

The background of the book cover is a grayscale photograph. On the left, two champagne flutes are filled with bubbly liquid and garnished with lemon slices. A white ribbon is draped around the base of the glasses. In the background, a classical statue of a nude female figure is visible. The title 'A TORRID Celebration!' is centered at the top. 'A TORRID' is in a white, bold, serif font, while 'Celebration!' is in a red, cursive script font with a black outline. Gold streamers are visible at the top and bottom edges of the cover.

A TORRID *Celebration!*

Christy Poff

Honey Jans

Monica M. Martin

Melissa Schroeder

Emma Wildes

Cheri Valmont

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Whiskey Creek Press

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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CONTENTS

[Published by](#)

[Dedication](#)

[GOING FOR EIGHT](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[THE TWELFTH KNIGHT](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[NOCTURNAL OFFERING](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[MASKED DESIRES](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[KNOCK THREE TIMES](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[SPANISH LULLABY](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)

[For your reading pleasure, we invite you to visit our web
bookstore](#)

* * * *

A Torrid Celebration!
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A TORRID CELEBRATION!

by

Melissa Schroeder, Cheri Valmont,

Monica M. Martin, Christy Poff, Honey Jans

& Emma Wildes

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

From author Melissa Schroeder:

For all my readers who always have to have a cowboy.

From author Cheri Valmont:

To Whiskey Creek Press and all the great people I've had the special privilege of working with during the years since my first publication with them.

From author Monica M. Martin:

For Bec

The greatest sister a girl could have. Love you!

To the Editors at WCP Torrid:

Thank you Jan & Stephanie! You ladies are wonderful. :D

From author Christy Poff:

My thanks go to Jan for asking me to be a part of this project and to Chere—as always

From author Honey Jans:

I'd like to dedicate this story to my husband Glenn.

From author Emma Wildes:

To Debi and Steven Womack in celebration of their success with Whiskey Creek Press

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

GOING FOR EIGHT

by

Melissa Schroeder

Chapter 1

Gerry Dillon glanced around at the people gathered at the VFW and took a swig of his beer. He made a face when he realized the brew wasn't only warm, but flat as well. Dancers crowded the floor, while the band performed a horrendous cover of a Garth Brooks' song. He winced when the lead singer hit a high, off-key note. But even as he hoped they would stop singing—and soon—Gerry enjoyed the atmosphere, the sense of completeness, he'd been feeling in the month since he'd returned.

Brander, Texas was celebrating its one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary with an all-school reunion blast off, and Gerry was intent on savoring every last damn minute of it. Six months ago, if someone had told him this, he would have snorted and bet the idiot a thousand dollars that he was wrong. But lots of things change in six months—especially when he found himself up close and personal with death. Gerry had a plan, one he'd spent months perfecting, and now he had one particular person to hunt up. If she ever showed up. She'd been diligently avoiding him—even though he'd been staying at her ranch for much of the month.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

The band finished their set and turned the music over to a DJ while they took a break. Gerry squinted at the amateur DJ and realized it was Chet Mankins, one of his best friends from high school. Gerry downed the last of his warm beer, set it down on the bar, and headed for the stage. It took him longer than he expected, though. Every few steps, someone stopped him, shook his hand, and inevitably asked him when he was getting back up on the bull.

When he finally reached the stage, he smiled at Chet. Six-four, two-eighty, all muscle. The only signs of his age were his thinning brown hair and the laugh lines around his brown eyes. When he noticed Gerry, he smiled and jumped down off the platform.

"Hey, Gerry." He held his hand out for a shake. "I heard you might be back in town for this."

After releasing Chet's hand, Gerry said, "I've been back about a month. Wasn't in any shape to go out until the last week."

Chet's expression sobered. "Alison and I were watching when Stampede took you down. For a few seconds, we didn't know if you were dead or alive."

"That makes two of us."

Uncomfortable with the direction their conversation was heading, Gerry looked over the crowd again. "So, have you seen Charlie Freemont tonight?"

When Chet didn't respond, Gerry looked back at him. The knowing smile sent a wave of heated embarrassment to his face. Gerry just thanked the good Lord it was dark inside the VFW.

"She turned out to be a hot little filly, didn't she?" Chet asked. "Charlie could always ride a horse like a queen. Makes a man wonder exactly what she's like in bed."

Yeah, it did, and Gerry had been thinking about it more and more during the past few weeks. Not that he hadn't thought about Charlie long before he'd ran out of Brander, hoping to forget everything about his childhood. But he'd always known she was a hometown girl. She didn't want to leave her father, or that damned ranch, so Gerry had avoided her. And that hadn't been hard—after they'd both hit puberty, being in Charlie's presence made him itch beneath the skin. He'd seen her only three times in the last four weeks, and he was staying on her damned ranch. Tonight, however, she wouldn't get away.

Noticing that Chet was still grinning at him, Gerry asked, "Does Alison know about this infatuation?"

His old friend threw back his head and laughed. "Alison knows all about my many fantasies. Besides, she can't say much when she's been eyeing your ass for the past five minutes."

Mortified, Gerry turned around and spotted Alison sitting on the other side of the dance floor with a group of women who looked vaguely familiar. Seeing how Alison graduated the same year as he and Chet had, there was a good chance he knew all of them. Chet laughed and clapped Gerry on the shoulder with one of his big hands.

"You look embarrassed. The Gerry Dillon I know would have been strutting over there to give them a better look."

"Lots of things change."

"You're telling me."

Chet nodded to the entrance of the room, and Gerry turned to face it. There, with the light of the hall highlighting her, stood Charlie Freemont. He couldn't make out her face, but he could see her figure. And what a figure it was. Curvy in all the right places, with a world-class ass he knew would be highlighted in those painted-on black jeans. The sleeveless shirt matched the jeans, black and tight—the only hint of color in her outfit was the red ropers he knew she wore on her feet. Her golden locks tumbled over her shoulders, and she paused to take in the scene. He knew, even without being able to see them, that there was a hint of humor in her jade green eyes as she did so.

"Her daddy probably had a fit when he saw her leaving tonight."

He glanced at Chet. "That's *if* he saw her. Besides, she's as old as we are. Why the hell would the old man be saying anything about how she dresses?"

"Gerry, please. You know what he's like. He's still pissed she didn't marry up."

"Marry up?"

"He wanted her to marry Sam Whitehorse 'cause it would have been beneficial to the ranch."

Gerry thought of old Sam Whitehorse who lived next to the Freemont Ranch. His roots in the community went back further than anyone's, seeing as his ancestors had inhabited the area before the whites stole the land. "Jesus, he's as old as her father."

Chet laughed. "No, his son. He's a year or two younger than us, but from what I heard, she refused. Not that she didn't see him for awhile. She has a list of conquests as long as yours, son."

"Watch it."

Chet shrugged. "Charlie's a friend of Alison's, so I hear about it. Besides, Charlie has said on more than one occasion that she doesn't give a damn what people say about her. She's perfectly happy with all aspects of her life, and if people have to pay attention to it, they must have nothing better to do. Aw, shit. Sam's not going to let it go."

Gerry turned to see what had caught Chet's attention. A man had approached Charlie. Judging from the long, straight-black hair that reached the middle of his back, Gerry assumed he was Sam Whitehorse. The man stood in Charlie's path until she reached him.

"I take it he didn't take the rejection well?"

"Hell, no. And it has nothing to do with her and everything to do with the damned ranch." When Charlie tried to walk past him, Whitehorse latched onto her arm. "Aw, damn. And I was having fun. Looks like I'm going—"

Gerry placed a hand on Chet's arm. "I'll take care of this."

For a second, Chet didn't say anything, just studied Gerry's face. A satisfied gleam entered his gaze, and he nodded. Gerry released his friend's arm and strode in the direction of Charlie and Whitehorse. Their raised voices were turning the heads of most people in the room. With each step, Gerry's anger rose.

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by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

When he'd finally pushed his way through a few onlookers—who were doing nothing to help—Gerry stepped up behind Whitehorse and said, "I do believe the lady isn't interested in talking to you, Whitehorse."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Charlie Freemont glanced over Sam's shoulder and fought the string of curses that rose in her throat. *Dammit to hell*. It figured this would happen. She didn't need any man's help—especially not Gerry Dillon's.

It was just like the bastard. Show up out of the blue, after ignoring her father and everyone else in Brander for ten years, and act like the prodigal son returning home. And everyone—including her father—was bowing at his feet like he was some kind of damned hero. All because he had the bad fortune to draw a bull named Stampede. Now Gerry thought he could butt into her business. Well, she wasn't having it.

Sam, who wasn't always the brightest star in the heavens, turned around and scowled at Gerry. He still held Charlie's arm in a death grip, and she swung around as he did, stumbling and almost falling over her feet. Gerry looked at her, as if checking to see if she was all right, and then turned his attention back to Sam.

"What the hell do you want, Dillon?" Sam's belligerent tone had Gerry's eyes narrowing as he studied the younger man. Charlie would've just laughed and enjoyed the show—if Gerry wasn't involved.

"What I want is for you to take your hand off of Ms. Freemont and go take some time to cool off."

Sam snorted. "Ms. Freemont? Ain't that a fancy name? I guess you've been gone so long, you don't know her nickname."

Deceptively calm, Gerry slipped his hands into his back pockets. She knew him better. There was a good chance he was doing that to resist the urge punch Sam.

"What name is that?" She could barely hear Gerry's voice, but she recognized the steel beneath the tone.

Sam opened his mouth, but Charlie stopped him. "Gerry." She waited until he turned his attention from Sam to her. The full weight of his scrutiny sent a rush of heat over her flesh. It had been like this for years. She couldn't be in the same room with Gerry without her legs going wobbly as a newborn colt's. There was something behind those clear, dark-blue eyes that had her heart thumping, her body warming. But that was her tough luck. He thought of her as a little sister, and he always would.

"I can take care of this myself."

Gerry cocked his head to one side. "I know you *think* you can. What I want to know is what Whitehorse calls you?"

Her face flushed with anger and embarrassment. Her nickname of "Good-time Charlie" hadn't really bothered her at all. In fact, she enjoyed it. No man expected her to tie him down, and they all understood they'd never get their hands on her daddy's ranch. There'd been a few, just after she'd graduated from high school, who'd tried that route. When she'd made it clear that, just because they got her in bed didn't mean they were going to get a piece of her heart—or a piece of her land—they'd all disappeared fast enough.

But now, for the first time ever, she was mortified. It was different for this man, the one she'd always wanted and could never get, to know that Brander's residents saw her as the

town skank. True, none of them said so to her face. They feared what she could do to them, since her father owned much of the town, and many found seasonal work on Freemont Ranch.

"Let it go, Gerry."

"I don't think I want to."

She snorted to hide the pain that stabbed at her heart.

"You don't always get what you want."

Gerry's gaze traveled down the length of her body, then all the way back up to her face. Her flesh burned as if he'd physically touched her. Her nipples hardened, her blood hummed with pleasure.

One side of Gerry's mouth kicked up seductively as he said, "I'm working on that problem."

Before she could figure out what *that* comment meant, he turned back to Sam. She knew Gerry was itching for a fight. Six months had passed since he'd been stomped by that bull, and he had to be ready to scream. He'd never been a man who could sit still for long, and he had a habit of lashing out. The situation with Sam provided the opportunity to vent some of his frustration—but she wouldn't allow him to use her personal life that way.

She wrenched her arm free of Sam's bruising hold and faced both men. "Both of you can go to hell."

A few of the women whistled and clapped as she walked away. Charlie smiled at a few people, but she didn't stop to talk as she made her way to the bar. She stepped up to order a beer when strong fingers wrapped around her hand. She turned and found an irritated—and oh-my-God beautiful—

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Gerry Dillon glowering at her. Since she was close to six feet tall, they stood almost eye to eye, and she glared right back.

"Oh, don't give me that mutinous look." With a jerk, he started back to the dance floor, dragging her in his path. "You and I have a few things to discuss."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

Gerry stomped to the dance floor, trying to ignore the curious stares. He hadn't wanted to approach Charlie so publicly, but she was putting a crimp into his plans. She was the most difficult, pain-in-the-ass woman. He had no idea just why the hell he wanted her—needed her, like he needed air to breathe—but he did. It probably had something to do with his hard head.

The moment they hit the wood, he pulled her into his arms.

"Gerry."

He ignored the irritation and anger in her voice and swiftly guided her around the high school principal and his wife. Trying to distract himself from the fact that Charlie was finally—*finally*—in his arms, he concentrated on the old George Strait song playing.

"I don't like macho he-man displays."

Now she sounded like a disgruntled three-year-old. Even knowing it was a mistake, he couldn't resist looking down at her. Well, as far down as he could, because they were almost the same height. Her skin was flushed, her eyes snapped with green fire.

Damn, she was something. Heat stirred then brushed along his nerve endings as she shifted and her nipples grazed his chest. He was painfully aware that just about every wonderful inch of Charlie was plastered up against his body. The scent of her was driving him crazy. She never wore

perfume because of her sensitive skin, but he could smell the herbal shampoo and rose scented soap she used. His cock twitched and hardened. If he wasn't careful, he'd embarrass himself even further. Gerry didn't know exactly how he'd explain a cum stain on the front of his jeans.

"I told you I could handle Sam myself."

At the mention of her ex-lover, Gerry's frustration shifted into anger. "Yeah, that was going really well. Tell me, do they all act like that when you dump them?"

She pursed her lips, a sure sign she was pissed. And sick fuck that he was, all he could think of was pressing his mouth against hers and tasting her.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at."

Knowing this wasn't the place for this discussion, he pulled away from her, grabbing her hand and tugging her along behind. He nodded to a few acquaintances—which meant about every damn person in the room—but he refused to slow down. He continued walking, right past a chuckling Alison and Chet, out into the parking lot. Annoyance and arousal thrummed in his blood, and he knew when he started talking, his voice would be close to a roar. Plus, there was always the chance he would end up kissing Charlie. Gerry really didn't know how much longer he could resist that.

When they reached his truck, he unlocked it with the keyless entry button. He opened the door and started to shove her into the cab, but she pushed back, and he released her. She was breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling rapidly. The tight stretch-knit fabric revealed a wonderful outline of her nipples each time she drew in a breath.

"Just what the hell is going on, Gerry?"

He looked up at her face and tried to form the words. For the last six months, there had only been one thing on his mind other than recovery. That had been Charlie. He had to have her. He'd been in love with her for most of his life, and he refused to live with the regret of not going after her.

But just now, being the ignorant, knuckle-dragging man that he was, he couldn't come up with a reply. The only thing he could do was act.

He crowded her against his pickup, took her face into his hands, and slammed his mouth on top of hers.

* * * *

Charlie tried her best to figure out just what the hell had happened. One minute she was madder than hell at Gerry, ready to beat the crap out of him. The next, he had her backed up against his truck and was kissing her. And not just any kind of kiss. This was a mind-numbing, out-of-control kiss that was turning her brain to mush. Any second now, she would fight him off like she should. Unfortunately, that would require a brain that worked, and that just wasn't happening at the moment.

What was happening was impossible, unthinkable, and so damn delicious she didn't know if she would ever be able to stop. Her eyes drifted shut as Gerry slipped his tongue between her lips and stepped between her legs. Every hormone hummed as he slid his hands down her body to cup her ass. With a jerk, he pressed his groin against her. There was no mistaking the long, thick ridge of his penis as he

ground against her. Hot liquid filled her pussy, her body throbbed, her mind spun. She threaded her fingers through his hair.

Before she was ready, he drew away. Slowly, afraid of what she would see in his expression, she opened her eyes. His hair had been mussed by her hands, his face was flushed, and lust shone in his eyes.

"I don't think we should talk in public." His rough voice slipped beneath her skin and wound its way to her heart, which was turning over in her chest. All her life—or, at least, since she'd discovered sex and boys—she'd wanted to hear that tone.

"Being in private probably isn't a good idea right now."

He stepped closer again, allowing her to feel the heat of his body and smell the scent on his skin. Bending his head, he nipped at her bottom lip. "I think that if I don't get you alone, there is a very good chance I'll strip you naked and take you in the bed of my pickup."

She shuddered, her sex clenching in reaction to the picture he painted. Judging from the glint in his gaze and the tone of his voice, there was a good chance he would follow through on his threat. And knowing her own feelings, there was also a good chance she wouldn't stop him.

It was a mistake—one she would regret big time—but it would be best if they got away from any prying eyes. By the time they reached the house, they'd both have calmed down.

Against her better judgment, Charlie heard herself say, "Fine."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

The moment Gerry put the truck in park and turned off the ignition, he reached for Charlie. But he found himself grabbing air. She'd already scooted to the door and was hopping down from the cab of the pickup. She slammed the door and started toward her house. Frustration—both with her and the situation—had him following suit and grabbing her arm.

When she turned to face him, she used her free arm to take a swing. He ducked and barely missed getting slammed in the jaw. Apparently, she'd rethought her decision.

"Fucking hell, Charlie."

He spun her around, slipped his arms around her, and captured her arms beneath his.

"Let me go." The low, angry growl of her voice didn't bother him. The truth was, sparring with Charlie had always felt like foreplay. They'd start in on each other—didn't matter what the subject was—and he always ended up pissed off and frustrated.

"No. I said—oof."

She caught him in the midsection with her elbow.

"That's enough, dammit." With deft moves, he released her long enough to turn her so she faced him. Bending at the waist, he slung her over his shoulder, using his arm to anchor her legs. Given the chance, she would definitely do some damage with those red ropers.

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by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

She bucked against him and pounded his back with her fists, all the while calling him names. "Son of a maggot" was his favorite.

"If you want your father and all the hands out here, keep it up. I'll be happy to explain to them how and why you are in your present position."

With a huff, Charlie stopped beating the living hell out of his back. She said nothing as he strode to the guest house, doing his best to keep his steps as silent as possible. Even though he'd dared her, he definitely didn't want to explain to her father what was going on. Jonathon Freemont would stick his nose into his business and mess everything up. The one person he *didn't* want involved in this was her father.

By the time Gerry reached his door, his shoulder hurt. Charlie wasn't the smallest woman. He shut the door with a kick of his foot and didn't slow down on his way to the bedroom. This wasn't what he'd always planned—he'd hoped to woo her, romance her. But she'd ignored him.

He dropped her on his bed. Like he'd expected, she came up off the mattress ready to fight. But as irritated as she was, he wouldn't give her the chance. He quickly covered her with his body, pinning her to the bed. She bucked against him twice, almost pushing him off her. Then encircling each of her wrists, he slipped between her legs. Even through the stiff jean fabric, he could feel the softness of her sex. His cock jerked in reaction, in anticipation.

"Let me up, you oaf."

"I would if you'd at least talk about it."

Green fire blazed in her eyes. "We have nothing to talk about."

"Really?"

"Nothing happened—nothing important."

That was a challenge he couldn't resist. Something of his intentions must have shown in his expression, because Charlie's eyes widened as he bent his head and kissed her. Just as before, the taste of her wound its way through him, heating his blood and dissolving all his thoughts. He stole inside of her mouth, savoring the true flavor of her. Hot, spicy, and completely untamed. He slanted his mouth over hers, barely registering the fact she was now fully participating. All he knew was that in this moment, right at this time, he knew he wanted—no, *needed*—to have her. Not since his teenage years had he felt so out of control. He was sure he'd come in his pants just from kissing her.

He deepened the kiss, angling his head just right. Her moans had him releasing her arms and cupping her face. Flexing his hips, he enjoyed the jolt of heat that shifted through him.

By the time he pulled away, they were both breathing heavily again. Keeping his face within inches of hers, he waited for her to open her eyes.

"Tell me now. Tell me you don't want this, and I'll let you go. But I know you, Charlie. I can feel your heat through my pants."

She didn't blush, didn't even try to deny it. Her clear gaze softened as she entwined her arms around his neck. "It's

stupid and probably the worst thing for me to do, but I want you. And for once, I'm taking what I want."

He leaned his forehead against hers and sighed in satisfaction. He'd hoped she wouldn't deny him, because he didn't think a pack of mustangs could've kept him from her, especially after that kiss. He had only tonight to prove to her that she was his.

Slamming his mouth down on hers again, he took what she'd offered and returned in kind. For years he had wanted her, had lusted after her. For five months he'd waited, plotted, and damn near gone insane trying to recover from his injuries. Now he finally had her beneath him, and he had to make sure she understood.

But he couldn't take his time—not this first time. He sat up, straddling her hips, and in one quick move, he grabbed her knit shirt and yanked it up and over her head.

The only light in the bedroom came from a living room lamp he'd left on. But even in the dim glow, he could see enough of her. His breath stalled in his chest at the sight before him. Creamy skin, with a hint of honey, spilled over a red bra. It wasn't anything fancy—just plain, smooth knit with no lace—but he'd never seen anything so seductive in his life. He slid the backs of his fingers over the skin, enjoying her sharp inhalations. She shivered as he dipped his finger in the crevice between her breasts.

He grinned at her. "Cold?"

She frowned, then gasped when he drew his thumb across her nipple. It pebbled instantly, standing erect and straining against the cloth. Bending at the waist, he dragged the flat of

his tongue over her nipples through the fabric. First one, then the other. She shifted restlessly beneath him. Drawing back, he unclasped the front hook of the bra.

The cups separated, falling to her sides, leaving her breasts bared for his greedy gaze. Full, bottom-heavy, and topped with the prettiest pink nipples. His mouth dried up just thinking about how they would taste. He brushed the tips of her nipples with his palms, and they tightened further.

"Gerry." Her low, sensual voice swept through him, through his blood, all the way down to the bottom of his soul. There was such want, such need, in her tone, it almost undid him.

He bent his head again, taking a turgid tip in his mouth and simultaneously pinching the other nipple. Her moans grew louder as her hands slipped up his back to his head, holding him closer to her. With one last lick, he kissed a path up her neck to her mouth. That sweet, sexy mouth. Her hardened nipples bit into his chest, and her body grew hot under his ministrations.

The need to feel her flesh next to his took over every thought. He wanted no barriers to his touch. Practically jumping off the bed, he tore at his clothes, throwing them carelessly behind him. Charlie had followed his lead. She stepped up to him, slipping her hands over his shoulders and behind his head. Without hesitation, she slid her tongue between his lips, tangling it with his. Her lack of inhibitions, not to mention the way she rubbed up against him, pushed him almost past the point of control.

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He took her by the hips, pulling her tight against him. The sweet, soft skin of her sex brushed against his shaft. In response, his balls drew up tight, and a drop of pre-cum escaped. Charlie circled his waist with her legs, pressing her pussy tighter against him. Liquid heat fairly poured out of his cock, and his control snapped instantly when he knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Without ceremony, he tumbled them back on the bed, neither of them noticing as they landed on the mattress. All he wanted was to be inside her, to feel her clench around his sex, and to pull him deeper into her channel. But first he had to have a taste. Tearing himself away from her, he slid down her body, then dropped to his knees on the floor. Gerry dragged her forward until her legs dangled over the edge. Placing a hand on each of her thighs, he pushed her legs further apart.

Her golden-brown curls, neatly trimmed in the shape of a triangle, were wet with arousal. With his thumbs, he spread her skin, his heart thumping as he uncovered her pretty pink lips amidst the tangle of hair. Drawing in a deep breath, he said, "Damn, woman, you even smell like sin."

He looked up to find Charlie watching him as she leaned back on her elbows. Without breaking eye contact with her, he licked her slit from top to bottom. Her juices poured out of her. Humming, he pressed his mouth against her, stealing between her folds for a taste. She closed her eyes and dropped to the mattress.

If he'd thought kissing her was erotic, tasting the essence of her desire went beyond anything he'd imagined. Just like

the woman, her juices were a contradiction in tastes. Sweet, but tart at the same time, and just as irresistible as the woman herself. As he savored her, he pressed his thumb against her clit, pushing her up and over a peak as she bucked against his mouth.

With one last swipe of his tongue, he moved away and pulled the nightstand drawer open. As he retrieved and opened a condom, he noticed his hands were shaking. He quickly donned the rubber and stepped back to bed. Charlie had scooted up the mattress, and he joined her. Grabbing her hips, he rose to his knees, raising her to the right level. He plunged into her with one hard thrust.

"Oh, Lord." She felt like heaven. As he began to move, she worked in rhythm with him, but soon that wasn't enough. He shoved her legs in front of him, holding them close together as he continued to pump in and out of her. With his free hand, he pressed her clit—once, twice, three times. She came, screaming his name, her body convulsing so violently he almost slipped completely out of her. Two more thrusts and he followed her, his balls drawing up tight, his body jerking with his own orgasm.

Moments later, he released her legs and pulled out. As they lay together, he pulled her into his arms, his body finally satisfied, his mind numb, and his heart whole.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 5

Charlie skimmed her fingers up Gerry's chest, trying to imagine what he'd looked like after the riding accident. Although everyone thought differently, she'd watched all his rides when they were on TV. It had been her dirty little secret. So, of course, she'd been watching that day. The memory of witnessing him thrown off that red bull, flipping and landing hard on the ground, then being stomped on by Stampede—it still made her sick to her stomach. As she'd watched a near-lifeless Gerry on the dirt floor at the National PBR Finals, she'd sworn her heart had stopped. She was certain that, for at least two minutes, she hadn't drawn a breath.

To think that all this glorious, golden skin had been so marred. Reports said that he'd suffered a compound fracture in his leg, as well as several broken ribs. Not to mention the concussion that had kept him completely out of it for at least a week. She'd used every bit of control not to hop the first flight to Vegas and rush to his bedside. The point had been moot, since her father had done just that, not even saying goodbye before he left.

For days, she'd waited for information regarding Gerry's condition. Both on TV and online. Most diehard PBR fans were devastated, and much of his recovery had been publicized for the whole world to see. Charlie had waited with them for word, praying every night that she wouldn't wake to the news of his death.

Her father had never called.

Charlie shook away those thoughts and trailed her fingers up Gerry's torso, enjoying the feel of his hard muscles. They'd been in such a rush the first time—not to mention the second time—that she hadn't had the chance to savor his body.

He stirred beneath her hands, and she looked up at his face. Talk about stopping a girl's heart. His dark hair was rumpled from their time in bed, and his eyes were barely open, but focused on her. The intensity in his gaze had her breath backing up in her throat.

To hide her reaction, she slipped her fingers over one of his nipples, smiling when he shuddered.

"You're a wicked woman, Charlise." Dark and heavy with sleep, his voice rumpled over her senses, tripping over her heart in the process.

She settled her head on his stomach and frowned up at him. A slice of white in the darkness told her he was smiling at her. "I don't like that name."

He snorted. "You don't have to remind me. I believe I still have a scar on my ass from the beebee you shot at me when I told Jack Brenen your real name."

She chuckled. "And I bet it didn't teach you a damned thing."

Gerry didn't say anything for a second or two. His amused expression slipped away, replaced by one that was much more serious. Charlie's nerves jumped in response, as did her heart. She'd known years ago that when Gerry concentrated on a woman, she lost a little of her sanity. That was the only explanation for the way some of his girlfriends had acted

through the years. She'd known that, even in high school, he'd had all of the girls dropping their pants as fast as they could. From the rumors she'd heard, Gerry hadn't lost his popularity with the ladies over the years.

But, in her heart, Charlie couldn't blame them. For the first time ever, Gerry had tried to get her into bed—and she'd barely put up a fight. What the hell was she thinking? She hadn't tried to resist him at all. And that just made her the latest in a long line of women Gerry would leave in the morning.

She tried to brush away the thought, and the hurt that clawed at her heart because of it, but something must have shown on her face. Gerry reached out and brushed his thumb over her mouth.

"What's going on in that crazy head of yours?"

Her lips tingled where he touched, so she curled them in and rubbed them together. She avoided looking at him until he curved his large, callused hand around her jaw and forced her head toward him.

"Charlie." His voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. But his tone warned her that he wouldn't let it go.

"It's nothing."

He cocked his head to one side as he slipped his fingers through her hair. Then, without warning, he grabbed her beneath her arms and hauled her up and over his body. Damn, the man was hot. Not just in looks, but in temperature too. He let off enough body heat to keep a mansion warm in the middle of winter.

Charlie squirmed, trying to situate herself more comfortably, and Gerry groaned. The hard, long length of his cock rubbed against her cunt.

"Hey." He slapped her on her bare ass when she kept moving around. "Stop that, or I'll lose my concentration."

"That's the idea." She sat up, straddling his hips.

Without any warning, he took her by the waist and switched their positions, rolling over the tangle of bed sheets. She laughed until she met his gaze. The intensity she saw there stirred something deep within her.

Gently, Gerry brushed his mouth against Charlie's. The contrast between this kiss and the ones they'd shared before struck her. He kept his eyes open, stared into hers and the warmth in his gaze scared the hell out of her. The emotion in his eyes wound through her system, affecting her more than the passion he'd shown earlier. Her heart squeezed at the near reverence as he executed the kiss.

Panic rose in Charlie's throat, almost choking her. Tenderness wasn't something she wanted from her lovers, and she damn sure didn't offer it. But when she tried to deepen the kiss, Gerry refused. He held her face in his hands, and took his time destroying her defenses. Instead of the fear she'd expected, warmth permeated her, and she felt herself melting.

From the moment he'd dragged her onto the dance floor, she'd never had a prayer. Protecting herself against this man, against what he could do to her heart—to her soul—just wasn't possible. Not with him staring into her eyes, devastating her with just a simple kiss.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

The moment he deepened the kiss, she closed her eyes and slid over the slippery slope of control. Fingers of delight shivered through her as he slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue diving between her lips. He moved his hands to the mattress, pulling his weight up and off her breasts. He flexed his hips, sliding his cock over her slit until the head of his penis butted against her clit. Her stomach muscles contracted, her pulse accelerating as he continued his lazy rhythm. Soon, both of them had lost control. He entered her fast, hard and high, her body quivering, and racing toward the finish. With two strokes, she was coming, his name erupting from her throat in a high, keening cry. He followed her moments—but not before pushing her up and over the edge one more time.

* * * *

Later, as Gerry dozed, Charlie slipped out of bed to dress. She didn't think she could handle his denials or morning-after flattery—especially since she was well aware he'd played the same game with too many women for him to remember. As she slipped her belt through the loops of her jeans, she shook her head. She had no right to think that way. Not with her track record, and especially not after she'd gone into this with her eyes wide open.

Sliding her fingers through her hair, she tried to bring the rat's nest under control, but she knew it was a lost cause. She picked up her boots, holding them to make sure not to wake Gerry. It was the coward's way, but she wouldn't allow him to completely destroy her. Granted, it would be a long

time before this night wouldn't mess with her—okay, she'd probably never get over it—but that didn't mean she had to face the truth without any coffee.

She crept closer to the bed and studied him. A day's growth of beard now darkened his chin, but he still looked as innocent as a newborn calf. Curling her fingers into the palm of her hand, she fought the urge to brush back a lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. If she touched him, he would wake up, and there was no way she'd be able to resist him. With a sigh of regret, she slipped out the door.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Charlie pulled up to Alison's house. She'd taken one of the ranch's rigs, since her car was still at the VFW. Sunday morning sunrise probably wasn't the best time to visit Alison, but Charlie couldn't deny the comfort she took in the sight of the Mankin home. The frame house had belonged to Alison's parents who'd moved to Galveston three years ago. Plastic toys littered the yard, a layer of dew covering them. As Charlie stepped onto the porch, it sagged and groaned beneath her weight. Alison had been griping at Chet to fix it for a year now. The paint was peeling and a few screens needed replacing, but Charlie felt more at home here than she did in her own house.

Hesitantly, she knocked on the door, trying not to disturb Buster, the Mankin's older-than-dirt bloodhound. Despite her efforts, Buster immediately sounded the alarm, and within seconds she heard someone stumbling to the door. When the footsteps were followed by a crash and a particular nasty curse, she was pretty sure it was Chet.

He opened the door, and Charlie tried not to laugh. His hair was a mess, his eyes were barely open, and his t-shirt was inside out. The hair he always wore slicked down, without a strand out of place, was now flattened on one side and sticking straight up on the other. He squinted at her.

"Charlie? What the hell are you doing here?" Even as he asked, he was pushing open the screen door.

Behind him, she heard footsteps, then she saw Alison peek over his shoulder. "Charlie? What's wrong?"

Charlie wanted to be an adult and just say nothing. She wanted to handle it all on her own, just like she usually did. She never revealed her emotions, not even to her best friend. Her father had forbidden it. But too many years of holding back, of not asking for anything because her father wasn't willing to share, she finally broke free. With a sob, she stepped around Chet and threw herself into Alison's arms.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 6

Gerry grimaced, trying his best not to leave the dream. He was snuggled up in bed with a warm woman, and even the sun shining on his face didn't bother him. But some jackass kept pounding on the damn door, and the noise was fucking up one incredible dream. He stretched, rolled onto his back, and pried an eye open. The door beating continued, but he ignored it. Instead, he closed his eye and reached for Charlie. When he found nothing but an empty bed, he opened his eyes and searched the room.

"Dammit, Gerry, open up the danged door!" Charles Freemont shouted from outside.

Damn, he didn't need this. Freemont wouldn't take kindly to the fact that Gerry'd had his baby daughter in bed. Didn't matter how old she was.

Sitting up, he stretched again, in no rush to answer a summons from his mentor. Glancing around, he noticed that not only was Charlie gone, but her clothes were too. Irritation crawled down his spine, his temper slowly boiling. He didn't know what reason she'd come up with, but her absence was something he hadn't expected and just couldn't accept.

Gerry slid out of bed, grabbing a pair of jeans and slipping them on without bothering with the button. His mind still wasn't working correctly, and it wouldn't without at least two cups of coffee. He stumbled to the door and opened it.

Charles Freemont had always been an impressive man. He was six-four, lean as a whip, with a full head of white hair

he'd worn in the same buzz cut for over twenty years. His blue eyes studied Gerry, taking in his state of undress.

"What in the *hell* took you so long, boy?"

Gerry shrugged and stepped back from the door, allowing the older man to enter. Even though all Gerry wanted to do was find Charlie and give her a good talking to.

"What you want, Charles?"

"Have you seen Charlise?"

"I just got out of bed."

"Well, I know both of you went to the VFW last night, so did you see her there?"

Gerry nodded but said nothing else, because he didn't know how much Charles knew.

"I can't find her. And she didn't drive back last night. Can't find her Mustang anywhere. And one of the rigs is missin'."

The genuine concern in Freemont's eyes sent a swift kick of guilt and worry to Gerry's gut. Sure, he knew she'd made it here safely, but he wasn't quite sure what had happened after she left him.

"When she didn't return last night, I thought she might've made up with Sam Whitehorse. That girl ain't got no sense."

