and licked her lips. "Well, if that's true, your night just opened up. What else did you have in mind?"

"I have a pretty good idea, but it's a gamble of another kind."

His arm tightened around her, punctuating his intention. She couldn't ignore his insinuation or the way her body felt standing so close to him. "What kind of gamble?" she asked in a breathy whisper.

"I don't think it's one that you'd mind. It's the kind that would leave us both completely satisfied—if it paid off." He grinned, inching closer, and pressed his lips to hers.

This felt right. This man, grifter, this sexy risk-taker kissing her, felt like the most natural thing in the world. Men before him, and she was

sure, men after him, wouldn't feel this good or this right. No one ignited that fire burning within her. No one but Jake. Not even twenty-four hours and she was ready to forget every precaution she set for herself, including hiding her powers, to have him for always. She moaned and rubbed against him in invitation.

The elevator opened, and he guided her back into it. They had the whole place to themselves, and it didn't take him long to press her up against the far wall. His hands slipped down her body, cupping her ass and lifting her, giving her enough room to wrap her stocking-covered legs around him.

Well, if nothing else, Jake didn't waste any time. She smiled down at him and nipped his bottom lip, squeezing with her thighs. "Your room better be on one of the top floors, or we are going to have to hit the run stop."

"Already on it," he chuckled, reaching back and slamming his fist against the big button. "That should buy us some time."

That little move was going to get them in some trouble, but if Jake was as high a roller as she thought, it wouldn't matter. "Perfect," she said and kissed him soundly, his hand on her thighs, slipping quickly up under the silk of the dress, his fingers catching on the garter.

He licked his lips, looking her over. "My thoughts exactly." His long fingers slipped under her , ghosting over her clit before teasing her open.

His touch was electric, sending a warm feeling of contentment through her. She purred at the invasion and threw her head back. It had been a while since she had let a man touch her, and Jake working her body so expertly further enforced that feeling of rightness. It was like he knew her already. "Jake," she sobbed, her nipples cresting to visible peaks through the dress in silent invitation.

Freeing a hand from her, he made short work of her dress, pulling it up and over her head. Discarding it behind him, he kissed down her neck, taking care to nibble lightly on the sensitive spot just at the crook of her neck.

All but nude in a stopped elevator. Nina's exposed skin was chilled by the air conditioning—the thigh highs and garter, and her heels the only things left after he snapped her underwear off, ripping the scant material, making her feel...Jake knew how to get a girl's wild streak to the forefront. She was a closet risk-taker, but damn this was beyond what

she would think. "Well this is hardly fair," she murmured into his hair and breathed in his clean and intoxicating scent. Her body keened with an energy that, if he played this right, would turn into the best good luck charm he would ever have.

He moved his head back, amusement flashing in his eyes. "Fair? What exactly would you suggest for evening up the score?" His thumb lightly stroked her clit.

She purred, "Ummm, well I'm naked and exposed and you still got everything on. How's that fair, Jake?"

"Not completely naked." He bent his head, taking a pert nipple in his mouth, scraping it against the rough lace of her bra to prove his point.

She gasped and dug her fingers into his hair, holding him there. "True, but I'm still at a loss...gods, that's fantastic."

His tongue circled her nipple. "So, what would you like me to take off? I'm a little harder to undress." His voice was light and teasing, but his eyes were full of deep heat.

"True...we'll take care of that later," she said as she nimbly undid the buttons of his shirt and slipped her hands under the material, feeling his skin, her body screaming to get closer to his.

He groaned, pressing her harder against the wall. "Oh, I know we will." He unclasped her bra, ducking his head under it and sucking her nipple into his mouth, this time unhindered by the lace. He lavished attention on it before moving to the other. "Gods, you taste like heaven." He pulled back from her a little, the bra wrapped around his head, and he smiled triumphantly. "And I was right about the peaches." Winking, he buried his face once again in her chest.

She giggled and threw her head back, arching as he nibbled, a desperate moan leaving her mouth. He was a terrific tease and she told him so.

"I'm no tease, pet, I always deliver on all of my promises." She heard him unzipping his pants, then felt his hot, hard flesh grinding on her clit where his thumb had been. "Now, tell me what you want, Peaches." His long fingers speared her deeper as if for emphasis. "In great detail."

She moaned and shuddered, looking him in the eye. She was committed to this. A stopped elevator, naked as the day she was born, the hot sexy stranger from her daybreak musings flesh, and willing to

make any fantasy she wanted come true...it was all too much. She would have him, and he would have a piece of her. Even if it didn't last it was the best she could give him. It was a fair trade off, the powers she would impart on him for a night of tawdry ecstasy.

*Screw it. He's a dream I have had for far too long.* "I want you," she whimpered. "The dangerous guy I fantasized about while I danced, the one that set my bed on fire in the early mornings from illicit dream sequences as I touched myself, wishing it was you. Give me you, Jake..."

"Then you shall have me." As he spoke he slowly drew his fingers out of her, making sure that she felt the loss before he placed the very tip of him at her. He grinned wildly, "This is going to be good," he said a second before he thrust deep up into her.

"Christ!" she called out, wrapping her legs around his waist tighter as he filled her to brimming. He was long and oh so deliciously thick. Her body felt his invasion all the way to her core and welcomed it, all that he was willing to give her. She shuddered and kissed him.

Both his hands were now on her upper thighs, parting her as wide as she could go without splitting. "Well, I've been called worse."

She chuckled and clamped down on him with her inner muscles, "If you're going to talk, talk dirty...."

"Fuck!" His knees almost buckled, but he caught himself on the wall with a growl, the hand he so recently had inside of her a mere inch from her face. "Fuck, Peaches, you'll kill me with that. Gods, you have no idea how fucking good you feel wrapped around my cock."

"Umm, about as good as it feels to finally have you inside me...ummm...Jake, don't hold back baby," she gasped as she turned her head, capturing his fingers in her mouth and moaning.

He thrust deeper, clearly turned on by her sucking, before drawing out slowly. "I'm not holding back, just making some room to work. You haven't had a good fuck in a while, have you?" He slammed back into her, steadying her against the wall and taking her hips in his hands.

Nina moaned and shook her head. "No...gods no, unless you count my Rabbit Rocket..."

"I don't, no matter how often you do indeed *rock it*. It just can't be the same." He glided back into her this time, starting a steady rhythm, drawing almost out of her before slamming back in home, keeping her hips firm in his grasp.

She could feel him move easier now, her body fully accepting him,

accepting his mastery at working her body to completion. It wasn't long, and soon she was purring and arching, loving the slight pain as his hand held her hips. She knew there were going to be bruises, and she didn't care. All she knew was his cock, the rhythm of his breath, and the pounding of his hips.

He sucked lightly on her neck, kissing and nipping hard on her sensitive flesh as her bare chest pressed against his and he worked himself into her. Their pace grew faster, more frantic, her body hungering for every touch he gave her. The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed loudly through the elevator.

She groaned. "Hit the run stop....I wanna be moving," she said, knowing well they could be caught by someone looking to get on the elevator. It was bad enough the camera in the far corner was recording it all. *Hope the boys in security are enjoying the show.*

"Dirty slut," he groaned as he slapped the button. "Pity there's no windows. My little exhibitionist, well, there's plenty of other casinos...would you like that? Me fucking you in a glass elevator, high above a crowd of gambling onlookers, hearing your muffled screams as you come time and time again for me? Watching everything, seeing everything from the way those beautiful tits of yours bounce up and down to the way that tight pussy of yours drips your honey down my shaft? Watching and knowing that they'll never have you? That turn you on?" As he spoke his thumb found her clit and stroked heavily.

His words were more effective than in her naughtiest daydream and she shuddered, coming hard and arching. "Jake!" she gasped, feeling a little of herself slip to him. Her powers grew, looking for a worthy outlet.

He called out her name as her orgasm pushed him over the edge, bringing him with her. He poured breathlessly into her as her body milked him for all he was worth.

Panting, Nina felt the sweat trickle down her back and the elevator slow to a stop. "Your room on floor thirty-six? Otherwise we are going to have some explaining to do," she breathed into his ear and nipped the lobe. "You're fantastic."