The unwanted reminder of the ex-lover sent Gerry over the edge. "Whitehorse is a jackass."

He said it with such vehemence that Charles' eyes widened. "What's wrong with Sam? Good boy, knows cows, and damn sure would've been easier if we'd combined the ranches."

Gerry's anger rose swiftly. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you insist she marry a man she doesn't really like?"

"She liked him well enough to date him for several months. Lord knows she slept with him."

"It isn't like he was the first."

"Are you insulting my girl?"

Gerry rolled his eyes. "No. Your girl, by the way, is old enough to make her own decisions. She's also old enough to say no to a bastard like Whitehorse. Everyone knows he was only after this ranch."

"And just what the hell is wrong with that? Man wants to marry well, make one of the biggest ranches this side of Dallas—that's not a stupid move."

"No, but it is a stupid move on your part." Exasperated, Gerry threw his hands up in the air and started pacing. "You think the only way for Charlie to get a man interested her is to offer this ranch?"

"Son, it ain't like that was the only time I've offered up a piece of the ranch. But she'd never even nibble at those guys. Whitehorse and her started dating, oh, while I was out tending to you in Las Vegas. I got home, realized what was going on, and had a little talk with him."

Gerry stopped and started at the man. Ever since he'd latched on to Charles Freemont as a surrogate father, he'd looked up to him. But at the moment, he would have loved to kick the man's ass.

"Are you telling me you offered her up to other men as part and parcel of the ranch? Like some goddamn piece of meat?"

"Now, Gerry, that's the way things are done. I don't have a son, and I know that you don't want to be tied down to the ranch, or I'd leave it to you."

"Leave it to me?"

While he wanted to be grateful for Charles' generosity, Gerry just couldn't. Charlie Freemont had worked her tail off on the ranch. She knew more about it than any man on it aside from her father. And this idiotic man didn't even consider leaving the ranch to his daughter. Instead, he wanted to offer it as some kind of bounty to marry her off with—as if she'd need that to attract a man—or give it to someone who wasn't even part of the family.

"Of course. You're like my son. It was my one regret that Lisa and I never had another child, especially a boy."

While it gave Gerry a momentary jolt of joy to hear that, the comment about "a boy" rubbed him the wrong way. But before he could say anything, his cell phone rang. Hoping it might be Charlie, he went after it. Noticing the last name Mankis, he turned on the phone.

"Gerry?" Chet kept his voice at a bare whisper.

"Whatcha need, Chet?"

"You need to get over here."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Charlie's here, and Alison would have my ass if she knew I was calling you. Get over here and straighten it out. I can't take any more drama. The woman's been crying since she got

here. Not to mention, she's talking about marrying Whitehorse now."

In the background, Gerry heard, "Chet, where are you?"

Without another word, Chet hung up, apparently saving his ass in the process. Gerry moved quickly, buttoning his pants and striding past Charles in search of a shirt.

"What are you doing now?"

"Charlie's over at the Mankins."

"Well, at least we know that. You going over there to straighten her out?"

Gerry tugged on his t-shirt and grabbed his boots. After he sat and donned them, he grabbed his keys and sunglasses. Without pausing, he said, "You can bet the damn ranch on it."

He strode out the door, ready to battle. It was about time Charlie admitted what they meant to each other.

* * * *

Charlie splashed cold water on her face and appraised herself in the small bathroom mirror. Since she'd shown up a few hours earlier, Alison had been wonderful. Chet had disappeared, like men normally did when confronted with a crying woman. As she dried her face, she contemplated her decision.

Alison had panicked when Charlie said she was going to marry Whitehorse. The marriage might not be what she wanted in life, but it wasn't like her father was ever going to give her the ranch. She truly believed he would rather sell it than leave it to her to run. A fresh set of tears spilled over, and she groaned. This was getting to be too much.

Charlie wiped her face dry, took a deep breath, and opened the door. Just as she stepped out into the hallway, raised voices sounded down the hall. She walked toward the shouting and stopped cold when she saw who was making most the noise.

Gerry stood in the doorway, glaring down at Alison, who had her fisted hands firmly planted on her hips.

"I asked where the hell Charlie is, Alison, and I ain't going anywhere until you tell me."

"And I told ya if you don't quit making a scene and leave, I'll sic Chet on you."

Chet was nowhere to be found again. Alison must have moved, because Gerry looked over her. The tense, angry lines of his face relaxed, and a look of what might have been relief passed through his eyes. He ignored Alison, pushing past her and striding toward Charlie. The panic and pain that had been hounding her since she'd left him came flooding back. She took a step away from him, but he reached her before she could escape.

"You're going to be pissed, but, well, I'm sick of waiting."

With that comment, he grabbed her hand and dragged through the Mankins' living room. Alison tried to intervene, but Chet made a miraculous appearance and made sure he kept her out of the way.

Before Charlie could react, Gerry pulled her down the front steps to his truck. She finally reacted when he opened the door to his pickup and tried to stuff her into the cab, much like he'd done the night before. She yanked her arm away and backed away from him, down the side of the truck.

"What the hell do you want?" she asked, happy that the only time in the last couple hours, she hadn't started crying the moment she opened her mouth.

"I want you to get in the truck."

Is the man that stupid? When he didn't smile, just continued to stare at her, she realized he probably was. "No."

He blinked, clearly surprised by her answer. "What?"

"I said no."

His nostrils flared as a rush of color flooded his cheeks. "Get in the damn truck."

She crossed her arms and shook her head. Gerry settled his hands on his hips and glanced around.

"We're drawing a crowd. I really would rather talk in private."

She sniffed, fighting the embarrassing tears that burned the back of her eyes. "I don't think being alone with you is a good thing. And I have some things I have to do."

"Like tell that jackass Whitehorse you'll marry him?" Her surprise must have shown on her face, because he nodded. "Yeah, I heard about that. Do you actually think I would let that happen after last night?"

She swallowed a lump that had risen in her throat. "Last night was just..."

"What? Just what?" When she didn't answer, his gaze grew even more intense. "Do you think that, after years of ignoring my attraction to you, I'd settle for a one-night stand?"

"So, after years of hopping from one bed to the next, you're ready to settle down? Give me a break."

Charlie turned away, needing some distance to save herself. But she didn't get far before Gerry latched onto her arm and spun her around. She opened her mouth to yell at him, but found her breath stolen when he slammed his lips down on hers. The taste of him sent her senses reeling. Her heart galloped, and her head spun.

Even as her body throbbed with approval, she couldn't stop the sob that escaped from her. He stopped kissing her but pressed his forehead against hers.

"Don't cry, baby."

Gerry took her face in his hands, wiping away her tears with his thumbs.

"When I was in the hospital, I had one thing on my mind. One thing that kept me going—and that was you."

Charlie pulled away, stunned, and he smiled. "That's right. You are the only reason I worked my tail off to get up and out of that bed. See, when we were kids we were friends, but then puberty hit. Nothing was ever the same again, and I knew I didn't want to stay here. You wouldn't leave the ranch, I couldn't stay here. It was that simple. But after Stampede trampled me, my first thought when I woke in the hospital was you. Never going after you was my only regret. Last night wasn't about just sex. Jesus, Charlie, please stop crying."

She snorted. "I never cry."

"Hell of a time to start." He sighed. "I can't let you marry Whitehorse."

"Then what the hell are you gonna do about it, Dillon?" Chet yelled.

Charlie glanced around and noticed that several of the Mankins' neighbors had stepped outside to watch them. Heat filled her face. "Lord. I'll never live this down."

Gerry chuckled. "You're just going to have to marry me and make an honest man out of me."

"That's not funny."

His smile dissolved, and he cocked his head to one side as he studied her with serious eyes. "What made you think I was joking?"

She glanced around at their audience and leaned closer to him. "I don't want a scene."

He shook his head. "Too late for that, babe."

Rage mixed with pain twisted in her heart, laying it open to bleed. Without another word, she turned in the opposite direction and started down the hill toward the street. The crowd—which now included members of five of the surrounding houses—began catcalling and razzing Gerry.

"You know, I can't let you run out on me. That baby is going to need a father."

She stopped in her tracks and spun to face him. All the anguish faded, replaced by a surge of anger. She stepped back closer to him. "You know I'm not pregnant," she muttered under her breath.

His eyes sparkled with familiar mischief. "Yeah, but by the time church is out this afternoon, you'll be expecting triplets."

"You don't want to live here."

He sobered. "I want to be wherever you are." His eyebrows drew down in a concentrated frown. "I don't care if you want to stay here."

Charlie wanted more. For once in her life, she needed to know that she was the one he was after. "And my daddy's ranch has nothing to do with this."

Gerry's eyes narrowed to slits. "I'd take offense to that if I didn't know how much the men in this town screwed with your head." He grabbed her hand and stepped closer. "I don't give a damn about that ranch. I have enough money to buy your father five times over."

Her eyes widened, and he nodded. "I've made a lot of money and, amazingly, I haven't pissed it all away."

Charlie's heart was beating hard against her chest, her mind trying to accept what he was saying. But she wasn't quite there yet. "Why?"

"Why didn't I piss all my money away?"

She shook her head. "Why me?"

He sighed. "You aren't going to let me out of this without the whole enchilada, huh?"

She nodded.

"You're the woman I want by my side, the one I want to wake up with in the morning and love all night. I want kids, dogs, the whole picket fence." He took her face in his hands again. "I love you, Charlie."

Joy whipped through her, warming her from the inside out. "Yeah?" A fresh set of tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Yeah." Keeping his eyes open, he brushed his mouth over hers. "Now, don't you have something to say?"

She smiled. "I love you, Gerry. Even if you are a pain in the ass."

"And?"

"Well, if you won't let it go—okay, I'll marry you."

He smiled, giving her a quick, hard kiss as the crowd around them applauded.

"Figures," she muttered.

"What?"

"You can never perform without a crowd."

He laughed. "For most things, but there's one activity in particular for which I prefer a crowd of one."

The heat in his eyes sent a shiver along her nerve endings. She slipped her fingers into his hair and tugged him down, bringing their mouths close enough to kiss. But before she did, she paused to say, "I think I can accommodate you on that one."

They were both laughing when she finally kissed him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE TWELFTH KNIGHT

by

Cheri Valmont

Chapter 1

"If you do not desist with this foolishness, some of the visiting nobles will truss you all up like the vain peacocks you be!" Willamina de Coucey shouted in a voice shaky from the extreme cold weather. The talons of the icy winds clawed at her thin cloak. "Mayhap pluck those puny pricks ye all seem so fond of," she grumbled.

"Like the one you guard so diligently?" By the strength of his voice, it was obvious Adonis was barely winded by the mock battle, which had him in the starring role. He only took a moment to glance her way to see if, by the expression on Minna's face, he had hit his mark with the barb.

By the grimace twisting her face, she knew she had rewarded him as he'd expected.

Minna stood on the edge of the forest, watching them as they continued their parry and thrust in the center of the snow-covered clearing. While three of the boys, who erroneously prided themselves on being men already, tried their youthful best to disarm him, Adonis laughed, his movements quick as he deftly avoided their pole jabs. It was a rare thing indeed, that laugh. Minna felt herself shiver in

response. The man had a true gift with that voice of his. Since she stayed in disguise as a man most of the time, she continually had to watch herself around those of their troop who were not aware of her sex.

Especially Adonis.

Minna pulled her tatty cloak closer around her body to try to keep winter's harsh winds at bay. Otho, Saer, and Tebald were clumsy in their youthful eagerness to best Adonis. They were breathing hard, their faces bright red from exertion. Even three against one, they were no match for Adonis' obvious experience. No one would have imagined the odds bothered Adonis one measure. Though he knew not who he was, Minna had no doubt, judging by his physical appearance and his skill, that the mysterious Adonis had been a knight in his previous life. The life he could no longer remember.

"Will you not join us, Wilhem?" Adonis prodded her.

"Humph," Minna snorted. "I have more important affairs requiring my efforts than strutting around like a yard full of cocks trying to impress the hens."

"As I suspected," Adonis teased her.

Minna grimaced again. She did that frequently in his company. Her flippant barbs rolled off his massive shoulders as water off a duck's back. He never rose to her bait like the other males in their company were likely to do.

They were probably all asking themselves what other things required her attention, since she was still standing there, practically gawking at Adonis and the gracefulness of his movements as he warded off the attack of his fellow performers.

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Their band was on its way to Castle Renwar. The messenger sent to hire them had gushed about the extravagance they were to see at this Twelfth Night celebration. And since they were to be very well paid, the troop had packed up immediately to join the merriment that awaited.

They were a family of strangers. None really knew the history of the other occupants of their band. Minna turned her attention back to Adonis. He'd almost completely recovered. A slight limp was still noticeable, but his clothing disguised the scars that covered his body. Their band had come upon him almost a year ago now. He had been on the very edge of death's dark embrace. In truth, Minna had doubted old Gretchen, as talented a healer as she was, could do aught for him.

In her mind's eye, Minna could still see the bloody mess he'd been. He had obviously been thought dead or else whoever had done such to him would have surely finished him. His handsome face had been swollen to thrice its size, to the point that he could not open his eyes. The older performers had debated whether or not they should even waste the time to throw him into their wagon and try to assist him. He seemed too far gone in their estimation.

Gretchen had insisted though. And Minna was glad she had.

The old healer and fortune-teller was the first person in the troop to guess Minna's gender after she'd joined them a year and a half prior. They'd only let the elders in on the secret. Galter, their leader, had concurred with Gretchen on the

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point: by remaining in disguise, Minna would prevent any forwardness on the part of the men in the towns and castles they visited for performances. None of the young men of the troop suspected. At least not that she could discern. They all treated her as an irritating equal, because of her propensity to tease them unmercifully.

Except Adonis.

"Shall you stand there idle and dreaming the day long, Wilhem?" Adonis asked as he stopped before her.

With a jolt, Minna realized the mock battle was over and the other boys had disappeared. She could feel the heat creep into her face. For just a moment, Minna's gaze took in Adonis' handsome features, before she forced herself to look away. He had aptly been given the name of Adonis, since he had no recollection of his real one. No one could accuse him of being vain, though. Sometimes she sensed he felt his appearance was more curse than gift.

The ladies of the castles in which they entertained had no such misgivings. When Adonis put on the persona of the *trouvères*, his voice as deep and lovely as a fresh, clean loch on a hot summer day, the ladies practically swooned. Although most bands like their own had only minstrels, they had soon discovered Adonis' hidden talents. Not least being his ability to describe far-off lands so vividly in his songs. Allowing the guests to imagine themselves in the luxurious tents in the vast deserts or experiencing the heat of battle and the honor of the knights. Minna knew no woman could possibly remain unmoved when his songs turned to *chansons de fins' amors*. Even she wanted to swoon then.

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Most *trouvères* were known to be nobles. So though no one knew for sure, they all had their suspicions Adonis was just such a man.

"Nay, I am not dreaming," she told him shortly. She pulled her hood closer, trying to hide her expression.

"'Tis time we were on our way, then," Adonis told her, but did naught to hide his amusement. Although she was the troop *ioculator*, Minna amused Adonis oftentimes without foolery as her intention. "Just so the passing nobles will not snatch our puny pricks."

He chuckled and turned to head back to the encampment, leaving Minna to follow in his wake. Just the sound of his deep laugh caused shivers to skitter over her body. God forbid he accidentally touched her. A jolt usually accompanied such an occurrence, streaking through her body and settling in her womb. Even though bound, her nipples would tighten and begin to ache. She hated to think of herself as one of those simpering females who took every opportunity to throw themselves at him. She was sick unto death of hearing all the disgustingly unsubtle innuendos and invitations he was given at every turn.

"How many days until we reach the castle?" Minna asked when she caught up to him. The elders had not shared many specifics of their journey this time.

Glancing up, Minna noted the expression on his face. Her steps faltered at the harsh frown she spied there. Had her simple question chased his good humor away?

Adonis shrugged, his broad shoulders lifting the woolen cloak he'd donned. He grabbed his hood and covered the appealing silkiness of his blond hair.

God's wounds, Minna! Desist fool!

Minna must think like a male and banish the ridiculous feminine feelings that kept intruding on her. She no longer wanted to notice every little thing about his handsomeness. She would do well to forget the beauty of his leonine head, the regal slant of his nose, the warmth of his golden eyes, the new fullness of his once gaunt face, the appealing dimple of his chin, or the facial hair that gave him the look of a rogue. The sight of his lips could send her off into a pleasant reverie if she did not resist. The way his beard and moustache framed his supple, defined upper lip, and the hint of fullness in his lower lip, might persuade even the most dedicated man hater to give up her abhorrence for just one taste of his kiss.

Blast! Off she went again. Realizing he had not given her an answer, she tried again. "Castle Renwar? Did the messenger give us a full reckoning of the castle's family?"

"Aye," was all he said before continuing up the path toward their camp, his long stride widening the distance between them.

Was that all he was going to say? That tweaked Minna's temper. She had to skip to catch up to him. "Well—" Minna gasped as she tripped over an unearthed tree root.

Adonis responded instantly, catching her as she went flying toward the hard ground. He pulled her up, holding her steady between strong, capable hands, glancing down at her from his

impressive height. Minna's head barely made it to the middle of his chest.

He frowned.

Minna wanted to ask him what was wrong. Had he remembered something of his past? Did he, perchance, know the family? Or did his frown have something to do with her? Her breath caught in her throat. Did he suspect her deception? Was there something about her questions that would cause his behavior?

"Forgive me," Minna muttered, trying to pull away from Adonis' strong grip. Her heart was suddenly pounding at his nearness.

"There is naught to forgive," Adonis told her. His intent gaze scrutinized her features.

"I ... eh ... think we should return to the camp," Minna suggested before she melted at his feet. Those eyes of his could make any female do so.

To Minna's utter shock, Adonis lifted her, sliding his arms beneath her cloak, and kissed her soundly. *Sweet Christ!* Was she wrong? Did he like males instead of females? Unless...

He knew!

Minna sputtered, eyes narrowing, trying to shove away from him. "How dare you! What do you think you are doing?"

Briefly, Adonis pulled away. "Desist, woman!" he said, and then grinned knowingly. "You are no more a Wilhem than I am the original Adonis."

Minna gasped at his accusation. "I am n—"

"Do not compound your lies, woman," Adonis commanded. "Or I shall take great pleasure in proving it!" After which, he lifted her until she was face-to-face with him.

Sweet Saint Mary! Why did he have to be so devilishly handsome? Minna's breathing sped up to match her pounding heart. Mayhap she should deny it one last time so he *would* prove it. She couldn't deny she was tempted.

"What is your name?" he insisted, and then continued, "Your true name. Not the one you have given to the troop."

What should she do? Fabricate another name? She wanted to trust him. Felt as though she could. But from the time his face returned to normal after his horrid beating, Minna had felt he looked familiar for some reason. As if she knew him from her previous life. A life that had brought her pain and anguish. A life she no longer wanted to remember.

She could supply him her given name. But until she knew his true identity, she would not give him her family name.

"Willamina," she said simply. "You may call me Minna, but only when we are alone."

"Minna," he repeated. The sound of her name in his deep, rich voice had her heart fluttering.

Of a sudden, Minna realized her hands rested upon his broad chest. Despite the coarseness of his clothing, there was no hiding the strength of the muscles abiding beneath. As if she were alone in her pleasure, Minna flexed her fingers. A jolt of pure feeling sent shocks of delight coursing through her body, causing her nipples to tighten, her womb to clench, and her toes to curl.

"Minna," this time her name took on the sound of a protesting groan, before he took her lips in a fierce kiss.

Minna's thoughts scattered. Her arms slid around his strong neck. Although she felt him moving with her, Minna paid no mind to where he was taking her. The wind had died down some, but the eerie sound still whistled through the trees of the forest. Her hood had fallen unnoticed away from her face.

When Minna opened her eyes again, she realized Adonis had removed his cloak and spread it on the unearthed roots next to a nearby tree, giving some clearance above the snow.

In silence, she let him position her with her knees against his waist as he brought her down with him. She really should protest. Minna could feel his hardened manhood beneath her backside, sending a sweet shiver of pleasure and longing through her.

Despite her misgivings, Minna was delighted Adonis was attracted enough to want to bed her. Although she was tempted to give in to her own desire to have him, she knew she dared not.

Minna shuddered as Adonis wrapped her cloak around them, creating a cocoon of warmth. "I will soon warm you, sweet Minna," Adonis told her, mistaking her shudders for chills. Before she could respond, he began kissing her ardently.

Minna's thoughts again took flight. Her desire for him was soon uppermost in her mind. His tongue swept through her mouth, quickly teaching her the method of sensual battle. She felt every touch of his hands on her body. The softness of

every caress. He released her hair from the leather thong holding it securely. Minna's hair had once passed below her waist, but since the outward change of her gender, she only wore it shoulder length.

There was something she had to know. "How long have you known?"

Adonis smiled slowly as he ran a gentle hand over her loosened tendrils of dark brown hair. "I suspected it very soon after I woke," he admitted. "The way you tended to me when you assisted Gretchen." His golden eyes looked directly into hers as he went on. "I soon found myself responding to your touch." He grinned now. "And though I remembered naught of my past, I did not imagine I would be drawn to another male with quite the strength of my attraction to you."

Minna swallowed. The look in his eyes gave her pause. They glowed with the light of his desire for her. "I ... ah..."

Adonis bent to kiss her again. Minna's lids fluttered closed as she let herself enjoy the warmth of his lips against hers. After a long moment of kissing, Adonis pulled away slightly. He caressed her face tenderly as he spoke. "I found myself dreaming of you. I could not resist the urge to watch you when no one else was looking, noticing the feminine slope of your nose, the delightful tip-tilted end." His words were accompanied by a soft kiss to said nose, before he continued, "I noticed the softness of your cheeks, the deep pools of your dark eyes, and this sweet bow of a mouth, which I was tempted to devour at every turn." He cupped her face in his hands and swooped down to capture her mouth, as if he could not resist the temptation any longer.

Minna's mind tried to discourage her, to bring sanity back. But her heart wanted him for her own. A realization she'd tried to suppress came surging forward. Minna was in love with him, and had been for longer than she cared to admit. Possibly from when she had taken care of him, rescuing him from death's grasp.

Minna shivered when Adonis trailed hot kisses from her lips across her cheek. His strong arms pulled her closer in a hug that left her body alive with desire.

"We shouldn't be doing this," his deep voice admitted next to the sensitive whorls of her left ear, causing gooseflesh to rise all over her body.

"What?" Minna pulled away from him to look into his eyes, seeing the desire still burning there.

"If my instincts are correct, then you are a maiden still," he said in a resolute voice. "I have no right to take what should be given to your husband eventually. Besides..."

When he fell silent, Minna encouraged, "Besides, what?"

As if a curtain came down, his face became shuttered. He was hiding something. She sensed it.

"It matters not," he insisted. "I must resolve my past before considering what lies in my future. And though I am sorely tempted, I cannot offer what any young maiden deserves." Adonis caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, staring at her lips with a look she could only describe as longing.

Minna should have known he would be a man of chivalry and honor. For one moment, she wished he'd be more like the rogue he looked to be.

"What if I were to say I do not care about the things other young maidens want?" Minna was shocked at the words that fell from her mouth.

Adonis' expression changed. She had shocked him too. "You know not what you are saying. Or if you do, you do not understand the consequences of what you ask of me."

"I am a woman who has traveled in the company of men for over a year. I could not help but be privy to the bawdy talk about men and women."

"Why are you here, Minna?" Finally, she realized he was asking the question that had probably slipped into his mind frequently. He wanted to know her past. What had brought her to the desperate act of leaving her home and family for the life of a vagabond and wanderer.

"I have never trusted the truth to another person," she admitted. "I know naught about you." Minna scooted backwards on his lap, her cloak falling away from his shoulders and destroying their warm haven. "How can I share such a thing?"

Adonis' grip loosened. "You are right. You know me naught from Adam ... or Adonis, for that matter." He grimaced at the truth of his statement. "I will not force a confidence if you do not trust me to give it."

They sat silently looking at each other.

"My name is Garret Fitz Hugh."

Minna gaped at his revelation. *God's wounds!* She knew that name! He *had* remembered his past!

"You *are* a knight!" she whispered in awe. "Who hurt you?"

"I have my suspicions, but until I have proof, I cannot say."

She knew she had recognized his features. The same features he shared with the man she wanted to forget. Roget Fitz Hugh, heir to the Earl of Aberle. A man whose depravity had sent her fleeing from her home and a betrothal she could not stomach, lest she die from his tender mercies. Now she knew she could not admit to him her true identity, or the fact she knew his kinsman. *But what is their relationship?*

"I am trusting you to keep my confession secret, Minna."

"Of course, Sir Garret," she promised.

He raised a hand. "Please, do not address me so in company, madam."

"As you wish."

Garret looked sharply at her. Had the tone of her voice betrayed her? With a raised blond brow, he asked her, "Are you a lady, Minna?"

Blast! Her slip *had* given her away!

"Certainly not," she insisted, lowering her gaze.

Nonetheless, he looked skeptical. But he let his accusation rest.

He moved to rise, grabbing Minna and assisting her to stand. She was disappointed he had not taken her up on her earlier challenge. Although Minna's frustration was acute, mayhap it was best, for she had the feeling once she gave herself to him, she could not prevent giving the confidence he'd hinted at before. Could it be she *did* want what other maidens craved?

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Minna swallowed a lump in her throat when Garret took the time to pull her hood forward, covering her unbound hair. Obviously, he seemed to care a little about her. Either looking to her comfort or ensuring her identity remained secret.

Garret could not fill the role she longed to give him, though. He was related to a man she despised, so he could never be her husband. She would have to leave the troop as well. Once they finished the performance at Renwar Castle, she would have to find herself a place with a new band.

His expression as he looked down at her made her realize he was tempted to kiss her. If he kissed her again, she might not be able to suppress her desire to submit to him. As if he himself realized the same, he turned abruptly and began the trek back to the camp.

"Garret?" she called out before they came too close to the others.

He stopped, but did not look over his shoulders. "Aye?"

"Do you know the family at Renwar Castle?"

Silence greeted her inquiry. The muscles of his body tensed. He hesitated, but then replied, "Lord and Lady Graven, and their only daughter, Elysonde."

His tone told Minna he wanted no further questions on the subject of this family. The strange inflection in his voice revealed more than words could supply. Garret knew this family, she did not doubt. It was apparent that something about them disturbed him.

Without another word, Garret began walking again. As Minna followed more slowly in his footsteps, she felt her heart ache at the thought of never seeing him again after the

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Twelfth Night celebration at Renwar Castle. Of never feeling those tempting kisses again. It would be pure hell to leave him when the time came. But alas, she had no choice. Before she left him, though, she meant to find out about the connection between him and the Graven family.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Minna's heart pounded in her ears. Not even the cacophony of noise from the Twelfth Night revelers filling Renwar's great hall could drown out the sound.

How could this be happening to her?

After the surveyor of ceremonies made the last announcement, cheers had erupted from the trestle tables.

She thanked God her turn at entertaining had already passed. Had that not been the case, she would certainly have balked.

"Pray, raise your goblets in a toast," the surveyor's voice boomed. "To the betrothal of our own Lady Elysonde to the venerable and honored Lord Roget Fitz Hugh, new Earl of Aberle."

While all the guests did the surveyor's bidding, Minna stood stunned next to the raised area at the back of the hall, which was set aside for the musicians.

How could fate be so cruel as to have thrown her once again into the presence of Roget Fitz Hugh? The knowledge that she was here entertaining for his betrothal sent a shiver of revulsion streaking through her body. Thanks to the masks everyone wore, she knew she could not have recognized him. Nor he her. Thank God in His heaven for that small recompense.

Two people rose to the uproarious applause of the guests. Bile rose in her throat, her gaze riveted to the man dressed in the guise of the good knight, Saint George. Had Roget

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

decided to take part in the festivities by joining the mummers for the fight between the good knight and the evil knight? Who was to take the part of the evil knight?

After the applause hushed and the betrothed couple regained their seats, the surveyor called out again. "To celebrate our dear lady's betrothal, we have a very special offering. Before her betrothed, who, as a lark, has graciously agreed to engage in mock combat at the end of our evening, we will first hear the *trouvère*, who has agreed to be the evil knight. He has written a *chanson de fin' amors* dedicated to Lord Aberle and our lady."

The guests surged, clapping and obviously excited at the thought of this spectacle.

Minna's heart leapt when she turned to watch Garret, dressed as a black knight, sans helmet, make his way between the trestle tables toward the dais. Obviously, Lord Graven had allowed one of his own knights to supply Garret with everything needed for this performance. Minna knew Garret carried no such things around with the troop. He also had a partial mask covering his face, as did most of the guests.

Despite being dressed as a black knight, he made an impressive sight. He wore a black surcoat and mantle. His movements had all the confidence and assurance with which a true knight would hold himself.

His chain mail coif hid his blond hair.

A feeling of unease settled in Minna's belly. She had the strongest suspicion something was not right. Or perhaps it was just her personal experience of Roget Fitz Hugh's

character causing her to feel this way. Would Roget recognize Garret? Why was Garret doing this? Unless, at the end, he planned to reveal himself to his kin?

"I do not like this," someone next to Minna commented.

Minna tore her gaze from Garret's impressive figure to see Tebald beside her. Tebald had many personas within the troop. Not only was he a juggler, he was also a tumbler and mummer. Tebald and all the young men in the troop admired Garret and were in awe of his skill, not only as an entertainer, but also when they performed mock battles for exercise and fun.

"Why do you say such?" Minna couldn't prevent the tremor in her voice. She felt the same, but she wanted to know why Tebald might feel uneasy as well.

"When we first arrived here, Adonis instructed me to find out what I could about the celebration. Who the high ranking guests were likely to be." Tebald craned his neck to get a glimpse of Garret, who had made his way to the front of the great hall. "When I told him about the betrothal rumors, he seemed to change. As if rage was barely beneath the surface of his feelings. I was too curious not to follow him."

"Follow him where?" Had he gone to see Roget personally? Minna wanted to know everything.

"He went to speak to Galter." Tebald had to raise his voice because of the cheers greeting Garret's arrival. "He asked for Galter to make arrangements for this very thing."

"I wonder why he's doing this?" Minna spoke more to herself than to Tebald.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

When the pure, deep sound of Garret's unaccompanied voice rose, she could no longer keep her attention from him. A reverent hush fell over the great hall. Minna listened with her heart in her throat as his story unfolded. Her mind's eye could see clearly the young knight and his true love. A young woman of virtue, who returned her knight's feelings of love and devotion. Something unknown to Minna was creeping around her heart, causing a tightness she was beginning to recognize as jealousy. Knowing Garret as she had come to know him, she realized quickly that he was singing about himself.

Minna's gaze darted to the figure of Lady Elysonde. Her hand moved to her throat. She must be the lady Garret sang of, mustn't she? Garret went on to extol his vision's sweetness and beauty. Minna could not miss the sighs coming from the females in the audience. As always, he was capturing the heart of every female within hearing distance of his strong, deep voice. Hers included.

Then his song told of a secret bond. A troth pledged between the young knight and his sweetheart. With his continued song, pages and servants began to scatter and scurry back with hand-held fans for some of the female guests. One insipid young girl swooned.

Minna grimaced. Her heart fluttered as Garret's tale, which had first been sweet, turned dark. Then entered the evil character. One who coveted the young knight's accomplishments and his sweetheart. Her gaze immediately turned to Roget Fitz Hugh. Below his mask, his lips turned

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

down, and she had no doubt that beneath his mask a dark scowl distorted his features.

Oh, sweet Christ! No one had to tell her Roget was the man Garret sang of. Garret was courting death doing such a thing here. In her heart, Minna realized Roget had probably been responsible for Garret's injuries. She had intimate knowledge of the extent Roget would go to get what he wanted.

And death would only be a trifle to him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

The atmosphere in the hall changed, as did the tone of Garret's song. It was as if the whole audience was acutely attuned to Garret's feelings: love, loss, pain, and betrayal. It no longer mattered that the hall was decorated with lush and vibrantly colored tapestries and banners. Nor did it matter that courses fit for kings had come and gone. Naught seemed significant but the anger and rage emanating from the man whose strong voice reverberated within Minna's chest—as well as everyone else's, she was sure.

When Garret began to sing of his ultimate betrayal, Minna saw Roget's hand move to the hilt of his sword. She watched as Lady Elysonde leaned and whispered something into Roget's ear.

Roget held his hand for silence. "Halt you!"

Garret sang on for several verses, ignoring Roget.

Roget bolted to his feet as the last of Garret's song trailed off. "How dare you, sirrah, dedicate such a vile tale to my betrothed and myself!"

A murmur of disquiet rippled through the audience. Were they angry at Garret or Roget?

"I am aggrieved that my humble story has given such offense, Lord Aberle. That was not my intention." Garret bowed, not to Roget, but to Lord and Lady Graven.

The stiffness of Roget's body testified that he had indeed taken grave offense to Garret's song.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

"Lord Roget, I'm sure this minstrel had no intention of disrupting our celebration so," Lord Graven told Roget firmly. "Let us be about continuing our merriment. You can give him his comeuppance in the mock battle when Saint George defeats the evil knight." As soon as Lord Graven's voice died down, he signaled with his hand. The musicians began to play once more, and the next course began.

The contest plays were to take place after the very last course. Since she was no longer needed for the moment, Minna meant to find Garret and ask him what he thought he was doing. Turning as soon as Garret left the hall, Minna slipped out of the suddenly sweltering atmosphere. Just by his stride, she could tell Garret was angry.

There were to be too many courses to count during this special celebration, so it was likely Garret would not have to return until well after midnight. Minna was grateful she would not have to perform again, although she would have to make an appearance every now and again.

She tried not to lose track of him as he made his way through the throng of servants and serfs, all bundled in their cloaks, as they returned from wassailing one of the fruit trees in the nearby forest, a ritual done in hopes of encouraging another bountiful harvest.

Garret was moving so fast, she had to skip every now and again to try and catch up with him. By the time he disappeared into one of the tents erected in the outer bailey for the lower-status guests and performers, Minna had almost reached him.

"Garret?" she called right outside of the tent flap. Before she could even reach for the opening, Garret's hand shot out, grabbing her arm and pulling her inside.

By the look on his face, she could tell he was fuming. "Do not call me that, Minna! Not here."

"I'm sorry," she said with a gasp. His grip was painful, causing her to bite her lip.

Garret must have realized what he was doing, because he wrenched his hand from her forearm.

Minna rubbed her arm, trying to ease the sting.

Garret grimaced. "My pardon, Minna," he told her as he turned away, releasing the clasp on his mantle. The fine black fabric whirled around him as he threw it onto his pallet. "I could not tolerate the hall any longer."

Minna had the distinct impression he was trying to steer their conversation to safe waters. Minna would have none of it. "What did you think you were doing? Are you hoping to have your life ended this eve, Sir Garret?" Minna wondered if she could make much of an impression, since she was still dressed in her fool's costume.

"It is time I move on with my life. And until I say what I must, I cannot do such." He removed his surcoat. What was he doing? If he disrobed, someone would have to help him get ready again.

"What are you doing?" she asked, watching as he removed his coif and mask.

"I am feeling stifled." Garret pulled off his hauberk, exposing the padding of his arming jacket. Obviously, Garret

was not just pretending to be dressed as a knight. Did he mean to really battle Roget?

"If you harm Lord Aberle, they will kill you, sir."

"I do not know what my plans were now."

What did he mean? "Pray tell me, what is your relationship to Roget Fitz Hugh?"

When Garret stood before her in only his leather greaves, he looked at her. He contemplated her query for a moment. With a twisted smile, he told her, "He was once my brother."

Minna's eyes went round. She sputtered and then coughed. "Your brother..."

"Aye," he told her, his voice filled with the animosity he felt toward his kinsman.

"He's the one who hurt you?"

Minna really didn't need his concurrence to know the truth of what she asked of him.

"Aye, though I have no proof. Only *he* had something to gain from having me killed. I am but a second son. He was my father's heir, though he has ever been resentful of my father's favor toward me. Not that I ever lauded it over him. In truth, I felt sorry our sire showed such difference in favor betwixt the two of us." Garret motioned Minna to a nearby chair, after which he turned away and pulled a chair from next to his pallet.

"Would he truly want you dead because of such a thing?" Minna knew some sibling rivalries led to hatred and death, but the possibility that this fate could befall Garret baffled her. Everyone loved him. Women fawned over him, and men wanted to be him.

"He always disliked me, but when he returned home empty-handed after setting out to find a bride, his dislike turned to hatred. I know not why."

Minna swallowed hard. *Oh, sweet Christ!*

"I mistakenly took him into my confidence about a maiden I desired to make my wife." Garret ran his fingers through his hair, then raked them down his face.

"Lady Elysonde?"

Garret jerked his face from his hands and stared at her. "How did you know?"

"Your song left me with no doubt. And Roget was the evil character who stole her from you?"

"Christ's wounds, woman! How do you know this?"

"Though you may doubt it, Sir Garret, I know you now."

They both turned their heads when they heard a faint sound without the tent. Garret put a finger to his lips, warning her to be quiet.

Then a feminine voice called out, "Garret?"

Garret and Minna stared at each other before Garret rose and moved to the tent opening. Minna's heart clenched. This woman was the one who owned Garret's heart. The star of his lover's lament. What did she want? She was the betrothed of his brother now. She would surely be the death of him if Roget found out about this rendezvous. Had Roget not stolen her from Garret, Garret would have been a powerful lord after the death of the lady's father. Not that Minna felt Garret needed such a thing to make his way in the world. But all the great families sought after great alliances. Either way, the alliance between these two families would be a welcome one.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Garret pulled aside the tent flap, not bothering to conceal his massively built body from the visitor on the other side. A stunned silence ensued. "I am not dressed for company, my lady," he told the woman Minna now knew as his lost love.

"I would have a word, if you would, Sir Garret," Lady Elysonde begged sweetly. Then, without waiting for an invitation, she glided into the interior of the tent like a queen into a throne room.

She threw Minna a dismissing glance before she turned to face Garret. Her expression quickly returned to her previous sweet, serene countenance.

When Minna made no move to leave, Lady Elysonde frowned. "Would you ask this fool to leave us, Garret? What I have to say is for your ears alone."

Minna didn't like the course this visit was taking. If Roget had followed Elysonde, then he might call Garret out.

Garret looked between Minna and Elysonde. His expression told Minna he was not sure what he might expect from Elysonde, nor did he seem to like the way she spoke about Minna.

"Leave us, Wilhem," Garret instructed her. "Wait without the tent until my lady has finished her words to me." Minna wondered if he did not trust himself alone with Elysonde. If the words of his song were true, then he had loved her enough to give his life for her.

"As you wish, sir." Minna rose and inclined her head, offering a flourished bow to their visitor before backing out of the tent.

Garret released the flap to let it fall back into place, leaving Minna staring with frustration at it.

Although she knew she should not do so, Minna turned, moving to stand with her back to the flap, her ears trained on the voices within.

"Why have you come, Elysonde?" Garret demanded.

"I thought you were dead," Elysonde replied. Did she expect Garret to believe that, had that not been the case, she would have remained true to him?

"As you can see, I am not, but for no other reason than my fellow entertainers took care of me after the injuries I suffered."

Minna was surprised Garret did not level his accusation toward his brother to the woman.

"I knew naught of this," Elysonde insisted. Minna's intuition told her the woman lied. Or was it just her wish to discredit Elysonde's true motivations that made her suspect such things? "My poor Garret," the woman crooned. "I had to excuse myself to go to the privy, so I might follow to find out if it was truly you."

Silence screamed from the interior, and Minna was tempted to dart back inside. To demand that Elysonde leave Garret alone. Had she not been the cause of enough pain to him? After all, she'd been responsible for his near death.

"I'm afraid, madam, there is naught else for us to discuss. You are Roget's betrothed now, and I would ask you to remember that I am still his brother."

"I do not love Roget," Elysonde insisted. "I marry him only for the alliance. You must believe me, Garret."

"Aye, that I do believe, madam," Garret's voice sounded dismissive. "It matters not to you that it was to *me* you gave your maidenhead and your pledge to be my wife."

"Oh, sir, you do me a disservice. I do remember, but when you went missing, my father insisted I consider Lord Roget's suit."

Were her words true? And would they melt Garret's anger toward her, make him want to fight for her?

"Now that you know I am alive again, do you plan to renounce this betrothal?"

"I ... eh..." the woman stuttered.

Minna heard more silence. A deafening one. "Again, madam, I repeat: for what purpose have you come here?"

"Oh, Garret, there is no reason we cannot remain ... close," she hesitated and then continued, "even though I am to marry your brother."

Sweet Christ! She wanted Garret to continue their intimate relations and cuckold his brother. The female was diabolical. Minna was angry she would do such to the man who had obviously loved her so dearly. The ungrateful wretch did not deserve a man of Garret's honor and sensibilities.

"So you would offer yourself to me despite being betrothed to my brother, Elysonde?" His tone made Minna understand the depths of his revulsion.

"Do not carry on so, Garret. You know marriage has little to do with love."

"Mayhap not for you, but it was one thing I hoped for myself. One thing I had hoped I had found in you." Minna heard rustling within the tent interior.

A Torrid Celebration!
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"But I do love you, Garret!" Elysonde cried.

"Do not presume to take my consent for granted, my lady," Garret responded harshly. "Cover yourself, if you please."

"I do not understand," Elysonde pleaded. "Do you not desire me anymore, Garret?"

"That you do not understand makes it clear to me: you know me not, madam. I have gone to hell and back at the hands of your betrothed and you, for the sake of your alliance. I realize now you never loved me, and thankfully, I also realize that I no longer love you."

"You beast!" Elysonde accused. "Do not think you will not pay for this insult, Garret."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

Minna gasped when Elysonde rushed out of Garret's tent, and seeing her, slapped her across the face. "Get out of my way, you idiot!"

"Elysonde!" Garret roared from within the tent interior. His booming voice spurred Elysonde on. She broke into a run, leaving Minna and Garret behind her.

Garret grabbed Minna's arm and pulled her into the tent. He pulled her fool's cap from her head. "Forgive me, Minna. I did not mean for her to take her anger out on you." When he lifted her chin, turning her head this way and that so he could inspect the damage, he bent to give her a kiss.

Minna's eyes fluttered closed at the sweet feel of his lips upon hers. So he did not love Elysonde any longer. "Garret," she breathed. "I have a confession."

She almost lost her train of thought when his arms slid around her, gathering her into a warm embrace. "Aye, and what might that be, my Minna?"

Had he just called her his Minna? She gulped. "I ... eh..."

Garret smiled at her reaction. "Come, sweeting." He then swung Minna into his arms and carried her over to his pallet. After throwing aside his mantle and placing her gently on his bed, he followed her down.

"What are you doing?" she whispered uncertainly.

"I want to hold you," he informed her. "And kiss you breathless."

"You do?"

When they lay face to face, Garret looked at her, his hand stroking where Elysonde had slapped her. "I will never let anyone hurt you again, Minna."

"Truly?"

"Aye, sweeting," he assured her. "When I saw her hit you, I wanted to kill her. I have never felt so aggrieved by aught except for the death of my fellow soldiers during a battle."

"I love you, Garret," she blurted out against her will.

With wonder, Minna watched Garret's beautiful smile appear again. But this time, it was accompanied by the smoldering look of desire. "Aye, my love, I suspected as much," he told her before pulling her into his arms for a fierce, slanting kiss.

Soon, he did have her breathless as he'd predicted. His kisses trailed a scorching path over her face. His hands were busy divesting her of her clothing. "Garret..." she gasped.

He gave her another soul-stirring kiss before pulling a hair's breadth away from her. "Aye?"

"Do you not think to take Elysonde's threat seriously?"

"She would be a fool if she told Roget she came here to meet with me, all alone," Garret assured her, even as he continued to disrobe her. "She would be blessed to get away with her life."

When he removed the cloth binding her breasts, Garret made a disapproving noise. "How could you abuse these beauties, love?"

Minna groaned as he began kneading and massaging her breasts, as if trying to make up for her tortuous treatment during her pretense. It had not been easy, it was true. For

Minna was not poorly endowed, and with his extra stimulation, her flesh swelled and her nipples tightened.

Now it was Garret's turn to groan. Minna gasped when Garret leaned down to suck her right nipple into his mouth. The warmth thrilled her, sending streaks of desire careening through her body, causing her sex to pulse in response. Moisture pooled between her thighs.

When they were both naked, Garret pulled her to him. "I love you, Minna," he admitted. Running his hands through her now unbound hair, he sealed his declaration with a kiss that made her realize he truly meant his words.

"You do?"

"Aye, our encounter in the forest had me searching my soul." Garret set about caressing her body again, but continued, "I thought I loved Elysonde, but after my overwhelming response to you during our time together, I realized it was not true love I felt for her."

"It was not?" Minna asked breathlessly. She was beginning to pant as Garret caressed from her breasts to her belly, then let his hand drop between her thighs.

"Nay, it was just the rutting lust of a young buck. I had convinced myself I loved her because she offered herself and I took what she offered. She does not make me laugh, nor do I enjoy discussions with her as I do with you. You are an intelligent, capable woman whom any man would be proud to call his wife."

His wife? Minna was having a hard time concentrating on his confession or its meaning, because his strong lean fingers were delving between the folds of her sex. When he felt her

wetness, he groaned aloud. "Oh, sweet girl, you are so slick with desire for me."

"Garret!" she cried out as a jolt shot through her when he dipped one lone finger into her sheath, her body stretching to accommodate him. Her body warred with her heart and mind. With all her will, she tried to make herself relax.

"I am no longer a virgin!" Minna was shocked when she shouted the thing that had been tearing her apart from the time she escaped her home.

Garret shook his head as if not sure he'd heard her clearly. "What?" Minna did want to cry when his gentle hands left her body.

"I can not be untruthful with you at a time like this, Garret." Minna looked up into his face as he leaned over her with an expression of surprise. She had been afraid to see revulsion in his golden eyes, but she saw none as he gazed back into her own dark brown ones.

"Who?" was all he asked.

Minna closed her eyes now. "Roget Fitz Hugh, your brother."

"What!" he practically shouted, making Minna cringe as the reverberations of his voice pounded in her chest.

Her heart tripped faster.

To Minna's surprise, Garret pulled her closer to him, with his face next to hers. Minna wanted to cry at his tone. "Tell me."

"I am Willamina de Coucey."

"Ah..." he said softly. "You were the one Roget set out to woo."

Minna nodded her head. "Aye," she admitted. "When he arrived at my family's home to make my acquaintance and pledge his troth, I must admit I was blinded to his true personality. I was flattered at his attention and thought myself in love with him. He flirted with me, and innocent that I was, I thought he and his intentions were honorable."

"What happened?" Although his voice was low, Minna could hear anger coming through his tone.

"I woke one night and called to my maid, but she did not respond." Minna shivered at the thought of that hellish night, as vivid in her mind as if it had happened only an eve prior. "Since she was not prone to such a thing, I grabbed my chamber robe and went to search for her. When I moved toward the stairs, I heard noise coming from down the way." Minna felt Garret's fingers flex lightly into her back. It was almost as if he knew what was coming next. "I stopped at Sir Roget's door, because the sounds were coming from inside. I could not stop myself from entering. There he was with my maid, Maude. God above! He had her trussed up and naked. The sounds I heard were her cries of pain; she looked as if he had tortured her. I shouted at him to stop..." Her words trailed off.

Minna choked on a sob, shaking her head. "He looked up in surprise; then, to my horror, he threw Maude off his bed and lunged at me. He must have realized I would never consent to marrying him after what I had witnessed. Mayhap he thought to force my hand by taking me. He threw me on the bed, keeping his hand on my mouth so I could not call for help, shoved up my robe and forced my legs apart..." She

wanted to tell him about the excuse Roget used to cause her father's doubt. That he was drunk and took her for a servant when she had gone into his room, alone, in her nightclothes. She had been humiliated, and her father still expected her to marry the hideous beast. That was one thing Minna vowed she would not do.

"Enough," Garret's voice was low and menacing. "He will not live another day."

When Garret moved to rise, Minna panicked. "Where are you going?"

"I go to challenge him," Garret's frown was frightening, and he tried to disengage her arms from around him.

"No! You cannot! It will not be he who dies this day, but you! He is a murderer, Garret. My maid disappeared. I am sure he killed her so she could not bear witness for me against him."

To her surprise, Garret did not seem shocked at her words. "After what he arranged for me, I do not doubt the validity of your words, my love. But I am sick unto death of what he has done to you, your maid, me, and any number of people on this earth. He is the new earl already. I would not doubt that he had our father killed to get his title and inheritance the sooner."

"Please, Garret, do not leave me now." Minna was desperate to keep him away from his murderous brother. She would woo him, and then she would convince him to leave with her. Minna slid her arms around his bare torso. "I love you. Take me."

Garret's eyes narrowed as he looked down into her pleading face. "Woman, you try to divert me from my purpose," he accused her.

Minna began kissing the warm, enticing skin of his chest. When her tongue peeked out to lave his nipple, Garret's hips surged against her, letting Minna feel his quickly hardening member.

"Damn you, love." His curse was accompanied by a nip to her shoulder.

"Oh, please, my lord, I am yours."

It was as if he could no longer take her tempting him. Garret began kissing her in earnest, trailing his lips along her body. "I want to give you so much, my sweet," he told her in a voice harsh with desire. "I cannot hold back now."

After quickly making sure she was still wet, Garret moved over her. Just the sight of his massively built body had Minna undulating beneath him. She wanted him to fill the void within the core of her body. Instinctively, she knew he would never hurt her. He would love her as she longed to be loved.

Garret settled into the V of her thighs. The head of his member touched the entrance of her sheath, causing Minna's womb to clench.

"Ah, my love, you are so tight," he muttered with an agonized groan. "Forgive me, sweet." And Minna cried out as he sank into her.

Instead of the rutting she had been expecting after what she had endured at the hands of his brother, Garret paused a moment, giving her body time to adjust to his sensual invasion. Little by little he pushed forward, until his sword

was completely encased in her sheath. The muscles of his body were rigid; moisture created a sheen on his skin. It was as if Minna's body demanded its due, instinctively thrusting upward, when Garret began to pull out of her.

"No!" she cried, bereft at the emptiness his retreat caused her.

Garret thrust forward quickly, causing a gasp of delight from Minna.

"Oh, Minna, love, I have longed for this," Garret whispered next to her left ear, before trailing his kisses along her cheek to finally capture her mouth.

Minna felt she was submitting herself to Garret, mind and soul along with her body. She slid her arms around his neck to hold him close. This was the man who had haunted her fantasies for almost a year, and he was her's—at last.

In response to Garret's lovemaking, agonizing pressure was building within Minna. She tore her mouth from his kiss to cry out, "I am yours, my love!" Of a sudden, a bright light sparked behind her closed eyelids, and a sweet explosion caused her body and womb to clench deliciously. "Ah ... ah..."

"Aye, Minna, you are mine, love!" he called out, his thrusts getting deeper and faster.

Minna delighted in the strength of his body pounding into her own. She arched wildly beneath him, meeting him thrust for thrust. Her body gave her no rest as she shot to the pinnacle once again and a second, more savagely sweet release consumed her, this time accompanied by Garret's roar as he spilled his seed into her welcoming womb.

The two of them sagged onto Garret's pallet, gasping for air, their bodies slick and satiated. They kissed softly, enjoying the afterglow of their intimate union.

"Will you leave with me, Garret?" she whispered, caressing the slightly damp tendrils of his silky blond hair with her left hand.

"When I found out Roget was here, I wanted to exact my vengeance for all he inflicted on me," he told her. "But I realized that to dwell in the past was to forsake my future. Hatred would only suck my heart and soul from me." He leaned down, placing a soft kiss on her trembling lips, as she gazed at him with her own heart in her eyes. "And I have found I have need of my heart elsewhere."

"Oh, Garret," Minna cried, throwing her arms around his neck in joy.

"Garret! Release her!" someone roared near them.

Minna gasped and released Garret. He moved quickly, as if his senses were attuned to the danger, reaching for something.

Christ's wounds! The only weapon he had available was a dull training sword.

Roget stood in full armor with his sword pointed toward Garret's chest. "You shall not cuckold me, you swine!"

"What say you, brother," Garret said with a harsh tone. "Had you taken the time to look, you would realize I do not have your betrothed in my bed."

Roget looked surprised and shot his glance to Minna. Then he looked stunned. "Lady Willamina?"

Garret took advantage of his brother's shock and smashed the hilt of his practice sword on his brother's hand.

"Ow! You bastard!" Roget shouted, his sword falling from his bruised and—as she realized now—unprotected hand.

Swiftly, Garret lunged and grabbed his brother's fallen weapon, pointing both swords toward Roget. "Desist! Lest I take my due and kill you for what you have done to my betrothed and myself," Garret said in a tone that warned Roget he meant his words.

"Garret?" Minna couldn't help her protest. Garret would surely die if he killed his brother.

Roget fell to his knees, obviously knowing he was no match for Garret's skill. "Do not kill me, I pray, Garret."

Minna wished she could see Garret's face. But at the moment, all she had was a view of his naked back.

"I will tell you this once, Roget. I do not covet your soon-to-be wife, nor do I covet your title, nor your new status. Leave me and mine in peace, and you shall never hear from me again." Garret motioned with the tip of one sword for Roget to stand. Cautiously, he did so, staring at the tip of Garret's sword all the while. "I would know one thing."

"Aye?" Roget asked warily.

"Did you murder our father? Remember, I will find out if you do not speak true."

Bitterly, it seemed, Roget shook his head. "No Garret, our father died of a broken heart. It was ever you he loved. I did not realize the true depths of his feelings for you until you were gone. Then it was too late."

Had Roget ever regretted what he had done to his brother and father? Now he possessed all he had schemed and plotted for. Sometimes there was no justice in the world.

"Get you from my sight before I change my good intentions." Garret's voice clearly revealed his feelings of anger and betrayal. "I suggest you find yourself another evil knight, for I will be gone from here as soon as I am dressed." Roget turned quickly to leave. "I ask that you forget I am kin and never bother to darken my door—ever."

Without replying, Roget walked out of the tent.

Garret stood tall, still holding the two swords, staring at the tent entrance.

Minna scrambled off the pallet. Garret looked over his shoulder at her. "My love, you do not know what strength of will it took for me to let him live."

Minna gave a shaky laugh and hurried over to slide her arms around his waist, kissing his back and resting her head against him. "I do know, my lord. And I thank you for it."

Garret turned in Minna's arms to return her embrace, but he did not release the swords. "I suggest we gather our things, so I may spirit you away from here. Now that I have my sword arm back, I suggest I find a place to offer my services."

"Would you be of a mind to pledge fealty to my father?"

Garret looked down at her. "Your father?"

"I know you love me, Garret." Minna gave him an indulgent smile. "But are you so blinded by your love that you do not remember I am an heiress in my own right?"

Garret actually looked like he was blushing. "But I thought..."

"That I never wanted to go home?"

"Well, aye, I did."

"I did not want to go home because I did not want to be forced to marry Roget. Since I no longer have that worry, there is naught keeping me away."

Garret leaned down to kiss her. "As you wish, love."

After a sweet interlude, Minna asked him, "Shall we marry in secret before we return?"

"It would be my pleasure, Minna," Garret assured her.

"Now hurry, so we may be away to our new life."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

NOCTURNAL OFFERING

by

Monica M. Martin

Prologue

Château Poitier, France

October 31, 1201 A.D.

Rhiannon struggled for air. She dragged in labored breaths, fighting the inevitable moment, which now approached upon swift wings. Through the haze, she saw tears well in his large black eyes. They were pools of unfathomable sorrow as they moved over her face. Without a doubt, she knew his eyes were capturing impressions he'd relive for years, even centuries to come. Silent red streams spilled down his ashen cheeks. His pale fingers swiped at them, and he muttered indistinctly before turning away. Charles was usually so calm and composed, she'd never witnessed him in such a state.

She watched him pace back and forth. His footfalls pounded urgently against the timber floor. She sighed wistfully, aware of the ache in her heart. He looked just as dashing in his sable and crimson surcoat as he had the day she'd met him forty-three years ago. His long black curls had lost none of their richness and luster, while her red locks had

faded to white. Mortality had its price, and she was about to pay hers.

Sir Robert and Lady Grace knew it was time; they'd said their goodbyes and then departed the room, giving Rhiannon and Charles these precious moments of privacy.

Mustering strength, Rhiannon pulled herself up and rested against the heaped pillows. She welcomed the numbness that followed after the stabbing pain. She drew several deep breaths, regaining her composure. "I'm not able to struggle through another day, my darling Charles. I'll pass on before you awaken."

"No!" He turned to face her. "Don't say that!" He smashed his palm against the stone wall. "Don't!" He let out a wrenching sob.

"Charles, I—"

"I *can't* go on without you!"

"Charles." She opened her arms and reached out to him.

"Please..."

He rushed to her side, knelt, and took her hands. His gaze filled with longing as it searched her face. "Death is inevitable for all mortals, but I've become accustomed to your presence, dear heart. For the first time in my existence, I feel utterly helpless. Forgive my weakness."

I'd not have caused him such pain if I'd been stronger. She gently squeezed his hand.

"'Tis challenging to stand by and watch you die. I've loved you so long. 'Tis just too much to bear." His tears fell unchecked. "All I want to do is save you ... make you like me."

"Tis too late for that now." Rhiannon stroked his tear-stained cheeks, blood smearing her unsteady fingers. "I-I recognize how devastating this is for you. I do."

"I sound pathetic." Charles laughed harshly. "Right now I am pathetic."

"No. You are not. You're a man in touch with his emotions. 'Tis why I've come to love you so deeply." She waited for the current wave of pain to subside before she continued. "You are true. Never change your beautiful self. Not for anyone."

He eased himself into the bed beside her and encircled her in his arms. "My beloved angel. My only love." He kissed her forehead.

He was a giant of a man; she always felt protected in his embrace. She melted into his warmth. Here, she was safe. Here, she was home. *Love conquers even the strongest of men. I loathe what I'm doing to you.*

He stroked her hair and placed his lips to her forehead. "We've an extraordinary marriage," he whispered, his breath cool against her skin.

"Indeed." She smiled as memories flooded her mind.

"And now you're leaving me."

"I-I am sorry. I..." The words caught in her throat. She was finding it difficult to keep her eyes open.

"You must fight it, my love."

She nodded. "Yes ... a little longer."

"You've spoiled me for other women. My existence will be bland without you to flavor it." His words quivered along with his large frame.

"You existed without me for over two hundred years, in fact. Time will heal your hurt, my brave knight. You'll find a new love."

"I will not. You're my soul mate." He sighed.

"And you're mine." She shivered, the chill permeating her gown. He pulled the blanket up around her shoulders and held her close.

"I knew you were the one the moment your father presented you to me. Arranged marriage or not, you're the only one for me."

She smiled. "I couldn't understand why barons vied for your allegiance. When Father told me ... I fought him, even tried to run off to the nunnery. But the night I met you, I was lost to you."

"Hmm ... I smelled your apprehension, although you hid it well, it was not enough to deceive an immortal. The moment you melted, I felt that, too."

"I remember the stories—which, I imagined, were fabricated: The night warrior moves with stealth in the dead of night, vanquishes without sound, and leaves no trace. Father imagined that almighty God favored you, and he would somehow be blessed by our union."

"Your father was a rather ambitious man. The truth would have boiled his gut."

"Hmm ... Men know your worth."

"You're the only one I've ever desired to garner appreciation from." He stroked her cheek.

"Sir Knight, the way you look into me causes me to blush. After all these years, I fear I'm still in awe of you."

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"There's no fairer, or more accommodating maiden in all the land." He smiled for the first time that evening. "We are blessed, you and I. Many crave the love we share."

"Indeed they do. I should not have refused immortality all those years ago."

"You were afraid, and rightly so. Immortality is somewhat daunting..."

She rubbed her aching throat. "Age has sapped my youth and my strength."

"Don't go..." Charles whispered. He drew back and searched her eyes.

"I don't want to leave..." She paused to take a breath. "'Tis in one's nature to be concerned with what one cannot have. If I could relive my youth, I'd choose immortality without a second's thought. But 'tis too late now." She struggled to drag air into her lungs. The chill had seeped right through to her bones, numbing her completely.

"If there's a way, another life, promise you'll come back to me. No matter what!" Charles exclaimed.

"I ... I'll come back to you..."

He shook her. "Promise you'll be my eternal bride."

She nodded at his words, too tired to speak.

"Say it!"

"I ... I promise to be yours forever. Upon Beltane, I will offer myself up to the darkness, to you, my only love."

He held her tightly. "I'll await you, milady. There'll be no other."

"You must go on. You must."

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"When you return to me I will. Then I'll remember this date with joy: the rebirth of my twin-soul. Come back to me; make it right." His cheek pressed to hers, and they rocked together. "*I love you! I love you! I love you...*"

Darkness enveloped her...

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 1

England, 2005

It was Friday at last. Nadia's day began with a nutritious breakfast of rolled oats, fruit, and orange juice, a four-mile bicycle ride, and liters of water. A fitness fanatic, she simply loved the adrenaline rush in the morning. It was a natural high, and she was a natural kind of girl. Nothing like a good workout to ease frustration and get those creative juices flowing.

Nadia was pleased with her literary success—she had three international bestsellers under her belt, and a potential fourth was about to land on her editor's desk. Furthermore, she still had over two months before the year ended. Her muse had been a loyal friend indeed. On the other hand, Rose, her best friend and publicist, had been nagging her to slow down and add some romance to her life.

Rose, a sex-crazed Spaniard who was hot-blooded to boot, considered constant male companionship necessary for self-esteem and stress relief. For Rose, stress relief was a good shag. The type of men she attracted fell at her feet in worship. The latest, Bruce Williams, was the personal assistant to recluse Charles Poitier, a nightclub entrepreneur and heir to the Poitier fortune.

Poitier's upmarket clubs were for the out-of-the-ordinary, discerning individual. According to gossip columns, his tastes ran towards the rather exotic. Rose didn't agree with most of the gossip about the enigmatic Frenchman. Apparently, he

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was tall, dark, and handsome—just the way Nadia liked her men. No one had managed to snap a shot of Poitier, though.

Rose vouched for his utterly gorgeous looks—not that this was any assurance, as Rose's tastes differed wildly from Nadia's. Much to her dismay, Nadia knew Rose had gotten it into her head to play matchmaker again. Nadia was a simple girl; she couldn't imagine having anything in common with a well-heeled Frenchman, especially one rumored to engage in kinky edge play.

Nadia just didn't have time for romance right now. It interrupted her creative flow. She'd grown tired of Rose setting her up with the too-hot-for-you guys, the-too-sexy-for-words guys, and worst of all, the in-your-wildest-dreams guys, none of whom suited her in the slightest. Not one reached second base—not that she was a prude or some kind of high-maintenance bitch. But equality and simplicity were high on her agenda; she really didn't need help choosing a man. She simply wasn't interested in others' ideals. A pity nymphomaniac Rose couldn't understand this.

Nadia had known her ideal since she was a giggling teenager. There was more to her than a throbbing pussy, as her ex-husband had discovered. In the long term, she wasn't about to settle for less than her ideal. Her marriage to Simon had ended in divorce two years after it began. Admittedly, this had left Nadia a little shell-shocked and in need of therapy. Rose was right to say one had to date to weed out the defective men. Simon had been all wrong for her, right down to his blonde tips and calculating blue-green eyes.

Nadia had grown a lot in the past four years. She was in no hurry to settle down. Heck, she was only twenty-six years old; her uterus wasn't about to dry up anytime soon. She was fine just the way she was.

Nadia brought herself back to the present, dismounted, and pushed her chrome mountain bike up to the gate. She lived in a white, turn-of-the-century two-bedroom cottage with a red tiled roof, and like most quaint English houses, hers had a white picket fence. The garage matched the house perfectly as well. She resided on the outskirts of Staines. It wasn't the best neighborhood, but she was happy here. Her neighbors were nice people who generally kept out of her business. What more could she ask for?

Opening the gate, she wheeled her bike through. After squeezing past her red, seventies vintage Volkswagen, which she'd aptly named Ladybug, she parked her bike in the stand at the rear. Next, she secured the garage, then made her way back down the cobblestone path to her letterbox. Her eyes moved over the fence. She noticed several palings had come loose again, and the lawn needed mowing.

Nadia sighed.

Maybe I do need a man around. I'm not good at this home-handyman stuff. She laughed at her thoughts.

No, I don't need a man. I am a self-possessed, balanced human being, and I don't need anyone to validate me as a person. I am complete. Neediness is highly unattractive. Should I feel the desire to have a man in my life, he'll complement me, walk beside me through thick and thin. He'll

respect me for who I am and treat me as his equal; there'll be none of this take, take, take. There. Much better.

Maybe Rose was right when she said I was sexually frustrated. Maybe I could do with a decent lay. Gosh, thinking on it ... it's been a while. So why don't I just take her advice and get a shag? She'd stop matchmaking if I acquired one on my own.

She laughed aloud. "That woman's getting to me," she muttered.

Nadia couldn't help smiling as she dug through her letterbox. She collected several nondescript envelopes and one elaborate, rose-colored number, on which her name was superbly penned in fine gold letters. She envied such a hand. Hers was a disaster. She thanked God for modern technology, as she didn't have to rely on her penmanship.

Letting herself in, she kicked off her exercise shoes to avoid marring the newly-buffed timber floor, which gleamed back at her in warm reddish-brown tones.

A bundle of black-and-white fur meowed and wove itself through her legs. She almost tripped. "Muffieeee." She bent and scratched her disgruntled cat behind the ear. "Did you miss mommy?"

"Meowwww." The cat looked up at her through displeased gold eyes.

Muffie was a gift from the neighbor to her left, a thank you for caring for Muffie's mother when she'd decided to give birth to her kittens in Nadia's laundry two years before.

"Meeeeeoowwwwww." Muffie started to paw Nadia's leggings.

"Come on then, I'll feed you."

Nadia made her way down the hall and into the kitchen, Muffie yowling at her all the way. Placing the letters on the breakfast table, she warmed some milk and tuna for Muffie—those were the cat's favorite dishes. After that, she filled the jug and made herself a cup of tea.

She peered through the sash window and into the backyard. It had begun to rain again. *There's no point taking tea out there.*

Nadia sipped her tea while sorting the mail, saving the eye-catching letter until last. "I wonder what this is." She tapped it on the bench top. "I'll open it once I've checked my e-mails and read through some edits; that'll give me time to cool down, and then I'll take a bath. Focus is the key; I can't go getting all distracted."

She hurried across the corridor into her cozy office, and switched on her computer. Then she parted the cream-colored lace curtains to reveal the rich, red-brown timber surrounding the two sash windows. It was raining rather heavily now, crystal droplets pattering at the windowpanes. She stood and admired her most frequented space. The solid mahogany computer desk and bookshelves matched the polished floor perfectly. She loved this room, the one that brought forth most of her inspirations. Everything was here.

Nadia checked her e-mail and replied to the pressing messages. Then she printed her latest draft and settled herself on the floral embroidered chaise lounge opposite the bookshelves. Muffie curled up in a black-and-white ball on the angora rug at her feet and purred contentedly. Nadia stroked

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the top of the cat's head with her foot, causing her to purr even louder. Finally, Nadia donned her glasses and began to read.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

*Rhiannon Rediscovered
England, 2005*

Charles stood silently in the chamber they'd prepared for his future bride. This was where she'd be reborn as his nocturnal offering on Halloween night. It would be a celebration long anticipated: He'd waited eight hundred years for her return. She promised to offer herself up to him forever, to share blood. Nothing could change that. *Nothing.*

Charles' dearest immortal friends, Sir Robert and Lady Grace, flanked him, their silver-blond hair a startling contrast to his black curls. In appearance, they were as different as night and day. In reality, they'd been born on the same day, reborn on the same day, and were inseparable for all eternity.

Immortals entered the dimly-lit chamber in quiet succession, forming a circle around the altar on which Lady Rhiannon's shrouded body had once lain. They rehearsed for the offering, the rebirth of Charles' immortal beloved. A pure white sheet draped the cold, gray stone, awaiting her tall, waiflike form. A pillow dressed in white lay waiting to caress her luxurious hair. However, this time her body would not be that of a gray-haired woman who'd passed onto death, but that of a fiery redhead who'd awaken to the night for eternity, as his immortal bride...

The all-consuming numbness he'd felt for centuries had evaporated the moment he'd seen Nadia walking along that

moonlit street and followed her home. He'd found her at last. Since then, not much else had mattered.

He watched nightly at her windows, unable to go to her without prior invitation. She rarely pulled her bedroom blinds, but seeing through those sheer lacy curtains was no trouble at all for a thousand-year-old immortal with perfect eyesight. On some unconscious level, she'd sensed him watching her, played with herself, and imagined him fucking her too many times to count. His awareness of her had rapidly awakened her consciousness, and without realizing it, she'd carried her sense of him to her dreams, thereby inspiring her latest novel.