He kissed her soundly before looking at the floor numbers. "Thirty-six? Luckily yes, but if it hadn't been we could have just taken the stairs. I wouldn't mind getting you in the stairwell." He winked. "And as for fantastic, that was nothing, give me some time to recharge and I'll show

you what a shadow Demon can really do. You, however, were amazing." He lifted her dress, slipping it over her head and fixing himself just as the door opened to expose their ruffled selves to an elderly couple who, by their angry expressions, had been waiting impatiently for the elevator.

Nina held onto Jake's arm, already feeling her power swirl around him. It was her luck as part of him that they didn't make it to the floor before and offend the old people, though as much fun as it was, it wasn't something she wanted. Hell, her gram would slap her if she knew she didn't just skate by the skin of their teeth.

Jake felt good, better now he was slightly branded by her, and as they stepped out of the elevator and walked down the hall to his corner room, her body thrummed to life all over again. "Glad the moldy oldies didn't catch us, eh?"

"You never know, it might have put some excitement into their night, given the old boy some ideas. Although, that's one show I think I'd much rather miss." They walked down the corridor until they came to his door, or she assumed it was his door as he stopped at it and fished round in his pocket for the card.

Nina leaned against the wall next to the door and watched him. "Sure you don't wanna go back down to the pit floor?"

"Maybe in a while, I don't think I'd survive another elevator trip. Besides, security will give us a sharp dressing down if we don't disappear for a few hours. Let's get room service and you out of that dress properly," He found the key and opened the door, ushering her inside.

She smiled. "Yeah, and you out of those fetching pants..."



## Chapter Three

Jake watched Nina sit down on the orgy-sized bed and immediately thought of a hundred different ways to defile her. The sex had been fantastic, the first he'd had in months. Despite his player lifestyle he wasn't one to sleep around, mostly because there were much better things to do. He'd rather spend a night on the tables than overworking himself with some slut who would drain his money and most likely leave him with some kind of nasty disease, itching for weeks. He'd learned the hard way that the tables were better to him than women. Yet, here he was with Nina. She was the type of girl he thought about, she had more class in her pinky finger than those other girls would ever possess in their whole life.

She crossed her legs, the short dress inching up on her, exposing her thighs to him. She gave him a grin, proving that she knew the effect it had on him. He looked away, focusing his attention on the room. It was a fairly nice place, full of all life's comforts. He always liked the idea of living in a casino, it had so many benefits—from the maid who turned down his sheets to the people he'd meet. There were never any set neighbors, either, everything was transient. Of course, that he was never more than an elevator ride away from a hand of cards was a real benefit.

He picked up the room service list from where he'd left it the night before and turned to her. "Any ideas on what you want, Peaches? It's pretty late and a Sunday, so they'll have run out on all the good stuff."

She smiled and lay back, stretching. "Ummm... I ate actual dinner hours ago, but I could go for a light recharge."

"That's all we need I think." He threw himself down the bed next to her, causing her to roll into him. He put his arm around her and held the menu so she could see it. As he'd been living there for a while he knew the menu by heart, but he wanted to be close to her. "See anything you like?"

"Ummm, the berry parfait looks divine, and so does the chop salad,"

she said and smiled at him. "But, I'm pretty easy when it comes to food."

"Well, the food here is top rate. It's one of the reasons I'm still here. I'd recommend the sea bass, but as I said they'll be all out by now."

Nina giggled. "Darlin', never say never. Can't hurt to ask."

"I suppose not, but I do kinda know how things work around here."

"Yeah? Well, just try, for me? It sounds so yummy."

She was amazing. Conceding, he nodded and rolled over to the phone, dialing the number for the reception. He inquired about the bass, surprised when he was informed that they did indeed have the fish. He grinned at Nina and ordered a bowl of mussels in crisp white wine along with a bottle of the wine in question. He had a bottle of champagne and a few extras for after their meal. "We're in luck, they had the bass. You were right." He smiled at her as he hung up the phone.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" she said with an amused look on her face. "I suppose that's a very good thing. I normally don't eat anything too heavy at this time of night, but it just sounds too good to pass up. How long till it's brought up?" she asked as she got off the bed and walked to the wall of windows, looking out at the strip beyond. "It's beautiful from up here, so clear, the twinkle, the colors. That's what brought me to Vegas, the welcoming feeling you get when you look at it. I suppose not everyone gets that, but it seemed like home to me the second I stepped foot off the plane." She looked down and shook her head. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get nostalgic. I'm sure you could care less."

He moved up behind her, sharing the view. "Not at all. I feel the same about the place. It's more home than home was. As soon as I saw the lights I knew I'd die here. That's what it'll take to get me to leave."

She grinned and turned to him. "Yeah, I would expect such an intense look at life from you. Though you're a heart and soul gambler, Jake, there's only a few places on earth you would ever really feel like that. Vegas just happens to be the hub. No, I like Vegas for the anonymity. A person can just disappear here, or rise to be the next big star."

"I've no interest in being famous." He could feel the heat rolling off her body and stepped closer. "So, which are you? Disappearing or trying to rise? You've already proven you're not a gambler."

"I'm a little of both, I think. Moderate acknowledgement is fine for the job I do. I don't want to be the next big stripper starlet, that just leads to porno, and I don't think I could deal with the lifestyle. Dancing is just

fine for me, and I think it's done what I wanted it to do for my life."

"Yeah? And what's that?" He was surrounded by her clean, sweet scent and he loved it. His body did, too.

"Well, it brought me to your attention, didn't it?" She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Knowing I had a fan, a complete stranger who didn't even bother to speak to me, it was a heady feeling."

"I'm sure you have many fans, Peaches." He kissed her. Her soft lips were highly addictive. This was no longer business, it was all pleasure. It had stopped being a business venture the moment she left the table. Where he would have left Shade a few hours to cool off after an argument, he couldn't have stopped himself running after Nina if he'd tried. A small part of his brain warned him that he was on dangerous ground, uncharted territory. It was a very small piece, however, the one that he'd stopped listening too years ago when he'd left home for good. Jake loved the risk, thrived on walking the tight rope lines between possible and impossible. Two nights ago he'd have said that having this woman in his arms was pretty much in the realm of fantasy.

"That may be true, but I don't even notice the men that come in, but I noticed you. It was like your gaze slithered inside me while I danced, and coming to work took on a new excitement, with the possibility that you would be there watching me from the shadows."

"Well, you were the only one worth watching." He moved to kiss her again when the door knocked and room service called. He kissed her quickly, then unwrapped himself from her moving to the door and letting in the young girl. Signing quickly and tipping the waitress, he ushered her out of the door and they soon had the room to themselves. The scent of the lemony sea bass filled the air as he lifted up the hood, exposing both the mussels and the fish.

"Now that looks good." she said as she walked over and giggled, grabbing the wine and two glasses. Jake grabbed the plates and brought them to the small table closer to the windows. They ate in relative silence, Nina finally looking up. "You have quite exquisite taste, Jake, this is frankly the best sea bass I have ever had."

"Normally I don't go for fish, but this I can never resist...when they have it. It was some luck they had it, I'm a betting man and I wouldn't have placed odds on it."

"Well, you seem to be getting lucky tonight." She winked and took a sip of her wine.

"I do. Indeed, you seem to be quite a good luck charm."

She laughed and shook her head. "So, you think it's all me, do you?"

"It could be...you said it yourself. I'm a gambler, we believe in luck. We have to."

"Not the odds? Word has it most gambling is odds and percentages. No, I'm sure it has nothing to do with me."

"Well there are the odds, although between me and you I never was good at fractions. As a gambler you study the odds, but we can't ignore anything that'll give us the edge. You see poker players with lucky coins, stones, and anything else that takes their fancy." He took a drink of wine, cracking a mussel open and eating it. "Besides, who am I to discount luck? I'm a demon."

"Yeah, but demons don't deal in luck, they deal with physical powers."

"I don't know. I've seen some pretty weird things in my time. I mean, how physical would you say a shadow is? Or sexual energy?"

"I have heard Shadow Demons—the powerful ones, anyway—can make shadows touch you, so I'd call that pretty fucking physical. And sexual energy is a palpable thing. Hell, some races can even see their energies."

"So? What's to say some can't see luck? Have you even been on a winning streak? You can practically feel that you're untouchable...you can't lose." He shrugged, feeling her pull away. She'd tell him about herself when she felt ready, if she even knew. "It's only a theory. I mean, who's to say what's out there in the world?"

"Very true. There's many races walking the world, you're probably right." She looked him over. "So, Shadow Demon, as I remember, you mentioned something about your own powers?"