Charles especially enjoyed the way she leisurely removed layers of clothing and caressed her silky-white skin, imagining his fingers tracing the path of hers over curves and valleys. She worked herself into a panting frenzy, circling and stroking those coral-pink nipples. Every time she pinched them and moaned, his cock steeled more. He longed to lick at their tautness, stroke every inch of her bare flesh with his tongue.

When she opened her legs, Charles smelled her musky heat. His mouth moistened with the desire to taste her secrets.

While she finger fucked herself, she imagined him driving into her with his rock-hard penis. He couldn't help but relent and masturbate with her. Her body undulated and rocked upon that four-poster bed, her mind filled with images of him, and the possessive streak in him appreciated her devotion. Her wildness drove him crazy; he could hardly wait to take her.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

His deprived cock ached to be inside her heat, while his immortal heart beat to her mesmeric tune. No one could ever replace her. Many beautiful humans had tried to woo him over the years and failed. He'd given his word ... and wait for her he would.

Charles had grown very patient over the past eight centuries. This offering had to be perfect.

"You have come back to me after eight centuries. No one has missed you more than I have..." he whispered. "No one has loved you more ... No one can sate your desires the way I can. You are mine, my love."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

At last! Nadia's heart hammered in her chest as she stroked the gold lettering with her index finger. She couldn't remember feeling this excited in months. She sensed that something of great importance was within. Taking a deep breath, she tore open the rose-colored envelope and scanned the flawless lettering.

This is an exclusive invitation to Club Decadent's Halloween bash, Nocturnal Offering.

Nadia rechecked the pale rose-colored envelope. Her name glowed back at her. *Why is this ball named after my present work? Why would Rose arrange such a thing without first consulting me? How did she do that?* She continued to read, as the fine gold lettering caught facets of light and reflecting them.

My Dear Ms. Kimble,

I cordially invite you to be a nocturnal offering...

"How can one be a *nocturnal offering*? I guess they can when written into a work of fiction such as mine. Rose is having a lend of me." Nadia laughed. "Very amusing, old duck." She resumed reading the unconventional summons.

Unchain your passions and set them free. Ease your frustrations. Be desirous and shameless, taste wild and forbidden fruits, while remaining entirely anonymous. Choose one mate ... choose many...

Be a whore in Eden's exclusive, abundant garden, without repercussions. Be a saint if you want, too.

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"Suddenly, I'm not so amused." Nadia's brow furrowed and her mouth pursed; she didn't bother trying to relax them.

A whore in the Garden of Eden indeed! What possesses these bloody people to come up with this crap? Talk about forward. Well, shag me six ways from Sunday!

There went her mouth ... ah, thoughts again. She could hear her mother's aggravated tones right now, "Nadia, you have a potty mouth! God knows it didn't come from me; must have been your father. He always preferred the gutter!"

Nadia shoved the exasperating thoughts aside and focused on the message.

The host would like to remind you that this is a Halloween costume ball. Wear the most decadent nymphet apparel should you desire to attract the appropriate partner for the evening. Think baroque elegance with a twist or medieval simplicity. Think self-indulgence and Casanova lovers requiring effortless access. Think romantic seduction ... wear undergarments pleasing to the eye.

Discover special golden keys to private chambers and sacred gardens ... unlock and explore. Let your imagination run wild. Eat, drink, and indulge...

Please bear in mind, this celebration ball is exclusive—don't bring a friend, as desired mates will be in attendance. New toys and entertainment will be provided—the games selected and played are entirely up to the individual...

All guests to attend incognito, including your host. Your secret is safe with us.

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by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Your chauffeur-driven escort will arrive at precisely five-thirty in the evening, October Thirty-First to collect you from your place of residence. Do be punctual.

Your costume will arrive via special delivery. Your publicist kindly donated your address for invitation, and she selected your costume for this special evening, looking forward to your attendance. Feel free to exchange the garment should you not find it to your liking.

Ms. Kimble, you will tantalize your senses at your generous benefactor's expense. In short, you're an honored guest of Charles Poitier himself.

*Yours Earnestly,
Charles Poitier*

Post Script: Said benefactor penned this invitation.

It will be a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Kimble.

Liberate yourself ... accept this invitation. Offer yourself up to the night and walk on the dark side with me.

Offer yourself up to the night and walk on the dark side with me. Nadia shivered as she reread the bottom line. That line is straight out of my book. What transparent, outright plagiarism. How very disturbing. He does not know me; how dare he behave with such familiarity? How could Rose do this to me?

She rubbed her forearms, sensing a chill seeping right through her. I need to get out of this gear and into a warm bath. I'll call Rose and ask her to fix this once I'm done. Hopefully, I'll have calmed down by then.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

Refreshed and warm after a long soak in the bathtub, Nadia picked up the receiver and dialed Rose's agency, only to be told she was out for the entire day. She hung up and called her home number. "Come on, answer the bloody thing," she muttered into the mouthpiece. The phone rang out. She redialed, her breath leaving her in a hiss as she waited. To say she was pissed off was putting it mildly.

Rose picked up the receiver on the third try. In her sweet, honeyed voice, she purred her name down the line. "...how may I assist you?" she finished.

"About bloody time," Nadia said, trying hard not to grit her teeth.

"You're in a wonderful mood, Nadia dear. If you must know what kept me, I was shagging Bruce. I know you haven't been gettin' any lovin' lately. You wouldn't relate at all. So I won't bother asking if that's your problem. Your crotch has been like a barren wasteland since the dawn of time. You're quite used to the fact, and I'm all out of guesses. Do tell Rosie what bit you in the ass and caused your grumpiness this morning, Nadia darling?"

Nadia was in no mood for Rose's sarcasm. She virtually yelled down the phone, "I don't want to be a whore in the freaking Garden of Eden!"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm no one's property. I don't want to wear a costume paid for by some kinky aristocrat! And I especially don't want to go to some perverted masquerade party."

"Oh. So you've received your invitation then."

"I assumed that was obvious."

"No need to be all hypersensitive. Calm down, or you're going to have a coronary." Rose's condescending tone irritated Nadia further.

"Why didn't you enlighten me?"

"Because you wouldn't have considered it."

"And now you imagine I will?!"

"The thought had crossed my mind, since I'd cajoled Bruce into acquiring two invitations."

"*Nocturnal Offering*, Rose? Did you tell your lover about my latest work?"

"I..." Rose sighed down the line. "I might have mentioned your title and a few words in passing. Nothing in-depth, mind you."

"It appears Charles Poitier liked it enough to make use of it."

"Don't flatter yourself, dear. Bruce coordinates all event details ... Charles Poitier instructs him, of course. By the by, you don't have exclusive rights to those two words. It's not as though you trademarked them."

"*Whatever*. Please don't mention my work, not even in passing, until it's ready for advertising."

"It's my job to promote you, dear."

"You know the rules. I *can't* believe that man used a line right out of *Nocturnal Offering* as well. Outright plagiarism, that's what it is!"

"Your line?" Rose sounded rather confused.

"Yessssss. My line."

"I didn't recognize any of your *words* on my invitation. Where?"

"At the bottom." Nadia sighed.

"I recall seeing *Yours Sincerely, Charles Poitier* on mine."

"Oh, that's strange."

"My guess is that, for whatever reason, one of the flunkies has penned it rather badly. Nothing intentional."

"Hmm." Nadia could see her point.

"By the way, the world doesn't revolve around you, dear." Rose's tone had taken on that bored pitch.

"Let's just drop it now."

"Good idea."

"Stop implying that I'm a narcissist."

Rose cleared her throat. "I wouldn't dream of it, dear."

"Ha!"

Rose's laughter roared through Nadia's ear. She held the receiver away. "It appears," Rose continued, "that Mr. *Poitier* granted your invitation without a second's thought. According to Bruce, he's simply dying for you to attend this Halloween celebration. He wants to discuss your works. It appears you have a devoted fan.

"Oh, great." *I was right.*

"Nadia, you don't sound so enthused. He does appear to like you quite a bit. He may even masturbate over you nightly. Who knows?"

"Funny one, Rose."

"Your attitude is what brings me to behave like this."

"I *sooooo* want to talk about my works with a demented psychopath whose interests, aside from me, include bloodletting and drinking."

"Now, don't you go getting all worked up about such an absurd rumor."

"Absurd rumor or not, I still don't like the man's manner."

"Manner?"

"The contents of my invitation were rather improper."

"Everyone invited received the same invitation as far as I know. It's possible he wrote you a special invitation, but highly unlikely. He has others to perform such tedious tasks. I know I wouldn't if I were in his shoes."

"Oh?" Nadia shook off the inexplicable disappointment. *Get your shit together, lass. Now is not the time to start behaving like a scatterbrained ninny.*"

"Apart from being a well-off recluse, the man's reputation is a mystery. People are bound to make up stories about such a guy. You of all people should know that, Nadia."

"Hmm ... right. True, for some."

"Your problem is that you write about vampires and the paranormal and you dream about them. You're not very normal yourself you know."

Nadia nodded to herself, a grin sliding up her mouth.

"Anyway, the *demented psychopath* has offered us the use of *Château Poitier* while you're in Paris for the *Nocturnal Offering* book signing. The chateau's only a thirty-minute drive from the city, so he said we could hold a publicity soirée as well if we wish to. Bruce passed the info on to me. Sooo, say thank you to your fabulous publicist instead of whining, dear."

"Hmm..."

"Nooo. Say thank you."

"I don't know about this. We'll see..."

"Thaaaank yooooou, Rosie."

"Thank you, Rose."

"Much better."

"Anyway, the man's a honey. If you give him the chance, he'll have you doing the wild thing in no time. And that's something you're in dire need of." Laughter echoed down the line.

"Not bloody likely!"

"You do realize the great privilege bestowed upon you. Thousands of women would kill to be in your position."

"I'm not into diamonds, fur, or drinking blood. I accept that's his thing. However, it's not mine. I'm sure he can find many other adoring women to offer themselves up to his kinky methods."

A hum of annoyance chimed from Rose.

"Pretty boys don't interest me much either. There has to be a real man beneath the surface. One who knows how to really romance a woman."

"I'm sure your fictional vampire lover is going to appear from the pages of *Nocturnal Offering*, just to romance you off your feet, and then shag you senseless," Rose interjected. "You don't have a clue what a real man is."

"So now you're judging me because I have high personal standards?"

Another unambiguous sigh came down the line. "It's Friday; didn't you visit your shrink this week?" Rose asked offhandedly.

Nadia hated the term *shrink*, and Rose darn well knew it. "Yes, I visited my *therapist* if you must know. My mood has nothing to do with lack of counseling."

"Stop being soooo fucking dramatic, and Rosie will ditch the sarcasm," Rose replied.

Nadia sighed. Rose had a point. If she maintained better control of her emotions, then Rose would lay off.

"Nadia, listen," there was a pause on the line, "Bruce just climbed out of bed, and he's looking very randy. Matter of fact, he's beckoning me and waving his cock in midair."

"Ewww ... gross!"

"No. You need to be reminded what it's all about before your pussy closes up, dear."

"No."

"He's jerkin' off now."

"Too much information." Nadia shuddered.

"Indeed. He says hello."

"Right back at him."

"Well, now is not the time to discuss the other matter. How about I pop over this evening and take you out to dinner?"

Nadia knew why Rose wanted to discuss the matter over dinner. She wanted to avoid an argument.

"Better still, I'll book a table at Susanne's Haven and you can meet me there."

Even better still! The notion of voicing her thoughts seemed rather appealing, but obnoxious. *How appropriate of you to choose a relaxing, upmarket restaurant known for its charm and tranquility. Plus the cuisine is divine.* Her mouth watered at that thought. In fairness to Rose, Nadia also happened to love the place, which was probably why Rose chose it.

Nadia choked back a mouthful of sarcastic words and cleared her throat. "Fine. If you can acquire a table."

"Done."

"Alright." Nadia looped the phone cord around her index finger, mentally perusing her wardrobe.

"I'll see you at seven in the evening then?"

"Fine."

"Fine then. Do get a grip on your attitude problem by then." There was a click, and the line went dead.

Nadia placed the receiver down with a sigh. "And, no, you're not going to mope all day. You have work to do," she muttered to herself, tightening the belt on her dressing gown. Time to change into daywear. She always did things the wrong way round, that was one of her many peculiar idiosyncrasies. She pulled on a woolen jumper and jeans and made for the kitchen once again. Today she wasn't going to write in her dressing gown. Nadia prepared a pot of tea and

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

placed it on her favorite silver tray, two small jugs of milk—one was for Muffie—and carried it down the hall to her study.

While gulping down her tea, Nadia quickly marked edits. She drank far too much tea and really needed to cut down.

She poured a saucer of milk for Muffie and set it down by the rug. The cat stretched and meowed, rolled, pawed its ear, and went back to sleep. "I want your life, Muffin."

Nadia got right to work on the next chapter. She worked tirelessly through the day, only stopping for a salad lunch.

"Another chapter done." She pushed her chair back and sighed in relief. Glancing at her watch, she let out a loud exclamation that would have burned her mother's ears. She shut down her computer and hurried to get ready for dinner.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 5

Stepping back from the mahogany antique dresser, Nadia took a long look in the mirror. Catlike green eyes stared back at her. She was a tall, slender redhead with small breasts. Her best features, she'd been told, were her pale skin, long straight hair, full lips, and high cheekbones.

Nadia considered her complexion a bit too pale and her mouth too wide, but she was okay with her flaws. She didn't mind freckles either. She didn't like to dwell on her looks too much, though. Such habits nourished unhealthy obsessions.

These days, she hardly cared if, at the end of a date, a guy wasn't partial to some of her features, or, for that matter, if he didn't like her manner. She wasn't about to conform to some guy's perception of an ideal mate to get a second date. Nadia was sincere and straightforward—true to herself and her friends—and expected no less from those whose company she kept. That's what set the individual apart from the clone drone. The bottom line was, no one was perfect, and acceptance was the key. As far as Nadia was concerned, *Relationship Street* ran two ways. She no longer tolerated those who just took, giving little or nothing in return.

She respected and accepted herself, just as she accepted and respected those around her, no matter their sexual preference, race, beliefs, and so on. As long as their behavior didn't encroach on the levelheaded folk around them, she tolerated it. This didn't mean she hung out with anyone and

everyone, however. She selected her friends wisely—loyalty, honesty and compassion were must haves.

Nadia didn't like to complicate things—life was far too complex without adding more shit to it. Her shoulders were broad enough to carry her own baggage—not that she had much these days. Her therapist was happy with her progress. She only had a few man issues to deal with. In light of what she'd been through, she'd weathered her troubles rather well.

Honestly, Nadia would give up singledom for a real man who knew how to give and take, both emotionally and monetarily. All she needed to do was work on choosing the right men to be around, and, hopefully, she'd find one who wouldn't abuse her trust or hurt her fragile heart. Looks weren't everything to her and, certainly, they weren't what drew her to see the beauty of a man.

Instead, his soul had to shine for her. That special glow from inside him, that light which poured from his eyes inspired much warmth and tenderness. She knew such a man had to exist outside of her dreams. He just had to!

The mere thought of him climbing from her dreams into her reality made Nadia weak with desire. She sank down onto the matching stool before the dresser. "I need a thorough shag," she said to herself, "before I go crazy."

She began to caress her pale, bare skin, running her fingers over her small upturned breasts, watching their pink tips tighten. They throbbed against her fingers as she squeezed them. She moaned.

Observing herself in the mirror made Nadia feel rather naughty and this caused her to become even hotter and

wetter. She trailed a path down her belly to the thatch of damp copper curls. Once there, she spread her thighs wider and opened her lips to expose her inner secrets. She watched her fingers slide over her pulsing clit and then lower, dipping into her drenched heat. She imagined him pleasuring her this way, and she raised her ass to meet her thrusting fingers. Her breasts bounced with the motion. She added another finger, thrusting two deep inside her velvety heat.

As her body undulated, her hair floated about her pale skin. She looked the wanton creature, panting and thrusting wildly in pursuit of her own gratification. Her muscles spasmed and gripped her fingers greedily. She bit her lip and ground herself against them, taking them as far as they would go, still wanting more ... wanting him deep inside her. Her juices glistened on her fingers as she retracted and inserted them over and over, until she could no longer bear the intense rapture and came hard.

She withdrew her fingers and licked the juices from them. She imagined him tasting her, and she couldn't help the frustrated sigh that escaped her. The fact was that she wanted him badly. If only such a thing were possible.

Nadia hastily washed up and dressed in a pair of white panties and lacy push-up bra, a lemon-colored ribbed cashmere sweater, a long charcoal-grey woolen skirt, pantyhose, and black knee-high boots. *Rose will approve of my attire.*

She quickly applied black-brown kohl liner around her eyes and brown mascara to her long lashes. Brushing her hair out, she let it hang loosely about her shoulders. She fluffed her

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by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

fringe, crinkled her freckle-smattered nose, and flashed a beaming white smile. "Hey, baby, you look hotter than the Sahara Desert." She winked at her reflection and giggled.

After one last spin before the mirror, she was good to go. She turned, grabbed her woolen coat off the four-poster bed, and made for the door, a well-fed Muffie protesting loudly as she walked briskly down the hall.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 6

Nadia smiled and nodded at Sarah as she entered Susanne's Haven. "Rose Virgilio's table, please."

"Certainly, Ms. Kimble." The attendant smiled back as she took Nadia's coat. "Ms. Virgilio was a little concerned you wouldn't arrive on time."

Nadia felt her cheeks flush. "Oh. I see."

"Don't worry, you're not too late."

Nadia sighed. "Thank goodness for that."

"Come. We'll get you seated so you can order."

She ushered Nadia past the seated diners to the tables at the rear of the restaurant.

Susanne's Haven was a place one usually had to book well in advance, which led Nadia to believe Rose had help garnering a table tonight. Her suspicions were confirmed when she laid eyes on the beautiful Spaniard: Rose had brought Bruce along with her. Bruce was Rose's ticket to the unobtainable.

The restaurant had a romantic air, which Nadia appreciated. A soft golden glow reflected off the glassware, white and red linen, and highly polished timber furnishings.

Nadia discerned the mouthwatering smells of various grilled and spicy meats, sauces, herb breads, pastas, cheeses, steaming vegetables, and more ... Her stomach rumbled loudly, and she looked around to see whether anyone had heard.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

A dark-haired male who was sipping wine with two silver-blond haired companions caught her eye. His pale, sculpted cheekbones, jaw, and chin fitted the knight who invaded her dreams on a regular basis. She could almost feel the thickness of the silky black curls that teased the collar of his crisp white shirt.

The way that shirt stretched across the broad expanse of his chest and shoulders made her want to run her hands over it, to discover exactly how tightly it fitted. The notion of unbuttoning it to feel the texture of his skin, kiss his neck, and inhale his pure male essence caused her pussy to pulsate. She knew, without a doubt, that her panties were wet.

She lifted her eyes to meet his penetrating ones and forgot to breathe. Dark and mesmerizing, they pulled at her insides. A slow smile crept up a firm set of lips, and his gleaming white teeth flashed at her. "Do you remember who I am, Nadia?" he asked, without uttering a word aloud.

He's telepathic! This isn't happening to me! I've finally gone crazy from writing too many works of fiction!

His look was knowing, intimate, and affectionate. *Oh, my God! My dream knight is real! He's just as perfect in reality. How can this be? It's not possible*

"Ms. Kimble? Ms. Kimble, are you all right?" She heard Sarah ask in the distance.

The beautiful man nodded and then returned his attention to his male and female companions.

Nadia tore her gaze away from his extraordinarily familiar form, sucking in much needed air as she did. Her heart rate

was through the roof; she felt ill and needed to sit for a minute or two, or else she'd more than likely heave the remaining contents of her stomach upon the floor. Her lunch wouldn't be completely digested yet.

"Ms. Kimble, are you all right?"

"I-I'm perfectly fine." Nadia summoned a smile for Sarah as she removed her vice-like grip from the table before her. "Just fine..." She forced her legs to move forward. She stumbled, but she caught herself in time. His eyes were on her; she could feel their warmth penetrating her back.

"Are you certain, Ms. Kimble? You look rather pale."

"Indeed. I am indeed fine." Straightening the messed up tablecloth, she pressed on towards her designated table.

Get a grip, Nadia, it's just a coincidence. Nothing more. You're acting crazy, old duck. She stifled a groan when she realized that both Rose and Bruce had witnessed her bizarre behavior.

"Bruce, it's nice to see you again." She leaned in and kissed his pudgy brown cheeks. "Rose." She pecked both of Rose's heavily made-up ones and then seated herself. "How are you, dear?"

Rose leaned in and whispered, "What the devil has gotten into you?" Her tone rang with displeasure. She'd have frowned had she not been injected with Botox.

Nadia waved a hand in the direction of the table where he sat. "I know this will sound crazy, but that dark-haired man two tables down, the one in a white shirt and blue-grey woolen trousers, looks just like the character in my latest book."

"Nocturnal Offering?"

Nadia nodded. Rose's dark eyes rolled upward, and she let out a long sigh. "I swear you get nuttier as the years go by."

Nadia couldn't really blame Rose for her reaction.

Bruce moved his hand over Rose's, his fingers sliding through hers. "You could at least look, sweetheart."

Rose shrugged, turned, and then gasped. "What's he doing here?"

"Dining with his dearest friends Robert and Grace," Bruce replied.

Nadia didn't like being left out of the loop in such situations. She cleared her throat loudly. They both turned to look at her. "Would either of you mind telling me what's going on?"

Rose waved at Bruce. "Go ahead, make her behavior worse than it already is."

"I take exception to that statement, Rose."

Rose's shoulders slumped. "Sorry. I'm having a hormonal day as well."

"Hmm. No harm done." Nadia glanced at round-faced Bruce.

He scratched his balding head. "The male you're referring to is my employer."

Nadia's throat suddenly went dry. Rose poured her a glass of water, which she gulped down rapidly. "Ch-Charles Poitier?" came out of her mouth, barely more than a whisper.

"Yes, but don't announce that fact to the world. He's a rather private man, you see."

Nadia's heart hammered rapidly in her chest. At this rate, stress would likely kill her before she reached thirty years of age. Coldness clawed its way under her skin—something was very wrong with this picture. "Why is he here tonight?"

Rose shook her head. "He has to eat as well, you know. The w—"

Nadia held up her hand. "I know. I know. The world doesn't revolve around me, right? I get it."

The party of three rose, all nodded in their direction, and then departed the restaurant single file. Charles Poitier's blonde companions looked very familiar to Nadia too. She tried to recall where she might have seen them before, but the details seemed to fuzz out.

That can't be all there is! Disappointment filled her for the second time that day. *What is it about that man? Am I simply going crazy?*

"If you desire more, accept my invitation. Be my Nocturnal Offering." His mentally communicated words triggered an adrenaline rush.

Nadia hastily got to her feet. "Look, I'm not all that hungry now. I'm feeling a little under the weather. I'll catch up with you tomorrow, Rose."

"Are you sure you won't stay for dessert?"

"No. I can't ... won't stay down, I'm afraid. Come by the house in the morning and we'll talk."

"I'll call you." Rose obviously planned to shag Bruce all night long.

Nadia nodded. "Okay. Just don't forget to call me."

"You're my bread and butter, dear. How could I forget you?"

"Ha! Very amusing. With friends like you, who needs enemies?"

Rose laughed in reply.

Nadia patted Bruce's arm. "It was good to see you again. You have my apologies for interrupting your evening. Perhaps we can make it some other time?"

"Sounds like a plan." He winked.

"Enjoy the rest of your evening, folks."

Nadia pulled her coat tightly about her as she exited the restaurant. The evening carried an extra bite from the wind. She looked all over; he was nowhere in sight. *I'm going stark raving bonkers. I really need to get it together. A long rest will do me some good.*

She turned to make her way toward Ladybug, her Volkswagen, which was parked a half a block down the street.

Charles stood there in the darkness, watching her just as he had when she'd masturbated earlier that evening. His cock had grown hard at the memory. He could scarcely wait to get inside her on Halloween night. *Forever wasn't nearly long enough...*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 7

Club Decadent, Nocturnal Offering

Halloween, October 31

Halloween night found Nadia standing inside the grey stone walls of the castlelike Club Decadent. Her costume was a simple medieval style gown of cream and emerald-green velvet, and she wore a matching cream and green velvet half mask. Nadia had found a golden key the moment she stepped over the threshold. She couldn't help but wonder whether she was meant to discover it.

Most of the furnishings were decorated in shades of red, offset by a profusion of thriving potted plants. Nadia had enjoyed Rose and Bruce's company while devouring a fine roasted meal and white wine. Wishing her a shagging good time, Rose had deserted her the moment dinner ended.

Nadia had wandered through the magnificent ballroom, enjoying renaissance and baroque music. However, she had yet to dance. The offers she'd received hadn't been to her liking ... She couldn't fathom why it had to be him she danced with, or why she sought him out. It all seemed too ridiculous to contemplate.

Admittedly, the whole scene had surprised her more than she'd expected. Her head was spinning from all the entertainment she'd witnessed. Not that the debauchery concerned her too much. She just wasn't about to join the other guests, no matter how many times she was asked.

Gratuitous displays of fornication filled almost every available space—the banquet hall and main ballroom were the only exceptions.

Exhibitionists fucked in twos, threes, and groups. Men with men and women with women, they fornicated on crimson couches, beds, floors, tables, and stairwells. Even the leafy internal courtyard and swimming pools were filled with undulating, rutting forms. Grunts and groans echoed throughout the enormous structure.

Suddenly, cool, long fingers enclosed Nadia's forearms as his solid form pressed firmly against hers from behind. She could feel everything. He smelled bone-meltingly divine. *Oh, God, it's him! I think I'm going mad!*

"You were surprised to see me the other night." His breath caressed her ear, and his tone mesmerized her. Fortunately, he was holding her, or else she'd have fallen on the floor. His close proximity did peculiar things to her insides.

"I-I ... well, yes."

"Were you stunned I was the one who invited you to my Nocturnal Offering masquerade ball?"

She nodded. "I imagined you acquired the information from Rose. At first, I thought it was a publicity thing..."

"I see. And now?"

"My dreams, merging with reality, I still have difficulty believing..."

"I noticed ... I wondered whether you'd gotten my message," he whispered.

She felt his cock harden against her bottom. It felt heavenly to have him so close. "I received your message loud and clear, Mr. Poitier."

"Mr. Poitier?" He laughed softly. "Come now, Nadia. You know we're on more intimate terms than that."

A shiver of excitement ran through her. Her limbs were starting to feel like jelly. She tried to calm her panted breaths. "I-I don't know what you mean."

"Don't play coy; it displeases me." His lips moved down the column of her throat. "Do you remember how it feels to wear my bite, beloved?"

"Your bite?" she couldn't keep the shudder out of her tone. "What an absurd thing to say, Charles."

"So *Nocturnal Offering* isn't about you and I, then?"

"It's purely fiction." *Stop lying to yourself, Nadia!*

"Mmm ... I see. So why am I the primary focus of your story?"

"I..." Nadia shrugged. She was out of excuses and tired of denying it all.

He took her hand, and suddenly they were in the ballroom. "Let's dance, shall we?"

She sucked in several calming breaths. "How did you do that?"

"I am immortal, dear. Remember, I can move faster than a blink of an eye." He snapped his fingers.

Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* played, and couples danced about the room. He held her close as they waltzed. He was an excellent dancer, and she thoroughly enjoyed keeping in step with him.

Nadia gulped for air as she moved, her mind swinging from incredulity to belief. "I recall ... so many things..."

"Was masturbating while imagining me fucking you pure frustration, because you couldn't have me for real?"

"Oh, yes..." *Night after night, in fact!*

"Did you ever ask yourself why I'm always in your dreams, Nadia?"

"Yes." She sighed.

"And?" He nibbled at her ear.

"Oooh." She closed her eyes and absorbed the pleasure. "I knew we had a special connection."

When she opened her eyes again her stomach knotted as she surveyed the surroundings. BDSM paraphernalia crammed the chamber where they now stood. Dominants and submissives were engrossed in special entertainments.

Nadia stepped further into the room; an icy chill worked its way down her spine as his eyes burned into her. She watched a master dress a slave in a kikkou rope tie—Shibari, the ancient art of Japanese rope bondage, fascinated her. It was such a beautiful art form.

His hands slid down her arms, and he laced his fingers through hers. "This fascinates you, although you deny it. I know you better than you know yourself." He removed her mask, and then his lips brushed her cheek.

"Mmmm..." The pit of her belly quivered in nervous anticipation.

"Come on, Nadia. Moan a little louder." His teeth sank into her neck, and he began to drink from her.

Icy pain shot through her body. She let out a piercing scream that drowned out the other sounds in the room.

"Do you remember now?" he asked telepathically.

The pain rapidly subsided, and warmth throbbed through Nadia's body to replace it. His teeth retracted and his mouth moved over her wound, his tongue gently stroking. "How could I not remember? I really thought my imagination was too vivid. I worried the men in white coats were going to show up on my door, straightjacket in hand, and take me away."

"Hmm ... while you exude peculiar behavior, this certainly doesn't make you insane, my dear." His lips brushed over her neck and ear.

Soon Nadia's pussy beat to his sensual rhythm. Her body tightened as ecstasy curled its way through her belly and extended out to her limbs.

How could I ever forget such a magic touch?

"Much better, my sweet," he whispered. "Do you remember how your blood warms me?" he whispered.

"Yes, I remember." She noticed he wore no mask. She longed to turn and look upon him. Heat coursed through her veins.

"And your promise to me upon your deathbed, eight hundred years ago?"

"I remember." She nodded. "Just as it is written in my novel."

"Yes, just as it is written in your novel." His lips traveled over her cheek.

"I know I'm repeating myself, but I thought I was going mad." She laughed. Without realizing it, she'd turned to receive his kiss.

His hungry mouth savaged hers, his tongue gracefully twisting and gliding with her own. His fingers worked to unlace her gown.

She buried her hands in his luxuriant curls and dragged him closer, needing to feel him possessing her.

Suddenly, she was against the wall, her dress falling to the floor and her panties and bra closely following. His mouth gorged on her breasts, his teeth nipping, his fingers squeezing.

"Oh! I can't wait to fuck you."

He sank to his knees, caressing her inner thighs and ass-cheeks, then drawing her close to drink her flowing juices. Slow strokes flicked over her clit and labia before sinking into her aching vagina. Deliberately and sensually, his mouth performed the best oral she'd had in this lifetime. She lifted a leg over his shoulder, and he buried his face further in her heat to tongue her drenched pussy with hungry abandon.

"Oh, that's amazing." She tilted her hips up and down while she watched him eat her. "Don't stop. Oooh, don't stop!" She stroked his curls. He pleased her with a combination of licking, sucking, and biting; she was his moaning convert.

"You'll beg me for release before I'm finished with you, my sweet." His telepathic words heightened her experience as intended.

He played and explored before swiftly penetrating her with two fingers. "Mmm..." She pumped her hips to meet his thrusting fingers.

He stroked until her muscles clamped around his fingers, then withdrew them. "I want more," she moaned.

He rose. "Oh, I haven't even begun, my love." He wound his fingers in her hair and kissed her hard. "Your turn," he whispered.

Nadia unbuttoned his white shirt and peeled it off his broad shoulders. His form was superb, his skin smooth and unblemished. She leaned in and kissed his neck and chest. The scents of musk and sandalwood pervaded her senses. She slid her hands over his muscular torso and down to his abdomen. "Hmmm ... perfect."

Nadia caught his look and smiled. She slid down, unbelted his dark trousers, and lowered them along with his underwear. Once he was completely naked, his form rivaled Michelangelo's finest sculptures.

She enclosed his cock in her hand, her tongue batting across the engorged head. She sucked and drew it inside her mouth, her teeth lightly grazing his flesh. Her lips sucked, and her tongue molded around his cock. She worked her fist up and down, following her mouth, until he stiffened and was about to come. Then she stilled all movement.

"Arrgh! Pleasure me." He thrust his hips at her. "Now."

"Patience, my dear." She laughed softly as she began to fondle and kiss his cock again.

He groaned his appreciation as his dark eyes pierced her, watching her suck him off.

Beautiful and thick, his cock pulsed against her lips. It tasted delicious against her circling tongue. She suckled the engorged head, enjoying its silkiness.

He thrust his hips at her, his fingers tightening in her hair. "Ah. Suck it all."

She obliged, eventually taking his entire penis inside her mouth. It wasn't long before he spilled his excitement down her throat, and she savored his distinct flavor.

He pulled her up his body, wrapped his arms about her waist, and buried his face in her hair. "You're perfect," he whispered. "I knew intimacy would be as good for us as it was eight hundred years ago."

"My dream male has come at last." She stroked his rich curls, savoring their silkiness. "I am again questioning whether this is real."

"You're not crazy," he said, kissing his way over the side of Nadia's face to her forehead.

Being in his arms feels so right to me, better than the dreams, more enriching than anything I've ever experienced. Giddy with excitement, she couldn't help smiling.

"It's time to use that golden key," he said, once he'd recovered.

"What's it for?"

"Come, and I'll show you." They now stood before a closed timber door. "Open it."

"Will I be able to transport myself as you do?"

He grinned. "Of course, my love."

Her heart hammering, she turned and fiddled with the key until it unlocked the door. She angled her head and met his

intense gaze, and he nodded. "Go on." She pushed the door wide to reveal a room full of chanting immortals, all of them surrounding a stone altar.

"It's not just some reoccurring dream this time. It's actually real," Nadia whispered, more to herself than to Charles. She reached out to him, sighing in relief as their hands connected and long fingers laced with hers.

"Don't be afraid. I am right here with you."

"I-I know you are." She gulped for air. *I trust him. Now that I know this is real, I want this badly, but it doesn't stop me from feeling anxious.*

"Do you remember your promise to me?" He caressed her cheek.

She nodded. "One I'm very happy to fulfill. I can't go yet, though. What about Muffie, my cat?"

He kissed her gently. "Bruce is my guardian; he'll fetch her for you."

"But..."

"I trust him with my existence."

"Very well. Muffie is extremely sensitive, though. She likes tuna for breakfast and warmed milk all day long."

He smiled softly. "Your cat will be here with us tomorrow. She'll be fine."

"What about my work?"

"You can still write novels, you endearing creature. I can't have you getting bored now."

She sighed in relief. "That's good."

"You'll do all the things you do now, with the exception of waking in the morning, exposing yourself to sunlight, visiting

human residences without permission, and consuming human food."

"At the restaurant?"

"Oh." He nodded in understanding. "Our own special wine."

"Blood."

"Hmm."

"I see. You watched me, didn't you?"

"You know I did."