Her eyes made his blood boil. He wanted her again, needed her. "I believe I did...those mussels getting to you?"

"Aphrodisiacs never do, though it's seeing you there with your shirt open and the expanse of skin I'm treated to. You're getting to me."

"Ah, it's all me then?" He asked her, amused as hell. She had no idea how sexy she was sitting there across from him.

"I think so. Truth? I don't get interested in men often, it takes the right guy."

"And you think I'm right for you? Well, Peaches, you won't hear me complaining." He stood, taking the distance between them quickly.

She smirked and stood, grabbing him as he closed in on her. "I think you're the guy I have been fantasizing about for a while. And I know I don't want to leave your bed."

Jake kissed her once again, reveling in the feeling of her so near to him. "Well, I think we should get in the bed first, don't you think?"

Nina licked her bottom lip and grabbed the button of his pants, pulling him. "I do need to work off those calories."

He let her take control. "Well, I didn't want to say..." he joked as she pushed him down and worked at his belt. "And you did say you wanted me naked."

"Very much so. I finally get to see if my fantasies were close," she said as she ripped his shirt open, the buttons flying hither and to. She purred and worried her lip, working his pants off and pushing them past his knees, the purr turning into a growl.

He put all his concentration on not staring at her slack-jawed. She moved over his body, removing his clothes. She felt right against him, her body heat and his mixing with every touch. Once she'd completed her task he grabbed the hem of her dress, pulling her onto his body and letting her straddle him. "So, how does one compare to fantasy?"

"Oh, I would say dead on...exactly by type...just enough muscle to hold me against a wall, but not enough to seem gross. Wiry, sexy. Damn, Jake."

"Well, that's a relief, the last thing I'd want to be is a disappointment." He brushed his fingers over her hip where there were the beginnings of bruises forming from their fun in the elevator.

Nina wiggled on his lap, sucking in a breath. She looked down, then at him. "I like that you were so wild." She said, motioning to the blooming bruises.

He felt a little bad about marking her. He wasn't in the game to hurt women, but she really didn't seem to mind so he shrugged, which wasn't easy lying on his back. "I get wilder," he promised as he used his hips to buck her forward just enough so he could pull her dress off in one smooth movement.

She giggled and shook out her hair, placing her hands on his smooth chest. "I'm counting on it, Jake."

"Are you now?" He shifted her upward on him, grinding himself along her. She was so slick and wet with her own juices and the remnants of their encounter in the elevator that he hissed with the feel of

her.

She whimpered for him and reared back, arching and shaking her hair once again. Her breasts jutted out at the pose and she stretched. "Jake...goddess, don't tease me with it."

He kept teasing, enjoying the feel of her on top of him. "Well, you are on top..." He gestured for her to take action, he wanted to watch her ride him, watch as those perfect breasts quivered on the verge of orgasm.

"So I am," she said and shifted slightly, sinking down on him. The underwear she had on in the elevator probably still there, as there was no barrier between them to stop his invasion. "Gods, you fit so well," she gritted out and rode him slowly, making the strokes deep and even, her hands on her breasts, eyes closed.

With a growl he lay back, letting her work. She felt so tight and warm. "Hmmm...that's it...god, you're good." He stroked lightly at her thighs, letting her fuck them both. She was amazing, and she used her dancing skills to both their pleasure as her body writhed expertly and in total control.

Nina's performance was at its peak, and she shuddered and grasped at him, calling his name as she came for him, her body releasing more of her essence. She opened her eyes in time to see his lifeforce soak her in, binding her more to the man she would have picked out of a crowd to consider her own. "Jake...gods...you feel so right," she murmured and fell forward as the next orgasm washed over her, her mouth seeking his out.

He kissed her forcefully, his arms wrapping around her and pulling himself deeper into her over and over again as his tongue probed her mouth. He was close, but he could hold off for a few moments more, his every coherent thought was about taking her owning her body. He had to get more from her. Her little whimpers were driving him insane. Her very being sang to him, begging him for more. Gathering her, he rolled them both, making home between her legs and pounding deeper into her.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and screamed and came for him again, her body taut. The air around them shimmered, and she shone quite brightly, light seemingly coming out of her skin. She called his name, like a prayer, and looked into his eyes, hers bright with the light within.

He dug deeper, calling on the shadows around her. No easy feat for a half demon, but it was something he'd manipulated them to do time and

time again, under Shade's tutelage, until it had become like second nature. The shadows around her caressed her body, becoming an extension of his own, stroking at what he couldn't reach, kissing and pinching at her skin.

A light sheen of sweat covered them both. "I'm yours," she breathed into his mouth, then kissed him—her body heating, the shadow tendrils becoming part of her as her essence became part of him.

She was his and he was hers. The shadows danced around their limbs as he reached climax, exploding into her violently.

She held him, cradled him and arched, her muscles grasping him, her aura melding with his. They were visible—her fuzzy pink aura and his bright neon purple one—the air around them awash with lights and star-like twinkles. She sighed and kissed him again, panting. "Wow." She chuckled.

Once he was sure he could move, he rolled them over so she could lie on top of him, for fear of crushing her. "You can say that again." He held her tightly. "Wow just about covers it."

She kissed his chest and saw what looked like a black stain on her shoulder and sighed, wiggling on him. "I have your shadows on me now, I hope it's a pretty design," she said absently, her fingers playing on his partially still luminous skin. Of course, the thought of his shadows branding her was a bit off-putting and a little scary. They'd never done that before, and the fact was that it was permanent. It must have had to do with her race.

"You don't seem too freaked about it. Either you are as jaded as you seem at first glance, or you know what I am." She said quietly, her lips and tongue dancing across his left nipple.

He sighed. "Oh, I'm more jaded than I seem...though I must admit I had my suspicions. I do have two questions." He looked down at his skin, which shimmered lightly. "Am I going to stay pink? And what the fuck was that?"

She looked at him. "Well, if you don't know, you didn't do enough research. I can hardly blame you, Jenai are not common. You won't stay pink, think of it as an afterglow. The rest is a bit more complicated. How much did you know when you set out to find one? I mean, someone must have told you where I was hiding...and there are a few others in town."

"How much do I know? Well, not much, obviously not enough. I didn't do any research, you weren't a pet project. I just wanted to talk to

you. I heard about the Jenai being lucky. I had a few names, but I didn't get past yours."

"Why not?"

Why would he? There was no reason to, he'd walked into that bar and just known that she was the one he wanted. He shrugged again. "Because there is nobody on this planet living or dead that I could have wanted talk to more than you."

She smiled, seemingly pleased with his answer. "Very well. you got it right about giving away luck. We can't seem to keep it for ourselves, it's given to the men in our lives. Trick is to find the one that's going to use it to its best ends, and to be able to take care of yourself as well. Most big CEOs and heads of quality organizations are husbands of Jenai. Though, get the thought of politicians out of your head, they usually go your route, only they don't bargain to Demons, they bargain to devils."

"Ah, well, I'd know nothing about that." He wasn't so sure what she meant about devils, he'd always assumed that they were the same as Demons. To think any further into it was a little too unsettling. "Okay, so...what does that have to do with us?"

"It's nothing as romantic as soul mates, Jake, but we kinda bonded. You're the best choice to keep me happy and comfortable. And I'm the best choice to get you what you want."

"Hmmm...so it's nothing romantic, then?" He trailed his hands over her back.

"It usually doesn't start that way, but I have heard that over time couples have grown fond of each other. Often it deals in the physical, I mean, there has to be an attraction and all, especially to propagate the species. It's chemical, but there's a few times, like now, when it delves deeper. I keep a piece of you with me, your powers manifested on my skin as a brand. Others would know that we go deeper with our bond, because I have truly given myself to you."

"Huh." He didn't know what else he could say. This was what he had wanted, more or less, but it was all just sounding a little too permanent. "And I'm not going to be pink forever?" he asked uncertainly.

"No, silly." she laughed. "I told you, it's like afterglow. Sex now is different with us. It reinforces the bond, and keeps your luck fresh."

"Keeps it fresh? It goes stale?"

"Kinda. Periodic refreshing is important, but it's not like we need



each other to live." She sighed. "After tonight you can go back to your life without thinking much of me. Once you feel things start to go south you can look me up for a recharge. Because of this," she touched the shadow scar on her shoulder, "you'll always be able to find me. Think of me as your personal lucky rabbit's foot."