"I felt you."

"Anything else?" He waited patiently.

"No. I have all I need now."

"Come, then." He led her to the altar. "They must witness our union and your making."

"Lovemaking, too?"

He nodded. "It's part of the ritual."

"Oh."

"We just pleased one another in front of others downstairs. Does it matter?"

She giggled. "No. I guess not."

"How do you feel?"

"A little scared."

He squeezed her hand. "I won't let anything dire happen to you."

"I know. I trust you, Charles, my beloved."

"Ah, 'tis all coming back to you, milady."

"Indeed 'tis, my lord. A relief to know I'm not completely bonkers."

Charles led her to the altar amid the rising chants. Once there, he scooped her up in his arms and laid her on the altar,

then positioned himself beside her. "Forget about them. There's only you and I." He bent and kissed her trembling lips. "Don't be afraid. I'll not leave you, not ever. 'Tis forever, my beloved. From this day on, we are one. What wounds you, hurts me." His captivating eyes searched hers. "There'll be no others, understand?"

"I do understand, and I would have you no other way. I pledge to devote myself to you. I'll always be loyal. I need nor want any other, Charles."

"And I promise to devote myself to you, my darling. I am yours and yours alone. No one else has, or will ever have my heart."

"Awww. Come here, you beautiful male."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tugged. His lips tenderly brushed hers, his tongue sweeping over her lower lip before he moved to nuzzle her cheek and neck. As he moved over her, she clung to him, opening her legs and resting her feet on his ass. His cock was poised at her entrance, then his dark gaze ensnared hers as he gradually filled her.

"Oh, Charles." She arched up to take all of him.

"Oh, baby, you feel beautiful," he said hoarsely.

She ran her hands down his back and pressed her feet against his ass. Drawing him closer, she arched her hips to meet his.

"Oh, that's it," he said hoarsely. His breath fanned her neck, his tongue sweeping along its pulsing vein.

"Oooh."

Her trembling heat constricted his thickness as every mouthwatering inch of him filled her. Nadia trembled as his teeth raked the column of her throat. She wrapped her legs around him tightly and spurred him on.

The immortals chanted even louder.

Her belly tightened. "Oh, Charles."

He thrust into her with measured consideration, drawing out her pleasure, urging her towards an intense orgasm. Her pussy contracted with his throbbing heat.

His mouth teased her throat as his powerful form trembled violently. Sharp incisors bit into her neck and pain sliced through her body. His lips suctioned onto her neck, and he feasted as though he'd been starving.

She tried to dislodge him but he was too powerful, and her strength was rapidly depleting. "*Charles!*"

Nadia welcomed the darkness which blotted out the remaining light.

His soothing voice brought her back from the brink, and she followed the stream until she could make out his words. Something splattered on her lips and then into her mouth. It was blood—his blood.

"Drink my blood. Bond with me forever, my love."

She swallowed weakly at first, but her strength improved as she drank. Her body felt strangely sensitive, her senses more acute. The more she drank, the more effervescent she felt. She liked the taste of him, and his scent too.

Charles removed his wrist, stilling her hand when she tried to fetch it back. "You've had enough for now." He stroked her cheek. "Get some rest, my beautiful bride."

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by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

"Nocturnal offering?" she added.

"Much better," he whispered. He smiled and gently kissed her mouth. "The dawn brings forth your rebirth. It will be my greatest pleasure to share that with you."

Nadia followed the lone crimson tear that tracked down his cheek with an index finger. "I love you, Charles."

"And I you, Nadia."

"Forever, yes."

He nodded. "Forever. I promise."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

MASKED DESIRES

by

Christy Poff

Chapter 1

"You can't be serious!" Kate gasped.

"I am very serious," Ava Clinton stated emphatically. "Steven's gay. I caught him with his lover and believe me—I couldn't wait to get away from them. If only he'd been honest..."

"But why did he hide it? The company's so open about different lifestyles."

"Except when you're trying for a huge promotion and appearances mean everything."

"But surely it's not like that," Kate argued.

"Evidently it is very much so," Ava said. "He needed the perfect girlfriend to impress Matthew Lord."

"I'd take that as a compliment if he..."

"I wouldn't have minded if he'd only been honest and up front."

"Hey, ladies," Jaime Earl said as she passed by on her way to the copy room. "Are you going to the costume party?"

"What costume party?" Ava asked.

"The annual one the Lords host. It always falls after the last krewe marches in the Krewe of Bacchus Parade. It's a lot of fun."

"I doubt I'll go," Ava said. "I hate going alone and besides, aren't most of those parties by invitation only?"

"I'm sure we can get you one," Jaime assured Ava.

"Don't go to any trouble. I'm not sure I want to party at this point."

"That's exactly what you need to do," Kate stated. "After Stevie boy, you need to get out and see what life has to offer."

"You make me sound like I'm a damned basket case. Besides, if I do, I'd be crashing some party I'm not invited to."

They chatted a few moments more before returning to their desks after lunch. On Ava's desk sat a white envelope with gold lettering, her name written in flourishes and swirls. She took it and slid it into her desk drawer, not wanting the others to see it and start making a fuss about it.

In New Orleans, gala parties after the parades usually raised money for various causes and most people who attended had lighter wallets when they left to go home. She knew she couldn't afford to go so she resigned herself to attending one or two of the larger parades then going home and watching the highlights on the local news channels the night after. All-in-all, she enjoyed her life but she'd taken a hit to her confidence when she learned exactly who Steven Ridge pretended to be. *Why didn't he just come out and tell me? I would have helped him...*

Ava went through the stack of papers on her desk dealing with Lord, Limited. A small but very influential firm, they dealt with high-tech electronics for the auto industry and several other fields. Her boss happened to be the son of the owner—Matthew Lord, III—a tall man with light brown hair, brown eyes to match and a smile that melted her every time she saw it. She'd heard him sing once, remembering his gorgeous baritone voice. She preferred his take on *Sixteen Tons* because it sounded to her like he'd gone just a little lower on some notes than Tennessee Ernie Ford did in the original.

She caught herself watching him at times, trying to act nonchalant about the fact he sent heat through her just by saying *hi*. She pushed these thoughts aside, sorting the stack of papers into piles then filing them. She picked up a piece of paper he'd written some notes on, jolting from the heat she felt coming off the paper. *What the...*

"Ava, could you get me the file for *Jaguar*?"

"Yes, sir," she said before she stood and walked across the office to the file room and the cabinet where the file she wanted sat. Finding it, she took it into his office and placed it on his desk then turned to leave.

"Thank you, Ava," Lord said. "Will you be available for a business trip the Monday after the ball?"

"I don't see a problem so, yes," she answered, not needing to look at a calendar. As far as she knew, her social calendar would be open for a long time.

"Good, make reservations for you and me in London."

"The usual hotel and..."

"Yes, whatever," he said, not once taking his eyes from the document he read.

"Right away," she said. She walked out of the office closing the door behind her.

Yeah, right—me with him? Never happen...

* * * *

Matthew Lord watched her out of the corner of his eye, his cock straining to find comfort inside the woman he'd been in love with for months. Considering his father's policy on interoffice relationships, he'd tried extremely hard not to betray his true feelings for Ava Clinton but each day it became more and more impossible.

She promoted to her present position as his personal secretary when Mrs. Cleary suddenly passed away. His mother had offered to help find a replacement but Matthew quickly told her he'd take care of it. He didn't tell his mother he'd seen the perfect replacement and wanted to get to know her on a more intimate level—years before, his father would never hear of anything like that. Matthew kept his feelings secret, hired Ava eight months before and lived in agony ever since.

Physical desire had gotten the better of him and pushed him to secretly place a gold-engraved invitation to the Lord, Limited's annual costume ball on her desk while she went on break with two friends. He watched her slide the envelope into her desk drawer, obviously not wanting the others to know she'd received it—definitely a point in her favor.

He realized if anything happened between them, her friends might be involved in one way or another and he'd decided if keeping them in the loop so to speak would help keep her in his life, he'd bear their presence. He had never been overly fond of them, feeling they truly didn't appreciate Ava. He'd learned Ava Clinton was a caring, gentle and giving woman who had the misfortune of befriending the wrong people.

Matthew Lord, III, had never been a snob but he was a good judge of character. Jaime and Kate could be very nice but they wanted what Ava had and he could tell she sometimes mistook their emotions for something innocent. He knew both had been openly jealous of Ava's promotion and it bothered him—Ava didn't need betrayal.

He thought of Steve—her recently outed ex-boyfriend. By accident, Matthew learned of Steve's relationship with his male lover and the reason he'd kept it hidden. Another wanting a promotion, he went *old school* and found someone who could be considered the perfect girl to be with in order to get where he wanted. Because of some extremely calculated timing on Matthew's part, Ava had walked in on Steve and his lover in her bed.

I hate that it happened but you needed to find out...

Matthew had gotten rid of two thorns in his side when Ava learned the truth. First, how could he honestly trust a man in a high-level position when he couldn't be honest about his love life? That alone told Matthew more than he needed to know about the man. Second, it got the asshole out of Ava's life. *Now I can see if she'll even consider me.*

He had taken the first step by inviting her to the ball. *Now will she go?*

Matthew saw her through the small side window at the door and could no longer take their close proximity. He called her, told her he planned to leave for the day then hightailed it out his private entrance. He walked down the street to a door leading to a private men's club and went inside.

He'd been a member for years—another secret kept from his father. *If only you knew about this ...* What he adored about the place—it had been kept as the original owner intended. Brant Dalton opened *The Men's Club* in the twenties as a way he and his friends could enjoy vices while Prohibition loomed. Membership had been by invitation only and had remained that way to the present. Brant had made a haven for men to go eat, drink and be happy—in more ways than one.

Right now, Matthew needed some relief. He hoped this would be one of the last times he'd have need of Valerie's attentions but if the encounter at the ball didn't work out, he knew he'd be back.

* * * *

Ava pulled the white envelope from her desk drawer and slipped it into her handbag. After grabbing her jacket, she put it on then left the office for another uneventful night at home. Since her break-up, she'd experienced many of them and this evening would be no exception.

Stopping for Chinese take-out on the way home, she decided if the envelope turned out to be what she thought,

she'd go and enjoy the evening. *Hell, a masked ball—no one will know me...*

Once home, she ate her dinner while it was still hot—wonton soup and cashew shrimp did wonders when she felt down. After that, she took a long hot bath, soaking in magnolia scented bath oil. Afterward, she went to her bag and finally looked at the mysterious envelope—hand addressed in gold script.

Slowly, she slid the contents out discovering a coveted invitation to the Lords' Annual Masked Ball. She couldn't believe it though she wanted to know why after all this time. She'd been at the office for the better part of eight years and had never received an invitation. Now she trembled holding it.

She felt something strange—an erotic feeling coming from the paper. *What the hell?*

Regaining herself, she read the card.

You are cordially invited to the annual masked ball to be held at The Aster Crowne Plaza immediately after the end of the Krewe of Bacchus Parade.

The invitation took her breath away, especially the handwritten *Hope to see you there.*

Ava Clinton sat on the side of her bed, her towel falling to her waist, stunned by what she held in her hand. She could not begin to figure out who'd sent the invitation but at the moment, she had other things on her mind.

Heat coursed through her when she touched the handwriting, her stomach tightening. *Who the hell are you and why do you have this hold on me?*

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She lay back, trying to determine what costume she should wear. With the ball in a few weeks, she knew she'd better get one soon or there would be no decent ones left in the entire city. Different ideas came to mind and she quickly pushed them aside. She saw beautiful images before her but she didn't feel in the mood to go as a Southern Belle, an angel or anything her friends might expect her to go as.

She knew from talk the day after the previous year's ball that masks remained on all night—a quirk of the host who had a reputation for loving mystery. Somehow, Matthew Lord, III, didn't strike her as a mystery lover unless he'd chosen to continue his father's tradition.

Ava got up and crossed the room to where she'd put her laptop. Ignoring her nudity—it didn't matter, no one would ever know—she sat in a comfortable chair, curled up with her Dell and looked up costumes. One struck her as unique, though Ava kept looking. The more she looked, the more she settled on the unique outfit she kept returning to.

She enlarged the picture and stared at it—a gothic sorceress. The gown had two distinct pieces—a low-cut little black dress and a sheer deep purple and black overcoat which flared out as it fell to the floor. If she got rid of the witch's hat, added the right mask and a slinky pair of black stilettos, the costume would be perfect—sexy while not slutty, wild yet mysterious.

She tried calling the costume shop and after talking to the owner for a short while, she had the costume put aside for her to try on the next day.

"Thank you, Mister..."

"Lovelace," he said, "and you're very welcome."

Ava hung up, shut off her computer and sat back. She pictured herself in this costume, her body aroused by the idea and the possibility her mystery man would help her experience an unforgettable evening.

* * * *

The next day, she walked out of the costume shop with her costume and the perfect mask to accompany it. Down the street, she entered a shoe store and bought a pair of stiletto sandals to finish the look.

"Are you sure you want to wear these all night long?" the clerk asked.

"Right now, I'm not sure of anything."

Ava left the store, went home and tried on the entire outfit to make sure it fit and that nothing lacked. Liking what she saw, she took it off, hung it up and walked over to pick up a robe from her dressing table chair. She stopped when she caught her reflection in the full-length mirror—her naked body wearing nothing but stiletto heels. She picked up the mask and put it on gasping.

The sight in front of her reminded her of the movie *Eyes Wide Shut* with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. She remembered the countless naked girls walking around a huge mansion waiting for the caped men to give their commands. Her nipples hardened at the thought and strangely enough—she loved how she felt.

"Maybe this won't be such a bad thing after all."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

The next two weeks passed quickly though two days before the ball, Ava had enough work to keep her busy over the weekend. She couldn't believe how many files Lord needed for one deal.

"Will you be able to work over the weekend?" Matthew Lord asked her late Friday afternoon.

"I did have plans for Sunday night."

"You may need to cancel them," he said matter-of-factly. "This deal needs to come together within the week."

"I think I may be almost finished getting together what you need."

"Are you sure? Please don't say this then Monday morning tell me it's not true."

"I'm sure," she stated, disliking his tone with her. Usually, Lord didn't treat her like this and it struck her as odd.

"I'm counting on you," he said. "By the way, are you going to the ball Sunday night?"

"Ball?"

"The masked ball my family hosts every year. As my secretary, you should have received an invitation."

"I did receive it but I'm not sure I'm going," she lied.

"I figured you would go. After all, it's my understanding the invites are coveted."

"I wouldn't know."

"Hmm," he said. He stood up, threw some files into his briefcase and started toward the door. "Seriously, Ava, if you get the chance—go. It's a fun evening."

"I'll see how I do with the work and decide then."

"I'll be showing up late. A member of the family always shows up at the Rendezvous at Convention Hall after the Krewe of Bacchus Parade."

"Rendezvous?"

"It's a black tie formal reception. I hate dressing up in the monkey suit but I have to."

"Oh," she said.

"I'll see you on Monday unless we run into each other at the ball."

"I'll see," she said.

She watched Matthew Lord, III leave the office and groaned. *Why me?*

* * * *

Matthew entered the elevator, pushed the button for the parking level, waited for the doors to close and grinned. He had Ava so confused she'd never suspect him of sending the invitation. He needed the element of surprise on his side or his little plan would never succeed.

One thing he hated with a passion had always been hope and expectation dashed because something went wrong. He hoped she wouldn't bog herself down in the file room—his orders to her not meant to keep her away from the ball. Unfortunately, the work came up last minute and despite the

fact he hosted one of the biggest galas during Mardi Gras, he still had a business to run and employees to worry about.

Sunday afternoon, he went by the florist's to order several dozen roses to be delivered to the penthouse suite at the Aster Crowne Plaza Hotel. If things went as planned, he'd shower her with roses and champagne and maybe...

Matthew went by the cleaners to pick up several suits including the Armani he'd wear for the reception then the ball. Having two major affairs in one evening—no, make that three—did not leave much time for changing clothes though he marveled at the way Reba, Cher and some of the others accomplished the same task at their concerts. He chose this way as a matter of convenience, not vanity.

He walked into *Magnolia Place*, the centuries' old family home, and immediately met his mother. Victoria Lord helped him take the dry cleaning upstairs to his room where she then asked which suit he planned to wear and went about laying out the shirt and accessories to go with it.

"Mom, you don't have to..."

"Old habits die hard. I always did it for your father."

They'd been married fifty years when Matthew, Jr. died on a fishing trip. Ten years later, she remained a widow who doted on her son. He worried about her if his plans proved successful.

"Mom, what are you going to do if I find someone to marry?"

"Have you?"

"Maybe."

"Hmm, good question," she said. "What's she like?"

"I think you'll like her."

"Will she be at the ball?"

"Hopefully."

"Blind date, I see."

"Mother!"

They laughed, Victoria hugging her son.

"I wish you luck, Matt. I'll be very happy if you've found someone."

She left the room before Matthew got into the shower then dressed for the evening ahead. *Here goes nothing.*

* * * *

Ava walked out of the office on Saturday afternoon, relieved she'd been able to finish the job Matthew Lord had given her. She could tell he rued making her work over the weekend—especially because of the masked ball on Sunday night. She'd always been fairly good at judging someone's feelings though only after she'd gotten to know them. Initial judgments didn't help her at all—Steve a prime example. She gave up trying to determine how she goofed that one.

She went to *Victoria's Secret* and bought some last minute things for her costume—sexy lingerie and thigh-high stockings in black. As much as she loved her reflection when she tried on the costume, she knew she needed more. *You are a lady*, her mother always told her. She picked up something for dinner then went to her condo where she laid out the costume she'd wear the next evening.

She ate then watched some television before she woke the next morning where she'd fallen asleep. She smiled, the

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memories of her dreams about a sexy mystery man making her feel hot and needy. She went to the invitation, ran her fingertips over the writing and sighed. Heat coursed through her but went unanswered. *Hopefully...*

* * * *

Sunday evening, Ava parked her car near the hotel and walked to where the concierge held the door for her. He nodded before she entered, Ava feeling strangely wonderful and naughty.

Ava Clinton had never been one to flaunt herself or wear suggestive or even sexy clothes. She'd always wanted to but remained true to her Southern upbringing. Now, she walked the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras in an outfit she'd bought on a wild whim. She hoped it wouldn't backfire on her.

She presented her invitation to the man at the door of the Grand Ballroom on the second floor of the grand hotel.

"Miss, all masks remain on throughout the evening to keep the air of mystery at its height."

"Thank you," she said, taking back the card and placing it in her clutch. She put on her mask, made sure she could see without a problem and entered the ballroom. Inside, she saw a myriad of costumes and even though she recognized some of the people wearing them, she didn't talk to anyone.

A waiter offered her a glass of champagne while another held a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She thanked them then ventured further into the room. She found a seat at a table near the wall hoping her mysterious host would find her.

This will definitely be interesting...

* * * *

Matthew made it to the ball in record time after getting tied up at the reception then attempting to get through traffic. After-parade revelers continued to fill the streets, the party never ending. *God, I love this town...*

He entered the ballroom and went to the head table where he greeted his mother and the others seated with her. He sat down then quickly took a look around the room to see if he could spy his guest. The receptionist had told him what she wore though he had some difficulty in finding her. Then he saw her, sitting at a nearby table and his body reacted. Once he knew exactly where she was, he kept an eye on her for the rest of the evening.

Several times, she danced with other men. Matthew Lord felt jealousy's evil side rear its angry head but he held it at bay. The time when he would try to sweep her off her feet drew near and he had to stick with his plan. Finally, he could take it no longer. He got up, excused himself from the table and crossed the room to where she stood speaking with an older woman.

"Would you excuse me? I couldn't help but notice you from across the room."

"You have me at a disadvantage," she said.

"Masks tend to do that but I've been admiring you the entire evening."

"I see."

"Would you care to dance?"

"I'd like that very much," she said.

Matthew placed his hand lightly on her back and steered her to the middle of the dance floor. He jolted feeling heated shocks jumping between them. His cock throbbed as if it knew something he did not.

The band kicked into a Latin number, Matthew pleased. He pulled her tight and led, her body answering his commands and his silent call to her. *She is definitely the one—why did I wait so damned long?*

Their hips swayed together and when he spun her around, his body felt the separation. Pulling her back to him, he felt their heat and prayed. *May the luck of Bacchus shine down on us ...* At one point, his forehead touched hers and even through their masks, he could feel it. Undeniable scorching heat and he shared it with one woman—Ava Clinton.

When the music ended, he escorted her to her table and handed her a flute of champagne.

"What do you think of the party?"

"It's amazing," she said, hoping he'd hear her over the music and endless conversation.

"Good, I'm glad," he said. "Will it be possible for us to get together later? Someone's trying to catch my attention."

"Sure," she said quickly while flashing a brilliant smile.

"I will see you later then."

"Until then."

Matthew walked away from her, his body hating being away from hers. He ducked out of the room once he saw the time, then returned without mask or costume to officiate at the closing speeches. On his way to the stage, he caught a

waiter and asked him to give a note to Ava. After describing her then pointing her out, he watched the man hand it to her and saw her reaction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I take this opportunity to..."

* * * *

Ava could not help but feel the heat surging between her and the mystery man dancing an erotic Latin dance with her. She'd felt it the moment he placed his hand in the small of her back and guided her onto the dance floor.

They barely spoke, words unnecessary. Their gazes spoke volumes, nothing else needed. She molded her body to his, feeling lost when he spun her around but the second he pulled her back against him, she felt the heat and comfort. *Why do I feel this way about someone I will never see after this evening?*

The dance ended, her mystery man escorting her back to her seat and handing her a flute of champagne. She drank it, a heady sensation overwhelming her.

They talked about the ball, yelling over the music and the people talking around them.

"Will it be possible for us to get together later? Someone's trying to catch my attention."

"Sure," she said quickly.

"I will see you later then."

"Until then."

She watched him disappear into the crowd he'd come out of. She felt lost without him, a feeling she hadn't felt with any

other man she'd shared moments with throughout the evening.

Shortly before the host of the evening's gala spoke, a waiter handed her a note.

If you'd like to continue the dance, come to the penthouse after the ball.

She looked around, unable to see who might have sent it. She felt the same thing with this note as she had with the invitation, her stomach tightening. *Who the hell are you?*

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I take this opportunity to..."

Her heart slammed into her chest upon hearing his voice. She looked at the man speaking and, though the microphone distorted his voice a bit, she knew immediately who she'd been dancing with. *Oh, my God...*

Her mind racing, she never heard anything he said, his words blending together to caress her body and her heart. She stared at him, unable to take her eyes off him. She watched him leave the stage and head for a table where he hugged an older woman. Immediately, she recognized the elegant Victoria Lord—his mother. Her head spun more. *This cannot be happening...*

"Miss?" a waiter said a short time later.

"What? Oh, I'm sorry, what can I do for you?" she asked, removing her mask.

"It's time to leave so we can clean the room."

"Yes, of course. My apologies. I may have had too much champagne," she said, trying to come up with an excuse for remaining well after most of the guests had left.

"You might want to take a room for the evening. I hear there may be one or two left."

She thanked him then left, the note tightly clutched in her hand.

Finding a bellman, she asked him how to get to the penthouse. He led her to the elevator and pressed the button for her then waited for her to enter it. The doors closed and the elevator easily took her to the top floor of the hotel.

Nerves overtook her—her butterflies feeling like dive bombers as her father would say. She watched each number change and had second thoughts which she quickly banished. *No, if Matthew Lord wants this, then who am I to ... What the hell am I thinking? What if he expects me to do this as part of the job? No, Mrs. Cleary never had to or...*

Her mind raced. A shred of her sanity told her Matthew Lord was an honorable man and would never put her in an awkward position. She had to hold onto that one bit of hope or she'd never be able to face herself again.

The elevator stopped then the doors opened. Slowly, she walked out onto the carpeted floor and looked at the doors to two penthouse suites. One stood ajar as if inviting her inside. She took a deep breath, praying she hadn't made a mistake and gently pushed it open.

"Hello?"

"Ah, you're here," his beautiful voice said. "I was afraid you'd changed your mind or had second thoughts."

"I did have them—all the way up in the elevator. I'm not sure this is..."

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"Trust me, if you want to leave, I won't stand in your way but I would appreciate it if you'd hear me out."

"All right," she said, walking a little farther into the luxurious suite of rooms.

He handed her a cup of tea and motioned for her to sit down on the sofa while he took the chair across from her.

"Ava, it's like this..."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

"You cannot be serious!" she gasped, nearly dropping her teacup.

"Actually, I'm very serious," he assured her. "If our time on the dance floor is any indication..."

"But you're my boss," she exclaimed. "How is it you haven't even given me a clue?"

"I wanted to protect you. I know how those women gossip every chance they get. I'd hate for you to be the topic of their malicious chatter."

"Even in your office, you've always been so ... professional."

"The walls not only have ears but eyes that can read lips from a mile away. I would never set you up or put you in a position to be embarrassed. You are too fine a woman and a beautiful lady to deserve that."

"But, sir..."

"Matt, please."

"Matt, this is so overwhelming. On Friday, you gave me the extra work knowing you'd invited me to the ball and never once let on that..."

"For me to place anything above the company's well-being would be out of character. I wanted you to be unaware of what I had planned so if anyone asked, your reactions would be genuine. Believe me, I've had a hard time trying to get us to this one point in time."

"This is unbelievable," she said, rubbing her temple.

"Are you all right?"

"A gorgeous hunk of a man who just happens to be my boss and has a voice that turns my insides upside down has just informed me of his love for me, having taken me totally by surprise."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't figure out any other way and the timing with Mardi Gras and the masked ball..."

"Matt, I have been harboring feelings for you, too."

"You what?"

"From the first time I heard your beautiful deep voice then saw your amazing eyes, I have been in love with you. Unfortunately, I thought I shared a relationship with someone else..."

"Gay Steve?"

"You knew?"

"Yes, and he's been let go. If one of my employees can't be up front with me, then how can I trust them?"

"Then I guess that ends it there."

"Why?"

"I haven't been honest with you though, at this point, I don't know how I could be given the unique situation."

"Keeping feelings to yourself is a very honest reaction to the prospect of getting hurt by others. To use someone in order to get a promotion is an entirely different thing all together."

Matt got up and sat next to her on the sofa. He took her hand, the heat rising between them once more.

"Ava, I'm asking you to give this a chance. I've never felt this way about any woman in my life. You bring things out in me I had no idea existed before you came into my life."

"Do you feel this wicked heat between us, too?"

"It's amazing, isn't it?"

"On the dance floor, I loved being spun around by you but not the lost feeling that went with it."

"Same here."

He placed his hand on the side of her face, Ava leaning into it. He leaned over to kiss her, their kiss tentative at first. Before they realized what happened, their tongues danced an erotic dance while exploring each other. His hand slipped under the sheer purple/black creation to the top of the little black dress and cupped her breast. Moments later, he touched her naked skin, his cock begging for freedom long enough to trade the confinement of his suit for the imprisonment of her body clenching him.

"Ava, I need you. I want you in my life—now and always. I don't know what we have between us but we need time to explore it."

"Matt, I can't believe the heat rising," she said, while fighting to remove the sheer creation holding her captive. The moment she freed herself of it, his hand eased the thin straps of her little black dress from her shoulders and pulled the top of it down. Her breasts fell into his hands, Matthew wanting more of her.

"My God, you're amazing."

"Take it off—the heat is..."

Expertly, he removed her dress leaving her in a skimpy black thong, thigh-high stockings and black stilettos. She shivered a little from the cool breeze blowing from the balcony into the bedroom. Groaning, he picked her up and carried her to the bed, where he laid her in the center of it then proceeded to quickly remove his favorite Armani suit and deep purple shirt.

Ava watched his every move, her body anticipating his touch. Her pussy creamed, his mere touch sending her into a mini-climax. When he came to her, she gasped at how impressive his cock appeared, her reaction evident.

"Don't worry, my love, you'll take all of me," he assured her.

"Then don't make me wait. This is becoming unbearable."

"What is?" he asked, amused.

"I can't believe how much I want you and miss your touch. This is a first for me."

"Ava, I suggest you hold on because I plan to take you on the ride of your life."

"I'm ready," she gasped.

Matthew took her nipple between his teeth, exerting a slight pressure on it while his tongue laved it. His thumb brushed over her other nipple, her body jumping off the bed. He took her breast, suckling it then the other while Ava arched closer.

He slid his hand inside her thong feeling the evidence of natural desire.

"This must go," he declared seconds before he ripped it from her.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed, her body drowning his fingertips once he drew them across her sensitive skin. "I don't know what the hell is happening but I don't ever want it to stop."

Seconds later, she felt his entry. He slowly and torturously slid his swollen shaft into her pussy and held it while she clenched around him. Her body trembled from the sensation of his cock touching her innermost sensitive spot. She drenched his cock, Matthew driving into her further.

"Oh!"

Matthew kissed her neck then started to move in and out of her. As overpowering desire took over, his pace quickened. He rose up to look at her, her breasts moving in time with his powerful strokes. He felt himself swell more, learning it was indeed possible. Ava had taken him further than he'd ever imagined and he had to make sure she never left him.

She cried out again, her hands pulling the bedspread with them.

"Ava!" he called when he filled her, his release hot and forceful.

"Matt," she cried, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Are you all right? I didn't harm you, did I?"

"You're amazing. I'm so damned happy right now, I can't see straight."

"Are you all right with this?"

"I do have one question."

"What?"

"Am I fired?"

"Yes, but I'm going to hire you in another extremely permanent position."

"What?" she asked, unsure if he was joking or not.

"I want you to be my wife—if you'll have me."

Ava's face lost color, shock overtaking her.

"Did you just propose?"

"Yes, I believe I did."

"But we barely know each other."

"I know all I need to about you. I can't lose what we have found here tonight. You are an amazing woman and deserve better than taking orders and running for files. I saw it the moment you walked into my office and I've been trying ever since to get you to see me for me and not as Matthew Lord the Third."

"Matt, are you absolutely sure about this? What about your family?"

"My mother will be very happy for me and I'm very sure. If you need more convincing, I'm prepared to do anything you ask."

"Take me again. I can't believe how utterly magnificent you are," she said, her body arching closer to him.

Matthew drove his cock deep into her pussy and held it there while she shuddered. He thrust in and out of her before losing control and pounding her hard. Seconds before he filled her again, he looked at her.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Yes!" she screamed.

"Ava Clinton, will you *please* marry me?"

His release exploded into her, filling her to what felt like overflowing.

"Yes!" she screamed, her hands grabbing his ass to press him closer.

When he calmed a little, he kissed her.

"When you screamed yes, what did you mean?"

"I will gladly marry you, Matthew Lord the Third."

"I love you, Ava, more than you know."

"I love you, too, just as much."

* * * *

The next morning, they enjoyed a light breakfast before Ava took a shower.

"What's your hurry?"

"I'm late for work. You wanted..."

"Ava, my wife does not work."

"I'm not your wife yet. Besides, you had me in the file room all day Saturday and I..."

"I've already called you in—in fact, I did it while you were calling my name when I fucked your gorgeous ass several hours ago. Remember, you call into me."

"But what about the London trip?"

"I called the office earlier and left a message for Richards to take the trip. He's been in on the job from the beginning and can handle it."

She calmed some, catching her breath. Ava looked at him and laughed, shaking her head.

"What?" he asked, amused.

"I don't believe this is happening. If anyone had asked me twenty-four hours ago if I'd be engaged to one of *the* Lords of New Orleans and that I'd be standing naked in his hotel room this morning, I'd have told them they were crazy."

Matthew slid out of bed and went to her. He pulled her back into the bathroom and then the shower where he made sure the water temperature wouldn't be too hot. Once he had her under the shower spray, he started soaping her body. Tracing rings around her nipples, he kissed her while his cock throbbed impatiently between them.

He rinsed the soap off his hand before he slid three fingers into her pussy. She jolted long enough to tell him what she wanted. His lips covered hers before he kissed her while his fingers tortured her body.

"Matt, please..."

"What?"

"Take me now. I need you inside me."

"Anything, Ava."

Seconds later, she took his shaft and held him while he pinned her body against the tile wall of the stall. The heat intensified between the water temperature and their bodies. The moment he felt close, his lips covered hers. Their tongues danced, Ava moaning when he filled her. She held him closer, refusing to be separated from him.

"How soon can we marry?"

"Why?"

"I don't know your mother all that well but it might be an idea to be official before we tell her I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"Trust me on this. I've always trusted my instincts when it comes to things like this and it wouldn't surprise me at all if..."

His lips covered hers, his tongue exploring her mouth while he thrust into her again. His desire for her overtook him, his body out-of-control. He pulled back, looking at her, his breathing erratic.

"Are you sure?"

"It's a strong possibility," she gasped, his cock swelling more.

"Then we'll have to make sure. I love you, Ava, and I want this more than you could ever imagine."

"I'm not trying to trap you—you need to know that."

"I trapped you, sweetheart. I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you your first day in the office. I hated the time you spent with Steven because I knew his story from the get-go but I couldn't do anything about it."

"What will people think?"

"I don't care—you are going to be my wife and the mother of our children. I'm happier than I've ever been and that's that."

"I need to know one thing."

"What?" he groaned, his cock waiting to release but obeying his mind.

"You aren't mad because I'm not on the pill and we didn't use..."

"No, I'm not mad. What we have is too special to worry about what should and should not have been done."

"Good," she said quietly.

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"Perfect," he said, thrusting deep into her body.

Ava cried out, the heat of his explosion overwhelming her. She felt faint, relieved knowing Matthew Lord would catch her if she passed out. She dug her nails into his shoulder needing something to hold onto. She cried out again, the sound of the running water drowning her voice out to everyone but them.

"Matthew!"

"Ava, you're perfect."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

One year later...

Madera Ava Lord looked at her mother while she took her bottle. She'd been born in late November before Thanksgiving while her name reflected her mother's fiery Latin heritage. Her parents brought her home from the hospital a few days before the annual Lord family celebration. Now three months old, she constantly brought joy into their lives.

Once she fell back to sleep, Ava gently placed her daughter in her crib and quietly walked out of the room after making sure the baby monitor was on.

"How is she?" Victoria asked.

"She's fine. I can't believe how complete I feel."

"Having a family will do that to you."

"It sure does."

"Have you made plans for this year's ball?"

"I'm not sure what he has planned. I don't even have a costume and it's getting late."

"This year, Mister and Mrs. Matthew Lord the Third will enjoy the masked ball in formal wear while everyone else wears costumes," Matthew announced, as he slipped his arm around his wife and kissed her neck.

"Why?" Victoria asked, surprised.

"I want everyone to see the happiest couple at the party. I want everyone to know we're celebrating our anniversary and the fact Mardi Gras brought us together."