"Whoa, wait...what will you do?"

She sat up and shrugged. "Show up, fuck you blind, then be on my way. A few of my kind do things that way, it's more a business transaction."

He didn't so much like the thought of that. Granted, he'd get his luck, but he'd watched her for months. To have her just leave then show up now and again for sex didn't sit so well with him. "And how do the others do it?"

"Some get married, live together. Some date. It's a question of how the couple works it. I wouldn't presume any of what I just said with you, so I'm giving you the option of just seeing me when you need to. You're not the kinda guy to get strapped down."

"No, I'm not, really, but I guess some company now and again wouldn't hurt."

She smiled and touched his bottom lip, rubbing softly with the pad of her thumb. "I thought so. Not like I'm leaving this town really, you'll be able to find me."

"Well, I do know where you live." He smiled down at her.

"Yeah, you do." She giggled. "Look, this is probably a bit much for you to handle, so I'm just going to jet, okay? No doubt you got some gaming you wanna get to."

He laughed. "What, you're just gonna bolt after some great sex? Use me like some cheap whore?"

She shook her head. "No, it's not like that. I just thought..." she trailed off and looked about the room, avoiding his eyes.

He pulled her tighter, hugging her to him. "Just thought what?"

"That you got what you wanted. I don't have to hang out, it's a done deal. You got what you were obviously looking for if you sought me out like you did."

"I don't mind if you do, you know. I like your company and if you leave now, then it messes up our chances of amazing morning sex...and I'm not one to give up that chance."

She offered him a bright and wondrous smile and kissed him. "I

want to stay."

"Well, that's a good thing, because you're not leaving, you sure as hell aren't going until I go back to my normal color."

She laughed and kissed him again. "It will go away, I swear. Though if we have another tumble, it might not for a while longer, but it should after a few hours sleep."

"Well, that's a good thing to know and something we should defiantly look at. So, what do you wanna do now?"

Nina grinned and palmed his length, squeezing softly. "Oh, I think you know."

He laughed. "And turn me pink for days?"

"It won't be as bad this time, I promise."

"It wouldn't matter so much if it did." He hugged her to him, kissing her deeply. "It'll be worth it."

She squeezed him harder and he groaned. "Then get to it, Opacus..."

## Chapter Four

The mid morning sunshine shining through the double paned glass warmed her, the slight chill in the air-conditioned room chased away by the slight heat. Nina looked out over the now sleeping strip, the magic hour of clubs closing for the day and the late night shows finishing just passing her by. The scene below was quiet, with few cars on the road and even fewer people about. It wouldn't last, she knew, soon the day element of the city would be bustling about, and the whole thing would start again.

*They look like ants, well organized ants*, she thought to herself as she turned from the vast Nevada wasteland to the large bed and its sleeping occupant. Jake was fantastic the rest of the evening, his attentiveness to her needs and her body reinforcing the feeling that she had made the right choice. It felt so good, Jake's unintended mark on her. He might not be the kind of guy to marry, but he was the sort of guy she wanted. Her body was already aching for him, but she shook it off. Nothing positive ever came from a purely sexual relationship.

Still, he did look quite fetching lying there wrapped in the white sheets, his hair tousled, a sleepy grin ghosting his face. He was beautiful, and powerful for an Opacus, and she couldn't see herself with anyone else. Jake was going to be easy to fall for, but she wasn't giving her heart along with her power unless she knew that that was right as well.

Her stomach rumbled, and she realized that she was more hungry than anything. She crossed the room to the bed and crawled back in, shedding the robe she wore against the chill of the room, and went to him, nuzzling the skin just under his ear.

He grunted softly, snaking his arm around her and pulling her sleepily to him.

She chuckled and nibbled his neck. "Are you one of those night owls?" she asked quietly.

He frowned in his sleep. "Owls?" His eyes opened a crack,

"Where?"

"Yeah, I thought so. Well, normally I am to but my tummy craves sustenance."

He groaned. "And you want owls?"

"No, I want breakfast. And by night owl I mean you sleep the day away."

"Too early for euphemisms and big words." He pulled covers over both of them. "If you're hungry order something."

"Umm, well, I don't eat alone, and I thought we could visit."

"Visit what?" he groaned, waking up fully.

"It's what my gram used to say when people got to know each other. We didn't do much besides fuck last night. I'd just like to get to know you, and have a plan for today. I should probably go to work, too."

"Work? You want to go back?" Surprise laced his voice.

"I need to make a living, Jake. This is fine and fun, but at the end of it all I'll still have to. You'll get tired of me quick, I'm sure."

"Doubtful, but it is your life, I guess. Let's talk about it after I've drank some coffee." He sat up, the sheets pooling around his waist.

She looked him over and growled. Sitting there, his chest and abs were framed in the sunlight. His deep brown, flat nipples puckered from the cold in the room, matching hers. "You look yummy sitting there, Jake," she said and kissed his cheek. "Where did that menu go?"

"So the pink's died down then? You want to get something in or actually leave the room? It might be nice to see the sunlight."

"I'll need to take a shower, the smell of sex is clinging to me like a cheap cologne." She grinned and stretched. "But I could go out for breakfast. Carlton's is just downstairs. I haven't been there yet, but it's not like I am in the casino a lot."

"Well, hopefully that's something we'll remedy soon."

She smiled. "And we can sit outside in the Pavilion."

"In the sun, it's a deal."

She kissed him, not even minding the morning breath, and winked. Getting up from the bed, she sauntered into the bathroom, her right hand going to the opposite shoulder, and stroked her shadow scar.

\* \* \* \*

He smiled at her as they moved into the elevator, returning to the scene of last night's crime. He'd dressed down today, favoring his favorite jeans and a comfy T-shirt instead of his formal attire. He

wouldn't be gambling until the night. Nina still looked stunning in her red dress, not that she'd had much of an opportunity to wear it the night before.

All his plans from the night before had been completely laid to waste. Things had worked out for the better, though, he'd gotten more than he'd set out for and he wasn't entirely sure how. He was sure it was mostly of Nina's devising, which made him think that she'd been looking for someone like him for longer than he'd been looking for someone like her. Which was surprising, as she was perfect, more than perfect in fact. She was smart, patient, and most of all sympathetic to his love of gambling.

She understood him, and because of that he knew she'd have no problem with them playing the poker tournament that he'd signed them up for while she'd been in the shower. It was a monthly entry game. One that, if won, would get him a ticket to the twenty-million dollar game held at the end of the month. It was a big event, all the casinos were in on it, collaborating for possibly the only time this year. Tickets if you were to participate, were five hundred thousand , but winning them at a qualifier was how most of the entrants would get in. He'd been trying to win a ticket since he'd arrived in Vegas, but he'd always failed. At five grand a pop just to get into a qualifying game, it had been getting an expensive obsession as well. Hopefully this time he'd have a better shot at it.

Her hair was still damp from her shower, and she smelled faintly of his shower gel as he held her back to him, resting his head on her shoulder. "So, what are you in the mood for?"

Nina rubbed her body against him and stretched. "Oh, you mean food? Something hearty, like an omelet with spinach and cheese and croissants. I hear Carlton's has the best pastries on the strip, too."

He raised an eyebrow at her thoughts of something hearty but didn't comment. Personally his view on a hearty breakfast was coffee with creamer in it, anything more substantial was likely to mess his day up and cut off his midday siesta. "I'm sure we're about to find out."

Nina giggled and turned in his embrace. "You know, I had hoped you would meet me in the shower, not take one yourself...or was that 'come hither' saunter not enough of a hint?" she teased.

His body reacted to her as it had done last night. Unfortunately, this time they weren't the only occupants in the elevator. He bent forward,

kissing along her cheek and over to her soft earlobe, nipping it between his teeth. "Oh, it was hint enough...but I knew if we'd started we'd have not left the room all day."

"True. Still, I could have used your strong hands to scrub down my back."

"Mmmm, I didn't think of that," He ground himself into her, letting her feel just how much he'd wished he had followed her. "You wanna go back up?" he asked, only half joking.

She giggled and shook her head. "No, no, I think I'll let you sweat it out over breakfast. After that, well, I'm up for anything."

"God, I hope so." The elevator reached the ground floor and people spilled from the open doors. He turned her around and smacked her lightly on the ass.

Nina chuckled and walked ahead of him a few steps, shaking her bottom at him, then turned and winked. "What did you do while I was in the shower, since you didn't come and defile me?"