"You are such a romantic, Matt," Victoria said, smiling.

"Didn't think I had it in me?"

"All the Lord men are—it just took longer for you to get the chance to be one."

"It's thanks to Ava. If we hadn't found each other, I..."

"You give me way too much credit, Matt."

"I don't give you enough."

"I will leave you two darlings alone and go sit with my granddaughter," Victoria said, before giving each a quick kiss.

Matthew waited until his mother had disappeared before he yanked his wife into their bedroom and locked the door. Ava looked at her husband, waiting for him to make the next move.

She didn't have long to wait. He pulled her into a kiss and while their tongues danced erotically, he removed her clothes. In no time, she stood naked before him, her body crying out to his. He quickly stripped then lifted her up and carried her to their bed.

"I really hate going into the office anymore."

"Why?" she asked innocently.

"You're not there. I can't stand your replacement. She is not as efficient as you and definitely not as beautiful or..."

"Don't say anything more," Ava said.

"Ava, I leave here and can't wait to come back to you. I'm lost when we're apart."

"I feel the same but you do have a *Fortune 500* company to run."

"True and we did meet there so I should make sure we don't lose it."

"Exactly."

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Matthew took her nipple between his teeth and brushed the tip of his tongue over it. Her body arched closer, needing as much contact as possible with his. He massaged her breast before he switched to make sure both got the same amount of his attentive ministrations. Cupping her breasts in his hands, his tongue drew lazy trails down the length of her body to where her neatly shaved mons waited. Past there, his tongue laved and teased her, Ava's body bucking the moment it entered her.

The way he held her, she couldn't move. The more he tortured her and she fought to move, the more aroused he became. His cock impatient, Matthew knew what they both desired. He took her to the edge and held her there, watching her gorgeous body shaking from her climax. The moment he drove his shaft into her, she cried out.

The feel of her body clenching around his cock drove him insane with raw desire. He took his wife without mercy, his cock pounding her pussy until she screamed his name and begged him for more. Only one woman drove him this hard and she lay underneath him. Only she could take his raw natural prowess and understand while wanting more.

"Ava..."

She pulled him to her, her tongue teasing his neck as she worked her way to his mouth. The moment he came, she kissed him—their bodies entwined in erotic ecstasy.

Matthew rolled to the side, Ava moving with him to make sure his cock remained solidly embedded inside her. He gasped for air, out of breath but extremely satisfied.

"I bought you a surprise."

"Matt, you buy me too much. The diamond wedding band still amazes me."

"You're worth it," he said, then kissed her. "Seeing as you've been busy with our daughter and have given no thought to the ball, I chose a dress for you which will show off my beautiful wife while telling everyone *Hands off, she's mine!*"

"Matt, what have you done?"

"This," he said, sliding from her side and going to the long closet on his side of the dressing room. From it he pulled the designer gown he'd bought her to wear—a leopard print taffeta gown with yards of material yet sexy enough to drive him mad with desire.

Ava gasped at the sight of the copper and black creation. She went to him, touching the soft fabric and instantly in love with it.

"Who designed it?"

"Tadashi."

"It's amazing."

"Try it on."

She took it off the hanger and put it on. The ruched gown clung to the curves of her body and closed at her waist. The right side wrapped over the left creating a wide V neckline from off her shoulders though a ribbon of the fabric went from under her arms to behind her neck. The bottom flared out to an extremely full skirt which opened in the front to her upper thigh.

"This slit is to my..."

"And no one but me should take advantage of it."

"What do you have planned?"

"A surprise that I know you will love."

* * * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mister and Mrs. Matthew Lord, the Third."

Thunderous applause filled the ballroom at the *Aster Crowne Plaza*. The couple walked into the ballroom and to the family table where Mrs. Victoria Lord waited for them with several other members of the family.

"You look beautiful, darling. Matt has good taste."

"So does Ava." Matthew beamed.

Though not in costume, Matthew and Ava wore masks once they sat down and the ball began. Matthew disappeared for a moment then came back.

"May I have this dance?"

"Of course," Ava said.

He guided her onto the dance floor and they waited. The band struck up the same Latin arrangement they'd danced to one year before. Lost in the music and each other, they moved across the floor as one, their bodies tight together. When he spun her around, the skirt of her gown flared out, showing off her beautiful long legs. He'd pull her back, holding her tight as if fearing she'd be taken from him by adoring admirers. Wrapped in the dance and each other, they had no idea they literally owned the dance floor, the other guests having moved off to watch the hot power couple.

When the music ended, they kissed and ignored everyone around them.

"I love you, Mrs. Lord."

"I love you, too."

* * * *

Well after midnight, they finally said good-bye to everyone. Victoria assured them she and Madera would be fine. She told Matthew to enjoy himself and his anniversary surprise.

"You're a gem, Mother."

They left the ballroom, arm in arm and headed for the elevator. Once inside, he pressed the button for the top floor and leaned against the rear wall of the car.

"Did you do what I'm beginning to think you've done?"

"You'll see."

He pulled her into a kiss, his hand slipping underneath her dress and between her legs.

"Good, you're ready."

"For you, always."

The doors opened and he lifted her into his arms and carried her across to their room. She slid the keycard in then pushed the door open. Matthew carried her inside and didn't put her down until he'd taken her into the bedroom of the suite.

She gasped seeing rose petals covering the bed and the floor around it. She took note of six vases of roses in the exact places they had been a year ago.

"I take it you remember?"

"Everything but the rose petals. It's exactly like the night we met."

"And you said yes."

* * * *

While Matthew went to answer the door for room service, the devil in Ava took over. She removed the beautiful dress she'd worn for the ball and put on the mask. Wearing only that and the stilettos, she waited for her husband to return.

She heard the door open and turned to face him.

"My God, Ava," he gasped.

She seductively sauntered over to him, remembering how the women at the exclusive men's club in the movie *Eyes Wide Shut* walked. Once she stood next to him, she traced the side of his face with one of her long fingernails. Carefully, she made sure to touch only certain spots knowing how her touch could arouse her husband.

"Ava, you're gorgeous," he said, catching his breath.

"What do you want to do?"

"If only you had a clue," he whispered.

"I'm yours, Matt. I give you myself, my heart and soul, my body. Please..."

Matthew Lord pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her. His hand went to her pussy, barely brushing over her sensitive skin. He felt her tremble with anticipation, her body fusing to his as she gave her entire being to him.

He carried her to the bed, laying her in the center of it. He removed his tuxedo slowly, torturing her with temptation. Once he finished, he laid next to her then set to teasing her senses.

"Your desire is obvious, my dear wife."

"But it began as a masked desire last year."

"They say Mardi Gras inspires many."

"It did it for us," she said, her nail tracing along his side.

Matthew took her nipple and suckled it while three fingers entered her pussy. He lazily finger fucked her while he drove her over the edge.

"Is my seductive masked goddess ready for what's to come?"

"More than ready," she gasped.

"Good."

Matthew thrust into her, his cock pounding her willing and desirous body. She cried out his name before his lips covered hers. Her moans threatened to echo through the room had he not taken them inside him.

Breathless, she flung the mask off, needing to see him without feathers in the way.

"I love you, Matt," she gasped. "I think we did it again."

"Did what?"

"Conceived a brother or sister for Madera."

"How can you tell?"

"This time felt different—I feel like I did when we conceived our daughter."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes, Matt, I am."

Matthew thrust into his wife again and fiercely pounded her body once more. He fell to her side after he filled her, breathless.

"God, I love your masked desires," he whispered.

Ava grinned.

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"Only for you."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

KNOCK THREE TIMES

by

Honey Jans

Chapter 1

Chemise Logan tucked a wisp of strawberry-blond hair behind her ear as she fumbled with the safe's dial. Trust her eccentric aunt to leave the combination in a cryptic note, along with the deed to the antique shop. Chemise's life had been a series of disasters of late; first she'd been fired from her job at the museum after the scroll she was conserving had seemed to spontaneously combust. Now she had her thirtieth birthday party to get through tonight. She wasn't quite sure she was ready to face her ex-coworkers yet. Not with her future in jeopardy. Dr. Edwards had even threatened to press criminal charges against her if his suspicions that she'd been negligent were confirmed. She knew they wouldn't be, but living under a cloud of suspicion sucked.

The safe's dial finally loosened with a click, and Chemise let out a relieved sigh. *At last. Auntie had been so protective of this—paranoid, even—so the safe's contents had to be interesting, maybe even valuable.* Going through the mystery goods would keep her occupied until Janelle picked her up for the party at Charlie's Bar.

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The heavy safe door swung open with an audible creak. Brimming with excitement, she peered inside, and then groaned. The safe was nearly empty. A glint of gold from the top shelf caught her eye. She drew out the jeweled pendant bearing the image of Isis, Egyptian goddess of love. If it was the real thing, it would be priceless, but what would Aunt Betty be doing with a genuine artifact?

The pendant had to be part of the Egyptian tourist junk that had flooded the market after Canarven unearthed King Tut, but it was expertly done. She slipped the exquisite necklace on, thinking it the perfect accessory to set off her turquoise dress, and felt a sense of warmth overcome her as it nestled in her cleavage. Another metallic object was tucked away in the back of the safe ... a priceless statue perhaps? She was sure she wouldn't get that lucky but the treasure hunt was fun, not to mention distracting.

Her heart raced as she reached in and pulled out an Egyptian oil lamp. Now *this* was the real thing. She could feel the item's antiquity; the former curator in her was as excited as a schoolgirl. It didn't matter if she made a dime when she got to touch beauty like this.

Why had Auntie stuck this treasure away? It belonged in a museum. Cartouches decorating the artifact told her it had belonged to someone important. Roughly translated, they read, "Knock three times." She smiled and did just that, rapping three times on the table.

The lamp warmed, thunder clapped outside, and Chemise fell back against a fainting couch as steam escaped the lamp. Blinking her eyes in disbelief, she watched the mist instantly

transform to naked male perfection before her eyes. She was obviously hallucinating, but what a sexy way to go crazy.

Her fascinated gaze swept over her phantom genie, focusing on his stirring cock. His body heat, his very presence wrapped around her, making her blush. She gulped and managed to tear her eyes off his impressive package. Her stunned gaze traveled up, past six-pack abs and broad shoulders, and finally focused on his handsome, scowling face. As their eyes met, an unexpected wave of lust hit her, taking her breath away. He was irritated and sexy as hell, and his whiskey brown eyes seemed to read her thoughts. He was wearing a pendant just like the one in the safe. At the thought of it, the gem seemed to heat up in her cleavage. Chemise's sex grew wet, her nipples budded tight, and her lips tingled as she stared at him. He was everything her wet dreams could have conjured up. *Happy birthday to me!*

He frowned and ripped his pendant off. "If she sent you to fetch me, vixen, tell her to screw herself."

She watched in shock as he opened his palm and the pendant he'd torn off vanished into thin air. Of course he'd speak English—she'd dreamed him up—but his British accent and his fury took her by surprise. She pushed away from the couch and her knees buckled. His hand shot out to steady her, wrapping around her forearm.

"She chose well," he said, tugging her toward him.

His warm palm made her tremble. He wasn't hurting her, but he wasn't letting her go either. A tingle of energy shot through her as his grip firmed. She'd always dreamed of a demanding lover, not that she'd ever admit it. She only dated

men who couldn't see past her dowdy image. And sex, there was precious little of that.

But this was different. She couldn't say who moved first, but they came together as if drawn by a magnet. "Holy moly, what a hunk," she blurted out. Well she'd finally flipped. When she went off the deep end, she did so with gusto, dreaming up her very own genie. But at least she'd picked a dream lover who couldn't give her away. She watched his glare focus on the lamp still clutched in her right hand. The damned thing heated up again, darned near burning her fingers. She glared back at him. Well, hell, he certainly wasn't acting like a dream lover.

He stared at her, hard. "What does she want?"

Bewildered by his aggressive tone, she asked, "She?"

"The goddess you serve. Isis." He focused pointedly at her pendant.

The breath caught in her throat as his gaze lingered on her cleavage. Her breasts seemed to swell, the nipples stiffening, her primal response shocking her. Her chin rose mutinously as she tried to get her racing hormones under control.

"Goddess I serve?"

His eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me. I will not tolerate it."

The implied threat made her angry. She would have to dream up a nut. "I serve no goddess, only myself."

"You wear her image."

"So did you." His expression turned remote at her words. She could feel his suspicion, his anger, but most of all his need. He needed her. It wasn't his fault he was mentally off-kilter. Everything she touched lately was a little off, especially

the scroll she'd somehow destroyed. Why should her dream lover be any different? The loss of the ancient book of spells that'd combusted before her eyes still pained her. "Should I call you Genie?"

She watched the corners of his sultry mouth turn up with reluctant humor, and she relaxed. Now that was more like it. The smile made him approachable—yummy, even. Her lips tingled as she stared at his sultry mouth. She so wanted a big bite of him. She knew she was desperate for sex when her urge to jump her hallucination was almost irresistible.

"Why should you call me Genie? My name is Lucien."

"I thought all men who emerged from magical lamps were genies."

"Not if they had the job foisted on them by an evil genie. I was working on a dig in the Valley of the Kings when Zander captured me to serve out the needs of his mistress, Isis."

So he was an Egyptologist who'd been the love slave of a goddess. Now *that* she would have dreamed up, seeing that her passion was Egyptian antiquities.

He gazed around her shop. "What kind of rubbish shop is this?"

She glanced at the cluttered shelves filled with assorted dusty collectables and sighed. Her former co-workers had voiced similar opinions, putting her on the defensive. That was another reason she wasn't looking forward to her birthday bash. Aunt Betty's tastes had certainly been eclectic, but she'd had a good eye. "This is Aunt Betty's Antique Shop." Her chin rose. "I sell old things, like you, hot stuff."

His eyes narrowed. "I am not for sale, Aunt Betty..."

A Torrid Celebration!
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"I'm not Aunt Betty," she said with a smile. "I inherited the shop from her. I'm Chemise. *Miss Chemise Lawson*." Time seemed to stand still as she looked into his eyes. His firm grip on her arm relaxed into a caress and she couldn't stop herself from leaning into him, feeling his potent strength. She bit her lip, holding back a moan as her curves pressed against his tempting hot body. She closed her eyes, embarrassed by her reaction, as he bit out a low curse.

"Hell, I've no time for this," Lucien muttered, but he bent to nuzzle the nape of her neck.

Panting, almost swooning in his arms, she stiffened. She wasn't some charity case. If he didn't want her he could just poof back into the lamp. She pulled back to tell him so, then hesitated. Lucien's smoldering gaze swept over her breasts; she could swear she felt him touch her there. Her nipples budded tighter as she pressed against him, aching to have him inside her. Her clit tingled and her sex grew creamy. His sultry smile said he knew how she was feeling. Hell, he was probably a mind reader too. He couldn't just cut and run; she'd dreamed him up, damn it! "You can't go," she said. "You owe me three wishes."

He gently tugged the lamp out of her hand. "You've been reading too many fables, my lady. You're mistaken. I owe you nothing."

She frowned as he stole her lamp. "Wrong, I know the fairy tale as well as you do. I release you and you grant me three wishes."

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"You don't have the power to truly release me. Zander will soon learn of my escape and come for me. I must go. A gentleman does not put a lady in jeopardy."

Well that just tore it. Only she would dream up a reluctant genie. She looked away to hide the tears of frustration misting her eyes. "Go then if you don't want me. I've got a man coming to pick me up in a few minutes anyway."

Lucien pulled her against him, saying, "Don't be daft, woman. How can you say I don't want you?"

Chemise gasped as he ground his throbbing erection against her and she stopped thinking completely. She let out a murmur of pleasure, wrapping her arms around his neck, when his mouth slanted over hers with fierce demand. Shaking with need, she melted, aching for him to possess her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Sir Lucien Darby's head swirled with suspicions, unanswered questions, and desire as he tested his stiff cock against Chemise's soft womanly body. She was built for love, for him, but who the hell was she? His beloved? Nonsense, he wasn't falling for that again.

Isis had had an astrological chart made for him. Oswald had assured him that someday his beloved would release him from captivity. Three signs would mark her. She'd trust him for no reason, she'd risk her life for him, and she'd bear a heart-shaped beauty mark on her left breast. He'd been fool enough to believe the prophecy, thinking Isis was the promised one. It'd all been a trick and after he'd uncovered her deception, she'd banished him to his lamp. He didn't know how long he'd languished there in slumber. It didn't seem to matter when Chemise kissed him.

She was a far cry from the simpering handmaidens Isis always sent to fetch him. Even if he hadn't had her strange provocative dress and language for clues, Chemise's feisty attitude would have told him she was different. He was a man out of time, but he didn't care. He found her spellbinding, arousing. But why was she wearing Isis's symbol of protection? The pendant was real—he knew because he possessed one. It was his last link with the goddess and he'd sworn he'd never use it.

Chemise whimpered, rubbing her hard nipples against his chest, and he forgot all about the past. He'd never felt such

warmth. He could tell she was hesitant, untried, but her instincts were good. When she tumbled him down onto the couch, he acquiesced with a grunt, pulling her atop him, even though he knew he should hurry. The urge to be with her was just too strong to resist.

Sprawled atop him, she froze for a moment as if shocked by her own boldness, and he stifled a groan. He couldn't bear to let her go now. He smoothed a hand down her spine, and her clothes vanished in his hand's wake. He waited breathlessly for her reaction; would she play the shy maiden, or would she keep ravishing him? Her blue eyes widened in surprise, and he watched, bemused, as a blush spread from her face to her delectably curved ass.

"How did you do that?" she asked with a sultry smile.

"Magic," he said, gazing at her through a haze of desire. His cock was so hard he thought it might burst, but when she lay on top of him, it grew even harder, aching. It had been so long, centuries, and he'd never been near anyone like her. She dared to make eye contact with him, her blue eyes smoldering with desire. He felt the same heated rush, and his cock twitched in response; she wanted this as much as he did. When she bent to lap at his nipple, he let out a hiss, his body arousing to painful proportions. She moved onto the other and he lay back with a laugh, letting her ravish him.

She raised her head and gave him a troubled frown. "Are you laughing at me?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," he responded. When she shimmied down to dip her tongue inside his naval, he lost all thought.

"Good," she said, slipping lower to flick her tongue against his cock.

He mumbled to himself, his body jerking in response as she licked him like a sweet. Knowing he couldn't last much longer, he grasped her arms, urging her up. He wanted to be inside her. She gave him a moue of disappointment and let him pull her up.

Lucien's heart skipped a beat when the heart-shaped mark on the curve of her right breast came into sight. Fate was laughing at him again. Oswald's prediction had come true; his beloved had set him free. What would Chemise say if he told her of it? He licked one of her sweet strawberry peaks.

She moaned, "Lucien."

He suckled her, his cock nestled against her soft wet heat. She rubbed her mound against him, and his balls tightened. He groaned in an attempt to slow things down. "Do you want this, Chemise?"

"More than you could possibly know."

"Oh, I think I've got a good idea," he grunted as he began to enter her tight wet sheath. Her sex spasmed, clamping down on him, forcing him to gasp.

"You're too big," she said with a cry.

"No, beloved. It will be perfect." He played with her stiff little clit, feeling her shudder and let out her juices. He eased the rest of the way into her until she took him all.

Chemise whimpered, rocking against him.

"That's it," he praised, his cock throbbing as her sheath rippled over him. It was perfect. Gripping her hips, he thrust up into her harder and deeper until they were both gasping.

She came, crying out his name, and he jerked, coming high and hard inside her.

Finally sated, he pulled her down on top of him. She settled against him with a sigh of pleasure, and he held her tight, knowing he'd found a treasure.

Cradling her in his arms, Lucien reveled in the sensation for a stolen moment. Then he cast a sleeping spell on her and felt her go under. After a moment, he forced himself to let her go and slipped out from under her body. She murmured, curled up on the couch asleep. He gazed down at her longingly, wishing he could stay. But Zander would stop at nothing to destroy her, a mere mortal who'd had the temerity to summon him. He needed to draw danger away from her tonight. After that, his one hope was to reverse the spell and put Zander back where he belonged: in the lamp, where he couldn't victimize others.

He blinked Chemise's clothes back onto her, shielding her from his hungry gaze. With a grumble of self-reproach, he dressed himself and bent to pick up his lamp from the floor. He couldn't walk about the city with the key to their survival in tow.

He carried the lamp to the open safe and thrust it inside, putting a blocking spell on the safe to prevent it from opening. The heavy metal casing would block its location. Was that where he'd languished all these years? Isis must have truly forgotten him. He pulled his mind off the imperious goddess and gazed back at Chemise, still dazzled by her tender and genuine reactions as he'd made love to her. He'd never experienced anything like it.

He gave his beloved one final, hungry glance before he strode from the shop. Her sleeping spell would be wearing off soon. He stepped out the door and almost collided with a tall, blond woman in a red dress. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she gazed from him to the closed sign.

"Where's Chemise?" she demanded.

"She's inside, waiting for you." He walked away glad to know that Chemise had a champion. She'd lied about a man picking her up. It wouldn't be the first time a female had deceived him, but this time he was glad. Maybe she was trying to make him jealous. He couldn't help smiling at the thought.

* * * *

Chemise woke with a start, her heart racing, her body tender. She brushed a hand over her wrinkled dress. It'd only been a dream. Her shoulders sagged at the realization, but she couldn't help glancing around the vacant shop for Lucien. Of course he wasn't there; he wasn't real. With a disappointed sigh, she glanced toward the safe. It was closed and there was no lamp was in sight. Time to get back to grim reality.

"Chemise, are you okay?" Janelle called out from the front of the shop.

Chemise sat up, brushing the hair out of her eyes and straightening her clothes. Thank goodness Janelle hadn't walked in on ... what? A sex dream? She scrambled off the couch, trying to regain her composure. "Back here," she

called out, picking up on her friend's worried tone. "What's the matter?"

Janelle burst into the back room as fast as her high heels could take her. "Who was the hunk?"

"The hunk?" Chemise gulped as she stared at her drop-dead gorgeous friend. The museum's donations coordinator was as exquisitely dressed as usual, tonight in a red dress that showed off her model thin body. The concern in her friend's eyes was replaced with a twinkle as she took in Chemise's blush. Was her vivid imagination contagious?

"Yeah, hunk. Tall, dark, and handsome if you like them brooding."

That described Lucien to a T, but she wouldn't let herself go there. Chemise shook her head, avoiding Janelle's incisive gaze. She so didn't want to talk about her dream lover. Her body tingled at the thought: her private genie. "I wish," she said, turning away to pick up her purse.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

Chemise smiled warmly at her three friends and former co-workers as Janelle led her toward a back booth at Charlie's Bar. Amber, a flirtatious brunette, worked in the business office, and Miko, a petite Asian woman, was a conservator like Chemise had been. Except Miko was still working. Through the years, they'd all bonded over coffee breaks. The fact they'd stuck by her after she'd been fired meant a lot.

"Happy birthday," they said in tandem, toasting her with chocolate martinis.

"Thanks." She clicked glasses with them. "So, how are things going at the museum?" She wanted to get the awkward subject out of the way.

Miko shook her head. "Not good. The director's hired consultant hasn't been able to come up with an explanation for the..."

"Inferno," Chemise cut in sourly.

"Accident," Miko corrected while the others nodded.

It wasn't a vindication, but maybe it was the best she could expect. With the budget stretched tight, how hard would the board of directors look? They'd simply continue to lay the blame at her door and move on, especially if the museum's insurance paid up. She sighed, demoralized.

"Cheer up, girlfriend," Amber said. "There's still a chance you'll be cleared and get your old job back. They haven't hired your replacement yet."

"And if they don't take you back, the hell with them," Janelle cut in. "You've got other things to think about, like that hunk you were canoodling with."

Chemise swallowed a groan as the others' eyes lit up with curiosity. They were constantly trying to fix her up, but there was no way they could matchmake with a mirage. "I told you there *is* no guy. It must have been a lost guy you bumped into."

"Too bad," Janelle said with a sigh. "He was hot."

Chemise gave the matchmaking trio a firm gaze. She wasn't in the mood to be fixed up with their cast-off dates. "I'm not interested in dating right now."

"But it's your birthday," Miko said.

Chemise got a very bad feeling. "You idiots didn't set me up with a blind date, did you?" Their guilty looks made her shoulders slump. After her hallucination, she wasn't in the mood to dance with some awkward stranger.

Miko shrugged. "We may have mentioned your party to a few eligible men."

"Oh lord," Chemise murmured.

Amber sat up straighter and stared toward the bar. "Don't worry, Chemise, you won't lack for male companionship. Get a load of the stud, and the way he's staring at you. Seems like your birthday is looking up, girlfriend."

Lucien? Chemise's breath caught. After Janelle's assertion about the hunk leaving her shop, she was starting to believe it too. Her gaze snapped up to the bar. She let out a crestfallen sigh when she saw a strange man watching her. He was good-looking, with coal-black hair and intense icy

gray eyes that seemed to focus on her, but he wasn't Lucien. "I'm not interested."

"Told you she wasn't up to this," Janelle said quietly to Amber.

Chemise winced, feeling their sympathetic glances on her. If they thought she was fragile after being fired, they'd really think she was nuts for dreaming up Lucien. She took a calming breath. "I'm fine."

When the man started walking toward her, she bit back a groan, fighting the strangest urge to run. It was true ... she was cracking up. He looked perfectly nice in a remote, cool way, she told herself as he stopped in front of her.

He smiled. "Dance with me."

Put off by the seeming order, she frowned up at him. He was a jerk. She didn't take well to being ordered about, and this iceman was putting her back up. He seemed to realize it and he smiled, losing his stiff formality. She let out a sigh, realizing she'd overreacted. He wasn't such an ogre after all. If she danced with him, her friends would stop worrying. She smiled and took the hand he extended. "Love to."

"Good," Miko said.

Amber nodded. "I'll say. Go get him, girl."

Chemise pasted on a smile and let her partner lead her out onto the dance floor. When he took her in his arms, she shivered as a chill went through her. Her heart raced, and she had to force herself to go through the motions of dancing. Still, she instinctively backed off, leaving plenty of space between them. *It's only a delayed reaction to my*

hallucination bothering me. She gazed at his pleasant expression.

"You dance well," he observed, whirling her across the dance floor.

"Um, so do you," she replied, almost missing a step, which made her stumble and crash into him. "Sorry," she murmured and tried to make space between them. His arm at the small of her back tightened, keeping her pinned to him. Then she noticed he'd managed to dance her into a dark corner. It was as if the other dancers were separated by a force field.

Boy, her imagination was running wild: he was just an ordinary run-of-the-mill pervert. She stopped dancing and glared up at him, glad she was close enough to knee him in the groin if he tried anything. His pleasant expression turned cold.

"He must find your fierceness amusing," he said, his probing gaze raking her body.

There was no he in her life unless he meant ... "He?"

"Lucien," he bit out.

Her jaw dropped as fantasy and reality collided. It couldn't be ... she must still be dreaming. She pinched herself and felt pain. His frosty smile told her he knew what she was thinking. She cast a panicked glance back at her friends and bristled when they totally ignored her.

"Don't bother. They can't see or hear us."

He could only be one person. "Zander," she whispered in disbelief as she tried to rack him. He thrust his leg between hers, preventing her move, and bent her arm back until she cried out.

"How nice, he told you my name," Zander said. "Where is my slave? My lamp. My property."

She recoiled as he bit out each statement. "Lucien isn't your slave. I freed him."

He blanched for a minute, then smirked. "You stupid mortal bitch. You don't have the power or the authority."

"Who does, the bitch goddess you serve?" she snapped and watched his gloating smile falter. *Was Lucien correct about Zander no longer having Isis' protection?* Her tingling senses alerted her to Lucien's presence, and a sense of relief made her stop struggling. Zander's eyes narrowed at he took in her change of attitude.

"What do you think you're about?" he demanded.

Lucien popped up on his left. His concerned glance focused on Chemise for a moment. He gave Chemise a glance of concern before Zander became aware of him. Zander let out a snarl as Lucien tore him away from Chemise.

Zander laughed and launched himself at Lucien, getting in a punch to his ribs. "You think you can protect her, fool?"

"He doesn't have Isis' protection," Chemise called out, and she saw Lucien smile. Zander turned to glare at her.

Lucien grunted and landed a solid punch on Zander's chin.

Reeling back, Zander glared at him, conjured a gun out of midair, and aimed it at Chemise.

Lucien stepped in front of her, blocking Zander's aim, and the Isis pendant appeared. Zander froze, his eyes narrowing. "Where did you get that?"

Lucien stood his ground. "Be gone before I use it to blast you into small pieces."

With a muttered oath, Zander disappeared into thin air.

Chemise watched him go, bemused. The most unbelievable things kept happening to her, and they were real. Trembling with shock, she locked her appreciative gaze with Lucien's. He was real, and he'd saved her.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he approached her.

She nodded and took in his masculine scent as he closed the gap between them. He looked like a warrior; a nerve pulsed in his jaw, and his mouth was a firm line. He was obviously feeling the same surge of adrenaline she did, but he was better at controlling it.

"I'm fine, thanks to you," she responded, trying to be strong. She winced when she noticed the bleeding knuckles on his clenched fist. "You're hurt."

"It's nothing," he said dismissively.

How could he be so blasé? "Like hell. You could have been killed."

Lucien shook his head and pulled her into his arms. "He'll only kill me as a last resort. He wants me back in the lamp so he can continue his attacks on humanity."

Chemise nestled in his embrace, feeling him stiffen when she hugged him. *Had Zander broken his ribs?* "Wait. So if you remain out of the lamp, there's a way you can send him back?"

"We don't have time to discuss it," he said, taking Chemise by the arm and moving her toward the exit. "You were really worried about me," he said softly.

"Of course I was," she said. *Still am.* His surprise told her just how badly he'd been hurt over his years of captivity.

"Obviously, being the object of concern is a new experience for you, but you'll just have to get used to it." She watched his slow smile emerge.

"Hurry, we must leave."

She shivered, understanding the need to rush. But her friends would worry if she just disappeared. So she stopped in her tracks, halting their retreat. "I can't just leave. My friends will worry."

He sighed, his irritated gaze flicking over to Janelle. "Fine. Say your goodbyes."

So Janelle and Lucien met outside the shop. Chemise gave an apologetic smile and turned to rush over to the table with Lucien at her heels. Her friends' admiring and curious glances at Lucien made her blush. She'd gone onto the dance floor with one man and come back with another. Such goings-on were so unlike her usual dull self. "I've got to leave, girls."

"I can see why," Amber said, batting her eyes at Lucien.

"He's the one from the shop," Janelle said.

"Excellent," Miko said, her gaze running him up and down him. "He's worth hiding. I can see why you were keeping him a secret."

Chemise blushed. It was true—and she wasn't about to share him. "Bye," she said, turning away.

"Have a happy birthday," they called as Lucien took her arm and rushed her out of the building.

Out on the sidewalk, he turned to look at her. "Your conveyance. Where is it?"

"Um ... I rode over with Janelle. Sorry. We can call a cab."

"No time," he said, pulling her toward the alley. Once there he swept her into his embrace. "Hang on to me, beloved, and don't let go."

He kept calling her that. It was an old-fashioned endearment, but she liked it. She clung to him, growing dizzy as the world spun away. Suddenly, they touched down, and she opened her eyes to see a strange room. The alabaster walls seemed to glow with an inner light. She looked around, fascinated. Silk wall hangings framed opulent furnishings and a large bed. It was like an *Arabian Nights* fantasy bedroom. Were they in the lamp?

"Where are we?"

"Some place safe."

She glanced over at him, hearing his confident tone. He was watching her like *she* was the most exotic thing in the room. His sultry smile made her blush, and a heat wave rushed through her. "Are you sure about that?" she asked to change the subject.

"For the moment, yes," he said, stepping toward her.

Chemise instinctively backed away, feeling vulnerable. She'd had the courage to ravish him before. This time she'd play it cool; she'd be aloof, seductive, and exotic, not out of control. So why did she want to tear his clothes off and taste him?

"How can you be sure?" she shot back at him, watching the corners of his mouth kick up in a smile. He knew exactly how he was affecting her, damn it all.

"It's inside your safe."

His words confirmed her guess. "We're in your lamp."

He nodded.

"Can we get out again?" she asked, recalling that he'd been imprisoned.

"Yes. If I entrench myself here, I can come and go as I please. But if I'm trapped—that's a different story."

She wouldn't mind being trapped with him for, say, one hundred and one sexy nights. Her heated gaze moved from his captivating face to the bulging erection inside his pants. "But what about me?" she asked.

"As my guest..."

"Captive," she corrected. His wicked smile made her heart trip and her sex grow creamy. Damn it all, there went her hard-to-get act.

"As my guest, I can pop you in and out at my will."

"Then you can pop me back to my place?" His hard smile told her it wasn't going to be that easy.

"I can, but I won't."

The disclosure made her shiver with delight. "Then I am your prisoner."

"Would you like to be?" he asked, intrigued.

It was too close to the truth for comfort, but she confessed. "Maybe."

"That's no answer."

His bad boy smile was maddening and arousing; it made her want to tumble him onto the bed and have her way with him. Her body still tingled from their last coupling, and she wanted more. But tonight the equation had shifted: *he* was in charge. She bit her lip, trying to hide how vulnerable she was. "This place is like an Aladdin's treasure chest of goodies."

He looked around the plush surroundings and shrugged. "My mistress presented me with many gifts."

"Isis." Her jaw tightened as she spoke her rival's name. Jealousy was petty and unbecoming, but she couldn't help it. She must be dull compared to a goddess, but there was no way she wanted to share her man with that bitch.

He shrugged. "At one time she teased me with promises of freedom. She taught me that women lie." He came up behind her, bending to nibble the nape of her neck.

"I don't," she said with a gasp; she leaned into him, her body on fire.

"You already did. You told me a beau was picking you up."

Her knees wobbled as he nipped her earlobe. "Sorry about that. It was a white lie. I wanted to make you jealous."

"You did," he said, his hands cupping her breasts as his fingertips fanned her nipples.

Whimpering, she thrust her bosom more firmly into his talented hands. "Really?" she questioned, astounded.

"Yes, really," he assured her with a chuckle.

Emboldened, she asked, "Would you like to carry on where we left off, Lucien?"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

"Do you mean you're going to attack me again?" he asked, teasing her.

"I didn't exactly *attack* you." Her face heated even as she pressed her ass against the tempting bulge of his cock.

"Near enough. Don't worry, I'm used to it."

"I'm not Isis," she said, offended that he would make the comparison.

"Well, I know it. You're more passionate and tender."