"I'll tell you over breakfast, it's a sitting down conversation." He gave her what he hoped was a secretive mysterious smile.

Nina shook her head and grinned. "Well, we better sit then, shouldn't we? I hope they have pomegranate mimosas here."

He nodded noncommittally, not sure what a mimosa was, but hoping she wouldn't call him on it. "Well, you never know, it's Vegas, you get all kind of things here. I'm just hoping they have coffee."

"Coffee is easy. The only place I have a pom mimosa is the Riviera, though I have to say they are quite good for morning alcohol."

"Coffee isn't easy, here there's so many different choices, and you'll struggle to get just plain French coffee. Most of it's all infused with spices or laced with syrup, it's hard to get a straight cup."

"Ah, I don't drink coffee, so I wouldn't know. Vile stuff."

"Now that's akin to blasphemy," he muttered in her ear as he steered her towards the Carlton.

They were seated quickly out in the bright sunshine, away from the air-conditioned casino. Nina ordered her breakfast, a three egg omelet with spinach, cheddar cheese, and mushrooms, and was delighted when they did indeed have pom mimosas. The waiter smiled at her and looked at her as if she were a dish herself. She smiled back at him and looked at Jake. "Just coffee, you stick in the mud?" she asked and licked her lips, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "You really should eat something

substantial, I don't need you passing out later from the lack of energy. This breakfast is a lot to work off, you know."

"No, I don't eat before one, my body wouldn't know what was happening to it if I did. I'm sure I'll manage to help you work it off, though. I can do many things on an empty stomach." He took his coffee, gratefully taking a sip. "So, what was I doing today?"

"I don't have a clue, and I think not eating is a copout. I think you should have something, a croissant?" she asked, grabbing a piece of pineapple the waiter set down with the fruit and bread.

"Not eating breakfast hasn't killed me yet, I don't think it's likely to start. I eat like a wolf after one, so it all evens out in the end. I can rarely handle the chewing and swallowing this early on."

She giggled and slipped the pineapple between her lips, sucking the juice and looking at him. "Fair enough. So, we are sitting, what were you up to while I was in the rain locker?"

"Well, it had to be done today, tonight's their last qualifier, I've been trying to get in all year." Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out the flyer for the main event and passed it over to her and watched her read it.

She smiled. "So that's why you didn't mind not going back down last night. Tonight's higher stakes. Main event is in less than a week. Hope you got something spiffy to wear."

"We'll see. It sure would be nice to get in."

"Why are you doubting it?" she asked as she munched on the pineapple.

"I'm not, but these games are crooked, often it's all rigged. Like I said, I've been trying since last year and it's not my poker skills that are lacking...at least, not that much."

She grinned. "Crooked is crooked, but you got an edge the others won't have. It's something you want, and I can't deny you the ability to achieve it, but the powers are tricky. There are rules, especially if I'm present."

"What kind of rules?"

"Well, you gotta play on your ability. The luck factor comes into play with the cards you get. It's up to you to decide how to play them in sequence. You won't get aces every time, but you will get great betting hands, and you'll get some shit hands. It's all a question of how you use things. Also, I can only push things along once, so save that till you really need it, like at the main event. At this qualifier you won't have to

do much, just play like you do."

"Ah, well, that's expected, I wouldn't play it any other way. I don't think I'd know how." Her breakfast came and she thanked the waiter, who winked at her. "So, as I said, you better have something spiffy to wear to the main event."

He watched the waiter walk off, amused at his reaction to Nina. "I'm sure you'll help me pick out something, Peaches."

"Of course I will, though I dare say you'd need it, you have amazing taste." She tried her omelet and purred with satisfaction. "Umm, this is yummy. So Tell me about your bargain."

He paused, drinking his coffee. "Bargain?"

"Well, if you're not eating I expect to be entertained. Why did you bargain for Demon status? Who was it? Must have been a high royal, your control of the shadows are superb."

Talking about Shade and his bargain wasn't something he liked to do, but she'd told him about herself last night, so it was his turn. "Well, it's not really a good story."

"It can't be that bad. You're a strong person and assertive, and you're doing what you want in life, so spill."

"I don't know really, I rarely think about it." And he tried not to, the thought that he sold his soul always left a bad taste in his mouth. "I was young and bored and possibly down on my luck. Shade offered me a bargain—powers for my soul, and who out there actually believes that they have a soul? The whole thing happened quite quickly. Shade stuck around for a while, teaching me to use the powers she'd given me. She was one hell of a card counter, too. I think she was some kind of royalty in her world but she never talked about it. Even she seemed to be surprised by the amount of power that I had, apparently, Shadow Demons are different from the rest of the others. It's all about the shadows themselves and how much they respond to you. They seem to like me for now."

"Indeed they do. They marked me, and that's no small feat, nor is the implication," she said between bites of omelet.

"Yeah, it sure isn't." He could practically picture the frown shade would have trying to figure out how it'd happened. He'd puzzled her, it was one of the reasons that she'd stuck around. "But, apparently the shadows don't stick around forever, even with full Demons. One day they can wake up and the shadows just won't answer their call anymore."



I'd half expected them to leave with her."

"It seems, though, that they like you well enough, but this mark will be with me my entire life, Jake. Shadows are funny things, but they know more than they let on, I think. Your power set recognizes something in the two of us, I think it was its way of..." she trailed off. "Never mind, I'm not sure where I was going with that."

Neither did he. "The shadows know everything that happens in their domain, anything in the darkness."

"I have always thought the Caligo were most intriguing of Demon races, I'm glad I'm bound to one," she said and sipped her pom mimosa, closing her eyes. "So yummy."

"I'm glad you found one and you're bound to an Opacus. The Caligo are the full Demons, these powers are just rented, and at the end of my run I get to trade in my soul for the honor."

"I know that. But I think you might be surprised. Who knows what the shadows have in store for you, they already chose your companion."

"Very true, and a beautiful one at that. I couldn't have picked better myself."

She blushed and looked down. "I think it means more to me that your powers welcomed me, like mine welcome you."

"Which is a great thing, too."

"Yeah, it is. Still, it's not written in stone, Jake, When you're tired of me, just let me know, okay?"

He had no intension of ever getting tired of her, even if he eventually succumbed to her mothering and forced him to eat a breakfast and a lunch. He told her his thoughts on the matter.

She laughed. "Look, Jake, I'm a high impact girl, just be happy I won't be getting you to go for a run with me in the morning."

He felt his expression change to horror. "A what?"

"You think this package maintains itself?" She grinned. "NO way, not at my age."

Ignoring the comment about her age, as he'd learned was the best course of action for all women, he shook his head. "But running? It sounds so...energetic. The only way you'll catch me running is if I'm being chased."

"I might have to chase you then. But honestly you don't think seven-hour shifts, fourteen sets between two rooms isn't energetic? You have seen me dance."

"Well that's sexy. I can be energetic for sex and passion, I'm all for that. But running just doesn't sound too appealing."

"It keeps me in shape," she said and shrugged, draining her drink, a rosy glow to her cheeks.

"I can see that. I've benefited for it." He winked at her, sluggishly drinking the coffee. "So, how would you like to enter the poker tournament with me? As lucky as you are, we'd be a great team."

She shook her head. "No, no, I'll just be the arm candy, thank you. I'm not risking anything."

"Are you sure?"

"It's not my bag, not to mention it's totally against the rules."

"Oh, yeah? Do I get a rule book?"

"Wish it were that simple. Just trust me when I say you'll need all the luck you have now, and if I try to use it, it will negate everything, and possibly our arrangement. I don't think you want that."

"How could it do that?"

"A Jenai cannot use her powers for herself. Our luck doesn't work for us, only the man we give it to."

Well, that explained a lot. "So, that's why you didn't want to play last night?"

She nodded. "I had touched you already, conscious of the luck effort from myself."

"So, the game wouldn't have went too well, then?"

"You would have lost every hand because of me. I didn't want that. It might have shaken your confidence."

"Well, yeah, it definitely wouldn't have gone down well."

"No, it wouldn't have. And if I was going to mess up your night I was going to do it on my terms, especially if you knew what I was, and you did."

"You're not playing a hand then, but you'll come and watch?" He didn't know why it was so important to him that she was there with him, but it was.

She smiled and nodded. "Damn right I will, I'm a great diversionary tactic, though I will have to go back to my place and get some clothes."