She melted at his words. "Thank you. But I think I'd rather *be* attacked." She moaned as he pinched her nipples. "Oh yeah, that's it."

"Do you know what you're asking?"

"Uh huh," she murmured, her body aflame. She looked over her shoulder, locking gazes with Lucien, excited by the heat in his dark eyes. She knew he'd be masterful, sexually demanding, and she craved it. "I'm yours."

He nodded and let her go, stepping back. "Prove it."

She stood immobile for a moment, startled by the daring demand. How could she prove it? She reached back to unzip her dress, shrugging it off her shoulders, and let it drop to pool at her feet. Lucien's hungry gaze made her body quiver. She gave him a teasing smile, noting the heavy beat of his pulse in his throat. Emboldened, she reached back to unhook her bra and let it slowly slide off, revealing her breasts an inch at a time. The flare of heat in his gaze made her sex wet and her nipples tight. Her hands shaking with need, she

peeled down her panties and stood before him, unashamedly naked.

"Very good," he said, reaching out to tweak one nipple.

She gasped with pleasure, but he dropped his hand, making her pout. "Your turn," she demanded, breathlessly. He closed his eyes and his clothes vanished. "No fair!" she exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"It goes with the job."

"What else can you do?" she asked, intrigued. She watched his mouth kick up into a wicked smile. Then she let out a gasp as she felt unseen hands caress her, touching her nipples, her sex. "That's cheating," she said, panting for breath.

"So who said I play fair?" he countered, quirking an eyebrow. "If you want to be my love slave, go to the chest and pull out the red velvet pouch."

Gasping as she fought to control her arousal, she made her way to the heavy oak chest and opened the lid. She pulled out the red bag. It was larger than she'd expected and filled with something hard. Intrigued, she carried it back to Lucien.

"Open it and see your toys," he said with a smile.

She laid the bag on the bed, pulled the drawstring, and poured out two white marble phalluses—one large, one small as her little finger. Did he mean to use them on her? Her body clenched at the exciting thought. She gazed at them, imagining how it would feel if he teased her with them. Her sex pulsed. Intrigued, she gazed up at Lucien, her hand tightening on the large one.

His eyes twinkled. "Show me how you'd like to pleasure me."

Her lips tingled as she stared at his sultry mouth. She brought the marble phallus to her mouth, swirling her tongue around its cool head. It warmed to her touch. Her eyes met Lucien's as she sucked on it, and she saw his eyes darken. He was just as turned on as she was, but he was better at concealing his emotions. She groaned and sucked harder, her pussy quivering with each stroke. This was what she'd wanted to do to him earlier—what she still wanted to do to him.

"Come here," Lucien said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She walked toward him on unsteady legs, still mouthing the dildo, the hot look in Lucien's eyes driving her on. He smiled and reached out to tumble her across his lap. She acquiesced with a muffled gasp of shock and delight.

"Does my naughty slave girl need a spanking?" he asked as his big hand spread across her bottom.

Her buttocks heated as his hand lay above them, and she nodded. "If you say so," she said, pulling the dildo out of her mouth and placing a kiss on its bulbous head.

"Good answer," he said, his hand coming down on her bottom with a smack.

She gasped as heat moved through her bottom, making her pussy quiver. He was going to make her come if he kept that up.

"Keep sucking," he said, accompanying his words with short, quick spans.

She moaned around the phallus as he caught her by surprise, setting up a steady pace. Her clit brushed against

his leg, making her gasp. Tightening as the ripples took her over, she let out a cry as she began to come.

Next, Lucien gently took the phallus out of Chemise's greedy mouth and slipped it into her creamy pussy. She moaned helplessly, her spasming walls clamping down on the object as he nested it deep inside her. He eased the smaller phallus into her ass, and she gasped in surprise, her body rippling on the device. He began to spank her again, making the marble shafts vibrate inside her as her body clamped down on them. With a final, hard smack to her mound, he pushed her over the edge until she cried out as she came. When it was over, she hung breathless and limp over his lap.

Lucien picked her up and placed her on her back on the bed. She moaned as her hot bottom hit the cool sheets, her pussy and ass rippling with after spasms. The shock of being turned over Lucien's knee still made her senses reel. She gazed up at his handsome face through an orgasmic fog as he stood over her. "More, please," she begged with a sigh.

His eyes twinkled. "Spread your legs, Chemise. Let me see your treasures."

Her legs parted at his command, and she couldn't help blushing as he gazed hotly at her bared pussy. She knew she was wet and pink, the dildos still clenched by her hungry body. He smiled and reached down to stroke her labia, tracing maddening circles around the two dildos. She cried out, arching her hips off the bed. "Play with yourself, beloved. Show me how you like to be touched."

At his urging, one of her hands went to her clit while the other plucked at her stiff nipples. His smile made her crazy.

She bit back a moan and reached for the phallus in her pussy, fucking herself with it. She desperately wanted the real thing, but she had a feeling he wouldn't be rushed.

"Is that how you'd like to be fucked?" he asked, sitting beside her. He cupped her breast, bringing the nipple to hardness again while she let out a needy whimper.

"Reach up and grab the headboard," he commanded.
"Don't let go until I tell you to."

Her hands shook as she reluctantly released her hold on the dildo. She was aching close to coming, and he knew it. Her ass was still hot from her spanking. She gazed deep into his eyes, telegraphing her need, and reached up for the spindles of the headboard. The breath whooshed out of her lungs as he knelt between her trembling thighs and touched his tongue to her clit; the wet and heat almost pushed her over the edge. He sucked her clit into his mouth, nipping it, and she came, her eyes rolling back in her head. He surged up her body, pulled the dildo from her pussy, and settled between her warm thighs.

His throbbing cock rubbed against her creamy sex, and she arched up, trying to complete their union, still clutching the headboard. He backed off an inch, hesitating.

"Look at me, Chemise," he demanded.

Her eyes popped open at his demand. His intense look made her want to hold him. He'd suffered so many betrayals, but she was different. She loved him. The thought came as no surprise.

"Do you want this, Chemise?" he asked.

The swollen cock rubbed against her clit, and she hissed with pleasure.

"Yes," she said with a needy moan, and gasping when he began to enter her. Her ass rippled on the small dildo, and she moaned. She murmured and gave herself over completely, melting around him. His huge cock filled her completely and he lay still inside her, letting her get used to his size and to the double invasion.

She moaned, luxuriating in the sense of being claimed completely. As he began to piston in and out of her, Chemise met his thrusts, quivering, gasping for breath as he drove deeper. The tingling pleasure swept from the point of their joining until it filled her entire body and the rest of the world seemed to fall away. She closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sensations, tightening and convulsing around his driving cock. Lucien stiffened, coming hard against her cervix.

When it was over, he rolled to the side and held her close. Almost immediately, Chemise fell into an exhausted sleep, feeling Lucien holding her tight.

* * * *

An hour later, Lucien went to his crystal ball. He didn't want to leave Chemise, but he knew he had to locate Zander. Zander's reaction to Isis' emblem had been telling: Zander really wasn't under her protection anymore. Lucien would use that to his advantage. He gazed deep into the swirling clouds inside the orb, seeking out his nemesis, and ground his jaw with frustration when Zander stayed out of sight. The evil

genie was powerful and crafty; Lucien couldn't afford to underestimate him.

Chemise sighed in her sleep, and Lucien turned to gaze possessively at her. She was his very own sex slave; she hadn't expected the dominance, but she'd enjoyed it. He sat down with his quill and parchment and began to plan.

A few moments later he sensed her presence and looked to see Chemise standing next to him. It didn't say much for his defensive instincts that he hadn't sensed her movement. And in that instant he acknowledged that his odds weren't good. Zander was powerful, even without Isis' protection.

Still Lucien focused on Chemise, dazzled by her beauty. He wrapped an arm around her naked waist, drawing her close to him. Her fascinated gaze was focused on his crystal ball.

"Is that what I think it is?" She peered into the orb's cloudy depths.

He smiled loving at her inquisitive nature. "It's a crystal gazing ball."

"How does it work?"

"Concentrate on what you want to see, and it may appear."

"How about my office ... or ex-office, I should say."

The anger in her tone made him wonder. "You lost your position?"

He watched her blush and he wanted to hurt the one who'd wronged her. Whatever had caused her dismissal both angered and embarrassed her.

"Yes," she answered with a sigh.

They gazed into the ball as a cluttered office came into view. The top of her desk held a wilting plant and stacks of papers.

"Why that bastard. He told me my things were being shipped to me."

"He?"

"Yes—my boss Dr. Edwards. And he let my plant die. What a jerk."

"Tell me about it," he offered, hoping to unburden her.

"A scroll I was working on suddenly burst into flames for no reason. I know I didn't do anything wrong, but it pains me that the ancient text was lost."

"You are an archivist," he said, shocked they had so much in common.

She smiled sadly. "I was." She glanced at the parchment he'd been writing. "Actually, part of the text was exactly like this—the calligraphy was just the same."

He went still as a sense of destiny passed through him. She was his beloved, and these events were fated. He knew it.

She picked up the illuminated page reverently. "Did you copy this? The calligraphy is outstanding, nothing like my scribbled notes."

"You have notes?" he asked sharply.

"Yes. Why?"

"The complete spell is what I need to defeat Zander. It will send him back into the lamp permanently. I've been trying to recall parts of it."

She looked up at him in wonder. "That's impossible. Things don't fall together for me like this."

He pulled her closer. "I have a story to tell you. When I'm done you may be a believer."

"After I was captured, I refused to do Isis' bidding, so she had a gift made for me: an astrological chart that showed that a woman would set me free. I'd know her by three signs. She would give her life for me, she would trust me when she had no reason to, and she would have a heart-shaped beauty mark on her left breast. At the time, I was fooled into believing Isis was the woman. Now I know better."

She gazed at him in wonder. "And she'd be called your beloved."

He nodded.

She frowned. "Then you've known our destiny all along ... and didn't tell me."

He could feel her hurt. "Would you have believed me?"

"No," she admitted with a sigh. And then she met his eyes. "You thought it was a trick, didn't you?"

He wanted to deny it, but she was too smart for that. "At first."

"How could you be so..."

"You were wearing Isis' protection."

"That's true," she said grudgingly.

"She doesn't just hand those pendants out to anyone ... how did you..."

"I found it in the safe, along with your lamp. Aunt Betty left them to me in her will. I wonder how she knew?"

He smiled, relieved that she seemed to forgive him.
"Sometimes it's better not to question fate."

"Right, let's get back to Zander. Have you tried to trap him in the past?" Chemise asked.

"Yes. I only had a brief look at the scroll and didn't know the complete spell, so my efforts didn't work. They will this time, thanks to you."

"My notes are complete," she said, smiling. "All we have to do is pop over to my office and get them."

His jaw tightened at her excited tone. There was no way he'd expose her to danger. "Just tell me where to go." Her stubborn frown made him even more determined to keep her out of it. She'd throw herself in the path of danger if he allowed it.

"Impossible. The museum is like a maze. I'd have to show you."

He captured her chin to force him to look at him. "No. Zander already tried to kill you once, and I won't make the same mistake twice."

"He won't hurt me with you around."

"I'm not taking that chance," Lucien said flatly.

She glared at him. "You can't stop me. I know my way around the museum, and you don't. I'm going."

He shook his head.

"Look at it this way. If you get worried, you can pop me back in the lamp."

"No." He pulled her astride his lap, smiling at her outraged shriek. Then they both gasped as he entered her. It was a

dirty way to win an argument, but he didn't care. "Don't fight me on this," he scolded, nibbling the nape of her neck.

She moaned, rubbing her stiff nipples against his chest. "You're a stubborn man, Lucien."

"Now you *are* sounding like Isis."

"Bringing her name up at a time like this isn't a smart move, stud." She nipped his earlobe.

"Sorry," he answered as her honey walls rippled on his throbbing cock.

"So she accused you of being stubborn?"

Lucien groaned and thrust up into her. "I wouldn't bend to her will. She left me with one final chance to call to her. I haven't used it. You feel so damned good wrapped around me, beloved."

"Oh, yes," she moaned.

"I heard it's your birthday."

She whimpered as she ground against him. "Um hum. I'm turning the dreaded three-o. And I can't think of a better way to celebrate it."

He pulled the ring off his little finger. It had been in his family for centuries, and he wanted to bind himself to his lover. He slipped the ring onto Chemise's finger, smiling at her gasp of surprise. "Happy birthday, Chemise."

She looked at the gold ring, touched. "I can't accept..."

"Would you like to go over my knee instead?" he warned, his eyes twinkling.

She grinned and nodded. "I think I'd like that."

He rolled his eyes. "I think I've created a monster. Take my ring." Lucien's hands stroked down her back, tracing her form, and squeezed her bottom.

He growled, smacking her ass playfully.

"What are you doing to me, Lucien?" she murmured.

"Playing with my love slave," he said, spanking her again.

"You're driving me crazy," she said with a gasp.

"Good. It's mutual."

"I remember when I thought you weren't real."

"How about now?" he asked, surging into her.

"Oh yeah," she murmured. "You're the real deal."

He thrust into her a final time as her orgasm pushed him over the edge.

Lucien held her tight as their heartbeats slowed in tandem. Though he knew she'd hate him for it, he willed her into a deep sleep, his body still joined intimately with her. He'd put Chemise in a safe place while he dealt with Zander; he'd protect her at all costs. He sighed and did the one thing he'd vowed never to do: he called in his last favor with the goddess.

He conjured his pendant out of midair and scooped Chemise into his arms as he stood. He dressed them with a blink and thought of Isis. Moments later, they were standing in the audience room of her palace. As usual, his clothes vanished, and he felt the chill of the cold marble floor.

Isis, seated on her throne, glared down at Lucien with Chemise in his arms. Isis always stripped him when he appeared before her; that was just one of her ways of

humbling him. He stood before her without bowing. "I need your protection."

The air around Lucien crackled with her outrage. She glowered imperiously down at Chemise in his arms. He noticed her furtive glance around the empty hall as her servants retreated. She was afraid of being caught with her secret plaything.

"How dare you bring this mortal before me ... *slave*."

"I'm calling in my last favor." He watched her eyes narrow with calculation and was repulsed. How could he ever have found her attractive? He much preferred the warm and tender woman in his arms.

"What will you give me?"

His mouth quirked into a sarcastic smile. She always demanded her pound of flesh. He held out his hand, and her pendant appeared in his grasp. "I'll give you back your love gift. You wouldn't want Ra to know you gave it to a mere mortal."

She sucked in a breath. "You dare to threaten me."

Hell, he didn't have time to argue with her. "No. I'm just stating a fact." Chemise stirred in his arms, and he stroked her back, renewing the sleeping spell.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, intrigued.

"Protect my beloved while I battle Zander. And give me your word that after it's over, she will be safe."

"That bastard—I was forced to banish him."

"Let me guess: he was starting fires again."

"I should have killed him," Isis said bitterly.

"But that would have attracted too much attention."

She arched a raven dark brow. "You ask so little. You do not ask for your life?"

He held Chemise tighter. "She is my life." He watched her roll her eyes at the sentiment; he knew she would never understand.

"What do I care? You'll destroy each other, and I'll be rid of you both." She regally inclined her head. "I'll protect your plaything while you go on your fool's quest."

* * * *

Chemise woke in a strange bed. She looked around at the thick limestone walls in shock. Where was she? And more importantly, where was Lucien? Had Zander found a way to separate them?

"You're awake," a woman said from a dark corner of the room.

Chemise peered into the shadows, and her jaw dropped when she saw the goddess walking toward her. After conserving so many manuscripts, she'd recognize Isis anywhere. Isis looked remarkably like her pictures and the image on the pendant nestled between her breasts. "Lucien will be furious when he learns that you kidnapped me."

Isis laughed. "Do not presume so much, foolish mortal. You are beneath my notice."

"Then why am I here?"

"He gave you to me, fool." She flashed a cruel smile.

Chemise burned. That had to be a lie. "It's not true," she blurted out, but the goddess' smug smile made her doubt herself. She glanced down at Lucien's ring on her finger and

her confidence returned. Lucien would only hand her over to the woman he hated for one reason ... her protection. He was going after Zander alone, and he'd called in that last favor he'd talked about. Her steady gaze flashed back to the goddess. "You can't let him fight Zander alone."

Isis's eyes narrowed. "You're very perceptive for a mortal. He made his choice," she said sourly, raking Chemise with an annoyed gaze. "There is nothing I can do for him."

"Choice?" Chemise asked, picking up on Isis' envy. To think a goddess would be envious of her seemed ludicrous, but it was true.

"His life or yours. He chose poorly." Isis turned to leave.

Chemise bolted from the bed. "Bullshit. You caused all this just because you had an itch that needed scratching." She froze while Isis glared back at her. A heartbeat later, Chemise gasped as she was flung back against a wall.

Isis smiled. "I promised to keep you. I didn't say how."

Chemise glared back at her, refusing to cower despite Isis' threats. "If you won't help him, I'll leave and do it myself."

Isis laughed. "You will remain here."

"The hell I will." Chemise lifted the pendant from her chest, acting on a hunch, and watched Isis' smug smile falter.

"Where did you get that?" Isis hissed.

"From my aunt," she said, rubbing the pendant.

Apparently, it had power. Now if she could just get it to work. She thought of Lucien and felt her body tingle.

"Stupid fool. If you go back, you forgo my protection."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 5

Chemise felt the world spin away and touched down in her office at the museum. It was dark, still evening, so not much time had passed. She stepped toward the light switch, but the night watchman's plodding footsteps made her freeze. It wouldn't do to have him catch her in the act of stealing back her notes.

After his footfalls faded into the distance, she dared to switch on the lights, then ran to her desk. She'd left the notes in her top drawer. If she was lucky, they'd still be there. She pulled open the drawer and found her notes on top. She let out a sigh of relief, but the sound of her office door opening made her look up in a panic. Zander stepped into the office and shut the door. His searching gaze scanned the room, and she noticed the lamp in his hand. Was Lucien trapped inside? Her senses told her he wasn't. She would have felt his vibrations.

"Where is he?" Zander asked.

"You're still asking the same stupid questions." She watched his eyes ice over at the jibe and she pulled her notes out of the drawer. She only knew one way to fight him. "I'd worry more about me, not him," she said.

He laughed as he saw the notes in her hand. His gaze made the edges of the paper singe.

She patted out the fire. "You. You're the one who burned the scroll and got me fired."

He grinned. "It's one of my favorite tricks."

He wasn't just nuts—he was a firebug. She clasped her notes tight, chanting, "Genie from..."

Zander stopped in his tracks and threw her a glare. "Stupid mortal. You cannot defeat me."

But she sensed his doubt—it was why he'd destroyed the scroll. This was fate. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. I have Isis' protection," she said to distract him, and she watched his mocking smile.

"You would be at her palace if that was so."

"I was. I left."

He shook his head. "That was your first mistake."

"Why aren't you with her?"

His eyes narrowed. "I don't have to explain myself to the likes of you."

He raised the lamp, and she fell silent at the threat. If he smashed the lamp, Lucien might be injured or killed.

"That's better; shut up and sit in your chair. I'll deal with you at my leisure."

She sank into her chair and gasped when she heard Lucien's steady treads heading their way. The cold smile on Zander's face chilled her. She reached for her wilted plant. When Lucien opened the door, she lobbed the pot straight at Zander's head. It bounced off his head with a thud, and he groaned, crashing into the wall.

"Why, you stupid bitch!" he yelled as he set her chair on fire.

"Don't touch her," Lucien ordered with a deadly growl, taking Zander to the ground with a tackle.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

Chemise's heart lodged in her throat as she watched the men roll across the floor, fighting for supremacy. Lightning and thunder flashed in the room. She had to stop this craziness before Lucien was killed.

She began to chant the spell again, "Zander, Genie from Below, go back from whence you came. Set your captive free."

Zander let out a howl of pain, his body turning transparent. In a whoosh, he was sucked into the lamp.

Chemise gazed at Lucien, praying he was all right, terrified she might lose him. He picked himself off the floor with a wince.

"You saved me again. It's getting to be a habit with you."

"Do you mind?" she teased, relaxing when he smiled.

"Not a bit," he assured her, pulling her into his arms.

She nestled against him, feeling the rightness of his embrace. Were the fates smiling down at them? "Where do we go from here?"

"How about back to bed?" he suggested.

"Now that I like," she responded, and she began to kiss him passionately. She broke the kiss to gaze up at him. She had so many questions that needed answering. Like, would he stay with her? Was he still a genie? His lamp or her apartment? Frankly, she didn't care as long as it had a bed. "Does that mean I get to keep you?" she asked, her body melting into his as his cock throbbed against her.

"I don't know," he teased, one of his hands cupping her breast, his fingertips fanning the nipple to attention. "That wasn't one of your three wishes."

"Hah," Chemise said. "Those don't count. I didn't know you were real at the time."

"And now?" he asked, studying her reaction.

"You're very real." She moaned when his hand slipped down to possessively cup her mound and pressed closer to him. "I don't care if we have to find another bottle to live in. I'm keeping you."

"And you wouldn't miss this place or your shop?" he asked, wrapping an arm around her waist.

He was a bit worried about her decision. The realization warmed her heart even as it firmed her resolve. "Not a bit. I've found an antiquity that interests me a lot more than anything in the museum."

"Nice to know I'm appreciated," he said with a grin. "And you'd go back to my time with me?"

"In a heartbeat," Chemise agreed, wrapping her arms around his neck as he played with her.

"We could be bi-coastal. Time jump so you could study your favorite time period up close and personal."

"Lucien, lover, the only thing I want to get up close and personal with is you," she said, melting against him as her sex quivered. The sultry look in Lucien's eyes told her he'd found his home and it was with her, wherever they chose to go. "Now about those three wishes..."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SPANISH LULLABY

by

Emma Wildes

My Dearest Son,

I am so gratified to hear news of the end of this terrible conflict and the final triumph of our valiant soldiers. Everyone at Chedwick Hall cannot wait for your return. A celebration is the order of the day, as I am sure you agree. I expect you have not had much gaiety in Spain these four years. Praise to God you can return to us.

From the Duchess of Chedwick to her son, the Marquess de Santorino, upon hearing of Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 1

Chedwick Hall, Berkshire
1815

The house looked the same. Ivy-covered walls, the elegant stone façade imposing against the sweeping lawn of the park, the trees holding impossibly green summer leaves, the long drive well-maintained as he rode along.

He kept his horse at a slow walk in a deliberate attempt to put off the inevitable.

Odd. He wasn't a coward in battle. Of course, it depended on the enemy.

Carlos Verde guided his mount toward the stables, wanting to see to the stallion himself. They had come through four years of hell together and if anyone deserved to be cared for well, it was Cortez. The poor animal had been wounded more than once—actually they both seemed to have a knack for being in the line of fire. Even now Carlos slid from the saddle and stifled a wince. His arm was usable, but far from healed. A stable boy ran forward to take the reins but Carlos said pleasantly, "I'll tend to him."

"Yes, my lord." The lad was young, but not too young apparently to remember him. He stammered, "Wel-welcome home."

Home. That point was debatable. After all, he was half-Spanish and had significant holdings in his native land, not to mention a rich family history. Perhaps he had fought in the British Army, but he'd done so just as much for Spain as

England. However, the rolling downs of Berkshire were where he was raised. "Thank you. Perhaps instead of tending my horse you could go up to the house to tell my mother of my arrival."

"Of course, sir." The young man turned in the direction of the sprawling mansion. He hesitated a moment, swung around and then blurted out, "If you don't me saying so, my lord, bloody good show! We taught that strutting Corsican a thing or two now, didn't we?"

It had been bloody certainly, and nothing good about it except the grueling campaign had finally delivered a victory. But explaining that to a sixteen-year-old stable hand was probably futile, and besides, he'd ridden all the way from London and was tired as hell. Carlos murmured, "I suppose one can look at it that way. Please tell the duchess I will be up directly."

"I will, sir." The boy hurried off.

He hadn't asked. Oh yes, he'd wanted to inquire in as detached a manner possible if Lady Juliet was in current residence. The last he knew she was in Bath with his step-aunt, her mother, but the post was notoriously slow and that information was months old. In her last communication, his mother hadn't mentioned her at all.

But the letter before that, well, he didn't particularly want to think about it. He'd gotten drunk the night after he read it, truly foxed perhaps for the first time in all four of those hellish years, and woken sick and ashamed and angry and a dozen other things the next day.

Of course the young lady in question was engaged. Certainly. Why not? She was beyond the age for it, actually, and not only beautiful and charming, but well-dowered. He hadn't seen her in four long years but somehow he doubted she'd grown less attractive and certainly the society bulletins in the letters he received indicated a dazzling success with the *haute ton*.

Golden hair, like silk under his fingers, soft lips parted beneath his, the warm feel of her breath against his cheek in a heated sigh...

It didn't matter that he still loved her. That he'd always loved her as long as he could remember. She was going to belong to someone else.

With the ease of long habit, Carlos put up the saddle, quickly brushed down his mount, measuring out oats without even thinking about it. Just as he finished the task, he heard the thud of hooves, the rider coming at a reckless pace into the stable yard.

Somehow, he knew.

That easily, that fast. Like the same kind of sixth sense that kept him alive through battles like Badajoz and Salamanca. He stiffened, not sure if it wasn't better this way. Over and done with as soon as possible had merit. Like pulling a crusted bandage from a half-healed wound.

Maybe it would be fine. Perhaps all the dread was for nothing.

Somehow he doubted it.

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A laugh rang out, light, musical and entirely female. Squaring his shoulders, he strolled out into the stable yard with a slight, practiced smile on his face.

* * * *

She almost fell off her horse in an undignified heap. The materialization should not have struck her so forcefully. After all, she'd known Carlos Verde was back in England, known he would come to Chedwick soon. It was just this day, this hour, this moment ... she wasn't ready.

Not, Lady Juliet Stather thought in consternation as she reined in her mount, that she would ever probably be really prepared. Rather like having the devil rise from the ground, she pondered darkly as she took a deep steadying—and hopefully inaudible—breath. A handsome one, albeit, but definitely as untrustworthy as sin.

Carlos Verde, Marquess de Santorino, wore his signature mocking expression; a faint curve to those well-shaped lips, a slight rise to his arched ebony brows, just the correct wicked glimmer in his dark, seductive eyes. Raven hair was worn just a shade long as was the fashion and it gleamed blue-black in the afternoon sunshine. He drawled in a smooth tenor without the slightest hint of an accent, "Good afternoon. I wondered how long it would take for our paths to cross. I am sure, of course, you are delighted to welcome me back with open arms, Juliet. I accept in advance your felicitations on my safe return."

Somehow she found her voice after that first earth-shattering moment when she realized he was really *there*,

controlling her restless horse with one hand. "I see the French are as inept as ever with their marksmanship."

Something flickered in his dark eyes.

Touché.

"Since I knew how deeply you would mourn my passing, you can be assured I stayed to the back of the lines to spare you pain." He was dressed in elegant riding clothes, the usual epitome of style, the tailored jacket spanning wide shoulders, fitted breeches and polished boots obviously new. His mother had said he'd stopped over in London and one would never guess he'd spent the past years in a British uniform.

Except, she could not help but notice he was thinner. Still tall, still muscular, but the classic bone structure of his face was highlighted by his leanness and faint lines by his mouth made him look older than she remembered. He was, as always, devastatingly attractive, nothing would change that, but ... different.

"Ever the gallant, as usual." Juliet gave him a deliberately false, saccharine smile. "You needn't have bothered to go to such lengths for me."

"For a beautiful lady, nothing is too much trouble, even trying my best to not get shot." To her dismay he stepped forward and grasped her waist, lifting her easily from the saddle.

The touch of his hands ... dear God, she felt the reaction swirl through her at even the commonplace gesture of politesse as he set her down on the ground. She quickly took a step back—bumped into her horse naturally since it was right behind her—and felt like a fool.

Carlos, damn him, was amused at her discomfort. The corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly as he stared down at her. "You have grown up, I see, Senorita. From lovely girl to stunning woman."

She barely noticed when one of the lads discreetly took the reins of her mare. Carlos rarely spoke Spanish but when he did there was a slight husky note to his voice made most women weak-kneed by all accounts. She was not one of them. "It's been four years," she said in a voice that held credible detachment to her relief. "I am sure everyone has changed some. Perhaps you have even grown up yourself after getting to play solider, Carlos. For Aunt Mary's sake I am glad you survived. Now, if you will excuse me, I am going up to the house to change for tea."

"I'll walk with you."

"Excuse me if I decline."

He fell into step next to her anyway. Her step-cousin always had an infuriating knack for doing as he pleased. The fact his legs were much longer than hers precluded walking faster unless she broke into an childish run and she refused to do that so she simply gritted her teeth. He slanted her a look and his mouth twitched again. "I'm going that way myself," he explained without apology.

"As usual, my wishes do not count. Perhaps you haven't changed after all, my lord."

"Perhaps. I see I was optimistic to hope you'd forgotten the way we parted, Juliet."

Surely not even someone as arrogant as her handsome cousin was that presumptuous. "No," she said shortly,

studiously looking ahead and not at him. "But it really does not matter. I do not care about your presence here one way or another."

"Total indifference? I see."

"Exactly." She reached for the gate into the gardens but he politely circumvented her and opened it instead, waiting for her to precede him. He was very tan, she realized, his graceful fingers bronzed as he held the latch.

"You never answered my letters." He spoke in the same conversational tone he'd used ever since he stepped out of the barn.

"I never read them." Juliet brushed past him and started up the path to the back of the house. Blooming flowers rose in fragrant banks on either side, the air warm with just the slightest hint of a breeze. Normally she would enjoy the lovely afternoon—she had, in fact, on her ride—but now she just wanted to get in the house as soon as possible.

To her surprise Carlos did not follow her but simply stood there, still holding the gate, motionless.

* * * *

It should have been one of the happiest evenings of her life. Unfortunately, despite her son's safe return and her joy over that miraculous fact, Mary Deburgh, the sixth Duchess of Chedwick, instead had a dismal feeling. The tension during the sumptuous meal celebrating Carlos' safe return was just the beginning.

She'd predicted this all along, not that her husband would ever admit she was right.

As much as she disliked doing it, this evening alone told her she would have to meddle.

For the good of everyone.

Her son looked well. She studied him with a mother's critical eye across the table. Thinner than he should be, but that would change soon enough now that he was home, and he'd always been naturally lean, like her first husband, his father. He was as handsome as Juan Carlos also, if not more so, with the same aristocratic bone structure and striking dark coloring.

In contrast, Juliet was fair, all ivory skin and golden hair. Enormous blue eyes dominated her delicate face, and though she was slender, she'd filled out nicely in the right places, which men seemed to appreciate if one counted the many offers for her hand in marriage. The fact she'd finally accepted one in direct conjunction with the ending of the war was not a coincidence. Mary sipped her wine. It was ludicrous to come to the conclusion her niece had waited for Carlos, and then at the last minute suddenly decided to become engaged, but it seemed to be the truth.

The clink of china was the only sound in the vast dining room during most of the meal and even her husband, Gerald, had roused himself once or twice to make small talk, a minor miracle. Though there was normally more family in residence, Gerald's sister, Juliet's mother, was visiting a friend and wouldn't return for a few days, and their youngest two children, Robert and Harold, were on a fishing trip to Wales.

Maybe with more people at the table it wouldn't have been so noticeable, but with just the four of them, the fact Juliet and Carlos didn't speak to each other was glaringly obvious.

Yes, something definitely needed to be done.

"The ball will be next week," she announced, signaling for more wine to one of the footmen. "Hopefully this glorious weather will hold. The flowers should be spectacular and it has been ages since we've held an event here."

Carlos lifted a dark arched brow, candlelight flickering across the chiseled planes of his face. "You needn't bother on my behalf, Mother."

"Nonsense. It's for you, but also for the end of such a dreadful war. I am tired to death of hearing about Bonaparte and now I won't have to. That alone is reason to celebrate."

Gerald gave a gruff laugh. "You see, Carl, it's for her, not you. Any excuse to have a party."

"I'm glad we won and could ease your suffering." Carlos gave her one of his charming smiles, the kind that had gotten him out of dozens of scrapes as a child because it tended to disarm her instantly.

For a moment—just one—Mary saw Juliet look away and swallow and it had nothing to do with the meal.

Ah yes, the power of a handsome young man's smile...

"I shall invite every eligible woman possible." Mary speared a small bite of chicken and tried to look bland. "You are twenty-five. It is time to look for a wife."

"I'm only twenty-five," Carlos corrected, reaching for his glass.

His hand wasn't quite steady. Surely a good sign.

"It can't hurt to take stock of what is out there."

"Good God, woman, you make it sound like gazing at a herd of cows," Gerald grumbled. But there was a gleam of humor in his eyes as if he knew exactly what she was doing, even though—like all men—he could be extremely obtuse at times.

"Juliet is engaged," she pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone. "To Lord Drake, who is quite the catch."

"So you wrote and told me." Carlos took a very long drink of his wine. He glanced across the table at the young woman sitting there picking at her food. "I believe I failed to offer my congratulations earlier when we met at the stables."

"Thank you." Juliet snapped out the response and lifted her chin.

"Of course. Naturally, I am very happy for you." It was smoothly said, but there was just the slightest edge to his tone.

Like bloody hell, you are.

"Naturally." Juliet echoed the sentiment in a sardonic voice.

Oh yes, she needed to meddle at once

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

The smell of crushed grass filled his nostrils, coupled with the fragrance of her hair, so sweet and fresh. In the aftermath he lay barely balanced on top of her slender voluptuous body, his pulsing cock still held in the tight sheath of her vaginal passage, his breathing ragged. In post-orgasmic bliss he felt a sheer contentment he'd never experienced before because in his heart he'd always known it was meant to be.

This woman, this exquisite pleasure, this monumental feeling of possession...

Carlos lifted his head finally and gazed into her face. Framed by a halo of golden hair, her smooth cheeks were flushed, her eyes still closed, her soft mouth parted and damp from his kisses. His hips were nestled between her open thighs, the warm cradle perfection.

He stroked her shoulder. "Juliet?"

Long lashes fluttered and lifted. Eyes of pure sapphire blue stared at him. "What did we just do?" she whispered.

He teased her collarbone with the tip of one finger, tracing the graceful arc. He could feel the pliant weight of her bare breasts against his chest, the soft cushion more than erotically pleasing, erect nipples pressing against his flesh. "We were a little reckless, I suppose, but if you haven't always known this would happen sooner or later, I have."

"We ... we shouldn't have."

She looked so adorably chagrined he couldn't help but laugh. "No, probably not. But," he added with a wicked grin, "you liked it."

A vivid pink blush crept upward into her face. "It wasn't what I expected."

"Hmm." He leaned down and kissed her, taking his time, savoring her taste and the feel of her in his arms. His mouth traced a path to her ear and he asked in a low whisper, "What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Not ... that."

She'd climaxed. He'd felt it, heard it, triumphed in it. The ripple of her inner muscles around his cock made him go straight over the edge with her. "Apparently you doubted my word it would be like nothing you've ever experienced." He teased the delicate junction of neck and shoulder with his tongue. "Shall I show you again?"

"I don't think we should, I mean..."

"Let me convince you. After all, the damage is done, sweetheart."

He began to move, his erection returning in record speed, never having really faded even after that explosive orgasm. Slowly he slid backwards and thrust into her wet, tight heat, hearing every moan, every pant, every feminine sigh with pure male satisfaction, with acute sexual hunger, with the feeling his life had changed forever...

* * * *

Stark moonlight poured over the bed. Carlos sat up, gasping and disoriented, a light sweat on his skin. The French

doors to the balcony outside his bedroom were open and the night breeze moved with a low sigh.

Jesus, he was hard as a rock, his erection making an embarrassing tent in the blankets, like he was some adolescent boy and not a grown man.

All because Juliet was in the same house, asleep only a few doors down, pale and gold in the filmy light, as untouchable as if she resided on the brilliant moon in the velvet night sky.

She hated him. Even though she'd told him as much the day he'd left four years before, he hadn't believed it. But truth be told, he was starting to think it was true.

Of course, what gave it away, you damned fool? The fact she told you flat out, the unread letters you poured your soul into, or is it because she's engaged to another man?

It was ironic to think this was his reward for four years of deprivation. Of battle after bloody battle, of seeing horror he'd never imagined existed, of sacrificing every waking moment to a cause he knew was worthy, was honorable, yet one she didn't understand at all.

Both his countries—Spain and England—had needed him. The price was that now Juliet did not.

Bloody fucking hell.

He lay back down against the pillows, staring blankly at the ceiling. No matter what she'd said, he'd expected her to wait. What a selfish ass. What an arrogant idiot.

At least it had been a good dream. Not that he would go back to sleep anytime soon. With a sigh he got out of bed and pulled on his breeches, wandering out onto the long balcony

to take in a lungful of night air. Still half-erect, his cock bulged against the material so he adjusted it with a grimace, and then leaned against the balustrade, looking out over the gardens in abstract contemplation.

It was a beautiful night with only a velvet breeze and the muted sound of insects in the trees. England was a world away from Spain, so lush, green and fertile, though he also loved the rocky slopes and picturesque valleys of his homeland. He could almost smell the bivouac campfires, hear the sound of distant cannon fire, taste the half-boiled weak tea he was grateful to have at all. The music also, the plaintive melodies of a people besieged but not conquered, ballads of war, of pain, of lost love...

Very softly, he began to sing,

"Fare thee well, sweet maiden

Off to war I go

I will think of thee in these cold nights

Sweet maiden, fare thee well."

"So long I loved

So long you have known

Our dance as old time

You've taken the hand of another now

Sweet maiden, fare thee well."

There was more, but he really couldn't remember the words and maybe that was just as well. He let the last refrain trail off and stared morosely at the shadowed depths of the spreading paths and neatly tended beds of blooming plants. After his mother's grand party maybe he should go back to London.

Maybe even back to Spain eventually. His estates there needed his attention.

* * * *

The soft singing held her mesmerized. The lyrics were in Spanish, so she didn't have the slightest idea of their meaning, but the underlying sadness to the haunting beauty of the song was spellbinding. Juliet stood by the window of her bedroom, one hand fisted in her nightdress as she listened to the voice fade away.

The man had a lot of infernal nerve to dare to sound melancholy. She was the one left behind as he rode off to war, to possible death. No one forced him to go, he chose it, chose to leave her. It was more complicated than that in his mind, she knew—but when it came down to it, the simple truth was he'd chosen honor over love.

And she had loved him. She'd always loved him from the moment her mother had brought her to Chedwick to live after her father's untimely death. She'd been four and Carlos eight, and in retrospect, he'd been pretty good-natured to let a little girl follow him around like an adoring puppy. When the time came for him to go off to school she'd been despondent, and his holidays home always a highlight. Naturally, as he'd grown older, he spent more time away from the estate—for any handsome titled young man with significant wealth London held more appeal than the countryside.

Juliet had also gone off to school, so they'd rarely seen each other. She hadn't thought too much about it, as when their paths crossed, their relationship seemed to pick up

where they'd last left it, so comfortable it felt like breathing. So easy. He would tease her, she would laugh and point out his myriad flaws, the banter familiar. They would go for morning rides together, reminisce over mutual childhood adventures ... in short, they were friends.

It would be forever branded into her memory the day she'd realized her feelings for Carlos were not simple sisterly affection. She was sixteen, just old enough to be included in adult functions. Carlos had been home from university, and Lady Braxton, one of the guests at a dinner party, had most certainly noticed his presence. At a guess in her early thirties at the time, the woman in question was a raving beauty with auburn hair and aqua eyes, her voluptuous figure shown to advantage by a daring gown. Apparently Lady Braxton had an appreciation for handsome young Spaniards for she shamelessly flirted with Carlos the entire evening. Juliet had realized to her amazement she was extremely put out.

Jealous, in fact. Very much so.

Everything changed at that definitive moment.

She began to notice ... certain things. The width of Carlos' shoulders, the length of his lashes over those seductive dark eyes, the straight line of his nose, and most of all, the quicksilver charm of his smile. It was as if the fact he was male and she was female suddenly occurred to her and there was no possible way she could conceal completely the change in her attitude.

"She's at that age, of course."

"So is he. Carlos is well aware she's too young, don't misunderstand, not that he talks to me about it but he and

Gerald have spoken. Notice he is careful to stay away as much as possible."

"Avoiding temptation is best, I suppose. Next year she'll be seventeen and he'll be finished at Cambridge. I expect we'll see a great deal of him then."

"Oh, my dear, from the way he looks at her, I would most definitely say you are right. I will be delighted, of course, to have Juliet as a daughter-in-law."

The accidentally overheard conversation between her aunt and mother a few days after that fateful dinner had left Juliet open-mouthed with astonishment. They both seemed to think that Carlos would one day wish to marry her.

Juliet straightened her shoulders, shaking off the ghosts of the past. It wasn't going to happen after all. She was going to marry Frederick Drake, who was good-looking, charming to a fault, and rich as well.

The day Carlos told her he was going to join Wellington in Spain he'd crushed whatever feelings she had for him. Destroyed her love, shattered her future, and even severed a lifelong friendship.

It was over. For four years their romance had been ashes, every last spark dead.

Juliet turned with the intention of going back to bed. At that moment, he began to sing again, in the same lilting mesmerizing voice, the words barely a whisper, the sound drifting on the night breeze. Damn him to hell, did he think she could sleep with that racket?

On this wing of the house, the balcony off the set of bedrooms ran the entire length. Without thinking she jerked

open the French doors and stormed outside. A figure leaned against the stone rail, limed by the moonlight, the gleam of raven hair unmistakable even if it didn't take great deductive powers to know the source of the song.

The man was half-naked.

She didn't expect that. Unfortunately, he'd heard her emerge from her bedroom and straightened, going silent. They stood there, half the long length of the balcony between them, and simply stared at each other. Then he said in a very ordinary voice, "I'm sorry. Did I disturb you, Jules?"

The nickname did not help her composure. "Quite naturally not every evening is there a man singing on the balcony by my bedroom." Her voice was not quite even and she cleared her throat.

"What? No serenades from your prospective bridegroom? How unimaginative of him."

"Frederick is a gentleman..." Her voice trailed off as she took an involuntary step forward so she could see better, her gaze riveted on his bare upper body.

Dear God, he'd lied to her.

A bold-faced, blatant lie.

"Carlos." His name was barely a whisper as she took in the number of scars. One, two, three, four ... the one bisecting his left shoulder was at least five inches long, silvery and jagged in the moonlight. There was another, lower, just above the top of his breeches beneath his ribs, and on his upper right arm an angry red mark that could only have come from a bullet. Even to her inexperienced eye she could tell it

was not yet healed. "You said you stayed at the back of the line."

His smile was humorless. "A jest. I was a colonel, Juliet. We lead the men, not follow them."

"You've been wounded."

"A few times. It happens in war for your information."

"You never told us ... your letters..."

His brows elevated. "And worry my mother? I think not. No matter what you think of me—and it clearly isn't much—you know I would never cause her pain or distress if possible."

"What if you had been killed?" Juliet realized her hands were shaking in a shameful way and she dropped them to her sides, willing a calm she couldn't quite seem to summon. "Did you ever once ... just once, think of that? Of how we would feel here, helpless and worried, not knowing if each day you even got up in the morning, if you breathed, if you lay in some foreign grave?"

"If I were buried in Spain, it would not be a foreign grave, Jules."

She was going to cry. The stinging behind her eyes horrified her, made her swallow hard and desperately seek control. "You were raised here. At Chedwick."

"My title is Spanish. My name ... this." He lifted his hand and touched his face, a faint sardonic smile curving his mouth. "I know you can't understand, but it is part of me, and part of why I joined the war. The British were there fighting for another country because they knew if Bonaparte wasn't stopped, England could be next. Imagine a man who

belongs to both places, who owes allegiance to two countries, not lifting a finger to aid the cause. My conscience could not allow me to stay here and do nothing, even if it meant leaving you. Had I died there, the cost could not be greater to me, but I would do the same thing again."

The impassioned speech made her lose the inner battle and scalding tears poured down her cheeks, her vision suddenly blurred. He was the one who didn't understand. It was selfish, but the day he'd told her he was sailing first thing the next morning for the Peninsula, she'd known she couldn't bear it. The only way to combat the worry, the fear, the overwhelming dread of what could happen, was to slice him out of her life right then and there. He said he loved her, but he had proven himself a liar. How could he truly love her and then risk the thing she needed most in the world?

"Juliet?" A hand touched her wet cheek.

She hadn't even realized he'd moved closer but she could feel the heat from his tall body. "I'm not crying about you," she said on a choked sob.

"Of course not." There was just a hint of tender amusement in his tone.

"I don't even care that you're home." An embarrassing hiccup punctuated her statement.

"You've made that quite clear." His arms slid around her.

The warmth of his embrace surrounded and overwhelmed her. He smelled slightly spicy, like brandy and male. The sharp recollection of that scent transported her back four years.

It seemed a lifetime ago.

A Torrid Celebration!
by Whiskey Creek Press Authors

The tears were probably because she was just tired. She hadn't slept well ever since she'd gotten the news he was coming home.

His chest felt hard, ridged with muscle, his arms strong around her trembling body. "Let me go. I want to go to bed," she mumbled against his skin, wondering why she was even letting him touch her.

"So do I." His response was hushed, the quiet in his voice somehow poignant.

As soon as he spoke she knew they did not mean the same thing.

* * * *

He'd lost her to honor once. Maybe he should eschew that particular strategy for the moment. Honor be damned for all he knew was he had her slender body in his arms once more, neither of them wore more than one easily removed article of clothing, and desire held him in a vise-like grip.

By measure of circumstance and choice, Carlos had been abstinent a very long time. The only woman he wanted pressed against him, her wet face resting against his shoulder as she wept tears of ... joy? Sorrow? Regret? He wasn't sure, but he did know that her cold claim of indifference was a lie. A welling triumph rose within him as he felt the tremors of her body with each telling sob.

He kissed her. Just a brush of his mouth against her fragrant hair at first, then a feathering of his lips across her temple and the delicate curve of her cheekbone as he moved

lower. The salty wetness of tears mingled with the warmth of her soft mouth as he claimed it.

There was no way he could help but pour the hunger of the past lonely four years into the kiss. It was in the way his tongue explored every inch of her mouth, tasting her, branding her essence forever into his memory. It was the tightening of his arms so she was against him and he could feel each delicious curve, the full surge of his erection no secret as he swallowed her gasp—of surprise or outrage, he wasn't sure.

A moonlit balcony, Juliet in his embrace, a warm seductive breeze whispering past...

He sure as hell hoped he wasn't asleep in some tent in a military camp on a rocky Spanish hill somewhere, waiting for the next horrific battle. It felt like a dream, especially since she wasn't resisting in any way but instead kissing him back, her slim fingers trailing up his neck to thread into his hair.

She was kissing him back. Still crying—he could feel the continued seep of warm wetness on her cheeks—but she clung to him with equal fervor.

It was good, it was miraculous, in fact. But it wasn't enough.

With effort he tore his mouth away and simultaneously lifted her in his arms. Juliet made a small sound—maybe it was of protest but he ignored it and instead carried her to the doorway of his bedroom and went inside to deposit her on his bed.

Her stunning beauty never failed to move him. He stared down at where she lay in disarray, golden hair tumbled over

the rumpled linens, the thin lawn fabric of her nightdress the only barrier between him and paradise, her lovely eyes framed by long sticky lashes and wet streaks on her cheeks.

"Carlos." His name was a choked whisper. "I—"

"No," he interrupted with urgent harshness. "We'll talk later, Jules ... please. No words now. I want to make love, not fight. I am so tired of fighting."

"I'm engaged."

"You've always been mine." He unfastened his breeches, effectively ending the argument if it even was one. Shoving the garment down past his hips, he stepped free, his erection stiff and high against his stomach, throbbing with every beat of his heart. Juliet stared at the evidence of his desire for her, the expression on her lovely face hard to decipher, but she made no move to resist when he leaned over, caught the hem of her nightgown and eased it upward.

She was as breathtaking as he remembered, and even more so if that was possible. Long supple limbs, full, taut breasts tipped with rosy nipples, the juncture of her thighs framing a dainty patch of hair a darker gold than her long tresses ... her nude body was every man's dream come true and especially his.

After tossing aside her nightdress, he slid on top of her and captured her mouth in another long, hot kiss even as he pinned her to the bed with his body. That first time he should never have done it, never touched her, never taken her innocence when he'd known already he was leaving, but this time, this night, was so right. His hard cock pressed her hip and he rubbed against her, one hand going to cup a firm

breast. Juliet moaned softly into his mouth and he gave an inner smile of masculine satisfaction.

If he'd always known they were meant to be together as lovers, now he'd prove to her it was true. Nothing was off limits because by the morning he wanted her to know there was no going back. If there was one thing he'd learned as a soldier it was hesitation could be deadly. Wicked, sinful pleasure was not a bad plan, and if that was how to win her away from Lord Drake—damn the man to hell—he was going to use it. She'd evidently nursed her hurt and feelings of betrayal for four long years. But, it seemed from the way she arched into his touch, she'd also held onto the passion they felt for each other.

Good. He'd exploit it, use it, do whatever he could to make her forget he'd ever left.

If he spoke he was afraid he'd break the spell. He lifted the silken weight of one breast in his palm, his thumb slowly circling the tight nipple, his mouth drifting down the graceful arc of her throat, teasing the small hollow where he could feel the beat of her pulse, the flutter there telling him more than any words. The taste of her skin was exquisite and he moved lower, nuzzling the valley between her full breasts, licking, savoring, finally taking a nipple in his mouth and sucking with gentle adhesion.

It's just the beginning, he vowed in silent promise.

As responsive as she'd been that fateful sun-drenched afternoon when they'd both been swept away and yielded to desire what felt like a lifetime ago, now she was no longer virginal, no longer a seventeen-year-old girl but a woman.

Her body quivered with each touch, each caress, and the breathless erratic pattern of her small pants made his cock throb harder. Carlos kissed his way down her ribcage and stomach, his hands urging her legs apart, his goal the beautifully warm, soft folds of her sex. She cried out as he gave the first long wicked lick across her labia, either from shocked sensibility or pleasure. *Probably both.* He enjoyed the sweet taste of her arousal. Slim hips shifted but he held her in place and began to bring her to climax, ignoring the incoherent protest she made even as she shuddered reflexively.

Perfect.

The small bud of her clitoris began to swell as he teased and toyed with it, using tongue and lips, kissing her with intimate purpose. The escalation in her breathing and the almost frantic grasp of her hands on his shoulders was a perfect gauge of her climb to orgasmic release. When it happened she screamed, a low telling sound as she toppled over the precipice.

Carlos rose up, positioned himself, and even as she lay in the damp, panting aftermath, claimed her body. He pushed his rigid length into her tight wet vaginal passage, his eyes drifting closed at the sheer pleasure of it, the knowledge he would not last long one he could accept because he'd waited what felt like an eternity for her, waited so long to feel this exquisite joy.

Maybe he thrust five times. Maybe it wasn't even that before he felt the blissful, earth-shattering rush of ejaculation. He buried himself as deep as possible as it

happened, a groan rising from his chest as he deposited his seed against the mouth of her womb. The moment went on and on, each pulse more satisfying than the last, until, shaken and spent, he collapsed to his side, taking her with him in a loose tangle of arms and legs.

God willing, he'd just settled things between them.

He was wrong.

A few moments later he felt Juliet pull away. She scrambled off the bed, a vision of loose pale hair and ivory skin, her face averted. Without a word she picked up her nightdress, slipped it on over her head, walked out the door to the balcony. A moment later came the clear sound of the doors into her bedroom being pulled shut.

Now what the hell did he do?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

How matters had gone from tense to ridiculous in the space of one night was a mystery but there wasn't much doubt things were even worse than the day before. Luncheon had been so strained it was obvious something had happened to make things more edgy between Carlos and Juliet. Mary eyed her son's face with suspicion and wondered how to approach the subject. "Did you sleep well, darling?"

He glanced up, his expression abstract and distant. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sleep," she repeated succinctly. "Last night. Well. Did you?"

"No."

She settled down next to him on the bench by a truly spectacular bed of blooming roses, the crimson color of the flowers vivid in the sunshine. The gardens were truly lovely in the early afternoon glow of another wonderful day. *Just five more*, she gave a silent prayer to the powers above that governed such things. It would be so much more of a success if the weather was this pleasant for the celebration party. Rain made such a mess, not to mention the ballroom got stuffy if it had to be closed up.

Carlos gave her a smile that was a pale imitation of the real thing. When he truly smiled, the world lit up. The pretense told her a great deal. As gently as possible, she asked, "What are you going to do?"

His mouth tightened. "About what, may I ask?"

"Juliet."

Just the mention of her name sent him restlessly to his feet. He paced across the garden path and reached down to pluck one of the roses from a bush, snapping off the flower and twirling it idly between his long fingers. In a matter-of-fact tone that didn't fool her at all, he said, "Why would I do anything about Juliet? She has made her choice and her feelings quite clear."

"Her feelings are certainly clear to me," Mary acknowledged dryly. "Please remember that after you left I was witness to how it affected her. Oh, she tried to hold on to the façade of indifference and pretend she didn't care, that she was angry enough to disregard whatever was between the two of you, but she wasn't particularly adept at it. Even when she finally agreed to have her coming out in London almost a year later, it was easy enough to see though she flirted and danced and allowed all those eager young men to court her, her heart lay elsewhere, Carlos. With you, in Spain. With you anywhere, I would guess. It wasn't good for the child. That's perhaps why she lost it right after you sailed, but maybe not. Those things do happen. She's young and healthy and will have another."

If she had slapped him it couldn't have had a more profound effect. The rose dropped from his long fingers, landing on the path in a scatter of petals like a splattering of blood, and her son stared at her in open shock. "What?"

Oh yes, she was definitely meddling now. Juliet had made her swear to never tell him, and she'd just betrayed that trust. All for her niece's own good, Mary excused herself,

hoping she was doing the right thing. She loved Juliet as much as she loved Carlos and to see them happy and together she would do more than reveal a secret that wasn't hers to tell.

Mary folded her hands in her lap and gave him a level look. "Surely you knew it was possible."

A muscle flexed in his jaw. It was hard to tell with his sun-bronzed skin but he seemed to be faintly flushed, probably because of having to discuss something so personal with his mother. "Yes, I knew it was possible. "Good God, she was pregnant and didn't tell me?"

"Would it have stopped you from going?"

He hesitated and turned away, his profile making him look all at once distant. "I don't know," he admitted finally in a quiet voice, his dark eyes somber. "But I would have married her before I left. I wanted to anyway, but she refused to even discuss it once she knew I'd bought a commission."

"I can speak from experience and tell you it is difficult for a woman to realize her child may never know his father. Not only was she abandoned and frightened for the future, but there was also that responsibility on her very young shoulders. If she is still angry with you, perhaps you understand a little better why now."

"I also lost a child." His tone held a definite edge. "I had the right to know."

"I think Juliet would argue you gave up the right the day you left."

"Damnation, Mother, you know why I went!"

She ignored the profanity. Considering what she'd just told him, she didn't blame him. "Yes, I do. So does Juliet. However, that does not change the fact it was very difficult for us here. That aside, you are home now, but she is engaged to another man. I am personally convinced she still loves you, but it is up to you to convince her to change her mind about Lord Drake."

Carlos gave a small humorless laugh. "Convince her? I don't need to do that. I can force her to change her mind."

"Force her?" Mary frowned, looking at him, seeing the implacable expression on his face.

"She could be pregnant again. I am not going to let some foppish English fool raise my child. Consider her engagement over. Please excuse me."

Good heavens ... if Juliet had fallen into his arms—and apparently his bed—again so quickly, maybe her interference was merited after all. Mary fought to keep her feelings of triumph from showing even as she realized her mouth hung open in astonishment from his revelation. She snapped it shut. "Darling, you should probably not..."

It was too late. He was already gone, striding away with purpose down the path...

* * * *

Uncle Gerald had an uncharacteristic ferocious frown on his face, and Juliet took it in with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. That look—coupled with Carlos' presence in the study—made her want to turn and run.

Why had she thought she could walk away from what happened the night before unscathed?

She sent an accusing look at the man standing so still by the window. He looked tall and austere in the warm light pouring through the window. Dark hair framed his aristocratic features and his gaze was steady, those long-lashed dark eyes holding an almost accusatory look.

What the devil was going on?

The duke cleared his throat. "Sit down, Juliet. Something has come to my attention and we need to address the issue."

She adored her uncle and had never disobeyed him in her life, but at the moment, she couldn't move. "I ... I'd prefer to stand, thank you," she said stiffly.

"My dear child, if you stand, I must stand also, and I would rather sit for this discussion. So, if you please, take a chair."

Put that way, she wasn't given a choice. She chose a wing chair by the fireplace and sank down, self-consciously rubbing her damp palms on her skirt. It took some effort to lift her chin and look neutral but she did her best to summon nothing more than a polite, bland expression.

Carlos ... touching her. His heated kiss, those skillful hands, the erotic foray of his tongue, not just into her mouth but other places as he seduced her with practiced ease...

Good God, he'd told Uncle Gerald exactly what had happened. She could tell by the duke's chagrined expression, and also by the very faint ghost of a smile on her lover's mouth. The fact he was more devastatingly handsome than any man had a right to be was incidental. Ever since they

were children, she'd trusted him. With everything. Secrets, fears, and eventually, love.

No, not so, she'd always loved him. Her feelings had changed, however, from affection to romantic involvement and it should be private.

"I have already sent word to Lord Drake, my dear." The words were said with heavy intonation. "Luckily, the severing of your engagement should not raise too many brows because the official announcement has not been in the paper. A hasty marriage to Carlos is a bit unseemly, but then again, war is a tricky thing. Returning soldiers are romantic figures. I expect there will be a few whispers and then the matter will be settled."

"Marry ... Carlos?"

"As I understand it ... er ... you must." Her uncle had ruddy color in his cheeks, obviously not enjoying the conversation. "Immediately."

"You got pregnant the last time," Carlos drawled in a cool voice. "You aren't marrying another man with my child inside you."

He knew about the baby, about the miscarriage. And how dare he tell her what to do? She'd tried to tell him to not go to Spain, not risk his life, and he hadn't listened to her.

Juliet looked at him, not bothering to hide her disdain. "I am not one of your soldiers, Carlos, that you can order about. Neither can you just ride away and come back four years later and expect me to fall into your arms as if nothing happened."

He adjusted his cuff in an exaggerated movement and then looked directly at her. "Apparently I can. Last night supports the assumption."

That he was right didn't help anything. She was a fool, and the minute he'd touched her she'd given in to the power of his presence, to the suppressed desire of four long years, to the memory of an ideal that had been shattered and taken from her. She snapped, "You seduced me."

"You allowed it." His lashes lowered a fraction. "Moreover, you enjoyed it."

A blush climbed through her neck and suffused her cheeks. As they stared at each other, her uncle coughed, making a great business of clearing his throat. He stood up. "I am going to see about making arrangements for a special license. In the meanwhile, I suggest the two of you come to some sort of truce. A successful marriage involves a great deal of compromise. My advice is now would be a good time to start."

He left the study, the sound of the door closing followed by a sizzling silence. Carlos stood there, his usual facile charm not in evidence. The expression on his face instead held something unidentifiable.

"How about it, Jules. Shall we negotiate?"

"This isn't a treaty," she responded as coolly as possible, her feelings in such turmoil it was hard to know what to say at all.

"No? It seems to me I have a battle on my hands." He leaned one shoulder against the frame of one of the tall windows and crossed his arms over his broad chest. An ebony brow arched up. "Now, I've certainly won the first foray

because I've got the enemy trapped and almost captured. It sounds like the latter will happen soon—maybe later today—so I am in a position to grant a few concessions. What are your terms, Jules, for a full surrender?"

The sexual implication of the word brought the memory of how it felt to be beneath him, their bodies intimately joined, bare skin to bare skin as they made love. She had certainly surrendered the night before without so much as a fight and if she were honest with herself, he could probably overcome her resistance just as easily again. And again.

She still loved him, she realized with painful insight. If she didn't, she wouldn't be so angry with him for leaving

While she was admitting a few things, she might as well acknowledge that becoming his wife might be the thing she wanted most in the world.

On the other hand, she didn't have to concede that to him, though she had the feeling he knew anyway.

Juliet lifted her chin. "My first request is obvious enough, Carlos. No more wars. No more leaving, period. If we are blessed with children, I want them to have a father. Agreed?"

"Agreed." The reply was quick and without equivocation.

"I get to choose their names. I am thinking Bathsheba for a girl and Septimus if it's a boy." She lowered her lashes a fraction and gave him an innocent look.

He hesitated, and then his lips twitched in amusement as he realized she was teasing. The tight line of his mouth eased. "Fine choices, both of them. Agreed."

"You have a pleasing voice. A lovely song like the one from last night would be nice once in a while."

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He inclined his head. "A Spanish lullaby whenever you wish to hear one, my lady. Agreed."

There was a pause. Her throat felt constricted. "I want you to tell me you love me every single day. At least once, maybe more if the occasion warrants it."

The request would have been more effective if her voice hadn't wavered, betraying her emotion.

He straightened away from the wall, the stark reaction in his dark eyes sudden and palpable. "I'll start now."

In two long strides he was across the room and she was swept into his arms, up against his tall body, his mouth hovering over hers. "I love you," he whispered. "I loved you when I got on that ship, during every cold night, during every miserable day. I loved you when cannons fired around me, when I was hungry, when men lay dying everywhere. I loved you when we lost ground, when we won battles, when we thought it would never end. Juliet, please understand, that never stopped, never faltered, never faded. It saw me through hell and it brought me home."

In answer she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him the fraction closer needed to kiss him, her heart pounding.

In tune with his, the steady thud a reminder he was very much alive and had come back.

To her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

Lady Wilhelmina Woodhull waved her fan in long, languid sweeps. "Such a brilliant party, my dear Duchess. You have outdone yourself, if I do say."

"It is going rather well," Mary agreed, her champagne flute dangling from her fingers, her watchful eye gauging the fullness of the buffet table and the efficiency of the staff as they carried trays of drinks around. However, she couldn't help it, her attention was drawn back time and again to the dance floor and a smug smile hovered on her lips.

The celebration was a splendid success, it was true, but her greatest triumph was currently waltzing to a popular tune. Even amidst the milling crowd the couple was striking, Carlos' height and dark coloring a contrast to his wife's delicate blond beauty. They were both smiling, and as Mary watched, he leaned down and whispered something in Juliet's ear and she laughed.

Dear God, to see them both happy was definitely something to celebrate.

"Are you tearing up on me, your Grace?"

"A bit," Mary admitted, plucking a handkerchief out of her sleeve to dab her eyes. "I am so delighted to have my son back."

Lady Woodhull shrewdly followed her gaze. "You are not the only one, it seems. They make a dazzling pair. Word has it Lord Drake is a bit put out over losing his perspective bride,

but it won't last, I'm sure. When one is handsome, titled and rich, there is no reason to be unhappy for long, now is there?"

"Juliet has always loved Carlos. His absence was very difficult."

"Such a romantic story." Wilhelmina sighed, still working her fan so small sausage curls moved on either side of her plump face. "The handsome soldier, his true love waiting patiently for his return ... it is like a fairy tale in some ways."

Well, Juliet hadn't exactly waited patiently and like all fairy tales there had been a price to be paid on both sides. Mary had found most things worth having in life were that way.

But, though Wilhelmina was often a silly woman, she was right, it was a romantic story now that it had a happy ending. Unable to resist being a little mischievous, Mary murmured, "He sings to her, you know."

Lady Woodhull's eyes widened with a gleam of interest at that juicy tidbit. "Really?"

"Love songs, I suppose. It is hard to tell for they are in Spanish. When the breeze is just so I can hear him, even though our suite is some distance from theirs. I must say I think he gets that romantic streak from his father's side of the family. My ability to carry a tune is appalling."

Carlos was going to throttle her when the gossip spread over that tidbit, she thought with an inner laugh.

"What a beautiful thing," Wilhelmina said, a dreamy expression on her face.

Mary watched the couple on the floor, so content in each other's arms. "Isn't it?" she agreed softly.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Born to an Air Force family at an Army hospital, Melissa has always been a little bit screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python and her strange family. Her love of romance novels developed after accidentally picking up a Linda Howard book. After becoming hooked, she read close to three hundred novels in one year, deciding that romance was her true calling instead of the literary short stories and suspenses she had been writing. After many attempts, she realized that romantic comedy, or at least romance with a comedic edge, was where she was destined to be. Influences in her writing come from Nora Roberts, Jenny Cruise, Susan Andersen, Amanda Quick, Jayne Anne Krentz, Julia Quinn, Christina Dodd, and Lori Foster. Since her first release in 2004, Melissa has had over twenty short stories, novellas and novels released with seven different publishers in a variety of genres and time periods. Those releases included *The Hired Hand*, a 2005 Eppie Finalist for Contemporary Romance, and *Tempting Prudence*, a 2005 CAPA finalist for short erotic romance. Her contemporary, *A Little Harmless Sex* became an international best seller in June of 2005.

Since she was a military brat, she vowed never to marry military. Alas, fate always has her way with mortals. Her husband is an Air Force major, and together they have their own military brats, two girls, and they live wherever the Air Force sticks them. Which, she is sure, will always involve heat

and bugs only seen on the Animal Discovery Channel. In her spare time, she reads, complains about bugs, travels, cooks, reads some more, watches her DVD collections of *Arrested Development* and *Seinfeld*, and tries to convince her family that she truly is a delicate genius. She has yet to achieve her last goal.

She has always believed that romance and humor go hand in hand. Love can conquer all and as Mark Twain said, "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand." Combining the two, she hopes she gives her readers a thrilling love story, filled with chuckles along the way, and a happily ever after finish.

Cheri has been reading romance since she was a young girl. In her twenties, she graduated from the sweet romances of youth to the steamier romances of adulthood. From then on, she realized the spicier the romance the better she liked it. So it's no surprise she likes to write as spicy as she likes to read.

Cheri is Cajun, born in the very heart of Cajun country down in Southwest Louisiana. Married to a military man for twenty-three years, she's lived in many places, but presently resides in Maryland.

I am of Irish, Scottish, and New Guinean descent. I was born in a small town called Longreach, which is located in Outback Queensland, Australia. Baptized Holy Roman Catholic, I have five siblings and am the proud mother of one teenage boy. I live on the east coast of Australia.

My first erotic romance was published in 2003. I write historical, contemporary, fantasy and paranormal sensual

romance, erotic romance and erotica. I also write sensual, erotic and mainstream poetry.

I've written several #1 bestsellers, been nominated for two CAPA awards for historical works published in 2004, and am a 2007 EPPIE Award finalist—in the Erotic Romance Fantasy/Paranormal category.

Watch for my mainstream suspense and crime novels late 2008.

Visit my website www.monicammartin.com

Email me: monica@monicammartin.com

Christy Poff lives in southeastern Pennsylvania with her husband and two kids—her teenage daughter (a college freshman) and her son who serves in the Army National Guard stationed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Previously, she wrote news articles for local newspapers and regional firefighting publications. With her articles, she added photography to her pieces. Writing for several years, she has a deep respect for the Civil War and has done extensive research into the times. This love and research have resulted in several Civil War novels including *Chase For an Angel* which was born from this love and released in March, 2006. Others will follow.

She loves old cities with history like Charleston and New Orleans, the wide-open spaces of Wyoming and the Dakotas, the beauty of a Maine sunrise plus seeing the rest of the U.S. and western Canada.

A volunteer firefighter for over twenty-five years, she's been able to use her experience in several published works for others and even in some of her own work.

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People wonder what she writes to—Brooks and Dunn, Gary Allan, Linkin Park, Nickelback, Harry Connick or whoever strikes her mood at the time. She loves to watch *Iron Chef* on the *Food Network*, *CSI:Miami* and reruns of *Nash Bridges*, *Miami Vice*, *Night Court* and *JAG*.

Honey Jans lives in a small Midwestern town with her husband and true inspiration. She is a born romantic with an extraordinarily vivid yet kinky imagination. Honey loves writing erotica and hopes that her stories add a little spice to her reader's lives.

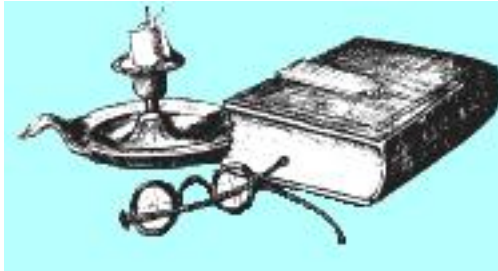
Emma Wildes is a #1 bestselling author at Fictionwise, the 2007 Eppie winner for best erotic historical, an RWA Lories winner for best novella, and a WisRWA Reader's Choice winner in historical romance. She is the author of over twenty-five novels and you can visit Emma at www.emmawildes.com. She also writes erotic suspense as Kate Watterson www.katewatterson.com, and futuristic as Annabel Wolfe www.annabelwolfe.com.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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