"Well, we drove your car here so it shouldn't be too hard getting you back. I will miss that dress, though."

She grinned and blushed. "What part, the easy on off or the way I look in it?"

"Well both," he admitted.

I'm sure you want to be rested for the tourney. My place? Then back?" She said as she licked her bottom lip, catching the very last of the drink she had finished.

He smiled at her, "Sounds good to me." He drained his coffee and called for the check.

\* \* \* \*

Nina lifted her leg high in the air and slipped her dainty foot into the stocking in her hands and slowly smoothed it up her leg, arranging the top of the thigh high so the silver lace would peek out a little as she walked. She enjoyed Jake's eyes bugging out when she did so, and had decided that as long as she was going to be with him, she would only wear them. The dress he had picked out for her hugged every curve. It was slinky, sexy and silky, the crème color splattered with auburn and sienna up the one side, the other had a slit to her hip. It always made her feel sexy, the stroke of it like a tease against her skin, though she was anticipating the caress of Jake sliding it off her skin more than moving around with it on.

They had gone to her place and picked up a suitcase full of her favorite lingerie, jeans, T-shirts, her cowboy hat, her spurs—an item Jake insisted they bring along—and a wide assortment of shoes. She wasn't sure how long she was going to be with him, so she also grabbed her betafish and some makeup and hair products as well, hoping she wouldn't see the apartment for a while.

Jake walked out of the bathroom, now clean shaven, and fiddling with his cuffs. He looked fantastic, the pants he had chosen hugging his legs enough to let her know that he wasn't wearing underwear, as usual. She was on the verge of drooling, watching him fix his collar now that his cufflinks were in, and sighed. He was hers, for now, and she would take advantage of the man wrapped in that pretty and dashing package as soon as she could.

She stood and fixed her garters, smoothing her dress down and stretched. "Darlin', you clean up real nice," she said and shook her hair out.

He grinned wolfishly at her. "You think?"

She walked over to him and grinned. "Hell, yeah. Lord knows I'm going to have to watch the other girls in the room."

"Oh, you'll have no problem with them, it's the other card players

you'll have to watch." He kissed her on the cheek, his hands moving over her waist and down her ass before his fingers made it to the edge of the dress slit.

She smirked. "Oh? See, I'm thinking I'll have to watch those harpies because they will want a piece of you, and you're mine tonight. Why would I have to watch the players? So they can eye-fuck me?"

"God no, Peaches." He looked her over. "Well, they might, but you're all mine. We'll just have to see who's playing, like I said it's all crooked and a lot of them don't like losing."

"Any idea who is going to throw in? Or did you get a list?" She giggled and turned, rubbing her ass against his groin, then bending and picking up a pair of strappy crème colored opened toe pumps.

He groaned, watching her. "There's a list all right, but it was early on in the sign up so the tables weren't full. There were a few major players already on, most likely wondering who paid the banker enough money for the game. Tied in with them are the regular losers, they never stay in for more than a few hands but they keep on playing. I play with them mostly every month, and a few I know from the small tables."

"Anyone in particular you don't like? I mean, if you're telling me to watch the players, then I should have a list of who might be an issue, don't you think?" She smiled and sauntered away from him to the full-length mirror, grabbing a few small combs and putting her hair into a moderately elaborate 'do as she watched him behind her.

"There'll be no trouble, love, I'm just saying that the girls pose no threat to you." He moved up behind her, taking her waist in his large hands and pulling her back against him. "If you want one to be wary of. watch out for Frank Malone, he's a tallish guy, dark hair and grey eyes. He thinks he owns Vegas." He kissed her neck, trailing behind her ear. "But I wouldn't worry about it."

Nina shuddered, truly enjoying the feel of his soft lips on her skin. She rolled her hips against him again and tilted her neck to give him more room. "Then I won't. Are you sure this outfit isn't too risqué? I mean, I don't wanna look like you paid me to escort you."

"You don't? Well, where's the fun in that? I love the dress, and I can't wait till I'm taking those stockings off with my teeth." He nipped at her neck playfully.

She sighed. "Neither can I, baby, it will be quite a way to celebrate your winning." She smiled and closed her eyes, savoring in his

attentions.

"Oh, it will be, but I'll have to win it first. Now come on, I don't have time to be sitting around discussing women's fashion all day. Let's get your sexy ass out to the car." He stepped back, slapping her sharply on the ass.

"Anything you say darlin'... you're the high roller, after all." She watched him grab his jacket and shrug into it, then hold up her shawl. She let him wrap the material around her shoulders. He looked hopeful, and she knew he didn't have to worry overly much. He was going to win, their combined magic too new and potent. The Shadows on her back pulsed and slithered and she giggled, feeling as if they agreed with her.

## Chapter Five

Nina giggled as she watched Jake stretch off the bed. It had been a very good night, the qualifier over, Jake once again holding the invitation to the main tournament in his hands, grinning like a Cheshire cat. She knew he was going to win, he had an affinity for the cards, but her luck gave him that extra push. He'd won the majority of hands, even with his shitty ones. She had noticed something about him, he played balls to the wall, extremely reckless and on the edge and she could feel the rush he got in the tiny tendrils of the shadow scar. It pulsed when he was on, shifted against her, caressing her when he won the hand and was relieved. The mark was an extension of him, and she was grateful for it. She had her suspicions about the mark, about what it really meant to both of them as a couple but she had kept her mouth shut earlier and she would continue to do so until they were confirmed.

The game itself only lasted an hour before Jake was declared the winner, and she had sat at his side in her red Valentino dragon dress, a slinky shimmery frock that he had overlooked when they were at her place the day before. She was sexy and stunning and she had the eye of every player there, and a few scowls and unfriendly looks from the other women in the room. They looked at Jake like fresh meat, but it didn't matter. He was Nina's, and she walked in with him and left with him, as some of the women changed hands in the room at the end of the tourney.

His only real competition, a haggard looking fellow by the name of Frank had rubbed her the wrong way. He had watched her intently, and it gave her a very unsavory feeling. During the entire hour of the competition, Frank's gaze only left her when Jake was either calling or raising the bet. Jake had won the invitation in a final hand that ended up being between only Frank and himself, that was down to the wire, the bet well over fifty-thousand. He had bluffed Frank well, and she was proud of him. Frank, on the other hand, seemed rather pissed off that Jake had a royal flush that beat his full house, and left quickly, a mere

nod of his head at them with a look that was full malice. Nina was sure they hadn't seen the last of him, though how he would get into the tournament now that the qualifiers were over was anybody's guess.

Jake whooped his excitement, tossed the invite on the bedside , and sat up, grabbing for her and kissing her soundly. She could feel his contentment in the shadows of the room, his powers proving they were pleased as well.

Upon leaving the room he had spirited her back to what she now referred to as their suite, and thanked her properly, at least twice already, once as he undressed her, then again in the wonderful shower stall. Making love to Jake was epic, and she again felt there was a reason.

She shifted against him, wiggling into his lap and sighing as his hands found the shadows on her back. "Gods, I love when you touch that."

"Me too, it feels good." He kissed her again, stroking her mark.

It was light, energy caressing her hither and to. The man's hands could be felt everywhere on her body, the shadows magnifying it that much more. "I'm so proud of you, Jake. You work those cards like you work me."

"Well, I hope that's a good thing." He laughed, kissing her shoulder.

"Everything you do has so much passion," she said, looking into his eyes as she shifted and sunk down on his waiting cock, purring as he filled her once again. She realized she only felt complete when he touched her, when he was moving inside her and whispering delicious things in her ear. She knew the idea of living apart from him wasn't going to work. She wanted it all, the man, the life with him, any life he chose for them. Dancing wasn't important anymore, he was.

Grasping her hips, he moved her over him, forcing her into a rhythm. "You as well...you and I aren't so different, you know." He whispered into her ear as he kissed her neck.

She shuddered, her body taut. Jake knew what to do to her body to bring her to her zenith quickest, and he was generous with it. In such a short time, he was so intoned to her needs, to her body. She moaned and kissed him, letting herself enjoy him once again. She came minutes later, arching in his grasp as he leaned her back and captured a nipple in his mouth as they juttled up, begging for his attention.

"Mmmm. You're perfect, Nina. Truly perfect." He bucked harder up into her.

She sobbed and gasped as his body dominated her, his lips like hot brands on her skin, marking her flesh as his and his alone. Jake was exactly what her body always wanted and what her heart needed. He was a man of passion, and had an unbridled zest for life. "Jake, goddess, save me..." she moaned as he nibbled on her flesh, biting her breast just hard enough.

"Fuck yes...God, Nina, she ain't saving you now. You're all mine," he grumbled into her as he bucked harder and harder into her, his body speeding up viciously as his desire almost reached his own completion. Every movement he made was more desperate with need.

"Jake, oh..." She shuddered and arched again, her body awash with sensation. She moaned as she came for him, her defenses down. She was his. She was...

A small tap on the door was all the warning they had before it came caving in on them, splinters flying everywhere. Jake jumped, shielding her with his body against the wooden shrapnel. Still joined, he grabbed her and glared toward the door, practically growling—his body tense and alert.

Three figures walked in through the ruined door, two short stocky men that she'd never seen before entered first the last man trailing behind them keeping his distance. It was the man that Jake had put out last; the one he'd said was fixing the game. He looked angry while the other two, clearly the hired muscle, looked as if the whole thing didn't affect them. One of them had a nasty looking metal rod and the other held what looked like a shotgun, one that had been altered to make it smaller. Whatever it was, it was pointed straight at them. The room was dark overly so as the shadows around them grew more viscose.

"Now, Jake, my boy, that was my ticket you just stole, and right out from under my nose," the player, Frank if she remembered correctly, spat out nastily.

Jake's arms around her grew tighter, as if to shield her from harm's way. There was nothing he could do, though, no way to escape. They weren't sitting in direct shadow and it had taken almost everything out of him to move them the night before, and that had only been a few feet. She looked in his eyes, seeing no hope of escape for now.

He cleared his throat. "Frank, that's my ticket, I didn't steal anything. I won it. I believe you were there at the time."

The words had barely left his mouth when the two men descended.



The steel pole came smashing across Jake's face, spraying his blood over her. The one with the gun grabbed her and pulled her off him, breaking the link which had moments ago been the only thing in the world they'd both cared about. Jake fell face first on the floor, seeming all the more vulnerable for his nakedness. He moved his hands, gathering them under him to lever himself up into an upright position.

"No," Frank said with barely a look to the pole man, "I think you should be lying down for your insult." The man brought the pole across Jake's back, the sound of crushed flesh echoing sickeningly through the room. "You cheated me, Opacus, a decision I'm sure you'll live to regret...if I let you live, that is." He checked his watch. "I wouldn't be hoping for hotel security if I were you, either, I bought us some time to chat."

Nina grabbed a sheet and looked at Frank. "Just leave him alone," she said with seething hatred. Jake did warn her, but she didn't think it was going to matter. She was wrong.

"Alone?" He turned his attention to her, Jake's beatings paused momentarily. "But why, little Genie? We've only just began to talk, and I do have so much to say to your little boyfriend."

Jake gasped from the floor, "It's me you want...leave her..." He struggled to breathe, blood bubbling out of his mouth. "Outta this...nothing to do with her."

"Nothing, Jake, my misguided fool? Nothing at all? Well, I tend to disagree...if it weren't for the little luck bearer we wouldn't have this at all. You'd never had cheated me...isn't that true, dear?"

Nina tried to play it cool, not knowing how it was that he knew, and she figured he just suspected. If that was the case, she wasn't letting on. "Excuse me? Jake didn't cheat. What, you think because a woman is with him that she's what, his dupe? What was I doing, the mirror trick? Or maybe the old Vegas roll out?" she asked, giving names of gambler tricks she had seen on a few gems from the Hollywood-style Vegas.

He reached in and slapped her hard, snapping her face around. "Don't play with me girl...you think you're the only one in Vegas?" He sneered. "It just so happens that you seem to be a little more willing to share than my bitter whore of a wife." He nodded to the thug with the shotgun, who stepped and leveled his gun at her chest. "It's filled with poison, my dear, one that will undoubtedly take care of your immortality. I'm afraid there's not enough room in the casinos for the

same scam twice. That prize money IS mine."

Nina seethed and spit blood on the floor. The bastard knew, married one, yet he was here claiming that she wasn't making good on their arrangement. "She can't keep it from you," she said, her eyes on him.

"She does as she pleases...and she's become very good at twisting my needs to her own satisfaction. But enough about me. Goodbye, Nina my dear, it's a shame to extinguish such a bright star." He smiled cruelly.

"Wait! No!" Jake rasped from his blood-soaked place in the carpet. In the distraction he'd managed to get onto his knees. He looked horrible, his hair was soaked in his own blood and his eye was distorted beyond recognition, but his gaze burned with conviction. "No...look, just take the ticket. You have it."

Frank turned to Jake, his goon's gun still trained on her. "No, Jake, I'm afraid it's all a bit too late for that. I already have my ticket. There's just no room for you in Vegas. I believe that it all wraps up much cleaner this way."

Nina looked at her lover, a true mess on the carpet, and her heart ached. She knew it could end like this, knew that the son of a bitch in front of them wasn't the kind to let things go, but this was all too *Godfather*-esque for her. She still couldn't believe that a Jenai wasn't being true to her powers, but that was neither here nor there. Still... "Frank," she called. "She cheated you. If she's older than me her power overrules my own." She then realized her mistake. It was all true, unless his Jenai didn't bond to him fully.

Frank's eyes narrowed and he drew his hand back to hit her again, irritation evident in his body language. "It's not important!" Jake shouted, stopping the man's hand. Jake had managed to stand, albeit very shakily. He wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing it with red. "It doesn't matter, Frank...listen to me. We'll go...killing us now isn't the cleanest way out of this. There'll be bodies and questions...look, we'll go." He rushed, fear and worry clear in his voice. "You don't have to kill her, or me...just let us go. We can be off in the next flight, you'll never hear of us again. You have the ticket...that's what you really wanted." He winced as he took in a deep breath. "Killing us now is distasteful and messy, I'm sure you'd rather just go home."

Nina looked at Jake, her heart swelling. He was choosing her, she was his ideal and wanted her more than the ticket.

Frank looked like he was thinking it over, his attention now fully on

Jake. "And you'll never return?" He sounded skeptical. "You're a gambler Jake, Vegas calls to your soul."

"My soul is already spoken for, and there's other games out there. Give us twelve hours...go home, go to sleep, and by the time you wake up we'll be gone." His voice was steady despite the tremble in his limbs. "If we're not, what's twelve hours? You'll find us anywhere we try to hide here...we'll just disappear, and you won't have to do the dirty work. Just let us live, you have what you want, please," he implored, tears leaking out from his eyes and mixing with the blood.

Frank nodded slowly, staring them both out. "You have eight hours, then I want no trace of you in my town. You both will be gone. I'll leave a man at the door, if you leave here and go anywhere but the airport..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I don't think I have to go into great detail about what'll happen to the girl as you watch, Jakey lad."

The goons drew back at some unseen command the one with the gun moving out of the door the other going to the bed and grabbing the ticket from where Jake had dropped it. "And Jake, for goodness sake, pull yourself together...you're embarrassing yourself in front of the girl." Frank said as he oozed out of the room.

The last goon with the ticket shook his head disgustedly at Jake. Smashing the pole over his back once more and throwing him to the floor in agony before he sauntering cheerfully out of the door. He lifted the main chunk of wood delicately placing it back on its hinges effectively leaving them both alone.

Nina moved quickly to his side and held him, kissing him on the head and sobbing. "Gods, are you okay?"

He rolled over with some effort, his whole body shaking. "Not really, no..." He looked at her face, lifting his hand to her mouth where Frank had slapped her. "How about you? I'm so sorry he hit you." His breathing hitched and he coughed violently. She sobbed again, tears running down her face. "Jake, don't worry about me. I have been through worse. Anything broken?" she asked as she gingerly touched around his face and chest.

"I don't think so...the face is fine." He winced as she touched a particularly painful spot on his chest. "Painkillers, lots of them. We'll figure the rest out once we get the hell out of here. God, let's hope I look enough like my passport photo to get through customs."

She smiled. "I'm sorry, Jake, I'm sorry, I didn't know he would have

a Jenai as a companion. It's my fault."

"Nah. It's not yours, the game's crooked and nobody made me sit at that table. Let's face it, the guy's a prick. It's just the way life is, no matter how big you think you are there's always someone ready to smash you up for a shot at the twenty mil prize pool. We can't worry about that now, though, now we worry about painkillers and planes."

She kissed his forehead. "Baby, I think your nose may be broken too. Oh, god, I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to choose."

"Don't worry yourself. I'm a gambler; I've taken a few beatings in my time. As for Vegas..." he sighed, shrugging. "I said I'd die here, I didn't say that it had to be now. I'm just glad you're okay, things could be much worse, I'd rather give up the bright lights than you, Peaches." He chuckled, rubbing his thumb along her face. "Now, we better get to thinking about our next destination, there's lots of places to visit. Tell me," he smiled, "what do you think of Atlantic City?"

## Epilogue

Atlantic City had everything that Vegas had to offer him and more. Jake didn't mind the move much at all. It had taken him a few weeks to heal and a few more to fast become one of the highest winning players in the circuit. He'd broken two ribs and a few bones in his left hand, thankfully he used his right hand for palming cards so it worked out well. The bruises in his face were all but gone, there were a few yellowish marks left still, but they were mostly unnoticeable. His nose also had suffered damage, causing it to have a crooked angle. Nina assured him that it only made him more attractive, but he wasn't so sure.

The airport and the journey to Atlantic City had mostly been a blur, thankfully Nina had more or less carried him onto the plane and off again to the nearest hospital. She'd been a godsend, nursing him gently and not so gently back to health. He'd really done it, though, he'd chosen her over Vegas, and he'd given up the bright lights. When they'd first left there wasn't a day that went by that he didn't ask himself if he'd done the right thing. He only had to see her smile at him though to know that he had.

After a week or two he found the golden palace featured less and less in his thoughts. Now he rarely even spared any time for it, he had his own life now with Nina. They had a future here, together, and looking to the past wasn't going to do them any good.

The two of them had taken to their roles in Atlantic City like ducks to water, ripping the place apart. He spent his nights on the tables, with her at his side, and he spent his days entangled with her or out seeing the sights or house shopping. They had a few picked out and more than enough money to afford them all. They'd even talked about moving elsewhere, there were millions to be made in China or throughout Europe, lots of hands to be played.

He left the room of the hotel they were currently staying in. It far succeeded the old room in Vegas as he was this hotel's high roller. He

headed down to the main lobby where she'd made him promise to meet her before she left in the morning for her usual run. She had a surprise for him and he'd been curious about it since he got the note she left on the bedside table.

He spotted her easily in front of the world clock, her shiny hair bobbing up and down. She looked up at him and smiled, that smile lighting through his entire body. He couldn't stop himself from smiling back and he caught her as she threw herself into his arms. He kissed her deeply, her body molding perfectly to his.

After a moment enjoying her scent surrounding him he pulled back, grinning at her. "So, what's this big surprise? You managed to find those pom mimosas you love so much?"

Nina giggled and kissed the tip of his nose. "No, though I think I got the bartender from the Taj to figure it out for me. So, remember what we talked about? That big penthouse at Royale Commons?"

He nodded. There was no way he could forget it. The place had been perfect. "I think I do," he teased. "Would that be the one with the private decking and pool?"

"That's the one. Well..." she slipped a large manila envelope to him and grinned. "Seems your luck is holding out, love."

"You're kidding, you didn't?" He laughed, scooping her up again and swinging her around. She had, they'd get to live in the casino, their own little slice of heaven. "I love you, you know that?" He kissed her quickly before she could react. Knowing it and saying it were two completely different things.

Nina squealed, breaking the kiss. "I do now. You mean it, Jake?"

He nodded, "I do. I really do."

Her eyes sparkled. "I love you, too, Jake, I think I have since the first time you watched me at Glitter."

"Phew." He grinned, mock wiping his brow. "Well, that's a relief." He hugged her, kissing her again. "Why don't we head over and break in the new place? I had my eye on that hot tub and I fully intend to have it well used by the time I have to hit the tables at ten."

She giggled and nodded. "Well, that's a good thing, cuz I have champagne and strawberries waiting, and a catalog to decorate the place to our tastes. Got that deal from the realtor for free, so it seems my luck might be changing, too. Ooh, and I already picked out the new bed."

"Oh, yeah? Well I suppose we'll just have to see about that, it'll

need to be tested thoroughly."

"I was hoping you would say that darlin'." She kissed him and rubbed against him. "And I can't wait to see how the shadows like the new place."

"Oh, I'm sure they'll settle in just fine." He swung his arm over her and guided her out of the hotel, listening to her make promises that would keep them hot and sweaty long after dawn.

They moved along the street to their new place together, their home. Not that it mattered where they were as long as they were together. Never in his life had he ever felt more at home than he did with her, she was his home, and as long as she stayed by his side, powers be damned, he was the luckiest man alive.

## About the Authors

**Will Belegon** began writing erotica as an exploration of his more primal side. He found the combination of his overactive imagination with his love of poetry and prose to be a good fit for the genre. Throw in his love of moonlit beaches and first kisses, and words began to flow.

The validation came when other people liked what he wrote. So he wrote more, and found that he enjoyed the attention. When someone suggested he might actually get paid to write, the notion seemed too wild to consider. Yet fortune is said to favor the bold.

Will has also contributed both stories and poetry to the *Coming Together* anthology series, the proceeds of which are donated to charitable and free speech organizations.

Readers can visit him online at <http://willbelegon.blogspot.com>

**Petula Caesar** is a single mother of two residing in Maryland. She's still trying to figure out how she ended up writing erotica, or why she's so good at it. In addition to her work published with Phaze, she has had erotic short stories and poetry published in popular erotica e-zines such as Clean Sheets and Desdmona. Her work also appears in erotica queen Zane's latest anthology *Caramel Flava*. Petula is also Associate Editor of Mic Life Magazine, a full-color bi-monthly publication that covers microphone culture (spoken word poetry, hip hop, live musical and vocal performances, comedy – any performance art involving the microphone).

**Sarah Dickson** lives in rural Victoria, Australia with her husband and two dogs. She took up fiction writing five years ago when an opportunity arose to work part-time. She has managed to avoid full time work ever since. Occasionally she does web sites as well as manual labor such as cleaning. She would also like to do some more abstract painting and photography.



Her passion is writing both erotic and non-erotic fiction that readers will enjoy, preferably a paranormal or set on another world. She is a member of the Romance Writers of Australia, a supportive group who also have great conferences.

Sarah can be found at [sarahdickson.com](http://sarahdickson.com)

**Stella & Audra Price** are sisters who have always shared their love of writing, even as children. Now in their twenties, they have created a complete world from the voices in their heads which they have deemed the Eververse. They both have similar interests in makeup, horror movies, dogs and a love of a good bottle of wine; they rarely disagree, unless it's over the last glass of that wine.

They live in a small converted farm house which is home to their menagerie of animals including 10 huskies, three cats; a fish called Claude, Linus the English bulldog, Zorro the king of beasts and Stella's very Evil "the Moo."

They can often be found at their local wine club, tasting various vintages and bringing the finest home with them. Both are avid adventurers and love to accept any new challenge that's offered to them.

### **Audra**

Although relatively young, Audra has enjoyed her fair share of life. Now engaged to her "high school sweetheart" she hopes to be married in 07. She's a fully qualified make-up artist and enjoys meeting new people. Audra has been showing and racing her huskies, competitively since the tender age of eight.

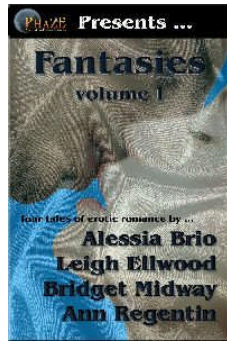
### **Stella**

Stella, the more experienced of the two sisters, has done many exciting things in her life. She's been a model, an ice cream slinger, a custom designer, and a tour manager. Throughout this all, art has always been an integral part of her life and she excels in sculpting, even though her

drawing skills are somewhat lacking. Her knowledge of Star wars and Lord of the Rings Trivia remains unparalleled. She is a voracious reader who loves movie quotes and video games.

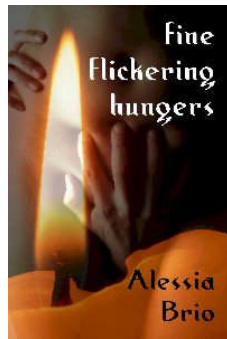
You can check out their website at [stellaandaudra.com](http://stellaandaudra.com)

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